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Intimate Partner Violence and Poverty: A Qualitative Study among Malaysian Indian Women in Penang, Malaysia

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Abstract

Poverty and stress associated to poverty have been identified as the key contributors to intimate partner violence. This chapter explores intimate partner violence experienced by Malaysian Indian women living in poverty in Penang, Malaysia. The data for this study comes from in-depth interviews of twelve women who were categorized as hard-core poor, ordinary poor and vulnerable poor. Most participants experienced some form of violence from their husband; they experienced physical, emotional and verbal abuse while some experienced only verbal abuse. Low income was the main reason for material deprivation in these households but this deprivation became worse with substance abuse and extra marital affairs by male partners. Both violence and poverty is part of a vicious cycle and some of their male children are following in their father's 'footsteps.' Violence is closely tied to patriarchal values and gender relations in family relationships which shows how the notion of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are played out in everyday life.

Keywords: traditional femininity, Tamil, domestic violence, Malaysia, poverty

Introduction

In Malaysia, studies on domestic violence is scarce even though domestic violence accounts for almost 50 percent of reported violence against women between 2000 to 2010 (Abdul-Ghani, 2014). According to the 1994 Domestic Violent Act (DVA), domestic violence is

defined as acts¹ by a person against his/her spouse, former spouse, a child, an incapacitated adult or other family members. It is not seen as a specific crime but attached to the Penal Code under definitions and procedures for hurt, criminal force, and assault (Awang & Hariharan, 2011).

One of the biggest studies on violence against women in Malaysia was conducted by Women's Aids Organization (WAO) in 1995. This study which involved 1221 respondents nationwide reported that 36 percent of the respondents experienced intimate partner violence (Abdul-Ghani, 2014; Shuib et al., 2013). Another study which involved 3440 female respondents from West Malaysia showed that 15 per cent of 2640 respondents (who have or have had a partner) had experienced intimate partner violence (physical, sexual or emotional) at some point in their life (Shuib et al., 2013). Even though these studies do not specifically report ethnic variations in the prevalence of intimate partner violence, other smaller studies, which did not use a nationwide sample, have indicated a high prevalence of domestic violence among Malaysian Indians (Awang & Hariharan, 2011; Wong & Othman, 2008).

This chapter which focuses on intimate partner violence in a minority and disadvantaged community in Malaysia is an outcome of a study which focused on material and non-material deprivation experienced by Malaysian Indians who are living in poverty. Penang has a level of urbanization of 90.8 per cent (Department of Statistics, 2010b) which, is a suitable place to study the experiences of urban poor women.

Poverty, masculinity and violence

Poverty and issues related to poverty has been identified as one of the main contributors to intimate partner violence. Even though intimate partner violence occurs in all socio-economic

¹ These acts include placing, or attempting to place, the victim in fear of physical injury; causing physical injury to the victim; compelling the victim by force or threat to engage in any conduct or act, sexual or otherwise, from which the victim has right to abstain; confining or detaining the victim against the victim's will; causing destruction or damage to property with intent to cause or knowing that it is likely to cause distress or annoyance to the victim (DVA, 1994). The Domestic Violence (Amendment) Act 2012 also included causing psychological abuse and causing the victim to suffer any delusion by using any intoxicating substance ("DVA," 2012).

groups, it has been reported in many countries that it is more severe among lower income groups (Jewkes, 2002). Scholars have argued that while poverty may not directly cause intimate partner violence, the influence may be mediated by notions of masculine identity (Gelles 1974 as cited in Jewkes, 2002). Intimate partner violence is more likely to occur when men's sense of masculinity is challenged. This may explain the higher rates of intimate partner violence among those who live in poverty (Anderson, 2005). In families living in poverty, the inability to provide for the family challenges the sense of masculinity of the male partner, hence violence is used as another way of exerting control over his spouse (Anderson, 2005).

Feminists have long argued that intimate partner violence is a way in which patriarchal power is manifested in everyday life (Anderson, 2005). However, this view has been contested using findings of sex-symmetry in the way violence is committed by spouses (Anderson, 2005; Renzetti, 1994) and challenged the feminists understanding of intimate partner violence as a problem of gender and power (Anderson, 2005). While such view is problematic for feminists' struggle to get the needed attention on domestic violence, it cannot be denied that the meaning and the experience of domestic violence is different in different parts of the world. Fernandez's (1997) analysis of fifteen case studies of domestic violence from Bombay showed violence against a married woman can be perpetrated not only by her husband but also his family members. Older women (such as mother-in-law and sister-in-law) may assist in the violence on younger women who marry into their family. Therefore, violence is not only caused by male dominance but is 'a product of interlocking systems of gender and life-cycle-based hierarchies in the Indian family' (Fernandez, 1997, p. 451). Older women have the power to abuse younger women because of their relationship with the men in the family.

