

### **Abstract**

For women around the world, involvement in urbanization can demand behavioral adaptation. One of the less visible but often serious adaptations is finding support in the form of friendships with other women. This paper draws on anthropological fieldwork to consider the friendship issue for a segment of urban women in Malaysia and to address the questions: How do newly urbanized women make friends with other women in the city? How are the friendships maintained? How do the friendships contribute to women's successful survival in the city? How do urban women's approaches to the problems of same-sex friendship compare with men's?

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## **Women's Friendships in the Context of Adaptation to Urban Living: A Malaysian Study**

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WOMEN'S FRIENDSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF ADAPTATION TO URBAN LIVING:  
A MALAYSIAN STUDY<sup>1</sup>

INTRODUCTION

In societies around the world, development consistently includes urbanization. Whether as change of location, environment, or lifestyle, urbanization can involve women in new opportunities and new roles, and modifications of their lives in most spheres of activity. In so doing, it presents women with a need to adapt their behavior. This paper draws on anthropological field research in Malaysia to address one of the less visible but often serious adaptations faced by female newcomers to urban living: finding support in the form of female friendships.

STUDY POPULATION AND PARTICIPANTS

In most of the developing societies of Asia, while both women and men have participated in the urbanization process as urbanward migrants, there have been more male migrants than female. In contrast, in Malaysia the movement to urban places has involved roughly equal numbers of males and females. Part of the explanation lies in a preference among married men to migrate with their wives and families rather than alone, but there has also been a substantial amount of independent female migration to Malaysian cities (Sidhu 1978). A leading incentive has been new opportunities in the cities for female employment. One recently much expanded sphere of female employment has been light manufacturing industries, and there are several reports available from social scientists on Malaysia's growing urban populations of "factory girls" (e.g., Grossman 1979, Jamilah 1980, Lim 1978). There has also been a considerable increase in the recruitment of women to professional, technical, and clerical occupations in cities and towns, and the aspiration for such employment has become well established in rural places (cf. Strange 1981:228-229). These "white collar workers" have attracted less research attention and it is these women's experience of urbanization that is reported on in the present paper.

The field research for this paper was carried out in Malaysia's capital city of Kuala Lumpur in 1980. At the last census for which reports are available (1970), the population of Kuala Lumpur was one half million. The ratio of females to males had risen since the previous census to 91 females per 100 males, calling into question the city's former image as a male-dominated town. Gone, too, was a century-old image of Kuala Lumpur as a Chinese town. The same census also reported an important change in the proportions of Malaysia's three main ethnic groups--Malays, Chinese and Indians--in the city's population. In particular, the proportion of Malays had increased from 15 percent in 1957 to 25 percent in 1970. The number of Malays had more than doubled in this thirteen-year period. For the first time in its history, Kuala Lumpur had more Malays than Indians among its residents and almost half as many Malays as Chinese. Part of Malaysia's development policy is to urbanize more and more of the traditionally rural Malay population through rural-urban migration, and the census figures for the capital city indicate progress. An estimate of the Malay portion of the population of Kuala Lumpur for 1980 puts it at 30 percent with a projection

of 40 percent by 1990 and 50 percent by 2000. Partly because of this planned exposure of Malays in particular to urbanization, this study of women's friendship under urbanization was designed to contact more Malays than Chinese or Indians, but a sampling of all three groups was made and will be reported on.

The study used a judgment sample of 30 women and was designed to collect details on three friendships from each woman to provide a total of 90 friendship links. The women who served as informants were all between 20 and 39 years of age. Women in their twenties and thirties constitute the core of modern Malaysian womanhood and were judged to be most concerned with the adaptive demands of contemporary urban living in general and with the friendship issue in particular. Older women would be unlikely to be recent in-migrants and, as longer term urbanites or city born, to have already established friendship patterns. Because married is the "normal" marital status for the age bracket surveyed, no attempt was made to secure equal numbers of married and unmarried women, but both are represented. All of the married women but one were married according to the prevailing Malaysian rule of ethnic group endogamy. Length of residence in the city ranged from a few months to a lifetime of 35 years for one Chinese informant, giving a variety of experience on this count, but most of the women had been urban dwellers for three to ten years. The white collar occupations represented were clerical assistant, typist, stenographer, laboratory technician and research assistant, medical service professional, teacher and teacher's aid, and organization executive.

