Addressing cultural barriers to the provision of aid for victims of domestic violence in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence is a global issue, and despite awareness of the issue increasing, the prevalence to which women are being physically and mentally abused is increasing. This study aimed to qualitatively investigate the impact of cultural barriers on the provision of aid to victims of abuse from the perspectives of social workers within a domestic violence care organisation in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Social workers within the organisation were interviewed to examine their personal experiences of working with clients from different cultural backgrounds and the results were analysed using the ecological model and the intersectional theory, as well as using earlier research conducted on the issue. The findings showed that the culture of a client can have an effect with regards to abused women seeking help, though the practices of the organisation were generally not impacted based on the cultural background of a client.

Keywords

Cultural barriers, domestic violence, ecological model, intersectional theory, Malaysia, social work.
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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The United Nations defines violence against women as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women’ (United Nations, 1993). According to a study carried out by the World Health Organization, the global prevalence of intimate partner violence among women is 30% (2013, p.16). Other national level studies concerning the prevalence of intimate partner violence present far higher rates of abuse, showing that up to 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence at some point during their lifetime, with prevalence of violence being higher in “developing” countries (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2014).

According to the United Nations Statistics Division (2013), Malaysia is a part of the South-Eastern Asian region, an area which is considered to be “developing”. While Malaysia itself is considered to be one of the fastest developing nations in the areas of economic growth and high standards of education and healthcare (United Nations Development Programme, 2013, p.63; International Monetary Fund, 2012, p.2), the rate of domestic violence towards women continues to grow. A recent report from the Asia News Network has exposed the current reality of domestic violence against women present in Malaysia, stating that between January and April of 2013, 1,353 cases of domestic violence were reported, a rise of 26.75% when compared to the corresponding period in 2012 (AsiaOne, 2013).

In order to protect those exposed to domestic violence, the Malaysian government created the Domestic Violence Act 1994 outlining the rights of people with regards to their personal protection from abuse and the avenues they are afforded to seek protection, support and justice if subjected to such crimes (Government of Malaysia, 2006, pp.8-17). Since the inception of this law, there has been widespread coverage with regards to the piece of legislation leading to women becoming ‘more aware of the laws that can protect them, [voicing] their rights and demand[ing] justice for them’ (Azilah & Jonit, 2005, p.118). Though level of awareness of individual rights increased in Malaysia, the prevalence of cases of domestic violence continues to grow yearly (ibid).
While the awareness of domestic violence and the amount of research being carried out on the subject is increasing, according to Kasturirangan, Krishnan and Riger (2004), little attention has been paid to the influence of culture and minority status on women’s experience of abuse (p.319). The authors go on to state that the influence of culture and ethnic background on women’s experience of domestic violence has been explored in research only “recently” despite the fact it may have far-reaching and important implications for the way victims of domestic violence view the act and their means for support and justice (ibid). The significance of culture in relation to domestic violence is supported by Morrison (2006) who presents the notion that an abused woman’s identity has in-depth associations in the matter of domestic violence and impacts her certain experience of abuse, also affecting the kind of assistance she receives, should she seek help (p.1063). Plainly stated, a woman’s likelihood to receive assistance for domestic violence is largely shaped by her view towards domestic violence itself, and her view towards domestic violence may largely shaped by her cultural background.

Malaysia is a culturally diverse nation made up of the three main ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese and Indian people, each with their own distinct culture. The largest ethnic group in Malaysia are the Malay people (those who speak the Malay language, practice Islam and whose ancestors are Malays), making up 67.4% of the overall national population. The second largest ethnic group is the Malaysian Chinese people (predominantly of Buddhist faith), making up 24.6% of the population, and Malaysian Indians (predominantly of Hindu faith) who form about 7.3% of the overall population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010; Tourism Malaysia, 2014). The large variation in the cultural background of Malaysian people is something which must be considered when addressing issues of significance such as domestic violence as the variation of ethnic groups may be significant with regards to the prevention of abuse and the way in which domestic violence is viewed in society.
1.2 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine what kind of cultural barriers are faced by social workers in Kuala Lumpur when providing aid to victims of domestic violence and the practical implications of these barriers. This will be carried out through examining the following research questions:

- According to the social workers, what cultural barriers exist when providing aid to victims of domestic violence in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia?
- What methods and strategies are used by the social workers to address barriers relating to the cultural background of victims of domestic violence?

1.3 Motivation

The impact of domestic violence on a global level makes it highly relevant within international social work. The widespread prevalence of domestic violence is an issue which warrants research into the effect a person’s cultural background can have on victims seeking aid. The need for literature centreing on the impact of culture in the provision of aid for victims of domestic violence is reflected by Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) who state that ‘there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for domestic violence and that, consequently, solutions must reflect these differences’ (p.50). This lack of culture-specific literature concerning domestic violence was a significant motivating factor in the development of this study as we wanted to examine if the culture of a client affects the aid they receive, and if so, in what ways.

Another motivating factor for this study was the fact that Elvi (one of the authors of this paper) undertook a 16 week internship at a domestic violence shelter in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia during the practical placement course of our university programme. When carrying out this internship, she was able to gain greater insight into the nature of domestic violence and the type of care made available to victims of abuse. Elvi also noticed that the clients at the shelter were from varying cultures and ethnicities, sparking interest into finding out more about the help that each group was able to receive and how effective it was. Through this internship, Elvi was able to establish a network of social workers at the organisation, allowing for easy communication with the host organisation throughout the research process.
1.4 Disposition

This study will be carried out in a systematic manner, building upon itself throughout the course of this paper. Chapter 2 of this paper is used to present earlier research on domestic violence and the effect that an individual’s culture has on the provision of services to a victim, subsequently allowing us to identify and address several cultural barriers which will be used as a framework for themes during analysis. Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical framework used throughout this study, specifically Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model and Crenshaw’s intersectional theory. Chapter 4 addresses the research design and methodology used in carrying out this study and the areas of essay credibility and limitations, as well as the ethical considerations considered throughout the research process. Chapter 5 presents the results gathered during the study and analyses said results in relation to the ecological model and the intersectional theory as presented earlier in the paper. Chapter 6 will provide a summary of the results gathered in accordance to the aim and research questions of the study and discuss the while Chapter 7 will present suggestions for further research within the area of culture and domestic violence. A list of the references utilised during the study and relevant appendices will conclude the paper. Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 were written by Chris and chapters 4 and 5 were written by Elvi.
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to gain a greater understanding on the impact of cultural background when providing aid to victims of domestic violence, earlier research on the topic was collected. Through analysing this earlier research, five themes were identified as cultural barriers to the provision of service, and were subsequently used as a framework for this study.

2.1 Language as a barrier to service

According to Lee (2013), ‘[l]anguage barriers can be one of the most disempowering and frustrating obstacles on the path to social services’ (p.1356). A report by the Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service (2006) in Melbourne, Australia addressed the issue of language in providing care to victims of abuse from the perspective of the care providers and the victims themselves. From the perspective of both the service providers and the victims of domestic violence, there is a distinct lack of suitable interpreters. According to the service providers, this lack of interpreters could be attributed to the rural setting in which the service is provided, and the interpreters that are available for assisting victims ‘are not sufficiently expert to follow the nuances of meaning in a conversation’ (p.14). Furthermore, the service providers stated that they have experienced that many women fear that information provided will not be held in confidence and will “get around” when using an interpreter from the community (ibid). From the perspective of the victims, the lack of suitable interpreters meant that individuals would often have to rely on friends or family members to interpret for them, bringing into question the effectiveness of the aid provided (ibid, p.16).

An article by Kulwicki, et al. (2010) also addressed the area of language as a cultural barrier in the provision of social services to domestic violence victims. Focussing on immigrant women who have been subjected to abuse in the United States of America, the article identified the inability to communicate with legal and social services was a challenge for women seeking help. Furthermore, in cases where police assistance was required and police officers were unable to communicate with the victim, inappropriate arrests or the release of the perpetrator could occur (p.729). Zannettino (2012) reiterates the importance of language, stating that ‘a lack of language skills… [can] prevent refugee women from seeking assistance and early intervention’ (p.12). Although language is only one of many cultural barriers in the
provision of aid for victims of abuse, ‘[t]he barriers for women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are… compounded by factors such as language difficulties’ (Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service, 2006, p.21), reinforcing the necessity for good communication between service providers and clients.

2.2 Client’s religion/belief system as a barrier to service

A second theme identified during the review of earlier research was that of the role of the client’s religion or set of beliefs based on their cultural background. While religion itself was never explicitly stated to be a barrier to the provision of aid for domestic violence victims, the role of religion as a wider part of societal norms could be seen. Burman, Smailes and Chantler (2004) state that culture, gender and religion are constructed as fixed differences by social service organisations and the role of each respective area was relatively fixed within a given context, ultimately playing an important and highly interrelated role in the construction of society (p.346). An example of the interrelated nature of culture, gender and religion within a society can be seen as Muslim religions and cultures are perceived to be relatively closed, centring on the notion that families deal with matters privately. In this sense, this “cultural privacy” stops outside organisations from engaging women on certain issues, subsequently perpetuating the dominant cultural and gender-based norms held by society (ibid).

The impact of the interrelatedness of culture, gender and religion is evident when considering domestic violence within the context of different societies. Zannettino (2012) states that ‘[e]ven though domestic violence takes place in all communities, culturally specific factors have an impact in the kind of violence that occurs as well as how it is perceived, understood, and dealt with’ (pp.814-815), emphasising the need for understanding cultural intricacies within given society and for aid organisations to be culturally competent. Cultural competence ‘requires an understanding of the cultural differences of clients as well as the particular cultural and structural needs that different communities have’ (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005, p.51), and organisations must be possess the appropriate set of skills and attitudes to deal with the often complex nature of social contracts within any particular society (Sullivan, et al., 2005, p.985). Due to the variety of cultures of the women at the organisation where this study was undertaken, the interrelated nature of culture, gender and religion, and how these areas are approached by the social workers should be and examined.
2.3 Isolation as a barrier to service

Through reviewing earlier research on the relation between culture and domestic violence, a common theme centred on the concept of both physical and social isolation was presented as a barrier to the provision of aid. In the report published by the Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service (2006), care providers identified physical and social isolation as ‘one of the most significant barriers to reporting violence and taking action for rural women in general, but particularly women from immigrant backgrounds’ (p.13). According to care providers, this is due to the fact that women who are geographically isolated with no consistent means of transport other than with their partner (often the perpetrator of the abuse), meaning the likelihood that they will report abuse or seek help is small to none (ibid). This view is reflected by those of the women themselves, acknowledging that the lack of transport (either private or public) coupled with their regional location can make reporting abuse very difficult. On top of this, the geographical isolation they experience can develop into social isolation as the rural location of their housing can make it ‘very difficult for women to remain linked to their own communities, and to the regional community in general’ (ibid, p.16), compounding the abuse they may be subjected to. The findings from this study are supported by those presented by Childress (2013) who presents the view that restricting the mobility of women is a significant barrier in providing aid to victims of domestic violence to the point where this restriction of movement is considered a form of violence itself (p.701).

