

**DIVISION OF HOUSEWORK AMONG MARRIED
INDIAN WOMEN DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIA**

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by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
IPS	Institut Pengajian Siswazah
JEPeM	Human Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Sains Malaysia
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia
WAO	Women's Aid Organisation
WHO	World Health Organization
NEP	New Economic Policy
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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PEMBAHAGIAN KERJA RUMAH DALAM KALANGAN WANITA INDIA BERKAHWIN SEMASA PANDEMIK COVID-19 DI MALAYSIA

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka pembahagian kerja rumah dalam kalangan wanita India yang berkahwin dan bekerja semasa pandemik COVID-19. Kerajaan Malaysia telah menguatkuasakan Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan (PKP) demi mencegah rebakan coronavirus. Semasa PKP, kebanyakan pasangan terpaksa untuk bekerja dari rumah, melibatkan diri baik dalam kerja berbayar mahupun dalam kerja tidak berbayar pada masa yang sama. Segelintir kecil kajian di negara Barat dan satu kajian di Malaysia telah menunjukkan wanita banyak terlibat dalam melakukan kerja rumah berbanding dengan lelaki semasa PKP walaupun kedua-dua lelaki dan wanita terpaksa bekerja dari rumah. Satu kajian kuantitatif di Malaysia mendapati bahawa tiada hubungan statistik yang signifikan antara tanggapan lelaki dan wanita terhadap tanggungjawab kerja rumah bagi golongan India. Kajian yang fokus dalam pembahagian kerja rumah, sebab ketidakseimbangan kerja rumah dan kesan ketidakseimbangan pembahagian kerja rumah terhadap wanita India yang berkahwin dan bekerja adalah amat kurang di Malaysia. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengisi jurang penyelidikan ini melalui kajian kualitatif. Dengan menemubual dua belas wanita India yang berkahwin dan bekerja di Pulau Pinang, kajian ini meneroka bagaimana kerja rumah dibahagikan, sebab ketidakseimbangan kerja rumah berlaku, serta kesannya terhadap wanita India yang berkahwin dan bekerja. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa informan terlibat dalam banyak kerja rumah berbanding dengan suami mereka walaupun kedua-dua lelaki dan wanita bekerja sepenuh masa. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan sebab ketidakseimbangan pembahagian kerja rumah antara

pasangan berlaku termasuk (i) kerja rumah sebagai kerja rutin bagi wanita, (ii) kewajipan, (iii) wanita memegang piawai yang tinggi terhadap kebersihan dan kekemasan berbanding dengan lelaki, (iv) peranan gender tradisional dan sosialisasi ibu bapa, dan (v) kelapangan masa. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa informan berasa tertekan dan kurang puas hati terhadap ketidakseimbangan pembahagian kerja rumah semasa COVID-19 pandemik kerana kerja rumah dianggap sebagai tanggungjawab wanita dan bukan tanggungjawab lelaki.

DIVISION OF HOUSEWORK AMONG MARRIED INDIAN WOMEN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIA

ABSTRACT

The study aims to explore the division of housework among Indian married working women during the COVID-19 pandemic. The mandatory COVID-19 lockdown was initiated by the government of Malaysia to prevent the coronavirus disease. During the mandatory lockdown, many couples were forced to work from home, engaging in both paid and unpaid work simultaneously. Few studies in Western countries and one study in Malaysia showed that women did more housework than men during the lockdown, although both men and women were working from home. The quantitative study conducted in Malaysia showed that there was no statistically significant difference in perceived housework responsibility among Indian men and women. Research into the division of housework, the reasons for unequal division of housework and the effects of unequal division of housework to Indian married working women during the COVID-10 pandemic is scarce in Malaysia. Hence, this study addresses the current gap in research through qualitative research. By interviewing twelve Indian married working women in Penang, this study explores the ways housework is divided, the reasons for unequal division of housework and the effects of unequal division of housework towards Indian married working women. The findings show that the informants did more housework than their husbands, despite both engaging in paid work. The findings show that reasons that lead to unequal division of housework include: (i) housework is routine work for women; (ii) obligation; (iii) women uphold higher cleanliness and tidiness standards than men; (iv) traditional gender roles and parents' socialisation; and (v) time availability. The

findings also highlights that informants experienced stressed and dissatisfied with the unequal division of housework during the COVID-19 pandemic because housework is considered as women's responsibility and not men's.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic had an immense effect on people's lives around the world. The pandemic caused massive disruption across the globe, bringing the entire world to a halt and causing huge cultural and economic crises. Between the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020, the lack of a COVID-19 vaccine forced all countries to severely restrict human mobility, whether among citizens or foreign visitors, and to temporarily halt the operation of factories, companies, and businesses that allow multiple employees to work from home simultaneously (Anam et al., 2021). Many countries had to impose severe lockdown measures such as the closure of schools, daycare centres, kindergartens, restaurants, and public places such as parks, cinemas, and gyms (Aguilar et al., 2021; Czymara et al., 2021; Mavroudis et al., 2021; Reichelt et al., 2021; Zamberlan et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown had changed the way people carry out their daily activities and routines (Chauhan, 2020).

