*Battling with Ourselves**: Exploring How Far Indian Middle-Class Working Mothers in Malaysia Are Able to Negotiate Gendered Spaces

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Abstract

This article looks into the realities of Indian middle-class working mothers in con- temporary Malaysia, as they negotiate their identity in a rapidly globalizing society. In Malaysia, the national agenda calls for middle-class Malaysian women to enter the workforce *and* produce healthy families: this is the national image of "successful" working motherhood. However, in most public discussion about this image, Indian middle-class working mothers have remained absent. This is in line with their mutedness in dominant public culture. In this paper, I will explore Indian women's everyday middle-class interactions as they negotiate the gendered spaces of education, work, and the home. Women's lived realities reveal how they struggle to carve out an identity amidst the intersection of gendered and racial politics. By exploring the quotidian journey of Malaysian Indian middle-class work- ing mothers, I challenge national narratives where they have remained silent.

Key words

working motherhood, gendered spaces, class and ethnic divisions, national policy, agency

Introduction

This paper reviews the quotidian realities of Indian middle-class work- ing mothers in Malaysia as they negotiate with patriarchy in their day-to-day interactions. Their realities are situated within evidences of

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* The phrase *'Battling with ourselves'* is taken as a quote from the interview with Sujata, one of the research participants. In the interview, Sujata is referring to struggles at hand that she and other middle-class Indian women experience.

public narratives that obscure these women's identity. Alluding to the politics of space, where borders can define both "territorial expression" and power (Van der Veer, 1995; Gottfried, 2013), the context of gendered negotiations these women undertake is given more meaning. These women's negotiations within both public spaces (of education and work) and private ones (within the household) point to the extent to which they strive to be seen and heard.

Ethnic and Class divisions in Malaysia

In the late 1700s and the 1800s, British colonial trade with Malaya (as the nation was called before its Independence in 1957) necessitated migrants from Indian and China to work in its rubber plantations and tin mines respectively (Meyer, 1966; Provencher, 1975). The Chinese and Indians were the largest portion of migrant workers during colonial rule, before they settled down and became citizens of the country (Sendut, 1976; Lee & Tan, 2000). However, although these ethnicities have been citizens for two to three generations, ethnic clauses continue to be reiterated within national policies (Daniels, 2005). As with ethnic privileging in other post-colonial nations like India and Indonesia (Weiner & Katzenstein, 1981; Hoon, 2006), the Malay, or bumiputera community in Malaysia, has been given priority in all socio-economic allocations (Pfaff-Czarnecka et al., 2000). These priorities are justified by the argument that economic progress by Chinese and Indians are causing the bumiputera to be disadvantaged (Lim, 1971). Ethnic dimensions in current policies cause the inequalities of class historicity to persist.

Class divisions within ethnic groups were also initiated in colonial times. The majority of Indians migrated to Malaya as indentured labourers,[1] as the British needed them to work on the rubber plantations (Manickam, 2010). However, the colonialists also needed educated Indians who were English-trained back in India. These men were needed to fill up vacancies in the British administrative bureaucracies in Malaya (Sandhu, 2006). It was this "highly educated segment of the Indian community" that came to be termed the "middle-class" (Manickam, 2010,

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[1] Although Malaysia is not a class-based society like the UK, Malaysian narratives used the term labour class to denote those who engage in manual labor (Appudurai & Dass, 2008).

p. 18).

Working motherhood and national discourses

As feminist history has shown, the main obstacle that stopped women from taking on paid employment was the ubiquitous association of their "value" with their reproductive role (Greer, 1970; Oakley, 1974). As Walby (1990) pointed out many years ago, patriarchy is the "metanarrative" that governs the state, workplace norms, and household patterns. The strong patriarchal notions that Asian women face is no different, and this explains why Malaysian women in the past shied away from engaging in public space (Ng, 1999).

Only in the 1980s did women's involvement in public space begin to be championed at the national level (Hing & Talib, 1986). When Vision 2020, the nation's socio-economic agenda, was launched in 1990, women's economic role was targeted.[2] Allegiance to the United Nations (UN) also positioned Malaysia to ratify CEDAW[3] in 1995. This necessitated the nation to make efforts to include a gender-friendly framework for women in their socio-economic policy reviews. Gender-sensitive research around this time began to showcase the place of women in paid employment (Razak, 1992; Ng, 1999).

