A Study on Malaysian Public Attitudes and Perceptions towards Violence Against Women (VAW)

A SUMMARY OF INITIAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

WAO WOMEN'S AID ORGANISATION
PERTUBUHAN PERTOLONGAN WANITA

About WAO
Since 1982, Women's Aid Organisation has provided free shelter, counselling, and crisis support to women and children who experience abuse. We help women and their children rebuild their lives, after surviving domestic violence, rape, trafficking, and other atrocities. Learning from women's experiences, we advocate to improve public policies and shift public mindsets. Together, we change lives. For enquiries, you may contact us at info@wao.org.my

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Foreword by WAO's Executive Director

Over the past four decades, WAO has assisted thousands of women and girl survivors of gender-based violence and discrimination. We've seen how inequality is at the root of violence against women, learnt that survivors of violence face further marginalisation from society through all forms of discrimination, and we've also seen how discrimination and harassment can make women more dependent and more vulnerable to violence. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and intensified vulnerabilities of women in our society, at home and at work, evidenced by the sharp increase in incidences of domestic violence and pronounced economic inequities. Gender inequality breeds violence and discrimination as it casts women as lesser than men, and less deserving of rights.

As we work to rebuild and reshape our society, culture and the economy post-pandemic, it is a fundamental imperative to address gender inequality. We need better accountability for the prevalent inequities faced by women and girls. Reform is critical and must address the formal (laws and policies) and as well ensure equality of opportunity and that the implementation of laws and policies indeed result in gender equality. Equally critically, we need "transformation of institutions, systems and structures that cause or perpetuate discrimination and inequality," as well as the "the modification or transformation of harmful norms, prejudices and stereotypes."[1]

Discrimination and harassment must be addressed and women's empowerment must be guaranteed by law. While gender progressive laws and policies (formal equality) are important drivers of equality, we also need the guarantee of substantive equality that ensures equality of access, opportunity and outcomes, recognising that "the law may have unintended disparate effects on women or women may face structural barriers to accessing their rights."[2] Still, formal and substantive equality is not enough. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) takes a transformative equality approach in Article 5(a),[3] articulating that states must take all appropriate measures:

> To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.[4]

According to the CEDAW Committee, transformation of societal institutions, systems, and structures with the purpose of achieving gender equality will require adopting measures aimed at redistributing power and resources among men and women, and at ensuring "...'a real transformation of opportunities, institutions, and systems so that they are no longer grounded in historically determined male paradigms of power and life patterns.'"[5] Simultaneously, states must transform norms, prejudices, and stereotypes that violate women's rights and thus "...create the conditions necessary for women to exercise their autonomy and agency and 'develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices.'"[6]

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[1] Simone Cusack and Lisa Pousey, "CEDAW and the Rights to Non-Discrimination and Equality," Melbourne Journal of International Law 3, no. 14 (2013), http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/MelbJIL/2013/3.html.

[2] Riki Holtmaat, "The CEDAW," Women's Human Rights, 2013, pp. 95-123, doi:10.1017/cbo9781139540841.006.

[3] Riki Holtmaat, Towards Different Law and Public Policy: The Significance of Article 5A Cedaw for the Elimination of Structural Gender Discrimination The Hague: Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2004.

[4] United Nations, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women New York: United Nations Dept. of Public Information, 1993.

[5] Cusack and Pousey, "CEDAW and the Rights to Non-Discrimination and Equality."

[6] CEDAW Committee, General Recommendation No. 28 on the Core Obligations of States Parties under Article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 2010.

It's thus clear that promoting and achieving gender equality requires a triumvirate of factors: Enabling laws, equitable access to opportunities and outcomes, and gender progressive attitudes and norms within society and its institutions. We are falling short on all three.

The lived experiences of women and girls that we have supported over 40 years demonstrate the unvarnished truth of norms, prejudices and stereotypes that entrench misogynism and chauvinism in Malaysia. This is now further buttressed with clear and convincing data. Through collaboration with the Global Fund for Women, we have been able to undertake research around societal understanding of discrimination and harassment, as well as around the Malaysian public's opinions on key issues that underscore and underlie attitudes towards gender equality.

It's not rocket science. We need to challenge gender stereotypes and prioritise gender equality in all spheres. We must do more to eradicate attitudes that facilitate the notion of women being lesser beings than men. We must implement progressive measures that will ensure women are employed, able to stay in the labour market, and benefit from fair and equitable practices in the workplace. Women must be free from discrimination and harassment, and have equitable access to advancement. It's never that women are less capable. What we need to remedy is the foundation that is flawed from the outset as it excludes women and girls from the opportunities and rights that can support us to the fullest enjoyment of life.

Seeking fundamental justice, fostering integrity in society and ensuring access to rights drive WAO's mission. Without this, women will continue to be disenfranchised compared to men, will continue to be trapped in stereotypical gender roles, and will continue to be more vulnerable to gender-based violence. Reflecting and understanding the fundamental injustices faced by women and girls face is painful but necessary. It is learning the baseline that can move us into the critical next step to pivot towards working to find solutions and to advocate for those solutions.

Our bliss comes from seeing how the lives of women and girls change positively when we are free and able to access rights and pursue our dreams. We're not only creating a Better Country for Women, but a better Malaysia for everyone.

Sumitra Visvanathan
Executive Director, Women's Aid Organisation (WAO)

Foreword by the Study's Panel of Expert Advisors

Panel of Expert Advisors

Studies of attitudes towards violence against women (VAW) are increasingly recognised as significant ways to understand the problem and to provide effective prevention and interventions. Literature has indicated that attitudes of acceptance and tolerance of different types of (VAW) are prevalent amongst men and boys around the world. Further, societies that reflect attitudes and behaviour towards greater gender equality tend to have lower occurrence of VAW. While aspects of attitudes can be universal, they are more often influenced by culture-specific factors and thus, it is important to collect localised evidence of attitudes on VAW.

Data on VAW, in general, is not extensive in Malaysia. Studies of attitudes about VAW in Malaysia in more recent years are also very sporadic. Thus, this study and report undertaken by Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) is very timely and highly commendable for contributing towards the corpus of important current knowledge on VAW specifically and on issues impacting women and gender equality in Malaysia, more generally. This study is also significant because it provides robust evidence about VAW in the Malaysian context that can be the basis for formulating effective policy and programmes on VAW prevention and on transforming the sociocultural norms towards non-tolerance of gender-based violence.

It is hoped that WAO's effort in collating this kind of data does not stop here but will potentially expand to other aspects of VAW and will also be accompanied by wide dissemination of and dialogues about the findings.

Professor Dr. Noraida Endut,
Unit for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA), Universiti Sains Malaysia.
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Violence against Women (VAW) is often thought of as acts of violence, but it is also about attitude towards violence; the individuals, the society, and the country. Attitude is often hidden and unspoken unless efforts are made to unearth them. We know much more about VAW, but we know little about societal attitudes that directly or indirectly support violence against women and violence in the society. Those who champion VAW's issues and who work with survivors of violence, understand fully well that providing shelters, having laws, establishing One-Stop-Crisis Centres (OSCC), having trained police and doctors in VAW issues are important and necessary, but not enough.

VAW must be prevented from happening. It has to do with grinding one's nose closer to the ground, closer to the society. For many years the literature has been publishing about the need to change societal norms about VAW, which would be a herculean task. The first step would be to understand these normative values and attitudes. This report is about that task; about taking the first step to study society's attitudes towards VAW in Malaysia. This study of Malaysia's Public Attitudes and Perceptions Towards VAW by Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) is the first big study of its kind in this country.

WAO, an NGO in Malaysia, whose name is synonymous with domestic violence, is known to be a passionate champion of ending violence against women in this country. Over the years its work has extended to other forms of violence and advocacy work. Marital rape, for example, unrecognised in Malaysia, is still an unfinished agenda for WAO and other women NGOs in this country. Firm in the belief that understanding society's attitude means taking the first step in

primary prevention of violence against women and recognising that deeply ingrained social and cultural norms can be changed and have changed, WAO, using the Australian National Community Attitudes towards Violence Against Women Survey, embarked on the first study on Malaysian's attitude to VAW. As one of the panel of experts to this study, I was impressed with the young WAO's researchers who aspired to use a good, validated tool adapted to Malaysia's cultural context. They were welcoming of the panel's advice to follow the ethical principles in doing research and committed to the good use of the findings.

To sustain this effort taken by an NGO, it would be the State's obligations to ensure regular data collection in the future, to track changes in our society's attitude towards violence against women. I look forward to the State fulfilling its obligations to promote, respect and fulfil the rights of women in our fight to stop violence against women.

Professor Dato' Dr Rashidah Shuib,
Honorary Professor, School of Health Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia
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Attitude forms a basis of one's action (or lack of) towards stopping violence against women. While there are increasing research to inform us regarding violence against women in Malaysia, data on community attitudes is scanty. I am glad that WAO has taken a ground breaking research to examine in detail various aspect of violence against women attitudes among Malaysian. The findings provide crucial information for immediate intervention relevant to the local context and in the future, provides baseline comparison data with repeated evaluation on the matter.

Professor Dr. Sajaratulnisah Othman,
Department of Primary Care Medicine, Universiti Malaya
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WAO's national study on Malaysian public attitudes on Violence against Women which included an online nationwide survey with a large sample and semi-structured in-depth interviews with survivors of violence is extremely important for not much is known of the Malaysian public attitudes on violence against women.

Why is such a study very momentous? Information on attitudes towards violence against women and towards gender equality are key to finding solutions in the prevention of violence against women. Attitudes can influence the responses of service providers, as well as those of family, friends, neighbours and work place colleagues of those affected. Violence against Women is linked to harmful gender stereotypes.

Stereotypical views on gender roles exist. And those who hold stereotypical gender views were less likely to view a range of behaviours as seriously wrong or likely to cause a great deal of harm. There is growing evidence on what works to prevent violence against women which is firmly based on the premise that violence against women cannot be eradicated without investing in change of attitudes, bringing about greater equality betweenwomen and men. Therefore, there is an urgent need in changing attitudes and eliminating stereotypes not only at the level of individuals but also at the level of institutions, by placing the obligation on states parties to conduct regular awareness-raising campaigns, introduce teaching material at all levels of education, regularly train all professionals in contact with survivors of VAW, including legal professionals and the police, set up perpetrator programmes, and involve the private sector and the media as partners in tackling violence against women.

Therefore, strategies aimed at reducing and preventing violence against women should focus on eliminating gender stereotypes and tackling discriminatory or stereotyping attitudes, cultures and behaviours. This national study conducted by WAO provides knowledge of Malaysian attitudes on VAW and it serves as a barometer measuring whether progress is being made and where we may need to focus our efforts.

Associate Professor Dr. Shanthi Thambiah,
Gender Studies Unit, Universiti Malaya
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Advocators have long established that Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), or Domestic Violence (DV), or Violence Against Women (VAW) are not private matters. Rather, they are matters of public issue and of public interest. They are embedded in patriarchal norms and perceptions and are promoted and sustained by official social policies, political choices as well as developmental approaches that undermine equal participation of women in both public and private sectors. Over the years these patriarchal values have continued to shape and sustain the thinking and responses to VAW/DV/IPV in Malaysian society. Besides supporting the victims and survivors, Malaysian women NGOs have been vigorously and continuously working to build up public awareness and change public attitudes and perception towards the phenomenon. This public perception research on the subject by WAO is undoubtedly a critical part of the action. However, the challenges are still daunting.

Results of the study indicate that Malaysian are generally aware that domestic violence is part of violence against women, but they do not seem to have changed much from their core patriarchal ideas on the subject such as victim blaming, giving excuses to perpetrators and believing in the sanctity of the family as an exclusive private domain free from any outside intervention. Indeed, the root causes of the problem remain intact. Four decades of advocacy work by women NGOs seems to have only scratched the surface of the problem.

It is time for higher authority such as the state to intervene and show more political will to address the issue and reset the Malaysian family to a new level. Indeed, the well-being of the Malaysian family cannot be left to women NGOs alone. The evidence from this study clearly shows that the problem deserves immediate and serious attention by all interested parties particularly the policy makers and service providers to enhance public awareness and eliminate VAW/DV/IPV in our society.

Congratulations WAO, particularly the research team, for all your effort to highlight the public perception and attitudes on DV/IPV in Malaysia.

Associate Professor Siti Hawa Ali,
Reproductive Health Association of Kelantan (ReHAK)
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Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

B40	Bottom 40 percent
CASVAWS	Community Attitudes Supportive of Violence Against Women Scale
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Violence Against Women
D11	Sexual, Women and Child Investigations Division, Royal Malaysian Police
DVA	Domestic Violence Act 1994
FGM/C	Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting
GEAS	Gender Equality Attitudes Scale
IO	Investigating Officer
IPO	Interim Protection Order
JKM	Jabatan Kebajikan Malaysia (JKM) or Social Welfare Department of Malaysia
MWFCD	Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development
NCAS	National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey
OSCC	One-Stop Crisis Centre
PO	Protection Order
RMP	Royal Malaysian Police
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UVAWS	Understanding Violence Against Women Scale
VAW	Violence against Women
WHO	World Health Organization (WHO)

About this Report

This publication is a summary of a study conducted by Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) to assess and explore Malaysian public attitudes and perceptions towards violence against women (VAW) and related sources of support. The study was supported by Global Fund for Women (GFW) with contributions from a panel of five Malaysian academic experts, current and former WAO staff, and sixteen VAW survivors who bravely shared their stories with us.

In this report, VAW is defined as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or sauffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."[7] and includes domestic violence, rape, sexual harrasment, stalking and harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). Harmful practices refers to forms of violence against women and girls which are defended on the basis of tradition, culture, religion or superstition by some community members.[8] Meanwhile, violence-endorsing attitudes can loosely be defined as attitudes that justify, excuse, minimise VAW, or blame survivors for the violence perpetrated against them.[9]

The findings of this study demonstrates a serious need for prevention interventions and programming for VAW in Malaysia that move beyond surface-level information-sharing to actively challenge underlying attitudes that help to sustain VAW within Malaysian society. Based on some preliminary analysis, the study highlights specific dimensions of violence-endorsing attitudes that are likely to be prevalent within Malaysian society. In doing so, it helps to inform the design of future prevention programmes and provides a foundation for continued monitoring of the progression and regression of Malaysian public attitudes and perceptions towards VAW.

The findings and recommendations put forward in this report are based on:
- A survey assessing attitudes and perception of 1,000 participants from the Malaysian population administered via an online survey company, Ipsos. The method of stratified random sampling was used to ensure survey results were representative of the Malaysian population.
- In depth-interviews with 16 survivors of violence against women (domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, stalking) exploring the impact of public attitudes and perceptions on survivors' experiences in help-seeking
- A brief review of existing research and discourses on female genital mutilation/cutting in Malaysia, co-authored with Sisters in Islam (SIS) and the Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW)

Following are key recommendations of this study:
- VAW prevention initiatives in Malaysia should be underpinned by a comprehensive prevention strategy and action plan in order to achieve a wider reach and sustained results.
- VAW prevention initiatives in Malaysia should enhance public understanding towards rape and forms of non-physical violence, in particular cyber-harassment, stalking and coercive/controlling behaviours by partners.
- VAW prevention initiatives in Malaysia should actively challenge underlying violence-endorsing attitudes and societal norms that help sustain VAW within the society.
- Integrate modules on challenging violence-endorsing attitudes within training for frontline government officers, particularly for police officers, Talian Kasih hotline operators, and Waja Squad members
- Invest in public information campaigns that empower Malaysians to adequately respond to survivors, including through promoting an awareness of pathways for survivor protection and support.
- Conduct nationally representative surveys that measure public attitudes towards violence against women and replicate it at least every four years as a means of tracking attitudinal changes within Malaysia across a period of time.

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[7] United Nations, *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* New York: United Nations Dept. of Public Information, 1993.

[8] ActionAid UK et al., "Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting Women and Girls" International Planned Parenthood Federation, December 28, 2012, https://bit.ly/3FSCRsF.

[9] ActionAid UK et al., "Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting Women and Girls" International Planned Parenthood Federation, December 28, 2012, https://bit.ly/3FSCRsF.

- Increase efforts for data collection, analysis, and transparency by government stakeholders.
- More political will and research is needed to adequately direct and inform the design of prevention initiatives for child marriage and FGM/C in Malaysia. This study, in the meantime, offers some key insights:
  - Malaysians are more likely to oppose the practice of child marriage (70.3%).
  - A significant portion of respondents who expressed support for child marriage were also aware of the myriad of harms that came with the practice; Public education initiatives on child marriage need to be a part of larger strategic plan that addresses all of its risk factors.
  - More research is needed to debunk the perspective that FGM/C, as it is practiced in Malaysia, is harmless. We also need more information on the long-term psychological impact of FGM/C, investigating how a woman's relationship to her body, sexuality, and sexual desire are affected.
  - In the years to come when there might be more of an evidence-base for the practices of FGM/C, this survey can be further expanded to incorporate a subsection on FGM/C.
- Implement and enforce law and policy reforms that criminalise acts of VAW and promote gender equality.

1 Introduction

VAW is a complex social phenomenon underpinned by a constellation of factors interacting at multiple but inextricably linked levels of the social ecology - the individual, community, organisational, and societal levels. This is often referred to as the socio-ecological framework of understanding VAW, and was initially developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a means of understanding underlying risk factors of violent behaviour or vulnerability to violence as well as to identify opportunities for prevention.[10]

Of all the risk factors for VAW, there is a growing recognition that the goal of preventing and eliminating VAW cannot be achieved without addressing the root cause of VAW, namely patriarchal attitudes and stereotypical gender norms that endorse violence, value male dominance, and disrespect women.

In the 2018 Concluding Observations to the Malaysian government, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women[11] (CEDAW Committee) cautioned about the "persistence of patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society," which they saw as "a significant impediment to the implementation of the Convention and are a root cause of the disadvantaged position of women in several areas, including in the labour market and in political and public life."[12] Following this, the Committee made several recommendations to the Malaysian government, some of which are included as part of the key recommendations in this report.

[10] World Health Organization (WHO), "World Report On Violence And Health" World Health Organization (WHO), 2002,https://www.refworld.org/docid/54aa8f744.html.

[11] The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is a body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). As a signatory to CEDAW, the Malaysian government has an obligation to to take all appropriate measures, including prevention measures, to eliminate discrimination against women and advance gender equality. Periodically, the CEDAW Committee reviews a governments' progress and issues its Concluding Observations which identifies the most critical measures that need to be taken by the government to implement the Convention.

[12] Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "Concluding Observations on the Combined Third to Fifth Periodic Reports of Malaysia" United Nations, 2018, https://bit.ly/3vGUR4n.

The observation and emphasis placed by the CEDAW Committee on the need for the government to address patriarchal attitudes and gender stereotypes within Malaysia marks this out as an important focus area for Malaysia in its obligation to fully implement the principles of CEDAW. Eliminating VAW is also part of governments' obligations under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include achieving Gender Equality (SDG 5) and advancing Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16).

In recent years, there have been some awareness-raising campaigns organised by separate and multiple actors in Malaysia that aim to draw public attention to the issue of VAW. Although these campaigns may help to shed light on the issue of VAW as a matter of public concern, experts suggest that effective prevention initiatives should focus on supporting changes in the attitudes, norms and behaviours that help sustain VAW.[13] However, Malaysian public attitudes and perceptions towards VAW remain understudied at present time - thereby creating a gap in our understanding of strategies that would best work within the Malaysian context to positively change violence-endorsing attitudes and behaviours.

Thus, the overarching question this project aims to answer is: What is the general Malaysian public's attitudes and perceptions towards violence against women and what impact does this have on a societal level, particularly on survivors?

In order to answer this question, this study set out the following objectives:

- To explore and assess Malaysian attitudes and awareness towards violence against women and gender equality.
- To explore Malaysian perceptions and awareness towards sources of support and public messaging for violence against women.
- To explore how Malaysian public attitudes and perceptions towards violence against women impact on survivors' help-seeking experiences.

To achieve these objectives, this study decided to draw on the extensive work done by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) in their National Community Attitudes Survey Towards Violence Against Women (NCAS)[14] carried out every four years in Australia to measure and monitor Australian public attitudes towards VAW. Selected question scales from the NCAS were reviewed and adapted to the Malaysian context in order to map out the prevalence of societal-level violence endorsing attitudes within Malaysian society.

The NCAS encompasses four forms of violence: Intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault and stalking. In order to address other forms VAW, this study included additional questions related to child marriage, rape, public knowledge and perceptions of sources of support and public messaging for VAW. Importantly, this study also explored the link between public attitudes towards VAW and survivors' experiences of help-seeking, with specific focus, in this report, on the encouraging attitudes survivors encountered.

[13] Lori Michau et al., "Prevention Of Violence Against Women And Girls: Lessons From Practice", *The Lancet* 385, no. 9978 (2015): 1672-1684, doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(14)61797-9.

[14] Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), *Australians' Attitudes To Violence Against Women And Gender Equality: Findings From The 2017 National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS)* Sydney, NSW: ANROWS, 2018. bit.ly/3BEZApy

1.1 Defining attitudes and perceptions

Broadly speaking, attitudes, following the conventions of psychological literature, is defined as learned predispositions to a concept or object.[15] Essentially, attitudes are evaluations or stances towards something specific.

Generally, attitudes are thought to contribute to social norms,[16] [17] [18] which are defined as unwritten rules of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are considered acceptable in a particular social group or culture.[19] As such, using the socio-ecological framework, we assert that social norms endorsed widely by the society become societal norms. Attitudes are central to this investigation because attitudes form the backbone of and reflect prevalent societal norms.[20]

As broader constructs, norms are exhibited by members of a society through beliefs, attitudes, and practices.[21] In turn, norms reciprocally shape the attitudes a society will hold. When we investigate public attitudes, what we are trying to do is ascertain the social norms of a society.

Attitudes, while not the only factor, play an important role in influencing behaviours. The underlying assumption is that by facilitating shifts in collectively held attitudes, behaviours can change, too. By focusing on attitudes that are linked to the perpetuation of violence, the resultant behavioural change will hopefully lead to a reduction in or elimination of violence against women. In this view, attitudinal change is understood to heavily influence behavioural change.[22] [23]

Related to the concept of attitudes is perception, which is the way in which something is regarded, interpreted, or understood.[24] Perception is influenced by our own biases, social learning, beliefs, and attitudes.

The best way to understand the relationship between attitudes, norms, and society is through the socio-ecological model (Chart 1.1). In this model, we can see the interaction between an individual's attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and the society around them, from their interpersonal relationships with people such as family and friends, as well as the greater community, involving colleagues, peers, and larger groups. Norms are found throughout and dictate socially appropriate attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours.

[15] Harris Chaiklin, "Attitudes, Behavior, And Social Practice", *Journal Of Sociology And Social Welfare* 48 (2011), https://bit.ly/2YLfhgL.

[16] Icek Ajzen, "Consumer Attitudes And Behavior: The Theory Of Planned Behavior Applied To Food Consumption Decision", *Italian Review Of Agricultural Economics* 2 (2021): 121-138, doi:10.13128/REA-18003.

[17] Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Predicting And Changing Behavior* Psychology Press, 2010.

[18] Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein, "The Influence Of Attitudes On Behavior", 1st ed. Psychology Press, 2005, 172–221.

[19] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, "Addressing The Social And Cultural Norms That Underlie The Acceptance Of Violence", 2018, doi:10.17226/25075.

[20] OurWatch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety Limited (ANROWS) and VicHealth, *Change The Story: A Shared Framework For The Primary Prevention Of Violence Against Women And Their Children In Australia*, ebook Melbourne, Australia: OurWatch, 2015, https://bit.ly/3Bl5iqr.

[21] Saul Mcleod, "Social Roles and Social Norms", Simply Psychology, Last modified January 1, 2008, http://www.simplypsychology.org/social-roles.html

[22] Chaiklin, "Attitudes, Behavior, And Social Practice".

[23] Keith L. Kaufman and Alan Berkowitz, "Fostering Healthy Norms to Prevent Violence and Abuse: The Social Norms Approach," in *The Prevention of Sexual Violence: A Practitioner's Sourcebook* Holyoke, MA: NEARI Press, 2010, pp. 147-171.

[24] Chris Aque, "Perception," Perception, Last modified 2007, https://bit.ly/2YTa1HF.
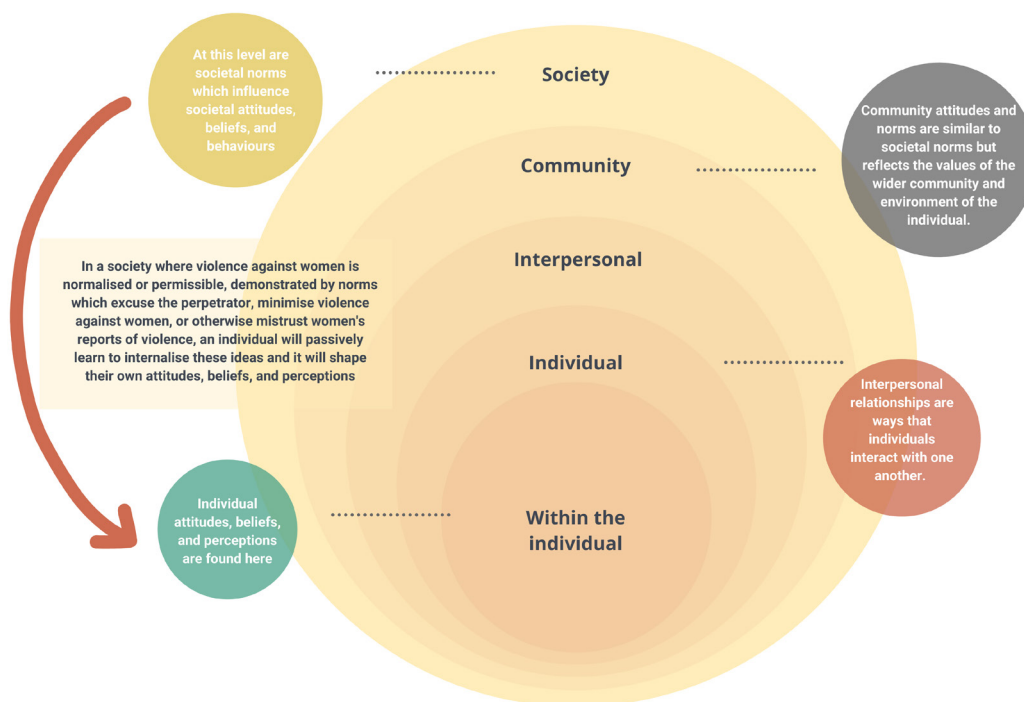
1.2 Attitudes and its connection to VAW

VAW arises in societies where violence is a normalised reaction. Thus, there must be sufficient endorsement and buy-in on a societal level if VAW is normalised and accepted enough that there are high reported rates of VAW.

Since the spread of COVID-19 in Malaysia and the enforcement social distancing measures, reports of domestic violence, child abuse, and suicide cases, particularly involving women and girls have increased,[26] prompting public concerns over the adequacy of existing national response systems towards VAW and mental health issues.[27] The government has reported over 9,000 domestic violence cases since the pandemic began,[28] while WAO experienced almost a four-fold increase in the number of calls and messages to our hotline during the initial months of Movement Control Order (MCO). Similar trends of increase were also reported by Childline Foundation regarding child abuse, seeing a 20-30% increase in calls during lockdown.[29] Meanwhile, rates of suicide and suicide attempts have surged in the months since the pandemic,[30] with reports of up to four suicide cases per day from January to April of 2021.[31] While a focus on improving Malaysian response systems and support to survivors is absolutely critical and necessary, prevention efforts that target the shifting of attitudes and mindsets and work to prevent VAW from happening in the first place should similarly be prioritised. Both prevention and response are usually critical components of national action plans against VAW, and should occur in tandem.[32]

[25] Based partially on a model by OurWatch, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety Limited (ANROWS) and VicHealth from *Change The Story*.

[26] Amber Peterman et al., "Pandemics and Violence Against Women and Children" Center for Global Development, April 1, 2020, https://bit.ly/3pjHgyQ.

[27] Roy Rillera Marzo et al., "Depression and Anxiety in Malaysian Population during Third Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health* 12 (2021), doi:10.1016/j.cegh.2021.100868.

[28] Rahimy Rahim et al., "Over 9,000 Domestic Violence Cases Recorded since MCO Began, Rina Harun Tells Parliament," The Star, Last modified September 23, 2021, https://bit.ly/3AD8Jxu.

[29] Faye Kwan, "1 In 10 Children Likely to Be Victim of Abuse," Free Malaysia Today, Last modified July 16, 2021, https://bit.ly/3j7KDoA.

[30] Hazlin Hassan, "Malaysia Sees Rise in Suicides and Calls to Helplines amid Covid-19 Pandemic," The Straits Times, Last modified July 12, 2021, https://bit.ly/3vnQfQz.

[31] Free Malaysia Today, "A Shocking Statistic – Four Suicide Cases a Day in First Three Months," Free Malaysia Today, Last modified June 29, 2021, https://bit.ly/3aMVsYH.

[32] UN Women, "Handbook for National Action Plans on Violence Against Women," UN Women, 2011, https://bit.ly/3AGdDtm.

The underlying assumption here is that attitudes underpin violent behaviours. As Powell and Webster[33] assert, research has shown that there is a link between those who hold violence endorsing attitudes and the tendency to use and support violence. For a society to normalise violence, it has to, to an extent, endorse violence. It is important to delineate the difference between explicit and implicit endorsement, whereby explicit endorsement takes the shape of explicit approval, whereas implicit endorsement is more insidious and involves behaviours such as complacency or non-intervention, which can indirectly support the perpetuation of violence.

According to feminist theory, violence against women results from gender inequality on the societal level[34] and is best understood as "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women." [35]

The more unequal women are compared to men in a society, the more likely men are to be violent toward women.[36] Therefore, VAW occurs and becomes permissible within societies where there is a power imbalance between men and women. This power imbalance is rooted in the *patriarchy*, which, traditionally, refers to any general structure where men have power over women. In the context of this investigation, we view the patriarchy as a system which consists of male-dominated power structures throughout an organised society and in individual relationships.[37] In valuing male dominance, VAW becomes a byproduct of the patriarchy's assertion. Crucially, violence within the patriarchy also exists on a spectrum from seemingly harmless and benign to explicitly harmful. The nuance between these behaviours is shaped by attitudes.

In a system that values male dominance, attitudes tend to normalise VAW because women's subordination is seen as "normal." For instance, people may believe men have a right to control women, which makes women and girls vulnerable to physical, emotional and sexual violence by men.[38] [39] Therefore, attitudes are seen as the root cause for why violence against women exists.

Public attitudes towards VAW remain understudied at present time in Malaysia and this gap must be addressed because attitudes have far-reaching impacts. For example, societal attitudes towards violence against women impacts the perpetration of violence, how survivors respond when they face violence, and the responses of those around the survivor, including those who constitute formal sources of support such as healthcare staff, police officers, and social welfare officers.[40]

In studying attitudes and beliefs, we focus on **violence endorsing attitudes**. Our study draws from Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), particularly their work on the National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women survey (NCAS), which defines violence supportive/endorsing attitudes as attitudes that:

> *Justify, excuse, minimise or trivialise physical, sexual and other forms of violence against women, or blame or hold women at least partly responsible for violence perpetrated against them... such attitudes expressed by influential individuals or held by a substantial number of people can create a culture in which violence is at best not clearly condemned and at worst condoned or encouraged.[41]*

[33] Powell and Webster, "Cultures of Gendered Violence."

[34] Yllö Kersti and Michele Louise Bograd, *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988.

[35] United Nations, "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women."

[36] Carrie L. Yodanis, "Gender Inequality, Violence against Women, and Fear," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 19, no. 6 (2004): pp. 655-675, doi:10.1177/0886260504263868.

[37] Linda Napikoski, "What Is a Patriarchal Society and How Does It Relate to Feminism?," ThoughtCo, Last modified January 24, 2020, https://bit.ly/3j29k5L.

[38] Amobi Linus Ilika, "Women's Perception of Partner Violence in a Rural Igbo Community," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 9, no. 3 (January 2005): p. 77, doi:10.2307/3583414.

[39] Aparna Mitra and Pooja Singh, "Human Capital Attainment and Gender Empowerment: The Kerala Paradox," *Social Science Quarterly* 88, no. 5 (2007): pp. 1227-1242, doi:10.1111/j.1540-6237.2007.00500.x.

[40] Michael Flood and Bob Pease, "The Factors Influencing Community Attitudes in Relation to Violence Against Women: A Critical Review of the Literature" Violence Against Women Community Attitudes Project, 2006, https://bit.ly/3DHQvN1.

[41] Powell and Webster, "Cultures of Gendered Violence", pp. 8 (quoting VicHealth).

Underlying the NCAS is a comprehensive policy framework for primary prevention of VAW[42] that is premised on this rationale: In order to reduce violence against women, communities must have accurate knowledge of VAW, low endorsements of VAW, and high endorsements of gender equality in public and personal life.[43]

This study adopts the same rationale and the attitudes and perceptions of interest in this study are similarly divided into three broad categories, following NCAS's model: Attitudes which support violence against women, attitudes which dismiss gender inequality, and public perceptions and understanding of what constitutes violence against women. By measuring these key dimensions, the data collected will be able to provide guidance on attitudes and perceptions towards VAW that should be targeted in prevention programmes.

If public attitude surveys like this are carried out every few years, it can serve as a tool to monitor the progression and regression of public attitudes towards VAW, evaluate the effectiveness of existing prevention programmes and potentially inform future public policies that shape prevention programming for VAW.

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[42] OurWatch, ANROWS, and VicHealth, *Change The Story.*
[43] Powell and Webster, "Cultures of Gendered Violence."

Chart 1.2: Attitudes as a root cause of violence against women

Child marriage

Rape

Sexual harassment

FGM/C

Child marriage

Domestic violence and intimate partner violence

Societal structures normalising violence against women

Understanding of violence against women

Attitudes dismissing gender inequality

Attitudes supportive of violence against women

Societal norms valuing male dominance
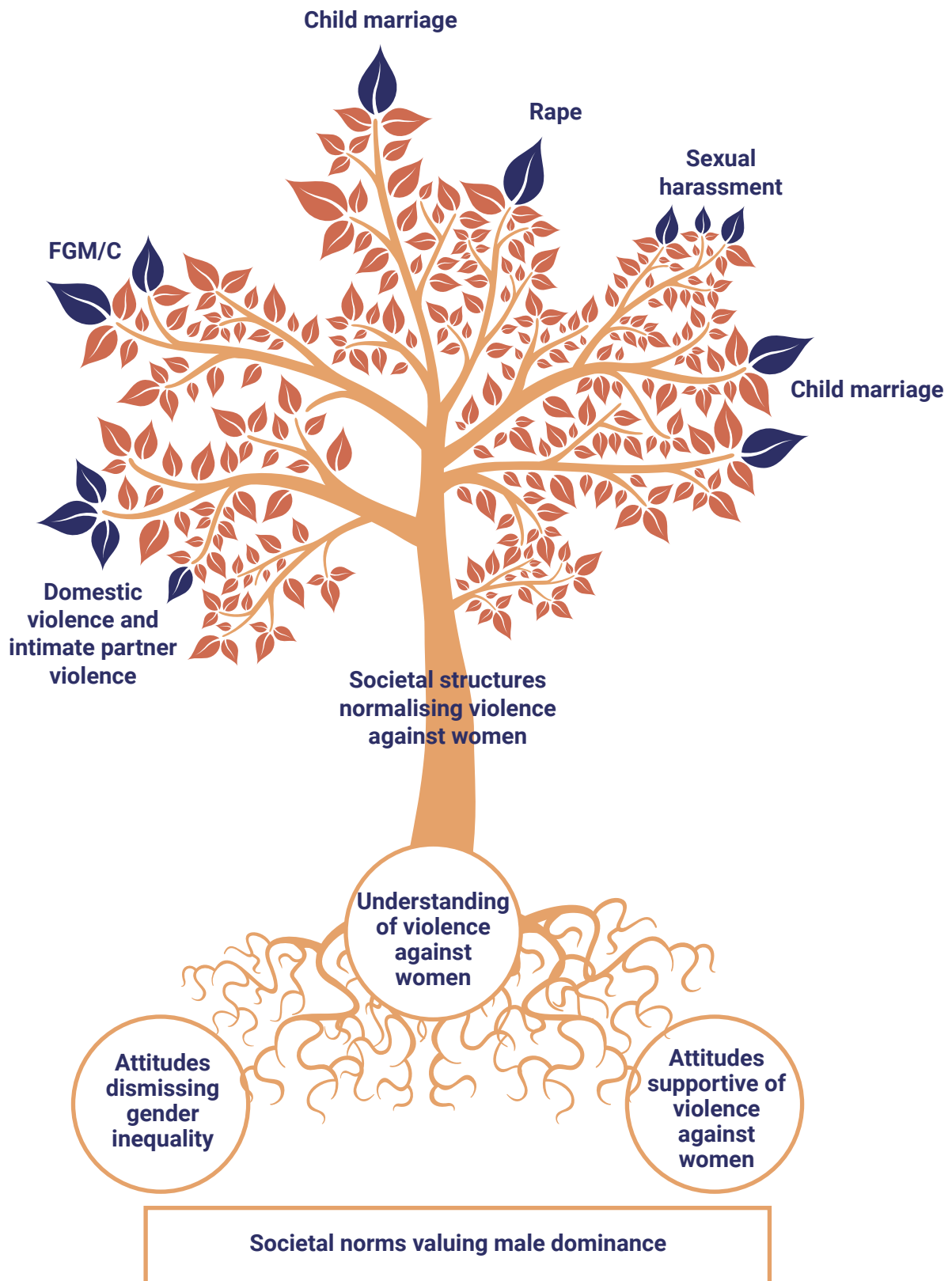
The issue of VAW is thought to have root causes which support and enable the perpetuation of the system. When we study attitudes, we are studying the roots of the tree. While this tree represents a simplification of the issue, it allows us to better understand the link between attitudes and violence.

Beginning at the very bottom, in the soil, societal norms that value male dominance are part of the patriarchy. This is what feeds the roots. When male dominance is valued, two particular types of attitudes arise: attitudes supportive of violence against women and attitudes dismissing gender inequality.

Attitudes supportive of violence against women feeds into victim blaming and the perpetuation of myths surrounding violence, which becomes permissible in societal structures where men are valued over women.

Attitudes dismissing gender inequality feeds into strict gender roles arising from societal norms valuing male dominance because male dominance is inherently predicated on a gendered differentiation that dictates appropriate roles and spaces for men and women to occupy. This differentiation is socialised, but is thought to be "innate" or "natural" when shaped by norms that value male dominance.[44] When gender inequality is dismissed, this often leads to women's exclusion from decision-making, both in private and public life. Exclusion from decision-making leaves women vulnerable to violence in failing to account for specific needs and protections.

These attitudes, in turn, feed into how people understand violence. This, then, gives rise to societal structures which enable or normalise violence against women and, thus, disempower survivors. Hence, collectively, we refer to these as violence endorsing attitudes in how they can support and underpin societal structures normalising violence against women.

1.3 Attitudes supportive of violence against women

Attitudes which support violence against women are relevant to the issue of VAW because violence is perpetrated when one understands violence as an acceptable response or behaviour. The attitudes which support violence roughly correspond to what sociologists[45] and feminist scholars[46] have termed "rape myths", which "explain a set of largely false cultural beliefs that were thought to underlie sexual aggression perpetrated against women."[47] While these are called rape myths, it encompasses the themes relevant to attitudes which support violence, including victim blaming, perpetrator absolution, and the minimisation or rationalisation of violence against women.[48] Research has also documented that men's engagement in sexual violence is predicted by rape myth acceptance.[49][50] The concept of rape myths is explored with more detail in Chapter 4 of this report.

Within the Community Attitudes supportive of Violence against Women Scale (CASVAWS), the NCAS draws on four themes to assess community attitudes which support violence.

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[44] Aydon Edwards, "It's a Man's World: The Effect of Traditional Masculinity on Gender Equality," E-International Relations, Last modified March 29, 2015, https://bit.ly/3lz4qyI.

[45] Julia R. Schwendinger and Herman Schwendinger, "Rape Myths: In Legal, Theoretical, and Everyday Practice." *Crime and Social Justice*, no. 1 (1974): pp. 18–26, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29765884.

[46] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* London: Penguin Books, 1976.

[47] Katie M. Edwards et al., "Rape Myths: History, Individual and Institutional-Level Presence, and Implications for Change," *Sex Roles* 65, no. 11-12 (December 2011): pp. 761-773, doi:10.1007/s11199-011-9943-2.

[48] ibid

[49] A. D. Desai, K. M. Edwards, and C. A. Gidycz, "Testing an integrative model of sexual aggression in college men," *Sexual violence perpetration: Individual and contextual factors*: Symposium conducted at the annual meeting of the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, Orlando, FL, Nov 2008.

[50] Catherine Loh et al., "A Prospective Analysis of Sexual Assault Perpetration," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 20, no. 10 (2005): pp. 1325-1348, doi:10.1177/0886260505278528.

Table 1.1 - Themes used to assess public attitudes towards violence against women (VAW)

Themes	Description	Example of statements / questions
Attitudes excusing the perpetrator and holding women responsible	Attitudes excusing men are based on the impression that there are factors leading to some men being unable to control their behaviour. Such attitudes shift responsibility for violence from the perpetrator and/or to the victim by holding them partly responsible for the violence occurring or for not preventing it	The survivor was flirting too much with other men.
Attitudes minimising violence against women	Attitudes that deny the seriousness of violence against women, downplaying the impact on the victim, or making the violence and its consequences seem less significant or complex than they really are.	I don't believe it's as hard as people say it is for women to leave an abusive relationship
Attitudes mistrusting women's reports of violence	Attitudes that are linked to the idea that women lie about or exaggerate reports of violence in order to 'get back at' men or gain tactical advantage in their relationships with men.	Women exaggerate the problem of male violence.
Attitudes disregarding the need to gain consent	Attitudes that deny the requirement for sexual relations to be based on the presence and ongoing negotiation of consent. These attitudes rationalise men's failure to actively gain consent as a 'natural' aspect of masculinity (e.g. that women are passive in sexual matters).	It is okay for men to touch women without their permission, since women are so sexual in public.

1.4 Attitudes dismissing gender inequality

Gender equality is a critical part of VAW prevention efforts. Many experts have argued that gender inequality creates the social conditions that increases the likelihood of violence against women and simultaneously inhibits the ability of those affected to seek protection and help.[51] [52] [53] [54] Endorsement of beliefs and attitudes which undermine gender equality, thus, creates an environment where violence against women is not only permissible, but warranted if transgression occurs.

Within the Gender Equality Attitudes Scale (GEAS), the NCAS draws on the five different themes, to assess public attitudes that undermine gender equality (see Table 1.2). These themes represent aspects of gender inequality that have been found by research to be linked to violence against women.[55]

[51] Lori L Heise and Andreas Kotsadam, "Cross-National and Multilevel Correlates of Partner Violence: An Analysis of Data from Population-Based Surveys," *The Lancet Global Health* 3, no. 6 (2015), doi:10.1016/s2214-109x(15)00013-3.

[52] OurWatch, ANROWS, and VicHealth, *Changing the Story*.

[53] UN Women, *In Pursuit of Justice: Progress of the World's Women* New York, NY: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2011, bit.ly/2YKSt0F.

[54] World Health Organization and WHO Collaborating Centre for Violence Prevention, *Violence Prevention: The Evidence* World Health Organization, 2010, apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/77936.

[55] OurWatch, ANROWS, and VicHealth, *Changing the Story*

Table 1.2 - Themes used to measure public attitudes towards gender equality

Themes	Description	Examples
Attitudes promoting rigid gender roles, stereotypes and expressions	Involves the idea that men and women are naturally suited to 'do' different tasks and responsibilities and have naturally distinctive, and often oppositional, personal characteristics.	Men should not display their emotions when they are hurt
Attitudes undermining women's independence and decision-making in public life	Involves attitudes endorsing men as better leaders, decision-makers, or more suited to holding positions of responsibility in work or organisational settings.	Only men make capable leaders or bosses in the workplace or within politics
Attitudes undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life	Involves beliefs that men have greater 'natural' authority, decision-making, and control in the private realm of intimate relationships and should have the ultimate say over what happens in a relationship or how a family and household are run.	Men should take control of the dynamics in a relationship
Attitudes condoning male peer relations involving aggression and disrespect towards women	Involves attitudes which agree that it is normal or harmless for men to encourage negative aspects of masculinity among one another (e.g. aggression and not showing one's feelings) and to talk about women in ways that are sexist and disrespectful (often referred to as 'locker room talk'). These types of attitudes uphold and perpetuate rape culture.	There is nothing wrong with making sexist jokes
Attitudes denying gender inequality is a problem	Displayed by expressing either a denial of gender inequality, sexism, discrimination and/or hostility towards women, and resentment of improvements in women's rights. These are sometimes referred to as 'backlash' attitudes.	Women tend to exaggerate when they speak about being unfairly treated or discriminated against

1.5 Understanding of violence against women

Violence against women encompasses many types of violence from the more obvious form of physical violence to social, emotional and financial violence. In general, studies show that people are a little more likely to recognise physical acts (e.g. slapping, hitting, or forcing someone to have sex) as violence, rather than non-physical acts such as preventing a partner from seeing her family or friends, denying money to partner or cyber-harrassing an ex-partner through repeated emails or text messages.

Research has shown that the level of knowledge or understanding of an individual towards a social phenomenon can influence their attitudes towards it.[56] [57] Recognising that a particular behaviour comprises a form of violence is, therefore, an important first step towards adequately responding to VAW.

Chart 1.3 - Understanding how attitudes contribute to violence against women [58] [59]

The link between attitudes which dismiss gender inequality and violence

1. ATTITUDES WHICH DISMISS GENDER INEQUALITY*

Usually when someone believes that gender inequality is not real or not an issue, they don't advocate for or believe there is necessity in increasing women's opportunities for equal employment, equal pay, equal representation in political structures

2. IMPACT ON WOMEN

Women need equal opportunities as men, otherwise they will be reliant on men for economic, financial, and physical security. The ability to be independent protects women from violence.

When women have opportunities for equal employment and pay, they can financially support themselves. an inability to support oneself financially has kept many women in violent situations.

Women need representation in political structures because sometimes men do not know what women need. Over the last 10 years, coinciding with an increase in women's political participation, 131 countries have passed 274 legal reforms in support of gender equality, including laws addressing violence against women, childcare and universal healthcare.[60]

3. HOW ATTITUDES MANIFEST [61]

When people believe men should hold positions of responsibility in the community (29.1% of malaysians) or that men make better political leaders (28.1% of malaysians), women are less inclined or empowered to play a role in community decision-making.

This works in tandem with ascribing women passive, subservient roles in public life, too, where it is assumed that women prefer men to be in charge (59.4% of malaysians).

This results in women's voices, opinions, and needs are unaccounted for in public life.

4. THE LINK TO VIOLENCE

When women's needs are unaccounted for, women tend to suffer for it. This places women in vulnerable positions, where violence can occur because, in being excluded from community decision-making, there may not be sufficient structures in place to support women through violence.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

When people believe gender inequality doesn't exist, they don't think equality is important to achieve. This, in turn, disempowers women's social and political participation. A lack of women's social and political participation means women's needs are less unaccounted for. In circumstances where violence occurs, this will exacerbate the issue.

Definition: Equal treatment of women and men in laws and policies, and equal access to resources and services within families, communities and society at large

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[56] Serge Galam and Serge Moscovici, "Towards a Theory of Collective Phenomena: Consensus and Attitude Changes in Groups," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 21, no. 1 (1991): pp. 49-74, doi:10.1002/ejsp.2420210105.

[57] Mehdi Moussaïd et al., "Social Influence and the Collective Dynamics of Opinion Formation," *PLoS ONE* 8, no. 11 (May 2013), doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0078433.

[58] OurWatch, ANROWS, and VicHealth, Changing the Story, pp. 22.

[59] Heise and Kotsadam, "Cross-National and Multilevel Correlates of Partner Violence."

[60] UN Women, Gender Equality: Women's Rights in Review 25 Years after Beijing New York: UN Women, 2020, https://bit.ly/3p7EKvF.

[61] These results are further detailed in Chapter 3.

Within Understanding Violence Against Women Scale (UVAWS), the NCAS draws on two different themes to assess public understanding of violence against women (see Table 1.3).

Table 1.3 - Themes used to assess public attitudes towards gender equality

Themes	Description	Examples
Physical forms of violence	To assess whether physical acts of violence are regarded as a form of violence	Slap/pushes to cause harm or fear
Non-physical forms of violence	To assess whether non-physical acts of violence are regarded as a form of violence	Repeatedly criticises a partner to make a her feel bad or useless

1.6 Other areas of investigation

Apart from utilising the question scales developed by NCAS, this study also explored other focus areas that we thought were necessary to inform VAW prevention strategies moving forward. These include public perception towards child marriage, rape, including marital rape, and Malaysian public's knowledge of sources of support.

Though the issue of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) was not covered within our survey, this study recognises FGM/C as an important and prevalent form of VAW in Malaysia. Due to the complexities of incorporating the issues FGM/C within a nationally representative survey, this research has chosen instead to reviews existing literature to better understand Malaysian attitudes towards FGM/C and its persistence. This section is written in collaboration with Sisters in Islam (SIS) and the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) who have been working extensively on collecting in-depth data and evidence on the issue.

Additionally, we also investigate the encouraging responses survivors encountered in help-seeking because, in a society where VAW is normalised, empowering survivors remains crucial. Survivors remain the most vulnerable to being adversely impacted by violence-endorsing attitudes. VAW is a whole-society issue because societal attitudes directly impact a survivor's own belief in their ability to seek and receive help, as well as the quality of help they receive. A survivor's empowerment is strongly affected by those around her and, as a society, we must work towards empowering survivors. This is modelled in Chart 1.4, which visualises the critical points and linkages within the socio-ecological model that influences a survivor's decision to seek help as well as the level of support a survivor will receive if and when they do decide to seek help. Conversely, Chart 1.5 models the barriers a survivor will encounter within societies with prevalent violence-endorsing attitudes.

Chart 1.4 - Modelling help-seeking using the socio-ecological model

At this level are societal norms which influence societal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours

How the community reacts is shaped by prevailing norms and societal attitudes - this is where most formal sources of support lie such as the police and civil society organisations

Society

Community

Interpersonal

Individual

Interpersonal relationships are important in empowering the survivor - these are usually the survivor's friends, family, and close community (ie. neighbours, colleagues, etc.)

Beliefs about ability to seek and receive help

Within the individual

Chart 1.5 - The relationship between the prevalence of violence endorsing attitudes and help-seeking

In a patriarchal society, applying the understanding that the feminist perspective affords us, violence against women becomes a societal norm when acts of violence against women are seen as permissible. These norms exist on a macro level, meaning all other structures within society, from institutions to family units, are shaped by these overarching patriarchal norms. This, then, gives shape to a society which values male dominance.

This permissibility will be reflected in public attitudes of those within the society. Attitudes, therefore, under the constraints of the patriarchy, are expected to be patriarchal. These attitudes fall under attitudes supportive of violence against women or attitudes dismissing gender equality. This will manifest as unresponsive, ineffective formal systems of support that are either unequipped to handle cases of violence against women or are dismissive of survivors who formally seek help

Society

Community

Interpersonal

Individual

Thus, in a society where violence against women is normalised or permissible, demonstrated by norms which excuse the perpetrator, minimise violence against women, or otherwise mistrust women's reports of violence, an individual will passively learn to internalise these ideas and it will shape their own attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions.

A survivor who internalises these attitudes may not understand what they are experiencing as violence or may feel disempowered from speaking up because of how normalised violence against women is

In societies with high endorsement of violence endorsing attitudes, the people closest to the survivor may internalise this and discourage the survivor from seeking formal support when she discloses the violence she is experiencing.

Within the individual

1.7 Contents of report

The report breaks down as follows: The methodology will be explained briefly in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 outlines the key results of the survey, while Chapter 4 will contextualise the issues that arise from the survey results and reconcile them with insights from the survivor in-depth interviews. Chapter 5 will discuss specifically on survivor's experiences of seeking help and the encouraging attitudes they encountered. Finally, Chapter 6 will highlight key findings and relevant policy recommendations.

2 Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses. As mentioned in the introduction, this was done to provide a breadth of understanding. The quantitative and qualitative results were analysed separately, as is usually convention in mixed-methods studies, however, we also subsequently triangulated the two sets of results during the interpretation process to draw out key insights (Chapter 4). This chapter details the particular methods of analyses relevant for both the quantitative and qualitative analyses.

2.1 Quantitative analysis

This section outlines the processes undertaken for the purposes of cross-culturally adapting the National Community Attitudes towards VAW Survey (NCAS) 2017, as well as the process of question development for the constructs of child marriage, rape, and perceptions towards sources of support.

