'So We Keep Silent'

An Ethnography of the Gendered Lives of Women in Kerala, India

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Abstract

Indian women negotiate gender within violent gendered spaces structured by cultural norms, and the position of women is marked by precarity. Thus, living up to normative womanhood becomes a vital task throughout a woman's life. Drawing on empirical material from fieldwork in Kerala, India, this thesis explores women's gendered lives and how their negotiation of gender is affected by violence. The thesis takes its point of departure in the empirical material and the analytical argumentation is led by the interlocutors' narratives.

With an understanding of gender as performatively constructed, it is argued that the normative gender script prescribes women to act as virtuous, dutiful wives devoted to their husband, which entails enduring whatever violence she is met by. Women are believed to belong to the private sphere, and all familial responsibilities as well as the blame for any domestic problem that might occur fall to women. When entering the public sphere women are expected to act according to cultural norms, which means demonstrating virtue, purity and visibly showing that one belongs in the private sphere. Negotiating one's gender within the normative script appears to be vital as the repercussions for not being deemed a 'good woman' can be severe and entail violence involving both physical abuse and social exclusion. The reproaches that follow if one falls outside the normative gender script can leave a woman in a precarious position on the margins of society. It is thus argued that receiving social blame and judgement from the community can be defining for a woman's wellbeing and opportunities in life. Suffering is foregrounded as a marker of the female character and a woman is expected to handle her problems privately in order for her to be considered a dutiful and devoted wife, and that means enduring violence and thus suffering in silence.

This thesis argues that the women's negotiation of gender is guided by the precarity of the female position mainly because of fear regarding violence and social stigma. Furthermore, I extent the argument suggesting that normative womanhood entails self-sacrifice, and that suffering becomes a constituting factor in the performativity of female gender. Lastly, in the discussion section of the thesis, parallels are drawn between the self-sacrifice involved in normative womanhood and the significance of female self-immolation in Hindu mythology.

***Keywords**: gender, violence, precarity, performativity, Kerala, India.*

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Introduction

Three years ago, walking down a dusty road in southern India, I was called to the side by three local women. It was my fourth week there and the little town felt comfortable and familiar to me. Still, travelling as a lone woman I knew I had to be mindful to dress appropriately, not show too much skin, and refrain from roaming the streets alone after nightfall. The night before, however, I had lost track of time, and when I finally headed home to my lodge it was past 11pm. I did not think much of it at the time, listened to music in my headphones without feeling the slightest bit anxious, and reached my cabin safe and sound. It was not until the next morning when I took the same walk in reverse, back into town, that I was made to reflect on the situation. Sheltered from the sun inside a small road side shop three women summoned me when I passed them. It was obvious from the earnest nature of their calling and gesturing that it was not the usual call of a vendor. Indeed, their business with me was not one of vendor-to-tourist, but rather woman-to-woman. In a both concerned and reproachful tone they went on to explain to me the danger I had put myself in the night before. They had seen me walk past their shop and they had been frightful for me, because, as they said, “they cannot control themselves”, gesturing to the men in the street. The women went on to pointing up and down my body, which was decently covered from the neck down, or so I thought. Shaking their heads, the women explained to me, that when men saw ‘that’, they lost self-control. This encounter left me somewhat perplexed; ashamed that my privilege had left me careless and insensitive to the circumstances I had entered into, and curious to know more about what lay behind their fear for me and the reproachful manner in which they had lectured me. I wondered about the lives these women live and how they navigate through an existence with the threat of violence as an inescapable condition.

Three years later I conducted a one month field study in Kerala, a state in southern India, investigating the gendered lives of a group of local women. Ethnographically, this thesis builds on empirical material gathered in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala.

The Backdrop of Female Vulnerability in India

To promote an understanding of what led me to formulate my research question, I now introduce the contexts from which this thesis unfolds – the precarious position of the Indian woman.

Despite heightened awareness on gender equality in India and increased attention to the brutal public cases of rape and murder, the issue of gendered violence remains staggering and the role of the woman remains precarious (Joy et al. 2015, 1743; Datta 2016a; Belur et al. 2014). Indeed, in the southern state Kerala, where literacy is high among women and many are educated and work in salaried jobs, the female role is still inferior and domestically subordinated men and reported gendered violence has increased over the past few decades[1] (Jeffrey 2005; Lindberg 2014, 41).

It can be argued that the female life is vulnerable even long before womanhood (and even birth) because of the issue of female infanticide. Infanticide is a problem well known worldwide through history and still to this day prevailing in India (Negi 1997; Kolokhe 2016, 2; Saravanan 2002, 8-19; Joy et al. 2015, 1743). Nowadays joined by the issue of sex-selective abortion (Joy et al 2015, 1743). 'Parents destroying infant girls consciously and wilfully under social pressure', as articulated by Negi (1997, 1-3), are heinous crimes perpetrated against the most vulnerable of an already vulnerable group in the Indian society (ibid.). Several reasons are proposed in explaining the incentives behind female infanticide, including most importantly poverty and dowry. The economical transfer of dowry from the family of the bride to the family of the groom at the time of marriage puts an immense burden on the parents of the bride (Belur et al. 2014, 1). Thus, the female child is an economic liability whereas the male child is an asset, and the inability to meet the demands related to dowry can cause a perception that infanticide is the only possible solution for the survival of a family (Negi 1997, 13-16). Dowry is a widely prevalent custom in Kerala and perhaps the main reason for infanticide and foeticide today (Belur et al. 2014; Joy et al. 2015, 1743; Negi 1997, 13; Raman 2010, 193). Also, Negi suggests the ironically altruistic motive for

[1] It is important to note that the numbers are ambiguous and a rise in reports on sexual violence may in fact be a sign of progress. Since the stigma regarding sexual violence often have severe social implications for the victim, women are discouraging from filing reports when assaulted, and the rise in incidents may in fact reflect an increase in women's willingness to report sexual crimes (Joy et.al. 2015, 1740).

infanticide which is ‘preventing the suffering of the female child’ (Negi 1997, 11) indicating that not being born could be considered preferable over life as a woman. In order to prevent foeticide, a ‘new facet of the old problem’ (Negi 1997, 24), the Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act was passed in 1994 making it illegal to investigate the sex of the child before it is born (Saravanan 2002, 8-19).

Dowry-related abuse and dowry-related deaths are a widely prevalent issue in India, and traditionally most dowry-deaths occurred through immolation (forced or self-inflicted) (Belur et al. 2014, 1). Although most dowry-related deaths nowadays are the result of poison or hanging, ‘dowry death’ has, in popular discourse, become synonymous with ‘widow burning’ (ibid., 2). According to Belur, the leading cause of death among Indian women at the age of 15-34 are kerosene-related injuries (ibid., 2-3). Indeed, women being burned to death in their own homes is not an uncommon occurrence, and those incidents are normally explained as ‘cooking accidents’ (Hess 1999, 23). It is however, according to Hess, often the husband or his family who are behind the crime, because of dowry-related issues or simply because they are not happy with her (ibid.). These cases rarely lead to prosecuted and in most cases the man can without trouble marry another woman and thus secure another dowry (ibid.).

Women moving freely outside the home unaccompanied are certainly at heightened risk of assault if they are not cautious (Joy et al. 2015, 1741). For a woman, there is immediate danger involved in leaving one’s house after dark, unaccompanied or accompanied by someone other than one’s husband and wearing clothes that are considered improper. That a woman is somehow to blame for the violent crimes committed against her is a common notion (ibid.). Addressing the issue of sexual assaults, the Chairwoman of the national Commission of Women in India in 2012 encouraged women to “be comfortable, but at the same time, be careful about how you dress”, adding that “aping the west blindly is eroding our culture and causing such crimes to happen (...) Westernisation has afflicted our cities the worst.“ (Pidd 2012).

According to Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj (2015), women with lower status in society are in greater risk of abuse like gang rape, and Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj point to the fact that lack of plumbing puts girls and women in danger as they are forced to go to open fields and riverbanks (Joy et al. 2015, 1741). However, seeing rape and murder as a consequence of for example lack of toilets and considering development issues the main cause of gendered violence is critiqued (Datta 2016b). Datta suggests that explaining gendered violence by pointing to a lack of development, ‘establishes rape as an ‘other’ space outside the ‘ordinary’ spaces of political, social and cultural institutions of state, community or family’ (Datta 2016b, 173). Rather than concentrating the whole debate on

extraordinary violent acts, there should be a heightened focus on the implicit everyday violence that promotes these acts, Datta argues (Datta 2016a, 178-180).

Indeed, a closer look at the private sphere is relevant as the violence against women within the home is far more prevalent than the public violence which, ironically, seems to cause far greater concern for society (Phadke et al. 2011, 29).

This has led me to the formulation of following research question.

Research question

What characterises the lives of women in Kerala, India, and how does violence affect the female negotiation of gender?

Methodological Reflections

The fieldwork in Kerala constitutes the empirical foundation of the thesis. In the following, I introduce the research, reflect upon the methodology applied and consider the strengths and limitations of the fieldwork. Furthermore, considerations regarding method will be added in the analysis whenever deemed relevant.

First, let me build upon the introduction and elaborate on my motivation. Over the past decade I have visited India five times, three of those times travelling alone, thus I have had to navigate within the prevailing gender structures as a tourist. Coming from a comfortable existence in Denmark where I, to a large extent, have been spared worries regarding gender inequalities and violence, the unfamiliar feeling of constantly being confronted with my gender both repelled and intrigued me. Having reflected on what it entails being situated in a female body in India, I have grown increasingly interested in the female lives lived in the spaces I moved in and moved through. Encounters with women in India and being witness to the way they navigate the gendered space

they live in, have impelled me to further my understanding of the many layers and facets, something I found very difficult to understand offhand.

This thesis adopts an inductive approach, where meaning is generated from the empirical findings (Bryman 2016, 375) and it takes an interpretivist epistemological position, opposing natural science models of quantitative research (ibid.). The analysis is based on one month of ethnographic fieldwork in Thiruvananthapuram, capital of the southern state Kerala. The empirical material consists of observations, nine in-depth interviews and extensive fieldnotes encompassing my experiences, various details and recounting of informal conversations. The fieldwork constitutes the foundation of the thesis, thus, the narratives of the interlocutors have led the focus of the research and the choice of the theoretical framework. The scope of the research is to further an understanding of the underlying structures forming female performativity, but doing so with a post-structuralist perspective, thus adopting the notion that gender is an unstable and fluid category (Leavy 2018, 78-79; Butler 1999).

Following the ethnographic tradition, the focus of this thesis is on cultural meanings understood through life history interviewing (Heyl 2001, 369), and the findings are interpreted as being 'indicative' of cultural characteristics rather than being 'representative' of Indian culture (Davies 2008, 89).

This thesis acknowledges the importance of recognising the voices of subaltern women themselves and to gain an understanding of 'real lived experiences of women in material and structural conditions of disempowerment or disenfranchisement and in the historical, cultural and geographical specificities of local contexts' (Belliappa 2013, 2). I do, to the best of my abilities, refrain from meeting the field with a reductionist approach, and avoid inscribing 'the researched into prevailing representations' (as quoted in Belliappa 2013, 6), and I strive to focus on agency rather than victimhood, so that my research does not contribute to the tendency to portray subaltern women as passive and helpless victims, and instead subscribe to feminists works examining 'the possibilities of women's agency within the limitations or constraints of discursive power' (Thapan 2009, 169). Furthermore, I recognise that my field study and the voices represented in this thesis do not represent an average from which I can generalise and draw conclusions about gender relations in India (Belliappa 2013, 3).

Entering the field

After a period of research on the subject my attention went to the South Indian state Kerala. Coming from a background of development studies, I can be inclined to ascribe cases of suffering to a matter of lack of development, which can indeed be a useful approach, but also risks obscuring the narratives of the people involved (Datta 2016b). Kerala is a state with high social development (Lindberg 2014, 71; Jeffrey 2004, 647). Literacy and employment among women are significant, but so is the degree of gendered violence and entrenched patriarchal norms (ibid.).

When approaching the field, I let myself lead by instinct and to some extent coincidence, and I had to have confidence in the unstructured nature of the process. Through a professor at Rajagiri College of Social Sciences in Kochin, Kerala, I was referred to Joshy (names are altered to protect anonymity), who was an old student of the professor. The professor let me know that this young man could quite possibly be a great entrance to the field I wished to explore, and true enough, Joshy turned out to be invaluable to my field work. Joshy works at a small shelter for boys in the centre of Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala. The shelter Don Bosco Veedu is run by the non-profit organisation Don Bosco[2] and its main focus is the rescue and rehabilitation of at-risk-children living in the streets due to poverty, neglect, abandonment or different kinds of abuse. I met Joshy in the shelter's dining hall where we joined the children for a dahl and fish lunch and he told me about Don Bosco's work in the community. His warmth and likability was evident right away, and when he told me that the organisation was also involved in income generating projects with women in a local low income area, I glimpsed a unique opportunity to get well acquainted with a group of women, despite my limited time. The area in question will henceforth be referred to as the colony[3]. I started following Joshy around whenever he went to the colony and I was pleased to see how comfortable and secure the women seemed in Joshy' presence and how his good name put me in a

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[2] In Malayalam 'veedu' means home. Don Bosco was founded by Giovanni Bosco, a nineteenth century Italian priest and educationalist, and dedicated the welfare of at risk, children youth and women (Veedu 2020).

[3] To protect the anonymity of the interlocutors I do not use the name of the area. Most locals would refer to it as 'the colony', therefore I will also use the word colony rather than the word slum used by most foreigners.

very positive light as well. I quickly felt accepted as a researcher and was met with curiosity by the local women. Joshy right away let the women know why I was there and so they knew about the scope of my visit from the get-go. It was clear to me that their interest in me grew when they realised that my interest was not in the income generating workshops in the colony, but in them and their personal stories. I made sure to separate myself from the employees of Don Bosco whenever I was in the colony, which was 3-4 times a week, because I wished to be accepted as a researcher rather than categorised as a Don Bosco employee. During income generation workshops[4] and so on, I would therefore roam by myself and seek the women in the group in an effort to gain their trust in spite of the language barrier. The women in the colony spoke Malayalam, the official language of Kerala, and the communication between them and myself consisted in nonverbal interaction and only very few words in English. Thus, to conduct the interviews I had to use an interpreter, which I will come back to later on. I felt as the weeks passed that the women got more and more comfortable with my presence, shy glances became lingering eye contact and recognizing smiles. That the unspoken familiarity grew was also indicated in a very physical way, as bodily touch became more and more frequent. A stroke on my arm, a squeeze of my shoulders, a pinch of my thigh - perhaps undue physical advances had we shared a common language, but in this case welcomed expressions of acceptance. Entering the field, I had my doubts regarding the women's willingness to disclose intimate details from their personal lives to me, especially taking the challenges regarding time and language barriers into consideration. However, my doubts were put to shame, as the women showed a high degree of willingness to talk to me and seemed almost eager to share their story.

