

A WORTHY CAUSE

Pillar of support

Singapore Children's Society lends a hand to mother of four facing domestic abuse

The physical abuse started even before they got married about five years ago, said Mdm Zuraidah*, 29. This took the form of slaps and kicks, which continued even while she was at her most vulnerable.

"He became more hot-tempered during my pregnancies," recalled Mdm Zuraidah. "Once, he kicked me until I bled."

The abuse spread to their four young children aged two, four, eight and 12. The two eldest children are from Mdm Zuraidah's previous marriage.

She said: "Once, when we were arguing over our finances, my husband picked up one of the children — who was only 18 months old at the time — by the neck because he wanted to provoke me. My son turned blue. I grabbed him back and slapped my husband."

In a separate incident last July, he kicked their daughter Fatimah*, sending her into a crying fit. "I've told him many times: You can say anything to them, but don't lay hands on them," said Mdm Zuraidah. She made a police report, one of many that she has filed over the years.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Things came to a head last September, when the couple had a massive argument which resulted in policemen coming to their home. Both of them were detained overnight, with her husband claiming that she had attacked him with a knife. He had also filed a police report of his own.

Recalling the incident, Mdm Zuraidah said: "The third child saw everything, and he kept repeating: I don't want police to come and catch you."

She is adamant that her husband's claims about the knife attack are false.

That incident was the final straw for Mdm Zuraidah. She said that while she could put up with the abuse, she would not tolerate her children being victimised.

So she filed for a Personal Protection Order and a Domestic Exclusion Order, and started divorce proceedings. But more problems arose shortly after.

As Mdm Zuraidah had lost her previous job at a childcare centre, she



Madam Zuraidah and two of her children. PHOTO: KOH MUI FONG

“My priority is my children. I don't want to think much about my marriage and the future. What I can do now is work hard and save up for my children's needs.”

Madam Zuraidah on her priorities

struggled to meet the household expenses and to provide for the children. Her phone line, which had been paid for by her mother-in-law, was cut off.

She was also afraid to go out and find a job, as she was worried that her husband would return home and harm the children.

FINANCIAL AID AND MORE

Fortunately, the Singapore Children's Society (SCS) stepped in to help.

One of its Student Care Centres had been helping to look after her two eldest children while she worked in the day, and it continued to do so. SCS provided financial assistance while Mdm Zuraidah was unemployed, and also asked the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) to deliver meals to the home.

She said: "I am very grateful for their help. They are very proactive."

The centre is an after-school care service for primary school children who are mainly from low-income, single-parent or distressed families, or who are sometimes left at home without adult supervision.

It provides a nurturing environment for children, and also runs various activities and programmes that help them develop emotionally, intellectually, socially and physically.

SCS operates 10 service centres

islandwide, offering caregiving, community, developmental, preventive, public education and remedial services.

Established in 1952, the goal of SCS is to protect and nurture children and youths of all races and religions. Last year, it reached out to 72,640 children, youths and families in need.

WORRIED FOR MUM

Through it all, Mdm Zuraidah drew strength from her children, especially her eldest son Iskandar*. "He is very helpful and sensible. He is the one who is always there for me," said Mdm Zuraidah with a smile.

She recalled how her youngest son once reduced her to tears with his disobedience — until Iskandar stepped in and told the boy to stop upsetting their mother. He also often helps with the housework.

Certainly, Iskandar has been affected by the instability at home. Mdm Zuraidah was asked to meet his principal, as his grades had been suffering. She said: "They told me that he keeps thinking of me. He has been telling them: I am worried for my mama and what will happen at home. I feel uneasy when I go to school."

HOPING FOR THE BEST

Today, Mdm Zuraidah has found a new job in the field of Internet marketing. Staff at the Student Care Centre report that Fatimah and Iskandar are looking more cheerful. Their various trials have also brought Mdm Zuraidah and her children closer together.

But things remain complicated on the

LEND A HELPING HAND

The OCBC-TODAY Children's Fund was set up to help children from distressed families who have suffered the effects of neglect or even abuse. Donations will be capped at S\$1.5 million each year — S\$1 million from public contributions and S\$500,000 from OCBC's commitment to give S\$1 for every S\$2 raised. This helps ensure that other charities, especially smaller outfits, also have the chance to benefit from the generosity of donors.

Visit www.ocbctodayfund.sg or call the SCS fundraising department at 6273 2010.

homefront.

Mdm Zuraidah's husband has moved back home in hopes of reconciling with her. She felt that she had little choice but to let him back in, as she needed help with the children. Her immediate family members are unwilling to help out. The estranged couple communicate little and the atmosphere at home is often tense.

"Whenever he starts to get angry, my children and I will look at one another. I try not to provoke him," said Mdm Zuraidah. She has put the divorce proceedings on hold, and is also fearful of losing custody of the children.

She said: "My priority is my children. I don't want to think much about my marriage and the future. What I can do now is work hard and save up for my children's needs."

Fortunately, if she needs a helping hand, she will not be alone: SCS will be there for her. **PRODUCED BY THE TODAY SPECIAL PROJECTS TEAM**

*REAL NAME WITHHELD.