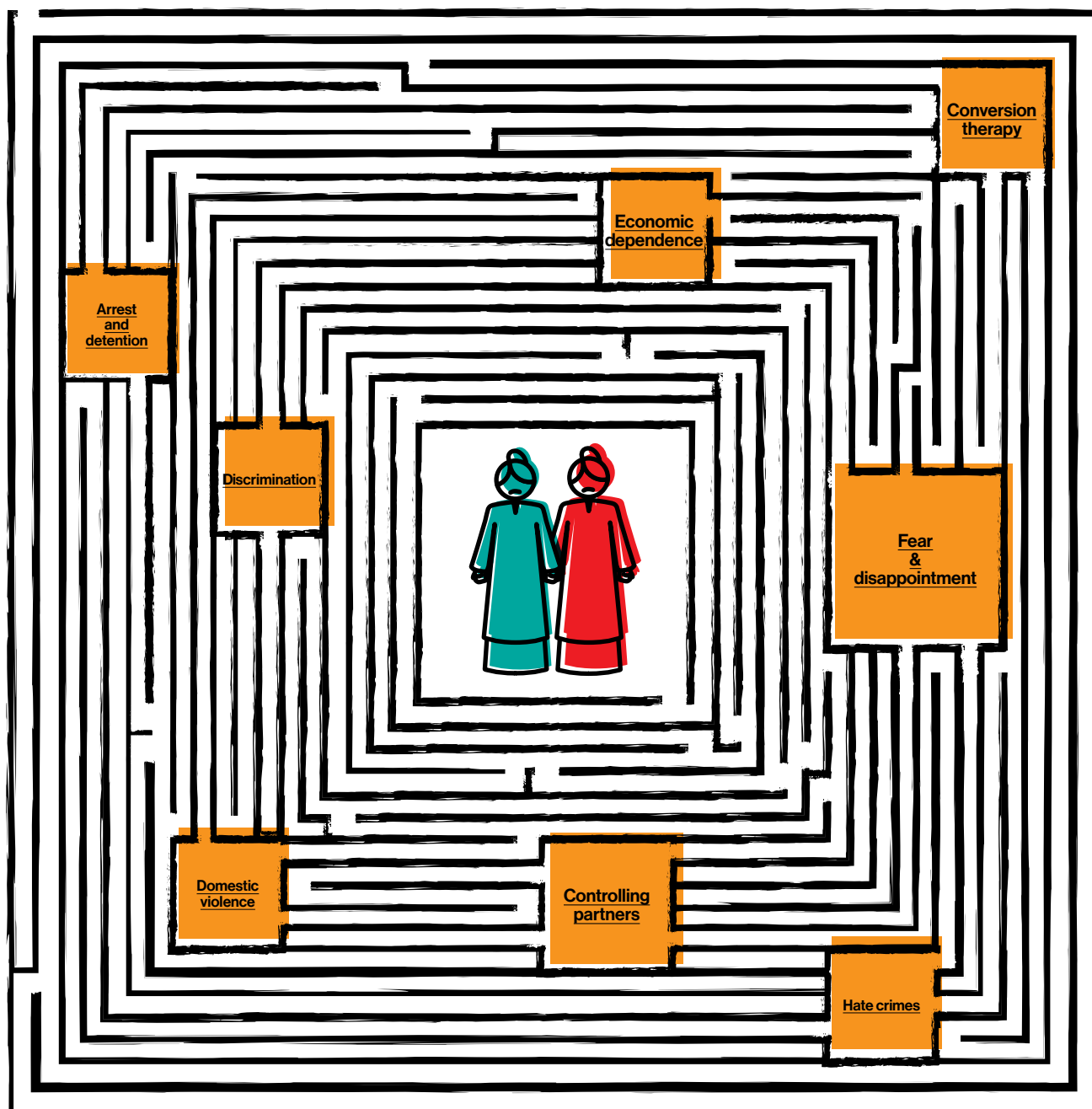


Shedding Light on SGBV Against Women in Malaysia

A summary of the impact of sexual and gender-based violence on both cisgender and transgender women in Malaysia, specifically on their freedom of expression and decision-making in public and political spaces.

July, 2021



Introduction:

Within the span of three years, two distinct studies were conducted to investigate precisely how sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) restrict women's freedom of expression and decision-making in public and political spaces in Malaysia: "Freedom of Expression and Gender-Based Violence" by Solving Lab Consultancy (henceforth SLC) and "Freedom of Expression and Gender Identity" by Justice for Sisters (henceforth JFS). These qualitative studies were conducted by two separate researchers and focused on two groups of women: self-identified cisgender women and transgender women. The studies included participants from diverse political, religious, and social backgrounds. All together, these projects took into consideration the experiences of 120 women; 60 interviewees identified as ciswomen and 60 more as trans women.

