

FAMILY JUSTICE COURTS WORKPLAN 2018

28 February 2018

FAMILY JUSTICE COURTS: IN THE NEXT PHASE

JUSTICE DEBBIE ONG

I: UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF THE FAMILY JUSTICE SYSTEM

Presence of children

1 “Family justice is a unique field in the administration of justice.”¹ This was an observation of the Honourable the Chief Justice in his speech marking the Opening of the Family Justice Courts (“FJC”) on 1 October 2014. In our justice system in Singapore, family justice occupies a unique and “special” place because of the presence of children. The interests of children demand a less adversarial approach, where parties and lawyers must cooperate to protect their welfare. Adult parties can, on their own or by instructing lawyers, decide what outcomes they wish to pursue and how they wish to pursue them. Children, on the other hand, neither instruct lawyers nor participate as parties in divorce proceedings, and yet they are most profoundly affected by the family breakdown and litigation.

Section 46

2 A good place to begin our understanding of family law and justice is with s 46(1) of the Women’s Charter. Section 46(1) provides:

Upon the solemnization of marriage, the husband and the wife shall be mutually bound to co-operate with each other in safeguarding the interests of the union and in caring and providing for the children.

¹ Opening Keynote Speech by Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, at the Opening of the Family Justice Courts (1 October 2014) at [24].

Section 46(1) sets out society's aspiration of how marriage partners should behave. Its role is, in some way, like that of a 'mother provision', an almost 'higher order provision' within the Women's Charter.

3 However, no sanction is provided for the breach of s 46 – in other words, if a spouse does not co-operate with the other and is unreasonable in his or her actions, there is no immediate direct legal consequence. There is no specific punishment or remedy accorded for such a breach. Yet s 46 remains a legal provision of immense importance. It sets out the very core expectation in legal obligations for the husband and wife. The law expects spouses to take their marriage seriously as a permanent union which they should *safeguard together*. This means that spouses must make efforts to resolve their disagreements amicably and treat each other with respect. Where spouses are also parents, they must commit to resolving any disagreement in a harmonious way, bearing in mind their children's feelings and needs.

Divorce and post-divorce conduct

4 But while family law encourages mutual cooperation and reconciliation, it will, when spouses reach a point where these become unachievable, permit a different course of action which still tries to mirror this goal, that is, enabling a *divorce* in a manner which causes the least bitterness, trauma and humiliation to the family.

5 Even when *divorced* parties no longer have a married relationship between them, parties with children remain *parents* to their children. Because the children need their parents to continue to co-parent, care and provide for them, a divorce does not entirely end the relationship between the spouses or ex-spouses. Thus, for the sake of the children's welfare, the legal divorce regime aims to ensure conflict is minimised and children can feel safe building relationships with *both parents*. Family judges have encountered all too often, parents battling over their children and causing them to suffer conflicts of loyalty, amongst other types of harm.

Harm to children

6 What can one do when one sees a young child suffering, really struggling, from the trauma caused by her parents' conflicts? I share an example from a concluded case. The Social Welfare Report on this case reads as follows:

[Sarah (not the child's real name)] excitedly shared that one good thing about her Father was that he bought gifts for her while her Mother loved and cared for her ... the parties shared an acrimonious relationship, the effect of which impacted [Sarah] psychologically ... [she] was fearful of being scolded by the Father and the fear had a pathological effect whereby she 'trembled', looked 'terrified' and was unable to place her foot into the Mother's home out of fear of being 'seen' by the Father ... [Sarah] shared excitedly that she wanted to meet and play with the Mother but within a few seconds, fear appeared on her face as she whispered that she was 'afraid' of the Father who did not allow her to see the Mother ...

7 What can we do to protect this five-year-old child from the effects of her parents' conflicts that are relentlessly affecting her? The report noted that "[Sarah] may grow up 'stuck' in her childhood traumatizing experiences." Her case is a real one – her situation reflects that of many children that come through our courts.

Exhort or intervene?

8 Can a court "order specific performance" of reasonableness and unselfish love? How does the law and the court "enforce" reasonable conduct?

9 I quote an insightful observation and exhortation from Professor Leong Wai Kum. She writes:²

The law cajoles spouses to try to reach the ideal but refrains from trying to punish each failure. The courts may astutely use every appropriate opportunity to affirm the legal exhortation.

