SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

Exploring Societal Challenges in the Malaysian Sikh Community: Perspectives and Insights

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the social issues confronting the Sikh community in Malaysia. Despite the noteworthy contributions made by the Sikh community to Malaysian society, they encounter social challenges with far-reaching implications. This study explores the complex social issues affecting the Sikh community in Malaysia, particularly emphasizing three core areas: the economy, health, and family dynamics. To capture the subjective experiences of individuals, the researchers employed qualitative techniques, specifically conducting comprehensive interviews featuring open-ended questions. The interviews yielded three principal themes: generational conflicts, drinking habits, and financial instability. These themes highlight the imperative for transforming societal norms within the Punjabi community. The insights from the Malaysian Sikh community suggest significant implications for research and practice, indicating that addressing issues like alcohol use, marital strain, and gender dynamics requires culturally sensitive approaches. Collaborative efforts among religious leaders, community organizations, and professionals are necessary to create effective solutions tailored to this community's unique needs. The study holds substantial value in its potential to inform targeted interventions and support systems that foster a more inclusive and harmonious society, irrespective of its members' cultural or religious backgrounds.

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INTRODUCTION

Renowned for its remarkable diversity, Malaysia is home to a dynamic Sikh

community that has made tireless contributions to the nation's advancement and cultural tapestry. Despite comprising only a small fraction, estimated between 80,000 to 100,000 individuals of Malaysia's total population of 32.7 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2022), the Sikh community has made significant contributions to the country's diverse society across multiple domains. However, like any other minority group, Sikhs in Malaysia face social issues that can have far-reaching consequences on their overall well-being. While there has been a gradual increase in studies conducted on the Malaysian Sikh community in recent years (Gill et al., 2015; Gill & Kaur, 2008; Kaur, 2002, 2003, 2012; Kaur & Kaur, 2022), researchers in this current study believe that further research is necessary to comprehend the challenges affecting this community. This study delves into the intricate web of social issues impacting the Sikh community in Malaysia, particularly focusing on three main aspects: economy, health, and family. As it is widely acknowledged, societal contexts evolve due to various factors like globalization, technological advancements, and changing cultural norms. Therefore, this study holds significance in acquiring a nuanced comprehension of the ways in which these changing dynamics influence the Sikh community and its societal challenges. Research findings can empower members of the Sikh community to advocate for their rights and address systemic injustices. It provides evidence-based insights that can be used to raise awareness, mobilize resources, and influence policies addressing social issues affecting the community.

Sikhism and its Theological Perspective

Sikhism, a faith that emerged more than 550 years ago, holds a pantheistic belief wherein God is perceived as the encompassing universe and all its elements or as the doctrine that sees the universe as a manifestation of God. This perspective on life is characterized by its practicality, rationality, and contemporaneity (Kaur, 2012). Sikhism finds its spiritual guidance in the Guru Granth Sahib, a scripture considered authentic, with God Himself as the author, who revealed the truth to the Sikh Gurus, regarded as messengers of God, and commanded them to spread it to humanity across the globe. Notably, the Gurus wrote the philosophy and authenticated themselves during their lifetimes, setting it apart from others compiled posthumously (Kaur, 2012). The scripture has been passed down through generations without any alterations, preserving its original content.

Sikh spirituality centers on understanding and experiencing God, with the ultimate goal of uniting with Him. The faith emphasizes living a virtuous life while balancing spiritual and worldly responsibilities. Sikhism promotes values like love for God, truthful living, peaceful coexistence, justice, and contentment, embodying the highest levels of human righteousness. Sikhs are encouraged to live these virtues daily, actively engaging as responsible community members, demonstrating integrity, and showing

compassion (Kaur, 2002, 2003; Kaur & Gill, 2022). These values are practiced through four fundamental principles that reflect the Sikh way of life: (i) *kirat karo* (honest hard work), (ii) *wand chakko* (sharing one's earnings with the needy), (iii) *naam japo* (contemplating and remembering God in thoughts, words, and actions), and (iv) *seva* (voluntary selfless service to humanity) (Kapur & Misra, 2013; Kaur, 2012). It is important to note that Sikh individuals are not isolated but rather interconnected with their family (*parvaar*), society (*samaaj*), and the larger community congregation (*sadh-sangat*) (Sandhu, 2004). The Sikh identity involves preserving the body's natural form, such as maintaining uncut hair, while also nurturing the character developed through the teachings of the scripture, which is considered an accomplishment for a Sikh (Kaur, 2012).

