

Discussing the EXCAPE-URMI Project in Malaysia: A Reflexive Account of Process and Outcomes

Sally Anne Param^{1*}

¹Centre for English Language Studies, Sunway University, 5, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Sunway, 47500 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: sallyp@sunway.edu.my

ABSTRACT

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Sally Anne Param
(sallyp@sunway.edu.my)

KEYWORDS:

Decolonial Critical Participatory
Action Research (DCPAR)
Urban poverty
Reflexivity

CITATION:

Sally Anne, P. (2026). Discussing the EXCAPE-URMI Project in Malaysia: A Reflexive Account of Process and Outcomes. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 11(10), e004130.
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i10.4130>

This paper provides a reflexive review of the EXCAPE URMI (Exploring Coloniality and Precarity Engagements amongst Urban-Poor Resilient Malaysian Indian Women) research project in Malaysia. It is a global and local collaborative effort over 19 months (2024–2025), investigating the intersections of coloniality and intergenerational poverty among urban-poor Malaysian Indian women in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. The project uses a Decolonial Critical Participatory Action Research (DCPAR) framework, which is relatively new in Malaysia, where participants are ‘co-researchers’ with the research team, in co-constructing knowledge. The review highlights how the project uses social media to share its findings, turning local stories into online accessible narratives, uncommon in traditional academic research. The project’s innovative ‘Decolonial Methods Toolkit’, which outlines the theoretical, methodological, and participatory frameworks used in the project, is intrinsic to the review. Together with the evaluation, the author’s reflexive stance is included, based on her first-hand experience in being a panel discussant at the project’s closing ceremony. The project is commended for its radical inclusivity, since such an approach may be part of pioneering research efforts in Malaysia. While honouring the project’s ambitious goals, this review includes personal reflexivity and suggestions on how to manage the complexities of this research initiative for the benefit of future endeavours.

1. Introduction

This paper is a review about an ambitious qualitative research initiative conducted in Malaysia between August 2024 and January 2026, funded by the British Academy. Based on local and international collaboration, the EXCAPE URMI project stands for ‘Exploring Coloniality and Precarity Engagements amongst Urban-Poor Resilient Malaysian Indian Women’. The grant for the project was funded under the ‘Knowledge Frontiers: International Interdisciplinary Research Projects programme’ section of the British Academy. EXCAPE URMI is one of three Malaysian projects selected by the Academy for its 2024 cohort, in collaboration with University Malaya (UM) (The British Academy,

2024)¹. EXCAPE URMI concluded its 19-month phase in January 2026 when the official interactive EXCAPE URMI digital exhibition went live to the public.

The EXCAPE URMI title is an acronym based on a play of words. Apart from EXCAPE (being defined earlier), 'URMI' is a deliberate, meaningful inclusion in the title. Its symbolic representation in imagery is based on a female Indian name, a drumming sound of Tamil music, and a 'wave', all three interpretations representing the project's theme of connecting the rhythm of female-led stories. These pieces of information are found in the EXCAPE URMI Decolonial Research Methods Toolkit (Reddy & Sugurmar, 2026).

The project focuses on understanding how colonial legacies impact the daily lives of the research participants who are Indian women of the B40 category. National narratives mention the demarcation of T20, M40 and B40 division of household income, representing the top, middle and bottom divisions (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Based on these official guidelines, EXCAPE URMI chose a gendered and ethnic lens to study poverty among the B40 community (Reddy & Sugurmar, 2026).

This research is grounded in Decolonial Critical Participatory Action Research (defined as DCPAR from now on). The DCPAR framework in discussion actually stems from the more fundamental Participatory Action Research (PAR) where the research is based on reflection, data collection, and action that people can self-initiate for their own betterment (Baum et al., 2006). This 'action research' thus has many layers, beginning from the basic PAR and building towards the CPAR and the DCPAR. In Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR), the research participants are 'co-researchers' of the data at hand, instead of being mere research participants. Here, the participants are given epistemological ownership where they can shape the research even though they were not the initial creators of the research plan. A recent example of CPAR research done in Malaysia is one which promoted public health among a peri-urban Malaysian community (Faiz Luai et al., 2026). The community was empowered to co-design and implement oral health initiatives, where they identified barriers and created tailored, community-led action cycles (Faiz Luai et al., 2026).