My position in the field

Throughout my field study I took into consideration the relationship between the interlocutors and myself, keeping in mind that the power relations would in all likelihood affect the interaction and the co-construction of meaning during the interview (Heyl 2001, 370; Davies 2008, 110-120). Not

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[4] I attended, among other things, a workshop where the women were taught to grow mushrooms to sell in the market, a workshop where they were taught to fold cakeboxes to sell to bakeries, and an English class where local school children taught women in the colony to read and write.

only was it important for me to be aware of my own view and pre-understanding of the women in the colony, but also to be sensitive to how the women perceived me to know on which grounds they engaged in the interviews (Davies 2008, 113). One factor very determining for my status was my indisputable privilege regarding access to power in the wider society compared to the women I interviewed, which according to Davies can undermine 'the presumption of equality of the participants within the context of the interview itself' (Davies 2008, 110-112). The very premise of the field study, the fact that I was there as a researcher, was proof of the freedom I have over my own life choices; writing a thesis, traveling unaccompanied across the world and interacting with people I do not know. Furthermore, the stark differences between the interlocutors and myself based in class and status perhaps stood out even more because we were similar in gender and age (Heyl 2001, 374). However, I did not experience this as a disadvantage or a hindrance for openness and establishing a trusting atmosphere. Davies does indeed highlight that differences in race, class and so on do not necessarily preclude a meaningful interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Davies 2008, 110-112), which confirms my experience. In fact, these differences can play a positive role in terms of making the interviewee feel that their narrative is being heard and taken seriously, thus having an experience of 'empowering and reflexively enlightening' (ibid., 111; Heyl 2001, 375). I assert that me being of a different nationality and coming from a different cultural background was to some degree working to my advantage. The assertion that having a similar cultural background as one's informants is not always beneficial, is supported by Lal's reflections about her research among factory workers in Delhi (Lal 2011, 112). Being an Indian woman herself, one might have thought that it would be easier for her to develop insider relationships with her interviewees, but what she experienced was that her higher status caused her to be unwillingly aligned with her interlocutors' employers instead. Lal's methodological difficulties show the importance of problematizing both differences and similarities in status between interviewer and interviewee in fieldwork like hers and mine (ibid.).

Another important factor to consider is the inherent inequality connected to the mere fact that I had the 'freedom to exit that social world' (Heyl 2001, 374) at any time. This was true both in the sense that I had a return ticket home to Denmark, and in the sense that I was staying at a hotel in the city centre away from the interlocutors' low-income households. My presence in the field was only a brief interlude in the lives of the interlocutors, and while this fact held me from developing deep connections, I did in fact sense that my 'visitor'-status perhaps made them feel safer confiding in me, because they knew I would leave.

To the Indian society that constituted my field of research I was an ’outsider’, and hence, to conduct the fieldwork in a meaningful way, it was important for me to gain an understanding of the context they were set in. Nevertheless, I deliberately kept my preliminary research in Denmark to a minimum, so that my time in the field would not be unnecessarily influenced by pre-understanding about violence in India. During the fieldwork in Kerala, I concurrently with the visits to the colony had many informal conversations with (among others) employees at Don Bosco Veedu as well as a local women’s resource center, which provided me with important insight and background knowledge.

Previously having travelled in India for all together 6 months over the past ten years, I had already gained a minimum of basic knowledge about the Indian society, customs and social relations and I felt somewhat familiar with the field, albeit a shallow familiarity which by no means made me an ‘insider’. My engagement with the women in the colony preceding the interviews was very limited because of lack of time, and I had to draw on my previous experience, while quickly intercepting the cultural codes of this specific group of women and being sensitive to the complexity of the social interaction I was entering. At times I purposely overdid my naivety and ignorance concerning certain aspects to incite the interlocutors to explain further. I also, at times, downplayed my understanding of the cultural codes in order to ask some difficult questions. Always making sure not to overstep the personal limits of my interviewees and keeping the interview a safe space, I would at times ask questions about religion and sexuality, knowing that these questions would most often be brushed aside with a giggle, a shrug or a headshake. My very presence in the colony and the topic of my interest were, in itself, far outside the realm of normal and proper behaviour and thus my position as an outsider allowed me to place myself outside the social boundaries and raise subjects that insiders could not (Davies 2008, 119).

The Interlocutors

Selecting the interlocutors was a procedure very much led by chance. After getting acquainted with Joshy and the people at Don Bosco Veedu, it was natural to make use of Joshy’ position as a valuable gatekeeper and entrust the task of selecting whom to interview to him. I was dependent on the accessibility and willingness of the women (Davies 2008, 89), and I have no doubt that the quality of the interviews benefitted greatly from Joshy’ help, as he knew who would want to participate and share their story.

Common to the eight women I interviewed is, therefore, a connection to Don Bosco Veedu. Six of the women were beneficiaries of the assistance of Don Bosco and three were employees at the organisation (with one person being both). In addition to the eight interviewees, there were always a group of 10-15 women present when I visited the colony, and although I did not speak with all of them one on one, they were all a part of the field.

The interviews with Ela and Meena, two employees of Don Bosco, differed from the rest. I got acquainted with Ela and Meena personally through my daily presence at the shelter Don Bosco Veedu, and the interviews with them were characterised by informal conversation, unlike the rest of the interviews. Contrary to the other interlocutors, Ela and Meena spoke English, so the dialogue between us could flow freely without the presence of an interpreter. Under these circumstances I allowed myself to also voice my own thoughts, whereas I was otherwise conscious not to voice my own opinion or standpoint and thereby avoid influencing the narratives of my informants (Heyl 2001, 370; Davis, 107). Since the premises of these interviews were informal and general conversations about female precarity in Kerala, they included both Ela and Meena's own stories and their reflective thoughts and opinions on the subject.

Ela, with whom I was on more intimate terms with, is brought up in Dubai and of a higher social status than the other interlocutors, and her thoughts on womanhood in India was an interesting addition to the other women's narratives. In the analysis I will reflect further upon Ela's role.

The interlocutors[5] whose narratives are brought forward in this thesis are:

Dhanya: 32 years old, resident of the colony, participant in income generating workshops.

Jayanti: 28 years old, resident in the colony, participant in income generating workshops.

Bhavana: 25 years old, resident of the colony, participant in income generating workshops.

Harshini: 35 years old, resident in the colony, participant in income generating workshops.

[5] The names of the interlocutors have been altered to ensure anonymity.

Bindiya: 34 years old, resident of a small town outside of Thiruvananthapuram, have sought help from Don Bosco.

Bijli: 30 years old, resident of the colony, employee of Don Bosco, earlier recipient of Don Bosco's assistance.

Meena: 38 years old, resident of Thiruvananthapuram, employee of Don Bosco.

Ela: 24 years old, resident of Thiruvananthapuram, working as a counsellor at Don Bosco.

Further presentation of the individual interlocutors will happen throughout the analysis when their narratives are addressed.

Interviewing

Most interviews were set up spontaneously whenever there was an opportunity. The locations of the interviews were either private homes in the colony (Harshini and Dhanya), the premises used for income generating workshop in the colony (Jayanti, Bhavana and the group) or the facilities of Don Bosco Veedu in the city centre (Ela, Meena, Bindiya and Bijli). Bindiya I was referred to by Ela, who also planned the interview and had her meet me at the shelter, thus Bindiya was the only one of the interlocutors whom I only met on the day of the interview.

By conducting observations, I gained an understanding of cultural codes and norms of this specific group which made me capable of conducting the interviews in the best way possible (Szulevicz 2020, 103-105). Furthermore, me being present as an observer prior to interviews created a less intimidating interview situation because I became a familiar face (ibid.).

I recognise that the human experience is one of immense complexity, and the interviews are conducted as life history interviews 'with particular focus on the meanings the interviewees place on their life experiences and circumstances, expressed in their own language' (Heyl 2001, 369-370). Thus, I asked open questions encouraging the women to share with me their life stories and asked follow-up questions led by their narratives and inspired by knowledge gathered in the field.

As Spradley puts it, ‘the essential core of ethnography is this concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand’ (Spradley 1979, 5), and the researcher's job in the ethnographic interview, then, is to communicate genuinely, in both subtle and direct ways that ‘I want to know what you know *in the way that you know it…*’ (as quoted in Heyl 2001, 369). Furthermore, I kept my position neutral, to the extent possible, by refraining from asking loaded questions and keeping my reactions (physical as well as verbal) to a minimum, while remaining an empathetic and respectful listener (ibid.)[6].

Recognising the importance of being cognisant of how the broader social context can affect the interlocutors (Heyl 2001, 370) the interviews were conducted as privately as possible. On a few occasions other people were present, or somewhere within hearing distance, during an interview, which has to be noted as part of the context of the interview (Davies 2008, 115).

When my field study in Kerala was drawing to a close, I gathered the women from the colony for a group interview after a Don Bosco-meeting. At an earlier workshop, the women had learned to make cakeboxes which were to be sold to local shops, and this day they came to hand in the boxes they made and collect their payment. Knowing that a group interview would be extremely difficult to facilitate, because neither the women nor the interpreter were experienced in that kind of situation, I nevertheless found it important to do. Mostly, I found it ethically appropriate to give them all a chance to be heard and to ask me questions as well.

The questions I asked, both broad and specific, were characterised by knowledge that I had gathered through the three weeks of field study. The questions did not, like in the individual interviews, invite them to share their life stories, but rather invited them to share their opinions and feelings on certain subjects and react to things I believed to have learned. When I for example asked the group “are women better at suffering than men?”, which is indeed a loaded question, it was led by themes gathered through prior interviews and asked in hopes of sparking conversation.

Being in a group will inevitably have an effect on interlocutors and it is not likely that they will answer exactly like they would in a one-on-one interview (Davies 2008, 115-116). The group dynamic plays an unavoidable role and while one group might respond by creating consensus

[6] The exceptions to this are, as mentioned, the interviews with Elma and Meena respectively, because they both spoke English and we got well acquainted to an extent where we could lead more casual conversations.

another group might respond with polarization (ibid.). Concerning the group interview a handful of things need to be taken into consideration. Because of the language barrier and the short amount of time spent in the colony, my knowledge about their personal relationships with each other was limited, and it was therefore difficult for me to attain an understanding of dynamics that might cause informants to emphasize certain opinions rather than others. Furthermore, the interview was so lively (bordering on chaotic) that the interpretation dwindled to primarily sparse summaries of the conversation. That said, the group interview gave important insights into the views in the group of women and rounded off the field study in a respectful manner, giving everyone a chance to express themselves.

Limitations

Recognising that ethnographic research should include lengthy field studies, through which the researcher establishes on-going relationships with the interviewees, and enough time and openness to allow for the researcher and the interviewees to explore meaning together (Heyl 2001, 369), I do acknowledge that the shortness of the fieldwork influenced the research. The fact that the duration of my stay in Kerala was only one month indeed limited the scope of the thesis.

Also, because the majority of the interlocutors did not speak English, the interviews were conducted in Malayalam with the assistance of an interpreter. It is therefore essential to take into account the implications of the interpretation process (Davies, 124). First and foremost, it is important to note that the translator I used was not a professional translator nor was he a neutral person to the interlocutors. The circumstances of the field study called for fast decision making when opportunities presented themselves. Because most of the interviews were set up spontaneously by Joshy and because he had offered me a unique entrance to the field by introducing me to the women of the colony, it was natural that he participated as both a ‘gate keeper’ and an interpreter. I would initially have preferred a female translator unknown to the women, but I was quickly taken aback by the trust the interlocutors seemed to put in Joshy and how open they were to share even intimate details from their lives right away. Joshy explained that the reason for their openness was the good reputation of Don Bosco, and that the women trusted that he would maintain confidentiality as an employee of the organisation. Also, Joshy was excellent in English and quickly grew somewhat accustomed to the role of interpreter.

As it is the case with any use of interpretation in interview situations, I too have to acknowledge that working through an interpreter adds 'a second level - the translator's - of theoretical assumptions which filter their informant's talk' (Davies 2008, 125).

Although Joshy was indeed the better option under the circumstances, his lack of experience as an interpreter was reflected in several ways. First and foremost, when I asked follow-up questions during an interview, he would sometimes step in and offer an explanation or clarification instead of passing the question on to the interlocutor. This obviously posed a problem as it would be a source of great error if I were to mistake his words for theirs, and I had to be alert to detect it whenever this occurred. Adding to this, these small 'interruptions' compromised the intimate space of the interview, with the woman as the narrator and me as the listener, because the English interaction between Joshy and I created a separate space that excluded the woman.

Other times that Joshy's interpretation skills fell short was when the interlocutors' recounting would become so dense and long drawn out that direct translation was impossible. Thus, the interlocutors' great willingness to relieve their minds to me, in some cases, became somewhat of a hindrance, because it compromised the interpretation. It especially proved to be a problem in interviews where the interlocutors would become so emotional and eager for telling their story that neither Joshy nor myself dared interrupt for interpretation. This would sometimes resolve in incessant flows of speech which inevitably caused interpretation of inferior quality.

Because of the language barrier and the quality of the interpretation, I have lost the linguistic subtleties that could potentially have been very informative (Davies 2008, 125).

Especially in the group interview the language became a great barrier. In the words of Davies, it is in a group interview 'clear that the interaction between interviewees can be very informative for the ethnographer.' (Davies 2008, 115). Thus, not speaking the language of the interlocutors manifested itself as a strong disadvantage during the group interview where very interesting interaction clearly took place among the women, but the majority of the talk was not interpreted. The 34-minute recording of the women's lively conversation ended up in only 4 pages of transcribed material, with the individual voices indistinguishable from one another. The debate between the interlocutors would indeed have been an interesting addition to the empirical material. Also, it would indeed have strengthened the material if all interviews could have unfolded as conversations, like they did with Ela and Meena (Heyl 2001, 374).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the fact that the scope of my research was explained to the interlocutors early on by Joshy. This introduction of my work was done in Malayalam so I do not

know his exact wording, but he did let them know what I was there to study - violence and the struggles women in Kerala face - which he had gathered from our preliminary discussions. Thus, they knew of the scope of the fieldwork before entering into the interviews, and this preunderstanding has inevitably had an effect on the answers, even though my questions were open and centred on their lives as a whole. They have most likely been inclined to share with me the most difficult aspects of their lives and have a specific focus on violence.

Another important aspect regards the delimitation of the scope of the thesis. Offhand, a deeper focus on caste and religion would seem appropriate, however, these themes were not prevalent in the fieldwork. While Hindu mythology is investigated in the discussion-section of the thesis, caste is not taken into consideration at any point. Recognising that caste is an important aspect of the lives of Indian women, I do acknowledge that this has indeed been neglected. The interlocutors did not touch upon the subjects of religion or caste, and while this fact might present an interesting point in itself, the scope of this thesis developed from the narratives of the interlocutors. I recognise that what is not being said also has analytical value, but due to the limitations of this thesis, I have chosen not to include considerations about caste.

Researching Violence

When researching violence, it is important to understand that violence is complex and that I as a researcher should not enter the field with 'ready-made explanations of violence so as to "find truths" to support [*my*] theories' (Nordstrom 1995, 4-5). I will thus refrain from drawing on any essentialist definitions on violence and instead view violence as an intricately layered phenomenon on which each victim, perpetrator or witness has their own perspective (ibid.). The understanding of violence should, according to Nordstrom and Robben, undergo reassessment and change throughout the fieldwork. In the words of Taussig, 'violence is slippery; it escapes easy definitions and enters the most fundamental features of people's lives. Violence is formative; it shapes people's perceptions of who they are and what they are fighting for (…)' (ibid.).

