

### Word from the 'Wart'<sup>1</sup>

What is fertility?

If there is one topic that risks being “all over the place” ... it would be this one on fertility or procreation.

First off, this is not a woman’s “problem”; fertility concerns men too. Like many of us now ultra-sensitive to ailments, I am surprised to read the flip side where WHO classifies *infertility as a disease* “... of the male or female reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse”<sup>2</sup>

Birthing a family is a most “pontificatable” discussion – why, why not, why cannot, why should not (as in before one is legally married). And the questions are generally lobbed at the woman, even when the man attests that he is involved in the decision.<sup>3</sup>

A myriad of rabbit holes emerges when discussing babies: duty, honor, filial piety, fulfillment, career advancement or not, work-life balance, sacrifices, bubbly joy of small feet pitter-patter, God’s blessings. And then we talk tiredness, lack of sleep, costs, financial planning. And then after a glass of wine, we careen to the feminist take on body/body politics, state dictates, citizenship.

The current, official Singapore definition of family is children post-marriage between a man and woman. So, from the get-go in Singapore, there are prerequisites already that hinder fertility because if not done “right,” there are consequences: social benefits are framed and delivered according to what you are and what you’ve done.

Singapore clocks roughly 40,000 babies a year from a citizen/PR population of ~3.6 million. It’s been reported that Singapore’s 2021 Total Fertility Rate is 1.12. Women are not only birthing few babies but later (“resident ASFRs Age-Specific Fertility Rates have been gradually declining for those aged below 30 years, while rising slightly for those aged 30 years and over. In 1980, fertility rates were highest among females aged 25-29 years. With the delay in childbirth among females, fertility rates have become highest among females aged 30-34 years instead.”)<sup>4</sup> A June 2017 writeup states that Singapore experienced the lowest population growth in over ten years including no growth in “citizen births”.<sup>5</sup> The 39,253 new babies in 2019 is 0.5% more than 2018 but still not at replacement level.<sup>6</sup> It’s been years of this same lament.

It’s supposed to be natural to conceive and birth children but we now view it as a decision. What if you don’t want children or can’t? Are you a “lesser” human or citizen or incomplete, unfortunate, unblest?

All this talk boils down to one thing -- pressure. And just who is imposing all this and on whom? Conversations can also get intrusive, like at family reunions. Like your personal, your person, your whole being is out there for all to judge.

And there’s no end to advice on babies – when, why, how many, what gender, ideal age gaps.

I view talk on new people/babies as political. It is a state agenda item and even enters international relations. None of this is new: throughout history, a conqueror’s loot often included new people; a diplomatic gift can be new people, often forcibly delivered. I was recently at a talk by a business titan and public intellectual and his answer to the question on the raging China-US relations started surprisingly with his observation that China is in trouble because its fertility rate has dipped below 1.0 during the pandemic (which did not fit the common trope that being stuck at home produces babies, like after blackouts in New York city). He said that this means China does not have the upper hand because in the long run, it will not have sufficient working labor to power growth. On top of that, societal pressures there will be so high from the accelerating aging population, unserviceable by decreasing numbers of young. “All US needs to do is wait ... for China to fall apart domestically”. The US might have the same declining birthrate pressure but it continues to build its population by allowing for immigration. To which he snidely remarked, “... and just who wants to immigrate to China?”

Lastly and this goes into familiar feminist territory ... the body ... how do I feel about being viewed as a baby-producer? It’s bewildering to be yo-yo’ed by different unsolicited baby comments through the years. To my mother circa 1950s: “You only have three children? So few?”; to my cousin circa 1980s: “My goodness, you have four kids?!!!”; to me circa 2000s: “You only

<sup>1</sup> *Wart* is short for Stalwart, which Exactly Foundation’s first resident Kevin Lee suggested that for future residences, I should pen a statement as “Exactly Foundation Stalwart” but I thought that label carried too much adult responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infertility>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/why-some-women-choose-to-be-child-free?fbclid=IwAR3CB7DqBdu4nTuKtj3lszTNXR1Ru4h6ODFmMb3vhpjUIGP\\_F6Z6z0cJlrc](https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/why-some-women-choose-to-be-child-free?fbclid=IwAR3CB7DqBdu4nTuKtj3lszTNXR1Ru4h6ODFmMb3vhpjUIGP_F6Z6z0cJlrc)

<sup>4</sup> Age-specific fertility rate (ASFR) is the number of live-births born to females of a specific age group, out of every thousand females in the same age group”. “Understand Age-Specific Fertility Rate and Total Fertility Rate”.

<https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/total-fertility-rate>

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Lee. *S’pore posts flat population growth; lowest in over 10 years*. TODAY 27 September 2017.

[http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapore-population-growth-flat-01-last-year-total-population-stable-561-million?cid=emarsys-today\\_TODAY%27s+morning+briefing+for+Sept+28%2C+2017+%28ACTIVE%29\\_newsletter\\_28092017\\_today](http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapore-population-growth-flat-01-last-year-total-population-stable-561-million?cid=emarsys-today_TODAY%27s+morning+briefing+for+Sept+28%2C+2017+%28ACTIVE%29_newsletter_28092017_today)

<sup>6</sup> “Number of babies born last year up by 0.5 per cent, after four consecutive years of decline”. *Straits Times*. 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020.

[https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/number-of-babies-born-last-year-up-by-05-per-cent-after-four-consecutive-years-of-decline?utm\\_source=emarsys&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=ST\\_Newsletter\\_PM&utm\\_term=Number+of+babies+born+last+year+up+by+0.5+per+cent%2C+after+four+consecutive+years+of+decline&utm\\_content=01%2F04%2F2020](https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/number-of-babies-born-last-year-up-by-05-per-cent-after-four-consecutive-years-of-decline?utm_source=emarsys&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ST_Newsletter_PM&utm_term=Number+of+babies+born+last+year+up+by+0.5+per+cent%2C+after+four+consecutive+years+of+decline&utm_content=01%2F04%2F2020)

have one? So lonely". Is our aging population situation today in Singapore calling again for another social engineering of women to ensure impressive economic uplift? How to have more children, Singapore-born and -bred? How can this talk be happening in today's Singapore where many women feel compelled to succeed on so many fronts: get degree, study lots, earn something, be filial, mother well, look good, stay healthy, be spiritual, keep husband happy, be gracious, age gracefully ... geez, where does it end? What's changed then – well, we don't have to cook or sew well.

As the saying goes, how long is a piece of string. This one on fertility is endless.

I am thankful and delighted to have met Kerry and work with her on discussing Singapore's fertility issues. I also want to thank the many project participants who so generously shared their stories. Though Kerry's "National Service" was commissioned in 2020, Covid restrictions gave us time to think through and plan. Kerry has meticulously crafted the mosaic of some different family configurations already before us in Singapore. Importantly, she encourages us to acknowledge the courage of many Singaporeans who pursue different paths. I recall my then 17-year-old's reply to a brash Singaporean interviewer who asked him how he feels about being from a broken home (our single mom household), to which he replied, "I don't know what broken is, it's the only home I know ... but I think I turned out all right". Yes!