

Boosting Female Labour Force Participation in Singapore

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6 July 2025

Abstract

This study evaluates strategies to enhance female labour force participation (FLFP) in Singapore, aiming to address economic, demographic, and gender-equity challenges arising primarily from entrenched caregiving norms and insufficient flexible working arrangements. Employing comparative policy analysis, we selected international comparator countries through quantitative similarity benchmarking (Mahalanobis distance) using demographic, economic, and cultural variables.

Our analysis reveals critical gaps in Singapore's current FLFP policies: insufficient paternal leave incentives, limited uptake of flexible work arrangements, and persistent childcare accessibility barriers, particularly impacting middle-income families. International best practices identified include Japan's dedicated paternal leave increasing male caregiving involvement, Denmark's and the Netherlands' universal childcare systems significantly supporting female employment, Australia's structured job-sharing arrangements sustaining professional women's career trajectories, and Japan's culturally targeted paternal responsibility campaigns reshaping gendered norms.

To address these gaps, we recommend targeted policy interventions: implementing dedicated paternal leave entitlements, developing community-based childcare initiatives, promoting structured job-sharing, and introducing workplace-focused paternal caregiving campaigns. While acknowledging that shifting deeply rooted societal expectations requires gradual change, these evidence-based measures provide practical pathways to mitigate gender disparities, improve women's economic participation, and strengthen Singapore's long-term economic and demographic sustainability. Future research should assess implementation effectiveness and examine long-term impacts.

1 Introduction

Increasing female labour force participation (FLFP) is critical for sustainable economic growth, gender equity, and managing demographic pressures from population ageing and declining fertility. Despite Singapore's progress through improved educational outcomes, higher employment rates among younger women, and robust family-support policies, substantial barriers persist. These obstacles—especially pronounced during marriage and motherhood—stem largely from entrenched caregiving norms and inadequate adoption of flexible work practices (Singapore Business Federation, 2021; Yeung & Li, 2022).

Goldin's (1994) seminal "U-shaped hypothesis" suggests FLFP initially falls with early industrialisation, driven by rising incomes and patriarchal norms, but rebounds as economies shift to knowledge-based systems, lower fertility, and evolving social attitudes. Subsequent research highlights education and cultural shifts as essential drivers facilitating women's transition into formal employment (Mammen & Paxson, 2000).

Demographic factors, notably fertility rates and educational attainment, also significantly shape FLFP. Higher fertility consistently associates with lower female employment, while education strongly promotes workforce attachment (Heath, 2024; Thévenon, 2013). Yet, cultural expectations regarding caregiving remain formidable barriers, especially in Singapore, disrupting women's career progression (Yeung & Li, 2022).

Cross-national evidence points to effective policy tools: subsidised childcare, structured parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and targeted norm-shifting campaigns (Thévenon, 2013). Although Singapore has adopted many such measures, persistent caregiving expectations suggest critical gaps remain.

Motivated by these gaps, we employ comparative policy analysis using quantitative benchmarking and qualitative case studies. Section 2 identifies relevant comparator countries through a rigorous similarity analysis. Section 3 examines Singapore's existing policy shortcomings, Section

4 analyses effective international policy approaches, and Section 5 provides targeted recommendations tailored to Singapore's context; Section 6 concludes.

2 Comparator Countries Identification Strategy

To pinpoint countries with policy experiences most relevant for enhancing FLFP in Singapore, we conducted a quantitative similarity analysis using key economic, demographic, and cultural variables. These variables, selected based on their empirical significance and data availability, include:

- **Demographic factors:** Fertility rate, female educational attainment.
- **Economic factors:** GDP per capita, unemployment rate, employment in services sector.
- **Cultural factors:** Gender equality index, difference between maternity and paternity leave, welfare coverage.

Data were sourced primarily from the World Bank, OECD databases, and the Global Gender Gap Index.

To handle the strong intercorrelation among these variables (illustrated in Figure 1), we employed the Mahalanobis distance metric. Formally, the Mahalanobis distance between countries i and j is defined as:

$$D_{ij} = \sqrt{(X_i - X_j)'S^{-1}(X_i - X_j)}$$

where X_i and X_j represent vectors describing the characteristics of each country, and S^{-1} is the inverse covariance matrix, adjusting for underlying dependencies.