The interviews were largely affected by the Movement Control Order (MCO) imposed by the Malaysian government to curb Covid-19 infection rates. Only four cisgender participants were interviewed by SLC face-to-face. Interviews conducted by JFS with transwomen, on the other hand, had to be conducted in two stages as the digital divide for transwomen outside of Kuala Lumpur cannot be disregarded. Regardless, all interviews recorded crucial information to the research objective through the guidance of a semi-structured list of questions, which were written and agreed upon by the researchers and EMPOWER Malaysia. Interviews were initially conducted in mixed languages and later transcribed into written English.

After data collection and selection, both studies produced independent thematic analyses—including some factors impacting women's freedom of expression in Malaysia. Analysis produced by SLC comprises ten factors, while the research group JFS stated another eight different factors. Thus, this report by EMPOWER will attempt to regroup these factors in hopes of staying true to the studies' findings while maintaining a keen focus on the objective of this report: to provide adequate insight and suggestions for policies affecting women's freedom of expression and decision-making in public and political spaces.



Research Factors & Findings:

Both studies identified women groups, both cisgender and transgender, as heterogenous. Personal and professional experiences of the interviewed women are highly dependent on their personal, social, political, and economic affiliations. For this reason, an intersectional approach to understanding the circumstances of the women participants is absolutely pivotal. In this report, EMPOWER has identified 10 sub-groups of women in Malaysia, although these categories are neither mutually exclusive nor is it an exhaustive list. Rather, these were extracted from the 120 interviews collected through the studies.

- Domestic abuse survivors
- Domestic/migrant workers
- Drug users
- LGBTQ+
- Living with HIV
- Married/in partnership
- Minority groups (B40/Religious minority/
Living with Disabilities
- Orang Asli
- Refugees
- Sex workers
- Single

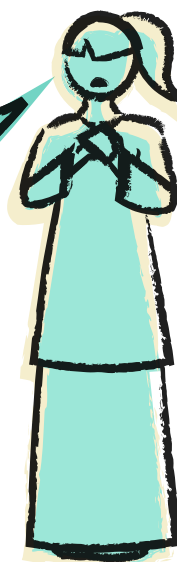


The studies showed that women who are in unstable and uncertain conditions were more likely to experience sexual and gender-based violence. Further, these women are more limited in avenues for self-expression and access to seek redress and justice. Thus, it is acutely crucial that these factors are considered as interlinked—creating a vicious cycle. There are six (6) identified ways in which experiences of sexual and gender-based violence impacts freedom of expression of women in Malaysia:

- **Lack of appropriate governmental recognition**
- **Fear of incarceration**
- **Hostile workplace & employment**
- **Lack of access to appropriate health care**
- **Unsupportive families**
- **Hostile virtual environments**

“Discrimination especially when women are drug users. **No one understands us and we are always judged**”

(LN34, pg. 3)



**EMPOWER's
Meta-analysis of
Findings from SLC
and JFS Studies:**

| Factors | Sub-groups affected |
|--|--|
| a. Lack of appropriate governmental recognition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. domestic abuse survivors ii. domestic/migrant workers iii. LGBTQ+ iv. Orang Asli v. refugees vi. sex workers |
| b. Fear of incarceration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> iii. drug users iv. LGBTQ+ v. refugees vi. sex workers |
| g. Hostile workplace & employment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. domestic abuse survivors ii. domestic/migrant workers iii. drug users iv. LGBTQ+ v. living with HIV vi. married/in partnership vii. minority groups viii. refugees ix. sex workers x. single |
| k. Lack of access to appropriate health care | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. drug users ii. LGBTQ+ iii. living with HIV iv. sex workers |

| | |
|--|---|
| e. Unsupportive families | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. domestic abuse survivors ii. LGBTQ+ iii. living with HIV iv. minority groups v. Orang Asli vi. sex workers vii. single |
| h. Hostile virtual environments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. domestic abuse survivor ii. LGBTQ+ iii. minority groups iv. Orang Asli |

Factors Reported in SLC and JFS Studies:

a. Lack of appropriate governmental recognition

A majority of women noted that their inability to seek aid and justice was directly due to neglect and even abuse at the hands of authorities—whether specific official bodies like the police and religious authorities (like in the case of sex workers and/or LGBTQ+ women), or the government as a whole (like in the case of Orang Asli and refugees). This often stems from lack of sufficient support from the appropriate institutions, which dwindles their sense of empowerment and autonomy.

b. Fear of incarceration

Some women noted their precarious position in the eyes of the law due to criminalization of their circumstances—such as drug usage, illegal job, political status, gender identity, or sexual preferences. Many of these women who are involved in illegal activities fear seeking redress and justice as a manner of self-incrimination.

c. Hostile workplace and employment

All women interviewed in this study noted some form of abuse or assault in the workplace. Some groups, such as domestic/immigrant workers, sex workers, and LGBTQ+ women, are more vulnerable to physical, sexual, and mental abuse from their employers and/or customers. This is attributed to massive power differences beyond the workplace. For instance, migrant domestic workers reported having no autonomy over their working hours or immigration status. For others employed in an office setting, employers and colleagues undermine their ideas and opinions and use their positions and higher qualifications to demotivate them.