Like the media, I have indeed, when instigating my research, been enticed by the spectacular and dramatic. The brutality of gendered violence in India and the male gaze that I felt myself in the streets was what initially sparked my interest the most and led the onset of my research. I must acknowledge that I have indeed been enticed by the parts of the fieldwork that lie outside of the

ordinary, and I have perhaps neglected the value that could have been found in the mundane parts of everyday life. Like Bronislaw Malinowski states in his reflections about his field study in the Trobiand Islands, I too, ‘like every ethnographer, (...) was lured by the dramatic, exceptional and sensational’ and have ‘neglected much of the everyday, inconspicuous, drab and small-scale in my study’ (as quoted in Martin 2007, 2). I assert that a reason for my initial focus on the spectacular and slight of the ordinary lies in the temporality of my field study.

During the fieldwork, the scope and the specific focus was mainly physical violence, which was perhaps enhanced by the fact that my time was limited. Field observations allowed me to gain an intuitive understanding of the empirical material (Szulevicz 2020, 103-105) and I learned that a broader and less restrictive understanding of violence was appropriate.

Coding of data

Having returned to Denmark and separated myself from the field both physically and mentally, I interpreted the collected data using an open coding technique (Corbin 2008, 159). The coding process was data-driven, rather than theory-driven, and also reflexive in the sense that I took my own role as a researcher into consideration (Brinkmann 2020, 56). This approach allowed me to consider the meanings I encountered through the data freely before interpreting and applying conceptual labels (Corbin 2008, 159). In attempting to lay aside preconceived ideas about what I might find, I let the empirical material guide me to identify the prevailing themes.

According to Davies, ‘it is certainly preferable to include fuller statements and sections of dialogue rather than heavily edited isolated quotations’ (Davies 2008, 128) and to foreground the narratives, I do in the analysis include longer excerpts of interviews and edit them only when I find it necessary. Also, in the process of transcribing I made sure not to change their statements by for example correcting incorrect grammar. I recognise that only partial knowledge can ever be attained and that the interview’s nature is one of discovery (Heyl 2001, 370), which is another reason why true and unaltered dialogue is to be preferred in the analysis. Furthermore, using the interlocutor’s own voices in the analysis, somewhat relinquishes my control over their narratives and adds, I hope, an intimacy to the reading of the thesis (Davies 2008, 261).

It was evident from a coding of the data that the physical abuse and suffering was almost considered a given which one cannot escape but has to navigate in certain ways. It was furthermore apparent

that violence is most prevalent in the homes, where the women are believed to belong, and in public certain norms were determining for female behaviour. What was emphasised most was the responsibility and potential blame that comes with being a woman, and the physical and social risk that follows not living up to what is expected of you within normative womanhood. It was a general theme that a woman has to act a certain way to not attract unwanted attention and stay out of harm's way, leaving her with only little possibility of action.

Conceptualising the data provides a language for talking about the data and entering into a meaningful analysis (ibid.), and the empirical investigation through open coding has led me to build a theoretical framework concerning violence, gender performativity and the notion of normative womanhood in India, which will be presented in the following section.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In the following chapter I will present the body of literature that has informed my analytical approach and constitutes my theoretical point of departure. This thesis inserts itself in a field of research concerning gender, the subaltern voice and gendered violence in India.

Annamma Joy, Russel Belk and Rishi Bhardwaj (2015) investigate the conditions of women in India and how gender is conceptualised. To discuss the 'precarious' position of women in India they draw on Judith Butler and bring the concept of gender performativity into the context of violence in India (Joy et al. 2015, 1734). Drawing on observations and interviews as well as scholarly publications they investigate the condition of Indian women as something defined by prevailing gender norms and a conceptualisation of women as being lesser (ibid.). Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj put forth the argument that to be deemed a legitimate Indian woman one is expected to be loyal to one's family and act within the notion of the 'pure and sacred wife' at all times (ibid., 1743)

The analytical approach of this thesis is inspired by the work of Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj, and adopts the same manner of investigating gender in India. With a similar scope I focus on gendered lives in Kerala, and I do, to a much larger extent, foreground the narratives of the interlocutors throughout the analysis, thus letting the personal accounts lead my argument.

Public assaults do indeed happen in Kerala (Lindberg 2014, 72), however, it is the implicit and explicit violence in the home that the women give most weight when recounting their everyday

struggles. Datta (2016a) argues that the brutal cases of public violence against women derives from a deep-seated prejudice against women, which imbues the lived spaces with both implicit and explicit violence. It is these violent spaces that women have to negotiate in their everyday lives over their entire life course (Datta 2016a, 178). Drawing on the works of Appadurai and Butler, Datta coins the term 'genderscapes of hate', arguing that the lived spaces in which women experience discrimination and devaluation originate from a deep-seated cultural prejudice against women. The 'genderscapes of hate' are, according to Datta's conceptualization, the fluid lived spaces produced by the 'performance of gender (Butler, 1990) through a repertoire of everyday ordinary acts as well as extraordinary incidents' (Datta 2016a, 178-180). The rise in violence against women committed by groups of men, concurrent with women's rising literacy, mobility, and participation in salaried work, Datta refer to as a 'tacit patriarchal pact' (ibid.). A claim supported by Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj who assert that sexual assaults in India are fuelled partly by men's fear of 'losing patriarchal power, as Indian women increasingly demand social equality' (joy et al. 2015, 1741). Although I do not make use of Datta's term 'genderscapes of hate', her thoughts on violent lived spaces being produced by deep seated cultural norms are highly relevant for the analysis.

For a theoretical understanding of gender, I draw upon Judith Butler's (1999) notion of gender performativity. Butler distinguishes between the 'physiological sex' and 'gender' and disputes that there are naturalistic causal explanations connecting them (Butler 1988, 520; Butler 1999, 9). Hence, gender is not the causal result of the sex (ibid.). Gender is, on the other hand, performative, and Butler adds to Nietzsche's claim 'the deed is everything' by stating that 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its result' (Butler 1999, 33). Butler's key argument is that gender, rather than being biologically determined, is performatively constructed through the repetition of acts, thus, the gender identity is unstable and constituted through time 'through a stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1988, 519).

Repetition is an important factor in the performativity of gender, as the performativity lies in the reiterative practice and ritualized repetition of social norms (Butler 2015, ix-xii). In mundane and ritualised form, already socially established meanings and norms are re-enacted and re-experienced, maintaining gender within the normative script (Butler 1988, 526). According to Butler, the body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, nor does an embodied self pre-exist the cultural norms which signifies it. Gender is not a result of free individual choice, as we are not sovereign stable identities.

My empirical point of departure in the analysis bears resemblance to the works of Meenakshi Thapan (2009). Thapan addresses the complexities of experience, embodiment and identity construction of women in India through an analysis of material gathered during fieldwork including interviews with a variety of women and textual representations of women (Thapan 2009, xvi-xvii). The way Thapan pulls forth both long and short excerpts of interviews throughout her analysis, is similar to the way I carry out my analysis, with the narratives being the centre of attention. Thapan too found that the expectations of women are guided by traditional gender norms and that the family is an important realm of gender politics (ibid., 94-98). Thapan considers tradition, culture and the ubiquitous male gaze as factors imposing on and constraining the women's embodied experiences and argues that the violence prevailing the women's lives are not only bodily attacks, but also what she describes as oppressing, and 'dehumanizing and depersonalizing' treatment (ibid., 129). Thapan is mainly concerned with compliance and resistance and how the women's lives are characterised by a twin process of 'submission and rebellion, silence and speech' (ibid., 170).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among factory workers in Delhi, Jayati Lal (2011) portrays the life stories of five women whose narratives lie outside the normative gender script of 'the good wife' in the traditional patriarchal family. Lal argues that even though their counternarratives are opposing the normative gender script, their narratives are still invested in 'the normative (meta) narrative that has eluded them' (Lal 2011, 573.) Nevertheless, it is in fact, according to Lal, in the circulation of these life stories of for example single, widowed or adulterous women, who do not meet to the expectations of the normative woman, that the agency of subaltern women emerge; that their alterity from the heteronormative gender order express new kinds of selfhood and hint at new future possibilities regarding gender relations (ibid., 553).

Thapan and Lal both find that the normative gender script of womanhood is the notion of 'the good woman' or 'the good wife', which builds upon traditional expectations regarding virtue, purity, devotion to one's husband and responsibility for homelife. While conducting fieldwork similar to theirs, albeit in a different location, I also address the violent aspects of female lives and how this informs their way of performing gender. The same notion of 'the good woman' prevails in my fieldwork, and I argue that also violence and suffering is an aspect of the performativity of normative womanhood.

In a study based on three years of research of women in Mumbai, Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade (2011) investigate women's presence in public space and how they may, consciously or unconsciously, strategize to negotiate this space to stay safe. While Mumbai is

considered India's most modern city with women having access to the public space, they argue that this access is not unrestricted, but comes with a lot of implied rules and only certain reasons for being away from the home are deemed valid (Phadke et al. 2011, 5). According to Phadke, Khan and Ranade, the private space is seen as the right place for a woman and whenever a woman enters the public space, she has to demonstrate respectability and 'privacy' to stay safe (ibid., 33). Thus, their contention is that although women's access to public space has in fact increased, women still do not have an equal claim to the public space of Mumbai. This female negotiation of violent space is indeed within the scope of this thesis, and while Phadke, Khan and Ranade are concerned mostly with women's safety in public space, I include the private aspect and adopt the framework of gender performativity.

For a regional focus on Kerala, I turn to Robin Jeffrey (2004). In the words of Jeffrey, Kerala is 'a place exhibiting favourable social statistics', standing out regarding life expectancy, female literacy, birth rates and access to health care (Jeffrey 2004, 647). There are several conditions explaining this, such as maritime and commercial connections, a plural society, social reform groups, Christianity, communism, reform-minded Indian princes, and the position of women, and the mix of factors, creating the conditions for the favourable social statistics in Kerala, is generally referred to as the 'Kerala model' (ibid.). Jeffrey highlights the position of women as the key factor in this so-called 'Kerala model', and he argues that it was made unique by the matrilineal system prevailing in some groups until well into the 20th century. It is, he argues, the reverberations of the matrilineal system that still has a positive impact on society today, but still, it does not seem to influence the social gender equality. Jeffrey raises the question: 'why, in the twenty-first century, are husbands in formerly matrilineal groups as patriarchal, and women as domestically subordinated, as among other groups in Kerala and India?' and adds that 'those questions await further discussion' (ibid., 662). That the high degree of gender equality regarding salaried work in Kerala does not necessarily affect the power relations and the implicit violence of the home is evident from my field work and supports the relevance of a move away from a development-focus.

Because the notion of the self-sacrificing wife is prevalent throughout the fieldwork, I lean on Partha Chatterjee's (1989) thoughts about the development of the Indian woman's role under colonial rule. Chatterjee emphasises that women came to be responsible for the upholding of the sanctity of the family, the home, and thus the nation, protecting the Indian identity against the encroachment of the West (Chatterjee 1989, 622). As a part of the proclaimed 'civilising mission'

in India, and thus the moral justification for colonial rule, Britain deemed Indian traditions and social customs ‘degenerate and barbaric’ (ibid.). At the centre of this conviction was the Indian woman and the custom of *sati*[7] (widow-burning) (ibid., 623). Like Spivak and Mani, Chatterjee notes that while the abolition of *sati* played a central role in the civilising mission of colonial rule, it was always less about the actual suffering of the women and more about the struggle between the colonising power and the traditions of the colonised people. Chatterjee explores the nationalist response to colonial domination and how this entailed a change in women’s role in the family and society. Chatterjee contends that in assuming a position of sympathy with the colonised women as victims, colonial Britain transformed the ‘figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country’ (ibid., 622). As a response to the outside pressure of colonial rule, nationalists introduced a new reformed tradition, which allowed India selective adaptation to Western modernity, allowing Westernisation in the ‘material sphere’ while rejecting it in the ‘spiritual sphere’, thus preserving the ‘spiritual Indian self’ (ibid., 623). Hence giving room to implement Western skills within the material domain, while upholding and cherishing the spiritual culture of the nation. Chatterjee introduces the *ghar/bahir*-dichotomy in order to explain the separation of society into two domains; *ghar* which involves the feminine, sacred ‘spiritual sphere’ of the home, and *bahir* which involves the masculine, modern ‘material sphere’ of the world outside of the home (ibid., 624-625). Chatterjee’s thoughts on the divide between the private home and public space in regard to women’s role prove relevant, because it reflects themes in the empirical material. The female position and how it is implicated by private and public spaces will contribute to an analysis of the normative gender script, and also provide a structure for the analysis, which I have chosen to separate into two parts; *Private Women* and *Entering Public Space.*

My approach to the field and my concern with the voices of subaltern women in India is inspired by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Lata Mani (1998). Spivak considers in one of her

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[7] Sati is a Sanskrit term literally meaning ‘good woman’ or ‘true woman’, however, today the term commonly refers to widow-burning and the practice of wives self-immolating on the funeral pyres of their husbands (Hess 1999, 6-7; Bacchus 2013, 171).

contributions to postcolonial theory, the question 'can the subaltern speak?' and doing so she includes reflections on the rite of *sati* and the abolition of the practice during the colonial period (Mani 1998, 298). Drawing on Said, Derrida and Foucault among others, Spivak discusses the epistemic violence of imperialism and how certain narratives of reality were established as the normative ones (ibid., 283). Doing so, she includes, like Chatterjee, thoughts on how the voice of the suffering widow was lost in the debate about *sati*.

As mentioned, self-sacrifice and wifely devotion is widely prevalent, and including discussions on *sati* to the theoretical framework seems like a relevant choice. Although the actual practice of widow-immolation was not mentioned in the interviews, I find that the parallels between the notions of normative womanhood and *sati* draw my attention and adds a relevant meta-layer to the discussion.

Another important contribution to the discussion on the discursive omission of the *sati*-woman's suffering is brought by the feminist historian and cultural critic Lata Mani (1998). Following Spivak and Chatterjee, Mani also focuses on the colonial debate on *sati* and the silenced voices of the subaltern women involved and addresses the 'blindness' regarding the actual suffering of the widows in question. Through discourse analysis of European eyewitness accounts of sati in colonial India, Mani highlights how the physicality of the women's pain is marginalised together with her agency. Mani contends that 'although sati became an alibi for the colonial civilizing mission on the one hand, and on the other hand, a significant occasion for indigenous autocritique, the women who burned were neither subjects nor even the primary objects of concern in the debate on its prohibition. They were, rather, the ground for a complex and competing set of struggles over Indian society and definition of Hindu tradition' (Mani 1998, 2). The subaltern women were left invisible and silent in the colonial discourse, and the narratives of the women were completely occluded together with the contradictions and paradoxes in *sati*. Through a careful reading of the texts Mani makes a point out of pulling to the foreground the voices of the widows, emphasising their terror and struggles for self-preservation (Mani 1998, 196). Mani's theoretical discussion and the narratives from the women suffering sati-deaths is relevant to the scope of this thesis as it will add depth to the understanding of female negotiation of gender in India.

In the discussion I furthermore draw on Hess's (1999) investigation of the Sanskrit text Ramayana and her argument that the goddess Sita represents the ideal Hindu woman and can be seen as a reason why expectations of female chastity continue to persist. Hess associates the story of

Sita with the rite of *sati* and argues that the recounting of Sita's fire-ordeal lingers in Indian consciousness and in some way give permission for *sati* (Hess 1999, 24).

