



## Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

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# What It Means to Be a Social Worker: *Her World* Woman of the Year Acceptance Speech

By Sudha Nair

Guest of honor, Mr. Tan Chuan-Jin, Minister for Social and Family Development; SPH CEO Mr. Alan Chan; SPH Magazines CEO Mr. Loh Yew Seng; Ms. Claire Chiang, *Her World's* Woman of the Year 1998; *Her World* Editor Ms. Tracy Lee; *Her World* Deputy Editor Ms. Jeanne Tai; ladies; and gentlemen:

Thank you so much, *Her World*, for this enormous honor. To find myself placed in the ranks of eminent Singapore women such as Professor Chan Heng Chee, Ms. Claire Chiang, Dr. Kanwaljit Soin, and Madam Halimah Jacob is unbelievable. My achievements are nowhere near theirs.

But by choosing a social worker, you recognize my profession—one that's often underestimated and regarded as little more than a soft option for kind, good-hearted people who hand out financial aid and food rations and visit the needy. Social workers do much more, operating at the point where personal troubles and public issues intersect. Our goals are to help people solve problems, and cope and function effectively. Where resources are needed, we help locate them.

Social work is primarily a female dominated profession, although more men are coming forward now, and former President S. R. Nathan, Singapore's most distinguished social worker, had the dubious honor of having as his first job title "Lady Almoner"—what we now refer to as a medical social worker. He carried it well and took it in good humor.

Social work involves several key tasks: advocating for change to policies and services, identifying gaps that need to be addressed, and ensuring that the delivery of social services is humane, accountable, and efficient.

Mr. Nathan embodied this. He was perhaps the first and only social work student whose diploma thesis led to the

starting of a government department. Mr. Nathan had been studying the lascars. These were sailors from South Asia. Most of them were Bangladeshis who took the lowest paying jobs on ships. What he found was that they were very badly treated and, when they landed, they were paid a pittance. And they were bonded to the owner of their boarding house in Tanjong Pagar. The owner could dictate the jobs they took on, sometimes even forcing them to carry opium. In effect, they were bonded slaves with no rights. Jean Robertson, head of the Social Work Department at the University of Malaya, showed the thesis to the then chief minister, David Marshall, who was horrified at how these laborers were treated. He set up a Seamen's Registry, and anyone who wanted to employ a seaman had to go through the registry to ensure that they were taken care of. Mr. Nathan's thesis highlighted the personal troubles of these lascars, whose difficulties had become a public issue. Chief Minister Marshall appointed Mr. Nathan to serve as the first seaman's welfare officer. This perhaps sowed the seeds for his career in public service and the labor movement. The skills he learned in social work—engagement, negotiation, listening, assessment—were skills that would last him a lifetime. He cared for people from the start of his career right through his last days. He exemplified the values of social work. He will be missed.

My introduction to social work was not as dramatic as Mr. Nathan's. I came to social work because it looked like the most interesting course in the National University of Singapore's prospectus after English literature, and I graduated in 1986.

My first job was with the Ang Mo Kio Social Service Centre. Back in the late 80s, social work was one of the poorest paid jobs for graduates. My salary was \$1,050, and my first increment was \$15.

This Perspective presents remarks delivered by Dr. Nair on August 24, 2016, in an address accepting the *Her World* Woman of the Year award.

A common perception was that you did not need a degree to do social work. Parents could not see why their children would go to university only to end up working with the poor, needy, and dangerous for so little money. I stayed at the Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centre for 18 years,<sup>1</sup> and the work I did there led to the setting up of PAVE, the first family violence specialist center in Singapore. Looking back, that was perhaps the best and most creative period of my life.

Thank you for allowing me to put the spotlight today on family violence. To me, family violence is terrorism in the home. Spouses, intimate partners, children, or the elderly are terrorized behind closed doors, living in fear 24/7. The people you love, people who are supposed to love you back, are instead your tormentors. You continually walk on eggshells, terrified of sparking a violent episode. All this *in* your home. And you feel you cannot tell anyone.

At PAVE, we like to think of our clients as survivors rather than victims. Most survivors seeking help at PAVE are women who have been abused by their husbands. Some are scarred and disfigured for life. Some have come close to losing their lives. Many have no confidence or self-esteem.