2.4 Stereotyping/community attitudes as a barrier to service

An area repeatedly addressed throughout the earlier research was that the attitudes of a community and the subsequent stereotyping of people impacted the way in which domestic violence is perceived to the point where ‘there may be a longstanding acceptance of or the ignorance about domestic violence – almost a tacit acknowledgment that domestic violence is acceptable’ (Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service, 2006, p.14). In this study, care providers stated that for women from cultural and linguistic backgrounds, community values surrounding domestic violence may be exacerbated by religious or cultural pressures to remain with their abusive partner, ultimately making the act of reporting the abuse more difficult for the victim (ibid). This view is reflected by the experiences of the victims who stated that they would feel an inherent feeling of shame for being in a violent situation, and by
seeking help for abuse they risk being disconnected from their own communities or social networks (ibid, p.16).

The attitudes and stereotypes held by a community regarding domestic violence do not only affect the victims individually, but often lead to discrimination being aimed towards certain cultural groups. Kulwicki, et al. (2010) identified these discriminatory attitudes of a community towards immigrant groups, noting that often ‘immigrant men [are seen to be] violent and immigrant women as being submissive, [causing] uncertainty in ethnic minorities to utilize services for fear of discrimination’ (p.729). The effect of such attitudes with regards to victims of abuse seeking help was also considered by Ammar (2000) who argued that stereotypes held by a community (in this case, regarding Arab people) led to the view that if domestic violence were to occur within a relationship, it was due to the cultural background of the individuals. This was so as Arab women were seen to be submissive and accepting of all forms of oppression, while Arab men were seen to be constantly exerting control and power over their wife (p.58). While the article focuses on a relatively specific group, the fact that community attitudes can skew the way in which domestic violence is viewed, that is, taking no notice of an individual abusive situation but rather stereotyping based on culture, provides an area which can be researched in line with the individual-focused ecological model and intersectional theory utilised in this study.

**2.5 Laws/regulations as a barrier to service**

The final theme identified during the literature review centres on national laws and regulations as a barrier when supporting women who are victims of abuse. Childress (2013) acknowledges that women who have reported being a victim of abuse have had negative experiences when dealing with authorities such as the police and their country’s legal system. The article goes on to state that this occurred as ‘police considered intimate partner violence to be a personal marital quarrel that the police should not intervene in’ (p.701). This hesitance on the part of higher authorities was also reflected by the experiences of domestic violence victims seeking legal support, where lawyers were generally seen to be unhelpful in assisting women to find viable alternatives to remaining in the abusive situation (ibid). These interactions with higher authorities actively discouraged abused women to leave the violent relationship, therefore encouraging the cultural perspective that violence should remain in the
family and not go through other means of resolution. Childress also argues that the reasoning behind such behaviour by these higher authorities which discourages intervention centres on view that in certain contexts, cultural beliefs support male dominance and the view that the wife is the cause of the abuse, emphasising the interconnection between culture, gender roles and the avenues of support for victims of domestic violence (ibid).

Other articles have furthered the idea that the laws and regulations of a country act as a barrier to women seeking help for domestic violence. Zannettino (2012) noted that women had expressed concern about seeking aid for domestic violence from the police and legal system as they believed that they would not be assisted, ultimately strengthening their husband’s resolve to continue the abuse as they would never be held accountable for their behaviour (p.818). This demonstrates that the power relations within a relationship and the stigma surrounding authorities can have a powerful effect in terms of abused women seeking help despite the existence of avenues for assistance. The perceived power of a husband over his wife extends to the legal system with regards to the victim’s residency and immigration status being utilised as a method of abuse within a relationship (Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service, 2006, p.15). According to Kulwicki, et al. (2010), ‘[r]esearch reveals that migration status is a profound determinant for women in abusive situations’ (p.729) where the husband is the legal sponsor of his wife, leading to the threat of deportation if the abused woman reported the violence she has experienced. With this in mind and regardless of the dynamic of power within an abusive relationship, ‘the lack of adequate institutional support in the form of social services… is another level of violence experienced by battered women’ (Lee, 2013, p.1353).
CHAPTER 3 – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Ecological model

The ecological model was originally proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s ‘to explain how human development occurs, focussing largely on the impact of context’ (Rosa & Tudge, 2013, p.244) and was presented as ‘a reaction to the restricted scope of most research then being conducted by developmental psychologists’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, pp.37-38). In his book titled *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* from 1979, Bronfenbrenner presented the notion that the development of people should be considered as ‘a lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with his environment’ (p.3), placing emphasis on the view that personal development is as a result of the interaction between the individual, their specific context and the time period in which this interaction occurred. The interaction between an individual and their environment has an impact on both respectively, as Greif and Lynch (as cited in Ungar, 2002) state that ‘[a] person is constantly creating, restructuring, and adapting to the environment as the environment affects the person’ (p.481).

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model places the person in the centre of their individual system, where they are surrounded by a series of concentric circles which represent their microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem, each having an effect on their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, pp.39-41). The microsystem is the pattern of activities, social roles and interpersonal relationships experienced by an individual including family, peers, neighbourhood and religious affiliation. The mesosystem focuses on ‘the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person’ (ibid, p.40), that is, the interaction between parties within an individual’s microsystem. The exosystem relates to economic, political, education, government and religious systems, as well as any other wider system which indirectly influences an individual, while the macrosystem refers to the overarching beliefs and values of a culture or subculture in which an individual is present (their environmental context) (ibid, pp.39-40). Finally, the ecological model’s chronosystem recognises the importance of the time-frame in which a person lives. Bronfenbrenner states that the ‘chronosystem encompasses change or consistency over time not only in the characteristics of the person but also of the environment in which that person lives’ (ibid, p.40), adding further depth to the application of the model.
Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model is presented as ‘a theory of human development in which everything is seen as interrelated and our knowledge of development is bounded by context, culture and history’ (Darling, 2007, p.204). With this in mind, the ecological model was selected for use in this study as it acknowledges the interaction between an individual and their environment when considering their personal development. On top of this, ‘a fundamental premise of the ecological system theory is its phenomenological nature’ (ibid), one which serves the research area of our study as we aim to analysis the lived experiences of the social workers (and indirectly, their clients) based on the interaction they have with their environment based on their cultural background.

The importance of individual’s personal experience is reiterated as one person’s lived experience can be extremely different to another’s, even within the same context, making the need to acknowledge the personal differences between people within the same physical space is paramount. This is especially necessary when with regards to culture as Bronfenbrenner (1979) recognises that the when concerning the levels of the ecological environment, ‘between cultures they are distinctly different’ (p.4). As this is the case, the culture of an individual greatly shapes their interaction with their environment, emphasising the relevance of the use of the ecological model in this study.

3.2 Intersectional theory

The intersectional theory was first presented by Kimberle Crenshaw in her 1991 article titled Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color, as a reaction to ‘[c]ontemporary feminist and antiracist discourses [failing] to consider intersectional identities such as women of color’ (p.1242). Intersectionality grew out of the work of feminist scholars of colour advocating that most work within the area of feminism at the time focused on white, educated, middle-class women, not taking into account other areas of importance such as race (Shields, 2008, pp.303-304). With this in mind, intersectionality placed great importance on recognising every aspect of a specific woman shapes her identity, and only by acknowledging the significance of each individual aspect would you be able to gain a greater understanding of the woman as a whole. This wider focus has led to some to state that ‘intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far’ (McCall, 2005, p.1771).
Simply stated, intersectionality is ‘an analytical tool [used] for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege’ (Association for Women’s Rights in Development, 2004, p.1). Intersectionality examines how various social, biological and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation and other forms of identity interact on multiple and simultaneous levels, and how these interactions contribute to systematic injustice and social inequality (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1242). By starting from the premise that individuals live multiple and layered identities, intersectional analysis ‘aims to reveal [these] multiple identities, exposing the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a consequence of the combination of identities’ (Association for Women’s Rights in Development, 2004, p.2), benefitting women subject to discrimination.

Intersectional theory allows for thorough analysis of women of different cultural backgrounds who have been subjected to domestic violence, as it recognises the ‘multiple interlocking identities that are defined in terms of relative sociocultural power and privilege and shape people’s individual and collective identities and experiences’ (Parent, DeBlaere & Moradi, 2013, p.640). In terms of researching the impact a woman’s cultural background has on the aid they receive for domestic violence, intersectionality emphasises that strategies and methods based on the experiences of women of a certain background will be of little to no use when implemented on a another set of women from a different cultural background whose lives are shaped by a different set of obstacles (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005, p.51). As each individual is different, there is no standardised approach to aiding victims of abuse as ‘battered women who have different religious backgrounds, sexual orientations, and nations of origin require different interventions’ (ibid). The fact that intersectionality acknowledges the differences between women when providing care lends itself to use in this study, allowing the impact of culture on aid provision to be examined on multiple levels.

The reason for combining the ecological model and the intersectional theory for use in this study centres on the fact each acknowledge the impact wider and more complex factors that have an impact on individuals in a certain context from different perspectives. The ecological model emphasises the impact wider systems have on the development of an individual while the intersectional theory focuses on the multiple identities of women and how each contribute to individual experiences, allowing for depth in analysing and understanding the role culture plays in the provision of aid for domestic violence from different yet related perspectives.
CHAPTER 4 – METHODOLOGY

This chapter is especially dedicated to describe the entire research process of this study where the aspects of validity, reliability and generalisation will be briefly discussed as well. The whole research process was conducted with ethical considerations in mind.

4.1 Philosophy of science: Paradigm and pragmatism

As it has been discussed chapter 1, the purpose of this study is to examine and understand what kind of barriers there are when it comes to providing aid to victims of domestic violence in Kuala Lumpur, viewed through personal perspectives and subjective experiences of the social workers themselves there. On the basis of the “personal perspective and subjective experiences” aspect, phenomenology has been chosen as it served this purpose beautifully.

Edmund Husserl is the founding father of phenomenology where he established it as a philosophy in around 1900 grounded upon thoughtful interpretations and careful analyses of humans’ consciousness and experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.26; Patton, 2002, p.105). The core attentions of this philosophical notion are the human life world, how people describe things and how they experience them and that we can only identify what we experience if we take into account the perceptions and meanings which awaken our conscious awareness (ibid, pp.105-106).

Phenomenology emphasises the importance of comprehending social phenomena based on participants’ own perspectives and defining the world as experienced by them (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, pp.26-32; Williams, Unrau & Grinnell, 2001, p.110). Phenomenology attempts to collect deep and rich information on the participants’ everyday experiences based on the data gathered through inductive, qualitative inquiries such as semi-structured and in-depth interviews, discussions and observations (Patton, 2002, pp.104-106) – all of these requirements have been applied to this study. Phenomenology assisted us in developing better understanding on the participants’ subjective experiences and interpretations of meaning in their work and as with this we were able to gain a clearer insight into their motivations and actions by exposing (our personal) “taken-for-granted” assumptions (Lester, 1999, p.1).
4.2 Research design

A research design provides a framework for the data collection and data analysis, which basically encompasses all the aspects involved in planning and executing a research: from identifying the problem through to reporting the results (Bryman, 2012, p.46; D’Cruz & Jones, 2004, p.84). A research design should contain the main key components in a research: “purpose(s)” which would be answered by the “research question(s)”, “theory” which acts as a guideline in understanding the findings, “methods” which specifies the technique in data collection and “sampling strategy” which informs from whom the data are sought from, when and where (Robson, 2002, pp.81-82).

