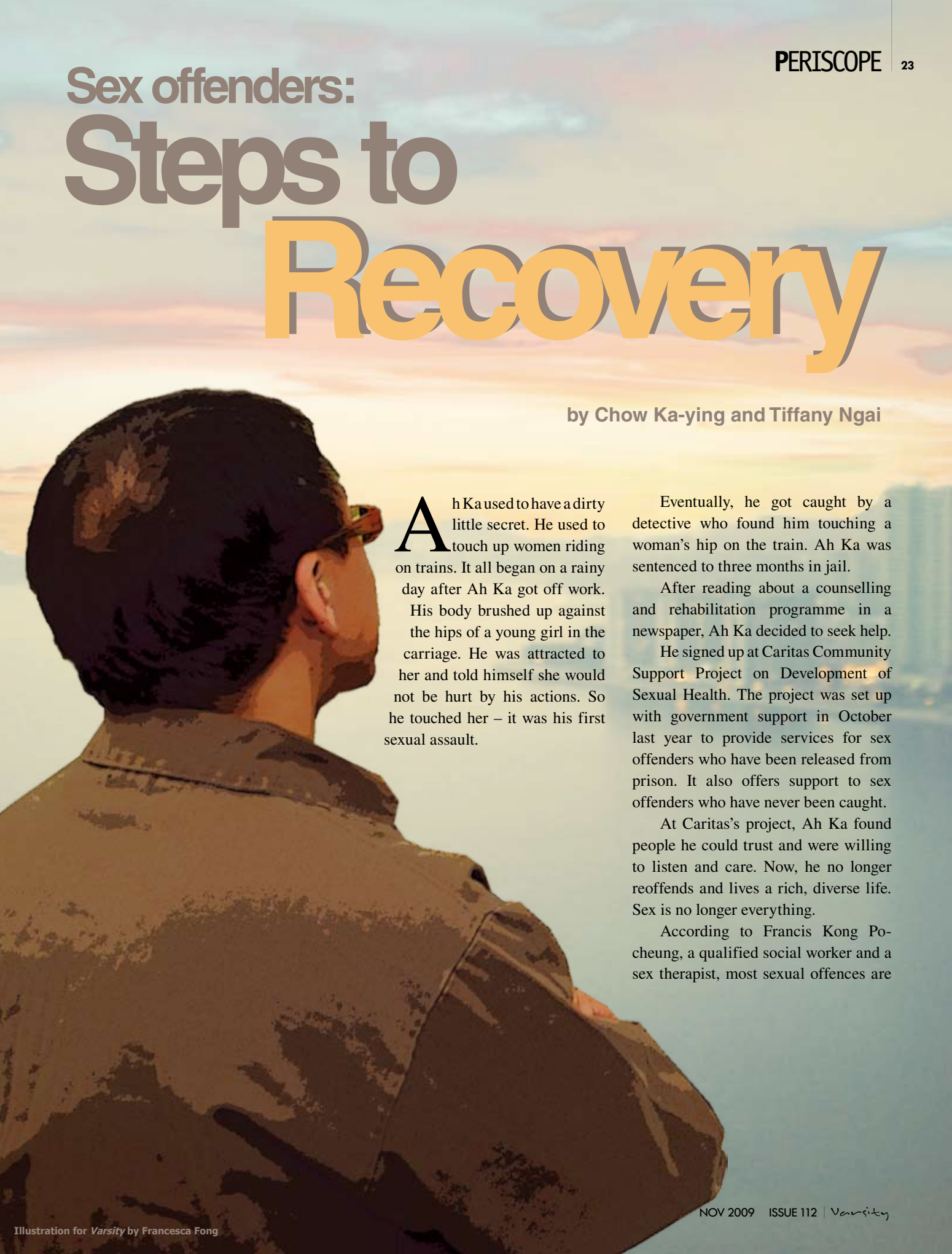


# Sex offenders: Steps to Recovery

by Chow Ka-ying and Tiffany Ngai



Ah Ka used to have a dirty little secret. He used to touch up women riding on trains. It all began on a rainy day after Ah Ka got off work. His body brushed up against the hips of a young girl in the carriage. He was attracted to her and told himself she would not be hurt by his actions. So he touched her – it was his first sexual assault.

Eventually, he got caught by a detective who found him touching a woman's hip on the train. Ah Ka was sentenced to three months in jail.

After reading about a counselling and rehabilitation programme in a newspaper, Ah Ka decided to seek help.

He signed up at Caritas Community Support Project on Development of Sexual Health. The project was set up with government support in October last year to provide services for sex offenders who have been released from prison. It also offers support to sex offenders who have never been caught.

At Caritas's project, Ah Ka found people he could trust and were willing to listen and care. Now, he no longer reoffends and lives a rich, diverse life. Sex is no longer everything.

According to Francis Kong Po-cheung, a qualified social worker and a sex therapist, most sexual offences are



FRANCESCA FONG

Social worker, Francis Kong Po-cheung shows a picture drawn by his client from a focus group. Through sketching trees, his clients can understand different parts of their lives.

never reported, let alone prosecuted. Mr Kong is also the project supervisor of Caritas's project.

Mr Kong said the satisfaction offenders get from committing sexual offences lasts for just a moment. Afterwards, they feel dirty and despicable.

"They lose their sense of self-worth. Therefore, it's important for sex offenders to seek acceptance from others," said Mr Kong. "It doesn't work to just blame them. We should treat them as people, not as criminals. Just because someone does something bad doesn't mean they are completely bad."

