

Legislation, mindset shifts needed to oppose toxic masculinity, say experts

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The solution to the problem of “toxic masculinity” lies in a combination of legislative changes and cultural mindset shifts, panellists at the Institute of Policy Studies Women’s Conference said. Toxic masculinity refers to the negative effects of social pressures on men to behave in “manly” ways, which can manifest as harmful attitudes, speech and violence.

Mr Wendell Wong, director of dispute resolution and co-head of investigations and criminal law practice at law firm Drew & Napier, noted the need for legislation to respond to changes in how technology is used as the “weapon of choice” in sexual harassment.

Ms Danielle Pereira, a lawyer and spokesman for the Aim for Zero campaign at the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), said legislation is needed to define workplace harassment and hold employers responsible if they fail to address it properly.

But changes to the law alone will not solve the underlying problem of misogyny in society, both panellists noted yesterday.

Mr Wong said advocacy and education are key. Ms Pereira cited the need to change attitudes and long-held beliefs in workplaces.

Also on the panel were Ms Monica Baey, an advocate for sexual violence survivors who started a national discussion on sexual harassment after going public with her experience as a target of voyeurism, and Mr Bryan Tan, chief executive of the Centre for Fathering and the Dads for Life movement. Ms Junie Foo, president of the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations, moderated the discussion on “Mindsets and Minefields”.

Ms Baey noted that the prevalence of victim blaming is a significant barrier that can discourage

survivors from speaking up, while a lack of awareness about sexual assault can hinder bystanders from helping victims. She said the work to change perceptions and lower the incidence of sexual assaults has to be rooted in governments, institutions and policies, but individual effort also counts.

On toxic masculinity, Mr Tan said traits perceived as masculine, like strength, aggressiveness, stoicism and independence, resonate with many men, but he noted that some men also struggle to live up to such expectations.

“I have to confess that I couldn’t resonate with the term ‘toxic’... What is described (as toxic) is so much a part of who we are as men,” he said. However, he also said men should not trivialise the aspects of their masculinity that may be harmful to others, such as over-sexualising women.

The panellists also discussed how toxic masculinity can be perpetuated in predominantly male institutions like national service (NS).

Referring to Aware chief Corinna Lim’s call to review aspects of NS and make it more inclusive, Mr Wong said this may not address the underlying causes, as sexual offences still occur in armed forces in countries where both men and women serve. Instead, efforts to change attitudes should start at the top, he said, with leaders ensuring that toxic masculinity does not dominate training and bonding activities.

Ms Pereira cited research by Aware showing how “locker room talk”, or speaking about women’s bodies in an objectifying manner during NS, can contribute to harmful attitudes about women.

Mr Tan said behaviours that could be described as “toxic leadership” should be reviewed. “It’s how the leaders at every level... make sure that everything is done with the right purpose in mind.”

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