4.2.1 Clarity regarding research purpose and design

The purpose in every research acts as a controlling force in guiding the researcher(s) to decide the research design, measurement, analysis and reporting – and subsequently it is important to start a research process by determining clearly the research purpose (Patton, 2002, p.213). Every research could be categorised according to “the purpose of the research purpose” and this study falls into “basic research” category which aims to the contribution of fundamental knowledge and to investigate, understand and explain a phenomenon at its nature of reality (ibid, pp.213-215).

Having an understanding of the purpose of the research purpose helped us to pick an appropriate research design, a “case study” design. A case study is a research strategy involving an investigation of a specific phenomenon within its real life context and the data is gathered by using numerous sources of evidence (Robson, 2002, p.178).

On the basis of these two definitions, this study was thus conducted in Kuala Lumpur with the purpose of investigating the cultural barriers faced by social workers there, assisted with participation of a local organisation working with victims of domestic violence. The data was gathered through interviews, participant observation and review of secondary sources (Bryman, 2012, p.70).

Having both the nature of basic research and case study in the research design, this study can be laid out in this manner (Robson, 2002, pp.81-82):
To examine and understand what are the barriers when aiding victims of domestic violence in Kuala Lumpur.

Sampling was chosen through non-probability purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were done in Kuala Lumpur in April 2014.

A Qualitative study applying semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions in order to gather deep and rich understanding of the phenomenon through the participants’ subjective experience (phenomenology), plus direct observation and secondary data. Data is analysed through thematic analysis where themes are generated and analysed.

4.3 Data collection

It may have been more interesting to have conducted this research based on clients’ (the victims of domestic violence) perspective – but after careful consideration, we chose to place focus on the social workers’ points of view instead. According to the World Health Organization (2001), when researching an issue as sensitive as domestic violence, ‘there is a real danger that research conducted without due sensitivity and attention to safety and confidentiality could be distressing and put respondents, and at times researchers at risk’ (p.10). With this in mind, we decided to place more emphasis on the perspectives of the social workers’ as in the context of this study, we believe that we are not yet experienced enough to directly deal with victims of abuse and the ethical considerations surrounding this with regards to their safety and level of vulnerability.
4.3.1 Sampling: Selection of participants

A non-probability purposive sampling called “criterion sampling” was utilised where the participants in the sampling were selected in a strategic way based on the researchers’ own judgement and interest in selecting the sampling, in order to satisfy the specific need in the research (ibid, p.265; Gabor & Ing, 2001, p216). One of the writers of this research conducted her practical placement at this particular organisation in Kuala Lumpur for 16 weeks and this was one of the reasons which roused interest in conducting this study. This organisation is a non-religion and non-race based organisation which aids victims of domestic violence in Kuala Lumpur. It employs social workers from different cultural and religion backgrounds found in Malaysia, age ranging from 20+ years old to 50+ years old with work experience varies from 3+ years to 18+ years respectively, which fulfilled the determined criterion for the sampling of this study: variety of backgrounds and experiences (Bryman, 2012, p.418).

During her internship at the organisation in 2013, Elvi informally requested the executive director and social workers (through the social work manager) about their willingness to take part in the study. Positive responses and a “letter of acceptance” were received. As soon as the final research plan was completed in January 2014, a formal e-mail was sent to the executive director and social work manager of the organisation where we introduced ourselves properly and as well the purpose of the study. The social work manager was allocated to be our field supervisor by the organisation upon our request. Three more e-mails were exchanged between us and the social work manager and executive director (via the administrator of the organisation) where we informed about our arrival dates, the preliminary dates for the interviews with four to five participants and the anonymity and voluntary of the participation – which would be completed with a consent form (see Appendix I) on the interview dates.

4.3.2 Designing interview guide and interview questions

The approach utilised in structuring the interviews was “semi-structured life world interview” which ‘attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspective’ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.27) where the interview questions could be adapted based upon interviewer’s observation of what seems to be most appropriate during the interviews (Robson, 2002, p.271). The themes of the interview questions were constructed upon “participant observation” and as well as our understanding after reading various articles and researches on domestic violence and providing services to victims of domestic violence.
On the basis of these themes, four to five open-ended interview questions on each theme were constructed carefully so that they could contribute both thematically to knowledge production and dynamically to encourage a good interview collaboration (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.131). Open-ended questions would give the study rich data as they are flexible and allow more depth answers to assess what the participants really believe, and as well as they encourage co-operation with the participants and can produce unexpected or unanticipated answers (Robson, 2002, pp.276-277); which was true in this study where two new themes emerged from every participant’s response.

An interview guide (see Appendix II) with somewhat structured list of memory prompts on the themes and predetermined open-ended interview questions was used as guideline during the interviews (Bryman, 2012, p.712), with some adaptation depending on each participant’s response.

4.3.3 Conducting interviews

There are three important factors researchers should keep in mind in order to conduct successful interviews: interviewers (researchers) are advised to do as much as possible to make the participants feel comfortable, the thought of any arising barriers during interviews should be erased from the participants’ mind and the participants should feel that the issue of the study is important and their participations are meaningful (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008, p.239).

Upon arriving in Kuala Lumpur, two visits to the organisation were made before the interview. The first visit was a friendly visit where Chris got to meet the participants for the first time and the second visit was an invitation from the organisation to join a case conference. On the second visit, dates and times for interviews in the following week were decided – all interviews would be done in three days at the organisation upon the participants’ request. These two visits before the actual interviews established a good contact and built trust, which ultimately made the participants at ease when the interviews took place.

All interviews were introduced by a briefing where we talked about the purpose of the study, the permission to use two sound recorders and then every participant was handed a consent form to be read and signed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.128). The consent form – which was designed according to the guidelines presented by Etikprövning av Forskning som Avser
Människor (2012) – introduced the study, the anonymity and voluntary of the participation and provided permission to carry the interviews out. All interviews were conducted in English except one where it was carried out mostly in Bahasa Melayu as the participant concerned expressed her worry on the possible language barrier where she thought that she would not be able to deliver her thoughts well enough in English. We assured her that she should not be worried about it as Elvi speaks Bahasa Melayu and she could switch to it anytime she wished. The interviews were conducted by both researchers where one would take more lead on some certain themes. Notes were taken during the interviews and we discussed the important and interesting points of every interview directly afterwards.

On the first visit before the interviews, we got a chance to talk to the social work manager and the social workers where we expressed once again our gratitude on how their participation was much appreciated and how important it was for the study – this was repeated again before and after the interviews. Our study is important for the organisation as well and thus we were invited to sign a form provided which requested us to credit them in a way in the report and two copies of the report would be allocated to them.

Four to five participants were planned to be interviewed, but it turned out to be six participants. The participants consisted of two Malay, two Chinese and two Indian social workers with work experience ranging from 3+ years to 18+ years – the length of the interviews were 20, 28, 33, 35, 51 and 55 minutes, respectively.

4.3.4 Participant observation

It is understood in general that a major source of qualitative data is obtained through verbal interviews or written documents but there are limitations to this: how much can be learned from what is said and written? (Patton, 2002, p.21). In order to understand entirely the complexities of many situations, direct participation in and observation of the phenomenon of interest may be the best research method (ibid). A vital feature in participant observation is that the observer seeks to grow into some kind of member of the observed group which involves physical presence at the location to share experiences, entry into the observed group’s social and symbolic world by learning and adapting into their social conventions and habits and the use of their verbal and non-verbal communications (Robson, 2002, p.314).
Elvi spent forty hours a week for 16 weeks as an intern at the organisation. She was given the opportunity to handle a few responsibilities where the most interesting included phone counselling in English, Bahasa Melayu and Hokkien (a dialect of Chinese spoken widely in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore), and after a few weeks she was then able to understand and apply the protocol, routine, habits and terms used both at the organisation or when conducting phone counselling. She took both physical and mental notes on almost daily basis and special attention was given to how the social workers from different cultural background would work mostly with clients from the same cultural background as theirs, the differences when working with Malaysian and non-Malaysian clients and how empowerment was the main goal when aiding the clients (Bryman, 2012, pp.450-451). The knowledge gained through participant observation became one of the grounded reasons to conduct this study.

4.3.5 Literature review of secondary sources

Using a secondary data source may provide a greater and deeper possibility than using only the primary data (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008, p.305). Review of secondary sources of this study using the materials collected in chapter 2.

Valuable/reliable and relevant sources for the study had been gathered through an intensive literature review based on a number of considerations such as availability, convenience factor and limitation in time. Guidelines and framework on research methodology and process were gathered though an intensive reading of some related courses’ literature and lectures while earlier research and theoretical perspectives were collected and filtered through databases and search engines, with access granted by Högskolan i Gävle such as DIVA, Google Scholar, EBSCO Host and Discovery. Discovery is a meta-search engine which covers many databases such as SAGE Journals Online, Wiley Online Library and Academic Search Elite.

Search-term combinations such as “domestic violence, cultural barriers, intimate violence, gender based violence, stereotyping, Malaysia, Asia, intersectional theory, intersectionality, ecological perspective, ecological system theory” were used, resulting in large amount of literature collected – but due to the size of the study and limitation in time, only a small representative of the most suitable literature was used.
4.4 Data transcription

All six interviews were taped using two tablets and as soon as all were carried out, we started transcribing the interviews. The interviewees are referred to as #1, #2, #3, #4, #5 or #6 respectively. We transcribed three interviews each and read each other’s transcription afterwards to make sure no parts were forgotten.

We had nearly four hours’ worth of interviews (where parts of one of them were translated into English after being transcribed) and the transcription was very time consuming – word by word and expressions such as “ahh...umm” and laughter were literally transcribed without any changes made so that we would not miss anything (Bryman, 2012, p.486). Every question and its response were marked with the time it was stated. As we transcribed the interviews ourselves, it contributed great benefits in terms of bringing us closer to the data and it inspired us to immediately identify key themes which showed us similarities and differences between different participants’ responses (ibid).

4.5 Data analysis

Utilising a qualitative data analysis and research software called ATLAS.ti 7 was considered at the beginning of the study as we wanted to save time in labelling codes and made use of all benefits the software could offer, but after spending a few hours exploring the software through Högskolan i Gävle’s remote desktop and reading the manual online, this software appeared to be most useful when the data is much larger than ours and it would require much time to learn all the functions. For these reasons the thought of using it was no longer considered.

4.5.1 Coding

In order to have more precise focus on the term “cultural barriers” in the research aim, the interview questions were designed according to five categories which generated upon intensive reading on earlier research. These five categories (language, religion and culture, isolation, gender stereotyping, and laws and regulations) would serve as themes in the coding process as well since they showed repetition, similarities and differences, indigenous typologies and theory-related material (ibid, p.580).
The data analysis was initiated with open coding where categories of information about the phenomenon being investigated were formed (Robson, 2002, p.194). The transcriptions were read by both of us and codes were given to the statements in the data. Related codes which arguably represented the pre-determined themes were then grouped under the same category or categories which later on gathered under themes (Saldana, 2013, pp.10-13). An example of the open coding process follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Society's view on women</td>
<td>Gender inequality</td>
<td>Gender stereotyping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriarchal society</td>
<td>Women's roles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are weak</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's duties at home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the coding process, two new and unanticipated themes, “ethical dilemmas” and “clients’ needs”, emerged from every participant’s responses.

