
Addressing Premarital Sex, Ex-nuptial Pregnancy and Infant Abandonment in Malaysia: Opinions of Young People

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Abstract

The triad of social and sexual behaviour; premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment among young people in Malaysia has become an alarming public issue. Information and evidence to inform effective intervention most often come from others and lack of opinion from young people themselves. This study aimed to explore their opinion on strategies to address this issue. We carried out six focus group discussions comprised of nine to ten young people aged between 18 to 29 years in each group. Their opinions were personal and focused more on microlevel strategies such as the role of friends, parents and family. Three themes emerged from the thematic analysis to address this issue including i) the importance of shared responsibilities between the young women, the biological father of the ex-nuptial baby and their parents, ii) the role of peer support, and iii) adherence to religious teaching. However, no common macro-level factors related to the triad such as social and gender disparities, violence against women nor comprehensive sexuality education were discussed. Management of premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment should take into account the opinions of the young people which emphasising the shared responsibility, peer support and religious teaching. The perspective of young people is valuable to curb these social issues.

Keywords: Baby dumping; Ex-nuptial pregnancy; illegitimate child; Infant abandonment; premarital sex.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, there has been increasing research interest in the triad of social and sexual behaviour in Malaysia; premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment. Perhaps these locally perceived 'transgressive behaviour' have garnered the attention of the researchers following highlights of the increase in cases of illegal infant abandonment in social media and newspapers (Razali, S Hassan, Yusoff, & Basri, 2016). Local researchers estimated that every four days one foetus or infant was being illegally abandoned at inappropriate places (Razali, Kirkman, Ahmad, & Fisher, 2014). About half of foetuses or infants died, translating into the inferred rates of infanticide related to infant abandonment which fluctuated between 4.82 and 9.11 per 100,000 live births (Razali et al., 2014). The distressing phenomena must be addressed immediately. However, the evidence that informed the planning and implementation of the interventions of this triad of social ill behaviour among young people is often coming from others with minimal input and opinions from young people themselves. Hence, this research aimed to fill up this gap to provide evidence regarding these issues.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to explore the accounts of young people on how to address social behaviour: premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment in this country.

Literature Review

Public, service providers, researchers and the women or girls who were blamed for abandoning their babies are not in unison on the genesis of infant abandonment in Malaysia. As a traditional society, public and service providers in this country believed that premarital sex and ex-nuptial pregnancy are the most common phenomena that served as mediators for illegal infant abandonment (Razali, Kirkman, & Fisher, 2020). According to an early review paper, apart from having premarital sex, other sexual behavior which imposed risk and made the life of young people in this country more difficult where the unwanted and unsafe pregnancies, illegal abortions, sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and HIV/AIDS, sexual diversity, cybersex and lack of sexuality education (Low, 2009). It is believed that poor adherence to religious teaching, poor parenting skills, lack of family involvement, and inadequate sexuality education is the essential contributing factors for these social issues (Razali et al., 2016).

In contrary to the perspectives of the public and service providers, a few experts who have interviewed personally the women and girls who have abandoned their babies claimed that grounded to this triad behavior of infant abandonment, premarital sex and ex-nuptial pregnancy are gender inequality, social disparity and lack of support given to young Malaysian generations (Razali et al., 2014). Furthermore, according to the experts, women and girls are often trapped between the violent environment of sexual assault, statutory rape and intimate partner violence. While pregnant, they were suffering as the victims of irresponsible partners and an abusive spouse whom a few are drug addicts (Razali et al., 2017a). Furthermore, the stigma and negative perceptions by the traditional society against women or girls with ex-nuptial pregnancy increases further the tendency for illegal infant abandonment (Razali, Fisher, & Kirkman, 2019; Razali et al., 2014; Razali et al., 2016). The inconsistencies in opinions between the public, service providers and the women and girls who experience the triad of premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment may not provide solid evidence to inform effective intervention in addressing these issues.

