

Marriage between man and woman remains norm, despite more liberal attitudes on homosexuality: MSF

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SINGAPORE — While a recent study found that Singaporeans have become more liberal towards gay sex and marriage in the last five years, the Government said there are still significant differences in views across society and marriage between a man and woman remains the social norm.

In response to TODAY's queries, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) said that maintaining social cohesion is the Government's priority.

"On issues where there may be deeply held views based on personal beliefs and values, it is important for... respectful and civil dialogue and for society to find common ground across the different perspectives," said the ministry's spokesperson.

"Robust surveys and studies can be useful in informing and supporting this process, but do not replace it."

Even so, a number of rights groups have renewed their calls for the Government to scrap Section 377A of the Penal Code — which criminalises sex between men — and relook other practices that they said are unfair to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals.

Last Thursday (May 2), the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) released a paper showing "distinct shifts" in attitudes — especially among the young — towards gay sex and gay marriage in the last five years.

The Singapore-based think-tank polled 4,015 Singaporeans and permanent residents between August 2018 and January 2019 as part of the second wave of a survey on race, religion and language. The first part was conducted in 2013.

The paper revealed that 11.4 per cent of the respondents to the latest survey felt sexual relations between two same-sex adults were not wrong at all. This was more than double the figure in 2013 (5.6 per cent).

Singaporeans are also more welcoming of gay marriage now, with 16.4 per cent saying in the study that it was not wrong at all, compared with just 8.4 per cent in 2013.

While most respondents remained conservative about these issues, the findings pointed to "significant shifts in acceptance" towards gay sex and marriage, said the IPS researchers.

Citing the findings, the MSF spokesperson said: "The prevailing social norm remains that of a man and a woman marrying, having and bringing up children within that framework of a stable family unit."

Even as sentiments may evolve on the whole, the study also noted significant differences in views across segments of the population, added the spokesperson.

‘A WAVE OF HOPE’, BUT MORE CHANGES NEEDED

Rights groups and LGBT activists told TODAY that the survey findings were encouraging and that the shifting attitudes among the young were clear and would become more pronounced in time.

However, they said more needed to be done to correct misperceptions about the community through educational efforts and to review policies and practices that marginalise LGBT individuals.

The IPS paper’s authors had said that if the trend towards more liberal attitudes on gay rights among the young continues, certain social policies will inevitably have to be relooked and re-evaluated.

LGBT movement Pink Dot SG pointed out that, with the sentiments it has sensed on the ground, society would eventually become more accepting towards the LGBT community.

But its spokesman Paerin Choa said that many LGBT Singaporeans continue to face discrimination in workplaces and schools. He wants these individuals to be protected from workplace discrimination and wrongful dismissal due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Government should protect the rights of the LGBT community as it does the racial and religious minorities, he said. “We cannot afford to wait until there is approval from the majority before the LGBT community is treated as equal citizens in the eyes of the law.”

Apart from calling again for Section 377A to be repealed, Mr Choa urged the authorities to review censorship guidelines on LGBT issues in mainstream media.

He also wants schools to offer more inclusive sexuality education programmes.

Echoing this suggestion, the Inter-University LGBT Network, which supports the LGBT community in universities here, called on the Government to re-evaluate its approach towards sex education.

“Students are taught current legal provisions concerning homosexual acts in Singapore and this sets the tone for how LGBT youth are perceived and treated,” said its public relations director Kennede Sng.

Mr Leow Yangfa, executive director of Oogachaga, a non-profit organisation working with the LGBT community, also called for a review of “outdated” policies, such as LGBT organisations’ inability to be registered as “they are seen as contrary to national interests”.

Mr Kyle Malinda-White, co-founder of Prout, an LGBT meet-up and support platform, wants more protection for those who are kicked out of their homes after coming out to their families. Singapore does not have a shelter for LGBT individuals, he noted.

“We still know of those under 18 who, after coming out to their parents, get kicked out of their homes. They have nowhere to stay,” he added.

“These people end up having to stay over with friends. Sometimes they can’t even do so and have to go in and out of their friends’ homes.”

Ms Braema Mathi, president of human rights group Maruah, said that, through the survey, society is “speaking louder” that it is more open to diverse lifestyles and ways of expressing love and commitment beyond heterosexual norms.

“We should move forward and the Government needs to take that leap of faith on its own principles as well as what people are saying,” said Ms Mathi, who reiterated Maruah’s call to repeal Section 377A.

Agreeing, Ms Corinna Lim, executive director of the Association of Women for Action and Research, said the advocacy group hopes that the Government will abolish Section 377A in response to trends here and globally of LGBT acceptance.

“We also hope that they remove other institutional practices that unfairly penalise the LGBT community, such as the censorship of LGBT content and the restrictions on Housing and Development Board schemes that prevent LGBT couples from easily accessing housing,” she said.

Ms Lim noted that nearly six in 10 respondents to the IPS survey who are between 20 and 24 felt that gay marriage was not wrong.

“The trends are clear — the views of the younger generation are changing fast and their views will become even more dominant in time,” she said.

“To us, that is a wave of hope, a signal that our youth are capable of empathy, compassion and reason.”