



RESEARCH BRIEF

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

This research brief synthesises initial findings and recommendations from a study conducted by Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) with support from the Global Fund for Women (GFW), Yayasan Sime Darby (YSD), contributions from a panel of five Malaysian academic experts and sixteen VAW survivors who bravely shared their stories with us.

Introduction

Violence against women is a critical human rights issue and a public health concern with far-reaching consequences. The goal of preventing and eliminating VAW, however, 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 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.¹ 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.

¹ 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.

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)² 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.

Key definitions

Violence against women (VAW): Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.³ This includes domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, stalking and harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).

Harmful practices: Forms of violence against women and girls which are defended on the basis of tradition, culture, religion or superstition by some community members.⁴

Violence-endorsing attitudes: Attitudes that justify, excuse, minimise VAW or blame survivors for the violence perpetrated against them.

The initial findings of this study demonstrates a serious need for prevention interventions and programming for VAW in Malaysia that move beyond surface-level information-sharing and 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 initial 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).

² 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

³ United Nations, *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* New York: United Nations Dept. of Public Information, 1993.

⁴ ActionAid UK et al., "Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting Women and Girls" International Planned Parenthood Federation, December 28, 2012, <https://bit.ly/3FSCRsF>.

Initial Findings

Highlight 1: Only about half of Malaysians are likely to oppose violence-endorsing attitudes and support gender equality.

- Only about half of Malaysians are likely to oppose violence-endorsing attitudes (52.7%) and support gender equality (46.3%).
 - 25.4% of respondents are supportive of violence-endorsing attitudes or are uncertain about their stance and, thus, complicit (21.9%).
 - 23.8% of respondents are dismissive of gender equality or uncertain about their stance/complicit (29.9%).
- Men, particularly older men, displayed more negative and uncertain responses compared to women.

Highlight 2: Malaysians had the most concerning responses towards attitudes and perceptions that:

- **Excuse the perpetrator and holding women accountable for the violence perpetrated against them**
- **Disregard women's right to consent**
- **Mistrust women's reports of VAW**
- **Undermine women's independence and decision-making in public and private spheres of life**
- **Deny that gender inequality is a problem**

While all the themes of questions in this study are somewhat interconnected, the six themes identified above received relatively higher percentages of negative and neutral responses, and have thus been identified as critical focus areas that should be prioritised in the design of prevention programmes. While uncertain or neutral stances towards VAW or gender inequality may appear harmless, this study argues that individuals who hold such stances are complicit in systems that endorse VAW, and are likely to passively enable the perpetuation of attitudes and behaviours that enable violence.

Figure 1: Percentage of negative responses in the Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Scale (CASVAWS)

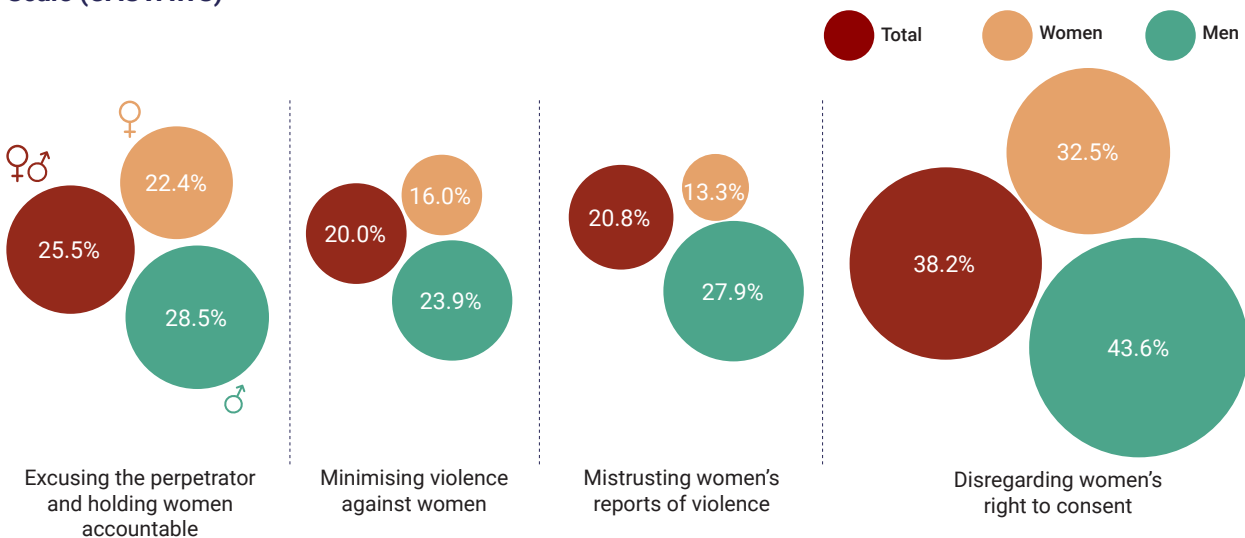


Figure 2: Percentage of negative responses in the Gender Equality and Attitudes Scale (GEAS)

