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Unveiling the Unspoken: A Comprehensive Literature Review on The Hidden Crisis of Out-Of-Wedlock Pregnancies among Malaysian Youth

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Abstract

Out-of-wedlock pregnancy is a complex and sensitive issue in Malaysia, particularly among young people. To develop a comprehensive understanding of this issue, this paper employs a literature search design, examining a range of scholarly articles, reports, and official statistics. This approach allows for a thorough analysis of existing data and perspectives on the matter, while also identifying gaps in current knowledge and understanding. It is important to avoid out-of-wedlock marriage in Malaysia for several reasons. First, it can have negative consequences for the individuals involved, such as social stigma, emotional distress, and financial difficulties. Second, it can lead to unwanted pregnancies, which can pose health risks for both the mother and child, as well as potentially negative consequences for the child's future. Third, it can impact society as a whole, as it may contribute to issues such as poverty, unemployment, and crime. The government has taken proactive steps to address this issue by implementing advocacy strategies, prevention programs, and public awareness campaigns aimed at educating teenagers and young adults about reproductive health. Non-governmental organizations and private entities have also established shelters and safe spaces for young, unmarried pregnant women. However, there is still a critical need for comprehensive programs that are tailored to the cultural and individual needs of the community, to educate and empower young people to make informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being.

Keywords: Out-of-wedlock Pregnancy, Youth, Malaysia, Government, Family Institution

Out-of-wedlock Pregnancies Scenario in Malaysia

Discussions about the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies among teenagers and youths are a constantly growing social issue that poses a threat to society and the nation. According to Ukekwe (2011), unwed pregnancies among teenagers and youths in developing countries usually carry social stigma within communities and cultures. In fact, this phenomenon has

been heavily condemned by society due to the increase in cases of extreme actions such as abandoning babies and fetuses (Noordin, 2012). Consequently, most teenagers and youths face years of regret for their decision to engage in sexual relationships when their lives are wasted and become a dark spot and accused of being a burden to their families and society. Moreover, unintended pregnancies can be a barrier to timely appropriate baby care, as it may take several weeks or months for a woman to realize or accept that they are pregnant. Lack of prenatal care, along with poor birth spacing or having a child before or after a person's fertile period, can pose health risks to both the woman and her newborn.

In the context of Malaysia, the Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017 (Act 792) (Malaysian Law, 2017) is an act that can be applied to handle cases of out-of-wedlock pregnancies among teenagers. Part IV, Section 14 of the Sexual Offences Against Children Act 2017 (Act 792) explains that the act of touching a child on any part of the body using certain objects or using the offender's body part can be punishable with imprisonment not exceeding 20 years and caning (Malaysian Law, 2017). Therefore, perpetrators who impregnate a teenager under the age of 18 can be subject to legal action for sexual offences (Malaysian Law, 2017).

Factors Contributing to the Increase in Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancies

Influence of social media

The factors contributing to the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies have been debated for a long time. This is because there are various factors that cause the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies among teenagers and youths. The increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies can be seen through the influence of social media and information technology (Reffina et al., 2020), which is on the rise in the country. In the era of globalization, all the information needed by an individual can be obtained at their fingertips. The development of information technology has opened up space for teenagers and youths to view sexy images and access pornographic videos on websites. Accessing pornographic videos is one of the main factors contributing to the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancy cases (Mohammad & Ishak, 2014).

According to a source from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (KPKM), 60 percent of pornographic materials are obtained from the internet. This fact is undeniable when the Royal Malaysian Police's Criminal Investigation Department (2010) stated that the increase in the number of teenagers and youths with out-of-wedlock pregnancies and baby dumping is due to the sophisticated technology available today, where various pornographic materials on the internet can be quickly and easily obtained and distributed to society. Teenagers and youths aged 18 to 24 years have recorded a 42.8 percent higher rate compared to teenagers and youths aged 13 to 17 years in accessing pornographic materials (Hasbullah, 2016).

Furthermore, cases of fraud through applications such as Omi, Tinder, and others also contribute to the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancy cases among teenagers and youths. Therefore, information technology is seen as important and capable of providing benefits to all parties, but if it is misused for other purposes, it can lead individuals into dangerous situations. This statement is also supported by Taib and Baiduri (2011), who states that the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancy cases is related to the increasingly sophisticated information technology.

