Premalatha Karupiah
Jacqueline Liza Fernandez *Editors*

# A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences

## Gender-Ethnic Intersectionality and Cultural Socialisation

Springer

# A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences

Premalatha Karupiah · Jacqueline Liza Fernandez
Editors

# A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences

## Gender-Ethnic Intersectionality and Cultural Socialisation

Springer

*Editors*
Premalatha Karupiah
School of Social Sciences
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia

Jacqueline Liza Fernandez
School of Social Sciences
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia

ISBN 978-981-19-5875-5 ISBN 978-981-19-5876-2 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2



This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

*To my mother, KR. Janaki for loving me, understanding my choices even when they were worlds apart and allowing me to become who I am…*

*என் அம்மா கரு. ஜானகி அவர்களுக்கு,*
*உங்கள் பாசமும் தைரியமும் என்னை*
*சிறகடிக்க வைத்தது…*

*To my dad and mum, Clarence and Amy, the pillars of my life, who planted the seed of faith in me, showed me the meaning of true love and taught me the virtues of life...you will always be remembered with love.*

# Standing on the Shoulders of Our Sisters

Our journey thus far has not been easy,
For most part of history, the world didn't care about our story,
We didn't get here because the world wanted us to,
For most part of herstory, the world didn't want us to.
But our sisters didn't take no for an answer,
They tried, they questioned, they challenged,
Some never made it,
Many were wounded,
Others died for this cause,
But they continued trying,
So here we are today, standing on the shoulders of our sisters,
Taking steps to move forward to a time when women are treated as equals.

Premalatha Karupiah
School of Social Sciences
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia

# Contents

# Editors and Contributors

## About the Editors

**Premalatha Karupiah** is an associate professor of sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia. She teaches research methodology and statistics. Her research interests are in the areas of beauty culture, femininity, Tamil movies, educational and occupational choices, and issues related to the Indian diaspora. Her articles have been published in leading journals.

**Jacqueline Liza Fernandez** obtained her Ph.D. in Economics from University of Malaya and her bachelor's and master's degrees in Social Sciences from Universiti Sains Malaysia. She is a retired senior lecturer from the School of Social Sciences (USM). Jacqueline has done research on several gender issues relating to the gap between men and women in the labour market. She was involved with a team of researchers from KANITA (USM) in conducting research for Penang's Economic Planning Unit that looked at the role of women in decision-making for the state of Penang. She was also commissioned by Penang Women's Development Corporation to carry out a study on Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) for the two local municipal councils in Penang and subsequently did a project on Gender Responsive and Participatory Budgeting (GRPB) for the Penang State Government.

## Contributors

**Devasahayam Theresa W.** Associate Faculty at the Singapore University for Social Science (SUSS), Singapore, Singapore

**Fernandez Jacqueline Liza** School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Gill Sarjit S.** Faculty of Human Ecology, Department of Social and Development Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Seri Kembangan, Malaysia

**Gopal Syamala Nair** School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Hashim Intan Hashimah Mohd** School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Karupiah Premalatha** School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Kaur Charanjit** Faculty of Creative Industries (FCI), Department of General Studies, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Selangor, Malaysia

**Kaur Kiran** Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

**Mehar Singh Manjet Kaur** School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Mogan Surita** Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

**Musa Mahani** School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Ratthinan Senutha Poopale** School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Saigaran Nithiya Guna** Department of Indian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**Sangaralingam Jayaeswari** Sentral College Penang, Penang, Malaysia

**Sathasivam Logesshri** School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Selamat Nor Hafizah** School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Tayeb Azmil** School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

**Thiagarajan Premalatha** Faculty of Creative Arts, Dance Department, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

**Wilson Sharon** Faculty of Creative Industries, Department of Mass Communication, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

# Introduction


**Jacqueline Liza Fernandez and Premalatha Karupiah**

**Abstract** This chapter introduces the book and lays the foundation for understanding the issue of inequality that is attributed to gender and ethnicity. The discussion in this chapter sheds light on the intersectional disadvantages that arise from being a minority in terms of gender as well as ethnicity. The arguments presented here are supported by examples as well as data on gender and ethnic inequality around the world, including Malaysia. This chapter gives some background information about Malaysia's demography which shows that Indians are a relatively small diasporic community in this country, and it proceeds to outline the compounded challenges that Malaysian Indian women encounter being a minority group in terms of ethnicity and gender. The final part of this chapter is an overview of the various chapters in this book, each focusing on different lived experiences of Malaysian Indian women.

**Keywords** Malaysian Indian women · Gender inequality · Ethnic inequality

## Gender and Ethnic Inequality: An Overview

Before undertaking to unravel the various gender issues of Malaysian Indian women in this book, it is necessary to provide an understanding of the term 'gender'. The terms 'sex' and 'gender' are often misconstrued to mean the same thing and hence the two terms tend to be used interchangeably. However, researchers make a distinction between the two terms. The term *sex* generally classifies individuals as either male or female simply based on their reproductive system, biological, and physical attributes. On the other hand, the term *gender* has additional connotations. In contrast to the term *sex* which is primarily concerned with physical and physiological traits, the term *gender* broaches the question of what it means to be a man or woman in society and how society shapes our understanding of the binary biological categories. Unlike the term *sex* which has a standard or rigid meaning that does not vary between different societies, the term *gender* is more fluid given that it refers to the various socially

J. L. Fernandez (✉) · P. Karupiah
School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia
e-mail: lfjacq@usm.my; jacliza80@gmail.com



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_1

constructed positions, roles, behaviours and identities that differentiate girls/women from boys/men in a particular society. In other words, the concept of *gender* is concerned with norms, attitudes, behaviours and activities that society regards as more acceptable for boys/men and girls/women, respectively, and also individuals' perceptions about their own identity. The use of the term *gender* as a social concept among feminists and social scientists has provided an intellectual space for inquiry and discourse about the issue of male domination, female subordination and gender discrimination. It is argued that gender is hierarchical and gives rise to inequalities that intersect with other socio-economic inequalities such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability and location.

There are many forms of inequality that are evident in society. One common type of inequality is gender inequality. Gender inequality is apparent when masculinity and femininity shape the treatment of men and women in terms of their assigned work, roles and responsibilities as well as their allocation of resources and social rewards. Prejudices and discrimination that is based on sex (i.e., sexism) which results in the lower status or disadvantaged position of women is a subject of concern among activists, governments, and international organisations, including the United Nations. Issues such as poverty and lack of employment opportunities tend to affect women disproportionately. In addition, unacknowledged social and institutionalised gender barriers often hinder women from making maximum use of their capabilities and this ultimately limits the development of a nation.

Gender inequality is a complex, multifaceted issue. The World Economic Forum computes the Gender Gap Index to measure the magnitude of gender-based disparities in four thematic areas, i.e., Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. It measures the progress of countries towards gender parity on a scale ranging from 0 (disparity) to 1 (parity) across the abovementioned dimensions.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report for 2021, the average distance completed to parity stands at 68% globally, i.e., a 32% average gender gap has yet to be closed. A scrutiny of the four sub-indexes indicates that the greatest gender disparity is in the area of Political Empowerment which shows a wide gap of 78% (i.e., only 22% of the gender gap has been closed in terms of political empowerment). This is followed by the Economic Participation and Opportunity gap which is 42% (i.e., 58% of the male–female economic gap has been closed so far). The gender gaps that have yet to be closed in the other two areas are significantly smaller, i.e., about 5% in the case of Educational Attainment and 4% in terms of Health and Survival (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Evidently, women have progressed in the area of education as well as health but still lag far behind men in terms of political and economic leadership. The participation of women in the arena of politics is noticeably lacking. Among the 156 countries that are included in the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, merely 22.6% of the ministers and 26.1% of members of parliament are women while 81 of the countries covered in the report never had a female head of state.

The 2021 Global Gender Gap Report also points out that in the economic sphere, on average 41% of professionals in senior and managerial positions in the private

and public sectors are women; the female representation in senior and managerial positions is dismally low at below 7.5% in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Pakistan while only 22 countries have succeeded in closing at least 80% of the gender gap in managerial roles. A look at other aspects of economic disparities shows that gender gaps still prevail with respect to control of financial assets and time spent on unpaid tasks. In 74% of the countries included in the report, not all women have the same rights as men to hold a bank account and in 81% of the countries, not all women enjoy the same inheritance rights as men. Generally, the time spent on housework and unpaid tasks is unequally distributed between men and women and this is more evident during the current Covid-19 pandemic. The Global Gender Gap Report reveals that although both parents have increased the time spent on childcare during the pandemic due to the closure of schools and nurseries, on average mothers continue to allocate more time for caregiving, leading to shorter working hours, which has led to adverse effects on their entry into leadership positions and a higher turnover rate among women in the labour force. For instance, in the United States women who have to care for young children have reduced their hours of work about four to five times more than men, and therefore they are more likely to leave the labour force (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Malaysia is ranked number 112 among 156 countries in the 2021 report of the global Gender Gap Index. Malaysia's overall gender gap score is 0.676. This indicates that Malaysia still has to close 32% of the gender gap in the country. The score for the sub-indexes in Malaysia in 2021 is 0.102 for political empowerment, 0.638 for economic participation and opportunity, 0.972 for health and survival, and 0.994 for educational attainment. Malaysia is very close to achieving gender parity in terms of educational attainment as well as health and survival. On the other hand, more needs to be done to close the gender gap in the areas of economic and political empowerment.

Another layer of inequality in many societies is racial/ethnic inequality. Racial or ethnic inequality arises from social distinctions between racial and ethnic groups, and it is often based on physical characteristics such as skin colour and/or cultural differences. Race and ethnicity are socially constructed variables that are capable of restricting one's social status, given that racial inequality often diminishes opportunities for members of marginalised or minority groups. Members of minority groups are often the victims of overt and/or indirect discrimination that may arise from institutional and social barriers which curb their full and equal participation in society and hence lower their socio-economic status.

Given the different types of inequality that may be experienced by women, researchers emphasise that women's social position in terms of their intersecting identities is very important in any study on gender because power relations are embedded in their social identities (Collins, 2000). In other words, it would be insufficient to discuss gender issues without taking into account the multiple identities of individuals. This is because individuals with multiple subordinate group identities (e.g., women from ethnic minority groups, women with disabilities, etc.) are more likely to experience discrimination and prejudice than individuals with single

subordinate group identities. This calls for the use of an intersectional approach in studying women's experiences.

The concept of 'intersectionality' refers to "intersectional oppression [that] arises out of the combination of various oppressions which, together, produce something unique and distinct from any one form of discrimination standing alone…." (Eaton, 1993: 229). The intersectionality approach recognises that the various forms of discrimination may intersect with each other and create overlapping and reinforcing barriers that impact those with multiple subordinate identities. For instance, ethnic minority women encounter discrimination in a completely different way than minority men or other women. The gender-ethnic intersectionality could aggravate the problems faced by women belonging to a minority ethnic group; they have to contend with the double jeopardy of gender and racial/ethnic biases in society. An intersectional approach highlights this fact.

Without taking ethnicity into account, statistics show that women lag behind men, i.e., women are not on par with men in many of the indicators that measure progress towards gender equality. When ethnicity is factored in, the inequality women encounter often becomes more glaring in the case of women belonging to minority groups (World Bank, 2013). The dual problem of gender and ethnic inequality and its consequences have not been highlighted sufficiently until recently. Previous research has often focused on either gender or ethnic disparities in society. An understanding of the challenges faced by minority women using an intersectionality approach is important in formulating policies and programmes, and providing services that benefit them. Policies to reduce inequalities in society are rendered ineffective in meeting the needs of minority women if policy-makers neglect to address pertinent gender-ethnicity intersectionality issues. This is because individuals with multiple subordinate identities tend to be marginal members within a marginalised group and this places them in a position of social invisibility and they have a higher likelihood of being overlooked in the process of policy-making (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). In other words, their needs are often not sufficiently addressed by policies targeted at persons with a single subordinate-group identity.

The gender-ethnic intersectionality intensifies the inequalities faced by women in minority ethnic groups, regardless of whether a country is a developed or emerging economy. The following are some statistics that highlight this fact. For instance, in the case of a developed nation like the United Kingdom, Breach and Li (2017) show that the gender wage gap in Britain is shaped by racial inequality. Women of most minority ethnic groups earn lower than White British men and the largest gap of 19.6% is noted for Black African women. In addition, women in ethnic minority groups also have lower earnings compared to men of the same ethnicity. The intra-ethnic full-time gender pay gap is widest in the Indian community (16.1%); the equivalent gender pay gap is less extensive (5.5%) between Pakistani and Bangladeshi men and women. Differences in gender gaps along ethnic lines are also evident in the United States labour market, i.e., females of the minority ethnic groups earn less than men in the same group, and also earn less than White men. The data for two important minority groups in the United States bear evidence of this. In the case of Hispanics, the female median weekly earnings in 2018 were $617 per week for full-time workers, i.e.,

only 61.6% of White males' median weekly earnings and 85.7% of median weekly earnings of Hispanic men. For the Blacks, the median weekly earnings of the women were $654, only 65.3% of White men's earnings and 89.0% of Black men's median weekly earnings (Hegewischand & Hartmann, 2018).

## Demographic Profile of Malaysia

Malaysia is noted for its rich mix of ethnic groups where more than half the Malaysian population is classified as Bumiputera, which literally means sons of the soil. The term Bumiputera does not refer to a single ethnic group, but it encompasses ethnic groups such as the Malays (the largest ethnic group), Orang Asli, and natives from Sabah and Sarawak (Mason & Omar, 2003). The Malays (all of whom are Muslims) play a dominant role in the Malaysian political arena. The next largest ethnic group is the Chinese. The first Chinese to come to the Malay Peninsula were the traders who frequented the port of Melaka during the Melaka Sultanate. The *Peranakan* (Straits Chinese) group emerged as a result of inter-marriages between the Malays and some of the early Chinese traders (Abdullah, 2013). This group adopted Malay culture but maintained their religion (i.e., Buddhism and Taoism) (Lee, 2008). Later, a large number of Chinese labourers migrated to the Malay Peninsula during the British colonial period to work in the tin mines, mainly in the second half of the nineteenth century (Lian, 1995).

The Indian community is the smallest group among the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. Like the Chinese, the forefathers of Malaysian Indians migrated from their native land (India) before Malaya gained independence from the British. There have been many waves of migration of Indians to Malaya. Among the earliest migrants were the Tamil merchants who came to the thriving port of Melaka in the fourteenth century. Some of them married the locals and settled in Melaka. Their descendants are known as the Melaka Chettis (Abdul Aziz, 2017). They adopted Malay cultural practices e.g., spoke the local lingua franca (Malay) and dressed as Malays and practiced Hinduism. However, the largest wave of migration happened during the British colonial period. The early Indian immigrants to Malaya were steeped in Indian culture and religion which is evident in the temples and gurdwaras that are interspersed in this country. In contemporary society, the Tamils make up the majority of the people of Indian origin in Malaysia; other smaller sub-groups in the Malaysian Indian community include the Malayalees, Telegus and Punjabis (Nagaraj, et al., 2015).

Aside from the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia, there exist other ethnic groups in Malaysia. This includes the Eurasians (a mix of European and local inhabitants of South East Asia) as well as the indigenous groups in Malaysia such as the Kadazan-Dusun, Iban, and Orang Asli (Nagaraj et al., 2015).

Malaysia's population in 2020 was 32.7 million, of which 16.8 million (51.5%) are male and 15.9 million (48.5%) are female (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). The current ethnic composition among Malaysian citizens in the country is

as follows: 69.3% Bumiputera, 22.8% Chinese, 6.9% Indians and 1.0% are of other ethnicities. Women constitute nearly half the total number of persons in each ethnic group, i.e., 49.6% among the Bumiputera, 48.8% for the Chinese, 50.4% in the Indian community and 48.8% in other minority ethnic groups.

## Malaysian Indians: Gender and Ethnic Gaps

During the British colonial era, Britain recruited workers from India to work in rubber plantations. The majority of the migrants were Tamil indentured workers but there was a smaller group of more highly educated migrants who came to work in the civil service or in supervisory roles in the plantations. Most indentured labourers who came to Malaya suffered various kinds of class and caste oppression in India and expected that migration would help them improve their living conditions. However, they continued to suffer from impoverishment and oppression in the plantations (Gopal & Karupiah, 2013; Sandhu, 1993).

After Malaya gained independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the growth of the industrial sector led to the rural–urban migration of Indians, but many ended up working in jobs with low wages and settled in squatter areas, particularly in the Klang Valley (Dass et al., 2014). The government acknowledged this problem in its Second Outline Perspective Plan (OPP2), 1991- 2000 in the following excerpt:

> The socio-economic position of the Indians (as well as those of certain groups within the Bumiputera community such as the Orang Asli and indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak) has lagged behind and the progress achieved by these communities has not been in tandem with the achievements of the other communities. [T]hey have not been given adequate attention in the government's development efforts despite the improvement in levels of income and standards of living for the country as a whole (Unit, E.P., 1991, as cited in Loh, 2003).

According to *Yayasan Pemulihan Sosial* (YPS), which is the social welfare arm of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) party, 40% of the Indians in the country are at the bottom rung of the income ladder. It was also reported that the bottom 40% of Indians had "regressed in the last 10 years" and were not on par with the bottom 40% of other ethnic groups in urban areas in the country (Malay Mail, 2015).

A pertinent issue regarding the change in the status of Indians over the years is the question of intergenerational mobility, i.e., the progress made by Indians (vis-à-vis other ethnic groups) in terms of the relationship between the socio-economic status of parents and that of their adult children. Socio-economic intergenerational mobility encompasses mobility with respect to education, occupation and income. The following discussion on this issue is based on the findings of a large-scale study by Khalid (2018) which compared the status of 4,999 adults born between 1945 and 1960 to the status of their eldest child born between 1975 and 1990. Individuals were regarded as having upward income mobility if they were in a higher income quantile than their parents; the same approach was used for occupational and educational

mobility. The study also used a logistic regression model to examine the influence of various independent variables (including ethnicity) on mobility.

With regard to intergenerational educational mobility, Khalid's (2018) study showed that the rate of upward educational mobility is less among Indians compared to other ethnic groups, i.e., 37% of Bumiputera children and 39% of Chinese children were able to attain tertiary education although their parents had low education (primary education or less); the comparable figure was only 10% in the case of Indian children. The logistic regression showed that ethnicity had a significant effect on upward educational mobility i.e., all things equal, an Indian child born to parents in the bottom 40% income group is 0.4 times less likely to complete tertiary education compared to Bumiputera children; it is argued this is possibly due to the lack of financial assistance that Indians receive from the government, given the affirmative policy that is mainly aimed at the Bumiputera group.

Khalid (2018) also found ethnic differences in intergenerational occupational mobility among children with low-skill parents. Only 19% of Indian children with low-skilled parents ended up with high-skilled jobs; the corresponding figure was higher for the other ethnic groups, i.e., 25% for the Bumiputera and 39% for the Chinese groups. The limited upward educational mobility among Indian children born to parents with low education translates into lower occupational mobility for Indian children with low-skilled parents.

Finally, Khalid (2018) pointed out that the progress of Indians in terms of income mobility was also not on par with that of the other ethnic groups. Among children born to parents in the bottom quintile of the income distribution, the upward mobility of Chinese children (89%) exceeded that of Bumiputera (73%) and Indian children (62%). This means that nine in ten Chinese children born to the poorest parents did not remain poor as adults, but in the case of Indians only six in ten children displayed upward income mobility. It was also found that the proportion of children in Q1 (lowest income quintile) who are categorised as vulnerable (i.e., children who are in the same income quintile as the parent but earning a lower income than the parent) is highest among Indians (22%). The corresponding figure is 13% for the Bumiputera and 3% for the Chinese.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that there are socio-economic disparities between Indians and non-Indians in Malaysia. This then raises the question regarding the position of women in the Malaysian Indian community. There is a paucity of data in Malaysia regarding the status of minority groups and even less information on minority women, which includes Indian women. Hence, the following discussion on the status of Indian women is based on the limited published data that is available.

In 2017, the overall unemployment rate was higher for females (3.8%) than males (3.6%). Among women, the highest unemployment rate was recorded for Indians (4.9%); the comparable rates for the Bumiputera, Chinese and other women were 4.2, 2.3 and 4.7%, respectively. The unemployment rate for Indian women also exceeded the unemployment rate for Indian men (4.5%) (Ministry of Finance, Malaysia, 2018). Based on these figures, it can be deduced that Indian women find it more difficult to get a job compared to Indian men as well as non-Indian women.

The statistics by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development show that in all ethnic groups, the mean monthly household income is higher for male-headed households than female-headed households. Among female-headed households, families headed by Indian women have lower mean monthly income than households headed by Bumiputera and Chinese women. The mean monthly household income among urban female-headed households is RM6006 for Chinese, RM5275 for Bumiputera and RM5073 for Indians. The corresponding figure for the rural sector is RM3130 for Bumiputera, RM2991 for Chinese and RM2906 for Indians (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia, 2016).

Besides gender gaps in education, occupation and income levels, there are also gender differences in health issues in Malaysia. Women constitute the majority of healthcare workers globally, and in Malaysia 97% of over 100,000 registered nurses are women, yet women's health care issues are often not given due attention. It is reported that there is a lack of awareness about diseases that affect women (for instance breast cancer, HPV infections and menstrual pains) which is partly due to gender occupational segregation and women's under-representation in leadership positions in the healthcare sector (New Straits Times, 2021). The statistics in the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019 (Ministry of Health, Malaysia, 2020) indicate there is a need to raise awareness about women's health issues. The following are some alarming facts about women's health issues that were documented in the survey report: three in four Malaysian women aged 40 and above have never had a mammogram; one in two women aged 18 and above did not practice Breast Self-Examination; 60% of women aged 20 and above did not undergo a pap smear test in the past three years.

The National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019 report also shows that women have a poorer rating than men in terms of the following health indicators: the prevalence of obesity among individuals 18 years and above in Malaysia was higher for women (i.e., 26.6% for women vs. 17% for men) and the prevalence of moderate and severe anaemia for individuals aged 15 years and above was far greater for women than men (13.8% for women vs. 2.1% for men). There were also some health issues that were more widespread among Indians in comparison to other ethnic groups. The problem of obesity was greater among Indians than non-Indians, i.e., the prevalence of obesity of individuals aged 18 years and above was 35.9% for Indians as compared to 25.3% for Malays and 16.8% for Chinese. The prevalence of moderate and severe anaemia was higher for Indians (13.8%) compared to non-Indians (i.e., 8.4% for Malays and 6.5% for Chinese). Among women in the reproductive age group (15–49 years), the incidence of moderate and severe anaemia stood at 21.5% for Indians and the figure was comparatively lower for women in other ethnic groups (14% for Malays and 11.7% for Chinese). The data presented in the survey report clearly shows that there are differences in the health status of Malaysians by gender and ethnicity. Furthermore, when the gender-ethnic intersectionality is taken into account, the data suggests that Indian women may suffer from certain health issues (such as anaemia) to a greater extent than other groups. A more targeted approach

is needed to introduce policies that address the particular health issues that are more prevalent in the different gender and ethnic groups.

In terms of political representation in the Malaysian parliament, only 13 out of 222 members of Parliament are Indians, of which only one is female. This illustrates that Indian women are highly underrepresented in the political sphere (Parliament Malaysia, 2019). The limited statistics available in Malaysia give some indication of the socio-economic position of Malaysian Indian women vis-a-vis other groups (i.e., Indian men as well as Bumiputera and Chinese women). This gives an insight into the marginalisation experienced by minority women in Malaysia. It also highlights the need for more in-depth studies on the lives of minority women in Malaysia.

The motivation for this book is the dearth of studies focusing on Malaysian Indian women. Many studies regarding problems such as poverty, single motherhood and domestic violence among Malaysian women do not delve into issues pertaining to women in minority groups, particularly Malaysian Indian women. Some studies (e.g., Baharudin et al., 2011; Hamid & Salleh, 2013; Sulochana, 2007) are focused on the experiences of women from the dominant group and are unable to provide insights on the lives of women in minority groups. Szakolczai et al. (2017) emphasise the need to study minority groups based on the following reasons. Firstly, it is argued that minority groups are often ignored or belittled because a nation-state is usually associated with a single group. Secondly, minority groups enhance the diversity of culture in contemporary society that is increasingly moving towards uniformity. In addition, the experiences of minority groups may showcase their agency in challenging norms and practices that serve as barriers that keep them at the fringes of society. Furthermore, studying minority groups is vital as it would reveal findings that are unique to these groups. These findings may be important in the quest for ensuring social inclusion and equality in society. In the context of a multi-ethnic and pluralistic society such as Malaysia, the diverse and intertwined issues regarding minority women should be examined from the perspective of gender-ethnic intersectionality. This book aims to shed light on the lived experiences of Malaysian Indian women in society, both in the past and in the present time. The chapters in this book will unveil and delve into some of the economic, political, social, religious and cultural problems and issues faced by Malaysian Indian women.

## Structure of the Book

This book consists of thirteen chapters. The Introduction highlights the various dimensions of gender and ethnic disparities globally and in the Malaysian context. It also explains the rationale for this book, i.e., to delve into the challenges in the lived experiences of Malaysian Indian women who belong to a minority group that is typically subject to multiple forms of discrimination. The rest of the book is divided into

four parts that includes theoretical discussions and anthropological, historical, political science, psychological, and sociological research about the lives of Malaysian Indian women.

Part I (Colonial Era and the Early Years of Independence) comprises two chapters. In the first chapter of Part I, Nair and Musa document the history of the migration of Indians to Malaya during the pre-independence era and give an insight into the lives of Indian women in Malaya by drawing upon information collected from historical archives. The chapter sheds light on the socio-economic position of Indian women in Malaya during the British colonial period. The authors give a succinct account of the hardships of Indian migrant women due to the oppression of their colonial masters as well as the patriarchal system prevalent in the estate system at that time. Even though Indian women migrants were often pictured as victims in the colonial and estate administration, Nair and Musa highlight the important role Indian women played in trade unions and militant groups in the early part of the twentieth century following the growth of radical nationalism in the motherland of Indian migrants. The involvement of Indian women in trade unions and the military movement paved the way for social activism, labour struggles and political consciousness in the fight for freedom of their homeland and the emancipation of women. This in turn led to the formation of organisations to protect the interests of Indian women in Malaysia.

The second chapter in Part I unfolds by tracing the migration history of Indians and Chinese workers to Malaya during the colonial rule which led to the co-existence of different ethnic groups in the colony. In this chapter, Devasahayam notes that although there were limited opportunities for the two migrant groups to mingle during the colonial rule, inter-ethnic adoptions were not uncommon during that period of time. This chapter examines gender roles in the context of inter-racial adoptions, particularly the adoption of Chinese girls by Indian families, in Malaya (including Singapore i.e., prior to its secession from Malaysia in 1965) from the late 1930s till the 1960s. The author used ethnographic data in her study and draws our attention to the fact that Indian women played a vital role in socialising Chinese girls into Indian daughters. Indian adoptive parents, especially the mothers, played a critical role in instilling the Indian way of life (with regard to norms about eating habits and cuisine, dressing and other cultural practices) in the process of assimilating their adopted children into the family. In this way, diasporic Indians showed that an individual's identity as an Indian is not purely based on having Indian biological parents, but it also extends to adopted non-Indian children whose Indian-ness stems from their assimilation into an Indian family.

Part II of the book is devoted to issues related to politics, economics and the work-life of Malaysian Indian women. In the first chapter of Part II, Tayeb and Sathasivam trace Indian women's political participation in Malaysia. They discuss Indian's women involvement in the Rani Jhansi Regiment during World War II and subsequently in political parties such as MIC, PSM, PKR and DAP in later years. The authors emphasise that even though there have been women in Malaysia's leading Indian political party, MIC, there were limited policies to enhance their status in the party given the adherence to patriarchal values that promote male leaders while women are relegated to the role of handling *soft* issues that pertain to children,

women and senior citizens. It is also argued that Indian women find it hard to get elected into office because they are often sidelined by political parties which prefer to field male candidates, especially in tightly-contested constituencies. The authors highlight other avenues for Indian women to participate in politics in the broader sense of the word, i.e., through social activism or trade union membership. It is noted that civil society organisations with egalitarian standards provide a suitable platform for women (including those from minority groups such as Indians) who wish to engage in socio-political issues and lead these organisations. The authors interviewed several renowned Indian women who are either politicians or activists in Malaysia's contemporary political arena in order to understand the hurdles they face in political participation as well as to examine whether their motivation for engaging in politics or social activism is rooted in upholding the cause of Indians, specifically Indian women, or if their quest transcends ethnic boundaries with the aim of promoting inter-ethnic unity.

In the second chapter of Part II, Guna Saigaran focuses on the issue of impoverishment, and she uses the capability approach to examine the capabilities, function and agency of Malaysian Indian women based on data that was gathered via interviews with a sample of twenty-four women in the northern state of Penang. She concludes that the impoverishment of Indian women is attributed to the failure of attaining basic capabilities (such as education) which limits their ability to develop more complex capabilities and their prospects of a better life. The author argues that Indian women from low-income families face financial constraints and traditional gender systems which hinder their acquisition of basic capabilities. Non-poor Indian women also reported having to contend with traditional gender socialisation in the family but unlike poor Indian women, they are able to transform their lives and develop their capabilities by getting a good education and career. The writer also found that poor Indian women faced problems in being free to function (i.e., to own assets, carry out financial transactions, form social networks, and be involved in decision-making) due to their limited capabilities and/or the gendered system in the Indian community that gives men dominance over women in these socio-economic matters. The situation differed for non-poor women because they have well-developed capabilities, ownership of resources, good education and a career that allows them to function freely. The third dimension in the capability approach is agency which refers to the autonomy to make decisions and function to achieve well-being for oneself and the family. Guna Saigaran notes that the agency of poor Indian women tends to be restricted by the patriarchal-structured household, i.e., women are subordinate to men in decision-making, and this restricts the empowerment of women. However, non-poor women are able to execute their agency with fewer limitations.

The next two chapters in Part II are on the work-life of Indian women. The work done by women in the area of performing arts is discussed by Thiagarajan. The author begins with an account of the role of women in the field of Indian classical dance during the 1950s and 1960s where women performed with their spouses who were dance masters and collaborated with them in conducting dance classes. She continues to trace the role of women in classical dances in the 1960s and 1970s, an era that witnessed the emergence of women in more prominent roles where they set

up dance schools and helped to groom the next generation of *gurus*. In the 1990s, the role of women became more visible as they undertook the role of choreographer and conductor of musical recitals. However, in the new millennium, women's onstage visibility began to fade as these tasks were taken over by male *gurus* while women were given off-stage functions. Women maintained their agency in their capacity as nurturers, motivators, trainers, consultants and trouble-shooters. Thiagarajan also highlights the barriers women face as performers in terms of the lack of financial support and moral support of the family, lack of commitment to practice on a long-term basis and the difficulty of capturing the interest of the Malaysian audience for solo performances given the preference for group performances. The author points out that some of the dancers were able to overcome these obstacles and carve out a career path for themselves. Some Indian women have also breached gender divisions and have become producers whose services are sought out by male dancers. Herein lies the seeds of change that challenge the patriarchal structure in the Malaysian Indian society, where the position of authority switches from men to the hands of women who act as the producer and manager of the play or performance.

The second chapter on women and work is on femininity and the empowerment of professional Indian women. This qualitative study by Karupiah and Fernandez revolves around the issue of empowerment and femininity among a particular group of women, i.e., Tamil women in Penang who are professionals with tertiary education. This chapter begins with a discussion of the concepts of empowerment and femininity in general as well as in the context of the Tamil community. The authors explore how Tamil professional women construct the meaning of empowerment and femininity and negotiate the notion of femininity in everyday life. The findings of the study highlight the challenges that these women encounter in maintaining their femininity as they attempt to remain empowered. The two main domains where there is an ongoing interplay of femininity and empowerment are the home and workplace. Decision-making is identified as a key element of empowerment for women. The respondents in the study differentiated empowerment in terms of decision-making at work and at home. Decision-making in the workplace is based on the level of power and autonomy that these women possess in the organisation. However, in the context of the household, the respondents act in an appropriate manner because transgressions against the ingrained patriarchal system often create conflict in the family. Therefore, these women subscribe to ideas regarding traditional gender values and the typical roles women should play as homemakers and caregivers. They choose to act submissive or docile, whenever necessary, in order to maintain harmony in the family and they adopt various strategies in the process of bargaining with patriarchy to achieve goals that were important and meaningful to them. This gives them some agency without challenging or changing the gender inequality that is prevalent in traditional Malaysian Indian households.

Part III of this book is devoted to chapters that relate to the theme of health and well-being. The first chapter in Part III by Wilson, Mogan and K. Kaur is about the issue of sexual reproductive health. The authors see the need for a discourse on sexual reproductive health issues of Indian women which are regarded as a taboo in the Indian community. The writers note that Indian women with endometriosis have

to deal with this problem with little support from their community or family. The authors highlight the fact that the gender-ethnicity intersectionality issues encountered by Malaysian Indian women encompass sexual health issues and it increases the severity of the problems faced by women with endometriosis. This chapter focuses on the effect of endometriosis on Indian women's gender identity, its impact on social and family relationships and the mechanisms women utilise to cope with the problem of endometriosis. A multiple case study method that involves interviews with three respondents is used by the authors to analyse these issues. Wilson et al. highlight the problems that the respondents have in terms of their gender identity due to the debilitating effects of endometriosis on their sexual reproductive health and the social stigma that they encounter due to endometriosis. The respondents report that their peers and family members often lack an understanding of endometriosis and their complaints about the problem are often unheeded. This gives rise to a sense of alienation and being discriminated against, particularly in the Indian community which tends to be conservative in matters relating to sexual health issues. The respondents use various methods to deal with endometriosis such as participating in the Malaysian Endometriosis Association's social media network (MyEndosis), speaking to others (including Hindu priests) about the problem and sometimes resorting to some form of escapism (such as enrolling in a course) to distract the mind from the real problems of endometriosis.

The next chapter is on issues related to stereotyping the beauty of women. In this chapter, Sangaralingam uses the auto-ethnography method to describe her experience as a large-sized woman with a dark complexion who was raised in a traditional Malaysian Indian family and socialised in a society that perceives beauty as being only skin deep and equated it with being fair-skinned and slim. The author shares intimate details of her experiences and challenges she encountered from her childhood days until adulthood. The author describes how she has been criticised for her looks by family members, schoolmates and colleagues which led to feelings of shame, despair, degradation and unworthiness in spite of the fact that she excelled in her studies and career. She tells of her experiences of being a victim of discrimination in school and the workplace and reveals her unsuccessful relationships where potential suitors were unwilling to accept her as a life partner due to their pre-conceived ideas of beauty. The author initially attempted to alter her appearance by changing the way she dressed, going on crash diets, and taking slimming pills but these steps were futile. The writer shares how she subsequently reached a point in her life where she had a change in mindset. Instead of trying to conform to society's standards of beauty, she embarked on a journey of self-acceptance and discovery of the beauty that lies within herself. This enabled her to overcome her feelings of being inadequate. She advocates body positivity and urges women to look beyond superficial beauty and seek the beauty that lies within each person, irrespective of their physical appearance.

Studies on intersectionality tend to highlight the interwoven multiple sources of discrimination that individuals encounter such as that experienced by Indian women in Malaysia. However, in the third chapter of Part III, Mohd Hashim and Karupiah examine the other side of the coin, i.e., the positive aspects of human experiences, using a sample of Indian female students from a public university. This study garnered

information about the respondents' views on happiness and meaning in life. With regard to the question of happiness, there are various domains of happiness in the life of the respondents i.e., relationships, achievements, personal freedom, leisure activities, health, material possessions and spirituality. Most respondents construe happiness as stemming from relationships, having personal time and freedom to carry out activities that they enjoy, personal achievements as well as the absence of sadness and stress. The majority of respondents reported a high level of happiness and indicate that it is partly attributed to the opportunity to pursue their tertiary education in a public university, which they perceive as a privilege for them given the fact that they belong to a minority group. A small group of students expressed that they were unhappy due to financial difficulties, their dislike of city life and conflicts. When asked to give their views on what gives meaning to their life, most respondents said their life is meaningful in the following ways: having a direction in life; achieving goals, making a difference in the life of others, and living a spiritual life. The authors argue that the women in this study become stronger as a result of their intersectionality experiences, and they find meaning in their negative life experiences. Good relationships with family and their personal strengths help them to survive and succeed despite the negative experiences that arise from gender-ethnic biases.

The fourth chapter in Part III by Selamat and Ratthinan looks at the travel experiences of Indian women. Travel was not common for the first generation of Malaysian Indian women in yesteryears. A host of factors such as community norms about gender, financial constraints faced by Indian women and concerns about safety issues created invisible boundaries which inhibited Indian women from travelling. However, the passage of time has witnessed a change in conservative ideologies about gender in the Indian community. In addition, the emancipation of women over the years is also linked to higher female educational attainment, which has resulted in increased female labour force participation rates, financial autonomy as well as access to resources, knowledge and technological skills. While the present generation of Indian women continues to observe the core practices of their culture and religion, they are increasingly travelling for pleasure nowadays, thus transcending traditional gender boundaries and gaining access to the traditionally male-dominated activity of travelling for leisure. The Grounded Hierarchical Leisure Constraint framework was used in the study and data was collected via interviews with ten Indian women. A gender lens was used to analyse their travel experiences and discuss the boundaries they encounter in terms of intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints in the different stages of travel. The authors highlight the role of technology (i.e., computers and mobile phones as well as web-based platforms and applications) that avails women with the means to navigate these barriers to travel, whilst providing them with the means to adhere to familial expectations and patriarchal constructions of femininity that still prevails in the Indian community.

Part IV of the book focuses on one sub-group of Malaysian Indians, i.e., the Sikhs. The two chapters in Part IV focus on the issue of religion and gender equality in the context of the Malaysian Sikh community. In the first chapter of Part IV, Mehar Singh stresses that the teachings of Sikhism espouse the principles of gender equality

where both men and women can participate in socio-economic, cultural and religious activities. Although the tenets of Sikhism enshrine gender equality, in reality, there is gender inequality in the position of men and women among Sikhs in their motherland and among the Sikh diaspora. This chapter focuses on the issue of gender (in)equality among the Malaysian Sikh diaspora which is a minority community in the nation's multi-ethnic society. The authors provide several possible reasons that contribute to gender inequality in the Malaysian Sikh community; this includes the existence of the patriarchal system in the community that diverges from the principle of gender equality, the amalgamation of Sikhism with other cultural ideologies in the country, and the consequent emergence of a bi-cultural identity among Sikhs as well as the tendency of the present generation of Sikh women to ascribe to stereotypes about gender roles by opting to confine themselves to particular roles and not crossing the boundaries of male domains in particular religious and cultural matters. The authors envision the way forward for the Malaysian Sikh community which calls for cooperation between the government, society and individuals in using education and awareness programmes as the medium to eradicate gender biases and re-shape attitudes in society that will promote gender equality. It is concluded that Sikh women themselves must be at the forefront to drive the changes that need to be made in the community by leading, motivating and influencing members of their community as well as women at the local and global level in the quest to achieve gender equality.

The second chapter in Part IV by C. Kaur and Gill is about the lived realities of women in Malaysia's Sikh community. As noted earlier, Sikhism is a religion that upholds the principle of equality, which includes equality along gender lines. The authors use a phenomenological lens to understand if the teachings of Sikhism are practised by exploring the role and status of women vis-à-vis men in the family. By using in-depth interviews, ten Sikh women's views on their gender roles and social status in the family institution were examined. The authors focus on three main themes of Sikh women's experience in the domestic realm, i.e., (i) the normalisation of sex roles; (ii) maintaining family social image; (iii) transmission of a new culture. It is expected that gender equality would be epitomised in the private domain of Sikh families who are believers of Sikhism but on the contrary the responses of the Sikh women who were interviewed suggest this is not the case in the context of interpersonal dynamics of family life, be it in the nuclear family or extended family. The respondents share their experience of having to contend with the patriarchal system which is still deeply engrained in the Sikh community, where the position of men and women tends to be unequal, in spite of the fact that Sikhism enshrines the tenet of gender equality. Although there are various institutions that play a role in propagating gender equality, the authors strongly recommend that the discourse on gender equality must begin from home, i.e., Sikh families must educate their children on the importance of gender equality and relate it to the religious principles of Sikhism.

## References


Abdul Aziz, R. (2017). Heritage conservation: Authenticity and vulnerability of living heritage sites in Melaka state. *Kajian Malaysia, 35*(Supp. 1), 39–58. https://doi.org/10.21315/km2017.35.Supp.1.3.

Abdullah, S. (2013). Effect of Malay-China trade relations during the Malacca Sultanate on the emergence of Chinese Peranakan Community. *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization, 3*(4), 143–149. https://doi.org/10.5829/idosi.wjihc.2013.3.4.3401.

Baharudin, R., Krauss, S. E., Yacoob, S. N., & Tan, J. P. (2011). Family processes as predictors of antisocial behaviors among adolescents from urban, single-mother Malay families in Malaysia. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 42*, 509–522.

Breach, A., & Li, Y. (2017). Gender pay gap by ethnicity in Britain. Retrieved from https://www.bl.uk/britishlibrary/~/media/bl/global/business-and-management/pdfs/non-secure/f/a/w/fawsc-gender-pay-gap-by-ethnicity-in-britain-2017.pdf.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Dass, M., Gill, S. S., Redzuan, M. R., & Ahmad, N. (2014). Urban poverty among Indians in Malaysia: A naturalistic inquiry. *Life Science Journal, 11*(7), 21–26.

Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2021). Population Quick Info. Retrieved from http://pqi.stats.gov.my/result.php?token=e288e3a1d8205fff50dfdb61878a0c1d.

Eaton, M. (1993). Patently confused: Complex inequality and Canada v. Mossop. *Rev. Const. Stud., 1*, 203–229.

Gopal, P. S., & Karupiah, P. (2013). Indian diaspora and urban poverty: A Malaysian perspective. *Diaspora Studies, 6*(2), 103–122. https://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2013.853441.

Hamid, S. R. A., & Salleh, S. (2013). Exploring single parenting process in Malaysia: Issues and coping strategies. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences, 84*, 1154–1159. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.06.718.

Hegewischand, A., & Hartmann, H. (2018). The gender wage gap: 2018 earnings differences by race and ethnicity. Institute for Women's Policy Research. 7. Retrieved from https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/C478_Gender-Wage-Gap-in-2018.pdf.

Khalid, M. A. (2018). Climbing the ladder: Socioeconomic mobility in Malaysia. *Asian Economic Papers, 17*(3), 1–23.

Lee, S. K. (2008). The Peranakan Baba Nyonya culture: Resurgence or disappearance? *Sari (ATMA), 26*, 161–170.

Lian, K. F. (1995). Migration and the formation of Malaysia and Singapore. In R. Cohen (Ed.), *The Cambridge survey of world migration* (pp. 392–396). Cambridge University Press.

Loh, F. K. W. (2003). The marginalisation of the Indians in Malaysia. Contesting explanations and the search for alternatives. In J. T. Siegel & A. R. Kahin (Eds). *Southeast Asia over three generations: Essays presented to Benedict R O'G. Anderson* (pp.223–244). Ithaca: Southeast Asian Program, Cornell University.

Malay Mail. (2015). YPS: 40pc of Malaysian Indians still at bottom rung of the income ladder. *Malay Mail*. Retrieved from https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2015/05/15/yps-40pc-of-indians-in-malaysia-still-at-bottom-rung-of-the-income-ladder/897033.

Mason, R., & Omar, A. (2003). The Bumiputera policy: Dynamics and dilemmas. *Kajian Malaysia, 21*(1), 1–12.

Ministry of Finance Malaysia. (2018). Profile of unemployment in Malaysia. In *Economic Outlook 2019*. Retrieved from https://www.treasury.gov.my/pdf/economy/2019/chapter1.pdf.

Ministry of Health Malaysia. (2020). *National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019*: vol. I: NCDs—Non-Communicable Diseases: Risk Factors and other Health Problems. Retrieved from https://iku.moh.gov.my/images/IKU/Document/REPORT/NHMS2019/Report_NHMS2019-NCD_v2.pdf.

Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia. (2016). Statistics on women, family and community, Malaysia. Retrieved from https://www.kpwkm.gov.my/kpwkm/uploads/files/Penerbitan/Buku%20Perangkaan/Perangkaan%202016.pdf.

Nagaraj, S., Nai-Peng, T., Chiu-Wan, N., Kiong-Hock, L., & Pala, J. (2015). Counting ethnicity in Malaysia: The Complexity of Measuring Diversity. In P. Simon, V. Piché, & A. A. Gagnon (Eds.), *Social statistics and ethnic diversity: cross-national perspectives in classifications and identity politics* (pp. 143–174). Springer Open.

New Straits Times. (2021). Women dominate healthcare, yet their health issues are neglected. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2021/06/698772/women-dominate-healthcare-yet-their-health-issues-are-neglected.

Parliament Malaysia. (2019). Members of house of representatives. Retrieved from http://www.parlimen.gov.my/ahli-dewan.html?uweb=dr&.

Purdie-Vaughns, V., & Eibach, R. P. (2008). Intersectional invisibility: The distinctive advantages and disadvantages of multiple subordinate-group identities. *Sex Roles, 59*(5–6), 377–391.

Sandhu, K. S. (1993). The coming of Indians to Malaysia. In K. S. Sandhu & A. Mani (Eds.), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* (pp. 151–189). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Sulochana, N. (2007). Poverty in Malaysia: A new look at old problem. In S. Nambiar (Ed.), *Reassessing poverty in Malaysia* (pp. 22–78). Wisdom Publishing House.

Szakolczai, A., Horvath, A., & Papp, A. Z. (2017). Individualization as Depersonalization: Minority Studies and Political Anthropology. Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, 23(1), 1–17.

World Bank. (2013). *Inclusion matters: The foundation for shared prosperity*. New Frontiers of Social Policy. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0010-8.

World Economic Forum. (2021). Global gender gap report 2021. Retrieved from http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf.

**Jacqueline Liza Fernandez** obtained her Ph.D in Economics from Universiti Malaya and her bachelor's and master's degrees in Social Sciences from Universiti Sains Malaysia. She is a retired senior lecturer from the School of Social Sciences (USM). Jacqueline has done research on several gender issues relating to the gap between men and women in the labour market. She was involved with a team of researchers from KANITA (USM) in conducting research for the Penang's Economic Planning Unit that looked at the role of women in decision-making for the state of Penang. She was also commissioned by the Penang Women's Development Corporation to carry out a study on Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) for the two local municipal councils in Penang and subsequently did a project on Gender Responsive and Participatory Budgeting (GRPB) for the Penang State Government.

**Premalatha Karupiah** is an associate professor of sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia. She teaches research methodology and statistics. Her research interests are in the areas of beauty culture, femininity, Tamil movies, educational and occupational choices, and issues related to the Indian diaspora. Her articles have been published in leading journals.

# Colonial Era and the Early Years of Independence

# Migration of Indian Women to Malaya: Socio-Economic Status and Sense of Nationalism, 1900–1957


**Syamala Nair Gopal and Mahani Musa**

**Abstract** This chapter aims to evaluate the migration and socio-economic status of Indian women in Malaya between 1900 and 1957. Rapid economic growth in Malaya under British rule led to an influx of immigrants from India and China. The presence of Indian women workers, although not as numerous as the males, can still be regarded as important in Malaya's economic growth. Traditionally, Indian women were not allowed to go out to earn a living, especially in a foreign land. However, this situation changed due to unavoidable circumstances. Indian women were in an oppressed situation and various parties have taken the opportunity to exploit their position in this process of migration. Indian women were also marginalised in education, and healthcare, and were left behind in their personal and professional development. Focusing on the period 1900 to 1957, this study looks into the migration of Indian women into Malaya and their socio-economic position under the British rule. The struggle of Indian women during the Japanese occupation and their involvement in the Rani of Jhansi regiment and estate strikes will also be examined. Exposure to social activism and labour struggles taught them the importance of education and equal rights that led to the formation of self-help organisations to address the issues of intersectionality caused by gender and ethnicity and the enhancement of the status of Indian women in Malaysia.

**Keywords** Exploitation · Indian · Nationalism · Socio-economy · Women

## Introduction

The Indian migration to Malaya during the British colonial rule has left an impact on the ethnic and gender composition of workers. Although the number of Indian women was lower than Indian men, the recruitment of Indian women workers was still relevant and a vital source of labour during the colonial era.

S. N. Gopal (✉) · M. Musa
School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia
e-mail: syamnair.gopal@gmail.com



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_2

Women's history is seldom acknowledged due to the stereotyped perceptions of their roles and lives which becomes a hindrance in their social development. Many studies that discussed the role of women in politics and socio-economy in Malaya have largely focused on Malay women. The roles and contributions of Malay women in various fields have been given more prominence by local historians than women of other ethnic groups. This situation is the result of protests by Malay women for their rights, socio-economic empowerment, and their political consciousness (Ariffin, 1997, 1988; Dancz, 1987; Manderson, 1980; Mohamad, 1989). Writings about immigrant women have also drawn the attention of a handful of local writers who touched on the role of Chinese and Indian women in developing the Malayan economy, especially in the plantation and mining sectors (Khoo, 2004; Lee, 1989).

The study of Indian women in Malaya is less noticeable among local historians. Studies that have been conducted so far by renowned historians are largely focused on a general approach to discussing issues regarding the migration of Indians to Malaya at the beginning of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as their living conditions in the estates (Kaur, 1988, 2006; Sinnappah, 1970; Sandhu, 1969). Indian workers and their struggle gained some attention from local historians. The role played by political organisations like the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) and the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) in upholding the rights of Indian workers in estates were briefly explained in these historical studies without giving specific attention to Indian women (Anbalakan, 2008; Gomez, 1994; Ramasamy, 1992; Stenson, 1980; Netto, 1961). Issues like the subordination of Indian women began to appear in studies notably in the field of sociology (e.g., Oorjitham, 1984, 1987). Oorjitham's findings predominantly show that Indian women were confined to estates while some were located in the urban areas. These women were constantly oppressed and exploited in terms of wages and other aspects such as workplace harassment. Questions were also raised regarding their positions in the community. Except for a small percentage of the educated middle-class, the majority of women did not participate as actively as men in activities outside the home such as in social organisations, politics, and labour unions, and those who participated were pushed to the periphery due to male dominance in the organisations. As a result, Indian women were marginalised in the larger decision-making process (Oorjitham, 1984, 1987).

Based on a historical perspective, this chapter aims to fill the void in Indian women's historical studies. It looks into their migration, the socio-economic upheavals they had to endure before Malaya achieved independence, and a sense of Indian nationalism that was instilled in them.

## The Migration Experience

The British government began to lobby for the entry of labour from South India by showcasing the considerable wealth of Malaya. As an attraction, benefits such as accommodation and shipping fare were promised. The significant wage gap between South India and Malaya attracted large numbers of workers to the latter with the

hope of getting a better quality of life for themselves and their families. Economic pressure faced by Indians was used by the colonial government to seek low-paid labourers and labourers who were willing to accept the poor working conditions and migrate to other parts of their colony.

The large and organised influx of Indians to Malaya during the British colonial rule started in 1838 (Sinnappah, 1970; Sandhu, 1969). The British government lobbied for Indians, especially from South India, as cheap labour for the plantation and construction sectors. Opportunities offered by the British government had attracted a large number of Indians who wanted to improve their life with better wages as compared to wages earned in their home country.

The vast majority of Indian labourers who migrated were single men. Their employment was much preferred by plantation, construction, and mining sectors but the influx of Indian labourers was strictly controlled by the British. Sandhu (1969) estimated more than 1.9 million Indians entered Malaya from 1840 until the 1930s and nearly 250,000 of them were brought into the country from 1844 to 1910 through the contract system (Dancz, 1987).

According to Sandhu (1969), until 1920, the number of Indian male workers who were brought to Malaya through the *Kangani* system[1] was higher than the number of women brought in. By 1920, Indian male workers accounted for almost 70 per cent of the total number of Indians in Malaya. This is because the intake of Indian women was more difficult due to Indian tradition and culture. According to Dancz (1987), women's freedom is limited due to their role as the wife who had to serve her husband and his family. They were not allowed to go out to earn a living, let alone to travel abroad.

Most of the Indian women who arrived in Malaya came from South India, and were either of Tamil, Telugu, or Malayali descent. A small number came from North India including Sikhs, Punjabis, Bengalis, and Gujaratis. However, Tamils made up 80 per cent of them and many of them were Dalits.[2] In the 1890s the importance of Indian women's labour was first discovered by estate employers. The sole dependence on male labour resulted in higher costs due to their higher wage rates than for female labour. With the separation of administration in 1867, the political relationship between the British government in India and Malaya became increasingly estranged. As a result, the movement of labour from India to Malaya was affected. Estate employers took the necessary steps of ensuring Indian labourers brought along

[1] *Kangani* is a labour recruitment system which replaced the contract system. *Kangani* means supervisor or foreman. Usually, a person appointed as a *Kangani* was a foreman to an employer. The employer would send the selected *Kangani* to India and recruit labourers who were interested to work in Malaya. Through this system, employers paid a little money upfront to the *Kangani* so that they could return to their village and recruit friends and relatives. The *Kangani* system brought an increase in Indian female labourers. The British government in Malaya increased the commission paid to every man who successfully brought in female labourers and male labourers who came with their families. For more information, please refer to Jain (1984), Tinker (1974) and Kaur (2007).

[2] The Dalits are from the bottom of the Indian caste hierarchy. They were called untouchables as their physical touch was considered polluting in the caste-based social division in India, and they were subjected to discrimination and denied basic human rights (Deliege, 1993).

their wives and families to retain them longer in Malaya. These employers regarded Indian women who came at the time as labour reproducers and servicing agents to the estate community. Some employers considered them as labourers with fewer skills and a very low salary was provided to them. They were also not given bonuses or separate food rations because women were viewed as secondary wage earners (Datta, 2016).

To achieve a balanced ratio among male and female labourers in Malaya, the British government in Malaya and India took several important measures to increase the recruitment of female labourers into Malaya. Among the measures taken were: to reduce the recruitment fees for female labour, to introduce the Indian Immigration Act in 1922 and the Indian Immigration Regulations in 1923, where the ratio of females to males was fixed at 1 to 1.5 (Sandhu, 1969). These facilitated the increase in the entry of female migrant workers into Malaya. While the *Kangani* system was heavily criticised due to various shortcomings, this system managed to increase the migration of Indian families thus increasing the number of Indian women in Malaya (Kondapi, 1951).

The gender ratio was often discussed concerning the recruitment of Indian women to Malaya. In 1938 as reported in mainstream newspapers at the time, the annual report of the Controller of Labour for Malaya emphasised that both the Malayan and Indian governments should cooperate in addressing the problem of the skewed sex ratio to overcome social problems and uphold morality. In this regard the Indian government was ready to send more Indian women to Malaya if the Malayan government was willing to undertake the following measures:

i. Reasonable salary
ii. Provide special incentives to employers who accept female immigrants
iii. Different allowances are given to married labourers
iv. Give a bonus of $1.00 for every child born in Malaya
v. Place a travelling lady inspector on board to ensure the welfare of female immigrants and children
vi. Provide childcare centres in estates
vii. Provide schools in estates
viii. Give maternity allowance for pregnant Indian women
ix. Introduce marriage registration law for Indian immigrants

(The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser, September 26, 1938)

Accordingly, the number of Indian women began to increase gradually in each state. Based on the study by Dancz (1987), the population of Indian women increased dramatically from 18 women per 1000 men in 1891 to 482 women per 1000 men in 1931 (Table 1).

**Table 1** Number of Indian women in each state in Malaya from 1911 to 1957

| State | Year | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1911 | 1921 | 1931 | 1947 | 1957 |
| Perak | 18,460 | 41,038 | 55,791 | 59,394 | 78,263 |
| Selangor | 17,548 | 42,298 | 57,290 | 61,095 | 87,816 |
| Negeri Sembilan | 3801 | 8939 | 16,562 | 15,605 | 23,676 |
| Pahang | 791 | 1602 | 4362 | 5475 | 9174 |
| Pulau Pinang | 12,647 | 16,240 | 18,609 | 21,777 | 26,963 |
| Melaka | 1499 | 4736 | 7504 | 8187 | 10,057 |
| Singapore | 4693 | 5398 | 8021 | 17,254 | 38,096 |
| Kedah | – | 10,189 | 18,614 | 21,285 | 29,179 |
| Kelantan | – | 659 | 1592 | 1598 | 2001 |
| Terengganu | – | 23 | 70 | 328 | 610 |
| Johor | – | 4889 | 14,185 | 20,602 | 29,208 |
| Perlis | – | 160 | 281 | 575 | 513 |
| Total | – | 13,617 | 202,927 | 233,175 | 335,556 |

*Note* The data in Table 1 is drawn from several census reports. For more information, refer to Del Tufo, 1949: 113; Fell, 1957: 51–52; Nathan, 1922:148; Vlieland, 1932: 121

## Socio-Economic Status of Indian Women in Malaya

The entry of Indian women into Malaya increased markedly from 1891 to 1931 and the ratio between women and Indian men improved from 18:1000 to 482:1000. By 1931, there were 202,981 Indian women in Malaya (Vlieland, 1932) which further increased to 335,556 in 1957. Wife enticement cases[3] were one of the most exasperating issues among Indians in Malaya at that time. This was further aggravated by illegal relationships, void marriages, and toddy problems among labourers (Nair, 2021). As a result, Indian women had to endure oppressive conditions, capitalist exploitation, and patriarchal control.

### *Capitalist Exploitation*

Generally, women are exploited in various ways. This exploitation occurs due to differences in gender, ethnicity, and other factors. In the case of Indian women, discrimination in terms of gender and ethnicity has become a norm since their entry into Malaya. Spivak (as cited in Raman, 2020: 272) noted that,

[3] Enticement cases are cases involving Indian men fleeing away with the wives of other men and women fleeing with other men, deliberately wanting to leave their husbands as a result of not being able to withstand abuse and misery.

> If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow.

Hathaway, a British revenue collector in Tanjore, India described the process of recruiting Indian women as a regularly organised system of kidnapping. His successor, Stokes, insisted that all *maistries* or recruitment agents would be given a lucrative share for every labourer they hired (Sandhu, 1969: 79). According to him,

> …the *maistries* get ten rupees per head for every adult coolie they bring, all contingent expenses being paid. A lower price is given for boys who are not in such demand and a somewhat higher rate for young and good-looking women.

The above statement clearly shows that recruiting activity was considered a very rewarding business, that *maistries* had no second thoughts to take actions like kidnapping to ensure the continuity of Indian female labourers. There are stories that these Indian women did not migrate voluntarily, but due to fraud as well as social pressure. According to one Indian social activist,

> …there only needs to be a quarrel in the house or greed of money and there arises the opportunity for the recruiters. There only needs to be increased anger or greed for jewellery and she will run away. Introduces to the boss, she will sign or apply her thumbprint onto a paper that as in a contract of slavery and away she goes. She has sold her honour (Nijhawan, 2014: 176).

More heart-breaking experiences awaited Indian women labourers when they arrived at quarantine camps in Malaya. They needed to go through a cleansing process in these camps to ensure they did not carry any disease or germs. Their clothes were removed, and their bodies would be wrapped with a piece of gauze-like clothes, and then submerged in a tank filled with Lysol disinfectants. The process took about 40 min and was performed in front of male officers (Malaya Tribune, 2 August 1933).

Indian women were targeted for exploitation immediately after they were brought into Malaya. There were cases of young women being abused. According to Sinnappah (1970), with the increase of female labourers from the 1830s to 1880s, many were regularly recruited for prostitution in the new labour settlements. Kondapi (1951) alluded that the notion among immigration officers was that all female immigrants were destined to a life of prostitution. The gap in the ratio between male and female labourers also affected the issue of sexual exploitation among Indian labourers. Most of the employers in the estate did not provide suitable housing facilities for Indian labourers while the placement of singles with married couples caused indecent behaviour (Jackson, 1961). The situation led to many complaints and recriminations among nationalists in India and Malaya with the Malayan government being criticised for its failure to take care or respect social traditions and the welfare of Indian labourers, especially women. They pointed out that this led to increased immoral incidents and crimes involving Indian labourers. An article in *The Indian* in 1936 mentioned,

> …it is easy to blame him [the coolie] …but those wiseacres who find fault in him are themselves responsible for his situation…for past many years, one could observe a steady

> increase in sex crimes among the labouring Indian in Malaya…and the seeds have been sown by the policy of …sex ratio….the only women available for the immigrant bachelors to marry are the [already] married women (Datta, 2016: 590).

Various criminal cases had been reported in the Malayan court at that time involving Indian labourers in estates, such as murdering the spouse due to dishonesty, wife enticement, and adultery. According to the colonial archives and court reports, spouse murder cases were mainly due to jealousy, or because the elopement of the wife would degrade their status, pride, and dignity[4] (Datta, 2016).

The injustice against Indian women became more apparent in court cases that were not in their favour as they were often unable to provide the court with documents to prove they were married. This was due to the absence of a law that required a man and a woman to legally register their marriage in India[5] (Federated Malay States, Proceedings of the Federal Council, 1929). Very often the decision favoured the offender. This has been shown by the report of the Indian government agent in Malaya in 1935.

> The common plea of the accused person when a husband alleges that his wife has been taken away by another man is that there has been no regular marriage between the two, and on this plea, the culprit very often not only escapes punishment but is able to retain the woman also. (Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya, 1934)

The Indian government pressured the Malayan government to resolve issues that were considered as immoral activities of Indian women as well as increasing murders involving Indian women. Subsequently, the Malayan government introduced the 'Marriage Registration Act for Hindus' in 1924 in which married couples of Indian descent were required to register their marriage legally. District officers and revenue collectors in Kuala Lumpur and Seremban were also appointed as marriage registrars. Unfortunately, after six months of its introduction, only twenty-eight marriages were registered, of which seventeen involved Sri Lankan Tamils, and the rest were other educated Indians. The act was thus deemed a failure. According to the Government of India agent, the marriage registration was costly and involved complex procedures.

---

[4] This is because the presence of women in the Indian male labourers' life is considered as giving them the status of a leader or protector. According to Datta (2016:594), "*Having a woman is likely to have privileged coolie men, providing them with some level of respectability in horizontal networks within estate society and at times even in vertical networks, such as cross-racial and cross-class hierarchies. This privilege however produced simultaneous anxiety and constant fear of losing their women to other men. Having a woman, especially a 'wife' elevated a coolie from the status of 'boy' to 'man' among his compatriots."* It is clear here that by having a woman, the male labourer considered it a gift of prestige and then the loss of this woman shows the man has lost that prestige.

[5] Marriage among the Tamil community who migrated to Malaya at that time was difficult to prove as marriage registration was not performed in India. The only evidence is the ritual of a traditional marriage conducted in India by a Brahmin priest. It is difficult to exhibit such evidence in the courts in Malaya if the labourer is involved in the case of the wife's heelopement. Since no law established obligations for married couples to register the marriage, labourers who got married in Malaya also underwent a traditional marriage ceremony in the temple. It was even more complicated for the labourer to prove his marital status in court in a criminal case, as the court requires the presence of the Brahmin priest who conducted the marriage as the main witness. Unfortunately, some marriages were not conducted by a Brahmin priest but by the estate manager or *Kangani*.

To simplify procedures, estate managers were appointed as marriage registrars, the registration fee was lowered from $2 to $1, and notices regarding the benefits of having the marriage registered were printed in Tamil and distributed in the estates[6] (Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya for the year of publication 1929, 1934).

The introduction of marriage enactment was in line with provisions of the colonial legislature although conservative Indian labourers ignored it completely. The British colonial government and the Indian government should have made it compulsory for Indian couples to register their marriages in India before they were allowed to travel to Malaya. This requirement could have reduced issues involving Indian women in the estates or other places.

## *Consumption of Toddy*

Toddy consumption was said to have increased in line with the growth of rubber estates in Malaya. Since the majority of Indian male labourers drink toddy, the existence of toddy shops became a must in every estate, alongside temples, schools, and worker quarters. Separated from the outside world due to transportation problems meant that Indian labourers were deprived of an opportunity to engage in any social activity after working hours. For them, drinking toddy with friends was the only entertainment they had. Employers also provided encouragement by opening toddy shops as they thought it would be easier to exploit labourers who were dependent on alcohol (Krishnan et al., 2014).

The toddy drinking habit not only involved men but also women. Drinking toddy is not something new to Indian women because, in their home country, toddy has long been consumed. However, the intake of toddy among Indian women increased after migration to Malaya. The Malaya Tribune reported in 1914 that, '*another disturbing factor is the case that a large increase in the number of [Indian] women who now drink*' (Malaya Tribune, 21 May 1914).

Krishnan et al. (2014) reported the number of toddy drinkers among Indian women in Johor in 1946. Out of 5,074 Indian toddy drinkers in the state, 956 of them, or 16.8 per cent were Indian women. Paloh district recorded the highest number of female toddy drinkers at 374. In terms of percentage by districts, Kluang, Rengam, Paloh, Labis, Kahang, and Mersing had 10, 7, 34, 11, 24, and 15 per cent of women toddy drinkers, respectively.

[6] Statistics from 1924 to 1928 show only 74 of the 1500 marriages of the Indian labourer were registered. From 1928 until September 1929, 272 cases involving incidents of wife abduction were registered in the court of the Strait Settlements, the Federated Malay States, Kedah and Johor but only 87 cases ended with prosecution due to a lack of valid marriage evidence. In 1934, out of 735 cases involving family relationships reported to the Labour Office, 191 involved abductions and only 61 of them were prosecuted under Sect. 489 of the Penal Code for the same reason. A total of 14 out of 39 suicide cases involving Indian labourers were due to jealousy.

Increased toddy intake among Indian women was influenced by several factors. Among them were the stressful estate life,[7] workload similar to male labourers, and family workload which pushed female labourers to toddy drinking. Initially, they drank toddy to get rid of fatigue but eventually became addicted to it. The Annual Report of Indian Agents in Malaya to the Indian government in 1931 mentioned that '*life in estates has converted almost the whole labour force into habitual drinkers including in some cases, women and children*'[8] (Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya, 1931). During World War II, emotional stress became a major factor for some Indian women to fall into this habit. When Indian male labourers were sent to the Siamese border to construct the Death Railway, many lost their lives. In a survey conducted by the United Planting Association of Malaya, the war caused 5,730 Indian female labourers to become widows and 6,975 children to become orphans in 1946. Under these circumstances, toddy consumption was to relieve stress and grief (Malayan Union; Annual Report of the Labor Department, 1946).

According to Mohamed (2012), the consumption of toddy among Indian women also contributed to family splits with increasing disputes, quarrels, and conflicts. Toddy also caused various health problems including visual impairment, diarrhoea, and food poisoning. There were even cases of death caused by mixing toddy with lime, weed, Datura,[9] alcohol, and *samsu*[10] (Krishnan et al., 2014).

## *Education*

In Malaya, education for Indian labourers began with their entry into this country at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Through the implementation of the Labour Code of 1912 and 1923, it was the responsibility of estate employers to provide schools if there were more than ten children, aged six to twelve (Ramachandran, 1994). However, there were no sincere efforts among employers or the colonial government to provide education for these labourers. They just wanted the next

[7] The labour process on the estates had always been gruelling and exhausting. Work was extracted from the labourers with inexorable percussion, any deviation would attract severe retribution. Women workers rose at 4.30 a.m., gathered for their daily roll-call at 6.00 a.m. and toiled until 5 p.m. After an exhausting day in the field, they began another phase of work at home; cooking, cleaning and managing the family – all unpaid. Refer to Krishnan, Dali, Ghazali, & Subramanian (2014).

[8] There was a rule where a restriction was imposed on the sale of toddy to women and children, but the rule was ignored. The opening of toddy shops in Klang and Kuala Selangor districts was strictly prohibited, and it was found that there was an adverse effect on the work performance and morale of Indian labourers there.

[9] Datura is a poisonous plant that is often abused in recreational use because it produces hallucinations and intoxication that can last for days.

[10] *Samsu* is a locally distilled spirit with an alcohol content of between 37 per cent and 70 per cent. There were over 150 brands of *samsu* in the market. The majority of alcohol consumers among the rural poor were samsu drinkers.

generation of workers to remain under their control and expected them to take over their parents' work. As for the labourers, they preferred their children to work with them in the estate to earn additional income to accommodate their family needs.

The literacy rate among Indian women was very low compared to women of other races. By 1938 there were only five Tamil girls schools, three in Singapore and two in Perak (Special Report on Education in Malaya, 1948). Even though there were Tamil schools in estates, parents did not send their daughters to school. In terms of enrolment, there were 7,633 male and 3,156 female students in Tamil schools in the Federated Malay States in 1934 (Annual Report on Education in Federated Malay States, 1935). In 1938, out of 22,820 children enrolled in Tamil primary schools, only 7,236 were girls. Ten years later, the number had increased to 13,645 students (Dancz, 1987). The following excerpt in the Annual Report on Education in Federated Malay States (1949:15) clearly shows that the parents themselves did not see education as a priority for their daughters:

> …the vernacular schools, on the whole, provide education to children of illiterate or semi-illiterate parents. For this reason, the school life of a girl is short as such parents regard her education as of less importance than that of her brother's and she is too often taken away after a year or two, to work or to assist her mother at home. The smattering of knowledge which she has gained is quickly lost and in due course, she becomes the ignorant mother of children. This perhaps is one of the main reasons why the standard of culture of this Indian community remains low.

Overall, the condition of estate schools was always isolated from other societies. There was no record of any Indian female estate worker who fought to get an education for her daughter. The middle-class and Indian professionals chose to send their children to English schools.

Low literacy rates and the reluctance to educate their daughters show the traditional culture of the Indian community that considered education for daughters futile since the girls would leave the family after they were married. Literacy rates were higher among Indian women in the urban areas, especially children whose parents were clerks and shopkeepers, who were aware of the importance of education for their daughters. The lack of awareness of the importance of education for girls resulted in Indian women in estates being left out in all aspects compared to Malay and Chinese women.

## *Economy*

The involvement of Indian women in the economy is more focused on the agricultural sector. According to Sandhu (1969), more than 80 per cent of female labourers fulfilled labour demand in the plantation sector, while Gamba (1962) claims the number of female and child labourers was almost equal to male labourers in the rubber plantation. The involvement of Indian women in the plantation sector, specifically rubber, was due to the lack of interest by women of other races and also due to the low wage rates. Based on the 1921 census, 69.3 per cent of workers in the estate consisted

**Table 2** Daily wages (cents) of male and female estate workers from 1915–1941

| Year | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| 1915 | 35–50 | 25–30 |
| 1917 | 45 | 40 |
| 1920 | 50 | 40 |
| 1928 | 50 | 40 |
| 1930 | 40 | 32 |
| 1932 | 25 | 20 |
| 1937 | 45 | 36 |
| 1941 | 60 | 50 |

*Note* The data in Table 2 is drawn from the Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya (1928, 1929, 1931, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937) and Malayan Union Annual Report of the Labour Department (1946)

of Indians, 18.9 per cent, and 10.2 per cent were Chinese and Malays, respectively. Agricultural activities in the estates initially focused on sugar and coffee but shifted to rubber and palm oil which provided jobs to both male and female labourers. The recruitment of female workers as labourers was also an advantage to employers because they were able to pay lower wages compared to male workers. According to the same census, there were 136,181 Indian women in Malaya with 73,084 of them as employees, either in agriculture or other economic activities (Nathan, 1922).

The salary received by Indian women, especially those who were married, provided additional income to support their families. Even though the rubber tapping work done by male and female labourers was the same, male labourers were still given a higher salary. Table 2 shows the wage differences received by Indian men and women labourers from 1915 to 1941 which clearly shows gender-based wage discrimination. It was only in 1953, that legislation to balance the wage rates received by Indian male and female estate labourers, was put in place.

During the Japanese occupation, many male labourers were sent to the Burma-Siam border leaving the womenfolk, children, and the elderly in the estates. Production of rubber and tin ore could not be carried out properly, in fact, strict control was imposed on imports and food rationing was undertaken by the Japanese (Jain, 1984). Indian women emerged as heads of families, supporting the family with rubber tapping and the cultivation of food crops. The hardships and difficulties these Indian women went through gave them new confidence to be independent and they were able to work together with the men in fighting for their rights.

After Japan's defeat, Indian labourers in the estate had undergone various changes, especially in terms of their self-confidence and the desire to bring change to the estate community. A new generation of Indians had come to the fore, those who were born in Malaya and who no longer perceived India as their homeland. They began to claim their rights through labour or trade unions, especially on wage-related issues. The return of the British colonialists to Malaya had given new hope to the estate workers, especially Indian female labourers. Although there were increments in the salaries of

estate workers including female labourers, what they received did not commensurate with the high cost of living then[11] (Malayan Union Annual Report of the Labour Department, 1946).

## Sense of Nationalism among Indian Women in Malaya

During the early years of migration, there was barely any labour movement. Estate labourers were obedient to their employers or managers. By the end of the nineteenth century, estate labourers faced various problems from abusive employers. They were forced to work with low wages and little food rations. The death rate of the labour workforce and their children increased every year. At the beginning of the twentieth century, with the emergence of the estate labour movement, several protests or strikes took place, but they were easily put down while strike leaders were sent back to India. At that time, no trade union existed to protect the interests of employees. Among the issues highlighted in the strikes were unstable positions of the labourer and settlements among Indian labourers, problems in the contractual employment system, and the failure of *kangani* to unite the labourers (Malayan Union Annual Report of the Labour Department, 1946).

In the 1930s, the emergence of radical nationalism in India had given exposure to Indian estate labourers in Malaya. The Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) was instrumental in spreading ideas on nationalism among Indian estate labourers that led to the visit of Indian nationalist leaders such Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and AK Gunalan. Their visit strengthened the ethnic bond and instilled a spirit of union among the estate labourers (Stenson, 1980). The issues highlighted by CIAM include toddy intoxication, land, health, education, and childcare issues in the estates. CIAM also demanded equal wages for all Indian workers in the estates (The Straits Times, 2 February 1940).

However, CIAM leaders were middle-class males and there were no Indian women involved in CIAM's highest level of leadership (Sandhu, 1969). Perhaps this was a late development as interviews with several national leaders who were active in the independence movement claimed that the sense of nationalism among Indian women only emerged during the Japanese occupation.

[11] In March 1946, the salaries of the estate workers increased to 65 cents and 55 cents for men and women, respectively. However, a month later, men's salaries were raised to 70 cents while women's salaries remained. The discrimination can be seen here in terms of wages given to Indian women. Remuneration depends solely on estate employers. In some estates, where the presence of workers for tapping was good, the salaries paid were 90 cents for men and 73 cents for women. For example, in Malacca, most estates increased wages to $1.00 for men and 90 cents for women. Some estates in northern Johor and Negeri Sembilan were paying $1.10 for male and female labourers.

## *Life during Japanese Occupation*

The Japanese occupation period gave a sense of awareness among women in Malaysia. This period brought many hardships to women's lives in general. The horrifying war experiences recorded in their memoirs and biographies show women had to struggle in their daily lives while parents were worried about their daughters' safety. They even had to hide their girls or send them to live with relatives to escape possible rape, torture, or being sexually exploited by the Japanese military (Musa, 2016). Although the Japanese occupation had a profound effect on the Chinese community in Malaya, the Indian estate labourers also experienced similar hardships. By the end of 1942, eighteen Japanese rubber companies were set up by the Syonan Rubber Syndicate which took over the rubber industry in Singapore and Malaya. This syndicate allowed labourers to work for only ten to fifteen days a month. They were given a very low daily wage of almost 30 to 40 per cent less than pre-war rates. The Japanese army required Indian male labourers to leave their families to work on the death railway. As a result, many Indian female labourers had to live alone in the estates. The Japanese army took the opportunity to harass and rape them (Datta, 2015). According to Jain (1970), newly married couples were separated, the husbands were sent to work in the railway construction while the wives were made mistresses by Japanese or *kiranis.*

Although the Indians had to overcome many difficulties during the Japanese occupation, one positive development during this period was the desire to free the motherland from the clutches of colonialism which was implanted by the Japanese. Adhering to the slogan Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and Asia for Asians, Japan instilled a strong sense of nationalism among Indians in Malaya to fight for India's freedom from colonial rule.

Accordingly, the Indian Independent League (IIL) was accorded new prominence by the Japanese. The IIL was a political organisation established in 1928 by Indian nationalists in Southeast Asia to oppose the British government in India. It was placed under the leadership of Ras Behari Bose. In the early part of the occupation, a military movement called the Indian National Army (INA) was formed under the wing of the IIL and placed under Colonel Mohan Singh. By February 1942, the IIL had branches in Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Penang, and Singapore with an estimated membership of 84,700. By September 1942, IIL membership had increased to 120,000 while the INA military recruits totalled 16,000 by the end of 1942 (Dancz, 1987; Datta, 2016). Due to leadership problems and their unambitious goals, IIL and INA received less Indian response after 1942. When Japan appointed the highly charismatic nationalist, Subhas Chandra Bose as the leader of IIL, only then, did the support of the Indians begin to seep in. Subhas Chandra Bose was a radical nationalist and former leader of the Congress party. In July 1943, he became the President of IIL and Commander-in-Chief of the INA. In October 1943, he established an Indian provisional government known as Azad Hind which declared war on Britain and the United States. It gained recognition from Japan, Germany, and Italy (Hills and Silverman, 1993). The IIL began to get overwhelming support

from Indians in Malaya regardless of gender because its goal was seen as honourable regardless of caste, social class, gender, and political ideology. Indian women were also involved in the IIL strategy. Subhas Chandra Bose introduced twelve departments under the IIL and twelve ministries in his provisional government. One department and a ministry were dedicated to women and Lt. Col. Lakshmi Swaminathan, a 30-year-old female doctor was appointed as its leader (Ramachandran, 1970; Dancz, 1987; Datta, 2015; Lebra, 2008).

