

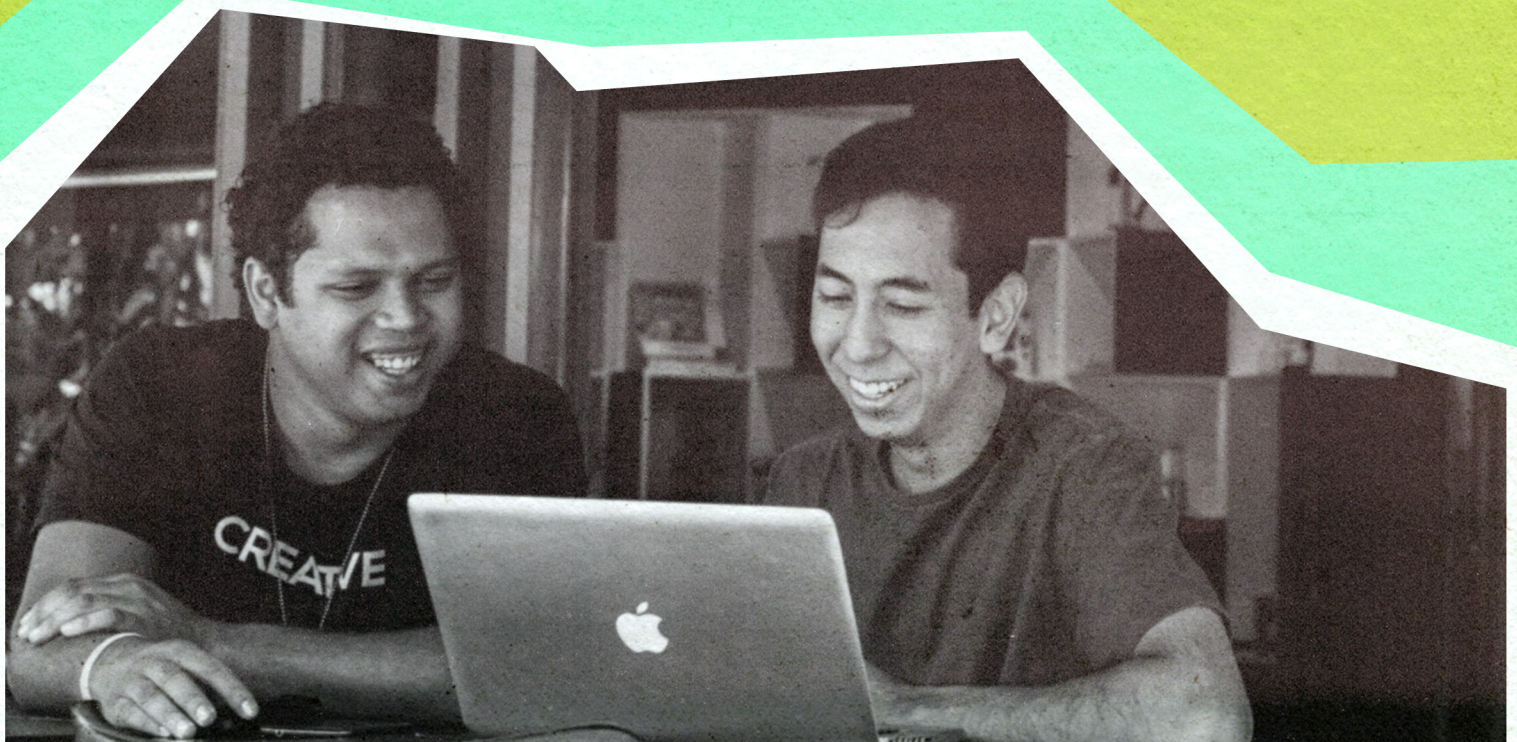
aware 

Reimagining Equality

Male Advocates
for Gender Equality

A Policy Wishlist From
The Community

July 2021



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Introduction

In the first half of 2021, AWARE brought together 33 men for an in-depth conversation about the role of men in advocating for gender equality.

These individuals had various gender and sexual identities, ethnic backgrounds, marital statuses and ages. They shared a common interest in ensuring that the government's White Paper on improving gender equality addressed prescribed gender roles and norms in our society. They believed that doing so would help society become more accepting of and inclusive of all genders—a crucial step for gender equality.

As a community, we brainstormed policy ideas to remove rigid expectations of gender, which inadvertently disadvantage people in different ways.

The Current Situation

Pressure to conform to rigid expectations of masculinity: Summary of participants' sentiments

Participants collectively agreed that society's expectations of what it means to be a man are very limiting. Examples include the need to be dominant, strong, assertive, aggressive and emotionally restrained. These expectations are deeply ingrained into boys at a young age and perpetuated in multiple spaces (such as their homes, in school, in National Service) and through multiple mediums (through the media, laws, social relations). This made the pressure to conform to certain norms overwhelming.

