

SPEECH BY MS RAHAYU MAHZAM, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE DBS-JUDICIARY-MCI COMMUNITY HACKATHON ON 21 JULY 2021

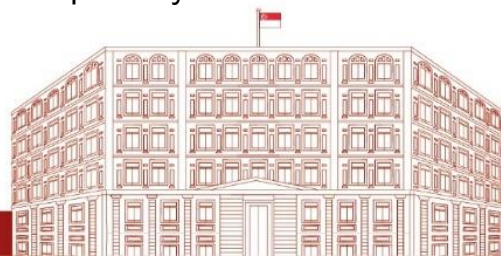
Mr Lam Chee Kin, Group Head of Legal, Compliance and Secretariat, DBS

Mr Tan Ken Hwee, Chief Transformation and Innovation Officer, Singapore Judiciary

1. Good afternoon everyone. I am excited to see so many of you here today, as part of a movement to create a safer and kinder online space.
2. Earlier this morning, my colleague Senior Minister of State Ms Sim Ann and I launched the Singapore Together Alliance for Action (AfA) to tackle online harms, especially those targeted at women and girls.

Prevalence of online violence against women

3. The work of the Alliance for Action starts now, especially in light of the rising number of cases of technology-facilitated sexual violence. According to Police statistics, cases that involved technology – like unwanted sexual messages and calls, and non-consensual sharing of intimate images – went up, from 46 cases in 2016 to 124 cases in 2018. More recently, the Police reported that there were about 500 cases of voyeurism and distribution of intimate images from January to September 2020. We also often hear stories of young girls and boys being sent obscene pictures, harassed for sex, and objectified on social media. In my involvement with the ongoing Conversations on Women’s Development, we have also heard concerns of sexual harassment against women and young girls especially in the online



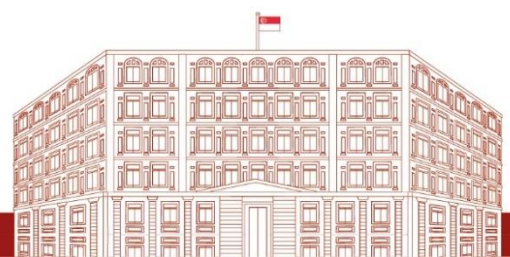
space. Just two months ago, we saw the now-notorious poll where women asatizah were deliberately demeaned and sexualised online.

4. These incidents show that the internet presents a double-edged sword, especially for women and girls. On the one hand, it provides vital spaces for individuals to seek new knowledge and opportunities for self-expression. On the other, it is increasingly a vector for abusers. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this situation as people spend more time online, therefore increasing the exposure of vulnerable individuals to threats.

5. It is a worrying trend. Our young are growing up in a hypersexualised world. Some of them are desensitised to sexual overtures to the extent that they find them 'normal' and do not see the need to call out such behaviours. Such attitudes negatively impact the mental wellbeing of victims as they are often compelled to remain silent. Some turn to self-harm, depression and even suicide.

Laws to protect women and girls online

6. Over the years, laws have been put in place to protect the dignity of users online. In 2019, offences in the Penal Code were updated to better combat technology-facilitated sexual crimes like voyeurism and distribution of intimate images or recordings. Such offences may result in caning and even imprisonment, signalling the severity of these offences. In 2020, the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) was amended to introduce the new offence of doxxing. On 1 June this year, the Protection from Harassment



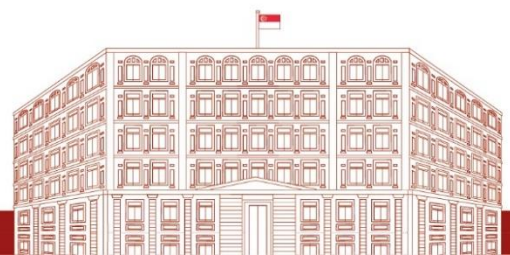
Courts, a specialist court dedicated to deal with harassment matters, whether online or offline, also came into operation.

Importance of whole-of-society effort

7. However, legal sanctions alone are not enough. This is a complex issue that requires a range of stakeholders with different expertise and resources to collaborate with each other and co-create solutions.

8. In view of this, my Ministry has been engaging various stakeholder groups on this issue, including technology companies, community organisations, academia, youths, the legal community, and the media industry. We reached out to about 300 people over six months. Stakeholders emphasised the need to step up public education efforts on online harms, enhance victim support and care, develop better knowledge of what constitutes 'harm' in the online space, and generally increase the level of digital safety in Singapore.

9. These suggestions are extremely useful. The Alliance for Action will take in these views as it develops solutions and recommendations. The Alliance for Action comprises members from the people, private and public sectors, and will work on five key workstreams over the year. These five workstreams are: public education, research, victim support, youth engagement and volunteerism. Through these efforts, we hope to develop support mechanisms and infrastructure for victims of online harms and establish partnerships to strengthen and drive this important cause.



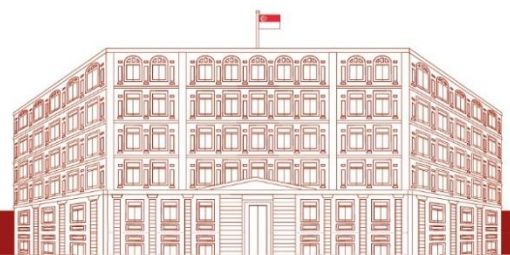
10. This year's 'Hackathon for a Better World' is the first private-public collaboration under the Singapore Together Alliance for Action to tackle online harms, especially those targeted at women and girls. It is also part of the larger Singapore Together movement, which was launched by DPM Heng Swee Keat in 2019. The vision is for Singaporeans to partner with the Government and with one another to own, shape and act on our shared future together.

11. As you embark on the hackathon, all of you will receive an info-pack containing some information about these issues to get you started. I look forward to hearing more about your innovative solutions on how we can better protect the rights of our women and girls in a digital future.

12. Moving forward, the AfA will continue to seek partnerships such as this, to strengthen and drive the cause of tackling online harms. Ideas surfaced through these collaborations will be helpful in raising awareness about the issue and co-creating solutions, such as developing a better and more easily accessible support system and infrastructure for victims of online harms. Our hope is for women and girls in Singapore to enjoy the same degree of freedom and confidence in the digital space, as they do in real life.

Conclusion

13. Before I conclude, I would like to thank DBS and Singapore Judiciary for partnering the Ministry of Communications and Information in co-organising this hackathon. The Government greatly supports citizen-led efforts like the hackathon. By working together, we can create a safer and



kinder online space that is not just a better place for women and girls; but better for everyone. Thank you.

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