

**21 October 2025**

## **Singaporeans back stronger safeguards and faster remedies for online harms, IPS study finds**

*Research shows strong public demand for victim-first laws, faster takedowns, and collective responsibility for online safety*

Singaporeans want tougher action to tackle online harms — from holding perpetrators accountable to ensuring harmful content is removed swiftly — according to a new study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

### **Key findings:**

- **Most severe harms:** Child sexual exploitation and abuse, violent content, terrorism-related content, and content supporting vice and organised crimes ranked top. Non-consensual sexual content, promotion of dangerous behaviours, and targeted harassment were also seen as highly harmful.
- **Victim-first lens:** Nearly three-quarters of respondents rated harm to individuals (73.5%) and victim vulnerability (74.3%) as very or extremely important in shaping their perceptions of severity. Focus group participants echoed this, consistently ranking child sexual exploitation and abuse as the most severe harm because of victims' extreme vulnerability and its lifelong consequences.
- **Shared responsibility:** 75% believed government, tech companies, and individual users all need to do “much more” to improve online safety.
- **Support for legal reforms:** Respondents viewed legislation and quicker takedown of harmful content to be the two most useful remedies. Eight in 10 backed legislation to hold perpetrators accountable, and 77% wanted faster takedown of harmful content by platforms.

The study, *Online Harms in Singapore, from Evidence to Action*, was conducted by Dr Chew Han Ei (IPS), Dr Carol Soon (Department of Communications and New Media) and Ms Harkiran Kaur (IPS) from the National University of Singapore.

Research collaborators included Professor Lim Sun Sun (Singapore Management University), Dr Natalie Pang (Department of Communications and New Media) and Ms Natalie Chia (SG Her Empowerment). Funded by the Ministry of Digital Development and Information (MDDI), it examined how Singaporeans view online harms: how serious they think different harms are, and what they make of existing laws, platform policies and public education efforts.

### **Singaporeans see harms through a victim-first lens**

Child sexual exploitation, violent content, terrorism, and vice-related content were consistently ranked by respondents from all demographic groups as the most severe harms. Non-consensual intimate images, the promotion of dangerous behaviours, and targeted harassment also emerged as major concerns.

About three in four respondents rated harm to individuals (73.5%) and the vulnerability of potential victims (74.3%) as very or extremely important factors in judging how serious an online harm is. Focus group participants reinforced this, consistently ranking child sexual exploitation and abuse as the most severe harm because of victims' extreme vulnerability and its lifelong consequences.

Dr Chew Han Ei, Principal Investigator of the study, said:

"Singaporeans see online harms first and foremost through the eyes of victims — how badly they are harmed and how vulnerable they are. Victims also tell us that they want clarity, speed and support when harm occurs.

At the same time, the public expects everyone — government, industry, and society — to step up together. This strong consensus provides a foundation for building a safer, more accountable digital ecosystem in Singapore."

### **Strong support for laws that hold perpetrators accountable and faster takedown against online harms**

The study also found broad support for stronger legislation to hold perpetrators of online harms accountable and to ensure victims have faster remedies.

Nearly 8 in 10 respondents (79.3%) said laws which hold perpetrators accountable would be "very" or "extremely" helpful, while 77% wanted harmful content and accounts removed more quickly by social media platforms. More than 70% also supported other measures including laws that can quickly

address new harms such as deepfake pornography, empowering victims to seek financial damages, and combining legal remedies with public education.

### **Shared responsibility across society**

Three in four respondents (75%) believed improving online safety is a shared responsibility between government, technology companies, and individuals. Even for social service agencies, for which expectations were lower, two-thirds (67.6%) of respondents wanted stronger action.

### **Recommendations to strengthen Singapore's online safety ecosystem**

Drawing on the research, the authors propose three areas for action:

- **Reinforce what's working:** Strengthen victim support pathways through the forthcoming Online Safety Commission, criminalise deepfake pornography, tailor digital literacy, and strengthen collaborations within the ecosystem.
- **Address what's lacking:** Clarify reporting processes, improve platform responsiveness and transparency, create a unified national platform for resources and best practices.
- **Anticipate emerging challenges:** Develop offender rehabilitation and restorative justice pathways and expand cross-border cooperation on harms such as scams and non-consensual sexual imagery.