Ruth Bacchus (2013) joins in the feminist discussion on the rite and practice of *sati*, and like Mani and Spivak she problematises the victim/agent dichotomy. Drawing on Butler's concept of performativity, Bacchus explores the concept of sati and the complexities in the agency involved. She argues that the women dying a *sati*-death should not be regarded as solely victims nor are they subjects possessing untrammelled agency (Bacchus 2013, 157-158). In the practice of *sati* we see the contradictions between the glorification of the idealised virtuous woman and the 'often-violent devaluation of women's lives' (Bacchus, 2013, 155.). Bacchus emphasises the need of a reconceptualization of the *sati*-woman as something other than a 'subject whose agency lies in her desire to die' (ibid., 158), while refraining from reproducing the imperialist construction of her being only a victim. The *sati*-widow should be seen as an effect of (but not completely determined by) discourses and to the agency of the *sati*-widow as an effect of performativity, which allows us to contest the notion that sati is an act of pure free will, without degrading the woman to a 'passive victim' (Bacchus 2013, 158).

Furthermore, the analytical approach is inspired by Ayona Datta[8] and Nabeela Ahmed (2020), whose research also takes place in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, and who call attention to the fact that 'the gendered specificities of structural, symbolic and direct violence in urban settings and its connection to the intimate scale remains little understood' (Datta et al. 2020, 70). Datta (2016b) in particular emphasises the importance of recognising how gendered violence is a complex exchange happening between and across 'home and outside' (Datta 2016b, 176). While Datta's focus is on the way spaces, terrains and infrastructures violently lay siege on women's bodies, I direct my attention to women's narratives and their negotiation of gender within these violent, gendered spaces.

[8] Not to be confused with Anindita Datta.

Analysis

To provide a structure for the analysis and to reflect a distinction which was prevailing in the field, I will begin in the private sphere by investigating the normative gender script of the sacred and private wife as it appears from the empirical material. Subsequently, I move on to the public sphere and how the women negotiate public space and what this entails in terms of the performativity of gender. I recognise that this is a constructed distinction, and the lines between the two will, inevitably, be characterised by overlapping, ambiguity and blurriness. The analysis is indeed carried by the interlocutors' narratives and larger excerpts from the interviews, thus, the line of argumentation is not a straight one.

Private Women: "*My mother used to tell me 'it is you girls who need to suffer.*"

Dhanya: "*I was locked up in my husband's home"*

Before sitting down for the interview, Dhanya seems quiet, almost subdued, and I feel inclined to ask Joshy if she is in fact willing to engage in an interview or if she feels pressured. He reassures me that she would very much like to tell her story. The interview takes place in her mother's house in the colony, with her mother making her presence known by loudly cooking and cleaning in the next room, not refraining from interrupting and weighing in her own side of the story from time to time. Dhanya looks older than her 32 years and she has a stern expression as if she is constantly clenching her teeth.

Not needing much prompting, Dhanya unfolds her story without wavering. Her very first sentence takes me by surprise. "I am a good dancer" she states and goes on to recount that she danced professionally as a child, performing in films and stage shows. This all came to an end, however, when she turned seventeen and a man fifteen years her senior demanded to marry her. He threatened her mother by saying that he would destroy her house if she did not consent to the marriage. Since Dhanya's father had died, her mother was the one with the final say, and she was hesitant because Dhanya did not like the man. When he went on to cut a knife into his leg and

threaten with suicide, she finally complied. Dhanya's marriage license says '20 years old', thus adding three years to the truth, because it is illegal to marry under the age of eighteen.

DHANYA: *So my husband's family they forced me to convert into Muslim. Before I converted to Islam, I was three months pregnant, so my child was aborted. They give me pineapple juice during the pregnancy, so this resulted in the abortion.*

NANNA: *Who did this?*

DHANYA: *My mother-in-law and sister in law. They offered me the juice with love and care and affection, so I drank it. And after that when I went for the clinical test, the test showed that the foetus got aborted. I asked my husband 'why did you do this to me?' and he told me that 'if you want to become a Muslim in the Islam religion you cannot be in a state of pregnancy'. That is what my husband told me. I think it was a brutal crime that happened to me. When I was converted into Islam, I was locked up in my husband's home, and my husband told me several times 'don't go and meet with your mother or your brother or no one else'. Because they are Christian. They usually tell me that I'm black in colour, my sister-in-law, my brother-in-law, everyone harasses me.*

Dhanya recounts a story of severe violence and coercion on many levels. After being coerced into marriage at a young age, she is coerced to convert into Islam by her family in law. In that process she experienced that the coercion crossed all bodily limits and killed her unborn child in her womb[9], leaving her with the sorrow of child loss. There is no doubt that she feels violated and when uttering "it was a brutal crime that happened to me" her face beamed with pent-up anger.

Dhanya's experiences of physical restrictions are very concrete as she was in fact locked up in the beginning of her marriage. However, the general notion of physical restrictions is very much prevailing throughout the field and something a majority of the women voice a frustration about. Not being able to decide for yourself where you can go and who you can talk to as a woman in Kerala is a recurring theme in all narratives. Being confined in her family-in-law's home and being forbidden to see her mother and brother, Dhanya was completely denied physical freedom after marrying her husband. During this time, she endured what she describes as 'torture' from the hand of her husband, who would, among other things, suffocate her with a pillow or threaten her life by opening the gas cylinders in the kitchen. A very real threat taking into account that a majority of deaths among young Indian women are caused by burn injuries resulting from either accidents, self-inflicted immolation or murder made to look like accidents or suicide (Belur et al. 2014, 2). "He would open the nozzle and if I just scratched a matchstick it would flame" Dhanya explains. Furthermore, Dhanya's husband would in the beginning of their marriage deny her food if she refused to have sex with him. Thus, from the very beginning of her marriage she experienced serious repercussions if she opposed the suppression of her husband. If she did not comply with his orders and sexual wishes, she would starve. Thus, to even obtain the bare necessities of life she had to disregard her own thoughts and feelings and endure the suffering her husband inflicted upon her.

Marital rape is a common violation in India (Thapan 2009), but not something spoken about directly by any of the other interlocutors. There is a direct link between sexuality and violence in Dhanya's narrative and reflecting this is the general reaction of the group when asked about female sexuality during the group interview. Well aware that the theme would bring about some

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[9] One might question her story because the myth of pineapple juice causing miscarriages has long ago been debunked in the Western world. However, what is interesting is not the factual truth about what might have caused the miscarriage, but Dhanya's interpretation of the events and what she experienced.

awkwardness, I raised the subject of female sexuality in the group and was met with only quiet murmur and no clear answers. Joshy, clearly uncomfortable, averted having to interpret by explaining to me that it was a complicated matter because the women, as he put it, "are forced to have sex". Thapan (2009) emphasises that the marital rape in Indian relationships make evident the intimate connection between power and sexuality, and that force itself is sexualised and inscribed with gender hierarchy (Thapan 2009, 122). She also points to the fact that denying a woman of her sexuality can be seen as a form of violence (ibid.). Because the conversation was in Malayalam I naturally do not know what was said and I can therefore only speculate whether Joshy's claim that they 'are forced to have sex' was in fact what was said among the women or perhaps his own conclusion and reflections about female sexuality. If the latter was the case, one might claim that his statement in itself strips away the notion of female agency within the sexual act and disregards the thought of female sexuality. According to Datta (2016a) the reduction of women to 'objects of desire devoid of any actual agency' is furthermore maintained by media and popular culture in which portrayals of women are usually within patriarchal norms (Datta 2016a, 180). Even when the ideal woman is portrayed in Bollywood movies, Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj point out, her familial obligations must supersede any articulation of desire (Joy et al., 1743). Ela explains to me that the Indian woman is expected to be pure and virtuous and concern herself only with the task of being a devoted wife and mother. Regarding sexuality she adds:

> Ela *Men do boast about it. Women they don't tell at all. About maybe their fantasies, no! It is suppressed. They don't tell it to anybody. They just keep it within themselves (...) She is just there to give birth and take care of the family and that is it.*

The point that Ela takes to the extreme by saying that women are "there to give birth and take care of the family and that is it", is indeed a notion that is prevalent in the fieldwork. That women are first and foremost wives, meant to look after the wellbeing of the family. The women's narratives are imbued with constant references to how a respectable woman should behave, dress and what is expected of her, and in the centre of the notion of ideal womanhood is the role of a wife. The 'good woman' is described as a selfless, pure wife who is able to suffer in silence. The trope of the virtuous woman in the form of the selfless wife, mother or daughter sacrificing herself for the family was indeed a general theme throughout the field study and apparent in all narratives.

The sacred wife

The woman who is recognised as a good woman, and thus in Butler's words 'understood as a living being' (as quoted in Joy et al. 2015, 1742), is a wife who takes care of her family and the sanctity of the home at all costs. Among the interlocutors, whether or not the family life is harmonious, the husband is content, and the children are successful is considered the responsibility of the wife and mother. While men have the freedom to roam the streets as they please, women are expected to keep to the private sphere and take care of the well being of the family.

Chatterjee (1989) argues that women in colonial India were assigned the responsibility of spirituality, virtue, and sanctity as part of the nationalist project to uphold and protect traditional Indian identity (Chatterjee 1989, 627-632). While the public sphere became influenced by Western modernity, nationalists in colonial India would not accept the cultural and spiritual identity belonging to the private sphere to be encroached upon. This was based on a recognition of the West as superior in the field of science, technology, statecraft etc., while the East was seen as superior in its spirituality, which became an important factor in the nationalist struggle against colonial dominance (ibid.). To protect the self-identity of the Indian people and the national culture of the country, a reformed tradition was introduced, according to Chatterjee, indicating a separation of society into two domains; the material and the spiritual. Chatterjee describes this division between the inner world (*ghar*) of spirituality and virtue belonging to the private realm of the home, and the outside world (*bahir*) of rough materiality overrun by Wester modernity (ibid., 624). The responsibility of *ghar* fell on women and thus the notion of women belonging in the privacy of the home was normalised (ibid.). With this new patriarchy promoted by the nationalist project in order to protect the traditional identity of the nation, it is Chatterjee's contention that women became bound to a new subordination legitimised by the nationalist discourse (ibid., 629). In the words of Phadke, Khan and Ranade 'She becomes the canvas on which narratives of modernity and honour are simultaneously written. She is the bearer of respectability – of all moral and cultural values that define the society.' (Phadke et al. 2011, 23).

A cause of great frustration among the majority of the women is the restriction to the private space of the home. The frustration they express is levelled against both the physical constraint caused by the stigma of entering public space without a valid purpose and mental constraint of responsibility and blame assigned to women. The gender difference met most with envy and dissatisfaction by the women is the fact that men are able to move freely wherever they desire and

talk to whoever they want. During the group interview I ask "What are your thoughts about being a woman compared to being a man?" and I get two replies from two different women.

WOMAN 1[10]: *If I'm a man I can find* [sic] *more places, I can go anywhere. But if I'm a woman, I need to stay at my home. I need to find my own place* [sic].

WOMAN 2: *We are happy that we are born as women. We are interested in looking after the home, domestic work.*

The first woman expresses discontent with being bound to the household, and she even indulges my question by putting herself in the man's place, phrasing her answer 'if I'm a man…'. The second woman, on the other hand, rejects any complaining and makes it clear that whatever comes with womanhood is embraced and even preferred. Furthermore, she takes it upon herself to speak on behalf of the entire group of women, or perhaps Indian women in general, beginning her sentences with a 'we'. After her statement, the group turns quiet, indicating that the emphasis on her words left no room for discussion. Her speech becomes a discursive means with which she sustains the fabrication of a gender identity as the dutiful wife and mother. Thus, she performatively constitutes her identity within the norm as an ideal wife, establishing that her rightful place is within the home and her duty is taking care of the domestic work. Domestic duties were a recurring theme when the women spoke of their lives, though sometimes expressed with dissatisfaction. This woman does, however, accentuate that not only does she carry out her wifely duties, she does so from a place of happiness and goodwill. I assert that the fact that the group turns quiet after her declaration suggests a recognition that her answer was the proper and 'right' answer, not to be contested. Both two answers touch upon the thought of access to space and women belonging to the home sphere contrary to men.

During the group interview I am still very concerned with the risk of violent assaults in public, so I ask the women what they do to stay safe referring to whenever they walk in the streets

[10] Again, since the voices are indistinguishable on the recording, I simply call the women quoted 'Woman 1' and 'Woman 2'.

of Thiruvananthapuram. Their answer very quickly lets me know that this is not where their concern lies, and that I should turn my attention to the home.

NANNA: *What do you do to stay safe?*

[All the women laugh]

WOMAN[11]: [suddenly in English] *Husband very danger. Husband very danger. Safety no!*

It is clear from their laugh that they find my question hopelessly naive. This first answer implies that when the danger is in the home, there is no escaping it and 'staying safe' becomes a futile task. Making herself heard above the laughter, another woman steps in and offers an explanation. Joshy, forsaking the effort of interpreting, explains "So she was of the view that if you are able to accept man as man and woman as woman there will not be any issue with the safety, so all are equal, gender will be equal." According to the woman, safety is achieved when performing the role of the woman and thus accepting the role of the man. In her statement lies an implied condemnation of the women who are not 'able to accept man as man and woman as woman', and thus she reaffirms the notion that a woman is responsible for any instability within the family if she does not accept her role without opposition. Butler compares the performativity of gender to acting on a stage within which the terms of the performance are already set; the script might be enacted in different ways, but the script is there before the performance and 'the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene' (Butler 1988, 526). I assert that in accepting the "terms" of normative gender roles and living up to the script of the ideal woman, women believe to heighten their chances of safety and well-being. It is when women resist and oppose wifehood and the suffering it entails, and thus step out of the normative gender script, that they step into a

[11] Since the voices are indistinguishable on the recording from the group interview, I do not mention any names.

position of true precarity and danger. Butler argues that if one does in fact experience free agency within a repressive culture this is because one is not aware of the norms that govern one's situation (Joy et al., 1741).

I contend, that when the woman in the group interview expresses that if women are "able to accept man as man and woman as woman there will not be any issue with the safety", she does in fact describe the main strategy among the women - performing their gender in a way that makes them socially recognisable as 'good women'. In 'accepting woman as woman' the interlocutors have to first and foremost negotiate gender in accordance with the notion of the sacred wife.

Concerning the inferiority of women, Meena, who did not attend the group interview, made the following claim during her interview.

> MEENA: *Even when women are highly educated or women are loved, they like to live under the power of men, or under the custody of men, they like that. They are giving the dominating power to husband, in family life also, husband is the dominating power. (...) All the restrictions and rules are sitting with the ladies.*

Meena's statement suggests agency in the submission and that women are in fact 'giving' men the dominating power. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that she says 'they' instead of 'we', thus placing herself outside the category she describes. An interplay between identification with and distancing from the research subject was, as mentioned, a characterising both Ela and Meena's interviews.

Family life and motherhood

The family is the focal point of the narratives and the main source of both the meaning and violence they recount. Apart from wifehood, the primary role normally attributed to the Indian woman is the reproductive role and being the one responsible for the survival and wellbeing of the family as a whole (Negi 1997, 11), which was indeed emphasised by the interlocutors. All interlocutors talk of

violence as a normalised part of their everyday lives. Except Ela and Meena, all have been or are at present victims of domestic abuse, most often from the husband and sometimes also the family-in-law.

