

Shared spaces, more understanding need to tackle greater diversity: IPS panel

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Minister of State for Education Sim Ann says different socio-groups in Singapore need to appreciate and understand their differences in order to make diversity a source of strength.

This is especially important as Singapore faces newer differences in diversity apart from conventional differentiators like race, language and religion.

She adds that newer challenges can stem from trends such as immigration, new media and globalisation.

Ms Sim Ann shared this during a panel discussion on "Living with New Differences" at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives dialogue.

Accepting and appreciating these differences, she said, can be done through common spaces.

However, this can be an "untidy business that is more give-and-take than the application of abstract laws."

"It is difficult I think, if not impossible, to weigh one unique request against another. But if we agree that it is more important for us as a society to be together, rather than apart, then I think it is possible to settle on agar-agar compromises and we can also let them evolve over time."

The give-and-take becomes more important in a highly diverse society like Singapore is today.

Director at SMU's Behavioural Sciences Institute, Professor David Chan, says that there is a need to group people in new ways to address differences.

"I'm not just male. I'm also Singaporean Chinese, I'm also a professor, I also live in Chinatown, I also take public transport every day. At any one time, my social identities can be different. When I'm in a public transport, squeezed during peak hours, when I get stuck in an MRT, my identity that gets activated is a public transport commuter. I am probably not on the lower decile of the social income but I am not happy with the public transport situation. So do not think that the public transport problem is (exclusive to) the lower decile and so on."

He adds that identity goes beyond narrowly-defined groups such as class, race or language.

"And when our identities get activated, we start clashing, it is possible to have intervention or policies whereby we either avoid those identity clashes by activating other identities. Now that's another way of thinking about co-existence in a very dynamic way."

Professor Chan says policymaking can be made more effective when the solution is more targeted.