Amidst these occurrences, ongoing international research was exposing how national agendas were including their female population for the sake of economic growth, as propelled by globalization (Kabeer, 1994; Bullock, 1994; Douglass, 2012). Women in Southeast Asia are equally affected by these discourses that now claim women's role as "instrumental" in moving their national economies forward (Robinson & Bessell, 2002; Quah, 2009). In Malaysia, all five-year socio-economic plans support the gendered employment agenda.[4] The Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015), the most current, continues to carry normative assumptions that most women get married and become mothers. This

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[2] Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia: http://www.wawasan2020.com/vision/p2.html

[3] Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This international human rights treaty for women was adopted by UN in 1979.

[4] National Economic Advisory Council. (2009): www.epu.gov.my/eputheme/RMKE10/img/pdf/en/chapt4.pdf

forms the basis in outlining Malaysia's "participation rate of women in the labor force" (pp. 164-173).[5] Dual-income households that contribute to the growth of middle-class families are now encouraged, as this is seen as bringing stability to the country.[6] To solidify this blueprint that "empowers" women, a lucrative clause is added to the national target of increasing women in employment: that "at least 30% women" representation is encouraged in top-management and decision-making jobs.[7]

From the nuances of these political narratives, what emerges is the *type* of Malaysian women that the modernizing nation desires: a feminine national identity. Middle-class women who straddle motherhood and employment are now centered into the nation's socio-economic transformation. These women are able to feed the global market economy and also keep their homes in order (Douglass, 2012). The women of my research fall into this typified category in public narratives of the media, academia, and politics.

Malaysian Indian Women and Public Space

The figurative allusion of Malaysian Indian women not having a voice, or being visible, is based on a historicity of silence faced by Asian women in public discourses. For example, Malaysian history books have been androcentric, defining male experience as the norm. This explains how history in relation to Indian women, in particular, has been silent (Nanjundan, 1950; Sandhu, 2006).

Ethnic representation also plays a part in national public discourses. This is especially unsettling when the Malaysian Indian community in contemporary statistics amount to only about 7.3% of the total population.[8] While the Chinese are also a minority, they are advantaged through their internal solidarity and business acumen (Lee & Tan, 2000;

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[5] National Economic Advisory Council. (2009): www.epu.gov.my/eputheme/RMKE10/img/pdf/en/chap4.pdf

[6] National Economic Advisory Council. (2009): www.epu.gov.my/epu-theme/pdf/nem.pdf

[7] http://www.my.undp.org/content/malaysia/en/home/operations/projects/womens_empowerment/52225_WomenDM.html

[8] http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&id=1215&Itemid=89&lang=en

Muzaffar, 2006). They are able to remain prominent in media and educational representations (Daniels, 2005). As for the Indians, intra-communal variations and a history of indentured labour keeps them disadvantaged (Sandhu, 2006; Appudurai & Dass, 2008). Writers of academic discourses focus on poverty-induced social ills, of which Indians predominate (Tate, 2008; Manickam, 2010). These factors, together with *bumiputera*-friendly policies, keep the Indian community displaced. Therefore, although recent national narratives urge Malaysians to forge ethnic cohesion for the sake of national solidarity,[9] past historicities that are still unrectified make this ideal unreachable.

When a gendered lens is used, this demarcation becomes even more uneven. Malay women can ride on their policy-protected status (Ng et al, 2006). Chinese women can ride on the economic visibility of their ethnicity (Lee & Tan, 2000). As for Indian women, there is no ethnic base to rely on. Apart from deep cultural practices rooted in patriarchy (Bhasin, 1994), their identity is based on a communal misrepresentation, as Malaysian Indian men also lack a positive visibility in public representations (Manickam, 2010). This leaves Indian women literally voiceless.

Class-based differences complicate gendered and ethnic dimensions even further. Since the majority of Indians in the nation belong to the labour class, dominant media coverage of the Indian community continues to pertain to issues that affect the labour class, like poverty or social ills (Manickam, 2010). Class-based gendered narratives evidence the same gap for Indian women. Middle-class women in Malay and Chinese communities have been studied academically (Stivens, 1998; Thimm, 2013), but not middle-class Indian women. The absence of this group of women from academic scholarship is a mirror of their under-representation in larger public discussions.

