



To Minister Tan Chuan-Jin, Ministry of Social and Family Development

Feedback: Unwed Mums Welfare Package Must Reflect Robust Thinking Process

I applauded Minister Tan Chuan-Jin's move to mandate an off day for maids when he took over the Manpower Ministry. As newly appointed Minister for Social and Family Development, Minister Tan can be lauded again for displaying compassion to single unwed mums. As one involved in work for the needy myself, I hope to offer some perspectives.

As much as we should offer the best possible support to unwed mums, equalizing of "benefits" to all mums conflate with societal ideals for child rearing and marriage. As such, support to unwed mums must reflect a robust thinking process that is careful not to compromise society's treasured ideals and mores.

1. The state can never neutralise the lost of a father with welfare, so fatherlessness must still be discouraged

First of all, we must dismiss any notion that the state can be a sufficient surrogate father to a child. Neither can the state ever empower a single mum sufficiently to replace the child's need for a father. Under Article 7(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), every child shall have *"as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents."* This article upholds the fact that every child needs a father and a mother.

The Marriage and Parenthood Package incentivises parenthood within marriage for the best benefit for the child. The state can never support a fatherless child holistically simply by extending the benefits of the Marriage and Parenthood Package to single unwed mums. In this, the purpose of the Marriage and Parenthood Package differ from that of supporting unwed mums. One enhances public good – hence, the state can be seen to be providing "benefits" to encourage it; while the other mitigates social cost – hence, the state can be seen to be providing welfare in a non-ideal, real, but discouraged situation.

The state must be careful not to incentivise the formation of other family structures that steer away from the intact (married) biological father and mother family unit. Such alternative family structures are not ideal for society and need to be discouraged as it compromise the child.

Nevertheless, real situations exist that many unwed mums had partners who walked away from their fathering responsibility. These unwed mums are to be applauded for their bravery and choice. Some form of welfare can be given in recognition of that, as well as to empower them to better care for their child.

However, if the state simply equalises the benefits given to married mums and the welfare offered for unwed mums, without providing for any differentiation, the state will end up encouraging the formation of unwed-single-parent family households – which will be detrimental to children – at the cost of society. Hence, as much as society sympathises with single parents and want to help them compassionately, "equalising benefits and welfare" cannot be a one-size fit all solution as this is never a zero sum game from the child's perspective. We cannot remove a father then hope to make it up by giving welfare. A perspective

focused on the long-term future of children in Singapore would build a social norm that discourages the “removal of the father” but provides assistance to genuine cases where brave mothers are caught by the irresponsibility of their partners.

2. In offering welfare, the state must distinguish the genuineness of the cases and not succumb to making uncritical, populist decisions that actually harm the child and society

Secondly, the state must demonstrate the wisdom to understand and discern the intention of each case whenever a child is born out of wedlock.

While most unwed mums did not willingly choose to have their child born out of wedlock, the fact is there exists liberal ideologies today that frown upon the institution of marriage.

For example, women who subscribe to feminism may denounce their need for a man in child rearing. How about a lesbian who wishes to have a child as an unwed mum so she can ultimately form a same-sex household with children? For women with such intentions, extending the benefits of the Marriage and Parenthood Package to all unwed mums uncritically would encourage them in their pursuits.

Such cases may be rare now but it is rare precisely because our culture frowns upon such alternative family ideologies. Our laws and policies do not permit alternative family units that compromise the rights of children and subvert societal mores. However, if the Ministry of Social and Family Development is to implement a blanket “benefit extension” to all single unwed mums without discerning the intentions and circumstances surrounding each case, it will incentivize the formation of such alternative “families”.

This will compromise the children caught in between their mother’s want for a child and their own need for a father. It can also spark unhealthy changes to our moral fabric.

3. The state must maintain that the best help is to secure public good and true help is holistic i.e. through the empowering of extended families and the community

Thirdly, in taking care of an individual, we must not forget that more individuals are actually taken care of by public good. Hence, the real social good is to enhance public good. We uphold individual good when we uphold public good. We should not for the sake of helping individuals, compromise the greater good of upholding public good.

We see this natural principle at play all around society. For example, in helping the poor but able, while it seems more straightforward to offer cash handouts unconditionally to alleviate immediate suffering, this fails to alleviate poverty – and more suffering – in the long term. Instead, it increases the poverty mindset, as it enforces the “I am weak and unable, and I can only depend on you” – savior and clutch – mentality.