As shown in Table 2.1, the survey underwent a series of five steps of rigorous validation before launching to the Malaysian public. This began with question selection and development, followed by the translation of the survey from English to Bahasa Malaysia. Both versions of this survey underwent pre-testing and face validation in order to ascertain its clarity and understandability for a small sample of the public, whose feedback was then incorporated to produce the final survey in both languages.

Following the fieldwork with a survey company, the resulting raw data was then cleaned and analysed descriptively, as well as with multivariate analysis. For the qualitative data, a set of ethical guidelines was developed in line with international standards and the on-ground experience of WAO prior to beginning interviews. Excerpts from each interview were then coded thematically.

Table 2.1- Key Steps in Survey Development

No.	Step	Procedure
1	**Question selection and development**	Drawing from the NCAS, questions from the CASVAWS, GEAS, and UVAW domains were selected and adapted for suitability to the Malaysian context. This involved the process of content validation, where the scaled questions were reviewed by a panel of academic experts. Additional questions were also developed specifically for issues relevant to the Malaysian context, namely to assess Malaysians' perceptions on child marriage, rape, and sources of support for VAW.
2	**Translation**	As a little over 50% of the Malaysian population speaks English, a parallel survey in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, was needed to capture more respondents and ensure national representation. Following question selection, two translators independently worked on the forward translation (from English to the Malay language) and an additional two translators independently worked on the backward translation (Malay language to English) to ensure suitability in both languages. This process was guided by the work of Tsang et al.,[62] and prioritised the capture of the conceptual reflection of each question and the survey as a whole, which took precedence over literal and linguistic equivalence.

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[62] Siny Tsang, Colin F Royse, and Abdullah Sulieman Terkawi, "Guidelines for Developing, Translating, and Validating a Questionnaire in Perioperative and Pain Medicine," Saudi Journal of Anaesthesia 11, no. 5 (2017): p. 80, doi:10.4103/sja.sja_203_17.

3	**Pre-testing and face validation**	Participants recruited for the pre-testing process were administered either the English (n=17) or BM (n=12) version of the survey through Google Forms. Each participant then provided extensive feedback via a phone interview. Pre-testing involved face validation as well, to ensure that the survey questions accurately and clearly conveyed concepts of VAW to the Malaysian public. Feedback on wording, translations, and neutrality from pre-testing were incorporated to develop the pilot test survey.
4	**Pilot testing**	Pilot testing was conducted with a sample of 113 participants (Malay, n=59; English, n=54). Each survey was administered over Google Forms with a short feedback form at the end of the survey. Feedback was thematically analysed and a final version of the survey for fieldwork was produced through pilot testing. This process was useful to pinpoint which terms and concepts required greater clarity for the general public. The final English and Malay versions of the survey incorporated feedback from participants to produce understandable adaptations that simultaneously, were able to retain the same level of meaning from the original survey as well.
5	**Initial Statistical Validation**	With the pilot results, the Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted twice independently to confirm the internal consistency of the survey. Cronbach's Alpha, α, tests whether the questions asked are targeting the same underlying construct - in this case, VAW. This process was important to ensure that the self-produced questions were in line with the adapted NCAS questions. The pilot tests confirmed that the survey had high internal consistency (average $\alpha = 0.94$).
6	**Fieldwork**	Fieldwork was conducted by an independent survey company, Ipsos (n = 1,000), through their online survey platform. Ipsos has a reach of over 1.6 million Malaysians. The survey population aimed to be nationally representative, in accordance with the 2010 Household Census by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), as this was the most recent, publicly accessible form of population data. Participants were randomly sampled from the Ipsos network following this determined strata.
7	**Analysis and report**	Preliminary descriptive analyses were conducted to identify particularly problematic attitudes. Multiple regression analysis was then conducted to explore which factors, such as gender, age, socioeconomic breakdown, ethnicity, or caregiving status, were significantly associated with the negative responses of respondents. This was reported and written up.

With reference to 2010 census data from the Department of Statistics, the survey population of 1,000 Malaysians was reflective of the general Malaysian population in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, household income, and regional distribution. Slight deviations for the recruitment of older Malaysians and regional distribution occurred, although to a minimal extent. The demographic breakdown of the survey population is as follows:

Group	Sample
TOTAL	**1000**
Gender	
Male	**510**
Female	**490**
Non-binary	**0**
Age group	
18 to 24	**191**
25 to 34	**276**
35 to 44	**213**
45 to 54	**167**
55 and above	**153**
Ethnicity	
Malay	**534**
Orang Asal/Indigenous	**36**
Chinese	**330**
Indian	**86**
Others	**14**
Stratum	
MC/Urban	**891**
Rural	**109**
Region	
North	**228**
Central	**360**
South	**188**
East Coast	**88**
East Malaysia	**136**
Monthly Household Income	
T20 (Above RM10960)	**160**
M40 (RM4850 to 10959)	**372**
B40 (Less than 4849)	**468**

Given that this survey was completed online, with respondents having the option to answer via the Ipsos phone application or website, it is assumed that all 1,000 respondents had some semblance of digital literacy and access to navigate these platforms. However, this may not be the case for most older or rural Malaysians and, as such, while these numbers are nationally representative, the respondent population is unique in this sense.

2.2 Qualitative analysis

A total of 16 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with survivors of violence against women were carried out to explore how public attitudes and perceptions manifest in survivors' experiences of help-seeking. Survivors were recruited from WAO's own network database of survivors, with the help of WAO's Services team.

Selection criteria for the respondents are as follows:
1. Survivor of domestic violence, rape, stalking, or sexual harassment,
2. Above 18 years old, and
3. No longer in a state of crisis or any immediate danger, as determined by WAO's Services Team.

A set of ethical guidelines and practices for data collection was developed in line with international standards and practical experience of WAO prior to beginning interviews. These are described in detail in the next section. Importantly, data collection activities were executed separately from case management support services and by a different team of staff. This meant that information collected for case management activities were kept separate from the data collected for this research.

Given that all participants were recruited from the WAO network only, there may be some bias towards WAO and the services offered. Due to various resource constraints, we were unable to reach out to survivors beyond our networks and we acknowledge this to be among the limitations of this study.

Interviews were conducted online and recorded. These recordings were then transcribed and stored in a safe and secure location. Excerpts from each interview were then coded thematically. The model of recursive thematic analysis by Terry et al.[63] loosely guided the analysis of the qualitative data.

Chart 2.1 - Model of recursive thematic analysis by Terry at al.


___
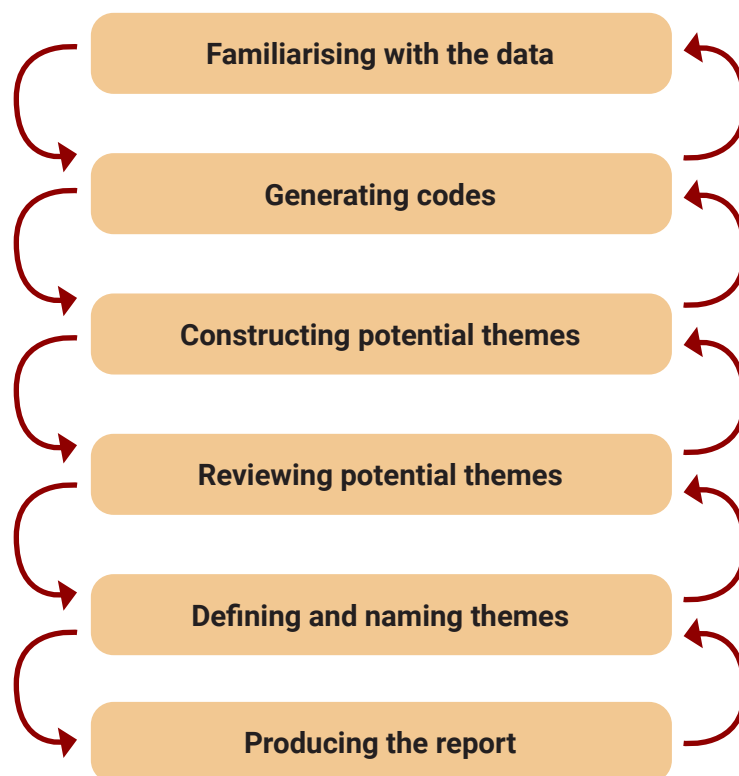
63 Gareth Terry et al., "Thematic Analysis," *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2017, pp. 17-36, doi:10.4135/9781526405555.n2.

After familiarising with the data, codes were generated based on the types of responses survivors encountered, with focus on both encouraging and discouraging responses. Discouraging responses were and encouraging responses were analysed for overarching themes. Discouraging responses were subsequently linked with the themes identified in the quantitative component of this study.

The following charts (2.1 and 2.2) show the age breakdown of the survivors, as well as the primary type of violence they experienced. About half of the survivors interviewed were between the ages of 30-39 and more than half comprised domestic violence and stalking survivors.

Chart 2.1 - Number of survivors by primary type of violence experienced
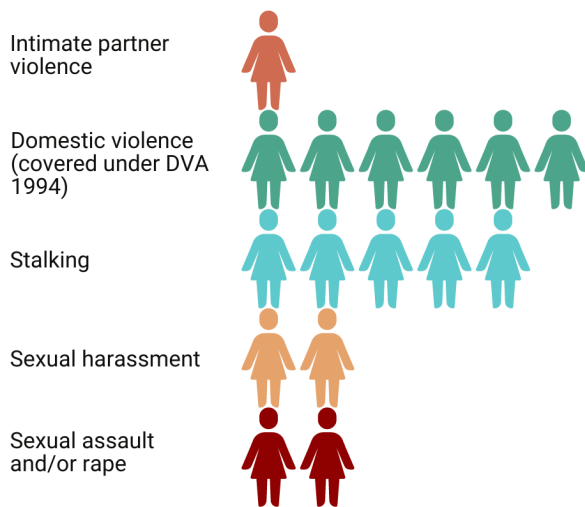
Chart 2.2 - Number of survivors by age

2.3 Ethical considerations

As addressed briefly above, several measures were implemented to ensure the study was conducted ethically, with the mental health and safety of participants and survivors given utmost priority.

Survey questions for the processes of pre-testing, pilot testing, and Ipsos fieldwork were preceded by a trigger warning for participants, stating that the topics covered could be distressing for some. For participants recruited for Ipsos fieldwork, a list of mental health resources, such as crisis hotlines and contact numbers for counselling services, were provided as a concluding page to the survey. Regarding data confidentiality of participants, personal details of the respondents are available to only Ipsos. In line with their company policy, Ipsos also ensures that the respondents' private information is kept confidential.

Ethical guidelines for the in-depth interviews with survivors drew largely on existing ethical principles outlined by the World Health Organization (WHO),[64] [65] which were then kept in line with the safeguarding policy of the Global Fund for Women, and consequently reviewed by experienced social workers within WAO. **Only survivors who were no longer in a state of crisis or in any immediate danger were invited to participate** in the qualitative component of study. This process of selection was guided by WAO's Services team (including social workers) who regularly monitor the well-being and progress of survivors and were able to identify survivors who fit into this criteria.

Prior to the interview, survivors were provided with an information sheet clearly explaining the objective of study, risks, potential benefits, and participant's rights to withdraw from the study. Additionally, the interview verbally reviewed the contents of the information sheet with the survivor and clarified any questions prior to beginning the interview.

During the interview, survivors were reminded of possible emotional distress that might occur as a result of participating in the interviews. Trigger warnings were included in both the information sheet shared with respondents prior to obtaining consent, and verbally, as part of the interview process. Survivors were also verbally reminded of their rights to withdraw from participating in the research at any time during the interview, and any time between then and publication. If data was already collected from the respondents, the data would be destroyed immediately and not used in reports or publications. If the survivor decided to withdraw from the study after the date of publication, qualitative data obtained from their interview would not be used for future publications.

If emotional distress was detected during the interview, the interviewer initiated discussions about either continuing the IDI at another time or withdrawing from the research project altogether. Where required, psychological first aid was provided to the respondents. For respondents expressing the need for mental health support following the conclusion of their IDI session, WAO's Case Management Team was alerted. The Case Management team then conducted their own assessment and arranged counselling sessions where required.

A list of hotlines and mental health providers that are directly contactable by respondents was also provided alongside the information sheet. To ensure the mental well-being of the research team, interviewers and any note-takers present during interviews with survivors were also provided with access to debriefing sessions.

With regards to data confidentiality, personal identity and audio and/or video recordings was accessible only to the WAO research team and not shared with anyone outside of this research team. During the process of data analysis and within this report (such as quotes from respondents' interviews), pseudonyms were used.

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[64] World Health Organization, *Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women* Geneva: World Health Organization, 2001, https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/65893

[65] World Health Organization, *Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Intervention Research on Violence Against Women: Building on Lessons from The Who Publication Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women* Geneva: World Health Organization, 2016, https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/251759

3 Key Results

This section discusses the key results from this survey. Responses are split into three categories: attitudes that support violence or gender inequality (negative attitudes), attitudes that oppose violence or gender inequality (positive attitudes), and attitudes that are uncertain (neutral).

The survey results presented in the following chapters have been descriptively analysed to provide a broad overview of Malaysians' attitudes and perceptions towards VAW. This encompasses results presented as percentages and/or proportions. Multiple regression analysis was also conducted, with the key significant variables of gender and age explored below for the relevant themes. These are presented as odds ratios - for example, in the theme Minimising VAW, older respondents (those aged 55 years old and above) are twice as likely to minimise violence against women as compared to those between 18-24 years old.

While uncertain or neutral stances towards VAW or gender inequality may appear harmless, this study argues that uncertainty is dangerous in a society wherein patriarchal norms inclusive of violence-endorsing attitudes and behaviours heavily influence the entities within it. The conscious expression of neutrality signifies a perceived belief that the individual does not believe they need to take a stance. However, in a patriarchal society, uncertain individuals are complicit in systems that endorse violence against women and, thus, passively contribute to the perpetuation of attitudes and behaviours that enable violence, suppress disruption of such systems, and perpetuate harmful patriarchal beliefs. This text continues to elaborate on how these attitudes manifest themselves as behaviours in these ways.

As such, we argue that complacency is a measure of violence-endorsing attitudes as well. Optimistically, a proportion of this subgroup may express uncertainty due to a lack of knowledge or awareness about violence against women, either due to a lack of exposure to public messaging or a conscious avoidance of it. However, this does not mitigate the impact of violence-endorsing attitudes in this subgroup or society as a whole - which is precisely why respondents expressing uncertainty should also be a population of interest in the larger analysis of this study.

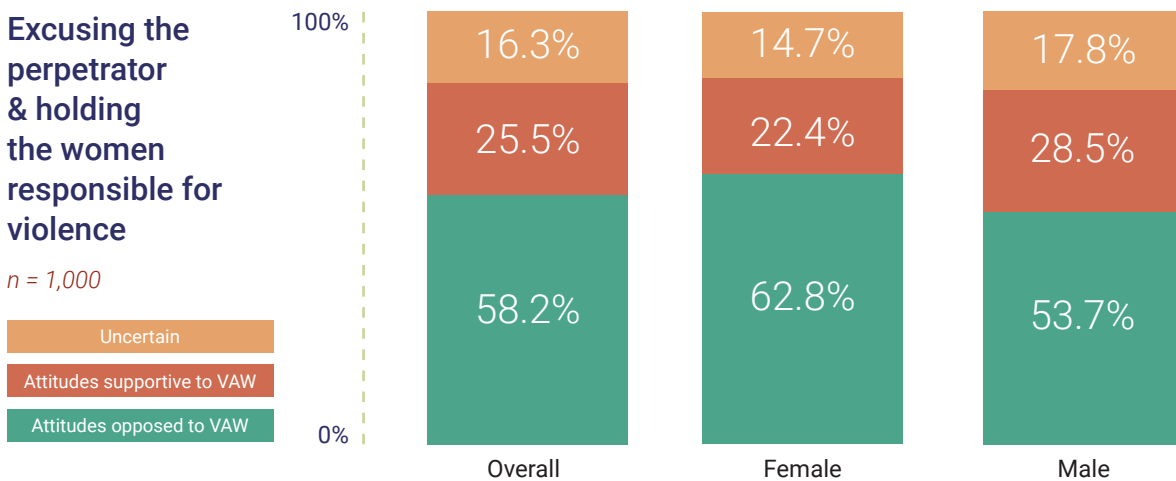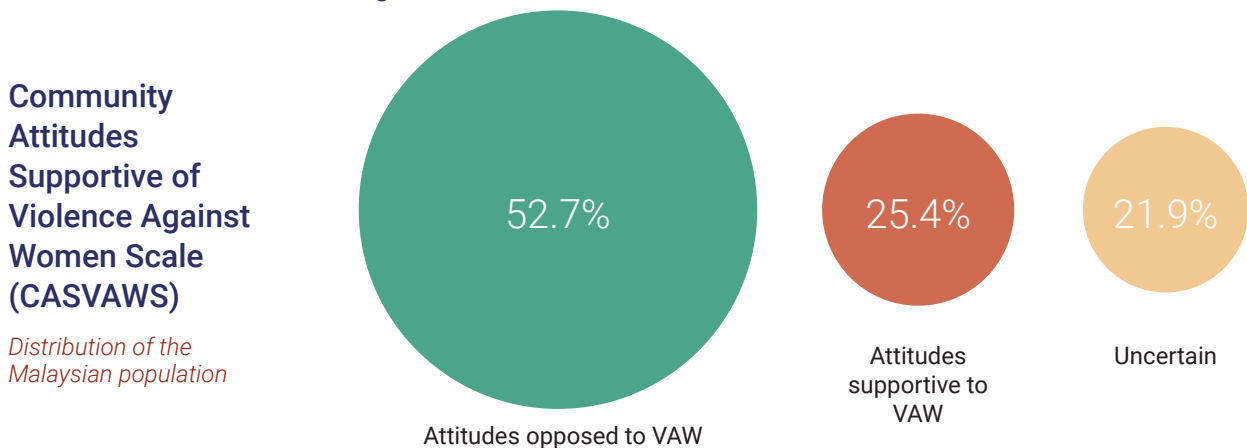# 3.1 Malaysian attitudes towards violence against women

From the NCAS 2017, the Community Attitudes Supportive of Violence Against Women Scale (CASVAWS) measures the overall concept of condoning violence against women. The four themes that make up this scale measure broad themes related to violence against women - such as excusing the perpetrator and holding women responsible, minimising VAW, mistrusting reports of violence, and disregarding women's right to consent.
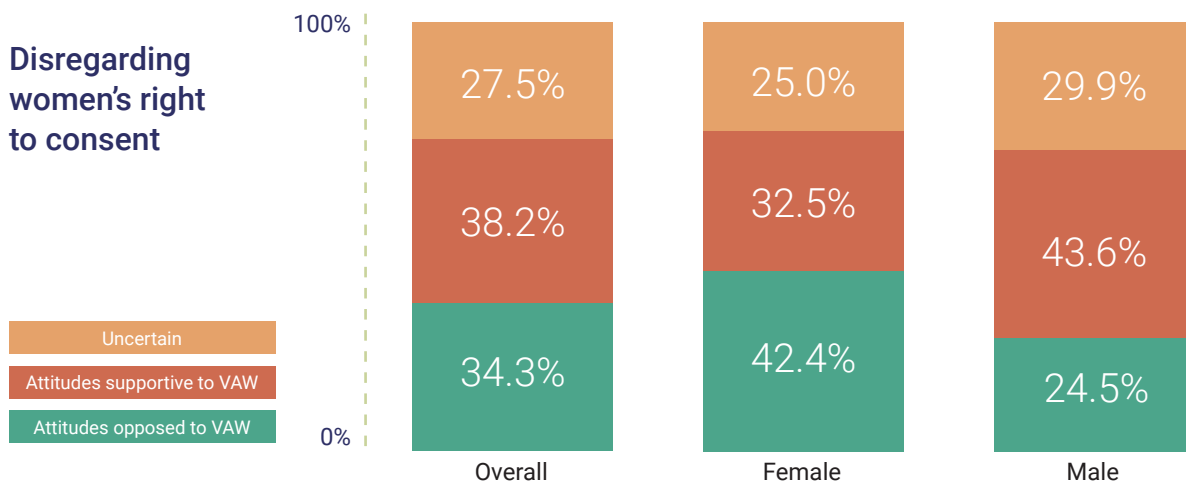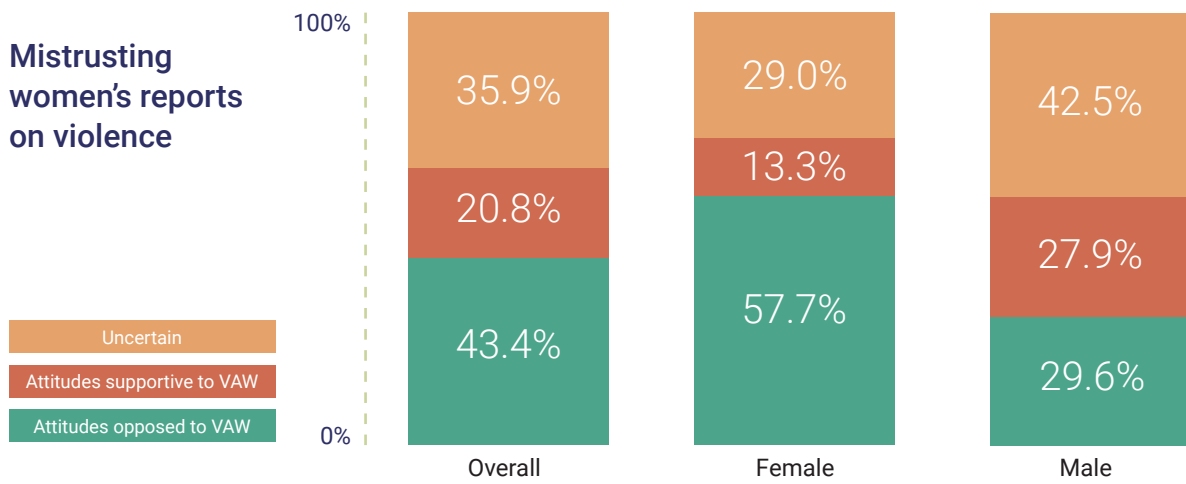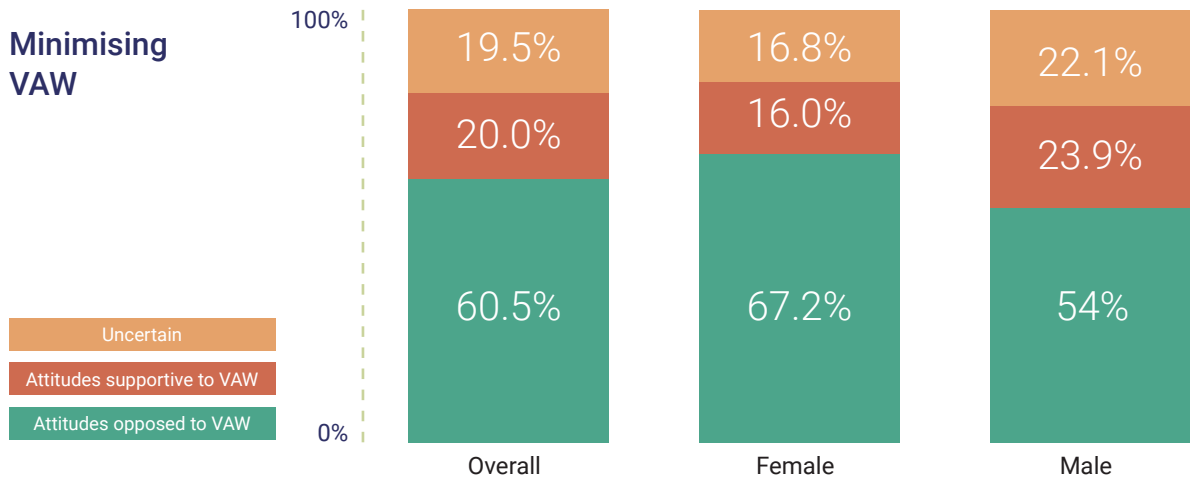
Each theme is made up of a series of questions that measure support or opposition to the concept of violence, which enables us to pinpoint which attitudes are most prominent in Malaysian society. In this way, prevention programmes and public messaging may better target these attitudes and the subgroups in which they exist most persistently.

Marked levels of endorsement (negative attitudes) for a theme indicate community support for that specific attitude. For example, 38.2% of respondents express a disregard for women's right to consent; when combined with responses expressing complicity, this statistic rises to 65.7%.

As shown below, the statistics are grim in that there is an almost equal split between respondents who oppose VAW (52.7%), and those who hold attitudes that support VAW or are complicit towards it.

Figure 3.1 - Overall results from the CASVAWS.

Community Attitudes Supportive of Violence Against Women Scale (CASVAWS)

Distribution of the Malaysian population

52.7%
Attitudes opposed to VAW

25.4%
Attitudes supportive to VAW

21.9%
Uncertain

Excusing the perpetrator & holding the women responsible for violence

n = 1,000

- Uncertain
- Attitudes supportive to VAW
- Attitudes opposed to VAW

	Overall	Female	Male
Uncertain	16.3%	14.7%	17.8%
Attitudes supportive to VAW	25.5%	22.4%	28.5%
Attitudes opposed to VAW	58.2%	62.8%	53.7%

Minimising VAW

Uncertain
Attitudes supportive to VAW
Attitudes opposed to VAW

	Overall	Female	Male
Uncertain	19.5%	16.8%	22.1%
Attitudes supportive to VAW	20.0%	16.0%	23.9%
Attitudes opposed to VAW	60.5%	67.2%	54%

Mistrusting women's reports on violence

Uncertain
Attitudes supportive to VAW
Attitudes opposed to VAW

	Overall	Female	Male
Uncertain	35.9%	29.0%	42.5%
Attitudes supportive to VAW	20.8%	13.3%	27.9%
Attitudes opposed to VAW	43.4%	57.7%	29.6%

Disregarding women's right to consent

Uncertain
Attitudes supportive to VAW
Attitudes opposed to VAW

	Overall	Female	Male
Uncertain	27.5%	25.0%	29.9%
Attitudes supportive to VAW	38.2%	32.5%	43.6%
Attitudes opposed to VAW	34.3%	42.4%	24.5%

In the next sections (3.1.1 to 3.1.4), we explore the results for each theme within the CASVAWS by specifically identifying attitudes for which Malaysians scored negatively, as well as highlight other concerning trends or results.

3.1.1 Excusing the perpetrator and holding women responsible for violence
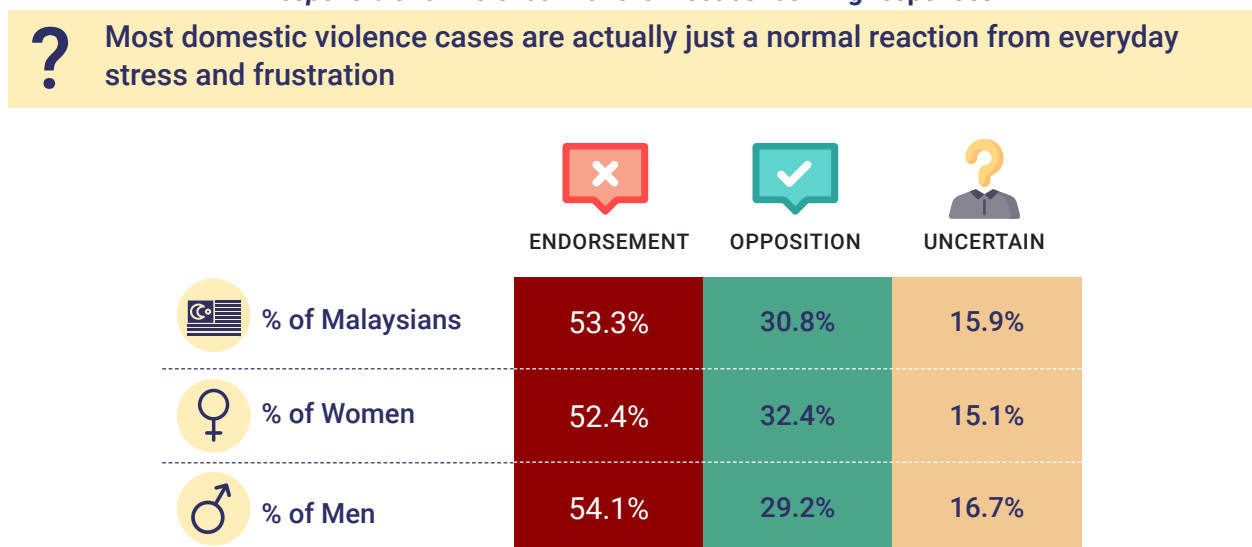
The questions in this theme address attitudes that shift the responsibility of violence from the perpetrator to the victim by holding victims responsible for the violence that has occurred. This includes ideas that women enable abuse when they do not leave violent situations immediately, or that perpetrators inflict violence due to a loss of self-control provoked by stress, anger, previous trauma, or the actions of their female partner.

Table 3.1 - Questions within the theme *Excusing the perpetrator and holding women responsible for violence*.

Excusing the perpetrator & holding women responsible for violence
1. Most domestic violence cases are actually just a normal reaction from everyday stress and frustration.
2. Domestic violence can be excused if it results from people getting so angry that they temporarily lose control.
3. Domestic violence can be forgiven if committed by someone who had been abused as a child
4. Domestic violence can be forgiven if after the incident, the violent person is truly sorry for what has happened.
5. Sometimes a woman can make a man so angry that he hits her when he didn't mean to.
6. Women who flirt all the time are somewhat to blame if their partner gets jealous and hits them.
7. Domestic violence is a private matter that needs to be settled within the family.
8. It's a woman's duty to stay in a violent relationship in order to keep the family together.
9. Domestic violence can be excused if the VICTIM is under the heavy influence of alcohol or drugs
10. Domestic violence can be excused if the PERPETRATOR is under the heavy influence of alcohol or drugs
11. A man is less responsible for rape if he is drunk or affected by drugs at the time

From the set of questions within this construct (Table 3.1), questions and results that received the most concerning responses were identified in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 - Specific questions within the theme of *Excusing the perpetrator and holding women responsible for violence* **with the most concerning responses.**

? Most domestic violence cases are actually just a normal reaction from everyday stress and frustration

	ENDORSEMENT	OPPOSITION	UNCERTAIN
% of Malaysians	53.3%	30.8%	15.9%
% of Women	52.4%	32.4%	15.1%
% of Men	54.1%	29.2%	16.7%

? **Sometimes a woman can make a man so angry that he hits her when he didn't mean to**

	ENDORSEMENT	OPPOSITION	UNCERTAIN
% of Malaysians	43.0%	35.3%	21.7%
% of Women	39.0%	39.2%	21.8%
% of Men	46.9%	31.6%	21.6%

? **Women who flirt all the time are somewhat to blame if their partner gets jealous and hits them**

	ENDORSEMENT	OPPOSITION	UNCERTAIN
% of Malaysians	30.0%	44.2%	25.8%
% of Women	24.9%	54.3%	20.8%
% of Men	34.9%	34.5%	30.6%

- Worryingly, **approximately half the respondent population endorses statements depicting domestic violence and physical violence as a normal outcome of stress, frustration, jealousy, or anger.** This suggests that for many Malaysians, certain acts of violence are an acceptable emotional outlet or a justifiable means for perpetrators to curtail certain emotions temporarily - and, as such, are viewed as forgivable acts.

- However, relating violence to an emotional act reduces it to a reaction that is automatic and uncontrollable. Instead of being addressed for what it is - a conscious act of perpetration, an active decision to inflict harm and exert dominance with the intent to hurt someone - such beliefs shift the responsibility of violence from the abuser to the victim, and prevent perpetrators from being held accountable for their actions. In this way, these beliefs are akin to victim-blaming attitudes .

- The practice of excusing perpetrators by victim-blaming contributes to violence becoming acceptable in certain circumstances, or for certain forms of violence to be more so than others. **Such beliefs are unlikely to stay contained within the general public, but may also infiltrate structures of support for survivors,** such as the police, social work, or healthcare settings. The collective acceptance that perpetrators may be excused from acts of violence does not prevent the continuation of violence, but instead enables its intensification, with victims having little to no recourse. Thus, social disapproval of violence is necessary at all levels of society in order to protect individuals experiencing violence reactively - that is, at the point of disclosure - and proactively, by collectively dispelling excuses that lead to violence. These are discussed in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5 of this report.

3.1.2 Minimising VAW

The questions in this theme address attitudes that minimise VAW. These include **denying the seriousness of violence** and downplaying its severity and effects, which in turn **minimises the psychological and physical impact on victims as well as the complexities faced** in violent situations. Following disclosures of violence, the words and actions of friends, family, and other formal structures of support play an essential role in supporting survivors.

Encouraging responses are more likely to create a safe environment for disclosure(s) and support, while responses that minimise and underestimate the severity of the situation could discourage or suppress a survivor's ability to speak up, and compromise the support or protection that would otherwise be available to her.

Table 3.3 - Questions within the theme of *Minimising VAW*.

Minimising Violence Against Women (VAW)
12. Female victims who stay with their abusive partners are **also** responsible for the ongoing abuse.
13. I don't believe it's as hard as people say it is for women to leave an abusive relationship
14. If a woman keeps going back to her abusive partner then the violence can't be very serious.
15. It is acceptable that police would give less priority to domestic violence cases which have been given repeated attention before.
16. Women who stay in abusive relationships do not deserve as much access to counselling services and support compared to women who leave their abusive relationships
17. If a woman claims to have been sexually assaulted but has no other physical injuries she probably shouldn't be taken too seriously,
18. If a woman was raped while she was drunk or under the influence of drugs, she is also responsible for what has happened.
19. Women who wait weeks or months to report SEXUAL HARASSMENT are probably lying.
20. Women who wait weeks or months to report SEXUAL ASSAULT are probably lying.
21. Women who are sexually harassed should solve it themselves instead of reporting it
22. In my opinion, if a woman reports abuse by her partner to outsiders it is shameful for her family.

From the set of questions within this scale (Table 3.3), questions and results that received the most concerning responses were identified and are listed in Table 3.4 below

Table 3.4 - Specific questions within the theme of _Minimising Violence Against Women_ with the most concerning responses.

? Female victims who stay with their abusive partners are also responsible for the ongoing abuse

	ENDORSEMENT	OPPOSITION	UNCERTAIN
% of Malaysians	44.9%	33.7%	21.4%
% of Women	42.2%	36.7%	21.0%
% of Men	47.5%	30.8%	21.8%

? I don't believe it's as hard as people say it is for women to leave an abusive relationship

	ENDORSEMENT	OPPOSITION	UNCERTAIN
% of Malaysians	37.1%	29.4%	33.5%
% of Women	33.3%	34.1%	32.7%
% of Men	40.8%	24.9%	34.3%

- **37.1% of respondents explicitly believe that women exaggerate how difficult it is to leave an abusive relationship**, while **44.9% explicitly believe that when women do not leave the relationship, they are partially responsible for the continued abuse.**
- This indicates that over a third of respondents from the Malaysian population believe that leaving an abusive relationship is a simple process, and that women who stay in violent relationships do so even when there is the clear-cut option to leave. **When the numbers in Table 3.4 are combined with complicit attitudes (uncertain stances) they rise to 66.3%** for the first question, and **70.6%** for the second question.
- The minimisation of violence, as well as a lack of understanding towards its nuances (such as imbalanced power dynamics, a lack of economic independence, etc.), contributes to victim-blaming attitudes - in this case, that women who do not leave only have themselves to blame for continued abuse. Despite the fact that over 80% of respondents have been exposed to public messages or awareness campaigns about domestic violence (refer to Section 3.7), beliefs in domestic violence myths and victim-blaming attitudes towards women experiencing abuse are still rampant in Malaysian society.
- For this theme, age is a significant predictor of violence endorsing attitudes. **Older Malaysians aged 55 years old and above are twice as likely to minimise violence against women as compared to those between 18-24 years old**. This is echoed to a smaller extent for respondents between 35-44 years old being 1.89 times more likely to minimise violence.
- Minimising violence draws attention away from holding perpetrators responsible for their actions. These attitudes underlie responses that prevent victims from speaking up, and, thus, work against women who need and are trying to secure support from others. Importantly, victims of violence may also internalise minimising attitudes in order to **rationalise the occurring violence** and **manage the negative responses of others**, such as through **leaving out information during further disclosures of violence to support systems.**

3.1.3 Mistrusting women's reports of violence

In this theme, respondents are questioned about their attitudes towards women's experiences of violence, and to what extent they believe that women lie or exaggerate reports of male violence in order to gain the advantage of power in their relationships.

These do not encompass only formal reports of violence to the police or other structures of support, but include informal disclosures to family or friends.

Table 3.5 - Questions within the theme *Mistrusting women's reports of violence*.

Mistrusting women's reports of violence
23. MANY women tend to exaggerate the problem of male violence.
24. A lot of times, women who say they were raped had led the man on and then had regrets.
25. It is common for women to make sexual assault accusations as a way of getting revenge against men.
26. Women who are fighting for child custody tend to create or exaggerate domestic abuse allegations to help their case

From the set of questions within this construct (Table 3.5), some key observations and points of analysis are highlighted below:

- As seen in Figure 3.1, attitudes that mistrust women's reports of violence are lowest relative to all other themes in the CASVAWS. However, levels of uncertainty (or complicity) are at their highest. This suggests that in this area of community attitudes towards violence, respondents are least aware of the issues raised here and/or are most complicit towards them - which as aforementioned, can be extremely harmful given that Malaysian society relies heavily on patriarchal values, that can ultimately ground and default conversations about

relationships or encounters with men in one-sided male-driven narratives.
- Among all themes in this scale, the gender disparity is greatest here - for which **women are 74% less likely than men to mistrust women's reports of violence.** Each question within this theme also has twice the number of men with violence-endorsing attitudes as compared to their female counterparts.
- This trend is most noticeable for question 24 - *"A lot of times, women who say they were raped had led the man on and then had regrets"* - a statement endorsed by 11.0% of women and 25.5% of men.
- Broadly speaking, Malaysians have a high propensity to endorse a variety of rape myths. This is discussed in further detail in Section 4.1.1.

3.1.4 Disregarding women's right to consent

Attitudes that disregard women's right to consent deny the need for sexual relations to be based on the presence of consent, and any productive conversations around it. Such attitudes are often driven by stereotypical ideas of dominant men and submissive women, that rationalise men's failure to actively include consent in conversations surrounding sexual relations and impose expectations upon women to give in to such circumstances without complaint.

Table 3.6 - Questions within the theme *Disregarding women's right to consent*.

Disregarding women's reports of violence
27. Women like to be chased after, even when they are not interested
28. If women send their nudes to their partners, they themselves should **also** be held responsible if the pictures are spread around without their permission.
29. Women often say 'no' when they actually mean yes.
30. Since some women are so sexual in public, it's not surprising that some men think that it is okay for them to touch women without permission.
31. When a man is very sexually aroused, he may not even realise that the woman doesn't want to have sex.
32. If a woman is drunk and starts having sex with a man, and then falls asleep, it is acceptable if the man continues to have sex with her anyway.

From the set of questions within this scale, as listed in Table 3.6, questions and results that received the most concerning responses were identified and are listed in Table 3.7.

Over 64.6% of Malaysians believe that if women send their nudes to their partners, they are also responsible if it is disseminated without their consent. This question has the greatest level of endorsement compared to all other questions within this construct. Including complicit attitudes, this rises to 80.8% of Malaysians.
- Over one-third of Malaysians endorse rape myths encompassed within this theme. This includes ideas that women like to be chased after even if they are not interested in the pursuer (37.2% endorsement), when women say 'no', they actually mean yes (32.2% endorsement), and that women's 'sexual' actions in public justify sexual assault. Rape myths are addressed in greater detail in **Section 4.1.1.**
- **Beliefs that consent is a once-off conversation - that is, that consent provided once encompasses any and all future sexual activities - plays to the favour of the more dominant person**. In a society driven by patriarchal values, this is typically the man. Importantly, the **disregard of women's consent exists beyond the confines of sexual activity towards the everyday independence** and decision-making of women, such as in preventing women from holding positions of leadership in the workplace or community, or suppressing their opinions and thus, solutions to the specific challenges faced by women and other members of society. In turn, this feeds into a self-perpetuating cycle wherein women's needs are not prioritised and in some cases, largely ignored, in both public and private spheres.
- This is discussed in greater detail in **Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2**.

Table 3.7 - Specific questions within the theme of *Disregarding women's right to consent* with the most concerning responses.

? If women send their nudes to their partners, they themselves should also be held responsible if the pictures are spread around without their permission

	ENDORSEMENT	OPPOSITION	UNCERTAIN
% of Malaysians	64.6%	19.2%	16.2%
% of Women	60.0%	22.7%	17.3%
% of Men	69.0%	15.9%	15.1%

? Women like to be chased after, even when they are not interested

	ENDORSEMENT	OPPOSITION	UNCERTAIN
% of Malaysians	37.2%	28.9%	33.9%
% of Women	28.6%	41.6%	29.8%
% of Men	45.5%	16.7%	37.8%

? Women often say 'no' when they actually mean yes

	ENDORSEMENT	OPPOSITION	UNCERTAIN
% of Malaysians	32.2%	31.1%	36.7%
% of Women	24.5%	40.4%	35.1%
% of Men	39.6%	22.2%	38.2%

> **?** Since some women are so sexual in public, it's not surprising that some men think that it is okay for them to touch women without permission

	ENDORSEMENT	OPPOSITION	UNCERTAIN
% of Malaysians	31.9%	47.4%	20.7%
% of Women	27.6%	56.5%	15.9%
% of Men	36.1%	38.6%	25.3%

3.2 Malaysian attitudes towards gender equality

Gender inequality and the societal attitudes that support it enable the conditions for violence to occur. When left unaddressed, prevailing attitudes of gender inequality may contribute to the proliferation of violence-endorsing attitudes and behaviours. Thus, promoting gender equality is a key driver to reducing violence against women.

The Gender Equality Attitudes Scale (GEAS) incorporates aspects of gender equality that have been linked to violence against women. Thus, relatively high levels of attitudinal support for the items in this construct indicate a greater likelihood of respondents supporting the gendered drivers of violence against women.

Unsurprisingly, Malaysians' attitudes towards gender equality are significantly associated with gender for four out of five themes in the GEAS construct. Men are up to 65% more likely to hold attitudes supportive of gender inequality compared to women.

Age is also a key factor associated with negative attitudes in the two themes in this construct: *Undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life,* and *Condoning male peer relations involving aggression and disrespect towards women.*

Figure 3.2 - Overall results from the Gender Equality Attitudes Scale (GEAS).

Gender Equality Attitudes Scale

Distribution of the Malaysian population

46.3% — Attitudes opposed gender inequality

23.8% — Attitudes that support gender inequality

21.9% — Uncertain

Undermining women's independence & decision-making in public life

Legend:
- Uncertain
- Attitudes supportive of gender inequality
- Attitudes opposed to gender inequality

	Overall	Female	Male
Uncertain	30.7%	28.0%	33.2%
Attitudes supportive of gender inequality	27.2%	20.0%	34.1%
Attitudes opposed to gender inequality	42.2%	52.0%	32.6%

Undermining women's independence & decision-making in Private life

Legend:
- Uncertain
- Attitudes supportive of gender inequality
- Attitudes opposed to gender inequality

	Overall	Female	Male
Uncertain	34.6%	22.0%	46.6%
Attitudes supportive of gender inequality	48.0%	54.2%	42.1%
Attitudes opposed to gender inequality	17.5%	23.8%	11.4%

Promoting rigid gender roles, sterotypes & expressions

	Overall	Female	Male
Uncertain	27.3%	24.7%	29.8%
Attitudes supportive of gender inequality	14.7%	11.8%	17.4%
Attitudes opposed to gender inequality	58.0%	63.5%	52.8%

Legend:
- Uncertain
- Attitudes supportive of gender inequality
- Attitudes opposed to gender inequality

Condoning male peer relations involving aggression and disrespect towards women

	Overall	Female	Male
Uncertain	19.9%	13.6%	25.9%
Attitudes supportive of gender inequality	10.7%	5.8%	15.4%
Attitudes opposed to gender inequality	69.5%	80.6%	58.7%

Legend:
- Uncertain
- Attitudes supportive of gender inequality
- Attitudes opposed to gender inequality

Denying gender inequality is a problem

	Overall	Female	Male
Uncertain	36.6%	34.2%	39.0%
Attitudes supportive of gender inequality	27.2%	20.1%	34.0%
Attitudes opposed to gender inequality	36.2%	45.7%	27.1%

Legend:
- Uncertain
- Attitudes supportive of gender inequality
- Attitudes opposed to gender inequality

3.2.1 Undermining women's independence in public life

In this theme, respondents were questioned about if - and to what extent - they believe men make better leaders and decision-makers.

Women's equal participation in government, communities, workplaces, and other institutions of public life, is a widely-acknowledged indicator of gender equality. Unfortunately, women are often overlooked or ignored in lieu of men's perceived capabilities - and as such, the beliefs encompassed In this theme may reflect unconscious gender biases or attitudes that perceive men as being inherently more capable to hold positions of responsibility due to the sole influence of gender alone, and pre-conceived ideas of masculinity.

As seen in Figure 3.2, over a quarter (27.2%) of the respondent population demonstrates attitudes that explicitly undermine women's independence and decision-making in the workplace, political sphere, and community, while over a third (30.7%) hold complicit attitudes. For this theme, men are twice as likely to hold attitudes that undermine women in public life, compared to their female counterparts.

Table 3.8 - Questions within the theme *Undermining women's independence & decision-making in public life*.

Undermining women's independence & decision-making in public life
38. In the workplace, men generally make more capable bosses than women.
39. Men, rather than women, should hold positions of responsibility in the community.
40. Overall, men are better political leaders than women.
41. Women are less capable of thinking logically compared to men.

From the set of questions within this scale, as listed in Table 3.8, some key observations and points of analysis are highlighted below:

- While the findings of this theme are grim, it is important to note that endorsing attitudes that undermine women as decision-makers in public life may not necessarily equate to a belief that all women are incapable of leadership. Rather, these may indicate that when provided the option, respondents are more likely to prefer a man over a woman on the basis of gender alone, with all other factors accounted for - which, in itself, cannot be underestimated for its harmful, long-term impact.
- This reflects an unconscious bias against women which, when unaddressed systemically, creates barriers for women's participation in public spaces to their full capacities. The explicit and continuous discrimination of women in such roles have been reported to deter women from even seeking opportunities for these positions.[66]
- As such, views that undermine women as decision-makers in public life have carry-on effects, defaulting women to economically or socially subservient positions, and may be understood as a means for which men are maintained as primary decision-makers and leaders in public positions.

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[66] Małgorzata A. Gocłowska et al., "Why Schema-Violations Are Sometimes Preferable to Schema-Consistencies: The Role of Interest and Openness to Experience," *Journal of Research in Personality* 66 (2017): pp. 54-69, doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2016.12.005.

Figure 3.3 - Key results from the theme *Undermining women's independence in public life.*

Women are less capable of thinking logically compared to men.

53.2%
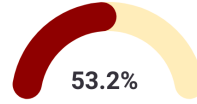
- On average, over half (53.2%) the respondent population endorses this belief, or expresses complicity towards it.
- However, there is a noticeable gender disparity.
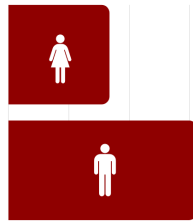
16.7% of women endorse this statement.

31.2% of men endorse this statement - twice the proportion of women.

61.5%
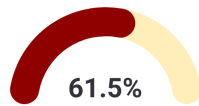
Men make more capable bosses than women in the workplace.

- 61.5% of respondents endorse or are uncertain towards this statement.
- 27.5% of respondents explicitly endorse this statement; 34% are complicit.

Men, rather than women, should hold positions of responsibility in the community.

57.9%
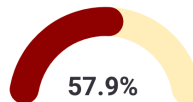
- Approximately two thirds of respondents (57.9%) show explicit support or complicity towards this statement.
- **29.1% of respondents explicitly believe that men should hold positions of responsibility in the community, rather than women**, with an almost equal proportion (28%) of respondents holding attitudes of complicity towards this scenario.

58.8%
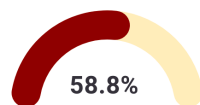
Men are better political leaders than women.

- Among the four questions in the theme of undermining women's independence in public life, respondents express the greatest level of uncertainty towards the idea that men are better political leaders than women, at 30.7%.
- Compounded with responses that explicitly support this idea, **58.8% of respondents hold attitudes that explicitly support, or are complicit towards beliefs that women are less capable than women in political spheres.**

3.2.2 Undermining women's independence in private life

The questions in this theme assess respondents' support or opposition towards men as authority figures in intimate relationships, which reflect common beliefs about the 'natural' role of men in such situations.

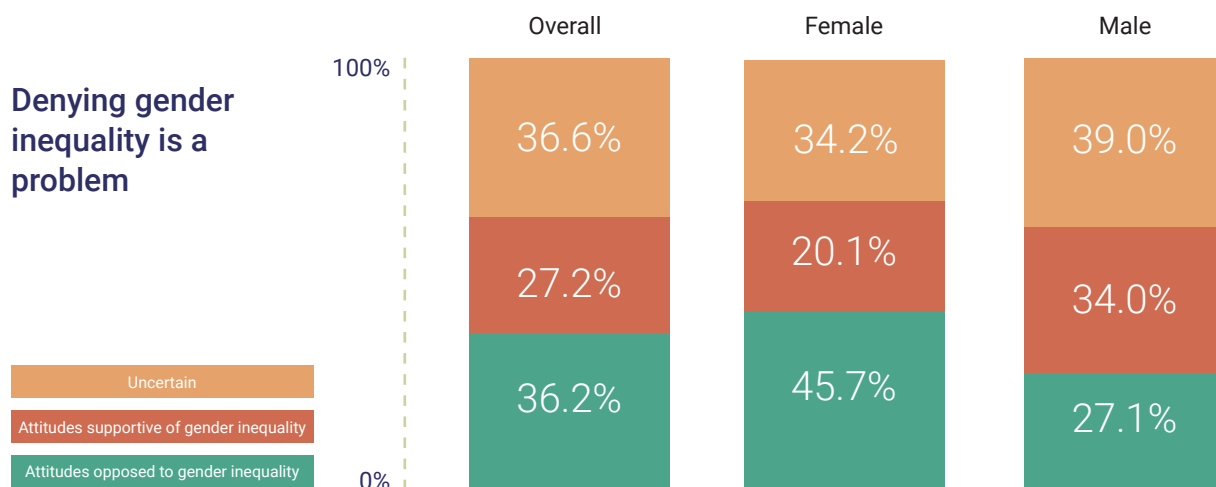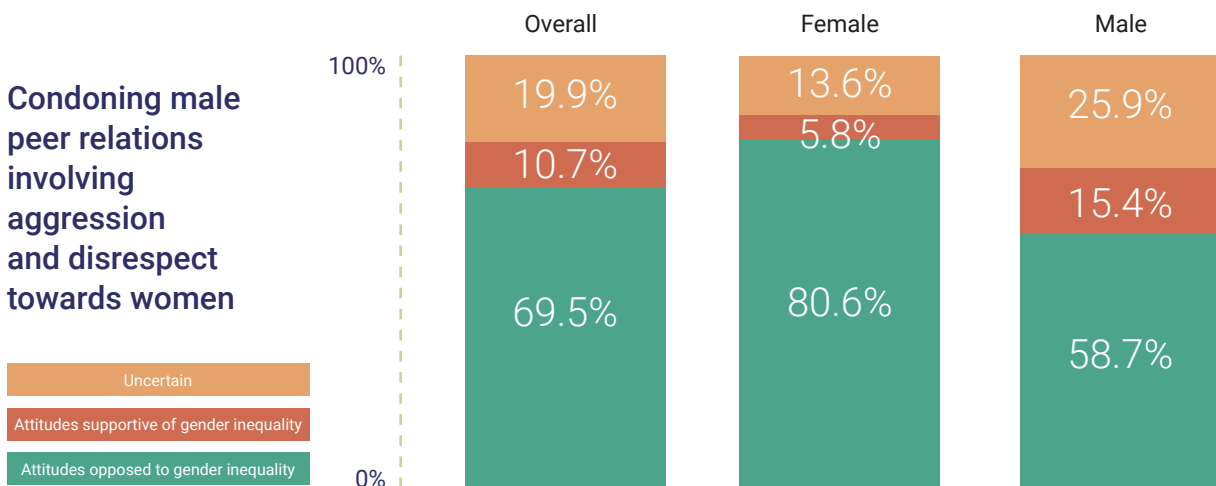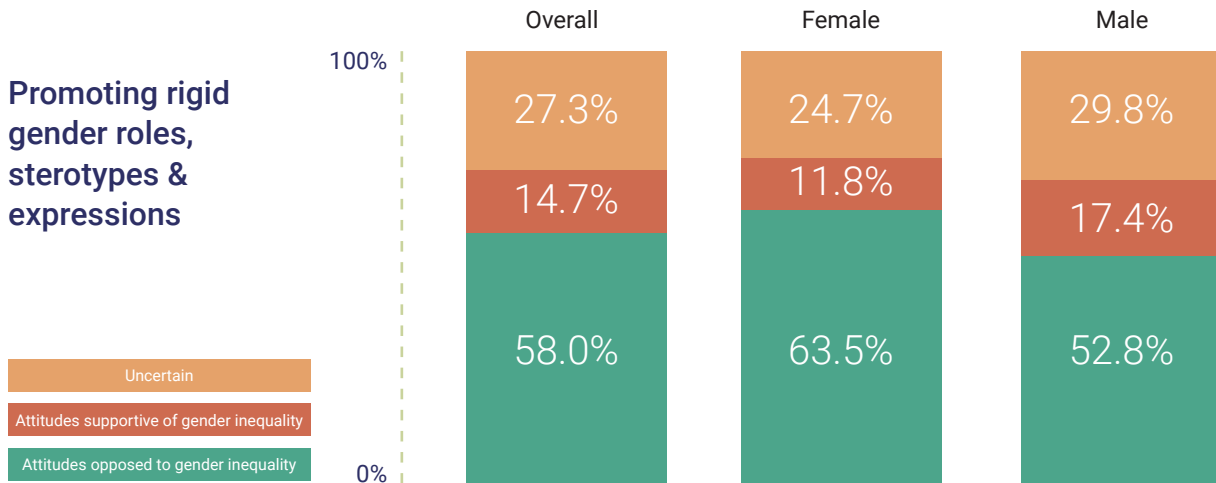**Table 3.9 - Questions within the theme *Undermining women's independence & decision-making in private life.***

| Undermining women's independence & decision-making in private life |
|---|
| 42. Men should control the relationship and become the head of the family |
| 43. Women prefer a man to be in charge of the relationship. |

From the set of questions within this construct, as listed in Table 3.9, some key observations and points of analysis are highlighted below:

- Approximately half of our female and male respondents (54.2% and 42.1% respectively) explicitly endorse attitudes that undermine women's independence and decision-making in private life, as seen in Figure 3.2 above. Consequently, this is one of the few themes throughout this survey for which gender is not significantly associated with violence-endorsing attitudes.
  - **Older respondents are significantly more likely to hold violence-endorsing attitudes here,** echoing a similar trend as with the theme, *Minimising VAW* in the CASVAWS.
    - Respondents aged 45 years old and above are over 2.5 times more likely to endorse violence in this factor as compared to 18-24 year olds.
    - Furthermore, 35-44 year olds are 2.2 times more likely to undermine women's independence in private life, as compared to 18-24 year olds.