Like middle-class women of other ethnicities, Indian middle-class working mothers are part of the national female "type" which the government advocates through its socio-economic policies. However, in reality, the national identity these women have is only on paper. As evidenced earlier, they lack visibility in public discourses. The Findings sec-

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[9] The '1 Malaysia' concept (2009): http://pmr.penerangan.gov.my/index.php

tion will discuss how these women seek to be more than an identity on paper; as they navigate gendered spaces of education, work, and the home.

Methodology

My research is based on feminist methodology, as it overcomes "malestream" research, and aims to study women's lives and issues without bias (Abbott, Wallace, & Tyler, 2005). The qualitative approach employed is especially significant, where both narrative and semi-structured interviews are employed (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Reflexivity, as a research tool, is also used. The "positioning practice," as in how the researcher's knowledge of broader issues can complement the research participants' views, enables the research context to be situated with more validation (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008).

Through friendships and the snowballing method, research participants who are mothers with school-going children are chosen. These women need to have shared variables in i) class background (based on parents' occupations), ii) household type (nuclear), and iii) type of employment (to ensure the definition of "middle-class"). Thirty women are identified, and contact, based on clearly delineated objectives and procedures, are then made. Interviews with these women are carried out using a gendered framework that encourages their participation. The research participants are aged between thirty-nine and fifty-two. Pseudonyms are used to replace the participants' names so that their actual identities are kept confidential.

Findings

Educational Choices

All thirty participants in this study had at least one diasporic grandparent or great-grandparent who migrated to Malaysia from India during the late nineteenth century or the early twentieth century (Sandhu, 2006). These kin members worked in the British government services in Malaya, and therefore came to be termed "middle-class."

For the research participants, education is an important middle-class

concern in contemporary Malaysia. In this research, most women point-
ed to how it was their fathers, and not their mothers, who were espe-
cially involved in their girlhood educational decisions. This is confirmed
by historical texts that claim how Indian mothers have only subsidiary,
supporting roles in the patriarchal set-up of Indian families (Supernor,
1983). The fathers' role in supervising their daughters' education would
then enable the offspring in getting a "good job": another vital
class-based concern amongst middle-class Indians in Malaysia
(Puthucheary, 2006).[10]

Fifty-two year old Veera's first choice of career was actually archae-
ology, but her father quelled her desires:

> "So what kind of worms are you digging, you know? In
> Malaysia, what is the scope of doing archaeology, are you
> crazy?"

He then suggested that his daughter pursue something that would be
relevant to the nation's economic needs:

> "You go and do something in English."
> "The rest is history," Veera says, confirming how her father's
> discretion has enabled her to keep her language-based career
> till the present moment.

Fifty-year old's Neeta's father not only advised the education route
for her and her siblings, but for all the children living in his community.
Neeta says,

> "My dad told the carpenter he wants to make tables for the
> children. He will get someone to clean the place and all of
> them will go there and study, and they help each other out…all

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[10] Tertiary education during the time of the research participants was based on a relatively
more meritocratic system, where students could choose their preferred courses at the
University without too much institutional control.

studying together."

Due to her father's influence, Neeta proudly says, *"My brother was the first to enter University in the community."*

This aspect of educational discussion between daughter and male parent is telling of older gender patterns of authority in Indian middle-class homes. This is similar to the pattern DeVault identified in European households two decades earlier when she discussed how "expert advice" and "an orientation toward expert discourse" were understood as the subtle yet definite spaces occupied by men (DeVault, 1991, p. 219). Stack and Burton (1994) explain this orientation in inter-generational terms, as "kinscripts." This is a similar vein in my research, where Indian fathers were the "experts" in making education choices for their daughters. This is a common "kinscript" feature among the research participants' girlhood experiences.

In spite of this, some participants were able to navigate against their fathers' wishes in choices of educational pursuit. They dare to contest their fathers' rightful space as the "expert voice." Forty-three year old Sujata opts for her own educational preference:

"My father…initially wanted me to do medicine…because his side, his siblings, children and all, were all in the medical line… I said, 'I'm not interested'… Somehow I took a liking to teaching."

Sujata then concludes,

"I remember talking to my dad about it. So…he just said, 'Okay, you want to do it, fine.'"

Forty-four year old Sheena has also negotiated with the father's authority over her career. She explains,

"Actually, doing my degree in accounting was a decision by my father. So I went to do accounting, not knowing what it was.