In most society, masculinity is associated with power and domination while femininity is associated with being weak and submissive. Violence and aggression are often seen as

characteristics of the idealized form of masculinity in a society; therefore, it can be used as a way to perform masculinity in everyday life i.e. ‘to show others that one is a “real man”’ (Anderson, 2005, p. 857). Violence particularly in intimate relationships has been used by men to control their female partners and display their masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a cultural ideal which refers to the most valued way of being a man in a particular community (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Connell (1995) defines hegemonic masculinity as

...the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (p. 77)

When discussing hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1987) emphasized that hegemony ‘does not refer to ascendancy based on force, [but] it is not incompatible with ascendancy based on force’ (p. 184). She explained further that ascendancy embedded in religious doctrine or practices and mass media is a form of hegemony. In the case of domestic violence, religious and cultural ideologies are often used to justify violence against female partners (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). Femininity, on the other hand, is constructed in the context of subordination of women to men and emphasizes compliance, nurturance, and empathy as womanly virtues. The most valued form of femininity is referred to as emphasized femininity and it describes social relations that involve subordination to men, and accommodates their interests and desires (Connell, 1987). Emphasized femininity has many similar expectations as traditional femininity in Tamil culture in which the self-sacrificing, caring, and submissive wife is often celebrated as the ‘ideal’ wife. These qualities are the most valued and cherished quality of femininity². In addition to this, the notion of *karpu* (chastity) is the most celebrated virtue for a Tamil woman (Sivakami, 2004). *Karpu* in Tamil culture does not only refer to physical chastity but it includes devotion to one’s husband. The notion of *karpu* is so glorified in Tamil literature that it gives sacred power to women who abide by these norms

² Please see (Karupiah, 2015) for a detailed discussion on traditional feminine ideals in Tamil culture.

(Ramaswamy, 2010). The notion of *karpu* by default gives ascendancy for the husband in a husband and wife relationship. In addition to this, marital status often gives different kinds of status to a woman. The existence of words such as *vazhavetti* (separated) and *vithavai* (widow) for women, without equivalent terms for men, is a reflection of this. Both words have negative connotation and are associated with some level of inauspiciousness.

In this chapter, the manifestation of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity can be seen in the experiences of urban poor Malaysian Indians in Penang. The perpetrators of violence are all males while the victims are all females. From the narratives of these women we are able to see how the notion of femininity and masculinity are constructed in their everyday lives. The understanding of how these constructions are related to the problem of intimate partner violence is important for feminist researchers and activists in influencing policy and support program for victims. It is also important to ensure that front-line service providers do not reiterate traditional biases related to domestic violence (e.g. domestic violence as a family matter; men will be men; violence is a norm) to ensure that more women are able to come forward in their struggle against intimate partner violence.

Malaysian Indians and Urban Poverty

Malaysian Indians are people of Indian origin who are Malaysian nationals. They constitute around 7.3 percent of the total population (Department of Statistics, 2010a). Most are Hindus, but there are also some Malaysian Indians who are Christians or Muslims. Most Malaysian Indians are descendants of migrants from South India, particularly from Tamil Nadu. There have been a few waves of migration to Malaysia from India (see Gopal and Karupiah, 2013). Most migrations happened during the British colonial times, when Indians were brought to Malaysia (then Malaya) to work in rubber plantations (Sandhu, 1993). While most of the Indian labourers were brought in to work on the plantations, a fair percentage were also located as labourers in other service sectors like road construction, railways,

telecommunications and port activities. Many of this latter group of labourers were located in urban areas (Lim, Gomes, & Rahman, 2009).

At present, the Indian community in urban areas in Malaysia rank as one of the poorest groups in the urban sector. Many of them moved to the urban areas when the plantation economy gave way to development projects. The environment in the plantation was hardly conducive for them to attain a decent education or acquiring critical skills that are needed in the modern sector of the economy. These displaced people with low levels of education and skills are largely unemployable. They not only find themselves competing with foreign workers for low-paying jobs but also competing in informal sector activities to earn a living, thus perpetuating their cycle of poverty (Nair, 2007).

Methods

The data for this study comes from in-depth interviews of twelve poor women living in Penang. This technique of data collection is expected to allow these women to express and describe their experiences about issues related to living in poverty as way of giving voices to women in a minority community in Malaysia. Equal numbers of participants were selected from three categories of poverty i.e. ordinary poor, hard-core poor, and vulnerable poor. Ordinary poor refers a household with an income below RM 763 [\approx USD 183] which is the poverty line income (PLI). Hard-core poor refers to a household with an income less than RM 620 [\approx USD 155], while vulnerable poor refers to a household with income more than the PLI. This PLI is for Peninsular Malaysia and is based on the Tenth Malaysian Plan (Economic Planning Unit, 2010). All the participants spoke Tamil for most parts of the interviews. They sometimes used Malay and English words or phrases in their interviews. Data from the interviews were transcribed and translated to English. After going through the transcripts for familiarization, the researchers coded the data to describe participants' experiences of domestic violence and the causes of violence and poverty in their households.