Pressure to conform to gender stereotypes from a young age:

A lot of toxic masculinity happens because socialisation happens early. I was in an all-boys school where talking trash and watching porn were normal.

-Mike, 25 years old*

I'm the first-born son and felt a huge stake being placed on me from a young age. I felt this responsibility to perform a certain way as a male. I remember, in secondary school, people telling me to 'man up' and to 'speak up.' People would ask, 'Why are you so soft?'

-Theodore 40 years old*

Seeing femininity as inferior:

I was told that crying was feminine. And this one-sided idea of gender got progressively worse as the years went on because it was just reinforced by my surroundings.

-Zhong Wen, 27 years old*

These expectations were also closely tied to the need to assert physical and sexual dominance over women. Participants were socialised into thinking that anything feminine, or deviating from traditional notions of masculinity, was inferior.

The Current Situation

The participants also shared that culture and society at large associate conventional masculinity with a high sex drive and having constant sexual desires. Participants identified two negative impacts of this.

Firstly, the idea of consent (i.e. the choice of when and how to have sex) is not internalised or taken seriously. This gives rise to an abundance of sexually violent behaviours. On this point, participants emphasised that sexual crimes must be dealt with seriously and that the government must adapt and respond to the growing conversations around this issue.

Secondly, men develop insecurities around being sexually assaulted because they are taught that they should always want sex/sexual attention. This results in stigma and shame around reporting sexual crimes.



We are not taught by parents or reliable guardians how to pursue someone or express feelings... media becomes the only form of guidance for these. But media portrays the idea that if your feelings are not reciprocated, it's because you have not pursued hard enough.

-Pranav, 29 years old*



Limited understanding of consent:

Men are told a lot of things about sex, but there are no healthy discussions around consent. This is why there are so many breaches of consent.

-Keith, 23 years old*

Stigma around reporting sexual crimes:

Hamza*, 32 years old, recounted his own recent realisation that he had been sexually abused. At first, he thought he should be "proud" of it, since it meant he was "attractive", but only afterwards realised that he "had not consented, even if [his] body reacted." He added that men are "taught to want sex, which may also be why so many men under-report sexual assault".

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

A. Participants identified the following challenges relating to education on gender, sex and sexuality:

Starting too late

Education on gender starts late, often after traditional gender norms are already ingrained.

Lacking depth

The sexual education curriculum lacks key topics, such as consent, prescribed gender norms, sexuality and sexual desire, and lacks opportunities for open conversation amongst students.

Educators' biases

Failure to recognise personal (unconscious) biases that may shape how educators teach, support and relate to students who don't subscribe to traditional gender and sexuality norms.



I teach pre-school and already I see that all the girls have pink bags and not a single boy has a pink bag. This issue about gender starts very, very young, as early as nursery.

-Nazir, 35 years old*

Early socialisation around gender and sexuality:



If you don't teach kids early on in schools, it's a bit hard to change values when they are adults or even when they start tertiary education. By then, it's hard to steer them in a different direction.

-Yanlin, 38 years old*

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

Insufficient depth in sexuality education:

I remember girls were just taught things like, 'You should wait for marriage to have sex', and boys were never really taught anything related to sexual desires, like how to handle them.

-Isaac, 29 years old*

Biases in educators:

The attitudes of teachers affect the way they teach the different genders. It affects how the different genders are supposed to conduct themselves... In my schooling years, boys were called upon more because they were seen as assertive, as leaders, while the girls were pushed to the back end.

-Arjun, 28 years old*

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Recommendations

Review how gender, sex and sexuality issues are taught in school

- Conduct a nationwide review of how gender is currently taught in schools, that gathers feedback from multiple stakeholders, such as industry leaders, civil society, educators, parents and students of different ages.
- Introduce topics such as consent, prescribed gender roles and norms, gender relations and gender equality into the current sexuality education curriculum. This curriculum should:
 - Be introduced as early as nursery/pre-school;
 - Be embedded into various other subjects, like civics and moral education, to ensure a holistic approach;
 - Take a scaffolded approach, where the depth of topics progressively increases with the level of schooling.
- Implement mandatory Diversity & Inclusion/Unconscious Bias training for all educators so that they are equipped to support students in an inclusive manner.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

B. Participants identified the following challenges related to National Service (NS):

Reproduction of rigid ideas of masculinity

This alienated individuals that did not fit into conventional moulds, such as excelling at physical activities.

Non-inclusive leadership

Instructors perpetuate prescribed gender norms around effective leadership (e.g. "men are natural leaders") and fail to create safe spaces for servicemen and women.