So when I started working as an auditor in Price Water House, I didn't like it. I decided to try teaching. And when I tried teaching, I really enjoyed it, because I think to me…I have this gift from God…[in] being able to impart knowledge. And from Day One until today…[it's] teaching… [It] gives me a lot of satisfaction."

Thirty-nine year old Kalpana's father wanted his daughter to also pursue a stable job:

"Go for teachers' training…it's the safest. Or work in the bank."

But Kalpana was not interested, and pursued chartered administration instead. She creates her own space in choosing her future path, and explains how this is also the case in her sister's life. Her sister *"was the brains"* in the family, but was not interested to go to University: "[She] *wanted to take up fashion designing"* instead, and her father "was very upset."

The whole family was unhappy about this, but in the end, Kalpana's father *"paid for her to go to fashion school."*

These women dared to dismiss their fathers' central position of deciding their educational futures. By questioning their fathers' space as the expert in educational knowledge, these women challenged this existing framework of authority upheld by Indian middle-class families.

Workplace Positions

Generally, the historical reality of Indian girls' route to education is clearly one that disempowers females. This was stated in local academic literature half a century ago: "The Indian community was generally not keen on educating their womenfolk" (Ampalavanar, 1981 p. 284). Career advancements were prioritized for male siblings while marriage and family were stressed for the daughters. Forty-seven year old Kumari re-

members what her parents had told her:

> "You need to get married and get out of the house. We don't
> want an unmarried daughter in the house at all in the family."

Other research participants face similar instances with their parents. Forty-one year old Selvam said,

> "My mum had ingrained it that family and children come first
> before career."

Thirty-eight year old Anjali had to contend with strong words from her father that undermined her own capabilities:

> "Don't be over-ambitious [and] don't try to become the
> General Manager or whatever, because you're a woman. Your
> place is at home. Your place is with the kids."

Words such as these from the research participants' parents make it clear to them that the spatial operation of power at the workplace belongs to the men. These women struggle in attempting to defy the construct of submissive "Indian woman" that is passed down to them; an identity that associates their ability only with domesticity. These instances reveal the actuality that in spite of class mobility that defines these women as "middle-class," the Indian construct of "woman" keeps them subordinate.

In spite of these ethno-cultural restrains, the women in my research have made strides in taking on jobs within the upper bracket of the economy. By holding "decision-making" portfolios, these research participants as middle-class Indian women have entered gendered and class-based spaces that they once were absent from.

Forty-year old Vanie is a senior manager who loves her job at the bank:

> "I can still contribute and I can still be happy in an

environment where it's still challenging… I wouldn't want to be in a job where I'm not empowered because I want to make a difference."

Forty-nine year old Navisha, a Securities Commissioner, also agrees that she likes her position:

"I head the department…a lot of things we do impacts the market. To be fair to the men, we don't look at each other as men or women. We look at each other as colleagues."

Thirty-nine year old Komala is a Human Resource Manager who feels she has crossed the gender barrier successfully:

"It feels good. Definitely…it feels good… We have a lady CEO who can stand up and say 'this is how I want it to be' and everybody listens. There's no gender difference. It's the person siting in that seat who tells [you] what needs to be done."

Viewed against the backdrop where middle-class Indian women have been muted in historical, academic and media-based representations, these examples give hope for new futures to be imagined. However, other stories narrated by these women reveal the continuation of patri-archal dimensions of spatial power (Walby, 1990; Gottfried, 2013).

Forty-one year old Selvam is a senior lecturer, but gives an interesting account of how higher management can be condescending in their ap-proach to subordinate staff. She narrates an occasion where her manage-ment had sent all staff a 'fun' email asking them for their workplace wish list:

"I'm like, 'if you're serious about getting what I want, then you send me a serious mail asking me exactly what I want, which we have already said three times around'…yeah, the system is such…I don't' have much hope with the system, the system

always looks at ROI (sic, return on investment)···So, if the system works that way, then I don't think I matter, or what I say matter [sic]. It is the calculation that matters".

