

Annex A

Testimony of Rachel Chung, a We Can! Change Maker, volunteer and domestic violence survivor.

It started 'small'. You know how frogs will let themselves be boiled slowly to death if they are cooked in tepid water? That's exactly what happened to me. In the beginning, it was verbal tirades, insults and put-downs. He then assaulted me with profanities. Soon, he started shoving me to 'make a point' and this escalated to more physical abuse like slapping and punching. The damage to my morale and self worth caused by the emotional abuse was no less than the physical injuries. I hope more people will come to realise that violence isn't always black and blue. We need to recognise and reject all forms of violence in our own lives, and also around us.

It was shortly after the birth of my first child when he sniped at me about putting on 23 kg when I was pregnant and about how I never really lost all the baby weight. I called him out for being insensitive and he replied with a barrage of *Hokkien* vulgarities. That was the first time he stepped out of line verbally. He said it would have never happened if I had not been 'sassy with my mouth' or 'challenged' him.

That marked the beginning of a series of verbal abuses when I 'stepped out of line'. The first mistake I made, like too many people do, is that I tried to trivialize the verbal abuse. When he realized that he was not keeping me 'in rein' with his verbal admonishments, he started shoving me. Things got worse when I started to earn more than he did. Over time, the violence got so bad that I ended up in hospital.

I tried to seek help from my in-laws, but it was an uphill battle. They were a very traditional family, where the husband is deemed the head of the household, amongst other gender biases. My ex mother-in-law would advise me with well-meaning intentions to 'not answer back' and 'not make him angry'. His siblings would turn a blind eye to the 'embarrassment'. I remember being at a family dinner where his sister and his brother's wife deliberately ignored my bruises and instead, chose to talk about their MLM business and recent trip to London.

While my family encouraged me to divorce him, they did not offer to let my children and me move back home. Perhaps they had the intention to do so, but without that reassurance, I never felt secure in the knowledge that I had a refuge, no matter what happens. I had a lot of emotional support from my grandmother but after she passed away, I felt like I was all alone to fend for my children and myself.

I am sure there are abused mothers out there with their children, who want to get out of their situation. The first few questions we always ask are, "Where can the children and I stay? Can we buy another flat easily?" The considerations are always about money. I was 'lucky' that I could move out and rent my own place when the matrimonial flat was being sold. I also fought for sole custody of my children and got it with the attached condition that I get no alimony at all from him. I thought it was a small price to pay, considering the mental and emotional wellbeing the children and I would gain in return. But honestly, how many abused women can afford to do this? And where can they turn for help when they can't?

There are many social, cultural and economic pressures that bind women to violent relationships. Emotionally, the woman could have been scarred by her abusive partner into thinking she could never find love again, she is not good enough, etc, and unless she has much-needed support from family,

friends and society, it might be difficult for her to find the confidence to leave. Financially, there are very real, practical concerns, especially if she was discouraged or forbidden from seeking employment, made to leave her job or if her finances were controlled by her partner. Moreover, the social stigma towards divorced women - that we are 'failed wives' or 'bad mothers' if we leave - still exists.

I faced some of these dilemmas myself. There were church members who felt I should not leave the relationship "as long as the kids are not touched". This not only dehumanizes the mother as a person, it isn't in the best interest of the children either. When people advise the mother to stay put 'for the sake of the kids', they haven't thought about the psychological trauma it causes the children to witness violence in the home.

I put up with the violence because it didn't happen to, or in front of, the children. But one night, my daughter was awakened by the noise. When she saw what was happening and came to my defense, he shoved her away. That was a breaking point for me. I fought back and subsequently filed for divorce.

I know other abused women who feel embarrassed, who would never agree to speak up about their experience. I understand this because I've been through it. "Why was I abused? Is it because I am not 'good enough' as a woman or wife? Have I failed in some way, that I cannot even make my husband happy?" These are some of the many questions that haunt women who are abused. The gender biases in families and society often perpetuate these beliefs, which abused women too internalize. They end up feeling ashamed, that they somehow 'asked for it'.

But the fact of the matter is, it is not our fault. We should not be made to or allow ourselves to feel it is our fault, and I refuse to feel ashamed or embarrassed. I want to get this message to abused women out there: It is not your fault and you should not be ashamed in any way.

When I told my girls (now 15 and 10) that I will be speaking openly about this, I shared my worry that they might be teased or heckled. Their self-confidence, pride and affirmation confirmed that I am doing the right thing, that I did the right thing.