

# Births out of wedlock soaring in the West

Studies show contrast between East and West in value of traditional family unit

By CHEONG POH KWAN

OUT-OF-WEDLOCK births are soaring rapidly in the West, reflecting an increasingly liberal attitude towards family formation. But in the East, where the traditional family structure is still widely valued as the bedrock of society, the percentage of births outside marriage remains low.

A study by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) – which tracked the trend from 1960 onwards – showed a rapid rise in out-of-wedlock births in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and almost all of Europe, with the exception of a few countries like Belarus, Greece and Russia.

In 2011, 40 per cent of births in the European Union took place outside of marriage. In eight EU countries, namely Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Iceland, Slovenia, Norway and Sweden, more than half of the babies born in 2011 had unwed mothers. In Iceland, the figure was a staggering 65 per cent – the highest in the world.

“Such figures would have been astounding, virtually scandalous, back in the 1960s and 1970s when terms such as ‘unwed mother’ or ‘illegitimate child’ were commonly used,” said Mr Carl Haub, a senior demographer with the PRB, a US-based non-profit organisation.

But “times have certainly

changed”, he said in the study released this month, adding that non-marital child-bearing is becoming almost like a “routine”. “The pressure seems to be off, as the younger generation lives differently than the earlier generations,” he said.

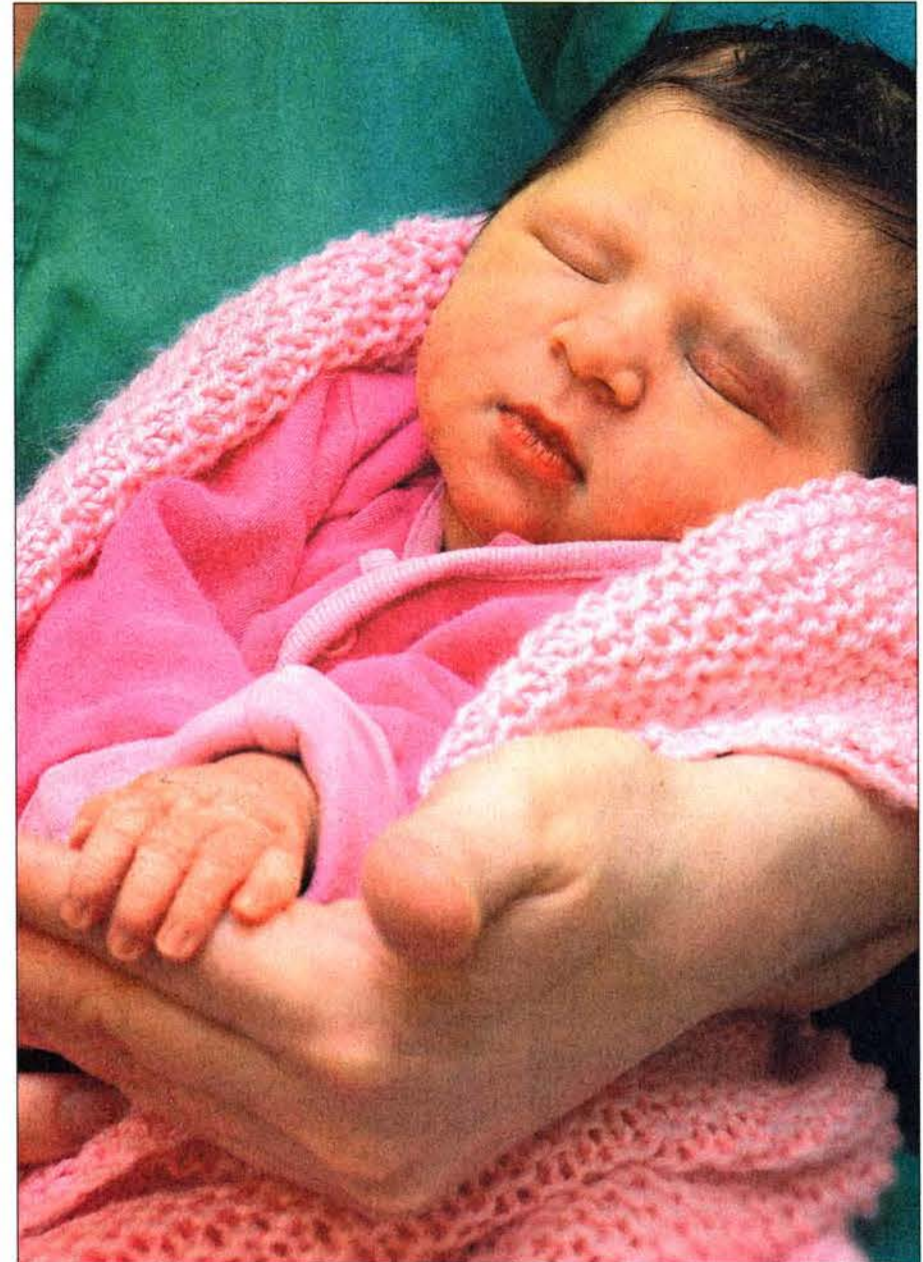
While the proportions are edging up for even the more conservative Mediterranean countries like Spain and Italy, Asian countries by and large manage to buck the trend.

According to data compiled by Professor Gavin Jones for a 2012 study, the proportions of out-of-wedlock births in Japan, South Korea and Singapore remained below 2 per cent over the decades. In Taiwan, the proportion was a just tad higher at 3 per cent.

In Asia, the norm is “marriage first, children later”, and it has not changed much with the times, said Prof Jones, director of Comparative Asia Research Centre at the National University of Singapore Global Asia Institute.

He added that the housing situation in Singapore could be another reason why out-of-wedlock births remain rare here, with young couples incentivised to tie the knot to qualify for government-subsidised flats first before starting a family.

Also, many benefits such as the baby bonus and parenthood tax rebates remain out of reach for unwed parents, while childcare leave and in-



Out-of-wedlock births are rising rapidly in the West, reflecting an increasingly liberal attitude towards the family. But in Asia, where the traditional family structure is still widely valued, the percentage of such births remains low. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

fant care leave have only last month been extended to them.

But the main reason for the low proportion of out-of-wedlock births, he believes, is still “cultural”.

“There is clearly more and more cohabitation in these Asian countries,” said Prof Jones. “But when the woman gets pregnant, the couple’s instinct is to get married before the baby comes.”

In contrast, more than half of the non-marital births in the West took place in cohabitating households. In Portugal, for example, such couples contribute to 74 per cent of births outside marriage.

“Non-marital child-bearing is

much less common in the East because it’s still stigmatised,” said Professor Bussarawan Puk Teerawichitchainan, who teaches sociology at the Singapore Management University.

In India, where non-marital births were deemed morally wrong by 84 per cent of the respondents polled in a 1997 Gallup survey, the proportion could be even lower, said Professor Premchand Dommaraju from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University.

“Abortion is legal in India,” he said, adding that it may well be an option that is less frowned upon.

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