Forty-three year old Sujata is a manager in a service-based institution, and laments of institutionalized patriarchy. She enjoys the decision-making element in her job, and her position transgresses gender stereotyping. Yet at the same time, she is expected to approve implementations of strategies that are existent, or that are passed down to her from a superior within the system. Patriarchy is evident in through this gender-typical consensual approach:

"[As] a government servant, you menurut perintah [follow orders]··· After so many years in the service, I think to myself, well, this is why things never get better···basically this is how the system runs. People go on a very impressionistic mode··· they feel···this is how it should be and therefore···no thinking is involved."

Another insidious element many Indian middle class women face is ethnic discrimination. Forty-five year old Lakshmi is a medical doctor, and says that being Indian made her lose out on promotions to the dominant ethnic group in the nation:

"My parents never told me that I've [sic] to be better than the next person because I'm Indian. But after···I start working, that's when you realize that it really makes a difference, your ethnicity···I was passed over for my first promotion···I would have gotten it maybe a year earlier but because of my ethnicity···My friend who sits with me, if she is going to have that criteria, I'll have to double that. And that is my own realization."

These excerpts shed light on the various levels of discrimination

Indian middle-class working mothers face at the workplace. There are instances where segregation in class-based space is overcome. Middle-class Indian mothers have access to higher-end workspaces that have been previously reserved for men or other minority ethnicities. But at the same time, old contours of discrimination remain. In the midst of sporadic traces of visibility, middle-class Indian women still contend with geographies of power in the workplace.

Household Space

Feminist scholarship in the West has claimed that household space is often the main site for women's discriminatory position (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974; DeVault, 1991; Oakley, 2005). This discussion is still valid for Asian women, who contend with restrictive boundaries instituted within the Asian family (Stivens, 1998; Tsuya & Bumpass, 2004; Quah, 2009). Malaysian Indian middle-class working mothers face a similar predicament, although the focus of home space has less to do with household chores.

Having domestic aid is common in middle-class homes in Malaysia, as it is with those in Singapore (Yeoh & Huang, 2010b). Although some mothers in this research do employ domestic helpers, there are many who surprisingly do not. The latter claim that their frequent supervision of the helpers equals them doing the job themselves. Whatever their option in relation to domestic help, almost all the mothers in this research have one common feature: household priorities or meal preparation are hardly mentioned in their interviews. Rather, the more current definitions to their domesticity relate to them being "agents" of their children's education. This has become a major preoccupation in urbanizing middle-class households in Asia (Donner, 2008). Children's educational needs have become "a key project of mothering practices" in a globalizing region (Yeoh & Huang, 2010b, p. 32). This trend is evident in the lives of my research participants.

Thirty-nine year old Karishma provides her children with personal tutors who came to the house to teach:

"We push our kids more now because the competition is a little bit greater…I think I bug them far more than I was ever

bugged…Now I feel that everyone is doing so well…where would our kids stand?"

Attending private tutoring, or "tuition," as it is more commonly called, has become a widespread phenomenon among urban school-going children in Malaysia and Singapore (Bray, 1999). Forty-one year old Selvam does not believe in tuitions at all, and spends most of her after-work time at home helping her children with their school work:

"I refuse to send them for tuition…going for tuition at this age just irregulates [sic] the child… If ever they get any marks or grades, it's what I do at home."

Although this mother does not succumb to class-based norms in getting tutors for her children, she chooses to absorb those "needs" by herself. In her interview responses, she explains how her entire afternoon would be taken up in coaching her children with school lessons.

This trait of "ideal mothering" is also seen in how the research participants encourage their children in extra-curricular pursuits, or what has been defined as a middle-class concern with a "multitude of activities" for children (Donner, 2008, p. 133). Forty-four year old Sheena describes how the weekends were as busy as school days for her daughter:

"My daughter has her tennis, her sangeetham [vocal lessons], [and] *her veena* [Indian classical stringed instrument]."

Thirty-nine year old Prema inserts time for co-curricular activities into the children's weekdays, as well:

"Both the boys are doing music, so we have a system…one is doing the music, one is doing reading time…then we swap…[I] try to give them a balanced childhood."

These maternal engagements with children's activities show how home space is often defined as feminized. However, what is often left

unspoken of is the lacuna of involvement by these women's husbands. In the methodology of this research, all research participants come from dual-income households, with live-in husbands. The "shared role ideology" that working parents are supposed to have is absent in these homes (Quah, 2009, p. 112). Heightened "mothering strategies" (Yeoh & Huang, 2010a) are in reality a euphemistic cover-up for the lack of shared conjugal roles in these households.

