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Exploring Rural Community's Knowledge on Child Maltreatment

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Abstract

Child maltreatment is an epidemic affecting children of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and socio-economic status, influencing both physical and mental health. In general, the attitude of the rural population towards child maltreatment plays a key role in determining their willingness to report such incidents. Therefore, this study was conducted among community members residing in Kampung Skim Sekuau in Sibu, Sarawak to explore their knowledge on child maltreatment. The researcher used an in-depth interview approach to collect data on the rural community's understanding and knowledge of risk factors that contribute to child maltreatment. The results of the study show that the majority of the respondents are female, aged between 30 and 52 years old, belong to the Iban ethnic group, and work in the government and private sectors. Nevertheless, the findings reveal the risk factors that contribute to child maltreatment, including conflict between spouses, financial hardship, stress, and parental substance abuse. By understanding the rural community's perception of child maltreatment, the trauma associated with such heinous acts can be more effectively addressed through the existing intact support systems for coping resources and prevention measures against child maltreatment.

Keywords: Child Maltreatment, Parents, Perception, Risk Factors

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018) defines child maltreatment as any act or omission by a parent or caregiver that has the potential to result in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation. Child maltreatment is also associated with a range of negative outcomes, including higher rates of depression, substance use, and risky sexual behaviour (Maguire-Jack, et al., 2020). Previous studies have found that rates of investigation and substantiation vary across countries, states, and even neighbourhoods (Bullinger et al., 2023; Maguire-Jack, et al., 2020). According to the National Children's Alliance (2020), 90% of alleged abusers in the US were related to the children, with 51% being relatives of the children' and another 39% being the children's parents. National data from the Administration for Children and Families (2021) shows that the highest rate of maltreatment victims at the state level is in Kentucky, at 22.2 per day per 1,000 children.

Another researcher has pointed out that the UK is considered one of the safest countries in Europe for children and adolescents, while Pakistan is viewed as the least safe place, according to a new index that ranks 40 countries around the world on how well they respond to child sexual abuse and exploitation (Lu, 2019). In Saudi Arabia, a total of 616 cases of child maltreatment were recorded between October 2010 and February 2012, of which 51.1% (315) were boys and 48.9% (301) were girls (Al-Shail et al., 2012). In addition, South Africa reported 34% cases of physical abuse, 16% of emotional abuse, and 20% of sexual abuse among children aged 15 to 17 years old in 2015 (Burton et al., 2015).

In the context of Malaysia, former Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development, Datuk Seri Rohani Abdul Karim, stated that from 2015 to June 2017, some 581 cases of child maltreatment involving caregivers were reported (Malay Mail, 2017). According to Datuk Azizah Muhd Dun, the former Malaysian Deputy Minister for Women, Family, and Community Development between 2015 and 2016, the highest number of child maltreatment cases recorded were physical abuse with 2,470 cases (53.09%), followed by sexual abuse with 2,012 cases (43.25%), and emotional abuse with 170 cases (3.65%) (Chow, 2017). In addition, Datuk Azizah noted that cases of child maltreatment are associated with financial problems, stress at work, parental negligence, family disputes, lack of religious education, and parenting knowledge (Chow, 2017). The Social Welfare Department stated that from March 2020 to March 2022, 1,910 cases of child maltreatment and neglect were recorded, with the state of Selangor recording the highest number of cases (Malay Mail, 2023). Superintendent Ong Chin Lan, deputy director of the Bukit Aman Sexual, Women, and Children's Investigation Department, said one of the biggest challenges for police agencies was the lack of evidence in handling child maltreatment cases. She also acknowledged that the Sexual, Women, and Children Investigation Department in Bukit Aman faces problems such as lack of manpower and coordination between the police, medical officers, and the welfare department to investigate or handle child maltreatment cases (Thayaparan, 2017).