Many express having sought help from their family members when the abuse in their home became intolerable. In several cases, however, the women were turned away, because as Bijli puts it "my mother believes that the problems need to be solved within the family, not outside the family, so if someone else outside is involved this will be a big issue", which correlates with the notion of the private woman. Thapan argues that the urban family is for the Indian woman a site full of complexities and the source of both fulfilment and of oppression, and she quotes Kalpagam who contends that 'the ties that bind [*Indian*] women in their lives provide both securities (…) as well as liabilities that are often very oppressive." (Thapan 2009, 169). It is expected that a woman can manage the problems of the family within the privacy of the home, and it is not regarded an appropriate option to seek help elsewhere. To leave one's home when facing domestic problems is viewed as failure, since the woman should be able to withstand and endure even violence, and the family is upholding this notion.

Dhanya recounts having suffered harassment from her family-in-law, who would use degrading and mentally abusive language. Abuse from in-laws is a common issue in Kerala, and especially the practice of dowry give rise to disputes which can result in harassment of the new wife, in the worst cases resulting in what is called 'dowry deaths' (Phadke et al. 2011, 23; Belur 2014, 2). When the demanded amount of dowry is not met by the family of the bride, or the dowry is deemed unsatisfactory by the receiving family, it is well known to cause tension between the wife and the family-in-law which can in some cases lead to violence (Belur et al. 2014, 2). While dowry was rarely practiced in Kerala a hundred years ago, it is today the norm and poses a problem for many families (Lindberg 2014, 22). In northern Kerala the money transfer is referred to as gifts while in southern Kerala, where the fieldwork took place, it is explicitly acknowledged as and referred to as dowry. Across communities and class, it is very difficult for a woman in Kerala to marry without her family paying dowry (Raman 2010, 193).

From the interview with Dhanya it does not appear whether or not her family paid her husband's family dowry. Because the practice of dowry is so common, finding a husband for one's daughter without having to pay dowry is difficult, and thus if a family does not have the financial means for the payment, they will, I assert, be more inclined to settle for any proposal that comes, good or bad. In addition to the threat of violence and even suicide, one might wonder if perhaps

Dhanya's mother's financial position as a single mother, had an influence on her decision to accept the proposal. She accepted the proposal on behalf of her daughter, knowing that he was violent and that Dhanya did not like him. I suggest that she possibly did not dare to wait for another potential husband whose family might demand a substantial dowry. The cultural practice of dowry indeed puts an immense pressure on a family and is an important factor making female lives vulnerable. Because the mere prospect of having a daughter can hold a threat of financial ruin, dowry is argued to be one of the main reasons for female foeticide and infanticide today (Negi 1997, 13).

Within the realm of the home, and thus within the woman's area responsibility, lie the family and most importantly children. Motherhood is embedded in the notion of the 'good woman' and all interlocutors express that their children are their main concern. Bindiya, a woman from a small village in the outskirts of Thiruvananthapuram whom I interviewed at Don Bosco's premises, emphasises that her role as a mother is the most important aspect of her life.

BINDIYA: *It's been 13 years since the* [beginning of the] *marriage and now the only thing I have to do is the mother role. There is nothing else to do for me. He wants* [a divorce]*, but for me to cope with the situation it's not possible, not easy. He can abandon and go, but in the end of the day everybody will blame me for not taking care of the children. So I can't leave the children, and he just goes away.*

Most worries and anxieties expressed by the women concern their children's wellbeing and future success. Bindiya stresses the importance of motherhood by adding "I can only say later that I am a successful person if my children have a good life now". At one point, Bindiya ask me what I think about women in Kerala. I tell her that I believe they are incredibly strong, and she replies "We're not strong, we just want our children to stay alive." Prevailing in the narratives is an ambivalence towards children and family in general. On the one hand the women express a common desire to provide their children with the best possible conditions for a good life, and on the other hand they express deep frustration with the constraints and responsibility that comes with motherhood. While children are an important indicator of ideal womanhood, having children also increases the

vulnerability of the mother, since she not only has to protect herself but also her children. Also evident in Bindiya's statement is the frustration that she feels being bound to the home, while her husband is free to leave both physically *and* leave behind the familial responsibilities, which she cannot.

Back in the colony Dhanya recounts, with the clinking sound of her mother washing dishes in the next room, how she, after a few years of marriage, found herself fearful for her daughter's safety. She had started working as a dance teacher, but her passion for dance had soon become an instrument of more violence. Throughout their marriage, Dhanya explains, her husband never concealed his paedophile tendencies and as Dhanya got older he lost interest in her and instead directed his sexual urges towards the local children. He take advantage of her position as a dance teacher and lure young girls to their home by offering the prospect of free dance lessons.

> DHANYA: *There was a kid of 11 years old, my husband he was like 'come, we go and study dance' and he put some tablet in Pepsi so the girl child will get seduced. In front of me they used to do sex, my husband and the child. After that I was like 'I don't want this relationship', but my husband was like 'no we have to continue like this'.*

Being a compliant wife and fearing for the reprisals if she refused even drove Dhanya to obey when her husband told her to bring children to their home for him to violate and rape. When their daughter reached the age of his earlier rape-victims, Dhanya started to fear for her safety. At that point he had already violated their younger son, and the risk of him violating their daughter and thus ruining her future, drove Dhanya to claim for divorce.

Also Bindiya expresses fear for her daughter's future safety and struggles to protect her from abuse. Bindiya fights her husband's request for divorce, in order to ensure the wellbeing of her children, but says she refuses to remarry if one day her husband sees through his threats of divorce. When asked whether she would consider marrying another man, she says "I don't want to get married again, I feel vulnerable that the person don't come with good intention, because I have a girl, a young girl". An act of sexual violence is devastating to a young girl's life, not only physically and emotionally but also socially as she is immediately deemed not virtuous and outside the category of what is recognised as woman. Even children are not shielded from the stigma that

comes with physical violation, and thus being the victim of sexual abuse once means being in great risk of being abused again. Ela explained to me how a woman or a girl who has been ‘taken’ once is seen as someone who can rightfully be ‘taken’ again.

Suffering as a hallmark of womanhood

When I conducted the group interview, my field study was coming to an end and I had already gathered a great amount of material. Thus, my precondition for the conversation was information obtained from almost one month in the field and I was already aware that suffering seemed to be regarded as a female trait. Hence the questions I ask can seem almost leading, because they are characterised by my prior understanding. Also, as it appears from the following excerpt, I cannot distinguish between the female voices on the recording and I therefore cannot connect their statements to their narratives. The interview does, however, bring a valuable group account of shared understanding.

WOMAN: *It’s very difficult to get a divorce, what we do is face the abuse, not go to the divorce. We suffer as much as we can. The major factor of what we suffer is that we have children, we need to look after them, so we stay with the husband even if he is very abusive.*

WOMAN: *So what we do is suffer for our children, we need to take care of them, so we face it. No one will go for divorce in a single second, we think and then no. It would be the last case* [sic].

WOMAN: *It’s a social stigma. We would have to face a social stigma from the people around the colony. If I get divorced then people will think that I need a divorce, and that I have another relationship. That’s the reason I face the abuse of my husband and not get divorced.*

NANNA: *Do you share your stories?*

WOMAN: *Some person tell us 'you need to suffer, this is your husband, you need to do that for your kids.*

NANNA: *I've now heard many times that women can 'take' suffering - are women better at suffering than men?*

[All women answer affirmatively]

WOMAN: *As Kerala women we are able to suffer, we look after the family, it's our first* [sic]...

In the statement "As Kerala women we are able to suffer, we look after the family" lies the implied idea that suffering is an ability with value in regard to taking care of the family. Being 'able to suffer' implies that it is something one can pride oneself on as a woman. The statement somehow equates suffering with looking after one's family, as if it is a matter of course that the two are linked. Suffering is not necessarily seen as a separated act or something that happens *to* someone, it is, rather, something closely tied to family life and something a woman is supposed to do for the benefit of the family.

The notion of suffering is a prevailing theme in all narratives and I argue that the act of suffering becomes twofold as it appears to be both a condition and a precondition of womanhood. A *condition* because abuse, stigma, and precarity comes with having a female body (Spivak 1988; Thapan 2009; Lal 2011; Datta 2016a), and a *precondition* because the act of suffering becomes a constituting factor in the performativity of womanhood, and thus to be recognised as a real and good woman one suffers. When investigating female precarity in Kerala through the lens of performativity, it is my contention that this prevailing point demands our attention: because you are a woman you suffer *and* because you suffer you are a woman.

I find that this notion of suffering seems to be an integral part of female family life, something praised as a hallmark of womanhood, handed down from generation to generation. The expectation that women should be able to endure suffering, which many of the interlocutors express, is articulated very clearly by Bijli:

BIJLI: *My mother used to tell me 'it is you girls who need to suffer'. (...) You need to yourself survive the situation, so I followed her instructions. So I never think of going out of this* [marriage].

Bijli stays in the abusive marriage, because she has been taught by her own mother that a woman is supposed to endure suffering. I find that within the family home, the woman holds responsibility for all aspects and it is her task to uphold a virtuous devotion to her husband, no matter what. Thus, if problems arise, she is expected to shroud them in privacy and endure the situation. Domestic violence and abuse is so common that the 'skill' of suffering in silence (and in private) seems to become a marker of female purity. Indeed, if one does face violence it allows one to prove that one can in fact endure without complaining, and thus suffering becomes a tribulation through which a woman can show her worth and constitute her identity as a devoted wife and a virtuous woman. That the ideal woman suffers for the benefit of her husband is also prevailing in Indian popular culture (Datta 180, 2016a) and many places in Hindu mythology, which I will return to in the discussion of this thesis.

Entering Public Space: "*Rumours spread like wildfire*."

Working women

Women holding salaried jobs and earning money to the household is quite normal in Kerala. A high degree of female literacy and women entering the job market is indeed seen as a considerable factor in the positive social development of the state (Jeffrey 2004). Certainly, one common characteristic for the interlocutors is the fact that they all hold low-income jobs or participate in income generating workshops facilitated by the organisation Don Bosco. Since the degree of gender equality in the job market is a feature which is distinctive for Kerala, it is relevant to consider the role of salaried work in terms of negotiation of gender among the interlocutors. The fact that women working in salaried jobs have become the norm and that having a job outside the home is deemed an acceptable part of womanhood can be interpreted as an example of reproduction of gender taking place on a large scale (Butler 1988, 254). Thus, with women in Kerala entering the

job market, the gender script has changed collectively on a large scale, but how does it affect female performativity and how does it implicate the women's general agency?

Before I proceed to consider this question, let me draw on Jeffrey to further the understanding of Kerala, the so-called Kerala model, and the position of women. Jeffrey (2004) estimates that approximately half of Kerala's population followed matrilineal practices since it developed around the eleventh century until its abolition in 1976, and he foregrounds the legacies of matriliny as one of the main reasons for Kerala's positive development (Jeffrey 2004, 651). Since matriliny heightened physical mobility for women (ibid., 654), it formed the basis of girls attending school and women entering the job market. Female education first became prevalent among the matrilineal groups and high-status women, which then made it something to aspire to among low-status groups, and today families in Kerala commonly view women in jobs as assets for the family. Thus 'matriliny eased women into salaried work' (ibid., 658) and prompted female education. The acknowledgment of women in salaried jobs, Jeffrey emphasises, has in recent times contributed to, among other things, a lower birth rate and a rise in the age of marriage (ibid., 657). Jeffrey argues that the unique matriliny of Kerala is a cornerstone of its development, and an important condition to recognise in trying to explain the 'Kerala model' (ibid., 662). It is however important to note that matri*linity* differs from matri*archy,* and while families were organised through the line of females, the power holders and decision makers were still men, in and outside of the home (ibid., 648). While allowing some women a certain latitude, unknown elsewhere in India, the woman remained inferior to the man (ibid.).

Ela addresses Kerala's history and the aspect of matriliny and ponders over the idea of a society where the female position was one of power. She points out that perhaps most people in Kerala do not know this part of its history and adds in a regretful voice: "from that I have no idea how it turned out to be this". Ela goes on to describe women working in salaried jobs as something which can be attached to the female burden of being responsible for the family's wellbeing.

> ELA: *(…) a lot of male depend on the female for money, because most of them don't work. They don't have work maybe at times. They work for daily wages. So someday they do have wages and some days they don't. But the women some way or the other figure out what to do. And the male just sits there. (…) Some families are very open*

minded and let the girl work after the marriage but even then she is supposed to be the one who is responsible. If a child fails an exam, she is the one responsible. Fathers are not responsible.

In Kerala, women earning money seems to be incorporated under the notion of the good responsible woman who, in Ela's words, 'figures out what to do' in order to take care of the welfare of the family. However, instead of having an empowering effect on women, having a salaried job seems to put even more pressure on the women as it widens their area of responsibility. Among the interlocutors it does not seem to strengthen the women's sense of agency but rather adds to their workload and entails them having less time to do the same amount of domestic work. Also, it adds an extra risk of being judged by the community as one of the women adds during the group interview: "If a woman finds a job outside the colony, people inside the colony will think bad about her, that she is going to some job that is not suitable for her." Bijli, who works in a low salary job at Don Bosco Veedu and lives in the colony, supports her family financially with help from her parents, while managing the domestic work in the home.

BIJLI: *Now I am going for work and my parents are also supporting me to meet the daily needs, so he now believes he does not want to go for a job. I am bringing for him also. (...)*

NANNA: *Now that you are at work all day, who does the domestic work?*

BIJLI: *I myself is managing my duties.*

NANNA: *Do you have time for that?*

BIJLI: *I adjust my time for the work, so I wake up early in the morning and in the evening also I find my time to do the domestic work.*

Bijli says she 'manages her duties' and seems to normalise that all domestic work is within her area of responsibility. Bijli's story goes to show how much the women are willing to endure to stay a dutiful wife and thus constitute one's identity as woman. While being the main breadwinner and holding sole responsibility for the domestic work, she suffers the abuse of her alcoholic husband without complaining, because of the 'instructions' from her mother as earlier mentioned.

Negi (1997) suggests that the higher the level of female employment in a society, the better the chances for female survival, especially regarding female infanticide (Negi 1997, 12-13). She furthers the argument saying that not only is it connected to the survival rate of female children, but a woman's economic contribution to the household will in fact, according to Negi, enhance her 'power and status' in the home and in the community (ibid.). Later studies, however, suggest that while salaried work for women benefits the society in general, it does not necessarily entail less domestic discrimination on women. Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj (2015) find that even when a woman enters the job market she will most often remain responsible for the household chores as the 'structural dominance of males in households continues' and the 'cultural perceptions of women as subordinate to men' prevail (Joy et al. 2015, 1741-1743). While working day jobs outside the home, women continue to hold sole responsibility for the domestic chores, thus ending up with two jobs (ibid.).

Portraying privacy in public

The physical appearance and behaviour of a woman when entering the public sphere is seen as important indicator of her character. Leaving the sphere of the home, a woman is expected to project that she does in fact belong in the home (Phadke et al. 2011, 24). Therefore, in the public sphere a woman should visibly demonstrate that she belongs in the private sphere (ibid.), thus 'portray privacy'. Clothing, which can be seen as a means of portraying privacy, is a theme the interlocutors continuously return to, especially in regard to freedom and the lack thereof.