DCPAR then develops from Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR), being an investigative framework that is applied primarily in contexts where marginalised communities seek to challenge Western or colonial power structures and take control of their own narratives (Smith, 2012). This framework goes against other forms of research which can be likened to the insensitive practices of 'extractive' research, where data is often obtained for academic gain only, without leaving sustainable value behind for the community that was researched on.

All three approaches – PAR, CPAR and DCPAR - focus on an active collaboration between researcher and participant, grounding the methodologies on the 'action' that needs to be taken to solve the existing problem. The CPAR takes the problematised situation to a

¹ The other two projects based in Malaysia also aim to dismantle traditional hierarchies. They are:

- i. 'Voices of the Rainforest' (with the aim to integrate traditional indigenous knowledge into a new educational framework), using the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, in collaboration with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and
- ii. 'Equitable Governance in Higher Education' (with the focus of assessing governance challenges in partnerships), using participatory methods, in collaboration with University of Malaya (UM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

critical level, where the authority is questioned, whereas DCPAR points the same problematised situation to a Western or colonial hierarchy from where the problem arises. DCPAR aims to transform social realities by co-creating knowledge that honours indigenous or local epistemologies.

Using the DCPAR approach, the EXCAPE URMI study investigated the intergenerational transmission of poverty among Malaysian Indian women in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. Although the EXCAPE URMI project is based on women in the B40 (bottom 40%) income group, the women's lives were not viewed as mere subjects, rather, they were included as 'co-researchers'. Although formal authorship was maintained by the research project creators, the participants were included in a fully collaborative knowledge-sharing paradigm.

Based on the theme of precarity, the project content was structured around a multi-modal 'Decolonial Methods Toolkit' which was created by the Research team and being quoted and referenced in this review (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026). This toolkit utilized a rich array of arts-based and culturally situated methods, including Photovoice, collage-making, and the adaptation of traditional Tamil practices like playing a game (*Pallānguzhi*) or using moral maxims (*Āthichūdi*). The toolkit stated how the project sought to redress deep injustices from colonial times, and develop sustainable, community-led solutions for social change (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026).

1.1 Research Objectives

The research objective of this review is three-pronged. One, the review intends to raise awareness of this collaborative project conducted in Malaysia, combining the skill sets of both international and local academics in the pursuit of completing a project. As global research intelligence shows, academic collaborations across borders is the preferred way esteemed universities aim to do research (Clarivate, 2025). Two, the project uses a Decolonial Critical Participatory Action Research (DCPAR) framework, which is relatively new in Malaysia. Elaborated on later, this approach counters what Malaysian academia is used to historically - Westernized, top-down quantitative models. Rather, the DCPAR is refreshingly democratizing and counter-hegemonic, placing importance on the subjective voices of research participants. Three, the author would like to add a reflexive edge to the objective review. Being privileged to be one of the invited panel discussants to the closing event of this project on 6 December 2025, the author would like to offer a sliver of subjective observation in the discussion section of this paper. Unlike other reviews where data is analysed from an objective detachment, the author had a first-hand experience in hearing stories of both challenge and success together with meeting the project creators and research participants in person. Thus, while the paper still executes a formal, academic review of the project's methodologies and outcomes, it includes a reflexive edge from the author's perspective, complementing the project's framework of participatory subjectivity.

2. Methods

The methodological framework of the EXCAPE URMI project was mapped against the conceptual framework of resilience, precarity, and coloniality (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026). EXCAPE URMI aligned their methodological frame with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) numbers 1, 4, 5 and 10 as per the United Nations framework as this

complied with the “multi-faceted nature of intergenerational poverty transmission” (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, p.2).

The research sample comprised 47 self-identified B40 Malaysian Indian women residing in urban-poor settings across Kuala Lumpur and Penang. The geographic split between the capital city of Kuala Lumpur and the northern hub of Penang further added a layer of contextual diversity, allowing the study to capture variations in how urban poverty and colonial legacies manifest across different Malaysian ‘urban poor’ landscapes.

The methodological foundation of this study is anchored in Decolonial Participatory Action Research (DCPAR) praxis. This approach was established as the foundational theoretical framework, drawing specifically from the “ten axioms for a decolonial PAR praxis” (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, p. 6).

Two research questions guided the entire EXCAPE URMI project (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, p. 7):

- i. How do urban-poor resilient Malaysian Indian women understand, rationalise, and explain precarity and inequality in their everyday lives?
- ii. How can community-led support and initiatives (using DCPAR) mitigate the psychological and material effects of precarity in Malaysian Indian communities?