4.5.2 Thematic analysis

One of the most common strategies to qualitative data analysis is “thematic analysis” where it identifies, analyses and reports patterns or themes within data, often going further than this by interpreting various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Thematic analysis is often seen as a process which is both implicitly and explicitly a part of other strategies of qualitative data analysis such as grounded theory and discourse analysis (Harvard University, 2008).

One common tactic used in assisting a thematic analysis of qualitative data is provided by “framework”, a digital approach developed by the National Centre for Social Research in the United Kingdom (Bryman, 2012, pp.578-579). As we did not have access to this software programme, a manual and simplified approach based on framework (ibid) had been implemented in data analysis. Every relevant statements from each transcription were marked
and codes given manually using Adobe Acrobat pro XI. A table with seven columns in Microsoft Word 2013 was created and all codes from every transcription were put in place according to the sources. Another table was created where related codes were put under categories and the last table was created to group the categories into suitable themes, still based on the data sources. After all the tables were done, the manual “framework approach to thematic analysis” table was created where participants’ responses on each theme were summarised.

4.6 Essay credibility

Credibility, which is related to internal validity, refers to conducting research according to the canons of good practice and to forming credible and believable results from a participant's perspective, showing that this study understands and describes the phenomenon investigated through participant’s eyes (Trochim, 2006). There are two techniques to ensure the credibility of the results: respondent validation and triangulation (Bryman, 2012, p.390). Respondent validation, meaning participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results, was implemented during the interviews where we occasionally confirmed with the participants with an account of what they said (ibid), but due to limitation in time we did not have the chance to send a research draft to the participants to gauge their reactions. Triangulation of sources was carried out as well where we compared our perspectives and understandings on the interviews and earlier research we read – and it showed that our views were compatible (Patton, 2002, p.556).

4.6.1 Reliability

LeCompte and Goetz highlighted external reliability as the form of generalisation because it points to replication of existing study and the replicated study would produce the same results – but in practice replications are rare (Payne & Williams, 2005, p.298). External reliability shows the degree to which a study can be replicated afterwards. This is difficult to fulfil in qualitative research as it is impossible to “freeze” a social setting and its environments of the initial study to make it replicable for the next study, but fortunately there are some strategies which could be executed to strengthen external reliability which were applied in this study (Bryman, 2012, p.390). To create a strong reliability degree, this study has tried to describe in
great details every action which had been taken in every single stage in the research methodology (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.245) and it has provided a detailed description of the details for others as a database for making judgement about the possible transferability of findings to another setting.

Internal reliability occurs when a great deal of subjective judgement involved in observations and translations of data where more than one observer is taking part (Bryman, 2012, p.169). The internal reliability of this study was strengthened by the fact that both authors carried out the interviews, transcriptions and data analysis – and what was heard, read, seen and understood through the research process was always cross-checked with each other to avoid a lack of consistency in the decisions.

4.6.2 Validity

Internal validity refers to a good understanding between researchers’ observations and the theoretical concepts of the research, as well as good explanations of choosing a certain idea among alternate accounts of something (Indiana University, 2014). This study has explained both explicitly and implicitly the reasons why, for example, phenomenology was adopted showing that good research concepts had been observed and understood earlier to strengthen the internal validity of the study (Gustafsson, Hermerén & Petersson, 2006).

External validity points to the degree to which findings of a result can be generalised across social setting but it could be a problem in qualitative researches as they have the tendency to employ case studies and small samples (Bryman, 2012, p.390). This study has applied direct participant observation and qualitative interviews with a small number of participants at an organisation in Kuala Lumpur and thus it is unlikely to determine how the findings can be generalised in other settings such as a women’s shelter in Gävle.

4.6.3 Generalisation

Generalisation in this study is analytical, which means it attempts to show good theoretical interpretations of the phenomenon being studied (Bryman, 2012, p.71; p.406). The six participants interviewed in this study were not meant to be representative of all social workers in Kuala Lumpur and the findings in this research were not meant to generalise to a wider or different setting, but it was rather to show how well the ecological and intersectional perspectives were applied in the interpretations of the research findings.
4.7 Ethical considerations

This study in its entirety has applied the four main ethical requirements for humanistic and social scientific research established by the Swedish Research Council: requirements for information, consent, confidentiality and data utilisation (Vetenskaprådet, 2006). These four requirements were embedded into the guidelines presented by *Etikprövning av Forskning som Avser Människor* (2012) and presented to the participants via oral briefing before the interviews and written consent form.

Interviews can involve an asymmetrical power relation between the interviewers and respondents where the interviewers are positioned as more powerful with more scientific competence in “controlling” the interviews’ topic and questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.33) but the fact that the participants are experts in the field concerned could affect the balance of power (ibid, p.147). The fact that one of the authors is acquainted with the participants raised a concern regarding the degree of reliability and validity of this study. To balance the power relationship and to strengthen the reliability and validity, a well-thought research design was utilised and “friend-mode” was switched off during the interviews.

4.8 Limitations of the study

The main limitation of this study was the allocation of time and for this reason, only a small sample was chosen. The interviews, transcriptions and final report were done within seven weeks’ which might have led to the minimum optima of intersectional and ecological perspectives in the data analysis, which are brought up again in chapter 7. Another limiting aspect of the study is language (English was everyone’s but Chris’ second/third language) and cultural background of both the authors and participants which may affect interpretation of interviewees’ responses – but as this study applies a phenomenological approach, the data would be interpreted only through participants’ point of view.

Elvi spent nine weeks in Kuala Lumpur while Chris stayed for only three weeks. As Elvi was in Malaysia, Chris was in Australia and our supervisor was in Sweden, the communication was done through email and Skype, and due to time differences it would sometimes take several hours to contact eachother so no work could be done until feedback was received.
CHAPTER 5 – RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Violence against women is a universal phenomenon where women are subjected to different forms of violence such as verbal, physical, psychological, economic and sexual assaults which disrespect and violate a woman’s physical body, sense of self and sense of trust, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, or country (United Nations, 2010, p.127; Alhabib, Nur & Jones, 2010, p.369).

Even though women in developing countries experience many types of violence, ‘domestic violence is the most pervasive form’ (Koenig, et al., 2003, p.269) but for the past decades it has developed from a relative “unimportant matter” to a crucial concern among researchers and policy makers (ibid). Despite the growing interest in this matter in developing countries, most studies about domestic violence have been conducted only in Western communities, leading to the absence of reliable data in developing countries where there is a “dearth of comparable data” on the prevalence, nature, causes and consequences of domestic violence (ibid, p.270; Shuib, et al., 2013, p.476). There is only one known nationwide study on domestic violence in Malaysia conducted by Women’s Aid Organisation in year 2000, involving 1,221 participants nationwide and it reported that approximately 36% of them experienced physical violence (Shuib, et al., 2013, p.476).

The data and results gathered in this study would be presented and analysed using intersectionality perspectives and ecological perspectives. Ecological perspectives make clear the need to view people and environments as a unitary system within a particular cultural and historic context, as both people and environment can only be fully understood in terms of their relationship in which each continually influences the other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.4) while intersectional perspectives argue that people live multiple and layered identities derived from social relations, history and the operation of structures of power and how various biological, social and cultural categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation and other forms of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic injustice, social inequality, oppression and discrimination which are interrelated and intersect with each other (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1245).

The results and analysis have been presented according to the seven themes mentioned briefly in chapter 4.
5.1 Theme 1: Language

5.1.1 Language as a barrier

Women who try to leave their domestic violence circumstances are often faced with various hindrances and crises which could be related to service-delivery systems, personal resources, cultural barriers, language barriers and lack of general knowledge about existing services – where the last two mentioned are especially factual for immigrants (Kulwicki, et al., 2010, p.729).

The organisation shelters female victims of domestic violence who come from different ethnic groups from Malaysia as well as different nationalities such as Indians, Cambodians, Indonesians, Burmese, Iranians, etc., meaning many different languages are spoken. The social workers at the organisation can converse in Bahasa Melayu, English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien which are spoken in Malaysia – but for those clients who are not from Malaysia, English would be the language used to communicate directly with the social workers though unfortunately many of the foreign clients do not know English.

There is a general acknowledgement between all participants that language was a barrier, but the degree of how much a barrier it is varies slightly among them. #4, who has three years of work experience stated with certainty that not speaking the same language as the clients is indeed a barrier while three other participants who have been working there for three (#1), six (#2) and nine years (#6) say that language could be a barrier in certain situations when verbal communication is crucial:

“I mean language is always a barrier, but for me… language is the second thing for me. You can always get some information out of them in a way… language is a barrier but it also depend on the clients… of course the case report will be a bit difficult to build because of the language barrier.” (#2)

“It’s true that the language can be a barrier when we actually do sessions with the clients but generally I guess how we portray ourselves when we interact with the women… those also important, it’s not just the verbal thing but also the non-verbal things, like for example the tone of the voice, your physical, your facial expressions and then the pitch of the voice.” (#6)
#1, #2, #4 and #6 have different roles and responsibilities in the organisation and this might affect the way they view the matter. #4 is mainly responsible for conducting programmes and activities for the residents, where not speaking the same language with the residents could be difficult when delivering information about the programmes. #1 and #2 work a lot with Tamil speaking clients with counselling and doing social work (e.g. driving clients to hospital) – where sometimes some degree of initial information could be retrieved from clients from India who do not speak Tamil by pointing at the body parts where they have been hit by the perpetrators, for example. On the other hand, fruitful counselling sessions with the clients can only be achieved if the clients are able to express themselves in the language they are most comfortable with, as it is easier express their feelings and experiences in their mother tongue.

One important thing mentioned both explicitly and implicitly by all interviewees is that non-verbal communication is as important as verbal communication because how the social workers present themselves would represent their words. #6 is both a social worker and social work manager and is pursuing her master’s degree as a professional counsellor. She sees the importance of being able to communicate verbally with the clients in certain settings and as well as of displaying to the clients that any power imbalance between social workers and clients is minimised by showing no intimidations in their acts, even if no words are understood between them. Abused women often come from a setting where they are inferior and powerless and thus it is vital to make them feel “equal”. It is important for the organisation to show their clients that despite of the lack of verbal communication, the organisation will provide them the assistance they need because it would be a great shame if a battered woman’s safety is dependent upon language barrier (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1265).

