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**HEADLINE:** **BABY** BLUES: S'pore not alone...

**BODY:**

*Taiwan: 1.5 births per woman*

*Singapore: 1.42*

*South Korea: 1.4*

*Japan: 1.3*

Better support facilities and change in work environment key to encouraging more births, say workshop participants

AT 1.42 births per woman, Singapore's fertility rate has plunged to its lowest - never mind the **Baby** Bonus.

But Singapore is not alone in facing this **baby** drain, said experts yesterday. South Korea and Taiwan have birth rates of about 1.4 and 1.5 respectively, while Japan is struggling with 1.3. And a view that came up at an international workshop looking into fertility decline in Asia yesterday: Money alone cannot encourage more births.

Professor Tsay Ching-Lung of the Institute of Economics, at Taiwan's Academia Sinica, said that Taiwan was debating the introduction of tax breaks.

'But it takes a lot to get people to change their minds,' he said.

'Raising a child is very expensive and people don't think that the tax break will make an impact on reducing the cost.'

In Singapore, the Baby Bonus takes the form of cash incentives for the second or third Singaporean child.

Over six years, the bonus amounts to \$3,000 for the second child and \$6,000 for the third child.

Also, the Government matches each dollar parents put into a Baby Bonus account, up to a

maximum of \$1,000 for the second child and \$2,000 for the third.

About 16,000 babies have benefited from the Baby Bonus scheme since it started in April last year.

Japan has also tried its own version of the Baby Bonus: Parents get a 5,000 yen (S\$70) allowance a month for the first two children, and 10,000 yen for each subsequent child, while the kids are still in pre-school.

They can also opt to take child-care leave and still receive 40 per cent of their salary.

But according to Professor Naohiro Ogawa from Nihon University in Japan, only a small number of workers use the schemes. The reason: Pressure to continue working from their peers and bosses.

The workshop was organised by the Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis and the National University of Singapore's Family Studies Research Programme. It was held at the NUS yesterday.

Professor Peter McDonald, head of the Demography and Sociology Programme at the Australian National University in Canberra, told reporters that mere monetary incentives would not work.

Unless there were better support facilities, such as child-care alternatives, and a change in the work environment, the problem was likely to persist, he said.

He added: 'Working parents are dedicating 150 per cent to their jobs. They work long hours and there is a continual need to acquire new skills or education to improve their personal worth so they will continue to be attractive to employers. They can't run a family at the same time.'

He suggested adopting schemes currently in place in Europe.

One scheme, for example, allows parents to work part time, while retaining 75 per cent of their salary, until the child is eight years old.

In Norway, parents have 12 months' paid leave for each child. But each parent can take only nine months at most. 'So if they want the full benefit, Dad has to take some time off to care for the child, which introduces gender equality too,' he said.