

## **Class, racial and religious, and local-foreigner divides are all threats to cohesion: Grace Fu**

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The class divide, racial and religious fissures and the chasm between locals and foreigners are all threats that may tear society apart, but the key to a cohesive society is to provide opportunities for Singaporeans to build relationships with those who are different from them.

This was spelt out by Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu, who gave her view on how the country can stay united amid disruptions that may come its way, such as terrorism or job displacement as a result of economic changes.

Ms Fu was speaking in an interview with The Straits Times and Lianhe Zaobao in February on her ministry's plans for the year.

The minister laid out different approaches to tackling these threats to cohesion - through building a caring society, offering opportunities for different groups of people to interact and giving the less privileged a leg up.

**In particular, the class divide was a hot topic during the Budget debate, after an Institute of Policy Studies study found the sharpest social divide now to be along class lines, rather than race or religion.**

When asked what the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth is doing to bridge class divisions, Ms Fu said it has been giving youth, especially those from lower-income families, more exposure to the arts, sports and youth leadership development activities. This helps them to discover their strengths, build their sense of self-worth and give them a shot at creating a brighter future.

Ms Fu said: "When the parents are living from day to day... there's no talk about what can you be. So how do you start them (the children) saying actually I can be somebody, I can have the skills, I can have the ability if I work hard.

"It's really talking about your aspirations, your worth, the fact that you can make an impact in small ways."

She cited the example of SportCares, which uses sports to empower the disadvantaged. Its Saturday Night Lights initiative started in 2013, with young people from needy families given free coaching in soccer on Saturday nights to keep them meaningfully occupied.

Coaches also inculcate values such as discipline and responsibility. Those who do well are given opportunities to undergo leadership training.

Last year, about 10,000 young people took part in a SportCares activity.

Ms Fu said another way to bridge the class divide is to encourage those who have more to share their resources with the less fortunate, such as time or skills for instance.

The minister noted too the divide between locals and foreigners.

Some Singaporeans are unhappy with foreigners, she said, as they feel that they do not follow social norms, such as how to behave on the train, at hawker centres and even not to hang clothes on playground equipment.

Ms Fu acknowledged that some of these social norms are also not well established among Singaporeans.

She said: "If we can have better social norms, I think you can take away some of the friction on the ground in day-to-day interaction."

As for religious and racial fault lines, Ms Fu said the threat posed by these fissures has not gone away even though Singapore has managed well and there has been mutual respect.

"In fact, it's always evolving. The trends are actually in some spheres moving towards a more fundamentalist, a more exclusivist thinking," she added.

The ministry introduced a series of dialogues on race and religion last year under the Bridge programme to bring about greater understanding on such matters.

This has reached out to 5,000 people already, said Ms Fu, and there are plans to reach out to more people.