d. Lack of access to appropriate health care

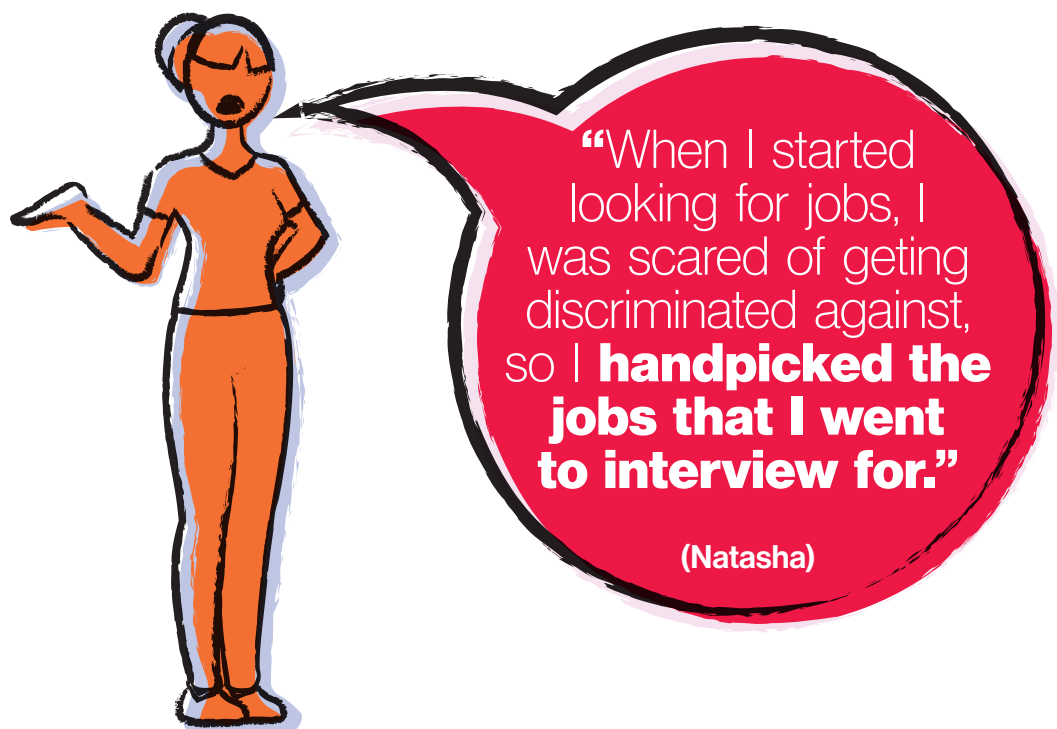
A majority of women face obstruction to appropriate health care due to discriminatory practices and personal biases of health workers, particularly towards specific community groups like the Orang Asli, sex workers, and transwomen. They have reported being humiliated by aggressive and inappropriate questions during consultations and other undignified treatments within a supposed safe space.

e. Unsupportive families and partners

A majority of women reported being physically, sexually, and verbally abused by spouses, intimate partners, and/or immediate family members. This varies from physically, and mentally abusive homes, family members that are unaccepting of their values, to assault offences committed by people within one household.

f. Hostile virtual environments

Both ciswomen and transwomen reported receiving mass criticism online, threats on their physical well-being through digital means (via direct messaging or public forums), and/or lack of empathy by the public for the issues they face.



Factors Unique to SLC's Research about Trans Women:

While all 6 factors above apply to the trans women's experiences in Malaysia, it is worth noting some unique challenges that they face due to the illegality of their gender identity and expression. The following explanations should be taken in addition to the section above.

a. Lack of appropriate governmental recognition

Many of the interviewees noted lack of support from the Malaysian government for transwomen and the challenges to which they are vulnerable. This was reportedly due to the politicization of gender in Malaysia, which results in trans women feeling powerless and helpless. Further, the usage of Islam as weapons against the trans community is notable, according to our study. Particularly, the treatment of trans women by the police and the Islamic Department has not changed since the 70s; many report similar types of abuse and violent treatment during arrests and detention. But oppressive religious government against transwomen certainly affects those beyond Muslim communities.

b. Fear of incarceration

All trans women interviewed in the JFS study noted their unstable position in the eyes of the law due to criminalization of their gender identity, gender expression and sexual preferences. Many of these transwomen perceive their gender identity as a hinderance to seeking redress and justice (in cases of physical, mental, and sexual abuse and assault) for fear of self-incrimination. For some, the illegality of their gender identity and expression alone is enough to hinder reporting abuse and violence to the authorities.



c. Hostile workplace and employment

While hostile work environments plague all subgroups of women reported in this study, transwomen face a specific form of workplace violence: misgendering, hindered access to appropriate gender-based facilities, and/or forced to follow gendered dress codes. Moreover, trans women suffer throughout the hiring process too, regardless of sector/industry. Transwomen face denial of opportunities, challenged capabilities, oppressive workplace policies even before being hired. Some have reported that Muslim-dominant workplaces are reluctant to hire transwomen in fear that as employers they will be complicit in encouraging the existence of transwomen.