Free Malaysia Today (2022) reports that in 2022, a total of 706 child maltreatment cases (68%) were reported for girls and 349 cases (33%) for boys in Malaysia. Police statistics show that a total of 1,348 cases of child sexual abuse were recorded in the first six months of 2022, to wit, 641 cases of rape, 438 cases of molestation, 127 cases of incest, 95 cases of unnatural sex, and 47 cases of gang rape (Free Malaysia Today, 2022). The Deputy Health Minister of Malaysia said that child maltreatment cases in Perak increased by 60% between 2015 and 2018, from 271 cases in 2015 to 451 cases in 2018, mostly perpetrated by the mothers' boyfriends, followed by the child's biological fathers, and stepmothers (Free Malaysia Today, 2022). Some examples of child maltreatment cases reported in Malaysia include the story described by Hassandarvish (2019) in January 2019, where a 9-month-old baby died in Sibu, Sarawak after being abused by his babysitter. The child was in critical condition before he died at the Sibu hospital. The doctor handling the case declared the cause of death as brain stem death after a medical examination confirmed that the 9-month-old child had suffered brain haemorrhages and fractures on the left side of his skull. The baby was abused by a babysitter lacking licensure, likely experience, and training.

Society plays an important role in preventing the occurrence of child maltreatment cases (Abdullah et al., 2017). According to Abdullah et al (2017), society should be aware of child maltreatment cases and have a desire to protect the child from abuse, as well as understand

the important steps to prevent the occurrence of child maltreatment. In addition, effective societal approaches can prevent cases of child maltreatment through the use of legal and policy measures to create a supportive environment for the child. Westby (2007) summarised the published literature on child maltreatment and neglect and found that family disharmony, financial problems, divorce, personality disorders, and parental substance abuse are among the most important risk factors for child maltreatment and neglect. Westby (2007) also mentioned that most of the reported cases of child maltreatment and neglect involve physical abuse, non-accidental injuries, sexual abuse, child neglect, rape, teenage pregnancy, cyberbullying, and bullying at school. Moreover, from an Islamic perspective, creating individual and social awareness and pushing for institutional reforms are the solutions to prevent the occurrence of child maltreatment, as all children have the right to feel safe and live in good health (Hamdzah and Yasin, 2016).

Filzah and Taib (2015) noted that child empowerment programmes such as 'Talian Nur,' an early intervention hotline for domestic violence situations, are an important step for those who want to report child maltreatment cases in Malaysia. In addition, Filzah and Taib (2015) noted that injuries can cause a child to develop mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and trauma if they do not receive appropriate intervention or treatment. According to Dahake et al (2018), many factors contribute to child maltreatment and neglect, such as substance abuse (i.e., drugs and alcohol), financial problems, unemployment, marital problems (including domestic violence), stress, and lack of family support network, leading to traumatic stress in the child, which can become a long-term problem requiring psychological treatment. An article entitled "Child Maltreatment: A Global Issue" by Westby (2007) explains why children with speech and language disorders are at risk of child maltreatment and neglect. Westby (2007) stated that children with disabilities are more likely to be maltreated compared to their peers, which further affects their language and cognitive abilities. The author also noted that the pathologist in charge of these children should prepare documents and reports on the child's condition if it is suspected that a child with speech and language disorders is being abused.

A study on parents' perception of the causes and effects of child maltreatment was conducted by Olusegun Bada (2015) in Ondo State, Nigeria. About 200 respondents in Ondo State, all of whom were parents, were included in this study. According to the findings of the survey, poverty, illiteracy, and marital crises were perceived as the major causes of child maltreatment in Ondo State. Parents' responses also revealed that the perceived major effects of child maltreatment were poor academic performance, sexual assault, dropping out of school, and emotional breakdown. Mendelson and Letourneau (2015) reviewed the overview of current strategies to reduce the prevalence of child sexual abuse and their limitations. They also presented a rationale for parent-centred child sexual abuse prevention and discussed the considerations relevant to developing an effective parent-centred approach. In addition, Mendelson et al (2015) noted that parents are the closest to the child and need to focus primarily on protecting the child, as they are the most effective position to do so. Rates of maltreatment vary widely across geographical areas and understanding the causes of these differences has been the subject of much research. Because most of our knowledge about child maltreatment comes from urban areas, it is not known whether the considerations and risk factors also apply to people in rural areas. Therefore, this study aims

to explore the issue of child maltreatment from the perspective of rural people in Sibul, Sarawak.

Research Objective

The research objective of this study is

- To explore rural community's understanding on child maltreatment issues.
- To identify rural community knowledge on risk factors contributing to child maltreatment issues.

Methodology

Research Design

Research design is important in data collection as it can help the researcher to obtain the relevant information to answer the research questions (Ahmad et al., 2014). A qualitative method was used to conduct this research to further explore the main aspect of the research. Also, open-ended questions were used as this approach engenders a better discussion between the researchers and the respondents.

