

Division of Housework and Subjective Feelings among Indian Women during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Women shouldered most housework despite their educational and employment status before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Indian women in the division of housework and their subjective feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. A sample of twelve Indian married working women shared their experiences through semi-structured interviews. The findings show that most Indian women shouldered the housework burden while juggling both paid and unpaid work simultaneously during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of Indian women felt stressed because they perceived housework as women's responsibility. Indian women's experiences and negative feelings indicate the need for policy makers to narrow gender inequality in unpaid domestic work and enhance women's well-being in the households.

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Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature about the experiences of Indian married working women in the division of housework and their subjective feelings about shouldering the housework burden in Malaysia. The findings provide insights for the policy makers in understanding gender inequality in unpaid domestic work and women's well-being in Indian households.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused severe lockdown measures such as the closure of schools, day care centres, kindergartens, restaurants, and public places such as parks, cinemas, and gyms across the world (Agiar et al., 2021; Czymara et al., 2021; Mavroudis et al., 2021; Reichelt et al., 2021; Zamberlan et al., 2021). The lockdown

measure has caused the majority of workers to work from home, juggling between paid work and unpaid domestic work simultaneously (Balakrishnan et al., 2021; Boo, 2021; Shah et al., 2020).

Studies in Western countries suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates existing gender inequalities between men and women (Górska et al., 2021; Lokot & Bhatia, 2020; Sarker, 2020; Waddell et al., 2021; Xue & McMunn, 2021). Women have been affected differently than men during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the increasing pressure of unpaid domestic work including housework and childcare (Chauhan, 2020; Chung et al., 2021; Hipp & Bünning, 2021; Xue & McMunn, 2021). There have been concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate gender inequalities between men and women in the Asian country, Malaysia.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, limited studies suggest that women do a higher share of housework compared to men in Malaysia (Abdullah et al., 2008; Boo, 2018, 2020; Choong et al., 2019; Choong & Tan, 2018; Ng et al., 2009; Noor, 1999; Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015, 2016). Most of the studies mainly focus on the housework sharing among Malay and Chinese couples in Malaysia (Abdullah et al., 2008; Boo, 2018, 2020; Choong et al., 2019; Choong & Tan, 2018; Ng et al., 2009; Noor, 1999) and only three studies focus on the housework experiences among Indian women in Malaysia (Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015, 2016).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, an initial survey suggested that women are responsible for most of the housework than men during the pandemic in Malaysia (Boo, 2021). Although the initial survey comprised three ethnic groups including Malay, Chinese and Indian women, the sample size for Indian women is rather small (6.3 per cent). In addition, a follow-up survey during the lockdown suggested that women felt stressed during the lockdown due to the unequal sharing of housework even though both spouses are working from home (David Chelliah et al., 2023). This study concludes that women felt stressed due to the unequal housework sharing, and this phenomenon required family and policy makers' attention.

Although there is some literature on the division of housework among married couples in Malaysia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, limited information was available on the division of housework among Indian married couples, which potentially ignores the experiences of the minority group in Malaysia. Indians remain the minority in the population of Malaysia (Param, 2015). Likewise, Indians have been economically overshadowed as a minority (Lee & Tan, 2000). It is important to study Indian families because they differ from Malay and Chinese families, in which the majority of the Indian families belong to the working class (Param, 2015) and are highly influenced by the caste system (Oorjitham, 1982). Because the limited studies focus on the division of housework among Indian women in Malaysia, hence, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of Indian married working women in the division of housework and their subjective feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

Unpaid domestic work refers to housework that is typically regarded as mundane, less visible, and less valued (McLaren et al., 2020). Women shouldered the burden for most of the housework responsibility even though they participate in paid work (Suleman et al., 2021). Women tend to quit their job and prioritize family when they are facing problems

in juggling public and private spheres (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Although female has surpassed education achievement compared to men in Malaysia, the female labour force participation rate is still lower than men due to women's family responsibilities (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020; Noor and Mahudin, 2016).

