

Trapped Within the Four Walls of a Living Nightmare: Respite for Victims of Family Violence

Be it a passionate flurry of punches or a spiteful delivery of poison-laced words, every abuse is one time too much.



Introduction

Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore is faced with yet another horrific set of statistics: There has been a steady upward climb in domestic abuse cases since 2021, with physical violence against young children consistently making up the largest share of reported cases.¹ The good news is that the increased awareness about domestic violence within the community has led to more cases being reported and thus, more victims have been rescued from their plight. However, the bad news is that the numbers are still rising today.

What constitutes violence?

The yardstick in evaluating whether an act constitutes violence is the severity of the victim's distress caused by the act, regardless of the intention of the perpetrator. As defined in section 58B of the Women's Charter 1961 ("Act"), family violence refers to physical, sexual, emotional or psychological abuse committed against a family member, either directed at the family member or is capable of being seen, heard or otherwise perceived by the said family member.² The abuse may take the form of a single instance or a sustained conduct.

¹Domestic Violence Trends Report December 2025, Ministry of Social and Family Development, Republic of Singapore

²AWARE Media. (n.d.). *What is Family Violence?* AWARE. <https://www.aware.org.sg/information/dealing-with-family-violence/what-is-family-violence/>

How does the law shelter the vulnerable?

Victims of family violence (henceforth “Applicant”) can apply for various protection orders against the alleged abuser (henceforth “Respondent”) from the Singapore Family Justice Courts. The breach of protection orders can have serious legal repercussions, including a fine of up to S\$10,000, an imprisonment term not exceeding 12 months (or 18 months for an aggravated offence), or both.³

Listed below are the most common protection orders applied to and granted by the court:

Personal Protection Order (PPO)

Under section 60A of the Act, the PPO is an order restraining the Respondent from committing family violence against the Applicant. It is granted when the court is satisfied that violence has occurred or is likely to occur, and that the order is necessary for the safety of the Applicant or other family members.

A PPO may include the following orders:

i. Domestic Exclusion Order (DEO)

Under section 60B(2)(a) of the Act, the DEO excludes the Respondent from the family house or from certain parts of the house.

ii. Stay Away Order (SAO)

Under section 60B(2)(b) of the Act, the SAO prohibits the Respondent from entering and remaining in the vicinity of the Applicant’s home or any other place frequented by the Applicant. Examples of such areas include the Applicant’s school or workplace.

iii. No Contact Order (NCO)

Under section 60B(2)(c) of the Act, the NCO forbids the Respondent from visiting or communicating with the Applicant or other family members.

iv. Counselling Order (CGO)

Under section 60E(2) of the Act, the CGO requires the Applicant and the Respondent to attend counselling. The programme is usually conducted over a specified period not exceeding 36 months, with a court review 6 months after the CGO is made.

³Understand the outcomes of a personal protection order application. (n.d.). SG Courts. <https://www.judiciary.gov.sg/family/understand-outcomes-personal-protection-order-application>

v. Expedited Order (EO)

Under section 61(2) of the Act, the EO is an urgent protection order restraining the Respondent from exerting violence against the Applicant pending the hearing of the application for a PPO. However, an EO will only be granted if there is sufficient evidence that the Applicant faces an imminent risk of harm from the Respondent.

Emotional or Psychological Abuse

Family violence does not always result in physical wounds, but its impact on survivors can be profound.

Section 58B(4) of the Act defines emotional or psychological abuse as conduct or behaviour that

- (a) torments, intimidates, harasses or distresses a person; or
- (b) causes or may be reasonably expected to cause mental harm to a person, including thoughts of suicide or inflicting self-harm.

This sets out the litmus test to be applied in court.

In *XWB v XWC* [2025] SGFC 135⁴, the court referred to examples of emotional or psychological abuse highlighted in the Second Reading of the Women's Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) (Amendment) Bill, in which there was a distinct pattern of the perpetrator exerting an egregious amount of control over the victim through fear, thereby causing mental or emotional harm to the victim.

Conclusion

The family unit should be a haven for all its members, yet for some, it ironically becomes the very weapon inflicting hurt behind closed doors.

As society develops a more contemporary view of domestic violence, the law has correspondingly adapted to better reflect the multifaceted realities of abuse that arise within the epitome of human relationships. The broadened definition of family violence in the recently amended Act is a pivotal step forward in building a stronger safety net of legal protections for vulnerable victims. However, simply relying on the law is not enough. Especially since emotional and psychological forms of abuse are far more insidious and easily overlooked than physical abuse, it is crucial for every member of the community to discern the SOS signals in an accurate and timely manner.

⁴[2025] SGFC 135

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