Clients’ willingness to try to communicate with the social workers in non-verbal ways play a role in minimise the language issue. Some clients would speak in their mother tongues explaining things as if the social workers understood, some would point and gesture what they want to say while some would do no effort as their only expectation from the shelter is to have a safe place to stay. Language barriers could often limit the opportunities of non-English/Chinese/Tamil/Bahasa Melayu speaking clients to take advantage of existing support services, such as limited information about the organisation’s services, especially if it is done over the phone where no physical expression can be observed. This could lead the clients to believe that if the organisation does not have someone who can communicate with them then the organisation for sure does not have the resources or ways to help them (ibid, p.1249).
5.1.2 Methods used in minimising the effect of the language barrier

In general, there are two methods utilised by all participants when it comes to dealing with language barrier, namely using body language and getting interpreters. The predominant concern when assisting immigrant women may largely require bicultural and bilingual services and thus getting interpreters are necessary (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005, p.51). Interpreters are usually provided by United Nations High Commisionner for Refugees if the clients (who are usually refugees from Myanmar) are referred by them and if the clients are from India who are referred by the Indian Embassy, an interpreter would be provided by the organisation if it is needed. One thing that is worth consideration, an interpreter in this context might differ from an interpreter provided by Social Services in Sweden where the interpreter should have certain education and skills and formal obligations. Interpreters in this context (especially if not provided United Nations High Commisionner for Refugees) would serve the main purpose of translating between one language to another – with some protocols and requirements provided by the organisation. Some other methods used by the social workers are google translate, watching movies and listening to songs in a client's mother tongue.

#1 expresses her wish to learn sign language in order to be able to communicate with deaf and mute clients, which she experienced once, where her client and she communicated by writing their thoughts in papers. This is especially important because mute clients would not be able to communicate verbally even though if they have the same mother-tongue as the social worker technically speaking.

The social workers utilise all possible channels to communicate with the clients as they clearly understand that many of their multicultural clients speak non-familiar languages to their ears. They have always managed to find a way to overcome the language barrier and thus it is not the main challenge in delivering services, language is a barrier but it is not an unsolvable puzzle.

5.1.3 The efficiency of service delivery despite the language barrier

The organisation provides numerous kind of services such as a safe place to stay, counselling sessions and social work support. All these services needed to be delivered through a medium which is understood by the clients, and the simplest yet not always the easiest medium would be language.
There are some basic rules and regulations at the shelter which are needed to be informed and accepted before the clients can settle in. In the counselling sessions the clients are empowered and motivated to take charge of their lives and to make plans for their future, in social work the clients needed to be informed why they have to lodge a police report, for example. Rules and regulations could be delivered by an interpreter or another resident who speaks the same language as the new client – but when it comes to social work and especially counselling sessions, it is much trickier than that.

#3 believes that when she does not speak the same language as her clients and an interpreter is needed, the services she provides to her clients will still be at a maximum but it might take much longer time due to, among other things, the waiting time to get an interpreter because there are only few interpreters available as #2 mentions: “They [UNHCR] only have 2-3 interpreters, for that language, but they have thousands of clients”. However, #3’s main concern related to the translator competence in comprehending and translating the language concerned into English:

“It depends on the capability of the translator. I feel that it’s not about the language; it’s about how the translator understands my questions. So let’s say if the translator is not fluent in English, she would probably not understand some words and she would just use her own interpretation to translate that to the client.” (#3)

Having non-professional interpreters should be discouraged and having neutral, professional interpreters should be maximised in domestic violence situations in order to deliver the true essence of what is being said by the clients without filtering and distorting it (Wolf, et al., 2003, p.127; Menjívar & Salcido, 2002, p.914). An interpreter should not interpret what s/he thinks the clients want to say because the interpretation should be left to the social workers. A non-professional interpreter who speaks the same language and thus presumably comes from the same cultural background as the clients might have the tendency to interpret the unsaid things through his/her assumptions based on the cultural similarity (Boonzaier, 2008, pp.187-188). Another downside regarding non-professional interpreters would be the lack of the required language skill as they might be recruited just because they know the other language and this leads to misunderstanding and error in translation. The language barrier could be even a bigger challenge when both the social worker and interpreter have different level of knowledge in the language being translated. This would mean the words are communicated,
understood and translated through a complicated process where cultural difference and competence might even be taken in mind by both parties.

Having interpreters when aiding foreign clients is significant but it will not reduce the quality of the services provided because interpreters are provided out of the necessity based on the clients’ needs. Every client has different wishes and expectations of the organisation and thus in some cases having an interpreter is crucial but in another case it would not matter so much:

“It depends on the client. Sometimes we have interpreter [helping us], [but] sometimes we have to work with body language. I don’t think language is a barrier… People come from different cultures and different values… They have different expectations.” (#5)

Clients who have made up their mind to leave their abusive relationship might request assistance in filing for divorce, custody and maintenance as well as information about social benefits from the welfare department while clients who are not ready yet to leave the abusive relations for various reasons might just need a place to stay for a couple of days until their abusers cool-off. Clients from India are usually migrant workers who have been abused or cheated by their agents and/or employers, and their stay at the organisation are referred by the Indian Embassy. These clients’ paper works are usually taken care of by the Embassy, and they just want to go home to their country, staying only to wait for their passport or salary settlement. When it is settled, they are sent back home by the embassy and thus many times (professional or non-professional) interpreters are not needed as counselling sessions are not prioritised for them, as #1 says. On the other hand, aiding foreign spouses and refuges require interpreters in most cases as these clients (especially for refugees) intend to stay in the country and they do not have much support from their embassy – and even when they want to leave the country and there is some help offered by their, there are still many other things they need to settle themselves, for example for the foreign spouses, to file for divorce from their Malaysian spouse and to get shared custody on the children (who are Malaysians).
5.2 Theme 2: Client’s religion/belief system

5.2.1 The role of religion in clients’ perception of domestic violence

One of the reasons why the area of religion was brought up in the interview questions was that based on participant observation and personal knowledge, one of the writers understands that in Malaysia there is a general knowledge about “combination” of someone’s ethnicity and religion. It can be said that Melayu people would mostly be Muslims, most of the Tamil people are Hindu and most of Chinese people are Buddhists where the Christians consist of Chinese, Tamil and non-Malaysians – and there could be misunderstanding and mixing up between cultural beliefs with religions. Four participants say that a client’s religion does not affect the way she seeks help but culture definitely does, while two participants say that both religion (Islam specifically) and culture affect the way a client seeks help:

“Let’s say we are talking about Malay culture… Most, some of them they do have a very strong belief that you have to always obey your husband. So let’s say if you do something without your husband’s permission, the husband can actually declare orally divorce against you.” (#6)

“I talk from the Muslim perspective because sometimes the women, the Muslim women, they misunderstand about their rights as a Muslim wife. They have been taught, or they have misunderstood that they must obey their husband no matter what… In Shari’a law there is a term called Nusyuz, to disobey the husband.” (#3)

These clients are reluctant to seek help since leaving the house without their husband’s permission is not allowed in their religion – their main fear could be not towards their husband but of committing sinful act towards God. #3 adds later on that these clients misunderstand what their religion tries to tell them, where obedient of a wife is required until certain point but when it comes to physical abuse and mental torture, a wife has all the rights to leave the house without her husband’s consent. These clients are afraid of being declared as “disobedient” by the Shari’a court, because it will then minimise their chance of getting maintenance and custody of the children:

“I have many Malay Muslim clients that when they called the first question normally “can I come out of the house without my husband’s permission?” From their understanding, the husband can accuse them of being Nusyuz for going out without his permission and once the court finds out that they are Nusyuz, the women will lose their custody of the children and have no right to get the maintenance from the husband.” (#3)
Having this understanding creates a wall for these clients to seek help because they believe that they can’t leave the abusive relationship without the permission from their perpetrator, and if they do, they would lose other things as punishment for their disobedience. These clients might rather stay in an abusive relationship and endure the abuse than doing something against what they know as God’s command.

Services provided are based on clients’ needs and not religion or cultural based – except when it comes to the court system:

“Civil law is for the non-Muslims and Shari’a law is for the Muslims... In terms of legal advice, for non-Muslim clients I would suggest them to go to the legal aid centre on the Bar Council while if it is a Muslim client then I would refer them to the Jamatan Agama Islam (the Islamic Community Affairs Department).” (#1)

Muslims are the major population in Malaysia and have their own court system which is based on their own Islamic Law called Shari’a Law. At the time when we were in the process of interviewing our participants, there was an interesting piece of news regarding these two court systems and how, sometimes, their jurisdictions could overlap each other. It was a case of a couple who, were both Hindus at the beginning, each demanded for custody over their children. Some time prior to the divorce, the husband converted to Islam in 2012 and was granted custody, care and control of the children by the local Shari’a court while in 2014, the wife who remained a Hindu, was granted a divorce and full custody over the children by the local civil court (Azhar, 2014). One might assume and speculate that some people selfishly might take benefit of the different court system for their favour but as far as it is concerned, both court systems have jurisdictions power based on different source of laws and both are acknowledged in Malaysia.

5.2.2 The role of culture in clients’ help-seeking patterns

Culture is seen as someone’s macrosystem which refers to the dependability observed within its constituent microsystem, mesosystem and exosystems which means that someone’s culture is understood through the intersectional relationship between the individual him/herself with his/her settings and his/her roles and activities within the settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.258; Crenshaw, 1991, p.1245). Even though the denotation of culture is broad and could be linked to anything that a group of people collectively agreed upon (Texas A&M University, 2014), in Malaysia it is widely related to ethnicity, and ethnicity is seen as an integrated unit
with religion and culture – for example, majority of Tamil people practice Hinduism and thus their culture is understood as combination of customs among Tamil and beliefs in Hinduism.

As it has been mentioned earlier, the organisation shelters clients from many different cultural backgrounds. #1 sees all these different cultures as one collective mindset of Asian culture as she notices that there are many similarities among these Asian sub-cultures and #2 and #6 elaborate further in their interviews:

“Like certain cultures where, most of the cultures actually, where they believe that you cannot go out and tell your family problem to anybody. You are humiliating your family. It’s a sin for you. You shouldn’t do that.” (#2)

“Like for Chinese culture, they, we are very cautious about problem that happens in the family should remain in the family. Actually Malay also has that. There’s this thing that in the Indian culture... I had a client who actually said that her parents had said that once she was married and moved out from her parents’ house and let’s say that she died, she had to die inside her husband’s premises and she could not come back. There’s also a phrase in Chinese which actually says the same thing.” (#6)

These statements could imply that women from these cultural backgrounds hesitate to seek help and break loose from their abusive relationships as they believe that no matter what happens they should stay because family affairs are not to be talked about outside. Asian culture in general tends to view marriage from a collective perspective where it brings two families, rather than two individuals, together and upon marriage women become members of their husband’s family (Childress, 2013, pp.700-701) and saving family honour from shame is a priority, which unfortunately obligates women not to scream rather than to obligate the men not to hit. Saving this family honour means that if the women lodge a police report against their abusive husband or family members will disgrace the whole family (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1257) and beyond this familial reputation, often these women are blamed for bringing her community into disrepute (Burman, Smailes & Chantler, 2004, p.340).