The pandemic affects people regardless of gender, but the impacts are still gendered (Nanthini & Nair, 2020). A lot of researchers have debated that the pandemic has increased the existing gender inequality between women and men (Górska et al., 2021; Lokot & Bhatia, 2020; Sarker, 2020; Waddell et al., 2021). Crisis situations always affect women more than men, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception (Neetha, 2021; Sarker, 2020). Lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant changes for working women.

Scholars suggest that one of the most contentious issues in contemporary marriages is the division of housework between spouses (Stevens et al., 2001). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected women differently than men due to the increasing pressure of unpaid work such as housework and childcare (Chauhan, 2020; Chung et

al., 2021; Hipp & Bünning, 2021; Xue & McMunn, 2021). Women did more housework than men during the COVID-19 pandemic is similar to the research conducted prior to the pandemic, which found that women spent more time than men on housework, childcare, and elderly care (Xue & McMunn, 2021). Women bear a disproportionate amount of unpaid work in a family due to the gendered division of housework, gendered roles, and social norms (Chauhan, 2020).

In Malaysia, women shoulder most of the housework responsibility before the COVID-19 pandemic (Boo, 2018; Choong et al., 2019), even when they participate in paid work (Suleman et al., 2021). Women tend to quit their jobs and prioritize family when they are facing problems juggling the private and public spheres (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020b). Although females have surpassed education achievement compared to men in Malaysia, female labour force participation rate is still lower than men due to women's family responsibilities (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020; Noor & Mahudin, 2016).

There are limited studies focusing on the division of housework in Malaysia before the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite there being a few studies focused on the division of housework among Malay and Chinese women in Malaysia, these studies did not explore the experiences of Indian women in the division of housework (Boo, 2018; Choong et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2009). Only few studies focused specifically on the experiences of Indian women in the division of housework in Malaysia before the COVID-19 pandemic (Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015, 2016). These qualitative studies, conducted in Kuala Lumpur, specifically at Klang Valley, found that Indian women spent most of the time doing housework and experienced gender inequality in households (Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015, 2016).

Limited studies examined the experiences of Indian women in the division of housework during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia (Boo, 2021b) and India (Borah Hazarika & Das, 2021; Chauhan, 2020; Deshpande, 2020, 2022). According to Boo's (2021) quantitative study, Malay, Chinese, and Indian women in Malaysia were responsible for most of the housework during the COVID-19 pandemic. The result is similar to the studies in India, where Indian women shoulder most of the housework responsibility (Borah Hazarika & Das, 2021; Chauhan, 2020; Deshpande, 2020, 2022; Neetha, 2021). Although these studies conducted in India suggested that women struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic to balance paid and unpaid work, gender inequality in the household increased during the pandemic because women had to do all the housework, childcare, and elderly care while engaging in paid work. These studies were conducted through quantitative surveys and not qualitative, semi-structured interviews.

In short, these studies did not capture the experiences and the effects of unequal division of housework to Indian women during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies conducted in India do not apply to Indian women in Malaysia due to the cultural, contextual diversity and different policies. Hence, this study aims to fill the gap by exploring in what ways housework is divided between married Indian couples during the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying the reasons for unequal division of housework among married Indian couples during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of unequal division of housework to married Indian women during the COVID-10 pandemic in Malaysia. This study is essential because it supports Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5): Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, as set by the United Nations Women (2020). More specifically, SDG 5 targets

recognizing and valuing unpaid domestic work through the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family.

1.1 Background of the Study

This section provides a brief overview of the Indian ethnic group in Malaysia, an overview of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impacts on families. First, it describes the history of the Indian migration to Malaysia. Second, it provides the context of the Indian ethnic group in Malaysia through demographic characteristics, Indian culture related to housework responsibility and policies that impact on their lives. Third, it describes the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on families in Malaysia.

1.1.1 The History of Indian Migration to Malaysia

Throughout the nineteenth century, Malaya has received thousands of South Indian immigrants. The Indian migrants was brought by the British Government to work at rubber plantations and tin mines in the late 1700s and 1800s (Param, 2015). With the expansion of Malaya's plantation sector and the rise in rubber prices in the late 1910s and early 1920s, the number of Indian immigrants to Malaya had increased gradually (Lee, 1984). In order to attract more immigrants to Malaya to fulfil the needs of the market, the British government also granted advantages such as accommodation and transportation expenses to those Indian immigrants.