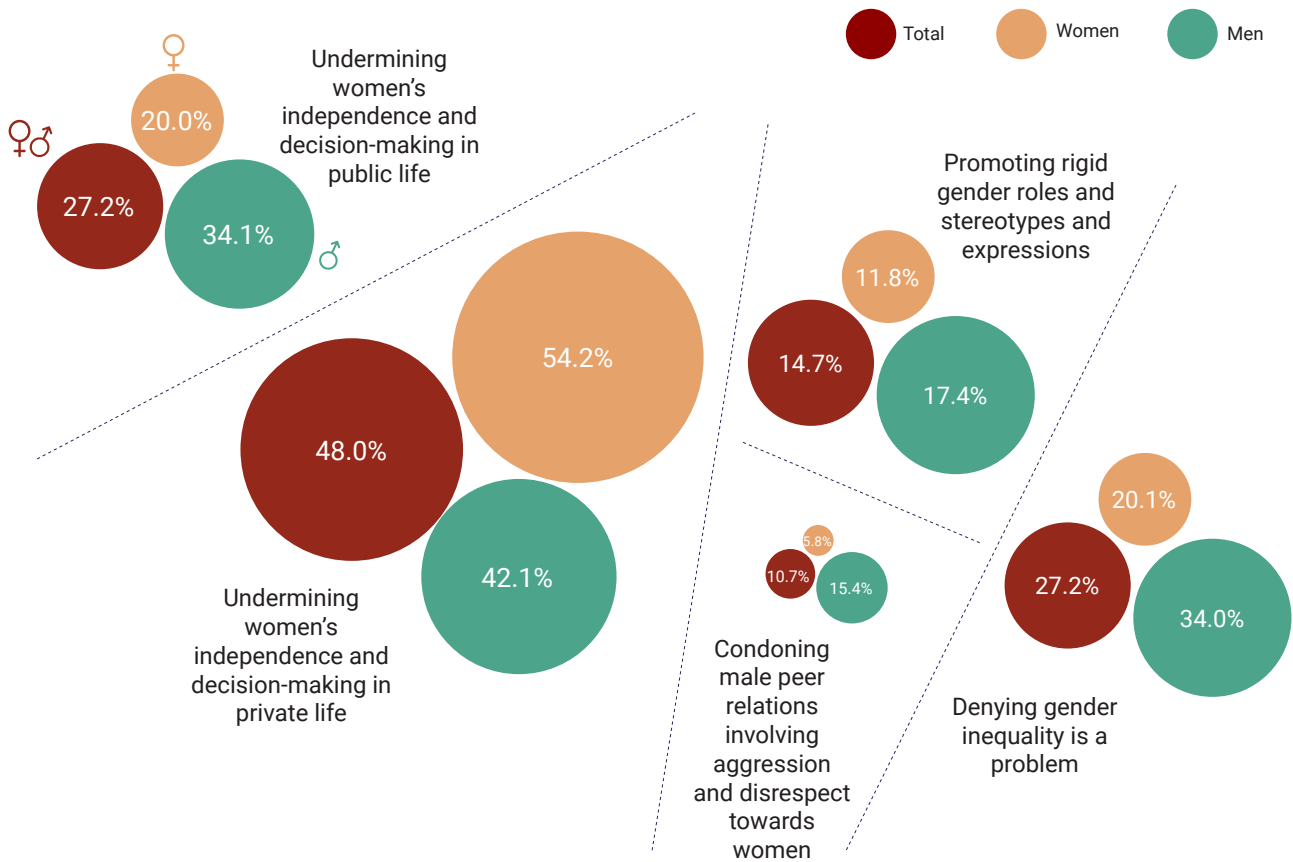


Figure 3: Percentage of positive responses compared against negative and uncertain responses for the Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Scale (CASVAWS)

