

Tougher laws against sexual predators

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Protection for kids from predators trawling cyberspace. Legal net to also nab those who pay for sex with under-18s here or overseas
SEXUAL predators beware.

The long arm of the law is reaching out to those who hide in cyberspace or head overseas to prey on children.

A tighter set of laws to protect children from paedophiles was one of the cornerstones of a new Bill proposing changes to Singapore's Penal Code.

It was read in Parliament yesterday, but has to go through debate and a final reading before it is passed.

In a new offence, adults who befriend children with the intention of sexually abusing them face up to three years in jail, even if no sexual act is committed.

Modelled after a similar law in Britain which criminalises 'sexual grooming', the move here is aimed at protecting children under 16 from sexual predators who trawl cyberspace.

Singapore has been seeing a steady trickle of cases involving sex offenders who meet their teen victims online. Rapes committed by culprits who met their victims online or via phone chatlines went up from five in 2004 to 13 in 2005, police statistics show. The majority of victims were teenagers.

Speaking to The Straits Times yesterday, Dr Teo Ho Pin, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Law and Home Affairs, said that building a safe environment for children was critical.

'There have not been too many cases here, but grooming of children in chatrooms has become something of a societal trend in countries like the UK,' said Dr Teo.

'We need to act fast to prevent the same from happening here.'

The legal net is also being cast over Singaporeans and permanent residents who pay for sex with those under 18, either here or overseas. Offenders can be jailed for up to seven years.

The new penalties, activists hope, will serve as a deterrent for 'sexpats' - Singaporeans seeking paid sexual favours overseas.

A study by Johns Hopkins University in 2005 said Singaporeans were believed to be the largest group of sex tourists in Indonesia's Riau Islands.

Women's groups such as Unifem Singapore and Aware, which have long lobbied for extra-territorial laws to curtail child sex, applauded the move to tighten regulations.

The amendments also tackle the contentious issue of marital rape. Earlier, a man could not be charged with raping his own wife because of 'marital immunity', which takes into account the conjugal rights of a married couple.

The proposed changes will enable a husband to be charged with raping his wife under certain circumstances, such as if she is living apart from him under a written separation agreement or if divorce proceedings are under way.

Women's groups such as Aware, however, would have liked to see the marital immunity clause done away entirely, said the group's president Constance Singam.

'A woman has the right to a violence-free marriage,' said Ms Singam, adding that marital rape was about violence, not sex. Australia, Canada, the United States and Britain all have laws protecting women from marital rape, she said.

However, total abolition of marital immunity, said the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), would be 'too radical a step' as there was still a need to balance a woman's need for protection with the 'general concern about conjugal rights and intimacy in a marriage'.

'The proposed approach is a calibrated one, taking into consideration the various views received,' MHA said.

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