

Make NS gender neutral & review it to weed out toxic masculinity: AWARE chief Corinna Lim

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Mothership, 25th May 2021

At her lecture on gender equality, Corinna Lim explored, among other things, the issue of masculinity.

Lim has been the executive director of women's right non-profit AWARE, the Association of Women for Action and Research, since 2010.

In the lecture on May 24, Lim talks about her research on what shapes the behaviour and psyche of men in Singapore as well as what can be done to support men better at embracing gender equality.

"I believe that change will happen once men start to see how much they have to gain when they get out of their prison [of masculinity]. And it's beginning to happen.

I also hope more men's groups will be formed and become active like the women's movement.

Women's groups can't do this work for men. But you will have our full support."

Toxic masculinity in National Service

One of the topics touched on by Lim was National Service.

NS is the "number one" reason why men oppose gender equality in Singapore, according to research carried out for AWARE, Lim shared at the online lecture.

The men that Lim spoke to for this lecture series described NS as a "hyper masculine experience".

The exclusion of women, the use of homophobic and misogynistic terms as well as the constant shaming and humiliation are forms of "toxic masculinity" perpetuated in NS, Lim said.

It's not just about women, Lim pointed out how unhealthy masculine norms are linked to a higher rate of suicide for men.

This is why one of the recommendations Lim suggested is to make NS more gender neutral through conscription for women.

Women conscripts

Lim said that she knows that this is a "major ask" and will require a lot of consideration. However, there are other reasons why the government should consider conscripting women into NS.

Lim listed two of them: 1) Shrinking population and 2) the need to ensure Singapore has sufficient care workers to support an ageing population.

One suggestion Lim proposed is to expand NS to include non-military service such as community, social work or healthcare sector.

Lim said for a start "it is possible" to adopt what S R Nathan Fellow, Ho Kwon Ping, had suggested previously; that women do NS, and choose between two-year NS or five-month healthcare or social care work.

"But ultimately, we should make NS totally gender neutral so that everyone, regardless of gender," can opt for total defence areas that need people, Lim said.

"The equal participation of women in NS will automatically make NS less masculine," she said.

Lim also proposed reviewing Basic Military Training.

Some interviewees had noted that some permanent units that people are assigned to after BMT had a less toxic culture, while still retaining military discipline.

Bullying and education

Lim touched on other aspects of toxic masculinity as well.

In particular, Lim highlighted a recent OECD study which showed that fifteen-year-olds in Singapore experienced more bullying than their peers in 52 other countries. This is the third highest, coming in behind only New Zealand and Latvia.

Lim said that there is a high level of social pressure in schools to make boys conform to masculinity norms.

She cited AWARE's 2017 survey, which showed that 9 in 10 teenage boys faced social pressures to be 'manly' through teasing, harassment, bullying and social exclusion. They were told to "man-up" and to "take it like a man".

Lim noted that boys who were pressured to conform to masculine norms were four times more likely to commit violence against others. Which cultivates a cycle of violence.

Another point Lim highlighted was how young people were getting their information on sex. Acknowledging the pervasiveness of pornography, Lim said the only antidote to that pervasiveness is education.

To achieve that, Lim called for comprehensive sex education programme in schools.