

A rape victim speaks up



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Azura Mohamed Noor knows she is putting a lot at stake by what she is doing today. Among other things, she risks stigma and discrimination and may have problems finding a life partner.

But the call operator, 24, is determined to go public as a rape victim.

"I am opening up a very old wound. But I want to help other girls who have gone through and are going through what happened to me and and I don't want society to judge us," she told *The Sunday Times*.

She is scheduled to go public at the We Can! Arts Festival at 3pm today at the Aliwal Arts Centre in Aliwal Street. The event is part of a campaign organised by women's group Aware to trigger change in social attitudes towards violence.

Interviewed at the Aware Centre in Dover Road, soft-spoken Ms Azura said she was raped repeatedly in her home by a family friend when she was 15.

"He threatened to harm my family if I didn't do what he wanted or if I told anybody. I was so afraid," said the youngest of three children of a former shopkeeper and a cleaner who divorced five years ago.

The abuse turned the teenager's life topsy-turvy. She went into depression, became suicidal, started hurting herself, was admitted to the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) and sent to a girls' home for five years.

"There was a lot of hate for my attacker but I learnt to forgive and accept whatever happened to me because if I didn't, I would not be able to move on," she said quietly.

Miss Azura grew up in her family's four-room flat in Boon Lay.

Trouble started in her early teens when her father's business failed and he became a bankrupt.

Her mother went to work as a cleaner and befriended a male colleague, a foreign worker who often visited their home and sometimes stayed over.

"He seemed like a nice guy. Once in a while, he would say some religious thing and tell my mother and me to pray," she recalled.

But one night he entered her room while the rest of the family members were asleep and started touching her. "I tried to push him away but he started to threaten me very quietly. I just kept quiet, I didn't know what to do. I was so afraid," she said.

The man stayed away for two weeks but attacked her again on his next visit. "He did it one or two more times, I can't remember," she said. Then he stopped visiting.

The once bubbly girl started to withdraw from her friends.

"I started to cut my hands and wrists," she said, showing the scars on her left hand. "Every time I bled, I hoped I would bleed more and my wounds would get infected and that would be it."

Whenever her mother or teachers asked about her bandaged wounds, she would say she fell. "I just wanted to kill myself. I didn't know if I should tell my family or my teachers. My reputation in school had always been good."

A teacher who had taken her to hospital on a few occasions finally managed to coax the truth out of her.

"She sent me to the A&E and had a talk with the doctor. I was told that I would be sent to IMH and the police would come later," she recalled.

At the mental hospital, the police questioned her in the presence of a doctor.

Her mother, brother and grandmother visited her a few days later. "I didn't tell my mother about the rape then. I didn't want my family to judge me," she said.

Her family was not allowed to visit her after that. To her horror, the police told her that her mother had taken money from her attacker and might well have known about what he did.

"I was shocked. I only half-believed it," she said

After six weeks in hospital, she was sent to a girls' home, for her own safety.

After a couple of months, she returned to school. Although she was forbidden contact with her family, she managed to sneak out of school to meet her mother a few times.

"I told her what the police told me. She kept crying and denied it but she did tell me she had borrowed money from the man," she said.

Miss Azura continued to hurt herself.

"I was still having nightmares. The staff and social workers at the home were very nice but I couldn't accept that I was placed in a home with juvenile delinquents when I didn't do anything wrong," she said.

Her rapist got away. She said the police told her he could not be found.

But she also recalled being humiliated when she identified her attacker from a photograph and a woman officer remarked: "He's handsome. Are you sure he is not your boyfriend and you willingly did it with him?"

Ms Azura said: "I was a victim, and I was getting these questions."

That experience is one of the reasons she has decided to come forward now. "What the policewoman said to me is one of the reasons rape victims do not come forward to make reports. That has to change," she said.

Indeed, a 2009 study funded by the National University of Singapore found that three in four women who experience physical or sexual violence do not make reports.

Aware's own data backs this up. "Only one in three clients of our Sexual Assault Befrienders Service makes a police report," said Ms Kokila Annamalai, We Can's campaign coordinator. The befriender service receives about 16 calls a month.

Recovery for Miss Azura - who went on to complete her studies in game design at the Institute of Technical Education - took a long time.

She is thankful for counsellors who persevered with her, including her "big sisters" at The Beautiful People, a volunteer group which helps troubled teenage girls reintegrate into society.

Ms Phyllis Ng, 48, one of the group's mentors who has worked with Miss Azura for four years, said: "She realised that staying in her situation of being depressed was not good and she was looking for a way to move out of her trauma."

One of the first things Ms Azura did after she was allowed to see her family was to have an emotional heart-to-heart talk with her mother.

"She said she felt very sad about what happened to me and she apologised. She also told me about her own past," she said. Her mother revealed that she herself had been raped by a relative when she was in her teens.

"After that, I told myself I had to let go," said Miss Azura.

She has written a script for a short film about rape. The Beautiful People and a local production company are now helping her to produce it.

She said that she lives with her mother, who knows she is going public today as a rape victim.

"She was a bit afraid people will judge her. But I told her, 'No friends or relatives came forward to help when things happened to me, so why should you be scared of their judgment now?'"

Aware's Ms Kokila said what Ms Azura is doing is important.

"She is making public the usually hidden human face of sexual assault. Together with We Can!, she will take her message to schools and other community groups, showing other victims that they are not alone and encouraging the rest of us to show empathy and understanding, which will help pave the way for a more welcoming atmosphere for other victims."

Ms Ng of The Beautiful People agreed.

"When she can take the step of going public to motivate and inspire others who are going through what she did, it means she has really moved on."

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