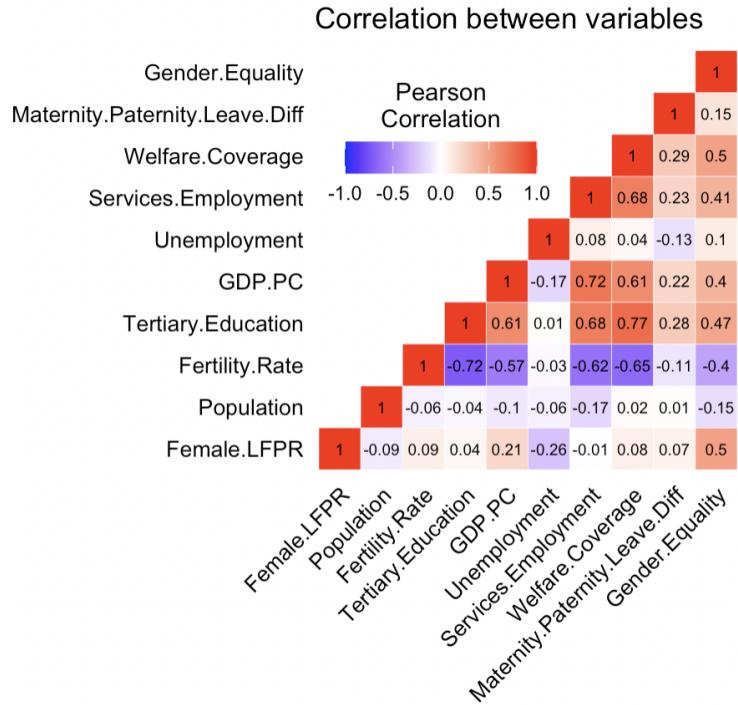


Figure 1: Correlation Between Variables

Using this approach, we identified a set of countries whose policy experiences are particularly instructive for Singapore:

- **Global comparators:** Ireland, Switzerland, Brunei, Austria, Denmark, United States, Netherlands (Figure 2).
- **Regional comparators (Asia-Pacific):** Indonesia, Australia, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Japan (Figure 3).

These countries serve as benchmarks for understanding effective FLFP strategies adaptable to Singapore's context.

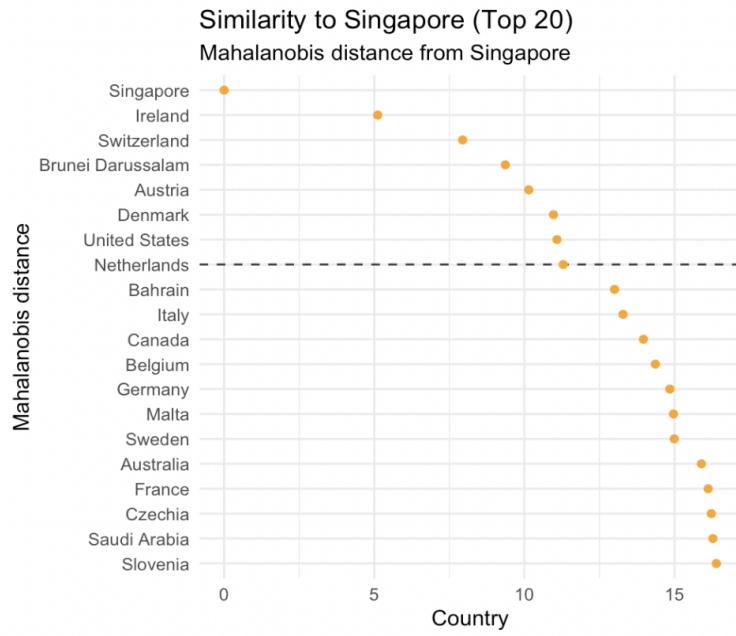


Figure 2: Top 20 Global Comparators (Overall) to Singapore.

