

Grandma of 17 works from home

As more older folk like her take time to care for grandkids, should there be more support?

Radha Basu

For the past five years, Madam Lily Ong, 67, has been taking a train from her home in Ang Mo Kio to Woodlands every weekday morning, returning only after a hard day's work 12 hours later.

Her "workplace" is the home of her son Elisha Lim, 38, where she acts as friend, companion and peacemaker to his three children aged between three and eight.

"It's like any full-time job, just more pleasurable," said the petite grandmother, who has helped raise 17 grandchildren.

Last week, she and her husband, who have three other children, moved into Mr Lim's new home, an executive maisonette in Serangoon North.

The commuting has stopped but not the grandparenting. Her 18th grandchild is on the way.

As Singapore celebrates Grandparents' Day today, Madam Ong will not be doing anything special. Her routine today is likely to be the same as any other Sunday – church in the mornings followed by some time-out with friends and a rest from child-minding.

Increasing numbers of older folk like her are sacrificing careers and leisure time to look after grandchildren.

A 2005 government survey of older folk showed that about 35 per cent were their grandchildren's regular caregivers, compared to less than 20 per cent a decade earlier.

There are also more three-generational families living under one roof – from 97,552 in 2000 to 112,063 in 2005.

Significantly, about 12 per cent of women aged between 55 and 64 had given up their jobs to take on the role of caregiver to their children, grandchildren or spouse.

Madam Ong, for instance, gave up her job as a retail assistant in 2003 when a daughter-in-law became pregnant.

A survey of about 50 grandparents by two National University of Singapore (NUS) researchers showed that despite being emotionally attached to their grandchildren, an overwhelming number did not see caring for them as their duty.

The study, by NUS Associate Professors Kalyani Mehta and Thang Leng Leng, was published in a 2006 book titled *Ageing In Singapore: Service Needs And The State*.

It followed on the heels of another NUS study, in 2003, that said older folk felt worn down by the "commitment of childcare, with many wanting to stop or do less".

In their study, Prof Mehta and Prof Thang said that despite such attitudes, grandparents continue to look after their grandchildren out of love and concern.

Both feel that the Government and society can do more to support such grandparents.

Prof Mehta, who teaches at NUS'



Madam Ong with 11 of her grandchildren, (clockwise from top left) Ezra Lim, 16; Kevin Tan, 11; Cheryl Lum, four; Jude Lim, 15; Ethan Lum, 11; Sarah Lum, seven; Esther Lim, three; Deborah Lim, eight; Jeremiah Lim, five; Kimberly Tan, eight; and Theophilus Lim, 17.

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social work department and is a Nominated Member of Parliament, worries about the future financial security of grandparents, particularly those like Madam Ong who trade productive careers for child-minding.

In 2004, the Government introduced a grandparent caregiver tax relief of \$3,000 if an unemployed grandparent looks after a grandchild on a regular basis. But the perk is extended only to working mothers. Grandparents looking after grandchildren whose parents are absent – like those who have died or are in jail – do not benefit at all.

Direct incentives to grandparents could be a way forward. Acknowledging their caregiving role as "work" would help. The Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) could also be extended to include grandparents who regularly look after children, suggested Prof Mehta.

Under WIS, the Government helps top up the pay of low-wage, older workers.

"If I work in childcare looking after someone else's children and earn below a certain wage, my income can be supplemented by WIS. So why not give me the same bonus for work I do for my own family?" asked Prof Mehta.

After all, older women, she pointed out, tend to live longer and have less Central Provident Fund savings than men.

Prof Thang, an anthropologist who researches inter-generational ties, said younger, better educated grandparents may consider surrogate parenting a chore.

"I think the trick is for them to balance their social life with child-minding duties, much in the same way a working mother balances career and kids," she said.

Measures like support groups for grandparents and the willingness

of parents to hire domestic help could also help.

In addition, she suggested the setting up of affordable childcare centres that allow grandparents to visit and interact with their grandchildren.

Chief executive officer of the Council for Third Age Henry Quake, 59, acknowledged that some baby boomers who have had kids "dumped" on them may feel shortchanged.

"The answer is not to mandate payments, but building better ties with your children, right from young," said the grandfather whose organisation promotes active ageing.

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Would you retire to look after your grandchildren? Have your say at straitstimes.com

Parents call the shots, not the caregivers

Little Hrishmita Chinchwade's life follows a rigorous routine – school, nap and playtime, with only two TV shows a day.

But the three-year-old's grandparents, Mr Eddie Tai and Madam Chan Siew Pheng, who look after her on weekdays, are not the ones drawing up her schedule.

"That responsibility is Ee Lin's," said Mr Tai, referring to the toddler's mother.

"We follow her instructions." More older folk here may be standing in as caregivers to their grandchildren but it is the parents who still call the shots.

A recent National University of Singapore study that compared the roles of grandparents in Singapore and Japan found non-interference to be the over-arching principle.

"It is perceived as a way of showing respect to the younger generation," said Associate Professor Kalyani Mehta, one of the authors of the study.

"Being non-interfering also allows both generations to avoid conflict," she added.

Grandparents whom The Sunday Times spoke to also tend to agree with the "hands-off" philosophy.

Former factory worker Lim Moe-yong, 53, showers Rachel Goh, who is two-and-a-half, and her three-month-old brother Richie with love and keeps a watchful eye on them.

But details like what they eat or what TV programmes Rachel can watch are left to Madam Lim's daughter, Ms Daphne Yeow, 30, to decide.

Grandma looks after the children so that Ms Yeow can pursue a career as a teacher.

"The children are safer with me, but their parents decide what is best for them," said Madam Lim.

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