

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR MOHAMAD MALIKI OSMAN, ADVISER TO PAVE AT THE PAVE FORUM
2013 “MIND AND SPIRIT: CULTURE AND PRACTICE ISSUES IN FAMILY VIOLENCE INTERVENTION”
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INTRODUCTION

A very good morning

I am very sure many of you will be wondering what the Minister of State for Defence and National Development would be doing in a conference on family violence let alone deliver the Keynote Address. At first I wonder too! I have been intimately involved with the issues of family violence for over 15 years since I returned from my PhD studies. So today, I am speaking as someone who is still concerned with issues of family violence in my capacity as the Adviser to PAVE, the organizer of today's conference.

I recalled the many men whom I have met while helping them overcome their violence. There was the 24 year old Malay man who abused his pregnant wife. There was the 36 year old Chinese professional who spoke so well of how much he regretted his violence when his wife threatens to leave the marriage. Although he volunteered to come for treatment, he blamed her for every minute he was in treatment. There was the 45 year old Indian man who believed strongly that his violence was only when he drank and because he suspected that his wife was having an affair. You see, to him, his wife brought the violence onto herself. Then, there was also the 60 year old Chinese man whose appearance made you wonder why he was front of you seeking treatment for violence. My experience then and I am sure now shows that violence knows no boundaries nor does it know who to specifically infect. Violence affects the young as it does the old. Violence affects the low income as it does the high income. Violence affects every ethnic group.

There has been much development in the field of family violence. You will hear of PAVE's experience for the past almost 20 years as the leading organization in family violence intervention. There is growing awareness with frequent media stories on family violence and the social support system currently in place to help affected individuals and families.

The many years of experience notwithstanding, are we satisfied with the current state that we are in – in terms of knowledge, expertise and even policies? Are we confident of what we currently know? Or are there still much more that we don't know? Do we know what really works and what does not in intervention? And a key theme of today's conference - what is the role of culture and values in the manifestation of family violence and intervention?

FAMILY VIOLENCE – IS IT STILL A PRIVATE FAMILY MATTER?

One of the key challenges we face is whether family violence should remain as a private family matter. Who comes for treatment? When do they come for treatment? We know more victims seek treatment than those who abuse. This, also only after they have suffered for very long and the amount of work to address their self blame and significantly reduced sense of self worth is tremendous. If adult victims suffer in silence for a long time, can we imagine children and elderly who are victims of family violence? The former will not know how to express themselves while the

latter will accept it as their fate. Even within the family, often times we know it is a private matter – “accept it as your fate” as many victims would share, as they make sense of their cultural reality.

We know amongst those who abuse, some would come forward voluntarily for treatment while others are mandated. PAVE’s experience indicates that they see greater success with mandated cases despite having to face with greater denials at the onset of the treatment process. But mandating cases would mean that the case is no longer a “private family matter”. It is a matter that has come before the Courts. It is a matter of public interest. But then again, have we understood sufficiently what about mandating treatment that makes it work? Is it the Personal Protection Order? Expedited Order? Domestic Exclusion Order? Or simply the frequency and duration of engagement with the helping professional that allows for better and deeper exploration of issues and overcoming of key challenges?

Should family violence remain a private family matter?

Allow me to play a song that was produced some years back which I think is still relevant today. It is a song entitled “How come, How long” by Baby Face and Stevie Wonder. Please sit back and enjoy the song.

The song reflects key challenges we continue to face with family violence:

First: Early calls for help

She tried to give a cry for help
She even blamed things on herself
But no one came to her aid
Nothing was wrong as far as we could tell
That's what we'd like to tell ourselves
But no, it wasn't that way

Indeed, given societal perception that family violence is a private family affair, we tend to tell ourselves that there is nothing wrong as far as we can tell.

Second: Knowing and doing?

How come, how long
It's not right, it's so wrong
Do we let it just go on
Turn our backs and carry on
Wake up, for it's too late
Right now, we can't wait
She won't have a second try
Open up your hearts
As well as your eyes

For as long as family violence is a private matter, many will continue to turn their backs and realise soon enough it is too late. Should we wait? Should we open our eyes and ears? What will we do?

