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Telling stories of the marginalised in an ethical manner

Netizen meets low-income person and shares story online. It goes viral, with some blaming the Government, which then clarifies. Vulnerable person feels bruised. There are better ways to discuss poverty.



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An episode involving a low-wage elderly cleaner that went viral last month has shed light on a problematic trend in how we discuss issues of inequality and social hardship on public platforms.

If this continues, it can lead to consequences for all parties involved, particularly vulnerable groups. The incident has also sparked discussion on how Singaporeans can discuss issues on poverty and share stories of the vulnerable in a more responsible manner.

What happened was this: Last month, a young man met an elderly cleaner, who told him that her wages are insufficient for her needs, and that she had lost her husband and only son.

He turned to Instagram and posted a story with photos of her, which gave details of how much she said she was being paid, where her workplace is, and the town where she lives.

He went on to suggest that the progressive wage model - a wage ladder that specifies higher pay for workers as they upgrade their skills - is not working, among other things.

The post was widely shared and went viral. Some concerned members of the public sought the woman out at her workplace, and even managed to trace her to her home, though the young man did not reveal her address.

However, the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) later clarified details about the woman's circumstances in a Facebook post.

It gave more information on the wages that she was actually receiving and how her salary had been affected by the Covid-19 situation. It also gave details about her housing and family situation.

It also listed the various forms of financial support that she will be receiving as a permanent resident, including monthly \$120 food vouchers for the next six months.

MSF also said the woman "indicated she was unaware of being photographed or that her comments and photo would be shared in public on social media".

The woman later told the young man she was "very stressed" by the unwanted attention received, according to another Facebook post he put up. He also said he apologised to her, and took down his original Instagram post.

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Incidents like these are not new; as far back as 2013, online posts about individuals facing hardship have attracted scrutiny. They play out in a similar trajectory. Someone meets a poor or vulnerable person, talks to the individual and posts a story online. After attracting public sympathy, the story goes viral. The authorities then rush to investigate the matter and issue a public clarification, if details of the original post were inaccurate or if it has sparked discussion.

