Time to turn 'bochap' Singaporeans into active bystanders

Whether it's fighting family violence or online harassment, bystanders have a responsibility to step up

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You hear crying and screaming from a child in a flat nearby. It doesn't happen just once, but regularly. You know it's somewhere in your block, but you don't know exactly where.

What do you do?

You are catching up with your newsfeed on Facebook, or Instagram, or Twitter. Someone has shared a post with photos of some young women, and asked commenters to rank them in order of which women "should be gang-raped". There are many ribald comments.

What do you do?

A man you know has uploaded some photos of himself. You notice some comments deriding his looks, and using derogatory terms questioning his sexuality.

What do you do?

I think many Singaporeans, if they are honest, would say: nothing or don't know.

When I put myself into these situations, I am not sure what I would do either.

Some will say "none of my business" and wash their hands of any responsibility.

I think many more will say "something doesn't seem right, but I'm not sure, best not to get involved".

That instinct not to get involved runs deep in many Singaporeans' psyche, honed from decades of learning to live and let live, avoiding trouble and letting zheng hu (the authorities) deal with any issue.

So if confronted with the above situations, some Singaporeans may suggest calling in the authorities: reporting the case of the screaming child to the police; or complaining to the social media platform about the incitement to sexual violence. Others may screenshot the offending content and write a post about it.

I don't know how many of us would have responded to the situation happening in front of our eyes, in real time, and tried to step in to prevent harm.

Family violence campaign

Supposing the person who heard the child's screams rang the National Anti-Violence Helpline (NAVH), 1800-777-0000, and shared enough information so the police and community volunteers could pinpoint the source of the trouble. A child could have been helped.

In fact, one was. The above scenario is taken from an account by helpline supervisor Tan Si Yin.

A Straits Times report in February last year said that Ms Tan "recalled a memorable call by a member of the public who was concerned about a child's frequent crying and screaming in a neighbouring unit".

She said: "After gathering information from her, we were able to identify the family and get our community partners to reach out to them.

"We appreciate members of the public giving us a call to share their concerns with us in such cases as it gives us a chance to detect issues early. It is a fulfilling experience."

The fight against family violence has intensified, as calls for help rose sharply during the Covid-19 pandemic with more people working from home. Being in close proximity in small spaces for prolonged periods can cause underlying tensions to simmer and explode into violence.

The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) launched the 24-hour integrated helpline in 2021 for family violence cases, as well as abuse and neglect. From Jan 18 last year till December, it had received 8,400 calls.

The helpline is part of a raft of initiatives to tackle family violence that includes raising awareness about the issue, making it easier to report cases, and helping victims.

The campaign has a strong component of working with community partners and the public.

For example, it targets other family members and bystanders - such as neighbours, friends, relatives. They are encouraged to report their concerns, with an array of methods making it easy to do so. MSF is creating a mobile app or live Web chat to enhance the helpline by the end of the year.

The child in the first scenario, and the family involved, would have received help, thanks to the concern of a bystander who rang the helpline.

In another tragic case, a domestic maid from Myanmar was starved and abused to death by her employers.

Ms Piang Ngaih Don, 24, started work for her employers in May 2015. She died on July 26, 2016, after repeated assaults. She weighed 24kg at her death, down from 39 kg.

Her employer, whom psychiatrists said suffered from post-partum depression and obsessive compulsive personality disorder, was sentenced to 30 years' jail last year. The employer's husband and mother are also facing charges in relation to the case.

Each time I read about cases of prolonged abuse in a family, either against a family member or domestic worker, I wonder how such abuse could have gone undetected for months or years. Surely someone - another family member, a close friend, a neighbour - would have seen or heard something.

Such bystanders can play a role in fighting violence in the family, in the community, or online.

Activating the army of bystanders

Rallying the army of active bystanders can help tackle some of our society's egregious social ills.

A culture of active bystanders means each of us is alert to the dangers around us, and will take steps to make things better.

In the scenarios above, the active bystander who sees the post asking commenters about subjecting the women to gang rape, would immediately call out the person making the original post and chide him for disrespecting the women, and for using terms that seek to normalise sexual violence against women. Other bystanders - men and women - would then chime in.

Likewise, those who saw the post questioning the man's appearance and sexuality would speak up against cyber bullying and harassment.