The large wage disparity between South India and Malaya attracted many labourers, who hoped to improve their families' living conditions. Since the Indians were experiencing economic distress, the colonial authorities took advantage of the opportunity to acquire cheap labour and the immigrant labourers who were willing to accept the poor working conditions (Lee, 1984). As Malaya's economy rose, there

were huge demands in the plantation, construction, and mining sectors which brought many Indian male workers to Malaya at certain periods.

The British strictly controlled the immigrants and brought the workers to Malaya through Kangani system. An employer's foreman typically designated a person as a Kangani. In order to find labourers willing to work in Malaya, the employer would send the chosen Kangani to India. Employers used this approach to provide the Kangani with a small upfront payment so they could go back to their village and hire those who were interested in working at Malaya (Lee, 1984; Nair & Musa, 2020a).

Initially, the plantation, construction, and mining industries preferred male employees. However, Indian female workers were brought to Malaya due to the manpower demands and greater expenses of wages pay to the men, but the number of female workers was still lower than the number of male workers (Karupiah & Fernandez, 2022, p. 24). It was challenging to attract female workers due to the influence of Indian culture and traditions. Indian women play the role as caretakers are responsible for their husbands and families, which has limited their mobility (Lee, 1984; Nair & Musa, 2020a; Oorjitham, 1982). They were not allowed to leave the house to work or travel abroad. However, the number of Indian women working as labourers increased because of the poor economic situation in Indian (Karupiah & Fernandez, 2022, p. 24). The majority of Indian women who immigrated to Malaya were of Tamil, Telugu, or Malayali ancestry and originated in South India. A few people, notably Sikhs, Punjabis, Bengalis, and Gujaratis, arrived from North India. However, most of them were Tamil people (Nair & Musa, 2020b).

A significant number of Indian male workers were also working in urban sectors such as telecommunications, railroads, port operations, and road construction. As the government's services and communications developed in Malaya, South Indian

labourers found employment in urban sectors, often occupying middle-class positions (Ramamurthy, 1989). Oorjitham (1982) stated that Tamil working-class families in urban Penang have participated in other jobs. The Indian men mainly participated in government jobs in various departments, while their wives were factory workers or household servants. Even though only a small number of Indian women participated in employment, their participation is considered important and essential to the labour market.

1.1.2 The Indian Ethnic Group in Malaysia

This section describes the demographic characteristics, including the proportion of Indian ethnic groups in Malaysia, religion, language, educational attainment, household size, age of marriage, labour force participation rate, and divorce rate, to provide an overview of the Indians in Malaysia.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with a population of 34,308,525 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Malaysia consists of three main ethnic groups: Malays (63.9 percent), Chinese (20.6 percent), Indians (6.0 percent), and other minority groups (0.7 percent). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2023), Indians are categorized as a minority group in Malaysia because they only constitute approximately 6 percent of the whole population.

In Malaysia, states such as Selangor, Perak, Johor, Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, and Penang are the top six states with the highest Indian populations (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023).

Approximately 1.8 million Indians live in urban areas in 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). On the contrary, only 2.4 percent of Indians live in rural areas (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). According to the data, states with the

highest Indian population and 100% urbanization are Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Penang (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021; The Star, 2022).

In terms of religion, Indians are free to choose their religion because the Federal Constitution guarantees the right to religious freedom to non-Malays in Malaysia (Haji Ishak, 2010). The majority of Indians believe in Hinduism, while only a small number of Indians believe in Christianity, Sikhism, and Jainism (Oorjitham, 1982).

For languages, Indians usually speak Tamil at home because it is their native language. Indians learn Malay and English languages in primary schools, secondary schools, and universities.

For household size, Hamid et al., (2019) stated that the household size for an Indian family is 4.2 people in Malaysia. It should be noted that Indian households scored the highest percentage of 30.3% for extended family household types in Malaysia in 2014. However, the number of Indian households with extended families has decreased, and they are mostly situated in less urbanized states.

Regarding the marriage age, the median age of non-Muslim marriage in Malaysia is 28 and 26 years for males and females, respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). The mean age of marriage among Indians is between 28.1 and 26.1 years for males and females (Tey, 2017). The Penang Hindu Association (2023) stated that the population of Indians has decreased gradually because the current generation is more career-oriented and less likely to commit to a marital relationship.