Third: Manhood or crime?

The way he proves himself a man
By beating his woman with his hands
Oh I wish that she'd seen the light
How can someone like that call himself a man
He's not a man
Soon reality ...
And we cannot ignore
Whenever we see the signs
'Cause any kind of abuse
God knows, it's a crime

This is another challenge that we face. We know violence is about power and control. Is it about manhood? How can someone who uses his force onto another person be called a man? Do all men feel that way?

If the show of strength is a show of manhood,

It takes a greater man to admit that that is not the right manifestation of manhood.

It takes a greater man to admit that he was wrong to use violence against his loved ones.

It takes a greater man to come forward and seek help.

Actually, it takes an even greater man to see the signs and stop the violence!

It also takes a greater man to tell his fellow men that **violence is a show of weakness not strength**, a weakness for self control and discipline.

FAMILY VIOLENCE – MEN HELP MEN DEAL WITH MEN'S ISSUES?

The issue of power and control in family violence may shed light to a gap in our current effort at addressing the issue. Is power and control a men's issue? Do men have challenges managing power and control issue? Power and control may only be one of the many issues that men face in their lives that are related to their management of anger and violence.

Today, men's issues tend to focus more on their roles as fathers. Do men have access to resources for them to discuss issues they face as husbands, sons or simply as men with emotional

challenges too? Who do men turn to when they need help? How much do they share or how much can they share and explore their vulnerabilities? It must go beyond talks at coffeeshops!

The reality today is that most of our helping professionals are women. It is not that women can't do the job. But perhaps we need to understand better how to help men by men. I recalled many years ago during my early days, I wanted to organise a conference for men to discuss men's issues. Naturally, more women were keen to attend to find out what was it that I wanted to tell their husbands. Of course, I did not allow it. I told the women to send the men there and they could leave and pick them up later. Three hundred men turned up and we had breakout sessions. One friend of mine who was what we would call "MCP" turned up and he was shocked to be in one of the sessions and after 15 minutes he came out and told me he can't believe that the men were figuratively "stripping" themselves naked with their sharing! I had since organized sessions and often would see men feel comfortable sharing their emotions in a safe and secure environment.

There is a greater need to explore more such avenues and address the challenge of the dearth of male helping professionals to help men address men's issues. These are key upstream efforts and helping men manage their own challenges and address issues of manhood, power and control.

FAMILY VIOLENCE – IS IT A COMMUNITY AFFAIR?

While we explore different avenues to help men, we should also look at the role of the community in family violence. Why is this critical? Why should we not turn our backs to members of our community who need help because of family violence? Is it our role to protect fellow citizens beyond our family members?

Today, we have ordinary citizens empowered to issue notices of offences for people who litter. Should we not empower ordinary citizens with at least the civic mindedness to protect fellow citizens from being victims of violence? Do members of the community feel that violence is more than a private family affair? Is violence a community affair – such that the message in the community is that violence is not condoned?

There is a Chinese Saying ""远亲不如近邻". (Yuan chin bu ru jin lin) which means "the far relative cannot compare to the near neighbour". How does this saying apply to the community in managing family violence? There are two dimensions to this – 1) as a neighbour, I can be relied upon more than a blood ties given the proximity for which I am able to provide support (and protection perhaps). Are our neighbours ready or prepared to do so? Or do we also close our windows and doors when we hear of shouts and fights in our neighbours homes? 2) if we build strong neighbourly relations, where neighbours know each other so well, could violence be less likely to happen? within an Asian cultural context, the "face" applies to almost all communities. Would it not be "malu" or embarrassing to meet one's neighbour who one is close to should one inflict violence to one's family members? In the days of the kampongs, the village heads will be sought to help mediate in domestic affairs. What do we have today? Have we harnessed the informal support systems for deter or buffer effects of violence? What is the state of our neighbourhoods and communities in providing this informal support structures?