- These findings complement those of *Undermining women's independence in public life* - demonstrating that the **vast majority of our respondent population believes or are complicit towards beliefs that men make better leaders in the workplace, political sphere, and community - while simultaneously believing that men should take charge of family life as well.**
  - This leaves little room for women's autonomy, opinions, or independence in both the public and private spheres of life, and as such these findings suggest a great propensity for Malaysians to perpetuate the sidelining of women in society as a whole - therefore excluding women from positions of power and decision-making, and inherently placing women in positions of vulnerability.
  - Following models of male control of decision-making, opinions of the 'man of the house' carry influence towards women's independence and decisions to participate in public life, such as in pursuing work. **This in turn impacts a woman's ability to become economically self-sufficient - which maintains positions of dependence and male dominance, and in environments of violence, serves as a barrier for women to seek safety.**
  - Given that such attitudes are more prevalent in working age and older Malaysians - i.e. those aged 35 years old and beyond - this suggests that there may be a turning point in the lifetime of a Malaysian, for which attitudes that condone the minimisation of women in public and private life become more rampant. Alternatively, this could also indicate a **generational shift in attitudes towards women's independence and decision-making; an encouraging discovery, wherein younger Malaysians are more likely to support women's autonomy as a whole.**
  - However, more research is needed to identify the factors linked to these differing attitudes - such as whether these are linked to the factors mentioned above or other underlying variables of influence

- and investigate the implications of these findings for Malaysian society. For example, it would be interesting to longitudinally track the tone and content of external influences like mass media messaging related to girls' empowerment (or otherwise), to understand if factors such as this play. a positively or negatively reinforcing role in perpetuating beliefs related to women's autonomy and gender equality as a whole. A shorter term study could, instead, involve a survey or in-depth interviews with adolescent girls or parents to investigate personal perceptions of how such influences play a role in shaping these beliefs in their lives, and whether these encourage or discourage parental conversations that dispute or reinforce such beliefs.

Figure 3.4 - Key results from the theme *Undermining women's independence in private life.*

Men should control the relationship, & become the head of the family.

36.6%
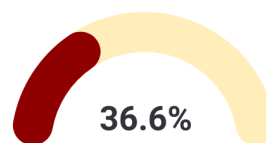
- An average of 36.6% of respondents think that men should control the relationship as the head of the family.
- **Women overwhelm men in this respect - 51.6% of female respondents express explicit support, while only 22.2% of male respondents share this sentiment.**
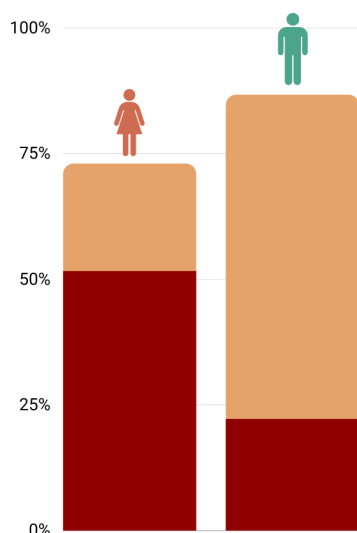
- However, the majority of male respondents express uncertainty towards this statement.
- With 64.5% of men compared to 21.4% of women, **male respondents are substantially more complicit towards the idea** that they should control relationships as the family head.

85.1%
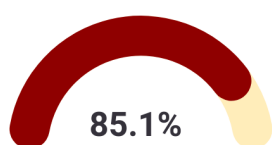
Women prefer a man to be in charge of the relationship.

- Two thirds of the respondent population (59.4%) think that women prefer men to be in charge of the relationship, while 25.7% express complicity towards this notion.
- Proportionally, men and women express similar levels of support and uncertainty, with male respondents holding peaking at slightly higher levels than women for both.
- **Thus, 85.1% - the majority of respondents - support or are complicit towards this idea.**

3.2.3 Denying gender inequality is a problem

Attitudes that deny the problem of gender inequality and express hostility towards women in the form of collective backlash are understood here as a collective cultural support for gender inequality. Hostility towards women and the denial of gender equality may be understood as the outcome of ingrained patriarchal norms, and a refusal to shift away from this culture towards one that is more equal and empowering. Hostile responses can occur at an individual level, - such as against individual attempts of women to gain equality, for example, by speaking out against sexism where they face it directly or indirectly, such as through systemic gender biases.

Table 3.10 - Questions within the theme *Denying gender inequality is a problem*.

| Denying gender inequality is a problem |
| --- |
| 46. Many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Malaysia. |
| 47. Many women wrongly interpret words or actions that are innocent as sexist |
| 48. Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in workplaces in Malaysia |

From the set of questions within this construct, as listed in Table 3.10, some key observations and points of analysis are highlighted below:

- **Male respondents are more than twice as likely than women to deny the existence of gender inequality in Malaysia.**
  - In relation to the above point, hostility has been seen as a response to growing advocacy for women's rights and protection, and even slight increases in women's participation in public life (discussed above) - in which case, this is termed 'backlash'. Backlash towards gender equality is 'a strong negative reaction to the progress made by the women's rights movement.'[67]
    - Societal backlash in the form of hostility towards women is correlated to the unfair treatment of women in the workplace,[68] as well as perpetration of sexual violence and intimate partner violence.[69]
    - Thus, **attitudes that deny gender inequality can be understood as hostility.** It would be interesting and helpful, as a means to better clarify national targets towards equality, to **track these attitudes longitudinally to understand whether these findings have found their footing in positive national growth towards gender equality, or are simply existing at a baseline level**. However, it is necessary to note that, in either situation, attitudes that deny gender inequality are dangerous.
    - As such, these should be taken as seriously as the range of other attitudes that explicitly endorse violence against women and girls (e.g. support for child marriage), or view certain acts of violence as normal or acceptable components of family life and intimate interactions (refer to Section 3.1).
    - Furthermore, while common indicators of gender equality show progress, this may not be reflected in community-level attitudes and behaviours. This is discussed in further detail in Section 4.2.

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[67] ANROWS, *NCAS 2017*, pp. 72

[68] Kristen P. Jones et al., "Not so Subtle: A Meta-Analytic Investigation of the Correlates of Subtle and Overt Discrimination," *Journal of Management* 42, no. 6 (October 2016): pp. 1588-1613, doi:10.1177/0149206313506466.

[69] Heidi M. Zinzow and Martie Thompson, "Factors Associated with Use of Verbally Coercive, Incapacitated, and Forcible Sexual Assault Tactics in a Longitudinal Study of College Men," *Aggressive Behavior* 41, no. 1 (2014): pp. 34-43, doi:10.1002/ab.21567.

Figure 3.5 - Key results from the theme *Denying gender inequality is a problem.*

Many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Malaysia.

67.4%
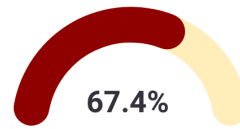
- A third of respondents (30.9%) believe that women exaggerate how unequally they are treated in Malaysia.
- Compounded with complicit attitudes, this statistic climbs to 67.4%.

70.8%
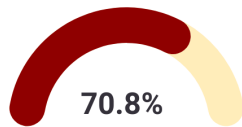
Many women wrongly interpret words or actions that are innocent as sexist.

- 70.8% of respondents believe or are complicit towards this idea.
- A substantial gender disparity is also observed.

36.5% of men endorse this statement.

16.7% of women endorse this statement - i.e. half the proportion of men.

As shown above, proportionally, there are more than **twice as many men as there are women who think that many women wrongly interpret innocent words or actions, as sexist.**
- An almost equal number of women and men express uncertainty/complicity (42.2% vs 45.7%).

Discrimination against women is no longer a problem in workplaces in Malaysia.

53.2%
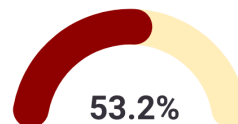
- Over half of respondents (53.2%) explicitly believe, or are complicit towards the idea that discrimination against women is no longer a problem in Malaysian workplaces.
- This constitutes 23.8% of respondents who explicitly support the idea that workplace gender-based discrimination is not an issue anymore, and 29.4% of respondents who hold complicit attitudes.

3.2.4 Condoning male peer violence

The survey questions in this theme assess the extent to which aggression and disrespect towards women in the presence of one's social network, is perceived as normal or harmless.

Table 3.11 - Questions within the theme *Condoning male peer violence.*

Condoning male peer relations involving aggression and disrespect towards women
44. I think that there is nothing wrong if men make sexist jokes about women among their male friends.
45. I think it's okay for men to joke with their male friends about being violent towards women.

From the set of questions within this construct, as listed in Table 3.11, key questions that received the most concerning responses were identified and are addressed below.

- For both items above, over twice the proportion of men express attitudes that support, or are complicit towards these statements of male aggression and disrespect as compared to women.

- As mentioned, uncertainty signifies complicity - a perceived belief that the individual does not believe they have taken a stance, or indeed, are required to. Not speaking out in these scenarios, thus, appears as passive acceptance. Violence does not have to happen physically in order for it to have a lasting impact, but can instead manifest in the habitual undermining of women and VAW in our everyday lives and interactions with others - such as in making casual statements about being violent against women, or perpetuating sexist stereotypes. It is easy to underestimate the long-term effects of such attitudes and behaviours, but it is necessary to remember that violence is not an issue for women alone, but one that affects society as a whole - particularly as it is based upon ideas of masculinity and femininity that are often inflexible and can be harmful for all.

- Thus, each individual has to hold themselves accountable to this reality. In order to address the extent to which patriarchal values are ingrained in society and everyday behaviour, attitudes of complicity should be addressed as harmful behaviours as well.

- Furthermore, a wealth of existing research indicates that male peer group cultures that normalise aggression and disrespect towards women - such as in the form of sexist jokes or casual statements about harming women - reinforce aggressive/toxic masculine ideals. These may be associated with greater support levels towards violence as a whole, and in some cases, are linked to increased risks of perpetrating VAW.[70][71][72] **While a minority of respondents believe that jokes of sexist or violent nature are acceptable, we must be cautious in accepting this as a direct link to their prevalence in everyday life.**
  - From the other themes, the majority of Malaysians appear to hold attitudes that support or are complicit towards gender inequality, and undermine the discrimination faced by women in Malaysia. Broadly speaking, if Malaysians do not have a good understanding of gender equality, minimise the discrimination faced by women on a day-to-day basis, and hold attitudes that condone violence to begin with, ideas of sexism and violence would already be skewed towards these problematic attitudes.
  - When ideas of sexism or violence are shaped by existing patriarchal values that undervalue women, the threshold for what would be considered sexist or violent would be much higher than what it actually is - regardless of how such beliefs and behaviours make women feel or impact their participation in public life.
  - This is demonstrated in the 36.5% of male respondents who believe that many women mistakenly interpret innocent words or actions as sexist - twice that of the 16.7% of female respondents who believe the same.

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[70] Rita C. Seabrook, L. Monique Ward, and Soraya Giaccardi, "Why Is Fraternity Membership Associated with Sexual Assault? Exploring the Roles of Conformity to Masculine Norms, Pressure to Uphold Masculinity, and Objectification of Women.," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 19, no. 1 (2018): pp. 3-13, doi:10.1037/men0000076.

[71] Michael Flood and Bob Pease, "Factors Influencing Attitudes to Violence against Women," Trauma, Violence, & Abuse 10, no. 2 (2009): pp. 125-142, doi:10.1177/1524838009334131.

[72] Mercedes Durán, Jesús L. Megías, and Miguel Moya, "Male Peer Support to Hostile Sexist Attitudes Influences Rape Proclivity," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 33, no. 14 (December 2016): pp. 2180-2196, doi:10.1177/0886260515624212.

- For this theme, gender and age are factors significantly associated with age.
  - Male respondents are 30% more likely to condone male peer violence compared to women.
  - Compared to 18-24 year old Malaysians…
    - Respondents aged 45-54 years old are almost twice more likely to hold attitudes that support gender inequality.
    - Respondents aged 55 years old and above are 1.8 times more likely to hold attitudes supportive of gender inequality.

Figure 3.6 - Key results from the theme *Condoning male peer violence.*

I think it is acceptable…

38.2%

… if men make sexist jokes about women among their male friends.
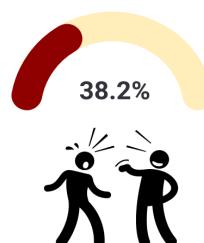
- Combining explicitly supportive attitudes with complicity, an average of **38.2% of respondents think that making sexist jokes about women, amongst men, is acceptable behaviour**.
- 13.8% of respondents think it is acceptable when men make sexist jokes about women among their male peers.
- Importantly, **almost thrice the number of men compared to women find this situation acceptable (20% men vs 7.3% women),** a disparity that is also reflected to a smaller extent with regards to complicit attitudes (32.2% men vs 16.3% women).

22.9%
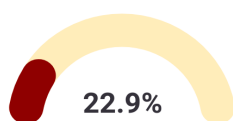
… when men joke with their male friends about being violent towards women.

- Combining explicitly supportive attitudes with complicity, **22.9% of respondents think that 'jokes' about violence against women are acceptable.**
- Similarly, more male than female respondents think it is acceptable to joke about being violent towards women, with only 4.3% of women and 10.8% of men finding this behaviour acceptable.
- 19.6% of men express complicity towards this situation.

3.2.5 Promoting rigid gender roles

The questions in this theme assess respondents' level of support or opposition for rigid gender roles and stereotypes. Driving these are ideas that men and women are 'naturally' suitable for different tasks and hold different roles in society. For example, ideas that women should be subservient to men both economically (question 33) and sexually (question 35).

Table 3.12 - Questions within the theme *Promoting rigid gender roles*.

Promoting rigid gender roles, stereotypes, & expressions
33. If a woman earns more than her male partner, it is not good for the relationship.
34. A man should never admit when others have hurt his feelings.
35. Women should not initiate sex.
36. I think it is embarrassing for a man to have a job that is usually done by a woman.
37. A woman must have children so that her life is complete

From the set of questions within this scale, as listed in Table 3.12, key questions that received the most concerning responses were identified and are addressed below.

- Although our survey respondents were least likely to endorse statements that promote rigid gender roles compared to all other themes measuring gender equality, there exists a significant gender disparity in these beliefs.
    - Men are 74% more likely to promote rigid gender roles, stereotypes, and expressions than women.
    - For each item in this theme, up to twice the number of men support statements describing rigid gender roles, as compared to women.
- A minority of respondents hold perceptions about the labour of men and women that adhere to rigid gender roles.
    - Only 11.7% of respondents think that if a woman earns more than her male partner, it is not good for their relationship. This is a statement explicitly endorsed by twice the number of men than women. However, attitudes of complicity are roughly equal between men and women.
    - Slightly fewer respondents (8.1%) think that it is embarrassing for men to hold jobs that are usually done by women. Twice the number of men express explicit endorsement and complicity towards this idea.
    - Thus, **compounding attitudes of complicity with those that explicitly support these beliefs indicates that 41.5% of respondents think it is not good for the relationship if a woman earns more than her male partner, while 26.2% think it is embarrassing for men to hold jobs typically held by women.**
- However, the majority of Malaysians tend to hold strongly to beliefs about conventional gender roles, which in turn, have the power to stigmatise individual choices that lie beyond these stringent expectations.
    - For example, 25.4% of respondents believe that women must have children to live a complete life. Compounded with complicit attitudes, this statistic rises to 55.6%.
    - 16.6% of respondents believe that women should not initiate sex, while twice the number of respondents express uncertainty towards this idea. Compounding both, 51.1% of respondents think that women should not initiate sex.
    - Furthermore, over one third of respondents (35.4%) explicitly believe or express complicity towards the idea that men should not admit when others have hurt their feelings. While this does not constitute the majority of respondents, it is still a statistic that is worth highlighting, given that it is a sentiment that is commonly heard in everyday life.

Figure 3.7 - Key results from *Promoting rigid gender roles.*

Percentage of respondents who answered negatively or with uncertainty (complicity) to each item in this theme
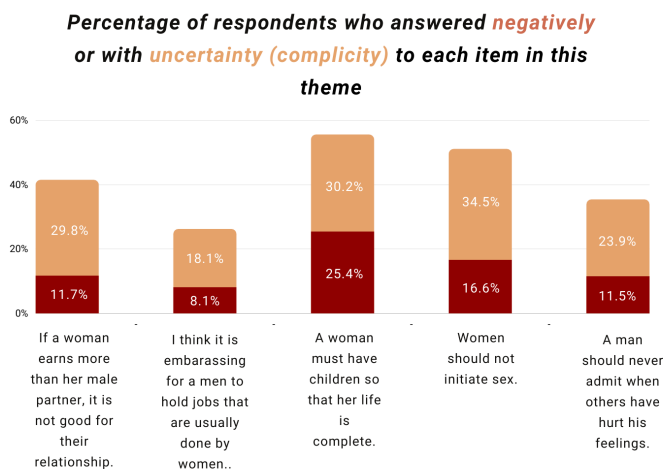
- The prevalence of these beliefs indicate that **some gender roles do prevail stubbornly in the collective Malaysian conscience; particularly those pertaining to child-bearing, sexual autonomy, and male expressions of emotion.** Traditional gender roles serve as a means to determine the parameters of masculinity and femininity. A lack of flexibility or acceptance of expressions beyond these parameters are able to perpetuate harmful stereotypes about men and women, which in turn can manifest in problematic behaviours. Furthermore, rigid gender roles often enforce ideas of 'natural' roles of men and women as being in opposition to each other, which can yield harmful effects. For example, where men are expected to take control of many aspects of public and private life, women are expected to give in to male opinions and fulfil male expectations. However, Tharp et al. found that attitudes that place value on adversarial roles of men and women, are linked to a heightened risk for the perpetration of sexual violence by men.[73]

- In addition, if expressions of hurt, anger, or jealousy by men are deemed unacceptable by the collective Malaysian conscience, healthy and productive conversations centred around the verbalisation of these emotions cannot take place. Compounded by the fact that men are often lauded for displays of aggression and physical strength, this may then contribute to perceptions that violence against women - physical or otherwise - are acceptable and normal outlets for men to release these emotions productively. This in turn, may contribute to the normalisation and acceptance of domestic violence and physical violence as outcomes of stress, frustration, jealousy, or anger - as seen in Section 3.1.1.

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[73] Andra Teten Tharp et al., "A Systematic Qualitative Review of Risk and Protective Factors for Sexual Violence Perpetration," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 14, no. 2 (2012): pp. 133-167, doi:10.1177/1524838012470031.

3.3 Malaysians understanding of violence against women

The Understanding Violence Against Women (UVAW) construct identifies the level of knowledge within a population towards physical and non-physical forms of violence. Knowledge of violence is one of many factors that can influence attitudes on a personal level; when individuals and the communities around them display a good grasp and understanding of violence, entire communities may be more clearly motivated to respond constructively to the problem of VAW.

Figure 3.8 - Levels of understanding towards VAW exhibited by Malaysians.

Understanding Violence Against Women Scale (UVAWS)

n = 1,000

87.4%

Malaysian who understand VAW

8.0%

Do not understand VAW

4.5%

Uncertain

Understand physical violence against women

•

Female
Male

100%

95.5%

92.8%

0%

Positive

2.2% 3.1%
♀ ♂

Negative

2.3% 3.1%
♀ ♂

Uncertain

Understanding Non-physical Violence Against Women

Female
Male

100%

0%

87.1%
79.3%
Positive

9.4% 14.1%
Negative

5% 6.4%
Uncertain
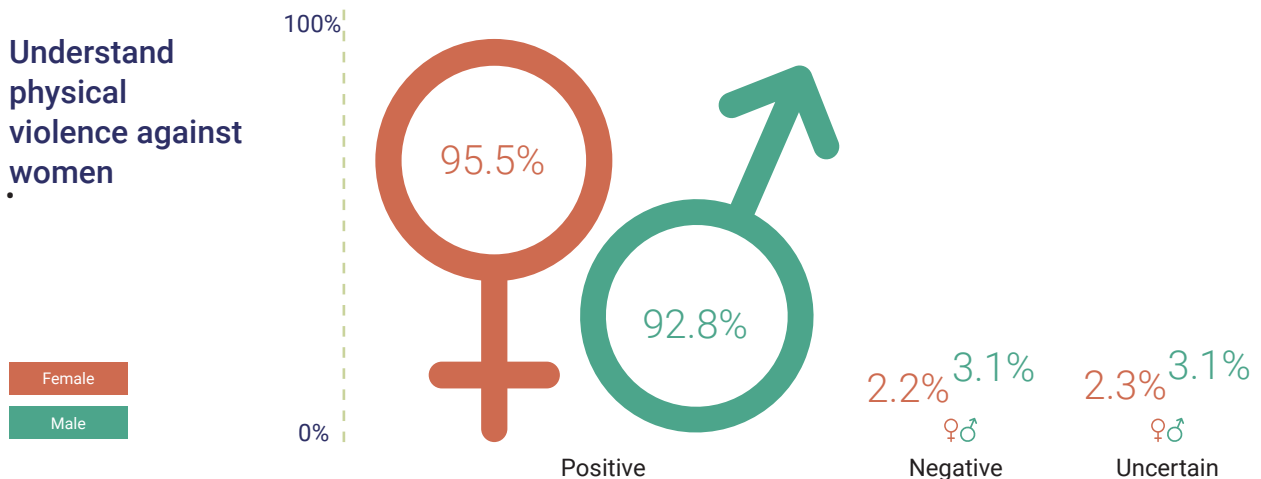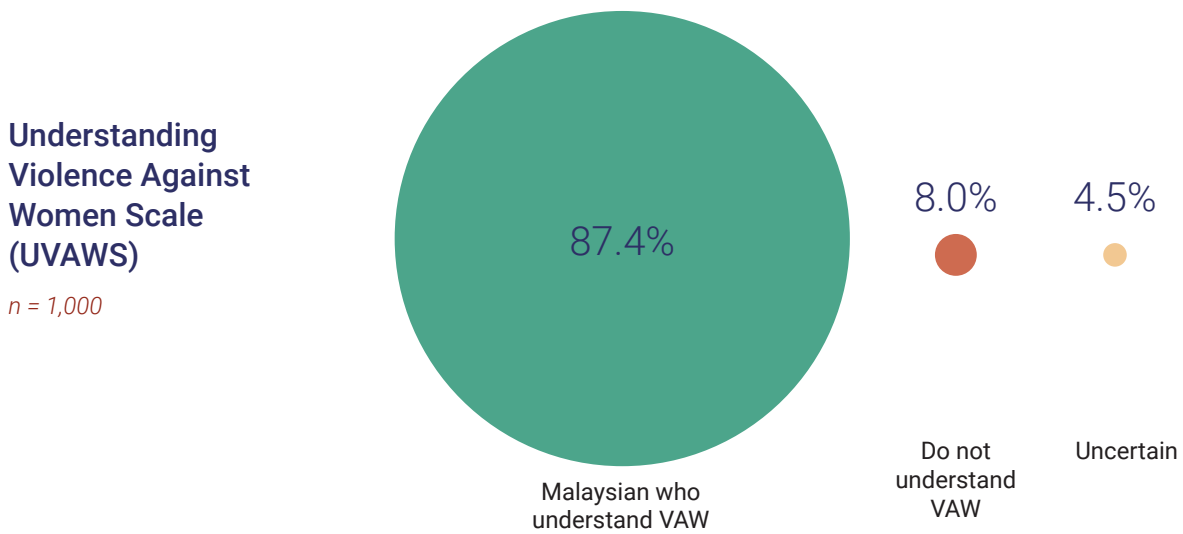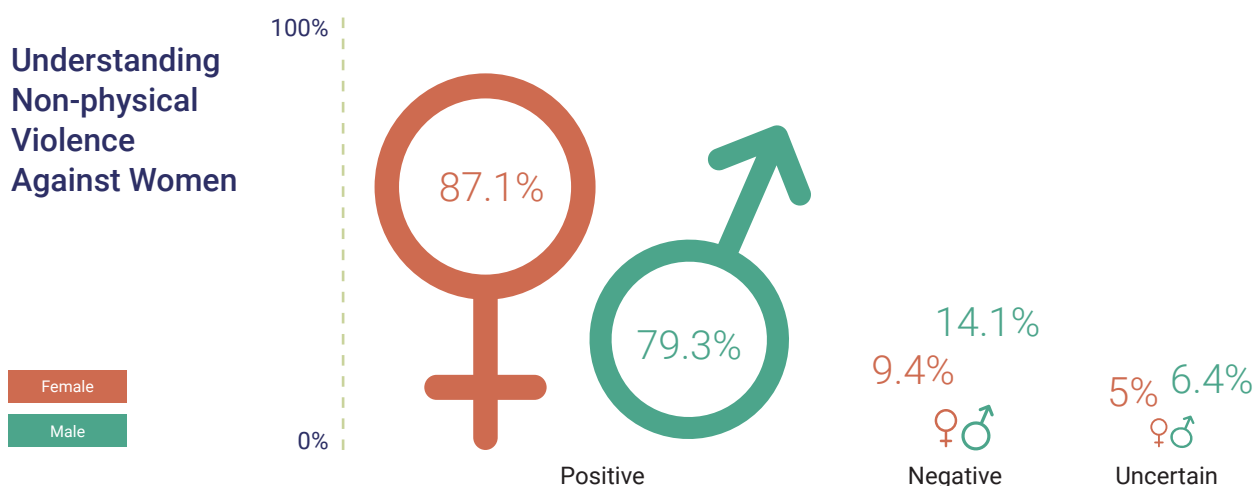
- **Our survey respondents appear to have a good understanding of violence against women**, in various depictions of physical and non-physical violence. This encompasses acts of slapping, pushing, smashing objects near an individual, and threats of hurt as forms of physical domestic violence. Acts of non-physical violence encompass controlling behaviour, financial abuse, stalking, and cyberharassment.
  - Understanding that violence can extend beyond physical violence is important because of the prevalence of psychological and emotional forms of abuse, which can be even more damaging to women's health than physical violence. The ability to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships serves also as a key violence prevention strategy, and demonstrates a positive first step towards a society that is responsive towards violence,

Table 3.13 - Survey questions encompassed within the theme of *Non-physical violence*.

Non-physical forms of violence
53. If one partner in a domestic relationship repeatedly criticises the other partner to make them feel bad or useless, is this a form of domestic violence?
54. If one partner in a domestic relationship controls the social life of the other partner by preventing them from seeing family and friends, is this a form of domestic violence?
55. If one partner in a domestic relationship tries to control the other partner by denying them money, is this domestic violence?
56. And if one partner in a domestic relationship repeatedly keeps track of the other's location, calls or activities through their mobile phone or other electronic devices without their consent, is this a form of domestic violence?
57. Do you consider stalking to be a form of violence against women? By stalking we mean being repeatedly followed or watched at home or work.
58. Do you consider harassment via repeated emails, text messages and the like to be a form of violence against women?

- However, **respondents' knowledge of non-physical forms of violence is notably lower than that of physical violence**.

- The WHO defines controlling behaviour as 'isolating a person from family and friends; monitoring their movements; and restricting access to financial resources, employment, education or medical care.'[74] In this survey, respondents did not possess a clear understanding of controlling behaviours as forms of violence, relative to all physical depictions of violence in this scale - with over 11.0% of respondents unable to identify financial or emotional abuse, or controlling behaviours as forms of violence.

- VAW constitutes a range of behaviours, encompassing those intended to intimidate and inflict psychological harm, through to those involving physical and sexual violence. Needless to say, all forms of VAW are harmful - although in this case, non-physical violence is not as well understood, and thus, less likely to be recognised as a form of violence by respondents across the board.

- However, previous studies have indicated that these forms of violence can be equally - if not more - damaging on women's health than physical violence. **One review comparing physical, psychological, and economic abuse faced by women in the Philippines found that past experience of psychological abuse was the strongest predictor for suicidal ideation.**[75] Controlling behaviours in a relationship signpost towards something more serious - however, the recognition of controlling behaviours, psychological abuse, and other forms of non-physical violence may be limited by overarching understandings of serious violence and injury as having a physical appearance.

- Unfortunately, non-physical forms of violence have the potential to continue and intensify over long periods of time, similar to physical violence. As such, the earlier it is detected, the earlier communities or formal sources of support can intervene to prevent fatalities or the exacerbation of long-term mental health effects.

- Generally, the minimisation of non-physical violence (compared to physical violence) is a theme that consistently emerges throughout the findings of this study.
  - This includes a lack of knowledge surrounding the topic of cyberharassment. For example, **15.2% of the population does not consider cyber-stalking as a form of violence, while 6.7% express uncertainty.** The minimisation and/or lack of knowledge towards cyber-harassment as a whole is a recurring finding of this study, as seen by the 64.6% of Malaysians who endorse the dissemination of nudes without the consent of the sender (within Section 3.1.4), as well as from survivors' internalised doubt of the violence experienced and the lack of formal support mechanisms in place for online abuse.

Table 3.14 - Survey questions encompassed within the theme of *Physical forms of violence*.

Physical forms of violence
49. If one partner in a domestic relationship slaps or pushes the other partner to cause harm or fear, is this a form of domestic violence?
50. If a partner in a domestic relationship forces their partner to have sex, is this a form of domestic violence?
51. If one partner in a domestic relationship tries to scare or control the other partner by threatening to hurt other family members, is this a form of domestic violence?
52. If one partner in a domestic relationship throws or smashes objects near the other partner to frighten or threaten them, is this a form of domestic violence?

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[74] World Health Organization and Pan American Health Organization. *Understanding and Addressing Violence Against Women*. World Health Organization, 2012. https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/77432

[75] Antai, Diddy, et al. "The Effect of Economic, Physical, and Psychological Abuse on Mental Health: A Population-Based Study of Women in the Philippines." *International Journal of Family Medicine*, vol. 2014, 2014, pp. 1–11. *Crossref*, doi:10.1155/2014/852317.

- For physical forms of VAW, Malaysians report the lowest level of understanding towards marital/intimate partner rape.
  - 10.7% of respondents did not think or are uncertain that marital/intimate partner rape is a form of domestic violence. However, levels of support for marital rape rise when the situation is dissected in more detail later on in the survey - for which 14.7% of respondents believe it is acceptable behaviour when a man forces his wife to have sex with him, even when she disagrees and pushes him away. When combined with respondents expressing uncertainty, this level of support climbs to 29.7%.

Figure 3.9 - Responses towards marital rape, from UVAWS and the Rape construct.

Percentage of respondents who answered negatively or with uncertainty (complicity)

5.8% 4.9% Marital rape is not domestic violence.

14.7% 14.5% It is acceptable when a man forces his wife to have sex with him, even when she disagrees and pushes him away.

0% 10% 20% 30%
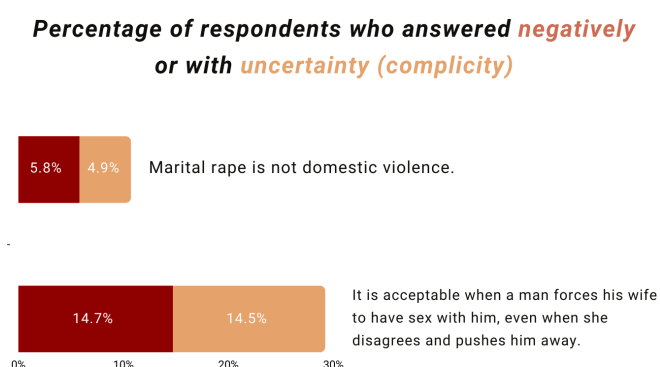
- These disparate levels of support for questions that circle around essentially, the same topic of marital/intimate partner rape supports the overarching finding that Malaysians are able to identify forms of violence - but that these are still acceptable to varying degrees. Given that question 69 delves into marital rape in greater detail, it is likely that the greater level of support and complicity from respondents to this question most accurately reflects the level of support for marital rape in the Malaysian population.
- The absence of a legal framework that criminalises marital rape in Malaysia may contribute to these attitudes. When public attitudes and perceptions towards VAW are delineated by existing legal frthe ameworks, this in turn plays an influential role in public understandings - thus creating variation in public perceptions towards violence against women.
- **Attitudes towards, perceptions, and understandings of violence are perpetuated not only by existing societal norms of gender hierarchies, but are also reinforced by formal structures that enable or oppose it - such as the absence or presence of adequate legal protection.**
- Interestingly, over one-fifth of respondents (21.9%) did not consider or were uncertain that cyber-stalking in the form of tracking a partner's location, calls, or movement without their consent, as a form of violence, while only 15% did not consider physical stalking, in the form of repeatedly followed or watched at home or work, as a form of violence or remained uncertain.
  - This suggests that – although understanding is good overall – physical stalking is more easily identified as a form of violence, when directly compared against cyber-stalking. Some behaviours - in this case, cyber-stalking - are less well-known and/or more permissible for respondents. This further exacerbates the problem of people not taking stalking (online or otherwise) seriously, particularly when it involves an ex-partner or family member.[76]
  - While it appears a small portion of the public holds these attitudes, the issue is when these attitudes are prevalent in sources of formal support (e.g. police, social welfare department, hospitals). Consequently, women tend to be denied help until something "serious" happens. This is explored in further detail in Section 4.3.2.

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[76] Kai Li Chung and Lorraine Sheridan, "Perceptions of Stalking: Examining Perceivers' Country of Origin, Perpetrator-Target Prior Relationship, and the Mediating Effect of Victim Responsibility," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, July 2021, p. 088626052110426, doi:10.1177/08862605211042601.

3.4 Malaysians attitudes and perceptions towards child marriage

This construct aimed to pinpoint attitudes and perceptions of the Malaysian public towards child marriage. 'Child' in this construct, is defined as any individual below the age of 18 years old.

Out of the 12 questions encompassed in this construct, nine were typical close-ended survey questions and three were open-ended questions for which respondents were provided a space to elaborate on their views towards child marriage in Malaysia.

Figure 3.10A - Key results of child marriage question items.

? **Should the minimum legal age for marriage in Malaysia be 18 years and above, without exception?**

70.3%
Yes

16.7%

No

13.0%

Unsure
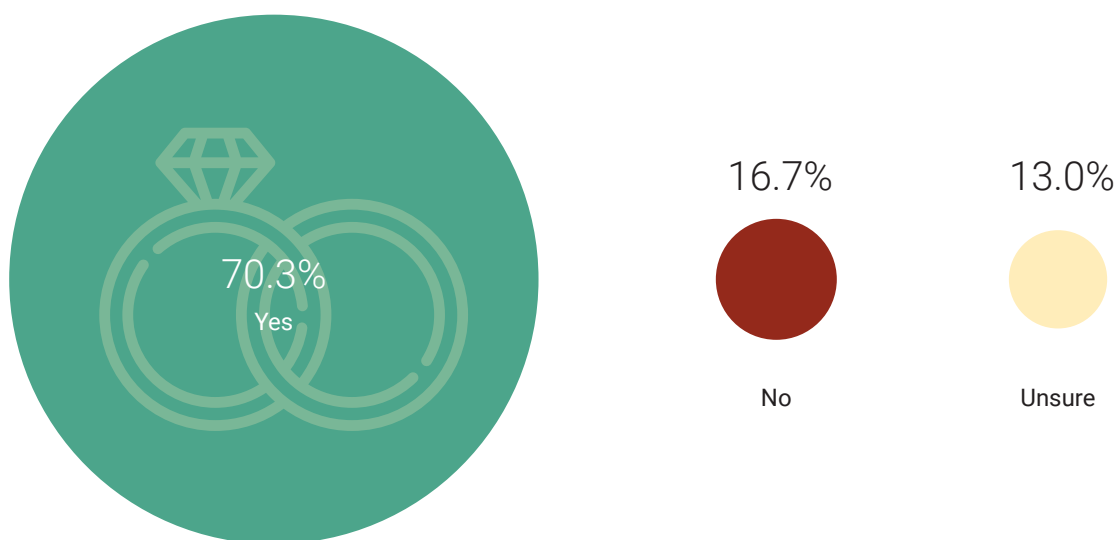
Encouragingly, **70.3% of respondents expressed that they are against child marriage** in Malaysia under any and all circumstances. This statistic climbs to 74.6% and 78.1% for child marriage involving girls and boys respectively, indicating that **between 70.3% to 78.0% of the respondent population opposes child marriage in any form.**

- However, as shown on the next page, **child marriage involving girls faces less opposition than that involving boys**. Although the difference of 3.5% is not significant, it is a notable statistic and should not be taken lightly, given the persistently higher prevalence of child marriage involving girls as compared to their male counterparts, and the specific challenges and forms of gender-based violence women and girls face throughout their lifetime

Figure 3.10B - Key results of child marriage question items.

? **Should girls under the age of 18 be allowed to get married?**

74.6%
No

11.2%
Yes

14.2%
Unsure
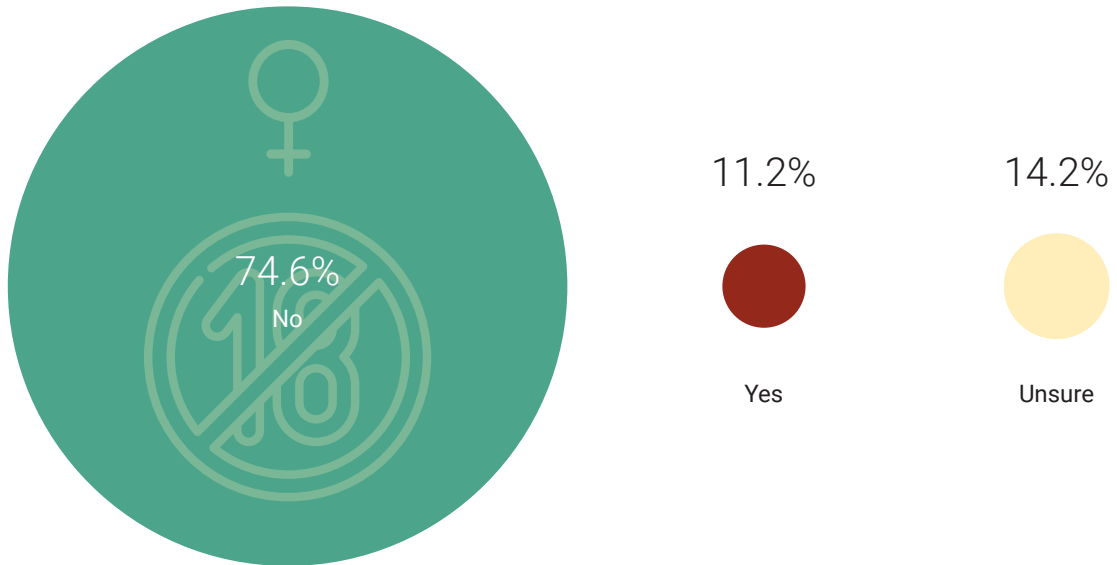
? **Should boys under the age of 18 be allowed to get married?**

78.1%
No

9.5%
Yes

12.4%
Unsure
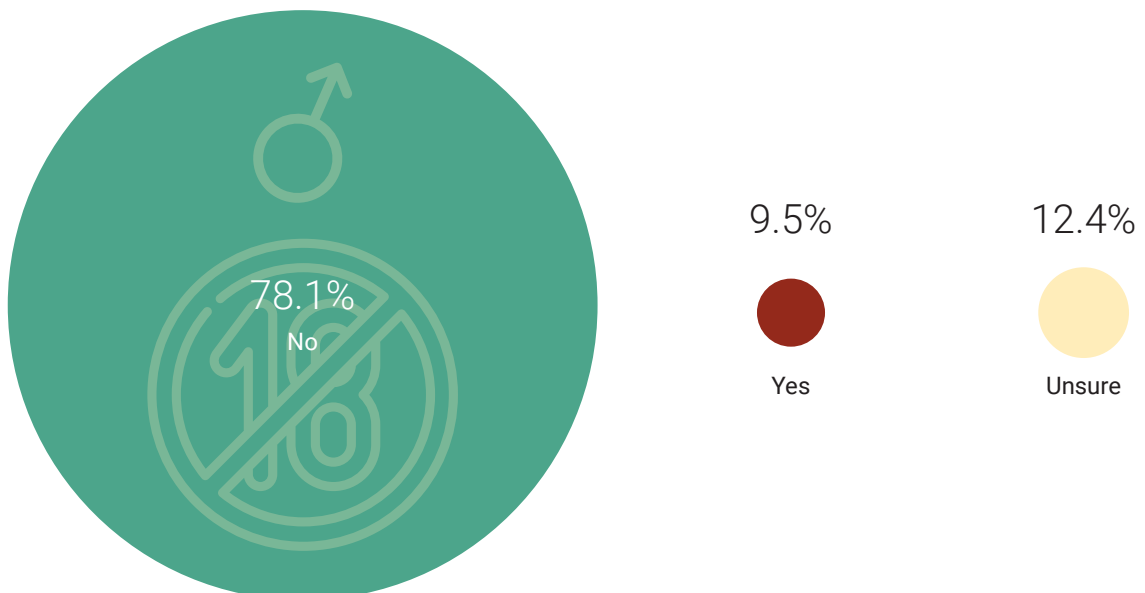
Figure 3.11 - Age distribution of respondents who support child marriage.

🔴 **GIRLS** under 18 should be allowed to get married.

🟢 **BOYS** under 18 should be allowed to get married.
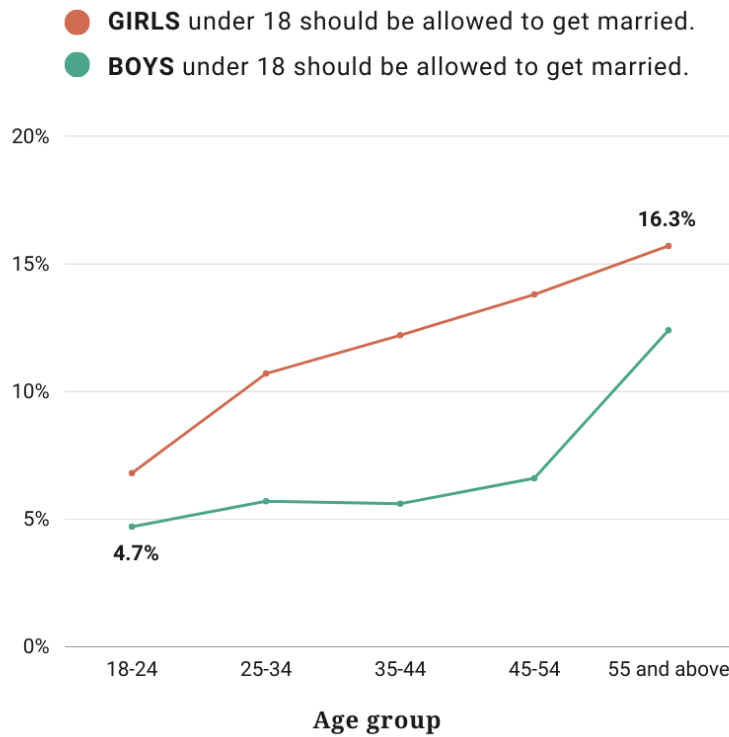
- Out of the approximate one fifth of respondents, 11.2% and 9.5% of respondents explicitly support child marriage involving girls and boys respectively. **More men than women endorse the practice of child marriage** - 7.0% of men and 4.2% of women express support for child marriage involving girls, and 6.5% of men and 3.0% of women support child marriage involving boys.
- Between 12.5% and 14.2% of respondents express uncertainty towards the idea of child marriage.
- **Older Malaysians express greater support for child marriage than younger Malaysians.**
    - 16.3% of respondents aged 55 years old and above support child marriage involving girls, while 12.4% of respondents from this age group support child marriage involving boys.
    - This statistic drops gradually with age - only an average of 5.8% of 18-24 year olds share this sentiment.

- Support for child marriage is relatively evenly distributed across all regions in Malaysia.
    - As expected, child marriage involving girls elicits greater endorsement than that involving boys in four out of five regions in Malaysia - with the exception being East Malaysians, who express equal levels of support for child marriage for both (8.1%).
    - East Malaysians - Sabahans and Sarawakians - are least likely to support child marriage involving girls (8.1% support), while Malaysians from the East Coast - consisting of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang - are most likely to support child marriage involving either girls or boys (15.9% and 14.8% respectively).

Figure 3.12 - Regional distribution of respondents who support child marriage.
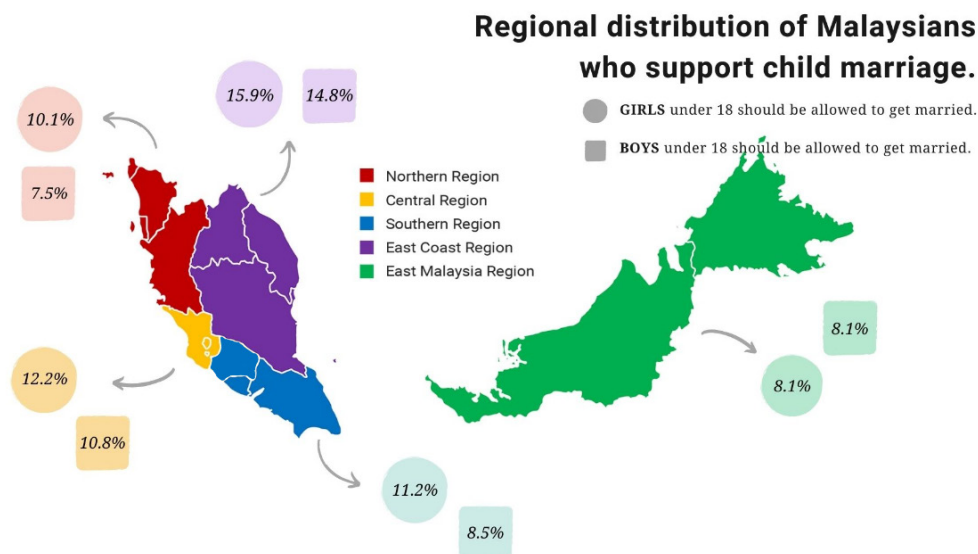
Regional distribution of Malaysians who support child marriage.

⬤ **GIRLS** under 18 should be allowed to get married.

⬛ **BOYS** under 18 should be allowed to get married.

Northern Region
Central Region
Southern Region
East Coast Region
East Malaysia Region

10.1% 7.5% 15.9% 14.8% 12.2% 10.8% 11.2% 8.5% 8.1% 8.1%

- While past evidence shows that girls from rural communities are at higher risk of child marriage,[77] [78] our data indicates that **Malaysians in urban and rural areas are equally as likely to support child marriage.**
    - Of the 112 Malaysians who support child marriage in girls, 11.0% are from urban areas and 12.8% are from rural areas.
    - **Of the 95 Malaysians who support child marriage in boys, 84 are from urban areas and 11 are from rural areas.**

- 11.0% of urban malaysians and 12.8% of rural malaysians support child marriage in girls.
    - Echoing a similar trend, is that 6.6% of urban Malaysians and 5.5% of rural Malaysians support child marriage involving boys. This indicates that support for child marriage is equal across urban and rural strata in Malaysia.

[77] Prof Dato' Noor Aziah Mohd Awal and Mohd Al Adib Samuri, "Child Marriage in Malaysia" UNICEF, 2018, https://uni.cf/3v6WoAo.

[78] Population Reference Bureau, "The World's Youth 2013 Data Sheet" Population Reference Bureau, 2013, https://bit.ly/3jb99FA.

3.5 Malaysians attitudes and perception towards rape

This construct aimed to pinpoint Malaysian public perceptions towards and knowledge of rape and marital rape.

3.5.1 Malaysians' perceptions of rape

Table 3.5 - Matrix survey questions about Malaysians' perceptions of rape.

Rape is...	% of Malaysians who agree	% of women who agree	% of men who agree
sex against a person's will or without consent	89.0%	90.2%	87.8%
when consent is obtained by threats of fear, hurt, or death	70.7%	71.6%	69.8%
when the person involved does not understand what is happening	56.8%	60.0%	53.7%
when the person's consent is obtained by using a position of power, a professional relationship, or other relationship of trust	48.9%	50.0%	48.2%
something that only happens to women and girls	18.1%	17.6%	18.6%

Encouragingly, **89.0% of the survey population understand that rape is sex against a person's will or without consent**, while just a minority of the population (18.1%) believes that rape can only happen to women and girls.

- Rape is legally defined as sexual intercourse with a woman against her will or without her consent in Section 376 of the Malaysian Penal Code; a statement that explicitly denies the fact that men can also be victims of rape. This finding is a key indicator that the majority of Malaysians do not support its narrow definition - strengthening previous calls by civil society to expand this to criminalise male rape in Section 376 as well, at its bare minimum level, in order to curb the stigmatisation of male violence and to ensure that no victim of rape has to suffer silently and in isolation, without the appropriate pathways of frontline support and legal aid in place.

- While other offences still apply, male victims of rape are at most, able to seek recourse for sexual assault through Section 354 of the Penal Code, which carries a lighter sentence.[79] [80] The issue of male rape should not be stigmatised by its lack of explicit legal protection within Section 376 - male rape is still rape, and should be acknowledged in its entirety.

- In failing to do so, Malaysian law automatically minimises male survivors' experiences, and enforces already pervasive ideologies of male machoism - where instead of supporting survivors of violence, the law actively discriminates against survivors based on their gender and one-sided notions of rape. This also exacerbates harmful beliefs of masculinity, wherein men are expected to tough out their trauma in silence, thus creating difficulty for victims to speak out or seek help.

- This is an important issue to address because as mentioned earlier, attitudes towards, perceptions, and understandings of violence are perpetuated not only by existing societal norms of gender hierarchies, but are also shaped by formal structures that enable or oppose it - such as the absence or presence of adequate legal

[79] Athira Nortajuddin, "Taking Male Rape Seriously," The ASEAN Post, Last modified February 6, 2020, https://theaseanpost.com/article/taking-male-rape-seriously.

[80] Women's Aid Organisation, "Rape and Sexual Assault Laws in Malaysia," Women's Aid Organisation, Last modified January 19, 2021, https://wao.org.my/laws-on-rape-and-sexual-assault/.

protection.

- However, only approximately half of the Malaysian population appears to understand the link between rape and the absence of informed consent, or the influence of imbalanced power dynamics.
  - Only 56.8% of Malaysians believe that rape is when someone involved does not understand the situation.
  - Only 48.9% of Malaysians believe that rape occurs when consent is obtained through the exploitation of a relationship of trust. Such beliefs completely ignore the fact that rape is inherently an issue of power, involving the exploitation of an imbalance dynamic in order to take advantage of another individual. As such, the means to which consent is obtained must be taken into account to ensure that it was not obtained by placing either person in a vulnerable position or position of danger.