Findings

In this study, participants were between the ages of 31 to 78 with a majority of them were in their 30s. All the participants had an income less than RM 1,000 (≈USD 250). All participants (except one) had children. Most were single mothers either because their husband has passed away or they were *de facto single* mothers³. Most participants have experienced intimate partner violence at some point in their married life, even though the type of violence experienced may be different. Almost all participants shared experiences of verbal abuse. For some, this was experienced with physical and emotional abuse. While participants highlighted that lack of social support, fate, lack of educational qualification and skills may be responsible for their condition, substance abuse particularly alcohol addiction and extra marital affair is seen as the main cause of the violence experienced by them.

Substance abuse, extra marital affair and violence

Substance abuse has been identified as one of the causes of both poverty and violence. In some households, for example, up to 50 percent of their monthly income was spent on alcohol hence they had very little money to spend on other necessities. Kanaga shared her experience:

[...]because of his heavy drinking habit he [my husband] spends more than 50 per cent of his earnings on alcohol and smoking...neglecting me and the kids...This kind of habit has made us poorer...If I try to advise him he will beat me... My other fear is that my kids would follow the footsteps of my husband and become a drunkard.

Meena explained how her husband's involvement with another woman added strain to their family well-being and financial situation at home:

Another reason my family have become poor because my husband has the heart to leave the family and cohabit or live with another women...even though he has many children with me. He has 7 kids with me and now he goes to other women....How is he going to support both of us? At the moment he is only giving us RM200 [≈USD 50] per month ...do you think it is enough? He is worst then an animal.

Malar, a single mother described her experience living with her husband who is an alcoholic:

³ This includes adult children.

When I ask him to stop drinking and be responsible...each time I question him, he scolds, shouts and beats me [sobbing]... The children were small and they would just watch him beating and scolding me using vulgar words. As I couldn't stand the daily torture, I would go and stay with my mother and will take my children with me. He will come there and create more havoc, scolds and beats me in front of my mother and starts framing me that I go to my mother's house because I have an affair with someone. So he doesn't allow me to go to my mother's house at all.

Malar's and Kanaga's experiences showed that they have been suffering from physical, emotional and verbal abuse for a long time. Meena, on the other hand, did not clearly talk about physical violence but her experience suggested that she has been suffering from some form of emotional abuse. Her husband's accusation on infidelity further added stress to her relationship and everyday life. Here, 'infidelity' has been used as a 'tool' to limit her movement and to stop her from going to her parents' place. This made her feel alone and isolated because she lost the only family support in her life. Her experiences highlighted how the notion of *karpu* is being used by her husband to limit her mobility and strain her relationship with her parents. When her *karpu* was challenged she was put in a position where she was expected to defend or prove her loyalty and devotion to her husband. In her narratives, she used the word 'allow' and this clearly shows the hierarchy in their relationship. Her husband has the 'power' to control and discipline her, the wife, on the other hand, is expected to play her role as a carer and nurturer regardless of how she was treated.

From the experiences of these participants it can be seen clearly that the power lies in the hands of the male partner. He then uses violence to maintain this power. Women remain rather submissive in the context (even though they are able to find some income on their own) of their relationship and are controlled by violence and traditional expectations of femininity. This clearly shows the manifestation of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity in their lives.

Lakshmi is a 38 year old housewife. She has some formal education but did not complete her secondary education. She lives in a low-cost house in Penang. She also experienced physical, emotional and verbal abuse:

My life is full of hardship...because my husband is an irresponsible guy who creates havoc with the children and becomes a nuisance after drinking...He always end up beating me if I tried to advise him to avoid all this vices. I don't have any peace because of him [in tears]...My jewelleries are all gone. He would beat and pester me daily for money to drink. I just wish someone could help me, just give me RM500 [USD 125]. I don't have help from anyone at all. He will shout at us using vulgar words. My youngest child would watch and ask why his father is talking like that. I tell him [my son] that the father is not in his senses due to his drinking habit. I used to send him to the neighbour's house to prevent him from listening to the quarrels, beatings, vulgar words etc. Even the children's education was affected in this way...I have a lot in my heart to try to control and improve the condition of my husband and my 2 spoilt sons [in tears].