Bose's actions gained the support of Indian women and this led to the establishment of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment,[12] a women's outfit under the INA. Women considered the establishment of the regiment as an honour for women. Bose reiterated the important role of women in the success of the national liberation struggle as he spoke at the opening of this regiment in Singapore in 1943.

> To those who say that it will not be proper for our women to carry guns, my only request is that they look into the pages of our history…It is not important how many guns you can carry or how many cartridges you can fire. It is the spiritual force which will be generated by your heroic example that is important. Indians-both common people and members of the British Indian Army – who are on the border areas of India, will, on seeing you march with guns on your shoulders voluntarily come forward to receive guns from you and carry on the struggle started by you (Aiyer, 1965:190-191).

This call received tremendous response from Indian women in Malaya and Singapore. It was estimated over 2,000 women avowed to join the regiment after hearing his speech. A former female soldier in the regiment, Janaki Nahappan, estimated that 1,000 women had joined the Rani of Jhansi Regiment (RJR) and most of them were educated. Some Indian female labourers had also joined the regiment and fought together with the elite female fighters consisting of doctors, teachers, and nurses. The women's participation was indicative of the emergence of emancipation and nationalism among Indian women in Malaya. The awareness of nationalism among Indian women was shown through the voluntary participation of both elite and grassroots women to liberate India from British colonisation (Ruhana, 2017).

However, historians were uncertain of the real cause that led to Bose's action in Singapore. Some claim it was meant to get support from the men while others called it a propaganda ruse. Although Bose cared about gender equality by engaging women to achieve Indian independence, his actions were often linked to a political agenda. One opinion claims women's emancipation was not Bose's primary goal as his real aim was Indian independence. From the perspective of K.R Menon who was formerly an IIL senior officer,

> It [the RJR] was a mere puppet show. And not a single woman knew how to wield a knife properly. They knew how to wield the kitchen knife, but not the knife for the battle. And

[12] The name Rani of Jhansi was taken in honour of nationalists and leaders in the Jhansi area (1828-1858) which was then under Queen Lakshmibai who had opposed British colonisation from 1857 to 1858 during Indian Mutiny. Known as tomboy, she was charismatic and spoke many languages. She was also a debater. Like other girls, she was forced to wear the purdah and was married at the age of 8 with a 40-year-old man. Widowed at the age of 18 she was criticised for not living as a widow. Her death in battle rendered her position similar to Joan von Ark of France. For more information see Rettig (2013:627-638) and Lebra (1986).

> they had no other source because every day this propaganda going on and asking Indian women to come and join. They are not going to fight, you know, but they are going to do other service for the army – the regular army… (Datta, 2016: 89)

During an interview, Perumbulavil (2000) asserted the establishment of the Rani of Jhansi regiment was a worthless act and mere propaganda. She thought women at that time should have helped in matters like nursing instead of holding guns. Another opinion insisted that Bose's skills had attracted many women to his direction with some of them willing to donate jewellery, "*if the women were wearing jewellery, she took off all her jewellery and gave it to him*" (Singh, 1984: Reel No 6).

However, this opinion was disputed by some parties including women (such as Rasammah Bhupalan) who were considered elite and had held high positions in the regiment. She emphasised the establishment of this regiment was to show that women should also play an important role in the movement to liberate their motherland and join hands with the men for that purpose. She also stated, that when Indian men who had joined the British army saw that Indian women were willing to leave their families and go into the battlefield for the country's future, this would create a sense of guilt among these men (Gopinath, 2007).

According to Sahgal (1990), the Indian community in Southeast Asia at the time consisted of communities living in deprivation who did not hold high positions but worked as labourers in rubber estates, clerks, office assistants, and in the Department of Works. Stemming from their confidence in Bose's intentions, nearly 1,000 women joined the regiment to liberate India from colonial rule. In his speech, Sahgal said, Bose stressed that women's participation in the fight for independence was very important. The freedom they wanted is not only the freedom of the motherland but also freedom for themselves, "… *now this is their chance not only to get freedom of the country but to get their emancipation*" (Sahgal, 1990: Reel No 2).

Nevertheless, archives and oral history sources focused only on one group, the elite women. On the other hand, the voices of subaltern Indian women that is those from the estates which comprise almost 80 per cent of the Rani of Jhansi regiment were not given attention and recognition. What was the real purpose of their participation, was it because they wanted to rise against the British? As mentioned earlier subaltern Indian women lacked education or exposure to the outside world. In such a situation, nationalist ideas coming from Bose who was highly educated were not easily understood by this group. The real purpose of their joining the regiment was to escape the cruel shackles they faced in the estates. Problems with food shortages, clothing, sexual harassment, and domestic violence were some of the reasons why they joined the regiment. According to Datta (2015: 92),

> … that women from estates were drawn to the RJR in part to secure benefits that were beyond the reach of other women. This indicates that the estate women used the dominant nationalist to alter their own lives.

In reality, the establishment of the regiment was merely to meet the demand for nurses and cooks for the INA. Although the regiment members were given initial military training, they did not participate in any battlefront activities.

According to Andaya and Leonard (2017), although the regiment was established as a support for the movement through services such as cooking, providing treatment, and doing menial tasks, the regiment received military training and was involved in the Burmese war front. He also argued that Indian women joined this regiment to escape poverty and caste discrimination.

> The uneducated young Tamil women who left the plantations to join the INA knew little about nationalism in India, and within the regiment they still experienced the discrimination of caste and class. Nevertheless, they embraced the opportunity to escape lives of poverty and drudgery, and their example was often invoked by Bose to inspire male recruits (Andaya, and Leonard 2017: 265).

Generally, it is agreed that the involvement in this regiment gave recognition to Indian women. It allowed Indian women to re-evaluate their existence in society and to understand and challenge the multiple oppressions they experienced because of the intersection of their various identities. Indian female estate workers experienced oppression not only because of race and gender but also social class and as subjects of a colony. Indian women who returned after the regiment's disbandment were among those who had changed in terms of their worldview, courage, new thinking skills, self-respect, and hunger for freedom. These however were irrelevant to elite Indian women who returned with sensational stories to share with the world while no one knew what happened to the women in the estates. Their stories did not appear in any historical snippets about women's struggle against colonial rule. This shows socio-economic position also played an important role in gaining recognition.

## *Estate Strikes after Japanese Occupation*

The Second World War brought changes in the mindset of Indians in Malaya towards British authority and power. This was caused by Britain's defeat to Japan and INA activities which slightly changed the perception of Indians in Malaya. From 1946 to 1948, Indian workers joined their Chinese counterparts in a series of militant and organised strikes. In the immediate post-war years, the labouring classes faced severe economic problems. In May 1947, rubber price fell to twenty-five cents per pound, which resulted in a 20 per cent wage deduction for estate labourers (Mako, 2017; Rudner, 1970).

What followed was a series of strikes in rubber estates where Indian workers were predominant. Many of these strikes also involved women. These strikes that took place from 1946 to 1948 were related to wage issues and other socio-economic problems, such as a shortage of basic provisions. In Dublin estate, Kedah, Indian women had joined the protest with the men in demanding higher wages. In this particular estate, 800 women joined 1,000 men to demand a daily wage increase of $1.50 and more rice supplies. Similar strikes were organised in other estates in Kedah such as Sungai Tawar estate, Bedong estate, and Sungai Toh Pawang estate (The Straits Times, February 27, 1947).

Other than the problem of wages, Indian women also raised the issue of sexual harassment. On October 28, 1946, 45 men and 28 women launched a strike at Sussex estate in Teluk Anson, Perak. The strike was a protest against an estate clerk who sexually harassed female workers, with a demand for his dismissal. In Gapis estate, female labourers protested against the estate conductor who harassed estate women (Indian Daily Mail, September 14, 1946). In the above instances, male labourers were aggressive and courageously stood their ground. In another incident in Kedah 66 workers were arrested and 21 workers were wounded in Bukit Sembilan estate on 17 February 1949. They included women. During the melee, the Kedah police chief, A.C Maxwell suffered head injuries after he was struck by a stick-wielding woman. The incident was the result of police entry into the estate to arrest Balaiah, a labourer who was alleged to have seized a lorry owned by the estate management. Other labourers including women and children armed with sticks, and hot water joined the fray to prevent the arrest. Another group of women were in the forefront armed with pepper powder to await the arrival of the police (The Straits Times, March 4, 1947).

The series of protests that have erupted in some of these estates led to the emergence of a well-known movement among the Indian community during the late 1940s. It was called the *Thondar Padai* movement or Youth Corps. It was a militant group meant to protect the interests of Indian labourers (CO 537/3752: Malayan Security Service, Political Intelligence Journal, 1947). *Thondar Padai* members were made up of former INA soldiers. There was evidence that former members of the Rani of Jhansi regiment had also joined the movement, notably its women's wing which was assigned to protect women workers. The *Thondar Padai* movement attracted labourers in the estates, particularly those between fifteen and thirty years of age. The movement aimed to solve the economic and social problems experienced by Indian labourers at that time. They sought to bring reformation for Indians in the estate by putting an end to toddy drinking, improving health and solving domestic problems afflicting labourers. In one incident, *Thondar Padai* members used violence to achieve their goals by punishing labourers who refused to stop consuming toddy by tying them to trees.

> …the present troubles arose through the activities of the Youth Corps which had been going around beating up conductors, tying workers up for drinking toddy and trespassing of estates against the wishes and often without the knowledge of managers (The Straits Times, 7 Mac 1947: 5).

The violent action was a source of worry to the British and they began to link the movement to the Malayan Communist Party. Subsequently, strong action was taken to resolve strikes allegedly initiated by the *Thondar Padai*. On February 28, 1947, British security forces dispersed a group of picketing women and children who had assembled in front of a toddy shop in Bedong estate, Kedah. The women were only armed with hot water, wood, stones, and pepper powder while the police were armed with pistols, rifles, and batons. The ensuing melee caused the death of a labourer after he was struck by a baton while another nine people were injured (CO537 / 2173: Labour Situation Unrest among Estate Labour, 1948). On March 3, 1947, a strike erupted in Bukit Sembilan and on April 28, at Dublin estate, Kedah. All were linked to

the *Thondar Padai*. In an investigation conducted by the Indian Government Agent, SK Chettur, it was claimed the British had taken unwarranted action after many women were struck by security forces with two of them raped while in custody. Nevertheless, the colonial government stressed that violence had to be dealt with in a forceful manner (Malaya Tribune, March 20, 1947). As a result, many followers of the movement were arrested and later deported to India. In 1948, *Thondar Padai* was banned by the colonial government.

The involvement of Indian women in trade unionism was less active compared to women of the other races. This is due to the conservative nature of Indian society that discourages women from engaging in social activities. Furthermore, issues relating to Indian women such as sexual harassment, workplace discrimination as well as childcare had not merited trade union attention at the time (Jomo and Todd, 1994: 31). Trade unions set up in small estates were usually monopolised by Tamils. They also functioned as *panchayat* (court of justice) to solve problems in the estate including those involving women. In 1946, the rape of a 16-year-old young woman by an estate foreman was discussed by such a union in Kedah. The foreman was only fined $50 (reduced to $25 after appeal) with the money to be donated to a temple in the estate (Malayan Union: Annual Report of Labour Department, 1946).

Following the increase in the nationalist spirit in Malaya, it is arguable that labour struggles among Indians became more prominent due to the increasing labour exploitation. The affiliation with Chinese counterparts gave confidence to Indian female labourers to participate in labour unions and voice out their needs. They were increasingly imbibed with political awareness and the desire to fight for their rights in Malaya.

## Conclusion

Conservative views predominate with regard to the role of women in the Indian community in Malaya. Despite being actively involved as workers to support family needs, they were still considered to be dependent on men. They were always marginalised and separated from the outside world which is aptly summed up by the Tamil proverb *'aanai potri vala, pennai adithu vala'* which means 'live by praising the male, live by hitting the female'.

The exposure and the influence of nationalist movements from India and the involvement of Malay and Chinese women in social activism, labour struggles, and political consciousness have profoundly inspired Indian women (Nair, 2021). They were more aware of the importance of education and equal rights between men and women. The injustice, exploitation, and negative experiences during the Japanese occupation had opened their minds to act in tandem with the women of other races in voicing their rights and interests.

The experiences gained during the Japanese occupation and involvement in the Rani of Jhansi regiment were an eye-opener for prominent figures such as Rasammah Bhupalan that led her to participate actively in self-help organisations to enhance the

status of Indian women in Malaysia. The socio-economic situation and political consciousness of Indian women received more attention from the 1960s onwards. Opportunities and recognition in the socio-economic field helped in improving the living standards of Indian women. Many self-help organisations that were formed after the 1960s have played a major role in defending Indian women in legal aspects, protecting them from domestic violence, assisting business start-ups, and so forth. This means that political consciousness led to an awareness of the importance of education and the desire to change the mindset of a society constrained by cultural traditions. A few prominent Indian women such as Janaki Athi Nahappan, Devaki Krishnan, Valli Muthusamy, Sarasa Pasamanikam, Jaya Partiban, and Komala Krishna Moorthy who were involved in politics became *agents* that brought change to the mindset of Indian women. They instilled trust and confidence among women members of the party. This method of 'educating from within' was seen by all these women leaders as very important before they stepped out into the wider Indian community. They did this by organising programs especially related to the economy and entrepreneurship to further enhance the socio-economic position of Indian women in Malaysia. One cannot deny that a strong socio-economic position and mature political awareness will enhance the self-identity and self-confidence of Indian women in this country.

## References

Aiyer, S. A. (1965). *Selected speeches of Subhas Chandra Bose.* Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publication Department.

Andaya, B. W., & Leonard, A. Y. (2017). *A history of Malaya.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya. (1928). Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch.

Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya. (1929). Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch.

Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya. (1931). Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch.

Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya. (1933). Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch.

Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya. (1934). Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch.

Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya. (1935). Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch.

Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya. (1936). Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch.

Annual Report of the Agent of Government of India in British Malaya. (1937). Calcutta: Government of India, Central Publication Branch.

Ariffin, R. (1988). Malaysian women's participation in trade unions. In N. Heyzer (Ed.), *Daugthers in industry: Work, skill, and consciousness of women workers in Asian.* Kuala Lumpur: Asian and Pacific Development Centre.

Arifin, R. (1997). *Women and trade unions in Peninsular Malaysia with special reference to MTUC and CUEPACS*. Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.

CO 537/2173 (1948) Labor situation unrest among estate labor.

CO 537/3752 (1947) Malayan security service. *Political Intelligence Journal*.
Dancz, V. H. (1987). *Women and party politics in Peninsular Malaysia.* Oxford University Press.
Datta, A. (2015). social memory and Indian Women from Malaya and Singapore in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 88*(2), 77–103.
Datta, A. (2016). 'Immorality', nationalism and the colonial state in British Malaya: Indian 'coolie' women's intimate lives as ideological battleground. *Women's History Review, 24*(4), 584–601.
Del Tufo, M. V. (1949). *Malaya, comprising the Federation of Malaya and the colony of Singapore: A report on the 1947 census of population*. Crown Agents for the Colonies.
Deliege, R. (1993). The myths of origin of the Indian Untouchables. *Man, 28*(3), 533–549. https://doi.org/10.2307/2804238.
Federated Malay States. (1929). Proceedings of the Federal Council.
Federated Malay States (1935). Annual Report on Education in Federated Malay States for the year 1934. F.M.S Government Gazette.
Federated Malay States (1949). Annual Report on Education in Federated Malay States for the year 1948. F.M.S Government Gazette.
Fell, H. (1957). *Population census of the Federation of Malaya* (no. 6). Kuala Lumpur: Department of Statistics.
Gamba, C. (1962). *The National Union of Plantation Workers: The History of the Plantation Workers of Malaya*, 1946–1958. Singapore: D.Moore for Eastern Universities Press, c1962.
Gomez, E. T. (1994). *Political business: corporate involvement in Malaysia political parties.* James Cook University of North Queensland.
Gopinath, A. (2007). *Footprints on the sounds of time: Rasammah Bhupalan: A Life of purpose.* Kuala Lumpur: Arkib Negara Malaysia.
Hills, C., & Silverman, D. C. (1993). Nationalism and feminism in late colonial India: The Rani of Jhansi Regiment, 1943–1945. *Modern Asian Studies, 27*(4), 741–760.
Indian Daily Mail. (1946). Chettur Intervenes Successfully in Another Strike. p. 4. Retrieved from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers.
Jackson, R. N. (1961). *Immigrant labour and the development of Malaya.* The Government Press.
Jain, R. (1970). *South Indians on the plantation frontier in Malaya.* University of Malaya Press.
Jain, R. K. (1984). South Indian labour in Malaya, 1840–1920: Asylum stability and involution. In K. Saunders (Ed.), *Indentured labour in the British Empire 1834–1920* (pp. 158–182). Croom Helm.
Jomo, K. S., & Todd, P. (1994). *Trade unions and the state in Peninsular Malaysia.* Oxford University Press.
Kailasam, A. (2008). *Identiti India di Malaysia.* Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
Kaur, A. (1998). Tappers and weeders: South Indian plantation workers in Peninsular Malaysia, 1880–1970. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 21*(s1), 73–102.
Kaur, A. (2006). Indian labour, labour standards, and workers' health in Burma and Malaya, 1900–1940. *Modern Asian Studies, 40*(2), 425–475.
Khoo, A. (2004). *Life as the river flows: women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle (an oral history of women from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore).* Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information Research Development.
Kondapi, C. (1951). *Indians overseas, 1838–1949*. New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs.
Krishnan, P., Dali, A. M., Ghazali, A. Z., & Subramanian, S. (2014). The history of toddy drinking and its effects on Indian labourers in colonial Malaya, 1900–1957. *Asian Journal of Social Science, 42*(3–4), 321–382.
Lebra, C. J. (1986). *Women against the Raj: The Rani Jhansi Regiment*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
Lee, S. M. (1989). Female immigrants and labour in colonial Malaya, 1860–1947. *International Migration Review, 23*(2), 309–331.
Mako, Y. (2017). Japanese occupation and economic policy in Malaya. *SEJARAH: Journal of the Department of History*, *10*(10), 21–51.

Malaya tribune. (1914). *The Drink Curse in Malaya and Ceylon.* Malaya tribune. p. 6. Retrieved from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers.
Malaya Tribune. (1933). Indian Immigrants in Malaya: Quarantine Difficulties. Malaya Tribune. p. 17. Retrieved from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers.
Malaya Tribune. (1947). Governer Gent Blames Unions for Kedah Riots. p. 6. Retrieved from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers.
Malayan Union. (1946). Annual Reports on Labor Department Malaya.
Manderson, L. (1980). *Women, politics and change: The Kaum Ibu UMNO, Malaysia, 1945–1972.* Oxford University Press.
Mohamad, M. (1989). Gender, class and sexual division of labour in a Rural Malay community in Kedah. *Kajian Malaysia, 2*(2), 22–36.
Mohamed A. D. (2012). Sejarah masyarakat India di Malaysia. Kuala Lumput: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.
Musa, M. (2016). Malayan women during the Japanese Occupation. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 89*(2), 101–124.
Nair, S. (2021). *The role of women self-help organisations and the MIC women wing in the socioeconomic development of Indian women in Peninsular Malaysia, 1963–2010.* Doctoral Dissertation: Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia.
Nathan, J. E. (1922). *The Census of British Malaya:(the straits settlements, federated malay states and protected states of Johore, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Trengganu, and Brunei), 1921.* Waterloo & Son Ltd.
Netto, G. (1961). *Indians in Malaya: Historical facts and figures*. The author.
Nijhawan, S. (2014). Fallen through the nationalist and feminist grids of analysis: Political campaigning of Indian women against indentured labour emigration. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 21*(1), 111–133.
Oorjitham, S. (1984). Indian women in urban Malaysia: A sociological approach. in H. Ai Yun, N. S. Karim & R. Talib. (Eds.), *Women in Malaysia.* Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publication.
Oorjitham, S. (1987). Problems of women workers in the plantation sector in Peninsular Malaysia. *Ilmu Masyarakat*, 46–52.
Ramachandran, S. (1994). *Indian plantation labor in Malaya*, Kuala Lumpur: S Abdul Majeed & Co Pub Division.
Raman, K. R. (2020). Can the Dalit woman speak? How 'intersectionality' helps advance postcolonial organization studies. *Organization, 27*(2), 272–290.
Ramasamy, P. (1992). Labour control and labour resistance in the plantations of colonial Malaya. *The Journal of Peasant Studies, 19*(3–4), 87–105.
Rettig, T. (2013). Recruiting the all-female Rani of Jhansi Regiment: Subhas Chandra Bose and Dr Lakshmi Swaminadhan. *South East Asia Research, 21*(4), 627–638.
Rudner, M. (1970). Rubber strategy for post-war Malaya, 1945–48. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 1*(1), 23–36.
Ruhana, P. (2017). *Perjuangan wanita dalam aktivisme sosial dan nasionalisme di Tanah Melayu, 1929–1957/Ruhana Padzil*. Doctoral dissertation: University of Malaya.
Sahgal, L. (1990). Oral History Interviews. National Archives of Singapore. Accession No 001182. Retrieved from http://nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interview.
Sandhu, K. S. (1969). *Indians in Malaya: Some aspects of their immigration and settlement, 1786–1957*. Cambridge University Press.
Singh. (1984). Oral history interviews. National Archives of Singapore. Accession No 000418. Retrieved from http://nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interview.
Sinnappah, A. (1970). *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore.* Oxford University Press.
Special Report on Education in Malaya, 1948.
Stenson, M. R. (1980). *Class, race and colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian case.* University of Queensland Press.

The Singapore Free Press and Merchantile Advertiser. (1938). Importance of Sex Ratio for Indian Immigration: Evils of Too Great Inequality. p.5. Retrieved from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers.
The Straits Times. (1940). CIAM & Wages on Malayan Estates. p. 12. Retrieved from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers.
The Straits Times. (1947). Governor visits disturbed Kedah area: Chettur to inquire into unrest. p. 5. Retrieved from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers.
Tinker, H. (1974). *A new system of slavery: The export of Indian labour overseas 1830–1920*. Oxford University Press.
Interview with Vilasini Perumbulavil. (2000). Oral History Interviews. National Archives of Singapore. Accession No 002437. Retrieved from http://nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interview.
Vlieland, C. A. (1932). *British Malaya: A report on the 1931 Census and certain problems of vital statistics*. Crown Agents for the Colonies.

**Syamala Nair Gopal** completed her Ph.D in History at Universiti Sains Malaysia. She is currently a senior teacher in History and General Studies at a Sixth Form college in Malaysia. She has more than 21 years of teaching experience. Her area of interest is in Malaysian history, gender and women history, politics and socio-economy.

**Mahani Musa** is a professor of history at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. Her research interest is socio-political history. The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society published her monograph Malay Secret Societies in the Northern Malay States (2006), and she has published widely on Malay women in Malaysian history.

# "Indian Mothers, 'Chinese' Daughters": Child Adoption in Pre-Independence Malaysia and Singapore


**Theresa W. Devasahayam**

**Abstract** This chapter examines how through cross-cultural child adoption, from the late 1920s to 1960s, the Indian community of Malaya (including Singapore) engaged in subtle shifts in what they thought to be 'Indian' in a colonial and post-colonial space. Demonstrating that ethnic boundaries are more fluid than once thought, the chapter delves into the process of 'cultural incorporation' of Chinese girls into adoptive Indian families: the ways in which the adoptive daughter is received into the Indian family, taking on the 'Indian' identity, erasing the ethnic lines between herself and that of the ethnic grouping of her birth family. The success of the incorporation of these daughters into these Indian families occurred because the girls embraced the 'categorical attributes' associated with Indian identity and culture; irrespective of their physical appearance and their 'cumulative disadvantage' of being females from an ethnic minority group in which son preference was not only upheld but led to these female children being given up for adoption.

**Keywords** Child adoption · Malaya · Singapore · British colonial government · Indian diaspora · Son preference

## Introduction

Nineteenth-century Malaya was marked by ethnic diversity: the social landscape changed and evolved in complex ways with the arrival of the British. Colonialism catalysed migration from mainland China and South Asia to Malaya, although these historical linkages had existed well before that period. In Malaya, the British encouraged Chinese and Indian immigration into the Peninsular to fill labour shortages in the plantation and mining sectors (Kratoska, 2001). From 1900 to 1929, there were no restrictions placed on the thousands of migrants from China, South Asia, and Java

T. W. Devasahayam (✉)
Associate Faculty at the Singapore University for Social Science (SUSS), Singapore, Singapore
e-mail: twdevasahayam@yahoo.com.sg



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_3

into Malaya (Purcell, 1967). Generally, migrant Chinese and Indians were considered transient and therefore would be repatriated when their labour services were no longer required (Kratoska, 2001).

In 1872, immigration from South Asia to the Straits Settlements became legalised (Amrith, 2010). While earlier waves of migration were dominated by males, by the early twentieth century, Indian (as had happened with Chinese) migrants began to establish families encouraged by the British who saw the advantages of a "proper family life"; in turn, employers of plantations began to encourage family settlements (Arasaratnam, 2006, p. 195). In addition to the Indian labour class, educated Indians also began to arrive in Malaya. Taking on white-collar and professional jobs and coming with their families, this group saw themselves as permanent residents of Malaya (Arasaratnam, 2006). From 1947 to 1957, Singapore and Pahang saw an estimated 80 per cent increase in the number of Indians (Sandhu, 1969, p. 190).

In contrast, the Chinese came to Malaya mostly on the credit ticket system while some were assisted by relatives and friends (Kaur, 2012). In the nineteenth century, the overwhelming outflow of Chinese into Singapore and Southeast Asia was propelled by conditions in China that made survival very difficult (Ee, 1961). In 1928, the Immigration Restriction Ordinance was set up and administered until 1933. The result was a drastic drop in the numbers of Chinese males as the Aliens Ordinance was established to empower the Governor-in-Council to regulate not only the number of "aliens" in the colony but "to extend … control to all adult male aliens" (Low, 2014, p. 85).

Interestingly, this same period saw a surge in the numbers of Chinese women working on estates (Purcell, 1967). Their arrival in the colony in large numbers might have been the result of a slump in the silk industry in China. Purcell (1967) mentions that the arrival of Chinese women might have resulted because of the absence of an immigration quota that applied to them. In fact, the Immigration Restriction Ordinance introduced in 1928, while limiting male migrants from arriving into Malaya, encouraged female immigration in the hope that families would develop to provide a more permanent workforce, leading to estates "witnessing a transition from male to family labour" (Purcell, 1967, p. 200). Steamship companies ferrying migrants from China to Malaya required that for every ticket sold to a man, six should be sold to women (Kratoska, 2001). The following years saw a gradual increase in the number of Chinese women immigrants and between 1931 and 1957, the censuses began to record gender parity in the population (Caldwell, 1963).

While the human flows into the colony at this time resulted in the co-existence of different ethnic groups, there was a distinct social construction of inter-ethnic relations. Each group—namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians—gravitated towards their own clan/dialect or ethnic group. This situation was reinforced by the fact that the colonial government provided few opportunities for inter-ethnic interaction. In reality, however, the ethnic boundaries were not impenetrable or impermeable (Hirschman, 1986, 1987). On the contrary, there was "relative openness of ethnic relations" deduced from the presence of intermarriage as well as the assimilation of Indian Muslims into the Malay ethnic group (Hirschman, 1986, p. 338; see also Nagata, 1974). In other words, the ethnic groups were not socially isolated from

each other, nor polarised; instead, cross-ethnic interaction was not uncommon as communities lived alongside one another. For example, diasporic Chinese and Indians spoke rudimentary Malay to communicate with one another as well as with the local Malays (see also Purcell, 1967).

Another context in which inter-ethnic interactions were evident was in the adoptions that took place. These adoptions provided evidence for the considerable interaction across the ethnic groups: such that people would turn to each other for help in times of need and such that biological parents were willing to part with their children and give them up to others from outside their own ethnic communities.[1] The lack of contraceptive use meant that families were usually large. In cases where the biological parents could not take care of their children, 'offloading' them to whosoever might be willing or looking to adopt a child was the most obvious option—a situation exacerbated by poverty or the hardships people encountered in pre-independence Malaya and Singapore. The common pattern in these adoptions was that Chinese girls were being adopted into Indian families. Although boys were being adopted, their numbers, however, were far fewer than girl adoptions as the persistence of son preference among the Chinese led to the practice of girl children, in particular, being 'given away' to families of means who were open to adopting them.[2]

Based on ethnographic data, this chapter seeks to examine the ways in which diasporic Indians in the then Malaya (now Malaysia and Singapore) transformed these Chinese girls they had adopted into 'Indian girls'. On the one hand suggesting that these girls, while they were not 'born Indian,' could 'become Indian' because of their being fully incorporated processually into the cultural world of their adoptive families. On the other hand, such a process resulted in the erasure of the ethnic lines between these girls and that of their birth parents. From the perspective of these adopted girls, the success of the incorporation rests on two planes. These girls saw themselves as 'being (every bit) Indian' in the 'self-other' construction[3] of ethnic identity in Malaya (and Singapore), viewing this as a natural consequence of their being raised by Indians and attesting to how their adoptive parents were able to help them navigate and establish a sense of ethnic identity as 'Indians'. Secondly, they almost always married Indian men, affirming further their Indian identity as well as their affiliation: a final demonstration of severance from their Chinese roots. In fact, the majority never saw themselves as a product of multiple identities—that is, being Indian and Chinese simultaneously, although, by physical appearance, they looked Chinese—a fact that they could not erase; even though they faced a "cumulative disadvantage" of being females from an ethnic minority group in which cultural

[1] It was also in the towns and rural settings that people developed friendships and fictive kinship relationships (through the institution of godparent-hood) irrespective of ethnic background; which paved the way for adoption across ethnic groups.

[2] If boys were given up for adoption, this usually only occurred because a close kin had fallen ill. Giving up the boy child was the decision made at the advice of a medium or astrologer who might have been consulted.

[3] 'Self-other' construction in this case refers to how the ethnic 'self', in this case, being raised by Indians is constructed and defined by the ethnic other, that is, the Chinese ethnic group, whom these girls resembled in terms of their physical appearance.

beliefs pertaining to son preference were not only upheld but led to their being given up for adoption (cf. Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 378), and thereby exemplifying how overlapping strands of oppression have played out. To this end, the analysis in this chapter highlights the centrality of the "interlinking grids of differential positionings in terms of …. race and ethnicity, [and] gender …" and how these have led to their unique lives (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199). These adopted women actively constructed "inclusionary/exclusionary boundaries" by embracing the "categorical attributes" associated with Indian identity and culture, attesting as well to the nurturing and socialising influence of their adoptive parents (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199).

In this case, the adoptive family was the primary site for the cultural socialisation of the adopted child who then learned about the beliefs, messages and practices of the racial or ethnic heritage of the adoptive parents in a warm and secure context where they felt fully received (cf. Neil, 2012). The transmission of culture from the adoptive parents to the adopted child largely focuses on the adoptive parents as the focal actors in the socialisation process (cf. Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2004; Hu et al., 2017). In the case of cross-ethnic adoption, the relevance of situational meaning, significance, and consequence become paramount (Simon & Alstein, 2017), as the adoptive parents play a pivotal role in socialising the adopted child early on, while in some cases even minimising the differences between the child's birth culture and that of the adoptive parents (Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001). This is imperative, especially since the ethnic socialisation process executed by adoptive couples is complicated since the adoptive children come from a different ethnic group from that of the adoptive parents. In fact, the way adoptive mothers understand diversity has been found to influence how they might eventually raise the adoptive child (Barn, 2013). While in the United States, cross-ethnic adoption saw instances in which adoptive parents socialised their adoptive children into the cultures of their biological parents, this did not happen in pre-independence Malaya and Singapore. Keeping the 'real' ethnic identity of the adoptive child 'a secret' tended instead to be the norm; with the child growing up and learning later on that she was adopted.

For the purposes of this chapter, stories around adoption were recreated based on a combination of ethnographic interviews, un/published (mainly student theses), and published materials (mainly journal articles and books). A total of eleven Chinese women who had been given up for adoption were interviewed; in addition to two women whose mothers had been adopted but had passed on some years ago. In an effort to complement the information gathered, more information was gleaned from seven young men and women whose mothers had been adopted by Indian couples. As in Pereira (1966) who engaged in a similar cross-cultural adoption project decades ago, I too can attest to the difficulties encountered in appealing for interviews among adoptive parents and daughters since the adoptive girls themselves had problems eliciting information on their own adoptions from their adoptive parents, who by and large were reluctant to discuss the matter. As for interviewing the adoptive couples themselves, it was near impossible to meet and gather information from them since nearly all had passed on. Aside from these interviews, I also had a chance to meet with a Catholic nun residing in Cheras Convent, Selangor in 2004 who

described her experience of working in the convent orphanage from the 1940s to the 1960s. In an attempt to understand the link between the Chinese horoscope and the reasons why some Chinese gave up their children (both boys and girls) for adoption, a Chinese geomancer was interviewed. All these interviews were conducted both in Malaysia and Singapore over seven years (2004–2011), while additional fieldwork was undertaken in January and February of 2020.

## Reasons for Giving Up and Reasons for Adopting a (Girl) Child

Poverty was the first and foremost reason for giving up children. It was not uncommon to have many children and not be able to provide adequate care for each of them because of the lack of financial resources. Caldwell (1963, p. 64) makes an argument for fertility rates among Chinese and Indian women in the diaspora being higher than that in their homelands because traditional birth control methods 'for limiting family size went into discard'. The situation becomes grimmer especially if the father was jobless and the family had to depend on Public Assistance. Hoe (1959) in a study of Chinese mothers who gave up their children for adoption mentioned a significant number living on Public Assistance; implying that they were struggling with maintaining a decent life. For many of these families especially with six or seven children, Hoe (1959) says that an extra child means an extra child to feed.

As a point of comparison, Indians were less likely to be 'forced' to give up their children, even if they were extremely poor. This same idea was reiterated by Heng (1957) who wrote that Indians do not give up their children "no matter how adverse their circumstances" (p. 14). Besides, there are cultural reasons for not giving up children. There are notions of what constitutes a noble and virtuous woman: one who would not give their children up so easily but rather chooses to share her adversity and hardship with them. In fact, according to Tamil beliefs, a married woman is an auspicious woman "credited with the power (*śakti*) to control and alter the course of events to … provide their families with wealth, health, and prosperity" (Reynolds, 1991, p. 35). Conversely, a woman who gives up her children would be despised and considered weak and selfish (Pereira, 1966). In fact, any child who was abandoned or was given up for adoption was usually born out of wedlock. Because of the stigma surrounding illegitimacy, there were no, or very few, Indian children available for adoption. This led to a situation where Indians adopted children rather than gave them away.

At this time, de facto adoptions, characterised by the lack of formal arrangements involved in the transference of children between the biological and adoptive parents, formed the majority of adoptions: thus, the exact number of adoptions would never be known as "a fraction of the adoptions [were] handled by the Courts" (Wee, 1980, p. 64). In most cases, the potential adoptive couple learned by word of mouth about the biological parent's intention of giving the child up for adoption. In fact, Wee

(1980) notes that the Chinese held a favourable perception of Indians and Malays and saw the latter groups as people who loved girls and would not use them as domestic servants or push them into prostitution, thus exemplifying the idea that the "inter-personal links … [were] far from being ethnically random" (1980 p. 64; see also Wee, 1977). Because the "Tamil poor have no tradition of off-loading excess children" in the diaspora, coupled with the fact that their illegitimacy rates were low, the result was a low number of (Indian) children being put up for adoption (Wee, 1977, p. 294): this made adoption within their own ethnic as well as caste group near impossible. Thus, the children given up for adoption were almost always Chinese—and almost always (Chinese) girls—whether among de facto or legal adoptions (see also Wee, 2017).

The underlying reasons for giving up a child for adoption were complex. Cultural beliefs were one motivating factor. Girls born in the Year of the Tiger according to the Chinese Horoscope often suffered this fate should death or illness occur in the family at the time of their birth. In this case, superstition rendered the child 'inauspicious' and was sufficient grounds for the transference of the child. A clash in horoscopes of the child and an older member of the family was another reason. The child was given up, especially if another (usually an older) member of the family fell ill, suggesting that the newborn baby brought on ill-luck to the family. Widowhood on the part of the mother also led to children being transferred out as sometimes the child would be perceived to have brought ill-luck to the parents. Hoe (1959) relates that, especially in cases when the widow has a string of children and was forced to go out to work to sustain her family, she may be forced to give up the youngest and most dependent child so that she is free to work and take care of her other children.

There have been instances of biological parents giving up their girl children because they were not keen on raising too many daughters. Here, the Chinese traditional practice of son preference was evident. Patriarchal and patrilineal kinship systems operate in favour of boys; the girl child was rejected based on social rather than economic grounds. A woman being too ill to provide care to a newborn baby was another reason (Hoe, 1959). In this case, there might be no female relatives to help provide care for the child, and paid domestic help or hiring a surrogate mother might be out of the question as the family was too poor. That the biological mothers themselves were mentally ill was also grounds for giving up the child; although it was the biological fathers who usually made the decision.

The reasons for adopting a child were as varied as the reasons for giving up a child. Childlessness was a common reason for Indian couples to adopt. While having a slight tendency toward adopting boys if they were childless,[4] couples would ultimately end up adopting girls in cases they were childless or already had a boy child(ren) since, as mentioned earlier, only girls tended to be available for adoption. In this case, their preference for a boy was clearly indicative of patrilineal cultural underpinnings, like

[4] It must be noted that son preference tends to be most pronounced in North and Central India compared to South India. Although boys are favoured because a male is needed to conduct the death rituals in the family and the dowry system reinforces the economic liability of a girl child (Arnold, Choe and Roy, 1998; Das Gupta et al., 2003); in the South, bilateral kinship systems operate more strongly when compared to the North. See also Pong (1994).

their counterpart couples in the Indian subcontinent. Among other reasons, the desire for a boy was mainly to fulfill inheritance as well as ritual purposes. In this sense, the Indians in the diaspora exhibited a clear preference for males. But because of the dearth of boys being put up for adoption in the context of Malaya and Singapore, they ended up having to be more receptive to adopting girls.

While childlessness was the first reason for adoption, actually desiring a girl child was the second (although not the primary reason) for inter-ethnic adoptions. In such cases, adoptive couples wanted a girl child to ensure a gender balance in the family, although none of my respondents spoke about experiencing any kind of partiality towards the biological son(s) on the part of their adoptive parents when it came to inheritance, a practice unheard of in South Asia where boys were clearly favoured over girls, indicating a distinct shift from cultural practices back in the homeland. This desire for a gender balance may have been spatially created; emanating from an appreciation for the girl child usually associated with the Malays and other local people from Southeast Asia who tended to value girls more than boys although they would express no explicit preference for either sex (Devasahayam, 2004; see also McKinley, 1975). Moreover, it must be noted that as in the Chinese case, an Indian couple would adopt a Chinese girl as she was an outsider who would be married off and, therefore, there was no issue of needing her to preserve the family lineage. Furthermore, in the context of Malaya (including Singapore) at that time, Tamil Indians were not strictly bound by the dowry system and, as such, the adoption of girl children would not have proved to be a burden to the adoptive couple. Thus, when Chinese girls were adopted, generally they would assume the status of either the only child in the family or the only daughter.

While in the Indian subcontinent, Bharadwaj (2003) speaks of adoption rarely taking place,[5] kin adoption did occur in some states such as Tamil Nadu. Trawick (1992) speaks about the practice of kin adoption to preserve cross-cousin marriage. Here, the adopted child grows up knowing her own biological parents and being aware that she had been adopted. In Malaya, Heng (1957) cites one couple whose initial preference was for a "family adoption" but later dropped the idea preferring a 'total outsider' as they were concerned that the child's biological parents might have a "'we—are—relations—hereafter' attitude" (pp. 102, 103). It is also possible that Indians were adopting beyond their kin group and that the social context of that time was integral to changing the cultural behaviour and attitude of diasporic Indians. In other words, in the South Asian diasporas of Malaya (and Singapore), Indians had the option of adopting outside the family because of the availability of children from other ethnic groups, namely the Chinese; and thus, the Tamils moved away from restricting themselves to their traditional practice of adopting within the kin group only.

Adopting a child outside the ethnic group was useful for another reason: the adoption of children of other castes among Indians would have been problematic,

[5] Pereira (1966) also details the cultural and social reasons why adoption was shunned. As such, children would not have been abandoned or given up since it would be difficult to find others who would accept them and take care of them.

thus it is highly probable that diasporic Indians were not keen on adopting within the ethnic group since caste would have been an issue, as it would have been in South Asia itself. In this regard, the Chinese girl was 'safely outside' the caste group which made adoption a viable option. Heng (1957) raises a similar point: that adopting a Chinese girl was less problematic as the girl is 'casteless' and had the potential of assuming the caste of the adoptive family through the process of caste assimilation. In contrast, I would argue that adopting Chinese girls was acceptable not only because caste rules did not apply to them but because the adoption of these girls would fall outside the matrix of the caste system; hence, a "context-sensitive kind of rule …" operates in this case which makes adoption possible (Ramanujan, 1989, p. 47). To put it differently, the caste system only operates for Indians and not others; thus, someone who does not belong to the caste system is not perceived as 'breaking' caste rules.[6]

## Becoming 'Indian'

The familial context was the primary site in which these adopted Chinese girls transformed into 'Indian' girls. The cultural shifts they experienced in their everyday life were integral to a 'new' identity they came to embrace not only through how they came to perceive themselves; but also how they were perceived by those around them, including their adoptive parents. Adoptive parents, in particular, the adoptive mother played a critical role in the cultural incorporation of the adoptive child. In the familial setting, it was the Indian woman who is the bastion of Indian culture; she perpetuates the Indian way of life reflected in the cuisine, clothing, and other habitual expressions of the culture surrounding their adoptive daughters. In Hindu homes, these Chinese girls learned Hindu rituals from their adoptive mothers such as taking an oil bath before they lit the altar lamp and prayed. Santha, 53, who resides in Singapore, affectionately recalls how her mother played a critical role in raising her. She said:

> I learned about the Indian culture through my upbringing … In terms of attire, I frequently wore traditional costumes and always adorned a *pottu*[7] … My mother was a fairly pious [Hindu] devotee and she taught me about the many aspects of the Hindu religion, with regular visits to the temple as well … I did not feel forced in any way and in fact, [I became] well accustomed … to the Indian tradition.

Thus, in the temples, stores, and restaurants in Little India in Singapore, it was (and is) not uncommon to catch a glimpse of these Chinese girls/women as they looked 'quintessentially Indian' and tended to stand out in a crowd of Indians because of their physical appearance. Usually, they wore *saree*s and Indian jewellery, complemented

[6] The case of Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers hired in Brahmin homes serves as a counterpoint (Devasahayam, 2005).

[7] Traditionally, the *pottu*, as it is called in Tamil, is a dot of red colour applied in the centre of the forehead between the eyebrows.

by a *pottu*. They also usually wore their hair long and braided. By expressing the 'performative' aspects of 'being Indian', they signalled their membership in the adoptive family. But the adoption of these girls, however, should not be seen as an act that occurred at one point in time; rather it should be understood as a process whereby these Chinese girls transformed into Indian girls at every stage in their lives. While the adoptive family, especially the adoptive mother, played a pivotal role in 'transforming' her adopted child, in a sense, the adoptive couple was not adopting the Chinese girl; rather, she was adopting them, and their way of life—their language, religion, values, Indian names, food, social customs, and style of dress: the outward trappings of 'Indian-ness' as defined by all my respondents, regardless of their religious identity; since among the Indians there were also Christian Indian couples who adopted Chinese girls.[8]

The transformation of these Chinese girls into 'Indian' girls occurred in every adoptive family. The families came from various castes, religious and language groups, as well as different class backgrounds. Many low-income, working-class Indian families from the rubber estates in Malaya also adopted; indicating that socio-economic class did not serve as a barrier to adoption. It could be argued then in this context that there were two sides to the process of 'cultural incorporation' of these Chinese girls into their adoptive Indian families. On the one hand, are the ways in which she is received into the Indian family into which she is adopted; and, on the other how she feels fully incorporated into the adoptive family to the extent that ethnic lines between herself and that of the ethnic grouping of her birth family are completely erased. Moreover, adoptive mothers, in raising these Chinese girls, always treated them as if these girls/women were their own. This point was described by an adopted woman: 'They [my adoptive parents] treated me like their own child … Their relatives also treated me like a family member'. It was not surprising that Savitri drew this conclusion because her adoptive parents had two sons and she was aware that her adoptive parents never made any distinction between them and her. In fact, the majority of my respondents mentioned that there was no difference in the treatment received between biological and adoptive children. If anything else, adoptive parents tended to show greater affection towards the adoptive daughter than they would to their own biological children.[9] This could have been possible because she was the only female among a group of boys in the case of those who had only sons, or she was the only child. Eighty-two-year-old Rani, mentioned how her adoptive mother would relate to her stories about the Second World War as she grew older; and how when the sirens would go off, her adoptive mother would be quick to scoop her up in her arms and run for shelter. She later learned that her adoptive mother's fears were founded on the fact that the Japanese soldiers targeted Chinese children with the intent of killing them. Such was the extent of her adoptive mother's love for her!

[8] These expressions of 'Indian-ness' were detailed by nearly every one of my respondents, including those who were Christian; although they did acknowledge that there were variations as to what constituted being 'Indian'.

[9] See also Pereira (1966).

In treating the Chinese girl as their own and, as any child, in need of love and protection, the adoptive child's "'Chineseness" [did] not … enter into the picture …" (Pereira, 1966, p. 27). The same idea, although at the level of the Indian community, was reiterated by Wee (1977) who points out that: "the Chinese origin of an adopted girl becomes a 'non-fact' in the Tamil community" (p. 295), attesting to the "strength of cultural conditioning and assimilation" (Heng, 1957, p. 32). In fact, the adopted Chinese girl was a member of the adoptive family as if she had consanguineal ties with her adoptive parents/siblings and in no way did the lack of those ties come up as an issue.

In the same vein, the adopted child was never perceived as an outsider to the community; a point which is reinforced in the context of marriage; instead the Indian-ness of these adoptive girls would only be affirmed again. As if they were biological daughters, many adoptive girls had arranged marriages, as Heng (1957) iterated in the case of girls from sheltered homes. In this case, these Chinese girls/women would go through the same Hindu rituals and ceremonies as they would if they were the natural offspring of their adoptive parents. In the families into which they were married, they held the authority of a married woman linked to their status as wives of heads of household. In an example raised by Pereira (1966), one adoptive woman who was married to the eldest cousin recalls that after the death of her in-laws, her husband's relatives would pay them visits first during festivals before visiting the other relatives, a custom practised in many Hindu homes in keeping with the patrilineal kinship system.

The context of marriage affirmed their Indian-ness in another way: these adopted Chinese girls almost always ended up marrying Indian men and *almost never* Chinese men. I assert that they almost always never marry Chinese men because the latter did not regard them to be Chinese women. On this, Heng (1957) reports that while adoptive parents may not object to these girls marrying a Chinese, there was an overt preference for an Indian suitor. In this case, it could be seen that marrying an Indian man for any of these Chinese girls is tantamount to an explicit severance from their own ethnic origin (that is, the Chinese community) as they begin their own journey of forming their very own Indian families. Besides, many adoptive parents felt that their Chinese adoptive daughters would have no problem finding an Indian groom because their fair complexion was a 'valuable asset'. In another study on these Chinese girls, Pereira (1966) notes one of her informants saying that "there would be a 'double demand' for Chinese girls brought up by Indians because they possess a charm and fascination which natural Indian girls do not [possess]" (p. 90).

In marriage, sometimes these girls were wedded off to male relatives, indicating that they were treated like consanguineal daughters back in India. This is especially so in the case of Tamils where it is acceptable for consanguineal relatives to marry. Aside from this, the household played in socialising these Chinese girls into Indian women, in Malaya and Singapore where attempts to preserve cross-cousin marriage were not very common, if it did occur, marrying a male kinsman reflected a 'double affirmation' of incorporating these 'outsider women' into the kin group. Santha, 53, described her marriage:

> My husband is my adoptive mother's brother's son … In other words, he is my cousin … I was constantly teased with him since young and at a tender age my husband developed feelings for me … My adoptive mother and his mother (the one who aided my adoption process) also wanted me to marry him … Hence, I would say it's a love/arranged marriage.

In a case study presented by Pereira (1966), one of her informants who had married off his adoptive daughter to a relative says that the reason for doing so was to ensure that she always remained "in the family" (p. 80). Thus, while there were some who had married men who were consanguineal kin of their adoptive parents, others married non-kin especially when suitable suitors came along.

It may be said then that, by and large, these Indian adoptive couples were highly successful in incorporating these adopted Chinese girls into their families: among those interviewed, most of the Chinese women who had been adopted mentioned that that they had no desire to know their biological relatives for fear of 'hurting' or 'betraying the trust' of their adoptive parents,[10] and preferred that there was no contact between them. This, however, was in contrast to how their children felt: some of whom went in search of their own mothers' biological kin. Invariably, "Chinese parents expect to sever all links" and Indian parents "welcome the complete incorporation of their child into their family" (Wee, 1977, p. 294).

Thus, it was found that these adoptive girls/women regard the Indian community as their own and regard the Chinese as "another race" (Pereira, 1966, p. 64). In fact, the notion of 'being Indian' and 'not Chinese' came up repeatedly in the narratives gathered. Shakuntala, now in her early 70 s, who identifies only with the Indian community remarked:

> I was only Chinese for nine months in my mother's womb; for the rest of my life, I was raised by an Indian family … they taught me how to speak Tamil … eat Indian food … and now [I] am married to an Indian man.

She later opined that she could never be a 'Chinese' for those reasons. Radha, 69 years old whose daughter I interviewed related in detail why her mother would never see herself as Chinese by ethnic identity. She explained:

> My mom considers herself an Indian because she speaks Tamil fluently … in fact she taught me how to read and write Tamil and to do my Tamil homework all the time … she wears the saree for occasions and cooks Indian food at home every day … she also prays to the Hindu gods and celebrates all the Hindu festivals … but she does not [celebrate] Chinese New Year.

Generally, they affirmed their ethnic identity to be that of being 'Indian' because of their engaging in the performative aspects of the ethnic group such as the habits, practices, customs and traditions associated with the Indian community. Sushila, who is now 53 and from Malaysia remembers being well-received into her adoptive family:

---

[10] An exception was one respondent who represented the younger generation of adopted Chinese girls into Indian families; she was born in 1967 and went in search of her biological relatives on her adoptive mother's death. As she explained, her search for her biological kin was because she needed a sense of 'closure' about who her 'real' family was.

> I think my adoptive parents treated me like an Indian girl … I can speak Tamil … but my appearance is Chinese … I look Chinese with Indian clothes …whenever I go out, people hear me speak Tamil and they are amazed … the Chinese people I meet speak to me in Chinese … but I cannot speak Chinese … I think I can do well in the Chinese community … but the Chinese expect me to speak Chinese … but I cannot speak Chinese … but if anybody asks me if I am Chinese or Indian, I say I am more Indian because everything I learned growing up is Indian.

However, like others who were adopted, while they recognised and thought of themselves as being 'Indian' because of their upbringing and their association with the Indian community, invariably they found themselves caught in the 'self-other' construction of ethnic identity held by the larger society, especially in their interaction with others in the public sphere. Regardless, they still considered themselves 'Indian' and not 'Chinese' and this self-reported identity was held constant throughout their life course from childhood until adulthood.

While their sense of belonging was to the Indian community as if they naturally belonged to the group, and the Chinese were 'another race', some admitted a degree of alienation from the Indian community. One of my respondents who went in search of her biological mother after the death of her adoptive mother recalled how she felt a measure of separation from her 'adoptive community', although not necessarily her adoptive family; attributing this experience to her physical appearance. Jeyanthy, aged 55, who originally hailed from Malaysia and was adopted at birth had this to say:

> I would say there wasn't really a specific time when I turned into an Indian … I was raised as a Hindu – so was named and blessed at the temple at birth … went to temple regularly as a child … ate Indian food … followed Indian customs – all from birth … basically no different from how an Indian family would raise their own …child … [and for these reasons] … I feel Indian and not Chinese.

But later as the conversation progressed, she said at times she 'feel[s] more like a chameleon … straddl[ing] both cultures' as she associates herself with both cultures. She then went on to say: 'the Chinese culture is what I should naturally affiliate myself with … but I don't feel like I belong to it … the Indian culture I identify with does not naturally accept me as I do not look like them … so I am part of both but really don't belong to either *(sic)*,' demonstrating how others within the Indian community as well as those outside the community can have an effect on shaping the complex identity of these adopted women.

It can be deduced that the extent to which the adoptive child is received into the adoptive family, on the one hand, and the adoptive community, on the other, speaks volumes with respect to how the adoptive child might construct her identity. A similar experience was cited by Saradha who is now 76 and identifies herself as an Indian. She remembers her childhood vividly. While her own adoptive parents loved her dearly and in her own words 'would never speak behind her back'; she recalled how some in the wider Indian community, in this case, the devotees of the Hindu temple the family would visit, would call her a 'Cina kutty' or 'little Chinese girl' (Tamil), a derogatory term applied to such women. They could recognise her as being an adopted child, and an outsider to the community, rather than 'one of them'.

But among the family and immediate kin group, undoubtedly these Chinese girls were always regarded as 'Indian'.

## Conclusion

Child adoption in the Indian diaspora of colonial and post-colonial Malaya (and Singapore) demonstrates the extent to which Indians were interpretative subjects of their mobility and settlement in a new land. Their diasporic experiences have presented them with the opportunity to challenge the notion of 'Indian-ness' as a homogeneous social category predicated on "sharing equally the particular natural attributes (positive or negative) specific to it", in this case values, customs and traditions held by an ethnic group rather than 'race' as it is understood in terms of physical appearance (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199). As Pereira (1966) so rightly points out: "Indian adoptive parents often have to accept a child of a different race, appearance, colour and ethnic background" and they did this with great success, as may be deduced from the narratives (p. 32). Among Indians back in their homeland: South Indians did adopt, but only kin, while North Indians rarely adopted at all (Bharadwaj, 2003); thus cross-cultural adoption is "a relatively new idea" in the diaspora and, in fact, "constitute[d] a sharp breach with traditional attitudes towards adoption, … reflect[ing] basic changes in community values towards the family and adoption" (Pereira, 1966, p. 32).

In this attempt to reconfigure what it means to be 'Indian', child adoption provided a means by which Malayan (and Singapore) Indians reinforced their 'Indian-ness' and their distinct ethnic identity in a plural society as they transformed these 'Chinese' girls they adopted into 'Indian' girls. In doing so, diasporic Indians also highlighted how Indian-ness could be performative rather than transmitted through blood; and the women of the household were crucial to this reinterpretation. By engaging in inter-cultural and inter-ethnic adoptions, these diasporic Indians were constructing a more porous ethnic (and caste) identity for themselves. Simultaneously diasporic Indians might be regarded as dynamic agents, defying British political constructions of irrecoverable differences between the multiple groups coexisting in Malaya.

From the 1970s onwards, fewer adoptions occurred across ethnic lines because adoptions had to be legalised through formal channels; which increasingly favoured adoption within ethnic groups. At this point in time, as contraceptive use increased and fertility rates dropped, adoption became more difficult as there were fewer unwanted babies. Undoubtedly the circumstances under which these cross-cultural adoptions occurred created a particular identity among those who had been adopted—an identity that was spatially and temporally created. And among those Indians in pre-independence Malaya and Singapore: choosing to adopt these Chinese girls not only meant that they were departing from cultural practices related to child adoption back in the Indian subcontinent; but they were responding to a particular social and historical context, mediated by shifting boundaries between public and private, male and female, parent and child, as well as individual, family and community identity,

as they found themselves engaging in subtle alterations in their perception of their own ethnic identity in a colonial space.

## References


Amrith, S. S. (2010). Indians overseas? Governing Tamil migration to Malaya 1870–1941. *Past & Present 208*(1), 231–261.

Arasaratnam, S. (2006). Malaysian Indians: the formation of incipient society. In K.S. Sandhu & A. Mani (Eds.), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, First Reprint (pp. 190–210). Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Arnold, F., Choe, M. K., & Roy, T. K. (1998). Son preference, the family building process and child mortality in India. *Population Studies, 52*(3), 301–315.

Barn, R. (2013). "Doing the right thing": Transracial adoption in the USA. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 36*(8), 1273–1291.

Bharadwaj, A. (2003). Why adoption is not an option in India: The visibility of infertility, the secrecy of donor insemination, and other cultural complexities. *Social Science & Medicine, 56*(9), 1867–1880.

Caldwell, J.C. (1963). The demographic background. In T.H. Silcock & E.K. Fisk (Eds.), *The political economy of independent Malaya: A case-study in development* (pp. 59–92). University of California Press.

Das Gupta, M., Jiang, Z., Li, B., Xie, Z., Chung, W., & Bae, H.-O. (2003). Why is son preference so persistent in East and South Asia? A cross-country study of China, India and the Republic of Korea. *The Journal of Development Studies, 40*(2), 153–187.

Devasahayam , T. W. (2004). 'A culture of cherishing children: Fertility trends of tertiary-educated Malay women in Malaysia', Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Working Papers, No. 23. https://ari.nus.edu.sg/publications/wps-23-a-culture-of-cherishing-children-fertility-trends-of-tertiary-educated-malay-women-in-malaysia/.

Devasahayam, T. W. (2005). Power and pleasure around the stove: The construction of gendered identity in middle-class South Indian Hindu households in Urban Malaysia. *Women's Studies International Forum, 28*(1), 1–20.

Ee, J. (1961). Chinese Migration to Singapore, 1896–1941. *Journal of Southeast Asian History, 2*(1), 33–51.

Heng, H.N. (1957). The adopted child with particular reference to the child adopted into a family of a different race. [Research Paper, University of Malaya].

Hirschman, C. (1986). The making of race in Colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology. *Sociological Forum, 1*(2), 330–361.

Hirschman, C. (1987). The meaning and measurement of ethnicity in Malaysia: An analysis of census classifications. *The Journal of Asian Studies, 46*(3), 555–582.

Hoe, A.W.N. (1959). Adoption and the natural mother. [Unpublished Academic Exercise, University of Malaya].

Hu, A. W., Zhou, X., & Lee, R. M. (2017). Ethnic socialization and ethnic identity development among internationally adopted Korean American adolescents: A seven-year follow-up. *Developmental Psychology, 53*(11), 2066–2077.

Kaur, A. (2012). Labour brokers in migration: Understanding historical and contemporary transnational migration regimes in Malaya/Malaysia. *IRSH*, *57*(Special Issue S20), 225–252.

Kratoska, P.H. (2001). Imperial unity versus local autonomy: British Malaya and the depression of the 1930s. In P. Boomgaard & Brown, I. (Eds.), *Weathering the storm: The economies of Southeast Asia in the 1930s depression* (pp. 271–294). Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Low, K. E. Y. (2014). Chinese migration and entangled histories: Broadening the contours of migratory historiography. *Journal of Historical Sociology, 27*(1), 75–102.

McKinley, R.H. (1975). A knife cutting water: Child transfers and siblingship among urban Malays. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan.
Nagata, J. A. (1974). What is a Malay? Situational selection of ethnic identity in a plural society. *American Ethnologist, 1*(2), 331–350.
Neil, E. (2012). Making sense of adoption: Integration and differentiation from the perspective of adopted children in middle childhood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(2), 409–416.
Pereira, D. (1966). Social adjustment in inter-communal adoption: A study of adult women and girls in the Indian community, who are of Chinese birth, their adjustment and degree of acceptance within the community, and the extent to which their non-Indian origin remains a factor of significance in their adult lives (Research Paper). University of Singapore.
Pong, S.-L. (1994). Sex preference and fertility in Peninsular Malaysia. *Studies in Family Planning, 25*(3), 137–148.
Purcell, V. (1967). *The Chinese in Malaya.* Oxford University Press.
Purdie-Vaughns, V., & Eibach, R. P. (2008). 'Intersectional invisibility: The distinctive advantages and disadvantages of multiple subordinate-group identities. *Sex Roles, 59(5–6)*, 377–391.
Ramanujan, A.K. (1989). Is there an Indian way of thinking?: An informal essay. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, *23*(1), 41–58.
Reynolds, H.B. (1991). The auspicious married woman. In S.S. Wadley (Ed.), *The powers of Tamil women*, Foreign and Comparative Studies/South Asian Series No. 6. (pp. 35–60). Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University.
Sandhu, K. S. (1969). *Indians in Malaya: Some aspects of their immigration and settlement (1786–1957).* Cambridge University Press.
Scroggs, P. H., & Heitfield, H. (2001). International adopters and their children: Birth culture ties. *Gender Issues, 19*(4), 3–30.
Simon, R.J., & Alstein, H. (2017). *Adoption, race and identity: From infancy to young adulthood*. Routledge.
Trawick, M. (1992). *Notes on love in a Tamil family.* University of California Press.
Umaña-Taylor, A. J., & Fine, M. A. (2004). Examining ethnic identity among Mexican-origin adolescents living in the United States. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 26*(1), 36–59.
Wee, A. (1977). The Chinese daughters of Indian parents. *New Society*, (10 November), 294–295.
Wee, A. (1980). Chinese daughters of Indian parent. In P Hodge (Ed.) *Community problems and social work in Southeast Asia: The Hong Kong and Singapore experience*, (pp.61–64). University of Hong Kong Press.
Wee, A. (2017). *A tiger remembers: The way we were in Singapore.* National University of Singapore Press.
Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Intersectionality and feminist politics. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 13*(3), 193–209.

**Theresa W. Devasahayam** is an Associate Faculty at Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) where she teaches courses on gender and health sociology. Her research interests include working mothers and women and the family life cycle; female labour migration; ageing; food security; and women and politics and leadership. Publications of significance include Women and Politics in Southeast Asia: Navigating a Male-Dominated World. Sussex: Sussex Academic Press (2019); Ensuring a Square Meal: Women and Food Security in Southeast Asia. Singapore: World Scientific (2018); Gender and Ageing: Southeast Asian Perspectives. Singapore: ISEAS (2014); Gender, Emotions and Labour Markets: Asian and Western Perspectives. London: Routledge, (2011) (co-authored with Ann Brooks); and Working and Mothering in Asia: Images, Ideologies and Identities. Singapore and Copenhagen: NUS Press and NIAS Press (co-edited with Brenda S.A. Yeoh) (2007). Additionally, she has published in the following international and regional journals: Asian Studies Review, Asia-Pacific Population Journal, Asian and Pacific Migration

Review, Diversities, Femina Politica, Intersections, Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy, Philippine Sociological Review, Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography, and Women's Studies International Forum, as well as local and regional newspapers. She has also been cited by CNN, Bloomberg, Channel NewsAsia, and The Straits Times on her views on women, family, and ageing issues. Theresa holds a Ph.D in anthropology from Syracuse University, New York, U.S.A.

# Politics, Economics and Work

# Intersectionality and Indian Women's Political Participation in Malaysia


**Azmil Tayeb and Logesshri Sathasivam**

**Abstract** This chapter provides a snapshot of Indian women's political participation in Malaysia through the lens of intersectionality. First, we present an overview of women's participation in politics as represented by female candidates and elected members of the legislative body in the region and elsewhere. We then look at the participation of Indian women in the electoral system in Malaysia, either as candidates or voters. We compare the political participation of Indian women in Malaysia with women from other ethnic groups and also with Indian men. We try to identify challenges faced by Indian women that limit their participation in the political process. We also look at other ways for Indian women to participate in politics, be it through NGO activism or trade union membership, among others. We interview several well-known female Indian politicians and activists to learn more about their experiences in the rough and tumble world of realpolitik and activism. Finally, the chapter offers policy recommendations on how to improve the political participation of Indian women in Malaysia.

**Keywords** Intersectionality · Malaysian Indian women · Political participation · Women's political empowerment

## Introduction

In most countries around the world, women are generally under-represented and under-appreciated in the political sphere, be it as politicians or activists. Historically, women in the West attained their hard-earned right to participate in politics, namely

Acknowledgement to "Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia for Fundamental Research Grant Scheme with Project Code: FRGS/1/2020/SS0/USM/02/15" and Universiti Sains Malaysia Short Term Grant, 304/PSOSIAL/6315357.

A. Tayeb (✉) · L. Sathasivam
School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia
e-mail: azmil@usm.my

L. Sathasivam
e-mail: logesshrisivam@gmail.com



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_4

suffrage, in (the) late 19th and early twentieth centuries. In the case of the US, for instance, women were only allowed to vote 144 years after its independence when the country ratified the 19th Amendment of the constitution in 1920. However, with few exceptions, the political sphere remains, by and large, the domain of patriarchy where men hold sway and the voices of women are relegated to the margins.[1] We can see a similar trend in Malaysia when it comes to women's participation in politics, and the reality is even bleaker for Indian women, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Political participation does not only mean voting in regularly held elections and getting elected into political office. In this chapter, we broaden the idea of political participation to include activism with civil society organisations, which can be "political" or "non-political" in nature. Examples of political activism are organising the public around contentious issues such as workers' rights, the environment, civil liberty, among others. Non-political activism can be categorised as engaging in "safe" activities that are deemed non-contentious and acceptable to the authority such as feeding the homeless, tutoring refugee kids, cleaning up the neighbourhood, to name but a few. Regardless of the nature of activism, it is a crucial means of taking part proactively in society and having a say in the affairs of the community in which one resides. It is, in other words, a form of political participation, no matter if it is construed as "political" or "non-political," an expanded definition that we will use in this chapter.

While the avenues for women's participation in politics have expanded significantly over the last century, there are still formidable barriers that women have to overcome and different women face different challenges with varying degrees of difficulty depending on factors such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. This chapter, therefore, aims its analytical lens on the intersectionality of Indian women's lived experiences in Malaysia when it comes to studying their political participation. Many Indian women in Malaysia have to confront what scholars term as "triple oppression," which are classism, racism, and sexism, that can inform the ways they choose to participate (or not participate) in politics. The concepts of "triple oppression" and "intersectionality" will be discussed in greater length below, particularly in the context of Indian women's political participation in Malaysia.

We start this chapter with an overview of women's participation in politics with the chief objective of situating the Malaysian experience in regional and global contexts. By mainly looking at the numbers, how does Malaysia stack up against other countries when it comes to encouraging women to get involved in formal politics, especially as elected officials? Also, in this section, we delve into the general category of Indian women to see how factors such as socio-economic status, geographic location and others influence the ways Indian women participate in the political process. In the next section, we discuss the concept of "intersectionality" in explaining women's participation in politics, particularly Indian women in Malaysia. The concept allows

[1] There are of course exceptional cases. For example, women MPs make up 61.3% in Rwanda, 53.1% in Bolivia, and 47% in Sweden (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020).

us to discern myriad overlapping challenges faced by Indian women depending on their own circumstances so as not to treat Indian women as a monolithic and reified category. In the third section, we illustrate the various ways used by Indian women to make their presence felt in the political sphere. We achieve this by interviewing several Indian women politicians and political activists and asking them to recount their personal experiences as active participants in the political process. Finally, we conclude this chapter by offering several policy recommendations on how the government and the society can work together to increase the rate of Indian women's participation in the political process in Malaysia.

## Malaysian Women and Political Leadership

Heuristically, women's representation in the legislative chamber can be used to gauge the degree of political empowerment of women in a country. As such, we can argue that women's participation in politics, symbolised by representation in the legislative chamber, should positively correspond to their group size in the general population. As of the first quarter of 2020, the percentage of women in Malaysia is 48.5%, slightly outnumbered by men. However, when it comes to representatives in the legislative chamber, women only constitute about 14.4% of the 222 members of the bicameral Parliament (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020a, 2020b). This percentage is the lowest among all countries in the Southeast Asia region. In comparison, women make up 28% of parliamentarians in the Philippines and 26.7% in Vietnam (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020). It is clear that Malaysia is trailing far behind other countries especially its regional neighbours with respect to filling the parliamentary seats with more women.

The abysmally low percentage of women in the Malaysian parliament is particularly perplexing in light of the announcement made by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) in 2019 when it proclaimed that the Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI) had its best number yet at 71.1%, which saw Malaysia's world ranking improved from 70th place in 2017 to 63rd place in 2018. As we scratch the surface of these statistics for a deeper look, we can see the yawning gender gap in the political sphere, compared to other dimensions of the statistics such as Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Economic Participation and Opportunity, where the gap is significantly narrower, so much so that in Education Attainment, it is men who are now trailing behind women.[2] According to the 2017 Malaysian Ministry of Education statistics, female students vastly outnumber male students in public universities, 62–38%. While it is apparent that educational achievement made by Malaysian women has led to the closing of the gender gap in social and economic sectors, the same progress does not lend itself to political empowerment, particularly

[2] According to MGGI, in the Educational Attainment sub-index, women have surpassed men at 105.4% while fast closing the gap in other sub-indexes such as Health and Survival (95.8%) and Economic Participation and Opportunity (72.7%) (Department of Statistics, 2019).

among Indian women. In other words, being well educated, healthy and economically stable does not offer women automatic access into the rarefied political space. We will try to explore the reasons for this missing link later in this chapter.

Malaysia is one of the many countries that practises a type of political system called *consociationalism*. It is a political system that is usually found in countries that are ethnically and religiously fragmented such as Lebanon, Belgium, and Canada. The idea behind consociationalism is to have the interests of every major group in the society represented at the highest echelons of government, namely through political parties, with the objective of maintaining stability and preventing majoritarian dominance from running roughshod over minority interests (Lijphart, 1969). In the Malaysian context, it means that the interests of main ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese, Indians, and the indigenous people are represented by their respective political parties. Ethnic-based political parties have been a permanent fixture on the Malaysian political landscape since the first federal election in 1955. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) represents the interests of the Malay community, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) represents the Chinese community, and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) represents the interests of the Indian community. These ethnic-based political parties are by no means monolithic, especially in the last twenty years, but they have indeed been a major political force for the most part of Malaysia's post-independence history.

According to consociationalism, ideally, the allocation of seats in the parliament should roughly correspond to the population size of the ethnic or religious communities. In Malaysia, Malays, Chinese, and Indians make up 65%, 26%, and 7.5%, respectively of the country's population. How then do these communal numbers translate into the share of parliamentary seats? The answer is that each of these ethnic groups holds the number of parliamentary seats that more or less reflects its population size. Currently, the Malaysian parliament comprises 62% Malays, 22% Chinese, and 7% Indians.[3] However, we do have to be mindful that the interests of these ethnic groups are spread across various political parties as ethnic groups very rarely vote *en bloc* with the exception of the last three general elections when 90% of Chinese and 75% of Indians voted for the opposition coalition (FMT Reporters, 2018).

While ethnic representation is somewhat balanced in the Malaysian parliament, it is the female representation that is found wanting. As mentioned above, women only make up 14.4% of 222 members of the Malaysian parliament, far short of the 30% threshold commonly used worldwide. Below is the breakdown of female representatives in the parliament by ethnicity.

Population-wise, women and men are evenly divided across all major ethnic groups. However, as we can see from Table 1, when it comes to gender representation in the parliament, women are not receiving their fair share of the seats, more so for Indian women, currently represented by a lone MP, Kasthuriraani Patto, a DAP politician from Batu Kawan, Penang. Even in the upper chamber, Dewan Negara, where members are appointed instead of elected, there is barely any effort to appoint more

[3] Only the indigenous tribes from Malaysian Borneo (Sarawak and Sabah) are over-represented in the parliament (Members of the House of Representatives and Senate, 2020).

**Table 1** Ethnic breakdown of female members of the Malaysian parliament in 2020

| Ethnicity | Members of parliament (MP) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Dewan Rakyat (lower chamber) | | Dewan Negara (upper chamber) | |
| | Female | Male | Female | Male |
| Malay | 20 | 126 | 6 | 34 |
| Chinese | 12 | 38 | 1 | 7 |
| Indian | 1 | 12 | 0 | 6 |
| Others | 0 | 13 | 2 | 3 |
| **Total** | **33** | **189** | **9** | **50** |

*Source* Members of the House of Representatives and Senate (2020)

female senators, much less Indian female senators, to help narrow the gender gap. It is clear that despite the strides made by Malaysian women in education, economic and social sectors, as evidenced by the 2018 Malaysian Gender Gap Index, they still lag far behind Malaysian men when it comes to political leadership. For instance, only one political party (PKR) has been led by a woman (Wan Azizah Wan Ismail). All told, within the small coterie of women political leaders, Indian women remain the fewest.

## Indian Women's Participation in Party Politics in Malaysia

Like the Chinese migrants brought to Malaya by the British to work in the tin mines at the turn of the twentieth century, Indian migrants at this time also formed their own societies that act as a socio-cultural-economic support system. The Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM) was the first official association to express a semblance of political ideology among Indians. This association was made up of only middle-class men who advocate a similar ideology of nationalism. Despite its conservative urban-middle class predilection, CIAM did try to represent all strata of the Indian community in Malaya, namely the working class, by acting as a mediator between rubber plantation workers and the colonial government in labour disputes (Tate, 2008). Nevertheless, cross-cultural and cross-class political solidarity was the exception rather than the rule as the Indian community was sharply fragmented along lines of primordial identity markers such as caste, religion, and sub-ethnicity. Indian women, it goes without saying, were excluded from this political process.

One person who can be credited to help raise political consciousness among Indian women in British Malaya was Subhas Chandra Bose. A well-known peripatetic anti-colonialist, he vigorously tried to gather the support of Indians in British Malaya for his nationalist cause in India. A crucial component of the mobilising effort was to form the Indian National Army (INA) that would fight alongside the Japanese Imperial Army against the British colonial forces with the ultimate goal of gaining India's independence. The active involvement of Malayan Indian women in politics

began when Bose initiated the Rani Jhansi Regiment or the women's wing under the INA in 1943 (Netaji Centre, 1992). As a self-proclaimed socialist (who was also cosy with fascism), Bose was not encumbered by age-old traditions and thus assembled his army with a mélange of men and women of various ethnic groups, religions, and castes with the singular purpose of driving the British Raj out of India. The loss of the Axis Power (Japan, Germany, and Italy) in 1945 brought an end to the INA and Bose's ambition but not before instilling political consciousness among many Indian women in British Malaya.

Soon after the end of the Second World War in 1946, hundreds of Indians from various socio-economic backgrounds gathered to form the Malaysian Indian Congress Party (MIC). MIC's main focus at this time was similar to other Indian political movements that preceded it, which was to secure the independence of India. After India gained its independence in 1947, MIC turned its attention to the political affairs of British Malaya. Unlike previous associations that sidelined Indian women, MIC did accept them into its fold. Among the women who helped to form the MIC was Janaky Thevar Nahappan. Janaky Thevar was one of the leading Indian women during the independence period who got her first political experience from enlisting in the INA's Rani Jhansi Regiment. Other early female founders of MIC include Devaki Krishnan, Rasammah Bhupalan, Jaya Parthiban, Analetchumy Periasamy, and P. Logeswary. Devaki Krishnan was the first woman, not just among Indian women, to hold political office when she won the Kuala Lumpur municipal election in 1952 under the Independence of Malaya Party (IMP).[4] However, she was not the only Indian female candidate in the 1952 municipal election as she had to face Elsie Somasundram, who represented the UMNO-MCA alliance. Devaki Krishnan later went on to become the Vice President of MIC Selangor and the chairperson of its women's wing.

The MIC's constitution at the time did not mandate a national women's wing but provided chairs for women at the local, state, and national levels. The formation of the MIC women's wing finally took place in June 1955 at Brickfields in Kuala Lumpur, around the same time when MIC made the fortuitous decision to join the UMNO-MCA alliance.[5] The first meeting was attended by 70 women, in which Devaki Krishnan was elected as the first chairperson. Even though there have been a number of women leaders in MIC throughout its existence, their development within the party was not properly nurtured. This lackadaisical effort to promote women in the party can be blamed on the absence of a concrete policy and power struggles between the party's male leaders (Kausar, 2006). While women did make up the founding members of MIC, they were having a hard time moving up the party's leadership rank, mainly due to its deeply entrenched patriarchal values that prefer

[4] IMP was established in 1951 by Onn Ja'afar, one of the founding members of UMNO, who left the party after a bitter disagreement about its political orientation. IMP was created as a multi-ethnic party but became predominantly Indian. Onn Ja'afar disbanded IMP two years later and established Parti Negara in its place.

[5] By joining the UMNO-MCA alliance, it reoriented MIC from non-communal and independent to communal and dependent on UMNO patronage, an image that has persisted until today (Tate, 2008: 98).

male leaders. Women's way up the party leadership ladder is through the patronage of male leaders who dominate all top-ranking positions in the party. It means not only do men get to decide how far women can rise in the party, but women also have to choose which male-led intra-party factions to support as the outcome would decide whether they are able to get promoted or not. In short, the development of women's roles in the MIC wholly depends on the vicissitudes of male leadership in the MIC.