When I think of the women, I think of Grace. She was 58 years old when I first met her. Married for more than 30 years, she finally decided to get out of her very abusive relationship and divorced her husband. A year after the divorce, her ex-husband went to her HDB (Housing and Development Board) block and slashed her so badly that she described her stitched-up face as a “jigsaw puzzle.” Her ex-husband was jailed, but he told her that he would never let her go. She lived in terror that he would come out of jail and attack her again. I placed Grace in a group of women survivors, and there she realized that she was not alone. We developed a community safety plan with the prisons, the police, the grassroots, and the MP (Member of Parliament). The plan succeeded in keeping her safe. Grace went on to remarry, and she exemplifies our belief that there *is* life after violence. As she puts it: “After 30 years of abuse I can finally smile again.”

Children who are exposed to violence in their home need help too, but it is so hard to reach out to them. What they experience in a violent home can haunt them for the rest of their lives.

I met Kelly when she was 9 years old. Her mother was a survivor of violence, and Kelly would accompany her to PAVE. She seemed cheerful, but her mother complained that she was doing poorly in school. When I talked to Kelly, I found that the girl was herself a victim, and it was her mother who abused her. Her mother would denigrate Kelly constantly, curse her for being born, blame her for

the physical abuse received from Kelly’s father, spew vulgarities at her, and physically abuse her. Kelly could not sleep at night, and could not concentrate in school. All she could think of was how to survive the day.

During one of our sessions, I asked Kelly what animal she would like to be if she were an animal. Other children usually say they would like to be a tiger, lion, or dragon. Kelly thought for a very long time and then said, “Ant!” When I asked why, she said, “So that people would step on me and I can go to God!” Her grandfather had recently died, and he had been her protector; with him gone, she lost all hope, and she wanted to be with him.

Social workers like to celebrate the resilience of human beings who are able to survive the most awful experiences and, with help, pull their lives together again. Children who are exposed to violence really need help early. PAVE started the third child protection specialist center in January 2017.

In my 22 years in this field, most of the perpetrators have been men. Most are not monsters, but somewhere along the line they learned that it is all right to batter their wives. The men who come to PAVE for mandatory counselling range in age from their twenties to sixties. They include polytechnic and university graduates, men in well-paying jobs. It is equally important to work with those who use the violence, and show them that this behavior can be unlearned. Men who truly value their families do learn to live their lives differently, without violence.

We also need to be vigilant to elder abuse, as Singapore is ageing rapidly. It’s hard for the elderly to complain against their abusers, who may be their children. The number of such cases may not be large today, but we can expect more in the years to come and must be alert to help.

People sometimes ask how I can go to work each day and face the horrible situations that our clients present. Seeing people in emotional or physical pain bothers me tremendously. But I also see people turn their lives around, smile again, and keep their families together. I see a wife-batterer put violence behind him and become a PAVE ambassador who brings other men for help. I see the child who had the worst childhood imaginable graduating and knowing that, although life tossed her a rotten deal, having support from people who cared enabled change. All this gives me a real high that I’m hooked on!

Today, new social work graduates are paid considerably more, but the work remains challenging, exciting, meaningful, and rewarding. There is nothing better than walking down the street and meeting an ex-client who stops to chat, then thanks you once again for being there and making a difference at a critical point of her life.

Social work requires heart, but neither a soft nor a calloused one. Many practitioners are strong and resolute, as working with families in crisis is no easy task. The profession needs critical thinkers, creative people to innovate and find pathways for clients when every door appears closed. A social worker needs courage, a great sense of optimism, and the ability to reframe negative situations to positive ones. A large dose of humor and having supportive colleagues are essential, and I have been blessed with both over the years.

There are many people that I have to thank tonight, but I shall do so personally. But there is one group of people to whom I am very grateful: our clients, who trusted us enough to share their often painful stories. They have been our greatest teachers, and it is such a privilege to have been a part of their lives.

Receiving this award is an immense honor, but there's still plenty of work to be done. We continue to hope that protection will be extended to unmarried people in dating and live-in relationships. We have to keep inspiring bright young people to devote their lives to this worthy profession. Thank you, once more, for recognizing what we do and for giving a voice to all our families who live with violence.

## End Note

1. In the mid-1990s, the name of Ang Mo Kio Social Service Centre was changed to Ang Mo Kio Family Service Centre.

## Author

Sudha Nair, PhD, is the executive director of PAVE (the first family violence specialist center in Singapore) and a member of the Public Service Commission of Singapore. She received the inaugural Outstanding Social Worker Award from the then Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports and the Distinguished Alumni Award from the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis.

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