

Call to review NS to weed out toxic masculinity

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SINGAPORE - It is time to review national service (NS) to weed out unhealthy practices that give men a skewed view of what it means to be masculine, said veteran women's rights activist Corinna Lim.

There is also a need to zero in on bullying in schools and the prevalence of porn among boys to put an end to some toxic practices that skew their understanding of what it means to be a man, and foster healthy ideas of being male, she added.

Conscripting women for national service, addressing the culture of what she called hyper-masculinity in basic military training and moving away from abstinence-only sex education in schools are also key steps in the march towards better gender equality, said Ms Lim.

She said: "The men that I spoke to described national service as a hyper-masculine experience. National service is designed to toughen up our boys. And to build bonds between males across ethnic and class divides. However, there are aspects of national service that bring out the more negative norms of masculinity.

"Ultimately, we should make national service totally gender-neutral so that everyone, regardless of gender, can opt for two years military, police, civil defence, community or healthcare, and whatever other total defence areas that need people. The equal participation of women in national service will automatically make national service less masculine."

That also means rooting out a homophobic and misogynistic culture that help to create a toxic environment during national service, Ms Lim said.

She recounted the story of a man she called Tim who, unlike other men, was relieved to be spared blanket parties in the army where the victim is covered with a blanket and beaten up. The victim, she added, is usually a soldier seen as the weakest link or is disliked, Ms Lim said.

Ms Lim - the executive director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) - was speaking at the third lecture of this year's Institute of Policy Studies-Nathan Lecture Series on Monday (May 24).

The lecture series is named in honour of Singapore's sixth and longest-serving president S R Nathan.

In her speech, Ms Lim focused on preconceived ideas of what it means to be masculine and how some ideas prevalent among young people affect gender equality in Singapore. She cited studies on the issue and also used anecdotal evidence gleaned from her interviews with men.

Another issue that feeds into toxic ideas of masculinity, Ms Lim said, is school bullying and the need to revamp sex education in Singapore.

A study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, she said, found that 15-year-old students in Singapore experience more bullying than their peers in 50 other countries and economies. Only children in Latvia and New Zealand have it worse.

Ms Lim also cited a 2017 survey by Aware that found that nine in 10 teenage boys faced social pressures to be manly, through teasing, harassment, bullying and social exclusion. They were told, she said, to "man up" and "take it like a man" - a trend called gender policing.

Such experiences, she said, go on to impact men later in life and can lead to suicide, crime and substance abuse.

Boys who were pressured to conform to masculine norms were four times more likely to commit violence against others, she added.

Ms Lim said although a 2017 study by the Institute of Mental Health found that more women than men suffer from depression in Singapore, the rate of suicide for men is double that of women, not only in the Republic but also in most other countries.

According to official data last year, 83 per cent of drug abusers and 90 per cent of prison inmates were men, she added.

"If we are to prevent or reduce gender violence, we must engage men and boys and also work to promote positive masculinity norms," Ms Lim said.

Ms Lim also touched on the need for comprehensive sexual education in schools with a focus on consent, respect and healthy relationships and the establishment of men's support centres that offer coaching and support groups.

Citing the success of Dads for Life, a national movement that promotes bonding between fathers and their children, Ms Lim said: "A lot of masculinity is about being accepted by other men. Well-facilitated men's support groups have a lot to offer."

Ms Lim said she was hopeful and excited about the future of gender equality in Singapore.

Referring to the government review to tackle issues affecting women in Singapore that kicked off last October, she said: "I hope that one day, we will celebrate the gender equality review as a historic event. That moment of pivot when Singapore started to embrace gender equality and never looked back."

Ms Lim also fielded questions during a question and answer session moderated by former nominated MP Eunice Olsen.