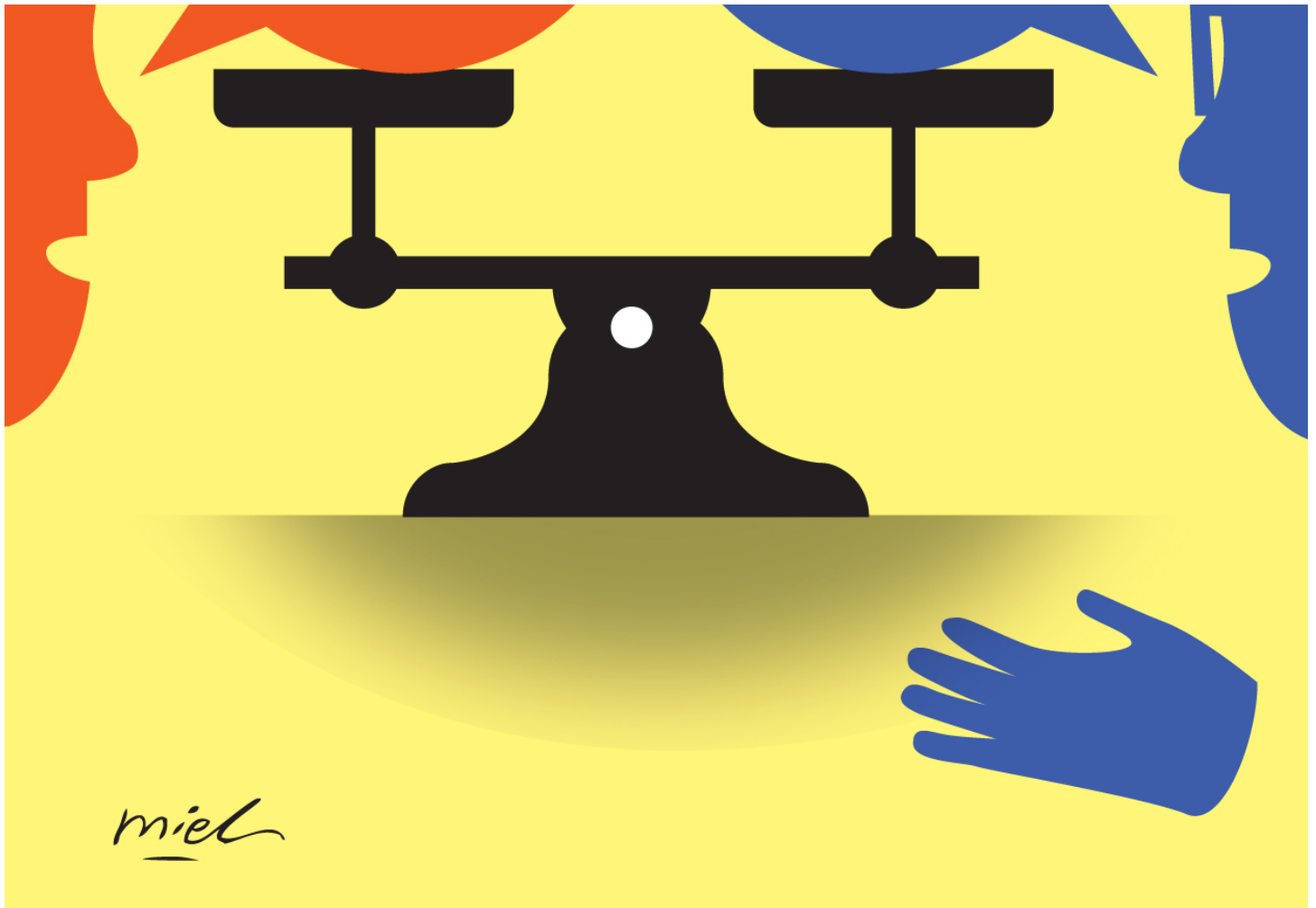
THE DANGER OF RELYING ON A SINGLE STORY

Personal anecdotes and stories help people develop understanding of and empathy for social issues. But it is problematic to rely on a single anecdote to make sweeping generalisations about Singapore's social policies.

After all, the existence of people who need help or fall through the cracks is not evidence of systemic failure on the part of the Government, though there is certainly room for policies to evolve.

In the recent case and other similar episodes in the past, vulnerable individuals whose details are shared online involuntarily get caught in the crossfire between vociferous netizens, who criticise the Government after reading the story, and public agencies, which want to clarify facts to defend themselves.





ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

Their privacy may end up being sacrificed as a result, as various parties share, debate and scrutinise details about them released online. Yet others may question their motives, pronounce judgment or make denigratory remarks.

Such episodes also affect social workers, said Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin, a former minister for social and family development. "It makes it sound as if the social workers working with the individual have been failing in their job. But he or she may actually be receiving help, and it's very demoralising for social workers working on the case."

The problem with spotlighting a vulnerable individual in this manner is that people may generalise from one anecdote to a critique of an entire system. Such discussions are not very helpful.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT POVERTY BETTER

This is not to say one should not discuss poverty in Singapore.

Poverty exists in every society and issues around poverty and inequality have been discussed and debated openly in recent years in Singapore. The Covid-19 crisis, too, has sparked meaningful conversations about how to raise wages for essential services workers. Many are also moved to help those in hardship. Such energies can be tapped to develop a compassionate, grounded response to social needs, without resorting to finger-pointing.

As a society, we can also develop a more constructive and thoughtful way of discussing poverty that does not expose vulnerable people to more harm.

SEEK CONSENT AND DO NO HARM

Social work specialists say the first rule of thumb is to get permission before writing or posting about a person.

Mr Kwan Jin Yao, a social welfare PhD candidate at the University of California, Los Angeles, said such informed consent means the person must know how his information or experience is being shared, and understands the risks and benefits of doing so.

But it is not enough to stop at that, as the vulnerable background of the individual also has to be considered, experts said.

Associate Professor Irene Ng of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) department of social work said: "Especially with lower-income individuals who depend on formal assistance and goodwill donations, consent is given under unbalanced power dynamics and pressure from a sense of obligation."