Research Sample

According to Hopkin et al (2015); McLeod (2019), a smaller set of data from a population is defined as a sample. Furthermore, Bhandari (2020); Denzin (2012) stated that it is crucial to select an appropriate sample as it provides the best representativeness for the general population. In this study, the sample of the study focuses on parents living in one of the rural areas of Sarawak, Malaysia

Location of the Study

This study was conducted in a rural village called Kampung Skim Sekuau in Sibul, Sarawak, which is 45 kilometres from Sibul town and takes about 45 minutes of driving to reach. There are about 15 to 27 longhouses in this village and the majority of the villagers belong to the Iban ethnic group. Despite its rural location, the village has a clinic, a primary school, a preschool, a church, and a community hall. Figure 1 shows the location of the study.

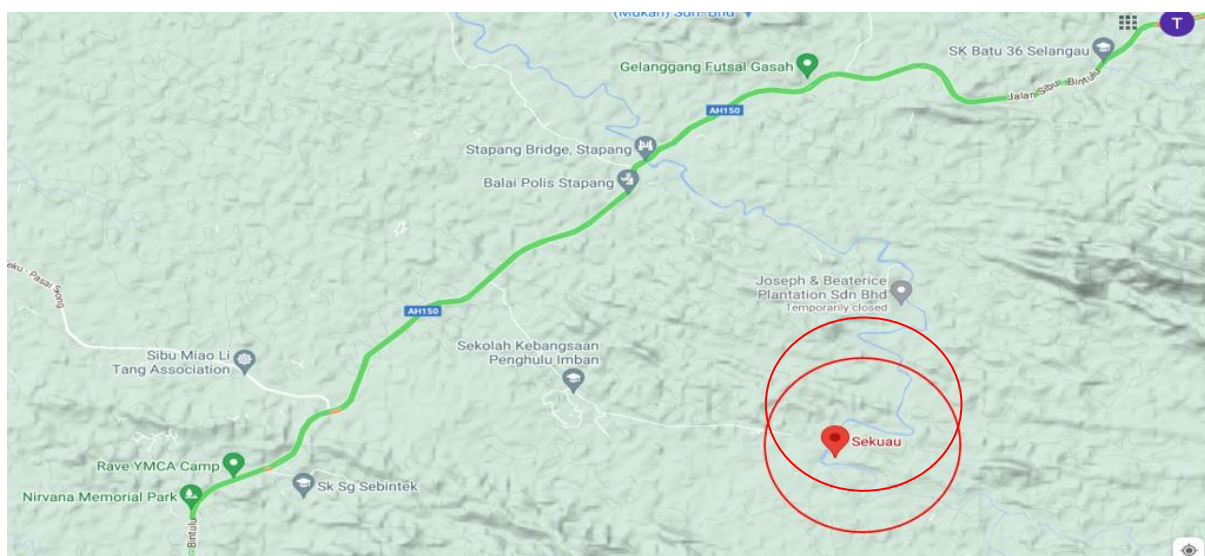


Figure 1: Location of Kampung Skim Sekuau, Sibul, Sarawak

Source: Google Maps

Data Collection Method

The researchers contacted the village headman and asked for his assistance in finding the respondents. Due to the pandemic COVID-19 only six respondents agreed to participate in this research. The respondents were asked to sign a consent form agreeing to participate in this study. Permission was also obtained from the respondents to audio record the entire interview to assist researchers in data analysis. The researchers then conducted an in-depth interview with the respondents to obtain information about their perceptions and knowledge of child maltreatment.

Result and Discussion

The findings of the study were presented in three main sections, namely: (i) demographic profiles of respondents, (ii) the rural community's understanding of child maltreatment issues, and (iii) the rural community's knowledge on child maltreatment risk factors.

Demographic Profile

A demographic profile contains the basic information of the present study's respondents. The majority of the respondents are female, between 30 and 52 years old, belong to the Iban ethnic group, and work in the government and private sectors. Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic profiles.