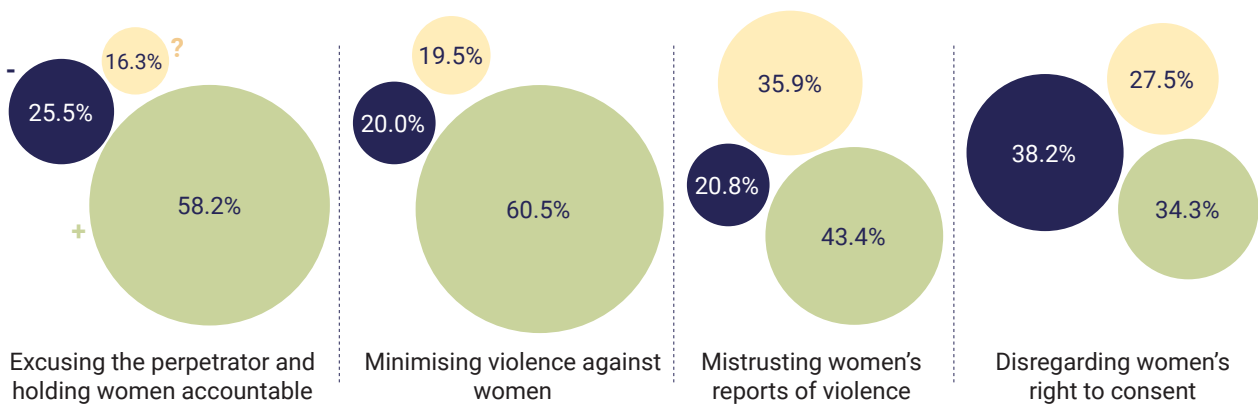
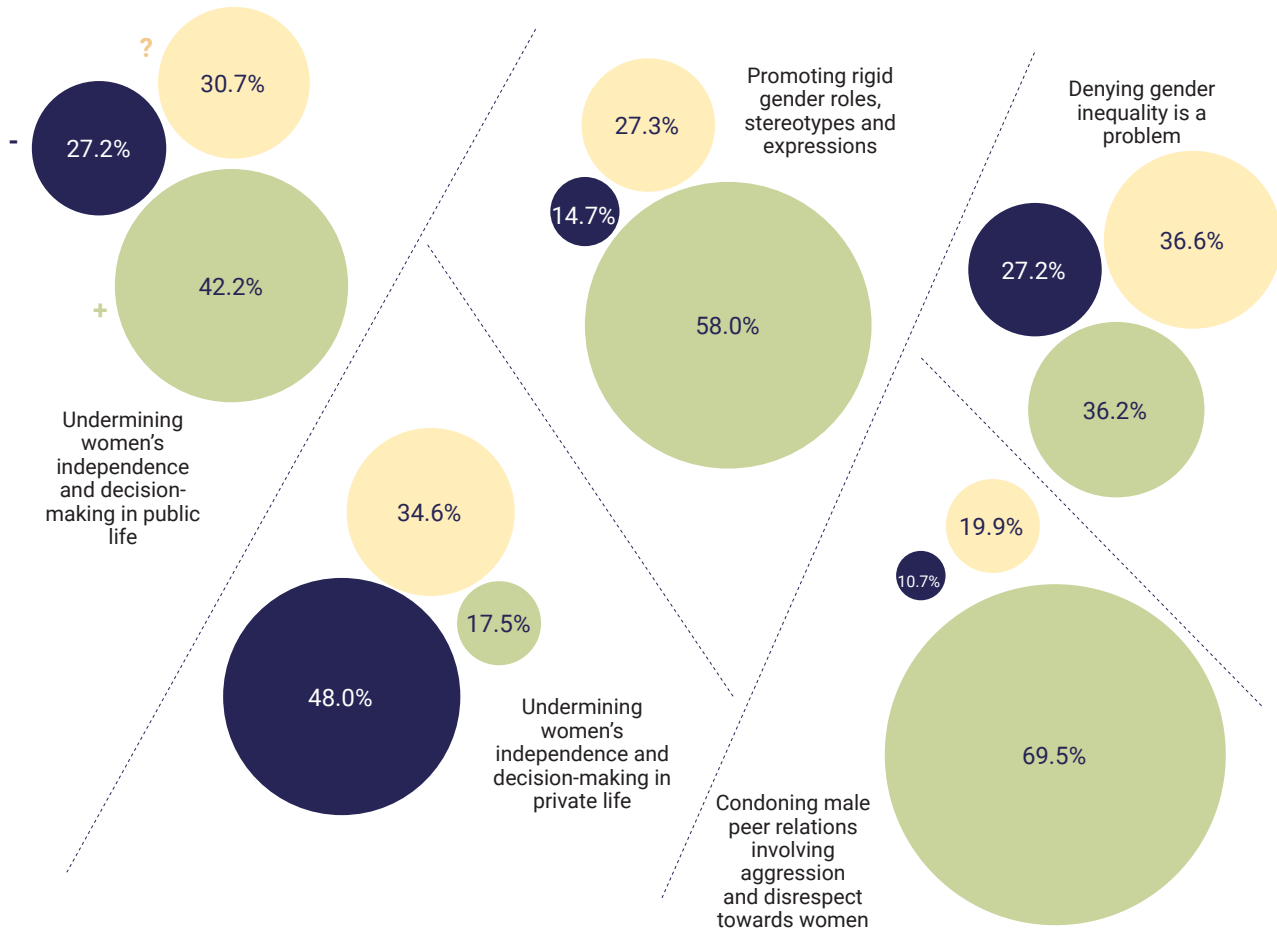