Effective management and interventions of premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment require a holistic approach from various stakeholders from every level of society. At the macro level, the National Women Policy which was formulated in 1989 has laid out several approaches to reduce gender and social inequality as well as to empower women and girls in this country (The Ministry of Women Family and Community Development, 2020b). In terms of sexual and reproductive health, policies on the social and sexual health of adolescents and young people have also been drafted and implemented (The Ministry of Health, 2020; The Ministry of Women Family and Community Development, 2020a). Furthermore, more comprehensive sexuality education has also been introduced to increase the knowledge of adolescents and young people on sexuality and reproductive health (Khalaf, Low, Merghati-Khoei, & Ghorbani, 2014; Razali et al., 2017b). However, despite several strategies that have been deliberated and executed to tackle these issues, there are still huge challenges to ensure the success of the programs. Among the fundamental hurdles that have been described include the discriminative behaviour, poorly trained and unprofessional etiquette of services providers, lack of family and parental involvement and failure of deterrence or legal measures and religious approaches in addressing these issues (Hazariah, Fallon, & Callery, 2020; Razali et al., 2017a).

Previous studies on these phenomena have been informed mostly from hospital records, registries, media, service providers and professionals (Nagandla & Kumar, 2020; Razali et al., 2014; Razali et al., 2020; Razali et al., 2016) and a few have explored in-depth the perspectives of contributing factors of these issues from the women and girls who had experienced the acts themselves (Razali et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2012). However, there is limited research exploring the opinion of young people on how to address these issues. The voices of adolescents and young people are seldom referred to inform interventions planning for their future. Hence, this study aimed to explore the accounts of young people on how to address social behaviour: premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment in this country.

Methodology

Participants

Information was collected through focus group discussions (FGDs). We carried out a total of 6 FGDs comprised of nine to ten young people aged between 18 to 29 years. We interviewed participants in *Bahasa Malaysia* or English. The participants were students of three colleges who came for a community program in one suburban area in Malaysia. The sampling method was a purposive nonprobability approach.

Initial preparation

The preliminary preparation includes training for the facilitator and evaluating the interview prompts, technique, comprehensibility and acceptability. The main author who is an expert in qualitative study trained ten nursing students aged around 20 to 21 years old to be the facilitator for the FGDs. These students were selected because of their nature as young people who were in the same age group as the participants; this is to enhance rapport and easy discussion on sensitive topics (such as sexuality). One week prior to the study, they were trained on how to facilitate the discussion using the interview guide, use open-ended questions and at the same time encouraging each and every participant to freely give their opinion. During the fieldwork interview, only 6 of them became the facilitators and the remaining others including the authors were the observers.

Focus group discussions

Prior to the interview, potential participants were given an explanation about the aim of the study and informed consent was gathered from each participant. The participants chose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Potential participants who signed the written consent form were invited for the discussion. Then, a short pro forma questionnaire of their socio-demography was completed. The discussion took about 90 to 120 minutes moderated by a facilitator and an observer, who took notes during the discussions and made sure the facilitator did not overlook any participants trying to add clarifications or comments. All discussions were audiotaped with permission from the participants. We provided food before and after the focus group discussions.

Guide for discussions

According to recommended focus group methodology, a few prompts (see Table 1) were developed by the research team, aiming to explore possible contributing factors experienced by young people that may give rise to premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment. The prompts were tested within and revised by the research team as well as pilot-tested in a group of ten university students before the fieldwork (as mentioned earlier). The prompts consisted of introductory questions which allowed participants to be familiar and feel connected, and to start the discussion of the topic. In order to guide the group towards the main part of the discussion and to focus on the aim of this study, transition and key questions were used. The participants were asked to share ideas concerning premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment. During the FGDs, the facilitator followed the prompts but asked side questions to obtain more in-depth information about the topics and showed enough flexibility to allow open discussions between participants.

Table 1: Guide for Focus Group Discussions

Question Type	The Prompts
Opening	1. What's your name? Where are you from?
Introduction	2. Ask participants for examples of common social problems experienced by adolescents or young people in this country.
Transition	3. Thinking about 'premarital sex', 'ex-nuptial baby' and 'baby abandonment', what comes to your mind?
Key	4. Imagine that you have a friend which such problems, what could be the possible ways to help her? 5. If it occurs to other people, what are other methods/ways/strategies to help them?
Ending	6. Do you have any last remarks about how to address this condition?