Those who post stuff on social media often do so to get affirmation and to be noticed. If they face a constant chorus of disapproval each time they post sexist, homophobic or racist pictures and comment, some will be deterred from doing so. Importantly, community disapproval sends a strong signal to others watching that such behaviour is not acceptable.

It is true that online, there are plenty of netizens who hide behind anonymity, and are happy to weigh in on issues, often with inflammatory, snarky or negative comments. Anonymity encourages extreme views. Left

unrebuked and unrebutted, extreme views can gain traction. It is up to the moderate-minded bystanders to speak up when they see such expressions.

MSF was right to tap the public to be the eyes and ears in the fight against family violence, abuse and neglect. Such an engaged citizenry can also be front liners in the fight against sexual harassment, online and in person.

If you are out with your buddies drinking, and one of them starts to target and harass a drunk woman and maybe even grope her, do you join in, grin and watch, pretend to look away, or step in and stop the abuse and help the woman?

If you see a post mocking or denigrating a minority group, do you like the post, ignore it, delete it, or add a comment to say why it's wrong?

While laws can be enforced to penalise those who engage in online harassment, the rest of us who are watching what is happening can take steps to become active bystanders who stand up to bullying.

We can move from being silent spectators to becoming responsible, active bystanders who speak out against abuse, speak up for what is right, and stand with those victimised.

Widening the circle of care

Activating the bystander army requires us to reprogramme our mindsets.

Many of us older Singaporeans were raised by parents who taught us to mind our own business; and who learnt from young to draw sharply the line between "our" people (family) and "other" people (the big, bad world outside the immediate family). We learnt to keep family secrets away from prying eyes, and we learnt to close our eyes to other people's secrets.

As responsible, civic-minded adults, we should overcome this habit of thinking in terms of insiders and outsiders, by extending our understanding of what is "us" to include our neighbours, our extended family, our friends and our fellow residents in Singapore.

When we expand the circle of care, we can then learn to feel concern for others beyond our immediate family.

Many Singaporeans, including younger ones, these days step up willingly to fight Covid-19, to help distribute food to the elderly or migrant workers, to pick up litter on the beach, or replant mangroves.

When they come across people, or animals, in need, Singaporeans do not hesitate to step up.

In a recent vivid example, a group of passers-by got together to rescue a cat that had fallen into a deep canal in Jalan Besar. The video of the rescue shows a cat meowing piteously, as rescuers used a fishing net and an open, upended umbrella tied to a long pole to get the cat out, to cheers and applause.

Proximity in time and space gave the bystanders a chance to save a cat - and they did. Being a witness to wrongdoing creates a certain responsibility, to redress it or take steps to prevent harm.

It is human to care about others, and human to step up to help them.

This may seem to run contrary to some stuff taught in psychology classes, about how the bystander effect diffuses responsibility, and no one steps up to help when many others are watching.

This theory is often accompanied by the story of a woman called Kitty Genovese, who was stabbed in 1964 in New York in the middle of the night, across the street from where she lived.

The New York Times followed up with an article two weeks after the murder that said 38 residents in apartments nearby ignored her cries for help. Theories were put forth that they did not want to get involved, or each thought someone else would act.

But in a recent book, Humankind: A Hopeful History, Dutch historian and writer Rutger Bregman painted a different picture. It was winter, and most people were in the flats with windows shut tight or were asleep, and would not have heard the calls for help. Of those who heard her, two called the police. One neighbour ran out

to help, and cradled Kitty in her arms as she died. In this version, the bystanders did try to help, but help came too late.

More recent research has been reported, questioning the accuracy of the uncaring bystander theory. An article in New Scientist in June 2019 cited researchers who looked at surveillance footage of violent situations in the United Kingdom, South Africa and the Netherlands, and found that, in 90 per cent of cases, at least one person, but usually several, intervened and tried to help.

Bregman's influential book sets out deliberately to debunk the "persistent myth that by their very nature humans are selfish, aggressive and quick to panic". Instead, he offers an alternative view of human history where altruism, not brutality, has ruled.

The stories we tell of ourselves help shape who we become.

We Singaporeans should stop thinking of ourselves as self-centred, apathetic citizens who compete with one another for material gains.

Instead, we should see ourselves as altruistic, community-minded people who care about others and will step up to make a difference.

Not apathetic and uncaring, but responsible, active bystanders.