3.5.2 Malaysians' understanding of rape

- **Just over half of Malaysians (55.4%) possess an understanding of statutory rape - i.e. sex with or between anyone 16 years old and below.**

- **Approximately half of the respondent population (44.3%) understand that women more often experience rape perpetrated by someone they know rather than strangers.**

  - The idea that women are more likely to be raped by strangers than someone they know, is a commonly heard myth. In reality, only an estimated 10% of rapes are committed by strangers, with the vast majority of rapes perpetrated by someone known to the victim.[81] [82] This encompasses anyone from an acquaintance, a family member, an intimate partner, or an ex-partner. According to the WHO, some of the reasons that victims delay reporting rape cases to the police include feelings of shame, fears of family or community responses, or because the perpetrator has made threats against them or their families. Such situations could be exacerbated when both the perpetrator and victim are ingrained in the same social sphere, wherein fears of community retaliation and other social complexities such as the above may be amplified - thus hindering reporting, immediate action by structures of support, and enabling perpetrators to further exploit existing fears to intimidate victims, or even intensify the abuse.

[81] Women's Aid Organisation, "Rape and Sexual Assault Laws in Malaysia," Women's Aid Organisation, Last modified January 19, 2021, https://wao.org.my/laws-on-rape-and-sexual-assault/.

[82] World Health Organization, "Sexual Violence: Prevalence, Dynamics and Consequences," in *Guidelines for Medico-Legal Care of Victims of Sexual Violence*, ed. World Health Organization World Health Organization, 2003, https://bit.ly/3prZGO5.

3.5.3 Malaysians' beliefs in rape myths

Figure 3.13 - Respondents' levels of support towards rape myths.

Rape happens because...

Overall   Women   Men
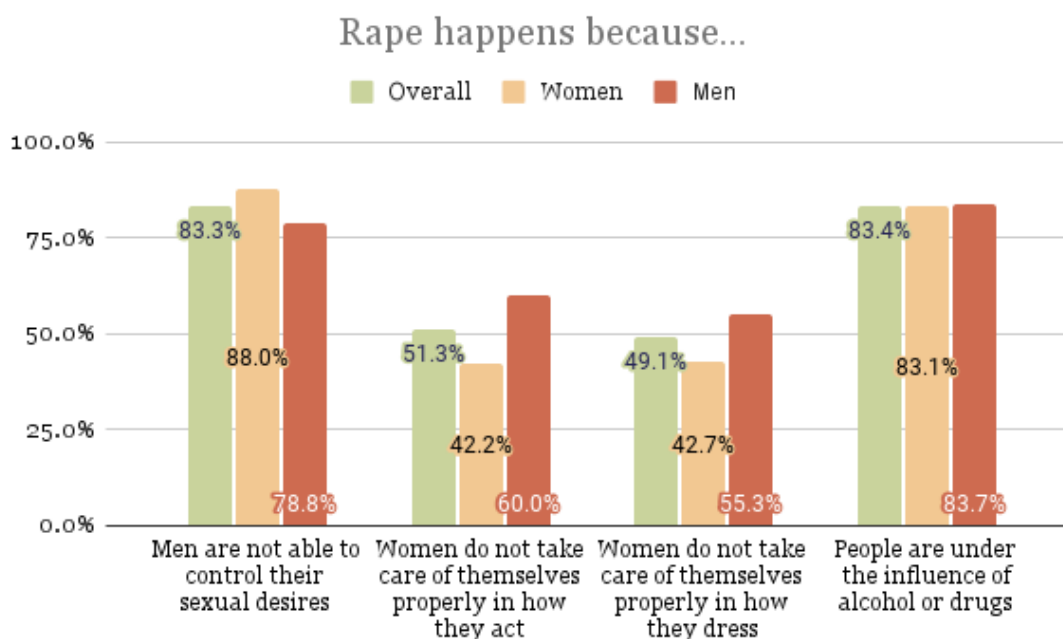
- The strikingly high levels of endorsement for each and every rape myth listed here effectively conclude that rape myths are highly prevalent in Malaysian society. The implications of this are elaborated in Section 4.1.1.
    - Interestingly enough, men are more likely than women to endorse beliefs that explicitly blame women for the occurrence of rape, whereas for the levels of endorsement for all other rape myths is relatively equal between men and women.
    - As addressed in Section 4.1.1, rape myths are centralised around the practice of victim-blaming - that is, attitudes that hold victims responsible for triggering perpetrators, due to reasons like their attire or behaviour around others.

-

- It is disturbing that the overwhelming majority of respondents support the notion that rape occurs because men are not able to control their sexual desires.
    - The WHO articulates that "sexual desire is not the main motivating factor for sexual violence... sex is merely the medium used to express various types of non-sexual feelings such as anger and hostility towards women, as well as a need to control, dominate and assert power over them."[83]
    - Sexual violence is a conscious act of perpetration, and an active decision to inflict harm and exert dominance with the intent to hurt someone. As mentioned in Section 3.1.1, endorsing beliefs that evade this fact simply shifts the responsibility of violence from the abuser to the victim, and prevents perpetrators from being held accountable for their actions - thus normalising and enabling environments wherein violence is viewed as acceptable. Rape - and other forms of sexual violence in the context of VAW - are just a means to degrade, humiliate, and violate women in order to exploit existing imbalances of power. As individuals, when we buy into such beliefs, we minimise women's experiences of violence and may prevent victims from speaking up.
- Similar levels of support are expressed towards the perception that rape happens when people are under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

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[83] World Health Organization, "Sexual Violence: Prevalence, Dynamics and Consequences."

3.6 Malaysians' perceptions of sources of support for VAW

This section describes help-seeking behaviours of the general Malaysian population (n=1,000) and survivor populations (n=106).

Figure 3.14 - Doughnut chart showing the sources of support first approached by Malaysians, if they were to experience domestic violence.

Who would Malaysians first approach for help, for domestic violence?

Others (<20 each)
3.7%
Religious bodies
2.3%
Legal services
4.2%
Social welfare department
4.4%
Mental health experts
4.8%
Friends
7.6%
Talian Kasih 15999
9.4%

Family members
30.5%
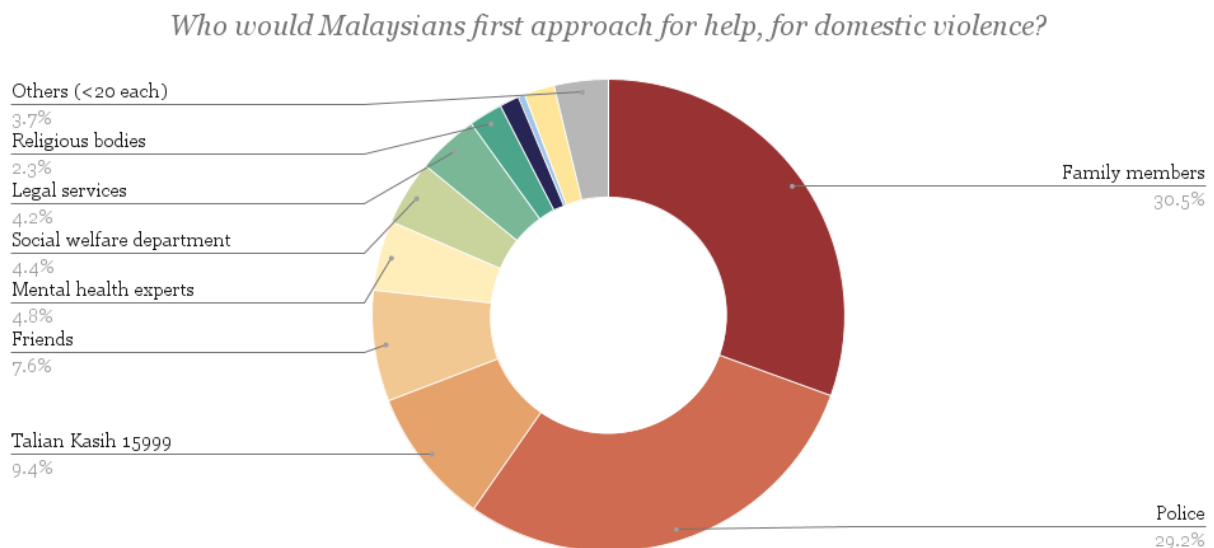
Police
29.2%

Figure 3.15 - Doughnut chart showing the sources of support first approached by Malaysians, if they were to experience sexual harassment.

Who would Malaysians first approach for help, for sexual harassment?

Others (<20 each)
8.3%
Social Welfare Department (JKM)
2.9%
Workplace management
3.9%
Legal services
4.9%
Mental health experts
4.5%
Friends
7.0%
Talian Kasih 15999
8.1%

Police
34.4%
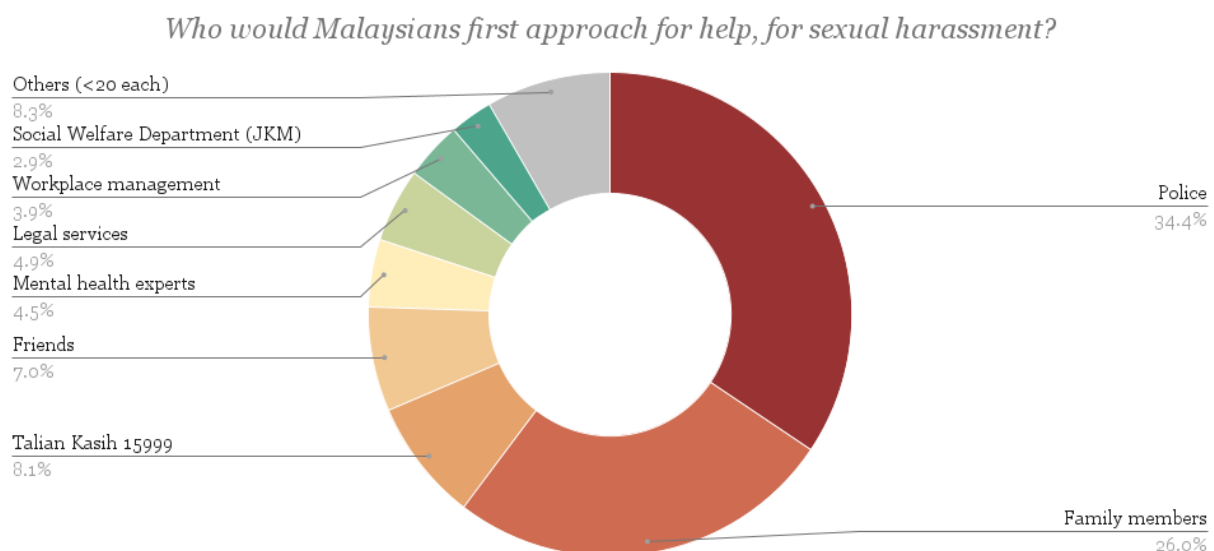
Family members
26.0%

As described in Figure 3.14, family members (30.4%) and the police (29.1%) are the top choices for which Malaysians would approach first, when experiencing domestic violence. This is followed by Talian Kasih (9.4% respondents), and legal services, which constitute the Legal Aid Centre, Legal Aid Department *(Jabatan Bantuan Guaman)*, and lawyers.

- "Others" consists of sources of support who would be first accessed by less than 20 people each, which include health services like hospitals and health clinics, and the Office of the State Representative or Member of Parliament (ADUN/MP). Only 0.02% of respondents would not approach anyone at all.
  - **Notably, only 0.4% of respondents would approach health clinics and 1.4% would approach hospitals when seeking help for domestic violence.** Similarly, only 1.2% and 0.3% of respondents would approach hospitals or health clinics following incidences of sexual harassment.
- Unfortunately, this indicates an overwhelming lack of awareness towards health services as a resource of support for victims of domestic violence and sexual harassment, and likely, other forms of violence as well.
  - This lack of awareness towards healthcare as a resource likely extends towards One Stop Crisis Centres (OSCC) situated in the Emergency Departments of public hospitals across Malaysia.
  - One Stop Crisis Centres are meant to serve this precise purpose - as a key entry point for which victims of domestic violence, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse can seek help and access a variety of services including immediate physical treatment, psychosocial support, and police reporting facilities in one place. In many cases, this also includes referrals to the Social Welfare Department, NGOs, or shelters - all of which are key institutions offering physical and procedural protections against perpetrators.

3.6.1 Responses of self-disclosed violence

A total of 201 people, or 20.1% of the respondent population, have experienced one or more forms of violence in their lifetime. Out of this number, approximately half (47.3%) did not seek help for the violence experienced, with the remaining having done so. However, we are limited in identifying the type(s) of violence experienced by those who did not seek help from others, as the question did not query this detail for this particular subgroup of survivors.

- Of the 106 respondents who did seek help for the violence experienced, the breakdown of cases is as such:

  - 45.3% **of respondents have** experienced domestic violence.
  - 25.5% **of respondents have** experienced rape.
  - 54.7% **of respondents have** experienced sexual harassment.
  - 36.8% **of respondents have** experienced stalking.

- A notable proportion of Malaysians who have reported violence in this survey, have experienced a multiplicity of abuse throughout their lifetime.
  - Out of 106 respondents who had sought help previously, **37.7% reported experiencing two or more forms of violence throughout their lifetime**, although this survey does not measure if these have occurred concurrently or at separate points in time.
  - The combination of violence that has the greatest prevalence in this population of self-disclosed survivors is **stalking and sexual harassment**, for which 12 respondents disclosed in this survey.
- The remaining 63.3% of the 106 self-disclosed survivors have reported experiencing just one of the following four forms of violence throughout their lifetime.

Figure 3.16 - Numbers of domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, and stalking cases disclosed in this survey.

Numbers of domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, &
stalking cases reported in this survey
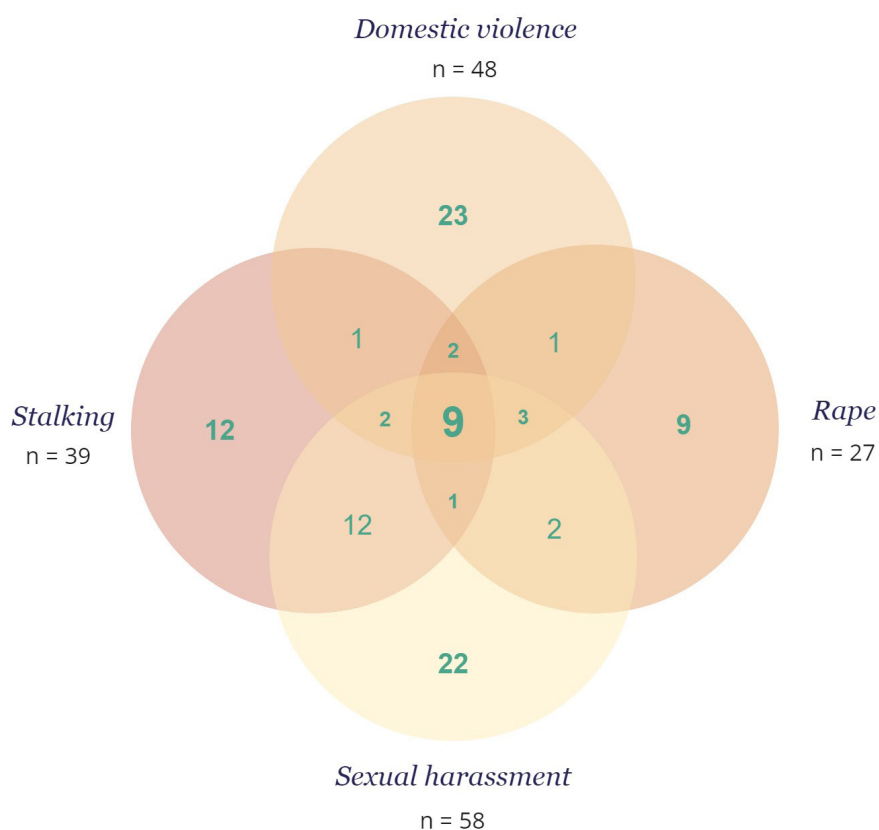
- Out of the 201 respondents who had disclosed violence in this survey, 47.3% had not sought help for the violence experienced.
  - From this survey, the rate of under-reporting for self-disclosed survivors stands at 52.6% for women, and 47.4% for men - an almost equal split between both. However, this particular survey question is limited in two ways: firstly, that this particular subgroup was not questioned about the type(s) of violence experienced, for which they did not seek help; and secondly, that this measure takes into account only respondents who have chosen to disclose an experience of violence, through their disclosure of non-reporting.
  - Broadly speaking, questions of prevalence incorporated into broad surveys about VAW (such as this one) have been seen to yield lower prevalence rates of violence compared to dedicated surveys, which are believed to garner disclosures more accurately reflective of actual prevalence rates. As such, it is likely that the even the self-disclosed rates of violence here are underreported and should not be taken as prevalence rates.
  - For future research, greater consideration must be given towards large-scale dedicated surveys or interviews about Malaysians' experiences of violence and reporting as well as their mode(s) of administration, as these are designed to enable interviewers to establish a rapport with respondents.

- In either case, the relatively low numbers of violence disclosed in this survey still reflects global trends, for which violence against women has been well-established as an underestimated and under-reported crisis.
- Previous research suggest that there are a myriad of factors related to this - such as fear of reprisals, economic and psychological dependence, anticipation that the police will not take the charges seriously,[84] and perceptions of assault as a private matter.[85] Furthermore, rates of under-reporting by formerly-married women have been attributed to a general lack of confidence in criminal justice systems that are likely to assign blame to them, rather than to perpetrators.[86] Some data from developing countries has found that a reluctance to report VAW includes concerns of embarrassment, beliefs that reporting is pointless, or that gender-based violence as a whole, is simply part of the woman's burden.[87]
- Formal structures of support - from the level of legislation, to police response - can impact societal attitudes and perceptions towards violence. Similarly, the lack of legal avenues for which survivors may seek recourse for violence limits the options available to them; therein systemically limiting options of escape from abusive environments, suppressing women's ability to speak out and seek help, and perpetuating the stigmatisation of violence in entire communities. For some victims, this then necessitates the rationalisation and minimisation of violence in order to manage the reactions of others, to prevent social ostracisation.
- The specific impact of these contributing factors was not fully investigated as part of this survey. As such, it would be unethical to draw concrete conclusions about the underlying reasons for under-reporting in our respondent population - although these numbers alongside existing evidence still posits an informative area for future research in Malaysia through dedicated surveys and/or qualitative interviews to assessing the prevalence of violence and decisions to seek help from formal or informal sources.

- **Domestic violence**
  - **From our survey population, 4.8% of respondents have sought help for domestic violence. This constitutes 5.1% of women and 4.5% of men who have experienced domestic violence alone or in combination with other forms of violence.**
    - Of the 25 women and 23 men who have experienced domestic violence in their lifetime, half are fully responsible for caregiving. Conversely, both men and women not a for caregiving at all report the lowest incidence of domestic violence at 12.0% and 4.4.% respectively.
    - Domestic violence is most prevalent in urban areas, with approximately half the number of domestic violence survivors living in urban areas.
    - Furthermore, women from urban areas who have experienced and reported domestic violence are typically between the ages of 45-54 years old, while the majority of men are between the ages of 25-44 years old.

- **Rape**
  - **Within the entirety of our survey population, 2.7% have experienced rape and disclosed it in this study.**
    - This self-disclosure amongst male respondents further emphasises the need for a more inclusive legal definition of rape in the Penal Code; which at present time, provides protective measures for women but fails completely to acknowledge male and non-binary victims of rape. As mentioned in Section 3.5, this is necessary as a means to **curb the stigmatisation of male rape and to ensure that no victim of rape has to suffer silently and in isolation, without adequate pathways of frontline support and legal aid in place**.

[84] Richard B. Felson and Paul-Philippe Paré, "The Reporting of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault by Nonstrangers to the Police," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 3 (2005): pp. 597-610, doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2005.00156.x.

[85] Richard B. Felson et al., "Reasons for Reporting and Not Reporting Domestic Violence to the Police," *Criminology* 40, no. 3 (2002): pp. 617-648, doi:10.1111/j.1745-9125.2002. tb00968.x.

[86] Felson and Paré, "The reporting of domestic violence and sexual assault by nonstrangers to the police."

[87] T. Palermo, J. Bleck, and A. Peterman, "Tip of the Iceberg: Reporting and Gender-Based Violence in Developing Countries," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 179, no. 5 (December 2013): pp. 602-612, doi:10.1093/aje/kwt295.

- **Sexual harassment**
  - **Sexual harassment was the most reported form of violence faced by Malaysians in our survey, compared to domestic violence, rape, and stalking. Within our entire survey population, 5.8% self-disclosed experiencing sexual harassment.**
  - Respondents of this survey are more likely to face sexual harassment **and seek help for it** as compared to the aforementioned forms of violence. Similar to the incidences of domestic violence and rape, women from urban areas are more likely to have experienced sexual harassment than their counterparts from rural areas. However, a contrasting trend is observed for men from rural areas, who are three and ten times more likely to experience sexual harassment than domestic violence or rape respectively, as compared to their urban counterparts. However, these numbers may be conflated due to the small sample size.

- **Stalking**
  - As seen in Figure 3.16, 39 respondents have experienced, and disclosed violence in this survey. **The number of respondents who have experienced both sexual harassment and stalking are the highest amongst all other combinations of violence.** Unfortunately, protective policies and legislation against both acts of violence, do not exist in Malaysia. While talks to table the Sexual Harassment Bill and pass Anti-Stalking Legislation have been long advocated for by a number of local civil society organisations, and have indeed, piqued the interest of several policy-makers over the past decade, neither have come to fruition yet - though, at the time of writing, promises to criminalise stalking have been renewed.
  - This data - already likely to be an underestimation of the true problem at hand - signals towards the urgency of this issue, and the need for stalking and sexual harassment to be addressed immediately and effectively.

Figure 3.17 - Doughnut chart showing the sources of support who survivors of domestic violence would first approach for help.

Who would survivors of domestic violence first approach for help?

Others (1 each)
8.5%
Community organisations or NGOs
4.3%
Religious departments
4.3%
Legal Aid Department (Jabatan
6.4%
Mental health expert
6.4%
Friends
8.5%
Talian Kasih 15999
12.8%

Police
25.5%

Family members
23.4%
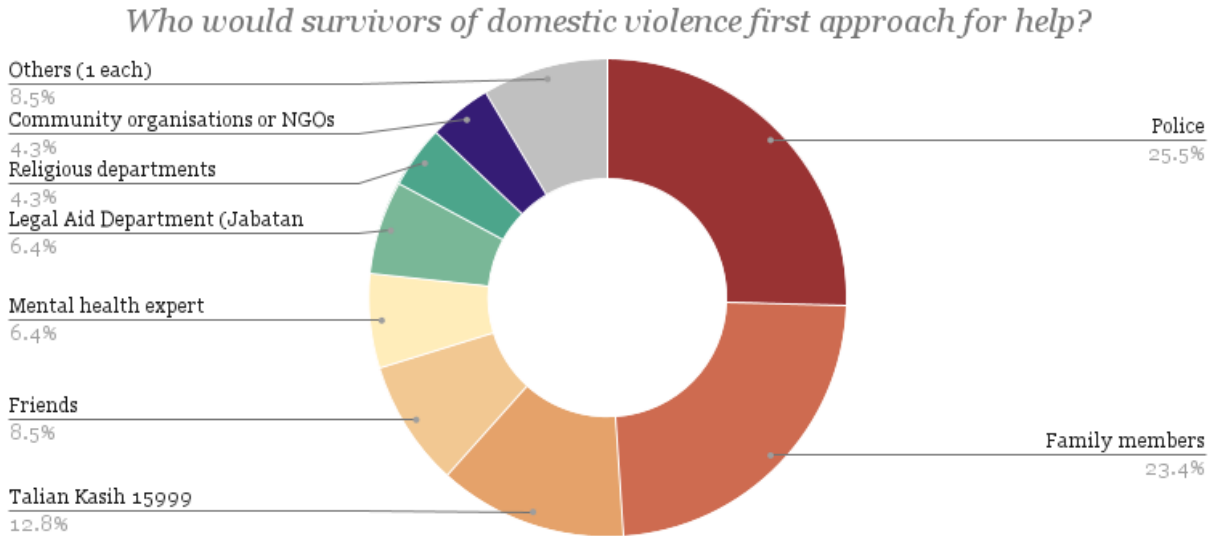
Figure 3.18 - Doughnut chart displaying the sources of support who survivors of sexual harassment would first approach for help.

Who would survivors of sexual harassment first approach for help?

Others (1 each)
15.5%
Hospital
1.7%
Community organisations or NGOs
3.4%
Mental health experts
8.6%
Friends
6.9%
Talian Kasih 15999
6.9%

Police
20.7%
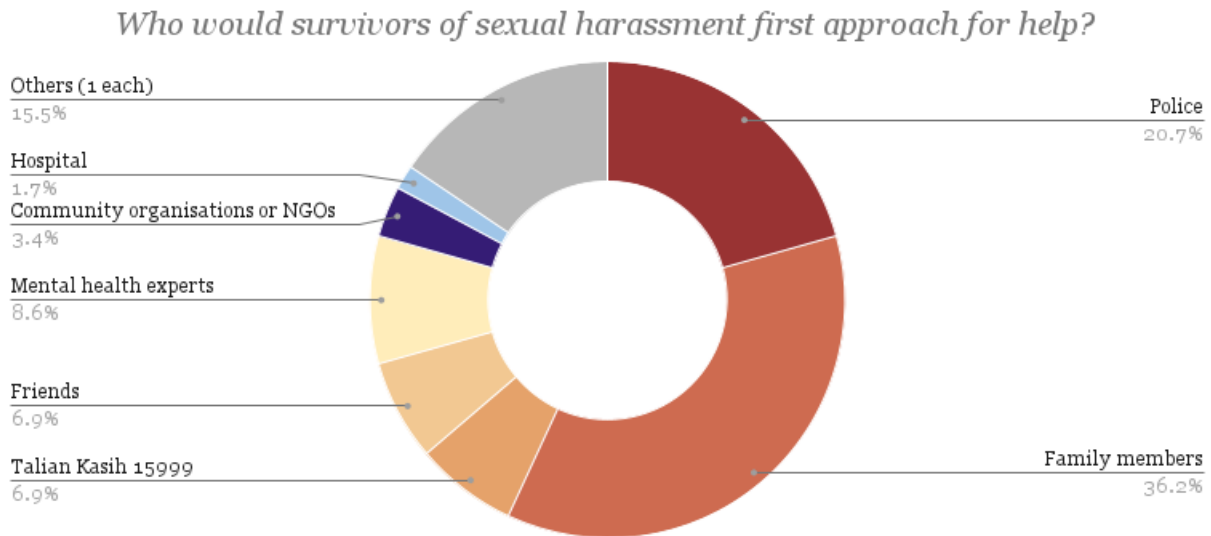
Family members
36.2%

Consistent with the help-seeking preferences of the broader Malaysian population, **survivors of domestic violence and sexual harassment would first approach the police or family members first.** This encompasses individuals who have experienced sexual harassment alone, as well as individuals who have experienced sexual harassment in combination with other forms of VAW - such as domestic violence, rape, and/or stalking.

That survivors would prefer to approach the police first, over any other source of formal or informal help, is somewhat consistent with findings of other recent studies. For instance, Tengku Hassan et al.[88] found that for women experiencing moderate physical violence by their partner, 98.5 % had approached the police, whereas for women experiencing severe physical violence by their partner, 96.4% had approached the police.[89] Of the survivors we interviewed in this study, nearly all decided to approach the police only *after* seeking help or counsel from other sources of support, such as friends and family, or advice from an NGO.

Additionally, while Tengku Hassan et al. and other studies[90][91] have found that hospitals or health centres, social services, and shelters are sources that are also highly likely to be approached by women experiencing violence, our findings of the general Malaysian population demonstrate otherwise. Worryingly **none of the domestic violence survivors from our survey selected hospitals or health clinics as a primary source of support.** This suggests that the healthcare sector is not viewed by survivors in this survey as a first point of support. Further investigation is needed in order to uncover the reasons for this finding.

For survivors of domestic violence and sexual harassment, just one person selected the Social Welfare Department as a primary source of support. Similarly, community organisations or NGOs are the primary preference for only 4.3% of survivors. This is reflected in our interviews with survivors as well, with many reporting awareness of WAO only after disclosing to informal support systems - like family members or friends - and in some cases, after lodging police reports. This indicates a relatively low awareness of the existence of or services offered by such organisations as well - indicating the need for more strategic and aggressive awareness raising in places or platforms often visited by survivors of violence. For example, by displaying posters or pamphlets about domestic violence in primary healthcare centres (*Klinik Kesihatan*).[92]

Further to that, our interviews with domestic violence survivors indicate that their interactions with the Social Welfare Department are often procedural, occurring almost exclusively when survivors wanted to or were in the process of applying for an interim protection order, or when they required legal support. As such, the Social Welfare Department is viewed as a place to secure safety in a procedural sense, as opposed to an authority that could provide immediate support or help in times of crisis.

It is necessary to note at this juncture that institutions of support need to scale up their efforts to support and protect women who are experiencing, or have experienced violence, in practical and empathetic ways. The development and effective implementation of national strategies to combat VAW and other forms of gender-based violence, as well as legislation to address domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, and stalking can provide the tools to build a protective system, thus ensuring that there is no impunity for these acts of violence. Effective implementation would take the form of a coordinated, comprehensive range of services provided by the police and justice system, as well as health and social services. Women also need access to specific measures that enable them to leave a violent relationship - for example, shelter services, protection orders, counselling and legal aid, have been shown to be effective in helping women to leave abusive relationships.

Such measures must also take into account the fact that women are often economically dependent on their intimate partner, and in this way, are at risk of being deprived of their only source of economic support should their partner face legal conviction, or retaliate harshly following formal reports of violence that subsequently, turn stale.

[88] Tengku Hassan, Tengku Nur Fadzilah, et al. "Patterns of Help-Seeking among Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence in Malaysia." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2015, pp. 77–92. *Crossref*, doi:10.1080/12259276.2015.1029226.

[89] In this paper, moderate violence was described as being 'slapped, having things thrown at them that could hurt, being pushed, shoved or pulled by the hair'. Severe physical violence was categorised as being 'kicked, dragged, beaten, choked, burnt, hit with fists or objects or threatened with a weapon'.

[90] Rashidah Shuib et al., "Domestic Violence and Women's Well-Being in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges Conducting a National Study Using the WHO Multi-Country Questionnaire on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 91 (2013): pp. 475-488, doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.08.445.

[91] Women's Aid Organisation, "Strengthening the Primary Healthcare Response to Domestic Violence" Women's Aid Organisation, 2020, bit.ly/30uclFP.

[92] ibid.

3.7 Reach of existing public messaging on VAW

Figure 3.19 - Percentage of respondents who have heard public messages, such as awareness campaigns, about the following types of violence.

Types of public messaging encountered by respondents
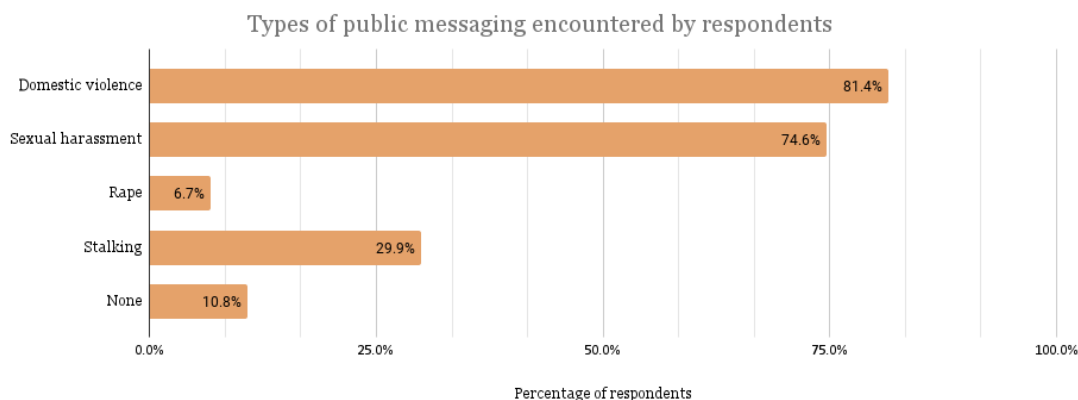
Over 80% of respondents have been exposed to public messaging on one or more types of VAW. As shown in Figure 3.20 roughly 81.4% of the respondent population has heard public messaging about domestic violence. This is followed by closely seconded by messages and campaigns about sexual harassment (74.6%), stalking (29.9%) , and rape (6.7%). The number of respondents **who have heard messaging about rape is absolutely dismal, indicating a significant neglect by all parties in the communication of information and awareness-raising regarding this form of violence.**

An overwhelming majority of respondents (74.6%) have heard public messages about more than one of the four types of violence specified - domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, and stalking. A tenth of respondents have not heard public messaging about any of the forms of violence.

Consistent with age-influenced beliefs in myths surrounding violence against women, **older respondents are less likely to have heard public messaging about VAW** - the majority of respondents of this subgroup are beyond the age of 55 years old (15.7%), while an average of 13.4% of respondents between the ages of 25-44 years old have not been exposed to any form of public messaging or awareness campaigns. **This halves for respondents below 35 years of age** - only 6.2% of respondents aged between 25-34, and 8.4% of those between the ages of 18-24 years old have not been exposed to public messaging and/or awareness campaigns ever.

Despite the fact that over 80% of Malaysians have been exposed to public messages or awareness campaigns about domestic violence, beliefs in domestic violence myths and victim-blaming attitudes towards women experiencing abuse are still rampant in Malaysian society (refer to Section 4.1.1).

This is extremely worrying, and suggests that public messaging does not centre enough around the realities and hidden complexities of VAW, but may focus solely on other points of advocacy such as the advertisement of helplines, shelters, and other resources for help targeted primarily towards survivors.

While raising awareness on help and resources available for survivors is intensely important, public messaging on VAW should not focus on this alone.

Public perceptions and attitudes towards violence play a critical role in enabling violence against women, such as through perpetuating myths surrounding violence which in turn, hold patriarchal values and unequal social hierarchies in place. Not only does this stigmatise domestic violence in a society that imposes already unfair expectations onto

women, it deters victims of violence from speaking up and seeking help - even to those closest to them. The responses of individuals living within a patriarchal society - for which victim-blaming attitudes and domestic violence myths run rampant - run the risk of harming, rather than helping.

Figure 3.20 - Platforms on which respondents have heard these public messages.

? **If yes, where did you see, hear, or read public messages or awareness campaigns?**

Number of respondents

Platform	Number
TV	619
Radio	365
Whatsapp	288
YouTube	376
Instagram	272
Facebook	589
Twitter	169
Other	240
Flyers	130
Posters	176
Newspapers	417
Magazines	195
Noticeboards	143
Gov websites	194
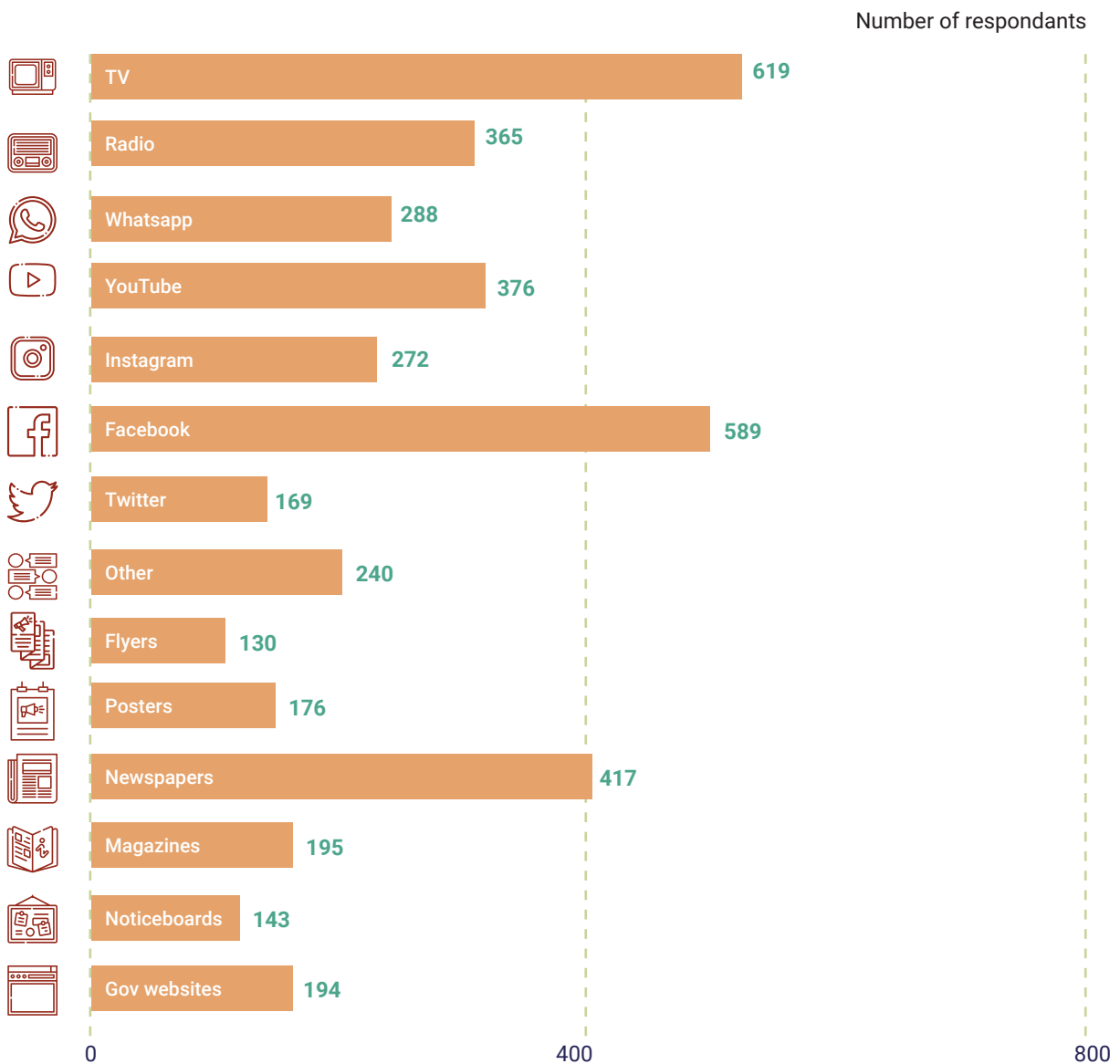
Figure 3.21 - Line chart displaying the sources of public messaging for respondents from urban and rural areas.

Figure 3.22 - Line chart displaying the sources of public messaging for respondents who have answered the survey in English, Malay, and Chinese.
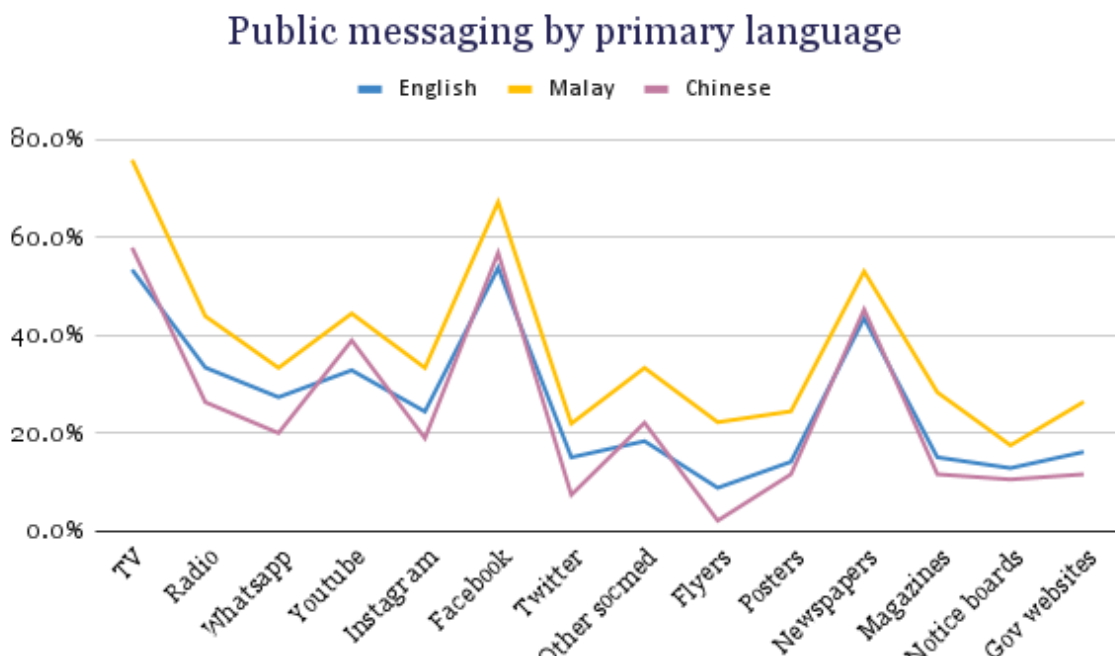
A more granular analysis demonstrates that reach of public messaging and/or awareness campaigns echoes a similar trend for urban and rural Malaysians, as well as for Malaysians whose primary language is presumably English, Malay, or Chinese. The latter information was based on the language chosen by respondents to answer this survey.

These findings signal towards identical levels of accessibility to a variety of information sources - but most pertinently, television, Facebook, newspapers, and Youtube, which are the top four sources of public messaging for urban and rural Malaysians. Alternatively, this may also suggest that greater attention is paid to these sources of information, or that messaging from these platforms are more easily retained in the memory of consumers. For virtual platforms like Facebook and Youtube, this could be due to the quality or accessibility of the messages and/or campaigns - not just in terms of how well-known and easily downloadable these applications are, but also in terms of the type of content produced (e.g. videos, or other eye-catching graphics that can communicate key information in a shorter amount of time). However, this study is limited in that respondents were not questioned about the characteristics of messages that stood out to them.

This would be an unique area for future research - to understand what constitutes effective public messaging and awareness campaigns for the Malaysian public, as well as to identify what platforms are most accessible and widely used by Malaysians and whether these differ significantly across age groups or regional strata. With the results of this study underlining the most pertinent problematic attitudes in Malaysians and across certain age groups, such research would clarify what problematic attitudes should be tackled, when they should be addressed, and how the Government or other civil society organisations could most effectively disseminate productive information about these issues.

4

Key Insights
& Discussions

This section addresses some important issues that arise from the results of the survey by contextualising these issues, addressing the link between demonstrated attitudes and its impact on a societal level, and more specifically, where relevant, on survivors. Broadly, these issues cover five key areas:

- The denial of consent and women's autonomy
- The denial of gender inequality
- The disconnect of Malaysians' understanding of violence and attitudes towards VAW
- Insights from perceptions of social support
- Insights from attitudes towards child marriage

The final section of this chapter is a special report on female genital mutilation or cutting, offering an overview to the issue in Malaysia, written in conjunction with Sisters in Islam (SIS) and the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW).

4.1 The denial of consent and women's autonomy

Malaysians do not have a good grasp of consent - as demonstrated in Section 3.1 above, 65.7% of Malaysians have attitudes that support or are complicit towards disregarding women's right to consent.

Broadly speaking, consent is made up of five elements: Freely given, Reversible, Informed, Enthusiastic, and Specific (FRIES).[93] By definition, the presence of consent delineates a consensual sexual activity from an act of violence or perpetration.

When the negotiation of consensual sex begins from an unequal playing field – in which men are perceived to be the more socially acceptable pursuers – it also contributes to attitudes that deem it less socially acceptable for women to assert their desires as the basis for sexual decision-making.[94] In short, stringent impositions of rigid gender roles and stereotypes in sexual encounters undermines the equal and ethical negotiation of sexual consent.[95]

When we collectively disregard women's right to consent, we also disregard the impact of violence against women and the extent to which patriarchal norms that undervalue women and perpetuate gender inequality influence our everyday lives. Without this, acts of violence against women are viewed as less harmful, less traumatic, with lower importance as a crisis to be addressed and tackled with urgency. This is what the minimisation of violence looks like, and what feeds into a collective mistrust of women's reports of violence and inequality.

Denying the necessity of informed consent in sexual relationships creates the substantial risk of minimising violence and its impact on victims. When violence against women - a subset of gender-based violence - occurs, entire societies may be inclined to doubt the severity of the violence, instead developing a propensity to question the behaviour, attire, or speech of the victim, and underestimating the one and only fact that matters: that consent was not provided during an exchange. When women are disproportionately affected by violence, this only widens the gap between men and women, when, as a society, the collective normalisation of recurring violence enforces the stringent patriarchal norms as part of a self-perpetuating cycle.

One of the ways a disregard for women's right to consent manifests is through endorsement of rape myths.

4.1.1 The pervasiveness of rape myths

Rape myths "explain a set of largely false cultural beliefs that were thought to underlie sexual aggression perpetrated against women."[96] These are often heard within the broad narrative of rape culture, and are centralised towards victim blaming - that is, attitudes that blame victims for triggering rapists, due to reasons like their attire or behaviour around others. Previous literature has documented the significant role of rape myths in violence-endorsing attitudes and behaviours (see Chapter 1). For example, men's endorsement of rape myths have served as a predictor of sexual violence.[97]

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[93] UN Women, "When It Comes to Consent, There Are No Blurred Lines," UN Women, Last modified November 18, 2019, https://bit.ly/3lzdOTd.

[94] Anastasia Powell, *Sex, Power and Consent: Youth Culture and the Unwritten Rules* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

[95] Diana T. Sanchez, Janell C. Fetterolf, and Laurie A. Rudman, "Eroticizing Inequality in the United States: The Consequences and Determinants of Traditional Gender Role Adherence in Intimate Relationships," *The Journal of Sex Research* 49, no. 2-3 (January 2012): pp. 168-183, doi:10.1080/00224499.2011.653699.

[96] Katie M. Edwards et al., "Rape Myths: History, Individual and Institutional-Level Presence, and Implications for Change," *Sex Roles* 65, no. 11-12 (December 2011): pp. 761-773, doi:10.1007/s11199-011-9943-2.

[97] Ashley K. Fansher and Sara B. Zedaker, "The Relationship between Rape Myth Acceptance and Sexual Behaviors," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2020, p. 088626052091683, doi:10.1177/0886260520916831.

What do rape myths signify?

Beliefs in rape myths are correlated to the presence of rape-endorsing attitudes or sexual entitlement.[98] As seen in Section 3.5, over 80% of Malaysians believe that rape happens because men are not able to control their sexual desires, a belief that holds relatively equal for both men and women.

Universally high endorsements in rape myths indicate that rape-supportive attitudes are prevalent in the Malaysian population, such as in the belief that men's sex drive cannot be controlled to the extent of violating consent and perpetrating rape. While this is an argument that has been heavily utilised in the discourse surrounding perpetration and motivations for sexual assault - in both academic circles[99] and for public consumption through the media - the fact is that rape and other forms of sexual assault are not about sex, but about the forceful need to exert dominance and control.

When rape myths are used as a means to justify rape, individual and collective beliefs of rape are centralised within the narrative of victim-blaming, for which women are held responsible for the perpetration of rape. Consequently, rapists are not held accountable both in a social context or within the criminal justice system - therefore, we posit that **endorsements in rape myths are reflective of a society's inclination to excuse perpetrators and hold victims responsible for abuse**, extending beyond the boundaries of domestic violence as suggested in the CASVAWS towards date rape, stranger rape, and a range of other situations involving sexual assault.

Rape myths and victim blaming are widely believed to be synonymous with each other in the self-perpetuating cycle of rape culture,[100] [101] [102] where rape culture is a collective normalisation of violence against women and girls. Individuals with high acceptance levels of rape myths are more likely to minimise the negative impact of rape on a victim, such as by expressing a greater willingness to justify the actions of the perpetrator.[103] Support for rape myths may also be interpreted as the minimisation of consent, or even as an unwillingness to acknowledge consent as an integral part of women's autonomy. This in turn, perpetuates and justifies the idea that men have needs that supersede women in all forms and spaces - in this case, through sexual entitlement and the suppression of consent.

In minimisation of consent, when violence against women occurs, women are held to account rather than the perpetrators, simply because by default, the responsibility of violence falls on the victim. Even if the woman has not consented or has explicitly resisted the perpetrator, these facts are placed secondary to interrogations about the way women have acted or dressed around men, and the idea that women are responsible for guarding themselves against violence.

Rape culture is unlikely to remain insular to casual social systems within the Malaysian public. Like all other attitudes, rape culture can infiltrate formal systems of support. Given the high levels of endorsement towards rape myths in this survey, it is likely that propensities to victim-blame already play a persisting role in Malaysia's front-line responses and general community responses towards disclosures of violence, likely even extending beyond that to the criminal justice system and other structures meant to support survivors of violence.

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[98] Rhiana Wegner et al., "Sexual Assault Perpetrators' Justifications for Their Actions," *Violence Against Women* 21, no. 8 (August 2015): pp. 1018-1037, doi:10.1177/1077801215589380.

[99] Jerry A. Coyne and Andrew Berry, "Rape as an Adaptation," *Nature* 404, no. 6774 (2000): pp. 121-122, doi:10.1038/35004636.

[100] Amy Grubb and Emily Turner, "Attribution of Blame in Rape Cases: A Review of the Impact of Rape Myth Acceptance, Gender Role Conformity and Substance Use on Victim Blaming," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 17, no. 5 (2012): pp. 443-452, doi:10.1016/j.avb.2012.06.002.

[101] Susan A. Basow and Alexandra Minieri, "'You Owe Me': Effects of Date Cost, Who Pays, Participant Gender, and Rape Myth Beliefs on Perceptions of Rape," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 26, no. 3 (April 2010): pp. 479-497, doi:10.1177/0886260510363421.

[102] Elizabeth M. Hammond, Melissa A. Berry, and Dario N. Rodriguez, "The Influence of Rape Myth Acceptance, Sexual Attitudes, and Belief in a Just World on Attributions of Responsibility in a Date Rape Scenario," *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 16, no. 2 (2011): pp. 242-252, doi:10.1348/135532510x499887.

[103] Aimee Reynolds, "The Effects of Rape Myth Acceptance and Gender Role Beliefs on Perceptions of Date Rape" dissertation, 2017, https://bit.ly/2YLVc9w.

Rape myths through a survivor's eyes

From our qualitative investigation, survivors believe rape myths are prevalent and there is a societal tendency amongst Malaysians to excuse the rapist in some way and pin the blame on the victim.

> People will [say] this kind of things, they will say [rapists] are mental, they are psycho, they will come out with the money. (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

Leah believes that rapists will be commonly painted as mental or psycho. The truth is a little more complicated. Most rapists do not have a mental disorder.[104] But by blaming a perpetrator's mental illness, the perpetrator is excused. This is harmful not only to survivors, but to people with mental illnesses, in assuming that a mental illness means one loses complete autonomy over one's actions. As Sarkar says, "**It is risky at least and downright negligent and harmful at worst to assume a causal link between a psychiatric disorder and rape**, that is, the rape was the direct outcome of someone's psychosis, bipolar disorder, depression, or any other psychiatric disorder."[105]

McFadden argues that "a rapist is defined an any man who believes he has the right to rape to express his patriarchal sexual power."[106] The issue is that not all rapists are men and rape does not have to be an expression of patriarchal sexual power. Rape, however, is inherently a power issue and most perpetrators of rape are those who have some form of power over their victim which allows them to commit the act of rape and, in some circumstances, get away with it. In instances where a perpetrator can rape an individual without punishment, in a patriarchal society, it is likely because of the power imbalance working in the individual's favour not only on an individual level, but on a societal level. There are many intersections which influence who is more likely to be believed as a rapist versus who can likely get away with raping. These intersections are influenced by power imbalances beyond just gender, but also involving race and class.

Regardless, however, this often manifests as a society which disbelieves survivors or expresses strong adherence to rape myths that put survivors at a disadvantage when they attempt to report rape. As a result of this, survivors feel disempowered to report instances of rape.

> *Masyarakat tengok rapist apa semua tapi zaman sekarang ah dulu dengan sekarang sudah jauh beza tau. Kalau sekarang, dia orang ingat, "Mmm perempuan itu tak betul, dulu perempuan semua masuk kitchen walaupun belajar tinggi-tinggi ah. Masuk kitchen saja. Kalau kahwin sudah family saja, tak mau keluar suka-suka. Sekarang perempuan mau sama-sama dengan lelaki. Smoking lah, vaping lah, tattoo lah, apa lah." So masyarakat sudah fikir macam tu, sebab tu rapist rasa macam, mm it's a normal thing already.* (Privya, 34, rape survivor)
>
> **Translation:** The society looks at rapists and everything happening nowadays as different than what happened in the past. Now, they see it as, "Mmm there's something wrong with women now - before, women would all go into the kitchen, regardless of how much they have studied. They all became dutiful wives. When they got married, they stopped wanting to simply go out. Now, women want to be the same as men. Smoking and vaping and getting tattoos - whatever." So the society thinks this way and as a result, the rapists feel that what they're doing is a normal thing already.

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[104] D. Grubin and J. Gunn, The Imprisoned Rapist and Rape London: Department of Forensic Psychiatry, 1990.

