

# Further laws needed to protect victims of online harms: Shanmugam

Existing laws may not cover every aspect, given changing nature of Internet, he says

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The law needs to be expanded to enable victims of harmful online content to take action and protect themselves, Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam said on Monday.

Singapore has the Protection from Harassment Act (Poha), which aims to protect individuals from being harassed in real life and online, but there are online harms that may not be covered by the law, given the ever-changing nature of the Internet, such as the rise of deepfakes generated by artificial intelligence (AI), he said.

Mr Shanmugam was delivering the opening speech at the three-day Online Harms Symposium at

the Singapore Management University, where lawyers, educators and other industry players gathered to discuss hot topics, including deepfakes, cancel culture and harassment.

British MP Damian Collins and Australia's eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant are among the speakers at the symposium.

The need to address online safety is made more pressing with the rise of harassment AI, said Mr Shanmugam.

He referred to an example of AI-generated naked images of local young girls in the Spanish town of Almendralejo, which was reported by the BBC on Sunday after the images circulated on social media without the victims' knowledge.

The pictures were created using

photos of the targeted girls fully clothed and processed by an app that generates an imagined image of the person without clothes.

Mr Shanmugam also cited recent survey findings on the harmful online content experienced by the average Singaporean, which he said were "sobering" and a "reality check".

Studies by non-profit organisation SHE, published in September, showed that roughly three in five respondents had encountered online harms or knew someone who did. This was especially true among young people, in particular women.

Mr Shanmugam cited image-based sexual abuse cases, where a victim's private photos are put up online without consent by an unknown perpetrator. The victim can make a police report, but investigations will take time, he said.

"There may be other options. But lawyers here will know there are

legal uncertainties, and going to court will involve time and money. Meanwhile, the images are often widely circulated. And the damage is done to the victim – mental health, reputation, relationships. Many things will suffer.

"And even after the perpetrator is found and brought to justice, the images could still be online."

"You can imagine other scenarios," he added, raising questions about whether society is doing enough to protect victims of online harms and what remedies will work.

Singapore has taken steps to tackle online harms, including the Online Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments) Act, which took effect in February and gives the authorities power to direct social media platforms here to remove egregious content like posts advocating suicide, child sex exploitation and terrorism.

The Online Criminal Harms Act,

passed in July, will also allow the Government to tell individuals, online service providers like Facebook and WhatsApp, and other entities to remove or block access to content it suspects is being used to commit crimes such as scams.

Poha has been tweaked to cover doxxing and make it easier for victims of online harms to claim remedies.

But the challenges continue to grow with technology, said Mr Shanmugam, making it necessary to look after the victims' needs.

Beyond law enforcement and regulation, there is a need to focus on individuals and what they encounter online, what rights they have and how they can be protected, issues he hoped would be discussed at the symposium.

He said: "Most individuals in the surveys say they want practical solutions – some way for the harmful online content to be taken down quickly, without having to spend

too much time and energy. That seems to be the top priority, to stop the harm first. Then go for other remedies.

"The focus here is not on the state dealing with these issues to protect society as a whole. It is on the individuals – what harms do they face online and what rights should they have as individuals..."

"What rights do individuals have to deal with the impact of these negative consequences, and how we can better empower and protect individuals?"

A survey by Sunlight Alliance for Action in 2022 showed only two-thirds of respondents felt safe online, which Mr Shanmugam contrasted with the 92 per cent of people who said in a separate survey that they felt safe walking alone at night in Singapore.

"We are doing a good job in the physical space, but we are a bit behind on the online space," he said.

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