Fragility of Family Institutions

Taib and Baiduri (2011) state that the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies is also due to the fragility of family institutions that occur in society. This is also supported by Mohamad Shahbani and Shaffie (2020) who believe that family institution issues, parents' busyness, and negligence towards religion are among the contributing factors to the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Many teenagers and youths caught in out-of-wedlock pregnancies are due to factors and problems surrounding them, such as broken families, histories of sexual abuse from family members, pornography addiction, and involvement in extramarital sexual activities (Zakaria & Zulkifli, 2017). The family institution plays a crucial role in a teenager's and youth's life, as the family is the primary pillar in shaping an individual's attitude, personality, and character.

According to Sarnon et al (2012), teenagers who lack affection and attention from family members face various conflicts in their lives. Today, many parents are more focused on their careers than spending time with their children. The high cost of living causes them to neglect their responsibilities as parents, and a large portion of parents allows their children to grow up alone. Barbara (2006) stated that studies have shown that teenagers and youths tend to engage in sex when they lack parental supervision. As a result, the lack of attention from parents causes teenagers and youths to become aggressive and have a desire for affection from outsiders (Sarnon et al., 2012). Indirectly, this situation contributes to the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancy cases.

Personal Desire

According to Shahbani and Fuziah (2020), the desire of teenagers themselves to engage in intimate relationships is also one of the reasons why premarital pregnancies are increasing among teenagers and youths. Studies have found that most cases of teenage pregnancies occur between the ages of 15 and 17 as a result of sexual relations with known partners, including boyfriends (Abdullah et al., 2014). Saim et al (2013) state that this voluntary factor is to satisfy the lust of immoral and unethical perpetrators. This is because these individuals become trapped due to their deep curiosity about certain matters, leading them to want to try it. According to Rafidah (2001), this group enjoys engaging in romantic relationships to the point that they are willing to do something they shouldn't, which is having sex. This desire is certainly difficult to control when it involves a lack of affection from one's own family (Maznah et al., 2019). Adding to this, Alfred Adler explains that humans are social creatures who find it difficult to control themselves and tend to engage in antisocial behavior (Pakianathan, 2016). Assistant Commissioner Ong Chin Lan of the Bukit Aman Criminal Investigation Department also stated that there are 60 percent of cases of underage teenagers engaging in sexual misconduct willingly, rather than being forced.

Peers Factor

Peer pressure is a significant factor leading to the rise in premarital pregnancies among teenagers and young adults, as pointed out by (Jumawaton, 2019). It is observed that today's young population spends a considerable portion of their free time with friends rather than family (Mohammad & Ishak, 2014). Often, they feel more comfortable discussing their issues or sharing thoughts with friends, believing them to be more understanding due to a similar age bracket, as opposed to their parents. Barbara (2006) suggested that friends hold a crucial role in moulding social relations among young people, establishing meaningful connections

within their social circles. However, if a young person aligns with the wrong crowd, they face a higher risk of getting embroiled in various societal problems, such as gang activities, drug use, and casual sex, which could potentially result in premarital pregnancies. If they are coaxed or pressured into sexual activities by their partners or friends, they often find it challenging to resist. They are more likely to yield to their friends' wishes and experiment with new experiences, exacerbating the situation.

Socio-economic

Low socio-economic factors have caused an increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies among teenagers and youths, causing many of them to fall behind in education (Khadijah et al., 2012). This is because low socio-economic and educational levels cause individuals to be unable to evaluate the good and bad aspects of a situation, leading them to be willing to sacrifice their dignity and honor. As a result, when pregnancy disrupts a teenager's education, it leads to weak and declining academic performance. Adolescents and youths who are less capable find it difficult to understand the risks of unprotected sex and consequently do not use the pregnancy prevention methods commonly employed by adults (McBride et al., 2003). In connection with this, the consequences of this problem cause pregnant teenagers or youths to bear the risks they have to face, and it also involves the unborn baby who may experience side effects such as health problems (Malmitis-Puchner & Boutsikou, 2006). These teenagers and youths will lose their youth and be required to take on roles for which they are not psychologically or physically prepared.