[105] Jaydip Sarkar, "Mental Health Assessment of Rape Offenders," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 55, no. 3 (2013): p. 235, doi:10.4103/0019-5545.117137.

[106] Patricia McFadden, "Why Men Violate," *Southern Africa Political & Economic Monthly* 7, no. 1 (1993): pp. 48-51, https://bit.ly/3iYHsiW.

Privya articulates that because society already orients itself towards blaming women for changing, for wanting to be more than just wives, this, in turn, justifies rape for rapists because it is constructed as a fitting punishment for women who want to do the things that men are doing. Notably, this also plays very much into *Promoting rigid gender roles, stereotypes, and expressions*. This paints a picture of a society that believes there is a way that women should behave and a way that men should behave and when women behave outside the norm, they should expect violence as a consequence.

4.1.2 Conflict surrounding marital rape

Question 50	Question 71
If a partner in a domestic relationship forces their partner to have sex, is this a form of domestic violence?	It should be a criminal offence for a man to have sex with his wife without her consent.

Question 50 touches on the topic of rape in the context of a 'domestic relationship'. As this survey does not explicitly define this term, this question may have been interpreted as either marital rape or rape perpetrated by an intimate partner. For this item, **9.0% of women did not believe this was a form of violence or remained uncertain while 12.4% of men expressed the same.**

The gender disparity for question 71 is substantial, with a difference of 9.4%. Women show a greater inclination towards opposing the criminalisation of marital rape (55.7%). To our knowledge, this is the first survey encompassing question(s) about marital rape in Malaysia - therefore, the gender-disaggregated results as demonstrated here will aid current understandings of which subgroups to target with preventive messaging, and where future research should be focused. In this case, these statistics confound our expectations of marital rape - given the prevalence of sexual abuse as a form of domestic violence in Shuib et al.,[107] we predicted a higher proportion of women to be supportive of the inclusion of marital rape within the limited Penal Code, where currently, perpetrators of marital rape are exempt from the offence of rape.

Rape is defined by the UN as *'any non-consensual vaginal, anal or oral penetration of another person with any bodily part or object. This can be by any person known or unknown to the survivor, **within marriage and relationships**, and during armed conflict.'*[108] In the seminal 2014 study by Shuib et al., over a tenth of the 9% of ever-partnered women who had experienced domestic violence reported 'forced sex' as a form of abuse. When extrapolated to the Malaysian population as a whole, this suggests that over 100,000 women in Malaysia have experienced rape by an intimate partner.[109] Instances of marital rape being part and parcel of some experiences of domestic violence was corroborated by two of the five domestic violence survivors interviewed in this study.

> I don't have enough sleep. He don't believe me for past 15 years I just fell asleep for two hours in my life. In the day, just for 2 hours. It's a very very true thing that I can tell you. I can't sleep. I scared of the fellow. I really scared what this fellow's going to do to me tonight. And every - he will force me to have the sex. He will use the sex toys to me. (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

[107] Rashidah Shuib et al., "Domestic Violence and Women's Well-Being in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges Conducting a National Study Using the WHO Multi-Country Questionnaire on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 91 (2013): pp. 475-488, doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.08.445.

[108] UN Women. *Frequently asked questions: Types of violence against women and girls.* Accessed from: https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/types-of-violence

[109] Shuib, R., Ali, S. H., Abdullah, S., Ab Ghani, P., Osman, I., Endut, N., . . . Shahrudin, S. S. (2014). *Executive Report, Summary of Findings: A Country Level Study of Women's Well-being and Domestic Violence Against Women (DVAW) Using WHO Multi-country Questionnaire.* Women's Development Research Centre (KANITA), Universiti Sains Malaysia.

> I actually, I want to come out, because after he take the ice, he want to make love more than one hour, and never let me go out one day, the kids are outside, when they knock the door, they're hungry, he will angry with the kids. That's the worst thing, last last happened. At home, the kids are disturbing so he will bring me to hotel. For one or two days, only for sex. After that he will beat me. (Priscilla, 35, domestic violence survivor)

Section 376 of the Penal Code states that any persons who commits rape will be punished with an imprisonment term of up to 20 years, and may be subject to whipping. But the Penal Code explicitly excludes marital rape from the offence of rape. Section 375A of the Penal Code criminalises **hurt or fear of death caused by a husband to his wife**, which is punishable for up to five years[110] - a punishment more lenient than that of Section 376, and still does not explicitly criminalise marital rape. Furthermore, rape perpetrated against men is not accounted for in Malaysian law. Thus, these existing laws are inadequate - serving only to enable perpetrators and consciously leaving a gap into which men and married women subject to sexual violence will fall into.

This can potentially explain the relatively high scores of negative attitudes for both men and women in question 50, as compared to other forms of physical violence. Without the criminalisation of marital rape, first-line law enforcement officers are not under any jurisdiction to act - and indeed, may even hold perceptions that marital rape is not worth pursuing, further exacerbated by the fact that the burden of proof often falls solely onto survivors. In 2018, a deputy minister in the Prime Minister's department had publicly stated that marital rape would not be criminalised due to difficulties in obtaining proof for criminal justice procedures.[111] In cases of rape and other forms of sexual violence, physical injuries may often be the only type of evidence taken seriously - despite how sexual coercion leading to violence is just as severe and just as likely to happen. However, the burden of proof falls almost entirely on survivors of violence. In a society that misunderstands and demotes consent to a secondary position in its considerations of sexual violence, oftentimes, the absence of consent is likely insufficient for further action, even with documented evidence.

Furthermore, the police serve as the primary source of formal support for whom Malaysians would approach when experiencing domestic violence. If police do not have jurisdiction and/or will to act against cases of marital rape, this may have carry-over effects into the general public, creating a dangerous cycle where marital rape is doubted as a crime in the eyes of Malaysians or the Malaysian law. Formal inaction is observed to deter survivors from seeking help as well. This was explicitly picked up on by one of the survivors we interviewed who, upon reporting instances of marital rape to the police, was dismissed, leading her to question how other women would be able to leave instances where marital rape occurs if structures fail to adequately address the issue.

> "[The police are] saying that it's a common thing between husband and wife, using the sex toys. How the women will come out of these kind of things? Even husband also he - it's not a thing - husband also there's a limit, he cannot force me." (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

The lack of support expressed by Malaysians for the criminalisation of marital rape suggests that most women (given that almost 80% of respondents in our survey have not reported violence) are not well aware of the impact of sexual abuse in domestic violence, despite understanding that rape itself typically unacceptable. This conclusion comes with the combination of this data, alongside the recognition most respondents felt that forcing a child rape victim to marry their rapist would exacerbate trauma as rapists are bad (Question 63).

Another plausible explanation may be that the majority of women do acknowledge the act of marital rape as harmful,

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[110] All Women's Action Society (AWAM), "Legal Remedies," AWAM, Last modified November 8, 2020, http://www.awam.org.my/2020/09/09/legal-information.

[111] Michael Taylor, "'When Is It Going to Stop?' Malaysia's Marital Rape Victims Ask," Reuters, Last modified March 21, 2019, https://reut.rs/2YYd6Wy.

but believe that criminalisation, which may initiate visualisations of prison sentences or whipping, is unnecessary. Other lighter solutions or sentences, such as marital counselling or communication workshops for married couples, may elicit greater levels of support compared to criminalisation. Additionally, the uncertainty levels for both men and women peak at question 71, suggesting that marital rape remains a conflicting topic for many. Overarchingly, reservations to the criminalisation of marital rape may be linked to Malaysians' misunderstandings or misinterpretations of consent, where the existence of a consensual relationship does not denote consent for any and all sexual relations.

The perceptions of the Malaysian public towards marital rape require further study, and would be informative in exploring Malaysians' views of marriage, the centrality of family institutions, and any shifts in understandings of consent within consensual relationships.

4.2 The denial of gender inequality

Gender inequality is a major barrier to human development. Despite advances in the sectors of health, education, political representation and labour market participation, gender discrimination is still faced by women globally in a myriad of forms.

One-third of Malaysians believe women exaggerate gender inequality in Malaysia.

Question 46
Many women exaggerate how unequally women are treated in Malaysia.

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) assesses inequalities from three dimensions of human development: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status.[112] The higher the Index value, the greater the disparities between men and women, and the greater the loss to human development. Out of 162 countries, Malaysia ranks at number 62 on the GII.

- While maternal mortality rate is relatively low, our adolescent birth rates are still higher than Singapore and Brunei, who score lowest in the region.
- Education attainment between genders appears relatively equal, with over 70% of men and women achieving at least secondary level education. The gender gap here is also less pronounced than in neighbouring Singapore, which has the highest regional education rates.
- Labour force participation shows a significantly greater gender gap, with 50.7% of women and 77.1% of men aged 15 years old and above participating in the formal economy.
- National data indicates that the political empowerment of women is still lacking as well, with only 16.1% of Ministerial positions occupied by women[113], while women occupy 14.9% of Parliamentary positions[114], and an average 11.7% of State Elected Representative positions occupied by women as of October 2021.[115]

As evidenced by these figures, women tend to make greater and faster progress in areas of basic capabilities, where their individual empowerment or social power is lower,[116] such as in access to healthcare, education, voting rights, and economic participation. These are often the 'entry points' to basic rights. Delving deeper into the power distribution present within these areas, however, shows us that a glass ceiling for women still exists - **that is, where women have the potential for greater responsibility, positions of leadership, and positive social stature in markets, social life, and politics, progress towards equality slows substantially**. Violence directed towards women parliamentarians is also rampant, with one 2016 study determining that 65% have been subjected to sexist remarks, mostly from male colleagues in parliament.[117]

[112] United Nations Development Programme, "Gender Inequality Index (GII) | Human Development Reports," United Nations Development Programme, Last modified 2020, http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii.

[113] World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*.

[114] World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*.

[115] Wikipedia Contributors, "Women in State Legislative Assemblies of Malaysia," Wikipedia, Last modified September 8, 2021, https://bit.ly/3aKPoQv.

[116] United Nations Development Programme, "Gender Inequality Index."

[117] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians" Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, https://bit.ly/3G8lEeQ

Even more discouraging is the fact that no country in the world has achieved gender equality, with growth within these indicators slowing down in recent years. **Thus, such indicators of gender equality should not be taken as an absolute measure but instead, with these limitations in mind.**

On-ground realities signal a much more dire fate. The hidden, day-to-day realities of women are not accounted for in assessments of gender parity - and are not easily detected if there are structures and discriminatory policies that inherently suppress and minimise the perspectives of women. There exists the unconsidered burdens of double shifts at home, sexual and gender-based violence experienced and heavily underreported by women everywhere, and workplace discrimination. The prevalence of sexual harassment amongst women and the persisting gender disparity of these experiences signals a persistent crisis of gender-based violence in Malaysia.

- Data from the Royal Police Force of Malaysia show that from 2013-2017, there were up to five times the number of women who had reported sexual harassment compared to men, displaying increases from year to year.
- A 2019 survey showed that almost 36% of women and 17% of men in Malaysia have experienced sexual harassment, with only a slight disparity seen in reporting behaviours.
- A survey conducted by WAO and Vase.ai in 2020 found that 62% of women have experienced one or more forms of sexual harassment in the workplace, ranging from sexual jokes, assault, body movements, or suggestive looks. Almost one fifth of women have experienced stalking behaviour.
- According to a 2021 survey by AWAM and Cent GPS, 57% of Malaysian women have experienced verbal sexual harassment.[118]

Further, when examining women in politics, even more disheartening, given our lack of female representation in Malaysian politics, a study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that globally, **over 80% of women parliamentarians have experienced psychological violence while serving their terms**, with **two thirds of those surveyed believing that the sexist behaviour faced as part of this was intended to discourage them and other female parliamentarians from continuing in politics.**[119] These findings signal pervasive attitudes of misogyny within the public sphere, directed as violent behaviours towards women in the political arena. While this warrants further study in a local context, it still reflects the challenges that female politicians face in their everyday interactions, that result from public attitudes that oppose women's participation in politics. These could be exacerbated when women are under-represented, such as in the Malaysian political realm - ultimately enacting and reinforcing barriers from women's participation in politics.

In short, public perceptions towards women in leadership positions can either enact barriers, or positively enable participation in politics - which ultimately impacts growth towards equality. For example, over the last 10 years, coinciding with an increase in women's political participation, 131 countries have passed 274 legal reforms in support of gender equality, including laws addressing violence against women, childcare, and universal healthcare - indicating that women's participation in politics yields positive outcomes for society as a whole, driving equality in entire systems and countries.[120]

These are barriers erected by societal expectations of, and persisting beliefs towards traditional gender roles imposed upon men and women. In a patriarchal society, the assumption is that these are enforced and omnipresent in individual interactions and structures meant to support women. Expectations for women to uphold the burden of care, and for men to serve as sole breadwinners of their families do nothing but enforce norms, suppress autonomy and flexibility, and further polarise the rights and roles of men and women in society. The attitudes and perceptions of Malaysians towards gender roles in public and private life are discussed in further detail in the next section.

[118] Hakim Akmal, "Nowhere Is Safe: Malaysian Women Reveal How They're Regularly Harassed & Abuse," TRP, Last modified September 22, 2021, https://bit.ly/3ncwyHR.

[119] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians" Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, https://bit.ly/3G8lEeQ.

[120] UN Women, *Gender Equality: Women's Rights in Review 25 Years after Beijing* New York: UN Women, 2020, https://bit.ly/3p7EKvF.

4.2.1 Gender roles in private life

Question 43	Question 42
Women prefer a man to be in charge of the relationship.	Men should control the relationship and become the head of the family

Both of these questions received high explicit endorsement and complicity across the board, with 80.0% in total for question 42, and 85.1% in total for question 43

Interestingly, there is a disparity between how men answer 42 and 43, exhibiting more uncertainty for question 42, although superficially, these questions seem to reflect similar concepts of familial responsibility. This difference may be due to the phrase 'control the relationship' in question 42, or the varied meanings attached to the terms 'head of the family' implying a domestic burden of care, and 'in charge of the relationship' (implying the role of providing financially) between questions. Combining both responses where men agree or are uncertain (as complacency usually means complicity within the system), it appears women's decision making in private life, as a whole, is not endorsed by a substantially large proportion of Malaysian men. Although this construct does not exhaustively question other realities involved in women's independence in private life, the burden of care implied and financial independence are both contributing factors to the overall independence of women within the household and in pursuing opportunities outside of it, as well as family/relationship dynamics.

Age is another significantly associated variable. Compared to 18-24 year olds, **respondents who are above the age of 55 have 2.63 higher odds to hold negative attitudes towards** *Undermining women's independence and decision making in private life.*

Since both questions 42 and 43 received nearly the most endorsement out of all the survey questions, it warrants further unpacking in the way it intersects with culturally sanctioned gender role ideals. Gender roles arise from socialisation as opposed to innately programmed functions.[121] Within a patriarchal society, these are predicated on the gendered division of tasks, such as leading, held in diametric opposition to other tasks, such as caregiving, creating gendered norms for how men and women are supposed to behave in relation to each other.

Research has shown that more masculine countries tend to adhere to more pronounced gender role differentiation, including the dominance of men in the private sphere.[122] While it is difficult to make conclusions, the high rates of agreement to questions 42 and 43 seems to suggest that Malaysia is a highly masculine society and this may be tied to a societally prevalent gendered socialisation that is culturally sanctioned. In essence, there is a societal norm for how an ideal relationship should look and, in these relationships, men are in charge and lead the family. High endorsement by women of the statement *"Women prefer a man to be in charge of the relationship"* relates a normative societal belief women culturally value and are, presumably, taught to desire through messaging and signalling they receive growing up. The sheer amount of women endorsing these statements likely traces its roots back to how male dominance is societally valued, thus leading women to idealise social structures which place men as dominant within family structures, too. While this may not appear to be a terrible issue at first glance, the proliferation of these attitudes is only possible within a society with high violence-endorsing attitudes because valuing male dominance inherently places women in positions of vulnerability. In societies with more egalitarian gender-role beliefs, there are also demonstrably higher levels of well-being across cultures and genders.[123]

That this relationship of valuing male dominance in the private sphere in our survey has a significant association with age suggests either one of two things: the endorsement of these traditional mores is an artefact of time, meaning it

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[121] Nikola Balvin, Saranya Misra Kerry Albright, and Sandy Oliver Shivit Bakrania, "What Is Gender Socialization and Why Does It Matter?," UNICEF, Last modified August 18, 2017, https://uni.cf/3auWhoZ.

[122] Fons J. van de Vijver, "Cultural and Gender Differences in Gender-Role Beliefs, Sharing Household Task and Child-Care Responsibilities, and Well-Being among Immigrants and Majority Members in the Netherlands," *Sex Roles* 57, no. 11-12 (2007): pp. 813-824, doi:10.1007/s11199-007-9316-z.

[123] ibid.

is possible these beliefs may die out, or the endorsement of these beliefs grow more pronounced with time and age and, as people grow older, they are more likely to shift towards these negative attitudes. Unfortunately, we cannot draw any conclusions from our data but this presents an area with great potential for future exploration and may serve well to prevent violence as Noraida Endut et al.[124] found that Malaysian teens, aged 17 to 19, with more rigid gender role endorsements already believe violence against wives is more acceptable than violence against husbands.

4.2.2 Gender roles in public life

Question 39
Men, rather than women, should hold positions of responsibility in the community.

Nearly twice the number of men who answered endorsed question 39 as compared to women (21.6% of women vs. 36.3% men). This indicates that, almost proportionally, there is a 14.7% gender disparity of support towards this statement. A similar trend is observed for men who are partially responsible for caregiving - but this gender disparity is completely absent between women and men not responsible for caregiving, thus suggesting that **men who hold some proportion of caregiving responsibilities at home, are more likely to endorse the belief that men, instead of women, should hold positions of responsibility in the community.**

This may be the result of gender roles and expectations underlying the responsibilities of caregiving, resulting in role-conflicts and role-strains. Unlike women, men report less social pressure to care for relatives. In contrast, female caregivers are often expected to play multiple roles both within and outside domestic settings and often have higher expectations placed upon them. As such women, unlike men, see their caregiving function as an extension of their usual role in society - one that plays out in accordance with familial and societal expectations. This multiplicity of responsibilities increases role strain. Appearing at a greater prevalence for female caregivers (of the elderly), this heightens the risk of burnout, fatigue, depression, and physical symptoms - which, in turn, may significantly impact self-esteem. Supporting this theory further is Friedemann and Buckwalter's finding that men are generally involved in fewer tasks of caregiving as compared to women[125] - therein suggesting a certain level of flexibility in men's caregiving roles not available for female caregivers. Consequently, it is not that women are unsuitable for positions of responsibility within the community, but that the burden of their multiple roles makes them appear as less capable to hold these positions, especially to men who hold partial caregiving responsibilities as they do not deal with the full burden women do and, thus, potentially dismiss the increased strains women are under and how this may impact women's abilities.

Gul and Uskul[126] offer an alternative explanation where masculine honour ideals and reputation are a driving force for male primary caregivers to 'prove their worth' outside this role. Previous research suggests that men who are primary caregivers are perceived by the public as less competent in the workplace. As such, the authors suggest that men with high masculine ideals are constantly in pursuit of preserving their masculine reputation - possibly manifesting through stereotypical masculine behaviour (in this case, ascribing to beliefs such as men are better leaders than women) as well as in greater feelings of resentment towards being a primary caregiver (arising from ascribing to stereotypical gender role beliefs).

There is support for this in Malaysian context as Noraida Endut et al. found there was a significant relationship between rigid gender role endorsement and attitudes towards inequitable gender norms such that masculine ideals in men contributes to gender inequal attitudes, including acceptance of violence against women.[127]

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[124] Noraida Endut and Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim, "Young Adults Perceptions of Marriage and Domestic Violence in Malaysia," in *Translating Women's Experience into Class*, 2015.

[125] Marie-Luise Friedemann and Kathleen C. Buckwalter, "Family Caregiver Role and Burden Related to Gender and Family Relationships," *Journal of Family Nursing* 20, no. 3 (2014): pp. 313-336, doi:10.1177/1074840714532715.

[126] Pelin Gul and Ayse K. Uskul, "Men's Perceptions and Emotional Responses to Becoming a Caregiver Father: The Role of Individual Differences in Masculine Honor Ideals and Reputation Concerns," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019), doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01442.

[127] Noraida Endut et al., "The Effect of Gender Role on Attitudes towards Inequitable Gender Norms among Malaysian Men," *Sexuality & Culture* 24, no. 6 (2020): pp. 2113-2136, doi:10.1007/s12119-020-09740-6.

In summary, this implies that while splitting the burden of care between spouses is important, it is not a guarantee of gender equality. Measures of its gender distribution are necessary to gain a broad picture. Nuances within the intersection of beliefs towards gender roles and caregiving must also be taken into account and studied closely as it may adversely impact women's ability to fully participate in life beyond the household when ingrained societal expectations faced by women to become caregivers and homemakers feed into patterns of exclusion from community decision-making.

Thus, while programmes and policies supporting women returning to the workplace and fostering greater inclusivity for women in the formal workforce are essential in countering such ideals and even show encouraging growth in some areas - for example, women's enrollment in institutions of higher education parallel that of men - deeply rooted patterns of gender inequality and exclusion still hinder the full participation of women in society.

4.2.3 Gender roles and the perpetuation of VAW

Promoting rigid gender roles relying on the idea that women must remain passive imposes harm on survivors by actively discouraging a woman from reporting violence. Relatedly, any dismissal of a male perpetrator's behaviour can also be a way of promoting gender roles, stereotypes, and expressions when it relies on the idea that men need to be dominant and strong.

For example, one survivor we interviewed spoke of how her father links abusive behaviour to being protective, which echoes the sentiments of the desirability of men who control the relationship.

> When my mum actually told his mum that he's hitting me, my dad was like, "Oh, he's just being protective. He's alone." I don't know - my dad was like "Oh, it's not his fault. They're still young. They're - they don't know what to do." (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

However, in linking abusive behaviour to desirable, romantic behaviour, such as a partner being protective and caring for you, we send the message that abuse is acceptable if it is from a place of love.

On the other hand, Rachel, was discouraged by her family from reporting to the police because her family did not find it appropriate for girls to go to the police station.

> I guess it's just that because we come from a very single and close family so I think we just don't want additional problems and they just - they find it - it's not proper for a girl to go and make a police report - they have that mentality that you know you 'don't step into the police station' - 'why do you need unnecessary problems'. 'No, you don't fight back' - that sort of thing. Maybe probably men - they're probably more assertive - 'go and get - go and do these things and that' but the ladies - they're not like that. (Rachel, 28, stalking survivor)

By adhering to these rigid expressions of gender, the violence women experience is minimised. This is especially problematic when the issue extends to formal sources of support as acceptance of rigid gender roles have demonstrably been linked to dismissal of VAW. Noraida Endut and Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim observed that these attitudes of violence minimisation are widely found in police officers and officers of the Social Welfare Department and Islamic Religion Departments and that those who reject or tolerate VAW also have more rigid gender role beliefs.[128] This issue is discussed in further detail in the next section.

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[128] Noraida Endut and Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim, "Justice and Enforcement Agencies Personnel in Malaysia and Their Views about Domestic Violence, Marriage and Religion," in *Law and Society in Malaysia: Pluralism, Religion and Ethnicity* London, UK: Routledge, 2018.

4.3 Malaysians' disconnect between understanding violence and attitudes towards VAW

As covered in 3.3, Malaysians have a good ability to identify and discern violence. Despite this, however, there appears to be some jarring gaps where, despite understanding violence, Malaysians have a propensity to endorse or excuse violence under certain circumstances to concerning degrees. This issue merits unpacking and this section will explore, crucially, how this disconnect presents the biggest hurdle for survivors, both in interpersonal relationships and in attempting to access justice.

4.3.1 Violence and the woman's burden

Within the survivors we interviewed, many of them experienced feeling pressured to stay in violent relationships in order to keep the family together.

> Early, early stage [...] of course my friend will say, "Aiya, never mind la, [we] as a woman, we have to swallow what they did la." this and that. [...] My two friends said, "Never mind la, I'm also like this I'm also not happy, but after a while you'll be okay." (Anna, 39, domestic violence survivor)

> Somebody advise me on that you know - that, "Don't take any action. Don't do anything. Don't leave. Don't do anything. **You just remain where you are until your children grow big, until they are able to fend for themselves**." (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

This issue compounds when children are involved because there is pressure on women not to separate children from their fathers, due to a persistent belief that children need a father to grow up well or that it is inappropriate or shameful for women to raise their children alone.

> Sebab anak-anak. Biarlah aku kena pukul ke apa sebab saya selalu tengok kadang-kadang mangsa ni sebab fikir anak dan fikir malu. Bila title bercerai, orang akan rasa malu. Saya perhatikan la. Macam satu lagi pandangan orang luar suka cakap macam bila bercerai ni macam teruk sangat. Pandangan macam negatif. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)
>
> **Translation:** Because of the kids. "It's fine if I'm being beaten or whatever" - I always see how victims think of the kids and they feel ashamed. Being labelled as a "divorcee" is shameful for people. I've noticed this. It's how people perceive you and they speak as though being divorced is the worst thing in the world. The perception is so negative.

> If they are woman, they will blame you. Oh you leave your kids. **Whatever is it, you're married, you shouldn't leave your kids.** They will put you down, they will put a point on you. This lady is already leave your kids. And you dress up nicely, you want to go to work - she leave the kids, and ya, she dressing up like this how come she can do it? (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

> **Many women have been there 'oh because of kids, I tolerate' - 'because of kids, I tolerate'. But how much it affect the children - they are not looking at that part.** They just think that because of children they need their father but the father mental torture for them - indirect mental torture - they're not understanding this. (Fatima, 43, intimate partner violence survivor)

Fatima makes a good point here. WAO's "Where's the Child?" report[129] discusses the impact of witnessing domestic violence on children. Children, especially young children, rely on their parents to interpret and understand their surroundings, thus development can be disrupted by growing up in an environment affected by domestic violence.[130] Children who grow up in these households are at significant risk of experiencing social, emotional, and cognitive difficulties.[131]

This shaming of women and mothers intensifies when women must make difficult decisions, such as leaving their children behind. This happened to Leah. The situation was decided as the safest decision because her children were not being abused by their father. Leah bore all of his violence and had endured it for 15 years. In choosing her own safety, knowing her kids would be safe with the perpetrator, Leah faced relentless shaming at the hands of her own family and community.

> I can't stay at my mother's place. My mother keep blaming me and my family members keep pointing me, *you leave your kids, you leave your kids*. The society don't want to accept me. **Till now they blaming me. You leave your kids and me alone.** [...] You leave your kids and come out already. They don't know - it's not easy for a mother to leave the kids and come back. But they don't know how [much I] suffer[ed]. (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

However, this finding directly contradicts the results in the survey, where only 11.4% of Malaysians agreed with the statement: *It's a woman's duty to stay in a violent relationship in order to keep the family together* (question 8 - CASVAWS). Thus, this phenomena warrants closer inspection.

Question no.	Question text	Percentage of Malaysians who scored negatively (%)
12	Female victims who stay with their abusive partners are **also** responsible for the ongoing abuse.	44.9%
13	I don't believe it's as hard as people say it is for women to leave an abusive relationship	37.1%

[129] Women's Aid Organisation. "Where's the Child? The Rights of Child Domestic Violence Survivors." Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), 2019, https://bit.ly/3BF3i2a.

[130] Cathy Humphreys, Claire Houghton, and Jane Ellis, "Literature Review: Better Outcomes for Children and Young People Experiencing Domestic Abuse - Directions for Good Practice," The Scottish Government, 2008, http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9525/1/0064117.pdf

[131] World Health Organization. "World Report on Violence and Health." World Health Organization, 2002, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42495/9241545615_eng.pdf?sequence=1

A large proportion of Malaysians believe that **abusive relationships are enabled by both the perpetrator and victim**. Over one third of Malaysians also tend to believe "domestic violence is a private matter that needs to be settled within the family" (encompassed within the CASVAWS). This, ironically, creates implicit pressure for many women to stay in abusive situations due to a lack of resources or support - which, as it appears, might be something Malaysians endorse, as 32.1% of Malaysians believe that domestic violence can be excused if the perpetrator is truly sorry for what has happened (question 4 - CASVAWS). Thus, there is clearly a paradox in these attitudes: **On one hand, Malaysians do not explicitly believe women should stay in violent relationships yet, on the other hand, Malaysians lack an understanding of how difficult these relationships are and, as a result, endorse attitudes that may, ironically, keep a survivor from reaching out for help.**

This clearly demonstrates how Malaysian's understanding of violence may, in fact, be purely superficial and informed by what Peters[132] terms *domestic violence myths*, or 'stereotypical beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and which serve to minimise, deny, or justify physical aggression against intimate partners.' Despite disagreeing with violence, Malaysians appear willing to accept or endorse survivors staying with perpetrators under certain circumstances and this implicit pressure is especially strong when children are involved.

As a result, survivors will encounter expectations for them to stay in violent relationships, such as Fatima, who had a son with her ex-husband.

> I had that when I left my ex husband. My mum was saying you know, **"Why you leaving him? Yes, he's bad but he can change." [She insisted], "He can change - you would change him."** (Fatima, 43, intimate partner violence survivor)

Unfortunately, as a result of these myths, coupled with the difficulty and shame surrounding these issues, staying and trying to settle the issue within the family may feel like the only option many women have. Consequently, many women remain with abusive partners. However, when this happens, it presents an issue for many Malaysians, who inherently already believe abusive relationships are not difficult to leave and, thus, cyclically, invites opportunities to victim-blame.

> So many people ask me **"Why did you endure until today? Why didn't you take action right from beginning? Maybe 10 years later, the most? Why did you wait until 20 plus years?** You have lost your youth. You are now an old lady!"** (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

These attitudes, however, also clearly disregard the complexities of the situations women are in, including issues such as perpetrators threatening to harm survivors or their loved ones, survivors lacking sufficient support systems, as well as the fact that some survivors may remain strongly hopeful that the perpetrator's behaviour will change.

> There were so many fears in the past and so many hopeful, inverted comma kind of "hope" that things will get better. (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

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[127] Jay Peters, "Measuring Myths about Domestic Violence: Development and Initial Validation of the Domestic Violence Myth Acceptance Scale," Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma 16, no. 1 (September 2008): pp. 1-21, doi:10.1080/10926770801917780.

> Mungkin dulu saya lebih fikir perasaan sayang. Saya biarkan suami saya. Maksudnya saya sayangkan dia. Memang sayang sangat. Apa pun terjadi, tak apalah. Biarlah. Saya sentiasa bagi peluang dekat dia. Disebabkan saya bagi peluang, ditindas. Saya ditindas. Akhirnya, saya yang kecewa. Saya yang sedih. Hidup saya yang merana. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)
>
> **Translation:** Maybe before, I thought more about that feeling of love. I let my husband [behave that way]. I mean, I loved him. I really, truly loved him. Whatever happened, it was okay. [I] let it be. I always gave him chances. But because I gave him chances, I was taken advantage of. I was taken advantage of. In the end, I was the one who was disappointed. I was the one who was sad. It was me who was miserable.

By blaming survivors who choose to stay, we often also gloss over their agency in the decisions that they felt they *could* make under their circumstances. Given how nuanced these issues are, Malaysians would likely benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of violence.

Figure 4.1 - The cycle of myths and how attitudes affect survivors.
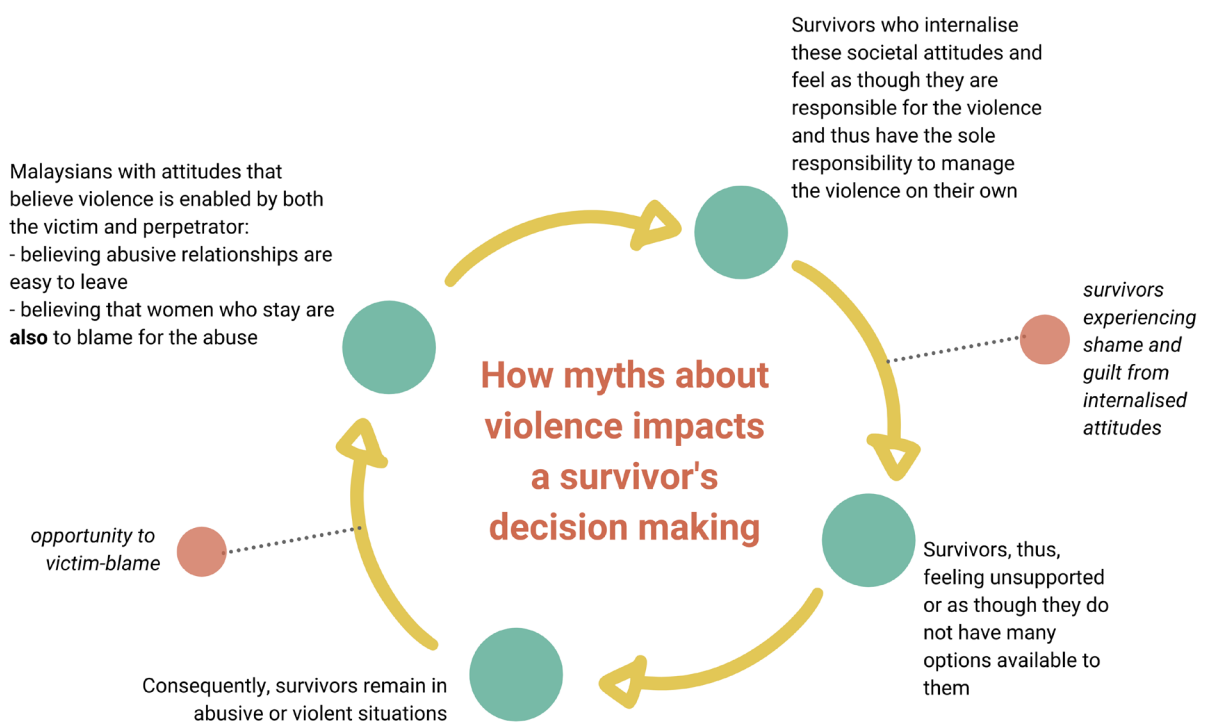
Worryingly as well, almost an equal number of women endorse or express uncertainty towards question 13 (33.2% and 32.7% respectively). Our assumptions regarding uncertainty thus demonstrates that just as many women are likely to endorse victim-blaming attitudes in domestic relationships, as they are to be complicit towards these beliefs.

In questions 12 and 13, women are explicitly blamed for continued abuse. The high levels of endorsement and complacency indicate that women are likely to minimise the violence experienced by other women, and display victim-blaming attitudes - albeit with a lower propensity than men. This is particularly concerning because informal support networks, such as friends or family - many of whom comprise other women within their circles - are a huge primary source of support for survivors and the general Malaysian population. The decision to disclose violence is a difficult

and multifaceted one, often involving extensive considerations regarding physical and economic safety, the wellbeing of children, and the emotional challenge of facing social stigma related to abuse and other myths surrounding domestic violence. **Peer responses following disclosures of violence are critical** - encouraging responses can motivate survivors to escape their abusive situations, while responses that question, blame, and invalidate experiences can trigger an internalisation of doubt and prolong this decision-making process. This internalised doubt and self-blame was experienced by several of the survivors we interviewed.

> I feel like **I don't deserve to tell people what happened** because like, "Okay this is my problem. It's my fault." (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

> I don't know like **I kind of like blame myself all the time** like and then I feel like the harassment is - it's always been like what the Malaysian always thought like this thing is very small matter like very normal. **So that's why I'm like, "Is it a big deal? Is it - should I report it?** Should I - should I call AWAM just because of this because I got harassed?" At that time, I didn't [think this] is like actually a serious issue. (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

Thus, this data suggests that there is a **great risk of minimisation and blame that survivors would face upon disclosing their experiences and asking for help from other women.** This signals towards an unsettling cycle: the internalisation of violence-endorsing attitudes in women, which in turn more broadly indicates the pervasiveness and continued perpetuation of patriarchal values within Malaysian society. This stretches to the extent that even women, who are disproportionately affected by violence, are moderately likely to hold violence-endorsing attitudes, such as by minimising violence against women. This does not exist on its own either, but signals towards a range of other harmful attitudes as well, such as a general mistrust towards the severity of violence experienced by other women and a certain propensity to blame women for the abuse experienced.

4.3.2 Attitudes as barriers to justice for survivors

While Malaysians demonstrate good understanding of violence in its many forms, the most concerning issue is how Malaysians fail to integrate this understanding into situational circumstances. As a result, understanding of harm is limited to what it is expected to look like - what is tangible and visible. When VAW is viewed through this lens, there is a propensity to excuse perpetrators. Violence, therefore, is viewed in a superficial manner. Less visible threats of emotional and/or psychological abuse also carry outcomes that are equally traumatic, harmful, and long-lasting for survivors.

This problem becomes pervasive when structures of support are only compelled to act based on personal biases of harm that disregard other valid forms of harm. Biases against non-physical forms of violence are exemplified in the findings of this study. In downplaying the seriousness of the violence women are facing by insisting there is a minimum threshold of violence that needs to occur before an intervention is warranted, the bulk of violence that occurs against women is disregarded and dismissed because it does not seem urgent. This, then, forms an active barrier to justice and safety for survivors.

I fear for my life and of course JKM told me - NO PROBLEM! If there is a problem, you take a fresh video and press charge. You lodge a new report. Yeah. Uhh **that is provided if I get a chance to lodge a new report but if by the time ah I'm half dead ah I'm not able to press charge then what happen?** (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

If a patient comes with diabetes, we will manage up to so that they don't face the complications of diabetes. They foresee the things but why can't the law foresee the things? Each time when we ask for help - even through the lawyers, they will say no doctor this never happen so the court will not entertain this. So I said - so I asked, **that means until I'm beaten up - until I bleed a lot and then only your court will take action is it? He said yes.** (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

As Sofia has clearly pointed out, in minimising violence against women, authorities orient themselves to be reactive, as opposed to proactive. And, oftentimes, when authorities wait until there is an actual physical threat to safety, it is often too late, as evidenced by the multiple times women wind up murdered at the hands of their partners.[133] [134]

The minimisation of women's reports of violence - while prevalent in all forms represented in this survey - is especially pertinent for issues of cyber-harassment.

Ignorance towards online abuse

Cyber-harassment is defined as *'any action carried out on the Internet or other forms of electronic or digital devices that makes a person feel threatened, distressed or humiliated to a point where it creates an unsafe environment for that person'*.[135] An example of this is the dissemination of nude or sexual images without the consent of the original sender. In Malaysia, **cyber-harassment has been on the rise, with the Malaysian Computer Emergency Response Team (MyCERT) documenting 596 cases in 2020, an all-time high of the past decade**.[136]

These are numbers reflected globally as well. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that 25% of adults in the United States have experienced severe online harassment, including stalking, physical threats, sexual harassment, and sustained harassment.[137] The survey reports that occurrences of online abuse have grown in variety and intensity.[138] In turn, Reyns et al. reports online stalking by intimate partners has a prevalence of 21.7%, involving acts like identity fraud, unwanted contact, threats of violence, unwanted sexual advances, and harassment.[139]

These experiences are not uncommon as, within the sample of survivors we interviewed, four of the five stalking survivors experienced at least one form of cyber harassment. All four experienced acts of unwanted contact and harassment, while two experienced acts of identity fraud, two explicitly mentioned receiving unwanted sexual advances, including the receipt of nonconsensual nudes, and at least two received threats of violence from their perpetrator, such as rape threats. At the very core of cyber-harassment is a breach of consent.

[133] TK Logan, "Research on Partner Stalking: Putting the Pieces Together," 2010, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/245387.pdf.

[134] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Global Study on Homicide: Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls" United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_5.pdf.

[135] The Malaysian Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights, "Cyber-Harassment Survivor's Kit – FAQ," MCCHR, Last modified September 23, 2021, https://mcchr.org/chsk_faq.

[136] Malaysia Computer Emergency Response Team (MyCERT), "Incident Statistics," MyCERT, Last modified 2021, https://bit.ly/3mURmDE.

[137] Emily A. Vogels, "The State of Online Harassment," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, Last modified May 25, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/01/13/the-state-of-online-harassment/.

[138] ibid.

[139] Bradford W. Reyns, Billy Henson, and Bonnie S. Fisher, "Stalking in the Twilight Zone: Extent of Cyber-stalking Victimization and Offending among College Students," *Deviant Behavior* 33, no. 1 (2012): pp. 1-25, doi:10.1080/01639625.2010.538364.

Question 28	Question 56
If women send their nudes to their partners, they themselves should also be held responsible if the pictures are spread around without their permission.	And if one partner in a domestic relationship repeatedly keeps track of the other's location, calls or activities through their mobile phone or other electronic devices without their consent, is this a form of domestic violence?

Within this survey, question 28 elicited the most violence-endorsing attitudes. This question item addresses nudes shared by women's partners with others, without their consent, **a practice 60.0% of women and 69.0% of men would blame the victim for**.

We also found that 18.0% of women and 25.9% of men endorse or are likely to endorse cyber-stalking in the form of repeatedly tracking a partner's location, calls, or activities through phone or other electronic devices without their consent as well. These numbers are lower than for question 28, yet still alarmingly high. Interestingly, while only 78.1% identified tracking a partner's location, calls, etc., as a form of violence, over 85% identified stalking behaviours as a form of VAW. This seems to suggest some stalking behaviours are perceived as more permissible for partners by a significant portion of Malaysians. This also likely feeds into the problem of people not taking stalking seriously, especially when it is perpetrated by a former partner of the victim. Three of the five stalking survivors interviewed were previously in relationships with their perpetrator.

Misunderstandings of consent feed into a self-perpetuating cycle where the impact of online harassment is minimised. In turn, this is tied to the invisibility of emotional harm to all except those directly experiencing it. This is an issue picked up on by the stalking survivors we interviewed.

Sometimes I even doubt myself - is this worthy enough of this devastation that I'm feeling. I doubt, I doubt that all the time. I look at the emails, I look at everything - this is terrible for me but by national standards or by global standards **- is it horrible enough to warrant such a reaction as this?** [...] **There's a significant lack of awareness that this is something unusual and criminal and uhh really detrimental to mental and physical health** because I get - like I said, I told you I felt myself ageing quite fast this past 1 year [...] and it's uhh... it's taken a toll on my physical health as well. (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

Because at one point, people think that, "Oh this is normal. This happens to everyone. I'm not supposed to overreact to this situation." So yeah I mean I think someone should play a part to actually tell that this is not us overreacting. This is how we are supposed to react. Because even **before I reached help, I thought that I am the one who's overreacting yeah.** [...] **I feel too scared to even step out of my room. I'll be locking my door. I can't even sleep at night.** (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

To many, online harassment does not appear harmful because there is no repercussion of direct physical harm. Emotional and/or psychological harm is more often the outcome. This is what both Nisa and Shanthi relayed experiencing during their interviews following cyber-harassment, although these harms are often perceived as less tangible, even to survivors themselves, because its effects are not visible to the naked eye. This can lead to survivors, such as Shanthi, internalising

the emotional burden of the crime and harm. This, then, forms a kind of emotional abuse (a pattern of deliberate, prolonged, repeated non-contact behaviours within a power-imbalanced relationship),[140] and increases women's risk of developing a mental illness, including but not limited to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicidal ideation.[141] Emotional abuse is especially complex and its explicit links to danger are not as tangible for many, but emotional abuse is just as traumatic for survivors most exposed to its devastation.

Furthermore, when trauma resulting from emotional abuse is downplayed in lieu of visible, physical harm, it may consequently serve as a means for perpetrators to escape the legal ramifications, while still maintaining a certain sense of control over the victim. This risk is exacerbated in cases of cyber-harassment, for which the use of technology guarantees a certain level of anonymity for perpetrators.

Such biases against non-physical violence on an individual and community-wide scale easily leak into structures meant to protect survivors as well. In our in-depth interviews, this reaches the extent to which longstanding, traumatic experiences of cyber-harassment faced by survivors are doubted in their severity by the police. In a society wherein physical harm is heavily prioritised over non-physical forms of harm and online harassment is greatly minimised, survivors who make the difficult decision to report their experiences to the police are individuals who disrupt these systems. However, the responses from individuals in structures of support (such as police officers) not only minimise these reports of violence and trauma, but enforce existing biases of harm.

Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that victims of cyber-stalking require the same support as traditional stalking victims[142] - which is a problem when structures meant to support survivors are unable to, or consciously choose not to acknowledge the impact of cyber-harassment, let alone identify it or act accordingly. This issue extends beyond front-line responders, as the survivors we interviewed explicitly acknowledged a lack of awareness on a societal level of the detrimental impacts of stalking.

There's a significant lack of awareness that this is something unusual and criminal. (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

I think because I think people think that stalking means that guy following us around. Like he's there physically. People think that is what stalking means but they don't understand that you know social media is a way of stalking as well. You know all those nonstop calls. Him getting a picture of you without your consent. (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

This dismissal and normalisation of stalking, as Shanthi points out, is likely because people do not understand how expansive a definition stalking actually has. Shanthi even notes that "stalking" in our daily use has a harmless nature. We FaceBook stalk people, we stalk people on Instagram, we stalk people on LinkedIn. It is an accepted colloquialism. But, she says, "**It's not supposed to be a very playful word.**"

The way we talk about these issues reflects how we think about these issues. That *stalking* has entered our language and remained light shows we do not culturally understand the impact and breadth of stalking on survivors. Nisa describes how being a victim of stalking has been "really detrimental to [her] mental and physical health," feeling as though she has been "ageing quite fast this past one year."

[140] Ashley E. Stirling and Gretchen A. Kerr, "Defining and Categorizing Emotional Abuse in Sport," European Journal of Sport Science 8, no. 4 (2008): pp. 173-181, doi:10.1080/17461390802086281.

[141] Kylee Trevillion et al., "Experiences of Domestic Violence and Mental Disorders: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *PLoS ONE* 7, no. 12 (2012), doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0051740.

[142] Daniela Acquadro Maran and Tatiana Begotti, "Prevalence of Cyber-stalking and Previous Offline Victimization in a Sample of Italian University Students," *Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2019): p. 30, doi:10.3390/socsci8010030.

A society that is able to identify and react appropriately is crucial in aiding survivors seek help. However, inadequate responses present a separate hurdle and have further implications in deterring reports of cyber-stalking, resulting in a gross underestimation of the impact of cyber-harassment as a whole in Malaysia.

Given the advent of technology in recent years, the growing prevalence of cyber-harassment poses a specific threat to young people who utilise technology the most. For example, recent findings by the Pew Research Center[143] indicate that over two-thirds of teenagers in the United States have experienced some form of cyber-harassment. Harassment occurring online may also create easily accessible avenues for undetected child grooming and other threats that extend beyond the screen. We should not wait until tangible harm is achieved, but rather take pre-emptive steps to address this issue as it happens in real-time.

Importantly, stalking (online or otherwise) is still not criminalised in Malaysia, with police officers having the jurisdiction to act only when physical assault occurs, further exacerbating the severity of this issue.

4.3.3 Unresponsive, ineffective systems of support

When problematic attitudes and perceptions are held by those in positions of authority, survivors will experience barriers to justice.

> I lodged a report and the police didn't seem to do anything about it. They're giving reasons - this was last year. And they will keep [using] MCO as a reason. They said, 'No we can't see him' - 'we can't call him'. It was dragging on for almost 7 months. (Fatima, 43, intimate partner violence survivor)

> It's just that when I asked him for updates he said investigating - waiting then they - after a long - after some time only he told me oh I need to pass this to MCMC. (Lina, 29, stalking survivor)

> So the whole experience has been and then it was like my IO didn't like update me the progress and then [only] when I asked her, she's like okay I want to like I want to take statement from the witnesses which I'm like I don't know anything about it. So yeah so there's no update on the work - on the progress. Kind of like she like terpaksa [forced to investigate]. (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

The most common barrier comes from mistrusting women's reports of violence. This is unsurprising, as misunderstanding violence or dismissing non-physical violence will mean that cases of violence without explicitly understood harm will appear as less urgent. These attitudes manifest as assuming women lied, questioning whether they are telling the truth or exaggerating, and other forms of gaslighting.

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[143] Monica Anderson, "A Majority of Teens Have Experienced Some Form of Cyberbullying," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, Last modified August 14, 2020, https://pewrsr.ch/3kaQAC7.

This can occur through failing to properly collect evidence.

> I give him the phone - he took a screenshot but again he didn't take the complete screenshot of what was the whole evidence. He just took like probably one or two screenshot. And the remaining below conversation - I said 'there's some more where you can just scroll down and see all the threaten and everything it's there'. He said 'never mind - that one later he can see'. **Which like doesn't make sense - when you collect evidence - you collect everything what.** (Fatima, 34, intimate partner violence survivor)

> Even when they go to my office, **I don't see [them] doing like proper investigation you know. Like ask the security about the - maybe CCTV or something you know like they just take picture and then just leave the office just like that. So I'm like of course you don't get anything.** (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

Another means of mistrusting a survivor's report of violence is by misbelieving women's narratives.

> The IO keep asking me - the IO keep asking me, *"Eh Privya just bagitahu je lah kalau you betul-betul nak diaorang punya duit, cakap terus-terang saja… tak payah buat macam ni."* Buat report report apasal apahal kutuk perempuan. They *kutuk perempuan*. They say, "I know *macam macam budak perempuan saya kenal lah dia main dengan laki sebab duit.*" (Privya, 34, rape survivor)
>
> **Translation:** The IO keep asking me - the IO keep asking me, "Eh, Privya, just let us know if this is actually about you owing them money, just be honest…. You don't need to do this [file a report]." What's the use of making a report if they're just mocking me? They mock women. They say, "I know these types of women lah, they mess around with guys because of money."

> It was a counsellor and also the person in charge of the shelter, the temporary shelter. I told him about my family issues. The way he reacted was really disappointing. Whatever I tell him, he was like, "Hah? Are you sure? Is that how a parents behave? Don't lie." I was like, "Excuse me sir, why am I gonna lie in this particular issue? Are you serious?" I felt very bad about the whole thing. (Mary, 20, domestic violence survivor)

Barriers in accessing justice often arise because the police fail to take serious action or conduct a proper investigation. This occurs regardless of whether or not there is available recourse to justice, as both survivors of domestic violence, who are protected under the Domestic Violence Act, and survivors of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and stalking, none of which are sufficiently afforded recourse in the Malaysian penal code, have faced these barriers.

> **Most of the time it was no answer no response. And then uh, it really made me feel that it's not going anywhere la.** That maybe, justice for sexual assault case in Malaysia is not at a point yet where I can bring justice to this case. (Ashley, 31, sexual assault survivor)

Besides mistrusting women's reports of violence, however, one of the biggest findings from survivor interviews is that formal sources of support often do not know how to respond to survivors on a practical level. This is especially concerning because it means that responding to violence is not enough of a priority that individual officers would know how to respond adequately.

On a practical level this may appear as the police not knowing the necessary steps to pursue justice for a survivor of violence. For example, when Sofia sought an IPO, she was met with a police officer who did not even know what an IPO was.

> My hand was inside the car window so [the perpetrator] closed the window so my hand got stuck inside the window. So he did it purposely la. He said, "You go and die. Go and die." So even for that, I lodged a report but no action taken actually so I went to the police station. To the IPD even. **I said I want IPO for myself and the officer is asking me, "What is IPO?"** (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

Sofia experienced another similar situation:

> Something should be done because the officer that was taking my report, **she don't even know that she has to give me the Pol59 Form for me to go medical checkup in the hospital**. That also I told her I want the form. The Pol59 Form. Then, she asked me, "What is that?" I said, "The orange colour form whereby when somebody's abused, they're supposed - assaulted, they're supposed to bring that form for the medical checkup." (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

In another instance, Rose describes how the division of labour between JKM and D11 was unclear, such that neither agency knew which one was supposed to be applying for the IPO.

> At that time there was confusion between police and the JKM, the D11 team thought they the JKM will do the IPO for me and the IPO uhh the, the JKM people thought that the police will do the IPO for me uhh so but anyway, we manage to sort through lah but thanks be to the WAO social worker. Really. At that time there was like - you know Malaysian law are like that one mah. **Sometimes ah they are unclear of what they are supposed to do.** So "hah I do ah?" "Hah not you ah?" So like that you know confusion. (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

In another instance, when Anna was considering pressing charges against her husband for domestic abuse, the officer told Anna that she would be arrested as well.

> **The police threaten me, like, if you want us to continue with the investigation, we have to catch your husband, we have to lock up you as well**, for our investigation then we have to put your two kids at the *jabatan kebajikan* (welfare office). (Anna, 39, domestic violence survivor)

All these instances demonstrate that while protocol exists, not everyone is certain what the protocols are or how to follow through with them. This poses barriers to accessing justice for survivors, which is especially worrying in circumstances such as domestic violence, where there exists the Domestic Violence Act which clearly outlines the protections afforded to a survivor.

Where there is a lack of guidelines for how to handle the issue, such as with cyber-harassment, the situation is even bleaker. One survivor speaks about the lack of preparation or a pre-emptive response from MCMC as a deterrent to reporting her experiences of cyber-stalking. Because the MCMC website does not have a step-by-step guide for the process of reporting online harassment, and/or what kinds of harassment can be reported and acted against, she did not feel as though there was any point reporting it at all as it seemed unlikely that further action would be taken.