Dr Carol Soon, Co-Principal Investigator, said:

“Singapore has taken important steps in online safety. Our recommendations build on this foundation by calling for clearer victim support, stronger digital literacy, and laws that keep pace with fast-changing harms like deepfake pornography. To be effective, our approach must be both preventive and responsive.”

### **Conclusion**

The study highlights clear public demand for victim-centred safeguards and faster remedies. These findings point to the need for tougher laws, greater accountability, and strong collaboration to strengthen Singapore's defences against online harms and build safer digital spaces for all.

## **About the study**

*Online Harms in Singapore: From Evidence to Action* was conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) between June 2024 and May 2025. The study drew on three phases: (1) a review of laws and platform rules, (2) focus groups discussions and in-depth interviews with victims and supporters, and (3) a survey of 600 Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents. The research was funded by the Ministry of Digital Development and Information (MDDI).

## **Further Information**

For queries on *Online Harms in Singapore: From Evidence to Action*, please contact the Principal Investigator of this study, Dr Chew Han Ei at [han.chew@nus.edu.sg](mailto:han.chew@nus.edu.sg), Tel: +65 66013222.

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## **About the Institute of Policy Studies**

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was established in 1988 as an independent think-tank to study and generate public policy ideas in Singapore. IPS became an autonomous research centre of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore in 2008. Today, IPS continues to analyse public policy, build bridges between thought leaders, and communicate its findings to a wide audience. The Institute examines issues of critical national interest across a variety of fields, and studies the attitudes and aspirations of Singaporeans through surveys of public perception. It adopts a multi-disciplinary approach in its analyses and takes the long-term view in its strategic deliberation and research. For more information about IPS, visit <https://www.lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips>

**Appendix:**

## Top online harms identified in focus group discussions

Rank	Category
1	<b>Child sexual exploitation and abuse</b>
2	<b>Violent or terrorism-related content</b>
3	<b>Content supporting vice and organised crime</b>
4	Sexual content
5	Promotion of dangerous behaviours
6	Cyberbullying/Harassment
7	Hateful online material
8	Content that could endanger public health
9	Misuse of inauthentic material
10	False or misleading online material
11	Online statements instigating disproportionate harm
12	Impersonation

# Perceived severity of online harms (survey ranking)

## Top harms

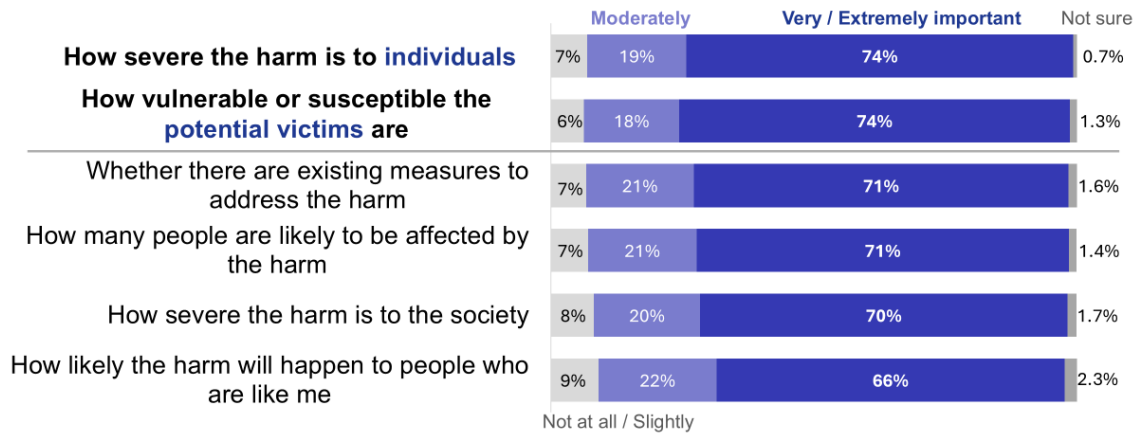
Rank	Category	Relative severity
1	<b>Non-consensual sexual content</b>	<b>+578</b>
2	<b>Promotion of dangerous behaviours</b>	<b>+335</b>
3	<b>Targeted harassment</b>	<b>+292</b>
4	<b>Misuse of personal information</b>	<b>+282</b>
5	<b>Sexual content recorded consensually</b>	<b>+252</b>

