Singaporeans are embracing racial diversity but minorities still face workplace discrimination – IPS report

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Singapore is faring well when it comes to inter-racial and inter-religious relations, according to a study of race, religion and language by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and racial harmony advocacy group, OnePeople.sg but there is an increase in perceived discrimination in the workplace.

Over 4,000 Singaporeans and Permanent Residents were surveyed on issues such as racial and religious identities, experiences of living in a multicultural society and their attitudes towards social and political issues. The IPS Race, Religion and Language (RRL) Survey conducted between August 2018 and January 2019 is a follow-up to the first study done in 2015

According to the recently released report, while a majority of respondents are seen to embrace racial diversity and have adopted colour-blinded in social interactions, there was a marginal rise in perception of workplace discrimination among minorities groups from 2013 to 2018.

A little over 58% of respondents said that they would trust either more than half, or all or mostly all, Singapore Chinese, Singapore Malays or Singapore Indians to help if the country faced a national crisis.

For example, 61.3% of respondents trust all or mostly all, or more than half, of Singapore Malays to help in a crisis, an increase compared to 52.7% in 2013. This was the same for trust in Singapore Indians to help in a crisis as where respondents who trust all or most all, or more than half, of Singaporean Indians to help rose from 54.1% in 2013 to 63.1% in 2018. For Singaporean Chinese, the figures increased to 71.3% in 2018 from 65.4% in 2018.

In terms of age group, the report revealed that those aged 18 and 25 were more likely to have higher inter-racial trust compared to those aged 56 and above. On this, there report says "it is important to consider that the older generation of Singaporeans did not have the same access to racially integrated settings as younger Singaporeans."

Apart from inter-racial trust, trust in all major religious communities was also higher in the 2018 with more than 59% of respondents saying they could trust either more than half, or all or mostly all, Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, Christians, Hindus, or those with no religion, to help if there was a crisis.

However, there was also a decline in terms of the level of comfort Singaporeans have with different racial and religious groups in both the private and public spheres. For example, for a Singapore-born Chinese/Malay/Indian colleague in the same occupation, the proportion of respondents who would be comfortable with someone of such a background was 93.7%, 91.5% and 90.4%, respectively in 2018. Those figures were marginally higher in 2013 at 96.5%, 92.9% and 92.9%.

Once again, on the religious aspect, the vast majority of about 90% were comfortable with people of various religious backgrounds in the public sphere.

The study did note that close to 50% of respondents were uncomfortable or only slightly comfortable with a place of worship near their place. Researchers suggested that this could be related to disamenities related to places of worship such as festivities, chanting, and incense which people might find too loud or pungent. The report added, "The discomfort could also stem from a lack of understanding of the different religious rituals and celebrations that are conducted at these religious sites."

In terms of close interracial relationships, people are now more likely to have a close friend of another race compared to five years ago. For example, 23% of Chinese respondents had a close Malay friend in 2013, and that increased to 30% in 2018. The increase was replicated across age groups.

However, the report notes that a larger proportion of Malays and Indians had such ties with the Chinese than vice-versa.

On the perception of discrimination, about 9 in 10 respondents felt they were treated the same as other races when they had to deal with public institutions such as hospitals, schools, social service agencies or the police – about the same as 2013.

The figures were expectedly higher in minority groups in terms of perceived discrimination at work – 35.2% for Malays, 32% for Indians, and 16.9% for others compared to 10.7% for Chinese respondents.

Also worse off, more respondents in 2018 felt that racial groups in Singapore had to work harder than other races for a decent life compared to 2013.

At least two-thirds of respondents believed that all races must put in the same effort to have a decent life, but respondents were more likely to think that Singaporean Malays and Singaporean Indians had to put in more effort than Singaporean Chinese to have a decent life.

Even so, two-thirds of the respondents say they do not experience racial or religious tension in their lives. A little over half also say they feel that the country is free from religious and racial tensions.

The report suggest that despite the generally harmonious communal relations in the neighbourhood, there are instances where religious practices can lead to some level of unhappiness which should be managed to prevent tensions from rising.

The study also looked at how much Singaporeans valued racial diversity. About 56.4% say they can learn a lot from other racial groups while 66.7% said it is good that Singapore is multiracial. However, about 26% and 34% of respondents were ambivalent about both those statements respectively.

The report concluded that Singapore is 'faring well' in terms of interracial and interreligious relations. However, older respondents were slightly more likely to have lower levels of interracial trust and a less racially diverse social network. Researchers suggested that this stems from the elderly having fewer opportunities to interact with people of other races.

As such, they suggest future initiative for the strengthening of racial and religious harmony in Singapore should continue to engage older persons just as much as the youth.