

The Good: Young Are Open, Few Feel Discrimination

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The Straits Times, 21 September 2013

TWO pieces of good news from the IPS-OnePeople.sg survey are how young people are more positive than older folk about multiracialism and that in everyday life, few people feel they are discriminated against.

On the youth front, when it came to having a close friend from another race, younger respondents were more likely to say yes.

Seven in 10 Malay respondents in the 18-to-25 age bracket said they had a close friend from another racial group. Five in 10 of those in the above-66 age bracket said the same.

For the other races surveyed, the same pattern emerged. Of Chinese aged 26 to 35, 36 per cent said they had close friends of another race, compared with 18.9 per cent of those over 66 in age.

Take investment officer Melanie Kiang, 28, who is getting married next year. Among her six bridesmaids, two are Indian and one is Malay.

The best friends initially bonded over hockey games at Crescent Girls' School.

Ms Kiang credits her upbringing for her open attitude. She has aunts and uncles who married non-Chinese, making her parents accepting of diversity, although it upset her grandparents.

She said: "There are many little things that Singaporeans might not be aware of, like respecting certain cultural habits of others, which is quite important to know."

The survey's principal investigator, Dr Mathew Mathews, an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow, said of the trend: "This gives us at least some sense that we are progressing on this front."

But anthropologist Lai Ah Eng, adjunct senior fellow at the National University of Singapore's University Scholars Programme, said this also depended on how much the young put these principles into practice.

The survey found that among those who said they were discriminated against, more were younger respondents.

She said it showed that the younger set were more sensitive to issues surrounding diversity.

The Government announced in March that it would set aside \$5 million to fund those who have ideas to promote racial and religious harmony. Seventeen projects have already been approved - nine of them youth-led.

Equal treatment

BUSINESS owner Mohammed Fareed Rashid Ali, 36, remembers the days of doing national service in the police force, when he would see senior officers hanging around chatting, and they would more often than not be all Chinese.

But now in the working world, he does not see this situation.

In fact, the Pakistani Singaporean's business partners are of a different race from him.

"In the working world, people operate largely based on what someone can deliver and contribute, how much money they can bring in," he said, adding he had not witnessed discrimination in the workplace.

His experience was borne out by minorities polled in the survey, with most of them saying they generally did not feel stymied at work. Only two out of 10 Malay or Indian respondents reported that they had often felt workplace discrimination.

If a Gallup poll done in June and July in the United States is anything to go by, this was better than what minorities there felt, where 31 per cent of respondents across all races felt that African Americans did not have as good a chance as white Americans of snagging jobs they qualified for.

In Singapore, beyond the workplace, the lack of discrimination in the public arena was also noted by survey respondents.

Be it a visit to the doctor or dealing with the police, minority races mostly felt they were treated equally.

In fact, the indicator on the absence of minority discrimination in using public services was ranked the highest out of all 10 indicators to measure racial harmony.

Close to 100 per cent of respondents felt they were treated the same as other races at hospitals, at schools and educational institutions, when seeking help from a social service agency, when in court and during interactions with the police.

In the US, a Pew survey last month found that 44 per cent of Americans polled felt African Americans were treated less fairly in their dealings with the police.

The fact that the public services treated all fairly, said Dr Mathews, was a testament to the success of the Government's policies and laws.

