

Call to review NS to weed out toxic masculinity

Practices that skew view of what it means to be a man should be relooked: Aware director

✓ MALAVIKA MENON

It is time to review national service (NS) to weed out unhealthy practices that give men a skewed view of what it means to be masculine, said veteran women's rights activist Corinna Lim.

There is also a need to zero in on bullying in schools and the prevalence of pornography among boys to put an end to some toxic practices that skew their understanding of what it means to be a man, and foster healthy ideas of being male, she said in a lecture yesterday.

Conscripting women for national service, addressing the culture of what she called hypermasculinity in basic military training and moving away from abstinence-only sex education in schools are also key steps in the march towards better gender equality, said Ms Lim.

She said: "The men that I spoke to described NS as a hypermasculine experience. NS is designed to toughen up our boys and to build bonds between males across ethnic and class divides.

"However, there are aspects of national service that bring out the more negative norms of masculinity.

"Ultimately, we should make NS totally gender-neutral so that everyone, regardless of gender, can opt for two years of military, police, civil defence, community or healthcare, and whatever other total defence areas that need people. The equal participation of women in NS will automatically make national service less masculine."

That also means rooting out a homophobic and misogynistic culture that leads to a toxic environment during national service, Ms Lim said.

She recounted the story of a man she called Tim, who was relieved to be spared blanket parties in the army where the victim is covered with a blanket and beaten



Aware executive director of Corinna Lim (left) with moderator Eunice Olsen during a Q&A session yesterday at the third lecture of this year's Institute of Policy Studies-Nathan Lecture Series. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

up. The victim, she added, is usually a soldier seen as the weakest link or who is disliked.

Ms Lim, executive director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), was delivering the third lecture of this year's Institute of Policy Studies-Nathan Lecture Series.

BULLYING

Another issue that feeds into toxic ideas of masculinity, Ms Lim said, is school bullying.

A study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, she said, found that 15-year-old students in Singapore experience more bullying than their peers in 50 other countries or territories. Only children in Latvia and New Zealand have it worse.

Boys who were pressured to conform to masculine norms were four times more likely to commit violence against

others, she added.

Although a 2017 study by the Institute of Mental Health found that more women than men suffer from depression in Singapore, the rate of suicide for men is double that of women, not only here but in most other countries, Ms Lim said.

She also touched on the need for comprehensive sexual education in schools with a focus on consent, respect and healthy relationships and the establishment of men's support centres that offer coaching and support groups.

Ms Lim said she was hopeful and excited about the future of gender equality in Singapore.

She said: "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."

mmala@sph.com.sg