

TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY MS SIM ANN, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CO-CHAIR OF SUNLIGHT AFA, AT THE MOTION ON SINGAPORE WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT, ON TUESDAY 5 APRIL 2022

UPLIFTING DIGITAL SAFETY FOR SINGAPORE WOMEN AND GIRLS

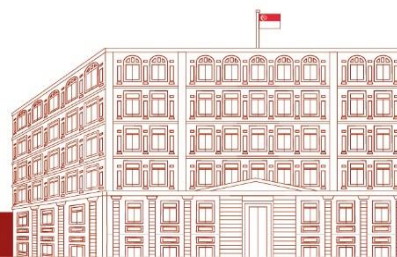
Mr Speaker Sir

Introduction

1. Since July last year, I have been co-chairing the SG Together Sunlight Alliance for Action (AfA) with my colleague Parliamentary Secretary Rahayu Mahzam, which tackles online harms targeted mainly at women and girls.
2. I will elaborate on how the Sunlight AfA, which seeks to support the Digital for Life (DfL) movement, tries to close the digital safety gap for women. Ms Rahayu will share more about how the Ministry of Communications and Information is responding to calls made by Sunlight AfA.

Impact of online harms on victims

3. Online harms, especially those experienced by women and girls, are not something that can be understood in the abstract.
4. Not everyone is aware of such online harms or what they look like. Based on a sensing poll conducted by the Sunlight AfA, 31% of respondents have either personally experienced or witnessed gender-based online harms or both.
5. However, you can feel the devastating impact of such harms on individuals and their families even if you have never been directly targeted. All you need is to listen with an open heart to the story of someone who has gone through such an experience. I have heard several of such tales from personal acquaintances, each of which have remained deeply etched in my mind.
 - a. The first that I recall occurred more than 10 years ago. A woman journalist related to me a harrowing experience, where her photos and contact number were posted by a person or persons unknown on websites that falsely profiled her as a prostitute. She was harassed and embarrassed by phone calls from strangers wanting to obtain sexual services from her. She had reason to think that this was part of a campaign by those who wanted to punish her for writing pieces that they disagreed strongly with.
 - b. In another episode, a father reached out to me because intimate photos that his daughter had taken of herself had been stolen from her phone and found their way onto blog sites that specialise in collecting and sharing such photos of young Singapore women. He went to great lengths getting the photos taken down. I will always remember his anguish when relating the severe trauma that this had caused his daughter and his fear that he might lose her forever should she do irreparable harm to herself. This is every parent's worst nightmare.
6. Thankfully, in both cases, the women and their loved ones were able to overcome the harm they experienced and put these terrible episodes behind them.



7. Our laws have been evolving. In 2019, the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) was amended to outlaw doxxing, which would address the kind of harassment that the woman journalist had endured.

8. But online harms, too, evolve. Another common form of such harms are hypersexualised communications on direct messaging platforms, typically involving the sending of lewd and sexually explicit photos. These are aimed at eliciting a response from the women and girls being targeted, and linked to sexual grooming and eventual exploitation

9. The impact caused by such online harms can have severe consequences on:

a. The victims, who are made to feel:

- i. Humiliated and ashamed
- ii. Violated and unsafe
- iii. Isolated and withdrawn
- iv. Depressed, and even suicidal

b. Their families and loved ones are also not spared.

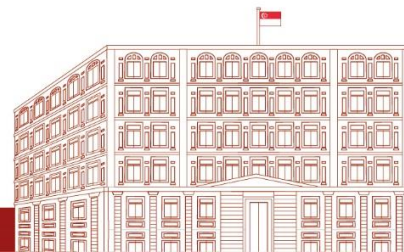
10. How many untold stories of scarred psyches or diminished lives are there? How many women and girls are out there who would never regain their self-confidence and peace of mind?

Impact of online harms on society

11. Hearing about these episodes make me – and many others who care about the wellbeing of women and girls – want to do something about it. This goes beyond our sympathy and indignation on behalf of the victims and their families. There are wider and more insidious implications on society too.

12. What do these online harms have in common?

- a. They stem from seeing and portraying women and girls primarily as playthings, for the sexual gratification of men.
- b. This is a deplorable and backward mindset, one that I believe most men do not subscribe to, but is nonetheless difficult to eradicate from society completely.
- c. It may be rooted in age-old inequalities between the sexes, but these are unjustifiable by any modern standard of morality or law.
- d. Generations of women – and men who support women – all over the world have pushed back against this mindset and fought for the dignity and safety of women and girls.
- e. Over time, like many other societies, we have developed clear laws and strong enforcement to protect women's safety in real life – against sexual assault, hurt crimes, and trafficking.
- f. Singapore is now one of the safest cities in the world for women and girls, so much so that many of us take it for granted that we can go about our daily business alone and unaccompanied. Since 2017, we have been ranked first in Gallup's Global Law and Order report.



- g. But the exploitative and backward mindset towards women has found new means of expression in the internet age. Perpetrators believe they can hide behind the cloak of anonymity. The digital publication and dissemination of information, allows for viralling at speed, and the impact on victims becomes more severe and wide-ranging. Such harms can also be weaponised in a malicious and cynical manner to threaten and inflict trauma on individual women.
- h. Unsurprisingly, more women than men feel unsafe from gender-based online harms. The sensing poll conducted by the Sunlight AfA found that while 72% of males felt safe from harms while online, only 60% of females did.