The methodology of this framework was in line with the DCPAR methodology which is inclusive of indigenous methodologies built on a fundamentally different paradigm than what Western authorities would define top-down ‘knowledge’ as and how it should be used (Omodan & Dastile, 2023). To ensure that all subsequent fieldwork was actively rooted in these decolonial principles, the framework was systematically introduced during initial researcher training sessions (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026). The framework was operationalized through specific workshop activities that aimed to constantly ground the “decolonial praxis” as a core learning outcome across all series (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, p. 15). By stepping into roles as co-researchers with “capacities to co-produce knowledge” (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, p. 3), participants applied their own expertise to challenge or build upon existing theories, actively dismantling conventional researcher-participant power dynamics. As co-researchers, the women were free to engage and contribute through a vernacular lens, making the process a shared moral commitment rather than a top-down requirement (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026).

Data collection was done in two phases, taking up 5 days and 6 days respectively. For Phase 1, participants were introduced to decolonial ethics, consent, confidentiality and training plans so that their participation would be informed and effective. Participants were also trained to use PhotoVoice method to capture the concept of precarity (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026). This tool is particularly useful when the community at hand is not used to being researched on, is wary of outsiders, or unable to articulate strong perceptions of oppression or marginalisation through the use of limited language (Mantikayan, 2020). In Phase 2, the Social Identity Mapping (the ‘self’) tool helped each person map out their personal identity positions—including age, background, and social status—to understand how their unique life lens and locus of enunciation influenced their worldview (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026). Participants were then introduced to the Āyvu Āthichūdi (Research Maxims) tool, a decolonial adaptation of 12th-century Tamil moral verses. This tool was chosen to translate standard institutional ethics—such as “data protection rights, consent, and respect for diverse voices”—into a familiar

cultural poetic form (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, p. 22). Through this, the researchers could move into a culturally familiar grounding platform. Using Tamil as the language of communication further helped to bridge cultural gaps and simplify complex consent issues (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, pp. 22-24).

In Phase 2 of the data collection the female participants shared their ideas on 'beauty' and the use of photostories (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, pp. 28-29). The women used photography to bridge linguistic gaps, empowering themselves with the technical skills needed to document their own realities. Similarly, the women were engaged in traditional game-playing and collage-making, which allowed them to move beyond words and investigate the structural dynamics of precarity collectively (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026). The Pallānguzhi (the 'strategy' tool) as a traditional board game was used as a metaphor where seeds represented individual resources and pits represented the obstacles encountered in daily life (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, pp. 37-38). By playing this game, the women were able to physically analyze their decision-making and the specific strategies they employed to navigate and overcome precarity (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026). Collage Making (the 'feeling' tool) utilized tactile materials like old magazines and strings to provide a visual medium for the women to express complex, multi-dimensional experiences of precarity that may have been difficult to articulate through words alone (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, p. 36). The participants also experienced the Theatre of the Oppressed as the 'action tool' that allowed the women to physically practice how to resist and transform their situations (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, pp. 3, 6).

These sensory-based tools in data collection allowed participants to materialize their lived realities, empowering them to communicate their felt struggles that are often too nuanced or painful to be expressed through more traditional research methods like interviewing. This research is an example of methodological pluralism, demonstrating how the women, although "descendants of indentured labourers" (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, p. 3), became co-authors of rich qualitative research through the multiple tools that were used to capture their thoughts and emotions.

3. Results

In Phase 3 of the EXCAPE-URMI project, the women participants developed composite narratives for anonymity and co-designed a digital exhibition with artists to translate their oral testimonies into visual art.

The EXCAPE-URMI project integrated its empirical findings directly into creative outputs. Their choice of using popular rather than academic means of capturing data resulted the use of visual photographs, audio voices of the women and art work into the culmination of a digital exhibition to evidence their findings. These findings demonstrate how marginalized women in urban Malaysia experience precarity and creatively map the intergenerational transmission of economic vulnerability from historical colonial structures to the present day.

During the launch of the project's Digital Exhibition², invited guests were treated to a live *urumi* drum performance (sonic), a mini gallery of artwork (visual), and a panel

² The project maintains its own dedicated site, EXCAPEURMI.com, which hosts the digital exhibition in Tamil, Malay, and English. EXCAPE URMI also has its own Instagram account, YouTube channel and online presence (all referenced to at the end of the document).

discussion (discursive), with the reviewer being a discussant in the latter. The exhibition was also inclusive in the sensory feast through its digital contribution, rich in artwork and interactive elements. The sonic, visual, and discursive knowledge-sharing platforms are a highly impactful inclusion to the project. This multimodal enhancement during the launch of the digital exhibition serves as a concluding manifestation of the project capturing the co-authoring women's felt experience and lived reality.

