

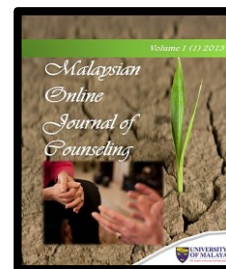
THE EDUCATION OF PREGNANT TEENAGERS IN MALAYSIA: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

It has been reported that teenagers who become pregnant lose out opportunities for the future due to lack of education and low socio-economy. It is inherent in the Eastern culture that premarital sex is a taboo and the situation is aggravated when the teenage girl is found pregnant. More often than not, these girls will be sent to a safe home to safeguard the interests of the girls and their families resulting in the social exclusion and reduce the chance of getting proper education. There is an impending need to specifically target more pregnant teenagers and teenage parents into education, training or employment to reduce their risk of long term social exclusion. The main question of, "How to encourage the reintegration of teenage mothers into the mainstream education system?" has sparked the interest in the areas of providing support to pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers in Malaysia. It was clear that for many of the pregnant young women and young mothers' disengagement from education occurred prior to pregnancy with less than half of the young women attending school regularly at the point of conception. This paper intends to provide an overview of the educational experience in the mainstream education system of pregnant teenagers and teenage mothers of school age in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Teenage pregnancy, risk behaviors, unwed mothers, mainstream education.*



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INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy comes with too many a definition. It was defined as 'teen aged or under aged girl (usually within the ages of 13–19) becoming pregnant' (World Health Organization, 2006). Previously the term pregnancy was used on any woman being pregnant without having a clear division of teenage or adult pregnancy. However, teenage pregnancy is often referred to those pregnancy among girls who are still under the care of their legal guidance (Azmawaty & Melati, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2009). Statistics indicated by the World Health Organisation (2005) has indicated a steady increase of teenage pregnancy worldwide.

Malaysia is not excused from this global endemic. Teenage pregnancy has been considered as one of the social ills that need to be addressed due to obstetric, medical & social issues associated to the pregnancy. This is a concern since complications due to pregnancy leading to death affects those mothers from developing countries and under the age of 15 years (World Health Organisation, 2009). Past literature have indicated that amongst the psychosocial factors that contributes to the rise in teenage pregnancies are risk behaviors, lack of education, socioeconomic and demographic factors, the lack of religiosity and family cohesion as well as the social relationship with others (Azmawaty, 2015; Jaafar, Wibowo, & Afiatin, 2006; Pinotti & Faúndes, 1989; Zulkifli & Low, 2000). For the purpose of this paper, the researchers are looking at the integration of mainstream education among pregnant teenagers and young mothers in Malaysia.

Teenagers and Risk Behaviors

In Malaysia, it has been reported that 11.8 million (40.9%) teenagers made up from the 28.9 million of the total population for the year 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). The health and well-being of these teenagers are the primary concern since there is an indication of a steady increase in the reported number of early sexual initiations and teenage pregnancy (Byrne, Kelley, & Fisher, 1993; Omar et al., 2010a; UNICEF, 2008; Wang, Hsu, Lin, Cheng, & Lee, 2010). The rise in teenage pregnancy is a consequence of risky sexual behaviour (Wang et al., 2010). The risk behaviors associated with early sex, child marriage, teenage childbirth, sexual violence and domestic labor has resulted in adolescents girls being more vulnerable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Jessor, 1991; Jessor & Jessor, 1984; Jessor & Jessor, 1977; World Health Organisation, 2009). Although the occurrence of sexual intimacy amongst adolescents in Malaysia is comparatively low (Lee, Chen, Lee, & Kaur, 2006), the steady increase of the early sexual initiation among the adolescents Malaysia is not to be taken lightly (Jaafar et al., 2006; Low, 2009; Low, Ng, Fadzil, & Ang, 2007; Omar et al., 2010b; Zulkifli & Low, 2000; Zulkifli, Low, & Yusof, 1995).

