

Greater trust among races, but perception of workplace discrimination against minorities higher than in 2013: Survey

Wong Pei Ting

TODAY, 30 July 2019

SINGAPORE — Even as the level of trust among different races here in times of crisis increases, there has been a marginal rise in perceived discrimination at the workplace against minorities when it comes to hiring and promotion, a new study has found.

More Malays and Indians feel discriminated against when applying for a job, and when seeking a workplace promotion, now than they did five years ago.

This is the finding from a working paper published by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Tuesday (July 30).

The study also found that two-thirds of the people surveyed felt that all races had to put in the same effort to “have a decent life” in Singapore.

However, 20 per cent of the respondents felt that Malays and Indians had to work harder, or much harder, to achieve this outcome. This was somewhat higher than the 13.1 per cent who felt that way in relation to the Chinese.

“Overall, the findings in this report bode well for racial and religious harmony in Singapore in general, though the issues pertaining to perceptions of workplace discrimination indicate that it remains a work in progress,” the report’s authors stated.

The study surveyed 4,015 Singaporean citizens and permanent residents from August last year to January this year.

The 2018 study — which continues to be led by the institute’s senior research fellow Mathew Mathews — was a follow-up to a survey conducted between December 2012 and April 2013, which sought the views of 3,128 people here.

The study again found high levels of inter-racial trust that even surpassed the levels identified in the 2013 study.

Nearly seven in 10 Malay respondents, or 68.1 per cent, said that they could trust either “more than half” or “all” or “mostly all” Chinese here to help in a time of national crisis.

For Indian respondents, the figure was 76.2 per cent.

However, the working paper found that a majority of Malays here now feel that there is discrimination when applying for a job or seeking a job promotion, when that was not the case five years ago.

In the 2013 study, 47.2 per cent of Malays said that they “sometimes, often, very often or always” perceive discrimination when applying for a job, but the proportion in the 2018 study moved up to 51.6 per cent.

When seeking a promotion, 50.8 per cent of Malays indicated that they felt discrimination at least sometimes, compared with 43.8 per cent previously.

Among Indians, 47 per cent (41.5 per cent in 2013) at least sometimes perceive discrimination when applying for a job, while 45.2 per cent (39.8 per cent in 2013) at least sometimes perceive discrimination when seeking a promotion.

Fewer Chinese feel that there is discrimination over work opportunities. Those who at least sometimes feel discrimination when applying for job went down from 16.5 per cent in 2013 to 12.2 per cent in 2018, while those who at least sometimes feel discrimination when seeking a promotion went down from 17.5 per cent in 2013 to 13.7 per cent in 2018.

When probed further for their views on social exclusion, the picture is improving for minorities in terms of whether they feel they need to work harder than someone of another race to reach top positions.

Back in 2013, 35.7 per cent of Malays and 30.9 per cent of Indians took the view that they did have to work harder, but that figure has fallen in the latest study to 31.9 per cent of Malays and 26.7 per cent of Indians.

MILLENNIALS THINK DIFFERENTLY TOWARDS RACE

The working paper highlighted that race is far less of a factor among millennials aged 18 to 25.

They are more open to inter-racial interaction, with slightly more than half agreeing or strongly agreeing that they liked to get to know people from other races, compared to around a third of those aged 55 and above.

They are more welcoming of racial diversity, with nearly three quarters agreeing that they could learn a lot from other races, compared to less than half of those aged 55 and above.

The study also found that millennials are likelier to have a close Malay or Indian friend, compared to older respondents, and that younger Malays were likelier to have close Chinese friends compared to older Malays.

These could be because the millennials are less likely than the older generation to rely on racial stereotypes.

The study found that around 47 per cent of those aged above 65 agreed or strongly agreed that a person's race gave them a good idea of what the person's behaviour and views were like, but those aged 18 and 25 with similar sentiments was only at 24.5 per cent.

Another reason could be that those aged between 18 and 25 were likelier to display higher inter-racial trust compared to the older generation because they had never been exposed to the communal tensions such as the racial riots of the 1950s, the researchers noted.

Also, many older Singaporeans had grown up attending vernacular schools and quite a number of kampungs back then predominantly comprised a single race, in contrast to the more integrated living after the implementation of the Ethnic Integration Policy in 1989, they added.

FINDINGS COULD RESULT FROM GREATER AWARENESS: ONEPEOPLE.SG

In response to the findings, OnePeople.sg – a non-governmental organisation promoting racial harmony that set the indicators for the 2013 and 2018 surveys with IPS – said this “disconcerting” increase in perceptions of work-related discrimination may stem from greater public awareness of discrimination.

“Singaporeans of minority ethnic backgrounds have made significant progress in education and have appropriately increased aspirations. They are increasingly competing for work across all industries and businesses,” it added in a media statement.

With the findings, OnePeople.sg will work to support greater education and engagement of both employers and employees to address bias and stereotypes, it noted. This includes working with the Singapore National Employers Federation, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices, and other champions of diversity and inclusion.

“We will continue to send the clear message to all in Singapore that all forms of racism and racial discrimination are not acceptable in our multi-racial and multi-religious society,” OnePeople.sg said.