



Newsletter – August 2008

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An exception to the norm – Stay-at-home Mom

If I were a new mother today in Singapore, I would find it extremely difficult to decide if I should work or be a full time stay-at-home mom.

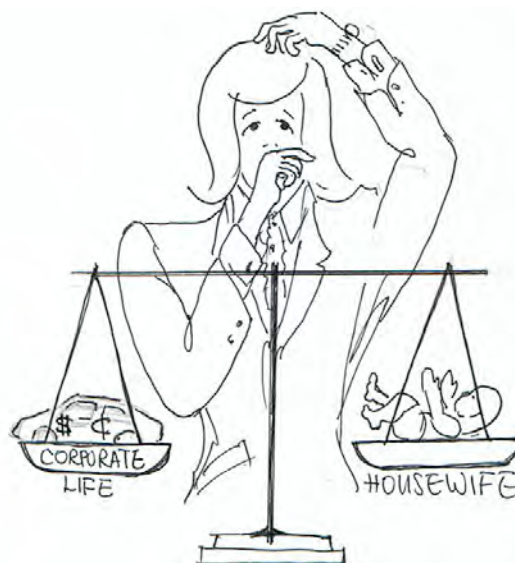
The carrots that the Singapore Government dangles in front of the new mothers are just too good to miss. Just to name a few; there is the tax rebate for working mother to employ a full time domestic maid. There is a further tax rebate of 15% of her earned income in the year that she had her child. There is the grandparents' tax relief if the grandparents were helping to look after the children, the enhanced child relief for each of her children up to a maximum of \$20k per child depending on age of the child. In contrast, the father only gets a paltry child relief of \$2k per child and \$2k for wife relief if the spouse is not employed. Moreover, there is easy accessibility to full time domestic help, subsidised child care centres, and now infant care centres, and, extended maternity leave. These would entice any mother to go back to the workforce without even batting an eyelid.

Jokingly, I told my husband that with such a biased tax structure, it makes economic sense for him to become a househusband than for me to become a housewife, assuming our incomes are the same. He heartily agreed to exchange roles with me, when I can find a job that could match his pay and on the condition that I hire a full time domestic help to look after him as well!

To be a stay-at-home mom is, an option that few young mothers here would even consider and even fewer would be courageous enough to take up the challenge. In fact, in our society today, dual income families are more common than single income families. The high cost of living is enough reason to justify why women have to work for an income.

This dual income trend can be attributed to the government's successful social engineering policy in encouraging women to join the workforce during the 1970s and 1980s to support the economic expansion of the nation. Without the contribution of the women, I am sure Singapore would not have progressed as rapidly as it had for the 43 years since independence.

From the beginning, girls were given equal opportunities in education and job employment. The mindset of most parents then was that if the girls were educated, they would be able to get jobs easily and support themselves as well as their parents. Education was seen as a gateway to a better life, and for some, to wealth. And the mindset remains unchanged today. The greatest opposition these girls (now mothers themselves)



faced for opting to become stay-at-home moms came mainly from their very own parents. The women themselves, too, believe “ why bother to study so much and waste my education by being a stay-at-home mom?”

When my husband and I were living in the States 15 years ago, I met a Japanese housewife who was living there with her husband. Her husband was a lecturer in a university in Japan and was in the States for sabbaticals. I learnt that they were childless. Later I found out that she graduated with a Law degree but had never practised law because she became a housewife shortly after her marriage. I asked her the same question most Singaporean parents would ask their daughters when the latter decide to become stay-at-home mom. Her reply was that it was their (Japanese) culture for a married woman to become housewife and look after the family. In my mind, I was thinking that surely, looking after a husband should not be that much an effort and work that one has to give up one's career.

I would not give up working, just to look after my husband. Even when we had 2 children, I told my husband that based on the economic theory of Marginal Utility (MU), it was not worth giving one's career to stay at home with the children. 3 children would perhaps be the breakeven point. Three years later, when Baby no. 3 arrived, I conveniently forgot about my MU theory or breakeven point concept. I even changed to a better paid, and even more challenging job. By then, we had committed ourselves to a new mortgage and surviving on a single income was out of the question.