> I didn't reach MCMC at all because... to be honest with you, like I went to their website and then I just like, **I don't think this ... this agency is gonna help me in anything. I mean they call it the MCMC but their website looks trash**. **There's no clear guide**.... it was nowhere on their website even "Oh if you have *aduan* (complaints)" - which is such a huge vague word... Not really like **"Hey, are you being cyber-harassed? Are you being cyber-stalked? CLICK HERE CLICK HERE!" Nothing like that.** (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

Further, when reaching out to formal authorities, survivors may encounter a system wholly unequipped to handle the issue. Lina, another survivor of stalking who was interviewed, recalls how both the police and MCMC failed to handle her case in a time-sensitive manner, demonstrating a misunderstanding on the nature of cases where perpetrators use online methods of violence. As Lina notes, "This kind of case, it happen[s] very fast because the stalker doesn't want you to take more information so he might [just] delete the account. Delete the messages. Change the URL. It happens very fast so I just hope that they understand and they take actions faster and always be proactive to follow up with the victims." Failing to proactively respond to these cases demonstrates the minimisation of harm, further demonstrated by the following excerpt from Lina's interview:

> I just told [the police] frankly, "Look, **this person is like saying wanna rape me and stuff. It's not like I can go to work safely.** Can you like find information like to help get rid of this threat to me? Because I go to work at night sometimes. I'm alone. I don't have anyone around me so like I wouldn't know if this stalker wanted to just suddenly come and get to me and do something to me at that time." [...] What they told me - what he told me is like, **"Oh online social media saja kan? Cakap saja kan? Tak buat - you tak cedera kan? Takde experience apa-apa kan?"** The attitude is like that. It's like - I'm like **wow you want to let this kind of thing to happen only you take it seriously?** (Lina, 29, stalking survivor)

The impact on survivors of barriers to justice is an overwhelming sense of insecurity. Survivors lose their faith in institutions and people that are meant to protect them. This is echoed by the alarming number of survivors we interviewed who explicitly stated that the police failed to make them feel safe or protected.

> I think that after I encounter [the police], I was being more [insecure] - I don't know, I feel very anxious. (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

> That's why sometimes I don't want to go balai actually. I don't know. I never feel safe with the police. Seriously I never feel safe. (Priscilla, 35, domestic violence survivor)

4.4 Insights from perceptions of social support

4.4.1 Public perception and police role in safety

Overwhelmingly, it appears that if Malaysians experience violence, they would seek the police for help. This signals the importance of the police in a survivor's journey. Especially encouraging is that, in choosing to seek the police for help, Malaysians recognise that violence is a crime.

Despite this, however, it appears that, from survivor interviews, police response can be quite discouraging since the police, as mentioned in the previous section, can be quite unresponsive. In interviewing the survivors, several suggestions came up on how the police can better support survivors, based on their experiences. It is important the police officers and other relevant authorities take these suggestions into consideration in order to be more responsive to survivors.

1. Be more sensitive

> Be more sensitive and more empathetic la. (Siti, 31, sexual harassment survivor)

Survivors recognise that police officers behave the way they do because it is likely how they are trained to approach their jobs, with Siti clarifying, "Even my father [who is a police officer] said it's because the nature of their work la. Police is just like - if they are not push the victim, they didn't know either the person say the true story or not because they are going to make eye contact and say that - and look all of the body gestures once they investigate so that's why la. That's what my father said."

However, this approach is not helpful or empowering to survivors, who have identified more sensitive approaches police officers can take when they speak to survivors.

I think **do not be too pushy and try to understand the situation** and the people actually before - I know you guys are police officers - you guys have the right because you guys want to know what happened but you have to understand that you know they have been through something so you guys are supposed to **be a little bit careful with your words** and stuff because **whatever you might say might close them from being open to other people.** (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

It's such a simple advice but - listen and *listen*, not record. **Just listen, look at the expression, look at the face.** I don't know if this is in police training syllabus or whatever- but the police really have to have empathy for another human [...] **dear police officers, please listen with empathy and not just to type, type it up in a report.** (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

But the way they actually questioned because when I went to make a report - so much of mental stress. And **the way they are actually asking questions - it's like adding on to the stress.** They make us feel very low. (Fatima, 43, intimate partner viaolence survivor)

Before the collect the correct details. Before knowing the- the- the betul-betul punya perkara, polis itu kena fikir family dia pun ada perempuan. Mak, adik, anak. **So fikir pasal perempuan-perempuan kat rumah, perempuan-perempuan yang baik dengan diri sendiri, dengan polis itu, baru cerita pasal perempuan dari orang lain. Tak boleh simply sakitkan hati perempuan.** (Privya, 34, rape survivor)

Translation: Before collecting the correct details, before finding out what really happened, the police officer needs to think about their family, the women in their lives. Mothers, sisters, children. So think about the women at home, the women that you care about, that care about you, and only then should yo talk about other women. You can't simply hurt a woman's feelings.

2. Take the issue seriously and respond appropriately

As mentioned throughout the report, the police tend to mistrust and disbelieve survivors, leading to issues because the police fail to take the problem or investigation seriously.

Just **treat the case as serious as possible**. I mean they - I understand they have to act like there's a doubt there you know like, "Oh might be this person is lying." But first, just believe the victim - the survivor and treat it as a serious offence. (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

> Police, first thing when they went - for any complain actually, I think they should just take it seriously first. Instead of just taking their own sweet time. (Fatima, 43, intimate partner violence survivor)

Importantly, survivors express how crucial it is that police officers are not merely *reactive*, but *proactive*.

> **Don't wait until it happens and then only you want to take action**. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

> Please take it seriously before the person die. (Priscilla, 35, domestic violence survivor)

> Macam contoh yang berdekatan, sampai kadang-kadang kita call polis, nombor - dia ada nombor khas kan. Pastu bukan terus dapat call. Kadang-kadang ada kena tunggu sekejap apa semua. Jadi dalam masa tu macam elok mangsa dah kena pukul dah, **silap-silap dah mati agaknya - baru nak sampai. Macam sia-sia tak perlu.** (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)
>
> Translation: A really relevant example - sometimes we call the police, there's a special number, right? But then, it's not necessarily the case that we can immediately get a response. Sometimes we have to wait. But, while we're waiting, it could be the case that the victim's already been abused and then by the time the police arrive, they're dead. There's no use, it's pointless.

For some survivors, how responsive the police are can be a matter of life and death.

In order for police to be more responsive, Sarah offers this suggestion:

> Saya rasa pihak polis kena lebih cepat pantas. Biar di setiap kawasan rumah - contoh biar ada peronda yang ada - setiap balai tu ada peronda satu. Maksudnya, ada setiap balai mesti ada satu peronda yang memang duduk dekat situ - stay dekat situ. Bila emergency, orang yang kawasan perumahan ni bila call, dia boleh datang dengan pantas. Maksudnya, setiap kawasan. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)
>
> Translation: I think the police need to react faster. There needs to be something like - in every housing area - there should be a patrol. Each police station should have a patrol unit. I mean, each police station must have one person patrolling that stays there. In case there's an emergency, when people in the neighbourhood call, they can come quickly. And this should be in all the areas.

Survivors also have advice for police on how investigations can be conducted more effectively.

> Stop asking bullshit. I will ask to the police, **please stop asking the bullshit questions with the girls.** Even though the girl's right or wrong, get [to] know the correct information. (Privya, 34, rape survivor)

Lina highlights how important these issues especially are for cybercrimes.

> This kind of case, it happen very fast because the stalker doesn't want you to take more information so he might as just delete the account. Delete the messages. Change the URL. **It happens very fast so I just hope that they understand and they take actions faster and always be proactive to follow up with the victims. Not until victim calls you only you do your thing.** (Lina, 29, stalking survivor)

3. Areas of improvement and retraining

Survivors also identified areas of improvement, based on their experiences with the services they received.

When Sofia had told a police officer she wanted to get an IPO, he had responded, "What is IPO?" This demonstrates that there may be a need for additional training to familiarise all officers with the procedures related to the Domestic Violence Act.

> They should retrain actually. What is domestic violence and what is the akta (acts) inside there - what is basically their duty - what actually they can help. Actually there's so many things they can do if they want. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

Police officers may also benefit from bias training and increased sensitivity.

> There's a kind of a prejudice on, I don't know if prejudice is the right word, but they have kind of set in their mind that, well I feel anyway that assault happens because the victim does this, this, this, this, this. I think **the focus should really be on the perpetrator and the perpetrator is doing this, this, this, this. So the crime has happened because of this, this, this, this.** (Ashley, 32, sexual assault survivor)

Lina also touches on this issue:

> It's like they don't trust the women. They give the benefit of the doubt to the men. (Lina, 29, sexual harassment survivor)

There is a way that justice currently functions where the burden of proof is placed in a victim-blaming way on women to demonstrate that they were victims as opposed to placing the burden of proof on the perpetrator to prove his innocence. Additional training should also include myth busting, so officers are not inclined to advise survivors to try and work things out with their abusive partners.

> Don't think like, mostly the police don't want take action, because husband and wife, they will get back together. So they don't want interfere in their thing, this is the main thing the police think. *Gaduh suami isteri, nanti okay balik* (husband and wife fighting – it always gets better). You know, but not everyone is like that. Maybe you can like more serious, don't like ah... it's a normal thing lah, we already see so many cases. You know, I know they see a lot of cases, like today give complaint and tomorrow, ok I *tarik balik* (retract the report), I don't want complain against my husband. A lot of things happen, even the police also ask me like that. Oh today you do like this, then.... But not everyone is same. Not everyone's situation is same. (Priscilla, 35, domestic violence survivor)

> So just don't say that - "It's family matter you settle it yourself. I'm seeing this case everyday so you go and settle it with yourself." No, you shouldn't say that. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

As Anna emphasises, survivors need to be advised accordingly and appropriately. This is the only way to truly empower survivors as knowledge on how to properly navigate the situation helps survivors leave and make the best decisions for themselves.

> **Advise the victim accordingly.** *Kalau*, like me, *kalau you nak buka kes, you boleh buat apa? Kes, buka kes untuk apa?* It's not like, *you nak buat ke tidak?* (If, like me, if you want to open a case, what can you do? What kind of case are you opening? It's not like, "Do you want to do this or not?") That's all. Advise them accordingly so that they could know okay, if I do this step, the next step will be what? What is the consequences? It's not that *'you nak ke tak nak?'* (It's not that, "You want or not?") That's all. That's the case. **We as a victim we didn't know what we should do.** (Anna, 39, domestic violence survivor)

Finally, the police and other authorities responsible for investigation need to do *more*. They must be equipped with the skills to think outside the box to advocate for and ensure the safety and protection of survivors.

> I hope MCMC would take initiative as in not just investigate on your surface level and go beyond that. And go to Instagram - go to Facebook and sort out that information because obviously, the stalker know I'm going after him - he will just delete everything. I feel that they should use - they should think out of the box a bit. (Lina, 29, stalking survivor)

There needs to be clearer guidelines for appropriate responses, especially crimes such as stalking. While there are no laws for legal recourse, the safety of the citizens is still an issue of concern for the police.

> I think police officer they should know that there's an NGO like WAO that we can refer to for advice. They should advise ladies, victims ladies, maybe 'you boleh minta pertolongan ke, apa-apa from WAO la, from NGO la.' (You can ask for help from WAO, from other NGOs.) Like this… (Anna, 39, domestic violence survivor)

> Of course recommend, they could recommend NGOs immediately or any support organisation - it should be, it should be on hand. Like the alternative. And NGOs and the police should - and I hope they already are - working together to support cases like this and with the law enforcement's close watch, you know? It's for the safety and security of the victims. (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

4.4.2 Beyond violence against women

Within this study, there was a self-reported disclosure rate of 8.7% for violence against men. The phenomena of male survivors remains understudied. While this study focused on violence against women, these issues merit address.

The violence that stems from male dominance also arises from enforcing rigid gender binaries because to define and attribute "maleness", one must also define and attribute what is not maleness. In these binaries, anyone who fails to perform the ascribed gender roles appropriately is susceptible to violence as a punishment for transgression, including feminine men, masculine women, and those who do not fall into the gender binary. These issues intersect with sexuality, race, and class, as well, which, while too broad to address here, needs to be acknowledged.

The issue with male survivors is it does not seem to fit neatly into frameworks of understanding violence, especially when the perpetrator is a woman. However, the issue of violence has always been an issue of power and individual circumstances of unequal power between partners can result in violence, even within a patriarchal system valuing male dominance. That the issue of male survivors is so difficult to reconcile, leading to underreporting of violence against men, is a problem worsened by social systems which associate men with strength and dominance. These systems are a double edged knife, with the potential to harm even those the system values when they fail to perform their ascribed roles. In the future, focusing on unlearning and moving away from traditional masculine ideals may help normalise conversations around male survivors and enable them to more easily and readily come forward, while also securing the safety of survivors overall.

4.5 Insights on child marriage

While over 70% of the Malaysian population oppose child marriage broadly, there are certain caveats to this rule. For example, while only 11.2% of the total population supports child marriage involving girls, this support increases by two-fold following the condition of adolescent/teenage pregnancy. A key theme central to respondents' support is the maintenance of family dignity, as well as the idea that children should take responsibility for the consequences of premarital sex.

Although there exists noticeable opposition to the broad idea of child marriage, certain issues come into play that can disrupt this belief - many of which are rooted in existing ideas of shame, considerations of dignity, and notions of familial reputation. The reversal of opposition in these circumstances is costly to the wellbeing of children - particularly for girls. Some of the open-ended responses from this survey include:

> **"Should get married because it (pregnancy) can embarrass the family and cover up her self-shame"**
>
> **"It's not fair for the child to be born without a father or not knowing whose their real father. It's also not easy for a young girl to be a single mum too. Both made the mistake therefore both of them should be responsible for the unborn child."**
>
> **"Because the child who going to born should have a happy family as father and mother instead of single parent"**
>
> **"It is because the pregnant girl need a man to be solely responsible to the mother and child to be in the future."**

Malaysians are more likely to support child marriage involving girls than boys (11.2% vs 9.5%). Delving further into the data shows us that there are almost twice the number of men than women who support child marriage as a whole - indicating a gender disparity that is worrying, and aligned to existing evidence about the higher prevalence of child marriage amongst girls.

Disturbingly, of the 11.2% of the population who support child marriage involving girls, the majority are aware of the myriad of harms inflicted by the practice.

50.0% of this subgroup are aware that child marriage harms the development of girls.

52.7% of this subgroup are aware that child marriage harms the emotional and mental wellbeing of girls.

47.3% of this subgroup are aware that child marriage harms the health and physical wellbeing of girls.

60.7% of this subgroup are aware that **child marriage harms education and employment opportunities.**

52.7% of this subgroup are aware that child marriage increases girls' risk of experiencing domestic violence.

42.0% of this subgroup are aware that child marriage perpetuates the poverty cycle.

47.3% of this subgroup are aware that child marriage perpetuates its intergenerational practice.

This suggests that for Malaysians' who support child marriage, ideas of family structures and pursuit to maintain a sense of familial dignity, as well as an avoidance of shame rooted in the taboo of premarital sex take precedence over the autonomy and long-term wellbeing of girls.

While past evidence shows that girls from rural communities are at higher risk of child marriage144, due to a variety of factors such as low economic empowerment, our data indicates that Malaysians in urban and rural areas are just as likely to support child marriage. The difference between the 11.0% of urban respondents and 12.8% of rural respondents who support child marriage in girls is minimal. This trend is echoed for child marriage involving boys as well, with 6.6% of urban respondents and 5.5% of rural respondents expressing support. As seen in Section 3.4, a regional breakdown of these attitudes show that support for the practice is reasonably consistent across Northern, Central, Southern, East Coast regions, and East Malaysia as well.

Thus, our data suggests that problematic beliefs surrounding children's autonomy and consent exist throughout Malaysia. This could mean one of two things: first, that the prevalence of child marriage in urban Malaysia is underestimated and thus, child marriage is even more widespread than we had initially identified. Alternatively, this could also mean that existing statistics about the prevalence of child marriage in urban and rural areas are accurate, and that there are certain factors withholding the occurrence of child marriage in urban Malaysia.

This could be due to a range of systemic factors. For example, poverty is a factor associated with higher risk of child marriage. More economic opportunities and greater economic empowerment in urban areas could thus delay or deter the practice in these localities. Furthermore, given that Malaysians between the ages of 18-24 years old are least likely to support child marriage amongst all other age groups, the volume of youth voices expressing opposition towards the practice may perpetuate a sense of fear towards societal backlash in individuals who explicitly condone child marriage.

Ultimately, these are only vague assumptions that we can glean from the data. We are limited in making concrete conclusions regarding Malaysians' support towards child marriage given that research surrounding the practice have been relatively small scale and scarce.

Importantly, it is difficult to track the actual prevalence of child marriage in Malaysia given that the Government does not consistently release regional statistics about the practice - however, we hope that in clearly demonstrating the pervasiveness of attitudes that condone child marriage, this will spur the relevant agencies to do so for the sake of data transparency and for us to pinpoint the extent of child marriage in Malaysia.

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144 Prof Dato' Noor Aziah Mohd Awal and Mohd Al Adib Samuri. "Working Paper: Child Marriage in Malaysia." *UNICEF*, 2018, https://uni.cf/3v6WoAo.

4.6 An overview of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in Malaysia

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is a persistent but hidden form of VAW in Malaysia, practiced within particular segments of the Malaysian population. The subject matter is entangled with a host of cultural and religious sensitivities currently being explored and unpacked at an in-depth level by experts within the field. For all of these reasons, it was decided that a large-scale nationally representative survey would not yet be a suitable method of inquiry in understanding Malaysian public attitudes and perceptions towards FGM/C.

Yet, this study recognises FGM/C as an important and prevalent form of VAW in Malaysia. As such, this chapter reviews existing literature to better understand Malaysian attitudes and perceptions towards FGM/C and its persistence with the aim of identifying initial recommendations for prevention work on FGM/C in Malaysia and prompting more reflections on how FGM/C should, if at all, be included in future attitudinal surveys on VAW.

This section is written in collaboration with Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) and Sisters In Islam (SIS), two organisations that have done extensive work on the issue of FGM/C in Malaysia.

4.6.1 What is FGM/C?

FGM/C, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), refers to all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or any other injury to the female genital organ for nonmedical reasons.[145] FGM/C is often a collective, cultural practice, underpinned by a complex interplay of beliefs which encompasses sexuality, religion, and health.

From a human rights perspective, FGM/C is a violation of human rights and is recognised as such in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) - two international conventions to which Malaysia is a party to. In 2008, ten international agencies, including the WHO, UNFPA, and UNICEF, banded together to produce a joint interagency statement renewing their calls for governments to end the practice of FGM/C.

WHO has broadly identified four different types of FGM/C:[146]
- Type I: Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce (clitoridectomy)
- Type II: Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (excision)
- Type III: Narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and apposition of the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris (infibulation)
- Type IV: Unclassified; all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for nonmedical purposes, e.g., pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, and cauterisation

The use of the term 'mutilation' within the Malaysian context evokes strong emotion, with many feeling that what is practiced in Malaysia is harmless and cannot be equated to mutilation, especially when compared to FGM/C practices in other parts of the world. The term 'cutting', however, appears to be the more generally accepted term within Southeast Asian literature as it does not carry the same negative emotional valence.

Despite these nuances and the different sentiments evoked around these terms, the practice still falls under the WHO's categorisation of female genital mutilation. As such, this chapter will refer to the practice as 'FGM/C.' While male

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[145] World Health Organization, *Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An Interagency Statement - OHCHR, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNECA, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WHO* Geneva: World Health Organization, 2008, bit.ly/3ADk8gz.
[146] World Health Organization, "Female Genital Mutilation.

circumcision will be referred to, this chapter will not touch on or address any issues associated with the practice as it is beyond the scope of this piece.

4.6.2 Contextualising FGM/C

The practice of FGM/C can be found across countries in Southeast Asia, including in Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia.[147] Within, these areas, it is usually practiced by Muslim communities.[148] Therefore, in Southeast Asia, FGM/C is largely viewed as a Muslim practice. While FGM/C is not regarded as a taboo, since the practice is generally normalised and encouraged within Muslim communities, it is hidden, meaning outside of those who practice it, FGM/C may not be a well-known issue.

For Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, the most prevalent types practiced are type I and IV.[149] This holds true in Malaysia, too, though there are no standardised procedures or formal guidelines for the practice. There are also no official prevalence rates in Malaysia.

In absence of official prevalence rates, the most comprehensive study thus far is by Dr. Maznah Dahlui who found that, of the ethnically Malay respondents surveyed in her study, 93.9% were circumcised. FGM/C, according to the same study, is also practiced by a small portion of *orang asli* communities (22%) in Malaysia.[150] No one outside of these communities are known to be involved in the practice. As such, there exists a binary in Malaysia, of those in the know, who partake in and perpetuate the practice, and those who likely will never encounter it because it is outside of their cultural scope. In this, FGM/C becomes a sensitive topic to those who practice it, because they see it as linked to their religious and cultural identities.

While acknowledging that the *orang asli* also practice FGM/C, very little is known about the reasons why *orang asli* communities practice FGM/C. Given the lack of resources on this, this chapter will focus on FGM/C as it is practiced by the Malay Muslim community. Malays comprise over 60% of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious society of Malaysia. The majority of Malay Muslims are Sunni Muslims and follow the Shafe'i *mazhab*. The majority of *imams* under the Shafe'i *mazhab* strongly support FGM/C.

FGM/C is viewed as a rite of passage, akin to how male circumcision is seen as a rite of passage for boys. Oftentimes, FGM/C occurs when a girl is still young, with the logic being that if a child is young enough, there is less trauma.

FGM/C, being a sensitive topic, is also under-researched. This means there is a lot unknown not just about how common the practice is, but also the types and extents of the procedures being performed. Furthermore, a relative absence of data on its subsequent effects and follow-up care within the Malaysian context adds to our lack of understanding both currently and longitudinally.

The purpose of this chapter, thus, is to provide further context and clarity on the practice as it occurs in Malaysia, including the reasons why FGM/C is still practiced and the issues identified with the practice.

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[147] Angela Dawson et al., "Addressing Female Genital Mutilation in the Asia Pacific: The Neglected Sustainable Development Target," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 44, no. 1 (November 2019): pp. 8-10, doi:10.1111/1753-6405.12956.

[148] ibid.

[149] Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) and Orchid Project, "Asia Network to End Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) Consultation Report," 2020, https://bit.ly/3lz5O4w.

[150] The Edge Markets, "Docs' Role in Female Circumcision Growing," The Edge Markets, Last modified August 21, 2014, https://bit.ly/3lz3B97.

4.6.3 Why is FGM/C Practiced?

4.6.3.1 Religious Reasons

Religious obligation is often the most cited reason for FGM/C. Below is evidence from some studies conducted.

Table 4.1 - Overview of studies examining where respondents have cited religious reason for the practice FGM/C.

Study	Percentage of total respondents citing religious reasons for why they practice FGM/C	Respondent population
Rashid et al.[151]	76%	Doctors
Maznah Dahlui[152]	Around 83%	Women, including mothers and traditional midwives
Rashid and Iguchi[153]	More than 85%	Malay women, including traditional midwives, in northern Malaysian states

In April 2009, JAKIM through the National Fatwa Council released a fatwa making FGM/C compulsory as part of religious calls.[154] However, according to the fatwa, if it leads to harm, it should be avoided. Although no law obligates Muslim women in Malaysia undergo FGM/C, the fatwa issued has a significant weight and value in society. However, rulings stating that FGM/C is compulsory and recommended are merely *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) from *ulama'* (religious scholar). The practice is not a religious injunction. Some of the jurists and *ulama'* believe that the practice does not fall as '*wajib*' (compulsory) and not even '*sunat*' (recommended). It is '*sunnah qadimah*' (old tradition), as the practice predates Islam.

Although FGM/C is commonly associated with Islam, not all Islamic countries practice FGM/C and the practice is not exclusive to Muslims. Historically, FGM/C was practised by the Jews, Arabs, and other societies predating Islam.[155] There was no record showing that circumcision took place before Islam came to the Malay Peninsula[156], suggesting the tradition was brought by the missionaries.[157]

There is also no clear verse from the Quran or hadiths that supports the practice.

Some traditional jurists refer to the verse in surah *al-Nahl* (16: 123):

$$\text{ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ مِنَ كَانَ وَمَا ۖ حَنِيفًا إِبْرَاهِيمَ مِلَّةَ ٱتَّبِعْ أَنِ إِلَيْكَ أَوْحَيْنَا ثُمَّ}$$

Translation: *So, We have taught thee the inspired (Message), "Follow the ways of Abraham the True in Faith, and he joined not gods with Allah."*

However, some of the *ulama'* argue this verse is only applicable to males and, thus, cannot be extended to females.

Proponents of FGM/C as a religious obligation also seek support from hadiths. There are two in particular which hardliners often refer to, provided in the following table.

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[151] Abdul Rashid, Yufu Iguchi, and Siti Nur Afiqah, "Medicalization of Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia: A Mixed Methods Study," *PLOS Medicine* 17, no. 10 (2020), doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1003303.

[152] Maznah Dahlui, "The Practice of Female Circumcision in Malaysia," in *Paper Presentation at Universiti Sains Malaya (USM)* Pulau Pinang, 2012, https://bit.ly/3BQynAk.

[153] Abdul Rashid and Yufu Iguchi, "Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia: A Mixed-Methods Study," *BMJ Open* 9, no. 4 (2019), doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2018-025078.

[154] JAKIM, "Hukum Pemotongan Genitalia Wanita (Female Genital Mutilation)," Sumber Maklumat Al-Ahkam Al-Fiqhiyyah, Last modified 2009, https://bit.ly/3AvIxos.

[155] Rushwan, Hamid, "Female circumcision," *World Health*, vol . 48️⃣ (1995): pp. 16 - 17, https://bit.ly/3nfP9m9.

[156] Ab.Rahman Isa, Rashidah Shuib, and M.Shukri Othman, "The Practice of Female Circumcision among Muslims in Kelantan, Malaysia," *Reproductive Health Matters* 7, no. 13 (1999): pp. 137-144, doi:10.1016/s0968-8080(99)90125-8.

[157] Hamid Rushwan, "Female Circumcision."

Table 4.2 - Hadiths used by hardliners to justify FGM/C.

Hadith	Source	Issues
"There are five natural tendencies for men (to maintain cleanliness) namely; to shave pubic hairs, circumcise, pluck armpit hairs, trim nails, and trim moustache."	Hadith narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim	Proponents of FGM/C see this hadith as making the practice compulsory or recommended. However, there is no strong evidence to indicate that this hadith, which speaks to men, can be applied to women as well.
From Umm Atiyyah al-Ansariyyah, circumcision took place among women in Medina, then the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w instructed her: "Do not cut everything, because it is beneficial for the woman and it will be an honour to the husband."	Hadith narrated by Al-Tabrani, Al-Baihaqi and Al-Baghdadi	This hadith is considered weak and fabricated when examining its chain of narrators. Therefore, this hadith cannot be used to derive a ruling saying that FGM/C is obligatory or recommended. Furthermore, the Prophet gave an order to a specific midwife and it was not a general instruction to circumcise other women at large.

In Islam, it is also important to consider rulings from *imams* (religious leader) and *ulama'*. The *imams* from the four major Sunni *mazhab*, i.e. Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafe'i, have different views on FGM/C, deriving from a mixture of tradition and culture in interpreting the religious texts and sources. The general consensus from the *imams* of the four major Sunni mazhab fall along *wajib* (compulsory), *mustahab* (highly recommended), or *sunat* (recommended).[158]

However, modern and contemporary *ulama'*, such as Dr Wahbah az-Zuhaili, stated that it is not sinful if a woman does not exercise circumcision, as it is her right not to do so.[159] Another *ulama'*, Dr Yusuf Al-Qaradhawi, said there is no evidence from al-Quran, hadiths, *ijmak* (consensus among ulama'), and *qiyas* (the process of deductive analogy between al-Quran and hadith) to make FGM/C compulsory.[160]

The value of the opinions of contemporary *ulama'* lies in their access to the breadth of research and knowledge available about FGM/C, including its harms. Classical *ulama'* made their rulings based purely on what they knew at the time. Contemporary *ulama'* who discuss FGM/C are also often doctors, who understand the issue not only from an Islamic perspective, but also a medical one.

The *Fiqh* methods used by contemporary *ulama'* are:

    i. Sadd Az-Zaraie - (preventing evil); سد الذرائع
    ii. La Dharar Wala Dhirar - (do not cause harm to others directly or indirectly); لا ضرر ولا ضرار

Therefore, FGM/C is 'haram' (forbidden) as it injures or harms the human body (which is an evil).

In reviewing the Quran, hadiths, and interpretations from contemporary *ulama'*, FGM/C does not have religious necessity or obligation. In this, it is safe to assume that the practice, in Malaysia, perpetuates because of cultural reasons, which will be further examined in the next section.

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[158] Imam Shafe'i: Wajib (from Al-Khulasah Al-Fiqhiyyah); Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal: Wajib (from Al-Ma'aani Al-Badi'ah); Imam Abu Hanifah: mustahab or sunat (from Nihayah Al-Mathlab fi Dirayah Al-Mazhab); Imam Malik: mustahab or sunat muakkad (from Al-Aziz Syarh al-Wazir)
[159] Al-Fiqh Al-Islami Wa Adillatuhu
[160] Al-Hukm al-Shar'i fi Khatan al-Inath

4.6.3.2 Cultural reasons

Sisters in Islam's 2021 report[161] on the perceptions of FGM/C in Malaysia calls the practice "a collective behaviour governed by an interplay of aspects, mainly culture, religion, and health." Collective behaviours are often linked to culture and supported by a community, in this case the Muslim (and Malay) community.

Religion and culture are inextricably linked in Malaysia due to how racial identity markers are linked to religious identity markers. However, the variation in how different Islamic societies perceive and understand FGM/C as part of their religious obligation suggests that culture also influences the practice. For example, the practice has been outlawed through official fatwas in Mauritania and Somaliland. In fact, in 2006, Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah, a pioneering foundation for fatwa in the Islamic world, located in Egypt, declared FGM/C as a cultural practice, therefore unnecessary and lacking foundation in Islam.[162]

As examined in the previous section, there is no official verse in the Quran related to FGM/C and hadiths on the matter are contestable. The confusion regarding this matter is further supported by the findings in Sister in Islam's report,[163] where, through qualitative interviews, they learned that the women interviewed were uncertain about where Islam actually stands on the matter, but still wanted the tradition to continue for cultural reasons.

It is hard to precisely pinpoint how FGM/C became a cultural marker, but this phenomenon can be observed through how people speak about the practice. For example, one participant interviewed by Rashid and Iguchi stated, "this is one of the ways to determine (differentiate) a Muslim and a non-Muslim,"[164] where, in this context the *cultural* meaning of being Muslim, especially within a Malaysian context, is transposed onto the practice. Sisters in Islam's report also picked up on how FGM/C is "felt to be a part of the Malay Muslim culture, a tradition carried forward from one generation to another."[165] Interestingly, when Rashid and Iguchi[166] interviewed the *Mak Bidans* who carried out the practice in the Northern States of Malaysia, they did not know what the actual roots of the practice were but disagreed that it was done because of religious obligation.

In Malaysia, the cultural reasons are supported by a belief that, through FGM/C, one can control female sexuality and desire and this is a social good. Gruenbaum observes that "pious Muslims would generally accept the idea that they bear some duty to help others fulfil their moral obligations, even if that means restricting their own freedoms or those of their family members."[167] Within Malay culture, specifically, it is desirable for a woman to have less sexual desire, as it means she will be less likely to cause or bring trouble. Female sexual desire is still a taboo topic within these communities and anything extending from female sexuality, especially outside of wedlock, is an undesirable social ill. In this way, as Saza Faradilla observes, "[FGM/C] functions as a means to unite a community by ensuring everyone toes the moral line."[168] This belief is not found in any scripture and is not supported by religious texts in any way but it is consistently reproduced in research conducted within the region, suggesting it must be rooted in a cultural belief. The issue with this belief, though, is that sexual desire does not rest in the sexual organs, but in the brain.[169] Further, if performing FGM/C is purely for lessening women's sexual desires, it is then, from a religious perspective, 'haram' (forbidden) following the contemporary *ulama'*.[170]

There also appears to be a link to cultural understandings of cleanliness, with 41.3% of respondents surveyed by Maznah Dahlui endorsing FGM/C for hygiene[171], the second most popular reason after religious obligation. There is a belief that

[161] Sisters in Islam, "Perception Towards Female Circumcision in Malaysia" Sisters in Islam, 2021, https://bit.ly/2YKcRyd.

[162] Hend El-Behary, "Female Genital Mutilation Is Forbidden in Islam: Dar Al-Ifta," Egypt Independent, Last modified June 6, 2018, https://bit.ly/3ngek9F.

[163] Sisters in Islam, "Perception Towards Female Circumcision in Malaysia."

[164] Rashid and Iguchi, "Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia."

[165] Sisters in Islam, "Perception Towards Female Circumcision in Malaysia."

[166] Rashid and Iguchi, "Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia."

[167] Ellen Gruenbaum, *The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

[168] Saza Faradilla, "The Complexities of Female Genital Cutting," *BA (Honours) in ANTHROPOLOGY* capstone final report, 2018, https://bit.ly/3lHWAmR.

[169] Viatcheslav Wlassoff, "Sex – Is It All in the Brain?," Brain Blogger, Last modified November 28, 2015, https://bit.ly/3oXT61u.

[170] If FGM/C is practiced to lessen women's sexual desire, it goes against Sadd Az-Zaraie - (preventing evil) سد الذرائع, as sexual desire is not an explicit evil from an Islamic perspective, whereas causing bodily harm is and it goes against La Dharar Wala Dhirar - (do not cause harm to others directly or indirectly) لا ضرر ولا ضرار because FGM/C is unnecessary bodily harm

[171] Maznah Dahlui, "The Practice of Female Circumcision in Malaysia."

the genitals are generally dirty and one way to overcome this is through FGM/C,[172] as removing part of the clitoral hood allows easier access to clean the area. Ritual cleanliness is essential in Islam, with the idea that "if you are not physically clean, you cannot be ritually clean[173]," which would invalidate your religious practice. While this masquerades as a religious reason, it is important to note that this belief of the dirtiness of the genitals is not replicated across all Islamic societies. This is a cultural interpretation of the religion which gains legitimacy through mirroring one of the key reasons for male circumcision. It is hard to justify this parallel for girls, however, because male and female anatomy are radically different and due to the varying degrees to which the clitoral hood is removed and the lack of standardisation of the practice makes it difficult to say anything conclusively about cleanliness, if cleanliness is measured by the amount removed of the clitoral hood. More importantly, there is no evidence to support that undergoing FGM/C makes one cleaner.

4.6.3.3 Medical Reasons

In Malaysia, there is a growing trend towards medicalised FGM/C despite international condemnation. Medicalisation refers to cases where FGM/C is carried out by a healthcare worker or professional, in any location, but usually in healthcare settings. While public hospitals are banned from performing FGM/C, private clinics offer the procedure. The shift towards the medicalisation of FGM/C stems from the perception that the practice will not be harmful if it is carried out by medical professionals.[174] The expertise of doctors and the use of surgical tools, anaesthetics, and antiseptics in the hope of mitigating any immediate complications, lend legitimacy to the procedure.

Across the country, the medicalised procedure is carried out without any regulation and is reported to result in side effects among 15% of the girls who undergo it.[175] These include mild and short pain, minor bleeding and pain during urination. In a currently unpublished study, when parents who had sent their daughters for FGM/C were asked if they witnessed any complications during the procedure, 59% of them had answered yes.[176]

While there is a growing body of evidence of the short-term clinical complications of the procedure,[177] [178] [179] long-term clinical complications remain understudied. Conducting a study on the side effects of FGM/C in Malaysia poses its own set of challenges since the practice here is considered minor. This also makes it difficult to raise awareness on the harmful and traumatic nature of the practice as physical harm may not be explicitly visible. Further complicating the issue is how the procedure is conducted on girls who are often below the age of one,[180] who cannot speak up about the pain they are experiencing and might not connect issues they experience as they grow up with the FGM/C they underwent as babies.

Steering away from the traditional practice, medicalised FGM/C is viewed as a matter of cleanliness and hygiene. Traditional practitioners are not medically trained and most perform the procedure without any anaesthesia or sterilisation.[181] Traditionally, it involves nicking the tip of the clitoris or prepuce with a pen-knife or sharp tool, with midwives usually insisting on a drop of blood as a requirement for the fulfilment of the practice.[182] Dr. Maznah's study documented the use of penknives, small scissors, needles, and even nail clippers.[183] Hence, most parents feel they are doing their daughters a favour by opting for the procedure to be performed in a sterile environment that ensures safe clinical practice. Besides hygiene, another perpetuating factor is the lack of knowledge regarding the health

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[172] Human Rights Watch, "Q&A On Female Genital Mutilation," Human Rights Watch, Last modified October 28, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/06/16/qa-female-genital-mutilation.

[173] *Female Genital Cutting in Singapore, New Naratif's Political Agenda New Naratif*, 2021, https://spoti.fi/2YCqOOR.

[174] ARROW and Orchid Project, "Asia Network to End Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C)."

[175] May Lee Lim, "The Hidden Cut," The Star R.AGE, Last modified January 9, 2019, https://bit.ly/3pwiTOn.

[176] *Kajian Rintis Impak Kesihatan Female Genital Mutilation* YouTube, 2020, https://bit.ly/3B6rjOP.

[177] Adriana Kaplan et al., "Health Consequences of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in the Gambia, Evidence into Action," *Reproductive Health* 8, no. 1 (March 2011), doi:10.1186/1742-4755-8-26.

[178] S. O. Ekenze, H. U. Ezegwui, and C. O. Adiri, "Genital Lesions Complicating Female Genital Cutting in Infancy: A Hospital-Based Study in South-East Nigeria," *Annals of Tropical Paediatrics* 27, no. 4 (2007): pp. 285-290, doi:10.1179/146532807x245670.

[179] World Health Organization. "Female Genital Mutilation."

[180] *Kajian Rintis Impak Kesihatan Female Genital Mutilation*.

[181] Rashid and Iguchi. "Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia."

[182] Isa, Shuib, and Othman, "The Practice of Female Circumcision among Muslims in Kelantan, Malaysia."

[183] Lim, "The Hidden Cut."

consequences associated with FGM/C, no matter how minor the procedure may seem. Many parents are also unaware that circumcision has no medical benefits and are even more in the dark on the healthcare providers' lack of knowledge and training related to FGM/C.[184]

Unlike male circumcision, there is no official training on female circumcision in the medical curriculum. Anecdotal evidence shared by Malaysian medical practitioners in a focus group discussion by ARROW this year revealed that they learned the skill from seniors and colleagues who themselves had no formal training. This mirrored the findings of Rashid et al.[185] in a study to determine the extent of medicalisation of FGM/C among Muslim doctors in Malaysia. One of the most significant findings of Rashid's study was that there may be a shift towards a more harmful type of FGM/C, from Type IV to Type I.[186] In the absence of specific guidelines for the procedure, some healthcare professionals practiced more invasive forms of FGM/C by cutting parts of the clitoris, a practice that falls under Type I FGM.

Research has shown that the harm reduction perspective is one of the most common motivations of health-care providers to perform FGM/C.[187] Despite the lack of standard operating procedures, some doctors in Rashid et al.'s study[188] still preferred the practice be conducted in a clinic or hospital by a health professional, primarily for harm reduction. Most medical practitioners who participated in ARROW's focus group discussion felt the procedure should only be conducted by a medically qualified health practitioner to mitigate risks and prevent complications. However, it raises the question of whether such medicalisation is harm reduction or the promotion of a dangerous practice - with the latter being a violation of medical ethics. The move towards a medicalised model of FGM/C presents with itself several issues, which we touch on in our next section.

4.6.4 Underlying Challenges and Issues

This section considers some underlying challenges and issues that may affect efforts and progress on preventing FGM/C in Malaysia. It considers the role of stakeholders, the danger of stop-gap solutions, misunderstandings of harm, and issues associated with the nuance of the language used around FGM/C.

4.6.4.1 Inaction and a lack of consensus among stakeholders

The biggest issue with FGM/C in Malaysia is that there seems to be no motivation on the part of those in positions of power to further look into the issue. Despite the fact that CEDAW has called for the practice to be stopped in Malaysia, there has been little official efforts to gauge how widespread the practice is or to put together a comprehensive plan on eliminating FGM/C practices in Malaysia.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) and religious leaders represent the two biggest authoritative stakeholders. In Sisters in Islam's report,[189] the women in the focus group discussions cited the Muftis as the key authoritative figure. This finding is replicated in Rashid and Iguchi's study,[190] too, with those interviewed saying they look towards Muftis as well as medical practitioners for further illumination on the matter of FGM/C.

Presently, the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC) has not stated its official stance on the practice of FGM/C among doctors. In Rashid et al.'s study, most doctors agreed that they would not conduct FGM/C if there were clear instructions

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[184] Rashid, Iguchi, and Siti Nur Afiqah, "Medicalization of Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia."

[185] ibid

[186] ibid

[187] Marie-Hélène Doucet, Christina Pallitto, and Danielle Groleau, "Understanding the Motivations of Health-Care Providers in Performing Female Genital Mutilation: An Integrative Review of the Literature," *Reproductive Health* 14, no. 1 (2017), doi:10.1186/s12978-017-0306-5.

[188] Rashid, Iguchi, and Siti Nur Afiqah, "Medicalization of Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia."

[189] Sisters in Islam, "Perception Towards Female Circumcision in Malaysia."

[190] Rashid and Iguchi. "Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia."

from the medical council or if it was declared illegal.[191] There is a lack of consensus amongst religious leaders as well, making it confusing and difficult for Muslims to navigate the issue. There is a national fatwa citing the practice as compulsory, yet individual states are allowed to gazette fatwas which contradict the national fatwa. For example, Perlis has a gazetted a fatwa declaring FGM/C not compulsory.[192] Consequently, Muslims lack clarity on the actual *hukum* of the practice.

4.6.4.2 The Danger of Stop-Gap Solutions

In 2012, Malaysia's Ministry of Health announced that it was developing guidelines for FGM/C in Malaysia. The current status of the guidelines is not in the public domain. During ARROW's focus group discussion, most medical practitioners were in support of standard operating procedures for FGM/C which they believe would make the procedure safer. Presently, the Malaysian Medical Council (MMC) has not stated its official stance on the practice. In Rashid et al.'s study, most doctors agreed that they would not conduct FGM/C if there were clear instructions from the medical council or if it was declared illegal.

In R.AGE's interview with a number of medical doctors, it is evident that some health practitioners who want FGM/C abolished view standardisation and regulation as a much-needed stop-gap solution.[193] In how FGM/C is linked to culture and religion, efforts to abolish the practice remain contentious. According to research, a common argument is the belief that medicalisation could be a first step towards full abandonment of the practice. However, the WHO asserts that there is no evidence to support this argument.[194] As Dr. Maznah says, classifying FGM/C as a medical procedure "constitutes a misuse of the professional medical role and may wrongly legitimise female circumcision as medically safe and beneficial."[195]

4.6.4.3 Misunderstandings of Harm

Related to the issue of medicalisation is the issue of harm. FGM/C is often spoken about in the context of harm reduction but harm seems to be narrowly constructed as physical harm in the moment, focusing on issues such as whether the practice is hygienic, whether the girls are bleeding too much when they are cut, and whether anaesthesia is necessary. In this narrow view, the possible harm perpetuated in the long term is completely ignored. There are questions which need to be asked surrounding a girl's right to her bodily autonomy and ownership. Oftentimes, when a girl undergoes FGM/C, she is young and will not find out until she is older - if at all. While there is scant research on how a girl's self-image and understanding of her own body, sexuality, and desire and her relationship to these things changes as a result of coming to terms with having undergone FGM/C, conversations and confessions on social media sites such as Instagram and Twitter suggest that some women find it hard to reconcile these issues. There are women who disclose how they cannot experience orgasms, cannot enjoy sex without experiencing pain, and an array of other issues which they feel, in part, is due to the FGM/C they underwent as children.

FGM/C is often touted as something done for the good of the girl in question, but this good cannot and should not be myopic. These conversations need to be had in tandem with conversations on the rights of a child to consent to what happens to their body. At its core, FGM/C can be framed as an issue rooted in a desire to control female sexuality. But a child's body should not be subject to speculation for her sexuality and the deviance that may arise from it. That young girls and their bodies are problematised and used as sites of control and shame is an issue that has yet to be adequately addressed.

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[191] Rashid, Iguchi, and Siti Nur Afiqah, "Medicalization of Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia."

[192] Malay Mail, "Perlis Mufti Decrees Female Circumcision Optional, Says No Proof It Cuts Libido: Malay Mail," Malay Mail, Last modified June 8, 2017, https://bit.ly/3oWVOEd.

[193] Lim, "The Hidden Cut."

[194] World Health Organization, "Global Strategy to Stop Health-Care Providers from Performing Female Genital Mutilation" World Health Organization, 2010, https://www.refworld.org/docid/4ca3385b2.html.

[195] The Edge Markets, "Docs' Role in Female Circumcision Growing."

4.6.4.4 The Nuance of Language

One of the biggest issues with FGM/C in Malaysia is that there is a variety of ways to talk about it. While the practice falls under the umbrella of female genital mutilation, the ways FGM/C is talked about in Malaysia is much milder. Arguably, the words used for FGM/C in Malaysia aim to distance and differentiate from more extreme versions elsewhere.

In Malaysia, it can be referred to as 'female circumcision', which lends legitimacy to the practice as a parallel to male circumcision. This language medicalises the practice. In Bahasa Malaysia, it is referred to as 'sunat perempuan', which is another parallel to the male 'sunat' (though not to be confused with the Muslim meaning of the word 'sunat', which generally refers to a good/encouraged practice). This, again, confers legitimacy to FGM/C, enabling a transference of meaning of the male sunat to the female sunat, including the ideas of cleanliness and necessity. Finally, religion adds another layer of complexity by referring to the practice as 'khitan' or 'khatan.' In the hierarchy of languages that Bahasa Malaysia borrows from, Arabic has a special place in its link to Islam. This allows Arabic to extend a special legitimacy. By removing all connotations of mutilation from how the practice is referred to and using an Arabic word in its place, FGM/C appears more Islamic and, thus, it cannot be bad for Muslims.

However, the confusing language and layers of complexity in the breadth of ways to refer to FGM/C is, in and of itself, a problem, making it difficult for the layperson to navigate the issues. Sisters in Islam[196] conducted a discourse analysis where they explored the language used to talk about FGM/C and found that coverage differed depending on the language used. News articles written in Bahasa Malaysia tended to write more favourably about the practice, whereas news articles in English were more likely to address the myths. This means crucial information about FGM/C might be inaccessible to people who only understand and know the practice as "sunat perempuan" or "khitan." Based on focus group discussions conducted by Sisters in Islam,[197] all fathers raised a concern that there are limited credible and reliable resources in Malaysia on FGM/C for them to refer to. This presents an issue because research has shown that, usually, when parents are given enough information to make an informed decision about FGM/C, they were less likely to submit their daughters to the practice.[198]

This clearly demonstrates a need to speak to people in ways they can understand, using language which is familiar to them. Given that sources in Bahasa Malaysia tend to overlook debunking myths in favour of reaffirming the goodness of FGM/C, there is a clear bias in media coverage and a segmentation of knowledge received based on language spoken. This is a huge issue because Bahasa Malaysia is the predominantly spoken language of the community which most practices FGM/C in Malaysia. In an ongoing study, 90% of parents who had sent their daughters for FGM/C did not know that the practice falls under WHO classifications of FGM. It is irresponsible that the only accessible media for a large amount of the community does not provide enough information for parents to make informed decisions.

Understandably, FGM/C is a sensitive topic, especially since it is seen as an important cultural and religious marker of identity. The issue needs to be approached with empathy and from a human rights perspective. Parents have a right to fully understand the decisions and choices they are making for their children just as much as children have the right to bodily autonomy.

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[196] Sisters in Islam, "A Discourse Analysis of Media Representations of Female Circumcision in Malaysia" Sisters in Islam, 2021, https://bit.ly/3iYsUje.

[197] Study yet unpublished as of this publication

[198] Angi Alradie-Mohamed, Russell Kabir, and S.M. Yasir Arafat, "Decision-Making Process in Female Genital Mutilation: A Systematic Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 10 (December 2020): p. 3362, doi:10.3390/ijerph17103362.

5

Survivors' help-seeking and societal empowerment

Consistent with the information introduced in Chapter 1, in a society where patriarchal norms are prevalent, violence against women occurs at an alarmingly high rate and is normalised. This is demonstrated most strongly by the fact that 10 of our 16 survivors (62.5%) explicitly mentioned experiencing multiplicities of violence. The normalisation of violence against women is observed in the amount of barriers women encounter when they seek help, which form the bulk of the discouraging responses survivors encounter, **most notably as attitudes which excuse the perpetrator, minimise the violence the survivors faced, or mistrust the women's reports of violence**, as evidenced in Chapter 4.

Help-seeking forms a means of disrupting the patriarchy. This disruption extends beyond the survivor's own action of seeking help, but to the people and places she reached out to which provided encouraging responses and enabled the process of seeking justice to be more navigable for the survivor. Despite the fact the survivors would like the government to play a more prominent role in facilitating their empowerment, **survivors, for the time being, appear reliant on informal networks for support,** such as their friends, family, and community, or on civil society organisations, **to help them through their journey.**

The main contention in this section is that **societal empowerment is crucial to facilitating a survivor's access to safety and justice**. In a society where violence-endorsing attitudes are rampant, empowering members of the community with knowledge to combat violence is one of the most helpful attitudes a survivor can encounter to encourage them to disclose violence and seek help.

While this chapter will touch on the encouraging support the survivors receive, it must be noted that this chapter only offers a brief glimpse of the findings from the qualitative research. The main objective of the in-depth interviews was to understand the attitudes the survivors encountered and how they impacted the help-seeking process for survivors and how these attitudes and perceptions encountered map onto the underlying attitudes which form the crux of violence-endorsing attitudes, namely attitudes supportive of VAW and attitudes dismissing gender inequality. Crucially, this chapter focuses on the encouraging responses survivors received as well as suggestions put forward by survivors to illuminate the ways in which our society can be more sensitive and responsive to the needs of survivors and how this looks like. The upcoming full-length qualitative findings publication will comprehensively contextualise the findings and its link to the attitudes measured in the survey. For now, the hope with this chapter is to highlight the importance of combating discouraging attitudes as well as the roles everyone can play (Section 5.3) because it forms a crucial step in a survivor's help-seeking journey.

5.1 Disclosing violence and seeking help

When we probed about the decision to disclose violence and seek help, we were curious to see whether what motivated a survivor's decision was internal or external. In theory of planned behaviour, the intent to produce a behaviour, in this case help-seeking, interacts with the attitudes and beliefs of those around the individual, such immediate friends and family, as well as the individual's own perceptions of societal attitudes and beliefs.[199]

While acknowledging how important it is for survivors to speak up about their experiences, motivation within the context of this study is specifically related to survivors reaching out *beyond* informal sources of support, as the literature tends to confirm that survivors often *do* reach out to informal sources of support, but stop short of reaching formal sources of support, such as relevant authorities.

The decision to seek help can be catalysed internally or externally. An internal decision to seek help is motivated by a survivor reflecting on her own situation and choosing to reach out, whereas an external motivation is when a survivor is encouraged by someone else to reach out for help. In the case of external motivation, it is usually an informal source of support that guides the survivor towards a formal source of support. Undoubtedly, however, **informal sources of support play a crucial role because supportive attitudes encountered at this point can motivate survivors to reach out to formal sources of support.** Importantly, however, when an informal source of support helps a survivor reach out to a formal source of support, this is a demonstration of societal empowerment. **Societal empowerment occurs at the point wherein members of a society know enough about violence against women that they are able to recognise a problem and guide survivors to points at which they can formally receive help.**

While two survivors explicitly mentioned seeking out a formal source of support on their own, for many, reaching out to supportive informal sources of support gave them confidence to reach out to formal sources of support. In most cases, **survivors only reached out when they could no longer personally cope with the violence or its impacts**. Survivors typically experience a high level of distress prior to making the decision. It appears that, usually, when survivors reach out for help, they have reached a breaking point and can no longer cope.

> **I started experiencing a lot of stress**. And then, you know **I started crying more often**. And then, I took things very more seriously now that with awareness and everything - you know like these things are all very serious. And that's when I start taking it as a problem. So I would say probably 2 years after him talking - after me meeting him. (Rachel, 28, stalking survivor)

> So [how I was penalised for reporting the sexual harassment by my workplace] kinda like really **made me so depressed** and like I feel so unjustified and then I didn't know la what to do. **I got so depressed like I didn't want to go to the office**. I just like stayed in the car. And then I decided to like reached for help so that's how I contacted [AWAM]. (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

> I used to volunteer for an organisation [...] then I called one of the girls there and **I just broke down** I just told her. "I don't know what to do." (Ashley, 32, sexual assault survivor)

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[199] Wayne LaMorte, "The Theory of Planned Behavior," Behavioral Change Models, Last modified September 9, 2016, https://bit.ly/30BZXmY.

