



Declining birth rate not just linked to finances, say experts

PETALING JAYA: An NGO has called for a close study of Malaysia's declining birth rate to see whether non-economic factors can be linked to it.

Speaking to FMT, Federation of Reproductive Health Associations Malaysia head of programmes and projects Mohd Fadzrel Abu Bakar cautioned against drawing premature conclusions although he acknowledged a "strong relationship" between the birth rate and economic factors such as the increasing cost of living, a weak ringgit and rising inflation.

The statistics department released figures last week on births and deaths for 2020, and one of the numbers which stood out was last year's fertility rate of 1.7, which was the lowest in four decades.

The United Nations says that to maintain a stable population, a country's fertility rate cannot be lower than the "replacement level" of 2.1 births per woman.

Another key figure in the statistics department's report was the number of live births, which stood at 470,195, the lowest in more than a decade.

Fadzrel said there could be some link between the weak ringgit, the inflation rate and the declining birth rate.

"We know that in terms of the weak ringgit and the cost of living, which is rising, people who want to start a family will have to think twice," he said.

"Yes, cost is one of the factors if you're looking to see why the fertility rate has declined. But is it the main factor? That is a question that needs further exploration."

Fadzrel noted that Malaysia's fertility rate had been on the decline even before the national family planning programme was launched in 1966 and said the country's rapid economic growth, urbanisation and rising education levels were among factors causing the decline.

He added that increasing female workforce participation rates, postponement of marriage and childbirth, increased contraceptive use and difficulties in conceiving were among the other factors.

"It may not always be a cost factor," he said. "Sometimes it may be time. The age that women are getting married has risen. That too closes the fertility window for them to have more kids, and there could also be a reduction in fertility."

"We are not seeing this decrease just today or yesterday. It has been going on for the past 40 years."

Center for Market Education chief executive officer Carmelo Ferlito said Malaysia appeared to be following the trend of developed countries, where people tend to have fewer children in line with economic growth.

He added that there might also be a shift in values among members of the younger generation, who might find career ambitions, financial security, free time and the freedom to travel more appealing than “traditional values” such as raising a family.

“This is happening, fortunately or unfortunately, as part of the modernisation process,” he said.

“The cost of living can be a factor, but I think I would look at it as a temporary factor and I would not put it at the very base of this phenomenon.

“We probably need to look at the data, but I’m pretty sure that if you plot the relative rise in income against the fertility rate on a graph, you will find that the more relative income rises, the lower the fertility rate.”

Consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Dr John Teo said families at the lower end of the economic scale tended to have more children as they had less access to and awareness of family planning methods.

He also said global fertility rates had declined continuously over the decades with countries experiencing economic progress.

He said that the common features of developed countries – high standard and cost of living, high education levels, delays in childbirth for career development, the use of contraceptives and increasing childcare costs – all interacted to drive the continuous decline in fertility rates.

However, he said the proportion of how much each factor contributed to the decline might not be “readily apparent” due to their complex interconnected relationships.

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