I also enjoyed a tad too much, the fast paced life of the corporate world to ever want to give it up completely. In the corporate world, as much as there is stress, there is also the excitement and the sense of satisfaction when deadlines are met, targets or goals achieved, recognition acknowledged and of course, the financial independence. I am sure I am not the only woman who enjoyed the adrenalin from the corporate world. An ex-colleague of mine was “dying” to get back to office after her 2 months' maternity leave ended. She said she was bored to tears at home. She could not imagine herself being a housewife.

That too was what I thought of myself, at that time. But God was very patient with me. He made the transition slowly and gently for me so that I would not suffer from any “withdrawal symptoms”. Due to the special needs of one of my children, my boss at that time offered me a part time position. I was the first employee in Asia to try out the part-time scheme. Working part time turned out to be even more stressful than holding a full time job, but I had pockets of time here and there for my children.

After working part time for 2 ½ years, I think God decided that it was time for me to go full timeas a mother. I wouldn't have done it on my own. Inevitably, I would calculate the opportunity cost first, and the decision, based on financial number alone is always against it. The final call came when my husband had to relocate to a new city for work and I was finally “forced” by circumstance to go full time.

A full-time mother is not worth \$22k salary that was calculated by some consultants and published in an article in the Straits Times a few months ago. Most of the mothers are not in the same league as the gourmet chefs or the executive housekeepers in the hotel or the private chauffeurs that the calculation was based on. In my view, it is worth much more than \$ and cents.

How do you measure those spontaneous moments when your little ones come rushing out of schools or at your doorsteps brimming with joy and excitement and wanting to share with you the happenings of the day? How do you put a dollar value to the precious tears they shed or the disappointments that weigh in their hearts when they had a bad day in school, and are just bursting to pour their misery on you upon reaching home? When I was working, it was my mother who had the privilege of sharing such precious and tender moments with them. Now that I am at home with them most of the time, I realised how much I had missed out on these moments during my 3 older children's younger days. To this day, they are very attached to my mother and I remembered how much they missed her and pined for her when we were living overseas.

It is the innermost desire to share my life with theirs that I decided not to return to work when we returned to Singapore. While there are days when I felt like I am their walking dictionary or spell checker, I know that my presence is not solely for their academic progress.

I am there to guide them in their faith formation. I am a model in helping them live their Christian lives. I am responsible for their character development and their maturity. I am there to teach them moral values that conform to our Christian beliefs. I am there to listen to their anecdotes about their friends or school life. Through all these interactions, I get to know them better just as they get to know me better. I may be able to interact with them, guide and guard them just as well while working, but to me, there would be lesser opportunities to point out real life lessons during the course of the day.

I know of some mothers who gave up their careers so that they can devote their time to their children's academic work. Some even measure their value and self worth by the academic results of their children or the financial success of their children's working lives. I feel that using such a materialistic yardstick is short sighted.

As one full-time mother in my Mother's Prayer Group shares, even if at the end of the day, our children decide to stray, do we blame ourselves? No, this - our time as their mother, is the best gift we have given them and whether they treasure it is up to them. We have made our best efforts as mothers and that is enough for God.

Whether one chooses to be a full time mother is a personal as well as a family choice. However, one has to be cautious and not be swayed by societal pressure. While it has now become the norm rather than the exception for women to work, I strongly urge young mothers to pray about their calling to motherhood and to be strong enough to make the financial sacrifice if one has to. After all, it is those initial years of your children's lives that they need you most.

I regretted having waited too long before I took the plunge.

..... by Joanna

Reflections

Familiaris Consortio – Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Pope John Paul 11 on the Family Part 3 – Role of the Christian Family – #23 Women and Society

“There is no doubt that the equal dignity and responsibility of men and women fully justifies women's access to public functions. On the other hand the true advancement of women requires that clear recognition be given to the value of their maternal and family role, by comparison with all other public roles and all other professions. Furthermore, these roles and professions should be harmoniously combined if we wish the evolution of society and culture to be truly and fully human.”

“ While it must be recognised that women have the same right as men to perform various public functions, society must be structured in such a way that wives and mothers are not in practice compelled to work outside the home, and that their families can live and prosper in a dignified way even when they themselves devote their full time to their own family

Furthermore, the mentality which honors women more for their work outside the home than for their work within the family must be overcome. This requires that men should truly esteem and love women with total respect for their personal dignity, and that society should create and develop conditions favoring work in the home.”