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Individuals in need who have opened up in a moment about their vulnerability may not fully understand the reach and risks of social media. "As a society, we need to draw up rules of engagement as social media becomes the norm for information

transmission and solicitation of help," said Prof Ng, adding that vulnerable people should be consulted in developing such a framework.

Social worker T. Ranganayaki, who is deputy executive director of Beyond Social Services, said telling stories of people in need can help raise awareness of social issues. But such stories must respect the vulnerable person's privacy and not reveal identifying information.

The Personal Data Protection Act, for example, prohibits the publication of a person's name, NRIC or address, among other details that can identify a person.

But even if the law is followed, those posting should adhere to a higher standard: Do no harm.

"We must also be clear on the purpose for sharing, and that it does not do more harm such as (putting) further strain on already strained relationships, causing issues at the workplace, creating unnecessary stress, and so on," Ms Ranganayaki said.

In an e-mail response to questions from The Straits Times on this issue, the MSF said that it "appreciates the efforts by members of the public in looking out for those in need", but added: "We discourage posting the personal circumstances and details of individuals on social media. Well-meaning members of public may seek out these vulnerable groups of people and their families... to help them, but inadvertently cause further distress to them by posting their photos and personal identifiable details online."

Such posts may also not reflect the full extent of help that someone is getting. Instead, those who wish to help can direct those in need to the social service offices or family service centres, said the ministry.

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Dr Ng Kok Hoe, a senior research fellow at NUS' Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said there is a need to look beyond stories about individual experiences to reflect on the systems behind them.

The focus on stories may reveal a tendency on the part of some to "individualise or privatise social issues, to place the focus on cases that can be resolved by making referrals and tying up loose ends", he noted.

But there is also a "need to step back and look at the underlying systemic problems, like low wages, insecure work and old-age poverty". He added: "Until we address those problems, we will keep seeing new cases and new stories of hardship."

Some experts interviewed also highlight that the authorities too must safeguard the dignity of the vulnerable person being spotlighted.

Dr Natalie Pang, a senior lecturer in NUS' communications and new media department, said: "As a ministry that is trusted to have all the relevant information about the case, they could explore publicly clarifying or correcting certain details, while stating why they are withholding other information, if need be.

"Ultimately, it is about ethical discretion to protect the privacy and dignity of individuals, especially those who are more vulnerable and the people around them."

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On this point, MSF said: "In cases of public interest, the law permits the disclosure of specific personal information, to preserve the public's trust in public agencies, and to ensure that people are not misled. It is also important to provide a correct representation of the situation, so that members of public do not offer financial and other forms of help without a clear understanding of an individual's situation."

Where such posts with inaccurate or incomplete information appear, the ministry will work with agencies and partners "to correct any misrepresentations of the situation while seeking to safeguard the privacy of (its) clients", it said.

Details are revealed where needed to correct any misrepresentation in posts by the public, said MSF. In the case of the elderly cleaner, MSF officers had also visited her to assess if she needed any help and support.

Unlike government officials, social workers do not have the ambit to disclose personal information of their clients publicly. The Singapore Association of Social Workers' (SASW) code of ethics states that social workers should "respect and

safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of clients by using information given and received responsibly". It also says they should not discuss or talk about their clients outside the professional context and in public spaces and areas.

Among those interviewed, some felt the MSF could have attended to the cleaner's case and corrected details without revealing so much about her specific circumstances.

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Given the difference in views on such cases, it might be worthwhile for the MSF, the National Council of Social Service and the SASW to come to a common understanding of how they can protect the confidentiality of vulnerable individuals when their stories are made public.

After all, whether it is a well-meaning citizen moved to tell a marginalised person's story, a casual reader who wants to help, a social worker who is already involved, or an official from the relevant ministry - each party is ultimately trying to do his part to reduce the suffering of those in need and help meet their needs.

But this has to be done in a way that is sensitive to the needs of the vulnerable person, and not turn him into an object of pity or contention.

As Ms Ranganayaki said: "It's all our responsibility to safeguard the dignity of the most vulnerable."



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