Figure 4: Percentage of positive responses compared against negative and uncertain responses for the Gender Equality Attitudes Scale (GEAS)

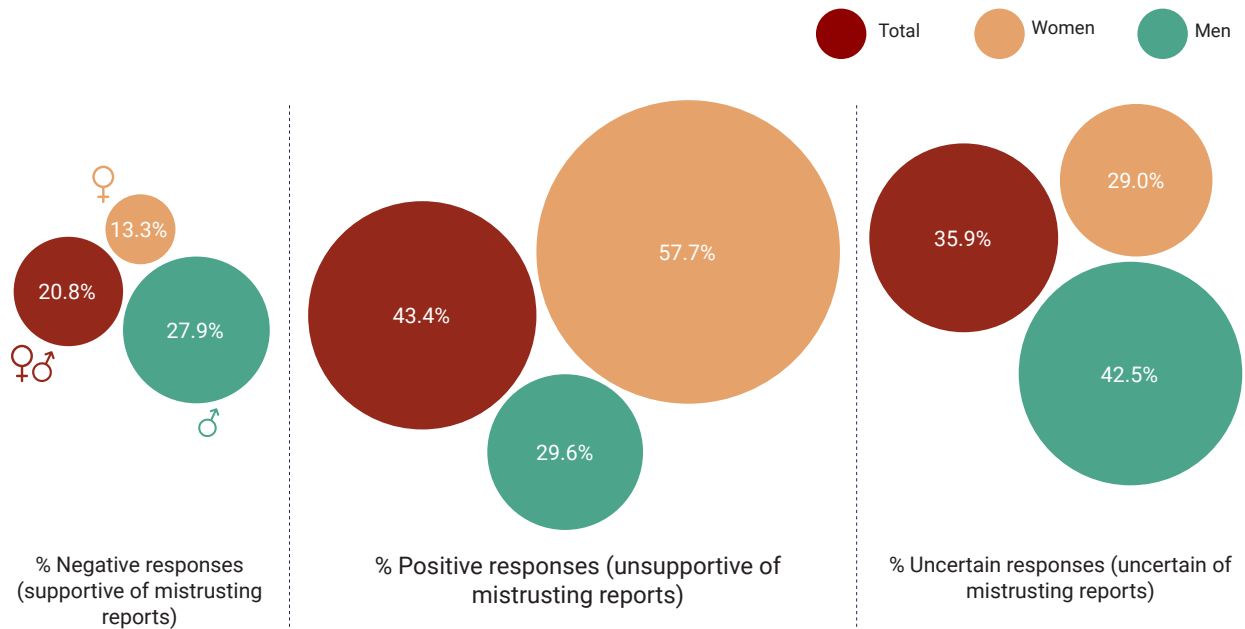


Highlight 3: Men, particularly older men, displayed more negative and uncertain responses towards VAW and gender equality compared to women

- For all themes, **men had more negative responses compared to women** (refer to Figure 1 and 2), except for in *undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life*.
- For the theme of *undermining women's independence and decision-making in private life*, findings showed that:
 - Malaysian women are likely to perpetuate and internalise male dominance within their personal spheres of life. Results showed that women (54.2% negative responses) had a higher percentage of negative responses than men (42.1% negative responses) in this theme of questions.
 - **Men were more likely to display uncertainty (46.6%) rather than to explicitly undermine women's independence in the private sphere**
 - Compared to 18-24 year olds, respondents 45 years old and above are 2.5 times more likely to display these attitudes while respondents aged 35-44 were 2.2 times more likely.
- Gender disparities in responses were also 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 1 and 2).
- In opposing attitudes that *mistrust women's reports of violence*, a gender gap of 28.1% was observed indicating that **women are more likely to trust other women's 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.