#### FEMALE FRIENDSHIPS UNDER URBANIZATION

Anthropological reports on women and friendship are few but the little information that is available has led to the generalization, as stated by Du Bois (1974:27), that friendship is everywhere "both empirically and normatively more significant for men than women." In one view, the disparity is biologically based (Tiger 1974). Others have drawn attention to the fact that in most societies the only models of friendship are of friendships between men (Brain 1976:47-48). Part of the explanation of the differences between men's and women's friendships may be that the men of most societies have traditionally had greater social and geographic mobility than women and, therefore, greater opportunities for forming friendships (DuBois 1974). Although the relative freedom of movement available to women in modern urban settings may expand their opportunities for friendship with each other, women newcomers to the urban scene are little practiced in the art of finding same-sex friends.

My view of female-female friendships as a serious part of the adaptation process to urban living does not rest solely on possible shortcomings in knowledge and experience. Circumstances deriving from the nature of urban society as well as from the nature of its individual members are at issue.

The circumstances surrounding friendship between women in cities vary from society to society but three interrelated circumstances recur as

significant. These are: (1) the wide and diversified circle of acquaintances urban women have from which to recruit female friends; (2) the compartmentalized or special-purpose pattern of friendship with other women that prevails in the city; and (3) the degree of female independence in social contacts generally and friendships in particular.

As others have noted, in its provision of more kinds of people from which to select friends, the urban setting can be seen as conducive to friendships for women (e.g., Markson and Hess 1980). In urban Malaysia, the diversified nature of the recruitment pool is both accentuated and confounded by the ethnic diversity of city populations. The main three-part division along ethnic lines into Malays, Chinese and Indians is matched by divisions in language and religion, and there is a history of ethnic independence and interethnic tension. A common response is to limit social contacts to people of one's own ethnic group. For newcomers especially this can reduce the complexity and strangeness of the urban environment and provide security in the form of familiarity. Nevertheless, the circumstances of daily life in Kuala Lumpur are such that anyone, female or male, living there has to be able to manage at least a minimum of interaction with persons of different ethnic groups. Cross-ethnic friendships are an obvious source of instruction.

In a fast-growing city like Kuala Lumpur, the populations of recruitment pools are not only large and diversified, but are also changing. Thus, the search for friends characteristically has to contend with comings and goings in the population of a particular workplace or neighborhood. New urban migrants frequently have contacts among established urbanites as points from which to initiate a quest for friends, but an inquiry into alterations in female-female friendships over time showed the loss or impairment of friendships because of intra-urban mobility to be a common experience. It was often reported, for example, that a former close friendship had become less close following one member's change in residence or job transfer.

The related circumstance of compartmentalized patterns of friendship has elements of advantage and disadvantage. My Malaysian informants often referred to their female friends in separate categories, as, for example, work friends or office friends in contrast to neighborhood friends. Female friends made through husbands comprised a separate category for married women. Having friends in several categories can mean a larger number of friends and offer the potential of variety among one's friends, but it can hinder the development of close friendships and put strains on the maintenance of even casual ones. The circumstance has been discussed by Boissevain (1974) in terms of "uniplex" or single-stranded friendships and "multiplex" or many-stranded ones in which two women could be linked as workmates, neighbors, and through their husbands. Multiplex friendships tend to be more intimate, more resilient, and, therefore, potentially more supportive than uniplex ones. Multiplex friendships predominate in small-scale, stable, rural communities. In cities, people are more likely to have uniplex connections with a wide variety of others.