The EXCAPE-URMI project is true to its intent, where it takes an “embodied approach to research” by drawing upon a multi-sensory approach to not only capture its findings but to enhance it with other involvements that are open to the public (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, p. 3).

4. Discussion

The EXCAPE-URMI project is significant and successful in its impact in a few major ways. Firstly, it changes how research is done by treating the 47 participating Malaysian Indian women as equal partners and co-researchers, rather than just subjects to be studied. The DCPAR approach is commendable, undoing hegemonic ‘extractive’ approaches of the past. Secondly, the principal investigator was able to unite the global academic reach of the Open University (UK) with the on-the-ground insights of University of Malaya, depicting international academic collaboration which is a forefront priority for premier universities (Clarivate, 2025). The were behind-the-scene engagements as well from academics from numerous other institutions which enriched the collaboration further. This was achieved not for large income-generating objective data collection. Rather, it was for of research that actively amplified marginalized local voices on a global stage while ensuring the research remained deeply respectful and relevant to the community. Thirdly, the project used creative methods and digital tools to share its findings. Undoing the need for lengthy academic reports, the team used expressive tools like storytelling, word clouds, and vivid multi-modal illustrations to capture the real-world struggles of Malaysian Indian women. The findings culminated in an interactive digital exhibition shared across social media platforms, effectively extending the research beyond traditional academic boundaries.

From the author's reflexive stance—a position deeply informed by training as a sociologist—while the EXCAPE-URMI project offers incredible depth, there remain a few areas that could benefit from further refinement. Firstly, because the study prioritizes rich personal narratives, it leans heavily on the self-perceptions of the participants. Although historical data was briefly alluded to, there was a gap of empirical, fact-based data which could help ground and strengthen the subjective findings. For example, the distinct administrative legacies of Selangor as a Federated Malay State (FMS) and Penang as a Strait Settlement state would have added a sophisticated layer of socio-historical background inquiry to the voices of the women from Selangor and Penang (Reddy & Sugumar, 2026, pp. 6, 30). This is because each state would have influenced the women living in it differently. The element of ‘precarity’ gleaned from the plantation-based labour systems of protected Malay states (like Selangor) and the urban, merchant-based structures of British Crown Colonies (like Penang) may have showcased a richer layer of nuance in the Indian women's lived reality (de Micheaux, 2022). While a constructionist framework effectively captures the subjective experience of poverty, it can risk diluting the research from structural economic realities. The latter must be included in triangulation in order to authenticate the research in contextual reality.

Secondly, the project's highly ambitious design incorporates too many tools and analytical frameworks. This methodological density inadvertently creates a sense of conceptual fragmentation. For example, the study of "precarity" had "three theorisations" and another "six-point theoretical approach" to understand how institutional structures and power relations distribute vulnerability (Reddy & Sugurmar, 2026, pp. 8-9). For the "coloniality" framework, a "matrix of oppression" is applied, carrying a five-pronged deconstructive tool and seven points for the "intended learning outcomes" (Reddy & Sugurmar, 2026, pp. 11-13). The sheer volume of these frameworks while intending to enhance detailed findings risk diluting the depth of the central narrative of B40 poverty. Having too many 'moving parts' in the conceptual interplay blurs the project's central objective of studying "intergenerational poverty transmission" (Reddy & Sugurmar, 2026, p.2). Streamlining the Toolkit with a better-formatted Table of Contents, while balancing multi-modal diversity with a 'less is more' analytical focus, would significantly enhance the project's practical utility.