- Age disparities were noticeable for minimising violence against women, where people 45 years old and above were twice as likely to display these attitudes compared to 18-24 year olds, while respondents between 35-44 years old being 1.89 times more likely to minimise violence.

Figure 5: Percentage of positive, negative, and uncertain responses for the theme of mistrusting women's reports of violence



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 survey results demonstrate that overall Malaysians have a good understanding of what constitutes physical (94.1%) and non-physical forms of violence (83.1%), 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.**
 - For example, while a majority of our respondent population agree that slapping and pushing are forms of violence (96.5%), a significant 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%).
 - 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 survivors.**

Highlight 5: Malaysians are likely to have less of an understanding of rape and some forms of non-physical violence

- In this study, Malaysians exhibited less of an understanding towards statutory rape (55.4% respondents understood) and the fact that rape is likely to be perpetrated by people known to the survivor (44.3% respondents understood). This indicates 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.

- 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.**
 - This is especially so for **controlling behaviours** (such as 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 4.6% and 6.3% uncertainty for these forms of controlling behaviour, respectively.
- Additionally, while there were 85.0% responses identifying stalking to be a form of violence, a lesser percentage (78.1%) identified behaviours of cyber-stalking, such as repeatedly tracking calls, location, and activities of a partner as a form of domestic violence.
 - This discrepancy 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 it is perpetuated by an ex-partner despite how a fair number of stalking cases are perpetrated by survivors' ex-partners.

Highlight 6: Malaysians are likely to disregard women's right to consent

- **Only 34.3% respondents displayed supportive responses to the idea of consent.**
 - This suggests 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, feeds into 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.
- Societal recognition of the importance of practicing consent is imperative to steer away from victim-blaming. **The recognition of women's right to consent is an acknowledgement of women's autonomy over her own body.**

Highlight 7: Rape myths are pervasive in Malaysian society

- Rape myths are "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."⁵
 - They originate from gender stereotypes, acceptance of interpersonal violence, and a misunderstanding about the nature of rape and sexual assault.⁶
 - Importantly, societal endorsement of rape myths often leads to the attitudes that minimise the severity of sexual violence or mistrust of women's reports of violence.⁷
 - It can shape responses of legal and law enforcement officers towards survivors
 - 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.^{8 9}
- This study reveals **Malaysians have high endorsement of rape myths**, believing 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
- These findings indicate that rape myths are extremely prevalent.
 - Research has shown that the endorsement of rape myths increases the likelihood of violence-

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Patrice Crall and Wind Goodfriend, "She Asked for It: Statistics and Predictors of Rape Myth Acceptance," *Modern Psychological Studies* 22, no. 1 (2016), <https://scholar.utcc.edu/mps/vol22/iss1/4>.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Amy Dellinger Page, "Gateway to Reform? Policy Implications of Police Officers' Attitudes toward Rape," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 33, ano. 1 (2008): pp. 44-58, doi:10.1007/s12103-007-9024-9.

endorsing attitudes and perpetuates injustices against survivors.^{10 11}

- 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 because sexual violence is a conscious act and an active decision on the part of the perpetrator.

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.¹²
- Malaysian women still lack comprehensive economic and political empowerment, which are crucial to achieving equality.
 - Without economic empowerment, women remain financially dependent on working partners while lacking political empowerment means 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 Malaysia¹³, far lower than the global average of 24.9%.¹⁴
 - 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.
- However, **only an average of 36.2% of the respondents in this study acknowledges that gender inequality exists in Malaysia.**
 - This 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 in poor levels of opposition to the following ideas:
 - Men make more capable bosses than women in the workplace (only 38.5% disagreed with this statement)
 - Overall, men are better political leaders than women (only 41.2% disagreed with this statement)
 - Men, rather than women, should hold positions of responsibility in the community (only 42.1% disagreed with this statement)
- 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 often overlooked. 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

- 70.3% survey respondents oppose child marriage under any and all circumstances.

¹⁰ Lonsway and Fitzgerald, "Rape Myths."

¹¹ 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.

¹² World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2021* World Economic Forum, 2021, www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf.

¹³ 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

¹⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in Parliaments: World and Regional Averages," Inter-Parliamentary Union, Last modified October 1, 2019, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>.