How can community support be harnessed for individuals who have been awarded various protection orders? Is there a role for community leaders in this regard? How can the community be trained to observe for “signs” and what do they do when they see these signs?

While the safety of community members must not be compromised, I think we will have to start thinking deeper the implications of community support, or lack of, towards family violence. If the community does not respond, are we sending the message and values to our children that indeed violence is a private family affair and we should not intervene? Or is the saying *Yuan chin bu ru jin lin* not applicable when it comes to domestic violence? I certainly hope not.

I think practitioners and researchers alike will have to start studying in greater depth this issue of the role of the community in domestic violence. It is not about encouraging neighbours to pry into the lives of others. It is about protecting the vulnerable. For example, the issue of elder abuse. Social workers in the field of family violence suspect that the incidence of elder abuse is grossly under reported. Few elderly would know where to seek help. They would suffer in silence. For one, it is really an Asian “face” issue. It is hard for an elderly to even know that neglect for example is a form of abuse. Would neighbours being close and paying attention to the well being of elderly be able to detect potential cases of elder abuse more readily? The challenge of course is educating the community on what is elder abuse for them to see the tell tale signs and subsequently take necessary action. We should see violence as a community problem and as a public health issue in addition to it being a criminal justice issue. It has to be more than a private family issue.

FAMILY VIOLENCE – COMMUNITY AND CULTURE?

While neighbourhoods are geographical communities that can play a critical role in being the first line of support and pressure points for prevention, there has been much in the literature that highlights the role of culture in defining the worldview of violence. Where is violence placed on the position of the victims within the cultural space of any particular community? Many women who are victims speak of accepting their fate as predestined and their sense of womanhood is defined by their ability to play her role as the subservient wife. Help seeking behaviours are strongly influenced by cultural norms and practices. Intervention models will then have to find within these cultural spaces to be effective. There has to be greater awareness of this dynamic process of the role of culture in family violence.

FAMILY VIOLENCE – WHAT THE DATA SAYS?

Greater awareness also lends us to have a better understanding of what we know and appreciation of what we don't know. While conferences like this morning's continue to build our body of local knowledge, much still needs to be done. If our study on profiles is limited to those who have sought assistance (voluntarily or mandated), then we can never draw definitive conclusions as we will not know the profiles of those who have not sought assistance. This will remain so until we are able to draw conclusions from national prevalence studies. For example, profile of clients showing over representation of certain ethnic groups cannot mean that that ethnic group is predispose to violence, as it could mean that that ethnic group may be predispose to seeking formal

assistance as their coping mechanism. Similarly seeing more clients from higher income groups will only allow us to conclude that more are coming forward but will not enable us to conclude that there is an association between violence and socioeconomic status.

There is also much that needs to be done on applied research in family violence, including studying the effectiveness of the systems we have in place. For example, from the first touch point of police coming to the scene of the violence incidents, to the contact and intervention by the social workers, to the various Court orders being issued and finally to outcomes like incarceration or death. What have we learnt works at these different milestones in the journey of help sought and rendered? What research questions need to be asked?

Applied research capabilities need to be strengthened along with the resources required to build up these capabilities. It is when we know more, systematically and scientifically, can we be more effective in addressing this critical issue that affects almost every community.

CONCLUSION

Family violence is something we can and should prevent. We can raise public awareness. Each time we do, we see increase in number of people who step forward but it would fizzle out after sometime and we then need to raise public awareness again. The best form of public awareness is the public themselves not just being aware but internalizing and articulating critical messages:

Violence cannot be condoned, it is criminal to inflict harm to another person

Violence is not the right of the perpetrators, no matter what they believe

Violence is not the fate of the victims, they have the right to be protected

Violence is not a private matter, the community must play its part

As the lyrics of the song goes again:

It's not right, it's so wrong
Do we let it just go on
Turn our backs and carry on
Wake up, for it's too late
Right now, we can't wait
She won't have a second try
Open up your hearts
As well as your eyes

Ladies and gentlemen, what do you see? Do you see a future where men and women, parents and children can have mutually respectful relationships? If you do, let's work together to make it happen for our children and their children.

Thank you.