Reproducing rigid ideas of masculinity:

There was constant talk of how to be a man. You must 'protect your country'. There was a lot of violent and dominant language: 'You don't run fast enough! You're not man enough!' There are systems that make the role of man out to be uncaring. NS was also very [cis]heteronormative. If you're trans, you have to hide your gender identity. If you come out, you're shipped off to another unit.

-Keith, 23 years old*

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

Non-inclusive leadership:

Theodore, 40 years old, tried starting conversations with friends about how policies within NS can be improved, but he always got "shut down".*

Another participant, Keith, 23, added that training on gender equality could be put in place for NS leaders to "challenge some of these entrenched norms".*

I came from a diverse [NS] company where my instructors held open conversations. So I saw that it was possible to create a healthy environment to talk about feelings or things that are not necessarily 'male-related.'

-Logan, 33 years old*

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Recommendations

Undertake a holistic re-examination of National Service

- Expand the scope of NS to include non-physical forms of service; moving beyond the Singapore Armed Forces, Singapore Police Force and Singapore Civil Defence Force. For example, social work at NGOs or VWOs can be introduced.
- Allow individuals to choose a form of service, regardless of gender and gender identity.
- Mandate Diversity & Inclusion/Unconscious Bias training for all instructors to ensure that they are well-equipped to support recruits of different genders in an inclusive manner.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

C. Participants raised the following issues related to the gendered nature of certain laws:

Gendered assumptions

The gendering of certain laws perpetuates rigid ideas of gender. For example, unequal maternity and paternity leave is based on the idea that women are "natural caregivers". It also distracts society at large from the broader conversation of gender equality, because many individuals fixate on the perceived unfair imbalance of certain laws.

Gendered assumptions in laws:

The option for so little paternity leave shows that the duty of caregiving still falls on the woman. In order for men to also recognise this duty of caregiving, there must be more paternity leave.

-Theodore, 40 years old*

We should also look at sexual offences against men. We should make our rape laws gender-neutral. Even though this may not be direct, a law like this can create certain stigmas around being a male victim and reporting.

-Mike, 25 years old*

The Women's Charter needs to be changed to be the 'Family Charter' and it should be gender-blind. Maintenance should be equal. Currently only women are allowed maintenance. Men will continue to think that women are the enemies if that doesn't change.

-Jun Hao, 24 years old*

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

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Recommendations

Make all policies and legislation gender-neutral (where possible)

- Review Government-Paid Paternity Leave and increase Government-Paid Shared Parental Leave.
- Make rape laws gender-neutral.
- Take up AWARE's recommendation to rename the Women's Charter the "Family Charter" and make spousal maintenance gender-neutral.

Even though the ultimate goal should be to make parental leave gender-neutral, there is both local and international literature arguing for an increase in non-transferrable paternity leave, to change gendered norms.¹ Furthermore, as a study on stay-at-home fathers by Research Associate Yvonne Arivalagan of NUS's Institute of Policy Studies stated, "the under-utilisation and uncertainty around the usefulness of paternity leave in Singapore can be directly linked to its limited availability".²

¹ van Belle, Janna. "Do Family Leave Policies in Europe Encourage Paternity Leave?" RAND Corporation, October 20, 2016. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1666.html

² Arivalagan, Yvonne. "Stay-at-Home' Fathers and Their Families: What Lessons for Policymakers?" Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, n.d. <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/stay-at-home-fathers-and-their-families-what-lessons-for-policymakers.pdf>

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

D. Participants raised the following issues relating to reporting sexual assault and support for male victims:

Need for stronger institutional measures

Lack of victim-centric and independent reporting mechanisms for those who do not wish to file a police report.

Efficacy of punitive modes of recourse

Ineffectiveness of punitive measures in preventing re-offending.

Male-specific resources for sexual crimes

Lack of resources dedicated to male victims, given the unique stigma and culture of under-reporting.

Need for victim-centric support services for sexual crimes:

There should be an independent body outside the police that can be trusted to provide anonymity and confidentiality. This body shouldn't just be for victims to report, but it should also provide victim-centric support. The point is to make reporting easier and more efficient so that it reduces fear and reluctance.

-Keith, 23 years old*

I think we must improve the visibility of support structures [for people who want to report or receive support for sexual crimes]. I'm not personally aware of many groups endorsed by the government that provide robust support. If the government steps up to officially support and set up more groups, it can help to give people more confidence to report incidents that happen to them.

