

She did not dare to tell her mum about grandpa's sexual attacks

A recent spate of court cases involved men who sexually abused their family members for years. In the past decade, there have been more child sexual abuse cases investigated by the authorities. Selina Lum and Wong Shiying examine why the culprits could get away with the abuse for so long and what can be done to prevent it.



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The first time she experienced a French kiss, it was with her grandfather. From the time she was eight till she was 14, Ms Sofia Abdullah's (not her real name) grandfather would repeatedly sexually violate her in his bedroom – with the door open – while her brother and cousins watched TV outside. For years, she kept silent, angry and blaming herself for what had happened, afraid that reporting him would tear her family apart. She finally broke her silence at the age of 20, telling a friend about the abuse while she was attending university in England. It took her another 12 years before she told her mother about it, when she was 32. By then, her

grandfather had been dead for more than a decade. The civil servant, who is now in her 40s, told The Sunday Times she had kept silent to protect her mother, as she would have been devastated if she had found out what her father had been doing to her daughter. Now an advocate for women's and children's rights, she has penned a memoir, titled The Years Of Forgetting, which pieces together a series of vignettes on the attacks. It is published by Epigram Books. Said Ms Sofia: "She (my mother) was so close to her father, I didn't want it to destroy her world. But then, at some point, I thought that I had to do it for our relationship, so

that it would not suffer because there was a chasm between us." She wrote about how, growing up, she blamed nenek (Malay for grandmother) for not doing her duty to "serve" grandpa. She has since made her peace with her grandmother. "She didn't know any better. He was the patriarch of the family, the religious guy. There was nothing to even hint that this was happening. He was outwardly a good guy. Very well liked, and very sweet, soft, shy and quiet." The fact that her grandfather was, on the surface, a kindly patriarch was also why she felt there was no point in speaking out, she said. Ms Sofia had also blamed herself for the abuse.

"I felt like I was a Lolita. And it was ridiculous, because when I sought therapy, obviously, any 10-year-old, eight-year-old, can't actually seduce a much older man. While she remembers certain incidents, she has no recollection of how often she was abused. "You dissociate because it's so painful," she said. "It's happening to my body, and my mind is somewhere else. I became so good at that." Over time, she picked up rock climbing and it helped her to be more present as she was forced to unite her mind and body during the exercise. The effects of the abuse lingered after her grandfather died. She got married in 2005 but divorced three years later. She believes her issues with sexual intimacy contributed to the breakdown of her marriage. She saw sex as something that was "dirty"; it was three months before she consummated the marriage with her husband.

There were 58 such cases in 2010, which jumped to 210 in 2019. This was consistent with the overall rise in child abuse cases. The MSF spokesman said that over the years, the ministry has introduced more rigorous screening tools and training for social workers, educators and health professionals to sharpen their ability to pick up safety concerns for children – like physical injuries or emotional outbursts – and seek appropriate intervention. MSF also stepped up public education efforts, which helped in uncovering more cases with child protection concerns, said the spokesman. A report last year by the United Nations' International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) on child sexual abuse, which looked at global research, said younger children are most likely to be sexually abused by a family member or caregiver. This is because younger children spend more time at home, compared with older ones and adolescents, who spend more time outside the immediate family. Figures from the Sexual Assault Care Centre, run by the Association of Women for Action and

Research (Aware), also showed an increase in sexual abuse cases involving family perpetrators – from 99 in 2018 to 127 last year. These cases have remained steady at about 12 to 13 per cent of all sexual abuse cases the centre received over the past three years. **PUNISHMENT AND PREVENTION** A spokesman for the Attorney-General's Chambers said cases where the sexual abuse is intra-familial would normally attract heavier punishments, in view of the fact that there is often an element of abuse of position, breach of trust and also because of the inherent difficulty in detection. Aware's head of research and ad-

vocacy Shailey Hingorani believes comprehensive sexuality education, delivered in an age-appropriate way, could mitigate the challenges in detecting intra-familial sexual abuse. "Children can be taught that their bodies are autonomous and deserving of respect from everyone, even their loved ones," she said. Dr Daniel Fung, the Institute of Mental Health's chief executive officer, said it is also important to teach children to tell somebody should they have an uncomfortable encounter with an adult. Ms Sofia believes it is important to have open conversations on child sexual abuse to change people's attitudes. She said: "As long as we think it's a

stigma, we will keep sweeping it under the carpet, and more kids will have their lives destroyed." selinal@sph.com.sg swong@sph.com.sg