Early Sexual Initiations: The Factors

Some of the contributing factors that cause the rise in early initiation of sex amongst the adolescents include being away from the parents and family, whereby the adolescents enjoy independence and freedom from parental control (Fade, 2003; Kogan, 2004). It has been found that

lack of family cohesion has resulted in the secrecy of sexual initiation and unwanted pregnancy (Kogan, 2004). Living in the modern society, parents are often too involved in their work and activities and tend to neglect their children. In this study, adolescents have not received any informed information on sexual initiations. It has been observed that the patterns of communication between the parents and adolescents are often broken in that proper guidance from the parents is absent and the adolescents are forced to make decision that may be improper for their wellbeing. Additionally, (Omar et al., 2010) state that inadequate family support will result in STDs and unwanted pregnancies. It is also evident from this study that children whose parents are not prepared and ready to care for them are normally the children experiencing abuse, neglect, school failure as well as participating in criminal behaviors in the later part of their life (Omar et al., 2010; Pinotti & Faúndes, 1989) and involved in sexual initiation. Unmarried adolescents might view motherhood as an avenue to start a new trajectory in their life, achieve independent and adult status or as a strategy to get a sexual partner to care for or marry them (Middleton, 2011; Pinto e Silva, 1998).

The parental guidance and family cohesion are vital in contributing to the knowledge of the adolescents pertaining issues of sexuality. It has been found that strong family cohesion and parental guidance resulted in a lower rate of sexual initiation hence a reduction in the pregnancy rates. Awareness of the consequences of sexual initiation and sexuality are issues that need to be given prominence. Rebelliousness is another contributing factor to early sexual initiation resulting in an unwanted pregnancy. Lack of parental guidance and family cohesion may result in rebellion which is often associated with defying parents, go against conventions, breaking rules and regulations, engaging in thrill-seeking activities that go beyond the norm of the society. This was purportedly done to get the attention of their parents.

Subsequently, it has been found that personal choice is another contributing factor to unwanted pregnancy among adolescents. It has been found that lack of family cohesion and peer norms have resulted in the adolescents engaging in sexual acts to seek out ideal love (Kinsman et al., 1998). Coercion into having sex happens in the preliminary stage and subsequently turns into a personal choice to show love to their partner. It was found that these adolescents were promised a hand in marriage and sexual initiation acts as the measure of love in the relationship.

Cultural and Religious Influence

The abandonment of babies, a result of unwanted pregnancy is an eye opener for the authorities to take precautionary measures and prevention programs to curb the issues (Royal Malaysia Police, 2012). Officially, Islam is the main religion in Malaysia. Despite that it allows her multi-racial citizens to perform their religious beliefs. Although the religions forbid premarital sex, the adolescents are now more open in their relationship with the opposite sex. This is much encouraged by the globalisation that has its effect on the Malaysian shore (Jaafar et al., 2006; Low, 2009; Omar et al., 2010; Zulkifli & Low, 2000; Zulkifli et al., 1995).

From the perspectives of cultural and religious context, sexuality issues are not discussed widely and openly in Malaysia. Parents find it a taboo to discuss issues pertaining to the sexuality with their adolescents leaving them to find out about their sexuality from other medium such as the media and peers (Athar, 1996; Lee et al., 2006). In many cultures, including the Malay-Muslims, dating amongst adolescents are no longer new, however; many traditional families still uphold their religious beliefs, values and morality issues. Traditional families with some religious background produced more grounded adolescents and stressed upon the issues of morality (Byrne, 1983; Jaafar et al., 2006). In the case of Malay-Muslims families, premarital sex is forbidden. Teenagers are expected to abstain whereby the act of consummation is only conducted after marriage, however; statistics have shown that the highest case of abandonment of babies occurred amongst the Malay-Muslims unwed teenagers, causing a public outcry (Royal Malaysia Police, 2012).

Ostracism from the Mainstream Education

The aftermath of unwanted pregnancy is noted to be detrimental and may cause disruption in the life of adolescents where they are often unprepared emotionally and cognitively. These teen mothers may suffer from depression which may result in suicide. Most importantly, unwed mothers are often ostracized from the society and the mainstream education. In consequence, they drop out of school, have no or low qualifications, be unemployed or lowly-paid, live in poor housing conditions (Hayward, 2011; UNICEF, 2008, 2012). In a recent study conducted by Azmawaty (2015), the pregnant teenagers were asked to leave their house when found pregnant by their parents and sent to a safe home. These girls have little knowledge of what pregnancy is all about and the expectations for their future. Little or no family supports to help them go through their pregnancy and facing difficult times are among the key factors of emotional abandonment. The study also found that no adequate support was provided from the caretakers in the safe home. Although they were provided with shelter and food, there was no support system to help them deal with their emotional and physical pain. Although Malaysia is a multicultural society, pregnant teenagers faced emotional abandonment and social stigma resulting in being ostracized from continuing studies in the mainstream education (Azmawaty, 2015). Henceforth, how do we encourage the reintegration of teenage mothers into the mainstream education system?

