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## Re-examine society to prevent falling birth rates: experts

By Judith Tan

Demographic experts warn that falling birth rates in Asian cities like Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan will continue, unless society's attitudes towards women in these areas are changed.

Both men and women in cosmopolis like Singapore get caught up in rat race and even more so during a global downturn, say demographic experts.

They say the fear of losing a job results in workers giving 150 percent of their time, often at the expense of the family, especially when women are still expected to work and raise families.

So it is not too surprising that in Singapore, the total fertility rate plunged to 1.4 per woman, way below the replacement rate of 2.1.

Monetary incentives such as the Baby Bonus Scheme do not seem to be enough of a driving force for Singaporean women to have more children.

Thus, experts say for the authorities to address the issue, they need to look at both parents rather than just the mothers alone.

Professor Peter McDonald, Head (Demography & Sociology Programme), Australian National University, said, "You have to have gender equity approach here otherwise women are going to have to do what men are doing. Young women, they can do it. They have the skills...It's a family-based solution that you need. It's both fathers and mothers. Countries that focus on women only fail."

He said Norway and Sweden have managed to keep their fertility rate at about 1.8, and both parents are given time off with pay - together or separately - until junior is 8 years old.

He advised that this could be one approach to boost the birth rate in Singapore.