d. Lack of access to appropriate health care

Transwomen unfortunately face the challenge of a discriminatory and unaccommodating healthcare system as a whole. Several women reported inappropriate and presumptuous comments from doctors and healthcare providers about their circumstances. Some HIV+ trans women also reported the lack of access to their medication when detained by the police. Further, some women also reported hindered access to gendered facilities by healthcare professionals.

e. Unsupportive families and partners

This issue is particularly prevalent among transwomen in the shape of 'pressure to change' and fear of rejection. Interviewees across different age groups, religious affiliations, and ethnicities face restrictions and pressures from family members to repress their gender identity and expression. 18 out of 60 trans women reported that among their immediate family, their gender identity and expression are accepted. Meanwhile, the rest of the interviewees stated that they experience 'mixed tolerance', which range from sporadic pressure to change to harsh rejection. Further, many forms of the rejection constitute acts of violence—such as conversion therapy, physical abuse, and social isolation.

f. Hostile virtual environment

In the JFS study, six explicit cases of doxxing were reported; in all cases, personal photos and videos were disseminated with consent across multiple platforms and dating sites. These photos were then used to catfish or scam other online users, or shared in association with transphobic and sexual messages, or distributed to unaccepting family members as means of personal leverage.

Amendment on laws and policies:

1

Review existing laws that criminalize non-cisnormative gender identity & gender expression.

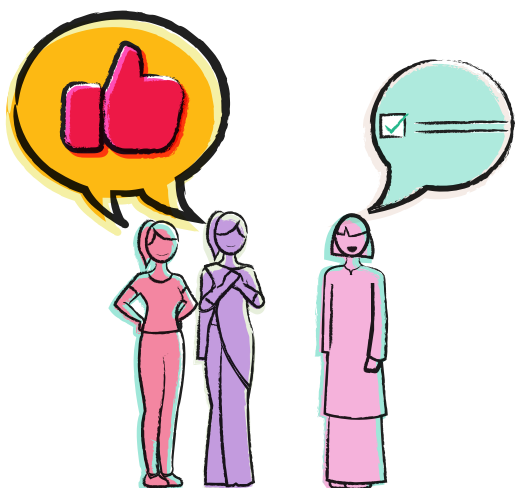
All 13 states and the Federal Territories have laws that criminalize non-cisnormative gender identity and expression, including the provisions of the Penal Code and Syariah that criminalize same-sex relations and cross-dressing. This empowers the state Islamic departments to arrest and detain trans women based on their gender identity and gender expression.

Transgender women, who are largely the targets of gender-based discrimination and violence, cannot report on the violence inflicted upon them without incriminating themselves.

Further, amidst the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the employment discrimination they already face, trans women have raised serious concerns over the prospective economic burden if they are tried in court.

Amendment of such laws and provisions will alleviate the serious fear of trans women incriminating themselves when engaging with or seeking help from the police and even the general public.

Hate crimes and gender-based violence can thus be adequately reported by the trans community, allowing the authorities to take appropriate measures to circumvent such violence from recurring and escalating.



Create access to adequate, accessible and survivor-centred protection against discrimination and violence.

Women from vulnerable communities (e.g. Orang Asli), precarious positions (e.g. drug usage, migrant/undocumented status) and atypical forms of work (e.g. sex workers) are exposed to intersecting forms of gender-based violence. The intersection of different attributes can compound the discrimination faced by these women; such as being a woman and a sex worker, a woman and from a minority community, and the likes.

These women are hindered from reporting the violence inflicted upon them due to fears of self-incrimination.

Discrimination and stigmatization by public authorities are also extensive which result in victim-blaming and inadequate responses to their needs and safety concerns.

A survivor-centred approach allows for immediate interventions that address survivors' physical safety, health concerns, psychosocial needs and non-stigmatizing access to services and justice. It ensures that the prevention and responses by public authorities are non-discriminatory and specific, respecting the rights and prioritizing the needs of the survivors first and foremost, including groups that are particularly vulnerable and in legally precarious positions.

Relevant ministries to implement stronger policies of protection and justice for women

There is a lack of research that can provide substantial gender-disaggregated data on the differing violences and barriers faced by women of diverse backgrounds in Malaysia.

The reality on the ground for many women is often dismissed, especially when the intersection of their different attributes are not properly considered and documented. Aid and support for women becomes too general that they benefit some groups less than others.

Gender-disaggregated data must be available for policy makers to be able to assess the situation and develop appropriate, evidence-based responses and policies. Such data must be collected and analysed within the policy-making process, ideally covering several years to track changes and take corrective action.

