

2 in 5 NSmen say employers rather hire staff with no NS commitments: survey

Jeanette Tan

Yahoo Newsroom, 8 October 2013

It looks like nearly half of employed Singaporean national servicemen believe that employers tend to prefer to hire people who do not have national service (NS) commitments.

This was one of the many findings of a study released on Tuesday and conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on the attitudes that Singaporeans have toward NS.

When asked in face-to-face interviews whether they felt that their employers preferred to hire people without NS commitments, 42.1 per cent of the employed servicemen who responded said they either "slightly agreed", "agreed" or "strongly agreed".

However, 89 per cent of employed servicemen respondents said employers generally were supportive of NS commitments and 76.9 per cent said their bosses would adjust the reservists' workload to take them into account.

On the perceived preference towards hiring those without NS commitments, IPS research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, who led the study, told *Yahoo Singapore* it could be because some industries need more responsiveness and dedication on the part of their employees.

"But let's not get carried away," he said. "Two out of five is not a majority, and this is a preference rating. There are many factors besides NS obligation, and the recent policy change on EP (employment pass) employment market testing requirement would have at least addressed some of these issues."

The IPS study polled 1,251 Singapore citizens of varying backgrounds and ages in various things about NS, including the topic of women being conscripted or serving in other capacities, for instance in volunteer work.

It was commissioned by the government-appointed Committee to Strengthen National Service, which is headed by defence minister Ng Eng Hen. The findings were presented on Tuesday afternoon to the committee with recommendations on how to improve the NS system, which a Singapore blogger recently described as a form of "slavery".

Should women serve NS?

To the question on whether women should serve NS, some 41.8 per cent of male respondents said yes. Much higher positive responses came from servicemen respondents when asked about whether women and PRs who are currently exempt from serving NS should contribute to defence as volunteers — with 80.7 saying women should, and 77.4 per cent of them saying PRs ought to.

Surprisingly, some 35.8 per cent of women who responded to the survey said either "Maybe yes", "Yes" or "Definitely yes" when asked whether they should serve NS.

In fact, more than half of the study's female respondents said they agreed that they should serve "a shorter military service", with a further 21.9 per cent of women saying they would take it on themselves. Meanwhile, 21.7 per cent of women said they should serve the full two-year NS period, with 9.3 per cent saying they would take it up themselves.

These positive sentiments surprised Leong, who said in the interview that he suspected it was because women lacked personal experience with NS.

"I don't think women will be made to serve NS, not on a compulsory basis," he said, stressing that this was his opinion. "But I hope the scope for women to contribute to defence (as volunteers) will be widened, (with) NS being one of the many options."

He voiced his doubts that the take-up rate for full-time NS would be as high as the 9.3 per cent of female respondents who said they would conscript themselves, but said he hoped a shorter duration would not be imposed as it "will erode the principle of universal policy implementation".

Commenting on the study's findings on PRs, Leong also said this would be an "opportune time" for more of them to be involved.

"It is an opportune time for first-generation PRs to step in too, if they want to be more deeply involved in Singapore society but are not prepared to give up their foreign citizenship," he said, adding that Singapore could follow in the footsteps of the US, which currently allows first-generation PRs between 17 and 34 years old to serve in the military.

Given the numerous positive findings of the study about trust in the dignity and impartiality of NS, Leong noted Singaporeans showed strong support for having the NS institution, despite recent safety issues and the global shift away from military conscription.

"In this regard, NS is more like Switzerland than Taiwan; it has become a rite of passage and a ubiquitous Singaporean identity," he said. "It is not just a means to meet the defence mandate but there is a strong social, nation-building element."