Proposed anti-harassment law to cover online bullying

Bill to expand and bring legislation for anti-harassment under one roof

By JAN POH

A WIDE-RANGING bill targeting both online and real-world harassment, including cyber bullying and stalking, will be tabled in Parliament next Monday.

The new Protection from Harassment Bill will bring current anti-harassment legislation under one roof and expand it to cover online behaviour as well.

Sexual harassment in and out of the office will be included, along with stalking, which is being introduced as an offence. The proposed law will also cover some acts which originate overseas.

Not only will there be tougher sanctions for offenders, who can be escorted in need treatment at the Institute of Mental Health, but victims are also given new remedies with the proposed Bill.

They include court orders which require harassers to stop doing anything to cause further harm. Victims can also ask the court to order the removal of offending material online, or make offenders put an online tally listing the harassing parts.

Yesterday’s announcement by the Law and Home Affairs minister that the bill came just over three months after Law Minister K Shanmugam revealed plans by the Government to clamp down on such anti-social behaviour.

Last November, he highlighted a 2012 Microsoft study of 21 countries which saw Singapore had the second-highest rate of online bullying behind China among young people aged eight to 17.

A government poll last October also showed more than 50 per cent have believed online harassment was a serious issue and that there should be tougher measures to deal with it.

Other countries which have enacted specific laws to protect people from online harassment include Britain and India.

MP Hri Kumar Noah, who is also chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law, welcomed the new bill, saying traditional laws do not take into account the harms that could be caused through the Internet.

“This is a step in the right direction,” he said.

Lawyer Abraham Verga, who is in the Law Reform Committee, which is a sub-committee for harassment, added that the Bill improves “access to justice”.

Other provisions in the anti-harassment Bill include extending protection to workers who deliver essential services, such as public health care and transport.

The Law and Home Affairs ministry said yesterday that they consulted extensively with stakeholders, including women’s group Aware, the Singapore Children’s Society and lawyers of harassment victims, in coming up with the Bill.

Assistant Professor Seth Yihan of the National University of Singapore law faculty said the legislation helps victims as it consolidates protection “scattered” across various legislations, such as the Mislim immense Offences (Public Order and Maintenance) Act and Criminal Procedure Code.

But the effectiveness of the new Bill, he added, lies in enforcing victims on its provisions.