“The Minister and all are interfere in our personal issues. **I don’t know why this is happening. I saw the community crying when they said they would arrest us.**”

(Asha)



4

Increase representation, opportunities and access to information of women from vulnerable & marginalized groups

Women from vulnerable and marginalized groups (e.g. LGBTQI+, Orang Asli, refugees, migrant/undocumented) are virtually invisible in public and political life.

The lack of visibility of these women in decision-making roles and mainstream media allows for the continuation of stigma traditionally attached to their identity and status. Such stigma influences the reactions and responses by the authorities and general public, resulting in discriminatory employment practices, as well as inadequate and discriminatory access to justice and services.

Increasing the visibility of these women is necessary to challenge misconceptions about their identity, status, culture and the general context of their circumstances. Correcting the cultural narrative this way can contribute to the societal acceptance of such groups and full realization of their rights.

Better collaborative projects with schools & educational institutions to educate children & adolescents

Children and adolescents are susceptible to sexual and gender-based violence, whether directly inflicted upon them; present in their immediate environment such as within the household or in school; or from the exposure to violent and discriminatory social behaviours of the general public.

Children with such experiences can develop deep psychological traumas, depression, guilt, shame and loss of esteem. This can contribute to internalized social marginalization which results in the unlikeliness of reporting incidents and seeking necessary assistance.

Furthermore, their exposure to violent and discriminatory behaviours is often internalized from a young age, causing the normalization of sexual and gender-based violence against them or towards others.

While school is a space where violence can take place, it is also an important place for preventing and overcoming violence, given that it is one of the main socialization environments for children and adolescents. Awareness programmes in schools can inhibit the normalization of sexual and gender-based violence, while teachers can be primed and supported to act directly in appreciation and consolidation of less violent relations, thus, lessening harmful gender norms.

Awareness outreach on a national scale through networks of community-based groups and national media platforms

The pervasiveness of sexual and gender-based violence legitimizes its normalcy, thus women from various groups resort to self-victimization and self-censorship.

Too many women, especially those from vulnerable groups, succumb to violent relationships and work circumstances. These are perceived to be inescapable because of the massive power differences between them and the perpetrator. Many end up unaware that they can seek assistance and justice, neither do they know where or how, especially when there are perceived risks of self-incrimination with the police.

Awareness for the masses is vital for information to reach, not only many women, but also those from rural and vulnerable groups who do not have adequate digital access.

Outreach must not be discriminatory, in terms of language and cultural appropriateness, so as to not perpetuate the exclusion of minority and marginalized groups. It must also provide accurate information so as to not perpetuate existing stigmas and traditional gender norms.

Training and capacity building for government sectors & institutions on inclusion and human rights

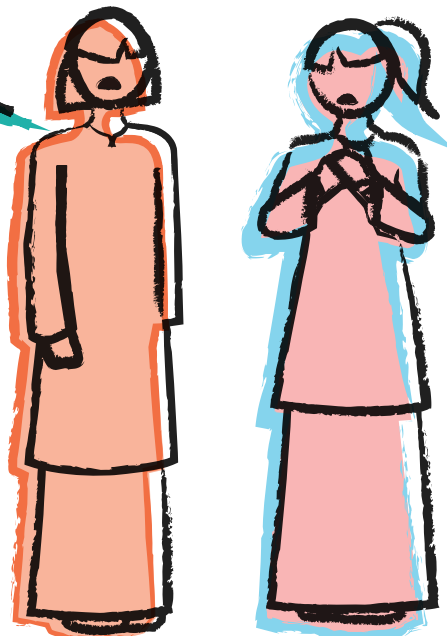
Police authorities & healthcare providers tend to dismiss or not give appropriate response to cases of hate crimes & gender-based violence due to stigmatization of women from various minority & marginalized groups (e.g. trans community, Orang Asli, migrant workers).

These women do not obtain adequate & appropriate access to justice & redress. The stigma-filled responses by public authorities discourages women from reporting and seeking help, compounded by fears of self-incrimination.

Mainstreaming inclusion & human rights training for all public institutions would empower all personnels to give appropriate care & assistance to women experiencing sexual and gender-based violence. The strengthening of their services can restore the confidence of all women to seek help.

“Recently, a woman from their community **was sexually abused by the driver who was supposed to bring her back...**”

(FGD 2)



Demographics of Interviewees:

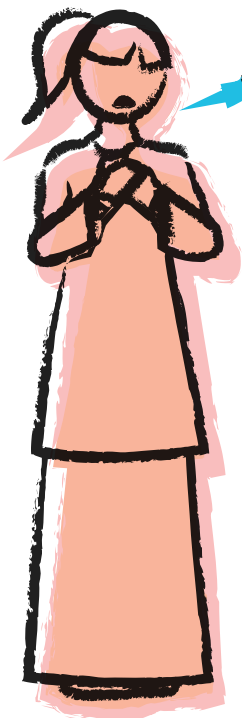
JFS's Transgender Women Group:

| State | Number of respondents |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| Kuala Lumpur and Selangor | 11 |
| Perak | 12 |
| Pahang | 8 |
| Johor | 8 |
| Melaka | 7 |
| Sabah | 8 |
| Sarawak | 6 |
| Total | 60 |

| Ethnicity | Number of respondents |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Malay | 47 |
| Chinese | 5 |
| Indian | 6 |
| Others (Dusun, Permanent Resident) | 2 |
| Total | 60 |

| Age | Number of respondents |
|---------|-----------------------|
| 18 – 19 | 1 |
| 20 – 30 | 26 |
| 31 – 40 | 20 |
| 41 – 50 | 9 |
| 51 – 60 | 4 |
| Total | 60 |