Therefore, as a whole, we can see that the factors contributing to the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies among teenagers and youths have led to various issues arising due to the negligence of all parties, including the teenagers and youths themselves. As a result of this increase, it has had a negative impact on the lives of these teenagers and youths, forcing them to bear risks and burdens that should not be their responsibility. Consequently, the factors presented here clearly illustrate that the increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies has had a profound effect on individuals and society, leading it to become a cancer within the country if not dealt with seriously and promptly.

Effects of the Increase in Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancies

Life is notably difficult for mothers who become pregnant outside of marriage. The welfare of teenagers and young adults is a crucial concern that has shaped the perception of non-marital pregnancy and childbirth as a societal issue. It's essential to consider sex and pregnancy from a comprehensive viewpoint, encompassing social, religious, and legal perspectives. As Kost (2010) noted, teenage pregnancy has emerged as a significant concern for communities globally, particularly in countries like Malaysia, both developed and developing. This is because the rise in pregnancies among adolescents and young adults has drawn the attention of various stakeholders, including religious leaders, policymakers, and social scientists.

The growing worries about the increase in non-marital pregnancies persist because the contributing factors significantly impact the lives of young girls and their future offspring. It's vital for these girls to reach physical and medical maturity before giving birth. Many young girls may experience complications or even lose their babies during childbirth because their bodies aren't fully developed to handle pregnancy and the associated stress. This expose both the pregnant teenager and the unborn child to a myriad of risks. Furthermore, non-marital

pregnancies can potentially lead to abortions or fatalities for either the mother or the child. As Bluestein and Starling (1994) highlight, the issue of adolescent and youth pregnancies transforms into a pervasive social problem with severe health implications. Consequently, it can significantly contribute to the overall burden of disability within the population.

Baby Dumping

The surge in non-marital pregnancies has resulted in a widespread issue of baby abandonment in the country. This is echoed by Nazni et al (2012), who stated that the rising number of unmarried young women becoming pregnant has become a central concern related to baby abandonment and abortion. According to Badiah and Jamil (2006), unmarried mothers often desert their children born outside of marriage. This trend is evident in Malaysia, where there's a significant rise in cases of illegitimate births and baby abandonment.

Annually, an average of 100 babies are abandoned in Malaysia, with most found deceased. Despite a decline in these statistics reported by the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) during the Covid-19 pandemic, this issue remains a concern for all parties involved and needs immediate attention. As per PDRM, the majority of baby abandonment cases, 149 in total, were related to individuals aged 18 to 25, while 73 cases involved those aged 25 and above, and 40 cases pertained to individuals under 18, during the period of 2018 to 2021 (PDRM, 2021).

Most teenagers and young adults who get pregnant outside of marriage tend to abandon their new-borns either because their partners deny responsibility for the pregnancy, or due to incidents of rape and the accompanying shame within their community (Jenkins et al., 2011). A study on factors contributing to baby dumping by Adilla et al (2012) added that cases of baby abandonment occur due to a lack of awareness and accountability in pregnant teenagers or women towards the children they deliver.

Abortion

In relation to the issue of abortion, Rains (2009) suggests that common responses to non-marital pregnancies include abortions, hastily arranged marriages, or being sent to shelters for those who are unwed and pregnant. However, under Malaysian law, terminating a pregnancy is illegal except under specific circumstances, such as health or medical issues. Those found guilty of this crime could face imprisonment for a prescribed term that could extend up to ten years, a fine, or both (Penal Code, 2006). Therefore, Abdullah and Wong (2010) propose that there's a chance for pregnant unmarried women to opt for illegal abortions, using drugs or herbal remedies to end the pregnancy. However, the issue of abortion can have perilous consequences for both the unborn child and the mother, due to the uncertainty about the composition of the substances used and their origins.