Data analysis

We used SPSS Statistics 20 to analyse data obtained from the questionnaire and to calculate descriptive statistics of the participants. The FGDs were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim manually in Microsoft Word. The qualitative data analysis software (QDA Miner) program was used to assist with the analysis. Through inductive methods, we used thematic analysis to analyse the data. The transcripts of interviews were read line by line iteratively. Quotes were given to the recurrent presentation of ideas. The quotes were then grouped together by means of a coding system. Related codes were clustered together into more general conceptions (subtheme) and further categorised into main emergent themes. Data interpretations, doubts or disagreements were

discussed with other researchers until agreement was reached. The study was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA.

Findings

Participants for the FGDs

We conducted and analysed six FGDs, comprising nine to ten participants per discussion group. The discussions were participated by 44(74.6%) female and 15(25.4%) male students in tertiary education; aged between 18 to 29 years old mean age (\pm SD) of 21.3 (\pm 1.8). Of the total 59 students, 51(86.4%) were in their first or second year of university study and 8(13.6%) were in college study. In terms of financial support or stipend, their educations were either supported by their parents (n=29; 49.2%), scholarship (n=17; 28.8) or other financial resources (n=8; 13.6%). All but one were unemployed. About a third (n=22; 37.3%) were in a close relationship and the remaining were not. All of them were single, never married.

The Themes

There were three themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. Below are the themes described by the participants of how to address the social problems related to premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment in this country.

- ***Theme 1: Shared responsibilities***

The majority of the participants believed that young people who have premarital sex and ended up with ex-nuptial pregnancy should not keep secret their condition. A few participants realized that it was difficult for the pregnant girl to disclose her condition. They suggested that as a Muslim-majority country, negative perception against premarital sex and having ex-nuptial pregnancy created severe stress and fear among girls with ex-nuptial children. The participants suggested that blaming the pregnant girl was not the solution. Hence, the first step according to a few participants was to manage the stress and let the girl calm down so that proper steps can be taken to solve the problem.

The most appropriate way to handle the situation was to share the responsibility with other people. First and foremost, the majority of the participants wanted the partner or the father of the baby to share the burden experienced by the young woman or girl who was pregnant. One of the participants acknowledged her responsibility to care for the ex-nuptial baby and at the same time wanted the partner to be responsible; as she described,

“[If I am pregnant], feeling shameful, of course! Things already happened. We have [the baby] in our body. Whatever might happen to us, we should take care of the baby. It’s our responsibility. The first step we should do is to convince the guy who is responsible for it. This is the main thing we should do!” – Translated, Liya, 21.

Another participant, Umi, 20 shared her experience helping someone close to her who was pregnant out-of-wedlock. She supported the opinion of the majority of the participants that wanting the parents and family to share the responsibility too. She said if she encountered another pregnant friend needing help, she would advise her that,

“Do not keep the worry to yourself. We have to help her if her boyfriend refused to be responsible. Well, we should tell her dad. If her family can accept (her condition), her family will support her; help her to find ways to take care of the baby if she does not want to. The baby is his baby. If the father refused to care for his baby. Then, family should take the responsibility” – Translated Umi, 20.

- **Theme 2: Peer support**

Young people in this study highlighted the role of peer support in addressing this issue. They believed that friends were the first person as a confidant to share problems with those who were facing this challenging experience. One of the participants, Liza, 20 described her experience having someone close to her with ex-nuptial pregnancy. She described the feeling of ambivalence that the girl harboured; between wanting to keep the pregnancy because she loved her baby or to give away the baby because of feeling ashamed of her condition. Liza further shared her experience when her friend wanted to abandon the baby,

“I told her not to dump the baby. Don’t you feel guilty? She said that she loved the baby. She was concerned with family’s perceptions when they knew about her condition; having pregnant out-of-wedlock. I then told her, ‘Not to worry, we are just normal human being, we make mistakes’. I gave her moral support. She had thought of throwing away the baby. I stopped her from doing so.”- Translated, Liza, 20.