When the group interview was coming to an end, the women formulated some questions they wanted to ask me before I left, and the first question they asked was: "When we are wearing leggings people will look at us and tell [*sic*] 'why leggings?' and things like that. What do you feel in Denmark, do you have the freedom to dress how you like? We don't have that freedom to choose our own dress [*clothing*]. So do you have that freedom to wear your own dress [*sic*]?". Here it is, first of all, noteworthy that this is the question they choose to ask me. I was indeed wearing a blouse

and leggings, but over the leggings I wore a skirt, so the end result was that my body was covered just as much as theirs. However, other than the degree of cover-up, everything about my appearance was Western and clearly outside the norm. We all wore pants underneath other clothes, but while theirs were cotton pants peeping out under their saris mine were yoga pants with no virtuous signal value whatsoever. On the contrary it did indeed indicate that it was an ensemble put together for the occasion, not in any regard serving as an indicator of my purity.

Clothing is indeed an important factor in strategic gender performativity as it is the first thing that is 'read' and judged, even before one has spoken or acted in any other way. Wearing traditional clothes and not wearing leggings is a way for the women to articulate gender through performativity within the normative script of what a good woman is. The traditional clothes they wore were both a symbolic indicator of virtue and privacy and at the same time, to the women, a physical symbol of the constraint they felt. Their question clearly expresses a lack of felt freedom connected to not being able to choose their own clothing.

Also Ela, an employee at Don Bosco with whom I got well acquainted, expressed frustration with the clothes she felt she was expected to wear. In the interview, she reflects on the reason behind the traditional *dupatta* (a thin scarf/shawl), a clear marker, I argue, of the symbolic norms imbued in women's appearances.

Before I continue, let me take a moment to consider Ela's role in the field study. Ela has grown up in Dubai and she differs from the rest of the interlocutors in the way she reflects on the gendered conditions. She varies between talking about herself as a full member of society and making observations that analyses and problematized the field, which goes to show that it can be beneficial to have an interview person who is 'marginal' in their own society as it makes them more aware of 'assumptions and expectations' of said society (Davies 2008, 90). This shows in the way she shifts between 'us' and 'them' when talking about Indian women, sometimes including herself and sometimes talking as a witness. Her reflections go beyond the life world stories of the rest of the interlocutors. In our conversations she became my ally in the quest for deeper understanding, and in some sense Ela's reflections come to work as extensions of my own.

In a backroom at the Don Bosco shelter, I close the door behind us and turn on the recorder before entering into a conversation with Ela, following up our many previous talks. We talk freely about womanhood in India and what it entails, and Ela incorporates the words 'penis' and 'vagina' into the conversation so many times that it almost seems as if it is done for my benefit, to show me that she is not restricted like the women she talks about. She lets me know that she could never be

this candid if her colleagues were listening. At her workplace she has to appear a certain way, she says, she has to appear ‘pure’. Sitting on the chair across from me dressed in traditional clothes she pulls on the thin scarf, the *dupatta*, hanging loosely around her neck. With a discontented glance at the *dupatta* she starts pondering over its purpose.

> ELA: *They keep telling us 'you should wear a dupatta’. It's part of that too* [laughs] *I am not a person who dresses up like this casually, this is my work clothes. So, this shawl means... previously they used to wear it like this, it's basically to cover your breasts. From what I've understood, I think prior to maybe really long time back maybe there were no bras, or people didn't use that, so to hide the nipples they started using this. But time has changed, you know, you don't really need this* [laughs]. *It's a symbol, you don't really have to wear this. But men here think that if you don't wear this, you are actually exposing yourself and attracting yourself to be touched. Yea, that's how it's implied it seems, so... It was hard for me to accept it too. Being brought up outside and then coming here, and then I have to…*

Ela articulates very clearly how her clothes have a symbolic value, which helps her send the message that she is a proper woman who does not deserve abuse. She emphasises the symbolism by pointing to the fact that this item of clothes once had a function, but that this function is now outdated and unnecessary. She considers that perhaps at one point in the history of India, perhaps the dupatta covered women’s nipples that might otherwise show, but today when most women wear bras, it carries a symbolic message of properness and virtue. Simone de Beauvoir claims that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman”, and adds that a woman is, rather than a natural fact, a ‘historical situation’, with a body distinct from the cultural meanings it comes to bear. One does one’s body and the body is ‘an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by

historical convention' (Butler 1988, 521). Indeed, gender identity is not inherent or stable, but 'is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo' (Butler 1988, 520). While Ela expressed a discontent with the dupatta, she chooses to comply with the norm, because deviation from the norm will imply a risk. She makes it clear that she is "not a person who dresses up like this casually", and thus, while gender performativity is usually a result of structures preceding and superseding the 'I' (Joy et al., 1741), Ela's is an example of conscious symbolic performance complying to existing cultural norms and thus be recognised as a proper woman. What she describes as her 'work clothes' comes to constitute a uniform of 'female' that she wears not just for the sake of the job but to not attract unwanted attention in public. I assert that Ela wearing the dupatta is a case of gender being performed as a 'strategy' for cultural survival. The strategy-element is, according to Butler, characterising for all gender performativity, although usually exceeding general awareness (ibid.). Ela, however, shows a level of reflection on the subject and clearly has an awareness of the duress that permeates the situation.

Something else worth noting in Ela's statement is the 'they' who prescribes women to wear a dupatta. "They keep telling us 'you should wear a dupatta'", Ela says. 'Us', I think it is safe to say, refers to women - the focal point of the conversation. Her use of 'they' is, however, somewhat ambiguous. One might think that if the 'us' is female, the opposing 'they' is probably male, however, it is, I argue, more complex than that. 'They' could hold the meaning of perhaps her colleagues or parents, or it might refer to a more obscure entity of societal pressures. In the following part of the conversation, it is clear that she is talking about both men and women in general and her colleagues. She follows up her talk about the *dupatta* by telling me that she sometimes wears untraditional clothes, like jeans and shirts, in her free time, disregarding the cultural judgement that it might entail.

NANNA: *And how do you feel walking in the streets like that?*

ELA: *Yeah it's like they are mentally raping you. They are literally scanning you down from top to toe. They*

can't control themselves[12]*. Even the women. When you pass by the women, if you are wearing that, even my colleagues, they themselves will say 'why is she exposing herself so much'.*

In accordance with the norms guiding gender performativity, women are supposed to act as virtuous pure women and when Ela wears Western clothes she is noncompliant with the normative notion of female. For those who fail to perform gender within the normative gender script the consequences can in general, according to Butler, be punitive (Butler 1988, 522), and Ela's behaviour entails a risk of 'not counting' (Joy et al. 2015, 1742) as a woman and a danger of abuse. Ela expresses an awareness of the precarious position she is in when entering the public without traditional signifiers of purity and privacy, and that it will be considered her fault if an assault happens. Her defiance of the normative order reaffirms what is in fact considered proper and what is considered deviant.

When Ela states that "they are mentally raping you" I interpret this as involving not only a sexual gaze but a judgemental societal gaze from both men and women. Meena also articulates how Indian women are judged on their appearance and the way they carry themselves in public space, constantly under scrutiny of the gaze of the community.

MEENA: *In the 21st century men's mindsets have not changed, they are always considering and judging everyone, like, what is her outfit, and what way she sits, and our body language, things like that, but not our behaviour, not our culture, not our character, not our intelligence. Only thinking about what is she wearing, and they put that to 'oh she is very modern' or 'she is very cultureless'.*

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[12] "They can't control themselves" – a phrase I had encountered three years prior when I was reprimanded by the three women at the road side shop.

The notion that being ‘modern’ is considered equivalent to being ‘cultureless’, as it appeared from Meena’s statement, reflects a general thought prevailing in the field. Selective modernity is available within normative womanhood, for example is it in Kerala considered acceptable and even preferable for women to be educated, but specifically ‘Western modernity’ is deemed not proper for a woman. As Chatterjee (1989) contends, in colonial India the woman was deemed responsible for the protection of the private home, which was not to be corrupted by Western modernity. As men became more Westernised outside of the home, women had to compensate by asserting spiritual purity and maintaining the social cohesiveness of the family (Chatterjee 1989). Chatterjee asserts that when women in colonial India became the representation of the ‘Indian nation’, they were to uphold the spiritual superiority of the national culture through their behaviour, clothing, eating habits, religiosity, social demeanour. While men entered the outside world that was already colonised by Western modernity, women were to safeguard the private sphere and by all means resist Westernisation, thus, only ‘selective appropriation of Western modernity’ was deemed acceptable (Chatterjee 1989, 623-624).

Following Butler’s notion of performativity, bodies ‘act’ and reproduce categories of gender in relation to the entrenched social expectations of gendered existence (Butler 1988, 254). Gender norms can over time produce a number of prevalent ‘social fictions’ like the notion of a real woman, which thus ‘[*produce*] a set of corporal styles which constitute and reify womanhood’ (ibid.). For women in Kerala, dressing in a way that can be interpreted as improper or ‘Western’ can indeed entail severe consequences. Datta argues that in the name of preserving cultural values, assault victims are blamed for the violent incidents, even rape, if their demeanour is for example viewed as Westernised (Datta 2016a, 180), thus the notion that only selective appropriation of Western modernity is acceptable still prevails.

Therefore, when entering the public sphere a woman is expected to stay within the normative script of womanhood and uphold the sphere of privacy around her. As mentioned earlier, many Kerala women hold salaried jobs away from home and therefore have to enter public space regularly. Hence, they have the added challenge of performing within the normative script of the good private woman while in public. That entails both demonstrating visibly a valid purpose for being away from home and portraying an aura of privacy, like Ela does by wearing the *dupatta*. The *dupatta* becomes an expression of gender which performatively constitutes the ideal womanhood.

In their study of female navigation of public space in Mumbai, Phadke, Khan and Ranade (2011) point out several means of indicating acceptable reasons for a woman being in public. They

found that women would purposely bring large bags indicating grocery shopping, accentuate their work clothes indicating a respectable job, and if standing still they made sure to place themselves at a bus stop (Phadke et al. 2011, 24-25). Standing by a bus stop indicates *doing* something and thus makes a woman's presence in public valid. If not portraying a valid purpose, a woman will be deemed 'out of place' and she would thus have stepped out of the script of the recognizable woman (ibid.). Following that the idea of gender is created through the various acts of gender that one performs (Butler 1988, 522), the performativity of womanhood becomes vital for a woman entering public space. The performed acts, gestures and enactments produce the *effect* of an internal core on the surface of the body (Butler 1999, 173) and allows a woman to portray privacy through her demeanour and thus be 'read' and recognised as a woman. Corporal signs like a *dupatta*, a big bag of groceries or visible work clothes are thus important means of gender performativity when navigating in the public sphere as a woman in Kerala.

Social blame and judgement

The very first time I had planned to join Joshy on a visit to the colony, he called me to postpone it to the day after. A man from the colony had committed suicide, he said. Later, Bhavana talks about the incident and explains to me the precarious situation a wife is in when her husband dies, because the blame of his death is likely to fall on her. According to Bhavana, people will start saying things like "she's only the reason for his death", and she explains that this is the current situation for the newly widowed woman in the colony. The deceased man's mother had publicly pointed out his wife as the cause of his suicide, and now it was the common notion in the community that she had failed as a wife and was to blame for his death. "She [*the mother-in-law*] started it and now it spread everywhere" Bhavana says, "she [*the widow*] is now staying with her own mother". Any problems arising within the home are predisposed to fall on the wife, whether it is domestic violence, a husband's excessive consumption of alcohol, a husband's infidelity or the like.

The difficult situation this newly widowed woman is in, clarifies the logic behind the many suicide threats from men to women, I heard of during the fieldwork. When a man threatens a woman saying that he will commit suicide if she does not comply with his demands, as Dhanya's husband to her mother, this does in fact pose a real threat to the woman's life. This goes to show how judgement permeates women's lives even in incidents out of their control. Rumours about a

woman's character can be devastating for her if they suggest that she is failing as a wife, because, I argue, failing as a wife means failing as a woman. Jayanti talks about the risk of blame and judgement from the community and describes life in the colony:

> JAYANTI: *Woman or man, people are there to look into your affairs. Whether it is a man or a woman they talk anything as they like, and we live in a community were rumours spread like wildfire.*

Jayanti's marriage with her ex-husband was turbulent and full of quarrels and abuse. This resulted in a lot of talk around the colony and people assuming that she was not a good wife. "I heard people saying 'I don't talk to her'" Jayanti says, and she adds "I knew that I didn't have an illegal thing [*affair*] or something like that, but in their eyes they think that I had an illegal affair." To be positioned outside of the norm of the ideal wife is, I assert, considered to be the most precarious position for a woman, according to the narratives of the interlocutors.

From excerpts from my conversation with Meena it appears that the most dangerous aspect of being out in public is not the immediate risk of assault, but the risk of being judged by people in the community.

> MEENA: *No safety in our place. Women can't even walk around at 10 pm at night, we are not safe in the roads* [inaudible].
>
> NANNA: *What would happen? Assaults or…*
>
> MEENA: *No, now here it's not very problem, but we are afraid of somebody catching me* [sic]. [points to her eyes and mimics somebody watching].
>
> NANNA: *Ah the eyes watching?*
>
> MEENA: *Yes, we are not confident to walk. I am confident so I can walk, but I am not confident what he think, what he think, what he*

> *think, what he did, what he did. Scared about the society or relatives or friends, what they are thinking. That's all that bothers us.*

Again, it appears from this excerpt, that I was still at this point during the fieldwork mostly concerned with the immediate threat of violence when talking about 'safety'. When Meena, on the other hand, says "no safety in our place", she refers to the judgemental gaze of the community.

Phadke, Khan and Ranade (2011) argue that women's perceived virtue and respectability outweighs the concern for actual safety (Phadke et al. 2011, 29). Thus, when a woman feels compelled to 'demonstrate' virtue to protect her honour, she is inclined to do so even if it is at the cost of her physical safety (ibid.). I assert that acting within the normative gender script also serves to protect a woman's physical safety, as 'failing' as a woman can entail danger both socially and physically. When Meena concerns herself with what people might think and acts accordingly, this protects her social position and thus lessens the risk of violence. Similarly, violence and especially sexual violence, poses a threat to a woman's social position as it pulls her away from the perceived private sphere, where she is believed to belong, and strips her off the gender markers purity and virtue. Thus, as in the private sphere, the performativity of gender seems guided by the possible prospect of violence. As mentioned earlier, sexual violence in particular brings with it a stigma upon the victim, which enhances the precarity of her position even further.

Exceeding the judgement that follows being seen 'out of place', is the judgment that follows if a woman's body is violated. The general perception when a woman is sexually assaulted is that something is bound to be wrong with her. The contention is that a victim of a bodily assault must somehow be impure for the violation to have happened, and she is then forever deemed outside the category of pure womanhood, which entails risk of further violations. Thus, also deeds that are done *to* a woman, something out of her control, is interpreted as an indicator of her character and worth as a woman. This placement of blame upon female victims of violence is indeed, according to Datta (2016a) something that can be read as yet another form of violence (ibid., 180). Phadke, Khan and Ranade argue that saying that a woman should dress and act a certain way in order to keep safe entails that '*both* the person perceived to be the potential molester and the potential victim of the act of molestation are denied legitimate access to public space on these grounds.' (Phadke et al. 2011, 19).