MIC, however, is not the only mainstream political vehicle for Indians in Malaysia. Another Barisan Nasional (BN) component party, the People's Progressive Party (PPP) also became the preferred party for some Indians, many of whom make up the bulk of the party's leadership. Being a small party not much is known about its female leaders, much less the ones of Indian descent. Despite its small stature, PPP claimed in 2016 that it had 600,000 members, comprised of 48% Indians and 34% Chinese (More Malays joining MyPPP, says Kayveas, 2016). This fantastical number however was not reflected in strong electoral performance as PPP only won a single parliamentary seat in the 2004 election and was completely wiped out in subsequent elections. After another disastrous outing in the 2018 general election, PPP was embroiled in bitter leadership disputes, which ultimately led to the party's deregistration by the Registrar of Societies (RoS), an agency under the Malaysian Home Ministry.[6] The fact remains that while many Indians might have been members of PPP, come election time the vast majority of them cast their votes for MIC and the opposition parties. As of now, PPP has all but disappeared from the Malaysian political scene.

As Malaysia's political landscape opened up in the late 1990s at the onset of the Reformasi period, Malaysians suddenly found themselves with a plethora of new political parties to identify with, and more importantly, a chance to break from the old ethnic-based politics. New political parties that emerged at this time were non-communal, whose appeal was mainly centred on economic and social justice issues. For Indian women there are three obvious alternatives to MIC. One is the Malaysian Socialist Party (Parti Sosialis Malaysia, PSM). PSM was established in 1998 by mostly Indian campus activists who were actively organising among rubber plantation workers, who were predominantly Indians. Being an ideologically based political party, PSM is open to anyone who shares its beliefs. Unfortunately, the ethnically segregated Malaysian society means that most of its members and the communities that the party works in are Indians; thus, PSM receives the unfair reputation of being an Indian party (Interview with Rani Rasiah). Nevertheless, the egalitarian nature of PSM allows Indian female leaders such as Rani Rasiah, Saraswathy, and K.S. Bawani to play a more central role in the party as it works tirelessly on behalf of displaced plantation workers, hospital cleaners, and forcedly evicted tenants, among others. Despite continuously contesting in every election since its founding, PSM has so far only managed to send one member, Jeyakumar Devaraj, to the Parliament due to Malaysia's "First-Past-The-Post" (FPTP) electoral system that is heavily in favour of the two main political coalitions. As such, there has been no Indian female

[6] The RoS later gave PPP a chance to reconcile and find a solution to its leadership problems as a condition for re-registration (Augustin, 2019).

MP or state representative from PSM even though they are well known within the local community due to their indefatigable grassroots organising work.[7]

Another political party that burst into the political scene after 1998 is the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). PKR began as a party that sought justice for the former deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, who was unceremoniously sacked by the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammad, and later tried and imprisoned for sodomy charges. PKR is mainly urban-based and became a multi-ethnic hodgepodge party for Anwar's supporters, civil society activists, and hitherto politically apathetic people who were galvanised by the *Reformasi* movement. The non-ideological "big umbrella" nature of PKR and its "new kid on the block" status provides a fresh opportunity for women and minorities to actively participate in formal politics. Many middle-class urbanites who are critical of the BN government's race-based policies but get turned off by PSM's Marxist ideology flock to PKR, including highly educated Indian women professionals.

Lastly, a political party that attracts many Indians, especially after the Reformasi period in 1998, is the Democratic Action Party (DAP). The democratic wave that swept through the Malaysian political landscape from 1998 to 1999 saw the birth of a new political party (PKR) and the rejuvenation of an established opposition political party (DAP), which resulted in a more competitive political field. DAP has been around since 1965 and was founded as a multi-ethnic party. One of its founders was Devan Nair, an Indian teacher and labour activist, who later became the third President of Singapore. DAP is a secular urban-based party that is predominantly Chinese since for the longest time it is seen as an alternative to the ruling establishment Chinese political party, MCA. While DAP is still overwhelmingly Chinese, the party itself is open to everyone and like PSM and PKR, DAP also became the home of those who were not happy with the BN government. Many Indian men and women make their way into DAP, especially in areas where the party has a long-standing presence such as Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, Ipoh, and Penang. Currently, the single female Indian MP in the Malaysian parliament is Kasthuriraani Patto, is a DAP politician representing the Batu Kawan constituency in Penang. Kasthuriraani hails from a DAP family as her father, P. Patto, was a DAP parliamentarian for several terms. Still, compared to PSM and PKR, DAP has the fewest number of Indian female leaders since the party tends to field candidates in areas where the Chinese form a majority or a significant minority.

The main reason why women typically find it more difficult to get elected into office than men is because their chosen party does not field them as election candidates or field them in tough-to-win areas as proverbial sacrificial lambs. It is a problem faced by female politicians worldwide, despite many countries' requirement for

[7] The "winner takes all" nature of the FPTP system results in voters picking their party of choice strategically so as to maximise the value of their votes. In this situation, it is the big parties with a long-standing reputation, well-oiled grassroots machinery, access to patronage and a national presence that stand the best chance of winning at the expense of smaller parties like PSM.

**Table 2** List of five parliamentary districts with the highest percentage of Indians in the 14th General Election (GE14)

| Parliament districts | Percentage of Indians | Members of parliament |
|---|---|---|
| Kota Raja, Selangor | 27.68 | Mohamad Sabu (Amanah) |
| Ipoh Barat, Perak | 24.42 | M. Kulasegaran (DAP) |
| Batu Kawan, Penang | 22.76 | Kasthuriraani Patto (DAP) |
| Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan | 21.97 | Anwar Ibrahim (PKR) |
| Bagan Datuk, Perak | 21.63 | Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (UMNO) |

*Source* Jayasooria (2018)

30% female candidates, and it is the same reason why we do not see many Indian female elected officials in Malaysia. Below is a list of five parliamentary districts with significant Indian voters and their elected officials. There is no parliamentary constituency in Malaysia where Indians form a majority.

From Table 2 we can see that four out of five parliamentary districts with the highest percentage of Indian population are represented by men. A similar story also takes place in other constituencies with a sizeable number of Indian voters. When given the opportunity, political parties are most likely to choose male candidates over female candidates. This problem becomes more acute in the case of Indian elected officials since they are so few of them, to begin with. Again, using the example from the 14th General Election (GE14), there were a total of 36 Indian candidates contesting in 22 parliamentary seats and only three of them were women.[8] That number translates to a paltry 8.3% of total Indian candidates and 0.4% of 687 parliamentary candidates contesting in the last general election.[9] It is obvious that the reason why there are so few prominent Indian female politicians at the national level is that the political parties do not put many of them up as candidates, much less as viable candidates with a strong chance to win. More discussion on how to remedy this problem will be discussed in the policy recommendation section.

[8] The three women candidates were Jayanthi Balaguru (Gerakan) and Kasthuriraani Patto (DAP), both contesting in the Batu Kawan parliamentary district, and Mohana Muniandy (BN-MIC), who contested in the Kapar parliamentary district. Only Kasthuriraani managed to secure a win to maintain the seat she has held since 2013 (Jayasooria, 2018). See also Fong (2018).

[9] Gender-wise, during GE14 only 10.92% of parliamentary candidates and 10.69% of state legislature candidates were female even though nationally the number of female voters was slightly higher than male voters (Lim, 2018).

## Intersectionality and Indian Women's Political Participation

When comparing socio-economic indicators such as rate of poverty, unemployment rate, education attainment and others, it is apparent that the Indian community as a whole falls behind other main ethnic groups like the Malays and Chinese. Policy prescriptions formulated to address this issue often rest on the presumption that the Indians must be helped as a singular ethnic group that barely factors in, if ever, intra-communal differences such as gender and class. The homogenisation of the Indian experience leads to one-size-fits-all government policies and strategies pursued by Indian political and community leaders that in the end do not reach a large number of Indians. The aforementioned consociational politics practised in Malaysia greatly contributes to the homogenisation of the Indian experience since the interests of the Indian community are represented by its elite members, particularly from the MIC, who are overwhelmingly urban male professionals. It is no wonder then that challenges that specifically pertain to Indian women, particularly those who are part of the B40 (bottom 40%) economic group and rural, are missing from the national agenda of the communal elites.

Take for instance the Malaysian Indian Blueprint, an ambitious plan that was launched by the then BN government in 2017 to help lift the Indian community out of its economic malaise and empower the least privileged of its members. The plan includes establishing a microfinancing programme to develop Indian entrepreneurs, increasing the number of Indians in civil service, improving the lives of B40 Indians, building and refurbishing Tamil-type national schools, among others (Radhi, 2017; "Subra: Malaysian Indian Blueprint must not be viewed negatively", 2017). Besides a passing mention of the intention to create Indian women entrepreneurs through the microfinancing scheme, there are no other women-specific programmes, particularly for those in the B40 economic group and rural society. The presumption is that any programme that is designed to benefit the Indian community as a whole, will also by default benefit its most disadvantaged members, in this case, poor Indian women.[10]

It stands to reason that it is fallacious to assume that the liberation of a single category (ethnic) will liberate all of its members (including women). Reification and homogenisation of collective identity and struggles would only result in marginalisation and disempowerment of minority voices within the said community.[11] As such, there needs to be an inclusive multiprong approach—intersectionality of categories—that guides a socio-political movement into achieving its goals. It is especially so

[10] There is also the issue of corruption and leakages in funds disbursement that renders these programmes ineffective (Chan, 2019).

[11] For instance, there is a tendency to downplay the seriousness of domestic violence in the black community in the US, so as not to feed the ethnic stereotype of violent black men and thus hurting the political cause of the black community as a whole. In other words, black women's concerns have to be swept under the rug for the collective sake of the black community (Crenshaw, 1991).

when the main narrative of racism is formed by minority men while in the case of sexism, it is formed by privileged women.[12] In the words of Crenshaw:

> [t]he failure to embrace the complexities of compoundedness is not simply a matter of political will but is also due to the influence of a way of thinking about discrimination which structures politics so that struggles are categorized as singular issues (Crenshaw, 1989: 166–169).

In the context of the Indian community in Malaysia, the different ways of thinking about discrimination and disadvantages play a crucial role in shaping policies that affect the Indian community. Here, the modes of thinking can be placed into three discrete categories: ethnic, gender, and class. The dominant mode of thinking that guides policies affecting the Indian community is one that is ethnic-based and dictated by male urban-based professionals. It is the kind of political advocacy that is necessitated by the consociational power arrangement, in which terms are then dictated by this small coterie of community elites, who for the longest time comprised of MIC leaders. This narrow sectarian political advocacy precludes other cross-communal solidarity that incorporates class and gender. As such, MIC tends to look inward for solutions to problems that plague the Indian community. Specific issues faced by Indian women, for instance, are unwittingly subsumed under the all-encompassing "Indian concerns," of which they play no part in contributing. In turn, it gives rise to the thinking that what is good for the Indian community is also good for Indian women, which as we have stated earlier is not necessarily true, and in fact, can be counterproductive since the diversity of interests of Indian women is not represented by those who have lived similar experiences.

We can also observe similar dynamics when the mode of thinking shifts to gender or class. A dominant form of feminist advocacy also has the tendency to embody the lived experiences and challenges confronted by a specific group of women, namely highly educated, urban-based professionals. These privileged activists construe the unjust patriarchal system based on how it affects their lives while overlooking intra-group differences, particularly ethnicity and class. Take ethnicity for example. Indian women undoubtedly face a set of religious and cultural challenges that can be distinctly different from the ones experienced by their Malay and Chinese counterparts, and the strategies employed by mainstream feminist activists might not take these differences into consideration. The same when it comes to class as there are qualitative differences between women of various socio-economic classes with respect to the challenges they face in their personal and working lives. To wit, female hospital cleaners may be struggling with unpaid overtime and unfair work contracts while their white-collar counterparts in the corporate sector might be pushing to break the glass ceiling and narrow the gender pay gap. The "lean in" approach popularised by Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, that encourages women to be more assertive in the workplace might benefit those in white-collar positions where such "aggressive" behaviour is tolerated or even prized but for women in

[12] bel hooks in her critique of women liberation and black civil rights movements in the US in the 1960s laments that to many [white] feminists, "…the term 'woman' is synonymous with 'white women' and the term 'blacks' synonymous with 'black men." (bel hooks, 1981:8).

precarious blue-collar jobs, the approach would most likely lead to swift termination or other serious repercussions (Lean In, n.d; Freedom Film Fest, 2020).[13] Moreover, only 55.8% of women participate in the labour force in 2020, in comparison to 80.8% labour force participation rate for men, which means that a significant number of women are staying home or working in informal economic sectors.[14] Their needs are often overlooked and not represented in the political sphere.

It is therefore incumbent upon us to analyse the political participation of Indian women through the lens of intersectionality, which presents a more holistic approach to capturing the variegated experiences found within the Indian community as it relates to the society at large. In other words, we can either study the political participation of Indian women that solely focuses on their ethnicity or we can parse through the lives of women who happen to be Indian, which compels us to incorporate class and gender as additional analytical tools. If the focus is exclusively on ethnicity, then we are missing out on crucial details such as the significant number of women who do not actively participate in the formal economy and that women also make up 19.4% of the heads of household in the B40 economic sector (Hamid et al., 2019).[15] In a Marxist class analysis of intersectionality, poor women of colour, victims of what it terms "triple oppression," represent the silenced voice of the subaltern that must be liberated before a successful socialist revolution can ever come to fruition. Claudia Jones, one of the leading figures of Communist Party USA, avers, "'Triple oppression' or 'super exploitation' should make minority women the vanguard of a socialist revolution by virtue of being the most oppressed group" (Lynn, 2014: 11). The Marxist analysis places an importance on the universal emancipatory force of a class struggle that begins its liberation from one of the most exploited groups within the working class: poor women of colour. Therefore, we would be remiss if we merely train our focus on a single category, namely ethnicity or gender, to study the political participation of Indian women in Malaysia. As Crenshaw states in her influential paper on intersectionality, "Recognizing that identity politics takes place at the site where categories intersect thus seems more fruitful than challenging the possibility of talking about categories at all" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1299). It is the aim of this chapter to move beyond the single category pigeonholed analysis.

[13] Speaking of serious repercussions for blue-collar workers who speak out, the authorities arrested five officials of the National Union of Workers in Hospital Support and Allied Services (NUWHSAS) for protesting against unfair treatment of (mostly female) hospital cleaners by their employer, Edgenta UEMS (Bunyan, 2020). See also the highly acclaimed documentary *Bila Kami Bersatu* (When We Are One) that narrates the struggles of three female hospital cleaners in Batu Gajah, Perak fighting for higher wages. The documentary was screened at the 2019 Freedom Film Fest Malaysia and can be seen in its entirety here: https://freedomfilm.my/wayang/2019-bila-kami-bersatu/ (accessed on 15 May 2020).

[14] The gender breakdown of labour force in 2020 is 61% men and 39% women, which again shows many women opt out of the formal economy despite outpacing men in educational attainment (Department of Statistics, 2020b).

[15] Indian households, meanwhile, made up about 15% of the B40 economic group in 2014 (Marimuthu, 2016).

## Avenues of Political Participation of Indian Women

As mentioned earlier, there are two broadly defined ways for Indian women to participate in politics. One is via membership in political parties and the other is through civil society activism. These two avenues of participation can sometimes merge, normally when activists turn into politicians, as in the case of the former chairperson of Bersih, Maria Chin Abdullah, or when the boundary between the worlds of activism and electoral politics is blurred, as in the case of PSM. In this section, we discuss the main motivations and challenges faced by several well-known Indian women in the political arena, either as politicians, activists, or both. In particular, we like to find out the extent to which their ethnicity plays a role in firing up their passion for politics. In other words, do they see themselves representing the Indian community and specifically Indian women in their political struggles or are they driven by an intersection of causes that transcends ethnic identity and promotes inter-group solidarity? In ethnicity-dominated Malaysian politics, this is a pertinent question to ask.

One important aspect that gets many of these Indian women to first become interested in politics is family influence. They grew up with parents and family members who were politicians and activists or were simply exposed to political talks at home. Their families sow the seeds of political passion within them and by the time they get to the university, their passion turns into full bloom activism. K.S. Bawani, the current Deputy Secretary General of PSM, grew up in a MIC family in Air Kuning, Perak, where her late father was the party's local chairperson and her mother is an activist with the party's women wing, an involvement she still maintains until today. K.S. Bawani does admit that growing up in a MIC family means that her political knowledge did not extend beyond the BN and MIC narrative. It was not until she arrived at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) to study psychology that she was exposed to views that were critical of the BN government (Interview with K.S. Bawani). Prema Devaraj, the former president of Penang-based Aliran, one of the oldest civil society organisations in Malaysia, also credited her family for sparking her interest in politics. She grew up in a family of activists, which includes her older brother Jeyakumar Devaraj, who was the former MP for Sungai Siput, Perak and the current chairperson of PSM, who has constantly supported her activism and has instilled in her strong values for social justice and equality (Interview with Prema Devaraj). As mentioned before, the presently sole Indian female MP, Kasthuriraani Patto, had also grown up in a political family. Her late father was P. Patto, a well-known DAP MP who was for a time detained under the Internal Security Act (ISA) during the 1987 Ops Lalang, and her mother was also a DAP activist. Kasthuriraani reminisces about the time when she was nine years old picketing in front of the Kamunting prison with other children of the detainees such as DAP stalwarts, the late Karpal Singh and Lim Kit Siang. As a politician, her father spent most of his time outside of the home, so the whole family would follow him on campaign trails and constituency visits as a way to spend quality time together. While her formative

years were certainly unique and not representative of most people, it is this experience that compelled her into public service later in her life (Interview with Kasthuriraani Patto).

University years are often the time when many get exposed to political ideas and are first presented with the opportunity to wet their toes in activism. Our informants also share similar experiences as they recount their first-hand experience in helping out marginalised communities through student organisations and participating in numerous political discussions and forums on campus. Rani Rasiah, one of the co-founders of PSM, was active with the Tamil Language Society during her student years at the Universiti Malaya, recalls,

> We were sent [by the Tamil Language Society] in groups to estates for a month during the semester holidays. During that period, I was able to understand a few things such as low wages and poverty. I wanted to explore and learn. I also wanted to help and contribute what I could… I consider myself lucky that I have gotten exposure on the poor community and the issues they face through my grassroots activism (Interview with Rani Rasiah).

K.S. Bawani also received her first exposure to issues that plagued many disadvantaged communities during her involvement with a UKM student organisation called Students' Welfare Committee (Jawatankuasa Kebajikan Mahasiswa/i, JKMI). Through her active participation with JKMI, she visited many distressed rural villages and estate housing to provide free tuition to primary and secondary school students. Soon after, she got involved with a national group called Oppressed People's Network (Jaringan Rakyat Tertindas, JERIT), an organisation primarily organised by PSM to foster working-class solidarity against all forms of oppression and exploitation. While her focus in JERIT was on student and youth issues, the experience nevertheless broadened her political horizon beyond the campus gates and taught her the importance of political solidarity that transcends exclusive identity markers such as ethnicity, gender, and religion (Interview with K.S. Bawani).

When it comes to accessibility of political participation, our informants agree that civil society organisations are much more egalitarian and welcoming to women, as opposed to political parties, with the exception of PSM.[16] The culture of patriarchy that permeates many political parties in Malaysia and impedes the development of female political leaders does not have similar traction with many civil society organisations. Ambiga Sreenevasan, the former President of the Malaysian Bar and co-chairperson of Bersih, a coalition pushing for electoral reforms, tells her experience of leading one of the biggest mass movements in Malaysian history,

> ... I was surprised that it [being a double minority] didn't matter when I was leading Bersih. So, there I was being a woman and an Indian leading a multiracial movement that even included support from PAS… It was about the cause. People just supported the cause. Where I am from or who I am didn't matter. There is something bigger than my gender, something bigger than our race, and Bersih is one of it (Interview with Ambiga Sreenevasan).

[16] PSM's socialist ideology places singular importance on class struggle and solidarity that supersedes consideration for gender, ethnicity, and religion. The party's central committee comprises of sixteen members and is evenly divided between males and females. Interviews with K.S. Bawani and Rani Rasiah.

In fact, Bersih is not the only major civil society organisation led by an Indian woman. For instance, Tenaganita, a long-time advocate for migrant workers, has had a long history of Indian female leaders such as the late Irene and Aegile Fernandez, and Glorene Das. Other prominent Indian female civil society leaders include Cynthia Gabriel, a well-known human rights activist and the founder of Centre to Combat Corruption and Cronyism (C4) and Ivy Josiah, the founder of Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), to name but a few. According to Ambiga Sreenevasan, civil society organisations are the best place to start for Indian women who are interested in socio-political issues, namely due to their egalitarian and open nature, borne by the fact that many of these organisations are led by talented and impressive Indian women. There is certainly far less discrimination in civil society organisations compared to political parties (Interview with Ambiga Sreenevasan). More importantly, involvement with civil society organisations exposes their participants to the broader world and its attendant issues; in other words, to be political. Prema Devaraj makes it clear by saying,

> It [women's political participation] is not necessarily joining a political party or standing in elections. It is more about understanding and being aware about what's happening around us. It is important to create an awareness that being political is part and parcel of our lives and not something separate (Interview with Prema Devaraj).

While these leading Indian female figures have found some degree of success in what they do, their hard-earned efforts are not without any formidable challenges. Based on their responses we have identified three main impediments that women typically have to confront and overcome when participating in the political arena: culture of patriarchy, socio-economic disparity, and weak capacity. Since politics is often the mirror image of society, it is no surprise that a culture of patriarchy is rife in Malaysian politics. Female politicians, regardless of ethnicity, are not taken seriously by their male counterparts and the media. For example, society expects female politicians to take up "soft issues" such as ones that pertain to children, women, and senior citizens so as to appeal to their "maternal instinct" (Interview with Kasthuriraani Patto). Their physical appearance can also come under unwarranted scrutiny, which their male counterparts never have to experience. Kasthuriraani Patto recounts her encounter with such incident,

> Once I was approached by a Tamil news reporter on social media and he mentioned about how the colour pink looked good on me because I wore a pink Punjabi suit that day. He then proceeded to tell me if I lost a bit of weight, I would look nicer. I screenshot that and sent it to the newspaper editor (Interview with Kasthuriraani Patto).

The disparity in socio-economic background is the second challenge that women generally have to face when deciding to participate in politics, either by joining a political party or a civil society organisation. Political participation beyond voting in an election every five years takes a certain degree of commitment and time investment, one that many low-income and working-class women are not able to make. It explains why efforts to mobilise women to become more active in politics tend to coalesce around the more economically well-off groups. Rani Rasiah of PSM laments that working-class people have no time to attend meetings, dialogues and discussions as

they are tied down with 9–5 jobs or household chores (Interview with Rani Rasiah). Prema Devaraj concurs with the obstacles thrown up by socio-economic disparity when it comes to women's political participation:

> Political involvement takes time and there are costs to think about. I think poverty is an added hurdle to women's political involvement. For example, women from a lower income group maybe working two jobs or long hours and may not have the time to spend on political involvement or activism especially if there are childcare and eldercare commitments. Not everyone has the luxury of working part-time or being able to support a family on a part-time salary (Interview with Prema Devaraj).

Lastly, there is a pressing need to develop and scale up the leadership capacity of women, especially Indian women, who are woefully represented in politics. One way to augment the capacity of women's leadership in politics is by training and cultivating talented and driven women from the grassroots level. Both political parties and civil society organisations have to some extent undertaken this development effort. PKR, for instance, established the Akademi Keadilan Rakyat (AKR) in 2009 for this purpose (see next section for more details). In Penang, the DAP-led state government organises efforts to cultivate women leaders at the grassroots level through the Village Community Management Council (Majlis Pengurusan Komuniti Kampung, MPKK), which established the Women and Family Development Committee (Jawatankuasa Pembangunan Wanita dan Keluarga, JPWK) in 2018 that aims to get women to be involved with the state's affairs. The Penang state government also created Women's Brigade (Briged Wanita) in 2013 for a similar objective (Interview with Kasthuriraani Patto; Briged Wanita, 'sendi' wanita Pulau Pinang, 2013). Another way to strengthen the capacity of women's leadership is through mentorship, the sheer importance of which is stressed by some of our informants. Kasthuriraani Patto lists her mother as one of her earliest mentors and a major source of political inspiration (along with her father) (Interview with Kasthuriraani Patto). Similarly, Prema Devaraj chalks up the source of her political education and ideals to good feminist mentors, mainly older women who had been through similar experiences and cared to share their knowledge. Female mentors, according to her, can serve as good role models for women activists and politicians, namely by showcasing different leadership styles that are non-authoritarian, consultative, and collaborative (Interview with Prema Devaraj).

In short, one aspect of Indian women's political participation that our informants wholeheartedly agree on is the need to build solidarity that is based on common issues and ethnicity only makes up a part of it. Kasthuriraani Patto emphatically sums up her view on the role of Indian female leaders in the context of non-ethnic inclusiveness,

> As an Indian female and an upcoming leader, there will be a lot of expectation to only talk about Indian issues. A leader should be aware that the issues that Indians face are also faced by other races as well… When you become leader, you don't just lead a single race. To me that is very dangerous and it is going back in time. When you are an Indian female leader, you must speak for everybody, particularly those who are marginalised and the voiceless (Interview with Kasthuriraani Patto).

Whether they realise it or not, the Indian female leaders we talked to have been carrying out their political advocacy in an intersectional manner. They strive to

include marginalised voices and place the utmost importance on finding common grounds, especially among groups that normally do not interact with each other and can be starkly different on the surface. The focus is on aspects that unite, not divide, people. Prema Devaraj facilitates a series of workshops called "Hand-in-Hand" that puts this belief into practice,

> These are a series of short sessions for women only. These sessions try to create a space or an avenue for women to discuss issues in a non-threatening and a non-confrontational manner… We facilitate the sharing of human values that matter without considering the ethnicity or religion. For example, shared values regarding families, and how family is very important for every woman from different faiths. We try to break down the barrier on the exclusivity of religion and ethnicity.[17]

On the main, it is clear that Indian female politicians and activists do not see their political struggle through a myopic ethnic lens. Building solidarity that cuts across ethnicity, religion, gender and class, one that is couched in common causes, is what drives the work that these women do. However, the biggest challenge currently is to increase the level of women's participation in politics, particularly Indian women, be it through party politics or civil society organisations, which will be discussed in the following section.

## Policy Recommendations

The commonly popular way to increase women's participation in politics is to institute the 30% quota for female candidates for political offices, normally in the legislative arena. The rule requires political parties to field at least 30% female candidates in any given election. As we have seen above, this requirement does not always translate to 30% of female members of the legislature. The main problem stems from political parties not fielding female candidates in constituencies where they have more than a fair chance of winning. Instead, political parties tend to field them where they have low electability. Even in the case where they are fielded as strong candidates, their political fortune is closely tied to powerful male patrons within the parties. Such is the case in Indonesia, where political parties are required to put up at least 30% female candidates but a good many of them are not successful (White & Aspinall, 2019). It is clear that simply requiring political parties to field 30% female candidates is not enough.

The question now is what Malaysia can do to increase the percentage of female members of parliament especially when there is no 30% quota in effect. When it comes to female representation in the national parliament, Malaysia, for example, still lags behind Indonesia, where the national parliament currently comprises 20.9% female MPs, in contrast to Malaysia's 14.4%. Even more pressing for Malaysia is how can it increase the woeful number of female Indian MPs, which presently stands

[17] Hand-in-Hand workshops are co-organised by Aliran and Ikram, a well-established Islamic organisation. Interview with Prema Devaraj.

at one? Despite the promise made in its election manifesto, the previous Pakatan Harapan (PH) government stated that it had no intention of introducing the 30% female quota in the parliament due to limited parliamentary seats and thus shifting the onus to leadership in political parties to field more women in winnable seats (Rashid, 2018). Meanwhile, the present PN government is too preoccupied with the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic fallout to broach this issue.

Quite interestingly, according to studies that look at the results of the Malaysian GE14 in 2018, female candidates tend to have a higher chance of winning against male candidates in any given electoral contest (Izharudddin, 2019). It is a strong indication that gender in itself is not an impediment when it comes to contesting for political office in Malaysia, unlike the case in Indonesia (White & Aspinall, 2019). It mainly boils down to political parties not fielding enough female candidates. In the GE14, women only made up 10.92% of the 687 candidates who contested for parliamentary seats. If there is no issue with electability, then political parties must put in more effort to increase their percentage of female candidates, particularly Indian women. Political parties, for a start, can place Indian women to contest in 64 constituencies where Indians make up a sizeable minority, which might help to increase their chance of winning. In the GE14 only three Indian women contested in these 64 constituencies and two of them competed against one another in the Batu Kawan parliamentary seat. Failing that, political parties can appoint more Indian women to Dewan Negara (upper chamber of the parliament) as senators. PAS, the Islamic party known for its conservatism, has a quota for appointing women as senators in Dewan Negara and fielding women candidates, a result of a directive from its Dewan Ulama (Council of Religious Scholars).[18] Ambiga Sreenevasan, the former President of the Malaysian Bar and co-chairperson of Bersih, also supports the implementation of affirmative action for Indian women in politics:

> I believe in the quota system because we sometimes need affirmative action or a positive discrimination to equalise. Sometimes it must be done by force. There should be a quota for women as well, which we have not reached. I don't think it's a bad idea to have racial quotas as well. Sometimes we must force the situation and provide affirmative action to uplift the Indian women politicians. I think that is something we should really look into (Interview with Ambiga Sreenevasan).

More importantly, political parties must make room at the top for more women especially Indian women in order for their voices to be heard and represented. Having Indian women as party vice presidents or members of the executive council will increase their chances of getting nominated for elections, which in the case of Malaysia is not nearly enough. As we have mentioned above, Indian women's

[18] Interview with Asmak Husin, a PAS female senator in Dewan Negara. Kota Bharu, Kelantan. 8 January 2020. In the GE14 PAS fielded more men than women in ineffective (unwinnable) contests, which can be seen as an indicator of the party's intention to have more women representation in the parliament, even though all but one of these female candidates ended up losing. See also Yeong (2018).

fortune within the MIC is closely linked with the male leadership that acts as a political patron. Only if there are more women in MIC's leadership, there would be less dependence on male patronage for women to rise through the party ranks. The same can also be said for other main political parties in Malaysia.

While there is certainly a deeply embedded culture of patriarchy within the leadership of main political parties and other structural barriers that can be a hindrance to promoting more female candidates, qualified, willing and viable female candidates are also in low supply. Political parties need to invest more resources in training and developing women leaders, especially Indian women. PKR has taken a proactive approach to cultivate women leaders within the party by establishing the Akademi Keadilan Rakyat (AKR) in 2009. Founded by Fuziah Salleh, the current MP for Kuantan, AKR's aim is to train party members from all ranks and prepare candidates for federal and state elections with a special focus on women leadership. As a result, PKR managed to field 20% female parliamentary candidates in the GE14 (in comparison to the 10.92% national average) and eleven of them went on to get elected, one of whom, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, became the first female Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia (Izharudddin, 2019). While it is indeed a commendable effort by PKR to develop more female leaders its target groups remain predominantly confined to young middle-class Malay-Muslim women professionals and older/retired Malay-Muslim women. With the exception of PSM, PAS and UMNO, other political parties tend to be urban-based and middle-class and do not have a strong presence among the B40 economic group.[19] Therefore, any serious plan to develop women leaders must address these weaknesses.

Another structural barrier to increasing the number of Indian women candidates is the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system practised by Malaysia. Better known as the "winner takes all' system, FPTP disincentivises political parties from fielding more Indian women candidates due to a limited number of seats contested by a pool of candidates that is heavily dominated by men. Due to the high stakes nature of FPTP, it is next to impossible to find male candidates or incumbents who would be willing to give up their seats to women candidates. Thus, reforming the FPTP system to the one that is based on Proportional Representation (PR) will allow political parties to nominate more female candidates without creating friction with its male candidates.[20] For instance, a PR system that is based on party-list will provide an opportunity for political parties to place more women candidates on their

[19] For instance, 1.5% of Indians are considered urban poor while 4.3% are categorised as rural poor. Nationally, 1.8% of Indians fall below the poverty level according to the Department of Statistics Malaysia. The Indian M40 economic group has benefited the most from the government's poverty reduction measures compared to the Indian B40 and T20 economic groups. Gini coefficient also shows that Indians have the highest level of inequality (0.44) among the main ethnic groups in Malaysia, bucking the national trend. The disproportionate focus on urban middle-class Indians comes at the detriment of overlooking the poor Indian demographic, namely in political participation (Khalid, 2016).

[20] In a Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system, political parties gain the number of legislative seats that corresponds to the share of votes they receive in the election. For example, in a PR system that uses party-list, if a party gains 10 seats in the parliament, it would choose 10 MPs from its party-list, typically the top 10 names, to represent the party in the parliament.

respective lists, which in turn, will increase the women candidates' chances of getting elected. In other words, if a political party is serious about promoting Indian women as leaders, then it will take the initiative to have more Indian women on its election party list. The former PH government had formed the Electoral Reform Committee, which proposed, among others, to change the current FPTP system to a PR system (Bernama, 2019). The fate of the proposal is yet to be determined as electoral reform is not part of the current PN government's agenda. Nevertheless, electoral reform remains crucial if Malaysia is to undertake the effort to increase the percentage of women's participation in politics, especially Indian women.

Political participation through party politics is not the only avenue available to Indian women as previously mentioned. Many Indian women leaders find that activism through issue-based civil society organisations to be more open, egalitarian and inclusive, which then allows them to play a substantive role in the movement. It is therefore imperative to encourage more Indian women to participate in politics through civil society activism. One way to do this is by not abusing draconian laws to punish those who air out their grievances in public spaces such as what happened to the union officials who protested in front of the Ipoh General Hospital recently. Another example, sections 233 and 211 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) of 1998 must also be amended so that those who write critically on social media about their issue advocacy will not face repercussions for doing so in the name of threatening national security and creating discord among ethnic and religious groups.[21] Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly form the bedrock of a functioning democracy, precisely because these rights give people the alternative space to participate in politics in order to have a say in how their lives are determined in this country. It is incumbent upon the government to respect these rights and expand this non-formal political space so as to encourage more marginalised voices to be heard, among which are the views and grievances of Indian women that are not represented by major political parties.

## Conclusion

We have demonstrated that the low participation rate of Malaysian Indian women in politics cannot simply be assigned to "Indian issues" since the Indian community is not monolithic and Indian women in particular come from myriad socio-economic classes. Indian women bring with them diverse lived experiences that have to be accounted for in order for any meaningful changes to take place. The main mode of dealing with pressing socio-economic issues in Malaysia has always been through the lens of ethnicity, a crowning feature of the consociational type of politics practised in this country. In so doing, the political elites who represent the interests of their community, in this case, the Indian community, are more likely to overlook and

[21] Amending these two sections of CMA had been part of the PH election manifesto in GE14 but was not realised after it came to power (Bernama, 2018).

marginalise many voices within the community, particularly those who do not share similar lived experiences as ones who claim to represent the community. Similarly, the feminist movement in Malaysia must also be cognizant and inclusive of the diverse needs of Indian women, which might not dovetail with the movement's main constituency. Crenshaw says it best when describing the lack of introspection among those who claim to represent the demands and aspirations of their groups:

> The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. These mutual elisions present a particularly difficult political dilemma for women of colour" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1252).

To the quote above, we also like to add the class element to the mix especially when most of these socio-political movements tend to be middle-class and urban-based. Karl Marx states the importance of ethnicity in the class struggle when commenting on the labour movement in post-Civil War America, "Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin" (cited in Anderson, 2020). It is therefore imperative that a socio-political movement be based on intersectionality of interests that is an amalgam of ethnicity, gender, and class. In order to raise political consciousness among the Indian community, one must start with its most vulnerable group, poor Indian women, and the only way to effectively help them is through intersectional organising that is inclusive, empowering, empathetic and transcends discrete identity markers.

## References


Anderson, K. B. (2020, June 12). Karl Marx fought for freedom. *Jacobin.* Retrieved June 12, 2020, from, https://jacobinmag.com/2020/06/karl-marx-slavery?.

Augustin, R. (2019, October 8). Home ministry throws former BN party a lifeline. *Free Malaysia Today*. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2019/10/08/home-ministry-throws-former-bn-party-a-lifeline/.

bel hooks. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism.* Boston, MA: South End Press.

Bernama. (2018, September 4). Gobind: Communications and multimedia act to be amended. *The Star*. Retrieved June 5, 2020, from, https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/09/04/gobind-communications-and-multimedia-act-to-be-amended/.

Bernama. (2019, October 2). Electoral Reform Committee proposes proportionate representation system for parliamentary seats. *Malay Mail Online.* Retrieved June 5, 2020, from, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/10/02/electoral-reform-committee-proposes-proportionate-representation-system-for/1796495.

Bunyan, J. (2020, June 2). Five arrested outside Ipoh hospital for peaceful protest against union-busting move. *Malay Mail*. https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/06/02/Five-arrested-outside-Ipoh-hospital-for-peaceful-protest-against-union-bust/1871801.

Chan, J. (2019, July 15). Audit: Millions meant for Indian community abused under PM's Department between 2014 and 2018. *Malay Mail*. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/07/15/audit-millions-meant-for-indian-community-abused-under-pms-dept-between-201/1771666.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black Feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics. *Living with Contradictions,* 39–52. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429499142-5.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

Department of Statistics. (2019). Press release statistics on women empowerment in selected domains, Malaysia. https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/pdfPrev&id=U2UvVllQQlJsbzkwclQrdVlnMzJTdz09.

Department of Statistics. (2020a). Statistics on Women Empowerment in Selected Domains, Malaysia, 2019. Retrieved May 7, 2020a, from, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=444&bul_id=U2UvVllQQlJsbzkwclQrdVlnMzJTdz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09.

Department of Statistics. (2020b). Principal Statistics of Labour Force, Malaysia, First Quarter (Q1) 2020. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=149&bul_id=d1k5WU1GV3kzeUdJS0E4N210VGZSUT09&menu_id=U3VPMldoYUxzVzFaYmNkWXZteGduZz09.

FMT Reporters. (2018, June 14). Report: 95% Chinese but less than 30% Malays voted for PH. *Free Malaysia Today*. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from, https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2018/06/14/report-95-chinese-but-less-than-30-malays-voted-for-ph/.

Fong, F. (2018, May 1). Jayanthi to focus on helping Batu Kawan women in first 100 days. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/05/364284/jayanthi-focushelpingbatu-kawan-women-first-100-days.

Freedom Film Fest. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://freedomfilm.my/wayang/2019-bila-kami-bersatu/.

Hamid, A. H., Ho, W. S. G., & Ismail, S. (2019, September 29). Demarcating households: An integrated income and consumption analysis. Khazanah Research Institute. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, http://www.krinstitute.org/assets/contentMS/img/template/editor/Presentation%20Slides_Demarcating%20Households_Discussion%20Paper.pdf.

Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2020). Women in parliament: 1995–2020–25 years in review. Retrieved May 7, 2020, from, https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2020-03/women-in-parliament-1995-2020-25-years-in-review.

Izharudddin, A. (2019, November). The 30% hope: Securing the electoral success for women in Malaysia Baharu. *New Mandala*, Policy Paper (pp. 1–14). Retrieved June 5, 2020, from, https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Alicia-Izharuddin-30-Hope-1.pdf.

Jayasooria, D. (2018, May 3). Battling for hearts and minds of Indian voters in GE14. *Malaysiakini*. https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/422807 (accessed on 15 May 2020).

Kausar, Z. (2006). *Women in politics: The case of Peninsular Malaysia.* Kuala Lumpur: Research Centre, International Islamic University Malaysia.

Khalid, M. A. (2016). Inclusive development and Malaysian Indians (pp. 295–297, 301–302). In Denison Jayasooria and K.S. Nathan (Eds.), *Contemporary Malaysian Indians: History, issues, challenges and prospects.* Bangi: Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), UKM.

Lean In. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://leanin.org/.

Lijphart, A. (1969). Consociational democracy. *World Politics, 21*(2), 207–225.
Lim, I. (2018). "All you need to know about GE14 in numbers," *Malay Mail*, 9 May 2018. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2018/05/09/all-you-need-to-know-about-ge14-in-numbers/1628878.
Lynn, D. (2014). Socialist feminism and triple oppression: Claudia Jones and African American Women in American communism. *Journal for the Study of Radicalism, 8*(2), 1. https://doi.org/10.14321/jstudradi.8.2.0001.
Marimuthu, T. (2016). The Malaysian Indian Community: Continuing Concerns (p.95). In Denison Jayasooria and K.S. Nathan (Eds.), *Contemporary Malaysian Indians: History, issues, challenges and prospects*. Bangi: Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), UKM.
Members of the House of Representatives and Senate: Parliament of Malaysia. Retrieved May 10, 2020, from, https://www.parlimen.gov.my/index.php?lang=en.
"More Malays joining myPPP, says Kayveas" *Malay Mail*, 10 January 2016. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/01/10/more-malays-joining-myppp-says-kayveas/1038111.
Netaji Centre. (1992). *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: A Malaysian perspective*. Kuala Lumpur: Netaji Centre.
Radhi, N. A. M. (2017, December 20) MAICCI applauds PM for introducing Malaysian Indian Blueprint. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2017/12/316651/maicci-applauds-pm-introducing-malaysian-indian-blueprint.
Rashid, H. R. A. (2018, November 26). Not mandatory to have 30 per cent women representation in politics, says Hannah Yeoh. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved June 5, 2020, from, https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2018/11/434660/not-mandatory-have-3w0-cent-women-representation-politics-says-hannah.
Subra: Malaysian Indian Blueprint must not be viewed negatively. *Malaysiakini*, 12 December 2017. Retrieved May 15, 2020, from, https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/405142.
Tate, D. J. (2008). The Malaysian Indians: History, problems, and future. Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.
White. S., & Aspinall, E. (2019, December 3). Why good women lose elections in Indonesia? *New Mandala*. Retrieved June 5, 2020, from, https://www.newmandala.org/why-good-women-lose-elections/.
Yeong, P. J. (2018). How women matter: Gender representation in Malaysia's 14th General Election. *The round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs, 107*(6), 771–786. https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2018.1545943.

## *List of Interviews*

Devaraj, Prema. (2020, June 3). Zoom interview.
Husin, Asmak. (2020, January 8). Kota Bharu, Kelantan.
K.S. Bawani. (2020, June 7). Zoom interview.
Patto, Kasthuriraani. (2020, June 5). Phone call interview.
Rasiah, Rani. (2020, May 28). Phone call interview.
Sreenevasan, Ambiga. (2020, June 10). Zoom interview.

**Azmil Tayeb** is a senior lecturer teaching Political Science at the School of Social Sciences in Universiti Sains Malaysia. He has done extensive research on Islamic politics, social movements, and local government politics, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. Previously he was a Fulbright fellow based at a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) in South Kalimantan, Indonesia and an Erasmus Mundus fellow based at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany. He is the

author of “Islamic Education in Indonesia and Malaysia: Shaping Minds, Saving Souls” (Routledge, 2018). The book won the Colleagues’ Choice Award for Social Science at the 2019 International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) in Leiden, Netherlands. Currently, he is also a Visiting Research Fellow at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore and an Adjunct Professor at Universitas Negeri Malang in East Java, Indonesia. He received his PhD from the Australian National University.

**Logesshri Sathasivam** is a trained teacher who graduated with honours from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in 2017 with a B.Ed in Malaysian Studies. Her past research focused on political participation of the Orang Asli women in Pahang under the Ministry of Education’s Fundamental Research Grant Scheme. Logesshri is interested in studying the intersection between media and politics, in particular perceptions of minority groups about inter-ethnic tensions that flare up on a regular basis in Malaysia. She currently works for British Council Malaysia and focuses on recognising the important contribution gender equality can make to poverty reduction and inclusive growth.

# The Impoverishment of Malaysian Indian Women: A Capability Approach Perspective


**Nithiya Guna Saigaran**

**Abstract** Indian women belong to an ethnic minority community in Malaysia. However, neither Indian women nor their poverty has received significant attention from researchers in Malaysia. The missing focus on Malaysian Indians, particularly women, occurs for two reasons: an overemphasis on poverty among Malays and a focus on poverty line income. Indian households are vastly gendered because they are based on a patriarchal structure. Hence, poverty among Malaysian Indian women is a complex issue that must be approached with a gender-sensitive and multidimensional approach. This is because women's poverty does not merely derive from an income deficiency, but is also a result of the gendered experiences in the household. Studies have argued that gendered experiences are embedded in the household in the form of its roles, responsibilities, tasks and routine practices, all of which prevent women from overcoming impoverishment. The capability approach, being gender-sensitive, could identify the impoverishment of women by focusing on women as units of analysis and interlocking the gender complexities in the household. This approach examines three components, namely capabilities, functionings and agency. Within this capability framework and intersectional approach, this chapter explores critically the poor Malaysian Indian women (B40) and non-poor Indian women (M40 and T20) in Penang in terms of capabilities, functionings and agency.

**Keywords** Capability approach · Capabilities · Gender · Impoverishment · Malaysian Indian women

## Introduction: Capability Approach as Framework

The capability approach was conceived by Amartya Sen in the 1970s and discussed in his *Tanner Lecturers on Equality* as a normative framework for understanding well-being and social arrangements. This approach focuses on the individual as the unit of analysis in assessing one's quality of life and development. Subsequently, prominent

N. G. Saigaran (✉)
Department of Indian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
e-mail: nithiya@um.edu.my



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_5

scholars, such as Martha Nussbaum, Ingrid Robeyns and Sabina Alkire, developed and applied the capability approach in the fields of politics, economics, philosophy, and sociology. The applicability of this approach in various fields has transformed the capability approach into an enriched and complex framework. Capabilities, functionings and agency are the major components in the capability approach that are used to analyse impoverishment. Capability is defined as the alternative combinations of things a person can do or be (Al-Janabi, 2018; Hvinden & Halvorsen, 2018). Capability is also seen as an asset with which an individual creates the life that he or she values (Al-Janabi, 2018). However, capabilities are not readily available in the household and are likely to be derived from the gender norms within the household (Bastos et al., 2009). Nussbaum (2011) further categorised capabilities into three types: basic, internal and combined capabilities. Basic capabilities refer to natural human capabilities, such as the ability to hear, see or walk while internal capabilities refer to the capabilities developed through exercise and training, for example, children learn to speak well as a result of their daily interaction with parents and family members (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011). Finally, combined capabilities refer to the internal capabilities with external conditions, which makes the exercise of a function compulsory, for example, communication with the public (Nussbaum, 2000).

Functionings refer to what individuals are doing in their current lives (Al-Janabi, 2018). This involves maintaining a healthy body, being safe, being calm, having warm friendships, and obtaining an educated mind and a good job (Alkire, 2005). It is a foundational term, used to include all of what a person is and does (Nambiar, 2013). Functionings, as beings and doings, are the outgrowths or realisations of capabilities. Agency refers to the individual autonomy to create and construct one's own life decisions and aspects of well-being. These three major components enable the evaluation of women as units of analysis and have the potential to release them from the impoverishment they have experienced. Hence, this chapter attempts to argue how the capability approach can be applied to critically examine the state of capabilities, functionings and agency of poor and non-poor Indian women in Malaysia.

The intersectionality approach is applied together with the capability approach in this study. Intersectionality is an analytical tool that is used to investigate the interlocking and complex power inequalities, and experiences of exclusion and subordination (Balsera, 2014). This study focuses specifically on the intersectionality of Malaysian Indian women by analysing their experiences of inequality and discrimination from the perspective of the capability approach. The participants' narratives are presented to show how Malaysian Indian women belonging to different socioeconomic groups, i.e., B40, M40 and T20,[1] encounter inequality and discrimination due to their gender, the patriarchal system, and dysfunctional capabilities, functionings and agency that they encounter in their household. The different social classes provide intersectional perspectives that allow an examination of the lives of Malaysian Indian women living in a multi-ethnic community such as in Malaysia.

[1] B40 (Bottom 40), M40 (Middle 40) and T20 (Top 20) are household income classifications in Malaysia.

## Cultural Socialisation of Malaysian Indian Women: A Brief Perspective

Most Malaysian Indian women are the descendants of Indian immigrants to Malaysia (then called Malaya) who were part of the mass labour migration wave during the British administration period in the late 18th and early nineteenth centuries (Lee, 1989). The majority were Tamils, while the other Indian minorities belonged to communities such as Sikhs, Malayalees, Telugus and so forth. Tamil migrants mostly originated from Tamil Nadu (then called the Madras Presidency). Indian women are often socialised into a traditional gender ideology based on patriarchy, which strongly influences Indian cultural values and norms (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2013; Lee, 1989). This means that a person born into an Indian household is socialised into the segregation of femininity and masculinity. Feminine and masculine roles are hierarchical within the household (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013). Indian women are socialised to act as subordinates in serving the interests of the males in the household. Scholars have stated that the prime responsibility of women is to be the cultural standard-bearers of their communities (Kallivayalil, 2004; Schütte, 2014). They are expected to ensure their generation follows the respectful culture they live in by adhering to the socialisation process in the household (Ehrenreich, 2013).

In immigrant communities, in the process of assimilation with the local communities, Indian women were found to be cultural vessels, protecting their culture by performing their maternal responsibility (Kallivayalil, 2004). In cultural socialisation, household members are taught about the beliefs, rituals, values, norms and traditions of their ethnicity (Mun, 2013). Based on this perspective, members of Indian households are socialised into Indian beliefs, values and traditions to enable them to assimilate into their society. Indian men are expected to be breadwinners, decision-makers and leaders, which indicates their higher position compared to women. Meanwhile, Indian women are expected to hold subordinate positions by assuming the role of caretakers, nurturers and other passive roles in the family, to ensure that men can fulfill their roles as leaders of their families (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013; Sonawat, 2001).

## Methodology

The data of this study were gathered via in-depth interviews involving twenty-four poor and non-poor Indian women. Purposive sampling was employed to identify possible respondents for this study. The selection criteria of the participants were based on Tamil being their mother tongue and their household income.[2] Participants with household income of RM 2928 or less per month were categorised as the B40 (Bottom 40) group and identified as poor. Meanwhile, those with household income

[2] Based on Table 5: Mean monthly gross income of Top 20%, Middle 40% and Bottom 40% of Households by Ethnic Group and Strata, Malaysia, 1970–2014 (Department of Statistics, 2016).

ranging from RM 2,929 to RM 6,311 were categorised as the M40 (Middle 40) group, and participants whose monthly household income was from RM 6,312 to RM 15,690 were categorised as the T20 (Top 20) group and classified as non-poor. The participants were selected from two research locations in Seberang Perai Tengah and Daerah Timur Laut. These locations were the focus of this study as the two districts are recognised as having been the settlements of Indian migrants since the earliest arrivals (Gopal, 2013). They also have higher concentrations of urban poor Indians compared to other Penang districts (Gopal, 2013).

Each interview with a participant was recorded by the researcher with the participant's consent. Employing the Capability Approach, the interviews focused on the three components—their current capabilities (able to do), functioning (able to be) and agency—in terms of their eight capabilities, namely physical health, mental health, education, domestic work and dependent care, paid work and special talents, time autonomy, material ownership (savings and property ownership) and bodily integrity and safety. The interviews were conducted in Tamil. First, the interviews were recorded and transcribed in Tamil. Next, the transcripts were translated into English. The back-translation method was employed to ensure the English translation was accurate. The interview data were processed using NVivo10, which is a qualitative analysis software. Upon transcription and translation, the researcher read the transcripts for familiarisation and to produce the codes. During the coding process, the transcripts were first read. Then, the data was coded by dividing and categorising the codes into groupings and subgroupings. Later, the related codes were combined, and the themes were expanded using the codes. Lastly, the narratives were presented, with explanations revolving around these themes. Participants were given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality. The participants were in the 34–55 age group at the time of this study. Table 1 provides a brief profie of the respondents who were interviewed for this study.

## Findings and Discussion

The interview data from the twenty-four participants were analysed in terms of the major components of the capability approach, namely capabilities, functionings and agency.

**Table 1** Brief profile of participants

| No | Pseudonym | Age | Marital status | Working status | Group based on mean household income |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Shaila | 46 | Married | Cleaner | B40-poor |
| 2 | Anita | 38 | Married | Housewife | B40-poor |
| 3 | Kanni | 42 | Married | Part-time Nanny | B40-poor |
| 4 | Jaysri | 40 | Married | Housewife | B40-poor |
| 5 | Ashwini | 43 | Married | Customer Service Officer | T20–non-poor |
| 6 | Priya | 44 | Married | Manager | T20–non-poor |
| 7 | Rekha | 42 | Married | Interior Designer | T20–non-poor |
| 8 | Anjana | 45 | Married | Restaurant Owner | T20–non-poor |
| 9 | Naila | 40 | Married | Nanny | B40-poor |
| 10 | Eswari | 36 | Married | Housewife | B40-poor |
| 11 | Jesintha | 40 | Married | Housewife | B40-poor |
| 12 | Latha | 43 | Married | Part-time Assistant | B40-poor |
| 13 | Rita | 41 | Married | Housewife | B40-poor |
| 15 | Sasikala | 45 | Married | HR Manager | M40–non-poor |
| 16 | Vaishnawi | 44 | Married | Marketing Executive | M40–non-poor |
| 17 | Visha | 40 | Married | Storeroom Manager | T20–non-poor |
| 18 | Kovarthini | 47 | Married | Executive | M40–non-poor |
| 19 | Ravina | 34 | Married | Manager | M40–non-poor |
| 20 | Vaithegi | 37 | Married | Breakfast Seller | B40-poor |
| 21 | Indira | 46 | Married | Housewife | M40–non-poor |
| 22 | Shavitha | 42 | Married | Restaurant Manager | T20–non-poor |
| 23 | Yuva | 44 | Married | Housewife | B40-poor |
| 24 | Seetha | 42 | Married | Housewife | B40-poor |

## *Capabilities*

***Failure in terms of basic capabilities***. Poor participants in this study were identified as having basic capabilities[3] failure. This is a serious issue because the failure to secure basic capabilities would contribute to the beginning of an individual's impoverishment (Chattier, 2012; Terzi, 2004). In this study, about 95% of the poor Indian women were identified as experiencing the failure of basic capabilities. As an example, Shaila, a 36-year-old woman working as a cleaner, shared the following:

> ….I am unable to read, I only studied until standard 4…I can spell the words slowly but I can spell only very limited words…My father discontinued my education due to financial

[3] In this study, basic capabilities refer to eight selected capabilities: physical health, mental health, education, domestic work and care for dependents, paid work and special talents, time autonomy, material ownership (savings and property ownership) and bodily integrity and safety.

> problems…I could not say much at such a young age, I just stayed at home to take care of my sister, who was still a baby at that time…

Education is regarded as a significant basic capability and plays a fundamental role in the expansion of the other capabilities of an individual (Terzi, 2004). Shaila's explanation shows that she had experienced a failure of basic capability in terms of education. Her education level was restricted due to the family's financial situation and gendered expectations. As a result, language skills such as reading, spelling and writing remained limited for Shaila. In this study, basic capability failure was a common pattern among poor Indian women. A shortfall in basic capabilities means that the basic features that an individual needs to lead a fulfilling life are threatened. Sen (2001) termed this basic capability failure as 'capability deprivation'. Scholars have argued that a weakened state of capabilities would restrict the freedom a woman has to enjoy a life that she values (Eberharter, 2018; Rauhut & Haiti, 2005; Waglé, 2014). Moreover, underdeveloped basic capabilities limit the achievement of a more complex level of capabilities, internal capabilities. These include the possession of skills and talents, having opinions, internalised learning, and an awareness of bodily fitness. However, scholars have highlighted that the progression from basic capabilities to internal or combined capabilities is strongly dependent on the exercise and training received by an individual in terms of his or her own capabilities (Nalagon, 2003; Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Sen, 1980). For instance, an individual needs to take care of physical fitness by adopting the routine of regular exercises like walking, running or going to the gym. Nussbaum (2011) argued that to acquire internal capabilities, exercise and training are significantly required. However, the narratives of the poor Indian women in this study revealed that the spaces for exercise and training were not always available in their environment. As a consequence, they were unable to expand their basic capabilities into internal and combined capabilities.

This problem is demonstrated in the case of Anita, a 40-year-old poor Indian housewife who was married with two children. She talked about her health:

> …I remember my teacher telling me that health is crucial for us to live a decent and quality life. In school, we always had the free 'Milo'[4] programme and free breakfast programme…Actually, the free breakfast was one of the reasons I went to school [laughing]…because, in my house there was no such thing as breakfast, just leftover rice from yesterday…Vegetables were quite pricey, and with a limited income we could not afford those things at all….

Anita's explanation shows that she experienced a lack of resources needed to be healthy: getting a healthy breakfast and proper nutritional food sources, such as vegetables and fruits. As Anita's case suggests, it was found that exercise and training were less likely to occur among low-income families. Being healthy requires three daily meals, with nutrients derived from vegetables and fruits. However, the availability of vitamins, nutrients and calcium was almost non-existent for poor Indian women like Anita, who struggled to balance their expenses with their limited income. This proves that exercise and training of basic capabilities are determined

[4] This refers to the service of MILO Malaysia, which includes nationwide school visits with its iconic MILO van providing free Milo drinks to encourage breakfast-eating habits among students.

by resources, i.e., income. As such, insufficient income can disrupt the availability of the exercise and training of one's capability. Another example is Kanni, 43 years old and working as a part-time nanny:

> …I was unable to go to work because of my illness...At the age of eighteen, I was diagnosed with low blood pressure…In school also, I often fainted and felt dizzy…It was worse when I had my period…I was scared to go to school as I would somehow faint … The doctor suggested that my body lacked essential nutrients and vitamins...My mother bought me some supplements once, but she could not afford to buy them again once they finished as they were quite expensive….

Deprivation creates the failure to achieve basic capabilities, which could jeopardise one's ability to escape impoverishment (Sen, 2001, 2017). Kanni realised that her weakened state of health deprived her of a decent quality of life. She was unable to obtain an empowered capability in terms of health since she constantly struggled with low blood pressure and her body lacked nutrients and vitamins. In addition, Kanni was unable to overcome health deprivation due to the problem of insufficient income that she faced. Income insufficiency meant she was unable to afford treatment from a doctor or supplements for the improvement of her health. This was clearly reflected in her narrative.

***Gender as an important vector in determining capabilities***. The narratives of the poor Indian women revealed that gendered households play a key role in either constructing or diminishing the women's capabilities. Gender norms, in the form of gender related beliefs and distribution of household resources, can contribute to the creation and possession of the key capabilities of an individual (Bastos et al., 2009). In this study, participants explained how gendered perspectives dictated their household roles, behaviour, actions and responsibilities. A case in point is the narrative of Jaysri, a housewife aged 39 and married with three sons:

> …I came from a very poor family…But because of my parents and help from my relatives, teachers and friends, I was able to study…My father's EPF [Employment Provident Fund] money further helped me to pursue a diploma in accounting… I planned to go to work and study up to a degree level…At that time, a relative came with a wedding proposal, and I got married a month later…After marriage, my mother-in-law strongly opposed the idea of me studying and working…so I just had to let go of my dreams.

The life events of an individual born into an Indian household are gendered because they are built on a patriarchal structure (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013). Jaysri's explanation clearly shows how an Indian household's gender norms can impose barriers and limitations to exercising one's capability as an Indian woman. Socialised in a traditional Indian family, she experienced pressure to conform to traditional household practices that were taught through gender socialisation within the household. In Indian communities, a woman is bound by the culture in which she is raised (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013). Hence, she is often pressurised to conform to the norms and values prescribed for an 'ideal Indian woman' to earn respect and status in the household and society. In a traditional household, the ideal Indian woman is required to obey the wishes of her parents, get married at the right time, and

submit to the authoritative figures in her husband's family, such as her husband and mother-in-law (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013). This was evident in Jaysri's life.

After marriage, authority over Indian women's lives is transferred from the male members of her own family to the male counterparts and elder females in her husband's family, such as the mother-in-law (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013; Desai & Thakkar, 2001; Menon, 2002). Thus, a married woman must obey the rules to ensure her own family's respect and honour, and submit herself to her husband's family (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013; Desai & Thakkar, 2001). This was certainly true in the case of Jaysri, who was suitably qualified to secure a well-paid job with her education. However, she ultimately became a homemaker because her mother-in-law was opposed to her working outside the home. About 90% of the participants expressed that they faced similar objections from various family members (e.g., their husband, brothers, mother-in-law, father-in-law or other authoritative male household members), both in their own and their husbands' families when they wanted to work. Despite realising the benefits of employment in terms of income and independence, Indian women's lives are constructed by the gender differentiation between men and women. Thus, unable to defy their traditional culture, most poor Indian women suffer the same fate as Jaysri. They constantly need the approval of family members who hold authority over them. Hence, they lose the opportunity to be financially independent, to be involved in decision-making and to enjoy the life they desire.

***Developed basic capabilities***. The narrative of the non-poor Indian women revealed a contrasting story to that of their poor counterparts in this study. The data revealed that most non-poor Indian women possessed the basic capabilities to create the valued life that they wanted. This means a failure of the basic capabilities was less likely to occur among the non-poor Indian women in this study. Ashwini, a non-poor Indian woman working as a customer service officer in a telecommunication company, said:

> ….My parents always emphasised the importance of good health, [and] we were always told to exercise, [and] eat healthy food…That's how I have been able to maintain my health till now…I'm 40 now, [and] every year I go for a medical checkup…I control my food intake daily. I eat lots of veggies but fewer carbs…That is what I am teaching my kids too…

Ashwini's explanation indicated that women from non-poor households possessed strong basic capabilities and were exposed to the platforms that enabled them to develop those capabilities. This is evident in terms of Ashwini's health, which improved due to her exercise, food intake and yearly medical checkup. Her efforts reduced the likelihood of health problems, and further encouraged her to enjoy a quality of life with improved and advanced health. Besides, it was undeniable that these efforts were supported by the financial resources available to her household. The progression of basic capabilities leads to efforts undertaken by non-poor Indian women to enhance their internal and combined capabilities.

***Enhancement of basic capabilities into internal and combined capabilities***. The development of capabilities relies strongly on the possession of internal and combined capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000; Pierik & Robeyns, 2007). Like Ashwini, Priya also admitted that her health, as a capability, was well-nurtured through the necessary

efforts taken, such as exercise, regular medical examinations and food control. These efforts helped sustain her health so that she could engage in various activities such as going out for training, exercise, shopping, visiting friends and relatives, and travelling. Enhanced capabilities can potentially expand one's ability to be more productive and increase one's earning power (Sen, 2001). This point is illustrated in what she said:

> …..I am a marathon runner and I often go hiking…These two are my favourite hobbies... hmm, I do regular health check-ups and examinations…I rarely fall sick as I am very concerned about my health.

Internal and combined capabilities create the possibility for an individual to gain the empowerment to enjoy a fulfilling life. They also increase the chance for one to prioritise all the efforts necessary to build his or her life (Nussbaum, 2000). Priya's explanation showed that her basic capability of health was transformed into her internal capability (having good health) and combined capability (i.e., being healthy enabled her to be involved in outdoor activities beyond the confines of the home). As mentioned, she was able to participate in more complex activities, for example, marathons and hiking, rather than just taking a walk.

***Barriers and limitations due to gender norms***. Most non-poor Indian women in this study revealed that they faced barriers and limitations due to the gender norms in the Indian household. According to Rekha, an assistant interior designer:

> My grandparents from both sides of my parents were quite conservative, [and] so were my parents…Their expectation was that girls needed to wear a dress in a traditional way, [and] you couldn't reveal your skin…so, the type of clothes which I like… short sleeves, tight blouses, and tight jeans were a big no-no for them…It was hard for me until I was in secondary school…"

Rekha's explanation reveals the struggles Indian women have in coping with the gender norms of the household in various forms, such as conforming to feminine norms and observing traditional dress, to be seen as an ideal Indian woman. Even though Rekha is from a wealthy family, she still faced gender constraints, which could be even more prevalent in under-privileged families. In this study, about 55% of the non-poor Indian women admitted that they experienced traditional gender socialisation. However, they acknowledged that their education and employment were two important factors that altered their capabilities and prevented deprivation. Anjana, a restaurant owner, shared the view below:

> In my family, women were not a priority; I used to think, "I'm worthless" ...Things changed after I pursued my higher education. I learnt how important it is to have my freedom, to do what I want… After working for a few years as a manager in a local restaurant here, I managed to attain financial freedom given my high salary… That is when I realised how important it is to be educated and be employed in professional jobs… that can help earn us respect and status…

Anjana's explanation shows that she had previously faced gender differentiation in the household, whereby men were the priority in the family. Coming from a traditional household, she was socialised into becoming a subordinate and, as a result, was

deprived of self-respect. However, opportunities to obtain education and employment changed her perspective regarding her status in the household. Almost all the non-poor participants concurred with Anjana in that education and employment helped to transform their various capabilities, such as being educated, employed and healthy. This finding is similar to the results of past studies, which show that education and employment are two key factors in the capability development process as they limit gender interference within the household (Cin et al., 2018; Terzi, 2004).

The analysis of the state of the capabilities of poor and non-poor Indian women revealed two different perspectives. It was found that the poor Indian women experienced basic capability failure, which contributed to limitations to the development of their internal and combined capabilities. Scholars have highlighted that poor and marginalised communities are less likely to possess internal and combined capabilities because of unfavourable external conditions (Nussbaum, 2011; Vansteenkiste & Schuller, 2018). Unlike the poor, the non-poor Indian women have developed basic capabilities, which have led to the expansion of their internal and combined capabilities. This notion is well-reflected in the lives of Aswhini and Priya. Second, the difference in the possession of resources among poor and non-poor women as well as conversion factors influenced their capability creation. This study revealed that most women in poor households were more likely to have access to limited resources and have dysfunctional conversion factors. These disadvantages are clearly portrayed in the lives of Shaila, Kanni, Anita and Jaysri, who had to get by with limited resources, in the form of lower household income and underdeveloped capabilities. Third, gender constraints were found to be a significant determinant of the capability deprivation of the poor due to their vulnerability, as reflected in the life of Jaysri. In contrast, the non-poor Indian women in this study confirmed that they managed to obtain education and employment despite having household gender constraints, as reflected in the lives of Rekha and Anjana.

## *Functionings*

***Limited and gendered functionings***. Almost all the poor Indian women surveyed in this study expressed concerns about the difficulty of translating their capabilities to functionings due to their underdeveloped capabilities. Nussbaum (2011) noted that in less-advantaged societies, such as poor households, the freedom to function in accordance with these capabilities could be disrupted by women being denied various platforms to exercise those functionings. Naila, a poor Indian woman working as a nanny, said:

> …. I have no savings for myself. I need to ask my husband for every single cent after giving my salary to him...Once I tried opening a bank account for myself but when my husband found out, he made a big fuss about it…He called me so many bad names and reported this matter to my family, and my mother was so angry that I could hide this from my husband…She believed that as wives and good women, we cannot hide anything from our husbands.

Material ownership (e.g., savings and properties) is crucial for the empowerment of women. However, Naila's story showed that despite understanding the importance of savings, she was denied the possibility of continuing her efforts to extend her function, i.e., saving her money in the bank. Her subordination to her husband was reinforced when he controlled her functioning in financial matters such as opening a personal bank account. As a traditional woman, her functionings needed affirmation, permission and validation. The majority of poor Indian women in this study agreed that their functionings were limited and depended on their husbands' consent. Another participant, Eswari, shared her experience, as reported below:

> …I cannot read and write in Malay or English…Though I can speak well and read well in Tamil, I have problems with writing. So when I receive any letters, I go to my neighbour and ask her for help to read the letters for me…When I want to go somewhere like the bank, I often ask my niece to accompany me…She is in Form 6 so she can help me out when the officer asks me questions….

A conducive external environment is needed for women's advancement, through which combined capabilities are transformed into functionings (Lessmann, 2007; Nussbaum, 2000). Eswari's narrative showed that the various dimensions of her functionings were restricted, given her low educational level. She was unable to function and respond positively to her surroundings. She needed assistance from other people, for instance, requesting her neighbour to read the contents of her letters. In addition, her freedom of functioning was limited in the household because of her lack of education and general knowledge. This shows the dysfunctional state in which Eswari found herself. About 85% of poor Indian women admitted their dysfunctional state within their households. Jesintha, who was married with five children, shared the following:

> …I am always occupied with cooking and cleaning tasks…From the moment I wake up till I sleep...it is always work and work …In the morning I need to prepare breakfast…. I need to prepare my children for school, pack lunch for my husband before sending him to work …After that, I need to cook, clean the whole house…I have five children who are still studying in primary school. Every single time they are back from school they will mess up the house. I have to clean up after them before my husband returns from work as he doesn't like the house to be messy. I also need to prepare food on time…He never helps me with the housework as he thinks it is women's work…

The challenge of managing their household and employment has become a significant factor in determining individual functioning. Jesintha's experience showed her struggles with the burden of household chores. Many working Indian women experienced similar struggles. The double burden prevents women from functioning freely as they must fulfill the demands of the household in the form of tasks, responsibilities and roles. Women are constantly expected to look after the household, in addition to fulfilling their husbands' demands. To exacerbate matters, the husbands refuse to do their share of household chores. This also strongly reflects the existence of the concept of emphasised femininity[5] even among highly educated women. In

[5] Emphasised femininity reflects the most cherished form of femininity in society and involves some level of subordination of women to men, and accommodation of male wishes and desires (Connell, 1987; Karupiah, 2016b).

addition, poor Indian women need to switch between two roles, breadwinners and caregivers, indicating that functioning revolves around two spaces: the household and employment. Scholars have argued that employment would open opportunities to yield income and freedom for women (Haller & Hoellinger, 1994; Maqbool et al., 2015) but may place additional stress on women due to the double burden they experience. However, the opportunity to develop the functioning in employment is usually unavailable for poor women due to their household workload and the types of jobs that they generally hold. In this study, about three-quarters of the poor women were employed in lower-skilled jobs. Lower-skilled employment corresponds to lower-paid jobs in which the accumulation of income or capital is mostly impossible. This is because opportunities for promotion, increments, bonuses and even allowances are scarcely available in these lower-paid jobs. Furthermore, the majority of the poor Indian women in this study admitted that they focused mainly on their household chores rather than their jobs.

A quarter of the poor Indian women acknowledged that despite being able to find space to function after completing their household chores, they were still struggling to overcome the restrictions imposed by household members, particularly their husbands. Latha, a part-time shop assistant, was struggling with household financial issues. She had a special talent for sewing clothes and had plans to pursue a tailoring business to earn some income for the family. However, she faced strong objections from her husband. She further explained this as follows:

> …He does not like other males to talk to me, [as]…he is scared that if they interact with me, they will eventually develop feelings for me and I will also fall for them….He is a jealous kind of guy…I hate his reasoning and the fact that he does not trust me…

Women are always controlled by their male counterparts on the basis of morality, which often disrupts women's functionings in various aspects (Vansteenkiste & Schuller, 2018). Molyneux (1985, cited in Vansteenkiste & Schuller, 2018) also mentioned that focusing on the functionings of women has the potential to effectively highlight their subordinate positions in various contexts. Like Latha, women's movement outside the household, and their freedom to have relationships and network with others, needed the approval of their male family members such as a brother, son and/or husband. According to Latha's explanation, she was under her husband's control and was pressured to obey and conform to the 'do's' and 'don'ts' set by her husband, for example, concerning her relationships in dealing with customers, especially male customers. The control of the husband is established through the limits placed on her behaviour, communication and networking, thus depriving her of the function as a tailor. Reporting her struggles in terms of functioning, she further explained it as follows:

> … Eventually, I disliked sewing clothes because every time I took orders, after the customers had left, there would be problems for me and we both would start fighting…Sometimes he thought that I ignored him [her husband] when I sewed clothes, so he did not like me to be involved in this business…

Latha's explanation shows the frustration experienced by many poor Indian women due to limitations on their functioning. Thus, Latha decided to give up her tailoring

job when her relationship with her husband suffered. This was most unfortunate, as the tailoring business could have given her freedom and empowerment and, most importantly, the opportunity to move beyond the household space. Rita, a housewife, shared her struggles and her functioning as follows:

> …No, I am not allowed to make any decisions for the family…even for the kids…My husband does not like it at all…[so] he does not allow me to speak my mind on anything…Even when I wanted to say something on behalf of the kids, he would always degrade me in front of everyone, including my kids…I feel so ashamed when he does that…I do not get any respect from him…

Rita's experience indicates that her husband has denied her the opportunity to participate in the family's decision-making. Her husband did not consider her role as a decision-maker, which has directly restricted her functioning in this capacity. This may also be because of her husband's unfounded fear that his wife's emergence as a decision-maker would reduce his male status in the household. The rejection of her basic functioning as a decision-maker would subsequently deprive Rita's complex functioning to have self-respect or the ability to appear in front of the family without any inhibitions. This in turn constrains her to the home, as she does not dare to go out and interact with neighbours or other people in the same housing area. She further explained her experience as follows:

> I think that I have no self-worth…My husband does not respect me…Because of him, my children also ignore me…Everyone around me treats me indifferently...Because of this I rarely go out…I'd rather stay at home and watch television…I don't know...I have this constant fear that if suddenly people ignore me, disrespect me and shame me…I think I am the problem…

Rita's explanation confirms the dilemma of women whose socio-economic status is dependent on that of their spouse. It also shows that the constant criticism and deprivation they face often makes them question their self-worth. They were also constantly expected to be submissive and self-sacrificing to ensure the well-being of their husbands and children. Defying the instructions of the husband in the traditional household means such a woman would be deprived of those patriarchal benefits that are tied to her dependency on her husband in terms of relationship and finance. She would eventually be regarded as having little social status within her community (Küçükşen, 2016). This expectation is closely linked to the expectation of chastity and submission that is emphasised in traditional Tamil femininity. In many ways, this notion of femininity remains the most cherished form of femininity in Tamil society, including the Tamil communities in Malaysia (Karupiah, 2016b).

***Developed functionings***. Functionings of the non-poor Indian women in this study provide a different perspective from that of their poor counterparts. Interviews with the non-poor women revealed that the state of their functionings was well-developed because almost all the participants were able to utilise well-developed basic capabilities, which then elevated the possession of the combined capabilities. One of the non-poor Indian women, Sasikala, explained it as follows:

> … Since I was young, I have been trained to be independent, [so] whatever I did, I did it by myself…I rarely depended on anyone to do something for me…After attending secondary school, my father encouraged me to go to driving classes. After I got my driving license, he let me drive wherever I wanted to…

Sasikala worked as a human resource manager in a food company in Penang. From a young age, her family encouraged her functioning, as she was allowed to move freely by herself anywhere and to make decisions using her reasoning. Her basic capability to move freely enhanced the combined capabilities. She had a valid driving licence and could move freely without any restrictions. This development capability opened the space for her freedom to function. This further empowered her to possess other functionings and engage with more complex functionings. On this subject, another participant, Vaishnawi, a marketing executive, mentioned that:

> …I was always trained to think and reason out for myself whenever I had any problems; no matter [whether it was] in school or with friends, or with my cousins…my father always encouraged me to solve problems on my own, or sometimes he discussed [them] with me but the final decision was left to me… That freedom helped me choose my field of education, my passion and where I would work...I did not have to conform to anyone's wishes…

Vaishnawi's explanation shows that she was empowered in terms of decision-making because of the freedom she gained through her education and employment. Her parents, especially her father, granted her this freedom, which in turn allowed her to achieve more complex functionings. This study further found that the functionings of poor Indian women were restricted and limited, whereas those of non-poor Indian women were more extensive and less limited. This may be due to several reasons. First, resources and resource ownership differed between the poor and non-poor Indian women in this study. The narratives of the poor Indian women revealed that the majority were employed in low-paid jobs and received lower mean household incomes, whereas the non-poor Indian women were identified as doing higher-paid jobs and receiving higher mean household incomes. The second reason is the conversion factors, which determine the functionings and the way household resources are utilised. Other scholars have also supported the notion that the transformation of resources into functionings is strongly influenced by the conversion factor[6] (Nambiar, 2013; Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2003). Hence, the functionings were different for poor and non-poor Indian women, based on their unique conversion factors.

## *Agency*

Agency is the third component of the capability approach and explains an individual's ability or capacity to act (Ballet et al., 2007), decide and function by themselves

[6] Personal conversion factors (e.g. metabolism, physical condition, gender, reading skills or intelligence); social conversion factors (e.g. public policies, social norms, gendered divisions of labour, social practices that unfairly discriminate, societal hierarchies or power relations); and environmental conversion factors (e.g. the physical or built environment in which a person lives, climate, pollution, geographical location and topography) (Hvinden & Halvorsen, 2018).

(Claassen & Düwell, 2013; Colfer et al., 2015; Iversen, 2003). Economists often interpret the term 'agency' as the decision-making power which one can possess (Kabeer, 2008). Agency is not a readily available component as it is the embodied outcome of an individual, which must factor in various surrounding circumstances. Individual agency determines the role, authority and influence of a person in the household. Women were often identified as having diminished agency due to the gender norms inside and outside the household.

***Husband's interference in a woman's agency***. In this study, poor and non-poor Indian women were found to have different types of agency, depending on their capabilities and functionings. Seeta, a housewife, had the desire to seize employment opportunities around her but had to first face objections from her husband. She explained her predicament as follows:

> …My neighbour has informed me about a job vacancy for a cleaner in a nearby housing estate …but my husband would not let me take the job…If I were to take up that job, I would get between RM 800 to RM 900 per month…This income would help my children's education. I tried to reason this out with my husband many times but he still refused to let me work…so in the end, I gave up.

Seeta's narrative showed how her capacity as an agent has been restricted. Despite her awareness of the employment opportunities around her that could ease her impoverishment, she could not 'act' by accepting them because she needed to comply with her husband's wishes, and still needed her husband's permission before she could take the job. Unfortunately, her husband did not grant her permission.

