

Harassment a rising worry, new laws to be tabled: Law Minister K. Shanmugam

Lim Yan Liang

The Straits Times, 19 November 2013

NEW laws against harassment, whether online or in everyday life, will be tabled by early next year in response to Singaporeans' concerns about this growing menace, said Law Minister K. Shanmugam yesterday.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a conference on harassment, he cited a survey by government feedback unit Reach that showed more than eight in 10 Singapore residents polled last month were in favour of tougher measures to deal with harassment, both online and offline.

The same proportion of respondents also supported empowering courts here to order that online comments be taken down if they cause distress or alarm to others. The survey polled about 1,000 Singapore residents.

Mr Shanmugam said "the anonymous, borderless, viral and permanent nature of cyberspace makes harassment and bullying easier and more egregious".

He cited a 2012 Microsoft survey that found Singapore had the second highest rate of online bullying worldwide among young people aged eight to 17.

Together with China, which had the worst online bullying rates, Singapore was the only other country out of the 25 nations surveyed where bullying online was more pervasive than in the real world.

Currently, the legal remedies for harassment relate to specific cases, such as the Women's Charter in cases of domestic abuse and the Moneylenders Act for harassment of debtors.

Existing laws do not extend to cyberspace.

Yesterday's conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, also saw voluntary groups, academics and lawyers discussing the different forms of harassment.

The Association of Women for Action and Research, for instance, said it was concerned about harassment at the workplace and stalking.

Mr Shanmugam, however, stressed that the law should be wielded only as a last resort against egregious forms of harassment. Less serious cases should be dealt with privately.

Participants at the conference also raised a number of suggestions to tackle the problem.

Among them, they proposed the setting up of a legally empowered tribunal that could mediate in harassment and cyber bullying cases, as well as issue orders to stop the behaviour.