



## ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS

### Research Summary

## METHODOLOGY

- A qualitative research through focus group discussion involving seven social workers from two family service centres.
- Transcriptions and thematic analysis.

## BACKGROUND

This study is a follow-up to a research conducted in 2015 by Rotary Family Service Centre on the housing experiences of Malay/Muslim women after divorce (Link to the earlier study at <http://rotaryfsc.sg/web/research>).

In the 2015 study, we found that social workers were not always engaged to lobby for housing resources for this group. This current study aims at understanding the roles and experiences of social workers in housing advocacy work for this clientele.

## FINDINGS

### Difficulties observed in Malay/Muslim clients going through divorces

Social workers interviewed in this study observed the same difficulties faced by the Malay/Muslim single mothers after divorce, namely the strained relationship with extended families when relying on their support for housing and resources for too long as well as multiple stressors such as attending court hearings and caregiving for their children. Due to the housing policy, these clients could only begin applying for a flat after divorce was finalized. Their other options would be renting a flat in the open market or purchasing a private property, which most could not afford.

### Clients' Perception of Social Workers on Helping Them with Housing Matters

Some social workers observed that clients might not perceive them as someone who could help them with their housing issues as social workers were often associated with providing financial support. Clients would then prefer to find the information by themselves, approach their Member of Parliament or lobby with the HDB on their own. However, not all social workers shared this view as there were clients who were open to seeking assistance from them on housing matters.

### Social Workers' Challenges in Advocating for Housing

Some social workers felt disempowered due to the lack of transparency in the appeal process, the lack of understanding in decision-making process and the housing policies in general. Some were concerned about advocating in a way that may negatively impact the relationship between HDB and their agencies. Others pointed out that having an unempathetic HDB officer made the advocacy process even more frustrating.

### Effective Strategies in Advocating for Housing

Studying the housing policies and advocating to the right person in HDB helped. Social workers should collaborate with the right stakeholders and persevere in the process. Other conducive factors included clients' own ability to articulate their needs, airing their needs via the right channels and building rapport with HDB officers.

### Enhancing Competencies in Housing Advocacy

Social workers suggested the need for continuous trainings and agencies' support in learning and practising advocacy, such as establishing community of practice and participating in conferences on advocacy work. They also highlighted the need for greater emphasis on advocacy in social work education at the undergraduate level.

### Beliefs in Advocacy

While there were no prescribed ways of doing advocacy, some social workers planned their advocacy work based on their beliefs in client empowerment and stakeholder collaboration.

### Suggested Improvements in Advocacy Work

Short-term structured trainings, adopting collaborative approaches with stakeholders, deepening network with HDB, rallying politicians and relooking into organisational culture on advocacy work were some suggestions listed by the social workers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

At the agency level, having internal trainings, supervision and a culture of sharing of best practices would help social workers to build up their capacity to advocate for their clients. At the sector level, establishing more open platforms for sharing of experiences in advocacy and developing local advocacy models would certainly help agencies and their social workers be more confident and competent in this area of work. Local studies too would serve as strong tools for advocacy on local issues such as housing.