10 The ideal conduct – being cooperative and reasonable spouses or ex-spouses – is much needed conduct in divorce proceedings, for the lack of cooperation and reasonableness has a grave and harmful impact on the children.

² Leong Wai Kum, *Elements of Family Law in Singapore* (LexisNexis, 2nd Ed, 2013) at p 89.

11 In a journal article by Sadowski and McIntosh, research on children’s views is summarised in the style of the *words of a child to the parents* – I quote an extract of the statement:³

Sometimes, my needs might be different from yours. When this happens, I’d be really grateful if you might put aside your own needs, and think honestly about mine, and what could help. There was this guy called Bowlby, who said ***the job of parents is to be bigger, stronger, wiser and kind.*** That about sums up what I’m asking for. [emphasis added in italics and bold italics]

12 To be bigger, stronger, wiser and kinder may appear to us as something we should achieve as part of living moral lives, something similar to the aims of the ‘Singapore Kindness Movement’ and the ‘National Courtesy Campaign’. It should not surprise us that parties in the midst of divorce often treat such conduct as ‘optional’ rather than as a legal obligation – it would be rare for disputing parties to be generous to each other when they are divorcing.

13 The intervention of the court ought to be the last resort for disputing families. On the one hand, the law should not be quick to intrude at every turn into family relationships which are so intimate and private in character; thus we should *encourage rather than force* good behaviour. On the other hand, family law is ‘*interventionist*’ to some extent, *demanding* parties to cooperate for the welfare of their children – indeed, the law has this ‘pedagogical’ role too, where it teaches what is right and expected of parties. *The legislative provision of s 46(1) of the Women’s Charter has greater force than the kindness movement or courtesy campaign, and rightly so, because in the context of family justice, there is a cost to the children’s welfare.*

14 Professor Leong urges that “[t]he courts may astutely use every appropriate opportunity to affirm the legal exhortation.” FJC aspires to do just that. The judgments of the court lay down legal principles with pedagogical character, setting out the State’s and the law’s expectation of how family members ought to discharge their legal responsibilities. Family law is rich in legal principles and has much room to exhort good conduct without harsh legal sanctions.

³ Christina Sadowski and Jennifer E McIntosh, “On Laughter and Loss: Children’s Views of Shared Time, Parenting and Security Post-Separation” (2015) *Childhood* 1 at 16.

15 This is an overview which gives an idea of where our fundamental and unique challenges lay. Our work in the next phase aspires to meet some of these challenges.

Role of FJC

16 I begin with setting out the role of FJC.

17 In FJC, there are well established avenues for court-mandated mediation and counselling. However, if a matter progresses all the way to adjudication, the court is tasked to take on the role of the adjudicator, applying the law to reach a just outcome for two opposing parties.

18 Often, parties in family cases come to the court seeking a decision that vindicates their positions based on their own perceptions of justice. The decisions of the family court, which involve intimate issues affecting the parties, may seem especially unjust to a party when emotions run high. This extends even to decisions on procedural matters. For example, it is not uncommon that a party seeks indulgence from the court for, say, an adjournment of a hearing because she is unrepresented and requires more time for preparation of her case. The granting of an adjournment or many adjournments may seem like “justice” from a compassionate court to the party who seeks them, but it would seem like “injustice” to the other party who seeks an expeditious and just conclusion to a long and painful process. It is important that parties recognise the role of FJC as a court which applies the law to reach a just decision between both parties; it is not an ‘agency’ that serves the needs of only one party. Respect for the court’s authority is necessary in the family justice system.

19 Although courts traditionally define their role in civil cases more as an umpire than a proactive force to improve the lives of parties, the presence of children necessitates a broader role for FJC. The Chief Justice had in his speech marking the Opening of FJC in 2014 said:⁴

... in this area in particular, judges need to be attentive to the way forward for the affected parties. In some respects, the judicial task can be likened to that of a doctor with a focus on diagnosing the problem, having the appropriate

⁴ Opening Keynote Speech by Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, at the Opening of the Family Justice Courts (1 October 2014) at [24].

bedside manner to engender trust and convey empathy, and the wisdom to choose the right course of treatment so as to bring a measure of healing.

20 A doctor diagnoses and provides a patient with timely interventions and treatments. A doctor may also refer the patient to another doctor or other professionals for specialist treatment. Sometimes a doctor must act swiftly to remove a tumour so that a cancer does not spread further. Treatment thereafter can be difficult and painful, such as chemotherapy for many months.