Another factor which may hinder the women to leave their abusive husband and reach out to seek help could be the “ideal family” picture in the society and how women are directly or indirectly pressured by society to keep her family together:

“Having very strong hope and holding onto the marriage because of the pressure from the society, because society sees a family as father, mother and child/children… Most of our clients hold to that kind of mindset.” (#1)
“Because a father is a very important figure although if he is not doing anything, an alcoholic, an abuser, it doesn’t matter. They just a want a father-figure to be in the house so that other people won’t say anything. It’s about the family image.” (#2)

Due to this “perfect” picture of a family, these clients might feel that they would be the outcast if they do not keep their family together and getting a divorce is a shame on the whole family and Asian women often feel tremendously guilty, especially if they initiate it and it is a shame on the whole family (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1257). A father-figure might serve some purpose such as being a breadwinner and thus the mother become financially dependent and accept his dominance and give him power over her (Childress, 2013, p.699) but most importantly, it is an assurance for the women to show people that the children are legitimate.

The social workers are usually assigned to assist the clients who come from the same cultural background in order to create an atmosphere where the clients could feel some “sense of belonging” based on cultural similarity as #5 says but every social worker has sufficient cultural competence to aid clients from all cultural background. #6 says that the cultural competence would assist the social workers to focus on different area which is important for the client based on their cultural belief and to understand the client better.

Many times, domestic violence and women’s perceived subservient roles were portrayed as a “normal part” of the culture by the women themselves and people from other culture, viewing domestic violence as “a cultural thing” (Burman, Smailes & Chantler, 2004, p.345). Clients would culturally normalise the abuse they experience and justify it as #4 states:

“[Some clients believe that] for men to go out drinking is common, so when he comes back home [drunk] and beats me, that’s common. When it is normalised, she has become immune… One of the [reasons for not seeking help], is that [victims] see the beating as a way of their husband to give them a “good lesson” and society says “that’s okay, that is normal, it’s not a big deal” and that’s why she won’t lodge a police report.” (#4)

Both men and women would justify the abusive acts as “normal” based on their “cultural thing” and would often explain it as cultural defence – and since culture is a collection of beliefs and values, people from other cultures cannot then say that “this culture is wrong” just because they do not share the same beliefs.
5.3 Theme 3: Isolation

5.3.1 Geographical isolation

Five participants have aided clients who have been physically and socially isolated by their perpetrators while #4, due to her main role at the organisation, has never aided one but she brings up another type of isolation:

“We do have Talian Nur (a helpline), but people in villages are not aware of these because they do not have information about us… So if they are abused [by their husbands], they don’t know where to go to, where to seek help.” (#4)

Some victims of domestic violence are isolated geographically as they live in remote areas where not enough information reach them and even if they had enough information, they might find it difficult to get to the big city alone and not knowing what to expect (Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service, 2006, p.3). Living in rural areas might also mean more conservative gender roles where these women do not know how to ride a bicycle/drive a car, if any vehicles available at the first place – they might be illiterate, as girls are not schooled, and any written information would be useless to them.

5.3.2 Physical isolation

Immigrant women are more easily exposed to isolation as they have moved to a new foreign place where they might know a little only about the language, culture, the physical geographic of the area and not many faces they are familiar with (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002, p.904).

Malaysia’s Domestic Violence Act 1994 gives the definitions of domestic violence and being isolated is one of them (Government of Malaysia, 2006), which means whoever isolates someone against his/her will is breaking the law. In aiding clients who are physically isolated, there are some protocols that should be followed by the social workers – either if it is the clients themselves or someone else who call for assistance:

“If a client calls us and she says that she’s being confined in her house and she says she wants to come out, we will get all her details and we will contact the nearest police station. There was an Indian national was locked up by the employer, somewhere about two hours from the city… The first thing is that we speak to the client and get her consent.” (#1)
The organisation and its employees do not have any authority to come and rescue the clients, only the enforcement officers such as police officers and officers from the Department of Social Welfare have the authority (ibid). The most important thing for the social workers to remember is that enforcement officers would be called only if the women wish to do so; unless they cannot be reached as the one who calls is a concerned neighbour. Clients might have their own reasons not wanting to leave and the organisation should never jeopardise their safety by sending police officers without their knowledge.

Clients might not call themselves for various reasons, it could be that they do not have access to any telephone and if they do they might worry that the perpetrators would check the record of outgoing calls; their perpetrator might be an important, friendly, well-mannered and well-known figure in the society and they worry that nobody would believe them if they seek help and this will make the abuse worse at home. Non-Malaysian clients might face the language issue for not speaking the language and thus cannot call for help and even if they manage to make themselves understood, they might not be able to tell where they are; it could be that their passport is held by the employer and their work permit have expired and their employer uses this to threaten them being sent to jail for being illegal in the country.

Perpetrators are crafty, they might have experienced domestic violence themselves and they have learned from this experience to be the abusers (Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service, 2006, p.16) as mentioned by #2: “Abusive action does not come as biological characteristic, it’s a learned behaviour. It’s not common nature”.

As a result of isolation, the perpetrators are able to gain more control over resources that could offer legal, financial, and/or emotional support to the victims and restrict their movement and make escape almost impossible. The victims may suffer from a lack of self-confidence from being isolated and they might have become too afraid to talk to other people, let alone ask for help (ibid).
5.3.3 Social isolation

Social isolation is where victims’ social life is restricted and this might not viewed as abuse by many, as no scars are “visible”. Victims are not allowed to have as much contact as they would like with their families and friends and their social life would be restricted to their work, if they work, as #3 says: “You can see a woman is very happy and fun at the working place, but when she goes back home she is like confining herself”.

Being socially isolated often means that the victims feel hopeless, confused and in despair but at the same time they fear their perpetrators so much so that they cannot leave even though they are physically able to (Childress, 2013, p.699). The victims have learned how to isolate themselves out of their fear and the belief that they cannot control the situation:

“Normally they have been in a violent situation for a long time and they have to cope with it with a lot of mechanisms that they have developed. In domestic violence, the very big thing when you talk to the survivors is actually they developed learned helplessness in their relationship. The physical and social isolation a result of that is actually learned helplessness.”
(#6)

After being isolated for a while and have to undergo unpleasant stimuli with no power to control them, the victims have become passive and less alert about what is happening. They might believe that there is no one who can help them and they might have lost all of their self-confidence because their perpetrators have told them that no one else could love them for their flaws as the perpetrators do. Many Asian women are taught from childhood to be dependent on men which makes themselves inferior and emotionally and financially dependent on the men (ibid) and because of this, they might believe that they cannot survive on their own.

Social isolation could often lead to other forms of abuse such as physical and psychological abuse. Some women and men think that, or made believe that, domestic violence is a result of women’s disobedience. It is then understandable for them that disobedience should be punished where often the women lose her self-esteem even more. In Japanese culture, overturning a kitchen table is a much worse form of abuse than being pushed or slapped, as it questions the woman’s legitimate role in the house – this shows that mental abuse could bring equal, if not more, damage to the victims.
5.4 Theme 4: Gender stereotyping

5.4.1 Societal gender stereotyping

Society’s cultural stereotypes and stereotypical views of what a woman should be and how she should act help create simple and yet dangerous stereotypes because they are gradually accepted as society’s axiomatic norms. Women’s stereotypical feminine behaviours are believed to be, and expected to be, sweet, silent and passive (Gilbert, 2002, p.1279) and when they are not act accordingly as they are expected to, they will be viewed as either bad or mad. Women are expected to be silent when they are insulted with raunchy jokes (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1291) and women are not supposed to swear or use vulgar worlds as these belong to the men’s world (Gilbert, 2002, p.1273). One stereotypical believe about domestic violence is that women provoke men to assault (Esqueda & Harrison, 2005, p.829) but when women become aggressive and fight back or become abusers themselves, society becomes surprised because this is not “typical” female behaviour and will view this violent behaviour differently from the way they would do if it was abusive men – some might even blame it on feminists (Gilbert, 2002, p.1272). This stereotypical belief makes women believe that it is their own fault that they are abused and they deserve it, and for something they cause themselves it is them who can solve this problem and no external assistance is needed.

#5 believes that society has stereotypical beliefs on women’s role but it depends on the women to whether accept it. Women who are submissive, passive and reluctant to seek help are not a result of societal stereotyping product, but rather it is individual’s traits:

“A lot of society says things like women should be submissive, of course, some women are submissive but it’s because they married an aggressive husband. She doesn’t want to break up her family so she chooses to be submissive… It is an individual belief. I think society does indeed play a lot in the part that a woman should behave like this and that but I have seen many [women] break away from that… I can see that it’s conflicting since everyone has that individual thoughts and power.” (#5)

There is a tendency for people to generalise someone’s act as a collective norm of society which that person comes from and tend to see someone as a representative of his/culture rather than as an independent creature – a person’s act does not always mirror his/her collective culture and a collective culture is not always followed by its members (Ghavami & Peplau, 2012, p.113). In order to be able to stand up for her own individual’s values and
beliefs a woman in this kind of society must be very strong and independent, as in a collective community with little social welfare benefits like Malaysia, financial and emotional dependency on family and society is crucial – and thus it is not a free choice not to seek for help but rather survival method in long term:

“Stereotyping from society also plays a big role in whether the client wants to take action or not. Stereotyping does not come only from the bigger community but also from the smaller community such as their own family… If she has been brought up in the abusive situation, then her mother or whoever involved in the domestic violence will tell her that “I experienced this before, I just be patient, you shouldn’t go out and bring shame to the family by filing the divorce”… When a woman initiates a divorce people will say “what’s wrong with you?”… When the wife leaves the house, people say unpleasant things to her and sometimes it will stop the client from taking action.” (#3)

In patriarchal societies, men rule his family in the relationships based on power and dominance while women focus her responsibilities towards her father, then towards her husband and his parents, and then towards her sons. In Asia it is often that women are blamed and abused when things in the household go south, believed to be caused by their failure to do their responsibilities (Kulwicki, et al., 2010, p.720) and often the solution given by the family, many religious leaders and society to them is a “corrective” solution where they advocate the women to tolerate rather than to eliminate the violence (ibid, p.734). These women, for not wanting to put themselves into even a bigger cycle of abuse and discrimination, have learned to tolerate and accept the tremendous pressure to stay in the abusive relationship.