Stigma and Negative Community Perception

The rise in non-marital pregnancies often incites societal stigma and negative perceptions, resulting in many adolescents and young adults being ostracized by their families when they become pregnant outside of marriage (Salina & Hidayah, 2020). This happens because families feel compelled to bear the burden of disgrace due to their children's actions, leading them to isolate or send the pregnant family members to rehabilitation centres, unable to withstand the scorn from relatives and neighbours. As a result, family members grapple with

the predicament of whether to care for the impending new-born or to entrust the child to a foster family. Moseson et al (2019) argues that societal stigma and negative attitudes significantly affect the emotional and mental wellbeing of these adolescents and young adults, pushing them towards desperate measures such as baby abandonment or considering an abortion.

Preventive measures for reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies outside of marriage.

The escalating issue of non-marital pregnancies among teenagers and young adults is a matter of grave concern and should not be dismissed lightly. It calls for effective preventive strategies to curb its proliferation. As such, Wel et al (2002) emphasize the crucial role of parental involvement in addressing this growing issue. Parents significantly shape and influence various aspects of their children's lives, including identity development, life satisfaction, and self-image. Initial reactions of parents to non-marital pregnancies are typically negative, as per Sarnon et al (2014), reflecting a form of denial. However, Abdullah et al (2014) explains that such reactions are often temporary and parents eventually come to terms with the situation.

Moreover, social support can serve as a potential deterrent to the rising incidence of non-marital pregnancies among teenagers and young adults. Koniak-Griffin et al (1993) describes social support as an informal social network providing emotional empathy, practical assistance, and appraisal expression. Cobb (1976) views it as the comfort, validation, and help extended by various sources like family and friends, making an individual feel cared for and valued. Therefore, unwavering social and emotional support from all parties is vital for unmarried pregnant women (Khadijah et al., 2012; Zakiyyah et al., 2015).

According to Martinez and Abrams (2013), family and friends are typically the primary sources of social support for teenagers and young adults. Unmarried young mothers often regard their interpersonal relationships, especially with their families, as a crucial part of the support they need (Panzarine, 1986; Panzarine et al., 1995). Research suggests that social support can alleviate the impact of stress on psychological well-being (Abadi et al., 2012; Wiggins et al., 2004) by bolstering an individual's internal resources (Bovier et al., 2004) or through the reassurance of available support (Abadi et al., 2012). Noraffy and Nasrudin (2020) also underscore the importance of a robust social support system in mitigating this pressing issue. Social support can contribute to improved pregnancy outcomes and prevent adverse events such as miscarriage (Ruth, Barbara, Hepworth-Jones, & Doyle, 2010).

Unfortunately, unmarried teenagers and youth who become pregnant often receive insufficient social support and encounter various challenges (Zakiyah et al., 2015). They tend to isolate themselves due to fear of sharing their predicament or seeking help from family and friends. If left unaddressed, this could lead to depression, endangering the health of both mother and unborn child. As per Theeke et al (2012), a lack of social support can result in psychological disorders like social isolation, mental health issues such as bipolar depression (Johnson, 2014), and maternal depression symptoms like 'baby blues' and postpartum depression (Miller, 2002). Therefore, teenagers and unmarried youth who become pregnant outside of marriage need encouragement and support from various parties to help them manage depression, emotional turmoil, and loneliness.

Programs conducted by authorities regarding the issue of out-of-wedlock pregnancies outside of marriage.

Teenagers and young adults are the torchbearers of future generations. Thus, it falls on everyone's shoulders, including parents, teachers, leaders, and individuals, to ensure that these young people are nurtured in an environment that is harmonious, compassionate, and understanding. Their immaturity and lack of decision-making capabilities necessitate special protection and care, including the provision of suitable legal safeguards. Hence, halting the rise in non-marital pregnancies is a critical aspect that warrants attention and priority. In light of this, implementing preventive programs targeting non-marital pregnancies is vital to address issues impacting teenagers and young adults. The discussion around such programs essentially revolves around tackling the surge in non-marital pregnancies. These initiatives are undertaken by stakeholders as a comprehensive strategy to prevent the escalation of non-marital pregnancies among teenagers and young adults. In 1993, Claire Brindis categorized pregnancy prevention programs into three main categories

- i. Programs that support delayed sexual activity and childbirth
- ii. Programs that focus on responsible decision-making about sexual activity; and
- iii. Programs that facilitate access to contraceptive services for sexually active teenagers.