Table 2

Demographic Profile

Variable	Description
<i>Gender</i>	
Responden A	Male
Responden B	Female
Responden C	Female
Responden D	Male
Responden E	Female
Responden F	Female
<i>Age</i>	
Responden A	52
Responden B	30
Responden C	47
Responden D	44
Responden E	43
Responden F	35
<i>Race</i>	
Responden A	Iban
Responden B	Iban
Responden C	Malay
Responden D	Iban
Responden E	Iban
Responden F	Iban

Occupation

Responden A	Offshore
Responden B	Housewife
Responden C	Cleaner
Responden D	Driver
Responden E	Nurse
Responden F	Preschool teacher

Rural Community's Understanding on Child Maltreatment Issues

Child maltreatment is one of the biggest social problems in Malaysia. As community members are the principle source of reporting, child maltreatment should be recognised as a community responsibility. This section presents the rural community's understanding of child maltreatment. The respondents' responses reveal that they are well aware of the problem of child maltreatment in their communities. For example, Respondent B said:

"In my opinion laa, child maltreatment is a behaviour that tortures the child below eighteen years old. Example, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and mental abuse" (Respondent B).

Interviewee C, who works at a preschool in Kampung Skim Sekuau, Sibul, mentioned that she observed evidence of a physical abuse case at her workplace. The respondent stated that she informed the head teacher after noticing a visible bruise on the student's head, hand, stomach, and shoulder area. The statement of Respondent C is as follows:

"I cannot say their name. My experience after working 7 years at the preschool, I bring the kid to the toilet to check. I saw the bruise around the head area, hand, stomach, and shoulder. I got nervous and inform the headmaster" (Respondent C).

Respondents B and C also spoke about an incident in Sibul, Sarawak in which a baby had been abused by their babysitter and hidden in the refrigerator.

"So many cases have happened before in Sibul. For example, there is a kid aaa had been put inside the refrigerator last year. The kid was taken care by the babysitter" (Respondent B).

"This is because on Facebook many people have posted about it. The one at Sibul where the kid was put inside the refrigerator. That is one of the cases that I have heard before" (Respondent C).

Despite their awareness of child maltreatment occurring in their environment, majority of the respondents are not well informed of public policies on child maltreatment such as the Children Act 2001 (Act 611), the Penal Code (Act 574), and the Domestic Violence Act 1994 (Act 521) which protects and safeguards Malaysian children from violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

"I don't know" (Respondent A).

"Never heard about it" (Respondent B).

"I am not highly educated. I am not sure" (Respondent C).

"Some I have heard, but I have no idea overall about what" (Respondent D).

Without community involvement, child maltreatment goes unchecked and undetected. Therefore, the understanding and opinion of community members are crucial in mitigating the problem of child maltreatment, as early detection of abusive situations depends entirely on the awareness and concern of the community at large. In the context of this study, all respondents were able to define the problem, share their opinions, and perceive it as a critical social problem. This clearly shows that media reports, awareness campaigns, social media messages, and public action are gaining momentum among the general public, especially in rural areas. The results also show that all respondents have some knowledge of what constitutes child maltreatment and neglect, and have had the experience of reporting such incidents to the authorities. However, despite her experience of reporting child maltreatment cases to school authorities, Respondent B stated that she could not be sure about the story and feared that her concern might be misplaced because the victim was a pre-schooler and could not reliably describe the incident. Therefore, it is essential that persons working with children are aware of maltreatment and safety protocols to protect children. In addition, these individuals should encourage children to talk to trusted adults when maltreatment occurs.

The high level of uncertainty among the majority of respondents on several key policies and child maltreatment laws in Malaysia clearly shows the need to educate the public. It is also evident that the majority of respondents indicated that child maltreatment can be prevented. However, some respondents still have concerns about reporting child maltreatment as they imagine that it might put the child in a vulnerable position. The findings of this study are similar to those of LeCroy et al (2020), which stated that fear of retaliation and the desire to avoid getting into trouble are some of the barriers that prevent community members from responding to child maltreatment. Therefore, the researchers believe that there should be a measure to ensure that the public and professionals are properly educated and trained on child maltreatment reporting laws and procedures, especially in rural communities.

Rural Community Knowledge on Risk Factors Contributing to Child Maltreatment Issues

The current study is also interested in obtaining information on the rural population's knowledge of risk factors that contribute to child maltreatment. In this regard, the researchers identified the following four main themes including: (i) spousal conflict, (ii) financial hardship, (iii) stress, and (iv) parental substance abuse.

Spousal Conflict

Respondent B and Respondent F expressed the opinion that family problems and previous experiences of the perpetrator can contribute to cases of child maltreatment. In addition, both respondents mentioned that child maltreatment occurs when parents beat their children until they sustain injuries, especially when there is a conflict between spouses.

"For the parent, the problem that occurs in a marriage life can make them abuse their child" (Respondent B).

