

Framed, flamed and left helpless

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Ministry considering updating laws after rise in reports of harassment cases online, in real world

The day before her wedding on Oct 1 last year, Changi General Hospital doctor Lim Baoying was told by a friend that an impostor had used her name to leave hurtful comments online about Institute of Technical Education students.

The comments were from the Facebook profile of a "Lim Baoying" who claimed to be a doctor.

"We knew the profile was fake but the impostor had even stolen one of my pictures and posted it on the fake profile," said Dr Lim, 31.

A couple of weeks later, more hurtful comments appeared under her name, aimed once more at ITE students and Workers' Party leaders. The comments provoked outrage, insults and worse.

"I tried to make a Facebook post saying an impersonator was making the comments, not me. But it did not matter much," Dr Lim told *The Sunday Times* in her first interview since the ordeal.

"I felt so helpless."

Victims of harassment online and in the real world may soon get better legal protection, with Singapore considering stronger laws on the matter.

Law Minister K. Shanmugan said at a civil society conference last week that his ministry was actively considering updating harassment laws, which were "behind the curve" when compared to other developed countries like the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

A Ministry of Law spokesman told *The Sunday Times* the move was prompted by a growing number of media reports on cases of harassment, stalking and bullying, both locally and overseas.

"We have also engaged community and civic groups such as Aware, the Singapore Children's Society and Touch Cyber Wellness, all of which have called for stronger protection of victims of harassment," she said.

In addition to reviewing criminal laws, civil remedies will be in focus. A recent court case caused doubts on whether a victim can sue the perpetrator for harassment, said the spokesman. "As a result, we also intend to clarify and strengthen the law in this area," she said.

The moves come at a time when voluntary groups are reporting an increase in harassment complaints. Women's group Aware, for instance, has received about 60 complaints of stalking, workplace sexual harassment and cyber harassment so far this year, up from 45 last year.

"We are not an official channel for these complaints, yet we get them," said Aware's executive director Corinna Lim. "We welcome the move to relook our harassment laws. It's what we have been advocating for years."

Pave, an agency dealing with family violence, is also concerned about a "new and increasing trend" of online harassment, said its executive director Sudha Nair. The agency started collating online harassment cases over the past year and saw 46 in that period.

"This includes damaging Facebook posts, tracking victims through mobile phones and other gadgets, incessant phone calls to workplaces, stalking at home and at work and so forth," said Dr Nair. "Some of the women have lost their jobs or had to change jobs because of the harassment."

Harassment is the topic of discussion at a conference tomorrow organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, where academics, policymakers, lawyers and representatives of voluntary groups will discuss ground realities and ways forward.

The Sunday Times understands that changes to the law will offer better protection to victims of stalking and workplace sexual harassment. But those likely to benefit most are victims of cyber impersonation and harassment - who have so far had little or no help from the law.

Take Dr Lim, for instance. "I was painted as this hideous person with a black heart," said the eldest of three daughters of a taxi driver and a shop assistant.

Her online attackers uncovered her medical registration number, where she worked and who she was married to. "But what hurt most was that some netizens were trying to damage my reputation as a doctor - and, by extension, that of the hospital I worked for."

Shortly after she returned from her honeymoon, she was told by her employer, CGH, that it had received complaints against the online posts allegedly made by her.

She tried in vain to complain to Facebook Singapore. Her employer issued a statement saying the comments were the work of an impostor.

She also lodged a complaint with the police. But she said she was told that since there had been no damage to property, and the comments were not racist or anti-government, there was not much they could do. "I was in shock and disbelief."

She consulted lawyers and was told she would need to get the Internet Protocol address of the impostor from Facebook USA and then petition the local telecommunications company to release details of the user.

"It was a laborious process and could cost a five-figure sum at least," she said. "I gave up."