In terms of educational attainment, Indians (6.9 percent) with no formal education recorded the highest unemployment rate, while those with primary education registered the lowest rate of 2.5 percent, respectively. The high

unemployment rate among those with tertiary education, including graduates, for Indians was 5.5 percent, or 14,500 persons, mainly due to the skills gap (Ministry of Finance, 2019). However, Mohd Arshad (2016) stated that the effects of pursuing higher educational levels on earnings were significantly positive for Indians. Among the various ethnic groups in Malaysia, Indians have the highest positive effect on earnings, which is 24.85 percent, followed by Bumiputera at 22.55 percent, and Chinese at 14.8 percent by pursuing tertiary education.

The labour force participation of Indians in Malaysia is 69.1 percent in 2023 (Ministry of Economy, 2023b). Taking into consideration of ethnic groups, the unemployment rate was higher for Indian women (4.9 percent) compared to the unemployment rate for Bumiputera (4.2 percent) and Chinese (2.3 percent) (Ministry of Finance, 2019). The statistics suggested that 4.9 percent of the total Indian populations that are unemployed are women.

Based on the statistics, the divorce rate among non-Muslims in Malaysia has increased by 30.4 percent from 2020 to 2021 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). Researchers found that the divorce rate among Malaysians had a huge spike during the COVID pandemic (Rahim et al., 2021b). Moreover, based on the article in the Press Trust of India (2013), the divorce cases among Malaysian Indians increased to 5000 cases in 2013. The median age of divorce among non-Muslims, male and female, is 39 and 36 years old, respectively.

1.1.3 Family Structure of the Indian Community

The family structure of the working class in Malaysian Indian families originated from the typical family system – joint family. In the Indian family system, joint families are common where husband and wife stay with their parents-in-law or husband's family (Oorjitham, 1982). Most young adults are less likely to leave their

families to live on their own before marriage or to substitute friends for their family's presence, especially when they have the elderly in their family. Adult children are more likely to remain with their parents or relatives and care for them in old age as caretaker (Kallivayalil, 2004). However, currently in Malaysia, the traditional Indian joint family system has mostly transitioned into a nuclear family structure, more closely aligned with the typical Malaysian family model – a nuclear family. It can be seen in the fertility rate for Indian families which dropped from 1.5 to 1.2 babies from 2015 to 2021 (Department of Statistics, 2022b). This transition reflects broader socio-cultural shifts in the Malaysian Indian community (Hamid et al., 2019).

Despite these changes, elements of patriarchy remain in Malaysian Indian households. Three key characteristics, namely gender-based hierarchical placement, gender roles, and norms that differentiate men's and women's authority, establish the patriarchal system in Indian households (Saigaran & Karupiah, 2020). Furthermore, the patriarchal system deeply connects both men and women through their power relationships, roles, and task distribution. Men frequently retain control over financial decision and family social life, although women are generally in charge of household administration and caregiving. These dynamics highlight the long-lasting impact of patriarchal standards, which continue to determine gender roles and authority structures inside the family.

The ideal type of Indian family is one with a father as the breadwinner and a mother as the caretaker, who is involved in household chores (Oorjitham, 1982). Moreover, men are considered as head of families even if they are younger than other female members in the family (Saigaran & Karupiah, 2020). Men have more authority over financial decision, the social life of the family, and deciding who does the household chores. The subordinates should not violate the orders of men in the family.

Typically, father and son will hold the most respectful positions, while mother and daughter will be submissive. Without negotiation, the father always has the final say in all conflicts; therefore, communication is always one-way (Chowdhury & Patnaik, 2013; Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015). Only cooking and grocery decisions were made by Indian women (Oorjitham, 1982). The other family members, especially the women, lack the authority to overrule the decisions made by the men (Devasahayam, 2005). Moreover, women were mostly responsible for taking care of the household, bearing children, and providing for their spouse's family. The women being in a subordinate position, must be aware of the men's needs in terms of their wishes, moods, sentiments, and food. Hence, the patriarchal system in Indian households is limiting women's potential to thrive, and it exploits them for the benefit of men (Saigaran, 2020).

1.1.4 The Impact of Malaysian Policies on Indian Women

Indian women experience a multifaceted situation that is both influenced by deep-rooted patriarchal norms within their communities and the policies in Malaysia. The interplay of policy and cultural expectations significantly affects their social roles and personal experiences.

Malaysia's multicultural policies, specifically the New Economic Policy (NEP), have historically aimed to tackle societal disparities by providing the Bumiputera (ethnic Malays and indigenous tribes) preferential treatment. Although these policies aim intended to foster economic equality and national unity, they have inadvertently marginalized non-Bumiputera communities, including Indian Malaysians. The marginalization negatively affects Indian women's socioeconomic status and mobility, limiting their access to resources and economic opportunities (Chin, 2006; Noor, 2024; Sundara Raja & Devadason, 2014).