“Family problems, fighting with husband, mmm our attitude and behaviour, cannot control our emotion. If the parent over beat their children, then it is wrong”
(Respondent F).

Respondents B and F's views on the factors of child maltreatment are consistent with DeFranzo's (2023) research, which finds that conflict between spouses contributes to child maltreatment. DeFranzo (2023) also mentioned that one of the factors leading to child maltreatment is that the abuser has been a victim of child maltreatment. The direct and mediated effects of marital conflict on child maltreatment seem to depend on whether it is physical aggression, non-verbal, or verbal hostility (Cummings et al., 2004). According to social learning theory, children exposed to interparental aggression and violence may model these conflict behaviours and exhibit aggressive behaviour in later interpersonal interactions (Erath et al., 2006). The findings of this study suggest that cognitive appraisals, behaviours and dysfunctional parenting practices play important roles in the transgenerational transmission of child maltreatment.

Indirect effects models attribute the negative effects of aggressive marital conflict primarily to the disruption of parent-child relationships and parenting practices. For example, according to a spillover hypothesis, negative affect triggered in the marital dyad may increase parental negativity and deplete parental coping resources, contributing to more irritability and punitive discipline practices (Chow, 2017; Erath et al., 2006; LeCroy et al., 2020; Patterson, 2002). Moreover, parents who have learned to respond to interpersonal conflict with aggressive tactics may use similarly harsh and coercive strategies when confronted with their children's misbehaviour, thereby unconsciously modelling and reinforcing aggressive exchanges with their children (Patterson, 2002). Aggressive marital conflict has been linked to harsh and inconsistent discipline, which in turn is implicated in the developmental models of aggressive behavioural problems in children (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; DeFranzo, 2023). Patterson (2002) stated that spousal conflict and the mother's disciplinary practices and responsiveness can be influenced by her negative maternal mood (e.g., anxiety and/or depression), which, in turn, can reinforce harsh punishments and coercive interactions that escalate the risk of child maltreatment.

High levels of marital disagreement can be a source of stress, increasing the likelihood of aggressive marital conflict and child maltreatment. In a study conducted by Margolin and Gordis (2003), spousal conflict was associated with a higher potential of parental child maltreatment, but only when mothers were exposed to high levels of family stress. It is possible that frequent marital disagreements engender stress and increase the extent to which marital conflict spills over and affects parenting style (Patterson, 2002). When children are repeatedly exposed to marital conflict, they may also become sensitised to the signs of impending conflict, which eventually increases stress and triggers aggressive responses. However, more research is needed to better understand the relationship between marital conflict and child maltreatment and to explore the potential moderating effects of marital discord, which should include multimethod measurement strategies.

Financial Hardship

Respondent E suggested that financial hardship can increase the risk of child maltreatment because parents have limited access to resources to provide for their family, including basic needs such as food, clothing, and medical care.

“Usually, this thing happens when they have financial problems. Maybe the abuser is stressed because of money matters, or they lose their job, no work, when they come back home see children, they release it to them.” (Respondent E).

While several studies identify behavioural and psychosocial aspects that correlate with child maltreatment, a growing body of work supports a causal link between financial hardship (which correlates with unemployment) and child maltreatment (Berger et al., 2017; Bullinger et al., 2023; Raissian & Bullinger, 2017). However, the impact of financial hardship on different subtypes of neglect has not been sufficiently studied. For example, Bullinger et al (2020) found that paid staff may be less involved in material neglect (i.e., inadequate provision of basic needs) but at high risk for supervisory neglect (i.e., inadequate supervision). A Japanese study also found that financial instability was a significant predictor of abuse recurrence, especially among families with a large number of siblings (Horikawa et al., 2016). As financial hardship is one of the critical risk factors for child maltreatment, providing more parent education and frequent home visits in high-risk neighbourhoods could produce the opportunity to take preventive measures against child maltreatment (Krysiak, Lecroy, & Ashford, 2008).

Children are the future of any society, and their protection and support should always be a priority to prevent unnecessary suffering and to enable the development of healthy, happy and productive adults. However, paternal unemployment is a significant risk factor for child maltreatment. Previous studies have found that factors such as poverty and parental unemployment lead to physical and emotional maltreatment of children, suggesting that low-income families may not be able to meet children’s educational, protection, and health needs (Yob et al., 2022). Higher living costs may increase pressure on parents as they are unable to afford necessities, have less time to spend with their children, and are exposed to more stress that affects their children. In addition, inflation can also cause parents to feel stress due to the higher cost of living and eventually become involved in financial problems. Similarly, Shaari et al (2022) found that higher inflation rates can lead to increased cases of child maltreatment.

