

Domestic Violence: Suffer The Children

MAY 31 — Last week, the Penang High Court found Ng Chiam Huat guilty of murdering his wife. He had set her alight after dousing her with petrol in their living room in front of their children. He claimed to have done so because she had refused to give him money to settle his gambling debts.

Three years ago, Mohammad Affandi Ismail was propelled to infamy when a CCTV recording of him violently assaulting his wife in the presence of their two young children inside a hospital lift went viral. He stated in court that he had to teach her a lesson, as she had been disrespectful to him. Today, the Bukit Mertajam Magistrates Court found Mohammad Affandi guilty of domestic violence and sentenced him to eight months' imprisonment.

In domestic violence cases, children are often the forgotten victims. The children in both the above cases were exposed to escalated levels of violence inflicted by one of their parents on the other. When children in such cases have to go through the trial process, they should be provided every protection available under the law. This includes access to representation or a watching brief lawyer, and the opportunity to present their victim impact statement to the court.

Witnessing acts of violence will undoubtedly deeply scar children. They may experience a range of emotions, including feeling scared, fearful, guilty, ashamed, sad, depressed or angry, and exhibit a variety of behaviours such as being aggressive, withdrawn, or even self-harming.

Children in homes where domestic abuse occurs will usually witness frequent acts of violence over an extended period of time. This is because domestic violence is repetitive in nature and the victims are often unable to or do not seek help immediately. Repeated exposure to violence might lead children to normalize violent behaviour. As such, the long-term impact of a child's exposure to domestic violence cannot be understated. According to UNICEF's "Behind Closed Doors" report, *the single best predictor of children becoming either perpetrators or victims of domestic violence is whether they grow up in a home where there is domestic violence. A*

2014 CNN research indicated that boys who witness violence are twice as likely to abuse their partners in future.

However, not all children exposed to repeated acts of domestic violence grow up to be abusers. Some grow up to abhor violence, while others may become victims of abuse themselves. The same UNICEF report highlighted that children exposed to violence at home are 15 times more likely to be victims of physical or sexual assault. Research also suggests that girls who witness their mothers being beaten may be more accepting of violence in their relationships.

While the two recent convictions uphold Malaysia's clear stance in opposing domestic violence, the effect of domestic violence on children is generally ignored. In the last three years alone, there have been almost 14,000 reports of domestic violence nationwide. How many of these acts of violence were witnessed by children? How has it impacted them? We must recognise that domestic violence is learned behaviour that can persist from one generation to the next. We have a responsibility to provide effective intervention in cases of domestic violence not just for the adults involved, but for the children as well.

** This statement is issued by Joshua Teh, Advocacy Officer, Women's Centre for Change, on behalf of the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality.*