Thirdly and in consequence, attending the project's closing ceremony provided an invaluable reflexive vantage point for the sociological leanings of the author. The organizers made a deeply compassionate and noble effort to honour the 47 co-researchers by funding an overnight hotel stay, complete with a fine dining experience where the women could celebrate in their finest attire. Yet, observing this moment of brief symbolic inclusion forced me to critically interrogate the deeper 'so what?' of the initiative. While the glamour of food, décor and photography offered a well-deserved celebration, this temporary entry into a space of luxury does not dismantle the enduring realities of structural marginalization. For an emancipatory framework like DCPAR to truly achieve its goals, the project must extend beyond transient spaces of privilege and address how these women can tangibly break out of their entrenched socio-economic precarity once the grand closing ceremony is over.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the EXCAPE-URMI project stands as an incredibly valuable, multi-modal intervention that bravely redefines knowledge production for marginalized Malaysian Indian women. It is a project that does not just collect data but seeks to co-construct dignity and empowerment, making it a significant contribution to research methodology in the region. By balancing its groundbreaking successes in international collaboration and local community partnership, this review highlights a critical lesson for contemporary social science research in Malaysia: are local researchers willing to do research that honours the participants in ways that go beyond the intended publications? Reflecting on the project through a sociologically reflexive lens, the author contends that true decolonial research must extend beyond aesthetic visual storytelling and temporary spaces of symbolic inclusion. To truly fulfil its emancipatory promise, future iterations of DCPAR must anchor their creative and subjective methods within concrete, fact-based data and long-term plans that can aid economic mobility. Ultimately, EXCAPE-URMI provides a vital, albeit complicated, stepping stone toward a more compassionate, accountable, and action-oriented academic landscape.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Having attended the EXCAPE URMI closing event by invitation, the author was granted permission from the EXCAPE URMI Principal Investigator to write a review for a Malaysia journal.

Acknowledgement

The Principal Investigator of the EXCAPE URMI project, Dr Geetha Reddy, had given consent for this review. The author is honoured to have been an invited panel discussant for the EXCAPE URMI closing event.

Funding

The author has not received any funding for this contribution.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

References

- Ananth, T. N. P. (2024, August 22). *EXCAPE-URMI Research Collective [DP3.1] seeks to engage in transformative action with urban poor Malaysian Indian women*. Varnam Malaysia. <https://varnam.my/100222/excape-urmi-research-collective-seeks-to-engage-in-transformative-action-with-urban-poor-malaysian-indian-women/>
- Baum, F., MacDougall, C., & Smith, D. (2006). Participatory action research. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 60(10), 854–857. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2004.028662>
- Clarivate. (2025). *Research collaboration in a changing world*. <https://clarivate.com/academia-government/lp/research-collaboration-in-a-changing-world/>
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2023, July 28). *Household income survey report 2022 (Malaysia & states)*. <https://www.dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/household-income-survey-report--malaysia--states>
- de Micheaux, E. L. (2022, May 19). *British Malayan capitalism, 1874–1957: An economic-historical perspective*. Economic History Malaysia. <https://www.ehm.my/publications/articles/british-malayan-capitalism-1874%E2%80%931957-an-economic-historical-perspective>
- EXCAPE URMI [@excapeurmi]. (n.d.). *Instagram posts [Instagram profile]*. Instagram. Retrieved July 2, 2026, from <https://www.instagram.com/excapeurmi/>
- EXCAPE URMI. (n.d.). *EXCAPE URMI [YouTube channel]*. YouTube. Retrieved July 2, 2026, from <https://www.youtube.com/@EXCAPEUrmi>
- EXCAPE URMI. (2026). *Outside the frame: Living with coloniality and precarity [Digital exhibition]*. EXCAPE URMI. <https://excapeurmi.com/>
- EXCAPE-URMI Research Collective. (2024, August 8). *EXCAPE-URMI: Engaging in transformative action with urban poor Malaysian Indian women*. Eksentrika. <https://www.eksentrika.com/excape-urmi-urban-poor-malaysian-indian-women/>
- Faiz Luai, A., Ahmad Zawawi, N. D., Kia Cheen, A. L., Rani, H., Yahya, N. A., Rosli, T. I., & Mohd. Dom, T. N. (2026). *Co-producing oral health promotion in a peri-urban*

- Malaysian community using community-participatory action research: A mixed-methods evaluation* [Conference presentation]. 33rd SCATE MDA Scientific Convention and Trade Exhibition, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- The British Academy. (2024). *Knowledge Frontiers: International Interdisciplinary Research Projects* 2024. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/knowledge-frontiers-international-interdisciplinary-research-projects-2024/>
- Mantikayan, J. M. (2020). Photovoice as qualitative action research tool: A review. *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, 9(1), 4059–4063. <https://www.ijstr.org>
- Omodan, Bunmi & Dastile, Nontyatyambo. (2023). Analysis of Participatory Action Research as a Decolonial Research Methodology. *Social Sciences*. 12. 507. 10.3390/socsci12090507.
- Reddy, G., & Sugurmar, E. N. (Eds.). (2026, February 16). *EXCAPE URMI decolonial research methods toolkit*. University of Northern British Columbia.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.