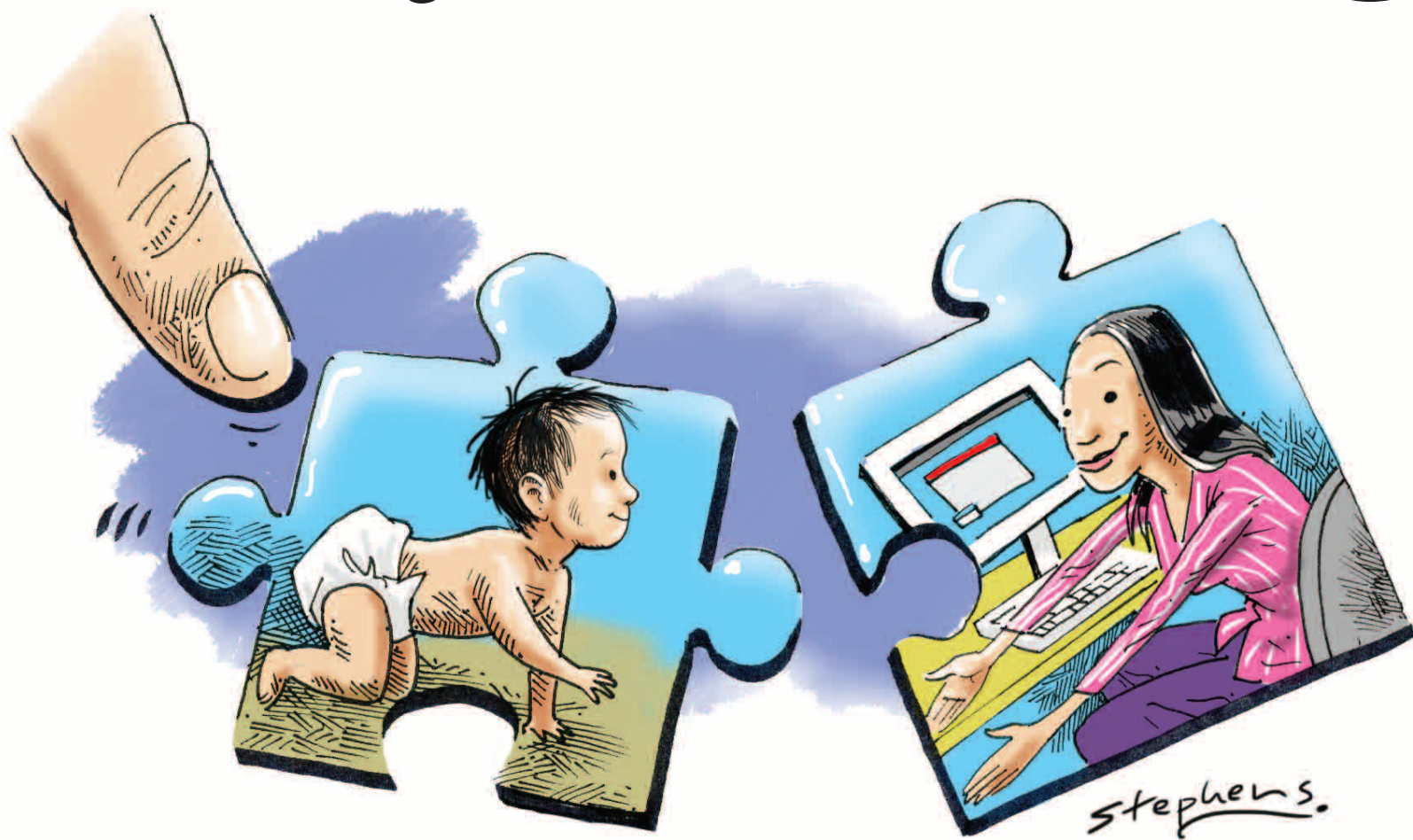


Family planning



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

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

The challenge is to remove barriers for those who do want to have children

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.

Paul Yip is a professor of social work and social administration at the University of Hong Kong

Home truth

Amelita King-Dejardin argues that, for their contribution to the economy, domestic helpers should enjoy the same labour protection as others

Last June, a milestone event took place that promised to improve the lives of millions of working people – mostly women – worldwide, including more than 250,000 in Hong Kong and up to 20 million on the mainland. The event was the adoption by the International Labour Organisation of the first international labour standards covering domestic workers.

The standards affirm that a worker does not lose basic rights simply because his or her work takes place in a private house and that domestic workers are entitled to fair employment terms, protection against abuse, social security and – where available to other workers – a minimum wage.

