

Forum on families stirs online debate Some unhappy with 'pro-LGBT' speakers at event by NUS students

Melody Zaccheus, Pearl Lee
The Straits Times, 13 March 2015

An upcoming university forum called Our Families has raised debate online after some accused it of having a liberal slant towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) relationships.

Supporters of the traditional family unit took issue with the line-up of speakers invited by the organiser, the National University of Singapore (NUS) Students' Political Association.

They described the speakers as "pro-LGBT" and said they were concerned that the forum would be "too one-sided".

The speakers are Ms Jolene Tan, programmes and communications senior manager at gender equality advocacy group Aware; Mr Leow Yangfa, deputy executive director of LGBT counselling service Oogachaga; and Tampines GRC Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng.

Those opposed to the line-up cited, for instance, Mr Baey's support of the repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises gay sex.

A poster of the talk, depicting four different types of households, including a lesbian couple and child, has gathered about 500 comments and has been shared about 180 times since it was uploaded onto the association's Facebook page on March 2.

Mr Greg Cheong, 45, vice-president of a software company, wrote in the thread that the "Government's definition of family" should be used.

Speaking to *The Straits Times*, he cited Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's parliamentary speech in 2007, which said family in Singapore means "one man, one woman marrying, having children and bringing up children within that framework of a stable family unit".

Real estate agent Arthur Gan, 55, who also commented online on the forum, said he hopes a pro-family viewpoint can be added to the forum for a "fair discussion".

But others pointed out the poster for the forum next Thursday also covers family types such as the nuclear family unit, single-parent households and elderly couples living alone.

Many netizens gave the organisers the thumbs up for promoting discussion on the topic.

NUS project and facilities management undergraduate Chris Low, 21, wrote that she was glad that organisers were not sweeping such issues under the carpet.

The organisers, who noted the discussion on their Facebook page, told *The Straits Times* they are "still in the process of identifying and inviting speakers". The event is restricted to NUS staff, students and faculty members.

Mr Kevin Gan, 21, social policies forum director of the NUS group, said the event's aim is to provide a platform for NUS students and staff to "engage in discussion on the definition of families in Singapore and its implications on society as a whole".

The organisers also wrote on their Facebook page that the forum does not support or endorse any particular group or type of family.

Mr Baey, the MP, said it is no secret that he holds a different opinion on issues such as Section 377A of the Penal Code. He added he was not surprised by the online reactions as such events tend to "draw quite polarising reactions".

He said he hopes to talk about the challenges faced by the Government when it comes to dealing with such issues. "I do hope that during the face-to-face discussion, people can be cordial and respectful and have a meaningful conversation," he said.

Oogachaga's Mr Leow said he will share his experience as a social worker.

The event's moderator, Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, said the forum provides a platform to re-examine how the family is conceptualised popularly and in social policy.

Dr Mathews, who broadly studies issues surrounding social cohesion, said: "At some stage, Singapore will have to decide whether it wants policies to reflect social realities or use policies to conform families to a certain ideal."