Another participant suggested that the pregnant girl should be mentally strong to face the challenges. Most participants believed that support from friends was very important to reduce the stress and burden. One of the participants said,

“We should advise her by giving her moral support. Not to blame her. She is already pregnant. Nothing can be done. We can only give support. Do not let her become hopeless”- Translated Siti, 21.

The participants suggested that as a friend, they could become a mediator to communicate with the boyfriend or father of the baby, and to deal with the family especially with a 'harsh family'. Then, the ultimate support seemed to be in the hand of the family to make the decision. Most participants believed that parents and family should provide a supportive environment including helping the pregnant girl to find a proper place such as homes or shelters to continue her pregnancy

- **Theme 3: Adherence to religious teaching**

Most participants agreed that embracing religious teaching was the fundamental way to address this triad of premarital sex, having an ex-nuptial child and infant abandonment. One of the subthemes highlighted by the participants was to adhere to religious teaching on the interaction between young people. They suggested that young people should keep the boundaries between males and females as taught by the religion.

“We should follow the teaching of our religion. We pray every day, we should keep modest and no intimate relationship with guys. Wait until we get married. It is okay to go out with friends, but keep the distance!” Translated, Hidayah, 21.

Having social activities, they claimed were not wrong, but have the activities in groups in an open area in contrast to having a date with an intimate partner in a secluded place. Furthermore, a few

suggested that the girl who has ex-nuptial pregnancy should repent for having done a serious sinful act of fornication and do not proceed with committing other sinful behaviour such as abortion and infant abandonment. Many suggested that consulting *Ustaz* or *ustazah* is the best way to find guidance and to embrace religion.

Discussions

This study highlighted the opinions of young people regarding pre-marital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment. Overall, their opinions were personal and focused more on micro-level factors such as the role of friends, parents, family, teachers or colleges/university authorities. They suggested the importance of i) shared responsibilities between the young women, the biological father of the ex-nuptial baby and their parents, ii) the role of peer support and, iii) adherence to religious teaching.

It is believed that women who are pregnant an ex-nuptial baby may have difficulty to disclose and keep secret their pregnancy because of various reasons; either psychotic experiences (Chase, Shah, Maines, & Fusick, 2020), fear or stigma (Murphy Tighe & Lalor, 2016) and various psychosocial difficulties. As part of difficulties, in this study, the participants described that the young women often received harsh and ill-treatment from the biological father of the ex-nuptial child and women' parents. This created an intense feeling of neglect and insecurity among them to face the future of having to give birth and bring up the ex-nuptial child. In Malaysia, the involvement of the biological father in relation to this issue is mostly kept silent, rarely highlighted nor discussed. In fact, a Muslim man who impregnated a woman from an Islamic legal perspective has no obligation to care for his ex-nuptial child. According to the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territory), sustenance of the ex-nuptial child is the responsibility of the mother (Section 80). The man is responsible to care for the child only if they are married to the woman and accept the child as part of the family member (Section 78). Apart from the status of 'illegitimacy', women with ex-nuptial children in this country also face various other challenges including stigma and negative perceptions from the community, financial difficulties, difficulties in registration of the child, problems with childcare, housing arrangement and unstable job (Tohid et al., 2021). The consequences of insecurity and lack of support, women with ex-nuptial pregnancy may continue concealing the pregnancy status which may result in poor perinatal care, various obstetric complications to the mother and the baby, infant abandonment and neonaticide (Razali et al., 2019).

Hence, as described by young people in this study, a good support system is crucial. Not only the biological father of the ex-nuptial child should take responsibility for his baby and the woman, parents and family support is also crucial. Certainly, proper parenting and providing a safe environment without violence are fundamental for children. In terms of addressing premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment, parental involvement should start as early as possible including equipping their children with knowledge on sexuality (Faudzi, Sumari, & Nor, 2020; Razali et al., 2017a; Sham, Zaidi, Zahari, Danis, & Razali, 2020). Relying only upon teachers at school to instil knowledge on sexuality and reproductive health could not ensure the success of sexuality education (Haberland & Rogow, 2015). Moreover, parents should provide full support whenever their children are facing any crisis including having ex-nuptial pregnancy (Razali et al., 2016).

