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Having **kids** not just a **personal choice**

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THE word 'choice' comes up often in feminist conversations - in emphasising that women should be able to 'choose' whether or not to marry; or have children and if so, how many; or work, and the type of work to be involved in.

Choice, however, is a problematic concept. The word conjures up images of autonomous individuals, making decisions independently of one another. However, that is not the case. Individuals make choices in particular contexts.

In the national conversation on fertility, we are too often fixated on people's choices in the individualistic mode. We imagine that people look at their individual circumstances - their careers, finances and 'lifestyles' - and then make 'cost-benefit analyses' which lead them to decide not to have children.

These factors are of course relevant. But when we frame choice this way, we imagine society as made up of auto-nomous individuals with great control over their decisions. We lament: Surely they can cut back on their careers, or spend less money on non-necessities, or alter their expectations in life, and so on.

Choice distracts us from seeing that when people think about whether or not to have children or how many to have, they are not only looking at their own lives. Instead, they are also gauging their locations within society: They are gauging what 'normal' Singaporeans do; they are imagining what being a mother or father involves; and they are considering what sort of life they can have.

To address low fertility, we have to think about the context in which people decide not to have children. We have to consider the environment in which people live, and the sorts of lives they lead or aspire to lead. The responsibilities of employed work, of caring for a household, children and the elderly are substantial and not always recognised.

When the dominant motif of society is 'work hard, make sure you're in good financial shape because society won't take care of you, your children or your parents', young people have real cause to be anxious about the future.

So to 'solve' the fertility problem, we have to rethink the sorts of support society provides for all its citizens, at various points in their lives, and not just the currently 'fertile'.

This idea is not new. The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) produced a paper, Beyond Babies: National Duty Or **Personal Choice**, in 2004 pointing out that 'quality of life' is the single most important reason why Singaporeans do not have more children. If society does not provide some assurance to its citizens that they will still have a place in society even if they are not economically productive, we must accept that Singaporeans will make the pragmatic decision to make their economic survival their No. 1 priority. In many cases, this means not having children or deferring the decision until they are financially secure.

The gender dimension in this problem is also key. Maternity leave policies, tax reliefs and foreign maid policies each point to women playing heavier roles than men in the actual work of the family. Women are still expected to be the primary caregiver and

men the primary breadwinner. Structural conditions that hinder men from taking time off to care for their children remain.

If you are a man, your main job as a father is to provide; if you want to take time off to care for your child, you bear the costs. No one will cut you any slack.

For women, leaving the workforce, even temporarily, is fraught with in-security. There are few provisions to ensure they are treated the same as their male or childless female colleagues, though the time they need to raise young children may, in the larger scheme of things, be brief.

For low-income women, the choices are even more difficult: Good childcare services are expensive, and those for infants are rare. Moreover, the small number of people who use childcare services for children under three means parents (particularly women) who use such services face a fair number of frowning faces and laments of 'Poor **kid**, so young!'

Paternity leave provisions comparable to maternity leave ones, childcare services universally available to parents regardless of their marital and/or employment status, and anti-discrimination legislation would go a long way to improving the situation.

When we think about choice as an individual matter, we inevitably shy from truly social solutions. We come up with incentive schemes designed to nudge individuals' 'cost-benefit analyses' towards deciding to have children.

Only when both men and women feel they will be sufficiently supported as valued members of society, not just as baby makers and contributors to GDP, will we all have real choices.

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