Forty-five year old Pushpa candidly talks about her husband,

> "He's an Indian man who wants the wife to do everything⋯ My husband will never pick up his plate, he was brought up with that environment."

Thirty-eight year old Anjali is also open about the lack of conjugal help she receives,

> "Again, it's always about him first.⋯ So I used to get very frustrated about that, you know⋯because I'm too exhausted, because I have to balance between the kids and my work."

Like Donner (2008) discovered in middle-class Kolkata, education in globalizing Asia is rapidly becoming an aspect of modern mothering instead of a shared parental responsibility. Indian middle-class women in this research had fathers who had been responsible for their education, but one generation later, the situation has changed. Now the mothers are responsible for the children's educational needs. Through the research tools of interviews, a time/space-use analysis, and reflexivity, the mothers have become the "expert voice" in dealing with their children's education. As forty-nine year old Navisha says,

> "When the report card comes, or they don't do their homework, then they get it from me⋯"

Home space may be deemed feminized, but it is not one that stems from the mothers' personal ownership. Rather, it is predicated on the

fathers' "run-away" attitude in relation to looking into the children's educational concerns. Indian women's discriminated position in household space is also evidenced through non-work pursuits at home.

Dual management of employment and home space sees middle-class Indian women lacking in leisure pursuits. As a family engagement, quotidian examples of leisure are more weekend-based; where parents and children go out as a family for shopping, a meal, or an occasional movie. However, these out-of-the-home pursuits do not reveal gender differences as much as home space does.

For many of the mothers, their non-work time at home is mostly associated with catching up with errands that have not yet got done. Says forty-four year old Devi:

> "I'm running around, I have to do everything…there's no rest time during weekdays."

Some mothers relax only when the children's needs are looked into, or when the children have gone to bed. Devi continues to say,

> "I have no time for myself; I just need to watch TV. That's why I need to sleep late because I need to watch TV."

Fifty-two year old Veera says,

> "Sometimes at 9.30/10pm, I'll be watering my plants. But it's nice, you know? Just sitting out there watering your plants, nothing to think or worry about…"

Meeting others' needs and not their own are part of Indian mothers' normative gender roles within the home (Donner, 2008). Although distinctions of leisure and non-work are becoming more complex (Rojek, 2000), it is clear that many of the research participants do not have actual engagements with "leisure." Spatial power at home remains in the hands of their husbands.

Forty-one year old Selvam speaks of her husband who enjoyed watch-

ing TV as his own leisure time:

> "There are some days where he will just come back and sit at
> his TV and we're all like in the room and he'll possibly behave
> as if we don't even exist. It's like 'I need to be on my own
> now, don't bug me.'"

Forty-four year old Mary says,

> "My husband is very particular. When he's home, we all should
> be home. Especially I should be home."

Rojek (2000) discusses how women themselves can accentuate in-equality in spousal relationships through the way they "support" men's leisure. Using this slant in my research, I found that Malaysian Indian middle-class women support their husbands' leisure by adhering to their husbands' wishes to watch TV or to be alone in a particular home space. By "respecting" their husband's leisure space, these women are also acknowledging their spouses' spatial power at home.

This strain of patriarchy is also evident from a reflexive analysis in my research. My interview with fifty-two year old Veera in her home became restricted once her husband came home from work. The husband had been informed that the interviewer and interviewee needed privacy, but he still chose to sit in the corner of the same space (the hall). Veera continued the interview in undertones, so that her husband could not overhear what she had to say. Another instance is when forty-year old Vanie narrates how she and her husband catch-up once they both get home from work. Vanie mentions how her husband gets to literally relax and "chill" while she has to look after the children, the family's dinner plans, and the next day's schedule.

These instances confirm that the normative association of women with the household is not one that speaks of women's power or agency. Rather, it is one that sees women as adhering to patterns of male domination. My findings show that Indian middle-class working mothers do not contest home-space; rather, they perpetuate the lived reality that

home space discriminates and disempowers middle-class Indian women.

Discussion

The choice of adjectives in "contradictory ideologies" and "conflicting social pressures" in Quah (2009) speak of Asian women's struggle for congruity (Quah, 2009, pp. 124, 127). The findings in my research echo a similar trajectory, where Malaysian Indian middle-class mothers face the same unenviable difficulty "to reconcile disparate social expectations" (Quah, 2009, p. 124).