Despite the relative freedom of movement available to females in modern urban settings as opposed to traditional rural and village ones, restrictions on female independence of movement and interaction still influence friendship patterns. One recurring source of restriction, which receives some specific twists in the Malaysian case, is marriage. The proper marital state for any young adult woman in Malaysia is married. Until married, she is subject to her family's protection and expected to pass most of her free time in their company. This tends to reinforce the pattern of compartmentalized, uniplex social relations and its mixed consequences for successful adaptation to urban living. Single women making a rural-urban migration independently are in theory less confined, but in practice many of them live with or near an urban family known to their rural one or in carefully supervised institutionalized housing. Once she is married, a woman's friends should take second place to husband and family. Married women "follow their husbands" was how one Malay informant put it. Another, city-born and sophisticated by local standards, was speaking for herself when she described the condition as being "under husband's management." In general, it was the view of Malaysian women that after marriage, personal preferences notwithstanding, they were less free and therefore less accessible as friends to one another.

Marriage aside, the traditionally low profile assigned women in Malaysia, the Islamic religion followed by Malays and recognized as Malaysia's state religion, the Hinduism that most of the Indian community adhere to, and the male-centeredness that persists as a feature of both Indian and Chinese social life in Malaysia, combine to monitor and put constraints on the public behavior of women in cities. One outcome with direct implications for the friendship issue is the need for female chaperonage. Young women should not move about in public alone or with young men other than their husbands. Malay women are bound by the strongest proscription against going out in public alone, but to a lesser degree the same holds for Chinese and Indian women as well. A lone woman of any ethnic group in Kuala Lumpur is subject to negative judgment and sanction (cf. Armstrong 1982). This circumstance of life in Kuala Lumpur and other Malaysian cities gives women good cause to develop female friendships but, at the same time, makes the endeavor difficult.

In focusing on Malay women in this study, I assumed that each of the circumstances surrounding urban friendships discussed above had stronger implications for Malay women as a group and at this time than for the Chinese and Indian women. As a group, Malay women are relative newcomers to the urban scene and, as yet, less wise in the ways of city life. Their traditional way of life was not only rural but, relative to Chinese and Indian women, confined to the domestic sphere. To quote one authority: "For the vast majority of Malay women a discussion of their place in the family exhausts the topic of their place in society, for there are few other spheres of society where women can have a place" (Swift 1963:282). In the traditional rural setting, women's connections with each other were built on family and kinship bonds; in the city, friends must be found within a predominantly non-kin world. As followers of Islam, Malay women are subject

to stringent behavior codes in dress, food, and daily routines. These put limits on their full participation in the modern aspects of urban living on the one hand, but perhaps give them additional need for support in their adaptation to it on the other. This fits their own self-image and is expressed as opinion by non-Malays as well. In short, there would seem to be ground for assuming the adjustments to modern urban living in general to be more profound for Malaysia's Malay women than for those of other ethnic groups and, as such, to merit some particular attention.

#### FRIENDSHIP STRATEGIES IN URBAN MALAYSIA

My discussion of Malaysian women's strategies for creating and maintaining same-sex friendship is concerned with close dyadic links only. Other types of friendship can have value for successful city living, but close dyadic friendships are consistently accorded the most value and securing them represents the bigger undertaking. My inquiry into the problem was designed to address the following questions: How are close friends made? How are the friendships maintained? How do they help survival in the city? How do women's approaches to the problem compare with men's?

Recruitment: Each informant was asked for detailed descriptions of up to three close friendships, using her own interpretation of close friend. One third of the Malay women and a few of the Chinese women chose to stop at descriptions of two. One reason for this could be ethnic and/or individual variability in perceptions of "close friend," but I think it also indicates that such friendships are not easy to make.

The sources of friends ranged from a woman's circle of kin to chance encounters at the local library. There were a few cases of a meeting as foreign students during a period of study abroad, and a few first meetings were through husbands who knew each other. The most frequently reported sources were neighbors, schoolmates, housemates, and workmates. Coming together as workmates was the leading initiator of the friendships under review. It accounted for formation of one half of all the friendships and, looking at the friendships by ethnic group, for one third of all the links described by the members of each.

