

## Older adults with no kids take on bulk of caregiving, study shows

Thian Wen Li

Older adults who do not have children provided significant caregiving support for their elderly parents, compared with their siblings who have children, a local study has found.

Regardless of gender and birth order, this group of adults aged 50 and above contributed more in caregiving for their parents.

These findings were from a study by researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Singapore Management University that involved 475 Singaporeans aged 50 and above with at least one living parent. Of the group, 298 had children and 177 did not have children.

The study looked at four areas of support for ageing parents, such as financial support and instrumental support, which refers to the frequency of performing activities that require time, such as household chores and caregiving.

It also studied the frequency of physical meetings and non-physical contact between child and parent in the past year, and the geographical proximity between child and parent.

Adults without children were found to give significantly higher levels of support across all areas of support, compared with their siblings with children, according to the research paper published in January 2024 in an academic journal, *Journal Of Marriage And Family*.

These findings are contradictory to the belief that childlessness signals a break from traditional family norms and weakening familial ties, said one of the researchers, Associate Professor Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan, co-director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at NUS.

The associate professor at the department of sociology and anthropology said societal expectations in Asia that adult sons contribute more to supporting their parents may be weakening.

"Gender and sibling position don't apply to childless individuals," she said. For example, birth order does not determine who contributes more support among childless individuals, she added.

As childless Singaporeans above 50 years old are found to take on the main responsibility of taking care of their parents, they also help to maintain values of filial piety, she said.

A 61-year-old businessman, who wants to be known only as Mr Y, currently lives with his mother, who is in her 80s. His father recently died after suffering from dementia.

Mr Y, the third of four children, who has never been married, contributes the most financially towards caring for his mother, which includes living expenses.

But he said that his siblings, some of whom also live with him, also contribute financially.

He said that siblings must work together to lighten the burden of caregiving. "I will consider myself lucky because our siblings' relationship is strong."

He hopes that his nieces and nephews would continue to maintain family ties and values, and care for one another and their parents.

Single first-born daughter Ms Lee, who declined to give her full name, provides the most financially for her father out of her three other siblings.

Ms Lee, 60, lives with her sister, who is also not married, and their 83-year-old father. While her siblings are close and contribute financially to their father, she and her sister share the bulk of the caregiving responsibility.

"It was a natural progression. The singles will just come together to own a place and my dad comes to live with us," she said, adding that she and her sister find companionship in each other.

The project director said that while she has had more freedom compared with her siblings, who have to put more time and investment into raising their children, she also spent more time at work.

While a lower total fertility rate and having fewer siblings may pose a burden for future adult children, future older Singaporeans are likely to have better health, greater wealth and enhanced access to government welfare, said Prof Teerawichitchainan.

Ms Lee said her group of single friends her age have toyed with the idea of living close together in the future to give one another support after retirement.

But to her, being independent in her old age is most important, she said, along with being healthy mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

"When I retire, I will pursue my hobbies and spend time on what I missed out on when I was working."

withian@sph.com.sg