Drawing on the fieldwork, it is clear that being talked about in a negative way in one's community is a serious matter. Thus, it is of utmost importance to navigate and perform gender in a way that does not raise suspicion to one's character inside and in particular outside the home. Refraining from leaving the house without a socially valid cause and not socialising with strangers seems to be, rather than being a strategy for staying out of harm's way while in the street, a strategy for ongoing cultural survival. Datta and Ahmed assert that the continued exclusion from social and physical space has an erosive impact on women's lives and should be viewed as a 'violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space' (Datta et al. 2020, 69).

As earlier argued, the judgemental gaze of the community is neither male or female and the expectation that women should endure suffering is passed on mainly from woman to woman. Likewise, the blame and stigma of not being a good woman are, I argue, upheld and reproduced by women themselves. When Harshini, who's story is unfolded in the following section, recounts her life story and the infidelity of her husband, she emphasises that the woman with whom he is having an affair is to blame. She even files a complaint to the police saying that "all responsibility goes to this woman". The interlocutors do, to a large extent, reiterate and confirm the notion that women hold the blame for any familial issues. Simultaneously articulating frustration regarding exactly the blame and judgement that fall to women, they do themselves participate in upholding this norm. The women continuously blame each other, even while reflecting upon the fact that women are blamed unfairly, which Meena both explains and partakes in in the following excerpt.

MEENA: *Even our mother or mother-in-law also blames daughter or daughter in law, like that, so even women are also thinking that we are making problems, and we are solving the problems, and we are the only person to face the problems, Our mindset are also like that, we are also thinking that if there is a problem then it is only for me and us. (...)*

And they [women] *are not fighting for themselves, not even talk about it, not even with their friends they are*

talking about the problems with husband, they are not sharing with anybody.

NANNA: *Why not?*

MEENA: *They are feeling unsafe or whatever. Even in my house, when I say something about my husband to my mother in law, she will listen, only then she will say to me 'you are the problem' or 'you said something and that's why he is like that'. So we keep silent.*

"They are feeling unsafe or whatever" Meena says explaining why women do not talk openly about their problems. Because of the risk of violence in the form of abuse, blame and possible exclusion from the category of the 'good woman', women are inclined to stay silent. If a woman complains, resists or in any way opposes her inferior position, she steps outside the normative gender script of the dutiful wife. It is evident from the interview with Meena that the norm of women having to endure their problems in silence is reaffirmed within the family by mothers and mothers-in-law, as by Bijli's mother who instructed her to suffer and solve her problems within the family. Women in India are, according to Lindberg (2014), inclined to stay silent about any reluctance they might feel about being the carriers of patriarchal traditions and it is considered inappropriate for a woman to complain and create family problems (Lindberg 2014, 39).

Here I find it worth noting how my initial worry as a researcher that I would be met with silence was proved completely wrong. The women's remarkable openness when participating in this research is striking in contrast to the general notion that a woman should stay silent and not voice her problems. I believe, it goes to show that the space of the interviews was a space outside the cultural space of normative gender performativity, and that articulating pain and suffering to me was apparently not compromising their womanhood since I was an 'outsider' and they accepted my position as a researcher.

Harshini refuses to keep her domestic problems a private matter, when she discovers her abusive husband is having an affair. She recounts a story of resistance and repercussions, and the following section will take its point of departure in her narrative.

Harshini: "*Because I was resisting*."

Harshini lives in the colony together with her husband and young son. She has a stern demeanour and a demanding presence, and she is almost always present when I attend the income-generating workshops facilitated by Don Bosco in the colony. We sit down for the interview in her home in the colony, Joshy and myself on two plastic chairs brought in from outside of the house and Harshini on a mattress on the floor. I am not entirely comfortable with the setup because her being situated on the floor and myself high on a chair does not exactly promote equality between and Harshini as the interviewee and myself as a researcher. However, I know not to challenge her hospitality and I know that this is within the social codes of Indian hospitality. With a rumbling sound, a metal fan in the corner of the room sets the warm air in motion, almost drowning out the sound of children playing in the street outside. I place my recorder on a small sewing table and point it towards Harshini and Joshy. Apart from playful children's voices entering through the open door, the three of us are alone in the house. I read her as being somewhat withdrawn, but when I ask her about her life, she talks for almost an hour. Without me having to ask follow-up questions she narrates her life story with astonishing intensity.

Harshini is 35 years old and has lived in the colony all her life. She has a Bachelor of Philosophy and prior to her marriage she worked in a bank. As a young woman, Harshini had strong opinions about what kind of man she wished to marry. She had a list of conditions concerning age, education and looks, but when she reached the age of 23 her father got impatient and urged her to accept a proposal from a relative. The man was not to Harshini's liking, but her father convinced her by telling her that the man was a civil engineer. Later this turned out to be a lie, in fact he had not finished primary school. Harshini today considers the proposal and her father's persuasion a matter of deceit. After marrying and her family paying dowry, Harshini moved into the house of her family-in-law, as it is custom. Ill will arose immediately and the two years she spent in the house of her in-laws were marked by conflict. After she and her husband got their own house, she discovered that her husband was an alcoholic and new challenges arose. During her pregnancy Harshini discovered that her husband was having an affair and when she confronted him he abused her so badly that a complication with the pregnancy occurred. Only less than a year prior to the interview, Harshini once again suspected that her husband was having an affair, because he wore new clothes and talked on the phone frequently. Late one night when he came home intoxicated, she confronted

him. He admitted to the affair and, to add insult to injury, threatened her by saying “if you tell this to your family members, I will commit suicide, I need you both”.

HARSHINI: *(...) so he told me ”if you go for divorce I will not be anymore, I will commit suicide”. (...) We had conflict and he just took a rope and tied it on the fan. For suicide. Because I was resisting. I shouted and the neighbours and my family members came. On that day I decided I needed to know who he was dating. So I got some sleeping pills. I added sleeping pills into the tea which I made for him. And he drank the tea, so then he fell into sleep. Then I took his phone and traced the mobile phone number. I tried it with True Caller* [caller ID app] *and I identified the person. Then I wrote a petition to the police - that my husband had an illegal affair. With the mobile number and everything. In the petition I wrote to the police that if anything happens to me and my child, all responsibility goes to this woman. ‘Everyday I have problems in my family and the main cause is this woman’, I wrote. (...) As a revenge for what I had done, he tied both my hands and both my legs to the bed, and he opened my mouth and poured beer. I didn’t report this. (...) he tied my legs and my hands, I was not able to take a breath. A full bottle I needed to drink because he was forcing me to drink. My head was rotated and I had trouble breathing. He never thought I would go to the police and report. He was saying he would commit suicide if I did.*

What I, in the beginning, interpreted as Harshini being withdrawn I soon after she started talking, read as pent up emotions. The way she narrates her story is characterised by stern perseverance and I even sense a glimmer of pride when she outlines the details of how she exposed her husband’s infidelity by questioning him while he was intoxicated, putting sleeping pills in his tea, taking his phone, and tracking the phone number with a caller ID app. I detect an underlying contentment in

her voice during this specific part of the interview, and I myself cannot help reacting with astonishment by the craftiness of her plan.

That Harshini does not want to put up with her husband's infidelity and lack of commitment to the family suggests self-reliance and a strong will, but the repercussions are brutal, when he ties her up and almost suffocates her in beer. Datta claims that this form of 'revenge', which Harshini calls it, against female agency can be seen in a larger scale across India as group violence against women is on the rise just as there is a rise in female literacy, mobility and employment (Datta 2016a, 180). I contend that this is an example of the general violence that a woman might suffer, in case she does not show endless devotion to her husband and shroud all familial problems in privacy. Thus, Harshini's story, while being a story of agency and resistance, affirms Butler's contention that failing to perform within the normative gender script can have punitive consequences (Butler 1988, 522). When Harshini involved both the community and the police in her domestic problems she did the very opposite of what is expected of a woman and what is deemed the proper way for a woman to act. She did not, like it is normatively prescribed, keep familial affairs private and suffer in silence. On the contrary she stepped out of the private sphere and made the issues with her husband a public matter. While many of the interlocutors have negative things to say about their position as women, the constraints of normative womanhood are rarely actually rejected. Harshini's story is indeed a story of resistance and opposition to traditional female norms, but it is also clear that her resistance has a limit.

Through her husband's violent 'revenge' of her rebellion, she is silenced in more than one way. Harshini does not report the violent incident, because a wife getting her husband in trouble puts herself in even more trouble – a condition which is recurrently explained to me. Harshini knows that her own livelihood and wellbeing is linked to her husband and if she were to cause him problems she would risk being blamed by the community. I contend that this is all part of Harshini's negotiation of gender, conditioned by both present and potential violence. Her husband knows that this is the circumstances and even adds the threat of him committing suicide if she were ever to report him. Offhand, this could seem like an idle threat as it would result in his own death and not hers, but, like earlier argued, his potential suicide would inevitably put her in a very precarious situation. In addition to the potential blame for his suicide, his death would also leave Harshini in a position of a single woman, which in

itself is a vulnerable position to be in. In the group interview a woman describes some of her personal struggles living as a single woman in the colony.

WOMAN *Nobody can visit your house. Single men cannot visit your house. People will start to talk about you. Bad things. (…) Another big difficulty is that when we stay at home during night as a single woman, people used to come and knock at my door, and this is because I'm living single.*

NANNA *Who?*

WOMAN *You cannot check which person it is, because we are not out of the house. Because of fear and things like that, so it's very difficult to know who it is. So it's very difficult to talk to a person in the colony with a friendly attitude.*

Harshini is thus left silenced and without further opportunities to resist, because the alternative to her situation right now might be worse. Thapan (2009) finds in her study that the interplay between compliance and resistance is a part of Indian women's everyday life experiences. The line between compliance and resistance is, however, thin and it is important to recognise that the very social structures restricting and oppressing the women are also the structures providing a security for their livelihoods, like those of kinship and community (Thapan 2009, 169-170). Harshini is caught in an ambivalent position between compliance and resistance and, in the words of Thapan, her gendered life becomes a site of perpetual negotiating between 'compliance and resistance, submission and rebellion, and silence and speech' (ibid.). Harshini comes up against a brick wall after reporting the issue to the police, when her husband abuses her 'as a revenge' and threatens her with suicide, thus making it very clear that stepping out of the normative gender script of the dutiful and self-sacrificing wife is not without consequences. This incident, she says, she does not report, because then her husband would 'be in trouble'. Her resistance is halted when the reality of her circumstances catches up with her and she is left without further opportunities to resist. This form of violence consisting in continual threats, risk factors and barriers faced by women, Datta and Ahmed conceptualises 'slow violence' (Datta et al. 2020, 69). Power over the gendered body is,

according to Datta and Ahmed, sustained through symbolic and material practices within violent everyday spaces (ibid.). Her "acceptance" of the current situation indicates, I argue, a circumstantial fear of what life might look like for her and her children if her husband left her, thus I contend that her negotiation of gender is guided by violence. She explains to me that at this point there is nothing more she can do other than stay and endure the situation. "So let me see if problems come" she says and starts crying without a sound.

Suicide and self-immolation

The interview with Bindiya is situated in Don Bosco Veedu's empty reception. On a scooter, with her two children on the back, she has driven all the way from her home in the outskirts of Thiruvananthapuram to meet me at Don Bosco Veedu. I only met her this once, nevertheless she recounts her life story to me with remarkable openness. Her life is characterised by a struggle to avoid divorce, which has left her in a position of precarity with an abusive husband, who wishes to marry another woman.

> BINDIYA: *...every day on a routine basis he comes to me and ask me 'why can't you just go die', 'why are you still existing?' and I'm staying in the house, because if I move out, people will start blaming me and the approach from people in the society will be very strong and since I have a girl and a boy, and the girl might get mature very soon, people might take advantage of me moving out and staying as a single mother.*

Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj deem the Indian women in their study, including both women with low and high status, precarious because their lives are without predictability and security (Joy et al. 2015, 1739). The way that Bindiya's husband questions her very existence because it is no longer convenient for him, is by no means an isolated case. Female suicides being abetted by both husbands and families-in-law is a general issue (Belur et al. 2014, 2). Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj states that Indian girls, because of potential dowry and inferior social position, are too often deemed 'disposable' which results in foeticide and infanticide (ibid., 1742), and I assert that this notion

continues throughout female lives. I argue that the gendered lives of women are conditioned by being a good wife and that if the role of the devoted wife is not fulfilled, like in Bindiya's case, a woman risks being deemed 'disposable'. It seems that the female life is first and foremost valued through a woman's relationship to her husband and her role as a devoted wife. Thus, having fallen completely outside the normative gender script, Bindiya finds herself and her children in a very vulnerable situation. An Indian woman is, according to Joy, Belk and Bhardwaj seen as 'legitimate only if she acts in culturally appropriate ways' (ibid., 1743). Both Bindiya and Harshini struggle to avoid divorce. They are bound to negotiate the violent space of marriage, because the alternative might be worse. Ela explains the concrete vulnerability of a divorced woman, which reaffirms the account of the single woman in the group interview, who experienced people 'knocking on her door' and being fearful to open.

> ELA *If a girl gets divorced and she is alone, maybe she doesn't have a child or even if she has a child, that gives the people around - the males around - the notion that they can actually go and have sex with her. If she is willing or unwilling, yeah.*

As I have argued throughout the analysis, the focal point of the women's lives and what constitutes them as women is their role as wives. Being in a 'good relationship' as opposed to a 'bad relationship' (a term used frequently by the interlocutors) is, I argue, defining for the success of a woman's life. So much so that women in 'bad relationships' in some cases see no other option than to resort to suicide. Many of the interlocutors have mothers, daughters, sisters or friends who have committed suicide and they describe it as a situation of having 'no other choice'.

NANNA: *Is it very important for a woman to find a good husband?*

BHAVANA: *Yes yes, I believe it's a great thing.*

NANNA: *Do you see many women who don't have a good relationship like you?*

BHAVANA: *There are a lot of people in the slum who don't have. So that's why many people commit suicide and things like that. My mother, because of the bad relationship with my father, she tried twice to commit suicide. And not only my mother, me and my sister also tried to commit suicide as children.*

NANNA: *How old were you?*

BHAVANA: *15 and 16 years.*

NANNA: *Is that common?*

BHAVANA: *When there is no good relationship, there is no other choice for the women. (...)*

NANNA: *How do people commit suicide?*

BHAVANA: *They use kerosene, we pour it onto our bodies and light it up. My mother in law also committed suicide like that. It's an emotional thing.*

NANNA: *Why choose such a painful way?*

BHAVANA: *This is the safest way to commit suicide, because definitely you will die. Other ways it's difficult. Why my mother stopped committing suicide was that when she poured on her body, I also poured on my body and she didn't want me to commit suicide, so she stopped.*

I am somewhat taken aback by the matter-of-fact voice in which Bhavana talks about self-immolation. The lack of drama regarding the subject is accentuated by the setting of the interview which is a backroom at Don Bosco's cakebox-workshop in the colony. Immediately after Bhavana has finished the statement above, we are interrupted by a woman who wants to ask Joshy about the preferred size of the cakeboxes. I struggle to remain collected, but Bhavana continues undeterred. She explains how finding oneself in a 'bad relationship' can put a woman in a position where

suicide is deemed the only option left. My immediate reaction to her story is astonishment over the brutality of self-immolation, and thus my spontaneous speculation goes to why one would choose such a painful way of committing suicide. Once again, the concern with physical pain comes from me and is in fact not a part of her narrative. Bhavana seems unconcerned with the aspect of pain and answers ‘because definitely you will die’. Thus, she disregards the importance of corporal suffering involved in self-immolation, which again suggests that suffering is considered unavoidable – a mere condition of female life. Self-immolation is a prevalent theme in Indian history and Hindu mythology (Bacchus 2013; Hess 1999), which I will elaborate on in the discussion.

