

Hong Kong's Family Trends and Their Policy Implications

A. FAMILY TRENDS

1. Resilient familism
2. The marriage institution in decline
3. The proliferation of aberrant forms of family
4. Towards more gender equality in the family

1. *Resilient familism*

- (a) Increasing numerical dominance of the 'nuclear family';
- (b) Prevalence of traditional family values and norms;
- (c) Active mutual aid networks among kin and relatives

- (a) **'Nuclear family' type of households remain the dominant type of household composition**

One unextended nuclear family, in %	
1981	54.4
1986	59.2
1991	61.6
1996	63.6

Decline in household size

Average household size	
1986	3.7
1991	3.4
1996	3.3

(b) **People still hold fast to some traditional family values and norms**

% of respondents endorsing traditional family values and norms (agreeing)	1990	2000
Newly married couples living away from their parents	62.1	46.6
Children are obliged to support their parents	56.1	68.3
Children should have a sense of filial obligation to their parents	-	94.2
Siblings should continue to give help to one another even after they have their own families	76.7	86.1

(c) **Mutual aid networks among kin and relatives still active**

Social Relations Rendering and Receiving Assistance in the Past Six Months, 1990, in % :

	Rendering Assistance to Parents	Rendering Assistance to Siblings	Receiving Assistance from Parents	Receiving Assistance from Siblings	Assistance Among Relatives
Any form of help	76.1	72.8	66.5	63.2	49.2
Help during illness	74.6	56.9	64.6	48.0	30.6
Financial aid	64.4	50.0	47.6	39.0	23.0
Care of children	20.2	30.8	39.6	22.1	17.7
Advice over important matters	69.5	69.4	65.7	63.5	36.2
Expensive gifts	37.0	23.9	27.3	21.0	12.6

1. *Multi-lateral flows both inter-generational and among kin of the same generation;*
2. *multi-functional types of assistance*

Persons from whom one sought help, in %

		Nuclear family members	Kin & Relatives	Friends, Workmates, Neighbours	Market & Social Service	No idea, No answer, Don't Know
When there was someone sick in the family	1990	71.2	21.8	1.1	2.6	4.7
	2000	44.8	37.5	3.1	5.3	9.3
When the family was troubled by financial problems	1990	55.2	25.5	10.7	0.0	8.1
	2000	38.3	35.4	12.5	5.1	8.7
When baby-sitting was needed	1990	42.7	40.5	5.8	1.7	9.3
	2000	26.4	44.8	5.2	12.2	11.3
When there were problems in one's work	1990	56.6	6.8	26.8	1.5	8.3
	2000	42.4	8.6	31.9	2.6	14.6
When there were marital or family problems	1990	59.5	14.2	13.0	1.4	12.1
	2000	37.0	19.7	26.2	5.8	11.3
When one was considering buying expensive goods or making important investment	1990	58.3	16.3	10.1	2.6	12.7
	2000	54.6	18.5	4.9	5.8	16.2
When one was upset and needed some to talk to	1990	50.1	4.7	35.3	1.4	8.6
	2000	28.4	8.6	53.2	1.1	8.6
When one needed advice or information on certain matters	1990	27.5	8.2	45.5	4.6	14.7
	2000	13.9	8.2	57.6	5.5	14.9

Compared with 1990, in 2000 :

1. Families are less ensconced within nuclear families, less inward-oriented, and less dependent on resources within nuclear families;
2. Families are more prepared to turn to kin and relatives to seek help from them;
3. They are also more ready to turn to social networks beyond kin and relatives to seek their help;
4. Also, they are more ready to reach out beyond their social networks to seek help from social services and the market.

- The 'modified extended family' is apparently still very much a reality;
- There could be disjunctures between beliefs in traditional family values and the practice of these values.
- Family policies should aim at 'modified extended families' and find ways to support them.

