My heart is dead, says Megan's grandmother



A 2017 photo of Megan Khung and her toys seen at her grandmother's flat on Oct 24. Madam Chua, Megan's grandmother, remembers the four-year-old as a cheerful child who liked to sing and ask her for hugs. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Regrets over failing to protect Megan, who died from fatal punch by mum's boyfriend

Christine Tan

The image of her granddaughter Megan Khung being forced to eat discarded food by her abusers is seared into Madam Chua's memory.

In a video played in court, one of Megan's abusers, Wong Shi Xiang, the boyfriend of her mother, Foo Li Ping, empties a dustbin and tells her in Mandarin: "If you don't eat, I'll hit you."

Her eyes reddening and voice shaking with anger, Madam Chua, 68, told The Straits Times on Oct 24 in Mandarin: "Are they even human?"

She was especially disappointed in her daughter, Foo, who allowed Wong to abuse four-year-old Megan and even joined in the barbaric acts. Megan died after a year of abuse on Feb 22, 2020.

Madam Chua said: "I thought Li Ping would protect Megan. Even animals would protect their young."

On April 3, Foo was sentenced to 19 years' jail, and Wong was sentenced to 30 years' jail and 17 strokes of the cane. The couple's friend was also arrested, and her case is pending.

Madam Chua spoke to ST in a three-hour interview at her one-room rental flat, a day after a review panel released a report detailing lapses by various agencies between March 2019 and February 2020 that could have prevented Megan's death.

The elderly woman's eyes were puffy from crying the night before. She said the report had dredged up old memories of Megan's suffering, which makes her tear up, five years after the girl's death.

Foo was Madam Chua's only daughter from her turbulent second marriage, where her husband would verbally and physically abuse her and Foo while drunk.

He kicked Foo for making mistakes in her homework, and threatened Madam Chua once with a knife. She divorced him and took Foo with her after about a decade of marriage.

Madam Chua described Foo as an obedient and kind child, but said she fell into bad company in her teens.

Foo married her first husband, Mr Khung Wei Nan, better known as content creator "Simonboy", in 2015 and had Megan in October that year.

Foo left the marriage and started a relationship with Wong in 2018.

When Megan turned up at her pre-school on March 19, 2019, with bruises across her whole body, her teachers alerted Madam Chua.

Said Madam Chua: "I cried for half an hour. She was so small, how could she fight back against them?"

She sensed Wong was trouble and repeatedly told Foo to leave him, but she refused.

Madam Chua said: "She would have died for him."

The review panel's report said Megan's teachers from Healthy Start Child Development Centre reported the injuries on the same day to Beyond Social Services (BSS), which runs the pre-school.

BSS community workers also developed a temporary care plan that day. Foo was still allowed to meet Megan, but the girl would stay overnight only at her grandmother's home.

From March to September 2019, Madam Chua, a cleaner, took care of Megan while Foo lived with Wong.

After work, Madam Chua would pick the girl up from school, and they would buy dinner, such as Megan's favourite soup noodles, on the way home.

Megan was a cheerful child who liked to sing and ask her "Ah Ma" for hugs, said Madam Chua, smiling.

Their familiar routine was disrupted on Sept 10, 2019, when Megan had a fever in school. Madam Chua was at work and let Foo pick the child up from school.

But Foo refused to let Madam Chua see Megan again and told her not to meddle with her affairs.

Madam Chua said: "If I didn't need to work, I could have taken care of Megan, and maybe she would still be here today."

Worried about Megan's safety, Madam Chua called Foo regularly, but her daughter did not say where they were staying.

Madam Chua would hear Megan's voice on the line, calling in her usual endearing way: "Ah Ma!"

Foo suddenly blocked her calls after several weeks. The review panel's report said a BSS community worker stayed in touch with Madam Chua and advised her to call the police.

The report said Madam Chua was hesitant as she was worried this would make her more estranged from Foo.

Madam Chua said: "I thought, at least Megan is with Li Ping, and she would protect her. As a mother, I know I would protect my child."

Madam Chua made the first police report on Jan 17, 2020, after the BSS community worker told her Megan's situation was serious as she had not been enrolled in any other pre-school.

Police told ST on Oct 23 that the police report stated Megan's grandmother had not been in contact with Foo and Megan for some time, and there was no indication of child abuse.

Madam Chua said: "All I knew was the police was the biggest (organisation), and they could help Megan."

The review panel's report said the investigation officer (IO) assessed this was a case of child discipline with low safety concerns and told her officer-in-charge (OC) she would try to find Foo. The OC did not raise this report in case review sessions.

The IO stopped pursuing the matter after trying unsuccessfully for about two weeks to locate Foo and Megan. She was later deployed for Covid-19 pandemic duties.

The police found that the IO should have highlighted the case to her supervisor when she was unable to contact Foo. The IO has since resigned while the OC was handed a financial penalty.

Megan died a month after that first police report, from Wong's fatal punch to her stomach. Foo, Wong and their friend burned her body in a metal barrel.

The matter came to light only in July 2020, after a hospital bill for Foo arrived at Madam Chua's flat.