Therefore, various actions and programs have been implemented and designed to address issues involving teenagers and youth from the perspective of ministries, NGOs, and private sectors.

Programs implemented at the government, NGO, and private sector levels

In response to the rising incidence of unplanned pregnancies, proactive measures have been taken by the government, including the development of advocacy strategies, prevention plans, and awareness campaigns focusing on adolescent and youth reproductive health. The National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN) launched the Reproductive Health Education Program (PEKERTI), a program tailored for adolescents and young adults. The program features a comprehensive Self-Awareness Module for males, covering topics like male and female reproductive health, safe sexual practices, and guidance on understanding women from both a biological and emotional perspective. This initiative is pivotal to addressing unhealthy sexual behavior among adolescents and aims to mitigate risks of unplanned pregnancies and associated maternal and infant mortality.

The program has been rolled out in numerous schools, institutions, LPPKN centers, and communities, with plans for further expansion. Designed for both young males and females, the program also aims to foster gender sensitivity, respect, and affection for women akin to the love they have for their mothers and sisters. Additionally, the government launched the #SaveALife program in 2019, aimed at enhancing public awareness about the dangers of unplanned pregnancies, complications, reproductive health, and baby abandonment. This program does not promote premarital sexual activities but seeks to offer protection to babies and unwed pregnant women.

In Malaysia, a number of non-governmental or private organizations have established shelters for unmarried young mothers to tackle unplanned pregnancies. Government-introduced shelters serve as a means of intervention to address the increasing number of unwed mothers

and babies born out of wedlock. These services, considered a type of social work intervention, cater to different age groups. Government shelters typically cater to unwed pregnant women under 18, while semi-government or non-governmental shelters cater to those above 18. Government shelters are fully funded by the Department of Social Welfare (JKM), whereas NGO shelters are funded by private companies, public donations, or grants from JKM.

KEWAJA, one of the many shelter types in Malaysia, reported housing about two thousand unmarried mothers from 2009 to 2011 (Kewaja, 2012). The services and social support provided by KEWAJA shelters have mitigated the problems faced by young pregnant women. Unique in its religious-based activities and administration by Muslims, KEWAJA shelters offer physical, emotional, and spiritual support to unwed pregnant youth. While the implementation of awareness programs and emergency hotlines have been admirable efforts to curb the rise in non-marital pregnancies among young people, there remains a crucial need for government and non-governmental agencies to plan various educational programs, possibly through community-driven initiatives. These programs should be sensitive to cultural and individual community needs to effectively reduce teenage pregnancies. According to Holton et al (2001), intervention design for young adults should consider the organizational context and desired outcomes, such as impactful knowledge and skills acquisition. Hiemestra and Sisco (1990) also suggest tailoring programs to individual control and addressing meaningful individual needs. Hence, all stakeholders must be alert to surrounding social issues and act promptly to address non-marital pregnancies. Prevention programs are crucial at this juncture, encouraging every agency, organization, and community member to prioritize the safeguarding of adolescents and youth as a collective responsibility.

Conclusion

The Malaysian government, in collaboration with NGOs, has taken a proactive stance towards the issue of non-marital pregnancies among young people, introducing advocacy strategies, prevention initiatives, and consciousness-raising campaigns. These efforts aim to educate this demographic about reproductive health and safe sexual conduct. Programs like the Reproductive Health Education (PEKERTI) and the #SaveALife campaign have positively impacted the reduction of non-marital pregnancies and enhanced the safety and health of both the mother and child. Furthermore, the introduction of the 24-hour emergency helpline, Talian Nur 15999, has been crucial in providing immediate help to those facing abuse, neglect, and unplanned pregnancies.

However, there remains a pressing need for both the government and NGOs to persist in creating and executing comprehensive programs that focus on educating young people about reproductive health and safe sexual behaviour. The efficacy of these programs hinges on a thorough understanding of the community's cultural and individual needs, as well as the involvement of change agents capable of delivering bespoke interventions. All stakeholders must stay vigilant to the societal issues at hand and act swiftly to safeguard and prioritize the welfare of adolescents and young adults as a collective obligation. Through concerted efforts, it is indeed possible to curb the incidence of non-marital pregnancies in Malaysia and enhance the quality of life for its young population.

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