Economy Issues

Financial problems like strain, job loss, debt, and money disagreements can stress Sikh and other families, causing conflicts and straining relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this, with many households facing income drops and moving from higher to lower income levels. In 2020, households earning less than RM2,500 increased by 12.5 percent, and 20 percent of families from the M40 group, which makes between RM4,850 and RM10,959, dropped to the lower-income B40 group. The T20 group, representing higher-income households, also felt the impact as 12.8 percent transitioned to the M40 group. The

decrease in income was more notable for B40 and M40 households compared to the T20 group (DOSM, 2021).

Many Malaysians, especially those in the B40 group, have faced tough times during the pandemic. Surprisingly, there's been little academic research on the economic struggles of Malaysian Sikhs. There is a common misconception that Malaysian Sikhs are generally well-off economically, but this notion does not hold true for the entire community. Though there are successful Sikh entrepreneurs, many Sikhs haven't thrived lately. Furthermore, the Sikh population has struggled to keep up with Malaysia's current socio-economic pace. Income inequality hampers the progress of the Indian ethnic community in urban areas—many struggle to afford basic necessities like food, rent, and transportation due to low job income. Poor budgeting and unnecessary spending worsen this financial strain (Jeyakumar, 1993). Rising urban living costs lead people to seek new jobs or resort to unhealthy lifestyles (Sandhu, 1970).

Studies by organizations like the Asian Development Bank (2002) and van de Walle et al. (2001) consistently find that ethnic minority groups worldwide tend to have higher poverty rates compared to the majority. These minorities often struggle to access job opportunities and are frequently relegated to low-wage positions despite improvements in their education and qualifications (Mail Online News, 2007, as cited in Gopal, 2013). A news article focusing on impoverished Sikhs in Perak,

Malaysia, sheds light on the poverty situation among Malaysian Sikhs. Initially, the former Chief Minister of Perak, Zambry Abdul Kadir, believed that Malaysian Sikhs didn't face severe socio-economic challenges like other communities. However, local leaders revealed there were approximately 1,500 hardcore poor Sikhs in Perak, accounting for about five percent of the total Sikh population of 28,000 in the state at that time (HT Correspondence, 2009).

Health Issues

The study primarily focuses on alcohol consumption, particularly its health implications, among Malaysian Sikhs. Regular consumption of hard liquor like Whiskey and Scotch is common among Punjabi Sikhs, with a notable lack of awareness about the health risks associated with alcohol use in this community (Thom et al., 2010). Countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, and India are increasingly acknowledging the need to address alcohol abuse within the Punjabi Sikh community on a national scale. However, similar studies in other countries, including Malaysia, are notably lacking. Due to the cultural acceptance of alcohol consumption, many Punjabi Sikhs tend to overlook this issue. Sikhs in the United Kingdom are identified as having the highest risk of alcohol-related health problems compared to other ethnic minorities (Galvani & Guru, 2020). A survey by Gleeson et al. (2019) found that 27 percent of British Sikhs knew of someone in their family with alcohol addiction.

Limited research exists on alcohol consumption among Malaysian Sikhs, with only a few studies briefly addressing the issue. Both Gill et al. (2015) and Singh (2014) recognize alcohol consumption among Malaysian Sikhs as a significant social issue requiring serious attention. Singh (2014) emphasizes that the community often overlooks the social illness caused by alcohol consumption, adversely affecting thousands of Sikh families. Excessive alcohol consumption is sometimes perceived as a sign of success. Singh (2014) notes that Malaysian Sikh women and children often end up abandoned because they lose their male family members, and this can be tied to alcohol consumption. Excessive drinking can lead to deaths among men, leaving their families without support. It can also cause family breakdowns, with separations or divorce leaving women and children on their own. Additionally, alcohol-related job loss creates financial stress, pushing families into tough economic situations. Alcohol use can also lead to domestic violence, forcing women and children to leave for safety. These scenarios illustrate the profound impact that alcohol consumption can have on family cohesion and the well-being of women and children in the Malaysian Sikh community. Despite this, little progress has been made by community leaders or the community itself to address the issue. Even occasional sermons from religious leaders advising against alcohol consumption often go unheard.

