

## 24. Community responses to gendered issues in Malaysia

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The COVID-19 health crisis had a major impact on the world, disrupting the economy, politics, and social life, as well as gender relations. Indeed, COVID-19 exposed long-standing gender tensions and inequalities as the world has struggled to contain its spread.

This chapter examines how women were affected by COVID-19 in Malaysia following the implementation of its first movement control order (MCO), in the first year of Malaysia's version of a quarantine and lockdown. It focuses on the community's role in providing help and assistance to women during an unprecedented health crisis and a unique political shake-up in the country. The political background of the nation yielded a variety of government responses to the few incidents that occurred during the MCO, as voids and holes in the system became apparent following a change of government in early 2020.

This chapter also aims to focus on the community outreach that unfolded both online and offline, as Malaysians and various non-governmental organisations like the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), which works on domestic violence and advocates for a gendered perspective on social and political matters in Malaysia, rose to the occasion. The MCO also brought new, innovative efforts through online efforts that sought to fill the gaps left by governments and other established institutions as they scrambled to ramp up and pivot their capacities towards dealing with the pandemic. These non-governmental initiatives received a lot of attention and were effective in shaping policy, especially on matters related to domestic violence and women's burden of care.

The pandemic made it clear that community-based organisations and their efforts played a major role in sustaining communities during the MCO. The government was limited in its capacity to engage

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with Malaysian residents. Moving forward, the pandemic proved that community-based efforts in Malaysia need to be further empowered and strengthened to allow them to serve the nation and its residents where the government fails to do so.

First, this chapter looks into the most salient issues Malaysia faced during the pandemic, such as domestic violence and how Malaysia coped with its rise following the implementation of the MCO. Second, it describes the Malaysian political scene that changed drastically overnight at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic; this political climate influenced public perceptions of the government and its actions relevant to women and gender. Finally, this chapter explores the different ways in which community responses have filled in the gaps and voids left by the government and its agencies.

## **Domestic violence**

Domestic violence was more prevalent than ever before during the stay-at-home measures introduced as part of the world's fight against COVID-19. The WAO in Malaysia recorded a staggering fourfold increase in the number of calls received compared to before the MCO was imposed (Bernama 2020). The increasing occurrence of domestic violence was observed globally, as UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a 'domestic violence ceasefire' when the pandemic first hit in 2020 (United Nations 2020). The secretary general also suggested that governments should take more proactive actions in supporting efforts to prevent domestic violence. An example of such support could be supporting civil society efforts and making investments in online services. To help monitor and manage the expected rise in gender-based violence following the pandemic, governments could declare shelters for domestic violence victims and survivors, provide essential services or set up emergency warning systems in pharmacies and grocery stores to increase the accessibility of services for victims (United Nations 2020).

The rise in reported cases of domestic violence was attributed to the stress brought on by lockdown measures. Increased anxiety from financial stress resulting from the concomitant economic crisis set the stage for a worsening domestic violence crisis (Peterman et al. 2020). Malaysia also recorded a rise in unemployment during the first year of the pandemic, defined as March to December 2020. In May 2020, Malaysia's unemployment rate rose to 5.3%, its highest point, with a total of 826,100 Malaysians unemployed (DOSM 2020). Studies in the

past have proven a causal link between economic hardships and a rise in domestic violence, especially between intimate partners (Schneider, Harknett, and McLanahan 2016). Rising unemployment numbers brought on by the pandemic thus definitely made domestic violence a cause for concern.

Physical distancing and quarantine measures introduced by government health officials to curb contagion also contributed to the increase in domestic violence (Campbell 2020). They made violence a coping mechanism, as perpetrators felt a loss of control over their lives (Peterman et al. 2020).

Part of this was due to reduced access to support systems, as lockdown and curfews confined victims to their homes, limited contact with persons outside their household, postponed court hearings or counselling services for domestic issues, and allowed perpetrators to more easily restrict victims' access to support hotlines and other services. Additionally, victims struggled to detach themselves and escape abuse due to the uncertainty the pandemic brought. Women might have opted to stay with abusive partners for a host of reasons that were exacerbated by the onset of the pandemic (Peterman et al. 2020).

In providing economic assistance, the Malaysian government first introduced an economic stimulus package called PRIHATIN, which directly translates into English as 'care', at the end of March 2020. Unfortunately, the PRIHATIN package lacked the ability to empower women, who were the most likely victims of domestic abuse: statistics obtained in 2019 showed that 91% victims of domestic abuse in Malaysia were female (Yuen and Chung 2019). The PRIHATIN package provided cash transfers aimed to instantly ease the burden on the community. However, they were given to the heads of households, 80% of whom were men (UNICEF 2020). The situation for women, meanwhile, worsened, as they were often left trapped in their homes and lacked the financial support to escape abuse (WAO 2020).

Fortunately, organisations like the WAO, Sisters in Islam, the Women's Centre for Change, and others included in the Joint Action Group in Gender Equality, a coalition of 13 women's rights organisations in Malaysia, were at the forefront of advocating and protecting women's interests, as they provided gendered perspectives on the pandemic. These organisations were especially active in both highlighting the challenges associated with domestic violence and providing various support services, from raising awareness of shelters for trapped women to advocating for better support and social protections for women (WAO 2020).