Only Malay and Indian women included kin as close friends and, in fact, the phenomenon was largely limited to Malay women for whom these kin friends were consanguines ("blood relatives") that they had known since girlhood. The very high rate of divorce among Malays is known to act as a deterrent to close relations with one's affines or "in-laws" (cf. Djamour 1959:24-26) so their absence among the recruitment pools for close friends is not surprising. One Indian informant chose to identify and describe one of her husband's sisters as a close friend. The influence of the patrilineal orientation of Indian kinship arrangements could be inferred but personal choice was involved too, as shown in the informant's comment, "All of my sisters-in-law are my good friends really. Though in-law tensions are common, I have never felt awkward coming into my husband's large family from the outside."

The few cross-ethnic friendships were nearly all between Malays and Chinese or Malays and Indians and had usually been formed in the modern, urban context of a workplace that was open to women of all three ethnic groups. The few exceptions were cases reported by Malays of friendships formed with Chinese who were their neighbors, and with an Indian met in the context of organized recreation, and one case reported by an Indian of a close friendship with a Malay that had begun when they were participants in a two-day workshop/seminar. Each of these contexts--integrated residence, recreation, and adult education--are new even for Kuala Lumpur and not yet very significant as far as the number of women involved. In other words, while they might be supposed to have potential as a source of cross-ethnic friends, they have functioned as such only minimally thus far. Even when they do, a specific leveller of ethnic difference is likely to be present. One of the Malay-Chinese friendships involved a Chinese woman who was married to a Malay. The Indian informant describing the close Malay friend she had met at a seminar volunteered the comment: "Though Malay, she had studied in the United Kingdom and is more Western in her ways."

Maintenance and Servicing: Though there is considerable variety in the source of their close friends, urban Malaysian women by their own testimony seek to form close friendships with women they sense to be "on the same wave length," with whom they feel "affinity as both Indians," who have migrated to Kuala Lumpur "from the same state or region," who present themselves as having "the same values and opinions" or "the same views on religion," in short, with women who in one way or another meet the qualification of "common background." Hence, collaboration for interests and hobbies in common was a frequent form of maintaining contact. Co-interest in the activities of a workplace or in performance of the same kind of job at different places, in being recently married, in being still single, in motherhood and children and home management, in a similar level of observance of the same religion were all repeatedly cited as both motivations and mechanisms for maintenance of a particular friendship. The sharing of hobbies was described as serving the same purposes, with the time-honored hobbies of cooking and reading receiving the most frequent mention, and house plant cultivation representing hobbies that have recently arrived on Malaysia's urban scene. A few women reported co-membership in a formal association as adding strength to a friendship by increasing the time spent together, but Malaysians generally are not noted for active association memberships and my Kuala Lumpur informants were no exception (cf. Douglas and Pedersen 1973).

There are types of friendship maintenance and servicing activities that can be discussed together as recreation. These were the next most often reported form of co-activity, though they show some variation by ethnicity, age, marital status, and category of friend. Weekend or evening sports, picnics, home visits to each other or to mutual friends, and other outings were all repeatedly mentioned. Movies, a very popular form of entertainment in Malaysia and particularly well catered for in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, were a common shared activity for women friends regardless of age or ethnicity but married women were more likely to attend with their husbands

and children. Friendships in which co-residence featured (neighbor friends or housemates, for example) were sometimes maintained by the habit of an evening stroll around the neighborhood together and, in the case of one pair of single young "moderns," a morning jog together. A few young married women whose husbands knew each other and who had no children and no close kin living in the city and therefore no day-to-day obligations to a wider kin group, described the modern young Kuala Lumpurite's recreation of dinner in a "nice" restaurant as a foursome or other party of couples. The more common pattern of restaurant outing, however, is for Malaysian men to go with other men, especially in the evening hours. Women friends seeking this form of recreation go during the day, and this was more often the case among the working women I surveyed. The regular lunch break for urban white collar workers is 75 minutes. The observation of Islam as Malaysia's state religion provides Malaysian workers of all ethnicities with an extended lunchtime each Friday. These long Friday lunchtimes are used by friends to meet, exchange news, pursue a hobby, walk the town, window shop, take in a movie, just "pass the time," or, for some Malays, pray together. These shared activities are a means of friendship maintenance and servicing.