- 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) faced less opposition than child marriage involving boys (9.5% supportive responses), aligning with existing evidence regarding 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
 - This support 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.
 - East Coast takes a slight lead in support for child marriage (15.9% for child marriage involving girls and 14.8% for child marriage involving boys)
 - East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) has the lowest number of support (8.1%).
- Additionally, 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 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.
- FGM/C remains a popular practice because of:
 - A misunderstanding of religious obligation, coupled with cultural interpretations of religion, sexuality, and hygiene.
 - The 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, serves to further legitimise the practice.
- Doctors view their provision of FGM/C as a necessary harm reduction technique¹⁵ but evidence suggests that how doctors administer FGM/C shifts the type of FGM/C practiced from the WHO's classification¹⁶ of Type IV to the more severe Type I procedure, where the clitoris is either partially or completely removed.¹⁷
- Many believe that medicalisation is a step towards abolishment, however, as the WHO asserts, there is no evidence that medicalisation as a stop-gap solution actually leads to abolishment.¹⁸
- The issue is further exacerbated by a lack of clear communication by 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 compulsory¹⁹, which has been gazetted by the states to varying extents.
 - However, Perlis released its own fatwa contradicting the national fatwa.²⁰
 - The medical community has failed to take a clear stance as well, despite medical practitioners stating

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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>.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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>.

¹⁹ JAKIM, "Hukum Pemoangan Genitalia Wanita (Female Genital Mutilation)," *Sumber Maklumat Al-Ahkam Al-Fiqhiyyah*, Last modified 2009, <https://bit.ly/3AvIvxos>.

²⁰ 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>.

- a willingness to stop providing the procedure if FGM/C were banned.²¹
- All of this feeds into a confusing environment, where parents are not given enough information to make an informed decision, 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.
 - Only articles in English discuss the myths surrounding the practice while articles written in Bahasa Malaysia fail to comprehensively expound the issue, instead perpetuating the myths of the goodness of the practice.²²
 - 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

- **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.
- As a first point of support, **Talian Kasih** was highlighted by **less than 10% of the respondents**, indicating insufficient public awareness of this service and its connection to serving domestic violence and sexual harassment survivors in crisis.
- Aside from the police, other government stakeholders such as the **Social Welfare Department, hospitals, and primary health clinics** were cited by dismal percentages of respondents, indicating a dire need to increase public awareness on the range of services available for survivors of VAW.

Table 1: Respondents’ preferred source of formal support following incidences of domestic violence and sexual harassment

Form of VAW	Formal Source of Support								
	Primary health clinics	Hospitals	Social Welfare Department	Workplace management	Religious body	Mental Health Experts	Legal Services	Talian Kasih	Police
Domestic Violence	0.4 %	1.4%	4.4%	-	2.3%	4.8%	4.2%	9.4%	29.2%
Sexual Harassment	0.3%	1.2%	2.9%	3.9%	-	4.5%	4.9%	8.1%	26.0%

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) **play a critical role** in connecting survivors with formal sources of support (e.g. police, hospital, NGOs).
- Additionally, the study also revealed a **pattern of third-party responses** (e.g. from family and friends, frontline

²¹ 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.

²² Sisters in Islam, "A Discourse Analysis of Media Representations of Female Circumcision in Malaysia" Sisters in Islam, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3iYsUje>.

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.
 - Domestic violence received the most responses (81.4%). This is followed by sexual harassment (74.6%), stalking (29.9%), and rape (6.7%).
 - 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 were consistent even when the data was disaggregated by respondents' language of choice or strata (rural/urban).

Key Recommendations

Recommendation 1: VAW prevention initiatives in Malaysia must be scaled up through a comprehensive prevention strategy and action plan in order to achieve a wider reach and effective outcomes.

- VAW prevention efforts in Malaysia need to be scaled up to reach about half of Malaysians who are either likely to support violence endorsing attitudes or hold uncertain stances and are potentially complicit in perpetuating these attitudes.
- Adopting a comprehensive prevention strategy that works across the ecological framework to target all levels of society using multiple strategies will help to ensure such efforts have wider reach and achieve more sustained results.

Key entry points for the delivery of strategies to prevent VAW

1. Central government and legislature
2. School and educational facilities
3. Health Services
4. Social Services
5. Police and the Justice Sector
6. Media, Popular Culture and Information and Communication Technologies
7. Workplaces
8. Sports and Recreation environments
9. Male-dominated environments (prisons, sports, clubs, military, police forces)
10. Community networks, organizations and institutions
11. Local authorities and local governments
12. Employment/economic employment and poverty reduction programmes
13. Transport Sector

Source: A framework to underpin action to prevent violence against women by UN Women²³

- Stakeholders should **draw on existing evidence-based research and guidance on prevention programming**. A thorough review of evidence-based interventions that could work within the Malaysian context is needed.
- Evidence-based interventions with promising effects 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.^{24 25}
- This recommendation also **aligns with a CEDAW Committee recommendation in the 2018 concluding observations** which called on the Malaysian government to address gender stereotypes including through "adopting a comprehensive strategy with proactive and sustained measures that target women and men at all levels of society."^{26 27}
- Consistent evaluations of such efforts **must be closely monitored to assess its immediate and longitudinal effects**, and whether these signal towards positive change, negative change, or stagnancy.

