

Rape case spurs social worker to do more for abused kids

MSF Child Protective Service manager among three honoured at Istana event

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A 14-year-old girl who was raped by a family member and started to cut herself led social worker Nisha Sanjay Verma to think about how she could better help children who have been sexually abused.

The girl felt guilty and worried about being blamed for her family breaking up after the abuse came to light, said Ms Verma, a manager at the Ministry of Social and Family Development's (MSF) Child Protective Service.

Not knowing how to deal with the trauma of the abuse, the girl started hurting herself.

Ms Verma, 27, co-initiated the Child Sexual Abuse Practice Circle in March. During the circle's sessions, child protection officers share their knowledge and practices on how they can better work to keep children who have been sexually abused safe, among other things.

These sessions have helped to

boost the officers' confidence in dealing with serious cases of sexual abuse, said Ms Verma.

She was one of three social workers honoured on Nov 17 at the Outstanding Social Worker Awards, which is held annually. The award is the top honour bestowed on social workers here.

Ms Verma and Ms Flora Tan, 28, a senior social worker for youth services at social service agency Care Corner Singapore, were both awarded the Promising Social Worker Award.

Associate Professor Peace Wong, deputy head of the social work department at the National University of Singapore (NUS), was given the Outstanding Social Worker Award.

The awards are organised by the Singapore Association of Social Workers, and are supported by MSF and ExxonMobil Asia Pacific.

Ms Verma, who has been a child protection officer for three years, said what keeps her going is the desire to make a difference in a child's life.

"Children are very dependent on

their parents and often, they can't protect themselves. So I want to give them a voice and protect them from danger."

A case that moved her deeply involved an 11-year-old girl who was the sole caregiver of her seriously ill mother, who had mobility problems and needed help with activities of daily living. The girl often skipped school just to see to the mother's needs, Ms Verma said.

"Her mother was very fearful of others, and she had isolated herself and her daughter. When we first saw them, the house smelled of urine, there was barely any food, and medicine was scattered everywhere."

Ms Verma and her colleagues persuaded the girl's relatives to look after her, and persuaded the mother to receive treatment in hospital.

Although the mother died after a few months, Ms Verma said she was impressed by the resilience of the girl, who now lives with her relatives and attends school regularly.

President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who was the guest of honour at the awards held at the Istana, said social workers are often the first person that those facing major difficulties turn to for help.

The Forward Singapore exercise



President Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli chatting with Ms Nisha Sanjay Verma, a manager at the Ministry of Social and Family Development's Child Protective Service who received the Promising Social Worker Award, at the Outstanding Social Worker Awards at the Istana on Nov 17. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

has brought about major moves to strengthen Singapore's social compact, and this includes shifts in government policies to further support social mobility and mitigate inequality, he said.

"But Forward Singapore also goes beyond shifts in government policies. A stronger social compact will have to be underpinned by a culture of solidarity and respect for all... Developing that culture is a task for each and every one of us, in the thick of our everyday life."

"And as social workers, you play a special role not only in helping the vulnerable and those in difficulty, but also in helping to engender that culture of solidarity and respect for all."

Prof Wong, 50, was recognised for her contributions in raising the supervisory standards of social workers and for establishing a robust field placement system for social work students at NUS, where she has been teaching for the past 16 years.

As the previous chairman of various workgroups under the Social Work Accreditation and Advisory Board, she led the implementation of initiatives such as the Social Work Supervision Guidelines.

The guidelines provide a common standard of supervision to support social workers to do their work better, among other aims, she said.

Prof Wong credits the late Mr

Anthony Yeo, known as Singapore's "father of counselling" for pioneering the profession's development here, for inspiring her to raise supervisory standards.

Mr Yeo supervised her when she was a young social worker working with delinquents and troubled youth.

She said: "When I felt lost or stuck, he asked me the right questions, and I could see how I could work with my clients more effectively. It's like seeing a master in action."

"So, I think competency in supervision can be trained and improved."

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