Mr Kong does not believe he can solve all his clients' problems, but he believes the project can help them to explore their characters and values, to reconnect with their hopes and passions in life.

By doing so, Mr Kong said his clients can find the courage to be responsible

**"They lose their sense of self-worth. Therefore, it's important for sex offenders to seek acceptance from others."**

for their behaviour and to gain control over committing sexual offences.

Ah Sum, another client of Mr Kong, used to photograph women from beneath their skirts. It was not an easy decision for Ah Sum to seek help—he was afraid of how others would react.

"I was worried because I didn't know if I would be accused and judged. Every time I thought about how my family, my work and my life could be affected by my actions, I felt pressure and anxiety," he said.

When Ah Sum first started his counselling, he was still tempted to reoffend. But whenever he felt the urge, he chose to think about the most important people in his life and the consequences of being discovered. "I couldn't disappoint those who had given me a second chance," he said.

With the help of the project and support from his wife and family, Ah Sum managed to overcome his habit.

Apart from Caritas, the government also provides rehabilitation therapies for sex offenders through the Social Welfare Department.

Yuen Shing-chi, a Senior Clinical Psychologist said the department's psychologists usually apply cognitive behaviour therapy to clients. This involves changing the way clients think about their behaviour.

Mr Yuen said some offenders may try to mitigate the seriousness of their offences and convince themselves that their actions do not cause any major harm to the victims.

"To prevent relapse, we give advice on how to restructure their

living pattern with a view to reducing their risk of reoffending. Possible ways for them to handle their stress or negative moods will be discussed too," he said.

As for those offenders who have been caught and convicted, the Correctional Services Department (CSD) has established the Sex Offender Evaluation and Treatment Unit. The unit aims to help sex offenders lead a law abiding and constructive life.

Offenders are first assessed for their risk of reoffending and treatment needs. They are then enrolled in either the Moderate Intensity Programme or the High Intensity Programme.

Both these programmes include mood management, rectification of distorted sexual attitude, handling deviant sexual interests and victim empathy training.

Most treatments use a behavioural modification approach, but in some cases, the CSD will use medication to curb inmates' sexual urges.

"We would only use drugs to lower the offenders' hormone levels when all other therapies seem to be ineffective. This ultimately reduces the sex drive of an individual," said Stanislaus Lai Ding-kee, Chairman of Hong Kong Sex Culture Society and a Criminology lecturer at the City University of Hong Kong.



COURTESY OF CSD

Risk of reoffending and treatment needs are thoroughly assessed in the Sex Orientation Programme in the Sex Offender Evaluation and Treatment Unit (ETU).

An example of when medical treatment might be appropriate was in the case of XYY men, also called "Super Males". Mr Lai explained XYY men have strong sex impulses because they have an extra Y chromosome.

However, it is hard to generalise about the main reason behind sex offences. Every sex criminal has a different personality, outlook and experience of growing up, which may influence their sex offending habit.

Mr Lai outlined a case where the client's mother worked as a hostess. He was angry with his mother and hated women as a result, raping them to vent his rage. According to Mr Lai, this case was about sexual violence rather than sexual satisfaction.

Violent sex offenders derive excitement and pleasant sensations through violence. "They feel excited when seeing the victims shout and scream for help," said Mr Lai.

Sexual excitement can also be aroused by smell, for example, some sex criminals steal underwear. It is not the process of stealing that excites them, but rather, the body warmth or smell left on the underwear that leads to erotic fantasies.

Instead of trying to eliminate their sexual excitement towards the acts, Mr Lai tries to help them find more legitimate ways to achieve their goals.



COURTESY OF CSD

Sex offenders assessed to be of moderate risk will be assigned to a group treatment in the Moderate Intensity Programme.

**"We don't have as much supervision of released offenders due to the shortage of human resources. That's why they (Hong Kong sex criminals) are more likely to reoffend."**

"You could just give them used female underwear," he said. "Once they have sexual excitement from smelling underwear, they should satisfy it in a legal way."

"The main point is to determine whether they satisfy their sexual arousal through legal means or not," said Mr Lai, "If they have permission (from their partner), or the action is under the social consensus, then it is legal."

In another case, a man pitched a tent on a hillside. He lured girls there and raped them. He even videotaped the process. "It is stupid, but he is addicted like a drug abuser."

Mr Lai described such actions as compulsive reactive behaviour – perpetrators have uncontrollable sexual impulses, and their cognitive control ability is low.

This is an extreme example of sexual impulses that have gone out of control. But Mr Lai said most sexual impulses are normal; the important thing is how they are handled.

To help sex offenders break the cycle of their offending behaviour, Mr

Lai said some countries, like the United States, put offenders under intensive surveillance for two years. During the period, they are in constant contact with a range of professionals such as psychologists and social workers.

Robert J. McGrath is the Clinical Director of Vermont Treatment Program for Sexual Abusers in the United States. The programme provides assessment, treatment and supervision in the community.

Mr McGrath said the experience in the United States had shown that, "a key to effective community management is treatment providers, probation officers, victim advocates and police work(ing) together to closely supervise and help the offender live an offence-free life."

Mr Lai at the City University said Hong Kong follows a similar model for treating and supervising sex offenders, but there is one big difference.

"We don't have as much supervision of released offenders due to the shortage of human resources. That's why they (Hong Kong sex criminals) are more likely to reoffend." ▽