COVID-19 has increased the risk factors associated with the commission of child maltreatment, such as unemployment and low income. According to Agrawal (2020), pandemic-related parental stress can lead to severe physical maltreatment, especially if there is a significant increase in unemployment cases. The pandemic created concerns about the family’s ability to meet the physical and material needs of the children. Given the difficulties in obtaining unemployment insurance and the delays in providing financial assistance from the federal government, it is not surprising that the inability of parents to provide materially for their children proximately leads to maltreatment (Goger et al., 2020). Other studies document an increase in parental stress and deterioration in mental health within the first week of the stay-at-home order during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they had less patience with their children and felt overwhelmed by parenting (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Kalil et al., 2020). Therefore, the researchers suggest that professionals should conduct home visits, especially in vulnerable neighbourhoods, to ensure a safe and healthy environment for children.

Stress

The frustration-aggression hypothesis is a popular concept offered to explain the relationship between stress and anger. This hypothesis assumes that aversive events cause stress, which leads to aggressive behaviour towards a target. For example, Respondents A and C explained that parents who are poor at controlling their emotions become impatient with their children, especially when they misbehave.

“Maybe because of the problem in their marriage, some parents can abuse their child to satisfy their feelings. It is like that sometimes, we as a human when we are hurt and angry, tend to release it to others. The child would be their victim as well” (Respondent A).

“Sometimes when the child is very naughty, the parent is impatient with their child and tends to abuse the child. The parent cannot control their child anymore because of the child’s behaviour itself. That’s why the parent should be patient when dealing with children” (Respondent C).

As all parents know, anger and frustration towards children are natural occurrences in child-rearing. However, anger problems can be exacerbated by limited anger control skills, including parents' inability to recognise cognitive and physiological signs of anger outbursts (Miragoli et al., 2020). These parents may also misinterpret many of their children’s actions, attributing non-compliance, and hostile intentions to what is normal child behaviour. In addition, many studies show that maltreating (vs. non-maltreating) parents do not objectively interpret the child’s behaviour, attributing hostile and provocative intentions where non exist (Balzarotti et al., 2016; Bushman et al., 2001; Camisasca et al., 2017). Furthermore, the literature suggests that aggressive behaviour and the perpetration of violence towards others (e.g. physical abuse of children, bullying) may serve to regulate negative emotions (Montes et al., 2001). In particular, some aggressive parents believe that “attacking” can be cathartic and therefore used as a good strategy for affect regulation (Miragoli et al., 2020; Montes et al., 2001).

The strong link between parental stress and abusive parenting shows that high levels of anger are another factor that has been consistently linked to abuse. Spielberger et al (1988) found that when high levels of anger are experienced but not adequately controlled, the anger is likely to express itself outwardly in the form of aggressive acts against others. A study highlighting the relationship between anger and harsh discipline found that the degree of physical punishment by mothers was proportional to the degree of anger towards their children (Peterson et al., 1994). However, despite the close relationship between parental anger and abusive parenting, not all parents with high levels of stress abuse their children, suggesting that some additional factors appear to influence the path from parental stress to physical child maltreatment. Other factors must interact with stress to alter the likelihood that abuse will occur in a given parent-child system, and this should be further investigated by future researchers.

Al Dosari et al (2017) found that more than half of parents tried to control their children by shouting at them and using physical punishment to discipline them. Schumacher et al. (2001) found that parental age was inconsistent as a risk factor for some forms of maltreatment. For

example, mothers who were young when their child was born had higher rates of child maltreatment than older mothers. Respondents in our study believe that parents with poor coping skills and impulse control are at high risk of hitting their children, especially if their children are noisy at home. This statement is supported by Schumacher et al (2001) who reported that poor parental coping skills, difficult temperament, and behavioural problems are associated with an increased risk of all types of child maltreatment. In addition, Black et al (2001) found that neglectful or physically abusive parents were individuals with low self-esteem, depression, and poor impulse control.

Parental Substance Abuse

Children who have a parent with substance use disorder are at risk of experiencing direct effects, such as parental abuse or neglect, or indirect effects, such as reduced household resources. In this context, Respondents B and C mentioned that parents who are addicted to drugs are more likely to abuse their children if they become delusional as a result of drug use. Here is the statement of Respondent B and Respondent C:

“The factor? Parents who consumed drugs also can abuse their child because they become delusional. Usually that’s how it happens” (Respondent B).