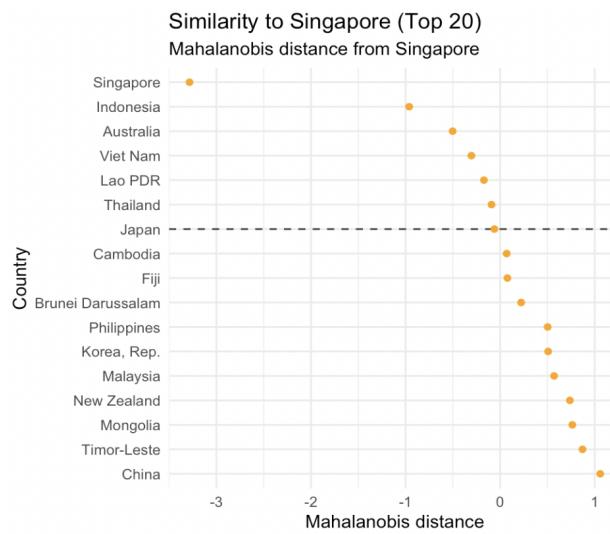


Figure 3: Top 20 Regional Comparators (Asia Pacific) to Singapore.

3 Gaps in Singapore's Policy

Despite significant policy progress to boost FLFP, key gaps remain that impede gender equity and economic sustainability. We analyze these gaps around three pivotal career junctures for women:

1. Entering the workforce
2. Leaving the workforce due to domestic duties
3. Rejoining the workforce

Social and economic factors predominantly drive these decisions, with a significant portion of Singaporean women's labor force non-participation stemming from leaving and not subsequently rejoining the workforce.

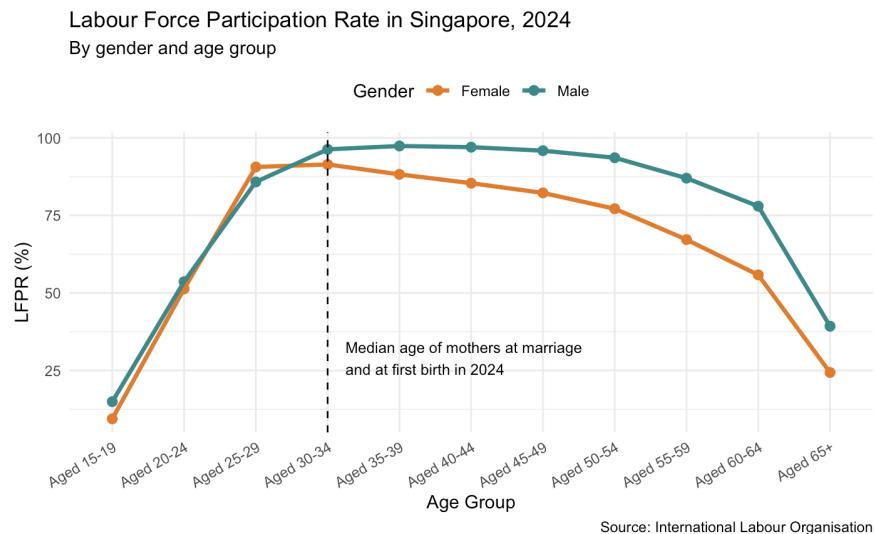


Figure 4: Labour Force Participation Rate in Singapore by Gender and Age Group in 2024. *Figures from ILO.*

3.1 Entering the Workforce

Women's entry into the workforce is shaped by labor demand, job types, potential wages, and work disutility. Despite workplace harassment and a 14.1% gender wage gap (2023), FLFP rates

surpass male-LPR in the 25–29 age group due to strong economic conditions, high education levels, and societal expectations for economic productivity (see Figure 4). The Workplace Fairness Act further supports improved employment conditions, influencing women’s career decisions at entry and beyond (Chew & Ng, 2025).

3.2 Leaving the Workforce due to Domestic Duties

Women predominantly leave Singapore’s workforce due to caregiving responsibilities. Figure 4 illustrates a marked gender divergence in labour force participation starting around ages 30–35, coinciding closely with women’s median marriage (29.5 years) and first childbirth ages (31.8 years). Indeed, caregiving was the primary reason (21.5%) cited by those neither employed nor actively job-seeking in 2024, with women comprising 95.1% of caregivers exiting employment to care for children (MOM, 2024). This stark imbalance reveals a persistent and deep-rooted burden disproportionately placed upon women, significantly disrupting their career continuity.

