

Bridging the Divide between Married and Unwed Mothers¹

1. A letter (“No extra perks if unwed mums adopt own children: Forum” on 25th May 2017)² by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) has raised pertinent views on how the Singaporean Government perceives marital status and motherhood. Recently, the MSF had granted Child Development Account (CDA) benefits³ and Government-paid maternity leave to unwed mothers and their children⁴ – a step towards greater inclusion of diverse family structures within Singapore. Currently, all mothers have access to: MediSave grants for their newborn, infant care and childcare subsidies, and maid levy concessions.⁵ While MSF has made concerted efforts to provide all children with healthcare subsidies and benefits, there remains a disparity in the treatment between married mothers and unwed mothers. Currently, the Baby Bonus Cash Gift of \$8,000 are granted to families for the first and second born children.⁶ Additionally, as part of the Marriage and Parenthood Package,⁷ married mothers have access to housing benefits and tax reliefs, as well as Child Development Co-Savings (Baby Bonus) Scheme, which includes a cash gift, a CDA First Step grant, and the Government matching savings to their child’s CDA.⁸

¹ Alicia Wee, 2nd Year J.D. Student, Singapore Management University’s School of Law

² Yee Siaw Ling, “No extra perks if unwed mums adopt own children” *The Straits Times* (25 May 2017) <<http://www.straitstimes.com/forum/letters-in-print/no-extra-perks-if-unwed-mums-adopt-own-children>> (accessed 29 Aug 2017).

³ A special savings account, where the Government will match one’s savings in the CDA within weeks; Ministry of Social and Family Development website <https://www.babybonus.msf.gov.sg/parent/web/about?_afLoop=164126761604929&_afWindowMode=0&_afWindowId=null#%40%3F_afWindowId%3Dnull%26_afLoop%3D164126761604929%26_afWindowMode%3D0%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D1a4z4f8uth_13> (accessed 29 Aug 2017).

⁴ MSF Baby Bonus website <http://www.ifaq.gov.sg/BSS/apps/fcd_faqmain.aspx?qst=hRhkP9BzcBKnt75r%2B11bopmAAxUYJsZ1XtCavhh%2Bg8uifs%2FSSJBsGPVjzjzBCH7BGcJma08%2Bf10V8N0fxRwPjyLLNRJ3i5OJUnssmJY7bRRkJdBesaTSJOHNS2iRg56wvEoci5zeUk4KkDsAzHoRdcnWfiKVeo#FAQ_188930> (accessed 29 Aug 2017).

⁵ Yee Siaw Ling, *supra* n 2.

⁶ Ministry of Social and Family Development website, *supra* n 3.

⁷ MSF Summary of Measures website <<http://www.heybaby.sg/summaryofmeasures.html>> (accessed 29 Aug 2017).

⁸ Ministry of Social and Family Development, “Child Development Co-Savings Scheme” <https://www.babybonus.msf.gov.sg/parent/web/about?_afLoop=164126761604929&_afWindowMode=0&_afWindowId=null#%40%3F_afWindowId%3Dnull%26_afLoop%3D164126761604929%26_afWindowMode%3D0%26_adf.ctrl-state%3D1a4z4f8uth_13> (accessed 29 Aug 2017).

2. However, unwed mothers are not provided any of the above grants.⁹ These benefits are tied to a mother's marital status, which falls in line with the conventional pro-family view that mandates marriage before children. Since only legally married parents are eligible for the Baby Bonus Scheme,¹⁰ it is implied that the conventional nuclear family structure is considered the best environment in which to raise a child. This is a disappointing position to take. Unwed mothers, who go through the same struggles in raising a child, should not be deprived of such grants¹¹ as there seems to be no convincing reason for this disparity.
3. Even though parenthood within marriage is the ideal family structure in society,¹² the question to be confronted should be whether the lack of marital status is a sufficient ground to deprive unwed mothers of these benefits. The additional benefits granted to married mothers seek to alleviate the financial costs of raising a child.
4. For instance, the Baby Bonus Scheme is intended to, and will greatly alleviate any mother's financial burden. This sum of money will tide every mother over for the first few months while she adjusts to having a newborn in addition to her daily routine, especially so for the unwed mother who must singlehandedly care for her child. Without receiving the cash benefits, the unwed mother is punished for not conforming to the conventional family unit. However, it should be noted that providing these mothers benefits would not portray the Government as endorsing different familial structures, but acknowledging the different circumstances that shape domestic households.
5. Further, without housing benefits and tax reliefs, unwed mothers are burdened with high rental costs which would weigh down on their finances. Their alternative is to wait until they are 35 years of age to qualify for the Single Singapore Citizen Scheme targeted at non-married individuals.¹³ This may not be the most suitable option, especially in situations where single, unwed mothers require urgent housing (in cases

⁹ Chong Ning Qian, "Time To Do Away With 'Illegitimacy'", *The Straits Times* (13 May 2017) <<http://www.straitstimes.com/forum/letters-on-the-web/time-to-do-away-with-illegitimacy>> (accessed 29 Aug 2017).

¹⁰ MSF Baby Bonus website, *supra* n 4..

¹¹ Hey Baby website <http://www.heybaby.sg/havingchildren/baby_bonus.html> (accessed 29 Aug 2017).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Housing & Development Board website <<http://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/residential/buying-a-flat/resale/single-singapore-citizen-scheme-or-joint-singles-scheme>> (accessed 29 Aug 2017).

where their immediate family are unable or unwilling to help them) for both their child and themselves. A possible way to counter the stigma that unwed mothers and their children face could be to provide better housing schemes in order to bridge this rift.

6. Crucially, these additional benefits are financial in nature; they relate to the financial costs of raising a child. However, such costs are incurred by both married and unwed mothers alike. Depriving unwed mothers of these benefits may send the message that the existence of their children is not only unwelcome but also regarded as being more burdensome as compared to their peers.
7. The forum discussion has shed valuable light on issues that must be resolved. Any proposed solution must carefully consider what is best for society at large, while ensuring that necessary aid is made available to all citizens. Providing both married and unwed mothers equal benefits would be a positive step towards alleviating the current stigma that has been unfairly associated with unwed mothers and their children.