

Hong Kong can do more to arrest declining birth rates

Paul Yip says the government's attitude to our low birth rate needs to change. Other advanced economies have shown that, with the right policies, more people can be encouraged to have children

FAMILY PLANNING

Apr 27, 2012

In the 21st century, low fertility and its impact on slowing population growth have become a great concern of governments in many parts of the developed world. A total fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman is regarded as the level of inter-generational replacement: a generation of women must each give birth to slightly more than two children to ensure replacement.

Hong Kong has one of the lowest total fertility rates in the world, at 1.04 per woman. The decline in fertility has been shown to be related to the substantial decrease in the proportion of married women of prime childbearing age.

People are putting off getting married, and those who are married tend to put off having a child, thus shortening the childbearing years. Family size is also smaller - more parents stop at one or two - and divorces are on the rise. All these put pressure on the fertility rate.

The collective effect of people's reproductive decisions is complex. From a micro perspective, raising children is a matter of private choice in which the government should have little right to intervene. However, from a macro perspective, because of the emergence of an ageing population and considerations of long-term economic sustainability, the government needs to pay attention and take appropriate action to halt the decline in fertility rates.

According to a 2007 study of family planning attitudes and practices in Hong Kong, the vast majority of fertile women surveyed said that, if they were asked to choose again, they would still want to have two children (49.7 per cent) or one child (26.2 per cent). Only 12.5 per cent said they did not want a child.

Certainly it is difficult, if not impossible, to change the minds of couples who are childless by choice. The challenge is to remove barriers for those who want to have children.

These barriers include the financial burden, worries over the local education system, and a working environment that is not friendly to families. Hong Kong people work long hours by international standards, and the city does not impose legal requirements for overtime pay or working hours.

By doing little, the government apparently believes that any programme to help remove barriers to raising children is likely to be ineffective. Family planning decisions affect society. We need children to generate the resources to pay for our health care and welfare, and help provide care for more and more elderly people. The government has a legitimate right and responsibility to provide preferential treatment to encourage more people to have children for the community's sustainable development.

Many working women in Hong Kong are forced to make a choice between having a family and having a career. Therefore, it is important to provide a family-friendly working environment for Hong Kong women. Due to financial needs, it is now the norm rather than an exception for both husband and wife to work. So, I propose these changes:

First, the community as a whole needs to be supportive of child-rearing and policies should be family-friendly.

Second, Hong Kong should grant a higher tax rebate to families with dependent children to ease the burden of working couples. While some people have argued for a cash allowance to be given by the government, a tax rebate is still preferable as it encourages women to remain in the workforce.

Third, companies and organisations should ensure that work and career do not compete with raising children. France and Sweden have demonstrated that work and child-raising can complement each other. France, for one, has a female labour force participation rate of 51 per cent and a fertility rate of 2. By contrast, Hong Kong's figures are 53 per cent and 1.04 respectively.

Releasing the power of the female workforce in the community is crucial to maintaining economic growth. Providing parental leave for men is a signal to the community that men have a responsibility to take care of their families.

Long working hours not only have a negative effect on fertility but also adversely affect the overall well-being of the community. But shorter working hours will require not only changes in regulations, but also changes in the mindset of Hong Kong workers, who are accustomed to long working hours. The provision of quality and affordable childcare facilities near the workplace can also be a win-win solution for employees and employers.

Demographic changes in Hong Kong are happening rapidly and they should be closely monitored and analysed. Certainly, it is not easy to obtain a consensus from different parties in implementing a population policy, which is a complex process. However, the government must realise the urgency of the issue and have the vision and courage to initiate and implement changes. Official policies should aim to bring out the best in people, to remove gender inequality and to work towards the betterment of the community.

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