²³ UN Women, "A Framework to Underpin Action to Prevent Violence against Women," UN Women, Last modified 2015, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/11/prevention-framework>.

²⁴ R Jewkes et al., "Effective Design and Implementation Elements in Interventions to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls" UK Aid, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2XFf0Yj>.

²⁵ United Nations, "CEDAW General Recommendation No. 33 - On Women's Access to Justice" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), 2015, <https://bit.ly/3kgcuUj>.

²⁶ CEDAW Committee, Concluding Observations, 2018

²⁷ United Nations, "CEDAW General Recommendation No. 33 - On Women's Access to Justice" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), 2015, <https://bit.ly/3kgcuUj>.

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 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 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 Committee²⁸

Recommendation 2: VAW prevention initiatives in Malaysia should enhance public understanding towards rape and non-physical violence, in particular cyber-harassment, stalking and coercive/controlling behaviours by partners

- 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.^{29, 30} 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.^{31, 32}
- Non-physical forms of VAW, such as controlling behaviours by partners and cyber-harassment, 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**.

Recommendation 3: VAW prevention initiatives in Malaysia should actively challenge underlying violence-endorsing attitudes that help to 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 still relevant, prevention programmes should:
 - Take a step further to **actively challenge underlying social norms and widely-shared community attitudes** that support VAW and gender inequality,
 - Recognise that the root causes of VAW **extend beyond individual circumstances, attitudes or behaviours and in harmful community and societal attitudes**.
 - **Employ a gender transformative approach** - programming that goes beyond addressing specific violent behaviours and focuses on challenging gender norms, gender inequality and ideas that promote controlling and aggressive forms of masculinity.
 - Clearly **illustrate how such attitudes are reflected through common daily practices and conversations**
- 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 justice³³. This can be done through:
 - addressing incorrect facts or beliefs related VAW (e.g. rape is more likely to be committed by a stranger),
 - 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 (e.g. Malaysian men are increasingly challenging toxic masculinity - how about you?).

²⁸ United Nations, "CEDAW General Recommendation No. 33 - On Women's Access to Justice" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), 2015, <https://bit.ly/3kgcuUj>.

²⁹ RAINN, "Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics," RAINN, Last modified 2021, <https://bit.ly/2Z7ff2y>.

³⁰ 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>.

³¹ 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>.

³² Home Minister, "Parliamentary Reply: Question 473," *Parliamentary Reply: Question 473*, Parliamentary Reply: Question 473 (2019), <https://bit.ly/3E3Jh6y>.

³³ Alexander-Scott, Bell, and Holden, "Shifting Social Norms."

- Studies on attitudes towards VAW can provide an indication of violence-endorsing attitudes likely to be held within a society and offer guidance on public messaging that should be amplified through a variety of methods. Although not as an exhaustive list, Table 2 provides examples of possible ways forward for VAW prevention efforts in Malaysia.
- The *Skwad Waja* should incorporate public messaging that actively challenges violence-endorsing attitudes in their modules. With a goal of attracting and mobilising 100,000 volunteers,³⁴ *Skwad Waja* has the opportunity to work at the grassroots level to educate and address violence-endorsing attitudes and, thus, presents a good entry point.

Table 2: Examples of violence-endorsing attitudes likely to 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 ³⁵
	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
	Sometimes a woman can make a man so angry that he hits her when he didn't mean to.	43.0%	21.7%	Violent behaviour is a deliberate choice. Perpetrators use it to control and dominate their victims because no one is watching or holding them accountable
	Women who flirt all the time are somewhat to blame if their partner gets jealous and hits them.	30.0%	25.8%	Usually perpetrators of domestic violence are never violent outside the home or in public, even when under stress.

³⁴ The Sun Daily, "KPWKM Targets 100,000 Waja Squad Members," The Sun Daily, Last modified October 17, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3m1MCNg>.

³⁵ 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%	<p>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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threats by 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%	

Recommendation 4: Integrate modules on challenging violence-endorsing attitudes within training for frontline government officers, particularly for police officers and Talian Kasih hotline operators, and Skwad Waja members.

