Racial, religious harmony in S'pore improving, but minority groups feel discriminated at work: IPS-OnePeople.sg survey

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SINGAPORE - More Singaporeans now have close friends of another race compared with five years ago, and are also more trusting of those from different races or religions.

A survey of citizens and permanent residents in 2018 found that interracial and inter-religious harmony in Singapore is improving.

But it also revealed an uptick in minority groups perceiving workplace discrimination, such as when applying for jobs.

Researchers say this may be due to greater awareness of the presence of discriminatory behaviour in the workplace and how this might have affected some minorities.

The survey findings from a study of race, religion and language by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and racial harmony advocacy group OnePeople.sg were released on Tuesday (July 30).

The IPS researchers said the results, in general, show that Singapore is "faring well" with regard to interracial and inter-religious relations.

"The majority of respondents embrace racial diversity and adopt colour-blindness in the case of social interaction and employment.

"In addition, most (including racial minorities) perceive little to no discrimination and social exclusion in public spaces in Singapore, which is an important sign of racial and religious harmony," they noted.

Researchers had polled 4,015 people between August last year and January, soliciting their views about race and religion in 10 areas. A similar study was done in 2013.

In the 2018 study, researchers found that a higher proportion of Singaporeans have close friends of another race compared with the previous study.

While 23 per cent of Chinese respondents had a close Malay friend in 2013, this proportion rose to 30 per cent in 2018, "indicative of increasing levels of racial harmony and interracial interaction", they noted.

Likewise, though 63 per cent of Indian respondents said they had a close Chinese friend in 2013, this increased to 77.2 per cent in the latest survey.

Fewer people also stereotyped a person based on race, the study found.

In 2013, 46.8 per cent of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that race is indicative of another person's views or behaviour, but this has dropped to 35.2 per cent.

When asked whether people from a different race or religion could be trusted to help in a national crisis such as a Sars outbreak, more respondents indicated "yes".

In fact, the study showed that between the 2013 and 2018 surveys, trust in all races increased.

For instance, 61.3 per cent of respondents trust "all or mostly all", or "more than half", of Singapore Malays to help in a crisis, up from 52.7 per cent previously.

In a similar vein, 63.1 per cent of respondents said they could trust Singapore Indians to help in a crisis, up from 54.1 per cent.

In a crisis, trust in those from other religions - Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism - or those without religion was also higher in the latest poll.

More than 59 per cent of respondents said they could trust either "more than half", or "all or mostly all", of people from a different faith, compared with more than 51 per cent before.

On the whole, Singaporeans were positive about the level of racial and religious harmony in the country, with more than nine in 10 saying it was either moderate, high or very high.

The remaining one in 10 felt that racial and religious harmony was low, or very low.

Researchers said the changes could be the result of "increased discourse on inter-racial and religious relations over the last few years".

This is through discussion and media reports of other surveys conducted, such as on race relations, ethnic identity and community relations amid the threat of terrorism, they noted.

Stories posted online by Singaporeans who experienced racial discrimination have also paved the way for more discussion.

And initiatives under the national SGSecure movement have also highlighted the need for Singaporeans to stay united in the face of terror threats.

But the study also showed that there is still room for improvement, with researchers finding a marginal increase in the perception of workplace discrimination among the minority groups.

Among Malay respondents, for instance, 22.3 per cent felt discriminated against "often, very often, or always" when applying for a job, an increase from 19.4 per cent in 2013.

Among Indian respondents, this proportion was 20.8 per cent in 2018, up from 18.2 per cent in 2013.

"This may partly be due to greater awareness of the presence of discriminatory behaviour in the workplace and how this might have affected some minorities," the researchers said, as they called for more resources to be channelled into tackling this issue.

Researchers also flagged older Singaporeans who were slightly more likely to have "lower levels of interracial trust and less racially diverse social networks".

"This could potentially stem from older persons having fewer opportunities to interact with people of other races, given the heavy focus on inter-racial understanding and mixing in today's educational curriculum and schools, as well as in ground-up exchanges and community activities, which may be benefiting younger people more," they added.

For example, if faced with a national crisis, two-thirds of respondents aged between 18 and 25 would trust "all or mostly all", or "more than half", of Singapore Malays or Singapore Indians to help.

But among those aged 56 and above, this dropped to 54.3 per cent and 56.6 per cent of respondents who would trust Malays and Indians respectively to help.