-Wen Han, 34 years old*

Need for stronger measures to prevent sexual harassment:

Bryant, 35 years old, believes we need to have "clearer zero-tolerance policies for discrimination and harassment". Jun Hao*, 24, added that the "policies need clear and transparent definitions". Nazir*, also 35, added that this could be formulated by a multi-ministry task force, reflecting the importance of this issue.*

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

Punitive vs. rehabilitative modes of recourse:

It is OK to admit mistakes, but it trivialises the matter to just simply close the issue with punitive measures. Instead, we should move towards rehabilitation and reflection. The issue with harsh punishments is that it may just bring about the question 'Is the punishment too harsh?' as opposed to 'Why did the perpetrator do what they did in the first place?' We should work with perpetrators to rehabilitate. And it may be easier for males, as opposed to women, to work with male perpetrators. Men must step up.

-Arjun, 28 years old*

Lacking male-specific support resources for sexual crimes

Keith, 23, asked how we can create spaces where men are able to open up about being sexually assaulted. Anwar*, 25, added that we also need to talk about the care needed for male victims. Zhang Wei*, 25, also mentioned that society reinforces unconscious stereotypes that "men are always the predators and cannot themselves be abused".*

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Recommendations

Review legislation, policies and procedures related to sexual crimes

- Establish specialist courts for handling all sexual crimes, with specialised, trauma-trained officers and judges.
- Commission studies to explore the comparative efficacy of rehabilitative vs. punitive justice measures for crimes of different levels of severity.
- Set up dedicated services and resources for male victims of sexual harassment to report and seek support.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

E. Participants raised the following challenges relating to media representations of gender and sexuality:

Unhealthy representation of gender

Perpetuates the objectification of women and characteristics typically associated with "toxic masculinity", such as sexual dominance in men.

Stigmatising portrayals of LGBTQ+ community

Negative and/or caricatured portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community encourage homophobia and transphobia. This reproduces the belief that anything outside the confines of conventional heterosexual masculinity is inferior.

Unhealthy representation in the media:

The overall theme of a traditional, patriarchal family life, where the man is the head of the household and the woman is the caregiver or homemaker, was promoted ever since I was young. Most of my formative experiences were shaped by TV shows that portrayed strong, silent men who don't cry or show emotions.

-Bryant, 38 years old*

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

Negative portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community:

Logan, 33 years old, brought up how gay characters cannot be portrayed in a positive light under Infocomm Media Development Authority's content codes. He believes we need to "stop putting non-heterosexual people in a negative light", as it is not about "pushing a 'gay agenda', but rather having equal representation".*



There are certain shows like Queer Eye that are rated R21. Why the age restriction? Perhaps such ratings can be changed based on the paradigm shifts we are seeing in society. This will help promote more gender equality and other forms of masculinities because more people will have access to these shows.

-Ismail, 31 years old*

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Recommendations

Conduct a review of media policies and practices

Review media policies related to portrayals of gender and sexuality. Specifically:

- Codify the prohibition of negative stereotypes related to gender and sexuality in media practices and guidelines (as with race and religion).
- Re-examine content codes and classifications to enable greater diversity of representation.

How Far Have We Come?

1. In December 2020, it was reported that the Ministry of Education (MOE) will work with general education schools and institutes of higher learning to standardise topics like gender education and respect.³
2. From 1 January 2017, eligible working fathers, including those who are self-employed, are entitled to two weeks of paid paternity leave funded by the government.⁴
3. From 1 January 2020, after the Criminal Law Reform Act (CLRA) 2019, men can now legally be considered victims of rape.⁵
4. In June 2021, a new court dedicated to dealing with harassment cases (the Protection from Harassment Court) was established.⁶

³Min, Ang Hwee. "MOE to Work with Schools to Standardise Modules on Gender Education and Respect". Channel NewsAsia . Mediacorp News Pte Ltd, December 21, 2020. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/sexuality-education-sexual-misconduct-gender-education-moe-13816866>

⁴"Paternity Leave". Ministry of Manpower Singapore, n.d. <https://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/leave/paternity-leave>

⁵"Rape Laws in Singapore and How Offenders Can Be Punished". SingaporeLegalAdvice.com, May 21, 2021. <https://singaporelegaladvice.com/rape-laws-singapore-offenders-punished>

⁶Low, Dominic. "New S'pore Court Dedicated to Harassment Cases to Be Established on June 1". The Straits Times. Singapore Press Holdings Ltd Co., May 31, 2021. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/new-spore-court-dedicated-to-harassment-cases-to-be-established-on-june-1>

Conclusion

The government's efforts to achieve gender equality must address the limited definitions of traditional masculinity, so as to better engage men in this issue. More specifically, they must holistically recognise the multiple levers reproducing and perpetuating these limited definitions: education, National Service, the media and legislation. We urge the government to consider policy recommendations made in this wishlist for the forthcoming White Paper.