“When we disclose or reveal our gender identity, some of them **will be surprised and change their behaviour by being immoral to us**”
(Fazura)



SLC's Cisgender Women Group:

| State | Total participants (%) |
|-----------------|------------------------|
| Perlis | 0 (0) |
| Kedah | 4 (6.7) |
| Penang | 7 (11.7) |
| Perak | 14 (23.3) |
| Selangor | 9 (15.0) |
| Kuala Lumpur | 10 (16.7) |
| Negeri Sembilan | 1 (1.7) |
| Melaka | 1 (1.7) |
| Johor | 2 (3.3) |
| Terengganu | 1 (1.7) |
| Pahang | 6 (10.0) |
| Kelantan | 1 (1.7) |
| Sabah | 2 (3.3) |
| Sarawak | 2 (3.3) |
| Total | 60 (100) |

| Age-groups (years) | Total participants (%) |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| 18 – 25 | 8 (13.3) |
| 26 – 35 | 22 (36.7) |
| 36 – 45 | 15 (25.0) |
| 46 – 55 | 13 (21.7) |
| >56 | 2 (3.3) |
| Total | 60 (100) |

| Sexual orientation | Total participants (%) |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Heterosexual | 54 (90.0) |
| Homosexual (Lesbian) | 4 (6.7) |
| Bisexual | 2 (3.3) |
| Total | 60 (100) |

| Ethnicity | Total participants (%) |
|--------------|------------------------|
| Indian | 15 (25.0) |
| Malay | 14 (23.3) |
| Chinese | 2 (3.3) |
| Punjabi | 1 (1.7) |
| Sabahan | 2 (3.3) |
| Sarawakian | 1 (1.7) |
| Orang Asli | 12 (20.0) |
| Others (mix) | 5 (8.3) |
| Foreigners | 5 (8.3) |
| Refugees | 3 (5.0) |
| Total | 60 (100) |

Notes:

Others (mix) – Malaysians who are from mix parentage

Foreigners – Migrant workers who are all domestic workers and foreigners who are married to Malaysians

Refugees – From Burma

**Notable testimonies
from Domestic
Violence Survivors**

Quoted from “Freedom of
Expression and Gender-
Based Violence” by
Solving Lab Consultancy



“I was a teacher for disabled kids. My husband knows about my work but never understood me. He will teach my kids that I am a crazy mother. I left the job. He was having affair as my kids were growing up. He went to the extend to consult a psychiatric doctor and got me admitted in mental hospital for 15 days. He comes there and laughs at me every day. Until now, he hasn't sign any divorce papers....he has married another girl and has a daughter with her. He has punched me on my face until my teeth was shaken up and refused to take me to the clinic. Due to the abuse and getting beaten up badly, if we stayed together, we would have killed each other.” (AA06, pg. 7)

“Problems started after we had kids. He hardly came home and start fighting and beating me up. Then I found out he has another woman; it became worst and the children had no food and I had to ask people for help. He never married me. I had to get a letter to show the government that I am not married but was abused and have 2 kids with the abuser.” (JR08, pg. 5)

"I was very young, got married at 20 and parents' choice. Married to a very rich and prominent and well-known man's son in Malaysia. He was so abusive and used drugs and meth. I was continually beaten up; had concussions, slip discs and much more. He even used our intimate photos that we had taken before marriage and created a FB account and added people to it and then used my photos and asked them to bank in money for my personal photos. When I was pregnant with my second baby.... he went crazy and took a chair and hit me on my stomach. I was hurt badly. Went to hospital and the doctor said that the baby died, 7 months. I had to push out my dead baby girl even when I didn't want to. They carried her away and I only saw her head and curly hair. They closed it because if there is a death certificate for her, it would have become a police case. They paid the doctor to cover up, and they injected me. Before passing out, I saw them covering her with newspaper and white cloth. They paid the doctor around RM15k and I don't know what they did to her body. (NP10, pg.6)

"I have been married for the past 11 years. I will get so much beating from him and also the extend where I was admitted in the hospital, I was hit in the middle of the road with face bleeding and fracture in my legs and hands. After that, he left to Singapore and he had affair. Whenever, I tried to speak up as a wife, he will beat me." (VJ15, pg. 6)