21 A family judge may make orders that seem painful to the parties, like the removing of a tumour, but these orders can start the journey of restoration. For example, an over-protective, gatekeeping parent may find an order allowing the other parent overnight access to the children agonising, but such an intervention may be necessary for a better outcome for the children.

22 Thankfully, like doctors, our family judges do not work alone. We have a strong team of Court “Family Specialists” who are drawn from the social work, counselling and mental health professions and are integrated into nearly all aspects of FJC’s work: ranging from divorce, protection from family violence, to the Youth Courts. The team from the Counselling and Psychological Services (“CAPS”) also works within a larger network of community agencies to which it refers families needing longer term therapeutic or social support outside of the courts.

23 CAPS serves as a conduit between FJC and the community. One significant group of community partners is the Divorce Support Specialist Agencies (“DSSAs”) managed by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (“MSF”). CAPS oversees all referrals from FJC to the DSSAs for programmes like Supervised Exchange and Visitation, the “Children in Between” programme and DSSA counselling sessions.

24 Just as a patient must take responsibility for receiving medical treatment, such as taking the prescribed medicines, eating healthily and exercising regularly, the family litigant must also take responsibility while growing in resilience; he or she must comply with court orders and cooperate in order to achieve restoration for the whole family.

25 If someone else could keep fit and exercise on our behalf, such as run five kilometres four times a week and transfer all the benefits of such exercise to us, many

of us would like that very much. But such wonderful benefits come only with our own personal discipline and hard work. The process of healing and ensuring that the children are well protected from the negative effects of family breakdown takes individual effort, personal responsibility and sacrifice.

26 Just as a doctor gives hope to a patient with a serious illness, a family judge can give hope of a new future. I often tell parties, after they have alleged the many failures of the other party: “today is a new day”.

II. MEETING OUR UNIQUE CHALLENGES IN THE NEXT PHASE

Review and Enhance Reforms Committee

27 We have established an inter-agency committee to **Review and Enhance Reforms** in the **Family Justice System**. As a convenient short-form, I call this the “RERF Committee”. This committee, which I co-chair together with the Permanent Secretaries of the Ministry of Law and MSF, builds on previous work to further strengthen our family justice system. This Committee will look at, amongst other things, promoting alternative and multi-disciplinary approaches to conflict resolution, reducing the cost and complexity of proceedings, and strengthening access to family justice.

Upstream support

28 With the RERF Committee, we will work to facilitate opportunities for parties to appreciate the consequences of the various decisions they make, and be empowered to make decisions that are reasonable and good for their children. We aim to work with other agencies to facilitate parties’ access to various support services “upstream”, *before* they even file for divorce in court. The court is to be the forum of last resort for the resolution of family disputes.

29 We will assist families through their journeys, by increasing their understanding of how divorce will affect their lives, especially their children’s. FJC is greatly heartened by the efforts of MSF in this respect, through the pre-action upstream Mandatory Parenting Programme conducted by the DSSAs. We will continue to work with MSF and support these endeavours.

30 Building on the DSSAs' good work in providing support to parties contemplating divorce, we will also explore, at the RERF Committee, further support services being made available upstream. We want to provide the support to empower parties to take responsibility and look ahead to recast their future with hope and positivity.

Harmonious resolution and online mediation

31 Even when parties do decide that legal remedies are necessary and proceed to make applications to court, there will still be conciliatory avenues for the harmonious resolutions of the various disputes. Our court processes are such that there will always be the possibility of mediation or non-litigious resolution at all stages in the divorce process.

32 Online mediation facilities will be built up. FJC has been included as part of the agenda of the Courts of the Future Taskforce (COTF) established in 2016, which undertakes a strategic study on using technology to enhance the administration of justice across all courts in Singapore. FJC plans to apply online dispute resolution ("ODR") for child maintenance claims as a start. The project aims to encourage resolution by providing an outcome simulator to help parties understand the possible outcome of a maintenance claim, and an online forum for both parties to negotiate between themselves. Where negotiation fails, online mediation of such claims will be provided. It is envisaged that ODR will help parties to resolve their child maintenance claims earlier and with less costs, ultimately benefiting the children.

Reduced complexity and costs, enhanced timeliness

33 When mediation does not succeed in a complete resolution of all issues, all or some matters may be adjudicated in court. Recent data show that less than 7% of divorce hearings were eventually contested on either the reasons for divorce or ancillary matters.