Feminists have contested for women's nurturing role to be recognised as "work" in the context of the division of the housework, but the conflict persists due to long-held beliefs that housework and caregiving are women's responsibility as a result of patriarchy (Lokot & Bhatia, 2020; Thompson & Walker, 1995). The traditional division of unpaid domestic labour is influenced by traditional gender ideology that practises the male-breadwinner and female-homemaker model (Kandiyoti, 1988; Spierings, 2014). According to this traditional breadwinner and homemaker model, women's primary responsibility includes doing housework, raising children and caring for other family members, whereas men's primary responsibility is to earn money and provide for the household. Under this patriarchal system, women can keep "*their respected and protected domestic positions,*" by leaving the public domain to men (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 7).

The way feminists argued that women's responsibility is the result of the patriarchal system is similar to the past studies conducted in Malaysia (Oorjitham, 1982). According to Oorjitham (1982), women's role is highly influenced by the patriarchal values that emphasize men as the breadwinner and women as the homemaker model in the Indian family institution. Adhering to this traditional gender role model, Indian men have more authority in financial decisions, social life decisions and household chores decisions compared to Indian women (Oorjitham, 1982). Indian women are only allowed to decide on cooking and groceries (Devasahayam, 2005).

In addition, scholars emphasized that Indian women are not allowed to work outside the home because of their homemaker role (Param, 2015; Nair & Musa, 2020). Likewise, Indian women are discouraged to hold high positions in work or attain higher educational qualifications because paid work and education can become a barrier for them in engaging in unpaid housework tasks. Although some Indian women engaged in paid work, their husbands refuse to help with housework due to the cultural gender role expectations (Deshpande, 2020; Singh & Pattanaik, 2020).

The past studies also highlighted that Indian women articulate feminine identity by doing most of the cooking and laundry compared to Indian men (Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015; Oorjitham, 1982). In Indian culture, women can be seen using housework for a variety of purposes, including resisting, manoeuvring, changing, expressing, and even reinforcing the dominant gender ideology (Devasahayam, 2005).

The way women use housework to reinforce the dominant gender ideology as highlighted by Devasahayam (2005) is similar to the gender theory which emphasizes that women display their feminine identity through doing housework (Brines, 1994). In the gender theory, men and women 'do gender' through public and private spheres (Brines, 1994). For example, men devote time in the public sphere (paid employment) by taking up the 'breadwinner' role whereas women devote time in the private sphere (home) by taking up the 'homemaker' role. Likewise, the gender theory highlighted that women who are more inclined toward traditional gender roles beliefs than their husbands are willing to shoulder most of the housework tasks (Bartley et al., 2005). They may have agreed to take on those responsibilities as part of their feminine identity as a wife.

As a consequence, the unequal division of housework among couples put women in experiencing “double burden” or “second shift” because they continue to engage in unpaid work after engaging in paid work (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Oakley, 1974; Silbaugh, 1996). Due to the ‘double burden’, women are feeling distressed and have negative well-being and psychological distress (Aziz et al., 2016, 2018; David Chelliah et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

By using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were adopted in this study to explore the lived experiences of Indian married working women in the division of housework and their subjective feelings during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who fulfil the criteria of this study. The inclusion criteria of this study include Indian women who are working and married, living with their spouse and have at least one child staying in the household can take part in this study. Indian women who are working and married, living with parents, parents-in-law and domestic helpers are excluded from this study. The exclusion criteria are justified by past studies which found that additional adults will increase or reduce the housework burden among couples (Baxter, Hewitt & Haynes, 2008; Gough & Killewald 2010). As this study aims to explore the division of housework among Indian couples, hence it is inappropriate to include those households with additional adults as the scope of this study.

A sample of twelve married working women was interviewed through either face-to-face interviews or online interviews through WebEx, Zoom or Google Meet. The average age of the sample was 40 years old. Most of them have two to three children. Two participants had attained a secondary level qualification, six participants had attained a diploma qualification and four participants had attained a bachelor’s degree. Eight of the participants were employed full-time in the public sector whereas the remaining four participants were employed in the private sector. Most of the participants were allowed to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and a few participants were requested to return to the office several days per week. The average monthly household income is RM6800 which means most of the participants are classified in the M40 income group.

The participants shared their experiences and feelings through a mixture of Tamil, Malay and English languages. Each interview was conducted for approximately 45 minutes to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants. The data collection process was completed in two months. A token of appreciation of RM30 was given to the participants as a way to thank them for taking part in this study.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis. Pseudonyms are used in this study to adhere to the privacy and confidentiality of participants as stated in the ethical guidelines and standards (Protocol number: USM/JEPeM/22060362).