In 1995, Malaysia showed its dedication to gender equality by signing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). By signing the convention, it means that Malaysia as a country plays a role to safeguard women's rights and ensure equal opportunities in education, health and employment – aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality. However, the convention implementation was inconsistent. Issues such as child marriage, limited access to reproductive health care, and the lack of women's representation in politics persist, highlighting the gap between policy and practice (Endut, 2020; Lemièrè, 2023; Sundara Raja & Devadason, 2014).

Whilst state policies in Malaysia offer a framework for gender equality and women's empowerment, they are often counteracted by very entrenched cultural expectations. Patriarchal norms in Indian culture greatly influence women's roles and often overshadow the effectiveness of government policies. Women are typically expected to handle the majority of housework and caregiving, which limits their ability to participate in workforce. In Malaysia, Indian middle-class working mothers often navigate their identities within these gendered contexts while juggling work obligations and household responsibilities (Param, 2015). The dominant patriarchal values in Indian communities can overshadow policy efforts, making it challenging for Indian women to fully benefit from state provisions. Due to their minority status, their specific needs are disregarded in mainstream policy discourse, which leaves them with a double burden of systematic marginalization and cultural expectations (Tayeb & Sathasivam, 2022).

In short, the policies and patriarchal norms continue to have a significant impact on Indian communities especially on their gender roles and career opportunities.

1.1.5 COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

Chinese tourists traveling to Singapore discovered the first COVID-19 case in Malaysia on January 25 (Umair et al., 2021). On January 30th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern and declared the outbreak of the pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2023). The Malaysian government has strictly implemented comprehensive and nationwide actions established by the WHO (Umair et al., 2021).

As a result of the second wave of COVID-19 breakouts, the virus spread increased significantly in early March 2020. This has prompted the government to impose the Phase 1 lockdown, also known locally as the Movement Control Order (MCO) (Balakrishnan et al., 2021). Since then, the country has implemented Conditional MCO, Restricted MCO, and Recovery MCO. After these three phases, the national lockdown ended on December 31 (Balakrishnan et al., 2021). Malaysia had experienced a third wave of COVID-19 transmission, with the number of positive cases increasing dramatically. This prompted targeted lockdowns in several states, including Selangor and Kuala Lumpur.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia has imposed MCO to break the transmission chain and minimize the number of new cases (Khalid, 2021; Umair et al., 2021). Malaysia imposed social distancing, closed national and state borders, and prohibited movement and mass assembly in areas such as religion, business, education, sports, culture, and social activities, except for supermarkets, public markets, grocery stores, and stores selling necessities. The government only allows the head of household, often times seen as men, to leave the house at a time and within a 10-kilometer radius.

According to JobStreet Malaysia (2020), COVID-19 restrictions force 67 percent of employees to work from home. When employed men and women had to work from home due to lockdown restrictions, there was a significant shift in work pattern from the public sphere to the private sphere. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown forces couples to stay at home, likely leading to conflicts as they juggling unpaid work and paid work in the same spheres (Baqutayan et al., 2021; Marzo et al., 2021). The divorce rate in Malaysia had a huge spike, with 78,000 couples filing for divorce from March 2020 to August 2021 (Rahim et al., 2021b). Since only the head of the family, which is mostly men, could go out to buy groceries, women had to stay at home and manage the housework, childcare, and paid work. Women experience higher levels of stress compared to men during this period (McLaren et al., 2020). In addition, some people lost their jobs during the pandemic. According to Habibullah et al., (2021), Malaysia's unemployment rate unexpectedly increased during the pre-lockdown period in January and February 2020 and during the lockdown periods.

There was also a lot of social impact during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive, prolonged stress for people. Marzo et al., (2021) stated that a significant proportion of Malaysians experienced a decline in their mental health status as the number of COVID-19 cases increased quickly, even a year after the COVID-19 pandemic started. During this third wave of the pandemic, Marzo et al., (2021) discovered that 70 percent of respondents experienced moderate to severe depression and 43.5 percent experienced mild to severe anxiety.

Although working from home made life easy for some people, it also increased domestic issues in the family. Domestic violence cases in Malaysia have increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic (Solhi, 2021). The Women's Aid

Organization (WAO) (2018) has reported 5421 domestic violence cases in 2018 and 5657 in 2019. However, domestic violence cases have increased to over 9000 cases since the COVID-19 pandemic began (Rahim et al., 2021a, p. 1).