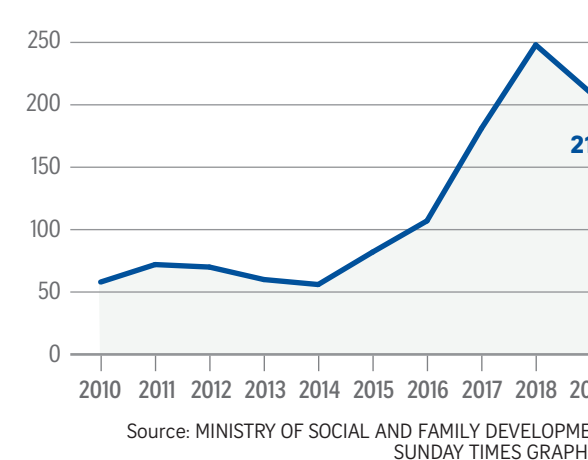
Ms Sofia Abdullah (not her real name) has written a memoir, The Years Of Forgetting, which features a series of vignettes on the sexual abuse by her grandfather, who is now dead. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Ms Nurul Nadiah Mohamed Noor says the toughest cases involve adults who blame kids for the abuse. For cases brought to trial, the ministry works closely with the police to allow the child to give her testimony separately, such as via video link, so she does not have to be in the courtroom with the perpetrator. While the safety plan is in place, the perpetrator will be referred to a psychologist for help, and educated on keeping proper boundaries with the child. Only after CPS officers have assessed that the child is no longer at risk of abuse is the safety plan withdrawn. With six years' experience, Ms Nadiah said the toughest cases involve adults who blame the children for the abuse. She said: "In a case where a father sexually abused his daughter, for instance, we try to get her mother to be the safe adult but instead she blames the child... These situations are upsetting because the child has already suffered the traumatic incident and on top of that, she is being blamed by someone she looks to for support. "After all these years, it still baffles me how such situations can happen. These children are vulnerable and depend on their parents completely. To have that trust breached can be very traumatising." Wong Shiying

When the Ministry of Social and Family Development is alerted to a case of intra-familial child sexual abuse, its Child Protective Service (CPS) ensures the child is kept safe. This entails having an adult who can ensure the child is not left alone with the perpetrator, said manager of the CPS investigation team Nurul Nadiah Mohamed Noor, 29. The safe adult – usually the child's relative – is proposed by the family and assessed by the CPS on his or her ability to keep the child safe. A safety plan will then be drawn up to determine the child's living arrangements and the rules family members have to adhere to. If the child cannot remain at home, she will stay with a relative or family friend while investigations are ongoing. If no one is able to care for the child, she will be placed with a foster family or children's home, but only as a last resort, said Ms Nadiah. The child's views are considered in the formulation of the safety plan. Ms Nadiah said: "A child could request that her grandmother move in with her because they are close. She would also be asked to rate how safe she feels at home with her parents on a scale of zero to 10." But family members do not always agree on the child's care arrangements. In such cases, CPS officers encourage them to prioritise the child's needs, but the matter will be taken to court if a compromise cannot be reached.

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Child sexual abuse cases probed by Child Protective Service



Sexual assault cases reported to the police involving young and vulnerable victims

9,200

Number of cases from 2017 to last year.

753

Number of cases of family member perpetrators with victims under 18 years old.

196

Number of cases of family member perpetrators with victims aged 18 and above.

Cases involving family member perpetrators at Aware's Sexual Assault Care Centre

99

Number of cases in 2018.

98

Number of cases in 2019.

127

Number of cases last year.

Grooming, self-blame and fear: Why cases stay buried for years

Many intra-familial sexual abuse cases can stay hidden for years because victims may not know they are being abused or are afraid to get their abusers in trouble. In a 2003 review by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) on 38 local child sexual abuse cases, 16 victims told someone about the abuse within a week, and 15 made the disclosure to one to eight months. But seven children delayed disclosure for one year or more.