Kabeer (2008) noted that the sense of being an agent is realised when it goes beyond observable behaviour to encompass the meanings, motivations, skills and purpose that people bring to their actions. In this study, poor Indian women always demonstrated the potential to become empowered by the opportunities around them. However, the husbands, who subscribed to traditional ideology, often failed to support the idea of their spouse being employed and often restricted it. This outlook is also supported by women who also believe in traditional notions of femininity and the importance for wives to be submissive; hence, they did not try to act when not granted permission by their husbands. Even when the household suffered from impoverishment, and the acceptance of a job could help resolve these financial problems, women were not allowed to take up job opportunities. Their agency was controlled and they were not given sufficient freedom to do what they thought was best for them and their family.

***Traditional values and norms restrict agency***. This study revealed that a quarter of the sub-sample of poor Indian women stated that they were hesitant to act in ways that challenged traditional values and norms. The reason could be the need to manage both the household and employment burdens, and being unable to avoid carrying the household burden, even when they were employed outside the household. These women were expected to cope with both paid and unpaid work. When a woman could not handle the expectations, they were seen as transgressing traditional norms of femininity and would be labelled as not being a "woman" "or a good woman". This is reflected in the explanation of Visha:

> First, my husband did not allow me to work…but after asking him a few more times, he finally agreed…. so I got a job. However, after two months, I decided to quit. During the two months, I could not juggle my time between my work and my household responsibilities… I was struggling to finish my cleaning, cooking and washing chores … Because of this, my mother-in-law and husband started scolding me,…especially my mother-in-law who kept saying directly to my face "You are not fit to be a woman' and 'Are you even a woman?'…She was also bad-mouthing me to my relatives… When I heard this, I could not bear the pain…I started to feel guilty thinking that perhaps I was not good enough. So finally, I decided to be a full-time housewife just to fulfill my responsibility as a woman….

Many traditional cultures relegate women to a subordinate position for the benefit of the patriarchy (Sultana, 2011). Thus, traditional women are pressured to conform to the values and norms of the situated culture, which subsequently affects their agency development. Visha attempted to exercise her agency by expressing her desire to work, and she finally got a job even though she needed her husband's permission for this. However, the development of her agency had to be terminated due to the pressure placed on her to conform to the norms of being a housewife and daughter-in-law. Conforming to the norms and values of the patriarchal household provides some benefits to traditional women in their relationships with the family patriarch (Karupiah, 2016a). Visha was no longer able to bear the insults from her mother-in-law, who questioned her femininity and household role. Her inability to manage both her household and employment also prompted her to resign. She believed that her responsibility was in the household, despite having understood that her real agency was associated with employment, which could provide her with income, status and financial support. Husbands have a strong influence and are crucial in the construction of a woman's agency (Ehrenreich, 2013), particularly in societies where being married gives women an auspicious status and the epitome of femininity is to sacrifice oneself for the benefit of one's husband and children.

'Agency freedom' is one aspect that was deemed important by Sen (2001). Agency freedom means one's freedom to create the achievements one values and which one attempts to produce (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2001). Almost all the participants, during the in-depth interviews, revealed that there was limited or no freedom at all in their households. The poor women in traditional households constantly required the approval and permission of their male household members. Poor Indian women did not explicitly exercise the freedom of agency. Even though they may have made a decision independently, they still needed their husbands' permission to exercise the freedom to act on this. A woman's decision-making process is considered the most common indicator of her agency in her household. In this study, almost all the participants revealed that they had no autonomy in the household decision-making process. Their partners were generally the sole decision-makers or had the final say in the decision-making process. The role of the woman in the decision-making process was merely to provide information because she tended to know more about the household. One of the participants, Kovarthini, working as an executive, revealed that:

> …Most of the time, my husband decides on something and informs me about it… [For example,] if we want to buy clothes for a wedding or a function [hosted by] relatives or

> friends…If he decides no, then we have to accept it and keep quiet about it…He does not like it when we speak against his decision…If we want to buy groceries or anything related to the children's education or other needs, he will discuss [this] with me first…but in the end, his decision will be not the same as what we have both discussed…[and] he will still go with his own decision…

The experience shared by Kovarthini was a common issue faced by the participants in this study. They did not achieve their real potential as decision-makers in the household. Like Kovarthini, Indian women are more likely to be regarded as subordinates, whose role is to assist the breadwinner in making crucial household decisions. These women's viewpoints were often utilised merely as tools for the decisions made by the men. In other words, women and their opinions were merely used for the benefit of the household. The agency of Kovarthini can be regarded as underachieved or limited, as she had no authority or power in the household decision-making process. This could be explained further using the concept of 'agency achievement'. This concept, advocated by Sen (2001), refers to the realisation of goals and values a person selects and the reason to pursue them (Keleher, 2014). A woman is unable to make decisions for the children, husband or the household; hence, she is deprived of agency. When one is deprived of agency, and is unable to make decisions, empowerment is impossible or can become complicated (Anand et al., 2019).

***The role of others in activating women's agency***. About 30% of the participants also acknowledged that they have the capacity to act and bring empowerment to their lives but only after those around them motivated them. Ravina explained this as follows:

> …My brother was not satisfied with what was going on in my married life …One day he visited me when my husband and children were not around...[and] he scolded me for just accepting life as it was and not doing anything to improve myself…He made me realise that, as long as I remained quiet about all this, my life wouldn't change…Since then, I have begun to make decisions for my children on my own. Moreover, my husband was also ignoring his responsibilities…so it was my brother who made me realise unless I changed, nothing would change….

In this situation, Ravina only embraced the change because of her brother's advice and assistance. On the contrary, Sen (2017) strongly emphasised that an agent should typically make autonomous decisions on certain issues rather than receiving assistance from someone else to make the decision (Crocker & Robeyns, 2009). Even though the decision empowered Ravina, the realisation of her agency did not derive from herself; hence, in reality, her agency did not evolve by itself. A quarter of the participants, particularly poor Indian women, also revealed that they did not independently decide most aspects of their lives and how to manage their household impoverishment. Vaithegi, a food stall owner, said:

> … I was planning to open a small food stall serving breakfast and lunch to cope with the financial problems at home…I really wanted to do everything on my own and when I shared my plan with my husband, he was very supportive…In fact, I did not even ask him for permission to do so ...He knows I'm very independent and will usually do things on my own….

Vaithegi's explanation showed that she had stimulated her agency when she decided to start her food business to earn income independently. She realised she had to act, plan and execute everything alone, despite her husband's verbal support. She was not solely dependent on the husband's income for solving the financial problems. Instead, she acted as an agent to solve the problem using her own capacity. About 25% of the poor participants reported that they had initiated their own agency in overcoming household impoverishment.

Poor Indian women interviewed for this study generally acknowledged the existence of subordination structures that led to their agency being constrained when negotiating restrictive norms and addressing their lack of entitlement. They understood that their subordination meant their agency was affected, so they had limited or no development space for their agency. Poor Indian women also realised that their agency was subject to the patriarchal system, in which their roles were gendered in both public and private spaces (Schütte, 2014). The exploration of this agency refers to the women's capacities to negotiate norms, power relationships, and roles based on the division of labour within the framework of impoverishment, urban poverty and patriarchy (Schütte, 2014).

***The real formation of agency: Act, decide and execute independently***. This study found that the agency of non-poor Indians differed from the agency of poor Indian women. The realisation of the importance of agency was evident among non-poor Indian women. About 80% of them acknowledged that as individuals they needed to act and make decisions for themselves. Indira, a non-poor woman, a housewife by her own choice, shared the following view:

> I like to be a housewife…Until two years ago, I was working as a designer in a company. After a while, I thought of becoming a housewife since all my children have settled down…I felt I needed to rest and stay at home…reading books or just having my own time…I have also achieved financial stability, so I decided to resign….

Indira's explanation showed that she decided and acted on her own without anyone's interference. She had the realisation of her capacity to make decisions on her own, such as resigning from her job and becoming a full-time housewife. Her narrative shows that agency was not influenced by other factors such as housework and childbearing duties. Her choice to be a housewife was not based on other reasons such as household chores or childcare. Instead, she enjoyed being a housewife, as she could utilise the time for her personal development, read books, and enjoy her personal time. From the perspective of agency, women like Indira have the freedom to construct their lives. Shavitha, a restaurant manager, said:

> …. I realise that women need to stand on their own, have education, their own careers, and financial support for themselves…We should not depend on anyone in these aspects; only then will we have respect and value ourselves...People around us will also have the same respect for us…

This sense of agency is noted in the explanation of Shavitha. She displayed enlightenment as an independent woman; she needed to be independent in terms of having

a job, income and education and other aspects. She showed her agency by deciding how her life should be, and she further explained that:

> …Working in the restaurant, even with the food smell [laughing]… I still love to be independent…Since I have been working, I have never depended on anyone, even my father, for financial support. I managed everything on my own…I am still in my job even though my husband kept asking me to switch to another job…but I will not quit my job..It's my passion to work in a restaurant…I love to do management tasks…

Shavitha's explanation suggested that she could decide and act independently despite experiencing pressure from her husband. She had a reason for valuing her restaurant work. She understood her employment and embraced her managerial profession. She was empowered to create her own financial status, live the life that she wanted, be independent and pursue her passion. In this study, about 75% of non-poor Indian women as compared to only 17% of poor Indian women, reported that they could act, decide and execute their agency with no limitations.

The narratives of Kovarthini, Indira and Shavitha revealed the agency creation process from the perspective of non-poor Indian households. Women's agency freedom and achievement were celebrated and welcomed in a greater measure in non-poor households compared to poor households. The lives of Seetha and Visha exposed the complexity of the agency creation process in poor households, in which women suffered greatly in terms of capability failure and weakened functionings.

## Conclusion

This study has illuminated the impoverishment of the Indian minority, specifically Indian women, using a gender lens and through the capability approach. By employing this approach, three major components—capabilities, functionings and agency—the complexities of Indian women's lives were explored in their cultural setting. The narratives of the poor and non-poor Indian women revealed different and complicated states of capabilities, functionings and agency. The poor experienced basic capabilities failure, which impacted their functioning and it meant they suffered from lack of agency. The setbacks in capabilities, functionings and agency have repeatedly prolonged their impoverishment for generations. Furthermore, the gender norms and its constraints were found to be largely pervasive in the households of poor Indian women, which affected their capabilities, functionings and agency. In contrast, most non-poor Indian women were identified as having developed capabilities and functionings and empowered agency. The non-poor acknowledged the existence of household gender constraints. However, the possession of empowered and developed capabilities, functionings and agency allowed them to minimise the vulnerability that impoverishment tended to create. This study has demonstrated that the impoverishment of women was largely determined by their capabilities, functionings and agency or the lack of them. Gender was also found to be an important vector that influenced the creation of capabilities and functionings. This study has

some limitations in that women of different marital status and from different locations (i.e. urban versus rural) were not included in the sample. Future studies may consider addressing these limitations.

## References


Al-Janabi, H. (2018). Do capability and functioning differ? A study of U.K. survey responses. *Health Economics, 27*(3), 465–479. https://doi.org/10.1002/hec.3586.

Alkire, S. (2005). Briefing note capability and functionings: Definition & justification. Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~dcrocker/Courses/Docs/Alkire-CapabilityFunctioningBriefingNote.pdf.

Anand, M., Mecagni, A., & Piracha, M. (2019). Practical tools and frameworks for measuring agency in women's economic empowerment. Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, https://seepnetwork.org/files/galleries/2019-WEE-MeasuringWomensAgency-_EN-DIGITAL.pdf.

Ballet, J., Dubois, J., & Mahieu, F. (2007). Responsibility for each other's freedom: Agency as the source of collective capability. *Journal of Human Development, 8*(2), 185–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649880701371000.

Balsera, M. R. (2014). Young migrants' aspirations, expectations and perspectives of well-being investigated using biographical narratives, the capability approach and intersectionality (Ph.D. thesis, Bielefeld University). Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, http://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/publication/2685956.

Bastos, A., Casaca, S. F., Nunes, F., & Pereirinha, J. (2009). Women and poverty: A gender-sensitive approach. *Journal of Socio-Economics, 38*(5), 764–778. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2009.03.008.

Chattier, P. (2012). Exploring the capability approach to conceptualize gender inequality and poverty in Fiji. *Journal of Poverty, 16*(1), 72–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2011.639861.

Chowdhury, A., & Patnaik, M. M. (2013). Understanding Indian family life: The gender perspectives. *International Journal of Management Studies, 3*(7), 58–67. Retrieved October 21, 2020 from, http://zenithresearch.org.in/images/stories/pdf/2013/JULY/EIJMMS/6%20_EIJMMS_VOL3_ISSUE7_JULY2013.pdf.

Cin, F. M., Karlıdağ-Dennis, E., & Temiz, Z. (2018). Capabilities-based gender equality analysis of educational policy-making and reform in Turkey. *Gender Education, 32*(2), 244–261. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1484429.

Claassen, R., & Düwell, M. (2013). The foundations of capability theory: Comparing Nussbaum and Gewirth. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice, 16*(3), 493–510. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-012-9361-8.

Colfer, C. J. P., Achdiawan, R., Roshetko, J. M., Mulyoutami, E., Yuliani, E. L., Mulyana, A., et al. (2015). The balance of power in household decision-making: Encouraging news on gender in Southern Sulawesi. *World Development, 76*, 147–164. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.06.008.

Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Crocker, D. A., & Robeyns, I. (2009). Capability and agency. In C. W. Morris (Ed.), *Amartya Sen* (pp. 60–90). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Department of Statistics. (2016). Mean monthly gross household income of top 20%, middle 40% of households by ethnic group and strata, Malaysia, 1970–2014. Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, https://mysidc.statistics.gov.my/index.php?lang=en.

Desai, N., & Thakkar, U. (2001). *Women in Indian society*. New Delhi, India: National Book Trust.

Eberharter, V. V. (2018). Capability deprivation, and the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantages-empirical evidence from selected countries. *Social Sciences, 7*(12), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7120253.

Ehrenreich, K. (2013). Femininity, dependency, and patriarchy: The marginalization of women with Japanese Encephalitis and Neurological Sequelae in the Northern Terai Region of Uttar Pradesh. *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*, *1561*, 1–36. Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1561.

Gopal, P. S. (2013). Urban poverty among Indians in Penang: A study on nonmaterial causes. (Ph.D., Universiti Sains Malaysia). Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, http://eprints.usm.my/43915/1/Parthiban%20S.Gopal24.pdf.

Haller, M., & Hoellinger, F. (1994). Female employment and the change of gender roles: The conflictual relationship between participation and attitudes in international comparison. *International Sociology, 9*(1), 87–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/026858094009001006.

Hvinden, B., & Halvorsen, R. (2018). Mediating agency and structure in sociology: What role for conversion factors? *Critical Sociology, 44*(6), 865–881. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920516684541.

Iversen, V. (2003). Intra-household inequality: A challenge for the capability approach? *Feminist Economics, 9*(2–3), 93–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/1354570032000080868.

Kabeer, N. (2008). Paid work, women's empowerment and gender justice: Critical Pathways of social change. *Pathways Working Paper*. Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/53077/1/Kabeer_Paid-work_Published.pdf.

Kallivayalil, D. (2004). Gender and cultural socialization in Indian immigrant families in the United States. *Feminism & Psychology, 14*(4), 535–559. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959-353504046871.

Karupiah, P. (2016a). Marital status and the influence of emphasized femininity on the romantic relationships of Tamil single mothers in Malaysia. In *Divorce, separation, and remarriage: The transformation of family (Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research* (Vol. 10, pp. 375–393). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1530-353520160000010015.

Karupiah, P. (2016b). Hegemonic femininity in Tamil movies: Exploring the voices of youths in Chennai, India. *Continuum, 30*(1), 114–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1117574.

Keleher, L. (2014). Sen and Nussbaum: Agency and capability-expansion. *Ethics and Economics*, *11*(2), 54–70. Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/55653679.pdf.

Küçükşen, K. (2016). Being a divorced woman in a patriarchal society: Example of Konya. *Journal of International Social Research, 9*(44), 826–833. https://doi.org/10.17719/jisr.20164420152.

Lee, S. M. (1989). Female immigrants and labor in colonial Malaya: 1860–1947. *The International Migration Review*, *23*(2), 309–331.https://doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/btq230.

Lessmann, O. (2007). Effective freedom and combined capabilities: Two different conceptions of capability. *Beiträge Zur Wirtschaftsforschung*, 1–24. Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228958923.

Maqbool, M., Shrivastava, N., & Pandey, M. (2015). A comparative study of mental health of working women and house wives. *Indian Journal of Health and Wellbeing*, *5*(11), 1399–1400. Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, http://www.iahrw.com/index.php/home/journal_detail/19#list.

Menon, N. (2002). Universalism without foundations? *Economy and Society, 31*(1), 152–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140120109295.

Mun, C. Y. (2013). Ethnic socialization: A case of Malaysian Malay and Chinese public universities students experiences. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity, 3*(6), 582–585. https://doi.org/10.7763/ijssh.2013.v3.307.

Nalagon, C. D. (2003). *Poverty: Deprivation in basic capabilities* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Bowling Green State University.

Nambiar, S. (2013). Capabilities, conversion factors and institutions. *Progress in Development Studies, 13*(3), 221–230. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464993413486547.

Nussbaum, M. (2000). *Women and human development: The capabilities approach.* New Delhi, India: Cambridge University Press.

Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating capabilities.* United States of America: Harvard University Press.

Pierik, R., & Robeyns, I. (2007). Resources versus capabilities: Social endowments in egalitarian theory. *Political Studies, 55*(1), 133–152. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00646.x.
Rauhut, D., & Haiti, N. (2005). Amartya Sen, capability deprivation and poverty. In D. Rauhut, N. Hatti, & C. Olsson (Eds.), *Economists and poverty: From Adam Smith to Amartya Sen* (pp. 275–296). New Delhi: Vedams eBooks (P) Limited.
Robeyns, I. (2003). Sen's capability approach and gender inequality: Selecting relevant capabilities. *Feminist Economics, 9*(2–3), 61–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/1354570022000078024.
Schütte, S. (2014). Living with patriarchy and poverty: Women's agency and the spatialities of gender relations in Afghanistan. *Gender, Place and Culture, 21*(9), 1176–1192. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.832661.
Sen, A. (1980). Equality of what? In M. S. Tanner (Ed.), *Lectures on human values* (Vol. 1, pp. 197–220). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Sen, A. (2001). *Development as freedom.* New York, US: Oxford University Press.
Sen, A. (2017). *Collective choice and social welfare* (expanded edition). United Kingdom: Penguin Press.https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674974616.
Sonawat, R. (2001). Understanding families in India: A reflection of societal changes. *Psiologia: Teoria e Pesquisa*, *17*(2), 177–186. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0102-37722001000200010.
Sultana, A. (2011). Patriarchy and women's subordination: A theoretical analysis. *The Arts Faculty Journal, 4*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.3329/afj.v4i0.12929.
Terzi, L. (2004, September). *On education as a basic capability.* Paper presented at the 4th International Conference on the Capability Approach: Enhancing Human Security, University of Pavia, Italy. Retrieved September 21, 2020 from, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228995095.
Vansteenkiste, J., & Schuller, M. (2018). The gendered space of capabilities and functionings: Lessons from Haitian community-based organizations. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 19*(2), 147–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2017.1411893.
Waglé, U. R. (2014). Capability deprivation in the USA. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 520–524). Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_3719.

**Nithiya Guna Saigaran** is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Indian Studies, Universiti Malaya. Her research focuses on Malaysian Indian community, poverty, gender belief system, gender inequality, capability approach, marginalised communities, and ethnic minorities in Malaysia. She is currently actively writing journal articles and book chapters for leading academic publications.

# Female Indian Classical Dance Practitioners in Malaysia: Labour and Visibility


**Premalatha Thiagarajan**

**Abstract** There is no Indian dance conversation in Malaysia, formal or informal, that exists without referencing male dancers. The first few names that are usually uttered by people in any dance dialogues are the names of male dancers. Despite the numerical predominance of women, it is a rare phenomenon to identify a female iconic or "star" performer in Malaysia. My contention is that, although female dancers may not always be visible as onstage performers, they claim power and authority through their backstage and offstage labour. Through the intersection of gender and ethnicity, I intend to visibilise Malaysian-Indian women's artistic voices and their labour through the ethnographies of dancing women. I demonstrate how gender is constantly reworking and reshaping itself by incorporating the artistic experiences and subjectivities of female dance practitioners. A multifaceted investigation of the division of labour, power, and visibility within the Malaysian Indian dance circle shows that women enact power by performing a wide range of tasks—as cooks and food servers in the cafeterias of dance institutions, domestic householders involved in taking care of family, dance teachers, dance rehearsal assistants, costume designers, emcees, stage managers, and organisers or coordinators of dance events. This chapter will focus on female dance practitioners from various institutions as well as selected independent dance practitioners.

**Keywords** Malaysia Indian · Women · Dance · Labour · Visibility

## Introduction

In the year 2015, I premiered a *Bharata Natyam* production entitled, *Stri Shakti: Women Empowerment*, in Kuala Lumpur. This production, as apparent in the title, is a gendered theme that framed the artistic direction, repertoire, choreographies, and performers. I was the artistic director and producer of this recital. I conceived and conceptualised this production with a leading female dance teacher, who is the artistic

P. Thiagarajan (✉)
Faculty of Creative Arts, Dance Department, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
e-mail: premalatha@um.edu.my



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_6

director of Kuala Lumpur (K.L.) based dance school, Laasya Arts, Guruvayur Usha Dorai. This was a duet dance recital, which I performed with an emerging dance practitioner, Hemanandhini Raguraman. Hence, three women worked on this production. The repertoire was thematised, and tailor-made, in other words, we commissioned new songs to be written and composed for this recital. The pieces comprised compositions that surrounded the Divine Mother Shakti, who is venerated as Goddess, the consort of Hindu pantheon Lord Shiva, as well as the depiction of Shakti in the form of power or life force energy that resides within each human. It also comprised two other expressive pieces with secular content. One piece portrayed a semi-fictional narrative of how a traumatised and oppressed rape victim emerged as a successful dancer and the other piece re-enacted the story of a brave mythical princess. The production was intended to make a gendered statement. While it showed many shades of challenges faced by women in society, it also celebrated women's power. Many audience members commended the production for its theme, content, and unique selection of pieces. The production was appreciated mainly for the newly conceptualised artistic works that centred on women's issues, which were extremely rare in Malaysia, particularly those created and presented by women. This self-reflective opening is a useful point of entry into this chapter as it teases out gendered issues such as women's labour and visibility within the framework of Indian classical dance in Malaysia.

This production stemmed from my doctoral dissertation, entitled, Performing Indian Dance in Malaysia, which was completed in 2012 in the U.S.A.[1] It examined Indian classical dance forms, *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi*, taking into account the intersection of ethnicity, gender and globalisation. In it, I foregrounded the artistic experiences and subjectivities of female dance practitioners (Thiagarajan, 2012). In doing so, I demonstrated that society exerts pressure on women and regulates all aspects of female sexuality regardless of which ethnic group they are in. As a result, women tend to get relegated to the private spaces as dance *gurus* (teachers). They are not always visible onstage as public performers. Although it may seem that women exist mostly on the margins or periphery (away from the stage), an investigation of the division of labour, gender power and gender visibility within the Malaysian Indian dance circle shows that women enact power offstage by performing various forms of labour. By doing so, they also find ways to earn cultural and economic capital.

Not only did this production offer a platform for Hema and I to create work that speaks of women's issues, transcending conventional *Bharata Natyam* repertoire, but it also allowed each of us to present our solo pieces and segments in this recital even though we performed together. This was a good start for us as we continued to appear in other productions as soloists in the following years. To date, we are among the very few female solo *Bharata Natyam* dancers in Malaysia. We were invited to

[1] Various sections in this chapter have been drawn and reworked from my doctoral dissertation written in 2012 with recently added interviews and observations.

perform in *Eka Bhavana,*[2] the Solo *Bharata Natyam* Dance Festival, organised in Kuala Lumpur in 2019. These opportunities came after many years of labour. We had to create financially modest platforms to launch ourselves as performers. As professionals who earn monthly income, we pursue dance as a part-time profession. Our monthly salary allows us to channel a portion of our income into our productions. I admit that such opportunities are not available to all women, particularly, those devoted to teaching dance full-time as they do not receive a fixed income. Support, be it moral or financial, is a necessity for women to excel in the arts in Malaysia since there are literally very few opportunities. If women strive to excel in the arts, it is usually of their own accord. As such, although women numerically predominate the Indian dance scene in Malaysia, only a few emerge and sustain themselves as committed public performers.

Substantial efforts have been made by Indian dance scholars to address the concerns of female dancers in India and the diaspora. The seminal works of, among others, Srinivasan (1983, 1985), Meduri (1996), Ram (2005), O'Shea (2003, 2007), Chakravorthy (2008), and Srinivasan (2003, 2012) have been specifically vital in foregrounding complex discourses surrounding female dancers. My research trajectory aims to be another useful contribution to the existing scholarship. This study foregrounds the experiences of Malaysian Indian women, a unique intersection between gender, nationality, ethnicity, and Indian classical dance in Malaysia. Priya Srinivasan's *Sweating Saris* (2012) opened an avenue for me to consider the in(visible) labour of women, which offer crucial insights into the enactment of power on and offstage. I utilise visibility both literally, to refer to onstage appearance, and metaphorically, to refer to attention and recognition. Lewis and Simpson's work on *Revealing and Concealing Gender* (2010) is key to foregrounding the politics of gender visibility. This scholarship demonstrates that although being visible can be empowering for women, it can also be detrimental to their personal lives and artistic careers due to reasons such as domestic violence, dissolution of the marriage, and hostility in the workplace. This conception allows me to explore why women sometimes prefer to remain variously "invisible/semi-visible."

## Methodology

As a Malaysian-Indian female dance practitioner, I believe that I possess a privileged insider perspective. I was trained in *Bharata Natyam* at the Padmini Kalalayam in the early 1980s under the sisters, Geeta Aiyappan and Girija Aiyappan. I furthered my dance training in *Bharata Natyam* at the renowned institution, the Temple of Fine Arts (TFA) in 1990 and staged my solo debut performance, *arangetram*, in 1994. I also pursued advanced training in *Bharata Natyam* and *nattuvangam* (the art of reciting rhythmic syllables while playing the cymbals) under Suryakala (the

[2] *Eka Bhavana* began in 2017. It is an initiative put together by local artistes, Ajith Bhaskaran Dass, Theban Arumugam, and Thavasakayam Suppiah, to promote solo dancing in Malaysia.

International Dance Director of TFA) in Chennai, India, after which, I established my own dance school. My identity as a dance scholar which I took on later allowed for wide interaction with dance artists within the Indian dance circle in Malaysia.

I utilised dance ethnography as a profound method of writing about dance and as means to enter my field. Ethnography, as one of the qualitative approaches to studying cultural socialisation, attained much focus in the works of scholars across disciplines including dance scholars. Dance and ethnography have come together as a way of exploring a range of power relations that circulate in dance performances.

I employed different ethnographic methods to facilitate this research and writing. I utilised feminist ethnography and auto-ethnography[3] as methodological tools to carry out my study. The feminist researcher takes on an active participant role in the research process while offering "greater respect and power to subjects of study" (Stacey, 1988, 22). Moreover, Visweswaran (1994) proposes that a women-centred ethnographic approach could foreground women's relationship with women. By focusing on these relationships, Visweswaran states, feminist ethnography could concentrate on power differentials among women. I undertook a "feminist" approach in this study as a female Malaysian Indian dance researcher in close interaction with other Malaysian Indian female dance practitioners, with whom I developed a long-term artistic relationship.

The verbal accounts gathered from practitioners of Indian dance through oral history had been extremely fundamental in writing this chapter. Patel in 2005 states the following about the importance of oral history,

> As a methodological approach, oral (hi)story is not only accounts of their life experiences, but also *how* and *why* they lived their life in the way that they have, and the *thoughts* and *ideas* that have guided their everyday *behavior* and *interaction* with others. (extracted from Leavy, 2011, 10)

Due to the lack of scholarly discourses that discuss Indian dance in Malaysia, the oral history approach presented an effective method of acquiring in-depth knowledge about thoughts, ideas, and actions from my subjects of study. I employed oral history as a way of linking dance artists' individual experiences, memories of events, beliefs, opinions, and perspectives of social and cultural phenomena. In addition, the fieldwork opened ample opportunities to meet and interact with the event organisers, dance practitioners, and dance enthusiasts. Dancers were keen to participate in this study and embraced my desire and effort to write about Malaysian Indian female dancers. I have masked the identities of the subjects of study to maintain confidentiality. In some cases, I have used their first name to create familiarity.

This chapter does not claim to have represented all female Indian dance artists in Malaysia. This ethnography is "partial and biased" in the sense that it could not incorporate everyone who has made a contribution to the Indian dance scene

[3] Feminist ethnographers such as Stacey (1988), Visweswaran (1994), Abu-Lughod (1990), Savigliano (1995, 2003), and Srinivasan (2012) are some of the scholars who have emphasised the importance of inserting the "self" into ethnographies shattering the still pervading myths of so-called objective anthropology. I am intrigued by the concept of auto-ethnography.

in Malaysia. The sample size of 20 dancers (not all of them are featured here) is purposive as it is aimed at achieving certain objectives of this study.

## Women in the Indian Classical Dance Scene in Malaysia

Significant developments in Indian classical dance took place in the 1950s with the emergence of male dancers such as K.P. Bhaskar, V.K.Sivadas, and Gopal Shetty. Before the arrival of these male *guru*s, five siblings known as the "Thiruchendur Sisters", conducted dance and music lessons in K.L. Malar, who was trained briefly by one of the sisters in the early 1950s, points out that the sisters conducted their classes in their home at Sentul. The sisters were not interested in performing publicly and so they were not widely known in the local Indian arts circle at that time. They terminated classes by the end of the decade. In contrast, dancing men attained popularity as the pioneer dance masters in Malaya and Singapore. There was a parallel development in both countries because Malaysia and Singapore were one nation until Singapore separated from Malaysia in August 1965. Crossing borders for dance tours and classes were a norm and occurred seamlessly before the parting, but it became tedious with the need for passports and validity of visas after that (Wong & Nedumaran, 2015, 105).

The Indian dance practice became visible and pronounced with the arrival of Bhaskar, Sivadas, and Shetty. Sivadas and Shetty resided and taught dance in various states in Malaysia, while Bhaskar lived and nurtured Indian classical dance in Singapore. Bhaskar travelled to Johor Bahru, Malacca, and several venues in K.L including Sangeeta Sabha. These masters were versatile in various dance forms such as *Kathakali*, *Bharata Natyam*, *Kathak* and folk dances.

Duet dance was a trend of the 1950s and the 1960s during which these dance masters performed and taught extensively with their wives, Santha, Vatsale/Vatsala, and Ratha. The Bhaskar-Santha couple created history in Singapore and Malaya through Indian classical dance performances and classes. They are best known for dance works that explicate the confluence of different cultures, Malay, Chinese and Indian, namely, the celebrated dance-drama, *Butterfly Lovers* in 1957. The Sivadas-Vatsala Dance Troupe was popular in Malaya. It produced dance-dramas on Hindu deities such as *Shiva-Parvati* (see Fig. 1), *Lakshmi-Narayana*, and *Ramayana*, as well as characters from Hindu mythology such as *Vishvamitra and Menaka*. Sivadas partnered Vatsala in most of their dance productions. Local performing arts magazine, *Hansa*, proclaims that the couple's performances created "cultural history" in Malaysia (Jit, 1988). Vatsala shared that it was considered fine for women to partner and perform with their husbands at that time. She was heavily criticised by her relatives when she partnered with her dance teacher, Sivadas, before marriage to the extent that her father, G.R. Kurup, had to speak to the master and arrange for both of them to get married. Shetty, meanwhile, choreographed and produced the television dance series called *Dayana* and *Serbanika* in the 1960s. These series contained an assortment of Malaysian dance styles—Malay, Indian classical dances, and folk

**Fig.1** Sivadas and Vatsala in *Shiva-Parvathi* (1980). (*Photo* Vatsala Sivadas)

dances. In the 1950s and 1960s, a complete *Bharata Natyam margam* (repertoire) was rarely seen or heard, including solo recitals. These were confined to *arangetram* recitals. The norm was variety shows. Dance groups staged short (twenty to thirty minutes) dance-dramas, diverse dance shows, and occasionally presented short rhythmic classical pieces, such as *Jatiswaram* and *Tillana*, with other dances. This trend slowly began to shift in the following decades. Schools that emerged after the mid-1960s focused primarily on promoting *Bharata Natyam* as a serious dance form.

Santha, Vatsala, and Ratha performed in the productions led by their husbands. They attained public visibility and popularity by appearing as performers. In Santha's case, she assumed power as a performer, a choreographer, and a teacher along with her husband while Vatsala and Ratha did not initially assume positions such as artistic directors, producers, and choreographers. The gendered division of labour mostly positioned men as *gurus*-choreographers and women as dancers, empowering men.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, women began to take on leadership roles in dance. Usha-Prema Dance School, Padmini Kalalayam, and Tanjai Kamalaa-Indira (TKI) Dance Academy were established and led by women. The first two schools ceased operation after several years, but TKI thrived and emerged as one of the leading Indian classical dance institutions in the country. TKI was administered by female dance teachers, Kamalaa and Indira. According to Indira, TKI, which opened in 1966, is the oldest registered *Bharata Natyam* dance institution in Malaysia. These schools focused on *Bharata Natyam.* Usha-Prema Dance School and Padmini Kalalayam/Dance Group were more inclined towards the Vazhuvoor Ramaiya Pillai's

*bani* (style). These schools taught *Bharata Natyam* but focused on films where choreographies were either drawn from Tamil movies or dances choreographed to film songs. The transnational dance artist, Zamin Haroon aka Chandrabhanu, who initially underwent training at the Usha-Prema Dance School between 1957 and 1973, said,

> Pure classical dancing was not well received. As such, teachers teach classical and film dances. For instance, when the famous actress/dancer, Vyjayantimala Bali, came to Malaysia after the release of the Hindi movie, *Sangam*, in the late 1960s, she presented a pure classical dance recital at Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur. I did not attend the performance, but I heard it caused riots; people threw Pepsi bottles. I think people wanted to see film dancing since she was an actress.
>
> (Zamin Haroon, personal communication, October 30, 2011)

The sisters, Kamalaa and Indira, returned to Malaysia after their training in Tanjavur, South India and opened TKI. They introduced the Tanjavur *bani,* the oldest dance tradition. It is also associated with the tradition of *devadasi*.[4] Ever since it started, many Tamil-speaking female dancers have been drawn to this institution.

The inauguration of the TFA in the early 1980s gave rise to a string of dedicated female dance teachers, depicting a unique intersection of gender-ethnicity. Malaysian Indian women have variously carved a distinct place and role for themselves by taking on multiple tasks in dance. Female dance teachers, as well as dance directors, have been instrumental in producing dance graduates and the younger generation of dance *gurus.* Female dance *guru*s outside TFA have also shown greater dynamism by assuming positions of authority such as leaders of cultural organisation, event organisers, and dance producers. In addition, Indira Manikam (as she is known today) also formed the Malaysia Bharatanatya Association in 2008, the first of such initiatives in Malaysia. It is an umbrella body that supports *Bharata Natyam* dance institutions in the country.

The predicament in Malaysia is that not many female dancers continue their journey as performers. Female performers discontinue dance practice after staging mini recitals, *salangai pooja*,[5] or after their debut solo performance, *arangetrams,* or in most cases, after marriage. Some female dancers "retire" from the stage and become dance *guru*s because of familial restrictions and commitments. This chapter investigates this conundrum in the ensuing sections.

[4] Literally, a "female servant of God." It is a name given to the hereditary temple dancers in India. For more details, see Srinivasan (1983, 1985), Meduri (1996), and O'Shea (2007).

[5] It is also called as *gejjai-puja* (Gaston, 1996, 313). It refers to ritual worship of ankle bells before a dancer ascends the stage. This ceremony emerges from the devadasi tradition but has grown out of proportion in the contemporary practice of *Bharata Natyam.* The *salangai pooja/puja*, which was initially conducted as a small ceremony at the *guru*'s house or at the temple has today manifested as a public recital performed by groups of students at the auditoriums.

## Visibility and Labour

"How do women and men experience visibility?" "How does (in)visibility link to power and how are these dynamics played out in different dance contexts?" Lewis and Simpson argued that visibility in organisations can be encountered differentially, often as constraining and detrimental for women, but advantageous for men. They contended that visibility can have negative consequences for women through "performance pressures, creation of hostile working environment and social constraints" (Lewis & Simpson, 2010, 3). In this study, I investigated the dialectic between labour, power and visibility in the dance scene based on ethnography that focused on female dance practitioners in studios, classrooms, and performance spaces. Through the examination of women dance practitioners, we will notice different forms of labour at play. Since visibility is conceptualised both literally (through onstage appearance) and metaphorically (voicing, attention, and recognition), I examined how the division of labour (between male and female teachers, between choreographers and dancers, and between onstage and offstage work) played out in terms of visibility/invisibility and occasionally complicate the vision-based binary.

I conducted a multifaceted analysis of women whose roles as a teacher, a performer and a producer at times overlap. I carried out nuanced reading by dividing their roles into three groups: dance *gurus*, principal dancers, and producers of dance recitals. Presenting the ethnographies of women at different dance sites, I examined the roles of women in the spatial organisation of dance production by taking into consideration their labour in the rehearsal spaces, labour onstage, labour backstage, and labour in dance-related events as dance teachers, public performers, and producers of Indian dance works.

## Women as Dance *Gurus* (Teachers)

Women from the 1930s onwards attained more authority as dancer-cum-teacher compared to earlier decades in India and in the diaspora. Under the system of *guru-sishya*, there was a clear division of labour, men as *gurus*/choreographers and women as performers. This system eroded with the inception of Kalakshetra, a world-renowned institution of *Bharata Natyam, Kathakali* and Carnatic music in Chennai. Before the 1930s, the choreography and instruction of Indian classical dance in South India was largely under the domain of a male *guru*, who trained female dancers, choreographed repertoires, and acted as *nattuvanar*. However, Rukmini Devi Arundale, an upper-class Brahmin woman, who played a distinctive role in the reincarnation of the court dance form, *sadir*, as *Bharata Natyam* in the early twentieth century, created opportunities for women to emerge as choreographers. This institution was founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale in 1936. O'Shea (2007) asserts that in her institution, Rukmini empowered middle-class women by creating positions of increased responsibility. This includes teaching, choreography, and conducting *nattuvangam.*

A *nattuvanar* is the conductor of a dancer's musical ensemble. A teacher attains visibility in public by performing her role as a *nattuvanar*. It should be clarified here that not all teachers can automatically assume this role because it requires a certain level of mastery in choreography, music, and rhythm. The teacher also requires confidence to display these skills in public. This study reinforces that the role as a choreographer and a *nattuvanar* are positions of power that garner visibility for those who take on these responsibilities. A choreographer gains recognition and attention when his/her choreography is embodied and visually presented by student(s) on stage. A *nattuvanar* attains visibility by conducting *nattuvangam* for dancer(s) and leading a live musical ensemble on stage.

When we turn to Malaysia, it is unfortunate that only a handful of female dance practitioners can conduct *nattuvangam* on stage. In such situations when a teacher is unable to conduct the recital, he or she employs the service of an experienced *nattuvanar* to conduct the recital. It is indeed a disadvantage from the perspective of a dance teacher, who must depend on an invited *nattuvanar.* I will use the position of *guru* and teacher interchangeably.

The contribution of female dance *gurus* to the development of arts and culture could be studied from various dimensions and I believe that each study would yield different theoretical insights. While it is beyond my capacity to focus on all those dimensions, I frame this study to specifically focus on the labour of female *gurus* in the staging of their students' solo debut, *arangetram.*

I observed many training sessions and *arangetram* during my research. Through my observations of a particular institution, which is referred to as Institution A, I witnessed a huge transformation in the role and responsibility of female *guru*s. In the 1990s, *arangetram* students were predominantly trained by female teachers, who selected repertoire, choreographed, and conducted *nattuvangam* for solo recitals. However, from the year 2003, the main task of training students for *arangetram* and conducting *nattuvangam* for recitals was passed on to male *gurus*. Female dance *guru*s were gradually uprooted from the performance on stage since they did not perform *nattuvangam* in public performances. They became "backstage performers," by undertaking multiple roles as costume designers, make-up artists, and stage managers, and "off-stage workers" as rehearsal directors or assistants. I ask, "To what extent are these women's behind-the-scenes and invisible roles empowering or disempowering?" "Does the preparation involved in the *arangetram* signify unequal power relations (empowering men while disempowering women) or a collaborative effort that in some unique way empowers female labour?"

I spoke with one of the senior female dance *gurus* after a rehearsal session at the studio. We discussed her role during the recital training. Sitting quietly behind the commanding male instructor, she was notating the new choreography to enable her to coach her three male dance students for their upcoming *arangetram.*

> Female teacher 1: X is a wonderful choreographer. The minute he looks at a poem or a text, he knows how to develop the piece. He is very knowledgeable. You have seen his choreographies, right? I do not have to explain more. He currently travels a lot and meets lots of musicians. So, he developed *nattuvangam* skills rather quickly. He creates new *jatis* and

> experiments with different *jati* compositions. *Arangetram* is more like teamwork. He concentrates on choreographing items and conducting *nattuvangam*, while some of us (female teachers) focus on matters such as dance rehearsals, costumes, and food.
>
> (Teacher 1, personal communication, August 12, 2011)

Two other female dance *gurus* pointed out that performing *nattuvangam* requires extensive practice and enhanced skills. The role of a *nattuvangist*, according to them, offered them a visibility that they would rather avoid.

> Female teacher 2: I do not prefer to be in [the] limelight. Performing *nattuvangam* requires lots of practice. My timing is tight. I do not have time to devote to *nattuvangam* practice. Even for my son's *arangetram*, many people asked me why I was not part of the live ensemble as a conductor of *nattuvangam*, but I told them that I was happy to watch his performance as a spectator. No tension, I'd rather leave those tasks to others.
>
> (Teacher 2, personal communication, August 9, 2011)
>
> Female teacher 3: In the first place, I do not have any formal training in *nattuvangam.* It scares me…those *kanaku* (mathematics), the calculations. You have to know the intricacy of how to play *nattuvangam*; you need practice and confidence. It can be very stressful to perform in public. You must live up to the expectations of the musicians in the ensemble and the audience. I would rather just train my students for *arangetram* than choreographing and performing *nattuvangam.*
>
> (Teacher 3, personal communication, August 30, 2011)

Based on the teachers' viewpoints, it is evident that the more visibility a dance *guru* attains on the stage, the more vulnerable he (or she) is to public scrutiny. Teacher 3 opined that coaching her dance students offered her much gratification. She preferred to focus on "polishing up" and "cleaning" dance *adavus* (steps) and expressive movements so that each item is perfected before her students present their solo recitals. Furthermore, Teacher 2 stated that she is consulted by her students on all matters pertaining to the management of the event such as costume designs, invitation cards, program books, food arrangements, honorarium for the musicians, and other performance protocol details. Thus, she was able to concentrate on non-dance preparatory tasks, which are also important aspects of the major event.

These dance *gurus* choreographed dances for non-*arangetram* performances, such as state-sponsored shows, corporate shows, cultural shows, and institutional events. Female teacher 4 explained,

> Those days in the 1980s and the 1990s, I used to choreograph short dance pieces for performances. Remember the piece on Krishna and his *gopis*? That was a popular choreography! I still do for shows if required but I do not choreograph dances for *arangetram.* Now, we have many teachers. I focus on teaching and administrative duties.
>
> (Teacher 4, personal communication, October 12, 2011)

In Teacher 4's view, choreographies for *arangetram* required a certain level of expertise and called for a clear division of labour. She did not seem to be troubled or challenged by the current division of labour.

Apart from teaching, female dance *gurus* performed multiple tasks such as administrative duties and voluntary work. Unlike the female dance *gurus* who performed multiple tasks from various spaces, male *gurus* executed roles that offered visibility onstage. These men were looked upon as artistically "superior," who possessed time, knowledge, and skills that the female teachers lacked. It may appear as though female *gurus* willingly handed over the tasks of choreographing dances, setting *jatis* (strings of rhythmic phrases), and performing *nattuvangam* to male *gurus* at the advanced level of training but it could not be generalised as such.

Female dance teachers' strategy of resistance here does not render them submissive or disempowered. They claim agency and power by working with male *gurus* and by performing many supportive roles such as nurturers, motivators, trainers, consultants, and trouble-shooters without performing primary duties (choreographing and conducting *nattuvangam*). Indeed, their labour in offstage and backstage spaces is vital for staging *arangetram* performances. In this phase of training, there has been no traces of marginalisation or exclusion of female teachers, but rather a form of 'voluntary withdrawal' in which they relinquished power and visibility to male *gurus*.

## Women as Public Performers

Locally trained women emerged as public performers in the 1950s as was discussed earlier in this chapter. However, the status of female principal dancers, an elevated status for female performers, is powerfully constructed in Institution B. This institution produced numerous female principal dancers, who were regarded as "prodigies" and "stars". These female dance performers primarily attained their "principal dancer" status by partnering with more established male dancers in various dance productions. This institution is well known not only for *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi* dance training but also for promoting these forms through professionally driven productions.

Scholars of Indian dance (Gaston, 1996; Greenstein, 1998; O'Shea, 2007) have argued that *arangetram* often terminates the career of many dancers, particularly female dancers. This is because the recital is deemed as a "graduation," rather than an inaugural performance that launches a dancer's career. This perception also pervades Malaysia which causes female dancers to vanish from the stage after their solo debuts. Some withdrew from classes permanently while others assumed teaching positions that inhabit private spaces.

Due to women's lack of dedication to becoming public performers, Malaysia has not been able to produce internationally recognised female performing soloists or iconic artists in at least the past forty years. A well-known *Bharata Natyam* dancer/dance *guru* in Malaysia, who toured numerous countries as a performing artist before she started her family, gave several possible reasons for this conundrum including her suggestion that, "female dancers need continuous financial support and moral support from their family. They could not commit to the practice on a long-term basis since they see dance as a hobby. Moreover, it is difficult to capture

the Malaysian audience's attention as a soloist for two hours" (Teacher 5, personal communication, September 12, 2011). She pointed out that it is more cost-effective to present group productions in which female dance *gurus* perform with their students. Group work is considered a financially viable option since it facilitates the selling of tickets. Reputable dance master, Y, emphasised the lack of seriousness among female dance artists. He noted that he had conducted over thirty *arangetrams* since 1990 and these were performed predominantly by female dancers. Y lamented that none of them continued dancing after marriage (Y, personal communication, September 15, 2011). Respectability plays a very important part in Indian families. Many dancers pointed out that they were seldom encouraged by their in-laws to perform onstage. They were encouraged rather to teach dance and earn an income for the household.

While this is the predicament in most schools in Malaysia, I am interested to focus on two women who emerged as principal dancers, Dancer 1 and Dancer 2. Dancer 1 was groomed as a "star" dancer in one institution, but she later moved to another institution. After two decades, she became the artistic director of her own dance company. Dancer 2, meanwhile, enrolled in dance classes and remained in institution B as the longest-serving dancer to date. These women's life stories show how their artistic affiliation with men, be it their *gurus* or co-dancers, launched their own dancing careers. The engagement has largely aided these women in forging networks abroad and securing opportunities for performances, advanced dance training, artistic residencies, and collaborations. Touring local to international performance spaces has offered them popularity and visibility as performers.

Dancer 1 emerged as a principal female dancer in the mid-1980s. Following the success of dance productions in Malaysia, she was featured in India. She toured the world as the principal dancer. She attained popularity by partnering with leading male dancers. The spectacle duet performances were very successful both in Malaysia and abroad. This was a tumultuous time in her life. She declared that "being a star was not all it was made out to be. I began to question everything—my star status, the aim of my dancing talent and more." She stressed that "This talent I have, that was giving so many people such joy was surely but steadily draining the joy out of my life. The joy of dancing was being replaced by the stress of constant travelling, endless rehearsals and juggling the demands of patrons." (Dancer 1, personal communication, October 27, 2001).

Marriage created a major turmoil between teacher and student, forcing Dancer 1 to move to another institution. She regarded the transition as a spiritual calling. She felt that she had the freedom and the space to grow as an artist. She taught, performed, and choreographed dance at the institution for nearly two decades. During this time, she travelled abroad extensively to perform as a solo artist and present group works. She put together sixteen full-length works and trained thirteen tutors, who later became teachers.

Dancer 1 started her own dance school after 2010. She presented solo performances at fund-raising programmes for schools, cultural programmes in temples, and dance festivals. Her corporeal ability to switch between *Bharata Natyam and Odissi* opened up opportunities for collaborative ventures. She emerged as one of the most visible female dance artists onstage between 2011 and 2013. She opened

her own studio and taught almost 100 students. She was whole-heartedly supported by her husband.

After many years of teaching and hosting arts programmes at her studio, she decided to close her studio in 2019. She moved to a small hall at her condominium for a more reasonable rental and relentlessly continued to teach dances there as sustaining dance studios in the city was very difficult due to rising rentals.

Dancer 2, on the other hand, was groomed as a homegrown principal dancer. She explored new artistic ventures while maintaining her artistic roots at institution B. She knew that she wanted to be a performing artist and this institution was the right place to realise her passion.

After completing her secondary education, her teacher suggested that she go to the U.S.A. for training in modern dance techniques (Cunningham and Graham techniques). She also went to India to further her training in Indian classical dance. As a dancer who specialised in *Odissi*, *Bharata Natyam*, and modern dance, she emerged as a principal dancer and performed with the institution for one decade. She was one of the few talented female dancers who was groomed by the artistic director. She presented her solo performance in 1997. According to Dancer 2, her mentor had confidence in her performance and believed that her vibrant stage presence and dancing were able to hold the attention of the crowd. The local press reviews described her as "a dancer to watch now and in the future" (Henry, 2000).

In 2003, she auditioned for a renowned London-based South Asian dance company and was accepted as a full-time dancer for its tour. Once her dance contract was over, she came back to Malaysia with the idea of rejuvenating the contemporary dance scene, while planning on reverting to Indian classical dance practices. This time she returned and took on more challenging roles as co-artistic director and an assistant choreographer. I speculate that her transnationality and the cultural capital she gained as a dancer abroad enhanced her artistic mobility in Malaysia. It enabled her to attain the more powerful positions as a co-artistic director and a choreographer. Her dance labour was deemed economically important. She was paid for all the projects in which she participated as a performer and an assistant choreographer. Dancer 2's comeback performance as a principal dancer premiered in Malaysia and she went on an international dance tour to India, Europe, and the U.S.A. During the performance in the U.S.A, a dance critic writes,

> ...once my eye lingered on [Dancer 2], it kept singling her out, even when she took a supporting role in groups. Just an advancing phrase of footwork with alternating in/out arm gestures became captivating with her. In extremes, either of vivid rhythm or sculptural positions, she is spellbinding, with sharply percussive feet, wonderful plasticity and stillness, and a riveting facial beauty. Tiny inflections of the shoulders and head made her movement more complete than that of others. This is a dancer who casts the spell of the dance form by the fullness with which she performs it.
>
> (Macaulay, 2011)

The press review was a testimony of the extent to which Dancer 2 claimed visibility onstage. This review revealed that the performance of classical dance enabled her to possess a certain degree of autonomy even when negotiating within the patriarchy

of the dance circuit. More importantly, the review lent to an understanding of the importance of visibilising certain female dancers such as Dancer 2 since it profited the patriarchy. In other words, she stood out for several different reasons (her stage presence, sexuality, beauty, and dance prowess), but she stood out more specifically for the convertibility of her "cultural capital to economic capital" (Bourdieu, 1977).

Later, she picked up the courage to produce and perform her own dance recital at a mini hall. She won the best-featured performer award for this recital. This is indeed an achievement since it is rare for female Indian classical dancers to win awards for featured performers at the national level, especially when they have to compete with performers from various dance genres. Despite various key successes in her life, she pointed out that she still struggles and had gone into depression several times. In our conversation, she shared,

> My journey as a performer, choreographer and sometimes only when I'm thoroughly driven, a producer, I have noticed myself creating works of and about Women's Empowerment. I am not sure if it is a natural quality for every woman to choose such topics in order to develop and create works that are intentionally probing and controversial, especially in the realm of a gender bias community. However, there is a thirst for expressing strength and power in being a woman, I find it so important to inspire my very own femininity and psyche to keep going in this competitive and aggressive dog-eat-dog world. It is only through art, that a female dancer/choreographer can express the frustrations and dilemmas of being a woman, which is fathomed or classified by men. It is time for women to realise that we are as equal as any men.
>
> (Dancer 2, personal communication, June 25, 2020)

## Women as Producers

*From backstage, the emcee announces, "the next piece is entitled Amma Ananda Daayini, the compassionate mother of divine bliss." A spotlight focuses on a male dancer who stands at the centre of the stage. As the emcee delivers the essence of the piece through an English translation, she, the emcee, walks to the centre of the stage and joins the male dancer who begins to narrate with his hand gestures and facial expression. She stands by his side and then moves around him while speaking into her headset microphone. She recites, "Grant us the bliss of your nourishing form, O Goddess; you are the very personification of spiritual bliss, ananda; you are the grace and power that activates Shiva himself; grant me your loving darshan; O Mother, I have surrendered myself at your lotus feet…" Moving gracefully through the space in her green silk sari, she articulates the meaning of the words she utters with her hand gestures, improvising the movements as she performs with the male dancer. Her verbal explanation is rendered through various voice modulations. Towards the end of the narration, she disappears to the side behind a curtain, leaving the male dancer to conclude the gestural synopsis and transition into the "actual" performance. The music begins…*

This dramatic narration was part of a two-hour *Bharata Natyam* recital, entitled *Echoing Anklets—A haunting Rhapsody of Bharata Natyam*, staged by Ajith

Bhaskaran Dass and his dance company, Suvarna Fine Arts in the year 2005 in K.L. "What is extraordinary about this performance? The emcee is a female. So what?" It was not just a matter of reading the script, but the emcee and her expressive live verbal narration were featured. Furthermore, Malaysia's prominent male dancer, Dass, employed her as the producer for his production. Meena, is actively sought out by male dancers for her professionalism in managing and producing dance recitals. Meena's authorisation as a producer/manager inverts the common practice in Malaysia of men being in charge of women. Instead, by taking the role of a manager, Meena, assumes a seemingly masculine role, challenging the patriarchal hierarchy.

Meena learned *Bharata Natyam* from Krishna Kumari. She taught *Bharata Natyam* at her teacher's school, Krishna Bharatha Kala Alayam, after completing two years of teacher training course. However, Meena was not interested in becoming a performer or pursuing dance as a professional career. After performing in several productions under her *guru*, she moved away from the dance scene to concentrate on her career in the corporate world. She holds a managerial position.

Meena's aunt, Nesa Poobalan, inspired her to nurture her "voice to perform/dance." Meena enhanced her Tamil and English language skills in order to write and narrate performance texts. She developed a strong belief that there is "so much more to dance than dancing." She came back to the dance world as an emcee, a scriptwriter for dance dramas, and a performer. Meena honed these skills through her own initiative and did not undergo any special training. She pointed out that the verbal synopsis played a vital role in an Indian classical dance production since it imparted the essence of a dance piece and educated the diverse audience members. For this, she became one of the most sought-after artists in Malaysia.

Meena was also hired as a backstage manager for several productions. She was in charge of giving cues to the lighting and sound crew members, giving instructions to dancers, handling costumes, and coordinating with musicians. On the whole, she held key roles during productions. She took on tasks that lightened the burden of artistic directors and dance *gurus*, who could then concentrate on the performance onstage. Meena enacted power from less-visible spaces.

Meena slowly transformed from a backstage manager to a producer/project coordinator. She describes this transition as an "unconscious" and "un-thought of" act. She produced Ajith Dass' and Natarajan Muniandy's collaborative dance productions for three consecutive years. She was hired for a professional fee to do her job. She produced among others *Ananda Absolute* in 2009, *Raghava Yadhava* in 2010, and *Vismaya Vrisksha* in 2011. While the male *gurus* looked into the artistic elements such as developing the concept or theme, training, rehearsals, booking auditoriums, and hiring musicians, Meena's labour was deployed to handle matters pertaining to funding, promotion and marketing, press releases, and ticket sales. However, in *Vismaya Vrisksha*, Meena pointed out that she was involved right from the start through her inclusion in the process of brainstorming ideas to developing an appropriate theme and structure.

Meena chose to be "invisible" onstage although she held important roles in dance productions. She had requested not to be featured in promotional materials. However, during an interview aimed at promoting the production, *Vismaya Vrisksha*, on the

ASTRO Tamil channel in 2011, she appeared publicly for the first time as a producer. The male artistic directors of the production wanted her to share her perspective on staging the classical work. In the process of promoting the work of the male dancers, her female subjectivity, labour, and "voice" were highlighted in the public sphere. Their collaborative effort signified mutual support between male and female dance practitioners and illuminated the dependence of male artists on female labour to promote and present their work. It is suggestive that the artistic success of some male dancers to a certain extent depended on the contributions made by "invisible" or "semi-visible" women such as Meena.

She also produced *Sapthashree: Nuanced Numerical* in 2016, a thematic performance woven around the number 7 (*saptha* refers to seven). It was a group presentation by Suvarna Fine Arts in association with Sutra Foundation. She discussed that she had to draw out money from her own savings when grants and sponsorships failed to come in. Saying that as a producer, one must be prepared to take the risk, she exerted,

> Funding is the major issue here. There are no major grants from the government. What is available is only a small pie but there is a great proliferation of dance schools in K.L. Everyone is doing a production. There is an unprecedented growth in dance productions. There are multiple productions in multiple halls. The small pie is not enough, in fact, the pie has shrunk.
>
> (Meena, personal communication, June 27, 2020)

Another established dancer/choreographer and producer, Sandhya, is trained in yoga, and classical forms, *Mohiniattam, Bharata Natyam*, and *Odissi*. She moved from Kerala, in India, to Malaysia once she got married and spent twenty-one years building her dance career in this country, hence, she is seen as a "Malaysian" outside the country. She learned *Odissi* from an institution, and later, came into direct contact with Ratikant Mohapatra, who also happens to be the son of the legendary *guru*, Kelucharan Mohapatra. While she mostly performed in group productions under the banner of the institution, she aspired to become a soloist by producing her own recitals.

She was invited to participate in two *Odissi* dance festivals in India in 2011. Her participation in these festivals provided her with an excellent platform to launch herself as a soloist. The irony here is that she received much-awaited recognition in India, not in Malaysia. This fruitful tour of India inspired her to do more productions. She began to conceive new themes and new repertoires with the guidance and mentorship of *guru*, Ratikant Mohapatra. In *Ashtanayika* (eight types of heroines as classified in the text, Natya Sastra), she commissioned a lyricist from India, Nithyananda Pandit Mishra from Odisha, to develop the entire poetry for the production. She was introduced to musicians from India who composed music. Eventually, Mohapatra arranged the music for this recital, and she was the producer.

Sandhya cited several challenges of being a producer for dance shows in Malaysia. First, it was the difficulty in selling solo recitals as people were more intrigued by group dances. Some people had the impression that solo performances were boring, which then created a dire need to nurture solo dancing in Malaysia. The second

challenge was the lack of musicians trained to compose and play music for *Odissi* recitals in Malaysia. Hence, producers and artistic directors must resort to getting the music from India. This factor increased the cost of production. Sandhya also pointed out the difficulty of securing sponsorships to cover production costs. She added that she started getting sponsorship only after staging several productions as sponsors needed to be convinced first. Sponsoring organisations also required that artistes promoted them during productions. Sandhya recalled that she had to project the exhibits at the beginning of her performances as a requirement. The third challenge was politics in the industry and being criticised for producing works to promote herself, and not for the institution she was in. Despite criticisms, she felt the need to grow as a performer while she was in her "prime". She said, "I can't do this when I am old" (Sandhya, personal communication, June 26, 2020). She added that it was very difficult to make others see and understand this. Over time, she diversified her roles and emerged as another most sought-after emcee for various dance productions. In 2019, she appeared as the curator for an *Odissi* event, *Samprajna*, that featured four dance icons from India.

She added that she preferred the culture in Malaysia where people paid for shows. She said, "Even if I beg my friends to come, I know they will buy tickets and support me" (Sandhya, personal communication, June 26, 2020). She countered that this was not the culture in India where shows were usually not ticketed, and artistes were not paid for their labour. After tirelessly performing in India for several years, she expressed relief that she is now being paid for her shows, which enables her to cover her costs.

Sandhya is one of the few local female dance choreographers and producers who conceive new concepts for her productions. For instance, she created *Padmanabha Daasa* in 2018 by working on the legendary music composer, Swathi Thirunal's songs in Carnatic music style for *Odissi*. She worked with musicians from India to create an *Odishan* flavour in the music composition. Through extensive research for this production, she managed to develop the theme of *bakthi* (devotion). She and another dancer, Priya, conceptualised the production based on the structure, traditions, and rites practised at the Keralan temple of Padmanabhaswamy. It was a successful production. As a producer, she feels that there is a need to give the audience new perspectives through dance. Such endeavours also artistically stimulate the artist.

## Conclusion

This chapter examines the emergence and contributions of Malaysian Indian women in the Indian classical dance, namely *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi* in Malaysia. This study lies on the gender-ethnic intersectionality as it foregrounds the various tonality of experiences of dancing women. I trace the historical development of female dancers in this country to demonstrate the varied ways women attain agency and power. By focusing on female artists as dance *gurus*, public performers, and dance promoters, this chapter has examined the complexities of presumed gender

roles and visibility of labour. A study on female dance teachers and their roles in the preparation for an *arangetram* illuminates the way in which control and dependency are perpetuated in the *Bharata Natyam* dance pedagogy at this institution. The gendered division of labour—"male choreographers and female rehearsal directors"—exemplifies how men control and maintain positions of power. It also demonstrates a phenomenon where female *gurus* are dependent on men for advanced dance training. Nevertheless, these female dance *gurus* assert power from less-visible spaces through the supportive roles they play in staging the recitals. Without resorting to contestation, they find institutionally sanctioned ways or means to negotiate more authority within the organisation. This chapter also focused on female performers who assume subordinate positions under male teachers, directors, and co-dancers, but emerge as powerful lead dancers. They access global performance spaces, gaining more mobility and popularity. The female dancers' artistic prowess and visibility thus empower their dancing bodies and increase their competencies in navigating ways to access positions of power. In doing so, this study demonstrates how one female exponent emerges as a potential competitor to other dance companies while another secures performance contracts globally and transforms into a transnational performing artist. I bring forth the artistic life narrative of dance producers, Meena and Sandhya. The demand for Meena's labour emphasises the dependence of male performers on female ingenuity in promoting and staging their work. Meena finds her agency through structures that require mutual support between male and female artists. Sandhya, meanwhile, challenges the notion that a dancer cannot simultaneously be a producer. As artists who fluidly move between various roles—producer, emcee, backstage manager, and dancer—both blur the boundaries between visible onstage labour and invisible backstage or offstage labour.

**Credits**

I wish to credit Universiti Malaya for offering me the grant, GPF064A-2020, that enabled me to further this research. I thank Dr. Priya Srinivasan, who inspired me to look at dancing women's labour more critically, and who mentored me when I first embarked on this research and writing in 2011. I also thank all the great women practitioners who are part of this study for their invaluable support. Thanks also go to Joelle Jacinto and Chubashini Amirtham for proofreading this chapter and for providing me with insightful comments.

## References

Abu-Lughod, L. (1990). Can there be a feminist ethnography? *Women and Performance, 5*(1), 7–27.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chakravorthy, P. (2008). *Bells of change: Kathak Dance, women and modernity in India*. New Delhi: Seagull Books.

Gaston, A.M. (1996). *Bharata Natyam: From temple to theatre*. New Delhi: Manohar.

Greenstein, M. A. (1998). Bharata Natyam: Translation, spectacle, and the degeneration of arangetram. In *Southern California life. Society of dance history Scholars conference proceedings* (pp. 127–134). University of Oregon, Eugene.
Henry, W. (2000, July 11). B Babes. *The Malay Mail (the Entertainment Column)* (pp. 2–3).
Jit, K. (1988). Life devoted to dance. *Hansa: The magazine of the temple of fine arts*, 2nd quarter, 26–33.
Leavy, P. (2011). *Oral history*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Lewis, P., & Simpson, R. (2010). Introduction. In P. Lewis & R. Simpson (Eds.), *Revealing and concealing gender: Issues of visibility in organizations* (pp. 1–22). London: Palgrave.
Macaulay, A. (2011, August 21). Hindu mythology comes to life on the streets of New York, *The New York Times*.
Meduri, A. (1996). Nation, woman, representation: The sutured history of the devadasi and her dance. Dissertation, New York University.
O'Shea, J. (2003). At home in the world?: The *Bharata Natyam* dancer as transnational interpreter. *TDR, 47*(1), 176–186.
O'Shea, J. (2007). *At Home in the world: Bharata Natyam on the global stage*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
Ram, K. (2005). Phantom limbs: South Indian dance and immigrant reifications of the female body. *Journal of Intercultural Studies, 26*(1–2), 121–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860500074342
Savigliano, M. (1995). *Tango and the political economy of passion*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
Savigliano, M. (2003). *Angora Matta: Fatal acts of North-South translation*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
Srinivasan, A. (1983). The Hindu temple-dancer: Prostitute or nun? *Cambridge Anthropology, 8*(1), 73–79.
Srinivasan, A. (1985). Reform or revival: The Devadasi and her dance. *Economic and Political Weekly, 20*(4), 1869–1876.
Srinivasan, P. (2003). Performing Indian dance in America: Interrogating modernity, tradition, and the myth of cultural purity. Dissertation, Northwestern University.
Srinivasan. P. (2012). *Sweating saris: Indian dance as transnational labor*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP.
Stacey, J. (1988). Can there be a feminist ethnography? *Women's Studies International Forum, 2*(1), 21–27.
Thiagarajan, P. (2012). Performing Indian dance in Malaysia. Dissertation, University of California Riverside.
Visweswaran, K. (1994). *Fictions of feminist ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Wong, C. M., & Nedumaran. (2015). *A quest for dance: The life and times of Singapore dance pioneer K.P.Bhaskar*. Singapore: Select Publishing.

**Premalatha Thiagarajan** is a Senior Lecturer and the Head of Dance Department at the Faculty of Creative Arts in Universiti Malaya, a leading research university in Malaysia. She received her Ph.D. in Critical Dance Studies from the University of California Riverside, USA, in 2012. Through her doctoral research, she pioneered the research in Indian dance practices in Malaysia. She has published widely in book chapters and journal articles. She is the founder of Premalayaa Performing Arts, a company that specialises in Indian classical dance and music. Her research interest focuses on gender, ethnicity, ethnography, and most recently, dance therapy.

# Negotiating Femininity and Empowerment: Experiences of Professional Malaysian Tamil Women


**Premalatha Karupiah and Jacqueline Liza Fernandez**

**Abstract** Higher education and a professional career are often seen as catalysts of women's empowerment. However, in society, disempowerment may be seen as an important part of femininity, and this may challenge the process of empowerment of women. This study explores how professional women construct the meaning of empowerment and negotiate the notion of femininity in everyday life. This study focuses on the lived experiences of twelve professional, Tamil women and analyses the complexities in the way they negotiate and construct the meaning of femininity and empowerment. The analysis shows that there is a constant struggle between the need to be feminine and empowered in their daily routine. The participants identified higher education and career, mobility, and decision-making as important aspects of empowerment. The women pointed out that they negotiate the decision-making process differently at work and at home. These women still chose to adhere to traditional gender values and roles by shouldering most of the caring tasks and household chores. They also chose to act docile at times while indirectly using various strategies to have their thoughts and voices heard. Professional women in this study not only masked their empowerment but chose to show passive resistance to maintain peace and harmony at home. This was identified as the most important goal for women in the process of bargaining with patriarchy which they actively participated in. While this gives them some agency and allows them to achieve their goals, it does not challenge or change the inequality that persists in their households.

**Keywords** Gender inequality · Malaysian Indian · Femininity · Empowerment

## Introduction

The term empowerment has been widely used in various fields such as sociology, psychology, gender studies and development. It is also seen as an important concept for the development and betterment of people either at the community or individual

P. Karupiah (✉) · J. L. Fernandez
School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia
e-mail: prema@usm.my



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_7

level. Despite being widely used, the definition of empowerment is clouded by ambiguity (Rowlands, 1995; Sheilds, 1995; Tengland, 2008). Some scholars identify empowerment as a process while others have argued that it is also the product of the process (Sheilds, 1995; Tengland, 2008). Based on discussions by various scholars, Kar et al. (1999, p. 1433) defined empowerment as 'a process through which individuals, communities and organisations gain control over issues and problems that concern them most'. Therefore, an important aspect of empowerment is about bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it, focusing on aspects which may contribute to their quality of life such as their relationships, health, work, education, leisure, and values (Tengland, 2008). For feminists, this includes decision-making in a public or private space. At an individual level, it involves the ability of a person 'to maximise the opportunities available to them without or despite the constraints from the structure or the State'(Rowlands, 1995, p. 102).

Two important dimensions when discussing the empowerment of individuals are personal and close relationships. At a personal level, empowerment involves the process of developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalised oppression' (Rowlands, 1995, p. 103). This involves a fundamental change in the person's consciousness about self which is very important to the process of empowerment (Carr, 2003). In terms of close relationships, empowerment involves one's ability to negotiate the nature of their relationship and various decisions made within it (Rowlands, 1995). Close relationships can involve various aspects of one's life such as relationships in one's family and the workplace, friendships, romantic relationships, etc. The discussion in this chapter mostly focuses on these two dimensions when exploring the experiences of professional Tamil women.

When discussing women's empowerment, education, i.e., particularly higher education, is often seen as an important catalyst of empowerment. Higher education provides women with various skills and knowledge to develop their capability and human capital to contribute to society outside the domestic sphere. While women have always contributed to society by doing a major part of the work at home, childcare and emotional labour, their contribution is still largely unacknowledged. Higher education enables women to pursue better-paying jobs which in turn is expected to give them some financial independence. Even though financial independence does not necessarily translate to empowerment, it is expected to give women more space to express themselves as empowered individuals. Furthermore, higher education is also expected to increase their awareness of gender inequality and the oppressive nature of a patriarchal system operating across various aspects of one's life. It gives them some tools to challenge the oppressive structure in society. There has also been a counter argument to this view, where scholars have highlighted that higher education tends to reproduce the inequalities in society and does not contribute enough to democratise the society. It has also been argued that higher education may only support the empowerment of certain groups of women (Jayaweera, 1997).

This chapter explores the meaning of empowerment with a particular focus on Malaysian Indian women's perception of the meaning of empowerment in their lives. It describes how women negotiate and navigate both the notion of femininity and the process of empowerment in their everyday lives.

## Femininity

Femininity is a concept that is often defined ambiguously. It often takes different meanings depending on the social context (Devasahayam, 2005). Femininity is socially constructed, hence many elements of femininity may be specific to some regions or cultures or work done by women (Healey, 1999; Lau, 2016). However, there are some common elements in the discussion of femininity around the world.

Femininity is often defined as the opposite of masculinity and involves the subordination of women to men. Some virtues are identified as womanly virtues such as compliance, nurturance, and empathy. When discussing femininity, Connell (1987) identified multiple femininities in a society. According to Connell, unlike masculinities, femininities in society are not ordered hierarchically because femininity is always constructed as a subordinate position when compared to masculinity, hence no one form of femininity could take a dominant position. However, the most cherished form of femininity is referred to as emphasised femininity. Emphasised femininity is a form of femininity that emphasises the subordination of women to men. It also accommodates and prioritises men's interests, needs and desires. In contrast to this, Schippers (2007) argued that femininity can be organised hierarchically (Charlebois, 2011) and identified hegemonic femininity as the type of femininity that is dominant over other types of femininities. Alternative femininities and pariah femininities are femininities that resist or contaminate hegemonic femininity (Schippers, 2007). In recent years there have been more discourses on femininity taking into consideration the various changes occurring in society and the discourses of femininity from a non-Western context. The conceptualisation of femininity in Western literature has been criticised because it takes the psychoanalysts' point of view and ignores other philosophical ideas such as Indian philosophy. Furthermore, it is based on the Christian ideology and ignores other philosophical ideas (Sahoo, 2015). The discourse on femininity in Indian philosophy is rather different from the Western context. In ancient Indian philosophy, femininity and masculinity are not organised hierarchically but rather complement each other. Contrary to Western literature, femininity in ancient Indian philosophy is not passive but is 'considered as *Shakti* or a source of energy' (Sahoo, 2015, p. 69). *Shakti* or power is not a masculine attribute in Hindu culture but a feminine principle, hence women possess greater power than men (Jacob, 1997). However, the manifestation of this power in Tamil classic as well as contemporary literature, and popular media is often done only through their devotion to their husband (Jacob, 1997; Karupiah, 2016a). Sahoo's (2015) discussion on femininity shows the need to diversify the way we conceptualise and understand femininity and the reasons why *shakti* is not visible in everyday life.

A close look at the notion of femininity in Tamil society shows many similarities with the concept of emphasised femininity which orientates women towards serving the interests of men. Girls who grow up with emphasised femininity ideas are of the view that women should be submissive because it is a man's role to lead and a woman's role to follow, i.e., men do not seek the opinion of women in making decisions. Tamil femininity centres on the notion of '*karpu*' (chastity). It emphasises the importance of purity, submission, service, and self-sacrifice. The caring, nurturing and submissive wife is epitomised as the 'ideal' Tamil woman. The notion of '*karpu'* implies not only a hierarchical relationship between a husband and a wife, but also gives ascendancy to the husband. Motherhood is also seen as an essential part of femininity. The exemplars of Tamil femininity can be seen not only in ancient mythology, classic literature, and legends, but also in everyday speech, contemporary literature, films, and songs. The manifestation of the traditional notion of femininity in everyday life may be ambiguous but some qualitative studies on Malaysian Tamil women have shown how the values of traditional femininity have been internalised by women and are still cherished in contemporary society (Karupiah, 2019, 2020). The notion of submission and service emphasised as part of traditional femininity is reflected in the various types of work that women do at home. This is most often seen in the form of emotional labour that women provide at home (i.e. by being a confidante, listening to the problems of others and giving advice) as well as bearing a disproportionate share of the caring responsibility in families (Karupiah, 2019). Traditional femininity also distinguishes the role of men and women in decision-making in matters related to domestic violence, romantic relationships and re-marriage (Karupiah & Gopal, 2018; Karupiah, 2016b, 2020). Traditional femininity, therefore, can be classified as a type of hegemonic femininity i.e., one that is dominant over other types of femininity (Schippers, 2007).

Since the 1990s, scholars discussed a hybrid form of femininity which includes various elements of traditional femininity and a newfound sense of agency by women. It shows the possibility of exercising agency while maintaining some elements of traditional femininity. With these changes, the relationship between traditional femininity and oppression has become muddled. The current generation of women has more opportunities which were not available to women in previous generations. For example, they have more access to education, employment, and political participation. These new forms of femininities are called empowered and individualised femininity (Budgeon, 2013, 2015).

Some forms of femininities that are seen as progressive help to further strengthen the notions of traditional femininity rather than challenge it (Budgeon, 2013). Karupiah (2019) in a study among Malay and Indian women in Malaysia showed that empowered femininity is sometimes a masked version of emphasised femininity and there is a need to scrutinise the notion of empowered femininity within the context in which it is being constructed. McCann (2020) used the term 'rigid femininities' to explain how certain femininities retain and strengthen gender boundaries and maintain the hierarchical nature of femininity. McCann (2020) highlights the need to scrutinise the types of femininities that support the reproduction of

patriarchal norms. 'This theorisation focuses on the *ideologies* that are institutionalised within some approaches to femininity' and explores how some norms become clearly defined at intersecting social identities of gender, race, sexuality, class and the body (McCann, 2020, pp. 8–9).

Discussion on the concept of femininity shows that there are various forms of femininity in society, but some forms of femininity are more cherished or accepted than others. These forms often support or reproduce the patriarchal values in society.

## Methods

The data for this study were collected using in-depth interviews involving twelve professional Indian women. They were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected by approaching professional Malaysian Indian women living in Penang. The interviews were conducted at a time and place suitable for the participants. The participants in this study were between the ages of 25–53. Nine participants were married, one participant was divorced, and two participants were single. They had at least a bachelor's degree and were professionals. They identified Tamil as their mother tongue. The interviews were conducted mostly in Tamil and/or English according to the preference of the participants. Most of the time, the participants used both languages when sharing their experiences.

During the interviews, participants were asked to share about themselves, their daily activities, both at home and at work. They were asked to share their strengths and some experiences that they considered a success in their lives. They were also asked what it means to them to be a woman, to relate their experiences as a professional woman, the challenges they faced as a professional woman at home and at work, and the kind of support they need as a professional woman. They were also asked what empowerment/being independent[1] meant to them.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated (where necessary). The researchers went through the transcriptions for familiarity before coding the data. After three rounds of coding, three themes described in the following sections were developed. These themes describe the meaning of empowerment as experienced by the participants and how they negotiate and manoeuvre around the notion of femininity to exercise their agency. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms. One of the limitations of this study is that it used a sample of highly educated women living in an urban area. Future studies need to focus on both men and women and explore the meaning of empowerment among women of varying social classes and backgrounds.

[1] In everyday language, being independent is commonly used to describe empowerment hence, it was also used in the interviews.