Madam Chua said Foo was injured after being hit by Wong, and was warded for three days.

She said: "I was shocked and worried about who was taking care of Megan."

After discussing with Mr Khung's family, Madam Chua and Mr Khung filed separate police reports on July 20, 2020. Three days later, Foo and Wong were arrested for Megan's murder.

Said Madam Chua: "I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I was in a daze. The pain lasts for a lifetime."

Officers from the Ministry of Social and Family Development visited Madam Chua on Oct 22, a day before the publication of the review panel's report, and told her about the news.

When ST asked if Madam Chua knew of the report's five key findings, she said: "I'm not educated. I don't really know the details."

On Minister for Social and Family Development Masagos Zulkifli's apology over the handling of Megan's case, Madam Chua said: "I've got to accept it... It's been so long. My heart is dead."

She acknowledged it was her daughter's and Wong's acts that led to the tragedy.

Madam Chua has since forgiven Foo.

In her fortnightly visits to Foo in prison, she comforts her daughter and tells her to change for the better.

She said: "Children are innocent and pure, and they need to be protected. This should never happen again."

yujiatan@sph.com.sg

Social workers say clearer agency roles will help in child abuse cases

Syarafana Shafeeq

Community and social workers often grapple with the weight of their decisions in child protection work, while managing heavy caseloads.

Factors like strained resources and differing risk assessments between agencies can add to their anxiety, on top of having to make judgment calls in difficult situations, social workers told The Straits Times on Oct 24.

They said the recommendations put out by a review panel on Oct 23 – such as clearly defining the roles of the agencies managing child abuse cases and setting up an appeals system – could provide stronger support for front-line workers.

The review panel was convened to look at the child protection system after the death of four-year-old Megan Khung, who was abused by her mother and the woman's boyfriend.

It found that there were lapses at multiple points across the system, and a lack of coordination between agencies. One of its seven recommendations was to ensure child abuse cases are mainly managed by child protection case management agencies, like the Ministry of Social and Family Development's (MSF) Child Protective Service (CPS).

Other groups, like community and social service agencies, should focus on detecting and reporting cases as they interact with children and encounter suspected abuse.

Another key recommendation is to set up an appeals mechanism to address differing views on the risk level of a case between agencies.

Social workers told ST that these moves would be useful if effectively implemented.

Ms Han Yah Yee, chief executive at Montfort Care, said greater clarity of roles between child protection case management agencies and other agencies on the ground will help ensure children in need receive the right level of support.

Having an appeals system will also help better assess decisions on cases when no agreement is reached, she added.

Mr Daniel Lopez, a social worker at Lakeside Family Services, said that some fear making a mistake in escalating cases and adding stress to the system. He noted that differing risk assessments between agencies can be discouraging for those on the ground.

Not all agencies have equal authority, and some staff may feel apprehensive about challenging the judgment of those in higher positions, he added.

The panel's recommendations could lead to higher caseloads for the main agencies handling child protection, and MSF was advised to allocate adequate resources to these agencies. The average caseload for child protection officers dipped from 40 cases per officer between 2018 and 2022 to around 35 in 2025.

Mr Lopez said the demand for workers managing family violence cases outpaces that of the supply, and staff are often handed high-risk cases relatively quickly. Adequate support from managers and supervisors is important, he added.

Ms Han said resources should be channelled to hiring more social workers and paying them right, as well as investing in their development.

Ms Cindy Tay, the director of Children's Aid Society, said the caseload of staff in this field must remain manageable so that they can respond to each case with competence and confidence.

She said: "Without the corresponding investment in manpower and capacity, the conditions necessary for effective practice, workforce retention and service quality cannot be sustained."

She added: "Learning and development cannot thrive in an environment of chronic stress and overload."

Jurong Central MP Xie Yao Quan, who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC) for Social and Family Development, said in an Instagram post on Oct 23 that the panel's report provides answers to many questions raised by sector professionals after MSF's initial statement on Megan's case in April.

MSF's earlier statement had said that Beyond Social Services (BSS), the agency running Megan's pre-school, did not escalate the case to CPS. The report later found that BSS had called CPS, but the CPS officer did not register the call in its logs. The case was thus not escalated to the supervisor on duty.

The report raised other findings, like the failure of the police to appropriately follow up on Megan's case after they were unable to contact the girl's mother.

Mr Xie said: "The report points to a confluence of factors across the system, rather than a single dominant factor, that led to the failure to prevent Megan's tragic death.

"And, crucially, the report suggests a way forward for the sector and the system."

Mr Lopez said social workers on the ground were upset by MSF's first statement on BSS' role.

With MSF issuing an apology on Oct 23, he said that while some are satisfied with the accountability shown, others feel that the case also highlighted a power imbalance, with less respect and care for staff on the ground.

Mr Xie told ST the report has surfaced many important aspects of the child protection ecosystem that need to be considered and worked on. The GPC will file questions on the report, for the next parliamentary sitting in November.

"The GPC intends for our questions to cover the ground comprehensively. Because this is what the case deserves," he said.

syarafanams@sph.com.sg