Family Issues

In Sikh society, as in others, individuals often face various family issues despite Sikhism's emphasis on strong family values and nurturing harmonious relationships. The generation gap, characterized by differences in values, beliefs, and lifestyles between older and younger generations, is a common challenge leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, and strained familial bonds. This issue is not unique to Sikh society but is observed in diverse cultural and religious communities (Mooney, 2020). Additionally, gender inequality can exist within Sikh families despite Sikhism's promotion of equality. This inequality may appear through the unequal distribution of household responsibilities, limited decision-making opportunities for women, or favoritism toward male children over female children (Kaur et al., 2022a). Parent-child conflicts, arising from differing expectations, lifestyle choices, career decisions, and cultural assimilation, can also arise within Sikh families as well as in other societies.

Despite being a minority group, the Sikh community in Malaysia has one of the highest divorce rates in the country, which is a paradoxical situation. Even though divorce is generally taboo within the Malaysian Sikh community, it continues to happen. According to the DOSM (2022), there was a notable increase in Muslim marriages by 21.0 percent in 2021 (176,002) compared to 2020 (145,443). Conversely, Muslim divorces decreased by 16.4 percent in 2021 (31,650) compared to 2020 (37,853). On the other hand, non-Muslim marriages declined by 4.7 percent in 2021 (38,941) compared to 2020 (40,854), while non-Muslim divorces surged by 30.4 percent in 2021 (12,284) compared to 2020 (9,419). These statistics illustrate a declining trend in non-Muslim marriages and an increasing trend in divorces. Many individuals undergoing divorce lack comprehensive knowledge of the legal framework governing such matters. Rahmat et al.'s (2019) study supports this, revealing that non-Muslim couples face emotional burdens due to their limited understanding of civil family law. Similarly, Kaur et al.'s (2022b) research found that Malaysian Sikh couples generally lack understanding of Malaysian Family Law. This study underscores the importance of Sikh couples familiarizing themselves with family law to protect their rights in difficult divorce situations. Many participants in the study felt trapped in unhappy marriages due to considerations like children or family pressure.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To accurately capture the subjective experiences, the researchers adopted a comprehensive interview approach using qualitative techniques (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). It involved crafting open-ended questions where the researchers ask broad, non-restrictive questions that allow respondents to answer in their own words, providing detailed and nuanced responses. This method elicits deeper insights and understanding of a particular topic or experience rather than merely seeking yes-or-no answers or numerical

data. Purposive sampling was employed to select primary participants with relevant experiences pertaining to the phenomena under investigation (Boyd, 2001; Creswell, 1998). Additionally, snowball sampling techniques were utilized to broaden participation, whereby current informants were encouraged to suggest others for interviews. The number of respondents was decided using a saturation point, attained at respondent number 12.

Twelve individuals were chosen for inclusion in the study based on specific criteria. Firstly, they were required to identify as Sikh, adhering to the Sikh faith. Secondly, they needed to be citizens of Malaysia, thus ensuring a focus on individuals within the local context. Lastly, participants were either currently facing or had previously encountered various social challenges or issues in their lives. These criteria were established to ensure that the perspectives and experiences gathered would be relevant and representative within the research context. Pseudonyms were allocated to participants, and their informed consent was obtained before proceeding with the study to safeguard confidentiality and privacy.

During the interviews, the participants' comfort level was considered, and the interviewer ensured that the questions were acceptable and proceeded accordingly. Interviews were carried out in three languages: Punjabi, English, and Bahasa Melayu, according to each participant's preference. This approach aimed to accommodate the linguistic diversity among participants and ensure effective communication and understanding during the interview process. Each interview, lasting approximately 90 minutes, was recorded. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved, indicating no introduction of new viewpoints or perspectives.

