

Weed out toxic masculinity and let women do national service, says AWARE chief

Hana O

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Singapore – Let women do national service, said Ms Corinna Lim, executive director of women’s rights non-profit AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research).

She called for women’s participation to make national service more general-neutral. National service has to be reviewed to weed out “toxic masculinity”, she added.

Ms Lim was delivering the third lecture of this year’s [Institute of Policy Studies – Nathan Lecture Series](#) on Monday (May 24).

“I believe that change will happen once men start to see how much they have to gain when they get out of their prison (of masculinity). And it’s beginning to happen,” said Ms Lim, AWARE chief since 2010.

NS, she said, is the “number one” reason why men oppose gender equality in Singapore, as concluded by research conducted for AWARE.

According to the men she spoke to for the lecture series, NS is a “hyper-masculine experience.”

She noted how the exclusion of women from NS, the use of homophobic and misogynistic terms and the shaming and humiliation were all forms of “toxic masculinity”.

Ms Lim added that unhealthy masculine norms are linked to a higher suicide rate among men.

Therefore, she suggested NS be more gender-neutral by letting women take part in it too.

The AWARE chief understands that such a request is a “major ask,” requiring much consideration.

However, she offers other reasons too why the Government should consider the proposal.

One reason is the shrinking population, and another the need to ensure that the country has sufficient care workers to cater to the ageing population.

She proposes expanding NS to non-military services such as those for the community, social work and healthcare.

Ms Lim noted that “the equal participation of women in NS will automatically make NS less masculine”.

“Ultimately, we should make NS totally gender-neutral so that everyone, regardless of gender, can opt for two years in military, police, civil defence, community or healthcare, and whatever other total defence areas that need people.”

Ms Lim also talked about bullying and sex education.

Fifteen-year-olds in Singapore are bullied more than their peers in 52 other countries, she said, highlighting a recent OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) study.

Citing a 2017 survey by AWARE, Ms Lim said nine in 10 teenage boys faced social pressures to be manly, such as being told to “man up” or “take it like a man”.

She noted such experiences impact the men later in life, leading to suicide, crime, or substance abuse.

“If we are to prevent or reduce gender violence, we must engage men and boys and also work to promote positive masculinity norms.”

She also called for more comprehensive sex education in schools, focusing on consent, respect and healthy relationships.

“I hope that one day, we will celebrate the gender equality review as a historic event. That moment of pivot when Singapore started to embrace gender equality and never looked back,” said Ms Lim./TISG