5.4.2 Gender roles stereotyping

Perception on different culpability of domestic violence is affected by differences in gender roles. Traditionalists attribute greater blame on the victims rather than on the perpetrator because one of them, the victim, is not following the roles assigned and thus, those who keep to traditional gender role stereotypes might perceive domestic violence as less serious and the woman as more culpable (Esqueda & Harrison, 2005, p.824). One question which could be raised deeper through the intersectional perspective is about the relation between gender and ethnicity, for further possible analysis, would the woman still be viewed as more culpable if she is from a superior race than the man? How would this be viewed in India, if a Dalit man rapes a Brahmin woman, or if a Kshatriya man rapes a Dalit woman (who is the inferior gender of the inferior race)?
Men and women are designated different roles and responsibilities and they are expected to understand this with high degree of acceptance, should any problems arise. #1 and #2 give examples of gender roles and one specific example within Indian culture:

“Men need to be powerful, masculine and strong, men don’t cry, men work and women are soft, passive and tolerant – they cry, they stay at home. These attributes lead to discrimination and it becomes a power imbalance. Because you see, they are strong, they are masculine.” (#1)

“Education is not so important for women but it’s important for men because they are going to work to take care of the family. Men who don’t know how to work are not men, women who don’t know how to cook are not good women… Indian women portray their husband as a God. Once you are married, your husband is everything to you. Abusive men keep doing what they are doing because of the stereotyping support… Women think “he loves you so much that is why beats you, he cares for you, that’s why he controls you”. He cares for your safety that’s why he confines you.” (#2)

Gender stereotypes have often related to power imbalance and social roles and those who have more power are often the perpetrators, just like these Indian women who portray their husband as a God which means supreme power over them. It is a general understanding that God is virtuous and just and his actions are based on considerations and affection towards his devotees. Telling other people, or even worse, lodging a police report is a humiliating thing to do towards your husband and this equals with humiliating a God – this is the last thing these women want to do. Men in patriarchal societies have so much support from the society to justify their unjust actions based on “collective gender roles” and because if it is patriarchal society and they do not want to lose their taken-for-granted power. Women are afraid to stand up and defend themselves because they don’t know how to as that is now their role, and asking for help from strangers (such as women’s shelters) could indicate that they don’t know how to follow their roles, thus the “messy” situation is their fault.

Women in many cultures are identified as passive, silent, patient, dependent, weak (biologically), emotional, caring and childbearing while men are macho, strong, independent, rational, aggressive and sexists. Women who are not “typical” perception of these traits are strongly perceived as “abnormal” and perhaps masculine, and this is disturbing for the rest because these women reveal the artificial femininity that is considered as normal by the society. Girls and boys are taught about the gender roles on daily basis, explicitly and implicitly, everywhere. It is a common thing for kindergarten schoolbooks in Asia to describe a story of “father is at work and mother is at home cooking while little Johnny is playing with
a fire truck and little Mary a pink doll”. Girls are told that pink is their colour, their hair and skirt should be long, they should know how to cook and clean otherwise no man would marry them and they should not smoke or drink because it is ugly. Growing up with these stereotypical gender roles and passing them down to the next generations making these women into women, as Simone de Beauvoir says in her famous othering-perspective: the second sex that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman (Ward, 1995, p.223).

5.5 Theme 5: Laws/regulations

Non-Malaysian clients who are married to Malaysian men face some degree of discrimination when it comes to legal aid and healthcare, for example. Spousal visa of these women is granted on the basis that their husband is guarantying their stay (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2014). #1 says that these clients’ husband often used this power to threaten these women for taking action against them, by personally going to the immigration office and cancel their visa. However, #1 adds that immigration has now changed the rule, that these husbands cannot cancel their spouse’s visa but they can refuse to be the guarantor for the visa renewal. One of the requirements for a foreign spouse to apply for a permanent residency are that she should be married to a Malaysian for at least five years, she has been issued with Long Term Visit Pass and has stayed continuously without leaving Malaysia for five years (ibid) – which means that even if a woman who has lived in Malaysia and has been married to a Malaysian for 20 years but has failed to stay for five continuous years, her visa would be depended on her husband.

#6 says that non-Malaysians face another issue when it comes to legal aid services because they are not entitle for free legal aid services as Malaysians, this means that they have to pay thousands of ringgits to hire a lawyer, which most of them do not have. Lodging a police report would be another problem as these non-Malaysians who do not speak Bahasa Melayu or English should then bring her own interpreter because often there is no interpreters at police stations – and this often discourages them from lodging a report as they think that it will be a fruitless attempt.
All participants mention about the discrimination in terms of costs faced by non-Malaysians when it comes to healthcare at government-owned hospitals where they have to pay at least double (exception for refugees with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees card) as much as Malaysians would for services while private hospitals charge the same regardless of nationality, but private hospitals are much more expensive than the government-owned ones. One of the authors experienced this herself when she was bitten by a stray dog in Kuala Lumpur. She went to a state hospital where for a Malaysian the fee to see a doctor was RM5 and a rabies shot was RM400 (5 shots were needed), and for her it was the double. Someone who works at a fast food restaurant earns RM6.5/hour on average, which means if they are non-Malaysian and suffer from “expensive sickness” which cannot be cured with non-prescriptive medication, they would be the first issue they worry about. At the time when the interviews were conducted, all participants mentioned the changes of protocol by the government hospitals. These hospitals are given the authority to detain asylum seekers and foreigners who are undocumented when they come for medical services – where female asylum seekers have been detained and separated from their newborn baby as soon as she has just given birth. This contributes to both social workers’ and clients’ worries and hesitation to seek medical help should any of the clients is undocumented.

All participants have a common agreement in that, some rights of non-Malaysians are clearly restricted by law but some rights such as access to medical and legal services are implicitly restricted by the lack of resources and different price tags.

5.6 Theme 6: Ethical dilemmas

5.6.1 Personal ethical dilemmas

All participants except #5 have expressed that they have experienced ethical dilemmas at some point in their work. Ethical dilemmas emerge as a result of ‘conflict of interest, imbalance, taking sides, intrusion, inclusion, influence and disseminating results’ (Boonzaier, 2008, p.188). #3 expresses her personal ethical dilemma at the beginning of her career:
“I come from quite a strong religion background and from a village where people are not so open-minded. I was totally against abortion, no matter what the reason was… I had to struggle with myself because among the domestic violence survivors, when they cannot carry on with the pregnancy because of the abuse or because she has so many children already and asks if it was okay for her to so – I didn’t know how to answer, I struggled between my own principle and what I should advise the client.” (#3)

It is sometimes not easy for social workers to separate personal and professional beliefs/values, especially when the personal values relate to religion as one might feel like “participating” in doing the sinful act when one doesn’t try to stop it. Clients might ask their social worker “what would you do if you were in my shoes?”, and they might take the answer as their solution – it is thus important to remind the clients that “we are now talking about what you would do”.

One thing that every social worker needs to remember in aiding their clients is that to prioritise what the clients want to do, not what the social worker wants. #5 says that she has never faced any ethical dilemmas because she has never been in the middle of “what should I do? Should I or should I not?” situations. She tells her clients about their options and the consequences but she keeps always in mind that whatever her clients decide to do with their life, she will support their decision.

5.6.2 Professional ethical dilemmas

All participants except #4 and #5 mention that they have faced professional ethical dilemmas when it comes to bureaucratic red tape regarding their non-Malaysian clients. They often stand in the middle of social workers’ dual responsibilities between “to serve their clients” and “to serve the community” and have to decide between two equally undesirable and unwelcome actions (Banks, 2012, p.20). Whichever decision they make, whether they “should or should not”, the main thing they keep in mind is the clients’ best interest. We cannot unfortunately go in details about the professional ethical dilemmas faced by the participants as it is a very sensitive matter and we have an ethical responsibility in handling the trust we were given.
5.7 Theme 7: Client-based needs

All participants mention about how important clients’ needs are and their services are based on these needs. Clients’ needs differ from one to another based on the case, the clients themselves and the best means available. All participants mention as well how important it is to empower their clients to move from “victims” to “survivors”. Empowerment is important for the clients so they can learn to be independent – this is done through for example economic empowerment where the clients are encouraged to find employment. To empower its clients is the ultimate goal of the organisation and it is usually initiated by letting the clients to make their own autonomous decisions and plans about their life. This is often not because as domestic violence victims, they have been controlled and never given the freedom to do so by their perpetrators:

“A lot of time the outcome from learned helplessness is they feel that there’s no way out but to continue living in the violence situation. It actually results in a lot of fear and anxiety so we have to let them talk about their fear and anxiety. It’s only when they talk enough about their fear and anxiety, then we can explore the possible options for them.” (#6)

Since the clients have learned to be passive by being told what they are supposed to do or not, given such a big responsibilities to actually control their own life might be frightening out of the fear of making a “wrong” decision. These fears are understandable and need to be explored so they know their options with the pros and cons, and based on these, they will be able to take their decision and fully understand the consequences of it. All participants say that whatever the clients’ decision is, they will support them fully, even if they decide to go back to their abusive relationship. This is part of exercising their freedom of choice, because if the social workers tell them that it is a wrong decision, they are then again back to the position of being told what to do by someone else.
CHAPTER 6 – DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine what kind of cultural barriers are faced by social workers in Kuala Lumpur when providing aid to victims of domestic violence, and the practical implications of these barriers. The starting theoretical perspectives of this study were Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model and Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectional theory as each focus not only on the individual but present the view that wider, more complex factors have an impact on the identity and development of individuals. With this in mind, the results gathered through interviewing the social workers who work with aiding abused women reveal that an individual can be greatly shaped by their wider environment to the point where they would not seek help for domestic violence, as certain aspects of their culture (such as their religious beliefs and accepted gender roles) discourage seeking support or reporting abuse. According to the interviewees, the attitudes held by the wider community greatly impacts the way in which domestic violence in general is viewed, that is, it can be tacitly accepted as an adequate way to treat women for whatever reason according to this gender-based power dynamic. While the way an individual’s environment (based on their ecological system) impacts their view towards abuse and seeking aid for this abuse, according to the social workers interviewed, the cultural background of these women has no impact on the type of care they receive from the organisation.

6.1 Summary of results in relation to aim

The aim of this study was to examine what kind of cultural barriers are faced by social workers in Kuala Lumpur when providing aid to victims of domestic violence, and the practical implications of these barriers. Our research questions focussed on what types of cultural barriers have been experienced by social workers at a domestic violence organisation in Kuala Lumpur, and the type of methods and strategies are used to counteract these barriers. Through a review of earlier literature, we identified five main areas which acted as barrier to the provision of service (language, client’s religion or set of beliefs, isolation, gender stereotyping and laws and regulations), and further two themes were added after analysis (ethical dilemmas and client-based needs).
The methods utilised by the social workers vary depending on the capabilities of both themselves and their clients. This can be seen when examining the theme of language in which interpreters are utilised, though when not available, other means such as sign and body language are used. This pattern continues when regarding the client’s religion or set of beliefs affecting the provision of aid as the responses reflected the open nature of helping women from all religious backgrounds, though in this case no different methods were implemented. One area of interest from the interview responses within this theme centres of the view that religion and culture cannot be considered as separate, but rather they interact and influence each other, subsequently shaping the identities of individuals. The area of isolation was also addressed in the sense that the organisation has methods in place to assist abused women, but this was not dependent on the culture of their clients.

The fourth theme focused gender stereotypes and community attitudes, and the responses provided by the interviewees reflected greatly on the gender roles and the impact these have on abused women seeking help. From the perspective of the social workers, domestic violence is often viewed as a family matter, therefore implicitly preventing women from contacting aid organisations. This reflects the effect wider systems have on the individual, and these forces must be acknowledged to be playing this role to gain a deeper understanding as to why decisions (such as remaining in an abusive relationship) are made by clients. This is also an issue when it comes to educating and empowering these women, as the wider societal view influencing their individual view is difficult to counteract. The fifth theme centred on laws and regulations, revealing that legal aid if other not encouraged to certain groups women, providing a significant barrier to social workers at the organisation aiding their clients.

