



(From left) Ms Nurhidayah Sazali and fellow support group members Siti Zafirah and Nurul Jannah Jumari at South Central Community Family Service Centre. Ms Nurhidayah's research will be on Mum's Collective, the support group she co-founded for low-income mothers living in HDB rental flats in Bukit Merah. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Research fellowship goes to non-professional for first time

Winner Nurhidayah Sazali co-founded a support group for low-income mums

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Armed with just an O-level certificate when she first started work, Ms Nurhidayah Sazali, 32, once felt she would not "go far" in life.

She was an auxiliary police officer, a retail assistant and a cleaner before leaving the workforce to care for her two daughters, who are now three and five years old. Her husband is a delivery rider.

So it was beyond her wildest dreams to be awarded a fellowship by think-tank Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in October.

She is the first person without a professional job to be given the Ngee Ann Kongsi Community Fellowship, said IPS' senior research fellow Justin Lee, who is in charge of the fellowship.

Ms Nurhidayah said: "I didn't think someone with just O levels could get a fellowship from a big organisation like the IPS. Besides,

I'm shy and my English is not good, unlike highly educated people."

The fellowship was started in 2021 for community leaders and change-makers to implement community-based participatory research that contributes to community development or social change.

Such research empowers community members to define the issues that matter to them and be involved in doing the research with the researchers and coming up with solutions, Dr Lee said. Two to three Ngee Ann Kongsi Community Fellowships are awarded a year, and they are sponsored by Teochew philanthropic organisation Ngee Ann Kongsi, he added.

Asked why Ms Nurhidayah was chosen, Dr Lee said: "The South Central Community Family Service Centre (FSC) proposed giving it to someone from their community to stay true to the principles of asset-based community development approach, which focuses on identifying the strengths of people and equipping them to be able to solve their problems. We really

Support group helps ease the stress faced by low-income mums

When a part-time sales assistant was hospitalised following emergency surgery after her cat bit and seriously hurt her hands, her friends in a mothers' support group took turns to take food to her children for a week.

She has six children aged between three and 20 and is also looking after a two-year-old grandchild. Her husband works as a pest control specialist.

The woman, who wanted to be known only as Mas, 39, said: "I was very touched by their help. I feel I'm not alone and the mums in the support group are always there for one another, offering help and advice. This is important as I don't really go out to make friends."

She is part of Mum's Collective, a support group for low-income mothers living in highly subsidised Housing Board rental flats in Bukit Merah.

Ms Nurhidayah Sazali, 32, and Ms Siti Zafirah, 38, collaborated with South Central Community Family Service Centre to start

the support group in July.

The group meets twice a month to discuss issues close to their hearts, such as childcare and mental health issues, and to do activities together.

Volunteers would look after their children while the mothers get some time to themselves during these sessions, said Ms Zafirah, a housewife who has two daughters aged 18 and 20 and a grandson, who is two. Her husband is a senior security officer.

Ms Nurhidayah, who has two daughters aged three and five, said: "Our main goal is to address what the mums are going through and let them know they are not alone. So next time if they see someone in need, they, too, can step up to help."

The pair said the mothers in the group face common issues such as financial struggles, parenting challenges and mental health concerns.

Ms Zafirah said: "Mums with young children can be very lonely. So in the support group, we

talk and we laugh together."

In coming together, the women also learn from one another, such as ways to handle the problems they are going through, Ms Nurhidayah said.

Beyond Social Services also runs four support groups, comprising mostly mothers, for HDB rental flat residents living in the areas it serves, such as Bukit Ho Swee and Ang Mo Kio.

Ms Lim Shaw Hui, who facilitates these groups called Family Circles, said their aim is to bring those who lost their jobs or saw their pay cut during the Covid-19 pandemic together to support one another and rebuild their lives. The groups' members motivate one another and share resources, such as information about help schemes or job opportunities.

She said: "The greatest benefit they have found is friendship. And when they share their struggles and their resources, they also learn from and support one another."

RENEWED VIGOUR

All this while, I looked only at my weaknesses, but I have now learnt to also look at my strengths. I can empathise with and relate to others. When I can help someone, I will go all out to help in whatever way I can.



MS NURHIDAYAH SAZALI, on how getting the fellowship gave her confidence a big boost.

liked the idea and supported them."

Ms Nurhidayah and another mother partnered the South Central Community FSC, a social service agency which works with low-income and vulnerable families, to start a support group for low-income mothers living in highly subsidised Housing Board rental flats in Bukit Merah.

For her year-long fellowship, which comes with a \$1,500 monthly stipend, she is doing research on the support group called Mum's Collective.

The idea for a support group came when her family faced multiple problems during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Her husband's income as a delivery rider fell by 20 to 30 per cent to about \$1,500 a month during the circuit breaker in 2020, and they had no computers for their children when schools switched to home-based learning, until the South Central Community FSC gave her family two laptops.

At the time, three nephews and her mother-in-law were living with her family of four in a two-room rental flat.

She started working part-time as a temperature screener at the South Central Community FSC to supplement her husband's income. At the FSC, she met other women with similar problems as hers, and she said sharing her struggles with her new friends helped to lighten her burdens.

She said: "We want to let the mums feel they are not alone. We want to understand their needs better and assist them better."

The mums meet twice a month to discuss and share topics close to their hearts, such as mental health and childcare issues, and to do activities together such as baking.

After she was promoted to a cleaning supervisor, she also took up a diploma in leadership management at a private school. She is keen to upgrade her skills and knowledge, and said being awarded the fellowship gave her confidence a big boost.

She said: "All this while, I looked only at my weaknesses, but I have now learnt to also look at my strengths. I can empathise with and relate to others. When I can help someone, I will go all out to help in whatever way I can."

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