Three main themes were identified in this study. The three main themes include (1) Increased housework loads during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) Housework as women’s responsibility, and (3) Housework is a burden, and it is stressful.

4. Findings

4.1. Increased housework loads during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of the Indian married working women claimed that they spent at least 4 to 5 hours per day during the COVID-19 pandemic to complete the housework tasks. The main housework tasks include cooking, washing dishes and cleaning the house.

It takes at least 4 to 5 hours to clean the house and wash the dishes. It is more than 4 to 5 hours if I cook daily. (Jeeva).

It takes 4 hours to cook and clean the house during the weekdays. It takes an additional one hour to wash curtains and bed sheets during the weekends. (Nachiyar).

I spent 4 to 5 hours cleaning the house during weekdays. During weekends, I spend more time cooking, mopping and doing laundry. (Pattu).

Cooking meals, washing dishes, and cleaning the house become daily routines for these Indian married working women during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the lockdown measures. These Indian married working women expressed that they have hectic weekends compared to weekdays because they are occupied with housework schedules.

It is super busy during weekends. I woke up around 8 am. I prepared breakfast, lunch and dinner. Also, I cleaned the house. It was hectic during the weekends compared to weekdays. (Poorni).

These women are not only occupied by full-time paid work during weekdays but most of their time is occupied in doing housework tasks. Even though they do not engage in paid work during weekends, they have busy schedules in getting the meals ready and making sure the house is clean.

4.2. Housework as women's responsibility.

Almost all married and working Indian women described that they are doing a higher share of housework than their spouses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I did most of the housework. My husband cannot do it because he is occupied with his work. (Nachiyar).

I did all the housework because he works every day. (Revathi).

I did more housework than my husband because his job demands him to work extra hours. (Rani).

These quotes imply that Indian married working women engaged in more housework than their spouses because their spouses were occupied with paid work-related tasks and could not help with the housework. The way these participants described women doing most of the housework seems related to the time availability perspective highlighted by [Coverman \(1985\)](#) and [Hiller \(1984\)](#).

However, one important point to note is that these Indian married women were working full-time, and their employment status is similar to their spouse, yet they considered housework as their responsibility and not their husband's responsibility. They expressed that engaging in housework is women's responsibility and they did not have the option to run away from this responsibility.

Doing housework is not an option. Eventually, I must do housework because we do not have a domestic helper. It is my responsibility. (Poorni)

I feel like it is my responsibility. I must do it. If I do not do it, no one will bother to do it. It is not an option for me because if I do not do it, the housework will pile up. (Kamala).

It is an everyday duty for me even when I must go out to work. I must do it even though I have to work the afternoon shift. (Jeeva).

Based on these quotes, the word "must" suggests that these Indian women were aware of their gender role, in which housework is shouldered by women and not men even though both spouses were working full-time. The way they expressed themselves implies that they conform to the traditional gender roles in which women are responsible for housework even though they are working, whereas men are responsible for work to earn income and not housework.

Apart from the way women self-perceived that housework was women's responsibility, this traditional gender role is emphasized by their husbands either verbally or through the way they behaved.

He told me that he would focus on work. He will handle the plumbing and electricity tasks if I need help. (Revathi).

He would not do housework even if I asked him to do it. He could not put his clothes in the washing machine. (Pattu).

The way these Indian husbands said and acted indicates the masculinity characteristics embedded in the patriarchal system. The Indian husbands can have their say and behave the way they like because housework is not considered their responsibility according to societal norms.

4.3. Housework is a burden, and it is stressful.

Apart from the lack of support and assistance from the husbands in completing housework tasks, most of the Indian married working women expressed that they considered housework as a burden because they have to juggle between paid work and housework. The housework burden has stressed them.

Sometimes I wonder why all the housework burden falls on me. I feel stressed because I had to do everything. (Kamala).

Sometimes I feel tired as a woman. Why do we need to struggle to work and do housework in our life? It makes me stressed and tired mentally and physically. (Jeeva).

According to Kamala and Jeeva's quotes, both started questioning their identity as a woman and the way housework is associated with their role as a woman. They are stressed because as a woman, they are obliged to complete the housework tasks. Likewise, Poorni started questioning why she has to juggle both paid work and housework simultaneously despite having paid work. Poorni's experience is similar to Dinasri and Jeeva's experiences because engaging in paid work did not get them out of doing housework.