“The parent who consumed excessive drugs did not realize they have abused their child. I think there was a case at Kedah or Perlis I don’t remember. The child was killed after being stabbed in the stomach after the father consume the drug” (Respondent C).

Furthermore, Respondent D stated that parents who are alcoholics or drug users are usually in a delusional state and tend to abuse their children without realising it. Respondent D mentioned that gambling can also lead to child maltreatment as a parent can be stressed when they lose money.

“Maybe because the parent is drunk. When they are drunk, they tend to beat their child. Maybe the parent also gambling and lost money and abuses their child” (Respondent D).

Drug use is a harmful and widespread phenomenon. Children who grow up with a parent who has substance use disorder suffer serious consequences, particularly in relation to child physical maltreatment (Goldberg & Blaauw, 2019; Laslett et al., 2012; Tharshini et al., 2021). The finding of the present study is consistent with previous literature showing an association between alcohol and/or drug use and victimisation in children, which can manifest in severe physical and psychological trauma (Abbey et al., 2001; Raitasalo & Holmila, 2016). The meta-analysis by Stith et al (2009) also found moderate to large effect sizes between child physical maltreatment, substance abuse and other comorbid disorders in parents, including mental illness, anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression. In addition, Stith et al (2009) found large effect sizes for anger and moderate effect sizes for parental coping and problem-solving skills, suggesting that it is important to consider personality disorders when examining the relationship between alcohol, substance abuse, and child maltreatment. Although research findings are mixed (Camisasca et al., 2017), clinical studies also show an association between substance use disorder and one or more types of child maltreatment

(DeFranzo, 2023; Walsh et al., 2003). In general, only a minority of people suffering from substance abuse receive medical treatment. For example, in a study of American parents, only 11% of those who needed specialised treatment received it (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), and in the Netherlands, only one in ten parents with substance abuse problems eventually reaches a health facility for treatment (Goldberg et al., 2019). It is also important to highlight that a large proportion of child maltreatment cases remain unknown to the authorities. It has been found that in high-income Western countries; only 10% of all children who are physically abused are identified by the relevant authorities (Goldberg et al., 2019). Thus, it is possible that parents who have committed child physical abuse have not been identified.

Current theories suggest that aggressive behaviour patterns were present before drug use and persist after drug use has stopped (Chatterji & Markowitz, 2001). Furthermore, chronic use of drugs associated with dependence leads to a long-term increase in aggressive behaviours (Allen et al., 1997). However, this link has not yet been clearly established in relation to child maltreatment. Although the evidence is conflicting and the causal relationship is unclear, there is some data to suggest that children of drug-abusing parents are more likely to have temperament difficulties, emotional problems, behavioural and emotional disorders, and poor behavioural regulation (Christensen & Bilenberg, 2000; Chatterji et al., 2001; Schuckit et al., 2000). Besides, Sheridan (1995) stated that substance abuse also often occurs in the context of emotional, social and economic deprivation, domestic violence, and childhood maltreatment. Thus, parental substance abuse may either directly or indirectly put a child at a higher risk of maltreatment by increasing the level of punishment towards them (Miller et al., 1999).

Conclusion

In summary, the present study adds to the limited data available on rural people's knowledge of child maltreatment and highlights new areas for consideration. By and large, the rural population has shown that they are generally well-informed about many aspects of child maltreatment. The findings also show the importance of understanding the risks of child maltreatment in order to reduce this threat. Another variable that emerged in this study and has additional implications is the reluctance of community members to report such incidents. In rural areas, the pressure to 'know everyone' and the network of familiarity between perpetrators and survivors may reduce the willingness to report. Although many ideas were confirmed by respondents, it is also important to understand that these findings are from the perspective of rural community members and not from the perspective of the maltreated child. A limitation of the present research is that the sample was only collected from one rural area in Sibu, Sarawak. Therefore, further research is needed to include respondents from different rural areas in Sarawak, especially with regard to the life experiences of survivors. We also need to promote clear reporting guidelines and education in rural communities to address child maltreatment and neglect in our society. In addition, a robust and differentiated social policy response is needed to reduce the economic, social, and psychological stressors that constitute the root causes of maltreatment.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest regarding the publication and authorship of this research.

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