LYING FOR THEIR ABUSERS

Association of Women for Action and Research's (Aware) head of research and advocacy, Ms Shailey Hingorani, said victims of intra-familial sexual abuse may not recognise they have been abused. This is especially if the perpetrator had established trust by lavishing gifts and attention on a young victim before gradually escalating his actions to abuse. She said: "This process is designed to confuse the victim into not recognising abuse for what it is, or feeling complicit in the acts and therefore responsible for them." She said that even if victims understand they have been abused, many fear they will not be believed. Said Ms Hingorani: "Fear of not being believed is the No. 1 reason given to Aware's Sexual Assault Care Centre by survivors (of all kinds of sexual violence) for why they do not want to disclose their experiences to officials." In cases where the victim is young and the perpetrator is known to the family, listeners often react by blaming the child and dismissing the child's experiences.

"It can be very hard for even loving parents to accept that their spouses or relatives could be abusers," Ms Hingorani said. In the case of intra-familial sexual abuse, a victim may feel protective towards both the abuser and other family members. Said Ms Hingorani: "They may worry about the perpetrator being taken away if they report the abuse, which would likely be hugely disruptive to the family unit, especially if the perpetrator is a breadwinner." Ms Nurul Nadiah Mohamed Noor, manager of the Ministry of Social and Family Development's child protection investigation team, said some victims blame themselves for splitting up the

WHAT VICTIMS FEAR

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family after speaking out about the abuse. "There have been instances where children denied or changed their accounts in hopes that things would go back to the way they were," she said.

IMPACT OF ABUSE

Dr Daniel Fung, chief executive of IMH, said it can be more difficult for victims to grapple with the abuse if the perpetrator is a family member, as opposed to a stranger. He said: "Victims can paint a stranger as a bad person, but it's very different when the perpetrator is their mother or father. They can't not love them." Trauma can lead to long-term effects on mental health, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and sexuality issues where the individual becomes hyper-sexualised or frigid. Dr Fung said there can be "trans-generational transmission" of child sexual abuse, where victims become perpetrators if they do not seek treatment for their trauma. "If sexuality becomes a subject they avoid, they may not be able to develop a good relationship and may choose to use sex as a tool for control," he said.

WARNING SIGNS

Dr Fung said victims of sexual abuse could show inappropriate sexualised behaviour, such as playing with their private parts in public or kissing their classmates. He added that they could also become secretive or show signs of fear, like having nightmares and wetting their beds. Ms Nadiah said a victim could be getting unusually close to a family member and meeting him secretly. But Dr Fung said it can be hard to tell if a child has been sexually abused just based on these signs, as they could arise from other factors such as stress, for instance. "On top of supervising them closely, it's good for parents to check in with their children if they spot any behavioural changes," he said. Wong Shiying and Selina Lum

Building rapport with victims key to solving sex crimes

As a police officer investigating a serious sex crime, he once spent half an hour on the floor talking to a girl about Korean pop stars before she felt comfortable enough to share her story with him. Deputy Superintendent Ker Boon Tat, 34, told The Sunday Times that having a connection with the victim is key to solving crimes. "Rapport building is very important in our field of work as we need to gather information as quickly as possible in order to establish the offence," he said.

The officer-in-charge at the Serious Sexual Crime Branch of the Criminal Investigation Department leads a team of officers who investigate offences such as rape and sexual assault by penetration. One challenge in investigating such crimes, especially in cases involving children, is getting a clear account from the victim. While some can be eloquent and forthcoming, others can be withdrawn and feel embarrassed about sharing their experience. "They do want to speak up. It's just that you might not be the one they want to speak to because you're a total stranger. That's when rapport building comes in," said DSP Ker. While an adult may be better at piecing events into a flowing timeline, some children do not have a good sense of time, he added. The police have enhanced initiatives to make sure victims feel taken care of during investigations, he said. The police work with volunteers with backgrounds in psychology, social work and counselling to provide emotional support for victims. A multidisciplinary interview process removes the need for a vic-