Lakshmi's experience highlighted not only the violence that she faced but her fear about the future of her children. She is worried that the violence witnessed in her family would influence her children to engage in violence outside their home. She also feared that her children, particularly male children, would be addicted to drugs and alcohol. Malliga shared similar experiences:

My husband's drinking *samsu*⁴ habit is the biggest culprit that brought us to be in this state...and he spends his half of earnings on illicit *samsu* ... as a result, the main source of income for the family is affected. I'm so stressed as to how to feed all the children and to look into their education. The eldest child is 24 years old now. But I also don't get any help from him...as parents would expect. Another son is involved in gangsterism. The eldest son is on drugs. He has fallen into a pit and I don't have any hope that he can be redeemed. For all these, I blame their father who did not navigate the family. He is so arrogant and wouldn't want to listen to our advice. The second son drinks daily...following his father's footstep [...]

Malliga and Lakshmi felt that their children, particularly their sons, have been most affected by the violence and substance abuse by their father. Their children are now addicted to various substance such as drugs and alcohol and act violently.

⁴ *Samsu* is a distilled potent spirit with an alcohol content of between 37 per cent and 70 per cent. It is often the consumed by consumers from the lower income category (World Health Organization (WHO), 2004).

The narratives of urban poor Malaysian Indian women in Penang often emphasized how much they contributed to the caring and maintenance of the household with limited or no support from other family members. They clearly articulated how they played the role of the nurturer of the family, being responsible in taking care of their family members including their husband who abused them. On the other hand, substance abuse (particularly alcohol) and violence is being used by the male partners to 'perform' masculinity which is often constructed as being powerful and being in control (Jewkes, 2002; Peralta, Tuttle, & Steele, 2010). Their narratives clearly show the sacrifices they have been making in their everyday life and their effort to closely fulfil the traditional expectation of gender roles in Tamil society in Malaysia. Other than caring for the family, many participants also work to earn a living in order to manage the financial demands of the family. While these women are rather independent in their ability in finding some form of income for the family they often still succumb to traditional gender roles in a heterosexual relationship where they show acceptance and submission to male dominance particularly when the dominating male is their husband. In Malaysia, traditionally, intimate partner violence has been viewed as a private matter. This has slowly changed with much effort from various women's organizations and non-governmental organizations in the early 1980s. These organizations played a major role in creating awareness and establishing intimate partner violence as a public issue in Malaysia which eventually led to the tabling and enactment of the Domestic Violence Act in 1994. As a result of such development in the legal front, front-line health workers and NGO groups further lobbied for the establishment of a formal service protocol to support the victims. This eventually led to the establishment of a pilot One Stop Crisis Centre (OSSC) in 1996. Since then, more OSSCs have been set up in hospitals as a way to respond to violence (which includes domestic violence, sexual violence and child abuse) (Colombini, Ali, Watts, & Mayhew, 2011). OSSCs provide medical, counselling, police and legal services at the

hospitals itself and the services are provided by medical staff from the hospitals and supported by other agencies such as non-governmental organizations, police, the Legal Aid, and the Welfare Department (OSSC, 2016). The OSSCs allow an active role by the NGOs in supporting the domestic violence victims. Even though there may still be some issues in the running of OSSCs, it has become a positive step in assisting victims of domestic violence (Colombini et al., 2011).

Any effort in advancing women's rights in Malaysia needs to take into account not only the cultural and religious diversity but also other demographic differences such as age and class. For example, the struggle towards the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act had to take into consideration the fact that family matters are under the jurisdiction of the *Syariah* laws for Muslims and the civil law for non-Muslims (Lai, 2012). Other than that, there are many social constructs such as the meaning of violence, family honour, faith and karma become barriers for victims in the process of seeking help (Othman, Goddard, & Piterman, 2014). Therefore, understanding of the experiences of women from all walks of life particularly is very important in designing policies and programs to support victims of intimate partner violence. People who actively work with victims such as feminist researchers, members of women organizations, front line health and legal service providers are responsible in bringing forward the complexity experienced by the victims in order to provide better support for them.

Conclusion

Issues related to intimate partner violence are rather serious in the lives of the urban poor Malaysian Indians in Penang. Substance abuse further contributes to this form of violence. The imbalance of power in marital relationship among these women clearly illustrates hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity in their everyday life. Aside from the deleterious effects of violence on women, there is also an intergenerational effect of intimate partner violence because children tend to display similar behaviour in their adult life. While

this study gives some instances of intimate partner violence among Malaysian Indian women it should not be used to gauge the seriousness of the problem among the urban poor in Penang or to generalize about intimate partner violence in Penang. While there has been much progress in the struggle against intimate partner violence in Malaysia particularly when involving severe physical violence, much work needs to be done on other aspects of abuse such as verbal and emotional. Furthermore, researchers and activists need to ensure that women themselves are aware of their rights both in public and private spheres of their lives to be able to combat intimate partner violence.

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