In response, the Malaysian Board of Counsellors and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development established and promoted the *24-jam Talian Kasih* to provide psychological assistance to those affected by the lockdown order. The Women's Aid Organization (WAO) has received a 14 percent increase in hotline calls since the country's lockdown began (Balakrishnan et al., 2021).

1.2 Problem Statement

Women's involvement in unpaid domestic work is typically regarded as mundane, less visible, and less valued (McLaren et al., 2020). Devault (1999) stated that family life scholars believe that women do the bulk of the housework, childcare and emotional work. Although men's participation in unpaid domestic work has increased over the decades, traditional gender roles still dominate in many societies, including Malaysia, where women shoulder most of the domestic burden, even when they are employed (Boo, 2021b). This disparity persist due to deeply ingrained cultural norms and gender ideologies that predominately assign caregiving and domestic duties to women (Chung et al., 2021; Chung & Booker, 2022). The unequal burden of domestic obligations has resulted in women leaving the workforce or struggling to achieve career advancement (Boo, 2021a; Chelliah et al., 2023). The pandemic has made this issue worse, with many women reporting lower productivity in their professional roles as a result of the demands of domestic work (Rudolph & Zacher, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both men and women by disrupting traditional boundaries between work and home globally. The shift to work remotely has forced men and women to manage their paid work and unpaid domestic work in the same sphere. The COVID-19 pandemic blurred the boundaries between work and domestic life globally. It disrupted Malaysian households especially for women, by merging public and private spheres into a single and complex environment. Lockdowns reinforced traditional gender roles by turning homes into places for work, family life and education. While juggling employment obligations, women were disproportionately responsible for taking on more home duties like childcare, housework, and elder care. The blurred boundaries between work and home magnified pre-existing gender disparities (Boo, 2021b; Power, 2020). Many Malaysian women encountered rise in unpaid work when the families were mandated to remain at home during the MCO (Boo, 2021a; Chelliah et al., 2023).

The merge of private and public spheres has led to increased stress and role overload, particularly for women who must juggle professional responsibilities, childcare, and household management (Craig & Churchill, 2020). Researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that the unequal division of housework during the pandemic has significant impact on women's mental health (Chauhan, 2020; Deshpande, 2022; Nanthini & Nair, 2020; Neetha, 2021).

Moreover, due to the constant juggling of their responsibilities, many women reported experiencing burnout and diminished opportunities for career progression (Rudolph & Zacher, 2020). The home has become a site for both economic and family activities as a result of the pandemic, which has also made it harder to distinguish between reproductive and productive labor. Women's contributions to the workforce are overshadowed by their disproportionate domestic responsibilities. This fusion has

resulted in the "double burden" phenomenon (Craig & Churchill, 2020). McLaren et al. (2020) reveals that women experience intensified role strain as their responsibilities as employees, caregivers, and homemakers merged into a constant cycle. Despite playing a vital part in maintaining household and economic stability during the pandemic, women's engagement in domestic work remains undervalued and often invisible (Chung & Booker, 2022).

No studies were found to examine the experiences of division of housework among Indian married working women in Malaysia. Only a few studies have been found to understand the division of housework before the COVID-19 pandemic (Devasahayam, 2005; Oorjitham, 1982; Param, 2015). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Param (2015) stated that Malaysian Indian men seldom get involved in housework even though their wives engaged in paid work too. Indian men are less likely to be encouraged or being socialized in doing housework since they were young. In contrast, Indian women are socialized in doing housework and are discouraged to hold high position in paid work because of their pre-determined gender roles (Ministry of Economy, 2023a). While engaging in the workforce, they encountered unequal obligations for managing the home, caring for children, and looking after the elderly, frequently with little assistance from their husbands (Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015).

Little is known about Indian couples' experiences in the division of housework during the pandemic. Hence, this study aims to fill the gaps by answering the following research objectives and research questions.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To explore in what ways housework is divided between married Indian couples during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.
2. To identify the reasons for unequal division of housework among married Indian couples during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.
3. To explore the effects of unequal division of housework to Indian women during the COVID-10 pandemic in Malaysia.

1.4 Research Questions

1. In what ways housework is divided between married Indian couples during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia?
2. What are the reasons for unequal division of housework among married Indian couples during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia?
3. What are the effects of unequal division of housework to Indian women during the COVID-10 pandemic in Malaysia?

1.5 Scope of the Study

This section outlines the scope of the study by stating the time period, the informants' characteristics, and the geographical location in which this study is conducted.

In terms of the research objectives, this study focuses on in what ways are housework divided between married Indian couples during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia. By exploring their experiences, this study also focuses on the reasons that lead to the unequal division of housework and the effects of unequal division of housework to married Indian women during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.