## Findings

The following sections discuss three themes identified in the data analysis. All the participants in this study identified themselves as an independent person; it is a way of saying that they were empowered. In the first theme, participants shared their experiences about 'when and how' they realised that they were empowered or independent individuals. They described experiences or instances that they identified as the symbol of their empowerment. The second theme discusses women's autonomy and how they negotiate their autonomy in different spaces in their everyday life. The last theme is a discussion on how women negotiate the notion of femininity in the context of their home in the process of ensuring women's empowerment in the family. This theme is divided into two sub-themes i.e., 'Don't disturb me' and 'Sometimes I act docile'.

### *Realising Empowerment*

When asked about their journey of becoming an independent or empowered person, the participants shared various elements of empowerment when describing their lives and work: mobility, decision-making, education, career, and financial independence. The most important element highlighted by all the participants is their autonomy. They discussed their ability to make decisions and to act on their decisions. Some participants became aware of their ability to function independently in early adulthood, while others described that they were able to make decisions about their life in their late twenties. The detailed description of the ability to make decisions and autonomy is discussed under the second theme 'Space and Decision-Making'.

The second most important aspect discussed by participants as being instrumental in the process of empowerment was higher education and career. This was expressed by all the participants in this study.

One participant, Meena, shared.

> It is hard to describe the joy I felt when I got accepted into a public university for my degree…I remember the day I walked into my campus and how that experience changed my life forever. Before that, I did not even go alone to the neighbouring city. This was the first time I was 400 km away from my home, on my own. That was liberating…My first step, [in the process of] being responsible for myself.

They felt that university education was important because it allowed them to learn various skills that enabled them to participate in the workforce. For some participants, it was a form of professional training, but for others, it was a time of personal growth and discovery of their abilities and strength. This process was further strengthened when they started working and building their careers. Three participants shared how they were asked or expected to quit their formal work after marriage and having children and they put much effort into the negotiation process to continue working.

Anitha, a 41-year-old entrepreneur explained how her experience working for a few years was useful in starting her own business.

> I think for me the most important thing I did was to get a job and to continue working even after I got married. It was not easy after I had my first baby. It was a difficult pregnancy, so my family asked me to stay home. Initially, I stopped working for about a year plus. Then I realised I could not do it [to be a stay home mom] so I decided to start something different. That is how I started my business.

Another participant Sujatha, a teacher, explained.

> Driving was the best thing I did for myself. It is the most liberating feeling. When I started driving, I was able to go places. I didn't have to wait for others or be dependent on others. Later it got better when I bought my first car.

Mobility was also very important to the participants. All of them were able to drive and/or ride a motorbike. However, five participants said that they 'don't drive too far'. They mostly drove to work, in Penang or to neighbouring states. For some of these participants, it is their spouse who drove when they needed to go on long journeys. Alternatively, others took bus or train rides or flights when they needed to travel long-distance.

## *Space and Decision-Making*

All the participants believed that they were capable of making important decisions in their everyday life and this was an important part of the process of empowerment. They identified various kinds of decisions they made in their daily activities both at home and at work. Their experiences showed the complexity of the process of decision-making and eight participants described the differences in the decision-making process at home and at work. For these participants, the level of their empowerment depended on where they were making these decisions. At work, they understood their position in the hierarchy of their organisation. Their position gave them a certain level of autonomy in decision-making. As an entrepreneur, Anitha made all major decisions regarding her business.

Anitha explained.

> When I am at work, I make all kinds of decisions: hiring, salary, spending, buying equipment, and so many other things. I monitor my business on my phone and if something happens, I find solutions…At home, I can't make all the decisions by myself. I must discuss it with my husband. I understand it is our home and we share responsibility but somehow, I always feel I don't have the last say. My husband still has to OK my decisions. It is very different when he says something, it becomes final. Even my children will talk to their father if they don't like my decision and there were times, my husband vetoes my decision.

Vanitha is a 36-year-old, civil servant and she is able to make some types of decisions at her workplace based on her job description. For anything other than these decisions, she would depend on the person who had the authority to make the

decisions. She was aware of the level of power she had in the workplace in terms of decision-making. However, she explained that the scenario is very different at home.

> I live with my mother-in-law; whenever I make a decision by myself regarding the family or children, she will remind me to check with my husband first. She will emphasise that I should talk to my husband first. Even my mom would give the same advice … This is so common that I tend to do it myself.

Participants often felt that they were 'stripped' of their power as soon as they reached home. Another participant, Monisha, shared how difficult it was to challenge the inequalities at home. The unequal status of men and women has been institutionalised and normalised that she is unable to figure out a different way of doing things at home. She also felt that she had more power to challenge gender inequality at work but not at home because the stakes were very high. She does not want to risk having conflicts in her family by challenging a system that is believed to work well by her family and society.

> And as much as I tell myself that my husband and I are equal, deep in my heart, even I believe he is the 'leader'. I am not sure how to be different. This is how my mother was and everyone around me is. It is very hard to break away from this. So, the way I am outside and inside my home is not the same…it is not like things are all equal at work but there I am more aware or more willing to challenge inequality but at home, it is very hard.

Women's acceptance of their husband as the leader and as a person with higher autonomy than themselves reflects the values embedded in traditional Tamil femininity which emphasises service, submission, self-sacrifice and loyalty to the husband and his family. These values are strongly rooted in Tamil families and influence the meaning of various experiences of Tamil women. A few studies among Tamil women in Malaysia show the influence of these values on various issues related to the family such as intimate partner violence and remarriage (Karupiah, 2020; Karupiah & Gopal, 2018) while this study shows the influence of traditional femininity in the everyday decisions made at home.

## *Traditional Values and Gender Roles*

Married professional women's descriptions of their role and responsibilities at home showed that they were mainly responsible for the bulk of household work such as cooking or food preparation, cleaning, washing, decorating and buying groceries. They were also responsible for the preparations to perform various religious rituals at home and in the temple. This is also seen as part of ensuring the well-being and prosperity of the family. Some participants shared that their husband mainly 'helps' them with the maintenance of the house, grocery shopping and performing important religious rituals (after all the preparations were taken care of by the women in the household). Their description of the types of 'help' they get from their spouses in completing household chores showed that housework is regarded as the responsibility of women. Performing care-giving duties, household chores and preparations for

religious rituals and festivals are acts of submission and services that are emphasised as part of traditional femininity. None of the participants talked about the sharing of household responsibilities despite having a professional career. Single women also shared their experiences of doing housework but felt that they had more autonomy in deciding what they wanted to do. They were also involved in caring for their family members but did not feel compelled to do it. Women's performance of traditional gender roles and adherence to traditional values are further discussed in the two sub-themes: 'Don't disturb me' and 'Sometimes I act docile'.

***Don't disturb me*** Professional women shared their experiences of 'double burden' when discussing household chores. Archana, a 47-year-old businesswoman, who owns two different businesses shared her experience.

> Don't disturb me- that is what my husband always says. He allows me to do anything I want as long as it does not inconvenience him. I have to make sure everything at home is taken care of before focusing on my career. If I need his help to take our children to school or to buy dinner, I have to tell him in advance. He hates it when I ask him at the last minute but never understands that sometimes not everything can be planned.

Another participant, Monisha, also shared a similar experience.

> Sometimes I have to work during weekends. Even if my husband is at home, I still have to ensure that food, anything related to my children's uniform, homework or tuition is taken care of. He would just drop them off for tuition. It is very different when he works during weekends; he just works. It is the same scenario if I have to travel for work. I have to make sure that everything is prepared for the days I will be away. The only thing he does is pick up the children after school.

Archana and Monisha's experience showed the extent of the double burden experienced by professional married women. They not only had to fulfil their tasks at work but also at home. The burden of work also increased if they were travelling because they had to make various preparations for the days when they were away from home. From their experiences, it can be concluded that they were able or in some cases 'allowed' to pursue their goals and dreams if and only if, they fulfilled their role as a wife and a mother at home. This meant that they were fully responsible for work in the house and childcare, and this was perceived as being more important than their work outside their home. For the man, their sole responsibility was towards their career. The professional women, therefore, were still expected to conform to traditional gender roles and more than half of the respondents accepted that this was an important responsibility for them.

***Sometimes I act docile*** Participants in this study admitted that they sometimes had to be docile when they were at home or in certain situations. The experiences and the underlying reasons women choose to be docile are rather different. Single women often acted docile when they felt pressured to conform to the traditional notion of femininity. There is an expectation that women are naturally gentle, caring, and soft. A previous study among Malay and Indian women in Malaysia also showed that an essentialist view of femininity was common in Malaysia (Karupiah, 2019). Unmarried participants in this study described two different situations as instances

when they had to act docile. Maha, a 39-year-old lawyer, explained that she often had to do this when her relatives or family friends visited her home.

> When I was younger, my aunts often warned me about the need to do housework because that was the expectation. An unmarried woman needs to know how to cook and clean as preparation for marriage. I really disliked the idea that I was constantly seen as someone 'in training for marriage'. They also often criticised the way I did housework. It is not I don't do housework. When I talk back to my parents or argue with them, I am told that I won't be able to do this at my [future] mother-in-law's house. As a mark of respect and to save my parents from embarrassment, I just ignored these criticisms, I seldom expressed my views [which were totally different from theirs] and told myself that they won't be here for long [laughs]...Now, they have given up because I am old and moved on to making other young women's lives miserable.

Another participant, Punitha, 28 years old, shared her experience.

> When I am home with my family, things are OK, they let me be myself…Recently, someone wanted to match[make] me with a guy. The moment this process started everything changed. I am in my late twenties, and everyone is worried that I am still single, so there were so many [pieces of] advice on how I should be, act, dress, talk, everything. It is almost like I had to fit into a template to be married…I want to be married and I am not in a relationship, so I gave this a try. I played along for a while. It did not work out, by the way…but somehow marriage in Indian families still has a strong emphasis on being submissive, moulding yourself to his [husband's] and his family's needs.

Mala, a lecturer (33 years old) shared a similar experience when she was single.

> I went through an arranged marriage. There were so many instances in this whole process when I was asked to just follow. The whole family was concerned about what the groom or the groom's family would think. We were always on the edge trying to do everything to ensure that they were happy or satisfied…Now I know that my husband would have agreed if I had told him what I liked or wanted but back then, everyone was scared that I would offend him or his family. We were engaged for about six months before getting married, but I would not say I knew much about him even though we talked over the phone and went out a few times.

Experiences of single women (or married women prior to marriage) showed that family honour and filial piety were highly valued by them. They therefore, had to 'act' disempowered as a way of maintaining their family's 'good name' or honour. At the same time, they were able to express themselves more openly with their immediate family members.

The experiences of married women were rather different. Most women in this study explained that being married and having a happy family was very important to them. Motherhood was an important part of their lives. According to them being a mother and maintaining a happy family required much sacrifice for empowered Indian women. Pramila, an executive in a private company, shared her experience.

> I know women always sacrifice for their family especially their children but for us, it goes beyond that. Traditional expectations are very strong in Indian families. I have to be very tactful in the way I navigate myself in the family. If I were to stand up for my right and express myself all the time, I don't think I will be able to stay married. It would cause many problems at home and everyone will be unhappy. As a mother I must ensure that my children are happy and for this sometimes or may be most of the time, I have to be one who conforms.

> My husband does not stop me from doing many things, but he still would not like it if he feels challenged or [sees that I am] more capable than him. No matter what, for him, his family or even my family, I am ranked lower than him…

Another participant, Nithya, shared her view on how she negotiated her empowerment and how she expressed herself subtly in the context of her home. While many married participants said that they were able or allowed to do many things, there seemed to be a caveat attached to this expression. They were able or allowed to do things that do not offend their husband or his family, challenge the idea that he is the leader or inconvenience him.

> You know being empowered doesn't mean you are in power all the time. I live in this society, so I have to choose when and where I would like to show that I am independent or capable. Knowing when to exercise your power is also [a form of] empowerment. I have taken gender studies at the university, so when I was newly married it was hard for me to accept how much I had to conform but over the years I have a few strategies. I still feel that I have a lot of say in what happens in my house, but I just can't scream [talk boldly] about it.

Similar to Nithya, Magesh highlighted that the act of conforming or expressing one's views subtly did not necessarily show disempowerment. These were strategies they used to achieve important goals in their life e.g., avoiding conflict, maintaining peace at home or having a happy family.

> I still feel empowered because I am not helpless. I am choosing to conform. I know it is like I am trading a part of me to get a peaceful life. This is the price I have to pay…and I do it happily because my family is the most important thing to me. Also, I have other avenues to express myself.

Professional women in this study, sometimes choose to act docile to safeguard their family honour or maintain peace and harmony at home.

## Discussion: Balancing Traditional Femininity and Empowerment

The women in this study have diverse experiences in terms of education and career but share similarities when discussing their experiences at home. While they identified themselves as being empowered, they admitted to making various adjustments at home. These adjustments were made so that women appeared to be conforming to traditional femininity that emphasises service, submission, and sacrifice, which indicates some form of disempowerment. However, it is important to scrutinise various strategies used by women to make adjustments at home in order to understand if these strategies are disempowering them. Karupiah (2019) discussed the process of masking empowerment in a study on the meaning of femininity among Malay and Indian young women. The study showed that women masked their empowerment to prevent problems in the family and as a strategy to be empowered. This was seen as a practical way to exercise some level of agency in their home given the various

restrictions and barriers they faced. Making choices with a good understanding and knowledge of the society in which one lives is a form of agency because individuals rarely make choices totally free from societal influence (Davis, 2009). A similar pattern is seen in this study. Many married women 'toned' down their capability or chose to act docile in the confines of their homes as a way to maintain harmony in their family. They also conformed to the traditional femininity by performing various traditional gender roles. They highlighted that this was a conscious choice to emphasise their empowerment.

The experiences of professional women showed how they 'bargained with patriarchy' by using various strategies to express themselves or achieve their goals within the gender structure that operates in the household. Bargaining with patriarchy is a term used by Kandiyoti (1988) to describe the strategies used by women to get greater authority and protection within an oppressive gender system. She explained that women exercise passive resistance and claim protection in exchange for their submissiveness and propriety. Similarly, women in this study use strategies to achieve their goals outside their home in exchange for some level of submissiveness they portray at home. The strategies that women use in this process are: fulfilling their traditional gender roles at home; subtly voicing their views, and choosing to exercise their power outside the confines of their home. Their experiences show the complexity and the irony of the bargaining process. Women choose to be submissive to a certain extent in their families as a way of being empowered. As suggested by Kandiyoti (1988), these acts are a form of passive resistance and enable women to exercise their agency to a certain extent but does not challenge or change the gender structure, particularly at home. The process of bargaining is more complicated for married women because their actions are often bound by their desire and choice of maintaining a happy family.

The process of bargaining was slightly different for single women, and they were often bound by the expectations and the honour of their families. Single women's actions and behaviour are associated with filial piety and honour of the family. Therefore, single women are more tactful in resisting and challenging societal pressure and influence to conform to traditional values and gender roles to safeguard the honour of their families. The institution of family in Malaysia particularly among Malaysian Indians is still very much rooted in traditional values and gender roles; hence, to ensure the well-being of the family they had 'no choice' but to conform to these values and norms. Some participants have internalised these values and it is hard for them to imagine how gender roles could be performed differently. Others admitted that all their life they have only seen or experienced one family model, which is one that followed traditional values and roles rather closely. Many married participants shared that personally they still perceived their husband as the 'master' in the house and identified various instances when they were expected to treat their husband as such, either due to advice or criticisms from family members and friends. Women's acceptance of male authority in the family and the continual reminder of the authority by family or friends around them is a manifestation of the notion of traditional femininity which emphasises the ascendancy of a man's status in a family (particularly the ascendancy of the husband). This was shared by the single women too. When

they were at home, they still contributed more to household chores and caring roles compared to the male family members. They admitted that this was a scenario they were familiar with, and it was difficult to imagine or perform their roles differently. This made it very difficult for them to transgress against traditional values in their home.

A good wife or mother is often expected to sacrifice for the well-being of her family (especially her husband and children). Therefore, to maintain harmony in their family life, many professional women perform traditional femininity that emphasises devotion, self-sacrifice and submission. They admitted that by doing this, they were taking a step back in the process of empowerment, i.e., they were not able to express themselves openly but felt that this is 'just' another sacrifice worth making for their family. Some participants highlighted that 'knowing when to do what' and acting accordingly is also an important part of empowerment. Even though they were choosing to conform to traditional values in various situations, they felt that they were empowered because they were not accepting various forms of gender inequality at home blindly but making a conscious choice to conform to the traditional values and gender roles to achieve a goal i.e., a happy family. To compensate for their actions at home, professional women used other avenues to express themselves as empowered women. By doing this they were able to express themselves as empowered women in other spheres and achieve what was important to them in terms of having a family or success in their careers.

## Conclusion

Professional women in this study identified themselves as being empowered and independent. They were all highly educated and had acquired various skills and abilities to perform tasks in their everyday life at work. At the same time, they spoke about the extent of work and emotional labour they did at home. They also stated that they were able to make decisions autonomously. However, women shared the complexity of expressing themselves or acting as empowered women, particularly in their homes. While they do not deny they have constraints in spaces outside their home (e.g., workplace, other public or semi-public spaces), they found it most difficult to face the challenges at home. This is mainly because these challenges are closely related to values and norms associated with the notion of being a good woman (particularly wife or mother) which is believed to be vital to the well-being of the family. Since all participants valued the well-being of the family, they find it difficult to transgress or challenge the traditional gender roles and values at home. Furthermore, some participants have also internalised these values and believed it was important to maintain a harmonious family. As a result, these women used various bargaining strategies to achieve goals that were important and meaningful to them.

## References

Budgeon, S. (2013). The dynamics of gender hegemony: Femininities, masculinities and social change. *Sociology, 48*(2), 317–334. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038513490358.

Budgeon, S. (2015). Individualized femininity and feminist politics of choice. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 22*(3), 303–318. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815576602

Carr, E. S. (2003). Rethinking empowerment theory using a feminist lens: The importance of process. *Affilia, 18*, 8–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109902239092.

Charlebois, J. (2011). *Gender and the construction of hegemonic and oppositional femininities.* Lexington Books.

Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power*. Polity Press.

Davis, K. (2009). Revisiting feminist debates on cosmetic surgery: Some reflections on suffering, agency, and embodied difference. In C. J. Heyes & M. Jones (Eds.), *Cosmetic surgery: A feminist primer* (pp. 35–48). Ashgate.

Devasahayam, T. W. (2005). Power and pleasure around the stove: The construction of gendered identity in middle-class south Indian Hindu households in urban Malaysia. *Women's Studies International Forum, 28*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2005.02.001.

Healey, L. (1999). Gender, power and the ambiguities of resistance in a Malay community of Peninsular Malaysia. *Women's Studies International Forum, 22*(1), 49–61. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(98)00094-6.

Jacob, P. (1997). From co-star to deity: Popular representations of Jayalalitha Jayaram. *Women: A Cultural Review, 8*(3), 327–337. https://doi.org/10.1080/09574049708578322.

Jayaweera, S. (1997). Higher education and the economic and social empowerment of women–the Asian experience. *Compare, 27*(3), 245–261. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305792970270302.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society, 2*(3), 274–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004.

Kar, S. B., Pascual, C. A., & Chickering, K. L. (1999). Empowerment of women for health promotion: A meta-analysis. *Social Science and Medicine, 49*, 1431–1460.

Karupiah, P. (2016a). Hegemonic femininity in Tamil movies: Exploring the voices of youths in Chennai, India. *Continuum, 30*(1), 114–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1117574.

Karupiah, P. (2016b). Marital Status and the influence of emphasized femininity on the romantic relationships of Tamil single mothers in Malaysia. In S. L. Blair (Ed.), *Contemporary perspectives in family research* (Vol. 10, pp. 375–393): Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Karupiah, P. (2019). Femininity in everyday life: Experiences of Malay and Indian women in Malaysia. In H. Cuervo & A. Miranda (Eds.), *Youth, inequality and social change in the Global South.* (Vol. 6, pp. 113–128). Springer.

Karupiah, P. (2020). Stigma and widow remarriage: Experiences of Malaysian Tamil women. *Journal of Family Studies*, 1–17.https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2020.1819378.

Karupiah, P., & Gopal, P. S. (2018). Intimate partner violence and poverty: Malaysian Indian women in Penang, Malaysia. *Global currents in gender and feminisms: Canadian and international perspectives* (pp. 225–236). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Lau, K. (2016). Problematizing femininity in slimming advertisements. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 24*(4), 1627–1650.

McCann, H. (2020). Is there anything "toxic" about femininity? The rigid femininities that keep us locked in. *Psychology & Sexuality, 13*(1), 9–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1785534.

Rowlands, J. (1995). Empowerment examined. *Dev Pract, 5*(2), 101–107. https://doi.org/10.1080/0961452951000157074.

Sahoo, S. (2015). Femininity and the feminine mystique. *Journal of East-West Thought, 5*(4), 67–76.
Schippers, M. (2007). Recovering the feminine other: Masculinity, femininity, and gender hegemony. *Theory and Society, 36*(1), 85–102. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-007-9022-4.
Sheilds, L. E. (1995). Women's experiences of the meaning of empowerment. *Qualitative Health Research, 5*(1), 15–35.
Tengland, P. A. (2008). Empowerment: A conceptual discussion. *Health Care Analysis, 16*(2), 77–96. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-007-0067-3.

**Premalatha Karupiah** is an associate professor of sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia. She teaches research methodology and statistics. Her research interests are in the areas of beauty culture, femininity, Tamil movies, educational and occupational choices, and issues related to the Indian diaspora. Her articles have been published in leading journals.

**Jacqueline Liza Fernandez** Jacqueline Liza Fernandez obtained her Ph.D in Economics from Universiti Malaya and her bachelor's and master's degrees in Social Sciences from Universiti Sains Malaysia. She is a retired senior lecturer from the School of Social Sciences (USM). Jacqueline has done research on several gender issues relating to the gap between men and women in the labour market. She was involved with a team of researchers from KANITA (USM) in conducting research for the Penang's Economic Planning Unit that looked at the role of women in decision-making for the state of Penang. She was also commissioned by the Penang Women's Development Corporation to carry out a study on Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) for the two local municipal councils in Penang and subsequently did a project on Gender Responsive and Participatory Budgeting (GRPB) for the Penang State Government.

# Health and Well-Being

# An Intersectional Case Study Analysis of Malaysian Indian Women with Endometriosis: Coping with Discrimination


**Sharon Wilson, Surita Mogan, and Kiran Kaur**

**Abstract** The onset of menarche is associated with physical maturity and the ability to marry and reproduce. However, a culture of silence surrounds menarche in the Indian community. It is a common belief among the Indian community that menstruation is associated with taboos and restrictions on work, sex, food, and bathing, and these taboos are associated closely with discrimination women face in their own gender and ethnic group. Using qualitative interviews and drawing on case studies of three urban Indian women who were patients of endometriosis, our study uses an intersectional framework to explore the experiences of Malaysian Indian women who cope with endometriosis. These Malaysian Indian women were influenced by an interplay of gender, racial and religious taboos. Their relationships with friends and family members were characterised by a deep sense of silence and isolation. Finally, we highlight an important intervention, which is the use of social media to connect with women facing a similar condition and to disseminate information on the condition, thereby lessening women's sense of shame and isolation.

**Keywords** Intersectionality · Indian · Women · Endometriosis · Culture · Health

## Introduction

According to Guilamo-Ramos et al. (2012), sexual reproductive health communication remains a taboo in the Indian community, making it hard for women to discuss difficult and delicate topics, including menstruation. Indian patriarchal attitudes and sociocultural norms have been said to impede menstruation-related discussions and communication. Hitherto there are no Malaysian Indian studies that have focused on how different social determinants influence interpersonal communication on the

S. Wilson (✉)
Faculty of Creative Industries, Department of Mass Communication, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia
e-mail: sharon@utar.edu.my

S. Mogan · K. Kaur
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_8

reproductive health and menstruation of Indian women (Lahiri-Dutt, 2014). There has been no research on Indian women's inequality in terms of the misconceptions they face regularly as a result of their reproductive health issues.

Indian women, historically and in traditional practice, have lived with the fact that menstrual taboo is a social restriction that is not specific to one region or religious practice. In India, the menstrual taboo originates from a Hindu belief in the impurity of menstrual blood and the impurity of women in general (Garg & Anand, 2015). The menstrual taboos associated with Hinduism have been widely practised and perpetuated for religious purposes. These types of taboos are also widely practised in other religions in the world. In the case of Hinduism specifically, menstruating women have been restricted from entering religious spaces, touching other people, touching, or preparing food, entering their own home, or eating near men or non-menstruating women. Women must be "purified" after menstruation before they are permitted to resume a normal life. These restrictions were enforced to prevent them from polluting things and people around them, especially religious spaces. For example, women and girls are not permitted to handle food, touch holy books, or offer prayers during menstruation. For the most part, the menstrual taboo among Hindus is deeply embedded in the Indian culture, and these practices are sometimes observed even more strictly in some regions and families. In some cases, young women are afraid of offending their elders and being spurned to the point that they still observe the restrictions despite their objections to these taboos. This is clearly noticed in the Indian diaspora, even in a modern, secular state such as Malaysia, which still adheres to the notion of the impurity of menstruation. Indian women in Malaysia, particularly those who embrace Hinduism, are still subject to the interplay of religious beliefs relating to gender issues that include menstruation and the reproductive role of women, such as marriage, sex, reproduction, and fertility. The problems and stigma encountered by adult Indian women are amplified when they have health complications concerning their reproductive organs. In this chapter, we focus on a condition called endometriosis affecting a large number of women around the world.

## Endometriosis

Endometriosis happens when endometrial cells from the uterus develop near the reproductive organ or in other areas of the body. Since endometriosis is often regarded as a taboo topic, many people are unaware of what it is and why some women suffer from it (Moradi et al., 2014). Aside from societies in the West and some Oriental societies that are accepting of women's reproductive health and consider this a celebration of womanhood instead of a curse, the discussion on women's reproductive health-related issues is limited, thus preventing women from obtaining adequate knowledge, guidance and services regarding reproductive and sexual health (Smith et al., 2000). The main concern is that there is a delay before girls or women with reproductive health diseases are diagnosed. It is also a known fact that medical practitioners do

not consider endometriosis a priority health care issue despite the prevalence of this disease in Malaysia (Wilson et al., 2020). Some of the issues relating to endometriosis include severe pain, infertility, and other health complications which inadvertently cause the women to be affected not just biologically but psychologically (anxiety due to the stressful nature of the treatment procedures as well as the fear that treatment will fail, and depression because of the inability to conceive) (Golombok, 1992).

This topic has been approached by scholars (Gundi & Subramanyam, 2019; McHugh, 2020; Mondragon & Txertudi, 2019) in the field of health communications who analysed how sexual reproductive health was communicated. The stigma and taboos relating to menstruation mean women and girls are excluded from regular day-to-day activities like attending school or earning a living. In some cases, women and girls are even prevented from living in their homes, eating certain foods, participating in religious activities or socialising during their menstruation. This study was carried out to fill a gap in the literature on the kinds of discrimination Malaysian Indian women face pertaining to this medical condition and also to explore how these women use various social media platforms to communicate and create an external coping mechanism.

## Gender and Indian Ethnic Identity

The present study specifically examines how gender and ethnic identities impact Indian women with endometriosis. It is well known that the "gender mandate" demands all women in our society to become mothers, and the current ideologies of intensive mothering believe that good mothering should be an all-encompassing enterprise (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). In addition, societies use race to establish and justify systems of power, privilege, disenfranchisement, and oppression. The American Anthropological Association states that "the 'racial' worldview was invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power, and wealth (American Anthropological Association, 1997). In the context of a multi-racial country like Malaysia where Indians are a minority group, this raises the question of what happens to Indian women who want to be mothers but cannot conceive children due to a flaw in their reproductive organs as a result of endometriosis and do not fall under the so-called 'gender mandate' and are seen as unable to fulfil their societal obligations let alone be included in the enterprise of womanhood.

Endometriosis is typically accompanied by a host of negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, depression, and helplessness (McQuillan et al., 2003). Women with endometriosis are more likely to experience negative emotions than their male partners/spouses and perceive their fertility problems as more stressful (Epstein & Rosenberg, 2005). Numerous accounts highlight the tendency for women with endometriosis to feel a sense of inadequacy and failure in their function as a woman. Endometriosis, thus, has a strong effect on women's sense of self and gender identity.

In this current study, we explore how the experience of endometriosis affects Indian women's sense of gender identity and how gender identity may be simultaneously influenced by their ethnicity. In other words, how does ethnicity alter or compound the influence of endometriosis on Indian women's perception of themselves as women? For some, endometriosis is inextricably bound with feelings of loss, dysfunction, and shame, and women with endometriosis note the social insensitivity of people who pry, question, and assume biological reproduction is a natural, normative, and even necessary adulthood transition (Mindes et al., 2003). Not surprisingly, endometriosis is likely to have a potent impact on women's relationships with friends, spouses, and family members. Marital relationships may also be affected by endometriosis which evidently will cause frustration and a lack of communication. Once again, however, the limited research in this area is primarily noted in the case of Malaysian Indian women. The medicalisation of endometriosis is firmly entrenched in our society, such that endometriosis is commonly viewed as a biological impairment or disease requiring medical intervention. By this definition, endometriosis is not simply a natural part of social life but a medical condition requiring treatment.

Our study will thus explore the following three research questions from an intersectional perspective: (a) How does the experience of endometriosis affect Malaysian Indian women's gender identity? (b) How does the experience of endometriosis influence Malaysian Indian women's relationships with friends, spouses, and family members? (c) How do Malaysian Indian women cope with endometriosis?

## *Intersectional Framework*

The idea of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995) focuses on the different dimensions of social life, which cannot be separated into discrete or pure strands. It is crucial to note that intersectional research avoids the essentialisation of any category, such as treating all members of a single social group as the same and implying that they have the same experiences and are attentive to time, place, historical and local specificity. Second, a study of intersectionality does not necessarily attempt to attach labels such as gender, ethnicity, or class to each other but instead attempts to explain the intersection of two or more axes of oppression. In doing so, it acknowledges the multidimensional and interconnected existence of social locations and places at the centre of lived experiences, social movements, and conflicting processes of oppression and subordination.

Analytical approaches to intersectionality are concerned with the implications and perceptions of multiple interactions between different social identities, such as gender, race, age, sexual orientation, and nationality (Cole, 2008; King, 1988; Shields, 2008; Warner, 2008). No single social identity captures the entire experience of an individual in a given time. Instead, intersectionality reflects how different social identities are encountered concurrently, with some identities emerging as more or less popular and providing greater or less privilege in different contexts than others (Ceballo et al., 2015).

Various scholars have used intersectionality in their research to explain the impact on women's issues. Tariq and Syed (2017) used the intersectionality lens to take into consideration interconnected and overlapping factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and family status that impact the challenges that women encountered in the labour force and considered women's agency and the strategies they employ to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of their employment and career. Intersectionality theory has also been applied in the field of health. Green et al. (2017) and Hankivsky (2014) declared that contextual forces like sexism or racism do not operate separately but interact with one another in the process of producing health inequalities. Green et al. (2017) employed intersectionality theory to examine the potential dimensions of intersectionality in applications related to epidemiology and health-related fields to reveal the power structures and social identities that generate inequalities. Meanwhile, Viruell-fuentes et al. (2012) used intersectionality theory to address how multiple dimensions of inequality intersect to impact immigrant's health outcomes. They also suggest particular inquiries concerning immigrants' experiences with discrimination, in addition to the role of immigration policies that inform immigrant health outcomes (Rogers & Kelly, 2011; Viruell-fuentes et al., 2012).

In the present study, we investigated Indian women who have endometriosis, and we use an intra-categorical approach to intersectionality research (McCall, 2005) which focuses on experience within an intersection and addresses fundamentally different questions. Given our society's adherence to a medicalised model of endometriosis and an emphasis on medical interventions (Harris, 2006), we focus on the role of stereotypes and social taboos and interrelate ethnicity, religion, and gender in our analysis. We include women from different socio-economic classes in order to compare experiences among Indian women across social class locations.

A major aim of the current study is to focus scholarly attention and give voice to a marginalised group of women who are underrepresented in the current literature, theory, and cultural representations. It is imperative that we investigate those who have been rendered invisible because "rarely is invisibility a value-neutral state" (Warner, 2008, p. 457).

## Methodology

### *Case Study*

A case study can be defined as an intensive study about a person, a group of people, or a unit, aimed at generalising over several units. In a case study, the focus is based on a specific unit (Jacobsen, 2002). The case study method is to define cases and explore a setting in order to understand it (Cousin, 2005). Multiple cases are looked at to understand the differences and the similarities between the cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This method also enables researchers to analyse the data both within each situation and across situations (Yin, 2003).

Multiple case studies can be used to either highlight contrasting results for expected reasons or augur similar results in the studies (Yin, 2003). In this way, the author can clarify whether the findings are valuable or not (Eisenhardt, 1991). When case studies are related to one another, the researcher may use the comparisons and similarities to significantly impact the literature (Vannoni, 2015). Case studies may be used to represent a research project (Gerring, 2004). In this context, the researchers only want to study one single thing (endometriosis) and a single group (a group of people), hence a single case study is the best choice (Yin, 2003).

## *Case Study Selection*

Data was collected from three respondents who were the primary case study subjects being explored and studied. They were selected based on the criteria: (1) they were Malaysian Indian women, (2) they were diagnosed with endometriosis, and (3) they were living in an urban setting–Kuala Lumpur. The reason for this selection was that women with endometriosis living in the city had access to medical practitioners who specialised in the condition and could attend endometriosis-based events that were frequently held, which then gave them limitless access to support groups and teams.

## *Case Study 1*

*G*, 47, is single (never married) and currently doing her PhD. She has four sisters, and all of them did not have endometriosis. *G* was diagnosed with endometriosis at the age of twenty-six. Prior to the diagnosis (i.e., from the age of twelve to twenty-six), she believed her pain was normal because people kept telling her it was all in her head. She believed that she had a low pain threshold as she interacted and compared herself with other women who had their menstruation. She felt like an outcast. Her mother understood her condition because she had similar issues when she was young. *G* tried traditional Indian medication given by her mother for many years. She was constantly thought to be lazy because she did not want to do household chores and was bullied by her sisters because of her pain, and because she was the youngest. In school, she fainted, and teachers thought she had psychological problems and referred her to the counselling department. At the age of seventeen, she visited a gynaecologist with her mother because she felt she needed to solve the issue before her major exam the following year. However, the gynaecologist brushed off her pain and gave her painkillers without even examining her. She had the tendency not to give a correct description of her pain because she was too shy to emphasise the area of her persistent pain. She has been living and coping with this condition for thirty years.

## *Case Study 2*

*U*, thirty-nine years old, was diagnosed with endometriosis in her early twenties. She is married and a career woman who is having difficulty getting pregnant. She only knew she had endometriosis after her marriage due to fertility issues and at that point, her condition was diagnosed as endometriosis stage 4. In her early twenties, she could do without painkillers. Her menstrual pain lasted for one to two days. From the age of twenty-five onwards, she had to take one to two pain killers, and her pain would last for two to three days. After her marriage, all her symptoms became more severe. Her pain became unbearable as endometriosis progressed to other parts or organs and led to problems related to the ureter, intestines, lungs and also bowel movement.

## *Case Study 3*

*A,* twenty-five years old, is a medical student, not married, and has been having menstruation issues since she was nine years old after getting her first menstruation. In 2013, she went for her first surgery and had six surgeries done till 2019. She had prolonged bleeding for more than a month from the age of nine to twelve. She was constantly given oral contraceptive pills (OCPs) at a very young age to manage her prolonged bleeding. She was diagnosed as having Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)–a hormonal disorder with infrequent or prolonged menstrual periods or excess male hormone (androgen) levels. The ovaries may develop small collections of fluid (follicles) and fail to regularly release eggs. From the age of thirteen to twenty-four, her pain became very bad with prolonged bleeding. At thirteen, the gynaecologists told her mother that she was imagining her pain and gave her painkillers. When *A* enrolled in medical school, she did research on her condition and realised her pain was a lot more than what doctors were telling her in the past. In medical school, she became a lot more knowledgeable that she was not diagnosed correctly and became well versed in her condition while studying to be a doctor. At twenty-four years old, she had to do a liver surgery and she convinced the liver surgeon to get a gynaecologist present and was finally diagnosed with endometriosis. The individual in this case study was diagnosed with PCOS at first before she was diagnosed with Endometriosis later. PCOS is linked to endometriosis indirectly if left untreated from the beginning.

## *Ethical Consideration*

This study received ethical clearance from the Endometriosis Association of Malaysia (MyEndosis)[1] and written consent from each case study subject. To ensure further privacy and confidentiality, the three case study subjects were anonymised.

## *Interview Design*

A semi-structured interview was carried out with each of the participants (*U, G* and *A*). The interviews were video recorded with permission, lasting 40 min each. Researchers *KK* and *SM* were also present throughout the interview session. The interview was structured with questions relating to *U, G,* and *A*'s personal details and lifestyles. We based the data collection instruments (topic guides) for semi-structured interviews on the study's objectives, theoretical framework, and literature review (Selwyn et al., 2005; Sourbati, 2009). The topic guides ensured the inclusion of previously identified essential issues relating to the topic, such as coping mechanisms and strategies, challenges faced, issues related to access to information and information seeking, social participation, and family relationships. The interviewers ceased conducting interviews when data saturation was reached, and that was when all transcripts from each individual had been coded, with no new codes emerging. The transcripts were subsequently analysed using a thematic approach (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The interviewers analysed the transcripts in the following manner. First, codes were assigned to phrases and sentences that described the meaning of the text segment. Based on the framework, the whole transcription was re-coded, and then the process continued until no new code was extracted from the transcript. Next, similar codes were gathered into more conceptual categories. Finally, themes were identified by relating categories and sub-categories. The coding and themes were validated through continuous dialogue among the researchers. Feedback was provided to the interviewees by summarising the findings before finalising the main themes and categories. They confirmed the results and provided valuable comments, helping to refine our findings further. In order to ensure that the research process and the findings were authentic with respect to the voices and meanings of the participants themselves, the member checking technique was employed.

An intersectionality analysis benefitted the study immensely. Examining the lived experiences of these Indian women required an approach that focused on building connections between identity, social location, and multiple forms of discrimination

[1] It is worth noting that the researchers are members of the association and hence would be classified as emic researchers. Emic researchers have a unique perspective on patients' experiences and are the greatest judges of the study and analysis (Morey & Luthans, 1984). Even if a direct correlation exists, emic viewpoints do not always mean that the researcher is familiar with the cultures of the patients. Researchers for this study also followed the rules and regulations of the association in order to maintain responsibility for the patients in the case study.

and taboos in health issues. This framework blended an understanding of the structural elements of social location with the personal interpretive aspects of what it means to experience reproductive health issues in a closed conservative community.

## Findings

This study used three Indian women's narratives of endometriosis as a tool to understand their experiences and emotional issues due to this illness. The study elicited three main themes in the discussion involving the case study subjects *U, G,* and *A*. These include the types of discrimination they faced and actions that they pursued in relation to their coping mechanism. Here, the subjects explain the various forms of discrimination that suppressed their freedom of speech and expression with regard to seeking help, making decisions, and adopting strategies to cope with endometriosis. The second theme which arose from this study includes the influence of cultural and gender taboos. This is further developed with narrative elements focusing on the impact of communication on the subjects in particular, and the Indian society and culture in general. These cultural and gender taboos encompass traditional rituals and religious practices as well as the biases that women face. Lastly, the theme of courage and support from various sources in society to deal with the condition is elaborated through the expression of their coping efforts and mechanisms, their current state, and their future plans and hopes.

### *Suppression of Freedom*

Respondent *U* expressed her disappointment that she did not receive support from her family members. She suppressed her feelings and limited the discussion of her disease with her in-laws and other members of her family. When pressed further by the interviewers, she mentioned that this act of avoidance was performed to avoid arguments, blame-shifting, throwing tantrums, and unpleasant or rough encounters with close family members.

*U* was also subject to unsolicited advice from elderly women from the Indian community at social functions, and she did not take this well. A sense of embarrassment was constantly felt. The advice (such as *"you should eat this more…," "you should pray to this God…,"* or "*you should do these rituals")* was very superficial and did not reflect an understanding or clear knowledge of endometriosis, hence it barely had any effect on the diagnosed condition. Women suffer from constant harassment or even bullying from other women who give unsolicited advice. They are expected to seek various paths either medical or religious to change their condition and were viewed as weak or defeated if they were unable to change their condition. These were further reasons *U* avoided socialising with her community or participating actively in making her Indian community understand the severity of this disease.

Due to this discrimination, *U* felt she was unable to rest in her home and kept herself busy with work to divert her attention. She was afraid of showing her weak side, especially during her menstruation, as she was "*unable to be herself*". *U*'s actions are linked clearly to a sense of discrimination based on the social construct that women who are married should bear children. Society believes that an individual who is not a parent is less mature and metaphorically one is deemed to be invisible without children. This notion can be regarded as society's expectations that might lead to discrimination; for example, employees without children in our culture believe they are short-changed on all fronts. Their benefits are smaller, although they may have a higher number of responsibilities. Their needs go unmet, unheard, and unnoticed. This continuous harassment and state of affairs can lead to an individual's suppression of emotions and avoidance of social contact, interaction, and engagement with other members of one's community.

For *G*, expressing the immense pain that she endured during menstruation led to discrimination and other problems. Her teachers thought she had psychological problems and referred her to the school counselling department. It was perceived that she was exaggerating her period pains problems which resulted in the decision to send her to the school counselling department. She was also constantly bullied and called 'lazy' by family members who did not empathise with her health experience. Period pain is treated as something that needs to be borne quietly by a woman and there is a lack of understanding of the nature of the pain or other medical conditions that can be related to the pain.

The problems of a woman with endometriosis who is at a low point in life and grappling with intolerable pain are compounded when she is labelled as lazy and subject to culturally bounded views and norms. This is another way of demotivating and discriminating against a woman. Her awareness of her condition should supersede everyone else's opinion, and therefore, parents, medical practitioners, teachers, employers, spouses, and peers should play their respective roles instead of neglecting the needs of the individual. The severity of her discrimination was further enhanced when the gynaecologist she consulted at age seventeen brushed aside her pain and gave her painkillers without even examining her. Being shy prevented her from expressing herself effectively. *"I had contraction type of pain, I did not know how to describe it, and for females at a young age, at that time, you are a virgin, it was very difficult for me to tell that down there [it] is painful…I just tell them the pain is [in] the lower stomach, or the hips actually."* Being expressive is something that is not received well in the Indian community, especially amongst young women, and speaking about issues relating to the reproductive organ is considered a taboo subject, to be broached with caution and care, and this can be categorised as suppression of the freedom of expression and speech.

The cases of *U* and *G* differed from the case of *A* as she was discriminated against by health care providers. When she was thirteen years old, she was told by the gynaecologist that she was imagining her pain and was given painkillers. *A* faced the harshest judgment from female doctors who kept telling her that her pain was normal to the point she was reluctant to see female gynaecologists. These various situations highlight the suffering these Indian women had to face to the point where

they suppressed their feelings and rarely expressed their thoughts. This is because the Indian society has a preconceived idea that women 'ideally' should not be allowed to express their discomfort in any way especially if it affects them being 'a woman' and specifically if it involves her reproductive health. To choose to disengage oneself from society because of these suppressions can only be seen as a violation of basic human rights where one does not feel 'safe' to be amongst other members of society.

## *Influence of Cultural and Gender Taboos*

The ideology that an Indian woman is only complete if she is married, has children and plays an important role in carrying out her duties as a wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law, and fulfils all her duties as a member of her family is still very vital and persistent in the Indian community. Indian women are also seen as an important factor contributing to the honour of the spouse's family image.

*U*'s in-laws were aware of her condition but refused to understand the severity of the disease as it is a taboo topic of conversation in the culture of Indian society. Accepting *U*'s condition, where the disease did not allow her to have her own child, would mean accepting defeat, i.e., she, as the daughter-in-law who is married to their only child, is incomplete. The entire family's reputation and image would be tarnished if her condition becomes the talk of the town. According to *U, "blame is always shifted to the women in an argument as women fighting for her rights is seen as unacceptable and [she] is portrayed as incomplete."* Such ideology demotivates Indian women, and their suffering becomes a lonely journey without support or motivation to overcome obstacles and without any empathy or sympathy.

Meanwhile, elderly women shift the blame to external factors in relation to the management of the disease. Utterances such as, "*You look sickly because you do not eat good food. You are so thin, you have lost a lot of weight, what happened to you?"* And then, upon hearing about menstrual pain issues, they relate their own experiences without understanding the disease, endometriosis. Uninformed members of society continued to comment on her looks, weight, or clothes without empathy or perhaps refusing to understand her and her problem. This is in line with the view that *"a woman is supposed to be a complete puzzle, not an unmodeled one"* which means that every woman has unique qualities, and she needs to fulfil certain expectations of the society and should be consistent with society's expectations. As an Indian woman, talking about menstruation and menstrual pain was a difficult task and more so if a woman is married because talking about sex, or painful sex, which is one of the symptoms of endometriosis, was completely disregarded, insignificant, and totally unacceptable.

Besides societal pressure, gender biases are obvious, where if a man is diagnosed with a disease, society is seen to be more sympathetic towards him. This discrimination might be because men are seen as role models in the family, and no taboo topics are associated with them. This was concurred by *G,* who felt that there is an unfair judgement of Indian women compared to Indian men because the Indian society is

a patriarchal society. *"We are being undermined; it is very different for men, if they have problems with reproduction, we are expected to sympathise with them."* The phrase "we are being undermined" here means we are being taken advantage of.

*G* felt that her friends from other ethnic groups practice empathy compared to women in her own ethnic group. *G* believed that Indians are uncomfortable talking about reproductive health because it is regarded as a flaw in a woman. *"Some of them do have pain, they don't want to be associated with people like me because problems with the reproductive system mean you are not a whole woman…they don't want to look imperfect."* Indian friends in boarding school were not sure about her situation, according to *A*. She could not explain to her friends about her prolonged bleeding. She was also shy when it came to having her period. *"If I don't go to the temple, everyone gets to know, including the boys."*

*G* believed that having endometriosis meant that it inhibited her from participating in temple prayers, which seemed like a needless requirement. Meanwhile, *A*'s mother told her that it was fine to pray while she was still bleeding because her prolonged bleeding was unusual. *A* was constantly in a dilemma when entering the temple because of her menstruation. She had a sense of guilt. Her dilemma intensified because she played the '*veenai'* (Indian traditional instrument), which is considered a sacred musical instrument. At the same time, her mother also told her to drink turmeric and wash her hair before going to the temple following a five-day cycle even when she was still menstruating to 'purify' her. Her mother told her not to inform other Indians in the temple that she was menstruating, and due to this, *A* prefers to wear dark outfits because she did not want to accidentally stain her clothing as she was afraid of her menstrual stain might reveal she was hiding or concealing her menstruation. When *A* reached puberty, her mother wanted her to eat certain traditional foods like '*ulunthu kanji'* (lentil porridge) and '*ulunthu maavu'* (cooked lentil flour) as it was supposed to strengthen her back and uterus. *A* remembered hating the taste and she refused to eat it. At one point, *"my mom used to tell me because you didn't take it…that [is why] you are suffering in pain now…but eventually, when she started understanding what was going on, she realised those remedies were not going to help."*

As a forward-thinking Indian woman, *G* felt that the Indian society regarded her attempts to empower herself as an additional further disadvantage in terms of finding a suitable husband as this would mean that she had knowledge and information and was able to speak up and stand up for herself. She was told that she set herself in a difficult position when selecting a partner because she was also pursuing her postgraduate studies. She was given the impression that education among Indian women might not be an important factor for marriage compared to being able to procreate/conceive. *"Another Indian female will tell females…you are not supposed to be [of a] higher [status] than men."* This line of thought was expressed by some of her friends. *A* meanwhile expressed fear of getting into any relationship because society expects a woman to be healthy and be able to conceive. She was also afraid that her potential partner would not accept her because of the discomfort in her lower abdomen. "*I had six surgeries up to today and the scarring on my abdomen is not something I like…I prefer to avoid wearing sarees."* This is because sarees reveal

a woman's abdominal region. *A* heard stories from family members about women that divorced because they were unable to conceive and expressed her worry that she might face the same ordeal.

All three case study subjects shared similar qualities, that is, being Indian women with a medical condition that affected their reproductive organs, but they differed notably in terms of the experiences they shared.

## *Action and Involvement with Courage and Support*

*U* managed to engage herself in positive activities receiving support from like-minded women in the Malaysian Endometriosis Association's (MyEndosis) social media network. She found an avenue to share her experience, discuss her pain and allow other women to encourage and support her. This was a way for her to cope with her condition. She finally found a place where she could participate actively while being allowed to speak her mind. This was also a way in which she could cope with endometriosis although the support she garnered was not necessarily from women of the same ethnicity. *G,* on the other hand, had more courage to talk about her condition after being diagnosed with endometriosis at the age of twenty-six because the diagnosis proved she did not imagine her pain. She felt vindicated and, therefore, able to talk freely about endometriosis. Her ability to cope stemmed from her openness to talk to men or women about this condition even if many women brushed off her pain. She was self-motivated to create awareness of endometriosis. "*I even spoke to a Hindu priest about endometriosis, and he was shocked I opened up about this.* " *A* was supported by her mother, whom she confided in. After being diagnosed with endometriosis and because of her medical knowledge, *A* was a lot more confident in explaining her condition. However, because *A* is still young, she expressed not having much experience dealing with society; therefore, she tried coping with endometriosis and managing her condition by herself most of the time. Being self-motivated, she finds ways to cope with her pain, such as enrolling in courses as a way to her divert her attention. At times *A* is in denial about what she is going through and she hopes one day it will end but knows that she has a long way to go to menopause.

*U*'s family members, that is, her brother, sister, and husband, forbade her to enhance her knowledge about her condition as they felt it would lead to more negativity that would affect her mind, her body, and soul. They did not equip themselves with the relevant knowledge, and they suppressed her efforts of gaining further knowledge about endometriosis. She does not dare to speak about her disease in her Indian community due to stereotyping, judgmental feedback, and lack of support. This feeling of dissatisfaction and the lack of society's support for her has stopped her from sharing her experiences with other members of her community, thus depriving her of a coping mechanism. *U* mentioned that the only courage she gets is from her support group; understanding other women's conditions as well as the sharing sessions with doctors and patients has helped her greatly in coping with her condition.

As a member of MyEndosis, a non-government organisation that supports women with endometriosis, she has not faced any judgmental remarks, which has given her so much hope and relief.

*G* has hopes for the future where she is able to better understand endometriosis and when more people know about the condition. Women nowadays are educating their children differently due to their past experiences and hurdles. *G* received support from her nephew, who is a medical student. *G*'s sister had a better understanding of her pain only when she witnessed *G* in the emergency department of the hospital. *G* hoped that she would not be judged wrongly and she sees this as a form of support for her to cope with the condition. She believes that social media is a powerful tool for creating a sense of belonging, saying, *"I finally found people who speak my language, I am not a liar, I am not an outcast." G* also believes MyEndosis is doing so much despite being a relatively new association and hopes education on endometriosis would be made available to young females and males in school to give them a better understanding of the issue. Women in rural areas, especially the Indian community in villages or small towns, should be educated about menstrual health in order to break the taboo of talking about period pain. *A* meanwhile wants her future partner to educate himself about endometriosis before even committing to the relationship. She is hoping her future partner will be in the medical line to better understand her situation. *A* believe that social media is an important tool but still believe topics on menstrual health are rather guarded on social media. "*People tend to vent out [their feelings] on social media, people tend to seek opinions on social media…you can reach out to a lot of people",* but there is a reservation on discussing issues related to menstruation, "*I don't think we are there yet [ready] to talk about menstruation openly or any issues related to menstruation."*

## Discussion and Conclusion

Intersectionality theory focuses on how one's human experiences are constituted by mutually reinforcing interactions between different aspects of one's identities, such as ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation. The theory identifies the various factors that intersect could lead to racism, classism, and other threats, thereby promoting inequalities against women (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008). This study examines the impacts of intersecting identities versus experiences of discrimination in a sample of young Indian women. Results from our study highlight the complex and differential influences of intersecting identities versus intersecting experiences of discrimination with regard to endometriosis outcomes. Identities and experiences of discrimination did not yield the same effects for these women in relation to these outcomes. This means proposing solutions that reflect people's realities—especially those on the margins and extreme margins, given that people can be both privileged and marginalised. In this context, a Malaysian Indian woman is able to access government healthcare privileges as a Malaysian but may face discrimination in her community because of her ethnicity and as a woman.

In relation to the issue of the inability to have children, solutions need to be driven and generated by those people closest to the women concerned, which includes the spouse, parents, friends, doctors, employer, co-workers or other endometriosis sufferers. The lived experience and experiences of discrimination of an Indian woman will be different from that of women in other ethnic groups. Society seems to overlook the fact that Malaysian Indian women are subject to discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, and culture and often encounter a combination of all three. Understanding Indian women's experiences purely based on their ethnicity or gender ignores specific challenges that Indian women face. In this discussion, we acknowledge the fact that the following characteristics, i.e., "woman", "Indian", "age", "urban", "educated", and "menstruation" do not exist independently of each other. It is used in conjunction with other variables to generate specific forms of discrimination and a complex convergence of oppression. Nevertheless, it should also be acknowledged that within groups of people with common identity markers such as those mentioned, there still exists intra-group differences. Intersectionality theory examines identity construction as composed of multiple social vectors that include gender, class, race, and sexuality, among other identity vectors that form a person's sense of self. This theory views identity as operating beyond singular dimensions and drives questions about multiple dimensions that shape human experiences and health. This study explores intersectionality and how cultural oppression patterns are linked together and affected by intersecting systems of society such as family, gender, religion, race, education, and economic background.

We acknowledge the limitation of this study that focuses only on urban Indian women and not Indian women, especially those who are marginalised in the rural areas. This study continues the efforts to conceptualise and operationalise intersectionality in public health research and contributes to a developing body of literature that applies intersectionality theory to understand health disparities and cultural taboos. We provide a small empirical data set to support the "intersectionality paradox" argument and suggest that researchers should not assume that health risks increase or decrease with each additional minority status.

Future studies should assess intersecting social positions (e.g., identities) and processes (e.g., interpersonal experience of discrimination or forms of structural oppression) as mentioned by Vu et al. (2019). Given a large number of potential identities (e.g., sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, age, weight, religion, immigration status) and experiences that can be related to these identities, we recommend that researchers use robust theory and evidence to guide their selection of variables.

## References

American Anthropological Association. (1997). *Official Statement on "Race",* Draft Ms.

Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report, 13*(4), 544–559.

Ceballo, R., Graham, E. T., & Hart, J. (2015). Silent and infertile: An intersectional analysis of the experiences of socioeconomically diverse African American women with infertility. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 39*(4), 497–511.

Cole, E. (2008). Coalitions as a model for intersectionality: From practice to theory. *Sex Roles, 59*(5–6), 443–453.

Cousin, G. (2005). Case study research. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 29*(3), 421–427.

Crenshaw, K. W. (1995). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 357–383). The New Press.

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1991). Better stories and better constructs: The case for rigor and comparative logic. *The Academy of Management Review, 16*(3), 620–627.

Epstein, Y. M., & Rosenberg, H. S. (2005). Depression in primary versus secondary infertility egg recipients. *Fertility and Sterility, 83*(6), 1882–1884.

Garg, S., & Anand, T. (2015). Menstruation related myths in India: Strategies for combating it. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care, 4*(2), 184–186.

Gerring, J. (2004). What is a case study and what is it good for? *American Political Science Review, 98*(2), 341–354.

Golombok, S. (1992). Psychological functioning in infertility patients. *Human Reproduction, 7*(2), 208–212.

Green, M. A., Evans, C. R., & Subramanian, S. V. (2017). Can intersectionality theory enrich population health research? *Social Science & Medicine, 178*, 214–216. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.02.029

Guilamo-Ramos, V., Soletti, A. B., Burnette, D., Sharma, S., Leavitt, S., & Mccarthy, K. (2012). Parent-adolescent communication about sex in rural India: U.S.-India collaboration to prevent adolescent HIV. *Qualitative Health Research*, *22*(6), 788–800. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732311431943.

Gundi, M., & Subramanyam, M. A. (2019). Menstrual health communication among Indian 613 adolescents: A mixed-methods study. *PLoS ONE, 14*(10), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0223923.

Hankivsky, O. (2014). Intersectionality 101. *The Institute for Intersectionality Research & Policy, SFU, 36*, 1–34.

Harris, A. P. (2006). From stonewall to the suburbs? Toward a political economy of sexuality. *William and Mary Bill of Rights Journal, 14*(4), 1539–1582.

Jacobsen, D. M. (2002, April). *Building different bridges two: A case study of transformative professional development for student learning with technology*. In 83rd Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Johnston, D. D., & Swanson, D. H. (2006). Constructing the "good mother": The experience of mothering ideologies by work status. *Sex Roles, 54*(7–8), 509–519.

King, D. K. (1988). Multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness: The context of a Black feminist ideology. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 14*, 42–72. https://doi.org/10.1086/494491.

Lahiri-Dutt, K. (2014). Medicalising menstruation: A feminist critique of the political economy of menstrual hygiene management in South Asia. *Gender, Place & Culture, 22*(8), 1158–1176.

McHugh, P. (2020). Immigrant and native-born fertility, 2008 to 2018. https://cis.org/Report/Immigrant-and-NativeBorn-Fertility-2008-2018.

McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *30*(3), 1771–1800.

McQuillan, J., Greil, A. L., White, L., & Jacob, M. C. (2003). Frustrated fertility: Infertility and psychological distress among women. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 65*, 1007–1018.
Mindes, E. J., Ingram, K. M., Kliewer, W., & James, C. A. (2003). Longitudinal analyses of the relationship between unsupportive social interactions and psychological adjustment among women with fertility problems. *Social Science & Medicine, 56*, 2165–2180.
Moradi, M., Parker, M., Sneddon, A., Lopez, V., & Ellwood, D. (2014). Impact of women's lives: a qualitative study. *BMC women's health*, *14*(1), 1–12.
Mondragon, N. I., & Txertudi, M. B. (2019). Understanding menstruation: Influence of gender and ideological factors. A study of young people's social representations. *Feminism & Psychology*, *29*(3), 357–373.
Morey, N. C., & Luthans, F. (1984). An emic perspective and ethnoscience methods for organisational research. *Academy of Management Review*, *9*(1), 27–36.
Rogers, J., & Kelly, U. A. (2011). Feminist intersectionality: Bringing social justice to health disparities research. *Nursing Ethics, 18*(3), 397–407. https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733011398094.
Selwyn, N., Gorard, S., & Furlong, J. (2005). Whose Internet is it anyway? Exploring adults'(non) use of the Internet in everyday life. *European Journal of Communication, 20*(1), 5–26.
Samuels, G. M., & Ross-Sheriff, F. (2008). Identity, oppression, and power feminisms and intersectionality theory. *Journal of Women and Social Work, 23*(1), 5–9.
Shields, S. A. (2008). Gender: An intersectionality perspective. *Sex Roles, 59*(5–6), 301–311.
Sourbati, M. (2009). 'It could be useful, but not for me at the moment': Older people, internet access and e-public service provision. *New Media & Society, 11*(7), 1083–1100.
Tariq, M., & Syed, J. (2017). Intersectionality at work: South Asian Muslim women's experiences of employment and leadership in the United Kingdom. *Sex Roles, 77*(7), 510–522.
Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing and Health Sciences, 15*(3), 398–405.
Vannoni, M. (2015). What are case studies good for? Nesting comparative case study research into the lakatosian research program. *Cross-Cultural Research, 49*(4), 331–357.
Viruell-fuentes, E. A., Miranda, P. Y., & Abdulrahim, S. (2012). More than culture: Structural racism, intersectionality theory, and immigrant health. *Social Science & Medicine, 75*(12), 2099–2106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.12.037
Vu, M., Li, J., Haardörfer, R., Windle, M., & Berg, C. J. (2019). Mental health and substance use among women and men at the intersections of identities and experiences of discrimination: Insights from the intersectionality framework. *BMC Public Health, 19*(1), 1–13.
Warner, L. R. (2008). A best practices guide to intersectional approaches in psychological research. *Sex Roles, 59*(5–6), 454–463.
Wilson, S., Mogan, S., & Kaur, K. (2020). Understanding the role of Facebook to support women with endometriosis: A Malaysian perspective. *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, *26*(4), e12833, 1–6.
Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

**Sharon Wilson** holds a Ph.D. in Communication from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and received her BA in Translation and Interpretation and a Master's in Communication from Universiti Sains Malaysia. She has been a Scholar of the Study of the United States Institutes' Journalism and Media Program at Ohio University and a Fellow of the Summer Institute for Asia Fellows in News Literacy Program in Hong Kong. She has worked in public relations, broadcasting, and journalism. Her research focuses on media, crime and society, and women and identity.

**Surita Mogan** obtained her Bachelor of Education (TESL) and her Master's in Education Administration from University Putra Malaysia. She currently teaches Communicative English, Oral Communication and English for Business at the Faculty of Creative Industries, University Tunku

Abdul Rahman. She has taught English Language in universities for 14 years. She has presented a paper at the International Communication and Media Conference (i-Come) in 2010 and at the TARC International Conference in 2013. Her research interests are in language and media in spoken and written discourse and literature.

**Kiran Kaur** is a lecturer at the English Department, Faculty of Creative Industries, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. She obtained her Master's in Language and Media Communication from the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia and Bachelor of Arts (Hons.) English Language Studies from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her research interests are in language and media in spoken and written discourse. She currently teaches Discourse Analysis, Critical Reading and Thinking and English for Mass Communication at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman.

# Surviving Body Shaming: An Auto-ethnography of a Malaysian Indian Woman


**Jayaeswari Sangaralingam**

**Abstract** Beauty is intangible, and standards of beauty differ from culture to culture and have changed over the years. Past studies in psychology have shown that at the individual level, the quality of one's body image is strongly related to the level of one's self-esteem and psychosocial adjustment. Shame inopportunely is a powerful self-conscious emotion which emerges from the experience of being seen by others as flawed, inferior, inadequate or powerless. Regardless of what we have been told, that only what lies within matters, most women grow up seeking perfection in their physical appearance as they are socialised to believe it is important to be physically perfect. Using the auto-ethnography method, this paper will explore my personal experience as a large-sized and dark-skinned individual, from my childhood days until I became an adult. Using my personal experience as a member of a minority community in Malaysia's multicultural society, I will explore how issues related to body shaming, objectification and colourism affected me at different stages of my life. It shows how living in a culture that places emphasis on the physical attractiveness of women and insistently objectifies them, inadvertently leads to the feeling of body shame and low self-esteem and eventually creates despair and misery in adolescent girls and women's lives. This paper also explores the journey of empowerment as I began to accept my body and it chronicles the choices I made to be who I am today.

**Keywords** Beauty · Culture · Colourism · Minority · Discrimination

## Introduction

"You are fat, dark and ugly, no one will like you".

I grew up hearing this from my mother. Why did she say this? I am not sure but I did not confront her. But did this affect me? Yes, of course, it affected me as a child, as a teenager and as an adult. I was born into a Malaysian Indian family, the youngest

J. Sangaralingam (✉)
Sentral College Penang, Penang, Malaysia
e-mail: jayaeswaris@gmail.com



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_9

of six siblings. I am different when compared to my female siblings, I have a darker skin complexion and I am much bigger than them, in height and weight.

This is the story of my journey, a 50-year-old woman who has almost half of a century's tale to narrate. In this paper, I share my reflections, challenges, experience and growth. I provide a personalised account of hurt, frustration, anger, vulnerabilities, achievements and triumphs. This auto-ethnography, writing about the researcher's experiences (Ellis, 2004), articulates my journey in constructing my identity as a beautiful dark-skinned and plus-sized Malaysian Indian female. Telling my story of identity construction, change, and growth started from the body positive movement that is gaining attention and momentum from various quarters in all corners of the world. I strongly advocate that everyone should accept people as they are, regardless of their body structure; everyone should be happy with their body image, whether they are fat or thin, tall or short, fair or dark. It was a tough journey which I had to endure to come to the realisation that "I am perfect as I am", although there were so many elements out there to crush this belief, including those in my social sphere and family circle (Umberson & Thomeer, 2020) as well as the influence of media (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008).

I have two aims in writing this chapter, first is to speak for all those who are struggling to accept who they are as they are in terms of their body structure and skin complexion, and secondly to fulfil the purpose of the auto-ethnography, that is, for everyone to benefit from thinking and reflecting about their lives based on the lived experiences of others (Ellis & Bochner, 1996).

## My Childhood

I am from a middle-income family; my father settled the family in a small town in Penang when he moved there for work. Growing up in a small community has its charm as well as shortcomings. My family belonged to a minority group and we lived in an area that was surrounded by Malay *kampongs* (villages). The majority of the population comprises the Malay race, followed by a small Chinese community and a smaller Indian community. Everyone knew each other in the small Indian community where news of births or deaths was shared. Comparing children of others with your own child or children was a norm. Social comparison between different groups of people from the perspective of various cultures, social status, and majority-minority groups is prevalent all over the world (Alexandre et al., 2007) and it occurred in my small town too.

I grew up in a sheltered environment and my upbringing was strict. I was told by my mother to behave in a certain manner as an Indian girl. There were unwritten rules about how girls are supposed to look and behave in my culture. I was a chubby girl as I was growing up, but I was not conscious of my size at an early age. My mother's remarks started affecting me when I started my kindergarten education. She would compare me with my sisters. The words I heard all the time while growing up were "Why can't you be like your sisters?" I was not a mischievous child; I

was just plump and I was dark-skinned. The ladies in my house, that is, my mother and sisters, were fair-skinned and slim. I was made to feel guilty about my physical appearance. Zametkin et al. (2004) indicated that the opinions of parents were significantly associated with a child's negative self-perception and my mother's opinion of me negatively affected my self-perception.

I started to feel and notice my mother's affection towards me was different compared to her affection for my other siblings. I was often made to feel like an outcast and consciously felt I did not belong in the family. It is interesting to note that Trombini et al. (2003) who studied relationship patterns of mothers with obese children and non-obese children found that mothers with obese children had a significantly insecure attachment with their child as compared to mothers with non-obese children.

My early experiences in life involved my family and my extended family. This was my microcosm of the world. The rejection by both my immediate family and extended family because of my skin colour and body size made me believe that I was not good enough for anyone and that I was not worthy as a person. There was an occasion when my uncle told me that I would be a 'nobody', I would not go far in life, and he looked at my sister and said that she would be successful, she would travel the around world and she would be happy. I was very affected by these opinions at that time of my life. I hated my skin, I hated being fat, I hated myself and I hated living in this judgemental world. I just wanted to hide from everyone. I loathed the comparison of my complexion with that of my cousins; it was bad enough to be compared to my siblings, but it was worse when I was compared to my extended family members as well. They would make fun of my colour and my weight. I had to listen in shame to everyone telling me I had to go on a diet. What surprised me was that my brothers who were bigger in size and shared the same dark complexion as me escaped the negative remarks and were not teased for their looks. It was just me. Why was I being targeted? Was it just because I am a girl? I started questioning this injustice that was taking place at home but I could not do anything about it.

This early-life exposure to negative remarks from a parent and close family members was the starting point of undervaluing myself which led to later life issues. Childhood is the time where one starts to formulate one's self-esteem and self-respect and having negative perspectives about life have a significant adverse impact on later stages of life and worse still, it affects one's attempts in embarking on long-term relationships (Umberson et al., 2014). I was not able to appreciate who I was, I could not see myself as pretty, I had trouble forming a relationship, and sadly I believed I was not good enough to live.

## My School Days

I thought going to school would be different, but I faced another set of challenges. Surprisingly, it was again about my skin colour and my size. The first impression of most people of an obese person is that the person is lazy and stupid. Berg (2000)

found that teachers evaluate and interact differently with large-sized students and initially I was treated differently until my teachers realised that they had a wrong perception of me. I was the smart kid in the class and I excelled in my studies. However, I was facing discrimination for being an Indian girl among my peers. I was the only Indian girl in my class during my primary and secondary school days. My primary and lower secondary school classmates consisted mostly of Malay and Chinese students. They did not understand why I was different from them and for most of them, I was the first Indian they came to know. My skin colour was again the biggest concern. Some thought I was dirty. I did not understand what was happening in the beginning but when some of my classmates shunned me, I came to realise it was my skin colour that was the cause of the problem and I just chose not to be with them. I felt both ashamed and rejected because of my dark complexion. Hjerm et al. (2018) explained the formation of prejudice among children based on Nesdale's (1999) social identity development theory and Tajfel's (1982) social identity theory. They explained that children form their views and judgements about persons based on the knowledge they gather of others' attitudes, thus engaging in the process of social comparison. Social grouping is a norm in society; it is a tendency to categorise people based on beliefs; practices; race or skin colour and it impacts the everyday life of persons, either positively or negatively (Hogg & Vaughn, 2008). As a result, individuals prefer to be in a group that they are comfortable with and be with friends who look and behave just like them because they feel secure with the known; when they encounter someone who does not belong to the norm, they avoid them. This social comparison triggers students to identify with an in-group and subsequently develop a bias in favour of it. As such, it was difficult for me to be accepted to be in the in-group but eventually, it changed when one of my classmates included me in her group.

When I went to a different school at age of sixteen to continue my education in Form 4, I faced another set of discrimination. It was a co-ed school, and I was the only Indian girl in the whole school. I had two Indian and three Chinese boys as my classmates. It was here that I understood I was disadvantaged for being an Indian first, and then a girl. When it was time for the selection of school prefects, I was not considered because the school wanted only one Indian student to be represented. In my previous school, I was the Head Prefect, active in extra-curricular activities and also the top scorer in my school for the nationwide exam. I thought I met all the criteria to be a successful candidate for the position of a school prefect compared to my male classmates who severely lacked all the credentials, but to my dismay, I was not chosen. I was utterly disappointed and when I asked why I was not even considered, I was told it was because I was a female, and I was not pretty enough to be a school prefect. I never experienced that level of body-shaming prior to this. Hebl and Heartherton (2008) argued that people perceive overweight individuals to have lower abilities with poor work habits and that these individuals are also unfit for challenging tasks and leadership roles as compared to average-weight individuals.

Katz (1997) indicated that shame is "a fearful and chaotic sense of an irresistible and eerie revelation to self, of vulnerability in one's nature" (p. 232). The experiences I encountered in school created a deep impact on my choices in life. I stopped

believing in a fair system. I was body shamed repeatedly and reminded constantly of my skin colour. I was told my body shape was not good enough and that I was not beautiful. My shame was being internalised. As argued by Bradshaw (1988), it is the people whom I respect and whose opinions I value most, who are the ones who caused the biggest damage to my self-esteem.

My teenage days were not easy either. Like any teenager, I was going through emotional and physical changes. According to Freud in the pre-adolescence stage, the ego and superego are fully formed and functional. Teens are at a stage of their development where they are trying to understand their own needs whilst also trying to fit into the demands of reality and social norms (Silverman, 2017). I was struggling to fit into the norm. It was during this phase of my life that I started evaluating my perception of beauty. My observation at that time was, to be beautiful means to be slim and fair, and to be slim and fair means success and anything outside that scope was deemed a failure. Was I a failure? Surprisingly I did not see myself as a total failure, maybe because I excelled in my studies. That was my success. Over time, I noticed that the discrimination against body size and skin colour was not only happening in my small town; it was widespread in many parts of the world, i.e., being thin meant being successful and attractive and in contrast, being fat meant being a failure and unattractive (Klaczynski et al., 2004; Thompson & Stice, 2001). Besides that, it was believed that obese or overweight individuals were unfit.

## My Working Life

Facing stigmatisation for my body weight followed me throughout my adult life. Carr and Friedman (2006) pointed out that stigmatisation is experienced in all facets of life. Discrimination existed in the different workplaces I was attached to, firstly because I am an Indian female with a dark complexion and secondly because of my weight. My experience of dark skin discrimination interestingly came from other Indian female employees. I was judged based on my appearance, not my qualifications or credentials. I was made to feel small and belittled; I did not fit their standard of beauty. However, all these judgements did not affect me much; perhaps because by this time, I had built a wall to protect my feelings. It was also because I believed in myself and that I could do my job well. I mastered the art of compartmentalising my feelings, separating my professional and private life well.

There was one instance when one of my male colleagues made a snide remark about my size when I was chairing a meeting. It was then that I decided I had to take control of the situation; I did not let his remark intimidate me. Instead, I looked at him and asked him if he had any problems with my size and whether body-shaming me made him happy. Everyone who was there was surprised by my comment and the person who made the remark kept quiet. I made my point clear that I was not going to tolerate such behaviour. That was the beginning of my journey of standing up for myself when someone made a comment or criticised me about my weight. One of the boldest actions I had ever taken with regard to criticisms about my body

was to hand in my resignation letter a day after I was body-shamed by my boss in the presence of staff members when we went for a retreat. The irony of the whole situation was that I organised the retreat and made all the arrangements for the staff getaway and training. At the end of the session, the boss commented on my size, and he embarrassed me by body-shaming me. I handed him my resignation letter the next day and stated the reason I was leaving. My boss apologised and asked me not to do it but it was a stand I had to make. I am a capable person, I do my job well, and my body structure has never come between me and my job. It did not surprise me that my employer was bullying me as studies have shown that weight discrimination among women is widespread; they face biases and bullying from both their colleagues and employers (Puhl, 2002).

Another noticeable perception I faced in my working life was that overweight people are lazy. I did not encounter this perception when I was in school probably because scoring good grades and getting my homework done was enough not to be branded as lazy. But at the workplace, there tends to be a stereotype that overweight employees do not perform as well as normal-weight employees. Agerström et al. (2007) found that people generally regard overweight employees as low performers at work as compared to their counterparts, i.e., the normal-weight employees, who are regarded as high performers. In addition, a study reported that overweight females are more affected by hiring bias as compared to overweight males (Pagan & Davila, 1997). It took time for my colleagues to discover that I did not fit into their perceived idea that an overweight person cannot do the job as well as a normal-weight employee. I was getting tired of proving people wrong of their misconception of overweight people and individuals with dark complexion. I started reflecting on my life and myself. Why was I allowing others to define my credibility and ability to function as a person? Why was my weight and skin complexion seen as a factor that affects how I perform my job as an individual?

## My Personal Life

My upbringing was in a typical Indian family. My family was not open about dating or having a relationship and that was a blessing for me. I did not face the pressure to have a boyfriend during my school days or in college and when my peers were finding their partners, I remained nonchalant. They were curious why I was not interested in anyone, and my answer would always be “my family won’t accept it”. My peers from different cultures were surprised that I was perfectly fine with the idea of an arranged marriage at the right time and letting my family decide on my fate. However, there was an inner battle within me that no one knew about, that is: whether to let my family decide whom I should marry (i.e., to marry a total stranger) or to find a partner myself (i.e., to know the person first before I marry him). But I had my doubts if anyone would find me attractive enough to want to be with me. The idea that I would not be liked by anyone was a real fear. By this time, my self-esteem due to my body image had deteriorated. I was extremely conscious of my weight; I was putting on

more weight while I was growing up. Pass et al. (2010) explained that women with issues with their physical appearance were afraid of being rejected by their potential romantic partners and consequently they tend to have lower self-esteem.

My fear was justified when my family started looking for potential suitors. I was rejected by potential suitors merely based on my photos. I was rejected firstly because I was large and secondly because I had a dark complexion. The irony of the whole idea was that the men who rejected me were also big and were of dark skin too. Why the double standard? Why such chauvinism? Why was there a different set of criteria to measure attractiveness for men and women? I was disappointed. People did not look beyond my outer appearance; who I am on the inside did not seem to matter. These rebuffs inevitably led to feelings of body shame and low self-esteem and eventually caused more despair and misery in my life. All my life I was being ridiculed but now the rejections were a big blow. To win this battle, I started going on crash diets. I started taking slimming pills. I was trying skin whitening products but somehow deep down, I knew this is not me. I did not fit the mould of beauty standards. I tried my best to fit in, but I kept failing miserably. Beauty standards are measured by many based on what they see and advertisements in the media affect consumers' attitudes not only in the selection of products to purchase but also contribute to the formation of social identity (Stankovic et al., 2018). Moreover, Stankovic et al. (2018) further asserted that advertising sells values, images, and concepts of what is considered to be normal. According to Gudekli (2014), the idea of attraction promoted by the media and commercials portrays the ideal image of beautiful and attractive women as those who are slim and fair. Our society's perceived standard of beauty and perfection took a toll on me and the pressure to be normal kept building day by day; I had to do something, I had to lose weight and I had to be fairer.

Eventually, I did lose a bit of weight; it was not to the level of society's beauty standard but a bit to give me some confidence. I met some men along the way. They were pleasant in the early stages of getting to know me but they were unwilling to take the relationship a bit further as I was not their choice of a life partner. The reasons given were numerous: "my family won't think we would be suitable"; "my mom wants a fair bride"; "maybe if you lose weight, then I can talk to my family". In the end, it was all the same for me; it was rejection all over again and the main cause was my dark complexion and body weight.

In hindsight, I realised I started using my coping mechanism as I did during my school days. I used my achievements in education as a balance in my life. When people were body-shaming me, I used to think I am not so bad, I still can do something for myself, and I shall excel in my studies. When I was older, my coping mechanism was going through a spiritual journey, I kept telling myself God created everyone differently for a purpose, and it is okay to be different. Perhaps that helped me to be stronger.

