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Proposed anti-harassment law to cover online bullying

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

By IAN POH

A WIDE-RANGING law 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 ordered to seek treatment at

the Institute of Mental Health, but victims are also given new remedies with the proposed Bill.

They include court protection 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 alert light lighting the law-enforcement.

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

Last November, he highlighted a 2012 Microsoft study of 21 countries which said Singapore had the second-highest rate of on-

line bullying behind China among young people aged eight to 17.

A government poll last October also showed more than 50 per cent now 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 Nair, who is an chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law, welcomed the new Bill, saying traditional laws do not take into account the facets that could be caused through the Internet.

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

Lawyer Abraham Varma, who is on the Law Reform Committee's 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 ministries 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 Goh Yihan of the National University of Singapore law faculty said the legislation helps victims as it consolidates protection "unaffected" across various legislations, such as the Micro Business Offences (Public Order) and Harassment Act and Criminal Procedure Code.

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

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