The only true form of help is one that is holistic, which often involves personal, loving but firm, committal encouragement to motivate the poor towards taking ownership of their lives. The chance of success increases when the poor feels a sense of dignity that comes from responsible undertakings that they can be proud of. Work plays an important part in building this sense of self-worth, as one feels fulfilled when one is able to achieve something and provide with his hands.

True help is to journey the poor towards this. Quick “one-stop-solve-it-all”, cash-handouts and “welfare” solutions that demotivate the poor from the need to work, encouraging them towards laziness, harm them ultimately.

All over the developed world, we are witnessing the failure of the welfare state fails as it flaunts this fundamental principle of upholding public good for social good. People involved on the ground in systemic helping work are often very clear about this blindspot that policy-makers or top-down organizational structural leaders may have.

I believe this is a principle that has long been understood by the Singapore Government. The Ministry of Social and Family Development's mode of helping the abled needy has always been conditional, requiring them to pick up on their employment status, for example. The Wage Credit Scheme introduced at the last recession encouraged employers to play a role in safeguarding employment and avoided having to provide direct welfare handouts to a people who might fall into need. This ingenious move turned the global retrenchment tide around for Singapore and upheld the hard-working attitude of Singapore workers at the same time, making Singapore one of the fastest nations to recover from the recession. However, if the state is to now, uncritically equalize the benefits for married mums with the welfare to all unwed mums, it will fall short of this principle of upholding public good, and end up harming more individuals eventually.

Can our government find the right "balance" or the same *ingenuity* again? I remain hopeful. Hence my letter.

Conclusion:

The Government and our policy makers must not lose this overarching principle that our founding father, Lee Kuan Yew in-built into our system. Public good must be above individual rights; rule of law must be premised into individual freedom. This system of governance has led to Singapore's success over the last 50 years. The review by the Ministry of Social and Family Development appears to threaten this underlying, foundational framework where our society, laws and policies have been operating on. If carried out flippantly, it might be a precedence that will open floodgates that can change our social norms – the moral fabric of our people. Our prosperity that is also based upon a responsible attitude in our people might be compromised. May we not lose the spirit and attitude of our pioneering generation, who placed social and moral responsibilities above their own wants. We need to uphold such timeless principles, or our society will disintegrate in no time.

Hence, this unwed mums welfare package review must be carried out cautiously and intelligently. The Ministry must spare no details in understanding the complications and the implications of every decision, while trying their best to help our people in need without compromising public good.

Summary:

How can the state support unwed mums without incentivizing unwed but natural, single-parent families and without allowing alternative-unnatural families – which imposes a structural injustice of fatherlessness on children – to form? This is the primary question this review must aim to achieve. Following this concern that public good will not be upheld, the second question the review must try to answer is: What is a holistic way to help single-parent families? Holistic help cannot be achieved by mere welfare for unwed mums. Sincere help requires the ministry to think of ways that can incentivize the community and social forces, to come alongside these families in need.

While I have not tried to review every detail comprehensively myself, here are some vague thoughts and suggestions for the Ministry's consideration. I hope it can be of help.

Suggestions:

1. Offer welfare to unwed fathers who take up responsibility for the child, to encourage co-parenting
2. Equalise child-care leave for unwed mums and married mums (this might probably be the only justifiable "equalisation" that does not unfairly flaunt the principle of upholding public good)
3. Offer welfare to unwed mums who are legally underage girls through parents, guardians, or community counsellors
4. Tag welfare to unwed mums' willingness to seek support from community
5. Offer welfare to extended families or centres that homes the unwed mum and her child
6. Offer subsidies to unwed mums seeking counseling

7. Do not offer any welfare to unwed mums with children born through unnatural means e.g. IVF, surrogacy
8. Do not offer any welfare to unwed mums whose father of their child is unverifiable
9. Do not offer any welfare to unwed mums whose circumstances surrounding the childbirth is suspicious, unknown
10. Do not offer any welfare for unwed mums with found evidence of activism for unnatural-alternative-families or unnatural lifestyles
11. Do not equalise housing or IVF benefits of married mums with unwed mums
12. Make welfare for unwed mums an applicable process, not entitled by default

Thank you for your kind attention and reading.