## Searching for Identity

Beauty is intangible and standards of beauty differ from culture to culture and are ever-changing over the years. At the individual level, past studies in psychology have shown how the quality of one's body image is strongly related to the level of one's self-esteem and psychosocial adjustment (Cash & Henry, 1995). It was also stated by McKinley and Hyde (1996) that women are more vulnerable to negative body image effects as compared to men. This is mainly because women's worth is often associated with their bodies in their everyday encounters and relationships. Women tend to self-criticise their image and have the tendency to compare their bodies with other bodies or images (Bessenoff & Snow, 2006).

I struggled as a child, and then as a teenager to identify myself to be worthy of something. My only salvation was that I was good at my studies. Other than that, I could not see anything good in myself. Any comments about my weight or skin colour would make me cry. I would be in tears and tell myself I am not worthy and thus reinforce the belief that since I am not beautiful, nobody will love me, especially my mother. I was ashamed of myself. Shame inopportunely is a powerful self-conscious emotion which emerges from the experience of being seen by others as flawed, inferior, inadequate or powerless (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Shame was eating into my self-esteem. I started wearing baggy clothes to hide my body. I did not want anyone to see my bulges; I could not find anything about me that I liked or loved. I wore only dark colours, mainly black, as the notion was black makes one look smaller or slimmer; however, dressing in black also made my already dark complexion appear darker. I was in a dilemma. Which was more important to hide, my weight or my skin? For most, this may sound so dismissive, but for me, it was a profound decision to make. I thought I was alone in this world making these kinds of decisions but alas many women out there are suffering from body shame and have negative thoughts as well (Bedford & Johnson, 2006). We are just not happy in our own skin and unable to accept the fact that we are good enough irrespective of our physical appearance. Regardless of what we have been told, that only what lies within matters, most women grow up seeking perfection in their physical appearance as they are socialised to believe it is important to be physically perfect, and I was not spared from seeking perfection as well.

There are two types of reflection discussed by Schon (1983) that is: *reflection–in–action* and *reflection-on-action.* The reflection process that takes place simultaneously as and when someone is experiencing a moment is referred to as reflection-in-action. However, reflecting and analysing an event after it has happened in order to improve future actions is referred to as reflection-on-action. In this study, I used reflection-on-action to form my identity. I started reflecting on events over the years that triggered negative feelings and thoughts in my mind. I started to recall moments when I was made to feel small and worthless. I remembered episodes where I was ridiculed about my size and complexion; when I was compared to others who were slimmer and fairer; when I was told to go on a diet and try whitening creams. I started reflecting on them and I started thinking about what could I have done differently

if I had empowered myself with self-confidence. Those reflections enabled me to become a stronger person today; I am able to identify myself as a beautiful, strong Malaysian Indian woman.

In the process of knowing myself, I started to compartmentalise my feelings, giving each role a different identity: a daughter, a professional, an aunt, a beautiful human being. This process of categorising or classifying is known as identification in the identity theory (McCall & Simmons, 1978) and each identity would be able to seamlessly function with the other roles. Moreover, the identity theory states that individuals do not view themselves as the same as everyone else, but they distinguish themselves from others, with their own individuality, interests, duties and responsibilities. The naming of the roles is important to the formation of one's identity. By categorising myself as beautiful, I am forming my identity, a role that I want to be recognised in a structured society. According to Stets and Burke (2000), this categorisation or role naming creates meanings in the form of expectations regarding others' and one's own behaviour. It invokes the belief in oneself to form a meaningful relationship with others. My journey of reassuring myself started with these three words "I am OK".

## My Journey

Park (2004) defined life satisfaction as an "overall judgment that one's life is a good one". Whenever I start doubting whatever I am doing, I ask myself this question "are you happy with life?" I may not know what the conventional marker for happiness is but I realised I have set my own definition for happiness: I am at peace with my life; I am able to count my blessings; I see beauty in everything; I love myself. Studies have shown that the relationship between overweight status and life satisfaction are mediated by perceptions of self and the influence of peers as well as family (Ball et al., 2004; Crosnoe & Muller, 2004; Forste & Moore, 2012). How others perceived me became a non-essential factor in my life. Instead, what became imperative to me was how I viewed myself; my self-appraisal was the only thing that mattered. I started to list what I like about myself, how I could be a better person for my own sake and my self-enhancement. Baumeister and Jones (1978) opined that self-enhancement is one of the key motives that drive a person's perceptions and behaviour by focusing on positive feedback about oneself and thus focusing on positive aspects of oneself (Banaji & Prentice, 1994). I started to focus on myself. I took steps to heal myself from the years of being told I am not attractive.

My first step was to accept myself as I am: my dark complexion and my weight, and most importantly, to love myself and not be ashamed of myself. I could look at the mirror and tell myself I am pretty. Initially, it was just telling the mirror that I have beautiful eyes and that was all I was capable of saying. I did not believe in myself but over time, when I catch myself looking in the mirror, I see a beautiful self and I truly know I am beautiful. The need for external confirmation did not arise. I was not seeking approval from anyone. I changed my mindset and my confidence grew.

Fittingly, Mu et al. (2019) mentioned that adaptiveness of self-enhancement depends on factors such as time frame, situational context, and what is being evaluated.

The second step I took was to reflect. I started a blog. I started writing about my past and about the events that had impacted me. I wrote each time I remembered something and as I was writing, I started reflecting. My questions were "why did the person say that?"; "why did that affect me?"; "how do I feel about it now?"; and most importantly I asked myself this question "how am I going to handle this now?". I was looking for a closure to my past. The things I could accept, I acknowledged and accepted. Whatever that was beyond my control, I let go. I conditioned myself to accept what is within my control; it is my reactions that I am in control of, not what others say or how they act.

Thirdly, I was less harsh in evaluating myself. Neff (2003) proposed that self-compassion is needed to thwart one's suffering and start treating oneself in a caring and empathetic way. I recognised I was my biggest critique and I set out to change that. I was less judgemental of myself. I reminded myself that everyone is born differently, i.e., bodies come in all shapes and sizes. Objectification and colourism have no place in my life, and I shall not conform to the narrow standards of ideal beauty as projected by the media and society. The bigger picture is about being healthy and living a fulfilling life. By reducing negative self-appraisal, one formulates a stance toward accepting one's body (Albertson et al., 2015) and I focused on adopting body positivity.

My next step was to surround myself with people who were supportive and accepted me as I am. Negative remarks were not doing anything good for my self-enhancement. I dismiss comments like "you should not wear bright colours with big prints, it makes you look big". I strongly believe I can carry myself well in whatever I like to wear, be it a bright coloured saree or a dress with big prints. When one is confident with oneself, it shows. Asserting oneself and having self-confidence stops others from giving their opinions.

The fifth step in my journey was to adopt a healthy lifestyle. I took this decision for health reasons. I developed healthy eating habits and started walking in my neighbourhood playground. I started reading about body positivity and began advocating it. I encouraged girls to be body positive. I was optimistic about making a change. I empathised with girls struggling with their weight. I focused on their strengths and encouraged them to be more aware of themselves. According to Grogan (2016), girls need to accept themselves as they are and discard the unrealistic expectations of society, i.e., expectations which only create hurdles for them. In the process of talking to others, I discovered that empowerment is a strong tool. Women want support from other women, not to be judged but to be treated equally.

My journey of body positivity also started my tattoo journey. At a time when I could not see anything beautiful about myself, I thought that at least I should have something beautiful on me like a tattoo of a beautiful red rose and a colourful butterfly. I did it and that made me happy. "I have something pretty on me" and it is part of me. Sanders (1988) explained that for most people, especially women, tattoos are a form of self-expression. Women mostly have a reason why they choose a particular design and the tattoo becomes part of the person or a life event they want to preserve (Jung

et al., 2012). Over the years, I went on to add more tattoos to my body. The reason changed, from adding something to make me beautiful to commemorating life events that changed me as a person. I have a phoenix tattoo on my calf that reminds me I am born again to live a life that I choose, a life to be happy.

## Conclusion

My experiences have made me cognizant that it is not easy to be a Malaysian Indian female, i.e., a member of a minority community in a multicultural Malaysia. The challenges begin at home and continue at the workplace. Discrimination encroaches on our personal space and while it can be subtle at times, on most occasions it is blatant. I was treated differently compared to my male siblings as I was growing up in my home; I was ridiculed for my dark skin complexion but my brothers did not face the same predicament. I was asked to use skin whitening products and home remedies to get a fairer skin tone. I was teased about my weight and body structure and was openly body shamed. Regrettably, as a young child, I was not aware that all these acts of discrimination and body shaming were morally wrong. I thought it was my fault and I blamed myself. No one communicated to me it is 'OK' to be myself; on the contrary, I was told over and over again that I did not fit into society's expectations about an ideal body structure. I went through a large part of my life thinking I was not worthy. I did not know how to identify what I was going through and I was losing my self-esteem, day by day. I believed what I was going through was the norm and a girl who is fat and dark-skinned is ugly.

The shame of being overweight and dark-skinned went on for years. It tremendously affected my confidence in meeting people; I feared what they thought about me, but I countered that by excelling in my studies and getting into a respectable profession. I worked hard and performed well at work, and that was my leverage to build my confidence. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to explain how discriminative perceptions from the majority condition the rest to think of subordination as a disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis. People generally focus on specific issues to target others who do not conform to the norm; for example, there is a tendency to perceive overweight individuals as lazy; to discriminate against individuals based on their skin colour as intelligence is associated with fair-skinned individuals; to judge individuals based on their race (for example, Malaysian Indians come from a poor background); or to view women as the weaker sex. Most individuals will face any one of these biases in their lifetime but some are subjected to all of these issues collectively, and their experience amounts to all these put together. I am one such individual who unfortunately had to face it all and it was overwhelming to be in my situation.

It dawned on me that whatever I was facing is not acceptable, and that triggered me to begin reflecting on the behaviour of others towards me and my response to their actions. I embarked on a journey to change my perceptions. Firstly, was to stop hating myself. I started by looking at myself, to identify something that I like about

my physical self, and then slowly learned to love that part of me. I was driven to self-enhancement because I knew I could not change the opinions and views of other people but I certainly could change my view of myself. Not everyone is content with their body image because society's and media's portrayal of the ideal female is next to impossible to achieve. Regrettably, the influence of media has had a long-lasting impact on most of us; we are fixated on society's benchmark of the ideal female; we need to be perfect, to be accepted, to fit in, but alas, it is at the expense of our comfort and life satisfaction. It is imperative for a woman to find in herself her inner strength and believe that she is attractive and she is good enough for the world and continuously build on her self-worth. Having self-compassion will help her to value herself and inspire her to achieve whatever she sets her mind on.

I am now at a stage in my life where I am happy with myself: my weight, my body structure and my dark complexion. I have accepted myself as I am. I am OK.

## References

Agerström, J., Carlsson, R., & Rooth, D-O. (2007). Ethnicity and obesity: Evidence of implicit work performance stereotypes in Sweden. Working paper, no. 2007:20, Institute for Labour Market Policy Evaluation (IFAU), Uppsala.

Albertson, E. R., Neff, K. D., & Dill-Shackleford, K. E. (2015). Self-compassion and body dissatisfaction in women: A randomized controlled trial of a brief meditation intervention. *Mindfulness, 6*(3), 444–454.

Alexandre, J. D., Monteiro, M. B., & Waldzus, S. (2007). More than comparing with majorities: The importance of alternative comparisons between children from different minority groups. *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy, 7*(2), 201–212.

Ball, K., Crawford, D., & Kenardy, J. (2004). Longitudinal relationships among overweight, life satisfaction, and aspirations in young women. *Obesity Research, 12*(6), 1019–1030.

Banaji, M. R., & Prentice, D. A. (1994). The self in social contexts. *Annual Review of Psychology, 45*, 297–332.

Baumeister, R. F., & Jones, E. E. (1978). When self-presentation is constrained by the target's knowledge: Consistency and compensation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 36*, 608–618.

Bedford, J. L., & Johnson, C. S. (2006). Societal influences on body image dissatisfaction in younger and older women. *Journal of Women & Aging, 18*(1), 41–55.

Berg, F. (2004). *Underage and overweight: America's childhood obesity crisis-what every family needs to know*. Hatherleigh Press.

Berg, F. (2000). *Women afraid to eat: Breaking free in today's weight-obsessed world*. Hettinger, ND: Healthy Weight Network.

Bessenoff, G. R., & Snow, D. (2006). Absorbing society's influence: Body image self-discrepancy and internalized shame. *Sex Roles, 54*, 727–731.

Bradshaw, J. (1988). *Healing the shame that binds you.* Health Communications Inc.

Carr, D., & Friedman, M. A. (2006). Body weight and the quality of interpersonal relationships. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 69*, 127–149.

Cash, T. F. & Henry, P. E. (1995). Women's body images: The result of a national survey in the U.S.A. *Sex Roles, 33*(1–2), 19–28.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, *Article 8.*

Crosnoe, R., & Muller, C. (2004). Body mass index, academic achievement, and school context: Examining the educational experiences of adolescents at risk of obesity. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 45*, 393–407.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (1996). *Composing ethnography*. Sage Publications.

Forste, R., & Moore, E. (2012). Adolescent obesity and life satisfaction: Perceptions of self, peers, family and school. *Economics and Human Biology, 10*, 385–394.

Grogan, S. (2016). *Body image: Understanding body dissatisfaction in men, women and children.* Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

Gudekli, I. A. (2014). Using woman in advertisement as a symbol of sex: Cosmopolitan magazine example. *Journal of Yasar University, 9*(35), 6099–6260.

Hebl, M. R., & Heatherton, T. F. (2008). The stigma of obesity in women: The difference is black and white. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 24*, 417–426.

Hjerm, M., Eger, M. A., & Danell, R. (2018). Peer attitudes and the development of prejudice in adolescence. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, *4*, 1–11.

Hogan, M. J., & Strasburger, V. C. (2008). Body image, eating disorders, and the media. *Adolescent Medicine: State of the Art Reviews, 19*(3), 521–546.

Hogg, M. A., & Vaughn, G. M. (2008). *Social Psychology* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.

Jung, M. M., Janigo, K. A., & Johnson, K. K. P. (2012). Tattoo and the self. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal, 30*(2), 134–148.

Katz, J. (1997). The elements of shame. In M. Lansky & A. Morrison (Eds.), *The widening scope of shame* (pp. 231–260). The Analytic Press.

Klaczynski, P. A., Goold, K. W., & Mudry, J. J. (2004). Culture, obesity stereotypes, self-esteem, and the thin ideal: A social identity perspective. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 33*, 307–317.

McCall, G. J., & Simmons, J. L. (1978). *Identities and Interactions*. Free Press.

McKinley, N. M., & Hyde, J. S. (1996). The objectified body consciousness scale: Development and validation. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 20*, 181–215.

Mu, W., Schoenleber, M., Leon, A. C., & Berenbaum, H. (2019). Body image distortion following social rejection or acceptance cue. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 38*(5), 395–408.

Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity, 2*, 223–250.

Nesdale, D. (1999). Developmental changes in children's ethnic preferences and social cognitions. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 20*(4), 501–519.

Pagán, J. A., & Davila, A. (1997). Obesity, occupational attainment and earnings. *Social Science Quarterly, 78*(3), 756–770.

Park, N. (2004). The role of subjective well-being in positive youth development. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591*(1), 25–39.

Pass, J. A., Lindenberg, S. M., & Park, J. H. (2010). All you need is love: Is the sociometer especially sensitive to one's mating capacity? *European Journal of Social Psychology, 40*, 221–234.

Puhl, R. (2002). Stigma, Discrimination, and Obesity. In C. G. Fairburn & K. D. Brownell (Eds.), *Eating disorders and Obesity: A comprehensive handbook*. New York: Guilford Press.

Sanders, C. (1988). Marks of mischief: Becoming and being tattooed. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 16*, 395–432.

Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* Basic Books Inc. London: Routledge.

Silverman, D. K. (2017). Psychosexual Stages of Development (Freud). In V. Zeigler-Hill & T. Shackelford (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Personality and Individual Differences* (pp. 1–5). Springer.

Stankovic, J., Zivkovic, R., Maric, T., & Gajic, J. (2018). Effects of women representation in advertising on customers' attitudes. *Marketing, 49*(3), 192–205.

Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 63*(3), 224–237.

Tajfel, H. (1982). *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge University Press.

Tangney, J. P., & Dearing, R. L. (2002). Gender differences in morality. The psychodynamics of gender and gender roleIn R. F. Bornstein & J. M. Masling (Eds.), *Empirical studies in psychoanalytic theories* (Vol. 10, pp. 251–269). American Psychological Association.

Thompson, J. K., & Stice, E. (2001). Thin-ideal internalization: Mounting evidence for a new risk factor for body-image disturbance and eating pathology. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 10*, 181–183.

Trombini, E., Baldaro, B., Bertaccini, R., Mattei, C., Montebarocci, O., & Rossi, N. (2003). Maternal attitudes and attachment styles in mothers of obese children. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 97*(2), 613–620.

Umberson, D., & Thomeer, M. B. (2020). Family matters: Research on family ties and health, 2010 to 2020. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 82*, 404–419.

Umberson, D., Williams, K., Thomas, P. A., Liu, H., & Thomeer, M. B. (2014). Race, gender, and chains of disadvantage: Childhood adversity, social relationships, and health. *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour, 55*(1), 20–38.

Zametkin, A., Zoon, C., Klein, W., & Munson, S. (2004). Psychiatric aspects of child and adolescent obesity: A review of the past 10 years. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 43*(2), 134–150.

**Jayaeswari Sangaralingam** is a senior lecturer and corporate training manager at Sentral College, Penang. She received her Doctorate in Business Administration from University Utara Malaysia in 2015. She has been an academician for over 20 years, mainly focusing on Information Systems and Business. Her research interest is mainly in the area of body shaming, green consumerism and marketing strategies. Jayaeswari is also a corporate trainer specialising in professional development.

# Happiness and Meaning in Life Among Indian Female University Students


**Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim and Premalatha Karupiah**

**Abstract** Happiness and meaning in life are arguably socially constructed and highly likely to be shaped by specific cultural values and practices. This study investigates the role of culture in determining sources of happiness and meaning in life by focusing on Malaysian Indian female university students as a specific cultural group. Employing semi-structured interviews, the study examines the meaning and sources of happiness and meaning in life among thirty Malaysian Indian female university students. Happiness is associated with relationships, having personal time, personal peace and freedom, personal achievement and taking part in everyday things as opposed to being in a state of sadness and stress. The majority reported being happy. Relationships, leisure activities, achievements, material advancement, spiritual well-being, and health were reported as domains of happiness. Sources of happiness are relationships and events or situations related to them. Most participants described their life as meaningful. Meaning in life is defined in terms of life goals and direction. Many respondents reported a continuous search for meaning in life. Findings highlight the role of socialisation and intersectionality in shaping these women's life experiences. It also implies a complex role of culture in shaping life experiences and outcomes. Findings are discussed within the socio-cultural perspective of meaning in life and happiness.

**Keywords** Happiness · Meaning in life · Intersectionality · Well-being · Women

## Introduction

Happiness and meaning in life are two positive constructs from the tradition of eudaimonic well-being often used to represent life's positive experiences (Delle Fave et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Waterman et al., 2008). The main aims of positive psychology are to study these experiences and to understand the factors/variables that shape them. One key factor is culture and its role in the socialisation process.

I. H. M. Hashim (✉) · P. Karupiah
School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia
e-mail: hashimah@usm.my



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_10

Happiness and meaning in life are arguably socially constructed variables and are highly likely to be shaped by specific cultural values and practices.

This study explores the role of culture in determining sources of happiness and meaning in life by focusing on Malaysian Indian female university students as a specific cultural group. This group represents not only a specific cultural group but also a minority group from more than one angle. Connecting to the concept of intersectionality where different social categorisations can create overlapping or multiple disadvantages for certain groups, we are looking at how ethnic Indian women in Malaysia may experience double discrimination because of their ethnicity and gender. In this context, this study is an attempt to understand how socialisation in general and intersectionality in particular, play a role in Malaysian Indian female university students' experience of happiness and meaning in life.

The approach to studying intersectionality originated from black feminist theory looking at oppression and discrimination as the outcome of social categorization (Cooper, 2016). For example, Canales and Lopez (2013) reviewed studies focussing on stress and challenges associated with stigmatised identities where gender roles interacted with other social identities. This study is taking a different approach by looking at how happiness and meaning in life can be experienced within the context of intersectionality. There are two reasons for this. One is to look at the issue from a different perspective and offer a wider understanding of how intersectionality can shape not only people's negative experiences but also positive ones. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, we would like to see not only how intersectionality can shape outcomes and life experiences for this particular social group, but also if there are other contributing factors like personal characteristics (in the form of character strengths) or social variables (like supportive relationships) that can contribute to the complexity of the experience. All of these are explored in this study.

## Happiness

The current approach to studying happiness can be separated into two major paradigms: hedonic and eudaimonic (Delle Fave et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Waterman et al., 2008). The primary concern in the hedonic approach is the experience of positive emotions and life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1991; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). The eudaimonic approach looks at happiness and well-being in a broader sense by including other aspects beyond personal evaluation and experience. Other constructs highly related to happiness include meaning in life, personal growth, and socially shared goals and values (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Delle Fave et al., 2013; Ryff & Singer, 1989). More specifically, eudaimonic well-being is not present only when positive emotions and life satisfaction are high but also it requires the existence of meaning in life as part of the experience.

Recently, there has been a movement to integrate the two approaches. For example, Seligman (2002) proposes three different elements of happiness which include positive emotions, engagement, and meaning in life. In a more recent development,

Seligman (2011) discusses a well-being theory suggesting that a measurement of well-being must include an assessment of positive emotions, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment. The presence of these five aspects indicates a flourishing life. Both Seligman's earlier and more recent theories represent the hedonic aspects of happiness i.e., positive emotions and life satisfaction, and the eudaimonic aspects of happiness i.e., engagement, meaning and accomplishment. This study is looking at both happiness and meaning in life as two separate but highly connected constructs. It belongs to the integrated tradition of looking at happiness beyond just positive emotions and life satisfaction.

## Meaning in Life

Meaning in life refers to efforts to search for meaning and purpose in life and has been associated with better health and psychological well-being (Lyke, 2013; King & Hicks, 2009; Steger et al., 2006). It is conceptualised as partially and/or highly related to happiness. Meaning in life and subjective well-being can interact in two pathways. Subjective well-being facilitates cognitive functions that allow individuals to further explore their environment, including meaning-making (Fredrickson, 2001; Shrira et al., 2011). On the other hand, purpose in life contributes to happiness and satisfaction (Steger et al., 2009). Individuals who make meaning from stress, trauma, or life-threatening illness have healthier diagnoses and improved psychological well-being (Taylor et al., 2000). This study is looking at meaning in life as a separate but related construct to well-being. More importantly, it tries to capture the two variables as part of the "positive" life experience in the context of Malaysian Indian women.

Steger et al. (2006) suggested meaning in life can be divided into two major dimensions: the presence and the search for meaning. The presence of meaning is characterised by the perceptions of one's life as meaningful and searching for meaning is associated with an active process of seeking a sense of meaning in one's life. A person with a high level of meaning in life is highly motivated to find meaning in his or her life by continuously questioning and discovering the purpose in life. The answers to the question on the meaning in life relate to the understanding of one's goals and achieving directedness and intentionality (Ryff & Singer, 1989). With meaning in life, an individual is more likely to have clearer aims and directions in life. In this study, the focus is on both the presence and search for meaning in life.

## Cultural Aspect of Happiness and Meaning in Life

Several studies have examined sources of happiness within specific cultural contexts and have identified relationships, achievements, satisfaction with material possessions, and health as some of the factors contributing to happiness (Chaplin, 2009; Ismail et al., 2014; Jaafar et al., 2012; Lu & Shih, 1997; Uchida et al., 2004). Lu

and Shih (1997) argue that while the nature and state of experience can be universal, people's sources of happiness can be different depending on their culture.

Uchida et al. (2004) observed substantial differences in the meaning of happiness among East Asian and North American cultures. More specifically, happiness for people from East Asian cultures is associated more with interpersonal connectedness as opposed to personal achievement in the North American context.

Kiang and Fuligni (2010) found that Asian Americans have a higher search for meaning than Latin and European Americans. The finding shows how the unique and challenging experience of being a member of an ethnic minority group may lead Asian American youths to seek the meaning of their potentially more negative life experiences. The other explanation was related to the aspirations of Asian and Latin American families to be successful in a new country thus facilitating more meaning-searching and meaning-making efforts in their children.

Kok et al. (2015) examined the perceptions of a meaningful life among Malaysian youths. The respondents in the sample were between the ages of 15–24 years old from urban regions in Peninsular Malaysia. The findings of the study suggest that Malaysian youths have the tendency to associate a meaningful life with the ability to pursue a happy life, relationships with significant others and the ability to achieve personal goals. Kok et al. (2015) also found that meaningfulness in life is more of a relational concept for their sample in which it is associated with happiness shared with others. Female participants especially reported life as meaningful when people around them are happy.

Hashim and Mohd Zaharim (2020) conducted a study on the happiness of Malaysian adolescents and found that household income, income of the father, education of the father, education of the mother, and academic performance were significantly associated with adolescents' happiness. More relevant to this study is the analysis of the everyday events that were reported to induce happiness. For adolescents in this study, everyday events as part of the intentional activities related to family, friends, and school were reported as sources of happiness.

From the above discussion, we argue that sources of happiness for our sample are likely to be influenced by their cultural background. However, consistent with Uchida et al. (2004) observation, the sources are likely to be embedded in interpersonal connectedness. Similarly, life challenges and experiences are likely to shape one's meaning in life (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). It is likely to be consistent with findings by Kok et al. (2015) who found meaning as associated with shared happiness.

## Malaysian Indian Women as a Specific Cultural Group

This study is looking at the experience of a specific cultural group. Studies have reported that Indian women are subjected to prejudice and discrimination. In the context of rural communities in India, women are considered of having a lower position compared to men (D'Souza et al., 2013). Domestic violence, gender preferences, and alcohol consumption were some of the common experiences of women in rural

India. Son preference is one of the key issues that may contribute to the experience of women in India. In Malaysia, differential treatment of girls, emphasis on traditional feminine norms, and unequal distribution of resources contribute to the deprivation experienced by some Indian women when they were growing up (Guna Saigaran et al., 2018).

In addition, ethnic Indians are a minority group in Malaysia. Social inequality and discrimination are common problems faced by members of minority groups. Intersectionality refers to the connection between different social categorisations which can create overlapping or multiple disadvantages for certain groups. Indian women may experience double discrimination because of their ethnicity and their gender. On the other hand, socialisation is a key factor in determining major life experiences. Women growing up in an unequal environment and being deprived of resources because of their gender are likely to experience more negative situations, contributing to a lower level of well-being. This study attempts to give voice to this group by understanding how they view and experience happiness. Studies on happiness tend to focus on the general population rather than specific cultural groups such as this. This study addresses this research gap and contributes to the understanding of the happiness among women from minority communities in a multicultural society.

## This Study

This study explores the role of culture in determining happiness and meaning in life by focusing on Malaysian Indian female university students as a specific cultural group. It addresses how the issue of socialisation and intersectionality can contribute to their life experiences, particularly in terms of happiness and meaning in life. The focus is on two main things, how they viewed and experienced happiness and meaning in life and how culture, particularly socialisation as being women and Indian, shaped their experience of happiness and meaning in life. Socialisation and intersectionality are investigated in their responses to questions on happiness and meaning in life.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

Thirty Malaysian Indian female university students were recruited from a public university (labelled as University A) in Northern Malaysia. Once they agreed to be interviewed, an appointment was set up. Interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience.

### *Procedure*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Eight questions listed below were asked. The first question was related to personal information, the second to fifth questions were on happiness and the last three questions were related to meaning in life. The interviews were conducted in Malay and English.

### *Interview Questions*

*Background Information*

1. Tell me about yourself

*Happiness*

2. What is happiness to you?
3. Are you happy? Why did you say that?
4. In what aspects are you happy?
5. What are the things that make you happy? (family, situations, events?)

*Meaning in Life*

6. Do you feel your life is meaningful?
7. What is the meaning of your life?
8. Are you still searching for meaning in life?

## Findings

This section is divided into three main parts. The first part discusses the profile of the participants. The second part focuses on findings related to happiness while the third centres on the meaning in life.

### *Profile of the Respondents*

Table 1 shows the profile of the participants in this study.

From Table 1, the age of participants ranges from nineteen to thirty-six. However, twenty-five out of thirty participants were between twenty to twenty-five years old. They were from all over Malaysia and enrolled in various degree programs at the university. Only one participant is pursuing her master's degree.

**Table 1** Profile of participants

| | Name (pseudonyms) | Age | Place of origin | Field of study | Year of study | Other information |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Sri Vani | 23 | Perak | Management | 1 | Second child in the family |
| 2 | Ramani | 23 | Perak | Management | 1 | Eldest in the family |
| 3 | Prashanti | 24 | Perak | Social Sciences | 4 | Youngest in the family |
| 4 | Nisha | 21 | Perak | Communication | 1 | Second child in the family. Parents are separated |
| 5 | Risna | 22 | Johor | Biology | 3 | First child in the family. Broken family |
| 6 | Priya Sri | 22 | Penang | Applied Biology | 3 | Twin |
| 7 | Pavithra | 24 | Negeri Sembilan | Social Sciences | 4 | Youngest in the family |
| 8 | Shamalah | 28 | Melaka | Art | 4 | Youngest in the family |
| 9 | Dhineswary | 22 | Kedah | Biology | Not provided | Third in the family. Her mother passed away when she was 12 |
| 10 | Sinthu | 23 | Penang | Art | 4 | Eldest in the family |
| 11 | Raaga Vilassinu | 20 | Penang | Computer Science | Not provided | Youngest in the family. Her parents passed away in an accident when she was 12 |
| 12 | Jagaanthiswary | 21 | Selangor | Biology | 2 | Third from 13 siblings |
| 13 | Sathana | 24 | Negeri Sembilan | Social Sciences | 4 | Youngest in the family. Elderly parents |
| 14 | Rathimalaa | 26 | Penang | Industrial Technology | 2 | Youngest in the family |
| 15 | Ponmalar | 19 | Penang | Computer Science | 1 | She has four siblings |
| 16 | Pavithra | 21 | Penang | Humanities | 1 | Mixed with Telegu |

(continued)

**Table 1** (continued)

| | Name (pseudonyms) | Age | Place of origin | Field of study | Year of study | Other information |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 17 | Sharona Diva | 22 | Selangor | Management | 1 | She has a twin brother |
| 18 | Rajes | 21 | Johor | Education | Not provided | Her father passed away |
| 19 | Nabisyah | 23 | Negeri Sembilan | Social Science | Not provided | She has three siblings |
| 20 | Sheela | 22 | Negeri Sembilan | Biology | 1 | Eldest in the family |
| 21 | Malini | 25 | Kedah | Art | 4 | Eldest in the family |
| 22 | Yuva | 21 | Johor | Management | | Eldest in the family |
| 23 | Ann Nathani | 27 | Perak | Art | 4 | Youngest in the family |
| 24 | Mathilda | 23 | Perak | English Literature | 3 | Eldest in the family |
| 25 | Thivya | 21 | Selangor | Chemistry | 1 | Eldest in the family |
| 26 | Darshini | 21 | Kuala Lumpur | Communication | 1 | She has three siblings |
| 27 | Kala | 36 | Kedah | Art | Not provided | Youngest in the family |
| 28 | Charrukai | 21 | Johor | Management | Not provided | Youngest in the family |
| 29 | Shantini | 24 | Johor | English and Linguistics | Master's | Eldest in the family |
| 30 | Poorani | 21 | Penang | Environment Science | Not provided | She has two younger sisters |

## Happiness

### *Meaning of Happiness*

When discussing the general meaning of happiness, several themes were identified. The key theme described by many participants is happiness is associated with relationships. Most participants described happiness as being with their family members. They also narrated that spending time with their family elicits happiness. Ann Nanthani described the unconditional nature of love in her family and how much it brings her happiness. Another participant, Darshini explained how she felt protected and loved by her family and associated this with her meaning of happiness. Risna

on the other hand said that the meaning of happiness is about making other people happy. She described how her happiness is associated with her mother's happiness showing that happiness is not necessarily defined in terms of bringing pleasure to oneself but also about bringing it to others.

> Happiness [for] me is [having a] a peaceful mind and [being] happy with my family members. Family love is something different [from] other [types of] love. It is the pure love in the family [that] creates happiness (Ann Nanthani, 27).
>
> [For] me, happiness is my family. Everyone [in] my family [protects] me and loves me; this is happiness to me (Darshini, 21).
>
> Happiness for me is making my mother happy; her happiness is my happiness (Risna, 22).

Still on the relationship theme, for some participants, happiness was associated with friends or their 'furry friends'. Nisha, for example, described how spending time with her friends and making memories with them was her source of happiness. Another participant, Prashanti described her pets as the source of her happiness. She described her love for animals as sacred because it was unconditional and shared without any expectations.

> [Doing] small thing[s] with my friends can make me happy; going out with friend[s] and making memories with them is my happiness (Nisha, 21).
>
> I am a pet lover. I like animals and can't live without them; since young, I have lived with them and feel that the love for animals is sacred. Animals are my happiness (Prashanti, 24).

The second theme for the meaning of happiness is the availability of personal time, peace and the freedom of individuals to do what they want. The freedom to do what they want is an important part of the participants' meaning of happiness. Risna described the need to have a calm and peaceful mind to be happy other than having some level of financial freedom. Other participants such as Ramani and Charukkai emphasised that happiness is about having the freedom to do what they enjoyed or liked to do. Being in control and having the option to focus on themselves was the key to the meaning of happiness for these women.

> [Keeping] calm in my mind [and being] peaceful [is] happiness [for] me. Financial freedom [gives] some kind of happiness to me (Risna, 22).
>
> Happiness to me is doing whatever I like, no one controlling my life and I can express myself freely (Charukkai, 21).

The third theme in the meaning of happiness is personal achievements. Some participants described their personal achievements as their meaning of happiness, i.e., setting goals and being able to achieve these goals is their meaning of happiness. For some participants, personal achievements were rather specific such as doing well in their studies and achieving their career aspirations.

> As I am studying now, [it is the] achievement in academics [and having a good] career (Sri Vani, 23).
>
> My happiness is my dream, achieving my dream, going out with friends. I want to be a director; watching [a] movie [in the] theatre makes me feel happy (Nisha, 21).

Some participants described happiness in everyday, mundane activities. This shows that the meaning of happiness is not necessarily associated with the activities that are performed but more the meaning the person attaches to an activity. Therefore, one did not need exciting or thrilling activities to be happy; instead, activities in everyday life were identified as their meaning of happiness. One example given by the participants was food. Santhana associated happiness with food particularly her mother's cooking. Here again, happiness was not about consuming food but food that was associated with her relationship with her mother, re-emphasising the importance of relationships in defining one's happiness. It is interesting that enjoying food was frequently described as one of the key everyday activities that were associated with happiness.

> Happiness is very subjective to me. Lots of things can make me happy. Food is happiness to me, whatever my mother cook makes me feel happy. Going out with friends [is] also happiness [for] me (Santhana, 24).
>
> I love food and being able to enjoy nice food is [a] kind of happiness (Priya Sri, 22).
>
> … as long as anything you do makes you happy. It can be very small thing[s], even eating [my] favourite food [can] make me happy (Dhineswary, 22).

The final theme for the meaning of happiness is the absence of sadness and stress. Some participants described that the absence of stress or sadness made them happy. This is a very important theme that indicates that being happy is seen as the opposite of being sad. In order for someone to be truly happy, the sadness and stress had to be addressed and removed. Happiness helped in removing the stress as mentioned by Raaga while being stress-free was happiness according to Nabisyah and Shantini. While both responses associated happiness with the absence of sadness or stress, they seemed to represent two different pathways. The first pathway starts with sadness in which happiness comes and takes away the sadness while in the second pathway, happiness takes a more passive role. Here, the lack of sadness is what leads to happiness.

> Happiness to me steers me away from sadness, and takes me out from [a] difficult part of life (Raaga Vilassinu, 20).
>
> Happiness to me is being stress-free, [being] able to do what I want without distraction (Nabisyah, 23).
>
> Happiness to me is not [to] have anything in my mind, not thinking about anything else, no stress, no problems, my mind is [at] peace and [I am living] in the moment, then I [am] happy (Shantini, 24).

## *Current State of Happiness*

In this study, nineteen (out of 30) participants reported that they were happy. Many participants reported a high level of happiness and identified their current experience of being in the university to be an important aspect leading to this evaluation. The assessment of happiness here was highly subjective and relied heavily on the participants' personal interpretations as reported in the interviews. For many Malaysian

Indians, pursuing a degree in a public university is seen as a great achievement. This is seen as achieving a big dream, particularly for students who are from low-income families because entry to a public university might be the only affordable pathway to a tertiary education available to them. Even for those who are not from low-income families, admission to a public university is highly regarded because of the small number of Indian students in public universities.

For the participants, being in the university also meant making their families happy. Pavithra and Shamalah explained how being in the university meant that they were fulfilling the expectations and dreams of their families. While being in the university can be part of one's personal achievement, it can also be part of the family's achievement. This is consistent with Uchida et al.'s (2004) observation of how happiness for people from East Asian cultures is associated more with interpersonal connectedness. However, in this case, personal achievements are entwined with interpersonal connectedness.

> Yes, I am happy. Because now I [have] achieve[d] what my parents expect[ed] me to do, [i.e.] to get into University A. For me, getting into [a public] university, especially [University A] is unbelievable (Pavithra, 21).
>
> Yes, I am happy in my life, able to get into University A and finish my studies because I was lazy previously. Get[ting] closer to [my] dream job and dream life. (Sri Vani, 23).
>
> Yes, I am very happy. I put ten years [of] effort in [my] studies and now I am able to graduate [from a public university], this achievement [is] not only for me but also [to] fulfil my mother's dreams (Shamalah, 28).

Some participants reported they were somewhere in between feeling happy and unhappy. Raaga and Priya Sri described a more middle ground assessment where they experienced ups and downs in terms of their happiness. While relationships with friends and family, and personal time contributed to them feeling happy, stress was the main contributor to the mixed assessment. Stress can be related to the inability to cope with studies, poor time management, and pressure to achieve and perform. Four people reported being somewhere in between feeling happy and unhappy.

> Sometimes I feel happy and sometimes not, life [has its] ups and downs. Now, sadness is more than happiness. I am [a] person [who] easily gets stressed. I [am] always happy with my friends, but if [someone] asked me [whether I am] really happy or not…[I am] not really [happy]. Stress from my studies, I cannot cope with my lecturers and the subjects, I [am] involve[d] in [a] lot of activities, time management is bad and [this] makes me feel really stressed (Raaga Vilassinu, 20).
>
> Yes, I am happy when I think about all the things I have in my life. Only when I am not able to achieve what I want, [it] makes me unhappy. Currently, I am very emotional because [I experience] a lot of pressure now, due to [being in the] final year, as this is [the] final semester with [the] final year project. Before this, last semester, I had a lot of time for my friends, my family and myself. I had leisure time for myself, taking care of myself, and had alone time for myself (Priya Sri, 22).

In comparison to the incidence of happiness, there was a lower number of respondents who reported the reverse i.e., seven participants who saw themselves as unhappy. Stress related to academic work was the main source of unhappiness. Financial issues were another form of stress they experienced. In addition, the environment they were

currently living in and their daily encounters with other people also contributed to reports of unhappiness. For Nisha, living in a city like Penang was adding to her unhappiness because she preferred to live in a place with a slower pace of life. Rathimala, on the other hand, experienced negative emotions due to the conflicts between people around her. To add to this, they also identified a lack of emotional support as an additional form of stress. Support from family members is vital for those facing stress and the lack of it resulted in people experiencing the full impact of stress without any buffers.

> Not really, because I don't like Penang at all. I like [a] natural city, I don't like [a] busy city with all the buildings, I don't like [it] at all. I like [a] natural, relaxing kind of environment. So [after] I came here, I can't eat and sleep well. I thought university life will be better, but now I think [my] secondary school life was better. I experience a lot of tiredness here, because of [my] studies. The projects and academic life here keep me busy (Nisha, 21).

> So far no, because I can't see my mother for one year and my course is [putting a lot of] pressure on me. I lack support and do not have close friends here. I am usually [on] my own; I am facing financial issues. I will be happy if I am able [to be] with my mother. I am married but my husband is outstation, he is working in the Air Force and in Kelantan now, [he comes] back once a month, I [do not see] him often. Support from family and [loved ones] is important (Risna, 22).

> I am doing fine, not fully happy. I am depressed now, visiting [going for] counselling once a week, that's why I said happiness to me is peace of mind. I always end up doing things I don't want to do, doing things I [don't] like, and that gives me a lot of stress. [I am] stressed up with people around me, people fighting around me and fighting with me. I feel it is difficult as people around me are negative. I am doing a course I did not apply for and now I try to survive and try not [to] fail this course (Rathimala, 26).

## *Domains of Happiness*

The third question focuses on identifying the aspects of one's life that contribute to happiness. Based on the responses given, it is possible to identify several domains including relationships, achievements, personal freedom, leisure activities, health, material possessions, and spiritual well-being. Consistent with the meaning of happiness, the first domain is relationships. Family and friends are domains that are relevant to happiness in the way they provide emotional support in the form of love and care. All participants reported more than one domain which meant that people were not happy with just one aspect of their life, but they were happy across a few different domains.

> Family is the aspect [of my life that] makes me feel happy. My parents provide me [with] everything especially love, and I appreciate everything they gave me. Friendship [is] also one of the aspects [that] makes me feel happy. I spend fun time with my friends and [I] don't feel homesick, [they] make me feel happy (Charrukai, 21).

> [My] family, my siblings and my friends are the aspects [of my life that] make me feel happy. The love and the loyalty of my friends bring me more happiness than material [things]. These are the aspects [that] make me feel happy (Shantini, 24).

Leisure or enjoyable activities also emerge as one of the main domains of happiness. Participants identified activities related to music, dancing, and the outdoors as important to them.

> Music is my main source of happiness, now I am involved in dancing and I join competitions in dancing (Raaga Vilassinu, 20).
>
> Also, going to the seaside, listen[ing] to the wave[s], enjoy[ing] the environment around there also make me feel so happy (Ann Nanthani, 20).

Another domain that is associated with happiness is achievements. Achievements such as doing well in examinations and getting accepted to a university represent previous achievements that help people to continue feeling hopeful for their future. At the same time, participants felt that daily achievements were also important to keep them going.

> Doing STPM [*Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia* or Malaysian Higher School Certificate] and success in STPM is real happiness and a great first achievement for me and an aspect of happiness for me. Besides [that] get[ting] into University A is [my] second achievement, my family [is] proud of me. [This] is the aspect [that] makes me happy (Pavithra, 24).
>
> Achievement is one of the aspects [of my life that] makes me happy. When I fail and put [in] more effort and [am] able to answer questions by the lecturer in class, this makes me feel so happy. Maybe this is nothing in other people's eyes but to me [it] is an achievement, as long I am improving (Dhineswary, 22).

Some reported material well-being as another domain of happiness. However, there were certain conditions in which material well-being is seen as a domain of happiness. When it comes to money, Mathilda recognised the importance of having money as it was not possible to be happy if one did not have money at all. For Sharon, it was important to have "enough money" but that did not mean she wanted "a lot of money". She also indicated the necessity for material belongings to be gained through one's own effort and not handed out freely by others. The two responses highlight the limitations in the role of material well-being as a domain of happiness.

> Money is the aspect [of my life that] makes me feel happy as well, although money can't buy happiness but if [we have] no money how are we going to happy? (Mathilda, 23).
>
> Material [things are] also the aspect [of my life that] makes me feel happy but [it] must correspond with [our] own abilities. I prefer material [things] that [I] get by my own, not given by others (Sharona Diva, 22)

Spirituality is another domain of happiness. Participants in this study reported religious rituals such as singing the praise of God and meditation as spiritual-related activities that represented aspects of happiness for them. This was shared by Mathilda and Rathimala who felt that singing and meditation were important aspects of their lives from which they derived happiness.

> Spirituality or some prayer activities make me feel happy. I am a Christian, we have many prayer activities, one of them is Charismatic [worship], they sing very energetic songs and are praising God, [this] makes me feel so happy (Mathilda, 23).
>
> Religion is the aspect [that] can make me happy, like meditation, I practised meditation six years ago for a month, and I feel that was the most peaceful time in my life. I experienced that and it really works for me (Rathimalaa, 26).

Lastly, health was identified as a domain of happiness. Being able to achieve ideal health was part of the domain of happiness. Ideal health was represented in the form of optimal body shape and function. For Ponmalar, maintaining the ideal body shape was important. For Ragaa, a healthy lifestyle was the key.

> I wish to have good health and walk better. [This] will make me feel happy, I had [a] knee injury previously. So, maintain [ing an] ideal body and shape [of] my body can make me feel happy as well (Ponmalar, 19).
>
> Good health is an aspect [of my life that] makes me happy, until now my health condition is good, and I am living a healthy lifestyle, that's making me happy (Raaga Vilassinu, 20).

## *Sources of Happiness*

In the last question on happiness, participants were asked to identify the different sources of their happiness. Responses to this question are categorised into either relationships or events/situations and activities associated with these relationships. Both Ramani and Sri Vani identified family and friends as their sources of happiness. For Ramani, it was the quality of the relationships (positive and helpful) whereas, for Sri Vani, it was the activities and time spent in meaningful relationships that were her sources of happiness.

> Positive and helpful [people] around me [always] make me happy. [They are] my family member [s] and my friends (Ramani, 23).
>
> I had [went on] a trip after I graduated with my Diploma. I enjoyed the planning process and travelling with people other than family members after [I] graduated. [I] enjoy[ed] the time spent with a group of friends (Sri Vani, 23).

From the above analysis, a few patterns are identified. For young women in this study, happiness was defined in terms of relationships, having personal time, peace, space and freedom. They also identified happiness with achievement, various everyday activities and being in a state that was the opposite of sadness and stress. Nineteen participants reported they were happy, four participants were in between the state of being happy and unhappy and seven participants reported feeling unhappy, mainly due to stress and lack of emotional support. Consistent with the first question, aspects of life associated with happiness are relationships, achievements and leisure activities. Three other domains of happiness also emerged as important from the data i.e., material belonging, spiritual activities and health. Lastly, the young women identified their sources of happiness as the people around them, including family members and friends, and situations or events associated with these people. The two themes, that is, relationships and personal freedom were very prominent and mentioned across different questions. Personal achievement entwined with relationships i.e., making people happy was also seen as being part of their achievement.

## Meaning in Life

### *Meaningfulness of Life*

The first question related to meaning in life is whether people thought their life is meaningful. A large proportion of the participants (24 out of 30) reported their life as meaningful. They felt that their life had meaning, or it was enjoyable when they could contribute or make a difference in the life of others, and when they had freedom. Rajes felt her life was meaningful when she could make others happy. Kala, on the other hand, thought her life was meaningful because she had her freedom. According to Pavithra, having a good family and good people around her and being able to explore and enjoy life, particularly through her music, made her life meaningful.

> Yes, my life is meaningful. God gives us this life to achieve something. I feel [life is] meaningful [by being] able to do [things] for others and myself. I once visit[ed] [an] old folks' home and the granny[1] [an older person] was smiling happily because of us. This means a lot to me, and I wish I can do it again in [the] future (Rajes, 21).

> Yes, now my life is meaningful. I do not care about my age now, I enjoy my freedom now at University A and no one can stop me from going out, and doing things I like and I am on my way to happiness now. My father and mother do not really stop me from studying but my brothers always try to control my life (Kala, 36).

> Yes, definitely. Having a good family, good people around me, good stuff to do and managing to explore more in life, make my life meaningful. Music also makes me feel [that] my life is meaningful. I am enjoying my life, [I] do not [have any] regrets and [fewer] regrets in my life make [it] more meaningful. I am creating happiness in my life, do [my best] every moment, [with] no regrets and able to live well, even [being] away from my home makes my life meaningful (Pavithra, 24).

Two respondents reported a mixed assessment i.e., their life was not yet meaningful but also not meaningless. They felt that they have yet to reach the meaningful stage of their life. Respondents attributed their mixed assessments to the fact that they have yet to achieve some of their aims in life, such as graduation or financial freedom. Other aims of life that they would like to achieve were showing kindness to the family and making them happy. The goal of giving back to others and making people happy was very important and associated with achieving a more complete meaning in life.

> My life is meaningful when I am able to give something back to my mother. I am halfway to graduation and my mom [is] waiting to see my graduation. I am on my way to financial freedom after I graduate and settle down. If I can do things for my loved ones or buy things for myself, [my life] will be more meaningful. If I can reward my family and myself, [this is] a meaningful life to me. [If I] can get food that I like, get what I want to eat [it will] also make my life meaningful as now I cannot do that (Risna, 22).

> My life is not meaningful now but [it is] still okay. My life should be more meaningful if I can do something for more people. If I see somebody is not happy, [I] make them happy. If I can have great achievements, my life will be meaningful. I wish to do social service if I can.

[1] Using kinship terms to refer to strangers is common in Malaysia.

> Now making my parents and my friends happy makes me feel [that] my life is meaningful. I feel if I can leave something good in this life after I die, then [it] is meaningful. I believe in my religion, which God says we need to do good instead of bad. That is why I have this belief which [is to do things] for others (Priya Sri, 22).

Five participants viewed their life as not meaningful. Feeling at a loss about their future and trying to figure out the right path or steps towards a better future were associated with a meaningless life. Direction and purpose played a critical role in the assessment of meaning in life and a lack of these contributed to people feeling lost and seeing life as less meaningful.

> Currently, my life is not so meaningful. As I question a lot, why I am here, [I am] not sure about what I am doing now. I feel lost about my future and [I am] feeling lost now. I am trying hard to fix things and hope to get back to [the] right path so that I can have a meaningful life (Rathimalaa, 26)
>
> Not really feeling [that] my life is meaningful. I think I haven't started that phase in my life [yet]. I think I need to follow the steps and explore more about life (Darshini, 21).

## *The Meaning in Life*

When asked what is the meaning in life to them, participants shared different views about the meaning in life, which included goals and directions, achievement, contribution to others, and spirituality. Some defined meaning in life in terms of life goals and direction in life. They tended to find meaning by setting targets and achieving goals. While Nisha talked about living for her family and helping others, she also mentioned achieving her dreams. Nisha defined meaning in life in terms of setting her dreams and goals, and her goals were about creating good memories and helping people. The setting of goals and directions is part of the meaning in life.

> Working on my dreams. Not [being] selfish and [to] live for my family, people I love in my life. I want to achieve something. Friends and family are my sources of happiness. I wish to create more good memories [which are] also meaning of my life. Helping orphans, [bringing] hope [to] them makes me happy and [is] meaningful (Nisha, 21).

Others directly associated meaning in life to be able to contribute to others. For Poorani, she wanted to contribute to others by improving the environment people lived in and the way people viewed the world.

> The meaning of my life is to make the world [a] better place, to make the environment better for people to live in. I wish to contribute to the environment. I also wish to make people think in [a] more positive way in their life, try to see problems in another way, and try to see life in [a] different way, in [a] more beautiful way (Poorani, 21).

Meaning in life is also related to achievements. Here again, achievements are entwined with relationships because individual achievements are also seen as part of the family's achievement. For Rajes, her achievements made her family and her mother happy, and this defines her meaning in life.

> The meaning of my life is [related to] my achievement which has made my family feel proud of me and made my mom feel so happy with me (Rajes, 21).

Meaning in life was also attributed to spirituality. For Sharona, the meaning of her life was to clean up karma by doing good things to help people.

> I am a spiritual person. I think the meaning of my life is to clean up karma. I do good things to clean up bad karma, such as helping people (Shahrona Diva, 22).

## *Searching for Meaning in Life*

Related to the search for meaning in life, a large proportion (21 out of 30 participants) reported that they were still searching for meaning in life. While they saw their life as somewhat meaningful, they were still searching for the true meaning in life. Nisha mentioned that although she was clear about her goal in life, she continued to search for meaning in her life. This is consistent with the dual-dimension conceptualisation of meaning in life that differentiates between the presence and the search for meaning.

> Yes, I am still searching [for] the meaning in life. I am still looking for what really [is] the meaning in life, as I see nowadays people [just follow a] routine in their life…to work, earn, spend and save [money], get a house, get married…what is beyond that, what [more] can I do with my life (Shantini, 24).
>
> Yes, I am still searching [for the] meaning in life. But I know my dream is one of the meanings in my life, creating good memories, getting [together] with friends and having a balanced life (Nisha, 21).

However, nine participants reported that they were not searching for meaning in life but instead chose to focus on the current or present situation. Poorani and Sathana emphasised more on the present life and situation instead of searching for the meaning in life.

> I am not searching [for] the meaning in life; instead, I am trying to stabilise my life (Poorani, 21).
>
> I am not purposely [intentionally] searching for meaning in life but think[ing] about [the] present situation and follow[ing] the flow in life (Sathana, 24).

From the above findings, a large proportion of the participants (24 out of 30) reported their life as meaningful. They felt that their life has meaning when they contribute to the life of others, have the freedom to choose, and find their life enjoyable. For those who reported their life as not meaningful, they attributed this assessment to feeling lost and lacking a sense of direction. Meaning in life is associated with directions and goals, contribution to others, achievements, and spirituality. While many reported their life as meaningful, a large proportion (21 out of 30 participants) reported they were still searching for meaning in life. These women tended to focus on their current life and situation. While meaning in life is more about sense of purpose, relationships and people are still prominent features in people's life and meaning in life is more about contributing to these relationships.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Analysis of the data revealed complex findings. From the analysis, happiness for our sample is associated with relationships, personal time, personal peace and freedom, part of doing everyday things, being the opposite of sadness and stress, and personal achievement. This is consistent with previous findings where happiness is associated with relationships and personal achievement (Uchida et al., 2004). Achievement may be particularly important to our sample of female, ethnic Indian university students in that they are members of a minority group.

Uchida et al. (2004) also observed that happiness for people from East Asian cultures is associated more with interpersonal connectedness compared to personal achievement in the North American context. Indeed, from the analysis, the theme relationship occurs repeatedly and is much more prominent than achievement. Even when they were defining happiness as related to achievement, they still associated it with their family. This again emphasises the importance of family and relationships in defining their happiness. Also, both achievement and happiness are seen from the family's perspective rather than just the individual's perspective. This is also consistent with the study on Malaysian adolescents where everyday events related to family, friends, and school were reported as sources of happiness (Hashim & Mohd Zaharim, 2020). Family and friends represent important sources of happiness in both studies.

Freedom is identified as an important aspect of happiness. Indian families in Malaysia are very much influenced by patriarchal values where women are expected or seen as dependents on the male family members. Furthermore, they are also expected to follow traditional gender values and roles (Karupiah, 2019). Given this context, it is not surprising that women identify freedom as a source of happiness. Being in a university and away from their home allowed the participants in this study to exercise their freedom. For some, this was their first experience of being fully responsible for their day-to-day activities hence these participants cherished freedom as one of their sources of happiness.

What is interesting is the theme of defining happiness as the opposite of sadness. This may reflect cultural-specific experiences in that these women might have faced some life challenges in the past, related to being female and members of a minority group, thus leading them to see happiness as the opposite of these negative experiences. A previous study by Guna Saigaran et al. (2018) explained how traditional feminine norms and unequal distribution of resources contribute to the deprivation experienced by some Indian women when they were growing up. Since the questions on life challenges related to being female and minority were not asked in this study, future studies should investigate if defining happiness as opposed to sadness is a direct outcome of these potential challenges.

Many participants (19) in this study reported being happy, four as being in between happy and unhappy but seven reported feeling unhappy, mainly due to stress and lack of emotional support. This finding can be attributed to both their current and past experiences. The university provides both a stimulating environment and a sense of

achievement and control but at the same time, it comes with demands to perform and improve oneself. Past experiences of possible intersectional challenges may still be contributing to some of the low well-being of the mixed and unhappy categories. This question was not addressed in the interviews, which is a limitation of the current findings. Future studies should address this further to understand more clearly the extent of the influence of intersectionality in the lives of young Indian women.

Consistent with the first question, aspects of life associated with happiness are relationships, leisure activities, and achievements. Three other domains also emerged, and they are material possessions, spirituality, and health. Lastly, sources of happiness are the people around them. Here again, we see the importance of relationships as they highlighted the importance of family members and friends and situations or events associated with these people (e.g., travelling with them, spending time with them) to be their source of happiness. This is consistent with past studies that examined sources of happiness within specific cultural contexts and have identified relationships, achievement, satisfaction with material possession, and health as some of the factors contributing to happiness (Chaplin, 2009; Ismail et al., 2014; Jaafar et al., 2012; Lu & Shih, 1997; Uchida et al., 2004).

From the above findings, a large proportion of the participants (24 out of 30) reported their life as meaningful. Purpose or meaning in life contributes to happiness and satisfaction in that individuals who learn and find meaning even in situations of stress, trauma or life's negative experiences can experience better well-being (Taylor et al., 2000; Steger et al., 2009). It is possible that the women in this study become stronger as the outcome of their intersectionality experiences, and they find meanings in their negative life experiences. Good relationships with family and the strengths of their individual personality may help them not only "survive" their experience but continue to thrive despite it. While this was not directly explored in this study, future studies should delve further into this.

Participants in this study felt that their life has meaning when they can contribute to the life of others, when they have the freedom to choose, and they find life enjoyable. Meaning in life is associated with directions and goals, achievement, contribution to others and spirituality. Kok et al. (2015) suggested that meaning in life is a relational concept that is associated with happiness shared with others. They found that women especially reported life as meaningful when people around them are happy. The same pattern can be observed in this study. In this study, relationships, devotions and service to others were reported as important by the participants. A previous study has shown that Malaysian Indian families still emphasise traditional gender roles and values, which in turn, have a strong influence on the way women perceive their roles and make decisions related to their family or life (Karupiah, 2019). Guided by previous studies, the researchers hypothesised that being raised to perform traditional gender roles of being nurturing and thus being able to fulfil these "expectations" can lead women to experience emotional satisfaction and meaning in their life. However, since this study has not addressed the question of traditional gender roles, future studies should be carried out to examine this issue more deeply and directly.

While many reported their life as meaningful, a large proportion (21 out of 30 participants) reported they were still searching for meaning in life. This is indeed

typical of young people's experience in which they will continue to search for meaning in life. This is consistent with Steger et al.'s (2011) conceptualisation of the dual-dimension of the construct of meaning in life which is divided into presence and search for meaning. A person with a high level of meaning in life may still be motivated to find meaning in his or her life by continuously questioning and discovering the purpose of life. This may explain the high level of both presence and search for meaning among the participants.

It is important to build a more comprehensive theoretical framework that can outline the mechanism of how culture via socialisation can influence how people view themselves and others and in turn shape their life experiences. It is also important to identify any aspects of socialisation that can hinder a particular group from being truly happy with their lives. It is also interesting to see how in this study, a group of young women adjust to their life circumstances and continue to cope and thrive despite their early socialisation.

In Malaysia, differential treatment of girls, emphasis on traditional feminine norms, and unequal distribution of resources contributed to the deprivation experienced by some Indian women when they were growing up (Guna Saigaran et al., 2018). Yet, the women interviewed in this study reported being able to set the direction in their lives and continue to thrive. Each participant in this study is a success story in that they find the strength in themselves to be their best possible selves. This may be attributed to their background as university students which gives them some privilege as they were among the small number of Indians 'chosen' to pursue their tertiary education in a public university. This particular group is likely to represent a more 'thriving' group in that they are equipped with more resources thus buffering them against the double discrimination they might have faced. However, to confirm this, future studies should address the issue of intersectionality more directly. Questions regarding how being a female and Indian in a multicultural Malaysia shape their happiness and meaning in life should be addressed more directly. Studies comparing different experiences are also necessary to understand the 'thriving' and 'less thriving' groups.

From a practical perspective, it is important to understand the kind of mechanism at work that helps them to thrive despite their circumstances. It is important to understand their character, strengths, and other resources available to them. However, from a methodological perspective, future studies that try to understand the experience of intersectionality should select samples from more diverse groups to fully capture the issue. Future research participants should include Indian women from different educational backgrounds, social classes, and age groups.

This study highlights the experience of Indian female students as a specific cultural group. It sets out to give voices to these women and bring forward their experiences. There have been very few studies in Malaysia that specifically focus on women from minority groups and this study has highlighted the experiences of young Indian women. It gives an optimistic picture of Indian women in Malaysia and allows researchers to understand not only the issues but also the strengths and resources available that can help them to flourish and thrive.

## References

Canales, G. & Lopez, S.A. (2013). Gender role conflict and intersecting identities in the assessment and treatment of culturally diverse populations. In F. A. Paniagua & A. Yamada (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural mental health* (2nd ed.) (pp. 127–146) Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-394420-7.00007-2.

Chaplin, L. N. (2009). Please may I have a bike? Better yet, may I have a hug? An examination of children's and adolescents' happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 10*, 541–562. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-008-9108-3.

Cooper, B. (2016). Intersectionality. In L. Disch & M. Hawkesworth (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.20.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "'what"' and "'why"' of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(4), 227–268.

Delle Fave, A., Brdar, I., Wissing, M. P., & Vella-Brodrick, D. A. (2013). Sources and motives for personal meaning in adulthood. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *8*(6), 517–529. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2013.830761.

Diener, E., Sandvik, E., & Pavot, W. (1991). Happiness is the frequency, not the intensity, of positive versus negative affect. Subjective well-being: An interdisciplinary perspectiveIn F. Strack, M. Argyle, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *International series in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 21, pp. 119–139). Elmsford, NY, USA: Pergamon Press.

D'Souza, M. S., Karkada, S. N., Somayaji, G., & Venkatesaperumal, R. (2013). Women's well-being and reproductive health in Indian mining community: Need for empowerment. *Reproductive Health, 10*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1186/1742-4755-10-24.

Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist, 56*, 218–226.

Guna Saigaran, N., Karupiah, P., & Gopal, P. (2018). Gender socialization and capability deprivation on child urban poverty: Experiences of Malaysian Indian Women. *Geografia: Malaysian Journal of Society and Space, 14*(4), 346–356. https://doi.org/10.17576/geo-2018-1404-28.

Hashim, I. H. M., & Mohd Zaharim, N. (2020). Happiness among Malaysian adolescents: The role of socio-demographic factors and everyday events. *Sage Open*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020940695.

Ismail, R., Hafezi, M. H., Mohd Nor, R., & Baghini, M. S. (2014). Study of happiness rate and life satisfaction in Malaysia. *Research Journal of Applied Sciences, Engineering and Technology, 7*(7), 1240–1245.

Jaafar, J. L., Idris, M. A., Ismuni, J., Fei, Y., Jaafar, S., Ahmad, Z., Mohd Ariff, M. R., Takwin, B., & Sugandi, Y. S. (2012). The sources of happiness to the Malaysians and Indonesians: Data from a smaller Nation. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, 65*, 549–556. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.11.164.

Karupiah, P. (2019). Femininity in everyday life: Experiences of Malay and Indian women in Malaysia. In H. Cuervo & A. Miranda (Eds.), *Youth, inequality and social change in the Global South. Perspectives on children and young people* (Vol. 6, pp. 113–128). Singapore: Springer.

Kiang, L., & Fuligni, J. (2010). Meaning in life as a mediator of ethnic identity and adjustment among adolescents from Latin, Asian and European American backgrounds. *Journal Youth Adolescence, 39*, 1253–1264.

King, L. A., & Hicks, J. A. (2009). Detecting and constructing meaning in life events. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(5), 317–330. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760902992316.

Kok, J. K., Goh, L. Y., & Gan, C. C. (2015). Meaningful life and happiness: Perspective from Malaysian Youth. *The Social Science Journal, 52*, 69–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2014.10.002.

Lu, L., & Shih, J. B. (1997). Sources of happiness: A qualitative approach. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 137*(2), 181–188.

Lyke, J. (2013). Associations among aspects of meaning in life and death anxiety in young adults. *Death Studies, 37*(5), 471–482. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2011.649939.
Lyubomirsky, S., Sheldon, K. M., & Schkade, D. (2005). Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change. *Review of General Psychology, 9*(2), 111–131. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.9.2.111.
Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 68–78.
Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. (1989). The contours of positive human health. *Psychological Inquiry, 9*, 1–28.
Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Free Press.
Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A Visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Shrira, A., Palgi, Y., Ben-Ezra, M., & Shmotkin, D. (2011). How subjective well-being and meaning in life interact in the hostile world? *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 6*(4), 273–285. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2011.577090.
Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 53*(1), 80–93.
Steger, M. F., Oishi, S., & Kashdan, T. B. (2009). Meaning in life across the life span: Levels and correlates of meaning in life from emerging adulthood to older adulthood. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(1), 43–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760802303127.
Steger, M. F., Oishi, S., & Kesebir, S. (2011). Is a life without meaning satisfying? The moderating role of the search for meaning in satisfaction with life judgments. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 6*(3), 173–180. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2011.569171.
Taylor, S. E., Kemeny, M. E., Reed, G. M., Bower, J. E., & Gruenewald, T. L. (2000). Psychological resources, positive illusions, and health. *American Psychologist, 55*, 99–109.
Uchida, Y., Norasakkunkit, V., & Kitayama, S. (2004). Cultural constructions of happiness: Theory and empirical evidence. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 5*, 223–239. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-004-8785-9.
Waterman, A. S., Schwartz, S. J., & Conti, R. (2008). The implications of two conceptions of happiness (hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonia) for the understanding of intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 9*(1), 41–79.

**Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim** is a professor of psychology at the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her current research area combines interpersonal relationship research with positive psychology. She is particularly interested in how culture plays a role in these relationships. Her work has been published in leading journals in psychology.

**Premalatha Karupiah** is an associate professor of sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia. She teaches research methodology and statistics. Her research interests are in the areas of beauty culture, femininity, Tamil movies, educational and occupational choices, and issues related to the Indian diaspora. Her articles have been published in leading journals.

# Travel Tales of Malaysian Indian Women: Transcending the Invisible Boundaries with Technology


**Nor Hafizah Selamat and Senutha Poopale Ratthinan**

**Abstract** There is an unspoken rule in Indian society that women are the parents' responsibility until marriage and thereafter the husband's responsibility. Religious practices and cultural norms intertwine with gender in the Indian community to establish the prescribed formalities that uphold the social order. Travelling for leisure is regarded as a masculine activity and a stigma for Indian women. There is a lack of awareness among Indian women about their right to leisure. However, the increasing significance of technology in the twenty-first century and generational changes have triggered women to transcend the invisible boundaries. Malaysian Indian women have gradually gained access to a wide range of resources such as technology, knowledge, and skills. There has been a shift in traditional family ideologies as well as an increase in their level of education, employment and financial autonomy. In recent times, Malaysian Indian women have been actively exercising social autonomy by engaging in travel activities. Grounded by the Hierarchical Leisure Constraint framework, this study examines the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints of the three stages of travel. Malaysian Indian women are steadily negotiating the gendered travel constraints using technology, which offers them choices to break the barriers and initiate transformation by challenging the patriarchal-induced practices and premises of womanhood. This chapter adds to the discourses on travel as a central axis of empowerment for women and contributes to the literature on gender and leisure in the Asian context.

**Keywords** Malaysian Indian woman · Travel · Technology · Invisible boundaries

## Introduction

In his song "*Puthumai Penn*" or New Age Women, the renowned Tamil poet Mahakavi Chinnaswami Subramania Bharati, also fondly known as Bharatiyar, spoke of women being confined by the so-called "virtues" or "qualities" established by

N. H. Selamat (✉) · S. P. Ratthinan
School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia
e-mail: hafiz@usm.my



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_11

men in Indian society (Ramesh, 2016). Traditionally, there is an unspoken rule in Indian society that women are the parents' responsibility until they get married and thereafter the husband's responsibility. Religious practices and cultural norms in the Indian community intertwines with gender to establish the faithful performance of the prescribed formalities that uphold the social order. Women's decisions, choices, actions and roles are informed or shaped by this orthodox system. Travelling for leisure is deemed as an overtly masculine activity that is seen as a stigma for Indian women. Furthermore, the lack of awareness about their right to leisure has gradually become one of the invisible boundaries for Indian women in addition to other social conditions such as biased community norms, financial constraints, and fear of safety. To be in an Indian woman's shoes is a challenge, especially when it involves breaking down gender biases in travelling. This is however changing among Indian women in India or the diaspora. In the case of Malaysian Indian society, there have been some shifts from the traditional values related to men, women, and their roles. Malaysian Indian society is beginning to embody a modern outlook with shifting traditional family ideologies, higher female participation in education and employment, and women's achievement of financial autonomy. The increased significance of technology in the twenty-first century and generational changes have slowly triggered women to embrace travel and transcend the invisible boundaries of travelling. Technology provides an opportunity to enhance their travel experiences while becoming a negotiation medium for simultaneous adherence to family expectations, religious norms, and patriarchal constructions of femininity. Despite the economic and social liberation, most Malaysian Indian women (MIW) prefer to conceal their abilities and autonomy to negotiate; they rather conform to the traditional traits of an Indian woman instead of being deviant. They subscribe to various markers with respect to marital status, class, ethnicity, and educational background to comply, confront or contest expectations and identities prescribed for them by their religion, ethnic traditions, and familial obligations (Joseph, 2014). Karupiah (2019) describes masking empowerment as a strategy used by Malaysian Indian women to live the lives they want. So naturally, Indian women tend to be cautious about travelling because it may be understood as transgressing boundaries both literally and figuratively. Their transgression of physical borders may be perceived as a transgression from accepted norms in society. According to Pillai and Krish (2021), the digital domain has become a vital enabler of economic and socio-cultural empowerment for Indian women in Malaysia. This chapter explores the travel experiences of ten middle-class MIW while using technology as a platform to negotiate their travel constraints. The focus of this inquiry is middle-class women, who are the centre of Malaysia's socio-economic transformation agenda (Param, 2015). The use of an intersectional lens explores real instances of MIW challenging the religious norms and cultural traditions to expand the definitions of agency, empowerment, and social change (Avishai et al., 2015). Due to the lack of documented academic research on travel experiences of MIW and to step away from the common interpretations of Indian women, we lend our ears to their stories with the hope to contribute to the existing body of knowledge about Indian women in Malaysia.

## Malaysian Indian Women (MIW)

During the colonial period, Indian migrants came to Malaya as skilled and less-skilled workers, consistent with Malaya's development plans (Ministry of Women and Family Development 2003). Even though there were male and female migrants during this period, the number of male migrants was higher than female migrants (Kaur, 2008). Most were working in plantations, hospitals, offices, and schools (Stenson, 1980). As time went by, they developed the ability to face up to life's adversities and continued to pass on values to their children while emphasising the importance of education (Lee, 1989).

The second-generation MIW born in Malaysia gradually managed to cope with adversities and encouraged their children to get a good education so that they can move up to become professionals (Ramachandran, 2002; Wong & Lau, 2016). However, many Malaysian Indians struggle in the informal sector and with the problem of urban poverty (Gopal & Karupiah, 2013). Most of them have been stuck in the working-class status, contending with poverty, limited access to education, and other social problems, such as high school dropout rates, crime, domestic violence, single motherhood, and the dependency on welfare assistance (Jayasooria, 2016; Wong & Lau, 2016). However, migration from rural to urban areas as well as economic, political, and social development in the post-independence era gave rise to the presence of middle-class MIW in public spaces. The national development agenda calls for middle-class Malaysian women to enter the workforce. Working women have increasingly become a public image across all ethnic groups. The participation of MIW in education and the skilled labour force continued to rise gradually. Many middle-class MIW were interested in pursuing their studies in computer science and technology which was perceived as a "masculine" field of education (Lagesen, 2008).

The third generation of MIW born in the 1970s onwards has adapted to local Malaysian norms and culture compared to the first and second generations (Wong & Lau, 2016). Similar trends can be seen among the later generations. Malaysia anthropomorphises unity in diversity. In their study, Wong and Lau (2016) revealed that the third generation of middle-class MIW embraces the Malaysian multi-cultural and multilingual environment while retaining their unique ethnic identity and rich cultural traditions. Although the third generation is more flexible, the construction of an Indian identity among their children is maintained through cultural celebrations, performing or attending religious prayers besides learning and speaking their mother tongue while creating awareness of their identity as Indians. *Don't wear revealing clothes, don't leave the house without consent, grow your hair long, behave gracefully, learn to cook and manage the household, and listen to your father, uncle, brother, grandfather, and husband*—these are some aspects of traditional cultural demeanour befitting a proper Indian woman that is advocated in families. Deemed as *kalacharam* (culture), it demands women to behave in certain ways that differ from men. In the case of Indian women, the idea of self-expression, the need to find freedom, and a sense of entitlement are dismissed. This further accentuates male authority and women are positioned as symbolic bearers of racial, religious, and cultural honour.

In her book, Growing up Female in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia, Joseph (2014) describes how Hindu teachings and Indian culture impose the legitimate authority of patriarchal values over women that ultimately shapes their roles, behaviour, and social interactions. Middle-class MIW continue to be marginalised as gender becomes the site of power and sexual control exercised by men and society.

## Travelling and Middle-Class MIW

Travelling, in the lives of middle-class MIW, generally meant visiting family, relatives, and friends or pursuing education away from home. Financial considerations, time limitations, and family responsibilities constrained women from travelling. Moreover, women were not allowed to travel without the consent of their family, spouse, or guardians. Their participation in the public sphere was confined due to the gender roles in the traditional family system, where the man typically holds the decision-making position (Lau, 2010; Stivens, 1998; Tsuya & Bumpass, 2004). Marriage, motherhood, and managing the household were the culturally mandated statuses and roles for middle-class MIW (Karupiah, 2019; Param, 2015). The dual-income middle-class family adds pressure to women with a dual burden. Joint-parental agency in dual-income households increases the workload shouldered by women. Middle-class MIW continue to negotiate their identity in gendered spaces of education, work, and home (Devasahayam, 2005; Kailasam, 2015; Param, 2015).

Despite the developments in the Malaysian Indian community, middle-class women still find that travelling for leisure is somewhat daunting or unnecessary. Additionally, it is still taboo for women to travel alone or travel at all. On one end, women from privileged groups enjoy travelling, while on the other end, disadvantaged women struggle to cope with gender-based oppression. MIW with financial stability, scholarships, study loans, and skills are able to travel abroad for education and employment. Even so, MIW encounter several constraints, such as getting consent from their guardians, worrying about safety as well as time and financial constraints when travelling for leisure. Travel constraints are perceived differently for the two gender groups; while men cited the lack of time and busy work schedules as barriers, women indicated safety, family responsibilities, domestic and caregiving roles, religious requirements, and cultural values as limitations (Blazey, 1987). Middle-class MIW are trapped in a cycle of taking on multiple roles; they are sandwiched between being a dutiful daughter, wife, mother, and reliable employee. Married women are beset by guilt and fear of being bad mothers for choosing to work and bad employees when they put their children first. However, they disregard it as a form of suppression and instead find a way to consciously reproduce, modify, and adapt values in ways that befit their mandated attributes as an Indian woman (Devasahayam, 2005).

Beneath the surface, most middle-class MIW struggle with constraints before they develop a sense of entitlement to travel. Henderson and Bialeschki (1991) raised questions about women's constraints and issues that impinge on their sense of entitlement

after several researchers provided evidence that women are apathetic, ignorant, or lack awareness about their entitlement and right to leisure (Deem, 1986; Wearing & Wearing, 1988; Woodward & Green, 1988). The Indian community takes immense pride in their culture, which upholds Hindu teachings, religion, the institution of marriage, and the idea that women should be obedient. In doing so, women indulging in travel activities are often judged or taunted as deviant. At present, Asian women embrace travel as a medium to negotiate their many roles within the boundaries of socio-cultural norms, ethnicity, and religious parameters with the aid of technology (Khoo-Lattimore & Mura, 2016; Ratthinan & Selamat, 2018). In this vein, as technology becomes an integral part of daily lives, it slowly inspires the construction of the contemporary identity of middle-class MIW as they simultaneously push against social boundaries that dictate their place within. There is some room for negotiations using technology while adhering to the authority of the Indian familial structure, religious teachings and cultural obligations. The process of negotiation and gaining access to leisure initiates the deconstruction of the deep-rooted stereotypes through active online engagement with participatory websites. The technology provides a platform through which the middle-class MIW gain support and social power to indulge in leisure activities considered atypical among traditional Indian women (Weatherby & Vidon, 2018).

## Constraints Imposed by Culture: Hierarchical Leisure Constraints Model

Crawford and Godbey presented the Hierarchical Leisure Constraints Model (HLCM) in 1987, and Crawford et al. (1991) expanded it later. In 1993, Jackson, Crawford, and Godbey reported that leisure behaviour was reliant upon the successful negotiation of the constraint levels in a sequential manner. It starts with intrapersonal constraints related to psychological conditions and attributes that interact with leisure participation. This includes desire, stress, anxiety, piety, and beliefs (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Culture influences intrapersonal conditions by creating insecurity, low self-esteem and fear that hinder an individual from travelling while perceiving leisure as insignificant in their lives (Walker et al., 2007). It reinforces the conviction that travel is unsafe for women, resulting in non-participation (Rabin, 2014, Henderson et al., 1989). Following that, interpersonal constraints arise from interaction with others, such as family members, friends, colleagues, and society. For example, religion and cultural norms determine the participation of individuals in leisure. Finally, structural constraints refer to the lack of opportunities, information or time, and the cost of activities resulting from external conditions in the environment.

