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TITLE: Panel suggests ways to tackle rising family violence

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SINGAPORE: The newly-established Family Justice Committee has put forth a series of recommendations to better support those exposed to family violence.

These include strengthening the sources of help available within the community and setting up specialist centres to give specific assistance in terms of divorce and non-legal advice.

Senior Minister of State for Law and Education Indranee Rajah said this at a seminar addressing family violence issues.

The recommendations come amid a rising number of family violence cases seen by the Family Court.

Last year, the Family Court heard 3,200 cases of family violence.

This is a three-fold jump from the 978 cases seen in 1995.

Statistics from other organisations also support these figures.

PAVE, which stands for "Promoting Alternatives to Violence", studied its cases over a 10-year period up to 2012, and revealed spousal violence cases still form the crux of their work.

It gets about 360 new cases each year. Of these new cases, an average of 72 per cent are on spousal violence. It has also seen a rise in the number of cases involving violence between parents and their teenage or adult children.

The 10-year findings also revealed an emerging trend of elderly abuse. PAVE gets cases from the central as well as the rest of Singapore, but it said it is puzzling that central Singapore has the highest population of elderly residents, yet the numbers of those seeking help are relatively low.

To ensure cases of family violence do not fall through the gap, the Family Justice Committee wants to ensure there is a more seamless mechanism among the various channels of help, starting with Family Service Centres (FSCs).

Ms Indranee, who is co-chair of the Family Justice Committee, said: "One of the things you want to do is strengthen the Family Service Centres so that they can give the

appropriate legal advice, then you can...determine (whether) this person needs counselling...or more.

"When FSCs are able to identify specific issues like domestic violence, they may want to refer to specialist agencies like PAVE, or other agencies which may be able to deal with specialist issues. And at the last resort, (if) it would have to come to the court...you would want to have judges and lawyers who specialise in this area and have a deep understanding of family law."

Ms Indranee also suggested that lawyers specialising in family law could also be trained in psychology to be able to understand the emotional and social aspects of family violence. Teachers too could undergo this training to be able to identify the tell-tale signs of abuse.

She said the idea is to try and keep the family unit together, but in some cases, this may not be possible, and the case ends up becoming a divorce case. Even then, she said the process should be done with the right tone.

She said: "That very litigious aspect is something we are working on, and that is where things like mediation, counselling, giving people the appropriate advice and having the right tone, matter a lot but require training to get to that point."

More resources may also be needed to deal with the root of the problem, and PAVE's statistics show that 96 per cent of those who inflict abuse are men.

Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman, Minister of State for National Development and adviser at PAVE, said: "Based on experience and literature, men do need a safe and secure environment to address their issues. Today we do not have sufficient capacities in terms of expertise nor capabilities.

"There are a lot of issues involved, you have to undo a lot of value systems, you have to undo a lot of thought processes that have led him to be violent."

Dr Maliki said there is also scope to increase the number of male social workers and counsellors, and set up new male-specific agencies.

- CNA/ms