Shopping is a favorite past-time as well as necessity throughout Malaysian society. It is frequently a family venture but women can and do shop together and urban woman friends of all kinds can use it as a time of interaction. Shopping of some sort was included as a shared activity in four-fifths of all the friendship links described for this study. It included window shopping at lunchtime and after work, weekend shopping, a visit to one of Kuala Lumpur's new and expansive shopping centers, and, for friends of the same ethnicity, food marketing for one of the several ethnic festivals that are highpoints of the Malaysian calendar.

Despite this range of activities, the most common way in which urban women maintain and cultivate their friendships, and certainly the most regular way according to my survey of working women in Kuala Lumpur, is by sharing what is known locally in English as "chit-chat." It covers sharing the news, talking about life, discussing office matters, and discussing family matters. It can mean spatially separated friends telephoning each other to keep in touch if face-to-face meetings have not been possible for a while, or neighbors taking time for a chat each day when they return from work because it is considered necessary to "being neighborly," or co-worker friends comparing notes on various topics during slack periods at their workplace. Regardless of content or context, it can be an important way of passing time together. Malaysians live in a tropical, hot, and humid environment; urban Malaysians must add the effects of concrete, congestion, and noise. It takes effort to do many of the things friends might consider doing together, and there is not always the time or space to do other things. Being alone is "unnatural," especially for females, and being idle is frowned upon. At the same time, the pace of life even in the modern, urban setting is not full. There are still "free periods" in the daily routines of most white collar workers at least. "Chit-chat" is a readily available solution to all of these quandaries. Female white collar workers in Kuala Lumpur made substantial use of it.

The frequency of interaction between pairs of friends ranged from daily to only on holidays and other special occasions, but as writers on friendship are quick to point out, the frequency of interaction is not necessarily a measure of closeness (see e.g., Boissevain 1974:28-35; Reisman 1979:123-127). Two women who saw each other every day might become no more than casual friends or even acquaintances. "Old" (long-term) friends may meet only occasionally and still feel and behave as close friends when they do. The experience of urban women in Malaysia confirmed that there can be considerable variation in the amount of actual interaction between "close" or "good" female friends and that judgment of how much is necessary are best left to the friends themselves.

Survival Value: Friendships are often compared as "emotional" versus "instrumental" in nature. Among anthropologists, Wolf (1966), for example, distinguishes expressive or emotional friendship, which serves to provide affection or satisfy some other emotional need of the participants, from instrumental friendship, which is formed initially for the practical purpose of attaining access to resources. In dyadic relationships, an emotional friendship is limited to the dyad involved. Instrumental friendship allows each member of a dyad to be a sponsor for the other in accumulating additional connections of practical value. Malaysian women see both kinds of friendship as important to a woman's "survival" in the modern urban environment.

Friendships with other women were seen to provide various sorts of services to all the women surveyed. One category of service that received frequent mention was the pooling of resources, such as carpooling by work friends, cooperative child care between kin friends and neighbor friends. An Indian woman received dental care from her Indian dentist friend; a Chinese woman knew she could rely on typing services from a typist friend and photocopying services from a close friend employed at Kuala Lumpur's only public photocopying outlet. Another informant reported help from a close friend who was employed by a housing developer in filing an application for one of the company's houses. Each of these things is a relatively expensive, inaccessible, and scarce resource in contemporary urban Malaysia. Another example was the loan of warm clothing for weekend visits to one of the hill resorts that Kuala Lumpurites like to "get away" to. This was just an occasional service but it was essential, and valued, when need of the clothing arose. Kuala Lumpur is located two degrees north of the equator and winter wardrobes are few and far between.

Descriptions of cross-ethnic friendships reported a variety of services in the resource-pooling category, but they were often ones that only the cross-ethnic link could provide. For example, lessons in Chinese cooking were being given, on request, to the Indian friend of a Chinese informant; an Indian informant expressed appreciation of instruction from a Malay friend in "how to get along with Malays" because it was important to her in her work setting; a Malay informant was learning a Chinese dialect from a Chinese friend who spoke Malay fluently; and the Malay member of a Malay-Chinese friendship acknowledged the value of being able to speak for one another in the separate Malay and Chinese sections of the city's multiethnic markets.