"I was with him since young. He was a playboy and I could not leave him because he made me pregnant and he told me he did that on purpose. And I had to marry him because of that. His family was odd but I focused on my baby. I was running the family. He has abused me many times. He has taekwondo, you can imagine. I also found out he has been having and affair for at least 10 years. During MCO, when I asked him about a parcel, he grabbed me from behind and beat me, hurt my head, eyes and mouth till all got swollen. He punched my face. I screamed and he kicked my stomach." (PG38 pg. 5 and 6)

"I got married at the age 21. The biggest mistake was that. He drinks alcohol and I never liked it. We always end up fighting. He will hit me and chase out of the house. I didn't see the outside world too much. I couldn't take it anymore when he hit my son. I was so dependent on him; I do not know how to manage without him. The day I walked out of the court carrying the status 'divorcee' I cried because I was ashamed of my status and myself." (KK44, pg. 5)

"I got married when I was young, and it was love marriage. He was a typical man because his mother raised him to think a woman has to do everything on her own without sulking even when she is not well. He will always hit me each time when I voice out my discomfort. I was beaten up when I was pregnant with my first baby and baby passed away at birth. I started having lots of problem with him when my next baby was 3 months. I tried to work things but didn't help." (KB45, pg. 5)

"I got married at age 23, after 3 months knowing him. His mother and him could not actually accept me fully because I am from a mix parentage. I was treated badly by them but I still changed everything for him. There were times I was beaten up badly but I stayed on thinking things will work out. After running away, I went back to him when he apologised to me and after 3 months he started back. The worst thing he did was to run away with my two girls and disappeared for 7 years. I was in the house where he left me for a week motionless and almost died." (RE46, pg. 6)

"I met him when I was 21 and he was 7 years older. We were in the same line of work. The violence was early in the relationship and I was always blamed. He gaslighted me and was manipulative. I was scared to leave him as he uses my weakness against my family and close friends. He was a pathological liar, cheated on me, was violent on me and keep me locked up for days will threaten me if I wanted to leave him. Once I tried to leave and the violence was extreme. He used a knife at my throat and strangled me and kicked me a lot. And then I got pregnant, he told me he would change after we had the baby and I believed him. He never changed and was violent with my dad and my baby. She got hurt and he blamed me that I was the bad mom." (PV51, pg. 5)

"I was married at a young age....to a prominent man. He stopped me from excelling and I abided by him. I thought he was looking out for me but he was jealous. This happened before our wedding and when I voiced out to him, we end up quarrelling. I wanted to call off my wedding by we were engaged for a long time and he manipulated my family and I had to marry him. I was crying on my wedding day. After marriage, he restricted me slowly. He used violence to control me and yet he got the support for it from my family. Day by day things became worst, so much bruises, blood. My nose was broken, got hurt at my stomach so badly at one point I couldn't even go to bathroom. I am such a small sized person. My head was so painful all the times due to being beaten up every day." (UD55, pg. 6)

Case Study: Transgender Women Working in a Government Sector

Quoted from “Freedom
of Expression and
Gender Identity” by
Justice for Sisters



Fatima (pg.82)

No freedom during working hours

“When we work in the government and we identify and express ourselves as a woman, it is wrong in the government sector. During work time there is no freedom. After work, we are ourselves,” says Fatima.

Fatima, who works as a teacher, says that she is not comfortable accompanying students to camps, but she has to. During these outdoor camps, she has to hide her long hair under a wig and a cap.

She has transitioned, and having to share a room with another teacher who is a cisgender man makes her uncomfortable, as her colleagues are mostly unaware of her gender identity. To avoid the discomfort, she prefers to rent a hotel room. When her colleagues ask her why she does not want to share a room with them, she makes excuses, like *‘It’s nothing, I have a friend who will be visiting me later.’*

While some colleagues might know of her identity, no one has confronted Fatima. Fatima has friends who have been called by the National Registration Department (Jabatan Pendaftaran Negara) after complaints were lodged by parents who spotted them as trans women in public. One of her friends was given a warning by the district-level Education Department. Fatima fears such incidents could delay her promotion, or result in her being transferred to another school, and have a negative impact on her productivity. These incidents worry her, even though she is desperate to be herself.

Once, Fatima was called in by the principal of her school after receiving a letter with photos of her being a trans woman. The principal did not take any action and was understanding, stating that the school was not interested in policing the staff's lives outside of work unless it is drug related. Fatima is very aware that the response is very dependent on the principal's personality.

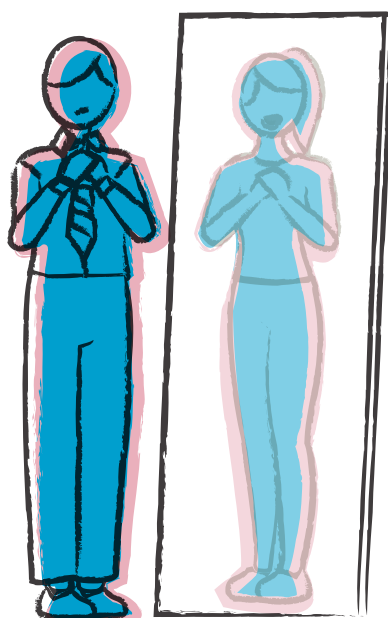
Fatima is aware that she is '*lembut*' or soft. Her strategy is to get the people around her to respect her as a person. Sometimes the situation can be stressful, fearful and anxiety-inducing, as she has to control her self-expression all the time. She sometimes asks herself, "*Why can't I be myself*"?