tim to travel to different places to recount traumatic incidents over and over again to different parties. The process is streamlined into one interview with police officers, doctors and child protection officers present at the same time. After getting the victim's account, investigators will interview the suspect and gather corroborating evidence such as surveillance footage and other witness accounts. "We do take whatever the accused says seriously, so the account of the accused will be investigated and verified," DSP Ker said. In cases involving family members, such as a father accused of abusing his child, the question of whether a witness account is indeed pertinent can become an obstacle in the investigation process. "If the mum is very sure that the child is lying, we cannot say that the mum is supporting the father, because the mum might know more than us," DSP Ker said. Since September 2018, the police have been doing video-recorded interviews for serious sex crimes. This allows the court to take into account the interviewee's demeanour and decide whether that statement is admissible, and how much weight to place on it. If a perpetrator pleads guilty in court, the case can wrap up within a year. But for those who contest the allegations, it could be two to three years before the trial.

When asked if it was difficult to remain objective, DSP Ker said: "At the end of the day, we have to be professional. We are not judges, so we cannot determine whether the person is guilty or not. Our objective is to find the facts." Selina Lum



Protecting victims of intra-familial child sexual abuse

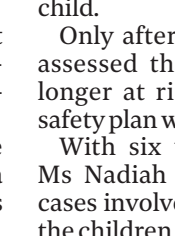
When the Ministry of Social and Family Development is alerted to a case of intra-familial child sexual abuse, its Child Protective Service (CPS) ensures the child is kept safe. This entails having an adult who can ensure the child is not left alone with the perpetrator, said manager of the CPS investigation team Nurul Nadiah Mohamed Noor, 29. The safe adult – usually the child's relative – is proposed by the family and assessed by the CPS on his or her ability to keep the child safe. A safety plan will then be drawn up to determine the child's living arrangements and the rules family members have to adhere to. If the child cannot remain at home, she will stay with a relative or family friend while investigations are ongoing. If no one is able to care for the child, she will be placed with a foster family or children's home, but only as a last resort, said Ms Nadiah. The child's views are considered in the formulation of the safety plan. Ms Nadiah said: "A child could request that her grandmother move in with her because they are close. She would also be asked to rate how safe she feels at home with her parents on a scale of zero to 10." But family members do not always agree on the child's care arrangements. In such cases, CPS officers encourage them to prioritise the child's needs, but the matter will be taken to court if a compromise cannot be reached.

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Deputy Superintendent Ker Boon Tat says initiatives have been enhanced to ensure victims feel taken care of during investigations. In cases involving children, aids like a doll and model house are employed during the interview process. ST PHOTOS: JASON QUAH

Past cases
MAN SEXUALLY ABUSED ALL THREE DAUGHTERS
A cleaner, 55, who sexually assaulted his three daughters over 14 years, was jailed for 33 years last month. He targeted the girls when they turned 11 or 12 years old. He raped the eldest girl for years until she turned 16 or 17. He then turned his attention to his second daughter, whom he raped and sexually assaulted several times a week. He molested his youngest daughter when she was 11. A year later, he gestured to her to have sex with him but she shook her head and cried. She confided in her friends and teacher the next day. The teacher took her to lodge a police report.
STEPFATHER GROOMED AND RAPED TEEN
A 53-year-old man, who groomed his stepdaughter into repeatedly having sex with him when she was 13, was jailed for 26 years for rape in June last year. In 2013, the girl shared her curiosity about sex with her stepfather, who then asked if she wanted to have sex with him. Between January and August that year, he took her to different isolated locations to rape her. She gave birth to a son in 2014 and her stepfather was confirmed to be the father. She eventually made a police report after being urged to do so by a child protection officer, but even then indicated her intention to protect her stepfather.
WOMAN'S LOVER RAPED HER DAUGHTER
A former taxi driver, 47, was sentenced to 34 years' jail and 24 strokes of the cane in 2018, for raping his girlfriend's daughter. He molested the girl when she was seven or eight, moving on to rape her when she was 11, even when others were at home. The girl's mother turned a blind eye to the abuse even after the girl told her about the attacks. She finally sought help from the man's wife, who referred her to a social worker, and a police report was made. The mother was jailed for six months for not reporting the abuse.