The interviews were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method allowing researchers to describe, interpret, and understand how respondents perceive and make sense of their lived experiences. According to Smith et al. (2009), "there is no right answer to the question of...sample size" (2009, p.56) when it comes to employing IPA methodology. On the other hand, Coyle (2014) stated that an average sample size of one to twelve people is sufficient for IPA. Themes were identified through a 'bottom-up' approach, emerging directly from the data rather than being influenced by existing theories. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed for accuracy. Researchers familiarized themselves with the transcripts by reading them repeatedly and noting significant portions. Analytical rigor was ensured through discussions among the authors to validate identified themes. Following the categorization of themes or the essence of lived experiences, a 'validity check' was performed by revisiting participants to confirm the accuracy of the captured essence. Maintaining objectivity and integrity, researchers consciously separated their own experiences from those of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the participants reflect the diverse makeup of the Sikh community. Among the 12 participants are four young adults in their twenties, five aged between 32 and 45, and three elders in their sixties, each offering unique viewpoints. Seven participants are female, while five are male, primarily from Peninsular Malaysia. Specifically, four are from Kuala Lumpur, three from Selangor, two from Negeri Sembilan, one from Penang, and two from Perak. They come from various backgrounds, including lorry drivers, housewives, educators, entrepreneurs, guards, and retirees, which enriches the discussions with their varied experiences. Among the participants, seven are married with two to four children, four are single, and one is a widower with three children. Educationally, five have bachelor's degrees, three have SRP qualifications, three have master's degrees, and one has a PhD. In terms of income, five participants earn between RM4000 and RM6000 monthly, four earn between RM1000 and RM3000, two earn between RM6001 and RM8000, and one has no income. The interviews revealed three primary themes: generational conflicts, drinking habits, and financial instability, which will be explored further in this section.

Generational Conflicts

Generational conflicts arise from differences in values, beliefs, and lifestyles between older and younger generations within families or societies. These tensions can manifest in various areas, such as communication styles, career aspirations, and parenting approaches, impacting family dynamics and relationships. Gurnoor Kaur noticed from a young age that her mother favored her brother due to his gender, resulting in unequal treatment toward her and her sister.

> The notion of being the '*ikala munda ghar da*' (sole male of the household) is simply an indirect form of differential treatment in any Punjabi household. Both my sister and I are expected to learn how to make *rotiyan*, cook a whole feast, and manage all the household chores. However, such expectations are never placed upon my brother. Why? Because it is assumed that he will bring a '*ghar di nauh*' (daughter-in-law) who will take care of cooking and cleaning for him. This situation is incredibly unfair and frustrating! (Gurnoor Kaur, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

Akalmeet Singh recounted an incident in which he observed his sister being compelled to abandon her dream of pursuing a Ph.D. due to their parents' preoccupation with finding a suitable life partner, considering her age, which was in her thirties.

> The matchmaker herself commented to my sister that she is becoming '*budhi*' (aged) and that if she postpones her marriage, she will only have leftover options, such as divorced or widowed men. This deeply saddened me on behalf of my sister and made me realize that if I have a daughter someday, I will

never subject her to such treatment. Girls have so much more to offer than simply getting married (Akalmeet Singh, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

Whereas, according to Birsaroop Kaur, her sister is in an unhappy marriage where her husband verbally abuses her and doesn't support their children financially. Despite this, their parents insist she be patient and expect Birsaroop Kaur to provide constant aid. The parents feel entitled to intervene because they arranged the marriage.

In my attempts to discuss the possibility of divorce, my parents always silence me, claiming that it's inappropriate to suggest such things to my sister, especially considering she has two young children. Similarly, when I bring up the topic of finding a partner on my own, they respond with statements like, "*Asi teri bhen di help karde aa because asi munda labhiya. Je usne ape labhiya hunda munda, phir ni asi help karde*" ("We help your sister because we arranged her marriage. If she had found a partner on her own, we wouldn't assist her and let her face the consequences alone"). Regardless of what I say to my parents, I find it impossible to change their perspective. It's disheartening to think about the lengths we must go to fulfill our parents' expectations (Birsaroop Kaur, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

Ekjot Singh, a person who identifies as gay, shared that he is currently concealing his sexual orientation from his family. Despite being open about his true self with his friends, he has not yet disclosed this aspect of his identity to his family.