When she teaches dance, she sometimes unconsciously breaks character. She then worries about the consequences, including losing her job and how this would create problems for her. At the same time, she can't help reflecting on how liberating it would be to express herself. She said, "*Oh no, why did that only happen for a split second. Why can't I just let people see who I am?*"

Amelia (pg.83)

God is on my side

Amelia, who works as an administrative staff at a public school, says that she does not have a problem with dressing as a man based on the government requirements. She wears a wig to school. People are aware that she is '*lembut*' (effeminate), and some of her colleagues have asked about her gender identity. She ignores them and as much as possible tries to avoid such questions.



When she is at work she is forced to express herself as a man. At work, she does not think about how she looks and focuses on performing her tasks to the best of her abilities.

According to Amelia, there are many trans women who face similar issues in the government sector. If they are allowed to express themselves, she says that would be a bonus. Amelia limits her movements and participation in public activities—including going to night markets, funfairs, and carnivals in the town that she works in—as she worries about bumping into her colleagues and it becoming an issue.

When she first started working in the government sector, she was not aware of the rules and regulations. Amelia freely expressed herself in and around town. Consequently, her colleagues reported her to the Education Department, and it snowballed into her being counseled by the State Education Department. They asked her about her different gender expression in and outside of school, and recommended that she be disciplined.

The incident affected her at the time. She was isolated by her cisgender men colleagues and was sidelined if her name was suggested as the accompanying teacher for competitions or trips—because she is a trans woman. When the issue of students having sex in the hostels emerged, Amelia was accused of teaching the students to have sex. Her colleagues said, *“The students were influenced, because there is a trans woman here. She taught them to have sex.”*

The complaint to the Education Department led to her being swapped with another staff from a different school.

Afterwards, she became more cautious of how she expressed herself. At the same time, she was worried about being terminated.

She says the experience taught her many things. She has since studied the guidelines and regulations so that she is aware of the actions that can be taken against her, and what she can do should such incidents occur again.

Amelia believes that God is on her side. A few years later, the staff that replaced her created problems in her former school, and her colleagues begged her to return to the school. Amelia refused, and filed an appeal to the Education Department to reverse the transfer decision. Her appeal was successful.



Case Study: Yearning Acceptance and Transference of Pressure

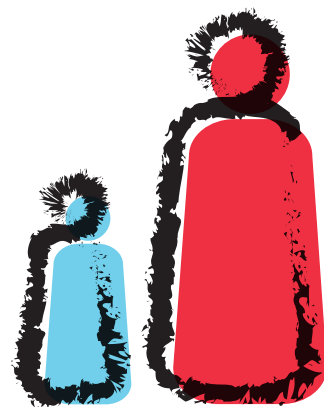
Quoted from “Freedom
of Expression and
Gender Identity” by
Justice for Sisters

Natasha (pg. 63)

Her mother remarried years later. Similar to father, her stepdad could not accept her as a trans girl: “Sometimes my mother is caught in the middle between her husband and I. Although I am a trans woman, I love my mother. If our mothers don’t pray for us, don’t bless us, how will the child change? To go towards good without their prayer and blessing (is challenging). This makes me stressed.”

“I present myself as who I am—I wear makeup, contact lens, my long hair—the usual. I just don’t wear clothes that are too feminine in front of him. With my mother, it’s okay. He can’t scold me because I am much older now. No, it’s just that he is tired of talking.”

When Natasha goes back to visit her family members, she tends to distance herself from her stepdad if he is home. Likewise, he tends to distance himself from her too, “As a child, you want to communicate with your dad, but till today he does not speak to me. He has never spoken to me, he finds it difficult. If he comes home he will quickly go to his room, to avoid me.”



Her only opportunity to talk to her mother is when her stepdad is not at home. When he is around, her communication with her mother is limited to exchanging glances and eye contact.

Natasha has many relatives, who are a source of her stress. The questions and comments that her parents receive from her relatives, neighbours and her parents' friends about her gender identity shock and stress her stepdad in particular. The stress is then transferred onto her and manifests in the form of pressure for her to change or 'return to the right path'.

Although her mother does not pressure her, she understands that her mother has a husband who pressures her mother. She does not blame her stepdad, and she understands his situation.

Natasha *redha* (accepts), and rationalises her situation, as she feels she chose this path and views her situation as a test by Allah, as much as it has a negative impact on her, which she feels is normal, as it is part of the life journey of a trans woman, "Whether you like it or not, you have to accept it."

In order to avoid conflict and hostility, she prefers to withdraw from the situation and isolate herself. She feels that is the only solution.

