

IPS-TSAO Foundation Conference

“Successful Ageing in Singapore: Older Men and Women in a Society of Longevity”

24 October 2008, The Pines.

A special emphasis of this conference was the sharing of research and data on the subject ageing and gender differences in this regard. It also featured a dialogue with the Minister in charge of Ageing Issues, Mr Lim Boon Heng, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office.

Singapore, as elsewhere, faces the phenomenon of the feminisation of ageing. The sex ratio among the elderly favours women (although the reverse is true of the older Indian community). While both men and women are living longer, differences in their life course has meant that women are more dependent on family members for financial support. Older women are also more prone to health and disability issues compared to older men although they tend also to outlive men. These have implications for them to age successfully.

Some highlights of the presentations during the conference include:

- While older women indeed have lower CPF balances compared to men, most of the older women who were home-makers jointly owned their homes with their spouses, which they could presumably draw on for financial security
- The CPF has further liberalised the Minimum Top-up Scheme to encourage family members to play a greater role in contributing to the retirement adequacy of older women. From 1 November 2008, CPF members are allowed to top up for a greater range of family members and receive additional income tax relief.
- While a higher amount of C class bills could be covered by Medishield from 1 December 2008, premiums would also be raised to provide for the enhanced coverage. Premiums for older members would exceed \$1000 per annum, raising the question of affordability for these members. With elements of co-payment and deductibles, “sandwiched” Singaporeans who are unable to afford comprehensive

private plans which also bear high premiums and unable to qualify for Medifund, would need retirement savings to pay for their healthcare.

- On a more positive note, there was gender balance in insurance coverage in private Shield plans as these are usually bought on the basis on insuring the entire family, which entailed that spouses and children were also covered.
- As the majority of Singaporean elderly prefer to age in place, the Lease Buyback Scheme and subletting are options that would allow the elderly to do so while enjoying a stream of monthly income. For three-room HDB flats, the Lease Buyback Scheme is a more attractive option. However, gender difference remains given differences in longevity.

Questions and suggestions that arose during the discussions included:

- The viability and possible scope of a preventive primary healthcare insurance scheme which provides for medical checkups and health screenings, as opposed to palliative and acute healthcare.
- Having a clearly articulated vision of the type of society that Singapore wants to create for the elderly, rather than responding with piecemeal measures, which sometimes contradict other existing policies.
- Addressing issues that arise from the natural process of ageing (e.g. deteriorating eyesight) and not only those that respond to acute conditions.
- Addressing ageism and mainstreaming the old.
- Promoting inter-generational activities and those that involve the entire family.

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