

SINGAPORE

Domestic workers talk about abuse in teary 'court session'

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SINGAPORE: She was hit with a spoon and slapped hard for waking up "late" at 7.30am. Foreign domestic worker Mary Rose Catador Colocar was also ordered to stand and sit 500 times while holding her ears.

The abuse happened in 2002 and Ms Colocar's former employer was eventually jailed. But other women at the shelter run by non-governmental group, the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME), are awaiting justice for abuse by their employers.

On Sunday, 14 of them shared their experiences in a teary mock court session to commemorate the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, which falls on Wednesday.

HOME president Bridget Lew said she was inspired by a similar event organised for female trafficking and HIV victims by the UN Development Programme and other organisations in Bali in July. That event created a platform for women to "talk about their grief without anyone questioning".

One of the women, a 26-year-old Filipina, said she felt a sense of freedom, "not like with my employer where I cannot talk anything, I cannot voice out what I feel".

Mrs Lew said abuse cases reported to HOME in the last year have remained steady. According to its latest annual report ending March this year, HOME saw an average of 71 walk-in cases and 180 helpline calls from female migrant workers each month.

Another migrant workers advocacy group, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), has had fewer calls to its helpline this year, said its president, Mr John Gee.

But this was due to fewer outreach efforts with staff handling existing cases, as well as more direct referrals through contacts or TWC2's members.

At the end of the session, activists reiterated calls for more protection for migrant workers, especially the 190,000 domestic workers here. Mr Gee also called for migrant workers to be included under the Employment Act, and for local authorities to interview departing workers.

Other efforts to eliminate violence against women are the No To Rape Campaign and the White Ribbon Campaign.

The former is an online petition (www.notorape.com) against marital rape that has garnered more than 3,100 signatories so far. The petition closes on Nov 30 and will be submitted to the Prime Minister.

The latter is spearheaded by the Association of Women for Action and Research to get men to pledge never to commit or condone acts of violence against women. More details are on www.aware.org.sg.