

SINGAPORE

'Laws alone cannot solve difficult social problems': Edwin Tong lauds role of community service organisations in tackling online harms

They play a critical role in turning policy into people-centred programmes, says Law Minister



Law Minister Edwin Tong lauded the role of community service organisations in helping to turn policies, such as the new laws on online harms, into people-centred programmes with impact that can be felt in everyday lives. PHOTO: Ministry of Law



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BY SEAN LER



Even as the Government updates different aspects of Singapore's legislation to adapt to emerging trends, laws alone cannot solve difficult social problems such as online harms, said Law Minister Edwin Tong.

Tong, who is also Second Minister for Home Affairs, was speaking at the Young Women's Christian Association of Singapore's (YWCA) 150th anniversary commemoration dinner on Friday (Aug 29).

Established in Singapore in 1875, YWCA is the oldest women's organisation here and serves to advance the development of women and girls through quality programmes, facilities and services.

Citing how YWCA Singapore has evolved to expand its reach and impact to meet the changing needs of Singapore's society, Tong said that the Government's policies have also evolved.

YWCA established Singapore's earliest childcare centres to enable mothers to re-join the workforce, to bringing companionship and delivering meals to over a thousand vulnerable seniors each week as Singapore's population aged.

Tong said: "We must keep listening, learning, and adapting, especially to emerging trends such as technological changes that will impact how we relate to one another.

"We are currently [working on new laws and a new framework to better protect Singaporeans from online harms](#), some of which aim to combat deeply distressing harms, such as intimate images abuse and also deepfakes.

"They cause tremendous distress and that should not be allowed. These unfortunately disproportionately target women and girls."

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Speaking on the Ministry of Digital Development and Information's spending plans for the year on March 7, Digital Development and Information Minister Josephine Teo said that a proposed law – the Online Safety (Relief and Accountability) Bill – will be introduced later this year to establish the [Online Safety Commission](#) (OSC).

The OSC will assist victims to get "timely help" if they encounter online harms, said Teo in Parliament then.

Tong said that this will ensure an offending post is taken down faster and "restore a sense of agency" to survivors of online harms.

Given the OSC's proposed powers to issue directions to the perpetrator of harm or administrators and online service providers, Tong said that victims will no longer be entirely dependent on online service providers to "do the right thing".

"Laws cannot solve difficult social problems such as online harms," added Tong, who highlighted the critical role community organisations play to turn policy into

people-centred programmes that can be felt in everyday lives.

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He referred to the SG Her Empowerment (SHE) annual symposium held at YWCA in February, which discussed gender norm issues in the online and offline world, as an example of community organisations partnering one another to complement each other's work.

"SHECARES@SCWO is Singapore's – and Asia's – first one-stop support centre for survivors of online harms.

"Operated by SHE in collaboration with the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations, the centre provides holistic victim support, including free counselling, and it will be, and has been a safe space for victims and survivors to turn to when they encounter online harms," said Tong.

He also used the occasion to urge policymakers, business leaders, community partners, and individuals to collaborate across communities, generations and sectors to align between national vision and community action to make Singapore's social fabric strong.

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