[The harassment] escalated in July, that's when I knew like hey you know what? I really have to manage it properly - I really have to do something and not just - **I'm just tired of being angry while texting my friends.** No, I'm gonna do something about this so yeah. (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

While we focus on the importance of a knowledgeable and aware society, we must emphasise again that **it is not merely the empowered community that takes survivors out of violence - it is the interaction of the survivors with the community**. Survivors importantly still hold agency over the decisions they make.

5.2 Encouraging attitudes

This section explores the encouraging attitudes survivors encountered, which ranges from believing the survivor and offering emotional support to more tangible forms of helping, including offering expertise, physical support, and, in instances where survivors interface with formal sources of support, professionalism.

1. Believing the survivor.

Responses that centre around believing the survivor serve to validate survivors' experiences. While seemingly similar to _offering emotional support_, _believing the survivor_ is a category of its own because survivors placed strong emphasis on being believed separately to being supported emotionally.

I mean **[the] first thing that made me feel glad that I called [AWAM], that I reached out to them is because they believed me**. They believed my story. (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

Yes, I speak to my father because my father is a policeman and he trust[s] me. [...] **My father said it's okay I [believe] you because I know you well.** (Siti, 31, sexual harassment survivor)

Or it can occur through actions that suggest that the person responding to the survivor is taking the issue seriously.

Yes, yes. I felt [...] they really take this issue - this thing ah very seriously. They didn't take it as a trivial matter. **Like really really they took it it's a serious offence.** In fact I didn't know that it's so serious that the D11 team ah they told me that [...] if let's say he is found guilty, he would have to be sentenced for don't know how many years you know - I didn't know that this is such a serious offence. (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor, speaking on the D11 team[200])

[200] Bahagian D11 (Siasatan Seksual, Wanita dan Kanak-Kanak)

> Nisa: The female officer read [the report I prepared], **"This is a stalker ni, this is…"** that's what she said. **"This is a stalker. This is a psycho stalker."**
> Interviewer: So in that, in that moment when those female officers, they validated your concerns and -
> Nisa: Yes, yes, that.

At the offset, this may seem like a simple gesture, but several violence-endorsing attitudes are rooted in disbelieving a survivor's experiences, whether by outright denying or doubting the experience occurred (mistrusting women's reports of violence) or downplaying the violence and its impacts (minimising the violence experienced). Help-seeking is a means of disrupting the patriarchy simply because the act is a means of reclaiming power. When power is concentrated with men, women tend to be disbelieved, especially when they speak out against men. Believing women when they disclose the violence they have experienced temporarily shifts power away from the perpetrator, often a man, and to the woman, in giving her space to tell her story.

2. Offering emotional support

Responses that centre around offering emotional support, for the most part, were reported by survivors to have come mainly from informal sources of support such as family, friends, and the community. When coding the responses survivors received following thematic analysis, 32 were explicitly coded as "offering emotional support." 29 of the 32 responses came from friends, family, or the community, such as neighbours (91%), whereas the remaining 3 came from NGOs or CSOs (9%).

Within theory of planned behaviour, encountering a response such as receiving emotional support is crucial because it assures the survivor that she is worthy of receiving help. Based on analysis of qualitative findings, emotional support from a friend or family is often one of the necessary elements required before a survivor reaches out to formal sources of support. When formal sources of support offer emotional support, it also provides hope and signals to the survivor that help is near.

Based on survivor responses, emotional support was often described as simple actions such as listening or offering words of encouragement or advice for perspective.

> **[My friends were] willing to hear me, what I say, then they advise me**, actually. They advise me, what can I do […] yeah, they really support me here, hear what I say. (Anna, 39, domestic violence survivor)

> **You know that encouragement from friends who have gone through a divorce, who have gone through domestic violence is actually just so precious. Because they can understand.** Like a friend of mine, she purposely call me all the way from overseas you know because she has gone through exactly the same thing […]. So she told me, "Look ahead, don't look behind already. Look ahead." (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

I kept telling my best friend, "No I'm scared. I just don't want [to file a report]. What if he's suicidal?" **Then she was like, "At this point of time, you don't need to worry about him. You're not obliged to worry about whatever that he's gonna go through."** (Rachel, 28, stalking survivor)

But when my friend actually saw [the physical altercation between me and perpetrator], **they were like, "You better go make a report."** Because I mean because they'll be leaving soon as well that time. **So they're like, "We won't be there. We are scared something will happen to you. You better reach out.** This is going out of hand. If something was to happen - are you going to regret it at that time?" (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

Emotional support from or in communities creates a communal sense of safety and support for survivors. This experience seems integral to a survivor's well-being and is an effective exercise of societal empowerment.

It was not them saying but the way they showed that they care actually. Because in my [accommodation], boys are not allowed but it's not like they're guarded or something. So I was afraid that you know [my stalker will] be coming out of sudden or something. So **they were there like, will be coming in the middle of the night knocking my door be like, "Are you okay? Are you okay?"** So I think yeah that - it made me feel safe. (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

Yeah so I feel that the people around us ah, especially the people that we can trust. Even my sister. Actually she help me out a lot. Uhh the church friends, the church people. It really, really help me out a lot. And **at the back of my mind I know that I have all the support that I need.** (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

Ah semangat. Macam saya ada rasa orang yang - masih ada orang yang sayang dekat saya - ambil berat tentang saya walaupun sebelum ini - sebelum saya cerita kat jiran-jiran, ahli keluarga saya - saya sorang-sorang. Bila lepas saya meluahkan, semua yang bagi support kat saya - saya jadi kuat. Makin kuat. Bukan makin lemah. Makin kuat. (Sarah, 40, domestic violence survivor)

Translation: Ah, support. It made me feel as though I wasn't alone - there were still people who cared deeply about me, even though before this, before I told my story to my neighbours and family members, I felt alone. After I told them, everyone supported me - I became strong from that. Stronger. Not weaker. Stronger.

> When I came to WAO, I see lot of survivors there - and **they give me lot of motivation, they show me who am I**. They ask me to talk to my friends, they ask me to dress up, **they ask me to look at myself and be proud of myself**. (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

A lack of social support, as mentioned in Section 4.3.1, can delay a survivor's decision from seeking out to formal sources of support due to internalised shame and guilt.

3. Offering expertise or knowledge

Expertise or knowledge is an important form of support for survivors. This can take the shape of legal knowledge or it can be knowledge which offers insight, for example making survivors aware that what she is experiencing is a form of violence

Relating this back to our framework, as patriarchal values and norms are passively learned, a part of this also involves the normalisation of violence against women. This largely manifests as survivors not knowing that what they are experiencing is a form of violence.

> I thought it's just a normal argument between husband and wife. **[The] domestic violence was not physical yet.** That was more like emotional. Whereby he was shouting, throwing things at home, breaking things at home. Things like that so I thought maybe he's stressed and things like that. I didn't even imagine even in my dreams that I'll end up here actually until this. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

> **I didn't realise that my relationship with him was abusive relationship** - I mean he will hit me, he will slap me and stuff. But literally after that stuff, I mean that situation, he will pujuk me back and I was emotionally and mentally abused as well. (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

> At first, I didn't realise that something - what happened to me was bad until people point it out. (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

Encountering support in the form of expertise and knowledge can increase a survivor's belief that she can be helped because her experience is validated as an issue worth caring about.

Expertise and knowledge can also help survivors access justice. **Largely, what this illustrates is what an empowered, survivor-centric society can achieve** as navigating justice systems can be confusing and a survivor may not know what options are available to them.

I mean AWAM - they just told me like **all the steps that I can take to like pursue my case** and then I searched for more and then I saw WAO [...]. And then, I just [called WAO] and then after that, they have been very very helpful to me until now. (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

Expertise and knowledge can also empower and advocate for survivors. For example, interfacing with the police sometimes requires writing letters to relevant parties, which survivors may not know how to navigate. In these instances, social workers can intervene and offer support:

WAO tried really hard, thank you, you all tried really hard, and you all tried really hard to submit the appeal, even to submit the repeal, no reply... **Then I think [a WAO Social Worker] tried to submit a complaint of the treatment of how the police treated me. She also helped me to call the police many times.** (Ashley, 32, sexual assault survivor)

In another example, Sofia went to the hospital to be examined for domestic violence-related injuries. Sofia wanted to get an interim protection order (IPO), but the Social Welfare Office (JKM) Officer had told Sofia that he did not know what an IPO was, therefore he could not help her. Since the healthcare specialist understood the process of attaining an IPO, she could advocate for Sofia by calling up the officer and guiding him through the process:

I went back to the hospital that examined me - I saw the specialist and I said, "So basically this is going to be repeated again and again and again without any actions because the officer doesn't know what is the meaning of IPO." And then what she did - **she called up some officers and JKM and she asked the officer, "Do you know what is the meaning of IPO or not?"** He said he [doesn't] know. He said, "*Saya tak handle kes keganasan rumah tangga. Saya tak tau.*" (I don't handle domestic violence cases. I don't know.) **Then, she said, "*Kalau tuan taktau, tuan kena tanya la orang yang tau.*" (Sir, if you don't know, you should ask a person who does know.)** And then after that - so she asked, "Did you open up the *kertas siasatan* (investigation paper) or not - first of all - for her to get the IPO? You didn't even open up that how can?" (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

Survivors also found support accessing justice through friends with legal knowledge.

I have like my close friends from outside of work - they're like lawyers. **They're the ones who support me to really fight for my case - for my justice.** To really fight my company. To even like email. That's how they support me like, "You should email this person [and] say [this, this, this]." (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

When [my friend, who is a lawyer] actually went through the evidence, then he advised [how to pursue the case] - **he's been a very good advisor**. (Fatima, 43, intimate partner violence survivor)

[My colleague is] also very very supportive and she told me - because she does a lot of criminal matters - I don't do criminal matters at all. So she was actually explaining to me and she told me everything la. **She told me how to make a police report and everything.** (Rachel, 28, a stalking survivor, speaking on her colleague at their law firm, where Rachel practices civil law)

Access to justice through the knowledge of legal services appears to be one of the strongest factors in a survivor's own belief that she can seek and receive help as multiple survivors mentioned wishing they had known more about these services prior.

[I wish I had known more about] better help system. Support system. Legal wise. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

If there's anything I would like to change is [...] the **awareness or the understanding that there are ways to go about it, to be formally assisted with it** [...] I didn't know that before that. So if I knew it earlier, for instance just like a few months after it started then I'd probably be able to handle it and see it as something that I can manage and it would have a better emotional and mental impact on me. (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

Another service that I wish I knew [about earlier] is free legal advice [...] because before this, I really don't know anything. Like [pro bono services] in Malaysia. So now I know like this [service exists] but it's just that **I think a lot of people don't know how to reach out to seek help.** (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

4. Offering support in physical or otherwise tangible means

This is a crucial factor in survivors' decision making to seek help because oftentimes a survivor needs more than just emotional support and expertise.

A lack of support with regards to a place to go or someone to help take care of the children has hindered survivors from leaving situations of violence as the hurdles seem too big:

Before I [attempted] suicide, I tried to go out with my [kids]. But like relative, they cannot support me. Brothers, the siblings - no. Even they can take care for one or two days [only]. They cannot support us - six of us! I have five kids and me - six. Who want? I don't have any friends because I married early, so I just lost contact with the friends. So I don't have anyone to help me. (Priscilla, 35, domestic violence survivor)

In navigating access to justice, survivors may need to go to different locations and being accompanied to these places signals an important level of depth of support to the survivor.

> The first time [I went to the police station to file a report], **I went with my friend**. (Mary, 20, domestic violence survivor)

> Saya buat report.. Jiran juga yang bawa saya ke balai. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)
>
> **Translation:** I made the report... it was also **my neighbour who brought me to the police station.**

> I went to confront [the perpetrator] at his house with a male friend. (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

The ability to ensure their children are taken care of while they are pursuing justice is also important to survivors. Many survivors remain in violent situations because they do not have access to childcare support. Thus, another crucial factor in help-seeking is the support a survivor has with childcare needs.

> For my family, of course... **actually my parents, they support me financially.** It's not [just] monetary la, but they're not in KL, they're in my hometown in Perak. **So every two [weeks], my brother [goes] back [and] they will buy a lot of things for me, for my kids, like fruits** [that my brother will bring to me]. (Anna, 39, domestic violence survivor)

> My former spouse [is supportive] as well because he [took] care [of] my son while I run around and do all the stuff [to pursue my case and seek help] lah kan. (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

Survivors, when making the decision to seek help, also need to consider their physical security, in terms of access to shelter or food.

> And another one part that is important is the church is very important also. Because now the church that I have been attending for the past 20 plus years, **they are assisting me, they are giving me a house, a place to stay.** A place that - for the time being until things are more settled that I can call home. I can call it as my home which is very important. (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

> **I'm so grateful actually that I [was] given this opportunity to have a temporary shelter**. The shelter wasn't a normal shelter, it was so comfortable. (Mary, 20, domestic violence survivor)

> I really need to thank [my social worker], because I never eat rice for 7 years you know? When - before I [came to WAO's shelter]. **[My social worker] bought me the rice, the first rice I eat with her.** And she [told] me, "You need to eat rice, you need to take care of yourself, you need to show - you got everything, you got everything in you. Don't be like this, don't waste your life." (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

When formal authorities, such as the police or survivor's legal counsel, offers this type of support, it can be especially valuable and encouraging in the survivor's process of accessing safety or justice.

In this excerpt, Priscilla recounts how when she was at the hospital, she had informed them that she was unsafe at home. In response, the hospital decided to admit her to keep her safe but her perpetrAator husband did not want her to be admitted. The hospital decided to call the police, who forced her husband to leave and allow her to be admitted.

> He come, he follow me to hospital, then [...] I meet doctor privately, confidentially. When psychiatry doctor want meet with us, confidentially they bring me to a room, then I tell them [what is happening and] I cry and everything. They want put me in a ward, 'cause I say I don't want go back home, I'm not safe. [My husband did not allow that],a he said, "Cannot, cannot, you no need to [be] admitted." Then the hospital [called the] police, because he never let me to be admitted. **The police come, "*Encik, encik kenapa kacau...* In emergency ward you know... *Encik, keluar encik, encik jangan kacau, dia kena masuk wad.*"** (Sir, sir why are you trying to interfere... sir, sir, please don't be a bother - she needs to be admitted.) He said, "No no no, *tak payah saya bawa isteri balik.*" (No need to admit my wife, I am bringing her home.) Police: "*Takde encik, encik balik, dia kena masuk wad.*" (No, sir, please go home. She needs to be admitted.) **So police is protecting me to [be] admitted that day.** So when he go back, I just express what what I feel. (Priscilla, 35, domestic violence survivor)

Fatima recounts how her IO was being difficult in the process of collecting evidence for her case and how she did not trust his intentions with seeing her phone. When her lawyer friend got involved in the case, the IO began taking the case seriously.

> [My IO] was giving all the reasons and every time he's asking me, "Give me the video - give me [your] phone" - because he wants [to see] the phone WhatsApp [messages, where the evidence is]. He said, "Give me your phone." So I didn't want to give my phone. I said, "Easily he can just delete everything." And then, that's when my friend the lawyer came with me and he was actually [a] very close friend of the some of the guys there. So what he did - so **when [the IO] knew, that's when he had no choice but to take action [on my case].** He didn't ask - when my friend was there - he didn't ask for the phone. (Fatima, 43, intimate partner violence survivor)

In this instance, Leah recounts how her lawyer protected her by refusing to tell anyone Leah's whereabouts since her perpetrator has kidnapped and attempted to kidnap her several times.

So I don't want [my perpetrator to kidnap me again], and my lawyer also scared for that, the fellow will take what he wants. The fellow is not a normal person, he is a very psycho person, I don't want this - that's why my lawyer even never tell to the police. **The police was asking, "Where she's staying now, and can you give me a contact number?" And my lawyer said, "I don't have any contact number of her and I really don't know where she stay."** (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

5. Sharing a contact or resource for survivors to reach out for help

This is usually the point that shifts survivors from seeking help from informal sources of support to formal sources of support who have the expertise to guide survivors through the process of seeking justice.

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, in the absence of strong government institutions to support survivors through their journeys, civil society organisations will often fill this gap. All of the domestic violence survivors interviewed were provided WAO's contact through another person or party, demonstrating what societal empowerment, at its best, can look like.

My psychiatry doctor give me letter and I told him that before, the social worker from [the hospital told me to reconcile with my perpetrator-husband]. Then he get angry, because I have my major depression. [He] get angry with [what the social worker did], then he call WAO. He help me to call. **He help with WAO, settle everything. Then he send me [to the shelter].** Really good this guy. Life saver. (Priscilla, 35, domestic violence survivor)

One of the person in [...] Facebook that time, I talked to her. [I said to her], "I want tell you something: I'm going to end my life. I don't want any other girls to suffer like me. I don't want other girls to be quiet like me. I don't want this to happen." She's the one that told me, **"If you don't want this to happen, you need to be alive, call this WAO."** And one of my neighbour - I was taking care of her baby, every time she come home, she see me and understand what I'm going through. **She also asked me to call WAO. So I called WAO.** (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

[My brother] gave more support whereby he - for the first few visitation, he followed me and then when he saw the harassment, he asked me to report to the police. Then, he guide me. **He said, "You should tell - bring up this matter to the Women's [Aid] Organisation."** He give more emotional and mental support. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

When I was telling [my friend], initially she just listened. And then when she... she felt [there] was urgency I guess, so she approached her friend in KL. So her friend - she's in the children church ministry and she knows of all this child abuse, all these rules, all the acts in our Malaysian law. **So she approached WAO.** (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

Other times, the contact shared was for help navigating the legal system. For example, Rachel was given both the contact of a police officer as well as legal professionals to help with restraining orders.

[My mum said to me], **"Okay you know what then, like I'll get you a police contact number.** You speak to the police first - don't make a report first. Maybe you speak to him - let him know and ask his advice on that." (Rachel, 28, stalking survivor)

[My mum said to me], **"Okay you know what then, like I'll get you a police contact number.** You speak to the police first - let him know and ask his advice on that." (Rachel, 28, stalking survivor)

6. Professionalism

Professionalism from formal sources of support is crucial in survivors' help-seeking. In a society where patriarchal norms are prevalent, the most common reaction a survivor will receive when she seeks help from formal sources of support is discouraging because help-seeking disrupts the balance of the patriarchy and the system works to counteract that. When a survivor encounters professional, responsive formal sources of support, she is empowered and may, in turn, have easier access to the justice and safety she seeks.

Below are some examples of professionalism survivors encountered:

JKM also came in, yeah JKM also came in to help out a lot. **JKM actually is very, ah, they are also very good, they are very good.** They came in to help and then they help me to apply for IPO. And then they went to court with me. (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

When I saw the Magistrate, she herself asked me. She asked me 3 times. She asked, "Are you sure you want to take the IPO it's just for yourself? Are you sure or not? Are you sure or not?" Then only I said, "No, actually I requested for both my children as well but I was not given." Then only the magistrate say, "No, when you request, they're supposed to write it up to me. It's my decision whether I want to give or not. They cannot simply say they don't give." And that is - she told the welfare officer - she said, **"No, you please prepare the document. The children's eligible to get the PO. I will sign."** That's when I got the PO. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

Anna explicitly identifies another important form of empowerment: Giving survivors the information they need to figure out what they want to do next.

The second officer, when I call, when I meet her, she really helpful. **She quite helpful. Because she said that - "Kalau you,"** she advise like, *"You nak ceraikan you nak dapatkan EPO [you kena buat action report]."* **(If you want to get divorced or get an EPO, you need to file a report.)** The third officer, I feel that the third officer is a guy, he really really really helpful. Because the third report, because [the perpetrator husband] scratched my daughter's leg, I totally don't know that on that night when he scratched, I should lodge a police report, because the next morning only I contact WAO. WAO said that I should launch a police report then to bring my daughter to hospital. So the next day after office only I bring my daughter to the police then the scratch mark is already subside. So it cannot see already. **Then the guy officer said, "I** *cuba tolong* **you** *dapat* **EPO." (I'll try and help you get an EPO.)** Anyhow, because the mark is already no longer there, so he cannot open the case for me. **Then he tried to contact his boss, I remember he tried to contact his boss**. (Anna, 39, domestic violence survivor)

5.3 Survivor's advice

As clearly demonstrated, the support survivors receive is crucial in helping them through violence as it helps empower them. In this, it is especially pertinent to ask survivors how we can best support and empower them. This forms the basis of a survivor-centric approach, which is defined by the United Nations as an approach "which seeks to empower the survivor by prioritising their rights, needs, and wishes. This includes ensuring that survivors have access to appropriate, accessible, and quality services."[201] A survivor-centric approach is not merely a justice-based approach, confined to what formal authorities can do, but a whole-society approach, involving members of the community from family and friends to the government.

5.3.1 To support systems

Support systems remain one of the most crucial people in a survivor's life to help her get through the experience. Here are some advice survivors give to those who have the opportunity to support a survivor, be it friends, family, or strangers.

1. Listen.

Be a good listener. That's the first thing to help the survivor, [survivors] want someone to listen to their story. (Siti, 31, sexual harassment survivor)

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[201] Eseohe Ojo et al.. "How Can a Survivor-Centered Approach Address Sexual Violence?" Open Global Rights, 1 Feb. 2021, https://bit.ly/3v7gwlT.

> I will always ask them to listen - **listen carefully** whatever the survivor is going through or have went through. (Rachel, 28, stalking survivor)

> Just listen to the victims, what she want to tell you. **The support really, really means so much for them**. (Anna, 39, domestic violence survivor)

2. Be comforting and/or supportive.

> Kena bagi semangat la untuk wanita-wanita yang contoh nak bercerai. Bukan semua orang nak bercerai. Tak ada manusia yang dah berkahwin yang nak bercerai. Tak ada. Baik tak payah kahwin kan kalau betul-betul nak bercerai, buat apa kita kahwin. Semua orang nak kahwin nak bahagia happy gembira. Nak yang positif. Saya rasa kena bagi semangat la. Support moral untuk wanita-wanita yang ada masalah. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)
>
> **Translation: You must give motivation to women**, for example, those who are facing divorce. Not everyone wants a dirvoce. There is no one who gets married that intends on getting divorce. No one. It's better to not get married, right, if your intention is to get divorced - why are we getting married? Everyone who wants to get married wants to be happy. They want the positive. **So I think we need to be supportive - give moral support to the women who are facing these issues**.

> **Be a support. That is the reason they actually came and approached you** because they would - they want some sort of advice or some sort of probably a shoulder to lean on or cry on. I would advise them to be there for them. (Rachel, 28, stalking survivor)

> [What] we need most is **emotional and mental support** at that time because at the moment that they're **going through the abuse - the domestic violence, it is really demotivating** and it's very stressful and you need to really empower yourself to go against this kind of situation. If not, you will really break down. You need to find something which is so called protective factor la for you to go through this thing. So women definitely will need emotional and mental support more from the family and friends. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

Patience will be really good [with the survivors]. Looking back I think it's quite hard [for those] who were around to support me, because at one point in time I couldn't get past what happened to me and I would always be turning in this circle and keep repeating, and then keep reliving the same trauma again and again. And I think the people around me, they're really tired of hearing me going through the same troubles, because to them it's different from a person who is going through it. Some of them had a lot of patience, some of them less la. **Sometimes, it does take a person going through it longer to get better. Yeah. It does take patience.** (Ashley, 32, sexual assault survivor)

3. If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.

Several women mentioned examples of what not to say:

Itulah kata-kata negatif biasanya - kebanyakannya la, kalau kita dah berkahwin - contoh berkahwin, tiba-tiba ada masalah. Kebanyakannya ahli keluarga ataupun kawan-kawan yang mengenali la biasa akan cakap 'kenapa kahwin dengan dia dulu' - 'ha itulah kenapa siapa suruh macam tu'. Cakap benda-benda yang tak sepatutnya. Sedangkan kita manusia ni tak pernah terfikir untuk - macam contoh dalam perkahwinan ni akan ada keganasan. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)

Translation: These are the negative things people tend to say - a lot, if you're married, for example if you're married and there's suddenly an issue. A lot of family members or friends will normally say, "Then why'd you get married with him?" - "Who asked you to do that?" They say things they shouldn't. Despite the fact that it never even crosses our minds that in this marriage there would be violence.

So...for the survivor, for the family or friends...rapist itu adalah rapist bukan suka-suka mereka pergi. So jangan. Kalau benda itu berlaku untuk family member sendiri, jangan sesekali sakitkan hati mereka ataupun kutuk mereka. [...] Kalau orang sudah rasa benda ini ah, mereka already in a- in a worst condition. So jangan sakitkan hati mereka lagi. Kalau boleh bagi diaorang semangat, bagi diaorang comfortable zone, bagi diaorang it's ok, nevermind, go for next, go for- go for- go for- go for your life. Just bagi diaorang semangat dan jangan- once benda ni sudah jadi, don't ever talk about this thing until when. Bila-bila jangan ungkitkan perkara ini lagi dengan mangsa tersebut. Tak payah. Benda ni bukannya kena selalu kena ingat kena ungkit, tak payah. Just forget about this. (Privya, 34, rape survivor)

Translation: So, for the survivor, for the family or friends - **the rapist is a rapist** - it is not that the survivor simply went. So don't - **if something like this happens to someone in your own family - don't hurt their feelings or mock them.** If someone has already gone through something like this, things are already bad for them. So don't hurt them. If you can support them, give them comfort, tell them, "It's ok, nevermind - go live your life [there is more in life]." Just give them comfort and don't - if something like this has happened - don't bring this thing up with them. No need. This is not something that they need to be reminded of, not something that you need to constantly bring up. Just forget about this.

> **Don't demotivate the person who's facing the situation** like the officer that asked me [when I told him I was being recorded nonconsensually], "You ada pakai baju ke tak?" I cried you know. After I came back home, I cried for one day. Why must I face this from another guy? You know you wanted to escape from one guy to live a peaceful life but why must I face that? People shouldn't use this kind of words or this kind - they shouldn't treat another person - **they should have more empathy la basically**. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

Several other survivors mentioned how it is best to keep quiet if the only things you want to say are negative.

> Just don't give your opinion randomly. Yeah I mean **just keep quiet and just walk away** if you can't be there for that person. (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

> Be a bit open-minded and listen to everything. Give the best judgment call that they can give. **If there's nothing nice to say, probably just don't say anything.** (Rachel, 28, stalking survivor)

> I will just tell them that if you really can't help her, if you really can't use a good word to her, no need to tell her anything. **Just leave her alone.** Because people say - people want to help her, help the survivors - actually they will hurt them a lot with their words. So just leave them alone, they can find out their selves and come back. If you can't give them a very motivational word, positive words, anything - no need to tell anything. Just be silent. **Leave them alone.** (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

Fatima mentioned that it is important for survivors to also set personal boundaries themselves.

> **If they cannot say something nice, just keep quiet. The survivor should know - they should know when to set the boundary**. If they know the friends are giving not something - not a moral support - not a positive support, then keep them away. Say okay maybe I just have this friend - it's okay I'll just listen to them. Said no. If not, change circle. The best for them is to change circle and think about their future - think positively there's a better future out there. (Fatima, 43, intimate partner violence survivor)

4. Believe the survivor.

Believe them. [...] Just listen if they really want to help then believe them. Believe the survivor. (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

First of all - very importantly - **they should not take us as a joke.** I tell you this [is the] saddest part. (Mary, 20, domestic violence survivor)

Believe her! BELIEVE HER!!! LIKE BELIEVE HER!!!!! Don't believe the perpetrator - why would she want to lie about something as frustrating as this? (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

5. Other ways to support survivors.

On a practical level, Sarah suggests that if you have an opportunity to help a survivor, help her reach out for help.

Call pihak yang sepatutnya la. Pihak polis, JKM dan pusat perlindungan la. Tempat yang lebih selamat untuk dilindungi selain orang kata. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)

Translation: Call the relevant authorities. The police, JKM, and shelters. A safer place to go to, as people say.

Try to give natural advice. How to get the help or the first thing first, **I think better they advise the survivor to lodge police report** when they experienced that thing. (Siti, 31, sexual harassment survivor)

Definitely **ask them to make a police report**. (Nurul, 32, sexual harassment survivor)

If you can help in other ways, such as providing temporary shelter, Sarah also recommends this.

> Yang membantu - saya rasa bila saya ada masalah, macam contoh saya kena pukul kan - jiran saya kena pegang saya dengan anak-anak saya - jaga saya untuk sementara - untuk dapatkan perlindungan. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)
>
> **Translation:** What helped - when I felt I had a problem, for example, **when I was beaten, my neighbour would comfort me and my children - take care of us - gave us shelter.**

5.3.2 To government

The government is a key player in a survivor-centric approach because the government has the power to shape community values and norms. The needs and rights of survivors must be prioritised by the government to ensure the vulnerable are protected. While the survivors offered many suggestions, in this report, we focus on the ways survivors believe they can be empowered through increased awareness and the kind of support and empowerment they want from the government in this regard.

There are two types of awareness that survivors touch on. The first is **public awareness**, which is awareness centred around teaching the public about issues of violence against women, including what the forms of violence are. As demonstrated in our survey, many of the non-physical forms of violence were less understood as violence compared to the physical ones.

As Shanthi explains:

> I think because **the situation didn't happen to anyone in my surrounding** - my friends or even my sisters so I think that was one of the factors [that led me to think] this is a problem that I created so I don't deserve to get help or I don't deserve to get sympathy. I don't deserve to be helped by someone. I have to settle this by myself. (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

Public awareness, thus, helps combat a survivor's internalised guilt and shame surrounding the issue as well.

Beyond that, by raising public awareness, the public themselves can be knowledgeable and empower survivors. As Fatima explains:

> Because I got a feel like you know, I got to really and find out what do I do. I got to like speak to different people - find out from different people. So I can't really ask a common friend because I know they don't know because I did try to ask them. So **I think the creating awareness is very important, that's the first thing they should do**. (Fatima, 43, intimate partner violence survivor)

Fatima believes her journey seeking help could have been made easier if the resources needed to help survivors becomes common knowledge.

This is something survivors want across issues.

> Bagi saya, saya rasa mungkin kekurangan - macam kita, kalau tengok tv tu tak ada macam - macam tak terlalu terdedah dengan bab keganasan ni - tak terlalu terdedah. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)
>
> **Translation:** For me, I feel that there's a lack - for example, when we're watching TV, **we're not exposed to these issues** of violence - there's a lack of exposure.

> Just first communication wise - **just raise more and more awareness that these things are happening and that these things are not normal**. I mean show a screenshot if you have to, in a huge ass page in a newspaper: *INI TIDAK NORMAL.* (THIS IS NOT NORMAL.) You know? *HUBUNGI POLIS.* (CALL THE POLICE.) Call the police if you receive anything remotely similar to this. You know - just more campaigns like that because like I said, some far removed friends just think it's a nasty message every once in a while and a couple fake profiles. No! (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

Nisa goes on to explain why this is important:

> It's really important for, for the greater public to really realise that stalking - to really know the examples of stalking, **we thrive through understanding through examples, accessible examples and I think that's a very important way - would probably be most important to start.** (Nisa, 31, stalking survivor)

> I don't think we have this type of thing that in specifically in our law like okay - "this is wrong." So I just hope that they'll take this thing as a serious matter rather than just "okay this is just a stalking." [...] I think **the government should at least let people know [the] type of stalking and you know the kind of things that we can do [if we experience stalking]**. Because at one point, people think that, "Oh this is normal. This happens to everyone. I'm not supposed to overreact to this situation." **I think someone should play a part to actually tell [us] that this is not us overreacting. This is how we are supposed to react.** Because even before I reached help, I thought that I am the one who's overreacting yeah. (Shanthi, 23, stalking survivor)

Ashley supports this, feeling as though Malaysians need a more well-rounded understanding of sexual assault as well.

> **I think it's better if [Malaysians] have a more well-rounded understanding** of how these kinds of assaults happen. (Ashley, 32, sexual assault survivor)

Even beyond reassuring survivors they are not overreacting and teaching people how to identify the forms of violence, raising awareness on these issues and normalising the recognition and reporting of these issues can save lives.

> **I think the government has to take harassment very seriously. 'Cause you know, [if] I don't have support and I don't know what to do - and then, this person is not gonna stop at the end of the day, you know a life would just go off just like that.** So I think they have to make harassment as a very very serious issue and probably, you know, like how people take murder very seriously. (Rachel, 28, stalking survivor)

Rose believes that when these issues are normalised through public messaging, more survivors will come forward.

> **More awareness are being created online** [through] public messaging that comes in and also more people will come forth. (Rose, 47, domestic violence survivor)

Many survivors feel that only through education can these issues be brought to the forefront, so there is an awareness on a societal level what the issues are, how to talk about them, and how not to talk about them. Siti believes that part of the reason why these issues remain problematic is because the public is not aware enough to tell what issues need to be taken seriously.

> **We need proper education** to teach [Malaysians]. It is a must in our country now because [no one knows] what they can talk and what they cannot talk - they think it's a joke but it's not proper for women to experience that. They don't know what is moral and immoral. (Siti, 31, sexual harassment survivor)

Survivors also believe it is the role of the government to cultivate empathy in a society, so that people will respond sensitively to survivors.

> Jangan masyarakat ah sekarang tengok- macam saya sendiri saya tak pernah fikir benda ini akan terjadi untuk saya. So, once saya sudah rasa saya rasa macam macam mana perasaan perempuan-perempuan sebelum ini dan apa perasaan mereka selepas ini kalau benda ini berlaku. So, dalam family ke, ataupun masyarakat jangan tunggu sampai family sendiri kena. Jangan tunggu sampai benda itu berlaku kepada keluarga sendiri. (Privya, 34, rape survivor)
>
> **Translation:** It shouldn't be that people - like myself, I never thought this would happen to me. So once it did, I realised how other women felt before me and what other women felt after this happened. **So, in a family or in a society, don't wait until it happens to your own family.** Don't wait until it happens [to care about it].

Sarah describes how empathy can be taught, what sorts of responses should be encouraged by the government in awareness campaigns:

Orang awam jangan pandang macam hina. Macam bila terjadi macam tu, contoh kes keganasan ni kena pukul, mula dia orang akan pandang - macam pandang tu macam - macam mana nak cakap ah - membuatkan kita terasa tau. Maksudnya tak nak macam tu. Patutnya dia orang kena bagi - datang dekat dengan kita. Contoh kita mangsa kan - datang dekat dengan kita - peluk kita. Tanya. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)

Translation: The public shouldn't look down on us. When something like this happens, for example domestic violence, someone's been physically abused, people usually make it worse [by saying inappropriate or hurtful things]. It shouldn't be like that. We should comfort them. For example, with victims, we should give them comfort, hug them - ask them [what's wrong, what's happening].

The second form of awareness is awareness specifically targeted to survivors on the sources of support that are currently available to them. Generally, survivors are aware that the government has already provided them with all the infrastructure necessary to navigate the situation, but merely lack the information on what the services available are. This holds especially true for survivors of domestic violence. Many survivors expressed regret in not knowing about certain services earlier, therefore more awareness on a community level on the support survivors can receive would greatly help survivors come forward.

I think there should be **more awareness on what domestic violence ladies can do**. Media should play their parts as well to **publish what the government should do, what the government already do**, as to get awareness to the victims la. (Anna, 39, domestic violence survivor)

Actually the law is there but we don't know. When I went and approached the lawyers during the first stage, they asked me, "Did you proceeded with any protection order?" I didn't know such things exist actually. Basically even I don't know whether such things exist. (Sofia, 38, domestic violence survivor)

For me, **when I was suffered, I don't know where to go. I don't know who to contact.** So if I know about - earlier about WAO, someone tell me, I should earlier come to them. [This] kind of rescue things very very less. People don't know. **People really don't know where to go, to whom to find the help.** (Leah, 36, domestic violence survivor)

I think if somebody put 'the programme has been successful' in LinkedIn and that's when 'oh such a program exists'. So similarly, **how many women actually knew that there are such programs - there are such help available**. So they don't know about those programmes. **Create awareness for all these different issues [and the] support available for them.** (Fatima, 43, intimate partner violence survivor)

Bagi macam kita perempuan eh bila tengok tv, eh ada la contoh rumah ke - nombor ke - nombor tempat perlindungan - nombor perlindungan - memang nombor la. Nombor dan tempat perlindungan tu yang boleh kita - yang kita boleh terus pergi contohnya. Ataupun, setiap tempat - contoh setiap kawasan-kawasan tu - macam contoh Selangor - ada daerah-daerah ke - ada tempat perlindungan yang boleh kita pergi yang berdekatan. Tak ada la tempat jauh-jauh - kalau kita pun, bila kita jalan dekat-dekat panik - jauh - bila kita fikir jauhnya tak apala biarlah aku terseksa pun tak apalah. (Sarah, 40, stalking survivor)

Translation: For example, us women, when we watch TV, if there is, for example, a shelter or number - a number for a shelter - really a number is most important. A number and shelter that we can go to directly, for example. Or, in each place, in each area - for example, in Selangor - if there are districts, we should be provided examples of places nearby we can go for shelter. Not some place too far away - because, even for us [survivors], places closeby we panic going to - if the shelter is too far away, then [it's like] *fine, whatever, it doesn't matter, I'll just suffer here.*

So actually **I think government has done everything but if you want to improve it, let the people know that the sources are actually available**. I did not know all the sources available until my friend searched for it so I am so glad I have such a helpful friend lah. Otherwise, I don't know where I would be. (Mary, 20, domestic violence survivor)

One hotline to **give guidelines or to assist survivors because they really didn't have any idea - after they lodge police report, what's next?** That - the question for me la because I also don't know where to go after lodge police report - then what's next? (Siti, 31, sexual harassment survivor)

The ideas encompassed in this chapter can be summarised by the diagram below: At each level of the socio-ecological model, there are attitudes and beliefs that must be held in order for a survivor to successfully seek help when they face violence.
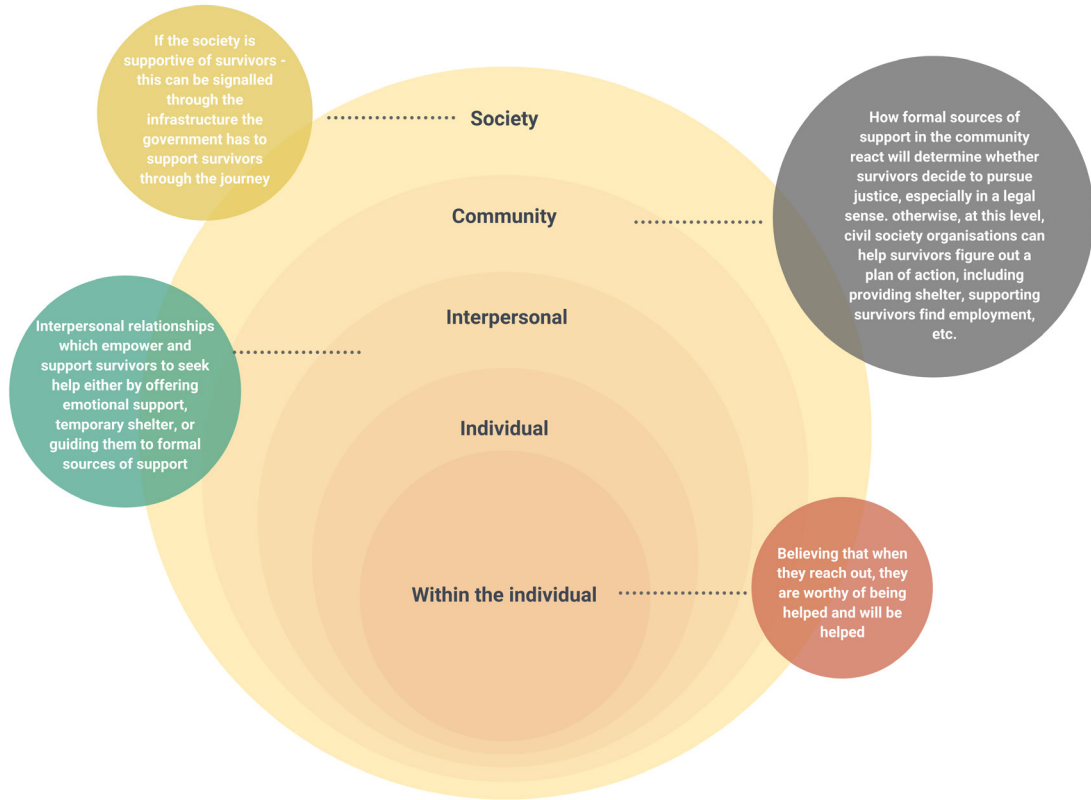
Figure 5.1 - Determining factors which draw survivors to seek help

6
Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter summarises key recommendations based on the initial findings of this study for the consideration of all stakeholders involved in efforts of prevention, and response towards violence against women (VAW) in Malaysia. These recommendations are also especially directed to the National Domestic Violence Committee, a committee set up to monitor and coordinate the national response to domestic violence and led by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.

6.1 Initial Findings

Highlight 1: Only about half of Malaysians are likely to oppose violence-endorsing attitudes and support gender equality.

Measured through the scales utilised in this study, the findings of this study indicate that only about half of the respondent population are likely to oppose violence-endorsing attitudes (52.7%) and support gender equality (46.3%). Worryingly, the other half are likely to be either supportive of violence-endorsing attitudes (25.4%) or are uncertain about their stance and, thus, complicit (21.9%); while approximately a quarter dismiss gender equality (23.8%) or uncertain about their stance/complicit (29.9%).

Unsurprisingly men, particularly older men, displayed more negative and neutral/uncertain responses compared to women. These worrying findings suggest that VAW prevention efforts in Malaysia need to be scaled up in order to reach the half of the population that hold problematic attitudes and are likely to contribute to a culture where VAW is either perpetuated, condoned, or not clearly condemned.

Highlight 2: Malaysians had the most concerning responses towards attitudes and perceptions that:

1. **Excuse the perpetrator and holding women accountable for the violence perpetrated against them,**
2. **Disregard women's right to consent**
3. **Mistrust women's reports of VAW,**
4. **Undermine women's independence and decision-making in public and private spheres of life**
5. **Deny that gender inequality is a problem.**

The top six themes of questions that emerged as having the most concerning responses by the respondent population are identified in Table 6.1. While all of the themes in this study are somewhat interconnected (as shown in Chapter 4), the six themes identified represent critical focus areas that should be prioritised in the design of prevention programmes in Malaysia. The specific statements within these themes that received particularly negative responses are explored with more detail in Chapter 3 of this report.

Table 6.1 - Themes of questions that received the most negative and uncertain responses by Malaysians

Scale	Theme	Percentage of negative responses (%)	Percentage of uncertain responses (%)	Combined percentages of negative and uncertain responses (%)
Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women (CASVAW) scale	Excusing the perpetrator and holding women accountable	24.5	16.3	40.8
	Disregarding women's right to consent	38.2	27.5	65.7
	Mistrusting women's reports of violence	20.8	35.9	56.7
Gender Equality Attitudes Scale (GEAS)	Undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life	48.0	34.6	82.6
	Undermining women's independence and decision-making in public life	27.2	30.7	57.9
	Denying gender inequality is a problem	27.2	36.6	63.8

As mentioned in Chapter 3, while uncertain or neutral stances towards VAW or gender inequality may appear harmless, this study argues that individuals who hold such stances are also a population of interest in this study as they may be complicit in systems that endorse VAW, and are likely to passively enable the perpetuation of attitudes and behaviours that enable violence.

Stacking up the percentages of total negative responses with total uncertain responses provides us a more accurate depiction of the scale of prevention work that needs to be carried out (Table 6.1). While prevention programmes usually look to shift attitudes of Malaysians who are explicitly unsupportive of VAW and gender inequality, those who hold neutral attitudes and who may passively adhere to patriarchal systems and societal norms must also be targeted.

As shown in Figures 6.1 and 6.2, the top five themes which received the most negative responses by Malaysians are:
- Excusing the perpetrator and holding women accountable,
- Disregarding women's right to consent,
- Undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life,
- Undermining women's independence and decision-making in public life
- Denying gender inequality is a problem

When percentages for total negative responses and total uncertain responses are compared against total positive responses for all eleven themes explored in this study (as shown in Figures 6.3 and 6.4) the top five themes that received the most responses are:
- Mistrusting women's reports of violence
- Disregarding women's right to consent
- Undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life,
- Undermining women's independence and decision-making in public life
- Denying gender inequality is a problem
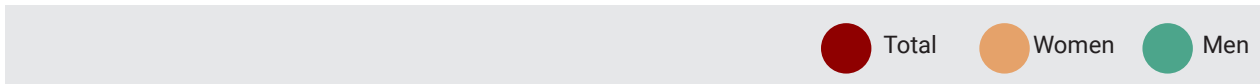
Figure 6.1- Percentage of negative responses in the Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Scale (CASVAWS)

Legend: Total | Women | Men

Excusing the perpetrator and holding women accountable
- Total: 25.5%
- Women: 22.4%
- Men: 28.5%

Minimising violence against women
- Total: 20.0%
- Women: 16.0%
- Men: 23.9%

Mistrusting women's reports of violence
- Total: 20.8%
- Women: 13.3%
- Men: 27.9%

Disregarding women's right to consent
- Total: 38.2%
- Women: 32.5%
- Men: 43.6%

Figure 6.2 - Percentage of negative responses in the Gender Equality Attitutes Scale (GEAS)

Undermining women's independence and decision-making in public life
- Total: 27.2%
- Women: 20.0%
- Men: 34.1%

Undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life
- Total: 48.0%
- Women: 54.2%
- Men: 42.1%

Promoting rigid gender roles and stereotypes and expressions
- Total: 14.7%
- Women: 11.8%
- Men: 17.4%

Condoning male peer relations involving aggression and disrespect towards women
- Total: 10.7%
- Women: 5.8%
- Men: 15.4%

Denying gender inequality is a problem
- Total: 27.2%
- Women: 20.1%
- Men: 34.0%

% Positive responses (unsupportive of VAW)   % Neutral responses (uncertain)   % Negative responses (supportive of VAW)

Figure 6.3 - Percentage of positive responses compared against negative and uncertain responses for the Community Attitude towards

- ?
25.5%   16.3%
58.2% +

Excusing the perpetrator

20.0%   19.5%
60.5%

Minimising violence against women

35.9%
20.8%   43.4%

Mistrusting women's reports of violence

38.2%   27.5%
34.3%

Disregarding women's right to consent
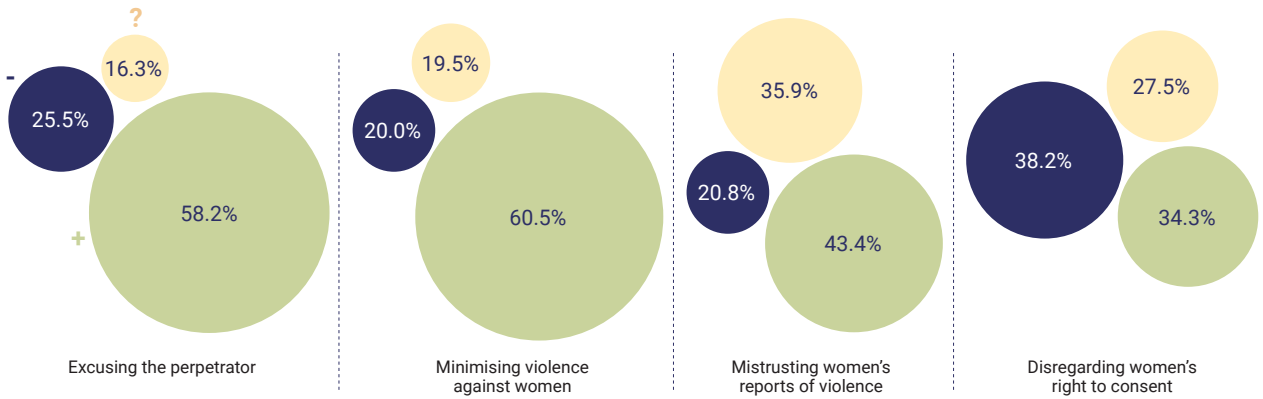
Figure 6.4 - Percentage of positive responses compared against negative and uncertain responses for the Gender Equality Attitudes Scale (GEAS)

- ?
27.2%   30.7%
42.2% +

Undermining women's independence and decision-making in public life

Promoting rigid gender roles, stereotypes and expressions
27.3%
14.7%   58.0%

Denying gender inequality is a problem
27.2%   36.6%
36.2%

34.6%
48.0%   17.5%

Undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life

19.5%
10.7%
69.5%

Condoning male peer relations involving aggression and disrespect towards women
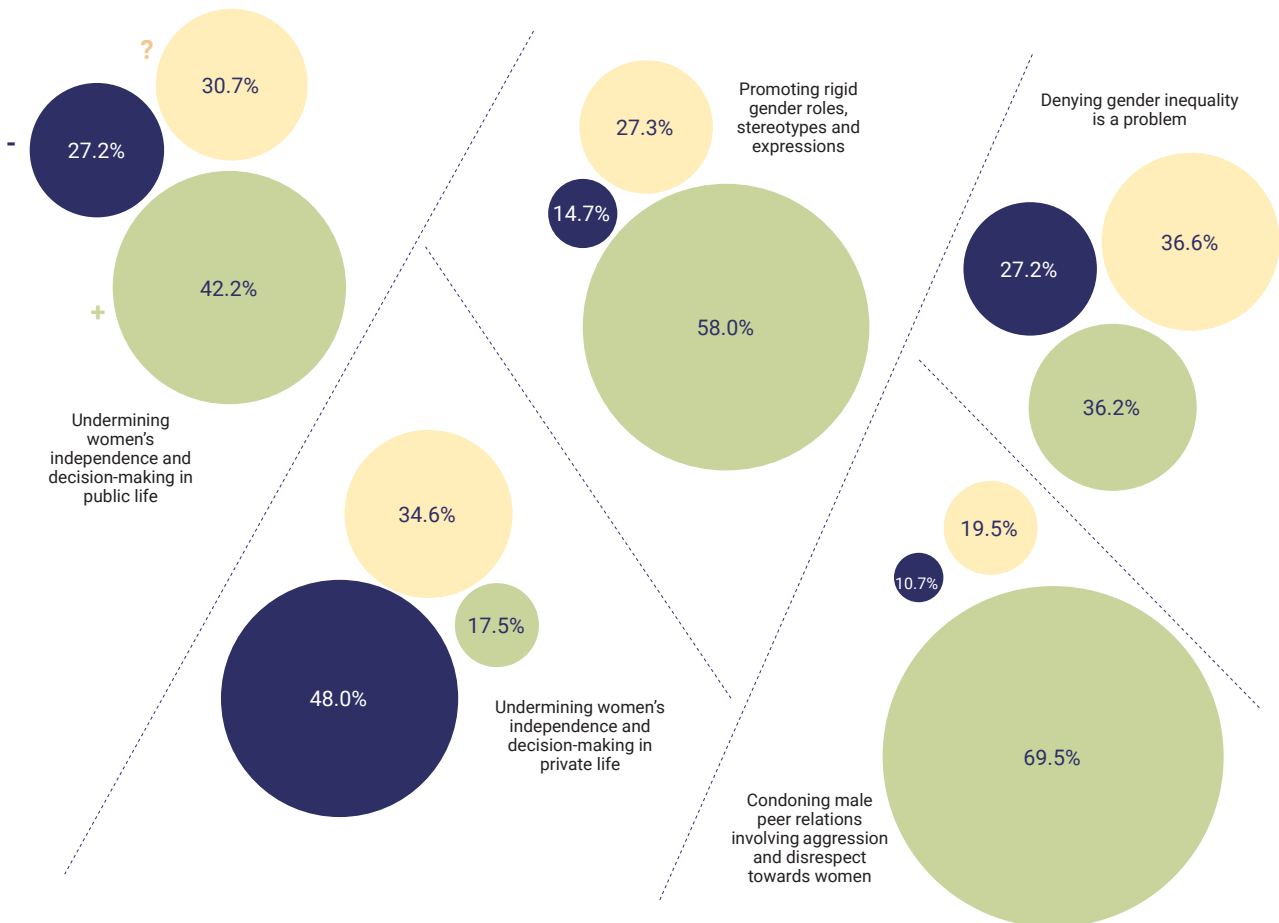
Highlight 3: Men, particularly older men, displayed more negative and uncertain responses towards VAW and gender equality compared to women.

For all eleven themes, men had more negative and uncertain responses compared to women (refer to Figure 6.2), with the exception of one theme - undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life - where women (54.2% negative responses) had a higher percentage of negative responses than men (48.0% negative responses). This is a rather concerning finding as it suggests that **Malaysian women are likely to perpetuate and internalise male dominance within their personal spheres of life**.