- This study revealed 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, from in-depth interviews with survivors, responses and behaviours by **frontline government officers can play a critical role in either discouraging or encouraging survivor's** 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 these 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 bias.

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.

- **Family, friends, and the community remain the most important points of support** for survivors, playing a critical role in connecting them with formal sources of support. This is demonstrated through survey findings and survivors' own re-telling of their help-seeking experiences.
- **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.

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.³⁶
 - The **National Survey on Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women (NCAS)** is a population survey carried out by the **Australian government** every four years, to establish periodic measures against which changes in attitudes can be closely monitored over time.
 - 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,³⁷ Ukraine,³⁸ China and Spain,³⁹ ⁴⁰ and many other countries.⁴¹
 - The CEDAW Committee, in its Concluding Observations to Malaysia, 2018 also emphasised the need **"to monitor and review the measures taken to combat stereotypes** in order to assess their impact and to revise them as appropriate."⁴²
- This study provides a template of what can be achieved through the study of public attitudes and perceptions in Malaysia.
 - Partly modelled after the NCAS and complemented by additional questions that address specific concerns in Malaysia, the questionnaire used in this study covers a broad range of topics pertaining to violence against women, therein **producing a foundation and a wide evidence-base** for which institutions such as the Department of Statistics, or Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development may reflect on, **for future iterations of national attitudinal surveys.**
 - A longitudinal effort to conduct this survey every four years - like the NCAS - would enable us to **plot attitudinal progression and regression over time.** In this way, **Malaysian attitudes towards VAW could be tracked back many years** and eventually, predictively plotted for the coming decades.
 - This would **inform and guide the design of prevention programmes** 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 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.
 - Concurrently, tracking attitudes allows us to monitor the effectiveness of prevention campaigns. Attitudinal progression (more opposed to VAW and gender inequality) could be indicative of their effectiveness, while regression could signal towards the opposite, and indicates a need for improvement.

³⁶ United Nations, *Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence Against Women: Statistical Surveys* New York: United Nations, 2014.

³⁷ 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>.

³⁸ 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>.

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² CEDAW Committee, Concluding Observations, 2018

Recommendation 7: Increase efforts for data collection, analysis, and transparency on VAW by government stakeholders

- It is critical for government stakeholders to address the need for better data collection, analysis, and transparency on VAW, including through the following efforts:
 - **Address data gaps on VAW:** There are many gaps in our knowledge of VAW, 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 have conducted some studies. 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 2020⁴³ - without any information regarding how many approvals had taken place.
 - **Make data on VAW transparent and publicly available:** Transparent, publicly accessible data would help us identify the extent to which issues of VAW, and their specific concerns, exist in Malaysia. 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.
 - **Develop a framework for adequate data collection and management of VAW: A data collection framework that** and includes a strategy for encompassing disaggregated data should be developed in order to strengthen our understanding of VAW, how it progresses over time, and how we can respond to it effectively.

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 offers some key insights:

- **Malaysians are more likely to oppose child marriage (70.3%),** although there was less of an opposition against child marriage for girls than boys. These are generally encouraging results, although they may likely reflect opinions of a demographic that is slightly more urban-centric and with 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,
 - preservation of familial reputation
- 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
 - 52.7% of this subgroup acknowledge 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.
- **Any effort to design prevention strategies or programmes for eradication of FGM/C in Malaysia should take this host of underlying issues into consideration.**
 - the lack of consensus and communication by religious and government 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.
- **There is a general lack of information and knowledge on FGM/C and that there is a need for more research.** 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.
- **The survey on 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, Family and Community Development, **to incorporate a subsection on FGM/C.** This would allow more insight on how the issue of FGM/C is perceived and understood by the general public.

⁴³ 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 9: Implement and enforce law and policy reforms that criminalise acts of VAW and promote gender equality

- 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. They can have a significant impact on shifting social norms, attitudes and perceptions around VAW.⁴⁴
- The government should 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

⁴⁴ 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>.

Conclusion

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, 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.

The full report and research brief was written by Shazana Agha, Isabel Chung, and Anis Farid, from Women's Aid Organisation (WAO).

About WAO

Since 1982, Women's Aid Organisation has provided free shelter, access to 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

Connect with us

- 🌐 wao.org.my
- 🐦 twitter.com/womensaidorg
- f facebook.com/womensaidorg
- 📷 instagram.com/womensaidorg
- in linkedin.com/company/womensaidorg