

Survey finds rise in perception of work-related discrimination among Malays, Indians in Singapore

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SINGAPORE: While relations between racial and religious groups in Singapore are positive, the proportion of Malay and Indian respondents who said they felt discriminated against when applying for jobs has increased since 2013, a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg found.

The findings of the paper titled IPS-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial Religious Harmony: Comparing Results from 2018 and 2013 were released on Tuesday (Jul 30).

The paper found that a large proportion of minorities, 73 per cent of Malays, 68 per cent of Indians and about half of Others, which includes Eurasians, felt that they had experienced discrimination when it came to applying for a job.

In contrast, 38 per cent of Chinese felt that way, according to the research findings.

"This may partly be due to greater awareness of the presence of discriminatory behaviour in the workplace and how this might have affected some minorities," researchers Mathew Mathews, Leonard Lim and Shanthini Selvarajan said in the paper.

Zooming into how frequently they felt this way, the proportion who perceived such discriminatory behaviour often, very often or always when applying for a job was also higher in 2018 compared to 2013.

About a fifth of Malays (22.3 per cent) in 2018 felt discriminated against, often, very often or always, when applying for a job, an increase from the 19.4 per cent who felt similarly in 2013.

Among Indians, the proportion who felt this, increased by 2.6 percentage points to 20.8 per cent, while among Others, it dropped.

In total, 4,015 Singaporeans and permanent residents were polled on issues ranging from aspects of their racial and religious identity, to their experiences of living in a multi-racial society, and their attitudes towards social and political issues.

Minority races were over-sampled so that their responses could be better analysed, the researchers said.

There was universal consensus that ability, rather than factors such as race, was important in hiring decisions. However, a substantial proportion of respondents perceived other attributes such as education, language and race of the job applicant as important.

More than four in 10 said language was either always important, or important most of the time.

GAPS NEED TO BE ADDRESSED

According to the researchers, the findings signalled the need for more resources to be channelled into tackling workplace discrimination.

One People.sg said the study demonstrated gaps which need to be addressed, in response to more respondents from racial minority backgrounds perceiving discrimination at work, calling the figures "disconcerting".

It said that the work it does, together with community partners, affirms that there have been increased perceptions of workplace discrimination.

"Singaporeans of minority ethnic backgrounds have made significant progress in education and have appropriately increased aspirations. They are increasingly competing for work across all industries and businesses," it said.

The organisation called for "concerted efforts" to tackle the issue, to ensure harmonious social relations at the workplace. It said it will work to support greater education and engagement of both employers and employees to address key issues such as bias and stereotypes.

On its part, it said it will work with employers through the Singapore National Employers Federation, and the Tripartite Alliance For Fair & Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) - to address racial discrimination at work.

"We will continue to send the clear message to all in Singapore that all forms of racism and racial discrimination are not acceptable in our multi-racial and multi-religious society," it said.

TAFEP also noted that there is room for improvement.

It "strongly urged" all employers to abide by its guidelines and treat all employees fairly and with respect.

"Employers should implement progressive human resource management systems and practices that allow workers to be assessed and developed based on their merits and contributions," a spokesperson said, adding that employers can contact TAFEP for advice and assistance to put in place such practices.

OVERALL POSITIVE RELATIONS

Overall, however, there has been "significant improvement" in inter-racial and religious relations in 2018, as compared to 2013, the researchers noted.

A set of 10 indicators such as the absence of minority discrimination in using public services; the presence of close inter-racial friendships, and levels of inter-racial and inter-religious social trust were used for the survey. Those who agreed to participate in the study received a booklet, available in four languages, which they had to complete on their own.

They pointed to findings such as respondents being more likely to trust people of other races and religions in 2018 than they were in 2013.

For instance, 61 per cent of respondents trust all or mostly all, or more than half, of Singapore Malays to help in a crisis. This was an increase from the 53 per cent of respondents who expressed such sentiments in 2013.

This trend was reflected in the case of trusting Singapore Indians to help in a crisis as well, the paper said.

In addition, the proportion of respondents who indicated having close friends of another race was bigger in 2018 even for older persons, who were more likely than millennials to rely on racial stereotypes and have slightly lower inter-racial trust.

There was also negligible change in perception of discrimination in public spaces, such as public transport, in 2018, the paper found.

“These trends signal the steady progress of inter-racial and religious harmony over time,” the researchers said.

The researchers pointed to increased discourse on inter-racial and religious relations over the last few years as one reason for these more positive results.

Still, while there has been progress in racial and religious harmony in Singapore over the past few years, the surveys do show that there is room for improvement, especially in areas of workplace discrimination and inter-racial and religious mixing, the researchers said.

“While narratives of multiculturalism are internalised by most, more resources have to be channelled into helping people achieve these multicultural goals and ideals through their actions,” they said.