The findings have showcased an attempt by Indian middle-class Indian working mothers to challenge spaces that have been steeped in patriarchal practices over generations, both culturally and nationally. Negotiations to claim gendered space through education, work, and home space reveal the different levels of success or lack of it, in these women's lives.

Educationally, middle-class Indian women have challenged certain aspects of marginalization. Many of them are highly educated, and have surpassed the educational levels of their parents. This inter-generational gain of spatial and cultural mobility has brought these women to a level of educational equality with Indian men in Malaysia. The ability of some of the women in negotiating their own educational preferences over their fathers' choices also speaks of them being able to challenge patriarchal mappings of their lives.

In their work life, some of the women's "decision-making" jobs have surpassed the job status that their fathers had held. Inter-generationally, many of these women enjoy work benefits due to their seniority within the organization, and this speaks of successful negotiations over contested workplace spaces.

In spite of workplace discrimination that continues to exist in ethnic, gendered, and institutional dimensions, middle-class Indian mothers who are active in labour force participations are able to fulfill national narratives. Having been overlooked for so long, these women have a chance to gain visibility. However, the stumbling block to their new-found trajectories in education and work-life is what is "inside the black box" (Douglass, 2012, p. 7). Equality in home space still eludes these women.

Although the research participants do less housework than their mothers did, their non-work time at home is not leisurely. Rather, "intensive mothering" skills keep Indian middle-class mothers working at maintaining their children's educational needs. Initially, this finding seemed to reveal a positive shift in power relations, as looking into the children's future had been a father's right in the Indian community. But a deeper analysis reveals that the mothers are merely substituting for the role of an absent father. Space that should be shared as joint-parental engagement in dual-income households spells out more work for the women. The gendered home space gets more complex when leisure patterns are analyzed. Findings show that husbands are able to validate their leisure at home. Their wives' "support" entrenches their patriarchal dominance in the home space.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the extent Indian middle-class working mothers of Malaysia have negotiated markers left by patriarchal historicity in their lived reality of urban space. In their journey to undo their mutedness in dominant national narratives, these women have had to confront the historical marginality of gender, ethnicity, and class.

In educational advancement, contemporary Indian middle-class women have reshaped past class-based trajectories where the space once held by Indian fathers now belongs to Indian mothers, as they initiate educational paths for their children. At the workplace, while intersecting inequalities persist, Indian middle-class mothers have begun reshaping for themselves a meaning of space that can contend with other class-based gender narratives. These spaces spell hope in these women gaining a visibility in public narratives. However, relations in the home space continue to evidence old patriarchal contours. Indian middle-class working mothers' traits expose the gendered shift in "kinscript" patterns, where they are now the "expert" voice. Analyzing gendered leisure patterns within the home also confirms that gender inequality remains unchallenged in Indian middle-class home-spaces.

This paper has showcased a glimpse into the lived reality of Indian middle-class working mothers in Malaysia. The multiple layers of inequality they face are personalized, and yet also determined by the wider

socio-economic and political contexts. As long as Malaysia pushes for working motherhood to be part of their national agenda, the "household" will be ubiquitously linked to the "global" (Douglass, 2012: Gottfried, 2013). However, what these women need to know is that they can still develop "the rhetoric of self-development" in spite of the tough task ahead in being reckoned in national dynamics (Donner, 2008, p. 177).

My research on this group of minority women has initiated a process of giving them a visibility as they negotiate urban patriarchal space. Possibilities of them beginning to be seen and heard are materializing. However, the "black box" remains the main point of contention; whether the women are able to exercise agency and negotiate for equality in household relationships (Douglass, 2012). Thirty years ago, Naila Kabeer had already identified the household as a primary site for gender inequalities in relation to Asian women moving forward (Kabeer, 1994). Thirty years on, Indian middle-class working mothers of Malaysia are able to negotiate certain landscapes of patriarchy that have limited them in the past. Their struggle of "battling with ourselves" can result in them being seen and heard.

The last negotiation these women have to contend with is the "intimate geography of power" within home space (Gottfried, 2013, p. 37). This gain in private democracy is essential. Only then will Indian middle-class working mothers of Malaysia be able to conquer internal impasses that stand in the way of gaining ground in public space.

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