2. *The Marriage Institution in Decline*

- (a) Postponement of marriage;
- (b) More families with fewer children or no children at all;
- (c) More marriages break down;
- (d) Lack of faith in marriage;
- (e) Pro-children attitude in decline;
- (f) More tolerant attitude towards divorce;
- (g) Rather tolerant attitudes towards cohabitation;
- (h) More tolerant attitudes towards outside-marriage activities

(a) **Postponement of Marriage**

(a)-1 Proportion of Never Married (%)

	1986	1991	1996
Male			
40 – 44	8.6	9.9	10.1
45 – 49	7.4	6.4	7.5
Female			
40 – 44	3.8	6.8	9.0
45 – 49	2.4	3.7	5.9

(a)-2 Singulate Mean Age at Marriage

	Male	Female
1986	29.7	27.1
1991	30.5	28.2
1996	31.2	29.1

(b) **More families with fewer children or without children**

	No. of children, in %	
	Households with 2 or more children	Households without children under 15
1986	27	54
1991	22	58
1996	19	61

(c) **More marriages break down**

	Divorce petitions filed	Divorce decrees	Crude divorce rate (per 1,000 population)	General divorce rate (per 1,000 population aged 15 +)
1972	532	354	0.09	0.13
1980	2421	2087	0.42	0.56
1990	6767	5551	0.98	1.25
1995	10292	9404	1.53	1.90
1999	12732	13408	2.00	2.42

(d) **Lack of faith in marriage**

% agreeing :

	Hong Kong	Beijing	Britain	Irish Republic	USA	West Germany
Married people are generally happier than unmarried people	38	49	33	46	51	38

(e) **Pro-children attitudes in decline**

% agreeing :

Marriage without children is not fully complete	60.2
Having children interferes too much with the freedom of parents	58.4
Married people must have children	34.9
The purpose of marriage is to have children	16.6

(f) **Attitudes towards divorce (%)**

	Disagree	It Depends	Agree	No idea / No Answer
The government should make it more difficult to divorce	37.5	14.0	30.6	18.0
Married people with children should not divorce	37.2	27.9	27.7	7.2
It is all right to marry a divorced person with children	27.3	16.3	44.5	11.9

(g) **Attitude towards cohabitation**

Advice would give to a young woman : Hong Kong and other countries (%)

	Hong Kong	Beijing	Britain	Irish Republic	USA	Germany
Live alone without a steady partner	-	-	4	3	9	5
Date a steady partner, without marrying	5	16	-	-	-	-
Live with a steady partner, without marrying	3	1	4	1	3	11
Live with a steady partner and then marry	19	4	43	32	26	50
Marry without living together first	54	76	37	59	46	19

(h) **More tolerant attitudes towards outside-marriage activities**

% disapproving :	1988	1995
Cohabitation	58.2	
Men		38.3
Women		47.3
Men's extra-marital relations	85.1	
Sexual		74.2
Romantic		64.1
"Second Wife"		86.2
Women's extra-marital relations	90.3	
Sexual		84.6
Romantic		69.7
Prostitution	76.4	
Men		76.8
Women		86.2
Homosexuality	92.6	
Male		82.7
Female		80.6

- Signs are clear that the marriage institution is in decline.

3. *Proliferation of Aberrant Forms of Family*

- (a) more childless families
- (b) more split families
 - * “astronaut families” resulting from emigration
 - * “split families” resulting from cross-border marriages and sex forays
- (c) more single-parent families
- (d) more elderly people living alone
- (e) cohabitation

(a) **Childless families**

	Households without Children Under 15, in %
1986	54
1991	58
1996	61

(b) **Split families**

(b)-1 “Astronaut families” resulting from the strategic placements of male bread-winners in Hong Kong and wives and children in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and other destinations of emigration.

(b)-2 “Split families” resulting from cross-border marriages and sex forays

b2.1 According to one study, between 1989 and 1998, as many as 195,622 Hong Kong residents went back to the Mainland to get married.

b2.2 According to enquires conducted via the General Household Survey in 1999 :

- As many as 286,300 children were born to Hong Kong residents **within** registered marriage.
- As many as 505,000 children were born to Hong Kong residents **outside** registered marriage.
- As many as 209,400 Hong Kong residents have Mainland children born within registered marriage.
- Among 83,700 Hong Kong residents who had Mainland children born within registered marriage, 31,000 had spouses

still living in the Mainland

- 61,000 Hong Kong residents who did not have Mainland children born within registered marriage had spouses still living in the Mainland.
- The prolonged separation of family members and their subsequent reunion is stressful to families involved. Giving these “split families” the support they need to tide them over stressful moments should clearly be an objective of family policy.