Next, in terms of the time period, this study focuses on married Indian women's experiences in the division of housework during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study does not focus on the women's experiences in the division of housework during the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods. The interviews were conducted between October to November 2022 during the endemic phase of COVID-19 pandemic after the study obtained the ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (JEPeM), Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Moreover, regarding the informants' characteristics, the twelve Indian women recruited in this study are those Indian married working women who live with their spouses and have at least one young child aged below five years old during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study excludes Indian women who did not live with their spouses and had children older than five during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, this study excludes Indian women who live with additional adults, such as parents, parents-in-law, or domestic helpers.

I recruited Indian married working women who reside in Penang State for this study. The study excludes Indian married working women who reside outside Penang State. Penang State was selected as the research setting because it is one of the top six states that have the highest Indian populations than other states in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Selangor, Perak, Johor, Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, and Penang are among the six states that have the highest Indian populations in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Penang has 155,000 Indians, which comprises 77,200 Indian women and 77,700 Indian men.

The choice of Penang as the study location was determined by both the pandemic context and practical considerations related to data collection. In addition, Penang's socio-economic landscape, characterized by a diverse and industrialized

economy, provides an important context for examining the experiences of working women juggling professional and domestic responsibilities. The state's economic development and urbanization have influenced family structures and gender roles, making it a suitable setting for this research (Khalid, 2024).

1.6 Definition of Terms

This section provides the definitions of three key concepts in this study: housework, division of housework, and gender inequality.

1.6.1 Housework

Housework is one of the unpaid domestic work performed at home, and it is related to the production and reproduction of the home (Cunha et al., 2016). Housework including cleaning, cooking, and washing clothes is labelled as feminine activities and it is perceived as the most disliked task by men and women (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016). It is considered a trivial task, and it is perceived as “women’s work” (Brines, 1994; Coltrane, 2000; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Davis & Greenstein (2013) stated that housework is a routine, repetitive, and disliked activity. Gender divides some housework tasks into feminine and masculine categories. For instance, people typically perceive cleaning and laundry as female tasks, while they view home maintenance chores as male tasks (Blair & Lichter, 1991; Kolpashnikova & Kan, 2020; Poortman & Van der Lippe, 2009). Domínguez-Folgueras et al., (2017) stated that unpaid domestic work is one of the most gendered spheres in the society, and it appears to be the most difficult to achieve equality in families.

1.6.2 Division of Housework

The division of housework refers to distribution of housework tasks and obligations among household members. The allocation of housework tasks among

members involved in keeping the home in good condition, such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and shopping refers to how these responsibilities are distributed within the household. Research regularly shows that, even in dual-income household, women typically handle a disproportionate amount of housework (Nitsche & Grunow, 2016).

This study avoid the term “division of household labour” because the division of household labour is a broader terms which include housework, childcare and elderly care, while the division of housework is narrowly focused on the chores required to maintain a home (Gupta et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2021). On the other hand, this study uses division of housework instead of division of household labour because it only focuses on the housework experiences among Indian married working women in Malaysia while excluding the childcare and elderly care experiences.

1.6.3 Gender Inequality

According to Lorber (2010), gender inequality may occur in many different forms, depending on the country's economic structure, social organization, cultures and policies within that society. Generally, women are at a disadvantage position in contrast to similarly situated men. For instance, men continue to gain more recognition in their work and have more opportunities to focus on their work and advance their careers. In contrast, single women, married women or mothers that possess the same qualification or expertise as men, they may not have the same recognition in their work and probably have less opportunities to advance their careers due to gender role expectations. The ideology that legitimizes a gender-segregated labour force, where women's incomes and opportunities are unequal to men, expresses these behaviours, which represent gender inequality within the family (Kane & Sanchez, 1994).

Women’s gender role as caretakers and nurturers makes them burdened with unpaid domestic work and family responsibilities. Women’s unpaid domestic work is

often unacknowledged, undervalued and unappreciated in the family, community, and market, despite its advantages to all institutions (Dewan et al., 2019). Due to their predetermined roles, women bear a heavy burden of substantial household and nurturing duties and have limited power in the families (Kane & Sanchez, 1994; Sullivan, 2021). Women's contribution to housework has always been undervalued; thus, gender inequality stems from this lack of value on their unpaid work contribution. It has also established the hierarchy of gender relations within the family (Dewan et al., 2019).

In some societies, household responsibilities are primarily perceived as a woman's responsibility and women find it hard to get their husbands to participate in these activities (Luke et al., 2014). Majority of men and women agree that unpaid domestic work should be shared, however, only a small proportion of men are willing to share housework responsibility with their spouses (Coltrane, 2000). Women tend to do more housework than their spouses, regardless of income, education, ideology, or the type of paid job (Greenstein, 2009). Gendered division of housework creates inequality among men and women (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994).