The lockdown measures that were introduced to curb the pandemic brought many things to light, including the role NGOs played in intervening in domestic violence in Malaysia. While Malaysia had developed its legal instruments to better protect victims of domestic violence through the Domestic Violence Act (Amendment) 2018, this was not extensive enough to provide victims with protection during the pandemic, as the political will behind such causes changed with the change in the Malaysian government in 2020. Building awareness in communities to collectively protect victims from domestic violence should be the first step in preventing the occurrence of domestic violence during a health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Politics and policies**

At the height of COVID-19's first wave in early 2020, Malaysia went through a political crisis. The Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition was ousted after 21 months in power. As a result, the nation went through a change of government without holding a general election. The new government from March 2020 was that of the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, which until July 2020 included the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – the party that had been in power from the nation's birth in 1963 until its electoral defeat in 2018. The PN government could be considered more right-wing than the previous PH government, which had a more progressive political stance on social issues, especially on those related to gender.

The change in government led to confusion in policies, a lack of coordination, and miscommunication, all of which resulted in backlash from communities. This may be attributed to the fact that Prime Minister Muhyiddin lacked political support in Parliament when the MCO was first implemented in March 2020 (Lee 2020).

The following incidents that occurred during the MCO called into question the PN government's gender sensitivity and awareness in the context of the lockdown.

### **1. Infographics**

The first incident involved the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development's publication of a set of recommendations and infographics that aimed to advise women on the management of their households to maintain peace and harmony at home. The recommendations, however, which included imitating 'Doraemon voices' and giggling coyly, did not receive a positive response from the community

and led the ministry to remove them and issue an apology for their publication (Palansamy 2020). The All Women's Action Society (AWAM), an NGO, called the ministry out for its 'sexist' tips through a series of tweets that condemned the 'recommendations' (Palansamy 2020).

## 2. Crisis hotline suspension

Another incident was the temporary suspension of the government's crisis hotline, 'Talian Kasih' (*The Star* 2020). When the MCO was first implemented on 18 March 2020, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development announced that hotline would be suspended, as non-essential services in the country were suspended for an initial period of two weeks. The criticism this invited led to the suspension being reversed, as politicians from both the government and the opposition cited the dangers that quarantine measures posed for women, which made the availability of the crisis hotline even more important (Chin 2020).

## 3. Crisis hotline data

Data obtained from calls received through the crisis hotlines provided by the WAO reported a staggering 44% increase in domestic violence throughout the first month of the MCO (Heanglee 2020). Contrastingly, the government's crisis hotline recorded a different trend, as data published on the official government website recorded just a 'slight increase' in the occurrence of domestic violence in the country (Arumugam 2020).

While the data obtained from NGOs does not necessarily coincide with the government's data, this has less to do with the government's capability to provide aid. Instead, it is more reflective of the preference society has for engaging with NGOs rather than government officials, as engaging with NGOs can be less intimidating and confrontational (Sabanayagam 2020).

## 4. Burden of care

NGOs also shed light on women's burden of care. Women were unequally affected by the increasing burden of care during the MCO (Hisamudin 2020). As families observed quarantine, schools and day care were closed. Women were forced to juggle their responsibilities in taking care of their families, especially children and/or the elderly.

This was on top of the usual housework that women did, such as cooking and cleaning. Normally, domestic helpers that visit homes daily or weekly help lessen the burden of housework, but, with the imposition of quarantine orders, some families no longer had domestic helpers that could come daily, as movement was limited (Hisamudin 2020).

A 2019 report by the Khazanah Research Institute on women's unpaid work in Malaysia highlighted the burden women faced in the country. The report conducted a time use survey that highlighted gender disparities in relation to the burden of care in Malaysian society, as women had to shoulder more responsibilities than men while attending to professional life at the same time, hence the term 'double burden' (KRI 2019). This report highlighted the unequal burden imposed on women given the stereotypical expectations of women in fulfilling housework duties. The unequal burden was further shouldered by women during the pandemic, according to global reports (Thornton 2020).

NGOs highlighted women's problems nationally. Issues akin to women's burden of care had not been previously recognised, with little societal or national awareness. The efforts to highlight this can themselves be said to have resulted in the government's subsequent economic stimulus packages that aimed to address the need for childcare services, including the PENJANA economic stimulus package (Povera, Harun, and Yunus 2020).

The relationship between civil society and the new Malaysian government was responsive. This was seen as subsequent government economic stimulus packages like PENJANA incorporated gendered perspectives that could empower women and families. The PENJANA package was introduced during the country's recovery movement control order (RMCO) that began on 9 June 2020 (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia 2020). The newly unveiled economic stimulus package paid attention to women's role in driving the economy, with 50 million Malaysian ringgit (roughly US\$12 million) allocated for women entrepreneurs in micro-enterprises (Aziz and Zainul 2020). The burden of care faced by women was thus recognised, as childcare support services were provided in the new package. The government also allocated a total of RM200 million (roughly US\$50 million) for childcare services to encourage and support parents to return to work (Aziz and Zainul 2020). This was a positive response compared to the government's initial actions, which were shown by civil society to lack a focus on gender issues.

## Conclusion

Malaysia's experience of handling the COVID-19 crisis coincided with several other historic political events in the country. The newly formed government's policies left much room for civil society and NGOs to step in and aid policies relating to domestic violence and other gendered issues. The events that unfolded in 2020 with COVID-19 demonstrated and emphasised the lack of gendered perspectives in Malaysian culture and the community at large. This situation signalled larger issues at hand that require the assistance and guidance of civil society and NGOs to ensure the needs of the people are met. To the government's credit, progress was made with subsequent policies like childcare subsidies and flexible work arrangements that were well received by NGOs and the community. The need for faster progress, however, merits exploration, as COVID-19 proved that slow and steady does not win the race when it comes to gender-related policies in Malaysia.

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