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Suicide law deters the distressed from getting help

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FROM CORINNA LIM, ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN FOR ACTION AND RESEARCH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AND PORSCHE POH, SILVER RIBBON (SINGAPORE) EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

20 FEBRUARY

In Singapore, attempting suicide is a crime under Section 309 of the Penal Code. While most people do not attempt suicide, we are responsible for how we, as a society, respond to those who do.

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Suicide law deters the distressed from getting help

CORINNA LIM, ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN FOR ACTION AND RESEARCH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AND PORSCHE POH, SILVER RIBBON (SINGAPORE) EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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In Singapore, attempting suicide is a crime under Section 309 of the Penal Code. While most people do not attempt suicide, we are responsible for how we, as a society, respond to those who do.

Recently, a woman was sentenced to jail for repeated suicide attempts. Her case spurs us to question, on this World Day of Social Justice, a law that penalises people facing extreme distress when they actually need social support.

Suicide is one of the top 10 causes of death in Singapore. In 2011, the Samaritans of Singapore handled more than 44,000 hotline calls. In recent years, suicide has increased among the elderly and the young.

From 2010 to 2011, the suicide mortality rate doubled among those aged 65 to 74 and those aged 85 and above. From 2008 to 2009, suicide among those aged 10 to 29 rose by 40 per cent, increasing from 64 to 91 deaths.

For every suicide death, there are seven suicide attempts. Arrests for attempted suicide have increased, from 706 in 2007 to 986 last year.

Although most arrests do not lead to charges, arrest and investigation are traumatising and aggravate distress for the individuals and their family.

The relative infrequency of charges reflects a tacit understanding that criminal law is the wrong tool for this problem. However, the police and magistrates have discretion to decide whether to lay charges, a process neither transparent nor reassuring to those in distress.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has said repeatedly that criminalisation deters people from seeking treatment, increasing the risk of suicide. Criminalisation focuses on censure and assignation of fault, rather than helping people deal with the causes of distress, such as illness, bereavement or financial difficulties.

It may even motivate those attempting suicide to ensure that they die rather than survive and face punishment.

Data from countries that have decriminalised suicide, including Canada and New Zealand, show that suicide rates did not increase as a result.

In Hong Kong, where suicide was decriminalised in 1967, several agencies implement effective suicide prevention strategies.

The Association of Women for Action and Research and Silver Ribbon (Singapore) call on the State to decriminalise suicide and develop a comprehensive suicide prevention framework modelled on the WHO's recommendations.

Suicide is a public health issue, not a criminal issue.

Those who are contemplating suicide would benefit from appropriate public health support, such as counselling, rather than from legal threats and punishment.

In his message on the World Day of Social Justice last year, the United Nations Secretary-General said that social justice is served when we see a "future we want". When people attempt suicide, it is often because they do not see a future they want.

Rather than persecute them, we must focus on addressing the causes of low well-being in society and alleviate conditions that cause despair.