34 When matters do proceed for adjudication, it is important to further reduce costs and complexity and increase timeliness of the resolution of family proceedings. This is a key priority in the next phase of our family justice system. We have already established the judge-led approach where the family judge pro-actively manages the cases to reduce the excesses of adversarial litigation. In order to reduce the

complexity, multiple applications and cross-applications within a case, family judges must continue to be competent in case management and empowered by the law to carry out robust case management that meets the ends of justice.

35 It has been more than three years since the current Family Justice Rules and Practice Directions came into force at the establishment of FJC on 1 October 2014. In the next phase, we will take stock and review these rules and processes. The RERF Committee will ruminate on the work required in the review and the simplification of the Family Justice Rules and processes.

36 Last year, we established the Family Protection Centre which provides for a more conducive environment and seamless process for the applicants, whilst offering them privacy and assurance. We also simplified the processes for applications for Personal Protection Orders and maintenance by leveraging on our new Integrated Family Application Management System or iFAMS. Applications can also be made from designated social agencies sited outside the courts. In this year, we plan to study how elderly and vulnerable court users may be further assisted through the court process. This will help the courts design suitable court processes, information technology systems and physical infrastructure that will meet the needs of this vulnerable segment of users. It will also complement our existing efforts to simplify specific court processes such as applications under the Mental Capacity Act, and to subsequently implement the upcoming Vulnerable Adults Bill which is anticipated to be passed in the middle of this year.

37 In the next phase, therefore, much work will be invested into the simplification of the Family Justice Rules and processes. Legislative reforms may also be required to achieve these aims. We want to ensure that every case is given fair treatment and a timely resolution.

Enhancing previous work begun

38 We will also be taking stock of a number of enhancements to the system in the past three years. FJC will look into enhancing the tools for the enforcement of child access orders. We will continue to build on the international networks formed with other jurisdictions to address cross-border disputes involving children. FJC will

implement the Parenting Coordinator (“PC”) scheme and strengthen the Child Representative (“CR”) scheme.

39 In 2017, as part of FJC’s efforts to build international cross-border mediation networks, FJC facilitated a cooperation agreement between the Singapore Mediation Centre and MiKK, a Berlin-based family mediation provider with a Europe-wide network. This agreement provides a platform for parents in cases involving issues concerning the 1980 Hague Convention or relocation, one of whom may be in Singapore and the other in Europe, to undertake mediation via online video link platforms.

40 We had, in 2014, introduced the CR scheme. In the first year in 2015, 8 CRs were assigned, with 17 in 2016 and 15 in 2017. The feedback regarding the scheme has been positive, both from judges and the CRs themselves. Judges felt that the CRs were valuable in interviewing the children, the parents and the significant caregivers. The CRs themselves felt that their role as representatives of the children was meaningful, and they gave up much of their time, including weekends, to carry out this work. There are at present 26 CRs.

41 Appointing a PC is another option by which parties may be assisted in carrying out their parenting plans. A PC will encourage and teach parties to co-parent, mediate disputes, and may ultimately make recommendations to resolve conflicts. There are at present 61 trained PCs, made up of both professionals trained in law and professionals trained in social science.

42 We are very appreciative of the work, commitment and sacrifices of the CRs and PCs.

Training of lawyers and judges

Training of lawyers

43 While processes can be simplified, “simple” processes do not necessarily equate with an “easy” journey. The divorce process is never easy. Parties who have reached the place where litigation is necessary should be supported in obtaining good legal assistance.

44 An effective family lawyer can assist parties towards reducing trauma and pain, and support sound judgment in reaching outcomes that are good for the children and the parties. A good and effective family lawyer helps the court to reach the fairest outcome. The very adversarial lawyer, on the other hand, can do more harm than good. I will quote from two letters sent by lawyers on behalf of their clients that in my view, do nothing to assist parties to minimise acrimony.

45 An extract from a letter sent to the opposing counsel reads:

It is clear to our client that your client is exhibiting an incorrigible pattern of abusive behaviour. Where it suits him, our client notes that your client takes recourse to any means available to exercise his hallmark trait of attempting to oppress our client. Such measures confirm for our client, the futility of any reconciliation with your client ... If your client continues with his misguided plans to disobey the Order of [Court], we will be proceeding to enforce the order against your client.