## Lower-ranked harms

Rank	Category	Relative severity
14	False statements about an individual	-321
15	Hate speech against groups outside of Singapore	-404
16	Online statements instigating disproportionate harm	-475

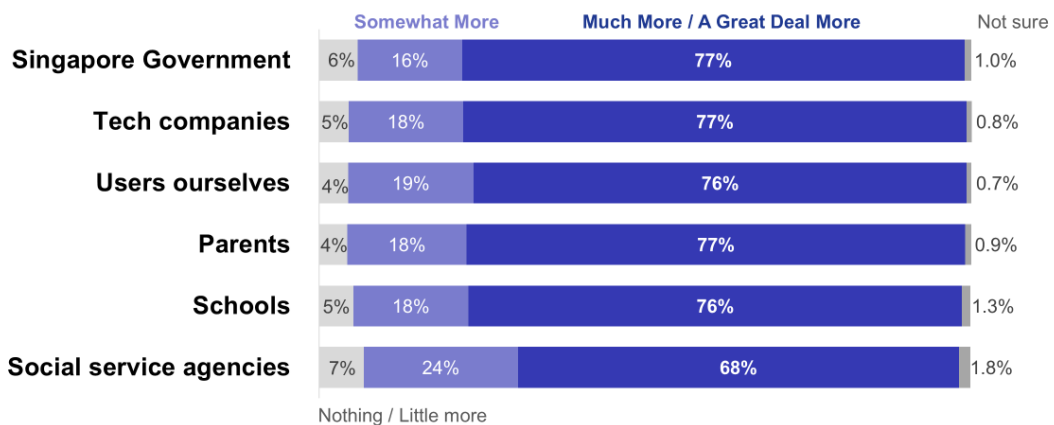
Relative severity = number of times selected as most severe *minus* number of times selected as least severe

## Perceptions of harm severity are shaped most by victim impact



















Please rate the importance of each of the following factor in shaping your perception of the severity of online harms

## Public expects all actors to do more, especially government and platforms



To what extent should [...] be doing more to improve online safety?

## Most useful remedies are covered under the Online Safety (Relief and Accountability) Bill

	Stakeholder / Efforts	Helpfulness of remedies	Very / Extremely
	When legislation/law	holds perpetrators accountable for their actions	79%
	When social media services	remove harmful content and accounts more quickly	77%
	When legislation/law	can adapt to emerging online harms quickly	78%
	When legislation/law	can allow for take down of harmful online content	77%
	When legislation/law	empowers victims to seek relief and financial damages for the harm suffered	75%
	When legislation/law	is accompanied by public education on the protections conferred by laws...	73%
	When social media services	implement safety by design...	71%
	When social media services	put in place additional safety measures to protect children...	72%
	When social media services	When social media services improve user reporting tools and processes	71%
	When legislation/law	ensures that individuals are aware of their responsibilities online...	70%
	When public education efforts	are relatable and incorporate real-life stories	70%
	When public education efforts	tell me what I should do...	69%
	When public education	tailor content to my age group and life stage	68%
	When legislation/law	offers ways to help offenders reform and improve	68%
	When social media services	publish transparency accountability reports	66%
	When public education efforts	deliver messages through creative and engaging formats	63%



## FACTSHEET: SG HER EMPOWERMENT QUALITATIVE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

This factsheet presents anonymised profiles of selected victims of online harms who contributed to IPS study, *Online Harms in Singapore: From Evidence to Action* via in-depth interviews. Data was collected by SG Her Empowerment (SHE), an independent non-profit organisation and collaborator of Institute of Policy Studies' for this Study.

Participants were recruited from SHECARES@SCWO, Singapore's first dedicated support centre for those facing online harms. Established by SHE, in conjunction with the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations, the centre supports clients facing online harms including cyberbullying, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), and sexual harassment.

"Online harms cut deep – into safety, livelihoods, families and even one's sense of self. The trauma continues long after the incident itself. While current laws have helped, gaps around anonymity, enforcement and survivor-centric care still leave too many survivors stuck in limbo. Faster takedowns and real accountability are key, and the OSRA Bill introduced just last week is a step in the right direction.