There has been a huge transition in traditional gender roles among heterosexual couples during the last several decades (Bianchi et al., 2000). Yet, women continue to spend more time on housework although women's participation in the workforce has increased throughout the decades (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Coverman & Sheley, 1986; Mandel & Lazarus, 2021; Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2007; Zimmerman, 2000). For instance, men's total time spent in housework has slightly increased over the decades in the United States (Coltrane, 2000), but it has not reached the same level of housework time as their wives. It leads many scholars to declare a "stalled revolution"

and emphasize housework inequality as a major and persistent cause of conflict in families (Cotter et al., 2013; Leopold et al., 2018; Raley et al., 2013).

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

The structure of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 reviews the past studies on housework in Malaysia, Indian women and gender roles. It also explains the theoretical perspectives used in explaining the involvement of men and women in housework and how couples divide housework in the past studies.

Chapter 3 explains the details of the qualitative methodological approach used to undertake semi-structured interviews with 12 Indian married working women in Penang, Malaysia. It covers the data collection process, the data analysis process, reflection as a researcher, and the methodological limitations of this qualitative research.

Chapter 4 presents the qualitative findings on housework. I divide the findings into themes that align with research questions 1 and 2. It first examines ways in which housework are divided between married Indian couples during the COVID-19 pandemic and then focuses on the reasons that lead to the unequal division of housework among married Indian couples in Malaysia.

Chapter 5 presents the findings related to research question 3. It describes the effects of unequal division of housework to married Indian women during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings from the theoretical components of the study and answers the overarching research questions. The study also underscores its contributions and recommends further research to comprehend the division of housework among married Indian couples in Malaysia.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this section, past studies related to Malay, Chinese and Indian women on division of housework are reviewed. It is important to review past studies on housework in Malaysia because there is limited literature on the division of housework among Indian women. In addition, this chapter reviews the four dominant theoretical perspectives, including time availability, relative resources, gender ideology, and feminist perspectives, used in explaining the division of housework in prior studies. In addition, a conceptual framework is developed for this study.

2.2 Past Studies on Housework in Malaysia

There is limited research that examines the division of housework among couples in Malaysia before COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on the division of housework among Malay couples, past studies generally suggested that Malay women spent twice as much as men on housework (Boo, 2018, Choong et al., 2019, Davanzo & Lee, 1978, Mazidah, Yun & Rokiah, 1979, Noor, 1999). For example, Mazidah, Yun & Rokiah (1979) found that women spent at least four to six hours per day on housework, and approximately the same amount of time in farm work. Two decades later, Noor (1999) found that working women spent an average three hours and eleven minutes per day on housework, whereas men spent an average of only one hour and twenty-two minutes per day on housework. Boo (2018) found that Malay women spent twelve hours and nine minutes per week on housework, whereas men spent six hours and seventeen minutes per week on housework. On the other hand, Boo (2018) found that Chinese women spent eight hours and fifty-nine minutes per week on housework,

and men spent three hours and forty-six minutes per week on housework. Two quantitative studies, conducted in Kuala Lumpur, specifically at Klang Valley, found that Indian women spent most of the time doing housework and experienced gender inequality in households (Devasahayam, 2005; Param, 2015, 2016). These studies focusing on Indian women's experiences did not specify the total time spent on housework.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a quantitative study found that women (Malay, Chinese and Indian) spent approximately eighteen hours and eighteen minutes per week on housework whereas men spent eleven hours forty-two minutes on housework in Malaysia (Boo, 2021b). Moreover, a quantitative study found that gender differences in housework responsibilities are statistically significant for Malay and Chinese ethnic groups before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and not statistically significant for Indian and other ethnic groups (Chelliah et al., 2023). This study found that Malay and Chinese women were solely responsible for housework tasks before and during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to Malay and Chinese men. Moreover, the study found that the proportion of Malay and Chinese women reporting housework as a sole responsibility rose during the pandemic. Likewise, the proportion of Malay and Chinese men who perceived that their spouse is responsible for housework tasks rose during the pandemic.

In Malay households, gender norms deeply rooted in culture and religion contribute to gender inequality in unpaid domestic work (Boo, 2018). Women are primarily responsible for housework due to patriarchal values that are intertwined with societal norms and religious beliefs (Boo, 2018, 2021a). Traditionally, men are viewed as the breadwinners and women as the caretakers. As a result of this cultural expectation, women are burdened with a disproportionate share of domestic