13. If left unchecked, online harms that promote exploitative and disrespectful attitudes towards women and girls may discourage women from being active online. We are not just talking about women deciding to make fewer posts or comments on social media. But avoiding important and meaningful undertakings – such as leadership roles or advocacy in real life – that might increase one’s chances of encountering haters who wield online harms as a weapon. Reduced participation means reduced opportunities. Why should women accept this?

14. If this mindset is left unchecked, it may erode the real-life safety that women in Singapore have come to rely on, by undermining the value of respecting women and girls as full human beings, that we have worked so hard to build up over the generations. Some who are intent on doing real-life harm to women and girls are also availing themselves of online means to identify and isolate their potential victims – hypersexualised direct messaging being one of such means.

Online harms warrant a whole-of-society response, seeded by Sunlight AfA

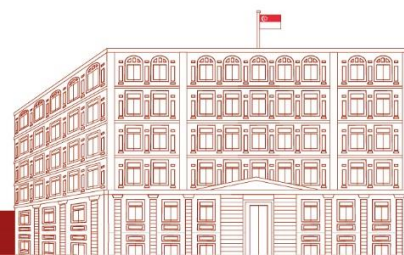
15. No society that respects and values women can stand for this - much less one like Singapore where women have achieved so much freedom and confidence in real life.

16. The digital safety gap must be closed. Our women and girls must feel as safe and confident online as they do in real life.

17. This is certainly relevant to many of the topics being discussed in the Conversations on Singapore Women’s Development. Therefore, while I was at the Ministry of Communications and Information, with support from my former colleagues, I decided to make an appeal to those who care equally about women and girls’ online safety, so that we can come together and do something about it collectively.

18. I was moved by the number of people who came forward because this cause resonated strongly with them.

- a. This included not only women but also men. The number of men reaching out and supporting the AfA affirms and strengthens my belief that men are absolutely vital partners for improving digital safety for women and girls. As fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, friends and colleagues – they care for and want the best for women and girls. This is never about women versus men. This is only ever about women and men working hand in hand to push back against mindsets that exploit and victimise women.
- b. IPS Senior Research Fellow and Sunlight AfA member Dr Chew Han Ei exemplifies this solidarity. He joined the AfA because he wants to help shift societal mindsets and norms to empower men, as supportive allies of women, to speak out against



behaviours that reflect and perpetuate retrograde and exploitative mindsets about women.

- c. These are men and women who recognise that online harms, which men and boys may similarly encounter, cannot be dealt with solely via Government action in the form of greater regulation and enforcement. Government's role is necessary but not sufficient.
- d. Concerted efforts from the public, private and people sectors, to formulate approaches to victim support, undertake public education and engagement, and have internet companies step up to do their part are also needed.
- e. Indeed, groups like the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), United Women Singapore, TOUCH Community Services, and AWARE are among the organisations that AfA members hail from.
- f. I also wish to express my gratitude to the many officers from MCI who believe in the cause and contributed so much of their time and effort to provide the AfA with secretariat support.

19. Since its launch in July 2021, the AfA has:

- a. Administered a survey to understand the incidence and impact of online harms in Singapore;
- b. Engaged over 240 parents and youths to raise awareness about online harms and impart tips on how they can help their loved ones navigate the digital space safely;
- c. Launched a website containing informational resources about online risks and safety tools on technology platforms.

20. What has been particularly encouraging to the AfA members is that the Government is responding to the calls we have been making, by introducing Codes of Practice for internet platforms. Parl Sec Rahayu will share more on this later.

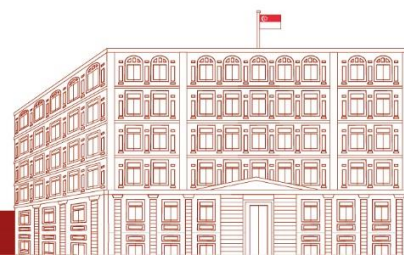
21. The AfA will roll out more initiatives in the coming months to empower individuals to recognise online harms and build a more holistic system of support for victims. These include:

- a. A workshop to equip youths to support peers who may be experiencing online harms; and
- b. A pilot to provide counselling intervention to victims of online harms

22. We will work with community partners to develop public education initiatives to drive awareness about online harms and promote digital safety.

A cause that can bring about new engines of activism

23. Parl Sec Rahayu and I are grateful for the support of all Alliance members, including those who expressed interest in sustaining initiatives in the longer term. The AfA has been a platform for many of our members to forge new friendships and explore common areas of interest, including wider advocacy for the protection and advancement of women and girls,



beyond tackling online harms. I am encouraged and look forward to new engines of activism in our society in support of women and girls.

24. Beyond the AfA, we have seen the cause attract wide resonance. The People's Action Party Women's Wing adopted the theme of tackling online harms for its International Women's Day activation for 2022. It partnered lawyers and counsellors to roll out a resource toolkit to equip branch volunteers to be good listeners and helpful responders when members of the public bring up issues relating to online harms during meet-the-people sessions.

25. More broadly, we welcome interested community partners to join the Digital for Life movement. There is room for many of us to amplify efforts to build a safer digital future for all.

Conclusion

26. Very recently, ST journalist Malavika Menon wrote courageously about her personal encounter with online harms, including that of a sexist nature.

27. Her piece reminded me of that first conversation I had all those years ago, with a different woman journalist. Back then, I felt upset for her, but did not yet have a clear idea of what can be done to tackle such online harms and defend the dignity and confidence of women online.

28. I believe we have a roadmap now, which is constantly being expanded and refined, thanks to the partnership and collective wisdom of the women and men who stepped forth to join our AfA, and all those who are committed to uplift digital safety for Singapore women and girls.

29. The digital safety gap can be closed for our women and girls. Let's make it happen.