I'm terrified of what the future holds. I get panic attacks just thinking about how I'll ever tell them about my orientation. I come from a traditional family that is deeply involved in temple activities, and my dad holds a position on the gurdwara committee. Can you imagine the chaos my news will cause? So, I've decided to leave the country under the guise of furthering my studies soon. Maybe once I'm away from my parents physically, I'll find the courage to reveal my true identity to them. It pains me to keep this from them, but I wish they were more understanding (Ekjot Singh, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

Drinking Habits

Drinking habits encompasses cultural or social practices related to alcohol consumption within a community. It can involve rituals, customs, and norms regarding when and how alcohol is consumed. Many participants discussed the troubling prevalence of alcoholism in their families. Gurnimrat Kaur, for example, recounts the profound impact of alcoholism in her own family. She notes that several of her uncles, relatives, father, and brothers struggle with excessive drinking. Unfortunately, she has witnessed the loss of multiple family members due to alcohol-related accidents and health issues.

My father experienced a stroke some time ago, and the doctors explicitly advised him against consuming alcohol. However, he disregards their warnings completely. Despite my mother's continuous reminders about the dangers of alcohol, he responds by shouting at her and then casually dismisses her concerns with statements like, "*Ik peg naal ni kuch hunda, thand rakh*" ("One drink won't do any harm, so relax"). This situation deeply saddens me, particularly because I empathize with my mother, who had to care for him during his previous health struggles (Gurnimrat Kaur, personal communication, June 2, 2023).

The interview excerpts highlight the challenges and negative consequences of fathers' excessive drinking despite their health issues being disregarded. Participants express emotions of embarrassment, worry, and frustration due to their fathers' behavior, as well as a lack of understanding or support from relatives.

Family gatherings are a source of distress for me because my father's behavior at these events is embarrassing. He eagerly attends these functions for free alcohol and ends up ignoring us, opting instead to sit at the bar with relatives. As he gets intoxicated and acts foolishly, people laugh at him. He then compels my mother and me to dance by forcefully pulling us onto the dance floor. Despite suffering from high blood pressure and diabetes, my

father shows no concern (Hargun Kaur, personal communication, June 2, 2023).

Our biggest challenge was convincing my father to quit drinking despite being a heart patient and receiving medical advice against it. Despite knowing his condition, our relatives showed no concern. Whenever they gathered with him, they engaged in prolonged, excessive drinking, causing us great worry at home. Sadly, my father passed away last year due to a stroke and heart attack. Astonishingly, those same relatives attended his funeral and had the audacity to criticize his drinking habits, ignoring their own role in encouraging his excessive alcohol consumption. I wish my father had understood how his drinking affected our family (Harkanwal Singh, personal communication, June 2, 2023).

Both participants discuss the difficulties they encounter when their fathers prioritize alcohol consumption, resulting in adverse effects within their families. Keerat Kaur voices her concern about Punjabi men's excessive drinking habits, expressing sympathy for her mother and disapproval of such behavior. She emphasizes the necessity for change and awareness of the negative consequences.

Avoid it, guys! I find it perplexing that our male counterparts consume excessive amounts of alcohol despite being well aware that Sikhism prohibits it. However, they casually dismiss

the notion, saying, "*Saada function and nasha haini? Aa taan kadi ho ni sakda*!" ("Can our event go without alcohol? That's impossible!"). Seeing my mother and aunts sitting apart from gatherings until late into the night is disheartening because my father and uncles are still at the bar. What values are you teaching us, your children? My father often becomes so intoxicated that he loses control of his words when speaking to my mother. My brothers witness this behavior, and I fear they'll emulate it. If our fathers can do it and get away with it, why shouldn't they? Watching Punjabi men lose control due to alcohol truly disgusts me (Keerat Kaur, personal communication, June 2, 2023).