Sometimes it makes me stressed. I have paid work to do. I feel it is a burden in doing housework. (Poorni).

I still have to do housework even though I am working. (Dinasri).

I must do it even though I have to work the afternoon shift. (Jeeva).

These women are stressed because they are solely responsible for housework and their husbands did not help in reducing their burden. They felt unsatisfied with the division of housework.

I am not satisfied. It is stressful for me because I cannot spend more time with my children because of the housework burden. (Sri Shamini).

I am not satisfied. It stressed me mentally and physically. (Jeeva).

I feel unsatisfied. It is not fair. I do not have a social life and friends. (Kamala).

These quotes imply that these women are unsatisfied and stressed with the housework burden. They could not have adequate time for their children and leisure time with friends because they are occupied with paid work and housework responsibilities.

Looking at these Indian married working women's experiences, it seems that these women are not satisfied and feel stress because of the double burden experienced by them whereas their husbands could focus on paid work and escape from the housework responsibility. This indicates that the experiences of engaging in paid work and housework are different to women and men.

5. Discussion

Twelve Indian married working women shared their housework experiences and expressed their subjective feelings through semi-structured interviews. First, most of the Indian married working women shouldered most of the housework during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is similar to the past research conducted before and during the pandemic in Malaysia (Abdullah et al., 2008; Boo, 2018, 2020, 2021; Choong et al., 2019; Choong & Tan, 2018; David Chelliah et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2009; Noor, 1999; Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015, 2016). In addition, the findings show Indian married working women shouldered most of the housework is consistent with the past studies

focusing solely on Indian women in Malaysia (Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015, 2016). This implies that Indian women continue to shoulder housework responsibilities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.

Second, Indian married working women believed that it is the women who are responsible for the housework tasks even though they engaged in paid work. There is much emphasis on housework that must be done by the women that 'I must do housework'. This is very similar to the past research that emphasized the notion that Indian women articulate feminine identity through doing most of the cooking and laundry compared to their husbands (Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015; Oorjitham, 1982). The way these Indian married and working women perceived and did most of the housework can be seen as using housework in reinforcing the dominant traditional gender ideology that women are the homemaker (Devasahayam, 2005; Brines, 1994).

Third, Indian married working women quoted that their husbands were busy with work hence they could not engage in housework is also seen as how they reinforce the traditional male-breadwinner and female-homemaker model and emphasize the public and private spheres based on their gender roles in the family. The Indian husbands can escape from doing the housework because they are busy with paid employment, their role is aligned with the male-breadwinner role. However, Indian women cannot escape from doing housework because these Indian women need to reinforce their feminine identity to compensate for the time they spent in paid employment. It should be noted that Indian women are less likely to be allowed to engage in paid employment in Indian culture (Deshpande, 2020; Param, 2015).

Fourth, by engaging in paid employment, they could not avoid housework, they were experiencing a double burden (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Oakley, 1974; Silbaugh, 1996). These Indian married working tend to oblige to the constructed feminine identity and the cultural gender role expectations in doing housework even though they have earnings ability and spent time in paid work. This suggests that women cannot run from their women's responsibilities whereas men benefit from women's earnings and their contribution to housework under the patriarchal system.

Lastly, Indian married working women shouldered most of the housework burden which cause them unsatisfied and felt stressed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is consistent with past research that the unequal sharing of housework could lead to negative well-being and psychological distress (Aziz et al., 2016, 2018; David Chelliah et al., 2023).

6. Conclusion

In sum, this study shows that gender inequality in the division of housework can be seen in Indian families in Malaysia even though women are engaged in paid employment. The findings provide the first qualitative evidence of the lived experiences and subjective feelings among Indian married working women during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. It could be argued that these Indian married working women are reinforcing their feminine identity by doing housework and experiencing stress due to the increased housework burden during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the limitations of this study is that it only explored a small number of Indian married working women which couldn't be generalized to the whole Indian married working women in Malaysia. However, future studies can overcome this limitation by including a bigger sample size and

exploring the division of housework among Indian couples from both women's and men's perspectives.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Human Research Ethics Committee USM (JEPeM) (Protocol number: USM/JEPeM/22060362). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to ethical guidelines and standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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