Other kinds of knowledge were also among the resources that friends exchanged. Some descriptions were in general terms such as "we exchange information and ideas" or "I value her opinion and always ask for it when I have an important decision to make," but the receipt of wisdom more specific to survival in the contemporary urban environment was often described too. An employee in a government department noted a friend employed in the private sector as a useful source of information on "the outside world." Speaking of a neighbor friend who was city born and aged 40, a recent rural-urban migrant aged 29 said: "I look at her for example, as an experienced woman." Still other women described tapping their same-sex urban friends for opinions or knowledge more conventionally provided by kin perhaps but sought from a friend because kin are not always on hand in the city. An example from an Indian woman was advice on sari buying: "You are spending \$40 or \$50 so you like another opinion." Finally, several of my younger informants illustrated use of same-sex friends for information exclusive to being a modern young urban female in Malaysia in their trading of "beauty care secrets," experience with "boyfriends" and, between non-Malay friends, the latest in "Western" fashions.

The exchange of gifts between close women friends in urban Malaysia has expanded well beyond the traditional exchange of food items to include exchanges of hobby items such as garden and pot plants and light fiction in paperback, but also gift exchanges of a strictly non-economic nature which are associated with the Western influence on contemporary Malaysian life. As one Malay informant observed in regard to gift-giving between herself and her close women friends: "We are copying the European habit for weddings and birthdays." Even the very Western custom of an exchange of greeting cards for birthdays was frequently reported but commented on as "a new thing for us." A number of married friends described the giving of birthday gifts not only to each other but also to each others' children. People of all ethnic groups and religions give gifts to Christian friends at Christmas. In these non-utilitarian gift-exchanges, some of them across Malaysia's sharp ethnic and religious lines, I think we can see younger women helping each other to display the outward signs of being or becoming "modern" and "urbanized."

Women in the city receive a substantial amount of social support from their close friends in connection with life crises and other special events. Marriage, for example, was a life crisis for which the support of same-sex friends was highly valued. Married women recalled it as such and unmarried women commonly talked about it as an occasion when they would "expect" their close friends to participate in a supportive role. It was also a regular topic for "chit-chat" and the sharing of advice and opinion on the part of yet-to-be-married friends. A number of ethnically specific events, such as the full moon dinners held for the Chinese male children one month after birth, were among other "traditional" life crises for which urban women valued the presence and active support of their close friends. The more "modern" events in which friends help include the celebration of birthdays, for example. In these examples, use of friends for support could be seen as the women's adaptation to the common urban condition of a lack of

or much reduced number of kin as potential supporters, but there are other special events that cannot be adequately "staffed" by kin and for which non-kin friends take on particular significance in contemporary Kuala Lumpur. These are the festivals of Hari Raya, New Year, and Deepavali, the major festivals of the Malays, Chinese, and Indians respectively, when home visits by as many friends as can come are expected and appreciated. This includes as many friends as possible from the other two ethnic groups for, in their Malaysian form, the three festivals are properly occasions of interethnic contact and goodwill. In advance of each festival, Kuala Lumpurites receive considerable official encouragement for such behavior. There is radio, television, and newspaper promotion of it and public announcements about which Chinese and Indian dignitaries will be visiting their Malay counterparts during the Hari Raya festival, for example. My research indicates that interethnic visiting at festival times has potential as a focus for the formation of more cross-ethnic friendships between urban women. To the extent that it was already the experience of the Kuala Lumpur women I surveyed, it was recognized along with the exchange of visits between women of the same ethnicity at these special times as something of value friends could be relied on to do for one another.