In the current study, young people involved in the discussion highlighted the crucial role of peers as the first line supporters for young people experiencing difficult situations. Friends according to them can help to reduce stress, assist in finding ways to solve the problems and become the mediator for further discussion with parents and other professionals such as counsellors. Hence, strategies to tackle this issue should include peers support. A few studies have shown the effectiveness of peer-

led or youth-led sexuality education which primarily involves young people teaching other young people about sex (Mellanby, Newcombe, Rees, & Tripp, 2001). This type of approach may be suitable to establish conservative norms and attitudes related to sexual behaviour than the adults, but the factual information should be prepared properly by adults (Mellanby et al., 2001). A recent meta-analysis of fifteen studies on peer-led approaches in enhancing sexuality education among young people showed promising findings (Sun, Miu, Wong, Tucker, & Wong, 2018).

Adherence to faith or religion as part of the strategies in addressing social issues such as premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment has been suggested by many local researchers (Muhammad, Shamsuddin, Sulaiman, Amin, & Omar, 2017). In this study, the participants who mostly Muslims highlighted that religion can be the source of strength and comfort rather than a source of stigma and blame. The participants expressed that at first, religion would be a preventive factor from pre-marital sex because Islam forbids such an act. When pre-marital sex has occurred, the essential element of seeking forgiveness, repentance and religion is secondary prevention from repeating such acts. On contrary, elsewhere, according to recent reviews, the motive of infant abandonment and neonaticide due to stigma and fear are lesser in developed countries which have a more liberal opinion on sexuality compared to developing countries with traditional beliefs on pregnancy status (Tanaka et al., 2017). Despite the potential benefits, the integration of religious teaching into mainstream sexuality education is a great challenge not only in Malaysia but also in other countries such as Canada and Australia (Sanjakdar, 2018; Shipley, 2017).

Nonetheless, it is worrying that discussion with those young people did not reveal any macrolevel factors known associated with these phenomena such as social and gender inequality (Razali et al., 2014), violence against women (Razali et al., 2019), reproductive and sexuality education (Razali et al., 2017a) and legal aspects (Mohamad Mansor, Zulkiflee, & Melton, 2014). This occurred perhaps due to immaturity, lack of exposure or lack of knowledge on fundamental factors underpin these phenomena among young people. This loophole should be rectified, perhaps by making comprehensive reproductive and sexuality education, which currently integrated only in primary and secondary mainstream education (Hazariah et al., 2020; Razali et al., 2017a; Yaacob, Rahim, Najid, Noor, & Zulkifli, 2020), as a compulsory subject of the co-curriculum in tertiary education such as colleges and university in Malaysia. By doing so, this group of emerging adults can be reminded of various social issues among them and accessible services to help them manage the problems can be offered.

Limitation and future research

Limitation

The rising incidence of inter-related social behaviour; premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy and infant abandonment requires a dire need for an effective strategy to address it. Young people's opinion on this matter should not be underestimated. Being in a similar age group in which these issues particularly affect, more empathetic strategies are proposed from them; the importance of shared responsibilities between the young women, the biological father of the ex-nuptial baby and their parents, the role of peer support and, adherence to religious teaching. The suggestions from young people for young people to address this issue should be given attention by all the parties involved in curbing this social behaviour. Nonetheless, this study is limited by the number of participants and focused only on young people who continue their tertiary education in college. Hence, the findings may not represent young people in the general population.

Future research and recommendation

Recognising the limitation of the research, it is suggested that future research be more comprehensive by investigating opinions of young people from qualitative and quantitative methods. By doing so, the findings can be informed from the study of a larger number of young people

including those in the general population. Translating the identified strategies into a practical solution requires a combined effort from various parties and stakeholders. Methods of implementation need a carefully thought discussion to ensure the most effective medium or platform is used to ensure the targeted young people benefitted from these measures. Despite empowering young people with knowledge and skill to be responsible for themselves and making the correct decision on the sexual relationship would be ideal in nipping this negative social behaviour in the bud. However, in view of the issues that may occur at various stages; addressing those involved with premarital sex, managing those who had already pregnant out-of-wedlock and supporting those who have delivered a baby, hence a multi-stage approach as what was suggested in this study is crucial and potentially able to address this significant social enigma.

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