Yet, resistance persists to adopting these standards as national laws. For instance, objections have been raised on the grounds that international labour standards have no place inside the home and that formal employment terms would fundamentally alter a dynamic that is more akin to a family relationship than a worker-employer situation.

Such arguments simply underscore the systematic devaluation and marginalisation of domestic work and exclude millions of people from the sort of work-related protection most of us take for granted.

The fact that such views are still prevalent should be a major concern for Asia's economies and leaders because millions of families employ domestic workers and, in many countries, domestic work is a significant source of employment. Overall, 41 per cent of the world's domestic workers are in Asia – equivalent to 21.5 million people aged 15 or above. In the Philippines, around 11 per cent of employed women are domestic workers.

What's more, the demand and numbers for domestic work are increasing, particularly as populations age, more women work and higher-skilled workers seek the freedom to build careers.

When we read of horrific stories about the abuse of domestic workers, we are shocked. Yet, we often fail to make the connection between these stories and the social and legal environment that leaves domestic workers so vulnerable, whether they are employed in a foreign country or their own.

The ILO estimates about 60 per cent of domestic workers in Asia are excluded from national labour laws. Almost 99 per cent have no legal safeguards against excessively long hours while 88 per cent are not entitled to a statutory minimum wage. In many places, local labour laws do not cover foreign domestic workers (Hong Kong is a noteworthy exception). Instead, they are covered by separate laws, bilateral memorandums of understanding or standard employment contracts. But the non-binding nature of these agreements and the frequent lack of dispute resolution procedures mean that these systems are generally ineffective.

Several economies are taking action to improve this situation – for example, Singapore is introducing a weekly rest day for domestic workers from January. But as well as legal reforms, a fundamental shift in attitudes is required. Both employers and workers must know their rights and obligations.

It is time to recognise the true economic and social value of domestic workers.

Amelita King-Dejardin is chief technical adviser on domestic workers at the International Labour Organisation. This is part of a monthly series on women and gender issues, developed in collaboration with The Women's Foundation

Beijing must come clean on Bo scandal to regain standing

Lau Nai-keung says China can't shy away from redressing what went wrong

The Bo Xilai (薄熙来) probe is continuing. The whole saga is a disgrace both internationally and within the country. How could something like this happen in the first place, and how could it have been handled like that in this age? Even at this juncture, I can safely predict that the one that will suffer the most damage in the end is the Chinese Communist Party.

The authorities want to portray this as a simple murder arising from commercial conflicts between Bo's wife and Neil Heywood. But that doesn't explain why the former police chief barged into the US consulate office in Chengdu (成都) apparently seeking political asylum. And how could Heywood, rumoured to be a British spy, have been so active in the inner circle of a high-ranking politician and still manage to escape the supposedly watchful eyes of Chinese security? This may not be an isolated case. If so, this is alarming.

Even more alarming is the high-handed handling of the case, which to some is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, any resurgence of which the government has vowed to squash.

The pledge of allegiance by the military is also disquieting, and it has fed the rumour that the Bo saga is only part of a much bigger conspiracy, even a military coup.

It is not my objective to speculate here: I just want to demonstrate that smooth power succession is still a problem in China because rules are not well-established or well-recognised. On top of that, there are

insufficient checks and balances, and transparency in the system, leaving plenty of room for power abuse among the hundreds of high-ranking officials that goes unchecked and unrevealed.

Why the big fuss about Bo? One reason is that he represents a drastically different policy direction that carries great popular appeal. What is wrong with redressing gross social injustice and giving people a better life? Why can't the ruling party

There is bound to be dirty laundry but hiding it will further damage Beijing's credibility

adopt a similar line in response to the now thundering public outcry? Is the current government bent on protecting the corrupt, the rich and the vested interests at the expense of the masses? If that is the case, then what is the mandate of the party?

There is no use covering up this case, though most people will understand that there are highly sensitive national security issues involved and, thus, total transparency is impossible. A public trial for Bo is out of the question.

But both internally and internationally, our government has to convincingly tell the world what

has happened. There is bound to be quite a lot of dirty laundry but it has to be done: hiding it will further damage its credibility and mandate.

Having come clean, the government has to be seen to be taking steps to redress the situation. It has to admit to the people what went wrong that led to grievances, and what it thinks are the right measures to take and how they are to be implemented.

China has done many things right, and even some of the Chongqing (重庆) experiments are in the right direction and should not be completely written off. People want to know, and in fact they have the right to know.