What gives me hope is the strong public consensus that we can – and must – do more. Parents, educators, platforms, government, and all of us have a part to play. The best way to protect people is to stop the harm before it happens, and that starts with agreeing on clear standards of online conduct. SHE will keep convening and connecting stakeholders to turn that belief into action," says Ms How Kay Lii, CEO of SHE.

Media interviews with available profiles will be coordinated through the SHE media team. Interviews with victims will be subject to their consent.

For media queries, please contact SHE:

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### 1. Kaitlyn, 40s, Female

Harms Faced: Cyberbullying/Harassment, Doxxing, Impersonation, Cyberstalking, and Physical Stalking

Kaitlyn met an individual online and as they became more acquainted, she chose to stop contact with him as she felt their personalities were not compatible.

In retaliation, the perpetrator began to spread false and defamatory statements on her TikTok and Instagram accounts. He also created fake profiles using her photos. Consequently, Kaitlyn was forced to make her all social media accounts private. This included accounts for her online business selling products on livestreams. She incurred financial losses as a result.

The harassment subsequently escalated offline, with the perpetrator sending threatening messages and leaving random items outside her home. The abuse also extended to her family – he targeted Kaitlyn’s daughter by posting harassing comments on her TikTok account.

*“The worst was [the perpetrator] coming to my house. I don't know when will [the items he leaves] be outside my house? When will it be under my block? Because he always leaves things outside...that's a bit eerie...especially when you're coming back home alone, and then you don't know who's waiting for me outside my house or under the block?”*

*“I was doing some online business...I have to shut down [my accounts]. My product can't reach to a certain number of audiences out there...[I lost] \$10,000-\$12,000 [of potential income] in a year.”*

## 2. Marissa, 30yo, Female

### Harms Faced: Cyberbullying/Harassment, IBSA, and Cyberstalking

Marissa became a victim of online harassment after ending an undefined romantic relation with the perpetrator. Following the breakup, he began sending her passive-aggressive and threatening messages, including verbal abuse, and using emotionally manipulative language such as making suicidal threats. This harassment went on for about two years.

The harassment later escalated when the perpetrator discovered she was engaged. He contacted her fiancé with malicious claims, accusing Marissa of being a harmful partner and threatening to release alleged intimate content (which Marissa is doubtful he possesses).

With SHECARES@SCWO’s support, Marissa filed for a Protection Order (PO) under the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA). Her application which was granted but she occasionally felt confused during the process e.g., uncertainty over the steps for submitting evidence. These challenges aside, the PO has fortunately been effective – she has not been contacted by the perpetrator since.

Marissa’s experiences speak to the need for more support for survivors seeking recourse. She believes there is a need for clearer and more accessible legal pathways for victims and stronger platform safeguards to prevent repeat harassment through new or fake accounts.

*“[Platforms] should focus on or always improve...the protection [of users].”*

*“There's not a lot of [criminal] charges that's applicable to online harassment. [It is] just the POHA, [which can] make it stop...[Only] if, if the person is, like, stalking*

*you, then it becomes like a very dangerous and criminal act. But with online stuff...I feel like the POHA is the maximum that it will go."*

3. Alanna, 31yo, Female

Harms Faced: Cyberbullying/Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Doxxing, Impersonation, and Cyberstalking

Alanna was harassed online by an ex-colleague following a disagreement between them. The perpetrator accused her of narcissism and fabricated claims of her facing mental health issues. He shared her photos without consent on social media and subscribed her to numerous online newsletters and websites including those related to narcissism and adult sexual content such as Pornhub – using both her personal and work email addresses.

Additionally, he contacted her friends and acquaintances to turn them against her. One friend he contacted was able to confirm his identity as Alanna's harasser.

Despite Alanna gathering substantial circumstantial evidence – including screenshots and corroborating testimonies – her police report and Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) application were ultimately dismissed as she was unable to prove conclusively that the ex-colleague was behind the harassing accounts.

*"It was frustrating that I couldn't prove it, even though I knew it was him...even now...I feel a strong sense of injustice that he was able to do all these things...hiding behind his laptop."*

## About Us

SHE (SG Her Empowerment) is an independent non-profit dedicated to building a Singapore where women and men are equal—at home, at work, and in the community. Through advocacy, research, and culturally relevant solutions, SHE addresses systemic gender gaps, including the urgent and growing crisis of online harms.