For this particular theme, however, men (46.6% uncertain responses) had twice as many uncertain responses compared to women (22.0% uncertain responses) indicating that what was lost in negative responses by men was made up through more uncertain responses. For this theme, therefore, **men were more likely to display uncertainty rather than explicitly displaying support for undermining women's independence and decision-making** (refer to Figure 6.3). Furthermore, respondents aged 45 years old and above are over 2.5 times more likely to endorse violence in this theme as compared to 18-24 year olds. Respondents between the ages of 35-44 years old are also 2.2 times more likely to undermine women's independence in private life, as compared to 18-24 year olds.

Figure 6.5 - Percentage of positive, negative and uncertain responses for the theme of mistrusting women's reports of violence

% Negative responses (supportive of mistrusting reports)

% Positive responses (unsupportive of mistrusting reports)

% Uncertain responses (uncertain of mistrusting reports)

Apart from the above, gender disparities in responses were most pronounced in the themes of **mistrusting women's reports of violence, disregarding women's right to consent, undermining women's independence and decision-making in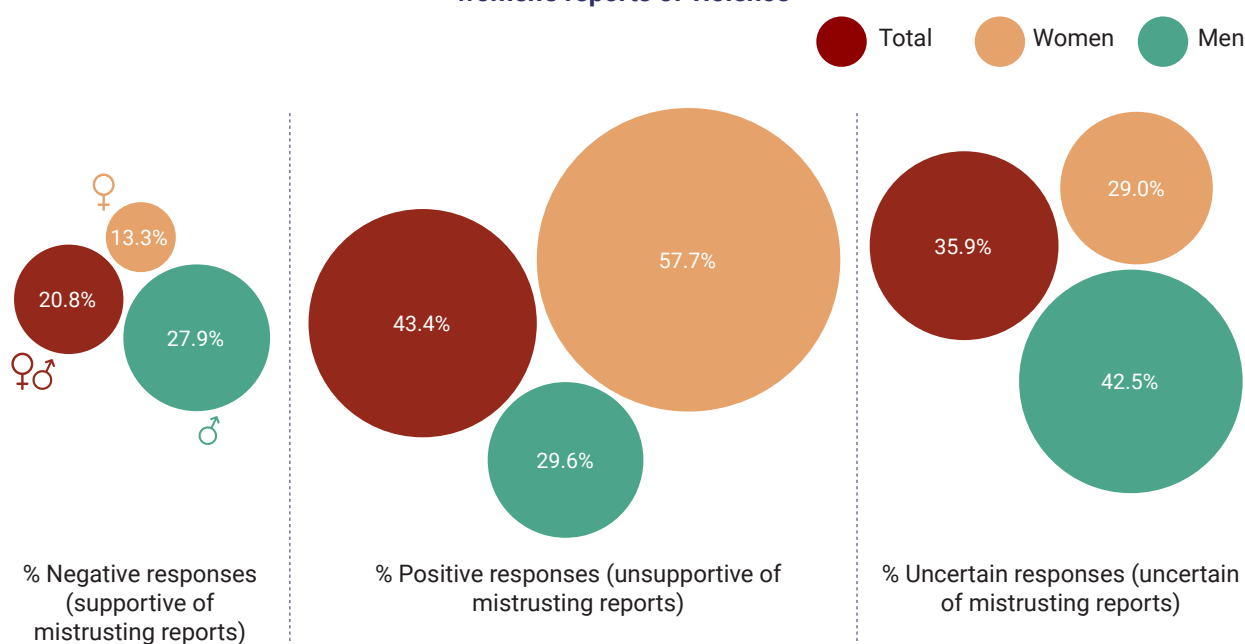 public life and denying that gender inequality is a problem** (refer to Figure 6.1 and 6.2). Age disparities were most noticeable for one theme, for which older Malaysians (55 years old and above) are twice as likely to minimise violence against women as compared to those between 18-24 years old. This is echoed to a smaller extent for respondents between 35-44 years old being 1.89 times more likely to minimise violence.

For the theme of **mistrusting women's reports of violence**, results showed a gap of almost 15.0% for negative responses (supportive of mistrusting reports), 28.1% for positive responses (unsupportive of mistrusting reports) and 13.5% for uncertain responses. In short, **women are more likely to trust other womens' reports of violence while men tend to hold uncertain or unsupportive stances towards the matter.** This is visible even within responses to the individual questions that make up the theme.

Highlight 4: Despite exhibiting a good understanding of the forms of VAW, there is a disconnect between Malaysians' understanding of violence and their perceptions of how this may manifest in their personal lives.

Although the survey results demonstrate that overall Malaysians have a good understanding of what constitutes physical (95.5%) and non-physical forms of violence (87.1%), results from other domains of investigation suggest that this understanding may be superficial as there is a disconnect between Malaysians' understanding of violence and their perceptions of how this manifests in their personal lives. **These discrepancies also raise the possibility that respondents may be responding to the questions in this survey in a socially desirable manner.**

For example, while a majority of our respondent population may agree that slapping and pushing are forms of violence (96.5%), a segment of the population are also likely to believe that domestic violence is a normal reaction to everyday stress and frustration (53.3%) or that leaving an abusive relationship is not as hard as people say it is (37.1%) and thereby partly blaming the survivor for the violence perpetrated against her. Rape myths were also highly endorsed by the survey population, with 83.3% believing that rape happens because of uncontrollable sexual desires and 51.3% blaming how women dress.

This suggests that an understanding of what constitutes VAW **does not necessarily include an understanding of the inherent and unequal power relations between perpetrators and survivors or a consciousness of rape myths, victim-blaming tendencies, and the injustice that it perpetuates against surivivors**. The study asserts that an understanding of such dimensions should be an integral part of prevention programmes and interventions that aspire to meaningfully shift community attitudes, norms, and behaviours towards VAW.

Highlight 5: Malaysians are likely to have less of an understanding of some forms of non-physical violence and of rape.

Despite displaying a good overall understanding of what constitutes VAW, Malaysians' understanding of non-physical forms violence is notably lower than that of physical violence (refer to Section 3.3). This is especially so for controlling behaviours (such as by denying a woman access to finances or preventing a partner from seeing their family or friends) which received approximately 11.0% of negative or unsupportive responses and between 4-6% of uncertain responses from Malaysians.

Additionally, while there were 85.2% responses identifying cyber-stalking to be a form of violence, a lesser percentage (78.1%) identified the behaviour of repeatedly tracking calls, location and activities of a partner as a form of domestic violence. The discrepancy in percentages suggests that stalking behaviours by partners may be regarded as more acceptable by Malaysians. This also likely feeds into the problem of society not taking stalking seriously when stalking is perpetuated by an ex-partner, and based on WAO's own experience of supporting stalking survivors, a fair number of stalking cases are perpetrated by survivors' ex-partners.

With regards to rape, Malaysians exhibited less of an understanding towards statutory rape and the fact that rape is also likely to be perpetratred by acquaintances or people known to the survivor.

- Just over half of the survey population (55.4%) agreed that rape is when anyone involved is under 16 years old, with or without their consent.
- Less than half of the survey population (44.3%) support the idea that women and girls are more likely to be raped by a stranger rather than by someone they know.

These findings, together with the findings that reveal a high endorsement of rape myths in Malaysia, indicate a critical need to enhance public understanding of the definition and characteristics of rape. This especially so, given that a large

percentage of rape cases in Malaysia involve girls under 18, perpetrated by persons known to them.[202] [203]

Highlight 6: Malaysians are likely to disregard women's right to consent.

Malaysians are likely to disregard women's right to consent - with 38.2% of unsupportive responses and 27.5% of uncertain responses towards this theme of questions. With only 34.3% of supportive responses of the idea of consent, it is likely that a significant segment of Malaysians have poor regard for women's decisions and choices in their intimate and sexual relations. In this theme of questions, men had more unsupportive responses compared to women.

This is deeply worrying, because denying the necessity of practicing informed consent in sexual relationships, including between married partners, often leads to the endorsement of rape myths and societal attitudes that minimise violence against women, mistrust reports of violence, and excuse the violent behaviours of perpetrators, particularly when personal boundaries are violated and violence against women occurs.

For example, in incidences of rape, rather than focusing on perpetrators' actions and whether consent was obtained, societal focus often shifts towards the behaviour, attire, or speech of the survivor as means of determining whether the survivor 'asked for it'. Societal recognition of the importance of practicing consent is, therefore, imperative in order to steer away attitudes that tend towards the path of victim-blaming and excusing perpetrators' actions. **Essentially, the recognition of women's right to consent is also an acknowledgement of women's autonomy over her own body.**

Highlight 7: Rape myths are pervasive in Malaysian society.

Rape myths can loosely be defined as "attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women."[204] They originate from gender stereotypes, acceptance of interpersonal violence, and a misunderstanding about the nature of rape and sexual assault.[205] Importantly, societal endorsement of rape myths often leads to the attitudes that minimise the severity of rape/sexual assault or mistrust of women's reports of violence.[206] It can shape responses of legal and law enforcement officers towards survivors, and when survivors themselves believe rape myths they may engage in self-blame or refuse to seek help due to the fear of revictimisation by the criminal justice system.[207] [208]

This study reveals that Malaysians have a high endorsement of rape myths, as large segments of the respondent population believe that rape happens because:

- men are not able to control their desires - 83.3% of respondents
- women do not take care of how they dress - 49.1% of respondents
- women do not take care of how they act - 51.3% of respondents

When extrapolated to the Malaysian population as a whole (as this sample size of 1,000 respondents permits), these findings indicate that rape myths are extremely prevalent in Malaysian society. Even a conservative estimate that takes into account potential measurement errors pertaining to question design, survey layout, or any other factors of influence in this sense, would likely still produce disproportionately one-sided responses towards rape myths acceptance.

This is deeply concerning, as research has shown that the endorsement of rape myths increases the likelihood of

[202] Muhammad Imran Ahmad et al., "Sexual Assault: A Descriptive Study of Victims Attending a Public Hospital in Ipoh," *Malaysian Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences* 16, no. 1 (2020): pp. 17-23, https://bit.ly/2Z5biLB.
[203] Home Minister, "Parliamentary Reply: Question 473," *Parliamentary Reply: Question 473*, Parliamentary Reply: Question 473 (2019), https://bit.ly/3E3Jh6y.
[204] Kimberly A. Lonsway and Louise F. Fitzgerald, "Rape Myths," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1994): pp. 133-164, doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1994.tb00448.x.
[205] Martha R. Burt, "Cultural Myths and Supports for Rape.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38, no. 2 (1980): pp. 217-230, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.38.2.217.
[206] Patrice Crall and Wind Goodfriend, "She Asked for It: Statistics and Predictors of Rape Myth Acceptance," Modern Psychological Studies 22, no. 1 (2016), https://bit.ly/3Bftf7A.
[207] ibid.
[208] Amy Dellinger Page, "Gateway to Reform? Policy Implications of Police Officers' Attitudes toward Rape," American Journal of Criminal Justice 33, no. 1 (2008): pp. 44-58, doi:10.1007/s12103-007-9024-9.

violence-endorsing attitudes and perpetuates injustices against survivors.[209] [210] The fact of the matter is that rape can happen to anyone, regardless of what the person is wearing, how they were behaving, or where they were when the incident took place. The focus must shift from what survivors did or did not do to the only thing that should matter: The violent actions and behaviour of the perpetrator. After all, sexual violence is a conscious act of perpetration and an active decision, on the part of the perpetrator, to inflict harm and exert power and dominance over someone. Reducing this to an inability to control one's desires evades this fact and simply shifts the responsibility of violence from perpetrator to survivor.

Highlight 8: Almost one third Malaysians are likely to believe that women exaggerate the extent of gender inequality in Malaysia.

Gender inequality is well documented in Malaysia, as Malaysia ranks 112th out of 156 countries in the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report,[211] a drop of eight places from our rank in 2020 - signalling a worsening of women's empowerment in Malaysia relative to other countries in the world. While performance in education and health are strong, Malaysian women still lack economic and political empowerment, which are crucial to achieving women's equality. Without economic empowerment, women remain financially dependent on working partners while lacking political empowerment means that women's needs may not be advocated for or reflected in policy. This is reflected in how women's representation across Parliamentary, Ministerial, and State-elected representative positions rarely exceeds 15% in Malaysia,[212] far lower than the global average of 24.9%.[213] These structures maintain women's vulnerable positions in the public sphere, and this is directly linked to women's vulnerability in the private sphere. When women lack structural and institutional empowerment, vulnerability to violence also increases as women may feel they lack the ability or support to leave violent relationships, being dependent on their perpetrators for financial security or physical security, such as having a roof over their heads and food.

Given this, it is concerning to find that **only an average of 36.2% of the respondents in this study acknowledges that gender inequality exists in Malaysia**. This either means most Malaysians are unaware of how gender inequality manifests and how it may directly impact them or they are aware, but see it as a non-issue. In either case, it suggests that women's subordinate position in society is seen as normal and acceptable, reflected in how **one third of respondents (30.9%) explicitly believe women exaggerate the extent of gender inequality in Malaysia, while another third (36.5%) are uncertain about this**.

Paradoxically, despite denying the existence of gender inequality in Malaysia, **almost a third of the responses (27.2%) were supportive of ideas that undermine women's independence and decision-making in public life, while almost half of the responses (48.0%) undermined women's independence and decision-making in private life**. This is reflected through survey results shared in Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, which includes poor levels of opposition to the following ideas:

- Men make more capable bosses than women in the workplace (only 38.5% opposing responses)
- Overall, men are better political leaders than women (only 41.2% opposing responses)
- Men, rather than women, should hold positions of responsibility in the community (only 42.1% opposing responses)

The more people believe that men make better leaders both in public and private spheres of life, the more likely it is for women to be excluded from decision-making processes and be discouraged from advocating for their needs. This issue compounds because, within a society where institutions are built by and for men, women's unique needs are

[209] Lonsway and Fitzgerald, "Rape Myths."

[210] Anastasia Powell and Kim Webster, "Cultures of Gendered Violence: An Integrative Review of Measures of Attitudinal Support for Violence against Women," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 51, no. 1 (2016): pp. 40-57, doi:10.1177/0004865816675669.

[211] World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2021* World Economic Forum, 2021, https://bit.ly/2ZlHnyI.

[212] Exact numbers: 16.1% of Ministerial, 14.9% of Parliamentary, and, on average, 11.4% of State-elected representative positions. Source: Global Gender Gap Report and Wikipedia

[213] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in Parliaments: World and Regional Averages," Inter-Parliamentary Union, Last modified October 1, 2019, https://bit.ly/3jqNNnr.

often overlooked. The way gender inequality links issues from maternity leave to access and proximity to shelters/safe spaces to differing needs for public infrastructure, such as public transport and streetlight placements[214], may not be obvious at first glance to men but these issues and many more is why the dismissal of gender inequality explicitly works to disempower women and maintain their vulnerable positions. Persistent denial of or ignorance towards the reality of gender inequalities always helps to inadvertently maintain the structures of gender inequality in a vicious cycle that puts women at increased risk of vulnerability and harm.

Highlight 9: Only one tenth of Malaysians explicitly support child marriage with the highest support coming from older men.

In investigating Malaysian public attitudes and perceptions towards child marriage, this study finds a noticable opposition to the broad idea of child marriage with 70.3% survey responses expressing support against child marriage under any and all circumstances (refer to Section 3.4). Issues that can disrupt this belief, however, are rooted in existing ideas of shame over adolescent/teenage pregnancy, considerations of dignity and notions of familial reputation (refer to Section 4.5).

Only approximately one tenth of Malaysians explicitly support child marriage, with the highest support coming from older men above the age of 55 years. Child marriage involving girls 11.2% supportive responses), however, faced less opposition than child marriage involving boys (9.5% supportive responses) aligning with existing evidence about the higher prevalence of child marriage amongst girls in Malaysia.

Disturbingly, of the 11.2% who support child marriage involving girls the majority are aware of the myriad of harms inflicted by the practice. For example, 50.0% of this subgroup are aware that child marriage harms the development of girls and 52.7% are aware that child marriage increases girls' risk of experiencing domestic violence. This suggests that for Malaysians who support child marriage, ideas of maintaining familial dignity as well as an avoidance of shame rooted in the taboo of premarital sex takes precedence over the autonomy and long-term well-being of girls.

Further analysis also reveals that those who support child marriage are more or less evenly distributed across the regions of Malaysia, with the East Coast taking a slight lead and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) having the lowest number of supportive responses. Support for child marraige by region ranged between 8.1% to 15.9% for child marriage involving girls, and 8.1% to 14.8% for child marriage involving boys. Interestingly, this study shows that Malaysians in urban and rural areas are just as likely to support child marriage.

Highlight 10: Malaysian perceptions towards towards FGM/C are likely to be shaped by several underlying issues.

While FGM/C was not specifically probed in the survey, this report has produced a special chapter (Section 4.6) on FGM/C in collaboration with two women's rights organisations, ARROW and SIS, who have worked extensively on the issue of FGM/C in Malaysia, to outline the reasons why FGM/C remains a persistent practice in Malaysia and the underlying issues associated with the perception of the practice. This chapter goes on to suggest that any prevention programmes or public information campaigns on FGM/C in Malaysia should take these underlying issues into consideration.

Largely, FGM/C remains a popular practice because of a misunderstanding of religious obligation (Section 4.6.3.1), coupled with cultural interpretations of religion, sexuality, and hygiene (Section 4.6.3.2). There is also a move towards a medicalised model of FGM/C, where the practice shifts away from provision by traditional *Mak Bidans* to medical professionals, such as doctors, lending the practice more legitimacy (Section 4.6.3.3). While doctors view their provision of FGM/C as a necessary harm reduction technique[215] and potentially a step towards the abolishment of the practice

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[214] Further elaboration on these examples can be read in *Invisible Women: Exposing data bias in a world designed for men* by Caroline Criado Perez.

[215] Marie-Hélène Doucet, Christina Pallitto, and Danielle Groleau, "Understanding the Motivations of Health-Care Providers in Performing Female Genital Mutilation: An Integrative

altogether, evidence suggests that the procedure, as provided by medical professionals, shifts the type of FGM/C practiced from the WHO's classification[216] of Type IV, involving all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for nonmedical purposes, e.g., pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, and cauterisation, to the more severe Type I procedure, where the clitoris is either partially or completely removed.[217] Further, as the WHO asserts, there is no evidence that medicalisation as a stop-gap solution actually leads to abolishment.[218]

The issue is further exacerbated by a lack of clear communication on the part of stakeholders. While there is no explicit verse in the Quran or hadiths that makes FGM/C compulsory, there is a national fatwa declaring FGM/C compulsory[219], which has been gazetted by the states to varying extents. However, Perlis released its own fatwa opposing the national fatwa.[220] The medical community has failed to take a clear stance as well, despite how medical practitioners have stated a willingness to stop providing the procedure if FGM/C were banned.[221] All of this feeds into a confusing environment, where parents are not given enough information to make an informed decision about whether or not to allow their daughters to undergo the practice, as evidenced by the fact that, in an ongoing study, 90% of parents who had sent their daughters for FGM/C did not know that the practice falls under WHO classifications of FGM.

Finally, studies by SIS demonstrate that FGM/C receives biased media coverage, such that only articles in English discuss the myths surrounding the practice while articles written in Bahasa Malaysia, the main language of the community which practices FGM/C, fail to comprehensively expound the issue, instead perpetuating the myths of the goodness of the practice.[222] This signals more must be done to effectively communicate information to the relevant communities in accessible and easy to understand ways.

Highlight 11: Compared to other formal sources of support, Malaysians are likely to first seek help from the police following incidences of domestic violence and sexual harassment.

In Section 3.6 of this report, respondents' help-seeking preferences revealed that the police and family are critical points of support for the public. About a third of Malaysians are more likely to first seek help from the police following incidents of domestic violence and sexual harassment. Positively, this also indicates that at least a third of Malaysians view domestic violence and sexual harassment as a crime needing to be reported immediately.

Talian Kasih was highlighted by less than 10% of the respondents, indicating insufficient public awareness of this hotline service and its connection to serving domestic violence and sexual harassment survivors. Aside from the police, other government stakeholders such as the Social Welfare Department, hospitals, and primary health clinics were cited by a dismal percentage of respondents (refer to Section 3.6), indicating a dire need to increase public awareness on the range of services available for survivors of VAW. In particular, more efforts are needed to highlight the free and integrated services available for survivors at One-Stop Crisis Centres (OSCCs) in major government hospitals across Malaysia.

Review of the Literature," Reproductive Health 14, no. 1 (2017), doi:10.1186/s12978-017-0306-5.

[216] World Health Organization, "Female Genital Mutilation," World Health Organization, Last modified February 3, 2020, http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation.

[217] Abdul Rashid, Yufu Iguchi, and Siti Nur Afiqah, "Medicalization of Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia: A Mixed Methods Study," *PLOS Medicine* 17, no. 10 (2020), doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1003303.

[218] World Health Organization, "Global Strategy to Stop Health-Care Providers from Performing Female Genital Mutilation" World Health Organization, 2010, https://www.refworld.org/docid/4ca3385b2.html.

[219] JAKIM, "Hukum Pemotongan Genitalia Wanita (Female Genital Mutilation)," Sumber Maklumat Al-Ahkam Al-Fiqhiyyah, Last modified 2009, https://bit.ly/3AvIxos.

[220] Malay Mail, "Perlis Mufti Decrees Female Circumcision Optional, Says No Proof It Cuts Libido: Malay Mail," Malay Mail, Last modified June 8, 2017, https://bit.ly/3oWVOEd.

[221] Abdul Rashid, Yufu Iguchi, and Siti Nur Afiqah, "Medicalization of Female Genital Cutting in Malaysia: A Mixed Methods Study," *PLOS Medicine* 17, no. 10 (2020), doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1003303.

[222] Sisters in Islam, "A Discourse Analysis of Media Representations of Female Circumcision in Malaysia" Sisters in Islam, 2021, https://bit.ly/3iYsUje.

Highlight 12: Survivor interactions with friends, family and the community are integral in influencing survivors' help-seeking decisions.

Findings revealed that informal sources of support (e.g. friends and family, NGOs) play a critical role in connecting survivors with formal sources of support (e.g. police, hospital). As such, this study posits that empowering society with adequate knowledge on how to respond to survivors, including through an understanding referral pathways and sources of protection and support for survivors should be made a priority within Malaysia's prevention strategy and programmes.

Additionally, the study also revealed a pattern of third-party responses (e.g. from family and friends, frontline government officers) that appear simple and mundane but were critical in encouraging survivors to reach out to sources of formal support for help. These include responses that centre around offering emotional support (in particular indicating to the survivor that she is believed), offering expertise, knowledge or insight (in particular knowledge of legal structures or processes), offering tangible support (e.g. sharing a resource/contact) and displaying professional conduct (for frontline officers) thereby instilling confidence that help is near and possible.

Highlight 13: Malaysian are more likely to have seen, heard or read public messaging on domestic violence and sexual harassment through television, Facebook, and newspapers.

A majority of the respondents (over 80%) reported having seen, heard, or read public messages on more than one form of VAW. Of this pool of respondents, domestic violence received the most responses (81.4%). This is followed by sexual harassment (74.6%), stalking (29.9%), and rape (6.7%). The notably lower percentage of responses for stalking and rape points towards a critical need to open up spaces for more public discussion on rape and stalking to create an awareness on the dangerous threats they may pose to women on an everyday basis.

Additionally, survey results revealed that television, the Facebook app, and newspapers were the top three mediums through which respondents reported consuming existing public messaging on VAW. **These top three mediums were consistent even when the data was disaggregated according to respondents' language of choice or strata (rural/ urban)**. This result is extremely interesting as it provides stakeholders with an indication of the effectiveness of existing messaging, albeit purely in terms of reach. A review of existing public messaging on domestic violence and sexual harassment on television, Facebook, and newspapers could provide an indication of best practices that could be echoed for in terms of reach, while a review of the quality of existing messaging could provide an indication of steps that need to be taken to directly challenge violence endosring attitude and improve public messaging on VAW in Malaysia.

6.2 Key Recommendations

Recommendation 1: VAW prevention initiatives in Malaysia should be underpinned by a comprehensive prevention strategy and action plan in order to achieve a wider reach and sustained results.

As mentioned, only about half of Malaysians are likely to oppose violence-endorsing attitudes and support gender equality (refer to Sections 3.1 and 3.2). Men, in particular, displayed more negative and uncertain responses and, thus presumably, were more complicit in perpetuating violence-endorsing attitudes compared to women. This suggests that VAW prevention efforts in Malaysia should be scaled up to reach these populations. **Adopting a comprehensive prevention strategy that works across the ecological framework to target all levels of society using multiple strategies** will help ensure efforts have a wider reach and achieve more sustained results.[223] This also aligns with a CEDAW Committee recommendation to the Malaysian government.

"To adopt a comprehensive strategy with proactive and sustained measures that target women and men at all levels of society, including religious and traditional leaders, to eliminate discriminatory stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes concerning the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society."

- Recommendation by the CEDAW Committee, in its Concluding Observations to Malaysia, 2018.

In shaping this prevention strategy, **stakeholders should draw on existing evidence-based research and guidance on prevention programming.** For instance, one of the key elements of effective prevention policy and programming identified by a team of experts, is for analysis and action to occur across the social ecology[224] - composed of individual, interpersonal, community and societal levels. This reinforces the idea that essentially everyone has to be a part of the solution and that the prevention of violence cannot be achieved by individuals, groups and institutions working in isolation. Apart from the government, the media, education and corporate sector also has an important role to play. Table 6.2 presents broad aims and intervention examples that can be adopted across the different levels of the social ecology.

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[223] Mary Ellsberg et al., "Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls: What Does the Evidence Say?," *The Lancet* 385, no. 9977 (2015): pp. 1555-1566, doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(14)61703-7.
[224] Ellsberg et al., "Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls."

Table 6.2 - Aim and intervention examples across the ecological model

Social ecology Level	Aims	Intervention examples
Individual	Empowerment and opportunity for women; Support and accountability from men	Skill-building, consciousness raising, activism
Interpersonal	Recognition, respect and dialogue	First responders, neighbourhood organising, skill building, critical reflection
Community	Enabling Environment	Community outreach, movement building, skill building, collective action, popular education, edutainment/change in public debate
Societal	Supportive Infrastructure	Social movements for state accountability; public opinion campaigns, legal and policy reforms, funding, advocacy

Source: Adapted from Michau et al. [225]

Although evidence-based research into prevention programming is still being developed and refined, there are many programming approaches and interventions that have been shown to have promising effects when designed effectively.[226] [227] These include community mobilisation interventions that are multi-component, women's economic empowerment activities, communication and media initiatives, school-based interventions, parenting programmes, peer and relationship interventions and many others. A thorough review of evidence-based interventions that could work within the Malaysian context is needed.

General Recommendation No. 33 on Women's Access to Justice by the CEDAW Committee

Recommendations for stereotyping and gender bias in the justice system and the importance of capacity building

- Take measures, including awareness-raising and capacity-building for all actors of justice systems and for law students to eliminate gender stereotyping and incorporate a gender perspective in all aspects of the justice system;
- Include other professionals, in particular health professionals and social workers, who can play an important role in cases of violence against women and in family matters, in these awareness raising and capacity building programmes;
- Ensure that capacity-building programmes address in particular:
    - The issue of the credibility and weight given to women's voices, arguments and testimonies, as parties and witnesses;
    - The inflexible standards often developed by judges and prosecutors on what they consider as appropriate behaviour for women;
- Consider promoting a dialogue on the negative impact of stereotyping and gender bias in the justice system and the need for improved justice outcomes for women victims and survivors of violence;
- Raise awareness on the negative impact of stereotyping and gender bias and encourage advocacy related

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[225] Lori Michau et al., ""Prevention Of Violence Against Women And Girls: Lessons From Practice"", The Lancet 385, no. 9978 (2015): 1672-1684, doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(14)61797-9.

[226] The Equality Institute, "Literature Review: Ending Violence against Women and Girls," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018, https://bit.ly/3pv33DT.

[227] R Jewkes et al., "Effective Design and Implementation Elements in Interventions to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls" UK Aid, 2020, https://bit.ly/2XFi0Yj.

to stereotyping and gender bias in justice systems, especially in gender-based violence cases; and

- Provide capacity building to judges, prosecutors, lawyers and law enforcement officials on the application of international legal instruments related to human rights, including the CEDAW Convention and the jurisprudence of the CEDAW Committee, and on the application of legislation prohibiting discrimination against women.

Recommendations for education and awareness-raising on impact of stereotypes

Education from a gender perspective

- Develop gender expertise, including by increasing the number of gender advisors, with the participation of civil society organizations, the Academia and the media;
- Disseminate multi-format materials to inform women about their human rights and the availability of mechanisms for access to justice. States parties should inform women about their eligibility for support, legal aid, as well as for social services that interface with justice systems; and
- Integrate educational programmes on women's rights and gender equality, including legal literacy
  - legal aid, as well as for social services that interface with justice systems; and
- Integrate educational programmes on women's rights and gender equality, including legal literacy programmes, into curricula at all levels of education which emphasize the crucial role of women's access to justice and the role of men and boys as advocates and stakeholders.

Awareness-raising through civil society, media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

- Emphasize the role that the media and ICTs can play in dismantling cultural stereotypes about women in connection with their right to access justice. Particular attention should be paid to challenging cultural stereotypes concerning gender-based discrimination and violence, including domestic violence, rape and other forms of sexual violence;
- Develop and implement measures to raise awareness among the media and the population on women's right to access justice, in close collaboration with communities and civil society organizations. Such measures should be multidimensional and directed to girls and women, boys and men and should take account of the relevance and potential of ICTs to transform cultural and social stereotypes;
- Support and involve media bodies and people working with ICTs in an ongoing public dialogue about women's human rights in general and within the context of access to justice in particular; and
- Take steps to promote a culture and a social environment whereby justice-seeking by women is viewed as both legitimate and acceptable rather than as cause for additional discrimination and/or stigmatization

Source: CEDAW Committee[228]

Importantly, comprehensive efforts to shift public attitudes and perceptions **must take into account Malaysians of different age groups, genders, socioeconomic groups, and other variables**. For example. violence against women is far from a woman's-only issue and neither is it necessarily concentrated in the urban areas, thus, attempts at prevention and eradication should not be targeted at women or urban areas alone.

While there are numerous types of interventions that could be implemented to improve community attitudes and behaviours against violence, ultimately, such efforts (whether existing or novel) must be closely monitored to assess its immediate and longitudinal effects, and whether these signal towards positive change, negative change, or stagnancy. This leads into Recommendation 6 of this chapter, which calls on the government to carry out national representative surveys on public attitudes towards VAW as a way of gauging progress and informing the design of prevention programming in Malaysia.

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[228] CEDAW General Recommendation No. 33 - On Women's Access to Justice" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCRH), 2015, https://bit.ly/3kgcuUj.

Recommendation 2: VAW prevention initiatives in Malaysia should enhance public understanding towards rape and forms of non-physical violence, in particular cyber-harassment, stalking and coercive/controlling behaviours by partners.

Overall, Malaysians demonstrated relatively good levels of knowledge about physical and non-physical forms of VAW. Non-physical forms of VAW such as controlling behaviours by partners and cyber-harassment, however, were a little less likely to be recognised as violence. VAW prevention programmes should emphasise that cyber-harassment, stalking and coercive/controlling behaviours are also forms of VAW.

With regards to rape, Malaysians exhibited less of an understanding towards statutory rape and the fact rape is also more likely to be perpetrated by acquaintances or people known to the survivor.[229] [230] These findings indicate a critical need to enhance public understanding of definition and common characteristics of rape. This is especially so, given that a large percentage of reported rape cases in Malaysia involve girls under the age 18 and is perpetrated by persons known to them.[231] [232]

Recommendation 3: VAW prevention initiatives in Malaysia should actively challenge underlying violence-endorsing attitudes and societal norms that help sustain VAW within the society.

Existing prevention programmes in Malaysia commonly focus on raising awareness of what constitutes VAW, its unacceptability, psychological first aid skills and resources for help. While these focus areas still remain relevant for Malaysian society, prevention programmes should take a step further to **actively challenge underlying social norms and widely-shared community attitudes** that support VAW and gender inequality, and in doing so, **recognise that the root causes of VAW extend beyond individual circumstances, attitudes or behaviours.**

As highlighted by many experts within the field, violence-endorsing attitudes and behaviours are unlikely to change unless and until societal norms that can act as 'a brake to social change' are addressed.[233] There is also emerging evidence that **interventions that employ a gender transformative approach are likely to be more effective** compared to interventions that do not.[234] Gender transformative approaches to programming goes beyond addressing specific violent behaviours and focuses on challenging gender norms, gender inequality and ideas that promote controlling and aggressive forms of masculinity. It could include campaign messages such as "real men don't hit women", alongside a range of other messaging disputing ideas of traditional gender roles, dominant, aggressive masculinity, and submissive femininity

Promoting gender equality is a critical part of violence prevention, as gender inequalities increase the risk of violence by men against women, and hinder the capability of those affected to seek protection. Thus, the discourse surrounding equality should not be posed, or interpreted as being disadvantageous for men - but rather, as progress for all members of society, to encourage healthy individual expression and community attitudes against violence. For example, school-based programmes can address gender norms and attitudes, while community interventions that empower men as partners against gender-based violence can encourage collaborative responsibility against violence.collective community attitudes against VAW.

In order to tackle harmful social norms and attitudes, interventions need to **create new shared beliefs and values** centred on non-violence, gender equality and social justice.[235] This can be done through a variety of ways including through addressing incorrect facts or beliefs related VAW (e.g. rape is more likely to be committed by a stranger),

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[229] RAINN, "Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics," RAINN, Last modified 2021, https://bit.ly/2Z7ff2y.

[230] Lucy Adams, "Sex Attack Victims Usually Know Attacker, Says New Study," BBC News, Last modified March 1, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-43128350.

[231] Muhammad Imran Ahmad et al., "Sexual Assault: A Descriptive Study of Victims Attending a Public Hospital in Ipoh," *Malaysian Journal of Medicine and Health Sciences* 16, no. 1 (2020): pp. 17-23, https://bit.ly/2Z5biLB.

[232] Home Minister, "Parliamentary Reply: Question 473," *Parliamentary Reply: Question 473*, Parliamentary Reply: Question 473 (2019), https://bit.ly/3E3Jh6y.

[233] Michaeljon Alexander-Scott, Emma Bell, and Jenny Holden, "Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls" Department for International Development, 2016, https://bit.ly/3CczsT8.

[234]

[235] Alexander-Scott, Bell, and Holden, "Shifting Social Norms."

providing examples of harms of VAW (e.g. child marriage harms the emotional and physical development of a child), reframing an issue in a new way or emphasising the direction of change within a community (eg. Malaysian men are increasingly challenging toxic masculinity - how about you?). Such efforts should be guided by proven communication strategies and models of behavioural change.

This study provides an indication of violence-endorsing attitudes that are likely to be prevalent in Malaysian society. Examples of corresponding public messaging are highlighted in the Table 6.3 below, not as an exhaustive list but as a primer of possible ways forward for VAW prevention efforts in Malaysia.

Relatedly, although the findings of this study show that Malaysians have a good knowledge about what constitutes VAW, this did not preclude them from the likelihood of holding violence endorsing attitudes. These findings show that there appears to be a disconnect between Malaysians' understanding of VAW and how it may manifest in their personal lives. As such, in addition to challenging underlying attitudes of VAW, prevention programmes should also clearly illustrate how such attitudes are reflected through common daily practices and conversations and challenge them or work to address and debunk them.

Table 6.3 - Examples of violence-endorsing attitudes likely to held be held by Malaysians and the corresponding public messaging that could be amplified

Themes of Violence Endorsing Attitudes	Questions with the most concerning responses			Example of messages to be amplified[236]
	Questions	Negative/ Supportive responses	Uncertain responses	
Excusing the perpetrator and holding women accountable	Most domestic violence cases are actually just a normal reaction from everyday stress and frustration.	53.3%	15.9%	• Violent behaviour is not an acceptable response to stress, frustration, jealousy or anger nor should it be regarded as normal • Violent behaviour is a deliberate choice. Perpetrators use it to control and dominate their victims because no one is watching or holding them accountable • Usually perpetrators of domestic violence are never violent outside the home or in public, even when under stress.
	Sometimes a woman can make a man so angry that he hits her when he didn't mean to.	43.0%	21.7%	
	Women who flirt all the time are somewhat to blame if their partner gets jealous and hits them.	30.0%	25.8%	

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236 Safe Steps, "Family Violence Myths & Facts," Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre, Last modified December 15, 2020, https://bit.ly/3G7d7ZJ.

Minimising violence against women	Female victims who stay with their abusive partners are also responsible for the ongoing abuse.	44.9%	21.4%	A survivor is at high risk of experiencing even more violence, including murder, when she leaves or attempts to leave an abuser. If a survivor chooses to stay in an abusive relationship, it doesn't mean the situation isn't bad. Rather, it could be that she is concerned that it might make things worse. Other reasons why a survivor might stay in a abusive relationship include: • Threats by the perpetrator of harm • Lack of financial independence • Family pressure to keep the family together • Belief that the partner can and will change • Isolation – lack of family and social support networks
	I don't believe it's as hard as people say it is for women to leave an abusive relationship	37.1%	33.5%	
Disregarding women's right to consent	If women send their nudes to their partners, they themselves should also be held responsible if the pictures are spread around without their permission.	64.6%	16.2%	**Consent** is permission that is **F**reely given, **R**eversible, **I**nformed, **E**nthusiastic, and **S**pecific (FRIES).[237] When both parties have consent, it means they both have each other's full permission for what is in question.[238] Any sexual act without consent is wrong. Even if a person consents to some sexual activity, this does not act as consent for all sexual activity.
	Women often say 'no' when they actually mean yes.	32.2%	36.7%	If a person changes their mind, and takes away consent, that must be respected. When someone say 'no,' they mean no and this must be respected. **Healthy boundaries** are when you say "no" and the other person respectfully listens, agrees, and behaves more appropriately.[239]
	Since some women are so sexual in public, it's not surprising that some men think that it is okay for them to touch women without permission.	31.9%	20.7%	**Unhealthy behaviors** are when you say "no" and the other person tries to make you feel bad for saying "no", guilts you into changing your mind, or ignores what you want.[240] [241]

[237] UN Women, "When It Comes to Consent, There Are No Blurred Lines," UN Women, Last modified November 18, 2019, https://bit.ly/3IzdOTd.

[238] RAINN, "What Consent Looks Like," RAINN, Last modified 2021, https://bit.ly/3CfwRYK.

[239] Design for Change Recovery, "Why Setting Boundaries in Recovery Is Important," Design for Change, Last modified August 29, 2020, https://bit.ly/3notU1x.

[240] ibid

[241] Elizabeth Earnshaw, "6 Types of Boundaries You Deserve to Have (and How to Maintain Them)," Mindbodygreen, Last modified June 25, 2021, https://bit.ly/3Eh07yR.

The recently unveiled Waja Squad, an anti-crime movement meant to unite and empower women against violence,[242] is a positive step towards addressing VAW. With a goal of attracting and mobilising 100,000 volunteers,[243] the Waja Squad has the opportunity to work at the grassroots level to educate and address violence-endorsing attitudes and, thus, presents a good entry point. In the future, the Skuad Waja Module should incorporate public messaging that actively challenges violence-endorsing attitudes (examples of which are shown in Table 6.3) in order to comprehensively address the issue of VAW at its roots.

Recommendation 4: Integrate modules on challenging violence-endorsing attitudes within training for frontline government officers, particularly for police officers, Talian Kasih hotline operators and Waja Squad members.

Compared to other formal sources of support, this study reveals that Malaysians are likely to first approach the police following incidences of domestic violence (29.2%) and sexual harassment (34.4%). This is followed by the national crisis hotline of *Talian Kasih*, mental health experts, and legal services (Legal Aid Department, Legal Aid Centre, and lawyers). Additionally, study findings from in-depth interviews with survivors also reveal that responses and behaviours by frontline government officers can play a critical role in either discouraging or encouraging survivors to leave abusive situations.

As first points of contact, it is imperative for frontline officers to be conscious of the prevalence of violence-endorsing attitudes, and how such attitudes may affect survivors' help-seeking experiences, the attitudes of the perpetrator, the attitudes of the people surrounding the survivor and the officers' personal unconscious biases. As a matter of priority, modules on violence-endorsing attitudes should be integrated within existing training for frontline officers in key agencies such as the police, Talian Kasih, government hospitals and the social welfare department. While the Waja Squad is new to the scene, it remains equally important for them to be well-versed on the issue of violence-endorsing attitudes as this will complement and likely enhance the work they do in empowering women against VAW.

Recommendation 5: Invest in public information campaigns that empower Malaysians to adequately respond to survivors, including through promoting an awareness of pathways for survivor protection and support

In a society where violence-endorsing attitudes are rampant, empowering members of the community with knowledge to combat violence is one of the most helpful attitudes a survivor can encounter to encourage them to disclose violence and seek help. Family, friends, and the community remain by far the most important points of support for survivors by connecting them with formal sources of support. This is demonstrated through survey findings (refer to Section 3.6) and survivors' own re-telling of their help-seeking experiences (refer to Chapter 5). As such, based on survivor recommendations, this study posits that empowering the Malaysian society to adequately respond to survivors, including through **promoting an understanding of referral pathways and sources of protection and support for survivors, is crucial to facilitating a survivor's access to safety and justice** and should be made a priority within Malaysia's prevention and response programmes.

[242] Kalbana Perimbanayagam, "Women's Ministry Launches 'Skuad Waja': New Straits Times," NST Online, Last modified October 17, 2021, https://bit.ly/2XvsucK.

[243] The Sun Daily, "KPWKM Targets 100,000 Waja Squad Members," The Sun Daily, Last modified October 17, 2021, https://bit.ly/3m1MCNg.

Recommendation 6: Conduct nationally representative surveys that measure public attitudes towards violence against women and replicate it at least every four years as a means of tracking attitudinal changes within Malaysia across a period of time.

Globally, in addition to conducting prevalence studies for VAW, national governments are increasingly focusing on the study of public attitudes as a 'proxy indicator' of the level of tolerance for the use of VAW within a society and as a way of tracking the progression or regression of public attitudes.[244] For example, the National Survey on Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women (NCAS) is a population survey carried out by the Australian government to establish a benchmark against which changes in attitudes can be closely monitored over time. The NCAS was undertaken in 2009, 2013, 2017 and is repeated every four years across the life of the Australian National Plan against VAW.

Similarly, in Scotland, the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA) on public attitudes against women was developed to provide a baseline measure of public views about VAW against which progress in achieving the objectives of the *Equally Safe* - Scotland's strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women - can be measured. Similar public attitude surveys have also been carried out by other actors in the European Union,[245] Ukraine,[246] China and Spain,[247] [248] and many other countries.[249]

This study is partly modelled after the NCAS (Sections 3.1 to 3.3), alongside the Out-of-Scale questions addressing specific concerns in Malaysia, and **provides a template into what can be achieved through the study of public attitudes and perceptions in Malaysia**. The survey questions encompassed here cover a broad range of topics pertaining to violence against women, therein producing a wide base for which institutions such as the Department of Statistics, or KPWKM may reflect on, for future iterations of national attitudinal surveys. By documenting attitudes every four years (as the NCAS does), we would be able to plot attitudinal progression and regression over time. Our understanding of VAW exists not only in real time, but can be tracked back many years and eventually, could be predictively plotted for the coming decades. This could aid the design of prevention programs for future generations.

An understanding of the factors that contribute to attitudes that endorse violence and/or gender inequality, is key to identifying existing awareness strategies, educational programmes, or other influences that should be avoided or whose complexities must be addressed in a more nuanced, yet publicly-understandable manner. Similarly, identifying the influences towards attitudes that oppose violence and inequality, allows for their further emphasis in future programmes.

However, **the effectiveness of prevention campaigns must also be tracked**. Regression could indicate that a prevention programme is not working, perhaps that platforms are not being utilised as effectively as they could be, that messaging remains unimpactful, or that societal backlash is occurring as gender equality progresses. At the very least, attitudinal regression signals towards an issue that needs to be addressed - the specifics of this may only be identifiable with deeper investigations based on this data. Progression would be ideal, and indicates that we are doing something right - that public messaging and awareness campaigns are reaching Malaysians effectively and efficiently, and that generational change for gender equality is imminent. This is encouraging, and should be a key driving factor into why this survey studying Malaysian attitudes towards VAW should be conducted consistently every few years on a national scale.

Ultimately, tracking change over time is important, to inform us of societal progression, and towards the design and implementation of interventions targeted at disputing the cultural and social norms that enable violence in communities

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[244] United Nations, *Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence Against Women: Statistical Surveys* New York: United Nations, 2014.

[245] Enrique Garcia and Marisol Lila, *Attitudes towards Violence against Women in the EU* Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union, 2015, https://bit.ly/2Z98sFY.

[246] United Nations Development Programme et al., *Baseline Survey of Public Perceptions and Attitudes towards Gender-Based Violence against Women in Donetsk, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts*, 2020, https://bit.ly/3IY3EeW.

[247] Menglu Yang et al., "Public Attitudes towards Intimate Partner Violence against Women and Influential Factors in China and Spain," *Anuario De Psicología Jurídica* 31, no. 1 (2021): pp. 101-108, doi:10.5093/apj2021a13.

[248] Victoria A. Ferrer-Pérez and Esperanza Bosch-Fiol, "Gender Violence as a Social Problem in Spain: Attitudes and Acceptability," *Sex Roles* 70, no. 11-12 (2013): pp. 506-521, doi:10.1007/s11199-013-0322-z.

[249] Thach Duc Tran, Hau Nguyen, and Jane Fisher, "Attitudes towards Intimate Partner Violence against Women among Women and Men in 39 Low- and Middle-Income Countries," *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 11 (2016), doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0167438.

and hinder adequate structural support for survivors. A comprehensive evaluation of these interventions should also be conducted concurrently as a tangible outcome measure, alongside those of public attitudes and perceptions.

> **"To monitor and review the measures taken** to combat stereotypes in order to assess their impact and to revise them as appropriate"
>
> - Recommendation by the CEDAW Committee, in its Concluding Observations to Malaysia, 2018.·

Recommendation 7: Increase efforts for data collection, analysis, and transparency by government stakeholders.

As part of our collective national effort to combat VAW in all its forms, from domestic violence to sexual violence to child marriage, more data must be made available. While Recommendation 6 has elaborated on the need for a periodic national survey on public attitudes towards VAW, it is important also to address more generally, the need for better data collection, analysis, and transparency efforts from the Malaysian government.

Currently, there are many gaps in our knowledge simply because we do not have the data needed to come to conclusions on the scale of these issues in Malaysia. For example, national statistics regarding child marriage are extremely sparse. Local literature has produced some numbers, while international governmental organisations like UNICEF attempt to track numbers and interpret what is available, to identify if this is an issue of growing concern. However, the government, and specifically religious bodies and state registration offices, are likely to have the most comprehensive information available. The most recent statistics made publicly available were about the number of applications for child marriage in 2020.[250] This is insufficient information- data about how many applications, how many approvals, the demographic factor of applicants from each state, the age differences between adult and child, and more, are key variables to consider and made publicly available to the public, in order to emphasise a collective recognition of the extent of this issue in Malaysia.

Such information would help us identify specific concerns to be tackled within the issue of child marriage. It is unclear if these are taken into consideration in existing standard operating procedures, or how greatly these vary between states. Only by fully and transparently sharing the already available data can we begin to understand the depth of these issues as they affect Malaysia and how to best move forward to address them. In this regard, making public the data that has already been collected is equally as important as sharing any novel data, should the government decide to undertake similar studies.

More efforts must also be made in data collection and analysis such that the data collected captures rich information, reflecting gender-, age-, ethnicity-, education-, income-, and region-disaggregation. The data, thus, must also be nationally representative to be sufficiently powerful, and for the nuances of intersecting factors to be understood in their entirety. Only from the breadth of this collection can appropriate analysis and targeting be done.

Developing a framework for adequate data collection and management is not something that happens overnight. There will be many challenges throughout this process - such as agreeing on the parameters of data collection, obtaining the buy-in of different frontline agencies, identifying the best way this data can be communicated to the public, and interpreted by the relevant government stakeholders for effective preventative or responsive measures. This will be a lengthy process, but one that will ultimately strengthen our understanding of VAW, how it progresses over time, and how we can respond to it effectively.

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[250] Ida Lim, "Ministry: 543 Child Marriages, Including Applications, in Malaysia from Jan-Sept 2020: Malay Mail," Malay Mail, Last modified December 4, 2020, https://bit.ly/3b3SSOd.

Recommendation 8: More political will and research is needed to adequately direct and inform the design of prevention initiatives for child marriage and FGM/C in Malaysia.

This study, however, offers some key insights:

- Broadly, **Malaysians are more likely to oppose the practice of child marriage (70.3%),** although notably, in the survey, there was less of an opposition against child marriage for girls compared to child marriage for boys. These are generally encouraging results, although they may likely reflect opinions of a demographic that is slightly more urban-centric and has access to digital technology. Issues that can disrupt this belief, however, are rooted in existing ideas of shame over adolescent/teenage pregnancy, considerations of dignity, and preservation of familial reputation as indicated through respondents' responses to open-ended questions in this survey.

- Disturbingly, **a significant portion of respondents who expressed support for child marriage were also aware of the myriad of harms that came with the practice**. For example 50.0% of this subgroup acknowledged that child marriage harms the development of girls and 52.7% of this subgroup acknowledged the emotional and mental harms. This suggests that, while important, **public education initiatives on child marriage need to be a part of larger strategic plan that addresses all of its risk factors** including that of poverty, lack of access to education or lack of access to sexual health and reproductive rights.

- There are several underlying issues that shape Malaysian public attitudes and perception towards the practice of FGM/C, in particular the lack of consensus and communication by religious and governent stakeholders, misunderstandings of religious obligation, cultural interpretations of religion, sexuality and hygiene, the medicalisation of FGM/C in Malaysia and the nuances of the Malay language that make it difficult to expound on the harmful impact of the practice. **Any effort to design prevention strategies or programmes for eradication of FGM/C in Malaysia should take this host of underlying issues into consideration.**

- Many key non-governmental stakeholders in Asia working to end the harmful practices of FGM/C[251] have highlighted that **there is a general lack of information and knowledge on FGM/C and that there is a need for more research**. This holds true in Malaysia as well. Despite many efforts from NGOs and academics to study the practice of FGM/C in Malaysia, there is still much that needs to be uncovered. For example, more research is needed before we can conclusively say that FGM/C, as it is practiced in Malaysia, is harmless. We also need more information on the long-term psychological impact of FGM/C, investigating how a woman's relationship to her body and sexuality are affected.

- In the years to come when there might be more of an evidence-base on FGM/C, **the survey we have conducted regarding Malaysian's public attitudes towards violence against women can be further expanded** and taken up by relevant and interested ministries, such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Women, Community, and Development, **to incorporate a subsection on FGM/C**. This would allow relevant stakeholders to gain insight on how the issue of FGM/C is perceived and understood by the general public.

Recommendation 9: Implement and enforce law and policy reforms that criminalise acts of VAW and promote gender equality

As reiterated several times in this report, **attitudes towards, perceptions, and understandings of violence are perpetuated not only by existing societal norms of gender hierarchies, but are also reinforced by formal structures that enable or oppose it.** Laws and policies that criminalise acts of VAW and promote gender equality, therefore, play a critical role in establishing the boundaries of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour within a society. Even without full enforcement, they can have a significant impact on shifting social norms, attitudes and perceptions around VAW.[252]

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251 Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) and Orchid Project, "Asia Network to End Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) Consultation Report," 2020, https://bit.ly/3lz5O4w.

252 Lori L Heise, "What Works to Prevent Partner Violence? An Evidence Overview" Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2011, https://bit.ly/3vTEu4N.

Currently, there are several ongoing efforts related to reforming the legal and policy framework for VAW and gender inequality in Malaysia. As a matter of priority, we call on the government to uphold their commitment towards CEDAW and to implement and enforce law and policy reforms that include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Complete the drafting of Gender Equality Act and table it in parliament
- Follow through with tabling the Sexual Harassment Bill, anti-stalking laws, and Employment Act Amendments in Parliament
- Criminalise marital rape, through the removal of the exception to Penal Code Section 375A, that specifically exempts husbands who rape their wives from the offence
- Implement a more inclusive definition of rape, that does not limit perpetrators to being men alone, and victims to only women.

Concluding comments

Violence against women, in all its forms, is prevalent within Malaysian society and can have long-lasting impact on women and girls. There is increasing evidence, however, to show that VAW is preventable. This study sheds light on the crucially understudied roots of VAW - community attitudes and societal norms - and how they present a viable starting point for constructively addressing and monitoring VAW in Malaysia. By adopting a comprehensive approach to prevention programming and employing evidence-based principles and best practices within the field, changes in attitudes and social norms can take place sooner without needing to wait for a generation. The impact of such changes for VAW in Malaysia are far-reaching and ultimately life-changing for survivors.

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