

INTERACTIVE: In a greying Malaysia, youths opt to remain single

PETALING JAYA: Youths are shunning marriage and big families amid a decline in the country's birthrate that's projected to turn Malaysia into an ageing nation by 2030.

A nationwide survey published by Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) on July 1 revealed that less than half (41.8%) of youths aged between 18 and 35 plan on getting married and most would rather have smaller families.

From a total of 485 respondents aged between 18 and 35 surveyed, only 41.8% said they plan to marry.

Titled "More Malaysian Youths Likely to Shun Marriage, Bigger Families", respondents of the survey conducted by the varsity's Tun Tan Cheng Lock Centre for Social and Policy Studies, believe singlehood gives them more freedom in life and marriage increases one's financial commitment.

The survey data is consistent with the findings of the Department of Statistics Malaysia which showed that mothers having children between 35 and 44 years old increased in 2018 and 2019, while those having children between the age of 20 to 34 gradually declined in the same period.

The department's data also showed that in 2019, the crude birth rate for Malaysia was 15 births per thousand population, which had gradually decreased from 32.8 births per thousand population in 1971.

The fertility rate per woman has been on a downward trend since 1970 from 4.9 babies per woman dropping to 1.9 in 2017, and 1.8 in 2018.

Malaysia, according to the Department of Statistics, may become an ageing nation by 2030 with people aged 60 years and over surpassing 15 percent of the population.

These trends, said the centre's chairperson Chin Yee Mun, could adversely impact the country's labour force and its progress to becoming a developed nation.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities Centre for Research in Media and Communication Assoc Prof Dr Jamaluddin Aziz, however, noted that a huge population was not a must for Malaysia to become a high-income nation.

A more controlled population that the government could adequately provide services for, he said, was more important than a high birth rate.

"Developed nations are able to attract more economic migrants to their country, fulfilling jobs that locals may not be interested in," he said.

With new economic models and the rapid development of technology, more jobs requiring manpower are made redundant and have become obsolete over the years.

“In this context, quality citizens or manpower are more important than the quantity as a highly developed nation usually focuses on a better income per capita.

“Locals will occupy higher positions and earn more money. This will improve their standard of living.

“With an improved standard of living comes an improved age expectancy. This means people can stay productive at the workplace longer,” he added.

He said there is a bright side to a delay in youths getting married.

One important effect from this, he said, is that youths will be more mature to make more conscious decisions about having children and on focusing on quality than quantity.

“It can also be assumed that they may have better plans in place before they start a family, such as family and financial planning for their children’s education.

“With living standards increasing all the time, smart families are a necessity,” he added.

Monash University Malaysia School of Business head Assoc Prof Dr Grace Lee Hooi Yean said getting married late and having kids late are just some of the factors that may affect the country’s progress towards achieving a developed nation status.

Having an aging nation, shrinking families and brain drain are some of the other factors that come into play.

Malaysia will inevitably undergo a gradual demographic aging process, she said, in the coming decades.

According to World Data 2020, an aging population is a more prominent trend in developed countries, she said.

“Countries with a moderate aging population can pursue successful policies that capitalise on the benefits while minimising the costs.

“Besides an aging population, many other factors, such as the outflow of skilled persons, are a ‘brain drain’ threat to the country, which can adversely impact growth and development,” she said, adding that with the “right policies” in place, we can achieve developed nation status.

Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Social Sciences senior lecturer Dr Abdul Rais Abdul Latiff said getting married later and having fewer children are “merely indirect factors” in a country’s economic growth.

He stressed that young people cannot be blamed for their choices and that as long as they contribute to the country’s economic activity, they will contribute to the nation’s development.

“There are other factors that must be taken into account when evaluating Malaysia's efforts to achieve developed-country status, such as our mortality rate versus fertility rates.

“This has a direct impact on a country's demographic structure, which then has an impact on the country's economic growth.

“It is also important to note that the needs of small families are increasing, which is resulting in rising opportunity costs for having children as well as higher costs for raising and educating them.

“Migration will also be fuelled by technological advancements, particularly among young people who are looking to improve their economic situation.

“All of these factors contribute to the acceleration of a country's aging process,” he added.

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