Chick and Dong (2003) highlighted that cross-cultural comparative research on leisure using the HLCM is extremely rare in anthropological literature. Culture is an important influence on the experience of travel constraints (Chick et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 1993). They demonstrated that culture can both prescribe and proscribe

intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviours in leisure while influencing structural constraints. Consequently, Godbey et al. (2010) acknowledged the contribution made by feminist research on leisure constraints for women which discusses certain restricting attitudes and beliefs (for instance, lack of sense of entitlement) that arise from inequalities imposed by culture and social reality. They agree that culture determines the operational definitions of each constraint, which comprises voluntarily internalised and imposed cultural norms. The norms are translated into individual values or beliefs that later become perceptions of constraints. While middle-class MIW negotiate travel constraints, the choices are strongly influenced and determined by culture (Ganesh, 2017). In Indian culture, women have been taught to be modest, obedient, and compliant to the idea that conforming to cultural norms is the most important thing in their lives. Middle-class MIW have found a way to negotiate these constraints using the digital platform that enables them able to participate in travel activities while maintaining their identiy (Paul & Thompson, 2018).

## Negotiating Travel Constraints via Technology

Technology has always gone hand in hand with tourism by transforming and enhancing the travel experiences while becoming an important channel in the various travelling stages (Poon, 1993; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Technology encompasses the various applications, devices, and platforms, such as mobile phones, computers, websites, blogs or social media that have rapid accessibility, real-time personalisation, and customised services for travellers (Buhalis, 2003). Given that technologies have become important drivers of change in travel behaviour (Buhalis et al., 2006), the motivation for using them may differ according to the characteristics of individuals such as women's identities, age, and cultural background. Van Zoonen (2002) opines that both the internet and gender are multidimensional concepts and discusses how the social, symbolic and individual dimensions of gender interact with the use of the internet in households. In their study of the Indian and Chinese women as information and communication technologies (ICT) intermediaries, Oreglia and Srinivasan (2016) revealed that women have constantly renegotiated their gendered roles in family and community. Kimmm (2012) suggested that the motivation aspects are also closely linked to constraints and negotiation in travelling activities. Women from developing countries like India and Uganda are no longer passively accepting socio-cultural norms and use technology to negotiate through processes of adaptive preferences and patriarchal bargaining within the context of concrete constraints (Masika & Bailur, 2015).

Statistics show that Malaysians are moving towards a digital lifestyle, with the broadband penetration rate in 2018 at 72.2% with 2.7 million fixed broadband subscriptions and 36.8 million mobile broadband subscriptions (Ministry of Communications and Multimedia, 2019). A study by Mothar et al. (2013) highlights the rise of smartphone usage among millennials in Malaysia and its importance to indicate their personal identity as it helped to represent or reflect their extended self to others.

Technology has allowed women to emerge as the Do-It-Yourself generation in the digital age (Gupta & Dogra, 2017). According to Pillai and Krish (2021), connectivity limits are related to access, social class, and privilege. MIW from the middle-class group, with income or financial access, are likely to get better digital appliances and bandwidth. This study traced the stories of MIW from the middle-class group, who used technology as a negotiation tool for travelling. In this capacity, technology functions as a potential catalyst for change (Neuhofer, 2014) that empowers women by granting autonomy to make choices and reduce their dependency on others.

The findings of this study emphasise the ways women negotiate particular technologies to produce different interpretations of the consumption of technology as a gendered practice. Engaging in travel activities by negotiating travel constraints can be understood as heterotopia, which offers an opportunity for MIW to transgress gender boundaries and resist gendered ideologies of what it means to be an Indian woman (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015; Harris & Wilson, 2007). The readiness of middle-class MIW to embark on the journey for pleasure allows them space to transcend the invisible traditional boundaries, as they make inroads into the traditionally male-dominated sphere based on their own choices and sets of rules (Myers & Hannam, 2008). Collins and Tisdell (2002) and Carvalho et al. (2014) in a study about gender and differences in travel life cycles, highlighted that gender has an important influence on travel demand. In this context, middle-class MIW have become empowered in a social construct through travel activities and the habit of using technology. While technology presents an opportunity for individual liberation, it also becomes a platform for adherence to familial expectations, religious norms, and patriarchal constructions of femininity dominant in the Indian community settings. It provides the opportunity for MIW to exercise a degree of personal choice and individual agency that contribute to the changes in their lifestyle, value systems, behaviour, relationships, traditional norms, and society.

## Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted with data collected from ten middle-class MIW using a semi-structured interview technique. The semi-structured interview questions comprised short, practical questions without jargon, and follow-up questions were structured to motivate participants to give long answers (Merton et al., 1990; Spradley, 1979). The semi-structured interviews were focused on obtaining information about the experiences of MIW, their background, constraints in travelling, and technology usage as a negotiation tool. The participants, in the age range of 22–46, were interviewed individually. They were chosen based on the following criteria, i.e., (i) Malaysian Indian, (ii) middle-class background, (iii) have experience travelling, and (iv) use technology. Pseudonyms are used to keep their actual identities confidential. The participants spoke in Tamil mixed with English and Malay. Four participants were married, one divorced, and five were single. Table 1 summarises the details of the participants.

**Table 1** Details of participants

| Pseudonym | Age | Marital status | Occupation | Preferred travel type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jaspal | 46 | Married | Lecturer | Family and girlfriend getaway |
| Kalai | 41 | Married | Homemaker | Family and girlfriend getaway |
| Gaya | 35 | Married | Executive Officer | Solo and family |
| Neeta | 34 | Married | Lawyer | Family and girlfriend getaway |
| Indra | 40 | Divorced | Nurse | Solo and girlfriend getaway |
| Vimala | 36 | Single | Legal Assistant | Family and girlfriend getaway |
| Pam | 31 | Single | Civil servant | Solo and girlfriend getaway |
| Priya | 29 | Single | Teacher | Family and girlfriend getaway |
| Roshini | 25 | Single | Postgraduate Student | Solo and girlfriend getaway |
| Hervena | 22 | Single | Financial Advisor | Solo and girlfriend getaway |

The interviews were audio-recorded to enable the researcher to transcribe, verify, and interpret data accurately (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Themes related to the research questions were identified during and after the process of individual transcription of the interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as an approach that identifies, examines, and reports patterns within the data. In sorting the data, the connection between the data and the established theoretical debate was traced. The theory was critical in generating intersectionality between the influence of culture and religion as constraints in the lives of middle-class MIW and their pursuit of leisure travel activities. The application of theoretical concepts is an attempt to comprehend the social life of the participants better. It is common for middle-class MIW to face travel constraints, and their conditions were considered based on the three sequential constraints proposed in the Hierarchical Leisure Constraints Model. Technology offers middle-class MIW the opportunity to negotiate the constraints to realise their potential. The experiences shared by the participants reflect that they have full knowledge of the negotiation as well as codes of honour into which they could immerse themselves with any degree of familiarity or comfort. This proves the remarks made by Avishai et al. (2015) that to understand middle-class MIW; it is necessary to view how these constraints are created, negotiated, and transformed within the cultural contexts.

## Findings

The travel tales of the ten middle-class MIW display how they navigated the cultural complexities as Indians while negotiating religious and cultural obligations in the most effective way to state their arguments. It was delightful to see and hear about their experiences. The most profound cultural change is home-grown. As they negotiate the constraints using technology, they draw attention to the fact that it is

not a matter of giving up their values, norms or teachings, but learning to transcend the invisible boundaries with appropriate actions. The participants continue to stay confined in the religious and cultural domain to adhere to the strict rules of being a "perfect Indian woman". However, technology gives them the choice and agency to enjoy travelling as a leisure activity. The issues related to their identity, constraints, negotiations, agency and adjustment remain fluid and change according to the conditions around them that make it possible for them to achieve the best of both worlds.

## *It Starts with Me…*

One of the crucial steps for a woman to embark on any journey is gaining a personal conviction. Godbey et al. (2010) describe it as "primarily being concerned with subjective perceptions or assessments of appropriateness and relevance of participation in a given leisure activity by the individual in question" (p. 121). Being a 22-year-old Malayali and the youngest in her family of three, Hervena inherited the travel interest from her parents who are doctors. She starts the narrative of her travel history by reminiscing about the time when she was 18 years old, after finishing her Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (equivalent to O Level). At first, like most women, she was doubtful and anxious about travelling outside her comfort zone.

> In Malaysia, we don't take gap years like European students. I don't have any problem going out with my friends or family…I felt safe, and it was casual and I always come back home. I did not have the confidence to travel alone although my friends were telling me exciting stories, Personally, I felt insecure, and feared about [my] safety and other issues that might happen.

Hervena stressed safety issues and feeling insecure. However, her family members were supportive and encouraged her to attempt travelling.

> My parents are not orthodox; instead of discouraging me, they asked me to go ahead. Even my *ammachi* [grandmother] told me to take the opportunity and go!

Despite all the encouragement, Hervena hesitated until…one fine day,

> I found this travel blog, actually my friend shared the link. Reading about the Dutch girl's travel stories was an eye-opening experience. It was inspiring because she was my age and had travelled around Europe. Yet, I was not convinced. Then, I started to Google travel blogs about Indian women. The story of Shivya Nath who quit her corporate job, sold her possessions and began to travel the world popped up. Then there was Poorna, who scaled the highest peak of Mount Everest at the age of 13! I felt inspired. I continued reading many blogs and I was surprised [that] Malaysian women are doing it too, but mostly Malay girls, not Indians. Finally, I was convinced. I decided to start slow, with friends, by visiting local destinations like Penang, Langkawi, and Melaka, to gain experience. My first trip with my best friend and her sister became a very meaningful local experience for me. Today, I am able to travel solo. My favourites are beach destinations like Lombok, Danang, and Goa.

Nowadays, Hervena's travel style is suited to the destination using self-built itineraries planned with online research. She says that women should not make the mistake of procrastinating and instead take the chance when opportunity knocks on the door. She dreams of starting her vlog (video blog) for her next travel.

Priya (29) is a teacher, and she is single. She lives with her very strict Hindu, retired parents.

> I've lived independently for over 5 years now. I'm 29 and still not married. Previously, I was posted in Perak. Last year, I got transferred here [Penang]. My relatives, friends and neighbours always ask my mother when I am getting married. I know they mean well, but it is frustrating sometimes. So, my parents are looking for an alliance for now. I will just follow what they decide.

Priya, like any other woman, was greatly concerned about personal safety when travelling. She believes that women are vulnerable and was apprehensive about embarking on a journey.

> I only travelled with my parents. My only overseas trip was to India—visiting temples. I love travelling but safety is my biggest worry. I don't think I can travel alone. I read news about women being raped. It terrifies me. Even the idea of solo travel stresses me. So, I always travel with my family or girlfriends who mostly are my cousins and nieces. Sometimes there are school trips I join though it is a rare occasion unless it is compulsory.

When planning a journey with family or her friends, Priya uses technology to gain clarity and confidence.

> My technology dependence is obvious in my everyday activities. I'm addicted to my phone and laptop. Before travelling, I make detailed plans assisted by travel websites, apps, and blogs. I also use social media to read reviews and make informed choices. Reading the views women post about the safety of the place I am visiting from reliable sources like TripAdvisor is helpful in giving self-assurance.

Unlike Priya, Indra seemed like an adventurous woman. However, her life story showed otherwise. The *gramam* (village) girl had never travelled outside her village except for visiting her grandparents or relatives during festive seasons. After completing high school, she enrolled in a local university in her hometown in Kedah. When her father was transferred to Penang, the family moved there for good. She adjusted to city life, found a job in the industrial area, and got married. Just when everything seemed perfect, her parents passed away in an accident. Following that, her marriage of eight years also fell apart. Now at 40, life has finally begun as she travels solo after divorce.

> Growing up as an Indian kid, in our Indian community, divorce is definitely not something we often see as a child. It's like a bad word. I was 30 when I got married. It was a love marriage, but I guess we fell out of love. We were married for eight years, and we realised we had grown apart and couldn't make each other happy. Even though it hurt, divorce was the best solution for us. I am glad we did not have kids, made it easier to part.

Living her life as a divorcee was testing for Indra. She was an orphan and had no siblings. Her circle of friends was the only solace. She promised herself one thing after the divorce—to live life without regrets.

> I am sure you know that for Indians, marriage is considered sacred and ideal for a woman. Even our Gods are happily married, some with two wives. So, divorce was a sign of failure. Women are usually the victims, riddled with stigma. The first year was very difficult for me, coping with divorce and constantly feeling guilty. I started taking yoga classes. There I met Vidya, a cancer survivor. She became my friend and told me about her travel experiences. When I saw her Facebook posts filled with her travel stories, it made me grasp the value of life. I told Vidya that I desire to travel but I am timid and fearful about the perception of others about me. I had constant insecurity about my actions. Instead of giving me a sermon, she sent me an email with links to travel blogs of divorced women. Then she tagged me on all the relevant Facebook pages of divorced women who travel. Afterwards, she sent me a short message saying- why care about what others think! YOLO! I didn't know what YOLO meant at first. Later, I found out—it means You Only Live Once! Vidya, the blogs, the FB posts, the virtual interactions—all changed me. I started to [realise] that any change starts with me. Honestly, I did not know there were many women in the same situation out there who decided to make a change in living their life. I understood that technology helped me grow as a person and overcome my insecurities. At the age of 40, I started travelling solo, slowly but surely. Solo travel is easier and safer than I feared! Sometimes I go with Vidya on girlfriend getaways.

Some middle-class MIW are plagued by psychological conditions such as the lack of confidence, fear, and gender-based myths that it is unsafe for women to be out without male companions. Individually driven negotiation using technology changes their thoughts and actions by increasing their confidence and overcoming their anxieties to fulfil their desire and explore travel activities. By doing this, they gain the freedom to consider the choices related to travel information with technology (Jackson, 1993). Today, Hervena, Priya, and Indra have conquered their fears and transcended their boundaries.

## *It's About My Family, Religion, and Culture…*

The Indian community in Malaysia still show signs of orthodox beliefs despite the changing times. Parental fear is one of the first hurdles middle-class MIW have to overcome when broaching the subject of travelling. Women are either the responsibility of their parents or husbands. Middle-class MIW from urban localities shared that the constraints were less rigid with understanding parents. However, they had to reassure their parents before gaining their approval. Vimala (36 years old) is working as a legal assistant. She lives with her retired father and housewife mother. A filial daughter and a staunch Hindu, Vimala is a vegetarian for life and getting her married tops her parents' to-do list. She grew up travelling with her dad when he went on business trips. As an adult, she sometimes travels with her family and sometimes with her girlfriends. She stresses that travelling is exciting but gaining approval from her parents was her priority.

> I grew up in a family where it's unusual for a woman to travel alone or with friends for leisure. It is a standard rule for the majority of Indian families. Convincing my parents about travelling was surprisingly not a problem. Maybe because I usually travel with them. But when travelling with my friends, I will never disregard the importance of their consent. Call me old-fashioned, but I feel it is necessary.

Vimala adds,

> When I decide on family trips or girl getaways, I convince my parents by making detailed travel plans using the help of technology. That gives them peace of mind. They know all my friends. When I travel with them, I update them with my whereabouts so they don't worry unnecessarily. I use the phone to make calls and tell them everything is ok. My friends do that too. It is no trouble. Aren't family the first ones we call or text whenever we are in danger or run into a problem? I will enjoy my trip when I am certain that they are happy.

Pam (31 years old), who works as a civil servant, also shared the same sentiment. Adhering to religious and gender role requirements was an important consideration when engaging in travel activities. She narrates,

> I am a faithful Christian who goes to church every Sunday. Unlike other religions, we don't have strict dietary restrictions but we should be wary of our behaviour. My parents placed their trust in me, and I should uphold it. It is not a constraint for me. I recently had the opportunity to travel to Vatican City and then to Rome, Firenze, and Venice. The experience was life-changing. I was able to witness other cultures' way of life. But, beyond that, I feel blessed for the earth that God created. Tourism today is made easy with technology so I don't see why one should feel burdened to share information, experiences or memories of their trip with families and friends. I always sat down and talked about itineraries, and ways how I could keep myself safe and stay in touch with them throughout the trip. We are different from the Western culture. Malaysians are family-oriented. Besides, my religious beliefs and traditional norms greatly affect the way I travel…making it an enhanced experience.

Like many MIW, gaining parents' approval and ensuring their travel plan abides by religious requirements was central for Vimala and Pam. By doing this, they create a reciprocal relationship by maintaining trust and freedom in their family. Technology becomes an influential medium that counters parental concerns about safety and religious requirements.

For Neeta (34 years old), a working wife and mother, finding time to travel was challenging. However, she was lucky to have a supportive husband and parents. Her passion for travel started during her childhood because of her parents. Both of them were teachers and loved to travel. Her brother and sister also follow in the footsteps of their parents. Neeta was promoted to become a partner in her law firm. That meant more work and losing sleep. However, she was adamant about not compromising her work-life balance; her resolution was further driven by her desire to spend quality time with her five-year-old daughter. With the support of her husband and parents, Neeta indulges in girlfriend getaways and family expeditions.

> My daughter takes after me and her grandparents. She is five and already a travel enthusiast. My husband is a foodie; he travels mainly seeking authentic food experiences. We are both lawyers, so travelling is rewarding ourselves with time to relax and bond. Sometimes, I travel with my family, sometimes with my parents and once in a while I go on girlfriend getaways.

Given that Neeta is still required to perform her roles and responsibilities as a wife, mother, and daughter, it represents a major part in making travel decisions.

> My husband and I will plan accordingly, to use our allotted vacation days for the holiday. Our holidays are usually well-organised but sometimes it's spur-of-the-moment trips. The existence of technology offers busy women like me the opportunity to explore travel information that fits my requirements without neglecting my work or duties at home. I prefer to be the planner and make all decisions about the travel. I am in charge and technology gave me the power.

During travels, women's time allocation may be subject to the demands of their husband and children's needs. When asked about being trapped in a cycle of double burden and the ongoing domesticated roles while on vacation, Neeta explained that

> In my family, we practice shared responsibility. We are both working. My husband does not expect me to tend to his daily needs. Most of the time he manages on his own. We also share household chores. We have been doing this since the day I got married. It doesn't mean I forgo my responsibility as a wife or mother. Instead, we share the workload. I learned this from my parents too. My father is the cook in the family. We were never taught to segregate work according to gender. The same goes when we are travelling. Before we travel, I want to be in charge of the plans. Maternal instinct or OCD—you name it, but I prefer doing it to ensure everything is in place. During travel, we take turns to care for our daughter, sleep in or visit our respective places of interest.

Like Neeta, some middle-class MIW ensure shared responsibilities in their marriage to lessen the burden on women while enabling them to have their freedom from familial responsibilities. This is because communal space with a joint-parental agency in dual-income households spells out more work for the women. Therefore, technology is used to transcend patriarchy that has limited them in the past (Param, 2015). Neeta is also embracing travel as a medium to negotiate her many roles within the boundaries of socio-cultural norms, ethnicity and religious parameters. Instead of her husband taking charge of family holidays, she uses technology to have more authority and freedom in making their family travel decisions.

Jasphal (46 years old) shared a similar idea about travel, marriage, and gender roles imposed on married women in the Indian community. She works as a lecturer at a local college. Married to a lawyer, she has two teenage sons.

> Growing up, travel was a big part of my childhood, but primarily domestic travel. My father was a civil servant, so he instilled the idea of travel as a form of experiential education. We used to visit [museums], galleries, historical places, and so on. When visiting my maternal or paternal grandparents or relatives in India, I learned to engage with them to understand my Sikh identity and my heritage. I saw the difference between the first generation and my generation. It reminded me [of] how lucky I am to have supportive and open-minded parents, particularly when I think about the gender stereotypes in my community. I understood that restrictions from my parents were genuine concerns about my safety or well-being. When I pursued my postgraduate studies abroad, they motivated me. My brother and I were treated equally. After getting married, the same values I attained as a young, Sikh woman are exercised in our family away from the typical gendered norms and societal pressures.

Jasphal highlighted the relationship dynamics that are changing in Malaysian Indian communities today. Even though women usually accord primary importance to

family responsibilities while disregarding their independence, these cultural controls can be framed in positive terms embedded within a traditional or religious upbringing. As an alternative, this reflects the changing nature of gender roles in contemporary times, where the trend in families nowadays is shifting more towards equal sharing of responsibilities while resisting stereotypical expectations of a wife's role through the reinforcement of traditional gender relations in a marriage.

## *It's About the Essentials…*

Structural constraints vary across cultures and refer to conditions that could limit women from participating in travel, such as lack of time, finance or information. Time, discretionary income, and information are essential for women to engage in travel activities after negotiating their intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints. The disparity of imposed gendered status results in inequality of leisure time between men and women. Constrained by the lack of time, women seek the aid of technology to negotiate their constraints in the hope of doing fun activities like travelling.

Gaya (35 years old) was born and bred in Kuala Lumpur. She is married and works as an Executive Officer while continuing her passion for travelling whenever she can. Gaya's first solo travel experience started when she was 18 years old as she volunteered to teach kids around rural areas in East Malaysia. Gaya strongly believes that travelling makes one wise. Every year she joins the family pilgrimage to Shirdi and visits ancient Hindu temples in India. Gaya described travel as a life story, an experience about oneself.

> Solo travel lets me disconnect from everything around me, When I first started my solo travel, I was curious and enthusiastic to discover new places on my own. That was in my teenage years. Nowadays I travel solo when convenient. It gives me freedom and flexibility. I still miss the enthusiasm. To be honest, my parents are still not comfortable with my passion for solo travel but they have never stopped me. Every time I come home and show them the pictures and videos I took, they were awestruck. After marriage, my husband gave me the freedom to continue indulging in solo travel but I don't go as often as I used to when I was single.

One of the biggest hurdles to keeping up with her passion is time. Work and domestic obligations put pressure on most women's daily lives. While focusing on that, making time for travel becomes secondary and almost non-existent. However, Gaya refuses to use it as an excuse.

> I have to cope with the workload at the office and go home to tend to my husband or manage housework. It is tiring. But I would never use that as an excuse to forget about travelling. I have grown physically, mentally, and to an extent spiritually because of travel. I am more independent, self-reliant, and open to challenges life throw at me. Even though I am married, my husband or my status as a wife or [daughter-in-law] does not confine me. I know most Indian women face problems with this issue, but personally, I just decided life is not about giving excuses and avoiding. So, I navigated the limitations I had with technology. Like getting info, booking and reading online what other women like me recommended doing. Fortunately, my husband and family were supportive. Maybe they too understood that I am

> independent and can take care of myself. I realised I have the willpower that I never knew I had before. Travelling is like going on pilgrimage, taking time off from my normal, everyday life and learning something new, cleansing the soul and getting new energy restored. I always return with a new perspective on life.

Using technology, Gaya can plan her travel arrangements while saving time. Working middle-class MIW such as Gaya look for convenience in making their travel plans using their mobile phones or computers. Online booking channels, travel websites, and apps offer flexibility to organise travel itineraries anytime, anywhere. It empowers them as travellers while eliminating the relevance of the traditional practice or intermediary channel between consumers and service providers (Taylor & Ampt, 2003).

Discretionary income is another essential element that permits travel (Cohen & Cohen, 2015; Graburn, 1983; Smith, 1977). It refers to extra money that can be used for travelling. Working women may have financial stability, but they need to cater to their primary needs first. In Indian culture, spending and purchasing power lie in men's hands, whereas women are not expected to make responsible financial decisions for their well-being. This becomes a functional and practical challenge that limits women's travel experiences (Wilson & Little, 2005).

Postgraduate student Roshini (26 years old), who stays on a local university campus, relates her experience of navigating her life between studies and travelling.

> The life of a student with a desire to travel is a struggle. But then again, travelling is exciting because I can experience the world on my own. This reminds me of a quote by Walcott—I read, I travel, and I become. My journey started when I opted to study at a local university far away from my hometown. I met like-minded women who [love] travelling here. As a student, I was inspired by social media postings and travel blogposts. Itching to try it, I took the first step by travelling locally. It was an eye-opening experience. The best part was enjoying my own company and having all the time and space to really get to know a destination well—on my own.

New generation travellers like students or backpackers travelling on shoestring budgets prefer cheap, flexible, and informal travel itineraries that they develop independently (Pearce, 1993). Technology offers access to various channels where women can find the best deals, discounts and cheaper rates than the rates over the counter. Roshini narrates,

> One of the important sources for my travel is my savings. As a student, I receive a scholarship. I also work part-time at the mall and on weekends I give tuition. My parents encourage me as long as I stay on track and inform them of my whereabouts. Travel is exciting but I ensure that I balance my studies and leisure wisely. Technology was a big help. For solo travel, planning is an important aspect. With each trip, my planning skills improved. I can use my privilege as a youth traveller on several websites. For purchasing tickets, I make use of my accumulated miles or discounted rates during the off-peak season. As a student, I rely on my saving, which is not much but finding the best deals online helps out a lot.

MIW from the middle-class group with limited disposable income or savings can use technology to find travel hacks that would help them overcome the constraints. Travel applications such as Trivago, TripAdvisor, Skyscanner, and Expedia offer them reasonable measures that save cost besides empowering travellers to find

competitive prices, compare and grab the best deals online. In addition to time and money, information is an essential element needed by MIW before they start thinking about travelling for leisure. Lack of information creates uncertainty that will impede planning and participation in travel.

Kalai (40 years old), a homemaker, is a prolific technology user who uses it to complete her important tasks such as online banking, paying bills and keeping in touch with her family members. After her first child was born, Kalai quit her job and became a full-time stay-at-home mother. It has been ten years, and she loves being a full-time mother to tend to her two children. Sharing her childhood stories, Kalai grew up in a rubber estate settlement in Perak. As a child, her travel experiences include visiting temples around Malaysia with her parents and visiting her grandparent's village. The long hours of bus rides or taking trains excites her. After she pursued her studies and entered the workforce, she began travelling for work to attend meetings. She considers herself a novice traveller. According to her,

> I like travelling but I am still a rookie. When talking to you, I recall the memories of my childhood. Estate life is fun. We go for temple *thiruvizhas* (festivals). Sometimes we visit our grandparents or relatives in other villages. We did not own a car, so we went by bus or train. During the bus rides, I always sit by the window with my dad. Looking out, I enjoy the view along the way. Trains too! My first experience of taking a flight was after I started working. I travelled to Sabah for a meeting. I travelled quite a bit after working but it was purely for business, not leisure. Then, I got married and travelled to Bangalore for my honeymoon. We also visited my husband's relatives there. Last year, I took my parents on a family trip to Bali. They enjoyed it. It was their first plane ride and vacation outside Malaysia. Next time, we are planning to take them to India.

She adds,

> I use technology mostly for my daily use because it makes a lot of things easier for which I would otherwise have to spend a lot of time. Being a housewife and taking care of two small children is a lot of work compared to the nine-to-five jobs. I also keep in touch with my family and friends using WhatsApp. Technology also makes it a whole lot easier to research before I go anywhere. Information is important for me. When my husband suggested we go to Bali, I was doubtful of the destination and the safety there. I went online and researched the place. Apart from searching the Internet for facts, I also read reviews from families who travelled there in recent times. Gaining that information was helpful before we decided on the destination. After it was definite, we booked the travel agent online. I also read up on the weather, food and the necessities to pack for my parents, my in-laws and children, particularly medicines. Later on, I discussed it with my husband and we prepared it together. I think information is important before we plan any trips because we are going to an unfamiliar place, especially on family trips.

Familiarity and information about travel destinations also help increase self-confidence to travel (Ratthinan & Selamat, 2019). Unlike men, women prefer to travel with detailed pre-planned travel information. By doing so, they can anticipate aspects like safety, the way of life of the locals, language, food, and weather. Travelling becomes more satisfying when uncertainty is reduced with enhanced destination knowledge (Fodness & Murray, 1997). Middle-class MIW like Kalai are cautious when travelling to a new destination. They rely on online sources such as travel websites, blogs and official tourism portals rather than depend on their own judgment. This reduces their uncertainty about travelling and helps enhance their mobility.

## Discussion

Anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963) opined that culture is synonymous with social heritage that flows down through the centuries from one generation to another, influencing the actions and views of society. In anthropology and tourism research, Graburn (1983) calls for non-Western studies to explore the connection of tourism to cultural change, focusing on factors such as socio-symbolic constraints, cultural self-confidence, and discretionary income. The findings of this study show that travelling for middle-class MIW (mainly from the second, third and later generations) revolved around visiting families and relatives or attending festivals within Malaysia. Some middle-class MIW who are privileged also travel to pursue their education or employment opportunities. By and large, the findings reflect that middle-class MIW are confined by religious and cultural beliefs which impose certain traditional and non-traditional roles plus behavioural standards on women's daily lives. Faced with religious and cultural demands, their quest to travel for leisure is shaped by gender logic, where their needs and norms are voiced, negotiated, and challenged. Even the new generation of middle-class MIW continue to retain and preserve their ethnic identity while contesting the idea of gendered interpretations of cultural duties that promote patriarchal orientation. It shows that MIW from the middle-class segment of society is gradually affirming their agency by using technology to engage in travel activities while adhering to their respective religious and cultural domain without interrupting the ideals of being a "typical Indian woman" and perpetuating the patriarchal system at home. The use of an intersectional lens helps to evaluate the real-life cases of middle-class MIW's actions in striking a balance between conserving their cultural values and following their newfound passion for exploring travelling. Most of the participants in this study could engage in travel due to their position in a comfortable middle-class segment of society with access to technology devices and skills. They belong to the third or later generation, are educated and employed with a high level of awareness of their ethnic identity. Responses show that the role played by parents in constructing the participants' Indian cultural identity is also through indirect means, i.e. parents become their children's role models by practising cultural obligations and celebrations. Being born and raised as Malaysian Indians, the participants shared positive experiences about travelling. Family trips and girlfriend getaways have become enjoyable activities for families to bond while solo trips offer women the experience of adventure and to be liberated. Although they spoke in excitement regarding travelling, most of them seem to be unaware of the sense of entitlement to leisure (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1991) with conscious ignorance. Religious beliefs, cultural customs, and social norms are still prevalent in their lives wherein they choose to acknowledge the presence of a tradition into which they could immerse themselves with any degree of comfort or familiarity. Technology does not guarantee immunity from patriarchy; however, the participation of middle-class Malaysian Indian women in travel using technology can effectively transcend the outdated boundaries in their lives, leading to a form of empowerment. In the feminist context, empowerment is seen as contesting conditions of being denied the

choice and exercising it (Kabeer, 1999). In this case, access to travel using technology depicts empowerment for the middle-class MIW, providing them with an avenue to contest the cultural conditions and bringing about a change in mindset about women's sense of entitlement for leisure. This study supports the argument posed by Chick and Dong (2003), Walker et al. (2007) and Ratthinan and Selamat (2019) that culture influences the participation and non-participation in travel activities. As a result, the HCM theoretical framework must be refined by adding culture as a category that substantively impacts travel constraints in cross-cultural or multicultural contexts. By understanding the constraints and biases in the Indian community associated with travelling for leisure, socially constructed norms could be addressed accordingly. Women should enjoy equal leisure time, travel without fear, and not be taunted for engaging in travel activities. They should be praised and celebrated. Some women may prefer to travel with their family and friends, while the rest may choose to embark on solo travelling. The choice is theirs, and as the future is looking bright for female travellers, middle-class MIW should not lose out.

## Conclusion

In Asian countries like Malaysia, religion, cultural norms, and the deep-rooted patriarchal system remain as a cultural leash despite the growing political, economic, and social developments. Middle-class MIW continue to be confined by traditional values as obedience in a familial relationship is an essential part of the society that provides the power of guardianship to patrilineal kinsmen. Working women suffer a double burden of being sandwiched between their various roles and responsibilities while their chances to travel for leisure are limited or go missing. In Malaysia, attributes associated with financial constraints, the pursuit of educational excellence, and work demands deprive middle-class MIW of leisure activities such as travelling. However, thanks to technology, they can engage in travel activities while enjoying greater freedom and opportunity in the tight space between new-industrial and old-patriarchal dominance. The majority of second-generation Indian parents raise their daughters by giving them freedom and the choice to look beyond gender stereotypes. Usage of technology, coupled with an intergenerational gain of cultural flexibility has brought some women to a level of leisure equality with men in Malaysia. However, middle-class MIW are still absent from this scenario. The findings have displayed the gradual effort by middle-class MIW to transcend the invisible boundaries of cultural control that have been embedded over time. The analysis using the HCLM framework reveals the stages of constraints MIW confronts, copes with, and contests in their lives. It starts from within by subjugating the internal limitations before negotiating the external constraints. The ability of the participants to negotiate their constraints displays that the stereotypical view associated with Indian women being passive is changing. Technology, as a mediator, played a role for MIW to find convenient solutions without disregarding the importance of their religion, tradition, and cultural norms. They have learned to unlearn patriarchal values fed to women via the digital

domain (Bierema, 2003; Ratthinan & Selamat, 2018). In the process of unlearning, they break the silence and step out of the comfort zone that patriarchy teaches and forcefully imposes on women for the convenience of the dominant group. In pursuit of exploring a world outside their comfort zone or taking time to relax, the participants masked empowerment (Karupiah, 2019) as an invisible strategy to transcend the invisible boundaries by not openly challenging the cultural norms of femininity. From the academic perspective, scholars should start looking at leisure and travelling among empowered and disempowered women as a relevant research topic in the Asian setting.

## References

Avishai, O., Jafar, A., & Rinaldo, R. (2015). A gender lens on religion. *Gender & Society, 29*(1), 5–25.

Berdychevsky, L., & Gibson, H. J. (2015). Phenomenology of young women's sexual risk-taking in tourism. *Tourism Management, 46*(1), 299–310.

Bierema, L. (2003). The role of gender consciousness in challenging patriarchy. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 22*(1), 3–12.

Blazey, M. (1987). The differences between participants and non-participants in a senior travel program. *Journal of Travel Research, 26*, 7–12.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Buhalis, D. (2003). *eTourism: Information technology for strategic tourism management*. Harlow, UK: Prentice Hall.

Buhalis, D., Costa, C., & Ford, F. (2006). *Tourism business frontiers*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.

Buhalis, D., & Law, R. (2008). Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and 10 years after the Internet—The state of eTourism research. *Tourism Management, 29*(8), 609–623.

Carvalho, G., Baptista, M. M., & Costa, C. (2014). Women travelling alone: Prospects on gender and tourism experiences. *Revista Turismo & Desenvolvimento, 5*(21), 31–32.

Chick, G., & Dong, E. (2003). Possibility of refining the hierarchical model of leisure constraints through cross-cultural research. Paper presented at the Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium, Newtown Square, PA.

Chick, G., Hsu, Y. C., Yeh, C. K., Hsieh, C. M., Ramer, S., Bae, S. Y., ... & Dong, E. (2020). Cultural consonance mediates the effects of leisure constraints on leisure satisfaction: A reconceptualization and replication. *Leisure Sciences*, 1–20.

Cohen, E., & Cohen, S. A. (2015). A mobilities approach to tourism from emerging world regions. *Current Issues in Tourism, 18*(1), 11–43.

Collins, D., & Tisdell, C. (2002). Gender and differences in travel life cycles. *Journal of Travel Research, 41*(2), 133–143.

Crawford, D. W., & Godbey, G. (1987). Re-conceptualizing barriers to family leisure. *Leisure Sciences, 9*(2), 119–127.

Crawford, D. W., Jackson, E. L., & Godbey, G. (1991). A hierarchical model of leisure constraints. *Leisure Sciences, 13*(4), 309–320.

Deem, R. (1986). *All work and no play: The sociology of women and leisure*. Keynes: Open University Press.

Devasahayam, T. W. (2005). Power and pleasure around the stove: The construction of gendered identity in middle-class south Indian Hindu households in urban Malaysia. *Women's Studies International Forum, 28*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2005.02.001.

Fodness, D., & Murray, B. (1997). Tourist information search. *Annals of Tourism Research, 24*(3), 503–523.

Ganesh, L. (2017). Gendered mobility: Travel as a rite of passage. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 24*(2), 145–170.

Godbey, G., Crawford, D. W., & Shen, X. S. (2010). Assessing hierarchical leisure constraints theory after two decades. *Journal of Leisure Research, 42*(1), 111–134.

Gopal, P. S., & Karupiah, P. (2013). Indian diaspora and urban poverty: A Malaysian perspective. *Diaspora Studies, 6*(2), 103–122.

Graburn, N. H. (1983). The anthropology of tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research, 10*(1), 9–33.

Gupta, A., & Dogra, N. (2017). Tourist adoption of mapping apps: A UTAUT2 perspective of smart travellers. *Tourism and Hospitality Management, 23*(2), 145–161.

Harris, C., & Wilson, E. (2007). Travelling beyond the boundaries of constraint: Women, travel and empowerment. *Tourism and Gender: Embodiment, Sensuality and Experience*, 235–250.

Henderson, K. A., Bialeschki, M. D., Shaw, S. M., & Freysinger, V. J. (1989). *A leisure of one's own: A feminist perspective on women's leisure.* University Park, PA: Venture Publishing.

Henderson, K. A., & Bialeschki, M. D. (1991). A sense of entitlement to leisure as constraint and empowerment for women. *Leisure Sciences, 13*(1), 51–65.

Jackson, E. L. (1993). Recognizing patterns of leisure constraints: Results from alternative analyses. *Journal of Leisure Research, 25*(2), 129–149.

Jackson, E. L., Crawford, D. W., & Godbey, G. (1993). Negotiation of leisure constraints. *Leisure Sciences, 15*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/01490409309513182.

Jayasooria, D. (2016). *Inclusive development for urban poor & bottom 40% communities in Malaysia.* Bangi, Selangor: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Joseph, C. (2014). *Growing up female in multi-ethnic Malaysia.* New York: Routledge.

Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievement: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change, 30*(3), 435–464

Karupiah, P. (2019). Femininity in everyday life: Experiences of Malay and Indian women in Malaysia. In H. Cuervo & A. Miranda (Eds.), *Youth, inequality and social change in the Global South* (pp. 113–128). Singapore: Springer.

Kailasam, A. (2015). Political expediencies and the process of identity construction: The quest for Indian identity in Malaysia. *Kajian Malaysia, 33*(1), 1–18.

Kaur, A. (2008). Indians in Southeast Asia: Migrant labour, knowledge workers and the new India. In R. Rai & P. Reeves (Eds.), *The South Asian Diaspora* (pp. 71–88). London: Routledge.

Khoo-Lattimore, C., & Mura, P. (Eds.). (2016). *Asian genders in tourism.* UK: Channel View Publications.

Kimmm, J. (2012). How do pleasure travelers manage their travel constraints? *Tourism Review, 67*(3), 30–40.

Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1963). *Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions.* New York: Vintage.

Lagesen, V. A. (2008). A cyberfeminist utopia? Perceptions of gender and computer science among Malaysian women computer science students and faculty. *Science, Technology, & Human Values, 33*(1), 5–27.

Lau, L. (2010). Literary representations of the 'New Indian Woman' the single, working, urban, middle-class Indian woman seeking personal autonomy. *Journal of South Asian Development, 5*(2), 271–292.

Lee, S. M. (1989). Female immigrants and labor in Colonial Malaya: 1860–1947. *International Migration Review, 23*(2), 309–331.

Ministry of Communications and Multimedia. (2019). 2018 Communication & Multimedia: Facts & Figures. https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/4Q18.pdf

Ministry of Women and Family Development. (2003). *The Progress of Malaysian Women Since Independence 1957–2000*, Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.

Mothar, N. M. M., Hassan, M. B. A., Hassan, M. S. B. H., & Osman, M. N. (2013). The importance of smartphone's usage among Malaysian undergraduates. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 14*(3), 112–118.

Masika, R., & Bailur, S. (2015). Negotiating women's agency through ICTs: A comparative study of Uganda and India. *Gender, Technology and Development, 19*(1), 43–69.

Merton, R. K., Fiske, M., & Kendall, P. L. (1990). *The focused interview: A manual of problems and procedures*. Glencoe: The Free Press.

Myers, L., & Hannam, K. (2008). Women as backpacker tourists: a feminist analysis of destination choice and social identities from the UK. *Backpacker tourism: Concepts and profiles*, 174–187.

Neuhofer, B. E., (2014). *An exploration of the technology enhanced tourist experience*. Doctorate Thesis. Bournemouth University.

Oreglia, E., & Srinivasan, J. (2016). ICT, Intermediaries, and the transformation of gendered power structures. *MIS Quarterly, 40*(2), 501–510.

Param, M. (2015). Battling with ourselves: Exploring how far Indian middle-class working mothers in Malaysia are able to negotiate gendered spaces. *Asian Women, 31*(2), 29–52.

Paul, A., & Thompson, K. M. (2018). Negotiating digital spaces in everyday life: A case study of Indian women and their digital use. *First Monday*, *23*(11).

Pearce, P. L. (1993). Fundamentals of tourist motivation. In D. G. Pearce & R. W. Butler (Eds.), *Tourism research: Critiques and challenges* (pp. 113–134). London: Routledge.

Pillai, S., & Krish, P. (2021). The digital divide among Malaysian Indian Women. In A. K. Sahoo (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Asian Diaspora and Development* (pp. 174–185). London: Routledge.

Poon, A. (1993). *Tourism, technology and competitive strategies*. New York: CAB International.

Rabin, H. L. (2014). *Revisiting gender constraints and benefits in leisure tourism: Man-Up, It's time to travel like a woman*. Theses and Dissertations, University of Montevallo, Montevallo, AL (pp. 1–84).

Ramachandran, C. P. (2002). The Malaysian Indian in the New Millennium. Indian Malaysian online. Paper at the Conference on "*The Malaysian Indian in the New Millennium—Rebuilding Community*, Kuala Lumpur, June 1–2, 2002. Retrieved from http://www.indianmalaysian.com.

Ramesh, S. (2016). Inspiring songs on women empowerment by Mahakavi Subramania Bharati. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 21*(10), 24–28.

Ratthinan, S. P., & Selamat, N. H. (2018). Being Muslim: Unveiling the voices of Asian Muslim women travellers. *Gender Issues, 35*(4), 302–317.

Ratthinan, S. P., & Selamat, N. H. (2019). Negotiating travel constraints via technology: A study of Malay Muslim women through a Hierarchical Constraint Model perspective. *Asian Journal of Business Research, 9*(2), 55–75.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Smith, V. (Ed.). (1977). *Hosts and guests: The anthropology of tourism*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Stenson, M. (1980). *Class, race and colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian case*. Vancouver: University of British Colombia.

Stivens, M. (1998). Sex, gender and the making of the new Malay middle-classes. In K. Sen & M. Stivens (Eds.), *Gender and power in Affluent Asia* (pp. 101–140). London: Routledge.

Taylor, M. A., & Ampt, E. S. (2003). Travelling smarter down under policies for voluntary travel behaviour change in Australia. *Transport Policy, 10*(3), 165–177.

Tsuya, N. O., & Bumpass, L. L. (2004). Gender and housework. In N. O. Tsuya & L. L. Bumpass (Eds.), *Marriage, work & family life in comparative perspective: Japan, South Korea & the United States* (pp. 114–133). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Tussyadiah, I., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2009). Mediating tourist experiences: Access to places via shared videos. *Annals of Tourism Research, 36*(1), 24–40.
Van Zoonen, L. (2002). Gendering the Internet claims, controversies and cultures. *European Journal of Communication, 17*(1), 5–23.
Walker, G. J., Jackson, E. L., & Deng, J. (2007). Culture and leisure constraints: A comparison of Canadian and Mainland Chinese university students. *Journal of Leisure Research, 39*(4), 567–590.
Wearing, B., & Wearing, S. (1988). "All in a day's leisure": gender the concept of leisure. *Leisure Studies, 7*(2), 111–123.
Weatherby, T. G., & Vidon, E. S. (2018). Delegitimizing wilderness as the man cave: The role of social media in female wilderness empowerment. *Tourist Studies, 18*(3), 332–352.
Wilson, E., & Little, D. E. (2005). A "relative escape"? The impact of constraints on women who travel solo. *Tourism Review International, 9*(2), 155–175.
Wong, N. L., & Lau, K. L. (2016). Voices of third generation Malaysians: Malaysian or Malaysian Indian. *SARJANA, 31*(1), 45–54.
Woodward, D., & Green, E. (1988). Not tonight, dear! The social control of women's leisure. In E. Wimbush & M. Talbot (Eds.), *Relative Freedoms* (pp. 131–146). Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

**Nor Hafizah Selamat** is a social anthropologist and an Associate Professor at the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang. She was the Deputy Director of the Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA) from 2013 to 2015. Her research interest includes anthropology of tourism, gender entrepreneurship performance, and gender and hospitality.

**Senutha Poopale Ratthinan** completed her Ph.D., in gender studies at the Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA), Universiti Sains Malaysia. She is a civil servant who graduated from Universiti Sains Malaysia with a Master's degree in Public Administration and Bachelor of Communication. Focusing on the anthropology of tourism from gender and technology perspectives, her thesis explores the female travel experiences enhanced by technology.

# Religion and Gender Equality

# Gender Equality or Inequality: Where Do Malaysian Sikh Women Stand in Their Community?


**Manjet Kaur Mehar Singh**

**Abstract** Gender relations of the Malaysian Sikh community are strongly influenced by gender ideology. Understanding gender ideology, as perceived by the Sikhs, influences how gender equality is practised in various aspects of life. Sikh religion originated from the Indian state of Punjab. Punjabi society is heterogeneous in terms of religion, region, class, caste and gender lines, and is a patriarchal society. In Punjab, male-dominant ideology is the norm of society and is very visible in day-to-day living practices. It is also evident among the Sikh diaspora in Malaysia that is a minority community in the country. The diversity of Malaysian culture adds to the complexity of the gender ideology understanding and its practice in terms of gender relations among Sikh men and women. Gender (in)equality is also influenced by the religious and cultural ideology that is rooted in the Sikh religion. In practice, gender equality between Sikh men and women in Malaysia is a debatable issue. Therefore, this theoretical and conceptual chapter discusses the issue of gender inequality among the Sikhs of Malaysia today. The discussion is framed by the Intersectional Sikhism framework that examined women at the intersection of sexism oppression and the identity construction approach. It is particularly necessary to examine and deliberate to what extent gender equality is advocated and practised in the Malaysian Sikh community. This chapter concludes with recommendations to improve gender equality in the social and economic domains of the Malaysian Sikh community.

**Keywords** Gender ideology · Gender (in)equality · Intersectional Sikhism · Malaysian Sikh women

M. K. Mehar Singh (✉)
School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia
e-mail: manjeet@usm.my



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_12

> Achieving gender equality requires the engagement of women and men, girls and boys. It is everyone's responsibility.
>
> Ban Ki-moon

## Background

Gender equality ensures the basic human rights for both men and women. These basic rights are a platform for achieving social, economic and political development in a balanced way whereby both genders are at par to compete, contribute and enjoy the fruits of their labour. Gender equality has been a debated issue as equality is often not practised. This has led to equity and women empowerment concerns being commonly raised as inequality is against the fundamentals of human development. Concerns have also led to the introduction of the concept of 'gender mainstreaming' by the United Nations in 1997. The ultimate goal of gender mainstreaming is to attain gender equality and not allow inequality to perpetuate. In this way, both men's and women's concerns and experiences are taken into consideration in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres. Further, it allows women and men to benefit equally from policies and programmes (United Nations, 1997). However, achieving the goal of gender mainstreaming is mainly disrupted by various factors such as religion. As stressed by Butler (1990) and Singh (2019), the inconsistency of gender as a social construct related to religion has regularly paved the way for many unwarranted gender equality wars for women. Furthermore, King (2005) added that gender and religious issues are ubiquitous, do not exist side by side, and are not relatable to one another at the same level. Further, both constructs are not independent of each other; this is due to patterns of gender-based roles' construction being embedded in all religions.

According to Kaur (2001), gender equality needs scrutiny from a wider perspective covering the holistic aspects of life. This covers the economic, political and social aspects of life. In the context of division of labour, gender roles are culturally defined based on behaviour that is expected of males and females within their society. As argued by Haralambos and Holborn (1994), the culture of a society is considered the main influencer in the design of masculine and feminine behaviour. In addition, Palmisano (2001) added that the allocation of workplace-related tasks, jobs and careers at individual and institutional levels are planned along gender lines by society.

In the context of Malaysia, as part of the Asian region, gender equality is not a basic human right notion that is considered a national priority. It lags behind economic progress and development. Accordingly, United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP) (2010) has indicated that pervasive gender inequality continues as a barrier to progress, justice and social stability although economic progress and rapid development have been impressive in the Asia–Pacific region. Such gender-based variability that governs the roles of men and women is entrenched in today's modern human societies. This gender-based variability does not provide opportunities for

women to compete on an equal footing with men and it justifies unequal treatment for women through gender-based roles. Kaur (2019a) indicated that resentment is the order of the day because the distinct favouring of men has made women accept the male-dominated world. Women are made to accept subservience to men partly due to the influence of religious doctrines and religious scriptures on their lifestyles. The acceptance of distinction in gender roles flavoured with resentment is due to the oppression spearheaded by using religious doctrines, and religious scriptures to define their lifestyles.

Relatively, Sikh religious and cultural ideologies have an egalitarian perspective whereby both males and females are considered equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities. However, the idea of egalitarianism is not reflected in daily practices. This leads to a paradoxical situation of disparity in ideology not coinciding with the practice or practice not complying with ideology. This is due to critical non-religious sources or external forces that impact the community's views and practices. In the Malaysian Sikh community, the existence of sex-role preferences of the Sikhs is indicated by past research (Kaur, 2006); for example, there is the strong practice of males performing the role of financial provider of the household, in addition to the Sikh cultural ideologies which are predominantly patriarchal. This can be seen in the variations observed at the level of perceptions about religious and cultural ideologies on gender roles. According to Kaur's (2006) research among Sikh households in Perak, a state in Malaysia, the variations are further exacerbated by the exposure to multi-cultural practices of various communities such as the Malay, Chinese and Indian (Tamil, Gujarati, Malayalee, Sindhi, etc.) communities. Other agents of socialisation such as workplace colleagues, local communities, peers, school, and the mass media are also present among the Sikh diaspora di Malaysia.

The social construction of gender through everyday practices has provided space for the escalation of established orthodoxies (for instance, patriarchal male as the dominant figure) even though these practices may be different from the teachings in the religion. These practices need to evolve to allow Malaysian Sikh women to work on par with men. In the Malaysian context, the lives of women in the Sikh diaspora showcase multigenerational and cross-cultural perspectives in often conflicted transnational social spaces. In the context of religion, Sikh women have chosen a less prominent path and do not interfere with the male-dominated Gurdwara committees and confine themselves to s*ewa* (selfless service) in terms of *langar* (preparation of food) and other home-based chores, reiterating the gendered division of labour. This contradicts the philosophy of the Sikh religion which clearly indicates that women are equal to men (Kaur & Gill, 2018). Shaw and Lee (2015) posited that gender as a pervasive theme in our world shapes social life and informs attitudes, behaviour, and an individual's sense of self. It is one of the foundational ways societies are organised. This has led to the division of Malaysian Sikh women into two groups. One group resists certain traditions to promote social change and gender equality within the community by way of practising forms of Sikh "lived religion" and creating their own ideas of personal religion, and yet attempting to remain within the folds of the Sikh community. This group has been contesting and transforming gender roles in various national and diasporic-public and domestic spaces for generations

and they play a bigger role in the labour market and domestic work. The second group conforms to the cultural and religious norms dictated and dominated by males (Singh, 2019).

Breaking the gender gridlock among Malaysian Sikh women is an uphill task. Educating and delivering the notion of cultural change with the aim of achieving gender role balance is a challenge as Malaysian Sikh women are part of a patrilineal society based on Punjabi culture, Sikh religion and the amalgam of various Malaysian cultural ideologies. The bi-cultural identity influenced by the home and social negotiation leads to an inner dialogue with oneself and external dialogue within the home and social context. Malaysian Sikh women have to deal with distinct cultural values and practices in the external domain, especially the workplace, and adhere to a set of cultural values and practices in the domestic domain. This causes difficulties among Malaysian Sikh women in terms of decision-making (given their identities in various spheres) and defending gender equality in a very patriarchal Sikh society. Family and community obligations have very much weighed upon their bi-cultural identities' negotiation which in turn has affected their degree of acculturation (Sekhon & Szmigin, 2011). Breaking out of the gender disparity gridlock is a matter that is suppressed by various surrounding and internal factors. According to Sanita (2017), the bi-cultural identity negotiation occurs in the context of patrilocality which is very deeply rooted within the Punjabi Sikh concept of family. Historically, it was designed based on the economic and patriarchal context of India.

## Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical underpinning that guides the discussion of this chapter is based on a gender equality framework via Intersectional Sikhism (Ratti, 2019) and identity construction (Bakhtin, 1984; Berry, 2019; Bhatia & Ram, 2004). The adaptation of the gender equality framework is based on the premise that it is clearly distinct and demonstrates interrelationships among associated concepts in gender studies such as gender parity, gender equity and gender equality. The gender equality approach which is meant to address the injustices resulting from gender bias needs to operate within the larger sphere of social justice in order to achieve full participation in society. Gender equality is achievable if both genders are empowered with equal opportunities to realise their full human rights and contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural, and political development. Parity and equity are the building blocks to achieving and sustaining gender equality.

In terms of parity, equal involvement is prescribed with the participation of Sikh males and females in all domains of life. According to Subrahmaniam (2005), for example, attaining parity in educational enrolment and increasing access to schooling is the first step towards gender equality in education. As for equity, the framework proposes fairness and equality in opportunities for males and females. The removal of gender bias is emphasised. Fairness is achieved when social and historical disadvantages that prevent Sikh girls and boys from operating on a level playing field

are compensated. Equity strategies may include "equal treatment or treatment that is different, but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities". Equity strategies to attain gender equality need to be reflected in policies and practices directed toward each individual regardless of gender. Finally, equality proposes that Sikh males and females have equal rights, freedom, conditions and opportunities for realising their full potential. Equality is possibly realised by having male and female leaders in society, equitable and positive power dynamics, and empowered male and female citizens (EQUATE, 2008, p.2). In order to achieve equality, the roles, identities, and power relations that shape relationships need to be transformed.

As for identity construction, the acculturation process needs to be discussed. According to Berry (2019), acculturation is a process of group and individual changes in culture and behaviour that results from an intercultural context. In the context of this discussion, the change among the Sikh community in Malaysia has been taking place at an accelerated pace as more and more people of different cultures move, meet and interact. Acculturation of Sikh women, into a multicultural and multi-ethnic community setting such as in the case of the Malaysian society, is widely visible as the lives of Sikh women reflect changes in culture and behaviour to suit the local context. In discussing acculturation as a process of Sikh women assimilating into Malaysian society, it is vital to understand how they respond to the stress of participating in a new culture designed by multi-religious boundaries. Identifying the roles and positions allocated to Sikh women, the perspective model of acculturation developed by Berry (2019) is used to guide this chapter. The model outlines four stages including "assimilation" into the host culture, "integration" into both the host and home culture, "separation" from the host culture and/or "marginalisation" away from both the host and home culture (Bhatia & Ram, 2004, p. 227). As a diasporic community, the Sikh community is actively connected to its ancestral home culture. At the same time, the community is also in the midst of assimilating itself into the host culture, Malaysia, and integrating their home cultural values with their host's cultural values. Separation/marginalisation or integration with the host culture and home culture (Bhatia & Ram, 2004) are choices the community can make to ensure their individual psychological well-being.

The construct of gender and gender (in)equality viewed from the dialogical approach (Bakhtin, 1984), promotes the use of the "dialogical self" which highlights the social construction and historical context of identity and the concept of "voice" which suggests individuals negotiate their identities through the imagined interaction between their voice and the voices of others. Bhatia and Ram (2004, p. 226) have also indicated that the identities of individuals from the dialogic approach were in a constant state of conflict. The stages of acculturation were "connected to a larger set of political and historical practices" and were "shaped by the voices of race, gender, nationality, religion, sexuality, and power" (Bhatia & Ram, 2004, p. 237). To further complement the acculturation model and dialogic approach, the concept of the bi-cultural self is referred to. Sekhon and Szmigin (2011) pointed out that people will either completely assimilate or acculturate over time, in complex and situational

ways. The term "bi-cultural self" is used in reference to those who are constantly navigating two cultures with their individual beliefs and sentiments (Sekhon & Szmigin, 2011). In examining gender issues among Sikh women in Malaysia, the acculturation factor also plays a role. Sikh women's bi-cultural identities were in a constant state of negotiation where family and community factors such as their obligations to the family and multicultural and multi-ethnic community also impact their gender roles.

Ratti (2019) coined the term intersectional Sikhism supported by Crenshaw's (1988, 1989) pioneering work in the late 1980s on intersectionality. Intersectional Sikhism is a theoretical framework that analyses how Sikhism is constructed within the forces that shape nation, religion, gender and race. The imbalance between genders exposes the hegemonic logic of privilege-construction and oppression-construction.

## Women and the Advent of Sikhism

Before Guru Nanak Ji founded Sikhism, women in Punjab were subject to degradation and oppression. They were deprived of basic opportunities such as education and decision-making rights. The birth of a female child was regarded as a bad omen and extremely disliked (Gill, 2003) to the extent that it led to infanticide of female babies before Sikhism was founded. The low status of women in the Indian society relegated women to traditional gendered roles in the domestic domain and women were regarded as a muted group that is weak. Their gendered role was centred around childbearing, doing household chores, and serving the male members of the community.

According to Kaur (2021), Sikh women's (and men's) views on daily life and their status is dominated by patriarchal cultural practices in spite of the egalitarian Sikh perspective. This cultural practice has demonstrated the subordination of women, which shapes and constrains their lives. Further, women perceive themselves as emotionally inclined and less rational than men as well as the weaker gender compared to men. Therefore, women's lives are constrained by the portrayal of women's lesser or weaker roles from the cultural standpoint.

In Sikhism, women are crowned with the identity of 'Kaur' (derived from the word *kunwar*) that means next in line for power (Kaur, 2019a). According to Sikh ideology, all men and women possess equal status (Banerjee, 1983). This is evident in the Sikh scripture which is replete with feminine symbolism (Singh, 1983). In the scripture of Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) (1983) it is stated that God is gender-neutral, that is, both man and woman, and its creative aspect is portrayed as that of a mother. Sikhism upholds women's liberation from the systems and hierarchies that bind them in religions across the world and Sikhism positions women beside the men. This was disputed by Jakobsh (2003) who indicated only exceptional women are held up as the standard by which to measure the gender-egalitarian ethos of the Sikh tradition. In reality, historical writings contain nothing about women, apart

from referring to some exceptional women. The feminist perspective in practice was neglected although Sikhism repeatedly insisted that women and men are inherently equal in the Sikh worldview (Gill, 2003; Jhutti-Johal, 2014; McLeod, 1997). This occurred as the Sikh religion rose within a patriarchal milieu (Kaur, 2019b; Singh, 2005a) and the ideals of the Sikh Gurus were not practised given that male elites controlled the recording and interpretation of the teachings of the ten Sikh Gurus. In spite of changing times and women's entry into the working world, women are not released from their conventional roles of homemaking, childcare and upholding family honour.

## Gender in Sikhism

Discrimination against women in many societies that contributed to gender inequality is based on strongly rooted religious doctrine as well as cultural and social practices. Theoretically, as a religion, Sikhism has always advocated gender equality between men and women in all aspects of their economic and social life. Guru Nanak and Sikh Gurus actively encouraged women's participation as equals in worship, society and the battleground (Singh, 2022). In addition, Sikh doctrines emphasise equal rights for men and women to cultivate their spirituality and achieve salvation via participation in religious, cultural, social and secular activities. However, within the dominant cultural spaces, the tenets of Sikhism are predominantly patriarchal as the Sikh society has not been able to fully overcome old cultural traditions and live up to the ideals of gender equality taught by Sikh Gurus. As mentioned by Nesbitt (2005), the Sikh Feminist Research Institute (SAFAR) based in Canada and Singh (2022), the practice among many Sikh communities worldwide (labelled as a minority community in countries where Sikhs are now the third or fourth generation diaspora) indicate Sikh's male dominance and their reluctance to support the notion of equality between men and women.

Gender inequality is a practice that continues as the Sikh community seems unable to distinguish between religious tenets and culture imposed by the majority community which engulfs them. It is a challenge to unravel thousands of years of deep-seated patriarchal values although the Sikh religion preaches equal values for every human being in terms of position, status, rights and opportunities to live as they wish. This disparity between the Sikh doctrine of gender equality and the dominance of patriarchal institutional structures are further dividing the space, status and rank between male and female Sikhs due to the enculturation of men and women's gendered roles.

The disparity is further aggravated as Ratti (2019) implied in her discussion of Intersectional Sikhism. Intersectionality requires the acknowledgement of humans experiencing all their identities. It means recognising the ways that systems of oppression interact and impact individuals. Thus, the interplay between males and females based on gender (in)equality needs to be recognised. The intersection between ideology and practice visibly states or shows a mismatch between both. Power, supremacy, and superiority are sustained by the male group and oppression of the

female group in the form of violence, illiteracy, and socio-economic deprivation take place through explicit and implicit avenues (Singh, 2021). Implicitly, women are at their best while resisting or appropriating some of the tenets to reconstruct their own identity of being Sikh women. As also indicated by Singh (2005b), twenty-first-century globalisation seems to accommodate old patriarchal customs whereby unwritten laws that govern daily life have taken over the written laws of the Sikh religion that granted full equality to men and women in all spheres—religious, political, domestic, and economic.

## Sikhs in Malaysia

Understanding gender relations through the lens of gender ideology is crucial to ascertain the role played by male and female Sikhs within the Malaysian Sikh community. This is because the gender relations of the Sikh community in Malaysia are strongly influenced by gender ideology. The understanding of gender ideology, as perceived by the Sikhs, influences how gender equality is practised among Sikhs in various aspects within the social and economic realm.

As a minority community in Malaysia, the Sikh community lives within the complex multicultural and multi-ethnic society in Malaysia. It is not known with certainty when the first Sikhs came to Malaysia from India. Nevertheless, it is believed that the first emigration of Sikhs from Punjab to Malaya, Burma, Hong Kong, China, Canada, the United States of America, Great Britain, Kenya and other countries of East Africa, and Australia began in the late 19th and early twentieth century (Dhalliwal & Sandhu, 1971a).

The Sikh community is part of Malaysia's pluralistic society. Sikhs in Malaysia constitute a minority community that practices the teachings of Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji (Kaur, 2012). The total number of Sikhs in Malaysia is estimated at approximately 100,000 of the 32 million of Malaysia's population (Aman, et al., 2017; Kaur & Gill, 2018; Zain & Ismail, 2018). Sikhs are a unique and distinct community in Malaysia due to their adherence to their own religion, practices and code of appearance. As a minority ethnic group in Malaysia, they are a cohesive society and according to Kaur and Kaur (2011), they take pride in the modernity of Sikhism. Kaur and Kaur also emphasised that the social and religious life of most Sikhs revolves around the *Gurdwara* (place of worship).

According to Kaur (2012) and Kaur (2017), Sikh women are subordinate to men in terms of Sikh religious practices. These practices reflect male supremacy. The patriarchal social structure of the Sikhs in Malaysia, a small minority group of Punjabi ethnic origin, is still strongly influenced by the patriarchal structure prevalent in the Indian state of Punjab, India and inherited by the Sikh community in Malaysia. Therefore, women's household responsibilities in terms of home chores such as cooking and taking care of the children are upheld despite having a full-time career or employment. This indicates that a paradigm shift to not segregate the role of men and women in terms of being dominant in different domains (such as external

(outside the home) and internal (inside the home) domains) will not be impactful in the discontinuity of Punjabi cultural ideology. The lack of emphasis on equality in the internal domain (in terms of men equally contributing to household maintenance and home chores) is unlikely to change in the near future.

Besides, Kaur and Gill (2018) argue that such change will damage the family reputation as women are usually not included in decision-making and are considered socially and economically dependent on men although they have a career of their own. Women "consider themselves insecure, incomplete, ineffective and inefficient without males" (Mir, 2018, p.125). In this context, male dominance gives rise to male discrimination against women (Mir, 2018). The persistence of such a hegemonic rule which privileges men and oppresses women in the domestic domain is also reflected in the Sikh women's role and socialisation in a bigger society outside their home.

Kaur (2019b) has highlighted the aspects of gender equality in Sikh religious and cultural ideologies pertaining to egalitarian gender values. The equality of men and women in education, funerary rites, rights of the widows, equal participation in Sikh ceremonies, dowry, veil, purity and pollution, wedding ceremonies, equality in congregations and the community kitchen are examples of these values. Her study was conducted among 197 Sikh households from the metropolitan, urban and rural areas of Perak, a state in Malaysia. It concluded that patriarchal values in terms of non-egalitarian gender role preferences of men and women and the pattern of division of gendered labour exist amidst an egalitarian religious ideology. This indicates the egalitarian concept is far less accepted in practice. This was proven via the study's results, where women do most of the household and childcare tasks. Paradoxical situations are prevalent whereby 'ideology does not coincide with practice and practice does not comply with ideology' (Kaur, 2019b, p. 148).

Similarly, Singh (2005b) indicated an egalitarian conceptualisation of gender roles in the Sikh religion; however, present-day Sikhs do not live up to the egalitarian conceptualisation of gender roles as set by the religion. Likewise, Gill (2003) in a study among the Malaysian Sikh community stated that although the Sikh religion recognises equal status of both genders, in practice, women are never granted equal status with men. The dominance of Sikh males could be due to the influence presented by intersectional religious and cultural ideologies present among other dominant Malaysian communities that affect the cultural socialisation of the Sikh community. In the Malaysian multi-cultural context, gendered roles are still prevalent among the majority of the ethnic groups such as the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The local affirmation of practices in their ancestral land, Punjab, has further strengthened the Sikh male supremacy in Malaysia.

Gill (2003) argued that in practice, Sikh women in Malaysia are accorded a lower status compared to men although gender equality is enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. However, a study by Kaur and Gill (2018) indicated that the distinct differences among genders should also be analysed in terms of generation categorisation. Kaur and Gill's (2018) study examined perspectives from Sikh women of different generations which indicated clear distinctions between the early generations (i.e., first and second generations) of Sikh women immigrants in Malaysia and the current generation. The first- and second-generation Sikh women immigrants were active

and determined to serve society and maintained the authenticity of the Sikh religion. At the same time, the men were also supportive of the women's active contribution for the benefit of the Sikh community. Surprisingly, this reflects that a patriarchal system can also portray egalitarian elements in certain practices such as allowing women to contribute actively in certain *Gurdwara* activities that are not specific to males only. The current generations, Generation Z and Generation Alpha, on the other hand, who are greatly exposed to social media and with a heightened awareness of their rights, are selective in terms of attaching themselves to religious and cultural traditions as highlighted by Kaur and Kaur (2011); they are not actively involved in the *Gurdwara* activities such as selfless service (*sewa*). This may indicate their desire to ascribe to stereotypes about gender roles and remain on safe and familiar ground by not interfering with their male counterparts in the religious domain.

An interesting finding by Kaur and Moghal (2014) indicated a transition in the mindset of Malaysian Sikh males. Transitioning to a total egalitarian conceptualisation of gender relations is regarded as idealistic, that is, not achievable in every aspect of human life. As such, the study's findings indicate egalitarian and a mixed worldview of gender relations differ in the following categories: education, religion and religious practices, funeral rites, marriage, widowhood, non-hierarchical religious domains, dress code and geographical locations.

Sikh women in Malaysia have been participating actively in Sikh organisations since 1920. Two main Sikh organisations managed by Sikh women in Malaya (then) are Istri Satsang Sabha beginning in 1933 and Istri Milap (Dhalliwal & Sandhu, 1971a). Encouragingly, these two organisations are still present in Malaysia today. One prominent woman in the establishment of Istri Milap, Pritam Kaur Saki, migrated from Punjab, India and had a significant impact on the affairs of Sikh Malaysian women (Dhalliwal & Sandhu, 1971b). In the past, Sikh women through the establishment of the two main organisations at state levels, played important roles to preserve the authenticity of the Sikh faith and uplift the social conditions of the Sikh community (Kaur & Gill, 2018). The associations currently offer Sikh women an avenue to address issues of gender discrimination and provide women empowerment initiatives, but do not challenge the male dominance in the religious context.

## The Way Forward

Sikh religious values and beliefs influence the actions of both individuals and the various social groups that make up Sikh society. In a migrant diaspora, such as the Sikh diaspora in Malaysia, religious values, beliefs, and practices affect economic life, and social relationships in families, their own community and other ethnic communities at the societal level (Singh, 2008a, b). In the spiritual sphere, the teaching of Sikhism is well received and practised in Malaysia as *gurdwaras* play a vital role in the life of the community. Women are regarded as equal to men in the spiritual sphere based on the preachings by Granthis at *gurdwaras*. However, in congregations (*sangat*) and community kitchens (*langar*) in Malaysian *gurdwaras,*

women play their role as imposed by the local *Gurdwara* committees and not as stated in the Sikh doctrines.

Women's roles in leadership positions and decision-making in Sikh organisations are very minimal or to some extent invisible. For example, Kaur and Gill (2018), in their study, indicated few *gurdwaras* have denied membership to females as stated in their *Gurdwara* Constitution. In addition, being educated, having awareness of human/women's rights, and being connected via the latest social media, the younger female generation is comfortable with stereotypical gender roles and prefers not to interfere with their male counterparts in the religious domain. This is supported by past literature that women generally do not seek visibility in the management of religion-based institutions such as *gurdwaras.* For example, only 23% of the national Sikh Naujawan Sabha Malaysia organisation exco members are women (Sikh Naujawan Sabha Malaysia, 2021). In Khalsa Diwan Malaysia's (KDM) executive committee for 2017–2019 only 23.5% were women, that is, four women and thirteen male executive members (Khalsa Diwan Malaysia, 2021). Indirectly, in this male-dominant cultural space, women are relegated to secondary positions as wives, daughters, mothers of the male Sikhs, and non-influential positions in religion-based institutions.

In such an imbalanced gendered space, negotiation, navigation and practices of lived Sikh religion led to a challenging bi-cultural identity revelation in the daily lives of Malaysian Sikh women. All important aspects of individuals' lives (i.e., economic, cultural and political) are negotiated through reference to the religious traditions that give recognition to male supremacy. It is strongly suggested that four major organisations representing the Sikhs in Malaysia (Malaysian Gurdwaras Council, Khalsa Diwan Malaysia, Sikh Naujawan Sabha Malaysia and the Sant Sohan Singh Ji Malacca Memorial Society) should allocate more influential leadership roles for Sikh women taking into consideration their capabilities and skills, especially in the Generation Z and Generation Alpha.

Women are currently participating in *gurdwara* activities such as reciting scripture and taking part in the management of the institutions in non-decision-making roles. Although most *gurdwaras* in Malaysia are male dominated, women are starting to penetrate into administrative positions. This initiative among the females should be lauded, encouraged, and pushed to attain more influential positions in the management of the *gurdwara.* Being labelled as the weaker gender is a stigma held worldwide not only by one religion. This is basically a common assumption of the global citizenship of women. Therefore, Sikh women in Malaysia should play a more vocal role through women's organisations affiliated to the *gurdwaras* in Malaysia as a stepping stone to venture into other non-religion-based institutions and intercommunity networking.

The struggle of women trying to move into more prominent positions in the management of the *gurdwara* or in performing certain rituals does not only happen in Malaysia. The highest leading chair of the Sikh religion in Amritsar, Akal Takht, ban women from performing *Kirtan* (singing of religious hymns) in the sanctum sanctorum of the Golden Temple, Amritsar, Punjab as well as giving a shoulder to *palki* (palanquin) (Rana, 2017). This indicates clear gender-based discrimination

even though the Sikh religion is considered the most modern religion in the world based on equality of gender, race, religion, caste and creed. In the Italian context, according to Bertolani (2020), the normative discourse of Sikhism affirms the equality between man and woman before God in terms of performing the same roles and functions in religious practices. However, her study in Italy indicates that men and women hold distinct roles and there is a clear division of tasks that implicitly promotes a gender-based hierarchy. This relational structure, nevertheless, is being challenged by the young women born and raised in Italy.

In the Malaysian context, Kaur and Gill (2018) asserted that diasporic Sikh women have been sidelined in their religious domain in everyday life even though some changes are being made. In 2018, the newly initiated institutions in Malaysia trained and produced preachers (*Granthis*). These institutions should be used as a platform to create awareness and promote gender equality in Sikhism. This initiative can be seen as a platform to be more women inclusive, in terms of accepting women *Granthi* trainees in the institutions. Currently, *gurdwaras* in Malaysia face problems hiring professional male *Granthis* to conduct religious ceremonies due to unattractive salaries and *Granthis* who are brought from India tend to use Malaysia as a stepping stone to migrate to western countries such as Australia or New Zealand (Gill & Kaur, 2008). Since gender equality is enshrined in the Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the locally trained religious male specialists should be able to promote gender equality in their sermons and lectures in the *Gurdwara* and relate the interpretation from the Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji to the current context. This will be followed by allowing more women to be professionally trained as *Granthis.* Sant Sohan Singh Ji Malacca Memorial Society, popularly known as the Vidhyala, plays an important role in training local preachers for the *gurdwaras* throughout Malaysia. This organisation should start with accepting women trainees into the pool of locally trained *Granthis* to be attached to Malaysian *gurdwaras.*

The Malaysian Sikh Women's Awareness Network (SWAN), launched in 2000, is the only registered national-level women's organisation for Sikh women that focuses on the advancement and empowerment of Malaysian Sikh women. SWAN plays its role in advancing Malaysian Sikh women and their families by working with other national Malaysian bodies. SWAN conducts capacity-building programmes and health camps nationwide. Some examples include collaboration between SWAN and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Caucus of Malaysian Indian Women Leaders and the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO) Malaysia. It is important for an organisation such as SWAN to be revolutionary in setting the gender empowerment agenda in a more active mode. The organisation should not just function with the objective of looking after the social and cultural needs of women. The organisation should move out of its comfort zone of mainly focusing on cultural and social based activities and reflect on strategies to empower Sikh women in order to compete and be on par with Sikh men.

Another agenda would be to inculcate awareness about gender-based mutual respect, joint responsibilities in home management and gender equality among young Sikh men. The initiatives need the strength, determination and confidence of female SWAN leadership. SWAN should harness the assistance and support currently

available from the Ministry for Women, Family and Community Development to further its agenda to uplift gender equality for Sikh women throughout the political, economic, social, cultural and educational domains.

SWAN, which is currently helmed by many extraordinary women leaders, especially from the academic sector, should be more proactive to create awareness of the importance of education and equality. More avenues and opportunities need to be provided for Sikh women to pursue higher education and posts in higher education while helping to improve the quality of life for Malaysian Sikh women. SWAN should act to envision the future and nurture Sikh women's dynamism so that male Sikhs will recognise them as equal partners in all domains of life. Initiatives such as holistic developmental programmes will equip Sikh women with the ability to face the challenges of globalisation independently.

In addition, the Sikh community should emulate and encourage practices aligned with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified by Malaysia in 1995 (Sharifah Syahirah, 2010) and the Beijing Platform for Action that the Malaysian government had pledged to implement to realise women's rights as human rights (Ministry of Women, Family & Community Development Malaysia, 2000). CEDAW and Beijing Platform for Action can be the constructive guide to creating a gender-balanced working world for both Malaysian Sikh males and females. Such a situation, as indicated by Manuel and Ee (2019), involves creating more equitable opportunities for Sikh women, particularly at the highest levels of Malaysian Sikh organisations and the workplace. This is practical and can be implemented in line with the Malaysian government's commitment to implementing the United Nation's Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs). At the core of the SDGs is the belief that sustainable development is supported by social, political, economic equality and gender equality as articulated in Goal 5 (Women's Aid Organisation & Joint Action Group for Gender Equality, 2019).

## Implications

The Sikh male and female generations born in Malaysia, living with their ancestors, who have left Punjab to settle in Malaysia have been greatly influenced and exposed to multiculturalism, ethnic and racial relations and religious pluralism within the Malaysian context (Dusenbery, 2018; Gill & Gopal, 2010). At the same time, this group of Sikh diaspora is also very much separated from their ancestral roots in Punjab. In this case, their worldview of gender equality is a much more universal-oriented perspective. A universal-oriented perspective of gender equality views men and women as equals in many broad aspects of life. Therefore, the future of gender equality among the young of these two groups in terms of their gender roles is more positive and will provide a paradigm shift from a gender inequality worldview to an escalation of gender equality progressively.

The status of a woman in a society is a mirror image of the social, cultural, religious and political scenario of the society the woman belongs to (Kaur and Moghal, 2014).

A fact that cannot be denied is the incommensurability between Sikh doctrine and actual social practices. This chapter has asserted the equal standing of men and women in the Sikh community from the standpoint of the Sikh religion and its doctrines. The prospect for women to play an equal and more vibrant role in the socio-religious, political and economic spheres is due to the egalitarian and humanistic message of the Sikh Gurus. Dependency on the egalitarian humanistic message of Sikh Gurus has only been effective to a certain extent to promote gender equality. To support the Sikh doctrine on gender equality, locally trained *Granthis* are vital to preach and promote an egalitarian perspective in terms of gendered roles. However, the patriarchal motivated society has allowed for gender bias and narrow-mindedness associated with a male-dominated society to persist (Kaur, 2015).