46 An extract from a letter sent to court reads:

Our client is clear that the Defendant will continue to aim at defeating the intention of the orders made ... and would plainly contrive to steer this case towards any outcome that would generate either delay or futility as she would be keenly aware that the longer [Tommy's (not the child's real name)] relationship [with his father] remains damaged, the more the prospects of her alienation campaign becoming entrenched and incapable of change.

47 Such letters are not only unnecessary but are unhelpful and harmful to the parties' relationship, and in turn their children.

48 We will support efforts to train and equip family lawyers with skills necessary for effective family lawyering in today's family justice system. Family lawyers who are in tune with the needs of families in conflict can work helpfully within a multi-disciplinary system that achieves therapeutic justice for families. The role of the family lawyer is critical to the success of a strong family justice system that delivers just outcomes expeditiously.

49 The *Recommendations of the Committee for Family Justice: On the Framework of the Family Justice System* published on 4 July 2014 states (at [186]):

The Committee proposes the introduction of a new Family Law Practitioner (FLP) accreditation for lawyers. FLPs are lawyers who have undergone specialist training so that they are equipped to practise family law effectively and in a manner that is consistent with and promotes the ethos of the new family justice system. Such specialist training may comprise modular courses in non-court dispute resolution methods, the judge-led approach and less adversarial techniques in family litigation, as well as non-legal aspects such as the availability of social support services.

50 The Family Law Practitioner Accreditation Committee was set up in 2015 to consider the feasibility of a framework for the accreditation of family law practitioners. This is an area which continues to be a matter of priority, and we will consult with the Singapore Academy of Law on refreshing the work of the committee, and study the best way to enhance the expertise of the family bar to meet the needs of the family justice system.

51 Meanwhile, in this year, FJC aims to work with The Law Society of Singapore (“Law Society”) and the Singapore Academy of Law to offer appropriate training in two upcoming conferences on family law and justice in May and October 2018.

Training of judges

52 We will also continue in our efforts to build up our family judges, to equip them to be well-rounded judges. Since the establishment of FJC in October 2014, FJC has organised regular training workshops for family judges covering a wide range of topics, including non-law topics to enable family judges to learn the latest that social science has to offer, such as training on child developmental theories, the impact of domestic violence on children and suicide risks. Family judges also attend skills-based workshops to learn skills for interviewing children, therapeutic communication and handling litigants with mental health issues.

53 This year, FJC will look into developing a targeted and specialised curriculum for family judges with an emphasis on specific competencies required in the area of

family justice. It is envisaged that following our practice, the content of the curriculum will cover legal and relevant social science topics and skills-based learning. Judges will be further trained on a holistic judge-led case management approach informed by social science research, to enhance their adoption of multi-disciplinary approaches for more optimal resolution of cases. We will also capitalise on the diversity of strengths of our family judges who are themselves equipped with varied experience and expertise.

Access to justice

***Low bono* scheme**

54 Many litigants in FJC are unrepresented. In the Chief Justice’s Response at the Opening of the Legal Year 2018, the Chief Justice highlighted that we will be exploring *low bono* schemes to improve access to justice and to family lawyers.⁵ These schemes are aimed at the segment of our court users who do not qualify for legal aid but are still unable to afford lawyers. FJC is exploring, together with the Law Society, the possibility of a Family Law Assistance Scheme (FLAS). The possible development of such a *low bono* model is inspired by the success of the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS). The aspiration is to increase access to legal services for those within the “sandwich class” who require but have financial difficulty obtaining legal services.

55 We will also explore whether and how the three law schools can participate in this scheme; law students with interest in family law or *pro bono* work may possibly be paired up with lawyers to bring legal services to this “sandwich class”.

Costs

56 Legal cost is a consideration for the access to justice. With court processes simplified and streamlined, the overall legal costs of divorce and other family proceedings may be contained to some extent. On the other hand, the valuable services family lawyers provide must be recognised. Costs of proceedings can also dis-incentivise protracted litigation that ultimately harms families.

⁵ See Response by Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, at the Opening of the Legal Year 2018 (8 January 2018) at [32].

57 FJC will be exploring the possibility of scaled costs for family proceedings that will meet the varied objectives and interests. Costs can facilitate access to justice through legal representation, support the principle of the free market in determining legal costs and shape the behaviours of parties. We will work closely with the Law Society to explore this issue further.

Research and law reform

58 In the next phase, we aim to further develop our family law jurisprudence. The RERF Committee will consider areas of family law where review and law reform may be desirable to meet new needs or to strengthen our law. One area for possible review is s 112 of the Women's Charter which provides for the court's power to divide matrimonial assets.