Overall, the statement highlights the negative impact of excessive alcohol consumption among Punjabi men, with implications for family dynamics and the potential perpetuation of such behavior among younger generations.

Financial Instability

Financial instability occurs when individuals struggle to maintain financial security, often due to factors like job loss, excessive debt, economic downturns, or unexpected expenses. Two respondents faced financial challenges during the pandemic, significantly impacting their lives. They had to adjust their lifestyles and seek alternative sources of income to meet their needs.

When my husband lost his job during the pandemic, it was a terrifying experience. We had to be extremely careful with our spending. The moratoriums were a significant help as they allowed us to postpone car and house payments. Our parents and in-laws generously supported us for about 7-8 months, mainly by buying groceries and essential items. Fortunately, my husband found a job again after the lockdown, although his salary isn't as high as before. Now, he drives for Grab part-time. Our lives have changed, but I'm grateful as long as we can provide food for our children (Sharon Kaur, personal communication, June 3, 2023).

The recent pandemic had a significant impact on our family. My father lost his job as a security guard, and both my parents contracted Covid-19, leading to ongoing health issues. My sister and I have taken on the responsibility of supporting our parents and managing the household despite having our own expenses. Unfortunately, our father's persistent illness means he can no longer work. While my mother wishes to sew to ease the financial burden, her arthritis prevents her from doing so for long periods. Frankly, I'm unsure how long we can sustain this situation, especially with my family to care for and the rising cost of living (Jasdeep Singh, personal communication, June 3, 2023).

Despite the hardships they faced, both individuals expressed gratitude for having food on the table and prioritized the well-being of their loved ones. The following interview excerpt addresses the transition of financial responsibility and the absence of spousal support in handling childcare duties.

In 2013, my father suffered a severe stroke that greatly affected his health. Before the stroke, he had a monthly income of RM3500, allowing our family to comfortably cover household expenses since we were all employed and managing our finances. However, due to concerns for my father's health, I encouraged him to stop working. As a result, I took on the full financial responsibility of supporting my family. Recently, my brother has started contributing a small amount towards household expenses. Meanwhile, my married sister struggles to earn enough to support herself and her children. Thankfully, I am unmarried, which allows me to use my salary to support my parents. Over the years, I have been participating in a '*kutt*' (tontine) arrangement, contributing each month. This savings helps fund occasional trips for my parents once every two years (Naamsimran Kaur, personal communication, June 3, 2023).

I was offered a promotion at work, but it required extra hours and frequent travel. When I discussed it with my husband, he made it clear that he could not help with the kids due to his shift work. It led to arguments between us. I turned to my parents for advice, hoping for support, but they advised me to prioritize my husband and children. They suggested I end the conflicts and wait for my children to grow. From that moment, I understood I was on my own. Sadly, I did not get the promotion (Ekroop Kaur, personal communication, June 1, 2023).

PATRIARCHAL NORMS AND GENERATIONAL TENSIONS

The excerpts provided highlight various generational conflicts experienced by individuals within their families, drinking habits within Punjabi culture and its negative consequences on families, as well as financial challenges faced by individuals during the pandemic and their efforts to cope with the situation. Sikhs strive to live a virtuous and genuine life[1] while maintaining a harmonious balance between their spiritual and worldly responsibilities. Furthermore, they need to lead exemplary lives as part of a community, displaying integrity and compassion towards others (Kaur, 2012). The essence of Sikhism lies in the belief in equality among all human beings. This principle advocates for fair treatment of all individuals, regardless of caste, creed, class, religion, or gender. It emphasizes social justice to ensure equal rights and opportunities for everyone,

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[1] Sikhism also preaches spirituality and inculcates love for God, truthful living, universal brotherhood, peaceful coexistence, loyalty, justice, impartiality, honesty, humility, forgiveness, self-control, courage, contentment, tolerance and all other morals and virtues known to any holiest man in this world (Kaur, 2012)

reflecting simple and universally applicable values. A key aspect is the belief that every human, regardless of gender, holds equal importance, with the same rights and opportunities to live according to God's will and achieve spiritual liberation (Kaur, 2002, 2003, 2012; Kaur & Gill, 2022). However, respondents express frustration over gender-based differential treatment in Punjabi households, where males are often exempt from household chores. Additionally, some girls face obstacles in pursuing academic and career aspirations due to societal pressure to prioritize marriage over personal goals.