On the contrary, in practice, contradictions prevail around the egalitarian principles in the Sikh society. Mooney (2020) indicated that gender hierarchies are a phenomenon that is ongoing. The contradictions and hierarchies are reflected in the gender imbalance and traditional expectations of the society's cultural ideologies. The imbalance and traditional expectations remarkably forced upon women a life trajectory more limited than those of men. In this context, gender inequalities are undeniably still present today in various forms in contemporary Malaysian Sikh society that lives in a multicultural and multi-racial context with locally flavoured economic and socio-cultural development that shapes their identities.

This informs us of the need for a modern and present-day Malaysian Sikh community to move beyond the ingrained customs, social taboos and know the true salubrious nature of justice and equality. The Malaysian Sikh community needs to embrace and practice genuine gender equality elements based on the true Sikh faith and live the way God desires by embracing freedom, justice, love and equality for all.

Sikh women of today in the Malaysian context need to have more influence within the *gurdwara* and be visible in the cultural space and discontinue the current norm of accepting the passive and secondary positions in the roles of women as wives, daughters, or mothers of the male Sikhs. The current scenario does not encourage Sikh women to negotiate, navigate or practise forms of lived religions as advocated by Sikhism. Sikh women in the diaspora need to debate with their Sikh community and accelerate mindset change to recognise the concept of gender equality, for example, in terms of performing the duties of a *Granthi.*

Gender justice or gender equality as indicated by Rashidah et al. (2016) and Ratti's (2019) intersectional Sikhism can be used to analyse Sikhs at the intersection of multiple forces of religious oppression. These frameworks inform us of the efforts and projects to advance Sikhism's positions for women in society by promoting, advancing and debating their rights within the framework of socio-political and socio-economic policies. Goetz (2007) indicated the need for the establishment of choice and entitlement for women, the elimination of gender-based discrimination and the achievement of these through discourse and strategies promoting their rights. One organisation spearheading these efforts is Sikh Women's Awareness Network (SWAN), though it needs to evaluate its role, purpose, and objective in terms of

taking women empowerment issues to greater heights through collaboration with other societal organisations involving the government, private organisations and non-governmental associations. SWAN can be a platform for Malaysian Sikh women to be empowered and be visible as leaders, motivators and influencers in the community. The Sikh women of Malaysia should be trendsetters and be empowered in their roles in the changing socio-economic-political-cultural landscape of the Sikh community.

## Conclusion

Equality between men and women means empowerment of both genders in all domains (such as home, religion, and society). It also includes the fairness of treatment for both genders in terms of their rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities. Achieving this in Malaysia's multicultural and multi-ethnic setting is compounded by many cultural, religious, demographic and racial challenges. The tripartite actors, government, society and individuals play a crucial role to work together and progress based on gender equality for all. Each party should devise actions to be delivered through education and awareness programs. Education is a valuable tool to educate and re-educate focusing on removing gender bias and cultivating new norms in terms of gender equality and re-shaping attitudes among the members of society in order to achieve gender parity. Change of gender inequality mindset that basically contradicts Goal 5 of the United Nations' SDGs, although slow, will be beneficial for the Sikh women and the Sikh community of Malaysia in the long run.

## References

Aman, D. D. Z., Jaffary, A., Rahimah, E., Syed Mohd Hafiz, S.O., & Safri, A. (2017). The Khalsa and the non-Khalsa within the Sikh Community in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 7*(8), 204–214.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (C. Emerson, Ed. & Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Banerjee, A. C. (1983). *The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Religion*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

Berry, J. W. (2019). *Acculturation: A personal journey across cultures*. Cambridge University Press.https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108589666.

Bertolani, B. (2020). Women and Sikhism in theory and practice: Normative discourses, seva performances, and agency in the case study of some young Sikh women in Northern Italy. *Religions, 11*(91), 1–22.

Bhatia, S., & Ram, A. (2004). Culture, hybridity, and the dialogical self: Cases from the South Asian diaspora. *Mind, Culture, and Activity, 11*(3), 224–240. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca1103_4

Butler, J. (1990). Feminism and the subversion of identity. *Gender Trouble, 3*, 1–25.

Crenshaw, K. (1988). Reform, and retrenchment: Transformation and legitimation in antidiscrimination Law. *Harvard Law Review, 101*(7), 1331–1387.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black Feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine. *University of Chicago Legal, 1989*(1), 139–168.
Dhalliwal, M. S., & Sandhu, M. K. (1971a). *Sikhs in Malaysia series: Some historical notes.* Pulau Pinang: Lopo–Ghar.
Dhalliwal, M. S., & Sandhu, M. K. (1971b). *Some Sikh culture, customs and traditions in Malaya.* Pulau Pinang: Lopo–Ghar.
Dusenbery, V. A. (2018). Millennial Sikhs of the diaspora come of age. *Sikh Formations, 14*(3–4), 252–259.
EQUATE. (2008). *Achieving gender equality in education: Trends in research and USAID programming (1996–2006); A synthesis report*. MSI.
Gill, S. K., & Gopal, N. D. (2010). Understanding Indian religious practice in Malaysia. *Journal of Social Sciences, 25*(1–3), 135–146.
Gill, S. S., & Kaur, C. (2008). Gurdwara and its politics: Current debate on Sikh identity in Malaysia. *Sari (ATMA), 26*, 243–255.
Gill, S.S. (2003). Malaysian Sikhs and gender Issues. *Akademika, 63*(1), 45–55.
Goetz, A. M. (2007). Political cleaners: Women as the new anti-corruption force? *Development and Change, 38*(1), 87–105.
*Guru Granth Sahib* (1993 Damdami Version). (Gopal Singh, trans. and annotated) Amritsar, India: Sri Gurmat Press. (Original work published 1706).
Haralambos, M., & Holborn, M. (1994). *Sociology themes and perspective.* Harper Collins UK.
Jakobsh, D. R. (2003). *Relocating gender in Sikh History: Transformation, meaning and identity.* Oxford University Press.
Jhutti-Johal, J. (2014). Gender equality or inequality in the Sikh community? Retrieved from https://savinghumans.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/gender-equality-or-inequality-in-the-sikh-community/.
Kaur, P. (2006). *Gender Ideologies, Resources and Marital Power: A Study of Sikh Household in Perak, Malaysia.* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation) Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya.
Kaur, B. (2001). *On Sikh identity.* Amritsar: Singh Brothers.
Kaur, C., & Gill, S. S. (2018). Sikh Women diaspora in Malaysia: The reality of their role and status. *Millennial Asia, 9*(1), 40–65.
Kaur, C. (2021). Paradoxes of Sikh women's life. Asia Samachar, 18 March 2021. https://asiasamachar.com/2021/03/18/37194b/.
Kaur, C. (2017). *A textual community: The Sikh minority community in Malaysia.* Conference Proceeding International Conference on World Ethnic Minorities' Cultural Heritage and Teaching Innovation, pp. 69–78, Tzu Chi University of Science and Technology, Taiwan.
Kaur, C. (2012). *Komuniti tekstual: Peranan Guru Granth Sahib dalam Pembentukan Identiti Gender dalam Kalangan Lelaki dan Perempuan Sikh [Textual Community: The Role of Guru Granth Sahib in Formation of Gender Identity among Sikh Men and Women]* (Unpublished PhD thesis) Bangi, Malaysia: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
Kaur, I. (2019a). A 'Kaur' Demands Gender Equality Given by Her Gurus. Retrieved from https://feminisminindia.com/2019a/11/13/kaur-demands-gender-equality-gurus/.
Kaur, K. & Kaur, M. L. (2011). Sikh women and their absence from leadership positions in Malaysian Sikh-Based institutions. In Shamsul A.B. & Arunajeet Kaur (Eds.) *Sikhs in Southeast Asia: Negotiating an identity*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.
Kaur, P. (2019b). Does location matter in gender equality? The impact of location on religious and cultural ideologies, sex role preferences and division of labour among Sikh couples in Malaysia. *Science International, 31*(1), 141–149.
Kaur, P., & Moghal, A. J. (2014). The perceptions on gender equality among the Sikhs in Malaysia. *International Review of Modern Sociology, 40*(2), 163–174.
Kaur, S. (2015). Equality of Women in Sikh Ideology. *Journal of Social Sciences Research, 6*(2), 1000–1003.
Khalsa Diwan Malaysia. (2021). Executive Committees KDM. http://khalsadiwan.org/?page_id=956.

King, U. (2005). General Introduction. In K. Ursula & T. Beattie (Eds.), *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (pp. 1–12). Bloomsbury Publishing.
Manuel, N., & Ee, H.K. (2019). Advancing Gender Equality in Malaysia. *The Edge Malaysia Weekly* (April 1–April 07, 2019). https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/advancing-gender-equality-malay.
McLeod, W. H. (1997). *Sikhism.* Penguin.
Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia. (2000). *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.* Malaysia Progress Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Outcomes of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly 2000.
Mir, S. (2018). Construction of negative identity of female gender in the Punjabi proverbs. *Humanities and Social Sciences, 6*(4), 125–129.
Mooney, N. (2020). In our whole society, there is no equality: Sikh householding and the intersection of gender and caste. *Religions, 11*(95), 1–21.
Nesbitt, E. (2005). *Faith Guides for Higher Education: A Guide to Sikhism.* University of Leeds.
Palmisano, J. M. (2001). *World of sociology.* Detroit: Gale Group.
Rana, Y. (26 July 2017). Why are women not allowed to perform kirtan in sanctum sanctorum of Golden Temple. Times of India. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/amritsar/why-are-women-not-allowed-to-perform-kirtan-in-sanctum-sanctorum-of-golden-temple/articleshow/59778529.cms.
Rashidah, S., Noraida, E., & Diana, W. (Eds.). (2016). *Debating GENDER JUSTICE in Asia.* Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
Ratti, M. (2019). Intersectionality, Sikhism, and Black feminist legal theory: Reconceptualizing Sikh precarity and minoritization in the US and India. *Sikh Formations, 15*(3–4), 411–440.
Sanita, D. (2017). "*We're not just Canadian": Identity negotiations of Canadian Sikh women living with their in-laws* [Unpublished MA thesis]. Royal Roads University Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.
Sekhon, K. Y., & Szmigin, I. (2011). Acculturation and identity: Insights from second generation Indian Punjabis. *Consumption Markets & Culture, 14*(1), 79–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/10253860903562171
Sharifah Syahirah, S. S. (2010). The Implementation of CEDAW in Malaysia: A Human Rights-Based Analysis. *Sarjana, 25*(3), 55–72.
Shaw, S. M., & Janet, L. (2015). *Women's voices, feminist visions: Classic and contemporary readings.* McGraw Hill.
Shinder Singh Thandi. (2014). The Punjab paradox: Understanding the failures of Diaspora engagement. *Diaspora Studies, 7*(1), 42–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2013.871891
Sikh Feminist Research Institute (SAFAR). http://www.sikhfeministresearch.org/.
Sikh Naujawan Sabha Malaysia. (2021). SNSM Exco. https://snsm.org.my/snsm-exco/.
Singh, A. (1983). *Ethics of The Sikhs.* Punjabi University.
Singh, D. (2008a). Sikhism and Development: A Review. *Religions and Development Research Programme.* Working Paper 21.
Singh, D. P. (2021). Status of Women in Sikh Theology. *The Sikh Bulletin, 23*(1), 34.
Singh, D. P. (2022). Sikh doctrines on women emancipation and empowerment. *Asia Samachar,* February 28.
Singh, J. K. (2019). Negotiating ambivalent gender spaces for collective and individual empowerment: Sikh women's life writing in the diaspora. *Religions, 10*(598), 1–20.
Singh, K. (2008b). The Sikh spiritual model of counseling. *Spirituality and Health International, 9*, 32–43.
Singh, N. G. K. (2005a). Re-membering the body of the transcendent one. *Sikh Formations, 1*(2), 201–216.
Singh, N. G. K. (2005b). *The birth of the Khalsa: a feminist re-memory of Sikh identity.* SUNY Press.
*Sri Guru Granth Sahib.* (1983). Reprint, S.G.P.C, Amritsar, India. pp. 1–1430.

Subrahmanian, R. (2005). Gender equality in education: Definitions and measurements. *International Journal of Educational Development, 25*(4), 395–407.
United Nations (1997). *Report of the Economic and Social Council for 1997.* A/52/3(18 September) 1–10 http://www.un.rg/documents/ga/docs/52/plenary/a52-3.htm.
United Nations Development Program (2010). Power, Voices and Rights: A Turning Point in Gender Equality for Asia and the Pacific. *Asia Pacific Human Development Report.* New Delhi: McMillan Publishers India Ltd.
Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) & Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG). (2019). *The Status of Women's Human Rights: 24 Years of CEDAW in Malaysia.* Women's Aid Organisation.
Zain, A. D. M., & Ismail, M. S. (2018). Sikhism's identity and challenges in Malaysia: A literature review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 8*(7), 986–998.

**Manjet Kaur Mehar Singh** (Ph.D) is an associate professor at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia. Currently, she holds the position of Deputy Dean of Research, Innovation and Community-Industry Engagement at the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation. She also serves as an editorial board member on various international and national level SCOPUS journals. In line with her expertise, she has also published widely in impact factor journals such as Springer, Emerald and Elsevier in the areas of higher education, international students, ESP, multiculturalism and academic literacies. She is actively involved in research related to academic plagiarism in higher education, academic literacies and higher order thinking skills among students.

# A Phenomenology of the Lives of Malaysian Sikh Women: Their Roles and Status in the Private Domain


**Charanjit Kaur and Sarjit S. Gill**

**Abstract** Sikh religion emphasises that every human being, both male and female, is equally important, and each has the same position, status, rights, and opportunity to live this life as ordained by God. However, phrases like 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman or a man' and 'females and males are born, but women and men are products of enculturation' shows that gender is not biologically determined but socially and culturally defined. This means being a man or woman is not 'fixed' but it is in the process of 'being'—an active state constructed through social norms or pressures from certain authority. The discussion in many studies tend to pay more attention to men's experience and the daily experiences of women are often not given much prominence. Thus, in this chapter, Sikh women's experience of gender in a private domain i.e., the family institution, is explored through a phenomenological lens. This article tries to discover how Sikh women understand the concept of gender as suggested by the *Guru Granth Sahib* (scripture) and how it affects their behaviour so that it becomes a social reality in their lives. Qualitative data were collected via interviews with ten Sikh females to see whether the daily experience of the Sikh woman is influenced by patriarchal culture or based on the teachings of the Sikh religion. This paper also offers some recommendations to strengthen gender equality status among both genders in the private domain.

**Keywords** Gender ideology · *Guru Granth Sahib* · Phenomenology · Private domain · Sikh women

C. Kaur (✉)
Faculty of Creative Industries (FCI), Department of General Studies, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Selangor, Malaysia
e-mail: charanjit@utar.edu.my

S. S. Gill
Faculty of Human Ecology, Department of Social and Development Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Seri Kembangan, Malaysia



P. Karupiah and J. L. Fernandez (eds.), *A Kaleidoscope of Malaysian Indian Women's Lived Experiences*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5876-2_13

## Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir in her book, The Second Sex (published in 1949), asked 'What is a woman'? No one, the author claimed would ever ask a similar question about men because men were considered to be the standard, the unchallenged human form, the universal category by which all else was evaluated. A similar situation is seen in the Sikh community in Malaysia. Women are under-represented in academic research. An extensive literature search has shown that very little has been written or documented about Malaysian Punjabi Sikh women's experiences in the fields of sociology, psychology, politics, economics or even in the mass media. Up to this day, most of the research conducted has focused only on the contribution of Sikh men (Kaur, 1973; Kaur & Gill, 2018; Sandhu, 1970; Sidhu, 1991; Singh, 1949, 1965). This is because the Sikh diaspora in Malaya was pioneered by the men.[1] According to Kaur and Gill (2018), many articles recorded the economic and social activities of Sikh men but rarely did the writers pay close attention to Sikh women's contributions[2] (Kaur, 1973, 1989; Nadzan, 1991; Sandhu, 1969; Singh, 1993). Likewise, most of the past studies are gender-specific and focus predominantly on the contributions of men (Kaur, 1991, 1993; Singh, 1998a). As a result, women are being marginalised in research and their lives have not been studied.

In their recent work, Kaur and Gill (2018) discussed the status of Sikh women in the religious domain by comparing the historical facts before the 1970s and the current scenario through a study based on fieldwork.[3] In the same way, this article aimed to bring women's experience in their private or domestic realm under the scholarly microscope by digging up facts and developing insights into that experience. There are three main sections in this writing: authority-defined gender ideology, Punjabi patriarchal culture, and lived experiences of Punjabi Sikh women in the domestic domain. This chapter is crucial as it endeavours to explore the roles and status of Sikh women in the family institution as their position in the society is obscure (Kaur, 2012, 2017) and the Sikh community continues to be portrayed as one that adopts a male-dominated creed in which women are still on the fringes and remain subordinate figures.

---

[1] For more about the early history of Sikhs, see Singh (1965), Sandhu (1969, 1970, 1993), Dhalliwal and Sandhu (1991). In addition, there were numerous academic theses and papers which discuss the same. Among them, Kaur (1973), Malhi (1977, 2015), Singh (1978, 1993), Kaur (1986), Kaur (1992), Sidhu (1996), Singh (1998b, 2000a, 2001, 2005), Kaur (2000a, b), Kaur (2003a, b), Kaur (2002, 2003a, b, 2009, 2012). To review the entire bibliography of a study on the Sikh community in Malaysia (1937–2002), refer to Gill (2002).

[2] In fact, it is difficult to trace the influx of Sikh women into the country either because it was not recorded, or the records are missing. If one investigates the first wave of Sikh women migration, they will know that not only were their stories and lives not included and detailed, but more importantly it reflects the imbalanced power correlation between the sexes. The number of women migrating together with their families cannot be accurately stated due to the lack of data and information on this matter, especially in the early waves of migration (Kaur & Gill, 2018).

[3] An ethnography study was conducted on Sikh men and women on the idealistic concept of gender as recommended in the *Guru Granth Sahib* as well as the implications on the status, rights, roles and responsibilities of both genders (Kaur, 2012).

## *Authority-Defined Gender Ideology*

*Guru Granth Sahib* is not merely a book or scripture but has been given the status of an eternal and absolute Sikh Guru status known as the Living Guru or the *Jivant Guru.* Since 1708, the *Guru Granth Sahib* has become the only authority-defined social reality for the Sikhs worldwide and its status as an eternal Guru remains forever. The hallmark of Sikhism is the belief in equality[4] among all human beings. Equality of humankind, fair approach regardless of social standing (non-discrimination based on caste, creed, class, religion, and gender), social justice (guarantees equal rights and opportunities) and worship of only One God are well-known basic values that have given the world a simple and universal faith. *Sikhi* believes in respecting the rights of others to be different (human rights and religious freedom) and does not believe in imposing its values on others. This has been practised through the *gurdwara* institution[5] which emphasises equal rights, responsibilities, opportunities and status between gender, ethnicity, or other social categories (Kaur, 2012; Kaur & Gill, 2018; Singh, 2005). Equally important, Sikhism does not believe that life is sinful or evil in origin but believes that human beings have emerged from a 'pure source'.[6] It believes in the 'here and now' and does not subscribe to the concept of the afterlife—thereby it rejects the existence of heaven and hell.[7]

Sikh religion has a unique world view of gender ideology. From a gender perspective, God is symbolically described as a 'husband' (Lord Husband[8]) to all humanity whereby all human beings, irrespective of gender, are perceived as having the status of 'wives' (soul-bride) to God. Since the Sikh philosophy focuses on the concept of the spirit rather than the physical body, therefore, the position of God and humankind should be seen from that point of view of the transformation of the spirit. Most significantly, every human being, whether male or female, has equal importance and each individual has the same status, rights and opportunity to live this life as God has ordained and could attain liberation (Kaur, 2012). As an authority-defined figure, the Sikh community relies solely on the *Guru Granth Sahib* to understand the gender relationship. In fact, tenets of life that define practices as worthy of praise, or to be avoided, are not gender-specific. This makes the philosophy of gender equality in the Sikh religion particularly interesting and worthy of academic scrutiny (Kaur,

---

[4] 'Accept all humans as your equals, and let them be your only sect (human race)' (*Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 28).

[5] *Sadh-sangat* (congregation) by praying together as equals, *pangat* (commensality) by sitting together as equals and *Guru Ka Langar* (Guru's Community Kitchen) by eating together as equals.

[6] Its origin was in God and its end is in God; and it operates in the God's *Hukm* (God's order) (*Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 294). Additionally, 'The creator who created the universe, knows when He created it' (*Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 4).

[7] Truthful living in the noble fear of God is heaven. Having no faith in God and leading an unethical life is hell (*Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 24).

[8] There is one Husband Lord, and all are His brides (*Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 933). In this world and in the next, the soul-bride belongs to her Husband Lord, who has such a vast family (*Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 137).

2012). Many verses discuss the status of women that have captured not only historical practices but also the reality of contemporary society. Hence, the scripture is considered reliable and authentic which has become an important source of daily guiding principles for the Sikhs.

Some of the ancient practices or concepts condemned by the Sikh Gurus[9] had become a major barrier for women to elevate their status in society, for example (i) the practice of wearing a purdah by Muslim women, (ii) the practice of the *sati* system by Hindu women, (iii) female infanticide. (iv) giving dowry, (v) female inferiority and (vi) impurity or pollution due to menstruation and childbirth. According to Singh (2000a, b), Sikhs during the Guru period (1496–1699) first questioned, challenged and ultimately eliminated sexist and misogynistic practices.[10] The Sikh Gurus were deeply aware of the prevailing victimisation of women in their societies and therefore actively opposed gender-biased customs and beliefs, leading the Sikh Gurus toward 'a new praxis, a formulation of new possibilities for the weak and oppressed' (Singh, 2000b: 67). For instance, the Sikh Gurus questioned the stigma and taboos associated with the reproductive power of women and Singh (2000b) interpreted it as an acknowledgement of menstrual bleeding as an essential and natural process, thus free from pollution and stigma. Instead of criticising people's negative perceptions, according to Kaur (2012), the Sikh Gurus tried to bring out the real meaning of such practices and link it to the Creator.[11] The following is the most popular verse used in religious sermons and daily interactions on women's real position and the verse challenges the cultural notion of women who are often seen as either 'approved' or 'disapproved and disassociated from':

> From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all. O Nanak, only the True Lord is without a woman. That mouth which praises the Lord continually is blessed and beautiful. O Nanak, those faces shall be radiant in the Court of the True Lord.
>
> (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 473)

[9] The Sikh Gurus refused to recognise the discrimination inherent in human beings in particular involving gender, class and caste systems as well as orthodox social conventions or regulations (Cunningham, 1972: 39; Tully & Jacob 1986: 17). The Gurus are very serious about the issue of gender equality between men and women in all aspects of life. They have fought for the fate and emancipation of women regardless of their religious background (Gill, 1978: 91).

[10] According to Narain (1967 as cited in Bonvillain, 1995), the Indian government had banned it in 1829, allowing the widow to remarry (1856), increasing the marriage age of girls up to 12 years (1860), allowing divorce and upholding women's right to the estate (1872) and giving women the right of ownership of property (1874) (Bonvillain, 1995: 134).

[11] Pollution lies in the heart and not in the stained garment (*Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 140). The impurity of the mind is greed, and the impurity of the tongue is falsehood. The impurity of the eyes is to gaze upon the beauty of another man's wife, and his wealth. The impurity of the ears is to listen to the slander of others. O Nanak, the mortal's soul goes, bound and gagged to the city of Death (*Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 472).

Overall, the biological differences have no significance, as they are seen essentially as God's creation (Kaur, 2012). Though the appearance of man and woman is different, both are equal in spirituality (Kaur & Gill, 2018). During the second millennium (1469), as a result of the 'activism' (actual knowledge or new meaning) of the Sikh Gurus' teaching, equality between men and women manifests in daily practice. To illustrate, there is no ban or prohibition on women attending *gurdwara* and paying obeisance. In religious matters, both women and men can receive Sikh Initiation,[12] be a *Khalsa*,[13] as well as perform all Sikh religious rites, such as recitation of sacred poetry and religious ceremonies (Kaur, 2012). *Khalsa* is expected to serve the community, defend the oppressed[14] and provide leadership to the wider Sikh community (Sikh Coalition, 2008: 2). Finally, the names of Sikhs are not gender-specific but females are given the last name Kaur (princess) and males are given the last name Singh (lion) to dispel the inequalities that society has imposed through the caste system, classism, and sexism (Ahluwalia & Zaman, 2010).

## Punjabi Patriarchal Culture: Homeland Traditions

"Patriarchy is a social system in which structural differences in privilege, power and authority are invested in masculinity and the cultural, economic and/or social position of men" (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003: 15). Under a patriarchal regime, women are, by definition, excluded from positions of power and authority—except where that power and authority work to support individual men or the social system as a whole. Henceforth, a woman might be authoritative towards her children in the home, in order to provide a calm and supportive environment for her husband.

Walton-Roberts and Pratt (2005) encourage context-specific definitions of patriarchy that each culture shares the same forms of patriarchy. The embodiment or epitome of the patriarchal tradition varies according to culture and by the same token, it is malleable according to the cultural context of the diaspora (Walton-Roberts & Pratt, 2005). As a South Asian community, the Punjabi[15] culture is a collectivistic

[12] Open to all social categories, i.e., no age, gender, race or education limits.

[13] Baptized Sikhs (*Amritdhari*) are called *Khalsa* and required to wear 5 K—physical symbols:(a) *Kesh*—unshorn/uncut hair, both genders are to keep their *kesh* covered—usually with a turban (headgear) or a scarf. (b) *Kangha*—wooden comb placed in hair as symbol of cleanliness. (c) *Kara*—steel bracelet as a physical reminder that one is bound to God. (d) *Kachera*—cotton underwear (does not always have to be used as underwear) as a reminder to stay away from lust and attachment. (e) *Kirpan*—small sword to defend one's faith (self-defense) and protect the weak. Teaches not to seek revenge or retribution but to be free of hatred. The four prohibitions or mandatory restrictions of the *Khalsa* are: (a) Not to disturb the natural growth of the hairs. (b) Not to eat ritually slaughtered meat. (c) Not cohabiting with a person other than one's spouse. (d) Not to succumb to intoxication (e.g., drugs, tobacco, alcohol and other unhealthful substances).
(Kaur, 2017: 75).

[14] In Sikh history, Sikh women have fought for harmony, mortality, and justice (Kaur, 2000a, b).

[15] Punjabi refers to being a native of or belonging to Punjab, which is a state in the Northwest region of India and an Eastern province of Pakistan. The word Punjab means the land of five rivers.

culture that seeks to keep the needs of others ahead of personal needs (Honore et al., 2013). "Collectivistic communities emphasise the "we" which consists of a few embedded characteristics such as collective identity, emotional inter-dependence, group solidarity, sharing, duties and obligations, the need for stable and predetermined friendships, group decisions and particularism" (Bhugra, 2004, p. 136) and also having an interdependent self-construal view of oneself, i.e., looking at oneself in relation to others (Ibrahim et al., 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This is in direct contrast with the independent self-construal view where the self is defined independently of others and this shapes how individuals navigate themselves in their family and community (Miller et al., 1990).

In short, a collectivistic community can be a source of support, but at the same time, it can cause stress among its members because it places importance on the needs of the family and not on the self. Many Punjabi families follow the patriarchal family structure (Angelo, 1997; Galdas et al., 2012; Gill, 2012; Honore et al., 2013). The Punjabi patriarchal hierarchy authorises the father to make decisions and control the members of his family. On the other hand, women typically hold the least amount of power and are not involved in decision-making for their households (Ray, 2006). In such a structure of power imbalance, women have lower status, are subject to ancestral rituals and customs and are vulnerable in situations of domestic conflicts.

There are three main cultural values of gendered socialisation in the Punjabi family: respect (*satkaar*), family honour (*izzat*) and face value/shame (*sharam*). In the first place, both sexes are taught to respect their parents and elders by performing their family duties (Nayar, 2004). Children are trained to say *Ji* when addressing or responding to their elders, as well as to follow the orders and advice of the elders, especially in joint or extended families. Showing respect by not questioning the decision or actions of elders is the first stage of the problem of women in the domestic domain. Furthermore, Punjabi females are expected to remain silent by not expressing their opinion because arguing with elders is seen as highly offensive and disrespectful. Secondly, maintaining family honour is important as it affects the family's position in the community (Jacobsen & Myrvold, 2015; Rait, 2005; Sekhon & Szmigin, 2005). Most of the time, the burden of maintaining family honour is on women's shoulders and they are told to keep family problems or marital conflict as a private matter. To maintain the reputation of the family, females hide the truth and feel dishonoured in seeking assistance (Lynch, 1990). Divorce or separation is the worst situation that can threaten the honour of the family. As a result, many Punjabi women suffer in silence, endure 'abuse' and face health problems.

Additionally, Punjabis are very particular about saving face and avoiding shame, and this is ingrained in the psyche of Punjabis (Angelo, 1997). Hence, Punjabi females

---

The Punjabi community encompasses individuals from different religions, including Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism (Gandhi, 2013). The Punjabi community is known for its rich land and vibrant culture. This agrarian-based community places importance on its rich and fertile land which is the breadbasket for India. Embedded in this community is a caste system that separates individuals into a hierarchy. Individuals are placed in this hierarchy according to wealth, specifically land ownership (Gandhi, 2013). The family into which one is born determines one's placement in the hierarchy, making it difficult to move up the ladder.

are repeatedly reminded not to bring shame to the family (Gill, 2012; Rait, 2005). They are expected to behave well and avoid any bad situations such as pre-marital sex, abortion, smoking, drinking, having tattoos, coming home late at night or running away from home. The problem of mental illnesses can also lead to shame in the family (Jarvis et al., 2011). These conditions have imprisoned Punjabi girls and women with no recourse to finding support (even from their own family) because once their name or honour is tarnished, the whole family lives in shame. Such is not the case for men. In short, behaviour is regulated by family and community norms. Maintaining harmony, saving face, and keeping disagreements hidden from people outside the family are characteristics of collectivistic cultures (Triandis, 1990).

## Phenomenological Approach

Qualitative research is based on the assumption that the context in which social phenomena occur influences and shapes the situation. This research is based on the phenomenological approach rather than a particular theory per se. Spiegelberg (1975) defined phenomenology as a philosophical approach, the primary objective of which is the direct investigation and description of the phenomenon as consciously experienced, without any theory about its causal explanation. This research approach is inductive and descriptive in its design (Cohen & Ornery, 1994; Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Phenomenology affirms the primacy of the world of everyday life as a starting point for research on the scientific explanations of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). As a result, the current study did not rely on any specific theoretical framework to guide its direction and focus. Rather, the participants' perspectives on the phenomenon provided rich data to describe the phenomenon.

Phenomenology is the most appropriate research method for the current study because it purports to explore how a person has lived through and made sense of a specific phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978; Karlsson, 1993; Van Manen, 1990). Numerous scholars (e.g., Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985; Osborne, 1990; Sandelowski et al., 1989) suggest that this research method is appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon or when aspects of the phenomenon cannot be easily quantified. Given that Sikh Punjabi women's domestic experiences have not been documented in the literature and knowing that their experience is difficult to quantify, we considered this method to be most appropriate because it concerns the description of the phenomenon rather than prediction or interpretation thereof. It deals with the subjective experience of a person's everyday life[16] (Giorgi, 1985). By seeing experience as a discursive

[16] The lived experience of the world of everyday life is the central focus of phenomenological inquiry (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). Phenomenological research aims to elucidate the lived experience of a particular life event from the perspective of the person who has personally experienced it. It emphasises the description of the experience from the viewpoint of the person (Van Manen, 1990).

construct and recognising its role in the production of subjects, we can use it to examine the relationships between individual subjects and the society and cultures in which they operate.

By using in-depth interviews,[17] ten Sikh women were interviewed. Eykam Kaur (1940), Harpreet Kaur (1944), Parineet Kaur (1948), and Eykas Kaur (1964) are all housewives with elementary education, whereas Gyani Gurkesh Kaur (1957) has religious education and a Certificate of *Gyaniship*. Parteet Kaur (1975) works as a banker, Nirvair Kaur (1979) as a lecturer, Jasman Kaur (1983) as a clerk, Satparvan Kaur (1986) as a self-employed person, and Manchet Kaur (1990) as an engineer.[18] Their ideas and meanings on gender roles and social status in the family institution were explored. Despite the scope and richness of the data obtained from each sample, it is usually intentionally limited[19] (Baker et al., 1992). Interpretative phenomenological analysis[20] (IPA) was used to examine the participants' experiences. Two distinct meanings that govern an interpretive approach are useful for understanding the lives of Sikh women. The first refers to culturally-given meanings, that is, those ideas, beliefs and values which have been derived from the culture, including religion. The second refers to ideas, beliefs, and values that we extract from our everyday experiences (Kasper, 1994). Furthermore, as an insider, the authors can speak and understand the language[21] of the people being studied, having the advantage of being able to access information faster and more effectively. Since the authors as insiders share the research participants' social world, there is less likelihood the authors will experience any "culture shock or disorientation". The expectation is that the

[17] Each interview began with a brief introduction. The purpose of the study was explained, and participants were assured that their identity would remain confidential, that they could refuse to answer any questions and that they could end the interview at any time. In addition, during the interview the participant's comfort level was taken into consideration; periodically the interviewer asked the participant if she was feeling comfortable with the questions and if it was all right to proceed with additional questions. The interviews took place at locations agreed upon by both parties. We felt that all of the participants spoke about their own experiences openly and honestly. We took brief notes during the interviews and with the permission of participants, audio-taped the conversations. All the participants stayed on topic and answered the questions without hesitation.

[18] Refer to Table 1 in the Appendix for their brief descriptions.

[19] In phenomenological research, the sample size is not predetermined. Several scholars (e.g., Colaizzi, 1978; Cresswell, 1994; Morse, 1994) recommend approximately six to eight participants for phenomenological research because of the extensive amount of information that is gathered from each participant using personal and in-depth interviews. Lengthy and repeated interviews are necessary to facilitate participants' descriptions of their experiences thus accounting for the typically fewer subjects in studies that use a phenomenological approach.

[20] We transcribed all the interviews verbatim and reviewed each interview transcript twice to ensure accuracy. IPA was appropriate for this study because we wanted to explore the participants' experiences instead of approaching the study with a research hypothesis. Most importantly, IPA is commonly used to interpret data on participants' lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015b). IPA is also ideal for studies with small samples and when data analysis requires a close examination of long individual transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2015a).

[21] As some participants may have felt more comfortable speaking in Punjabi, we were prepared, if necessary, to carry out interviews in the Punjabi language, especially in the case of individuals of the older generations.

context will be understood and appreciated in a way that is not open to a non-Punjabi researcher. The insider has the ability at the time of the research to provide knowledge and sensitivity[22] to both verbal and non-verbal responses.

## Lived Journey of Sikh Women in the Domestic Sphere

A majority of the respondents state that Sikh women are equal to Sikh men and Sikh women enjoy respect and reverence in the Sikh faith when asked how women are treated in Sikhism. Sikh religion gives women a very high degree of respect according to Eykam Kaur, while Harpreet Kaur mentioned the Sikh Gurus elevated the status of women by stressing that even a King was born from a woman. Parteet Kaur elaborated that the *Guru Granth Sahib* verses consistently praised women, criticised their oppression and strongly challenged the idea that women were evil or unworthy. Nevertheless, studies conducted by Kaur and Gill (2018) and Gill and Kaur (2008) revealed that women do not get public dominant positions. Men in the *gurdwara* management dominate in almost all aspects and do not welcome women to hold a higher role in committees. Women are encouraged to continue their domestic roles in the *gurdwara* (i.e., cooking and cleaning). The kind of gender equality that Sikh apologetics has so often promised is not practised. What about the roles and status of women at home? To discuss this phenomenon, the authors will focus on the three main themes of Sikh women's experience of roles and status in the domestic realm: (i) normalisation of sex roles (ii) maintaining family social image (iii) transmission of a new culture.

### *Normalisation of Sex Roles*

Historically, the role of women in India has been largely limited to marriage, household chores, child support and upbringing (Miller, 1999). Commitment to the family as a way of life is highly valued and motherhood is seen as an avenue for increased power and status within the family unit. Women are undoubtedly said to be 'naturally' nurturing, sensitive and emotional. The majority of respondents had been socialised to male-biased cultural norms and have internalised these norms. With this in mind, husbands and wives play complementary roles with men specialising in instrumental functions (goal-oriented) and domestically-oriented women specialising in affective functions (emotional). This reduced any potential strain between the instrumentally

[22] Due to the researcher's deep involvement, his/her personal beliefs and assumptions can potentially influence all aspects of the research from the wording of the question, deciding what the data are, to collecting the data and finally interpreting it (Osborne, 1990). Although it is extremely difficult for the researchers to separate from their personal values and beliefs, the strategy of phenomenological reduction allows them to become cognizant of their presuppositions that may influence the data collection and analysis (Beck, 1994; Kvale, 1983; Osborne, 1990).

oriented world of work and the emotional atmosphere of family life (Kaur, 2012). Correspondingly, most of the female respondents support this ideal culture by saying that women are 'natural homemakers' who seek 'pleasure' by managing their homes. Eykam Kaur described the chores of husband and wife casually:

> My husband is the head of the house because he has the responsibility of supporting the family and bringing the money home. But I am also the head of the house because I take care of the children's welfare and the kitchen. Simply put, a man is a prime minister while his wife is a home minister. Men have to work to make money, to provide for their families and to take responsibility for every family member. The wife raises children and cares for the family, cooks and washes. However, the primary duty of a woman is to give birth to children and to take care of ailing family members. This is because only women can convey emotions to everyone. However, to keep the family going, each family member has a responsibility and a role to play. They should be helpful to each other and can be expected [to do so] in times of uncertainty, especially when there are sick or disabled family members.[23]

Nirvair Kaur displayed a similar way of thinking when sharing her experiences as a wife and mother to two daughters:

> Men's roles are as breadwinners, heads of families and [the] family [role] model, especially [to their] children. As a wife, I support the actions of my husband and as a mother, I support the actions of my children and am responsible for guiding them in the right direction. My husband, however, praised me for managing finances well. This is probably because I am a degree holder in accounting. So, my duties and responsibilities can be like ministers of finance and home affairs.

She added,

> If a woman is strong, the pillar of her family is strong. I'm a pusher at home. This is because I would wake up early in the morning and wake up my family for the morning prayers and remind them of the evening prayer. If I hadn't been home, the house would have been a bit hazy [disorganised]. Therefore, the family wants me at home all the time. But if I work on Sundays, my husband will send the children to Punjabi school and *gatka*[24] classes and make sure they have their meals.

Jasman Kaur believes that the mother's job is to teach children. If a child makes a mistake, the mother will offer support and guidance to correct the mistake. This is because of the feelings or instincts that mothers have about their children. Men do not take full care of children, so they do not have a good understanding of the child's feelings. If the child cries, the mother understands that the child is hungry while the father will say, "Don't make noise, please!". The aspect of motherhood and love recorded in *Guru Granth Sahib* as '*mata preet kare putt khai*' (mother loves seeing her son eat) indirectly indicates a mother's calmness when feeding her children. Therefore, Parteet Kaur says if a man or a father takes over, the role he plays is quite limited. This is because he cannot possibly give emotional support to his daughter. In a simple word, a father can take up the role of "mother" toward his son, but not toward his daughter.

---

[23] The authors keep every word and expression of the respondents as they are to reflect its originality in terms of their ideas and life experiences.

[24] *Gatka* is a traditional martial art of the Sikhs.

While some respondents commonly acknowledged an inequitable division of domestic labour, few expressed dissatisfactions with the unending housework that does not have a defined job description, and which does not directly involve the exchange of a certain number of hours or an agreed amount of work for a specific return. According to Eykam Kaur, she was raised to help her mother in the kitchen and do other housework including cleaning the house and washing dishes, clothes, blankets and so on. Being a woman is like getting a 'license' to do daily chores while the boys are often 'saved' because of the differences in expectations set in a man-made culture. Parineet Kaur, born in Punjab in 1948, has been raised since childhood to help her parents do chores. As a farmer's daughter, she was assigned to do tasks such as helping her father to cut the lawn, cleaning the buffalo and feeding the buffalo twice a day. Her two older sisters were assigned to do other housework such as cooking, mending the floor with new soil, milking the cows, and cleaning the house. In the meantime, her two younger brothers were told to focus on their studies and not be directly involved in the chores. Meanwhile, Satparvan Kaur, a respondent of the young generation, grunts that she has been brought up to do all sorts of cleaning and cooking since she was young. Her mother was very critical when she did not know how to do housework. She was unhappy that her elder brothers were not told to do the same thing.

Given these narratives of lived experience, the pressure to conform to the gender stereotypes in the Punjabi culture, which directly reinforces the patriarchal system, is seen as natural. While the acceptance of 'natural' sexual divisions is central to biological explanations of gender, the acceptance of 'having to adjust' has come about quite recently. Having to manage the duties of both spheres often created a double burden on the working mothers. Unlike men who have the right to relax after work shifts, working women are culturally forced to begin their second shift (i.e., the domestic shift) after work. It is also known as the 'dual burden' where women have to perform both paid work and unpaid domestic labour. Also, women in the sandwich generation have to take care of both their ageing parents and their children. According to data from Round 5 European Social Survey (ESS) (2010/2011), women living with a male partner who holds a full-time job are responsible, on average, for two-thirds of the time spent by couples on household and childcare activities. There is no industrialised nation in the world where men do more housework than women. Some women were relieved of a few of these responsibilities if they were able to pass them on to their daughters. In short, the stress of having to wear a lot of hats created marital tension for women.

Most of the respondents comply with the Punjabi patriarchal paradigm where the father plays the role of the provider and head of the family, which also means that he is the authoritative figure and ultimate decision-maker in the family. Although cultural norms place the father in charge of the family, the wife has authority over the children and is essentially in charge of raising and disciplining them. She also plays the role of mediator between the children and the father. According to Chadney (1984), the very meaning of family in Punjabi represents mutual commitments and partnerships based on interdependence and reciprocity. There is also security and support in times of need but with this support comes a set of certain duties and

responsibilities of family units and their members. An essential requirement is for the individual to subordinate[25] herself to the family and extended family (Chadney, 1984).

## *Maintaining Family Social Image*

Despite Guru Nanak's efforts, women have traditionally had a low status and a small chance of being given their rightful position within the Sikh faith and Indian community (Singh, 1993). It is worth noting, though, that some Sikh categories have revised or re-negotiated or 'bent' these specific codes of the culture. Women are expected to devote their lives to the welfare and needs of their husband's kin, including their children. Such notions are so deeply ingrained in them from birth to marriage that it is no surprise that these ideas of proper conduct are part of their ideology (Kakar, 1990). Therefore, females are socialised to regard men as superior to themselves and taught to follow humbly without questioning the demands of their parents, brothers, and husband. When women go against the convention, it will have a significant impact on the dignity of their families. Girls are thus taught to be, first and foremost, good daughters-in-law, then good mothers and wives. Young girls are taught to cook, clean, sew and take care of their younger siblings as a way of preparing them for marriage. These are valued skills for good daughters-in-law and remaining a virgin until marriage is important for maintaining the honour of their family (Kakar, 1990).

A woman has the utmost respect for her role in the family and society. She has the same right to develop spiritually, attend religious congregation gatherings and recite divine hymns in the *gurdwara.* They are also eligible to participate in and conduct all ceremonies, including baptism. However, social realities point to the existence of gender hierarchies[26] among Sikhs. According to Manchet Kaur:

> Men have a low mentality, so they look down on women. Educated and competent women are often seen as a threat to their position and status. Not surprisingly, to secure their status, which has been preserved by tradition, they regulate women's abilities but do not offer women the opportunity to participate in 'male activities', especially in a *gurdwara.*

Gyani Gurkesh Kaur points out that the differences between men and women are man-made through a set of values called culture:

[25] Subordination means putting the needs and interests of the family as a whole ahead of personal needs and desires.

[26] The importance of hierarchical relationships within the family is reinforced by the higher status conferred onto married women over unmarried women, women with children over childless women, women with sons over those without sons, and older women over younger women (Miller, 1999).

> In the past, men believed they had the highest position or rank and thus labelled women as '*pair di jottee*' (which is a shoe, indicating the lower status of women). But the Sikh Gurus have changed the perception of society by saying that, how a woman who gives birth to [even] a king can be treated badly?

Another participant in this study, Parineet Kaur was given a marriage proposal by her uncle, a matchmaker (*bichola*). Parineet Kaur's uncle gave her a marriage proposal. Because both parents were adamant, Parineet Kaur did not intend or think of refusing the marriage proposal. She was married within a week and moved to Malaysia with her husband's family after two years. She has not had a happy marriage so far because of her husband's difficult attitude. For Gyani Gurkesh Kaur, it was not her father but her eldest uncle who had the final say in determining her marriage. She suffered nearly 40 years in her marriage and family life for marrying a man who is not only uneducated but showed no interest in keeping a good relationship with her or their children.

Eykam Kaur highlighted that in her time gender socialisation prevented Sikh girls from working for safety reasons such as the fear of abuse or exploitation of girls. Therefore, only men remained as a breadwinner due to safety concerns and as well as to maintain the family's dignity. Manchet Kaur added that a long time ago, parents were not keen to send their daughters to national schools because of the same safety reasons. But, as time went on, women were given equal opportunities to get an education that not only makes them economically independent but also raised their social status. For example, Nirvair Kaur's mother did not remarry after the demise of her husband at the age of 36 but supported her family by following the *Sikhi* way of life. Her mother constantly reminded her to stay alert in an ever-changing world and avoid making wrong decisions that might embarrass her.

Sikh women need to raise their children with a strong sense of morality and ethics to be seen as a 'good mother'; this can be done by taking their children to the *gurdwara.* This shows the wider community that the woman is successfully performing her expressive role. However, women often blame themselves and consider themselves imperfect without children. When she loses her husband, a widow takes over the role of the father, but her subordinate status remains if she wants to remarry. It is important to note that a strong emphasis on keeping their marriages and families intact due to cultural recommendations (such as family honour) poses severe challenges for women who face marital abuse.

## *Transmission of New Culture*

Symmetrical families refer to those that are well-balanced and versatile and where partners share both instrumental and expressive roles. Young and Willmott (1973) support the view of modern families 'March of Progress', in that families are less patriarchal and more symmetrical. Along with greater social mobility, communication among family members is declining which consequently reduces the burden on newly married couples to retain traditional segregated roles. With enhanced status

and rights for women and more women in paid work, people are motivated to see women on an equal footing. In addition, with the commercialisation of domestic labour, many consumer goods and services (such as washing machines, dishwashers, and home delivery of groceries) help to ease the burden of domestic labour, although these goods and services are only affordable to the middle-class. Married couples are therefore free to choose and mix roles that can lead to the weakening of traditional gender identities, which in turn undermines the gendered division of housework and childcare. Hence, human beings act not in a 'natural' way but based on social norms or expectations of behaviours in accordance with our culture or within social structures and identities. Everyday culture encodes a sense of gender that not only represents society but also construct it and influences how we behave.

Eykam Kaur felt that women needed to show their sons that they do not have to be dominant all the time and they should not be given preferential treatment. It is important to be fair and sons need to learn to cook and clean as their future wife will not always be able to do the household work. Jasman Kaur explained her own experience:

> Briefly, men and women are equal. The gap only exists because of the mindset of the parents. My parents have three daughters and two sons. Everyone had the same parenting. I play football because of my interest, and I have a women's soccer team while my little brother can do all the housework as girls do. In reality, what was learned in childhood was passed on to the offspring. I have always emphasised this dimension of equality, where all my children are encouraged to wash their clothes, polish their shoes, clean up their dishes and rearrange books and so on. But for girls, they've to do a little extra because their instincts say they should (be) doing more.

The male–female division of roles in households (i.e., male breadwinner and female housewife) has declined over time; in recent times, dual-earner households have become the norm among young Sikh families. Veteran Harpreet Kaur argues that, economically, men and women should work and share what they receive in the form of money or property purchased. Every couple should behave as a family rather than split their income by saying, "This is not your money, but my money". Eykas Kaur says, "If a woman wants to work and can support [her family] financially and show her skills, why not"? In reality, Eykam Kaur also accepted that the hard work of both partners should be valued. She added that, in current times where the cost of living is on the rise, women and men would have to operate on a double-income basis and share their wealth to purchase common property, such as houses and automobiles, and fund their children's education.

Younger generation Nirvair Kaur agrees with the older generation's views that were expressed by Harpreet Kaur, Eykam Kaur, and Eykas Kaur. To her, a career-oriented woman never neglects her home responsibilities and roles. She also takes care of her husband and children. At the same time, she ensures that her relationships with her family and friends are well established. This is clearly stated in the

*Lavan* verses, as mentioned in the Scriptures, which are read on the wedding day. In short, spouses should support and respect one another. There is also emphasis that harmonious relationships with families, parents and others (society) should be maintained.

Although there is a changing trend, it is still largely women, as wives and mothers, who are primarily responsible for caring for the home and children and who give up paid work or take a part-time job after the birth of children. According to Eykam Kaur:

> Women have always been with their children and never neglected them. While taking care of her children, a mother tends to put herself and her own needs on the back burner. My mother-in-law was uneducated, but she could teach religious matters to my husband's siblings. I think this is a strong pattern that needs to be continued. At least my husband tried doing trivial things like changing diapers, making baby food, cooking basic children's dishes and cleaning the house.

As a result, men are now more likely to be involved in child-care, but they have scarcely increased their involvement in daily household chores, even when women are working. Ironically, both men and women have recognised this unequal distribution, but this so-called 'recognition' does not seem to have contributed to a shift in the actual distribution of domestic labour. Gyani Gurkesh Kaur, therefore, stressed that women have the right to make decisions. It is best for the couple to discuss (*veechar*) and seek advice from the other person (*selaah*) before making a decision. She elaborated further on the issue of spousal correction:

> We have got the right to deter others from doing something wrong. If the husband makes a mistake, the wife has the right to stop the action and vice versa. If not, there will be challenges in the family as they each use their [own] logic to determine something. As my husband is always quiet and reluctant to communicate, I still rebuke him for his behaviour or actions that may hurt other family members. Almost all of his salary, for example, is spent on himself. I always exercised my rights as a wife and I have warned him. But, probably because of his iron brain, all my criticism was ignored, and I had to work on sewing clothes [do tailoring work] to support my family.

Managing social differences based on physical differences is, in essence, an artificial construct that does not have true meaning. Adherence to this artificial social construct not only distinguishes the roles, responsibilities and status of individuals but also rationalises the reality of one gender group enjoying the freedom to live their life while the rights of the other group are compromised. In a nutshell, gender definition is not rigid in the Sikh religion. They are not bound by any conventional rules or behaviour or acts that are specific to their sex or gender group. This means that a man or woman is not limited to one set of behaviour unique to a particular gender. Alternatively, they should follow common values that are classified as masculine and feminine in any social space at the same time. Thus, Sikh religious philosophers recognise the ideal concept of androgyny[27] in which men and women of Sikh descent have masculine and feminine values within themselves. However, to become

[27] The term androgyny is referred to a tradition in many parts of the world allowing for an individual to have both male and female characteristics.

a perfect human being, they must achieve a balance between these two elements. This means that gender-related components are balanced across man-made biological and imaginary boundaries of man and woman.

## Paradoxes of Sikh Women's Life

*One is not born, one is made a woman*—Simone de Beauvoir (1989)

Gender itself is a socially formed cultural distinction between the two biological sexes and divides humans into two categories, i.e., male and female. It is a hierarchical system in which superior males and inferior females are coded. Such a division gives men privileges over women and impacts the way people view themselves. Sociologically speaking, gender is a collection of definitions that people hold in different societies. Gender activity in our society takes such definitions on board, organises them as masculinity or femininity and matches or lines them up with male and female bodies (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003). Certainly, the belief that gender differences are artificial because 'feminine' tasks can be performed by men and women can also perform 'masculine' tasks. Hence, gender is not inherent but is constructed by a society based on cultural beliefs or societal needs. In other words, women acted in line with men's perceptions rather than their own. This analysis drew on phenomenological philosophy that portrayed the development of the individual subject or self with an object or 'other'. Rather than building selves in a parallel manner, women wholeheartedly accept the image created by the male gender *as* their gender identity. "Though femininity is claimed to be a natural state, it was a result of a (mis)guided choice by others (agents of socialisation) in shaping their behaviour and personalities, as claimed by de Beauvoir" (Smith, 2013: 86).

Unlike the patriarchy that is present in Punjabi culture, according to the Sikh perspective, women are considered equal to men and should be treated as equals (Kaur, 2012). Being an egalitarian philosophy, the authors discovered that the patriarchal cultural practices dominate the views of Sikh women (and men) about daily life and their status. Women could not be understood outside the context of the family because the identity of women depended on the home-life rules, standards and context. Through the fieldwork, the life events shared by the respondents proved that the patriarchal system has encouraged the practice of gender inequality. The stories gathered by the authors show that male dominance has contributed to the subordination of women. The role of culture in shaping a woman's image as more emotional and less rational than men, weaker and less capable needs to be revisited.

The inferiority of women in the Sikh community is caused by a deficiency in one's commitment to the practice of the word of God. Before the Guru era, women were mistreated, dominated by man-made traditions and had no religious freedom. Gender-based prejudice, inferiority and injustice have been challenged by the Sikh Gurus. Sikh Gurus instituted a scripture containing guidelines for uplifting the dignity of

women, which in turn was capable of liberating Sikhs from any gender-discriminatory behaviour and practices. Unfortunately, gender stereotypes are maintained and reproduced from one generation to the next that lead males to believe they are dominant over females. The Punjabi Sikhs are reluctant to adapt to the 'civilised' gender ideology that is underscored in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The aim of this chapter was therefore to examine the phenomenon of the subjective experience of Punjabi Sikh women with a focus on their roles and status in the domestic realm. We described their experiences and explored how gender differences can be experienced in their lives. This chapter hopes to contribute to the limited research available on Punjabi Sikh women and provide a voice for discourse and the understanding of social practices due to cultural barriers. More specifically, how do Sikh women find themselves living inside the contradiction between gender-based hierarchical structures and a religious commitment to gender equality? In short, the authors wanted to understand their experience and recognise how these practices were constructed as a norm.

The most prominent ontological narratives among respondents are (i) gender differences are practical and maintain the social order of the family (ii) women's selfless service (*seva*) is linked to the domestic domain (iii) gender inequality or sexism persists due to subjective adaptation of Sikh philosophy. Correspondingly, societal perceptions and cultural norms seemed to be the common influence on Punjabi Sikh women's perception that doing what was best for the sake of the community took precedence over her personal interests in some instances. Respondents also pointed out that Punjabi Sikh women demonstrate their family orientation by consistently putting their family prestige within the community before their own needs. This focus on the family was considered a strength of Sikh women because the women have become integral in holding a family together through affection, compassion and nurturing. They also stated that a great strength of Sikh women was their need to be mothers and their dedication to the family above all else, including themselves. Placing great emphasis on Sikh women's preservation of family values often results in women feeling trapped. Parteet Kaur highlighted that:

> Irrespective of her own experience, Sikh women appear to believe that they ought to listen to their husbands or their in-laws to maintain a stable household. Then it's not necessarily a strength of Sikh women but at the same time, it's a part of the tradition. We seem to think that they can if they want, to start a revolution, but unfortunately, many of them tend to go with the flow and do whatever they need to do. They hardly voice out dissatisfaction. Certainly, such as [this is a] weakness, but in terms of strength, we assume they're capable of managing matters for the sake of the family.

To sum up, as Harpreet Kaur shared: 'it's harder for the women to remain conventional, but not hard for men because the men regulate power, and that's where they want to be'.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

It is often difficult to separate the religious and cultural components of beliefs held by particular ethnic groups. The Sikhs are tightly tied to both cultural and religious beliefs and practices. The findings of this study provide an understanding of the kinds of dilemmas Punjabi Sikh women face and give insights into the role of the Punjabi culture and Sikh faith in Punjabi Sikh households. Looking at the continuity of gender inequality and gender disparity in the Sikh minority community, the authors urge the Sikh community to be more serious to combat this issue. The differences in women's and men's access to resources, status and well-being, which usually favour men and are often institutionalised through culture and social norms, should be revisited.

Notable social institutions of Sikhs such as the Malaysian Gurdwara Council (MGC) and Sikh Naujawan Sabha Malaysia (SNSM) should play a more prominent role, particularly in the promotion of gender equality as enshrined in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Therefore, the MGC is advised to be more proactive in promoting gender equality in the Malaysian *gurdwaras*, as they are the religious institutions that are registered under this body. The MGC should organise more seminars and forums on gender inequality issues that directly affect the Sikh community in various aspects of life such as religion, family, education, economy and politics in Malaysia (Kaur & Gill, 2018). We believe that the Gurdwara Management Committee (GMC is also known as Gurdwara *Parbhandak* Committee) must be more proactive and responsible to empower Sikh women in the religious and private domains. GMC must also encourage Sikh women to participate in the decision-making process in their programs and activities. The elementary principle of Sikhism which focuses on gender equality must be upheld by the GMC. As stated earlier, the *Guru Granth Sahib* teaches gender equality; however, the religious message has not been fully understood and practised by the Sikh community, especially by the Sikh men.

Both Sikh Naujawan Sabha Malaysia (SNSM) and Sikh Women Awareness Network (SWAN) have played a role in addressing the importance of gender equality among the Sikh youth and women in Malaysia. The annual Sikh camp (*samelan*) organised by SNSM is the best platform to address the gender ideology among Sikh youths. The participation of the male and female Sikh youths in this one-week socio-religious gathering has directly and indirectly created awareness of the importance of gender equality as enshrined in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. SWAN is another rising Sikh organisation established in Malaysia. SWAN's objective is to create awareness on various issues to bring about change in attitudes for the betterment of society. It does this by empowering women and enhancing their perspectives in life through talks, seminars, and workshops and by improving women's livelihoods via skill training. Women are, after all, the nucleus of the family and when she is taught to fish, she

teaches the whole family to fish. SWAN endeavours to support not only the spiritual and social needs of women but also their economic,[28] intellectual and physical well-being (Kaur, 2016).

According to Kaur (2017), the need for empowerment is not to campaign for woman's justice but rather to help create a sense of self-worth and gratification for all women. Women have made great advancements that should not be overlooked or overshadowed by issues of gender or even emotional sentiments. Henceforth, empowering a woman is not only important but is necessary and crucial. One way to create such empowerment is to raise awareness about women's legal rights, social and economic status, and other aspects of their lives. However, merely acknowledging this Sikh ideology, will not necessarily translate into the true practices of the teachings of *Guru Granth Sahib*. Every person needs to look beyond and practice every basic tenet of the Sikh faith and teaching to create harmony between men and women. A woman should never be tied down by limitations but rather be inspired with courage and strength. Therefore, it is necessary to create consciousness about these issues and educate members of society, be it a man or a woman, regarding women's legal rights. No one can improve the status of women unless the women themselves decide to be responsive and mindful of their honour and pride (Kaur, 2017).

Having said that, the authors strongly advocate that the discourse on gender ideology and gender equality must begin at home, the primary social institution in every society. This key institution must not be overlooked in dealing with gender issues. According to Kabeer (2005), families remain the basic unit within which to effect change as well as to protect and empower girls and women. While empirical research has demonstrated that education, employment, and political participation are the foundations for achieving gender equality, access to resources is subject to culturally determined social relationships. Therefore, Sikh families must educate their children on the importance of gender equality from the early socialisation period and relate the discourse with the Sikh religious principles.

## Appendix

See Table 1.

[28] In November 2015, SWAN received RM171,740.00 from the Federal funding for a project to improve the position of Sikh women via skill training which helps to supplement their income (Asia Samachar, 2015).

**Table 1** Brief description of the respondents

| No | Name (pseudonym) | Year of Birth | Marital status | Education level | Occupation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Eykam Kaur | 1940 | Married | Primary Education | Housewife |
| 2 | Harpreet Kaur | 1944 | Married | Primary Education | Housewife |
| 3 | Parineet Kaur | 1948 | Married | Primary Education | Housewife |
| 4 | Gyani Gurkesh Kaur | 1957 | Married | Religious Education (*Gyaniship*) | Housewife |
| 5 | Eykas Kaur | 1964 | Married | Primary Education | Housewife |
| 6 | Parteet Kaur | 1975 | Married | College Graduate | Banker |
| 7 | Nirvair Kaur | 1979 | Married | University Graduate | Lecturer |
| 8 | Jasman Kaur | 1983 | Married | Secondary Education | Clerk |
| 9 | Satparvan Kaur | 1986 | Married | College Graduate | Self-employed |
| 10 | Manchet Kaur | 1990 | Married | University Graduate | Engineer |

## References

Ahluwalia, M. K., & Zaman, N. K. (2010). Counselling Muslims and Sikhs in a post-9/11 world. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counselling* (3rd ed., pp. 467–478). Sage.

Angelo, M. (1997). *The Sikh diaspora: Tradition and change in an immigrant community*. Routledge.

Asia Samachar. (2015). 4 Malaysian Sikh NGOs receive RM950,000 Federal funding. Asia Samachar, November, 6.

Baker, C., Wuest, J., & Stern, P. N. (1992). Method slurring: The grounded theory/phenomenology example. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 17*, 1355–1360.

Beck, C. T. (1994). Phenomenology: Its use in nursing research. *International Journal of Nursing Studies, 31*(6), 499–510.

Bhugra, D. (2004). Migration, distress and cultural identity. *British Medical Bulletin, 69*(1), 129–141. https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/ldh007.

Bonvillain, N. (1995). *Women and men: Cultural constructs of gender*. Prentice-Hall.

Chadney, J. (1984). *The Sikhs of Vancouver*. AMS Press Inc.

Cohen, M. Z., & Omery, A. (1994). Schools of Phenomenology: Implications for research. In J. M. Morse (Ed.), *Critical issues in qualitative research methods* (pp. 136–156). Sage Publications.

Colaizzi, P. F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views its. In R. S. Valle & M. King (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological alternatives for psychology* (pp. 48–71). Oxford University Press.

Cranny-Francis, A., Waring, W., Stavropoulos, P., & Kirkby, J. (2003). *Gender studies: Terms and debates*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Cresswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage.
Cunningham, J. D. (1972). *A history of the Sikhs*. New Delhi: S. Chand & Co.
de Beauvoir, S. (1989). *The second sex*. Vintage Books.
Dhalliwal, M. S. (1972). *Sikh Ithiaas Malaya Sambandhi Lekh* [*An Essay on Sikh History in Malaya*]. Penang: Lopo–Ghar.
Dhalliwal, M. S., & Sandhu, M. K. (1991). *Sikhs in Malaysia series: Some historical notes*. Pulau Pinang: Lopo–Ghar.
European Social Survey Round 5. (2010). Data file edition 3.0. Norway: Norwegian Social Science Data Services—Data Archive and distributor of ESS data.
Galdas, P. M., Oliffe, J. L., Wong, S. T., Ratner, P. A., Johnson, J. L., & Kelly, M. T. (2012). Canadian Punjabi Sikh men's experiences of lifestyle changes following myocardial infarction: Cultural connections. *Ethnicity & Health, 17*, 253–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/13557858.2011.610440.
Gandhi, R. (2013). *Punjab: A history from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten*. New Delhi, India: Aleph.
Gill, C. K., & Gill, S. S. (2006). Terjemahan Teks *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (Kod Tingkah Laku Penganut Sikh) ke dalam Bahasa Melayu: Satu Pengenalan [Translation of *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (Sikh Code of Conduct) into Malay Language: An Introduction]. *Journal of Indian Studies, 9*(1), 61–79.
Gill, H. S. (2012). Becoming men in a modern city: Masculinity, migration and globalization in north India (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (UMI No. 3524121).
Gill, P. S. (1978). *History of Sikh nation: Foundation, assassination and resurrection*. New Academic Publishing.
Gill, S. S. (2000). Diaspora Sikh ke Tanah Melayu [Sikh Diaspora to Malaya]. *Human Ecology Research Bulletin, 2*(1), 1–5.
Gill, S. S. (2002). Bibliografi Komuniti Sikh di Malaysia [Bibliography of Sikh Community in Malaysia] (1937–2002). *Sari, 20*(1), 169–179.
Gill, S. S. (2003). *Malaysian Sikhs and Gender Issues. Akademika, 63*(1), 45–55.
Gill, S. S., & Kaur, C. (2008). Gurdwara and its politics: Current debate on Sikh identity in Malaysia. *Sari, Journal of the Malay World and Civilization, 26*(1), 243–255.
Giorgi, A. (1985). *Phenomenology and psychological research*. Duquesne University Press.
Giorgi, A. (1997). The theory, practice, and evaluation of the phenomenological method as a qualitative research procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 28*(2), 235–252.
Guru Granth Sahib. Retrieved from http://www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?S=y.
Honore, M., Rodriguez, M., & Hett, G. (2013). *Diversity, culture and counselling: A Canadian perspective*. Calgary, Canada: Brush Education.
Ibrahim, F., Ohnishi, H., & Sandhu, D. S. (1997). Asian American identity development: A culture specific model for South Asian Americans. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development, 25*, 34–50. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.1997.tb00314.x.
Jacobsen, K. A., & Myrvold, K. (2015). *Young Sikhs in a global world: Negotiating traditions, identities and authorities*. Ashgate.
Jarvis, P., Koehn, S., Bains, S., Cheema, J., Goudriaan, D., & Addison, M. (2011). "Just scratching the surface": Mental health promotion for Punjabi seniors (Forums). Retrieved from http://www.centreforhealthyaging.ca/documents/Just_scratching_the_surface-FINAL.pdf.
Kabeer, N. (2005). Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1. *Gender and Development, 13*(1), 13–24.
Kakar, S. (1990). *Intimate relations: Exploring Indian sexuality*. University of Chicago Press.
Kasper, A. S. (1994). A feminist qualitative methodology: A study of women with breast cancer. *Qualitative Sociology., 17*(3), 263–281.
Kaur, A. (1973). *North Indians in Malaya: A study of their economic, social and political activities with special reference to Selangor (1870s–1940s) (Master thesis)*. University Malaya.
Kaur, A. (2003a). *The roles of Sikhs in the policing of British Malaya and Straits Settlements (1874–1957) (Master thesis)*. National University of Singapore.

Kaur, C. (2002). *Teks Sikh Rehat Maryada: Satu kajian mengenai kod tingkah laku penganut agama Sikh [Sikh Rehat Maryada Text: A Study of Sikh's Code of Conduct] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kaur, C. (2003b). *Perubahan peranan Granthi di gurdwara: Satu kajian etnografi di Kuala Lumpur [Role Change of Granthi (Religious Specialist) in the Gurdwara: An Ethnography Study in Kuala Lumpur] (Master thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kaur, C. (2012). *Komuniti Tekstual: Peranan Guru Granth Sahib dalam Pembentukan Identiti Gender dalam Kalangan Lelaki dan Perempuan Sikh* [Textual Community: The Role of *Guru Granth Sahib* in Formation of Gender Identity among Sikh Men and Women] (PhD thesis). Bangi, Malaysia: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kaur, C. (2017). *A textual community: The Sikh Minority Community in Malaysia.* Conference Proceeding International Conference on World Ethnic Minorities' Cultural Heritage and Teaching Innovation, pp. 69–78, Tzu Chi University of Science and Technology, Taiwan.

Kaur, C. (2009). *Institusi Keagamaan Berasaskan Gender: Kajian Kes ke atas Komuniti Sikh di Gurdwara Kuala Lumpur* [*Gender Based Religious Institution: Case Study on Sikh Communities in Kuala Lumpur Gurdwara*]. Paper presented in The International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities. Organised by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 2–3 December.

Kaur, C., & Gill, S. S. (2018). Sikh women diaspora in Malaysia: The reality of their role and status in the religious domain. *Millennial Asia, 9*(1), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/0976399617753753.

Kaur, D. (1986). *Ritus Perpeloncoan dalam komuniti Sikh: Satu kajian etnografi [Rites of Passage in the Sikh Community: An Ethnography Study] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kaur, D. (2000a). *Gurdwara Sahib Tatt Khalsa dalam sejarah sosial masyarakat Sikh 1924–1999 [Gurdwara Sahib Tatt Khalsa in the Social History of the Sikhs 1924–1999] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Malaya.

Kaur, G. (1991). *Dato' Mahima Singh: Biografi dan sumbangan seorang tokoh Sikh tempatan kepada masyarakat Malaysia 1946–1985 [Dato' Mahima Singh: The Biography and Contribution of a Local Sikh Figure to the Malaysian Society 1946–1985] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kaur, G. (2000b). How religious institutions can help combat domestic violence: Sikhism: A plea for a return to the ideal of equality. In S. Nankani (Ed.), *Breaking the silence: Domestic violence in the South Asian-American community* (pp. 133–138). Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris.

Kaur, H. (1989). *Sejarah kedatangan buruh–buruh India ke Selangor 1900–1941: Satu perbandingan antara buruh swasta dengan buruh kerajaan [History of the Arrival of Indian Laborers to Selangor 1900–1941: A Comparison between Private Labor and Government Labor] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kaur, H. (1993). *Biography of Datuk Gurdial Singh Gill (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kaur, M. (1992). *Gurdwara: Satu institusi sosial komuniti Sikh [Gurdwara: A Sikh Community Social Institution] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kaur, M. (1998). *Status dan peranan wanita dalam masyarakat minoriti Sikh di Malaysia: Satu kajian etnografi di institusi gurdwara [Status and Role of Women in Sikh Minority Community in Malaysia: An Ethnography Study in Gurdwara Institution] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kaur, P. (2007). *Gender ideologies, resources and marital power: A study of Sikh households in Perak, Malaysia* (PhD thesis). Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: University Malaya.

Kaur, S. (2016). Empowering women through SWAN. *Asia Samachar*, July, 2.

Kvale, S. (1983). The qualitative research interview: A phenomenological and a hermeneutical mode of understanding. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 14*, 171–196.

Lynch, O. M. (1990). *Divine passions: The social construction of emotion in India.* University of California Press.

Malhi, R. S. (1977). *The Punjabi newspapers and Sikh organisations of Kuala Lumpur (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Malaya.

Malhi, R. S. (2015). *From loyal British subjects to ardent revolutionaries: Anti-British political activities of the Sikhs in Malaya, 1914–1945* (PhD thesis). Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Asia e University.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review, 98*, 224–253. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224.

Miller, B. D. (1999). Wife beating in India: Variations on a theme. In D. A. Counts, J. K. Brown, & J. C. Campbell (Eds.), *To have and to hit* (pp. 203–215). University of Illinois Press.

Miller, J. G., Bersoff, D. M., & Harwood, R. L. (1990). Perceptions of social responsibilities in India and in the United States: Moral imperatives or personal decisions? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58*, 33–47. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.1.33.

Morse, J. M. (1994). Qualitative research: Fact or fantasy? In J. M. Morse (Ed.), *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 1–9). Sage.

Nadzan, H. (1991). High noon of the Sikhs in the armed establishments of British Malaya. *Malaysia Dari Segi Sejarah, 19*(1), 65–78.

Nayar, K. E. (2004). *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver: Three generations amid tradition, modernity, and multiculturalism.* University of Toronto Press.

Osborne, J. W. (1990). Some basic existential-phenomenological research methodology for counsellors. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 24*(2), 79–91.

Rait, S. K. (2005). *Sikh women in England: Their religious and cultural beliefs and social practices.* Trentham Books.

Ray, S. (2006). Understanding patriarchy. *Human Rights, Gender & Environment*, *1*(1), 1–21. Retrieved from https://atlismta.org.

Sandelowski, M., Davis, D. H., & Harris, B. G. (1989). Artful design: Writing the proposal for research in the naturalistic paradigm. *Research in Nursing and Health, 12*, 77–84.

Sandhu, J. S. (2004). The Sikh model of the person, suffering, and healing: Implications for counselors. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling, 26*, 33–46. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:ADCO.0000021548.68706.18.

Sandhu, K. S. (1969). *Indians in Malaya: Some aspects of the immigrations and settlements.* Cambridge University Press.

Sandhu, K. S. (1970). Sikh immigration into Malaya during the period of British rule. In J. Ch'en & N. Tarling (Eds), *Studies in the social history of China and South-east Asia* (pp. 335–354). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sandhu, K. S. (1993). Sikhs in Malaysia: A society in transition. In K. S. Sandhu & A. Mani (Eds.), *Indians communities in Southeast Asia* (pp. 558–567). Time Academic Press.

Sekhon, Y. K., & Szmigin, I. (2005). Conceptualizing ethnicity and acculturation of second-generation Asian Indians in Britain. *Academy of Marketing Science Review*, *3*, 1–18. Retrieved from https://link.springer.com/journal/13162.

Sidhu, M. S. (1991). *Sikhs in Malaysia.* Sant Sohan Singh Ji Malacca Memorial Society.

Sidhu, S. K. (1996). *Kebangkitan semula agama Sikh: Satu kajian kes di Kuala Lumpur [The Resurgence of the Sikh Religion: A Case Study in Kuala Lumpur] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Sikh Coalition. (2008). A brief introduction to beliefs and practices of the Sikhs. Retrieved from http://www.sikhcoalition.org/images/documents/english-august2011.pdf.

Singh, A. (1993). *Sejarah Kedatangan Masyarakat Sikh ke Malaya, penglibatan mereka dalam bidang ekonomi dan sosial serta masalah–masalah yang dihadapi sehingga tahun 1957 [History of Sikh Communities to Malaya, their Involvement in Economic and Social Issues and Problems Faced until 1957] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Singh, G. (1949). *Singa: The lion of Malaya.* Quality Press.

Singh, G. (2000a). *Ethnic conflict in India: A case-study of Punjab.* St. Martin's Press Inc.

Singh, I. (1965). *History of Malay States Guides (1873–1919).* Penang: Cathay.

Singh, K. (1978). *Population mobility of the Malacca Sikhs (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Malaya.

Singh, N.-G. (2000b). Why did I not light the fire? The refeminization of ritual in Sikhism. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, 16*(1), 63–85.

Singh, R. (1998a). *Jagat Singh 1886–1956: Satu kajian biografi tentang peranan dan sumbangan seorang tokoh Sikh tempatan [Jagat Singh 1886–1956: A Biographical Study on the Role and Contribution of a Local Sikh Figure] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Malaya.

Singh, S. (1998b). *Masyarakat Minoriti Sikh di Malaysia [Sikh Minority Society in Malaysia] (Bachelor thesis).* Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Singh, S. (2001). Kedatangan orang Sikh dan penubuhan Gurdwara di Tanah Melayu [*The Arrival of the Sikhs and the Establishment of Gurdwara in Malaya*]. *Malaysia Dari Segi Sejarah, 29*(1), 31–42.

Singh, S. (2005). *Peranan gurdwara dalam pembentukan identiti Sikh di Malaysia: satu kajian perbandingan* [*Role of Gurdwara in the Formation of Sikh Identity in Malaysia: A Comparative Study*] (PhD thesis). Bangi, Malaysia: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Smith, B. G. (2013). *Women's studies: The basics.* Routledge.

Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2015a). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 25–52). Sage.

Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2015b). Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for research on the lived experience of pain. *British Journal of Pain, 9*, 41–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/2049463714541642.

Spiegelberg, H. (1975). *Doing phenomenology.* Springer.

Streubert, H. J., & Carpenter, D. R. (1995). Phenomenological research approach. In H. J. Streubert & D. R. Carpenter (Eds.), *Qualitative research in nursing: Advancing the humanistic imperative* (pp. 29–49). J.B. Lippincott Company.

Triandis, H. C. (1990). Theoretical concepts that are applicable to the analysis of ethnocentrism. In R. W. Brislin (Ed.), *Applied cross-cultural psychology* (pp. 34–55). Sage.

Tully, M., & Jacob, S. (1986). *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's last battle.* London: Jonathan Cape.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching Lived Experience.* The Althouse Press.

Walton-Roberts, M., & Pratt, G. (2005). Mobile modernities: A South Asian family negotiates immigration, gender and class in Canada. *Gender, Place and Culture., 12*, 173–195.

Young, M., & Willmott, P. (1973). *The symmetrical family: A study of work and leisure in the London Region.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

**Charanjit Kaur** received her Ph.D from National University of Malaysia. She is currently an Assistant Professor at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman's Department of General Studies, Faculty of Creative Industries (UTAR). Her area of expertise is cultural anthropology, with a particular emphasis on the Sikh minority community in Malaysia, where she addresses issues such as religious-cultural conflicts, gender identity, and social behaviour. Most of her research findings have been published as book chapters as well as in local and international journals. She is also frequently invited as a member of the Sikh religious panel and field expert in various academic and community forums organised by Malaysian agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local and private universities, and religious bodies such as Institut Darul Ehsan (IDE), Institut Integriti Malaysia (IIM), TV Alhijrah, TV2 Fresh Brew, and Radio Traxxfm. In addition, she was interviewed by the Wali Media Production Center (WMPC) of Finland about diversity and social cohesion in Malaysia.

**Sarjit S. Gill** Ph.D (National University of Malaysia), is a Professor of Social Anthropology and the former Head of the Department of Social and Development Sciences, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia. He teaches Anthropology and Sociology, Social Policy and Planning and Qualitative Research Method. His current research interests include minority studies and national unity in Malaysia. He was a former Executive Editor for the Malaysian Journal of Youth Studies, the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES), the Malaysian Ministry of Youth and Sports, and a member of the Malaysian Institute of Integrity. He is the immediate past Secretary of National Unity Cluster, Council of Professors Malaysia (MPN). He has represented

Malaysia in three important international dialogues, namely the Peace and Human Security Workshop organised by UNESCO in Bangkok, Thailand (2007), the Interfaith Conference in Perth, Australia (2009) and the Interfaith Summit in Bali, Indonesia (2012).