

EXPLOITATIVE VIEW OF WOMEN

Fundamentally, these online harms are driven by a view of women and girls which is exploitative in nature. In real life, we have laws that uphold women's safety. We have cultural norms as well that govern acceptable interactions between men and women.



SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION SIM ANN

HAVING EQUAL RIGHTS

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MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS AND LAW K. SHANMUGAM

More to be done to ensure equal rights for women: Panel

Sue-Ann Tan

There should be something “aspirational” in Singapore’s Constitution that recognises the equal rights of men and women, said Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam at a panel discussion yesterday.

He added that it was a personal view and that he was not speaking for the Government.

He was responding to a student who asked if it was possible to amend the Constitution to express gender equality.

The panel was part of the Tembusu forum on women, organised by the Tembusu College of the National University of Singapore. It was moderated by Professor Tommy Koh, rector of the college.

Mr Shanmugam said: “My personal view on this is that we should have something aspirational in the Constitution because the Constitution sets out our values (and) where we want to see society going.”

But he also said that it is not a simple issue to just make the amendment, as various trade-offs have to be assessed.

“At another level – these are the constraints on policymaking – you don’t want to hurt the very people you’re trying to help.”

Referring to how this change can affect firms, he added: “What you don’t want to end up (with) is a lot of litigation affecting the very companies and the very economy of Singapore.”

“Any time we impose (something) on companies, we need to think about the trade-offs. So when you come to putting it in the Constitution, the question is – does it impose certain inflexibility or make our companies and economic sector face additional litigation, on the



Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam spoke at the Tembusu forum of having something “aspirational” in Singapore’s Constitution that recognises the equal rights of men and women. PHOTO: TEMBUSU FORUM

basis of discrimination?... But having said that, if we can marry the two, I think it would be ideal.”

Ms Corinna Lim, Association of Women for Action and Research’s executive director, who was also a speaker on the panel, noted that when the Women’s Charter was created in 1961, some wanted it to include anti-discrimination provisions.

“Those objections (to the charter) were not heeded. It’s actually been a long-time debate about whether or not we should have protection against discrimination.”

In his opening address, Mr Shanmugam said that with regard to the position of women in Singapore, the glass is “perhaps two-thirds full, maybe a little more”.

He noted that while Singapore does well with female education, for instance, it is a work in progress in areas such as helping women juggle multiple roles, particularly in adult life. There is also the serious issue of family violence, he added.

Most importantly, changing attitudes is key.

“From a very young age, these attitudes get hard-coded. There are differences between... men and women, but I think the right approach is not to say that everything can be done equally, but to say that everyone has equal rights.”

Panel speaker Junie Foo, the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations (SCWO) president, noted that there is some way to go towards gender equality. The Women’s Charter was first passed in 1961, and “60 years later, we are still talking about it”, she said.

For instance, SCWO has pushed for more women on company boards since 2011, but the proportion of women on boards in Singapore still has not reached 20 per cent, she added.

Ms Lim also said that merit is key to achieving leadership positions, but that the playing field has to be levelled.

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