

Singapore getting tough on all forms of harassment

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Singapore is getting tough on all forms of harassment, and in particular harassment of individuals online.

A review of legal provisions to address the issue could take place early next year, said Law Minister K Shanmugam.

Speaking on Monday after opening a conference on harassment organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, he emphasised that conduct which is considered unacceptable in the physical world must also be resisted in the virtual world.

Mr Shanmugam said: "At the core of it, conduct which harasses, which stalks, which is abusive, which in a way threatens the other individual, which can lead to suicide -- we have had suicides -- (or) conduct where somebody tells someone 'go kill your baby, go kill yourself'. That sort of conduct is certainly egregious and needs to be dealt with."

According to a 2012 survey by Microsoft, Singapore had the second highest rate of online bullying of youths aged eight to 17, just behind China.

The Singapore government feedback unit REACH also conducted a survey among nearly a thousand Singaporeans for their views on harassment.

More than 80 per cent felt that online harassment here is a serious issue, while 87 per cent felt that those who harass others should be dealt with firmly under the law.

Over 80 per cent supported tougher measures to deal with harassment both online and offline, and also wanted the courts to be given powers to order that online comments be taken down if they cause distress or alarm to others.

Mr Shanmugam said he prefers to use the law as a last resort to deal with harassment cases.

He elaborated: "I would share the perspective that the law should be the last resort. As far as possible, we still want to create a situation where there is a bedrock for laws which kick in if we consider conduct to be so egregious that it impacts on people, that society should have laws to protect people from such conduct.

"Ideally we want to create a situation where self-help is possible. If there is stuff said about you and it is untrue and you feel victimised, you feel harassed or it is plain wrong, then maybe you don't have to run to the law, you don't have to run to the police. Maybe there can be a framework for you to correct or have clarifications, so that the truth is out.

"Then at the second level to the extent possible, the civil law can kick in. And criminal law is the third and final stage. That's the way I see it."

Senior Minister of State for Law and Education Indranee Rajah said: "For schools and children, you wouldn't be applying heavy criminal penalties generally. It is a question of education, teaching them respect for each other and common courtesy in common space, and basically helping the teachers to understand such issues and working with the parents."

Speakers at the conference had many examples of harassment to share with the participants and these cases were those they had personally dealt with together with the victims.

The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) said it has received 47 complaints about harassment at the workplace till the end of October 2013, compared to 43 instances for the whole of 2012.

AWARE's executive director Corrina Lim said: "We think an Omnibus Act would be best. If you do piecemeal there will always be some gaps people will fall through, and you may not be able to comprehensively protect everyone."

Mr Shanmugam also stressed that Singapore cannot tolerate unsavoury conduct which creates an intimidating, hostile or abusive work environment.