Women are expected to prioritize the welfare and needs of their husbands, families, children, and others. These ideals are ingrained in women from birth to marriage, shaping their ideology (Kakar, 1989). As a result, women are socialized to view men as superior and taught to humbly obey the demands of their parents, brothers, and husbands (Kaur & Gill, 2022). Female respondents express disappointment when their spouses refuse to support their career advancement. Cultural expectations that women excel in domestic roles hinder their career progress, as they lack family support. Young girls are taught domestic skills like cooking and cleaning, which are valued for marriage prospects rather than higher education and earning potential. Interestingly, female respondents become the financial backbone of the family when husbands and fathers lose income sources. These accounts highlight women's resilience, sacrifices, and prioritization of loved ones during financial instability.

Despite a clear structure of equality in human relationships, the majority of the Punjabi households are trapped in the patriarchal system. As a South Asian community, the Punjabi culture is a collectivistic culture that seeks to keep the needs of others ahead of another (Honore et al., 2013). A collectivistic community can be a source of support, but at the same time, it can cause stress among its members. Many Punjabi families are following the patriarchal family structure (Angelo, 1997; Galdas et al., 2012; Gill, 2012; Honore et al., 2013). The Punjabi patriarchal hierarchy authorizes the father's power to make decisions and control his family members. On the other hand, women typically hold the least power and are not involved in household decision-making (Ray, 2006). In such a structure of power imbalance, women may be unguarded by domestic conflict and confined to the lower hierarchy, subject to ancestral rituals and customs.

As noted by Cranny-Francis et al. (2003), patriarchy is a social system where privilege, power, and authority are predominantly held by men, influencing cultural, economic, and social positions. Consequently, Punjabi females are expected to remain silent and refrain from expressing their opinions, as arguing with elders is viewed as offensive and disrespectful. Additionally, they are not encouraged to offer solutions to family issues, discuss divorce or choose their own partners. Divorce or separation is considered a threat to family honor (izzat), leading many Punjabi women to suffer silently, endure abuse, and face health problems.

One study by Gill et al. (2015) revealed prevalent concerns about divorce among Malaysian Sikhs. Another study by Kaur et al. (2022) found a lack of awareness about civil family law among married Sikh couples. Additionally, both studies highlighted misconceptions about *Ghristi Jivan*, clarifying that Sikh teachings do not condone wrongdoing or violence within marriage. These findings prompted further investigation into how Malaysian Sikhs address marital issues that may lead to divorce. These conflicts also prevent respondents from disclosing their sexual identity and orientation to their orthodox families, underscoring the challenges arising from generational differences in values and societal norms. In patriarchal systems, women are typically excluded from positions of power, except when supporting individual men or the social system. Thus, women may assert authority within the home to maintain a supportive environment for their husbands (Kaur & Gill, 2022).

CULTURAL PRACTICES AND HEALTH RISKS

Punjabi Sikhs place significant emphasis on maintaining face value and avoiding shame that is deeply ingrained in their psyche (Angelo, 1997). However, while males are not typically reminded to avoid bringing shame to the family, females are repeatedly cautioned against it (Gill, 2012; Rait, 2005). Interviews reveal that drinking habits create shame among the drinker's family members rather than the drinker themselves. Participants share personal experiences

and observations of their fathers' excessive drinking despite medical advice against it, leading to embarrassment, frustration, and worry within the family. Moreover, relatives show no shame in enabling or participating in prolonged drinking sessions, disregarding the health of those involved. Yet, Punjabi society does not label this behavior shameful to the family or community. This lack of recognition exacerbates the challenges faced by participants and their families.