From a theoretical perspective, a woman’s decision to leave employment for caregiving is often evaluated at the household level, given shared finances and benefits. Since childcare responsibilities impose a fixed minimal demand, households typically weigh the opportunity costs of each parent’s potential career interruption. Without sufficient external childcare or adequate parental leave policies, the lower-earning partner—usually the woman—is likely to leave employment, underscoring critical policy gaps and cultural norms influencing these decisions in Singapore.

There are several policies in Singapore that address these decisions and cultural quirks that influence them.

3.2.1 Parental Leave Scheme

Singapore currently provides mothers with 16 weeks of Government-Paid Maternity Leave (GPML), fathers with 4 weeks of Government-Paid Paternity Leave (GPPL), and an additional 6 weeks of

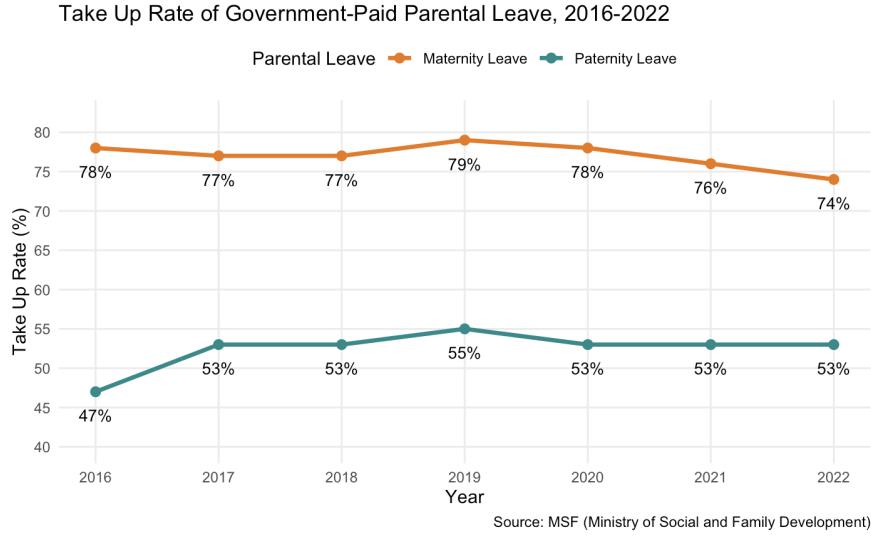


Figure 5: Take Up Rate of Parental Leave in Singapore, 2016-2022. *Figures from MSF.*

Shared Parental Leave (SPL). Despite widespread societal agreement (99%) that both parents are equally important caregivers (IPS, 2024), paternal leave uptake remains persistently low at 53% compared to 74% for maternity leave (2022).

The stagnant paternal leave utilisation largely reflects workplace cultural barriers and concerns over operational disruption, rather than personal choice alone (National Policy and Talent Division, 2021; Lim, 2024). Employers remain hesitant to accommodate extended paternal absences, reinforcing traditional gendered caregiving roles and perpetuating women's disproportionate exit from the workforce for childcare.

3.2.2 Financial Incentives

Singapore provides financial incentives such as the Working Mother's Child Relief (WMCR) and the Grandparent Caregiver Relief (GCR), aiming to ease the economic burdens of childcare by lowering taxable income or subsidising caregiving expenses. While these incentives effectively raise mothers' marginal returns from continued employment, they inadequately address the fundamental necessity of childcare provision itself. Without parallel measures that directly expand caregiving alternatives or reduce the intensity of caregiving demands, these financial incentives alone remain insufficient

in substantially preventing workforce exits among women.

3.2.3 External Care Services

In recent years, Singapore has significantly expanded external childcare provision to support sustained female workforce participation. Between 2012 and 2021, 586 new childcare centres were established, complemented by tiered subsidies that improved childcare affordability for various income brackets (ECDA, 2025; MSF, 2024). Nevertheless, substantial accessibility gaps persist, particularly affecting middle-income families who neither fully qualify for subsidies nor can comfortably afford unsubsidised care. As a result, significant segments of women continue to face limited childcare alternatives, perpetuating gender disparities in workforce continuity.