There is no better time for change than at the 18th party congress later this year, when a leadership transition is expected to take place. Mao Zedong (毛泽东) got his mandate through revolution, Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) through reform and opening up, and Jiang Zemin (江泽民) and Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) through economic growth. Xi Jinping (习近平) will have to find a way to give the Chinese people a better life and a fairer world.

Lau Nai-keung is a member of the Basic Law Committee of the NPC Standing Committee, and also a member of the Commission on Strategic Development

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Free to foster culture of innovation and creativity

Ross LaJeunesse sees an open internet as an engine of growth for Hong Kong's economy and society

Imagine a world where anyone can access and enjoy Hong Kong's rich cultural offerings, from anywhere in the world and at any time. With the launch of Google Art Project, that reality is here now. The project has put the collections of the Hong Kong Museum of Art and the Hong Kong Heritage Museum online in a vibrant, interactive format, making these artistic treasures available to anyone in the world with an internet connection.

The project provides only a glimpse of what's possible, however. Consider Hong Kong from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, when it produced hundreds of movies a year and was the second largest exporter of movies worldwide, lagging behind only Hollywood. People from all around the world were fans of Hong Kong television, music and film.

This was in an age before the internet: if you lived abroad and wanted to watch a John Woo or Jet Li movie, your only options were to rent poor-quality VHS tapes or go to the Chinatown cinemas.

Imagine the popularity and global appeal Hong Kong culture could have, given what's possible with today's technology.

Korea gives us some insight: hallyu, the global "wave" of Korean culture, is gathering fans around the world by going online, not only in Asia but also in the Americas and Europe. Last year, Korean pop music videos were viewed nearly 2.3 billion times on YouTube.

In today's turbulent times, it's

understandable that economic growth is a priority. But as the hallyu trend reveals, an open internet is an engine of growth in cultural production, opening up new economic opportunities.

Culture is not only critical to the economic future of advanced economies, it is also, simply put, the essence of society. Combining culture with the open internet allows ideas to cross-pollinate from any direction and across any border. Differences can be celebrated and more widely understood. In contrast, countries with a closed internet will not only continue to lack a vibrant civil society, but will also struggle to contribute to global culture and understanding.

So what's next for Hong Kong? With its rich cultural heritage and impressive infrastructure, it is only steps away from harnessing the full potential of the open internet. Hong Kong must continue to foster a grass-roots culture of innovation, collaboration and creativity. And, it must ensure that the internet remains free and open, with a flexible regulatory framework, especially in the area of copyright.

Only then will it be able to leverage the true potential of the open internet and tap into the talents of its vibrant society. If it does so, not only will the future match Hong Kong's cultural heyday – it will eclipse it.

Ross LaJeunesse is head of public policy for Google in Asia Pacific

Burma rediscovers its voice in global affairs

Pavin Chachavalpongpun welcomes its more assertive foreign policy amid continuing reforms

Burma has undergone serious political reform. The by-elections on April 1 saw the overwhelming victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy. Political changes will make Burma more accessible for outsiders. Under such conditions, the country is likely to become more integrated into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the broader Asia-Pacific region.

The process of opening up will make Burma's foreign policy more predictable, and its decision-making less constrained. Meanwhile, it requires Burma to adhere to regional norms and practices, particularly in performing as a responsible member of Asean. This will alleviate political and investment risks as more countries rethink their stance on trade and relations with Burma.

Already, Burma's former nemesis have restarted their dialogue with the regime. The European Union announced this week it was suspending most of its sanctions on the country. The US has also adjusted its position and is lifting some financial restrictions and its travel restrictions on Burmese diplomats.

It is clear that the Burmese leaders recognise the necessity of "diversifying" their foreign policy choices away from China. Such a diversification is becoming a prominent characteristic of Burma's strategy on interstate relations. In reorienting its policy,

Burma has re-emerged as an active player in international politics, while seeking more friends and partners to minimise the Chinese influence on its regime.

China is a rising power; so is India. The two have competed fiercely in maintaining strong footholds in Burma. Meanwhile, Burma has not hesitated to take advantage of their competition to ensure a greater degree of autonomy in the conduct of foreign policy.

Asean, too, has responded well to Burma's newfound confidence. Last year, Burma was awarded Asean's chairmanship for 2014. Burma voluntarily gave up its rotating Asean chair for 2006 following widespread objections from the international community because of the country's poor human rights record.

For Burma, finally serving as an Asean chair will further burnish the image of a regime seriously carrying out obligatory reforms and showing determination to become a responsible nation.

For Asean, Burma's political progress has satisfied one aspiration: an apparent vindication of Asean's policy of "constructive engagement" which concentrated on gradual change rather than harsh punishment – a policy often criticised by the West for its lack of authority and substance.

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