Singh (2014) underscores that Malaysian Sikhs often overlook the social illness stemming from alcohol consumption, which adversely affects numerous Sikh families. Excessive drinking is sometimes viewed as a measure of success despite its devastating consequences observed among Malaysian Sikh women and children, often left abandoned due to the loss of male family members. Families are torn apart by alcoholism, yet community leaders have made little effort to address the issue. Sermons advising against alcohol consumption by religious leaders often go unheeded. This sentiment reflects sadness, concern, and a call for change and awareness regarding alcohol's harmful effects. Participants question the values passed to younger generations and disapprove of witnessed behaviors. It highlights the urgent need to address excessive drinking among Punjabi men and its repercussions on family dynamics and future generations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the excerpts offer a critical lens into the pervasive social issues that

deeply impact the lives of individuals and families within the Punjabi Sikh community. These issues, ranging from generational conflicts to entrenched patriarchal structures, underscore the complex interplay between cultural norms, societal expectations, and individual well-being. Despite the egalitarian principles championed by Sikhism, the stark reality of gender-based disparities and familial power dynamics persists, stifling the agency and potential of women. The entrenched patriarchal system within Punjabi households serves as a formidable barrier to progress, perpetuating gender inequalities and curtailing the autonomy of women. This systemic inequality manifests in various forms, from hindering girls' educational and career opportunities to silencing their voices in matters of divorce and partner selection. As a result, women endure silent suffering and bear the brunt of health issues, underscoring the urgent need for systemic change.

Furthermore, the cultural acceptance of excessive drinking within Punjabi society exacerbates familial discord, social stigma, and health risks despite the absence of associated shame within the community. Effectively addressing these entrenched social issues demands a paradigm shift and concerted efforts to challenge and dismantle patriarchal norms and gender inequalities. It necessitates comprehensive community-wide initiatives, including awareness campaigns, support systems, and interventions aimed at addressing the root causes of alcohol consumption and its detrimental effects. Ultimately, enhancing the well-being of individuals and families within the Punjabi Sikh community requires a collective commitment to fostering an environment that values inclusivity, equality, and individual agency. It entails challenging detrimental social norms and stereotypes, promoting gender equality, and creating pathways for comprehensive development and personal fulfillment for all members of the community.

Implication for Theory and Practice

The insights from studies and observations within the Malaysian Sikh community regarding issues like alcohol consumption, marital challenges, generational conflicts, and gender dynamics have profound implications for theory and practice. These findings underscore the necessity of considering cultural contexts when examining social phenomena, suggesting a need for culturally sensitive approaches to research and theory development. Moreover, they contribute to discussions on identity intersectionality, highlighting how factors like gender, culture, religion, and socio-economic status shape individuals' experiences. Practically, these insights call for targeted interventions and support systems tailored to the Malaysian Sikh community's unique needs. Collaborative efforts involving religious leaders, community organizations, and mental health professionals are crucial to addressing issues like alcoholism, marital discord, and gender inequality effectively. Culturally appropriate education and awareness campaigns can challenge harmful norms and

promote healthy behaviors. Additionally, culturally competent mental health services are necessary to support individuals and families dealing with substance abuse, domestic violence, and intergenerational conflicts. Bridging theory and practice demands a holistic approach that respects the Malaysian Sikh community's cultural context while striving for meaningful and lasting change.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

One limitation of current research on issues within the Punjabi Sikh community, notably concerning alcohol consumption and family dynamics, is its heavy reliance on anecdotal evidence and qualitative studies. While these studies offer valuable insights into individual experiences, they may lack the quantitative data for a comprehensive analysis. Moreover, longitudinal studies are scarce in tracking changes over time and assessing the lasting effects of interventions or societal shifts. Additionally, there is a lack of research examining how factors like gender, socio-economic status, and cultural norms intersect with alcohol consumption and its impact on family dynamics. For future research, it is recommended that more comprehensive and longitudinal studies that blend qualitative and quantitative methods targeting Sikh youths in Malaysia be conducted. Surveys and statistical analyses can provide quantitative data to complement qualitative insights and offer a more complete understanding of alcohol consumption prevalence and its effects on families. Longitudinal studies can track changes and evaluate intervention effectiveness over time. Exploring the intersectionality of factors like gender and socio-economic status can deepen understanding of alcohol consumption patterns and family dynamics.

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