Close friends also provide assistance for survival in the city in the form of general emotional support. Though expressed in various ways, much of this would fall under what one informant called "mutual aid as needed," and, again, expecting it from friends might be seen as an adjustment to having fewer or no "old-style" kin helpers on hand in the city. But, emotional support specific to the "new-style" activities of working women in the city is needed too, and friends may be the preferred as well as the only source of it. Examples described were help in job seeking for friends and moral support at work against demanding or unpleasant supervisors. Two Malay friends had become closer as a result of mutual support during their husband's absences on overseas assignments for several months as a time. In a research laboratory where the several technicians were all young married women, one of the women undertook organizing a lighter workload for a co-worker/friend who was pregnant. Lastly, most of my informants looked to their female friends for companionship. There was general agreement that women needed close friends in the city in order to counter the perceived high risk of loneliness there. Younger unmarried women without family in the city were seen to be at the greatest risk, but the problem was by no means considered theirs alone. A married Malay informant acknowledged her continuing need of friends despite the expanded supply of time-fillers in the city: "All the TV, magazines and newspapers can't take their place." A Chinese woman emphasized the importance of friends in helping a newly arrived in-migrant like herself "feel at home." A mature, professional Indian woman echoed the same theme in her comment that if she were without close female friends and "just had my husband," she would be "less informed and less content."

Female/Male Comparisons: To what extent are the strategies of urban women regarding friendship sex specific in Malaysia? How do they compare with the strategies of urban men? My inquiries into this aspect of the

friendship issue were preliminary and my data consist only of the views of women. They do, however, overlap with the experience of men as indicated in reference to friendship in a study of male immigrants to Kuala Lumpur by McGee (1976).

Most of the women I interviewed put women and men on a more or less equal footing with respect to making close friends in the city and downplayed differences between the sexes in favor of other factors. A number of women described Kuala Lumpur as an "unfriendly" or "less friendly" place where it was hard for both sexes to make and maintain close relationships. Others saw location within the city as making a difference. An ethnically mixed, middle class suburb was often mentioned as an "unfriendly" place where "doors are closed" and "neighbors don't talk to each other." A predominantly Malay suburb of low-cost housing compared as a "very friendly" part of town. It was also suggested that sex was less significant than personal characteristics and abilities, that an outgoing, sociable person, woman or man, would cope with the quest for friends more competently than a reserved one, for example. As one spokeswoman for the Malays among my informants put it: "Don't blame the city. Blame the person!" There is nothing original in these characterizations of the urban environment but my informants' application of them to contemporary urban Malaysia should be noted.

Among the views of female/male divergence regarding same-sex friendships in the city were several that referred to recruitment patterns. Men seem not to acquire male friends through a spouse as a woman can, but urban men have at least two sources of friends that women generally do not. One, the Kuala Lumpur business world, is open to men of all ethnicities but the other, the Islamic mosque or neighborhood prayer house, is open to Malay men only. Ethnic variations were also indicated in general comments on men's recruitment behavior. An Indian woman expressed the opinion that it was harder for men of her ethnic group to make close friends because of greater competition among urban men than women for work, positions, power, and prestige. Indian men, however, placed in the middle of an ethnic scale on which Malay men were the most friendly to each other and Chinese men the least. Two Chinese informants voiced the opinion that urban Chinese men think and act as if they "don't need friends" and invest much less time in the formation of friendships than other urban men, especially if the comparison is with Malay men. A Malay informant observed that today's urban Malay men are more likely than women to have cross-ethnic friends, and this is a female/male difference that is widely supposed to hold for non-Malays too. It is a sign of being a modern and urbanized Kuala Lumpur man to be able to claim (in Malaysian English) "friends from all the races."

Female/male differences in style of friendship maintenance received less comment. It was suggested that men are more loyal to male friends than women are to their female friends. The woman-to-woman links are more fragile, more subject to disruption by "small things," and, thus, need more careful maintenance. Time, or the lack of it, was repeatedly mentioned as an obstacle to both the making and maintenance of friendships in the city,

but it was widely supposed that urban men had less time for friendship maintenance than urban women. Chinese working men presented themselves to Chinese, Indian, and Malay women alike as having the least time.