3.3 Rejoining the Workforce

As caregiving responsibilities diminish with children growing older, women often seek to re-enter employment. However, returning to the workforce after prolonged absences presents substantial challenges, notably skill obsolescence, workplace ageism, and ongoing eldercare duties. Age-based discrimination remains the most common employment bias in Singapore, disproportionately affecting mid-career women seeking re-entry (MOM, 2024). Furthermore, caregiving duties often shift from childcare to eldercare, prolonging career disruptions and widening gender participation gaps (see Figure 4).

3.3.1 Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA)

FWAs including adjustable hours, remote work, and workload flexibility—aim to ease workforce re-entry by enabling caregivers to manage employment alongside domestic responsibilities. Despite policy efforts such as the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests introduced in December 2024, widespread adoption remains limited, especially among SMEs lacking necessary

operational capabilities (SUSS, 2025). Moreover, FWAs are predominantly concentrated in lower-skilled positions, reducing their viability and attractiveness to mid-career professional women seeking meaningful employment upon re-entry.

3.3.2 Returner Programs

Returner initiatives like Workfare Skills Support, Career Trial, and SkillsFuture offer targeted training and job-readiness programmes designed to enhance employability among women re-entering the workforce (SkillsFuture SG, 2024). Nevertheless, their effectiveness is constrained by persistent structural barriers, including employer reluctance, ageism, and social stigma associated with prolonged career breaks. These limitations highlight a crucial policy gap: the need for enhanced support frameworks explicitly designed to address the unique barriers faced by returning female caregivers.

4 Analysis of International Policies

Building upon Singapore's identified policy gaps—particularly around caregiving responsibilities influencing women's decisions to exit and re-enter the workforce—this section evaluates successful international policy interventions.

4.1 Alternative Parental Leave Models: Japan, Denmark, Ireland

Japan provides dedicated, non-transferable paternity leave of up to 12 months, with 67% salary replacement for the initial six months. Following mandated employer targets, paternal leave uptake surged from 17% in 2022 to over 30% by 2024, significantly promoting equitable caregiving roles (Kimoto, 2025; Kyodo News, 2024).

Denmark allocates 24 weeks of paid parental leave to each parent, with up to eight transferable

weeks, explicitly incentivising shared caregiving responsibilities and balanced parental involvement.

Ireland's maternity leave policy provides 26 weeks paid leave, complemented by an optional 16 weeks unpaid. Approximately one-third of mothers choose this unpaid extension, highlighting substantial demand for extended caregiving support (Keane et al., 2025).

4.2 Job-Sharing: Australia

Australia's structured job-sharing arrangements effectively support continuous female employment during critical caregiving periods. According to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA, 2024), 64% of large employers formally offer job-sharing, where two or more employees share a single full-time role. This arrangement allows essential flexibility without hindering career progression.

Research by Dixon et al. (2020) shows strong retention of experienced female employees through job-sharing, particularly in professional roles such as project management and engineering, although adoption remains limited in manual labor sectors (Pickering, 2022). Successful job-sharing implementation relies significantly on leadership support, clear career progression structures, comprehensive managerial training, and transparent performance evaluations (NAWO, 2023).

4.3 Paternal Responsibility Campaign: Japan

Since 2022, Japan has implemented a nationwide campaign promoting paternal caregiving, emphasizing the social value of fathers taking parental leave. Legislation mandates clear disclosure of paternity leave policies by employers, enhancing transparency. The campaign utilizes extensive social media outreach and endorsements from prominent figures such as ministers and CEOs, effectively normalizing paternal leave and reshaping societal norms. Concurrent with policy en-

hancements, this initiative significantly increased paternal leave uptake from 13.97% in 2021 to 30.1% in 2023, accompanied by longer leave durations (Kimoto, 2025).

4.4 Universal, Subsidized High-Quality Childcare: Denmark, Netherlands, Japan

Denmark's comprehensive childcare infrastructure provides universal, high-quality care to approximately 91–95% of children under five. This system maintains rigorous standards such as qualified educators, structured curricula, favorable child-to-staff ratios, and regular assessments, directly supporting Denmark's high female labour participation rate of around 77% among women aged 15–64 (OECD, n.d.).