59 FJC will also be continuing to partner MSF and the universities to facilitate the conduct of empirical research and other long-term research that will be beneficial for the development of policy and family justice in Singapore and Asia. An example of a joint research project between FJC and MSF is one where the court's data on divorce will be matched with data from MSF to understand the longer term effects of divorce on parties and their children. This is a study that considers the intergenerational transmission of criminality and other social disadvantages.

60 As for ongoing work, in partnership with researchers from the Nanyang Technological University – National Institute of Education, FJC, through CAPS, has started a longitudinal study of the impact of child-inclusive and child-focused dispute resolution for divorcing couples in terms of parental acrimony, parent-children relationships and the wellbeing of the children one year after those interventions. The outcome of the research will better inform FJC of the effectiveness of the approaches and the areas for improvement.

'Heartware' – we who carry out the mission

61 FJC's efforts have seen some early results. For instance, as mentioned in the Response by the Chief Justice at the Opening of the Legal Year 2018:⁶

⁶ Response by Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, at the Opening of the Legal Year 2018 (8 January 2018) at [27].

[T]he percentage of divorce cases decided under the simplified track with no contested issues has increased from 24% of all cases filed in 2015, to 37% in 2016, and 49% in 2017. The percentage of divorces that proceed to contested ancillary matters hearings has also decreased over the years. Notably, in 2016, less than 7% of divorce hearings were contested on either the grounds of divorce or on ancillary matters. This low proportion of contested hearings is a result of, amongst other things, the greater use of mediation and counselling and the slew of other measures that have been introduced over the years, in the effort to encourage the parties to resolve their differences with less acrimony.

62 I add that in 2017, close to seven in ten cases were *fully* resolved through court mediation. A further 15% of the cases not fully resolved were *partially* resolved so that fewer issues went on to contested hearings.

63 Such encouraging results are made possible due not to just the “hardware” of support schemes and simplified processes but also the “heartware” – that is, the FJC staff and our partners in the community – with each giving the best to enable parties to move forward, and sometimes even facilitating a measure of healing.

64 The FJC staff have shown the greatest commitment towards the fulfilment of our mission. Often, parties approach the FJC staff in a highly emotional state; often, sacrifices are made by our staff such as in giving up a part of their lunch time, or delaying the closing of registry counters at the end of a work day. I know of those who stay on, long after closing hours, to assist parties in distress.

65 We must support our staff, and look into ensuring their wellness, for the work is not just demanding physically but also draining on the spirit. We recognise the need for all who work together in this field to have a supportive environment, to carry out our shared mission in a cohesive and united way. We will look into organising cohesion activities for us to encourage each other and spur on new ideas and suggestions for the family justice system and the workplace environment. We will look at how we can support our staff in various aspects, such as in operational needs and in receiving training to build capacity and enhance wellbeing.

66 For all of us who work within the family justice system and are involved in assisting families towards harmonious resolutions of their disputes and issues, we are privileged and blessed to be a vehicle that brings some order to families affected by conflicts and breakdown.

Appreciation

67 We would like to express our appreciation to Justice Valerie Thean, who was the Presiding Judge of FJC in its inception. She took on the pioneering work required of a “start-up” – with its heavy demands on time and hard work. I thank her, the team, the staff, and all who contributed their time and efforts and made sacrifices to bring family justice to families who come through our courts.

68 It is a great honour for me to take on the role of the Presiding Judge of FJC. I find this work to be extremely meaningful and fulfilling. In 2008, as a law academic then, I published a short article in the Law Gazette as a tribute to those family lawyers who gave much of themselves to help distressed families. I quote from my own article:⁷

A woman once told me, ‘Right after my husband told me that he loved another woman and was leaving me, I felt I was drowning, together with my two young children. And then X (a family lawyer) reached out and pulled me out of the water. She saved me’.

How blessed to be the hand that saves another from utter despair.

...

One must be a wonderful human being to sustain family lawyering for so many years.

69 While the work is challenging and the responsibility is very heavy, I find strength in the knowledge that there are colleagues in FJC, at the family bar and in our community agency-partners who are so passionate and committed to the work and our mission.

⁷ Debbie Ong, “Family Lawyering ‘Justice’”, *Law Gazette* (July 2008) at 30-33.

70 I look forward to working with everyone who will play a part in this mission, **in the next phase.**

71 Thank you very much.