My female informants' comments on the contribution of same-sex friendships to male survival in the urban environment clustered around the view that the male-male links are more likely than female-female ones to be mainly instrumental. As one Malay informant put it: "Male friendships are more often for a reason or a return rather than for a genuine feeling of friendship from the heart." The opinion matches the general literature on male-male friendships (e.g., Bell 1981:75-93., Tiger 1974). We should, however, consider that the women in my study were speaking of men similar to themselves in age, socioeconomic level, and life experience rather than of Malaysian men in general.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper has used case material from Malaysia to report on female friendships as one of the less visible dimensions of adaptation to urban living and one that has been largely neglected in anthropology's research on women in development and change. The large size, complexity and mobility of urban populations, the compartmentalized nature of urban social relations, and limits on female independence of movement and action as circumstances that can make same-sex friendships a "problem" for women in urbanization throughout the world. The responses of Malaysian women to the problems of establishing and maintaining friendships have been examined as have the perceived value of these friendships for successful survival in contemporary urban Malaysia. A preliminary report has been offered on how the responses of women are seen to be similar and different from the responses of men in the Malaysian case.

The paper has concentrated on the experiences of younger Malaysian women who are white collar workers in the city, and on women of the Malay ethnic group at the expense of Chinese and Indian women. It is appropriate in conclusion to consider the usefulness of the paper's occupational and ethnic foci.

First, was the focus on white collar workers useful? This focus was earlier presented as filling a research gap as far as Malaysia's urban women are concerned and the same gap has been noted for studies of women in cities elsewhere (Wekerle 1980). Beyond helping to fill a gap in the literature, however, has my focus on white collar women allowed any particular contribution to understanding friendship with other women as a "problem area" of urbanization?

I see the occupational focus as useful in that white collar women probably face a broader spectrum of adaptive demands than other types of working women in Malaysia's cities and therefore may have more need of friendships as a source of support. Female factory workers, for example, are people for whom many of the new needs presented by urban living are

catered to by the employing company. Most of the factories are organized along Asian lines and provide a wide range of facilities and services beyond the work-related ones.<sup>2</sup> Domestic servants--another significant category of working women in urban Malaysia--are in a long-established form of female employment and, thus, do not have the major adaptation to new kinds of work that the white collar workers do. Like the factory workers, the servants' adaptation to city life per se is typically ameliorated by their being very much in the care of their employers.<sup>3</sup> White collar workers, on the other hand, must find their own supporters for survival in the city. At the same time, they have a number of "modern" resources for coping that the others do not, notably a higher education and a greater measure of Westernization. Their lifestyle offers access to many of the possessions and behaviors that, for the time being at least, Malaysians associate with "success" in the urban setting. Some information on how, and how competently, white collar women handle the friendship issue in the course of becoming urbanized is of interest in this context too.

Was the assumption that Malay women feel the need for change in female friendships in the city more keenly than Chinese and Indian women justified? The point was made earlier that, in as much as urbanization of the traditionally rural Malay population has been specified as development policy for the 1980s and 1990s, urban living is to be the destiny of more and more Malay women. At the time of my study, it was a relatively new style of life for them, as was employment outside the domestic sphere. When the constraints and conservatism of Islam are added, I think it is fair to say that Malaysia's Malay women do have some particular pressures to contend with in meeting the behavior changes needed for successful contemporary urban living. There is some support for such a view in a survey of the same three ethnic groups in the city of Singapore by Wong (1975) and in an earlier Asia-wide review by Ward (1963). Assessing the assumption of relative disadvantage for Malay women must await a more equitable sampling of non-Malay women for comparison than the present study has attempted. A reconsideration is perhaps indicated in the frequency of reference by my Chinese and Indian informants to the Malays as "very friendly people" and as "much more friendly" than themselves. To the extent that the present study has been multiethnic and comparative, it has pointed to a number of interesting similarities as well as differences regarding female-to-female friendship links. A more equitable sampling of the three ethnic groups could have confirmed these findings and probably expanded on them. It is likely, also, to have revealed more cross-ethnic friendships and more information on their contribution to the reduction of ethnic independence and tension that contemporary Malaysia aspires to, as well as to the management of day-to-day interethnic contact that the nation's expanding urban populations must deal with as a newly significant social fact of life. While the potential of female friendships for meeting this particular demand of urbanization is recognized, Malaysian women do not yet make effective use of it.

NOTES

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2. These comments are made simply to compare existing circumstances. They should not be taken as in any way denying the far-from-satisfactory conditions under which many female factory workers work and live in the cities of Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries.
3. This statement draws on a study of female domestic servants in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, that I conducted during the same period of research as the present study (1980).

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