



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

We say we believe in strong families and in loving children. But do all of us in Singapore really love all our children?

IF we really love our children, we must be inclusive. Inclusiveness is primarily a mindset and value system, which all of us must demonstrate in thought and action. Inclusiveness here means that we must respect and value each child for who he or she is, not what he or she should be.

Ultimately, all children must be treated with equal dignity and compassion, and provided equal opportunities, no matter what their family backgrounds are - how rich their families are, how intelligent their parents are or the kind of family they come from. After all, children cannot choose their parents.

Yet, in many of our actions and perceptions, we discriminate against children.

First, we discriminate against the children of single parents and unwed mothers, who struggle harder because they do not have a spouse to share the load with. Unwed mothers are also not eligible for the Baby Bonus, and it's hard for a single parent to buy or rent a Housing Board flat. As employers and colleagues, do we go by the book, or are we aware, and are we more understanding and flexible towards such parents and mothers?

We also discriminate against the children of poor parents. The co-savings component of the Baby Bonus favours higher income families who are better able to save upfront to get the matching grant. Do we rejoice at our own good fortune or do we even question whether this is fair? Do we also have any doubts about the HOPE scheme, which illustrates that we value the children of less economically productive people less? What about the education system which increasingly favours those who can afford tuition for their children?

We discriminate against children whose fathers do not have stable incomes and whose mothers are foreigners. These foreign wives often find it hard to obtain a Long-Term Visit Pass, let alone Permanent Residency or a Long-Term Visit Pass-Plus. Children whose families' financial situation is dire often have mothers who are not allowed to work or to even stay in Singapore for the long term. Are we aware that these are Singaporean children who need a mother, and in making it harder for the mother, we make life hard for the children?

We discriminate against the children of stay-at-home mothers. Working mothers, especially the higher income ones, are eligible for huge tax benefits through the Working Mother's Tax Relief and receive more generous infant care and child care subsidies. Do we realise that stay-at-home mothers feel and are under-appreciated even though they tend to have more children on average and try to invest more time with their children?

Finally, the worst discrimination is against all unborn children who are aborted. This is a highly emotive issue, and many would defend vigorously the rights of women to choose. But who asks about the rights of the unborn children who are voiceless? If they are unloved by their mothers, there are many others in Singapore who would queue up to adopt them.



PHOTO: MARINE PARADE FAMILY SERVICE CENTRE

How to make this a great place for all children

We seem to love only certain kinds of children. We favour the ones who are from intact and financially stable families, and who have both parents working and with decent income.

Many Singaporeans are socially conservative when it comes to marital and family matters. Most of us wish for children to have parents who are married and have strong relationships. But after the children are born, we should treat them equally. They should not be made to suffer for whatever their parents did or did not do.

To achieve our vision to be one of the best countries in the world to raise children, we must do more than avoid discrimination at the personal level and as a nation.

As Catholic individuals and families, we should reflect on our own attitudes and actions towards children. If we truly believe that the development of the whole man and of all men depends on recognising that our human race is one single family (*Benedict XVI: Caritas in Veritate*, 8, 53), we must embrace the development of every child and not just our own as a priority. We are called to be families for other families.

As a nation, Singapore needs a critical

review of our social policies to create a total environment that makes us one of the best places in the world to bring up children.

We need to establish quality childcare and preschools for all. We have to revamp our education system, and allow a more flexible one that caters to a wide diversity of abilities and learning styles and foster a lifelong love for learning.

We must also strengthen families. Marital instability is a major concern. Parents also need much better work-life balance, more than just having childcare leave, so that they can spend more time with their children. There must be strong and clear social safety nets for all families who have children facing major health problems and disabilities, regardless of their income levels.

Creating the right environment for raising children is our responsibility as Catholic individuals, families and organisations and as Singaporeans. It is not the Government's job alone to fix them. Singapore is already a good place to raise children. With a little bit more effort, we can become a great place to raise children.

(This article is adapted from a speech delivered by Nominated Member of Parliament Laurence Lien in Parliament on April 8.)

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