Before proceeding to the discussion let me return to the interview with Bindiya, who has recounted a story of a husband who repeatedly urges her to commit suicide by saying to her 'why can't you just go die' and 'why are you still existing?'. The final minutes of the interview with Bindiya are interesting, partly because I, as a researcher, completely overlooked the significance of what she told me. Also, they highlight the subtle everyday negotiation of submission and opposition to the normative gender script that appear in seemingly trivial, mundane practices.

When I round off the interview with Bindiya, it is because her children are getting impatient. She has told me in detail about the strains of her abusive marriage and the struggle of trying to ensure the wellbeing of her children. At the end of the interview, the atmosphere in the room is emotionally charged after the violent narrative, which Bindiya has told with tearful eyes and a resentful voice. When her children start pulling at her skirts, because they want lunch, I ask her the final question I often asked to round off an interview. “Is there anything you would like to add?” I say, and she answers quickly without hesitation, making me curious what final thing she is so keen to tell me. After hearing the interpretation, I am left somewhat puzzled by the apparent triviality of the statement.

BINDIYA: *Me roaming around with my children on my own bike* [scooter]*, people might think that I don't know what I'm doing. I learned to drive on my own, because of my children. I bought the bike on my own. My husband used to use it, but eventually I started learning.*

I remember thinking that it was quite peculiar that she chose to emphasise exactly this. While I was surprised by the matter-of-fact voice in which Bhavana talked of self-immolation, I was indeed equally surprised by the passion with which Bindiya talked about her scooter. Why tell me about her means of transportation, I thought. It was not until I had coded all the material from the fieldwork and analysed it within the theoretical framework of this thesis, that I understood the norms prescribed to the woman, assigning her to the private sphere, and thus understood the weight of her words. A woman driving a scooter around in Kerala is not a trivial matter in Kerala. Just like loitering in Mumbai is not a trivial act for a woman, but a serious act with potentially dangerous repercussions (Phadke et al. , 2011). To leave the private sphere is one thing, but to 'roam around', like Bindiya phrases it, is indeed taking a giant step outside the normative gender script.

Discussion

A predominating theme characterising the women's lives is, as I have argued, self-sacrifice. In accordance with the prevalent theme of the devoted and self-sacrificing wife, I find it imperative to include a discussion of the concept of *sati* (widow-burning). Even though there is no direct mention of widow burning in any of the interviews, I assert that the rite of *sati* and the process through which a woman constitutes herself as *sati* is relevant for the scope of this thesis. The practice of *sati* and the Hindu mythology behind it is explored by great feminist scholars within the field of gendered lives in India (Mani 1998; Spivak; Chatterjee 1989; Hess 1999; Bacchus 2013) and proves relevant, I argue, in the discussion of normative womanhood in India. Although, the practice of *sati*, was outlawed in 1813 (Mani 1998, 19), and is no longer a common occurrence, still today *sati*-widows and self-immolating goddesses are widely worshipped, in India, for their self-sacrifice and ultimate devotion to their husbands (Bacchus 2013, 158; Hess 1999, 7).

The word *sati* has come to refer to the ritual of widow self-immolation, but the Sanskrit word itself means 'good woman' or 'virtuous wife' (Bacchus 2013, 171). Spivak (1988) reflects on what is inscribed in the word. *Sati* is the feminine form of sat, which is the present participle of the verb 'to be', in the sacred texts it is 'essence' and 'universal spirit' transcending any gender specificity. According to Spivak *sat* does 'not only mean being but the True, the Good, the Right', and thus, '*sati*, the feminine of this word, simply means "good wife"' (Spivak 1988, 305). Goddesses believed to have self-immolated are worshipped for their devotion to their husbands, 'iconized as

resting with divine serenity in the blaze, smiling as the flames envelop them' (Bacchus 2013, 158; Hess 1999, 7), and thus the notion of the devoted wife self-sacrificing for the benefit of the family remains ingrained in Indian culture (Joy et al. 2015; Chatterjee 1989; Mani 1998; Negi 1997).

Let me briefly recount the "ideal" narrative of the *sati*-ritual as described by Bacchus (2013): When a woman's husband dies it is seen to be, in one way or the other, an incident inflicted by her, the wife, through her lack of wifely devotion or other shortcomings as a woman. Widowhood is thus a self-inflicted state that leaves the woman in a position without *sat* (without virtue or truth) and inauspicious for not only herself but also people around her (Bacchus 2013, 173). Saying the formal *vrat* (vow) and constituting herself as a *sati* absolves her from this blame and responsibility and establishes her as a virtuous woman and, through the rite, a powerful agent. The act of *sati* is highly ritualised and in the hours before she is to mount her husband's pyre she gains a series of metaphysical capacities; the *sat* enables her to utter blessings, curses and prohibitions, and even perform miracles, like causing the pyre to self-ignite. While climbing the pyre the woman is joyful and even when she is shrouded in flames she remains serene and calm (ibid., 159). The rite and the speech-acts of the *sati* establishes the woman's volition and thus absolves the community involved of responsibility regarding her immolation (ibid., 162-163). If a woman regrets or attempts to escape the pyre after uttering the irrevocable vow this will bring great disgrace to her family and community, and ironically then, as Bacchus puts it, 'at the very moment a woman is deemed to be most powerful, it may be almost impossible for her to do other than reflect the desires of those around her' (ibid.).

I assert that the glorification of the suffering and self-sacrificing woman prevalent in the rite of sati corresponds with the interlocutors' articulation of suffering as a female trait. Furthermore, it is my contention that the story of the widow climbing her husband's pyre calmly, wilfully and silently smiling when the fire burns her body reflects the prevalent notion of an ideal woman suffering silently for the good of her family. From what has prevailed from the fieldwork, the repetition of acts constituting the women's gender bear a resemblance with the rite of *sati* constituting the *sati*-widow. I do not suggest that the female body is passively scripted with the cultural codes of sati but contend that the rite of the self-immolating wife imbues the norms that signify their gendered lives. Recognising that gender identity is constituted performatively, I assert that *sati* can be interpreted as both a 'result' of womanhood *and*, more importantly, constituting womanhood. Just like the sati-ritual constitutes the widow as a sati (and thereby a 'good women/wife'), the everyday act of suffering can be seen as a repetition of social norms maintaining

womanhood within the normative script. Thus, as earlier argued, because you are a woman you suffer *and* because you suffer you are a woman.

Suffering was by the majority of the interlocutors described as a female trait and marker of a woman's good character. The implicit and explicit violence of both private and public space appears in different forms, but to me as a researcher especially the violent use of fire caught my attention. Perhaps, at first, I was interested mainly in the spectacular brutality I felt came with the use of fire, which stood out to me more because the women themselves normalised and almost trivialised it in their accounts. The majority of deaths among young women are, as earlier mentioned, caused by fire (Belur et al. 2014, 2) and I have over the years, in India, time after time heard stories of women found burned to death under mysterious circumstances. Adding to this Dhanya telling me about her husband threatening her with the cooking gas and Bhavana telling me about women pouring kerosene on their bodies and lighting it up, I do indeed find a discussion of the mythology behind immolation relevant.

Hess (1999) links the story of the goddess Sita's fire ordeal to the rite of *sati*, because of the obvious similarities regarding wifely devotion as a key marker of womanhood (Hess 1999, 7). Hess investigates the Sanskrit text Ramayana, arguing that Rama and Sita symbolise the ideal man and woman in Indian society, which is a reason why expectations of female chastity continue to persist (ibid.). Hess recounts the story of Sita, wife of Rama, who is abducted by a demon king and throughout the torment has her attention fixed on her 'husband-lord, to whom she bears unwavering devotion' (ibid., 5). When Sita is finally returned to Rama, he treats her with cruelty and calls her virtue into question. Rama addresses the weeping Sita and says to her "He has looked lustfully at you. (...) Surely Ravana [*the demon king*], seeing your ravishing, celestial beauty, did not respect your body when you dwelled in his house". After giving a spirited speech, Sita then demands for the rising of a pyre with the words "These unjust reproaches have destroyed me, I cannot go on living. Publicly renounced by my husband, who is insensible to my virtue, there is only one recourse - the ordeal by fire." (ibid. 6). Hess quotes a Hindu scholar who declares that "Sita is the noblest flower of Indian womanhood, devoted to her lord in thought, word and deed ... There can be no better text-book of morals which can be safely placed in the hands of youths to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character" (as quoted in Hess 1999, 2). According to the rite, the 'worldly stain' of Sati's abduction was removed in the blazing flames and the fire ordeal serves as a culmination of her devotion to her husband (ibid., 6).

If Sita indeed is a symbol of the ideal woman, 'a flower of Indian womanhood', her devotion to Rama is the ideal female behaviour (Hess 1999). Even when her husband abuses her, wrongly accuses her and renounces her, she stays true in her devotion and virtue. She utters that with her husband having publicly renounced her, she is left with only one option – the fire ordeal. I find it relevant to highlight how this statement from Sita, the ideal woman, resembles Bhavana's statement about suicide in the colony: "When there is no good relationship, there is no other choice for the women. (…) They use kerosene, we pour it onto our bodies and light it up." The rite prescribes that the violence and accusations has left a 'worldly stain' on Sita that is removed with the ordeal of fire. This, I argue, constitutes the self-immolation as a powerful performance of female virtue.

While ordinary suicide is seen as shameful in the scriptural doctrine of the Dharmasastra, self-immolation in the form of *sati* is an exception in the discourse of the scripture (Spivak 1988, 299). The sanctioned suicide of the *sati* loses the phenomenal identity of the 'suicide' through formulaic performance (ibid.). If, however, a widow does not burn herself in the fire of her husbands' pyre she is 'never released [*mucyate*] from her female body [*strisarir* – i.e., in the cycle of births]' (ibid., 303). The sanctioned female suicide of the *sati*-ritual does, according to Spivak, identify the individual agency in the act – kill yourself on your husband's pyre now, and you may kill your female body in the entire cycle of birth' (ibid.).

As Chatterjee, Spivak also points to the significance of *sati* in colonial India as the ritual became a signifier of reverse social change in colonial India (Spivak 1988). In the words of Thakur, many 'had come under pressure to demonstrate, to others as well as themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture. To many of them *sati* became an important proof of their conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky.' (Ibid., 298). A 'proof' that fell to women to perform, compliant with the nationalist notion of the woman as the bearer of true Indian identity. According to Spivak, the abolition of *sati* is generally understood as a case of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (ibid., 302), which again effaced the ambiguous free will of the female. Against this was, Spivak argues, 'the Indian nativist argument, parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: 'the woman actually wanted to die', which hides the violence involved (ibid.). Mani who pulls forth the voices of the widows and attends to the female recounting of fear, coercion and the distresses of widowhood, calls the notion that the rite is a voluntary act of duty a 'false and violent fiction' (Mani 1998, 196).

Bacchus (2013) permits us to consider the practice of *sati* as devoid from neither volition or violence and offers a way of theorising on female subjectivity with the notion that both agency and

violence can co-exist. Like with the *sati*-widow, one might assert that the agency exercised by women when they negotiate gender, somewhere in the space between resistance and compliance, is both shaped by and expressed within violent social structures (Bacchus 2013, 171). While the women do express a degree of awareness about the cultural norms that govern their situation, they continuously reiterate and re-constitute the notions of normative womanhood. Bacchus dissolves the binaries between violence and volition, coercion and self-will, victimisation and agency (ibid., 170), but emphasises that even though violence might be consented to or even self-inflicted, it is indeed still violence. She deems it 'impossible to represent *sati* as anything other than an instance of patriarchal violence – as material violence against one woman and symbolic violence against all women' (ibid.). Women in Kerala using self-immolation as a means of suicide can, I argue, be perceived as a consequence of violent patriarchal structures prescribing a normative womanhood that leaves women with no other option than self-sacrifice. Thus, I contend, self-immolation becomes a marker of female negotiation of gender as it releases a woman from the violent structures of womanhood *and* at the same time constitutes the normative gender script, prescribing suffering and self-sacrifice to the ideal woman.

Conclusion

Drawing upon empirical fieldwork in Kerala this thesis has investigated women's lives and how violence affects their negotiation of gender. The argumentation is a product of my interpretations of the fieldwork, thus it cannot be taken as a representation of a generalisable reality.

This thesis has shown that violence and coercion are prevalent on many levels both physically, mentally and socially and seem to create a conditioned space within which the women negotiate womanhood. According to the fieldwork, the most explicit violence occurs in the private sphere where many women endure domestic abuse and constraints regarding where they can go and how they can behave. The normative gender script prescribes women to act as sacred, dutiful wives devoted to their husband, and women appear to negotiate gender according to this normative script of the ideal woman. The cultural norms assign them to the private space of the home, which they carry with them symbolically when entering the public space. Therefore, the women's lives are characterised by normative gender performativity in the private sphere and the public sphere

respectively, and the gender performativity includes the everyday challenge of portraying purity, privacy and familial dedication.

Living up to the notions of the traditional dutiful woman, who sacrifices herself for her husband and the good of her family, is, I contend, at the centre of the women's gendered lives. Violence is occasionally contested and patriarchal strains cause frustration among the interlocutors, but the violent gendered structures are rarely truly defied.

I argue that not living up to the notions of normative womanhood can be determining for a woman's possibilities in life, because the consequential stigma puts her in a vulnerable and precarious position both physically and socially. Thus, I argue, navigating between compliance and resistance in a way that does not exclude one from the category of normative womanhood is vital, and gender negotiation becomes a strategy for cultural and actual survival. I contend that this thesis has shown that women's lives are characterised by negotiation of gender in accordance to the normative script of the virtuous wife, as well as perpetual negotiation of when to resist and when to stay silent, based on a circumstantial fear of violence.

I assert that the normative gender script of the self-sacrificing wife contains important elements of endurance and suffering, hence endurance and suffering becomes performative female acts. It is, therefore, my contention that the suffering caused by gendered violence is ambiguous. Apart from the obvious negative impact physically and mentally, suffering compromises women's lives in the sense that it suggests that she has somehow failed, while simultaneously constituting her womanhood and providing her with the dubious opportunity to prove that she is able to endure in silence as a virtuous woman would. Likewise, I suggest that there is both agency and performativity of gender to be found in self-immolation, which is sometimes considered a woman's last resort.

Within the social matrix of Indian culture, violence and suffering seem to, to a great extent, guide the negotiation of gender because the repercussions for a woman whose acts do not constitute her gender within the frame of the normative good and virtues woman can be severe.

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