Finally, two new themes were found during the analysis section of the research process, ethical dilemmas and client-based needs. These themes are similar in the fact that the social workers addressed that the needs of the clients were always put first, whether it was considered the “ethically correct” thing to do. Each of these themes were looked at through the use of the ecological model and the intersectional theory, and by doing so it became clear that while wider and often more complex societal structures such as religion, the legal system or simply the attitudes of communities have a large impact on the decisions of the individual with regards to seeking assistance for abuse, the methods utilised to aid these women remain the same, regardless of their cultural background.
6.2 Comparison to earlier research

Language was the first theme selected as it was presented as being a major obstacle in terms of both seeking and providing aid to victims of abuse, a view supported by the interviewees as it could be difficult to aid victims who they are unable to communicate effectively with, though using interpreters and other methods (such as body language), the challenges could be minimised to the point where it did not have any real impact on the service provided. The second theme centred on the role of the client’s religion or set of beliefs, where culture, gender and religion were difficult to separate as they are highly interrelated. This was reflected by the social workers interviewed, believing religion shapes the gender roles of a community which affects the way people seek help for abuse, though in practice the religion of a client does not affect the service provided by the organisation. The third theme was that of isolation, and while the earlier research identified that physical and social isolation is a significant barrier to aiding abuse victims, it was not reflected by the interviewees. While most of the social workers interviewed acknowledged isolation to be a barrier to service, the methods put in place by the organisation counteracted the major impact of said isolation.

Community attitudes and gender stereotyping was the fourth theme of this study as the earlier research presented the view that the way in which gender is defined by certain communities (both from within and outside of the community) had a great impact on battered women seeking help. This was reflected in by the social workers as stereotypes made their work more difficult as they would have to inform their clients of their rights in order to stop them from continuing to be subjected to violent behaviour. The fifth theme identified centred on the law and victims experiences dealing with authorities. While the earlier research focused mainly on the interaction between (immigrant) women and the police as a deterrent for victims of abuse seeking help, the interviewees identified the law itself as the main area of concern as a major lack of support for certain communities (non-Malaysian) both legally and medically, ultimately lowers the likelihood of abused women speaking up and reporting violence.

During analysis of the results gathered during this study two more themes were identified, ethical dilemmas and client-based needs. These themes were not recognised during the literature review, though the interviewees acknowledged that personal and professional ethical dilemmas were present in their work, however the needs of the clients were always put first.
6.3 Discussion of theories

The main theoretical perspectives utilised in this study were Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model and Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectional theory. Each of these approaches acknowledges the structure of an individual is made of wider, more complex systems and constructs. This is the case as the ecological model greatly focuses on the impact of context in the development of people, understanding that the aspects of an individual’s life are interrelated, each impacting their identity. This model was an appropriate theory to utilise during this study as we aimed to understand how culture (a wide and complex concept) impacted the provision of care to victims of abuse. As analysis incorporates the individual and societal level, we were able to greater understand how wider perceptions and beliefs effected the individual and how these attitudes impacted aid provision. Although the broad nature of the theory allowed us to gain greater insight into a complex issue, the wide nature of the ecological model made it difficult to address specific issues, particularly as the timeframe for the study was so limiting, and in order to gain the most out of the use of this theoretical approach, either the aim of the study should have been further specified or the study would be carried out over a longer period of time.

The second theoretical perspective used was the intersectional theory which takes a feminist perspective on the view that discrimination occurs as a result of the many related identities of women, such as their gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and so on. The use of this theoretical perspective was well-suited as it allowed us to understand the abuse perpetrated on women from the position that many factors are to relevant, not only the individual relationship between a woman and her abuser. While using intersectionality helped us gain a greater understanding of the complexities surrounding domestic violence (such as the role of culture, religion and gender in forming individual identities) we believe that more depth would have been added had it been the only theory implemented rather than as a complement to the ecological model. The thought process behind utilising two (albeit related) theories was that the ecological model would give us a wide picture of the situation as a whole and the intersectional theory would allow us to narrow in on the core issues and examine them in depth. While we believe that the results were analysed sufficiently, had we focused more on the role of intersectionality we may have been able to understand the individual situations of abused women within wider society more effectively.
6.4 Discussion of methodology and research process

As the aim of the study was to examine the impact culture can have on the provision of services for domestic violence according to social workers working in the area, the choice of using a phenomenological research approach was appropriate. By structuring our interview guide around understanding the lived experiences of the social workers when dealing with abused women, we were able to gain a greater insight into the themes we had identified through our literature review from the perspective of the social workers. Also, by allowing the interviewees freedom to answer the questions in the most fitting manner according to their personal experiences, we were able to gather a larger amount of relevant data allowing for more in-depth analysis of the results.

Due to one of the authors having a previous relationship with the social workers at the organisation and the organisation itself, communicating with the interviewees was very easy in terms of explaining the purpose of the study and setting up interviews. These prior relationships also made the fact that we were coming different cultural upbringings and may have possessed different sets of beliefs easier to deal with. With this being the case, getting the interviewees to open-up during their interviews was relatively simple as they had no doubts as to the intention of our questions and the study itself, subsequently encouraging them to talk about their experiences openly. In this sense, the selection of the interviewees was very straightforward to the point where we had more interviews than we had initially planned for, again allowing us to collect more data.

While establishing a network of social workers to interview was relatively easy, it may have been beneficial to interview clients of the organisation in order to gather their perspectives on the area of research. With this being said, the ethical and practical implications surrounding interviewing victims of abuse (many of whom are from different cultures and speak different languages) would prove too difficult for this level of study, both in terms of the ability and experience of the researchers themselves and the timeframe in which the entire study would have to be completed.
CHAPTER 7 – FURTHER RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

The need for research in the area of domestic violence is overwhelming, particularly from a cultural-based perspective. Lacey, et al. (2013) reflect this point, presenting the view that ‘how intimate partner violence affects the well-being of racial and ethnic minority women remains unclear due to a lack of research focus and limited systematic studies’ (p.362). With regards to expanding on this study, our first suggestion for further research would be to narrow the focus of the research to individually examine different subcultures within a wider culture. Throughout the course of this study, the focus of comparison between different cultural groups fell on the most common type of person who fit within the respective category (e.g. Malay women who practice Islam, Chinese women who practice Buddhism and Indian women who practice Hinduism). By taking this approach, we were able to come to some conclusions based on the broadest representation of people within a given cultural community, for example, analysing the data regarding Malay women who are Muslim against those who are Christian or of another faith. By focussing on and subsequently comparing the responses from different subgroups within the wider culture, it may be possible to gain a greater understanding on the determining factors that affect the provision of service to victims of domestic violence. It may also be possible to examine the way in which domestic violence is viewed within a community (i.e. whether Muslim-Malay women view domestic violence differently to Christian-Malay women). If it were possible to determine the different ways subgroups view domestic violence, it may also be possible to identify the core issue, therefore taking a huge step in reducing the numbers of people who are affected by domestic violence.

Another suggestion for further research within this area could implement a quantitative approach. By taking this approach, the effect of culture on the provision of care for domestic violence can be examined on a much larger scale, possibly allowing for patterns to be easily found between different groups of women. While the lived experiences of victims of abuse are invaluable in gaining a greater understanding into the impact of seeking aid, the fact remaining is that they are ultimately individual views and may not present the most accurate findings in relation to determining the overall impact of culture on domestic violence services in general. Overall, each of these suggestions would allow for more research to be conducted regarding the cause of domestic violence, hopefully leading domestic violence to be reduced on a global scale.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix I: Letter of consent

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a research study our group is conducting as part of our Degree Project within the Study Programme in International Social Work at the University of Gävle, Sweden. We would like to provide you with some information about the study and what your involvement would entail if you decided to participate.

The aim of our research study is to explore the impact culture has on the provision of aid for victims of domestic violence. Our group would like to study this in relation to any barriers which may exist for providing service based on a client’s cultural background, the ethical considerations which exist in relation to this, and how it affects practice.

Participation in this study is voluntary and will involve an interview held in a mutually agreed location and will be approximately 30-45 minutes in length. During the interview you may decline to answer any of the questions if you wish to do so. You are also free to withdraw from this study at any time without consequence by advising the interviewer or the other member of our group. With your permission, the interview will be recorded using an audio device in order to make analysis of your responses easier to carry out at a later time.

All of the information you provide during the interview is considered completely confidential. Your name and any details provided which can be traced back to you will not appear in the research paper, though with your permission anonymous quotes from the interview will be used. The responses collected from the interview will only be made available to our research group, our course supervisor and the course examiner, and once analysis is complete the recording of the interview will be destroyed.

If you have any questions regarding the study or you feel that you would like additional information about it in order to make a decision of whether to participate, please contact Elvi Suherman Chang at +46704049966/+6076170521 or vsn11ecg@student.hig.se, or our course supervisor Ann Kroon at ann.kroon@hig.se.

We look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your participation in this study.

Elvi Suherman Chang and Christopher Burfoot.

1. After understanding the information presented in this letter, I agree to participate in this study of my own free will. □ Yes □ No
2. I agree to have my interview recorded on an audio device. □ Yes □ No
3. I agree to the use of anonymous quotations from my interview to be used in the writing of this research project. □ Yes □ No

Participant name: ___________________ Participant signature: ___________________
Witness name: ___________________ Witness signature: ___________________

Date: ___ / ___ /2014
# Appendix II: Interview guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree Project</th>
<th>Interview Guide</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Background information</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Interviewee’s role within the organisation, time spent working there and in the profession as a whole.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 1: Language as a barrier to service</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Have you personally worked with a client who was unable to speak the same language as you? How was this experience?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What methods or strategies did you use to counteract this difficulty? Did you have to take any special measures to be able to provide this client(s) with service?</td>
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<td>• How do you believe this barrier affected the service you were able to provide to your client?</td>
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<td><strong>Theme 2: Client’s religion/belief system as a barrier to service</strong></td>
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<td>• From your experience, does a client’s religion or set of beliefs impact the way they seek help?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Do you have different ways of aiding people with different religious backgrounds? How do these methods differ from one another?</td>
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<td>• Are there special considerations which must be taken with regards religion when providing service to clients?</td>
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<td><strong>Theme 3: Isolation as a barrier to service</strong></td>
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<td>• How common is it that you assist clients who have been physically or socially isolated?</td>
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<td>• Have any methods been put in place by the organisation to aid women who are physically or socially isolated? How are these methods utilised?</td>
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Theme 4: Stereotyping/community attitudes as a barrier to service

- Do community attitudes or stereotyping of victims impact the way in which people seek help for domestic violence?

- Do community attitudes have an impact on the way domestic violence is viewed? How do these attitudes differ between communities?

- To what extent is stereotyping an issue of concern for social workers when trying to assist victims of domestic violence? Do you do anything to encourage clients to disregard stereotypes during their recovery?

- Do community attitudes and stereotyping have any impact on the aid provided to clients?

Theme 5: Laws/regulations as a barrier to service

- Does a woman’s culture have any impact on the service they are entitled to receive? Does the organisation’s approach change based on a client’s nationality?

- How does the aid provided to victims of domestic violence change regarding citizenship and residency rights? How do you ensure that the clients are receiving all of the treatment they require?

- What ethical dilemmas exist when aiding women from other nations who are not entitled to all services available?