The Netherlands subsidizes childcare significantly through combined contributions from the government, employers, and employees. Notably, when subsidies were reduced in 2012, female labour participation briefly declined, underscoring childcare's critical role in enabling women's workforce engagement (De Ridder, 2023).

Japan employs community-led childcare models, such as Playcentres, originating from New Zealand. These centres facilitate a shared, communal childcare experience, reducing isolation and psychological burdens on parents. Parents actively participate in childcare planning and supervision, enhancing collective community support and indirectly promoting greater workforce participation among mothers (Satoh, 2010).

5 Policy Recommendations for Singapore

Drawing from the identified policy gaps in Singapore and proven international best practices, we propose targeted policy interventions aimed at addressing caregiving barriers and enhancing FLPR.

5.1 Dedicated, Tiered Paternal Leave

Given persistently low paternal leave uptake in Singapore, we recommend reallocating a portion of the existing shared parental leave into a dedicated, non-transferable paternal leave entitlement, modelled after Japan’s successful approach. Initially fully subsidised, the entitlement could taper to partial subsidies after four weeks, balancing fiscal sustainability with clear incentives for paternal caregiving. This structured tiering explicitly encourages fathers’ active involvement in caregiving, progressively shifting cultural norms towards equitable parental responsibilities.

5.2 Community-based Childcare Groups

Given practical staffing challenges in achieving a universally accessible public childcare system—highlighted by high training requirements and burnout-driven turnover (Lim, 2022)—Singapore could consider adopting community-based childcare initiatives modeled after Japan’s and New Zealand’s Playcentre frameworks. Local Community Clubs could host these informal childcare groups, supervised by trained early childhood educators, and operated cooperatively by participating parents. By flexibly utilizing the existing parental leave entitlements, families could rotate childcare duties, extending their available childcare support over a longer period.

Successful implementation of community childcare relies heavily on trust among families, fostered through interactions during continuous parental leave periods. Additionally, to ensure safety and quality, Singapore would need to develop new regulatory frameworks explicitly tailored to oversee such informal childcare arrangements.

5.3 Job-sharing

Structured job-sharing represents a promising FWA for retaining female talent, particularly among PMET and other professional roles susceptible to significant career downgrades after prolonged

absence from the workforce. Job-sharing allows two employees to share one full-time role, mitigating productivity disruptions from long-term leave and reducing onboarding costs, as experienced employees mentor their job-sharing partners.

Despite existing in Singapore, job-sharing currently sees limited adoption, with only about 10% of employers open to the practice (Low and Tang, 2024). To boost acceptance, Singapore could integrate job-sharing pilots with Workforce Singapore's existing return-to-work initiatives, such as Career Trials and Career Conversion Programs, ensuring a consistent supply of high-quality job-share candidates. Government oversight during pilot programs could capture performance data and facilitate workload coordination, generating comprehensive best-practice guidelines for firms.

5.4 Paternal Responsibility Campaigns Targeting the Workplace

To address deeply entrenched gendered caregiving norms directly within workplaces, we propose targeted paternal responsibility campaigns similar to Japan's approach. These initiatives would clearly communicate paternal leave entitlements and promote uptake through visible endorsements from respected public figures and workplace leaders. Providing modest financial incentives to employers who demonstrate transparent, proactive support for paternal leave could further accelerate shifts in workplace culture, reducing gender disparities in caregiving responsibilities.

6 Conclusion

Enhancing FLFP is vital for Singapore's sustained economic growth, gender equity, and demographic resilience. Despite substantial progress, deeply entrenched caregiving norms continue to limit women's full economic engagement, particularly during marriage and motherhood.

In our essay, we highlighted critical policy gaps—inadequate paternal leave incentives, limited adoption of flexible working arrangements, insufficiently accessible childcare services, and cultural

norms resistant to change. Drawing on successful international practices from Japan, Denmark, Australia, and the Netherlands, we propose targeted and actionable solutions: dedicated paternal leave entitlements, community-based childcare models, structured job-sharing arrangements, and workplace-targeted paternal responsibility campaigns.

Although transforming societal norms and overcoming structural barriers is undoubtedly challenging and gradual, strategically pursuing these evidence-based steps may allow us to generate meaningful progress toward reducing gender disparities.

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