

Spotlight on tudung ban and racial harmony

Participants at race forum discuss headscarf issue for nurses

Leonard Lim and Andrea Ong
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A Polytechnic lecturer asked at a race forum yesterday why nurses were barred from wearing tudungs, sparking a discussion on whether frontline officers here should be allowed to wear the Muslim headscarf and the practices in other countries.

Mr Chong Ching Liang, the first of 11 forum participants to share their thoughts on racial harmony, said nursing students had to remove their Muslim headscarves before going on clinical attachments or starting full-time work in hospitals.

"How much are we as a society willing to tolerate differences that different members of a population bring?" he asked.

The topic was also raised recently by a committee tasked to collect feedback on the concerns of Malays.

The Suara Musyawarah committee, in a report released in July, pointed out that there are scores of girls coming out of madrasahs who would gladly work as nurses if they could wear the headscarf.

The reason given for not allowing this is that tudungs are not part of nurses' uniforms.

At yesterday's forum, former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin observed that the headscarf issue is one that other countries like France are also grappling with. He was one of four panellists in the forum at The Grassroots Club in Yio Chu Kang.

He said he believed that this was a lost cause in Europe, and that immigrants had to make an effort to integrate into their new homeland.

Still, he expressed optimism that nurses here will probably be allowed to wear tudungs in the future, though "deep perceptions" have to be removed first. "It's not something that you can legislate and say, this matter is over," he added.

Nominated MP Eugene Tan, who was also a panellist, called for further discussion on the "unwritten state policy" that frontline officers working in the police force, nursing and at immigration checkpoints not wear the tudung.

Most of the panellists yesterday - with former Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan and academic Kwok Kian Woon rounding up the quartet - agreed that there was scope to move beyond rigid classifications of race.

Associate Professor Kwok, a sociology don, said it has become almost instinctive for Singaporeans to think of race, language and religion as "primordial dark forces" and as being

highly sensitive. In his view, it is better to move away from terms like "race", which suggest something biological and frozen, to a fluid concept like "ethnicity".

Mr Sadasivan, meanwhile, asked if Singapore can move beyond the "crutches" of self-help groups like Mendaki, and the Group Representation Constituency system, which guarantees minority parliamentary representation.

"Do we have enough confidence as a people to say - let's give ourselves a chance, and see if we can survive, see if we can enhance trust by trusting our basic instincts?" he asked.

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