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Breaking the silence on sexual violence: More care and support for victims in Singapore



The National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline received about 11,600 calls in 2023. PHOTO: ST FILE



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SINGAPORE - Victims of sexual violence now have more support, with different agencies in recent years breaking down the barriers for the reporting of such crimes.

Victims reporting their cases now have priority queues at police stations, better emotional support during investigations, and more careful treatment in court, after new measures announced in January to protect them from improper questions.

More people are also seeking help.



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Latest figures from the authorities show that the National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline received about 11,600 calls in 2023, up from 10,800 calls in 2022, and 8,400 in 2021.

The helpline, previously known as the National Anti-Violence Helpline, was renamed in 2022 to better reflect its function in supporting people who experience any form of violence, including sexual offences.

Helplines

Mental well-being

- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222 (24 hours)
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1-767 (24 hours) / 9151-1767 (24-hour CareText via WhatsApp)
- Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
- Chat, Centre of Excellence for Youth Mental Health: 6493-6500/1
- Women's Helpline (Aware): 1800-777-5555 (weekdays, 10am to 6pm)

Counselling

- Touchline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- Touch Care Line (for caregivers): 6804-6555
- Care Corner Counselling Centre: 6353-1180
- Counselling and Care Centre: 6536-6366
- We Care Community Services: 3165-8017

Online resources

- mindline.sg
- eC2.sg
- www.tinklefriend.sg
- www.chat.mentalhealth.sg
- carey.carecorner.org.sg (for those aged 13 to 25)
- limitless.sg/talk (for those aged 12 to 25)

Between January 2018 and November 2022, there were 11,868 reports of sexual assault in Singapore, with figures hovering between 2,200 and 2,400 each year. These include rape, sexual assault by penetration, outrage of modesty, and sexual crime involving children and vulnerable victims.

Care Corner Project StART's Sexual Assault Recovery Programme, which began in 2021, helps an average of 40 people annually.



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Ms Faith Lee, assistant head of Care Corner Project StART, said there has been a gradual increase in the number of clients coming forward for help.

Other than referrals from police, Care Corner has seen an increasing number of self-referrals requesting emotional support to process past incidents of sexual assault, as well as more clients seeking help at earlier stages.



"We think this can be attributed to heightened awareness about the importance of timely intervention and support," said Ms Lee.

Since January 2023, three Protection Specialist Centres, which previously catered mainly to family violence, have been tapped to provide social and emotional support for victim-survivors of all forms of sexual violence.

These centres are run by social service agencies.

And in April 2023, the police formed the Sexual Crime and Family Violence Command to raise standards of investigations and provide better oversight of the management of sexual crime and family violence cases.

Priority queues were set up at neighbourhood police centres for victims of sexual crime. They are also given a private space during interviews.

Victims of sexual crimes are also offered the services of Victim Care Officers, who provide emotional and practical support throughout the criminal justice process. The team has grown from 11 such officers in 2014 to about 250 to date, said the Singapore Police Force (SPF).

Since January 2023, the police have also been working with SG Her Empowerment (SHE) to better support sexual crime victims.

When certain victims of serious sexual crimes go to the SheCares@SCWO centre for help in reporting, police officers will go there to do the interview, to spare the victim discomfort and inconvenience.

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Reducing trauma

In a further step, the Singapore courts implemented new measures on Jan 13 aimed at protecting complainants of sexual offences from improper questioning. This came after Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon's [earlier remarks](#) on the need for judges to take a more active supervisory role in managing such cases.

Under the new measures, the judiciary will use a checklist at the pre-trial stage to help identify any contentious issues that are likely to be explored in cross-examination. This will allow the judge to disallow lines of questioning that are irrelevant or insulting to the complainant during the trial.

Cases involving certain sexual offences will be heard by a list of experienced and specially trained judges.

SHE chairwoman Stefanie Yuen-Thio said that other than bringing on more needed expertise in handling such traumatic cases, the move by the courts sends a strong signal that sexual violence cases are unique and require different judicial consideration.

"For example, victims of sexual violence may wonder if they should blame themselves and feel shame, which may impact how they respond to questions and affect their perceived credibility. The trauma may also affect their memories," she said.

Ms Sugidha Nithiananthan, director of advocacy and research at Aware, said: "Survivors often do not recall or articulate their experiences in a straightforward way, and it's vital for the judiciary to recognise these nuances. Judges trained in these areas can better assess cases with sensitivity and fairness."

These changes also address a significant barrier to reporting sexual violence, she said.

"Many survivors hesitate to engage with the justice system because they fear not being believed, being blamed, or going through a lengthy and re-traumatising court process."

Having a trauma-informed judiciary can reassure survivors that their cases will be heard by judges who will handle their cases with sensitivity and understanding, Ms Sugidha added.

"While this won't eliminate all the challenges of testifying, it will reduce and limit the circumstances that can cause distress for survivors," she said.

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Gaps remain in recognising sexual violence

Ms Sugidha said that although Singapore has made progress in support for sexual violence survivors, gaps remain.

The public may not be aware of new accommodations like priority queues, while some survivors have reported inconsistent experiences with police officers, who may not handle cases sensitively, she added.

Aware's Sexual Assault Care Centre saw 786 clients in 2023. This is a drop from 947 cases in 2022, and 1,032 cases in 2021.

“Some have experienced poor handovers between investigating officers and a lack of understanding about trauma, which made them feel unsupported. Some even wish to stop participating in the court proceedings because of the re-traumatisation they experience,” said Ms Sugidha.

SHE’s Mrs Yuen-Thio pointed out that online harms are often still seen as less serious than physical harms.

“Online harms, especially those of a sexual nature, can cause significant and long-lasting emotional trauma,” she said.

In a parliamentary reply in August 2024, Law Minister K. Shanmugam said that between 2021 and 2023, the police received an average of about 340 reported cases per year involving possession or distribution of voyeuristic, intimate or abusive images.

SPF does not track the number of such cases involving deepfakes or manipulated images or videos using generative-artificial intelligence tools, he said.

Mrs Yuen-Thio said helping the public learn that sexual violence includes harmful online behaviours can help deter potential perpetrators and empower victims to recognise when they are being targeted, and seek help.

“It will also provide survivors with the affirmation that their experiences are valid, so they can heal.”

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Ms Sugidha said survivors of such violence often tell Aware that they feel their experiences are dismissed as “less serious” compared with physical acts like rape.

In 2023, Aware received 713 calls related to sexual violence, with 113 cases involving technology.

Ms Sugidha said institutions also sometimes fail to recognise non-physical sexual violence as serious.

In one case that Aware saw, a survivor of stealthing, which refers to the non-consensual removal of a condom during sex, said medical staff recognised her experience as a crime only after multiple visits.

“Dismissive reactions like this deepen survivors’ trauma and reinforce the misconception that only certain forms of sexual violence ‘count,’” said Ms Sugidha.

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