(c) **Single-parent families**

Number of single parents :

1986	36,541	}	-5.5%
1991	34,538		
1996	42,309	}	+ 22.5%

		Single Mothers		Single Fathers	
		<u>1991</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>1996</u>
No. of Single parents	(No.)	23059	30402	11479	11907
		(+ 32%)		(+ 3.7%)	
Marital					
Status	(No.)	11852	111237	3394	2750
Widowed	(%)	51.4	36.6	34.8	23.1
Divorced / Separated	(No.)	11207	(+ 72%)	7484	9156
	(%)	48.6		63.4	65.2
Age					
Median age	(Yrs)	41	40	43	42
Educational attainment					
Primary or below	(%)	57.4	42.0	48.0	35.9
Secondary	(%)	35.4	47.9	42.5	50.8
Above secondary	(%)	7.2	10.1	9.5	13.2
Activity Status					
Working	(%)	64.1	60.0	86.5	83.6
Non working	(%)	35.9	40.0	13.5	16.4

* In 1996 :

- ◆ 72% of the single parents were single mothers.
 - ◆ 63% of the single mothers and 77% of the single fathers were divorced / separated.
 - ◆ Between 1991 and 1996, single mothers who were divorced / separated increased by 72%.
 - ◆ Single parents were getting younger.
 - ◆ Single parents were more well educated.
 - ◆ There were more single parents not working.
- Not much is known about how single parents and their children live their lives. For example, we do not know whether they live with their extended kin and whether and how they draw on support from kinship networks.
 - Single parents who are earning low incomes, who are non-working, and who have few connections to social networks (e.g. new immigrants from the Mainland) are likely to be having many problems and difficulties.

(d) **More elderly persons aged 60 and over living alone**

		% of Increase
1981	59,534	
1986	70,865	+ 19.0%
1991	79,718	+ 12.5%
1996	91,967	+ 15.4%

- ◆ In 1999, among elderly persons aged 60 and over living alone, 80% were ever married and 20% never married.
- ◆ Of those who were ever married and who had children living in Hong Kong, the main reason for not living with children was that “children moved out after marriage” (63%) and that “homes were too crowded” (17%).
- ◆ Of all elderly persons aged 60 and over living alone, 27% regularly received cash income (\$2,000) from children, 39% received Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) (around \$3,100).
- ◆ Of all elderly persons aged 60 and over living alone, 40% said they had worries. The top two worries were : “not being taken care of in case of serious illness” and “not having enough money to spend”.

(e) **Cohabitation**

We do not know how extensive this is. The public generally approves cohabitation leading to marriage. It does not approve cohabitation per se. Cohabitation is very probably, therefore, a transitional arrangement, a station on the road to marriage.

4. ***Towards More Gender Equality in the Family***

- (a) Attitudes towards gender roles in the family on the whole “traditional”;
- (b) Distribution of household labour generally follows the traditional gender-based pattern;
- (c) Most decisions have been jointly made by husbands and wives together;
- (d) Dual-earner families are more egalitarian than families with just husbands working.

(a) **Attitudes towards gender roles in the family still generally traditional**

Attitudes towards women working (%) :

	Disagree	It Depends	Agree	Don't Know / No Answer
The family suffers when the woman has a full-time job	11.9	14.0	70.1	4.1
A woman cannot establish as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work	18.3	17.4	55.5	8.7
A woman will be happier if she does not go out to work	33.7	22.7	39.5	4.1

- Working women are less traditional in their attitudes than women who do not work.
- Young women are less traditional than older women.

(b) **Distribution of household labour**

- It generally follows the traditional, gender-based pattern : most chores and duties are still primarily wives' responsibilities.
- In families in which husbands work and wives stay home, most household chores and duties gravitate to the wives.

- ◆ When both husbands and wives work, wives have to do housework all the same. But they tend to do less. Also, husbands are more likely to become involved in house-work.

(c) **Decision-making**

- ◆ Most decisions have been jointly made by husbands and wives together.
- ◆ Dual-earner families are significantly more egalitarian than families with just husbands working.
- As more women work, which is the trend, it is likely that families will be more and more gender-equal.

B. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These trends and changes call for :

1. policies which admit the continuing presence, and draw upon the cultural and social resources of Chinese familism;
2. policies which recognize the existence of modified extended families and their functions, and which aim to strengthen these families and lend them strong support;
3. policies which recognize the growing diversity of family forms, are sensitive to variations in, and respond to, their problems and needs;
4. policies which recognize and anticipate the decline of the marriage institution and its consequences;
5. policies which recognize existing gender inequalities and that promote greater equality between men and women in the family.