It is uncommon to see pregnant teenagers to be in the mainstream school education system. It is a taboo and culturally unacceptable for teenagers to be pregnant before marriage. Hence, pregnant teenagers are exposed to the social stigma. The Education Ministry has realized the importance of continuance of education among pregnant teenagers and in 2010, the first school was opened in Malacca. The school known as *Sekolah Harapan* or School of Hope intends to assist in curbing the rising epidemic of baby dumping or abandonment of baby. There are mix reactions on the opening of the school where some conservative comments from the Malay-Muslim stated that it will only encourage more premarital sex.

Meanwhile, the main objective of the facility is to reduce baby abandonment and continuing the mainstream education amongst these pregnant teenagers. Besides, these girls were provided for with counseling as well as skill training to help them once they have given birth to their child. This

helps in encouraging and boosting the morale of these girls. Unlike many other private safe home that are not registered under the Department of Welfare, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development; School of Hope, helped these girls in many ways: boosting self-esteem, education and skills. To ensure sufficient skills and knowledge provided to these girls via education, no one girl should be denied access to education in the event of unwed pregnancy. Knowledge on religious matters was also provided in the form of counseling.

Involvement of Pregnant Teenagers in the Mainstream Education

Past studies have indicated that disengagement from the mainstream education was due to the stigmatization from the society since Malaysia is predominantly a Malay-Muslim country. This occurs at the onset of pregnancy avoiding self-blame, sense of failure, being bullied and stereotyped by friends and the society (Azmawaty, 2015; Macleod, 2010). However, in the west it was found that “a majority of these young women reported improved attendance and a greater willingness to engage with education following pregnancy, especially if offered appropriate non-judgmental support” (Dawson, Hosie, Meadows, Selman, & Speak, 2005, p. 9).

For some girls, becoming pregnant has a negative impact on their life, where education is no longer an option. Peer support and their reaction is another deciding factor on the willingness of these pregnant teenagers to return to the education system. Bullying especially by boys was specifically the main reason of their leaving school. The school had failed to intervene and this had made the re-engagement and reintegration in the mainstream education impossible. Azmawaty (2015) in her study has found that transformation of self, helped in acquiring the positive change in planning for the future and outlook towards life. The participants in the study realized that in order to be successful in life, education and economic viability is important. The involvement of pregnant teenagers in the mainstream education is important albeit in a modified manner to take on board the various issues discussed.

CONCLUSION

The thought of having a future facing ostracism and having nothing to fall back on in terms of education and support has somehow served as an impetus to keep unwanted pregnancies under wrap. As discussed earlier, we have a mixed reaction to towards the setting up of School of Hope. Future research can look into answering the following questions:

1. With such a school, are we giving a detrimental option of complacency to teenagers?
2. Is the society lacking the compassion of saving the babies?
3. Are we agreeing to the decision that ensures that traditional morals are preserved to uphold the essence of a community?

One of the major influences of pregnant teenagers willingness to continue in education during their pregnancy was the belief that education is of utmost importance in helping them having a meaningful life in the future. This realization was already known prior to their pregnancy. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development is not in favor of such set-up owing to the

fact that separation from the mainstream school system will stigmatize these girls further. They need to be absorbed in the normal school system. Additionally, the integration of sexuality education should be incorporated in the syllabus in the mainstream school education system. The women's ministry has for years advocated that students be taught a health and reproductive course.

Parents of pregnant teenagers should be educated on matters pertaining to the health and psychological well-being of their daughters. Most parents that are not exposed to such information will be in a dilemma on what to do next. The major issue that a parent would most likely bring up is "How are you going to raise a child on your own? You just destroyed your education and future." What happen next will be the teenager will probably end up being left in a safe home to think of her future. Social stigmatization and lack of education on such issues will aggravate the situation of these girls. It will end in such a way that the baby she gives birth to will be given away for adoption.

Preventive and educational programs have been implemented to suit the needs of teenagers, and to hope that they can completely prevent teen pregnancies is unrealistic. However, it is possible to ensure that once a teenager is pregnant, she is granted and given the education she is entitled to. In conclusion, "teenagers who become parents should not lose out on opportunities for the future" and that "young parents should have the chance to complete their education and prepare to support themselves and their families" (Dawson et al., 2005).

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