

Inclination of Teenagers to Become Involved in Lesbianism in Kuala Lumpur

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DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v7-i12/3739 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v7-i12/3739>

Abstract

Lesbians in Malaysia are considered a hidden population due to social stigma. Due to this, it is hard to determine this group as they are comfortable hiding behind their identity as heterosexual females. However, lately teenage girls are seen to be getting involved in the world of lesbianism and it can be traced through social media such as Facebook, Twitter and other websites where most of the followers are teenage girls. Therefore, this study aims to determine the tendency of teenagers being involved in lesbian activity. The methodology used in this study is through in-depth interview involving six teenage lesbians in Kuala Lumpur. From the outcome from the interviews, it was found that bad experiences with men, compatibility with their lesbian partner and childhood experiences account for the factors making girls become inclined to being involved in lesbian activity.

Keywords: Teenage Girls, Lesbian, Kuala Lumpur, Inclination, Hidden Population.

Introduction

A lesbian is a female who has feelings for and is sexually attracted to other females. Gamache and Lazear (2009) defined a lesbian as a female individual who is attracted to other females, due to physical, emotional and mental factors. This study uses the term lesbian to represent respondents, according to research ethics by Martin and Meezan (2008) who stated that the term lesbian is a specific term for females only. Bradford et al. (1994) also emphasized that the usage of the term lesbian is based on suitability of the terminology at the research location.

Generally, lesbians in Malaysia are a “hidden population” and it is quite difficult to acquire the actual total number of homosexuals in this country. Meyer and Wilson (2009) opined that a hidden population is a population whose main characteristics are unknown and its members cannot be determined easily due to stigma. Patterson (1995) also explained that since the 20th century, minority sex groups such as gays and lesbians choose to hide their sexual identity due to religious, cultural and legal factors. Therefore, this group is considered a minority in society especially in countries that deny social and legal protection for this community (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1993). According to Md Yusof et al. (2014), the LGBT community in Malaysia cannot expose themselves to the public and can only be determined through social media such as

Facebook, YouTube, blogs as well as related non-governmental organisations (NGO). This is supported by Wong (2012) who stated that the lack of written records regarding the lesbian community is due to the seclusion of this community from the main public.

According to Knowledge and Rights with Young People through Safer Space (KRYSS) (2014), involvement in lesbianism is found to begin from 12 years of age, at a time when girls start to realise their sexual attraction to other females. Ahmad et al. (2015) also agreed that the beginning of one's involvement in homosexual activity is during their early teenage years. Mufioz-Plaza et al. (2002) also explained that lesbians usually start to realise that their sexual orientation is different from the norm while they are a teenager or a young adult. According to McCabe et al. (2011), the teenage period is the phase when teenage girls are still trying to determine their sexual identity and during this phase, they need love and attention. In the phase of forming their homosexual identity, teenagers are first tied to heterosexual activities then they move on to explore homosexual activities; this homosexual behaviour will carry on through to adulthood (McCabe et al., 2011).

In addition, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community face challenges from living in a society that only accepts heterosexuality as the normal sexual orientation and assume homosexuality as deviant behaviour (Subhrajit, 2014). In this context, when one's sexual identity is clearly different from social norms, it can make it hard for the individual to carry their sexual identity, apart from needing social and emotional support (Sells, 2013). Therefore, this population faces social elimination and discrimination, as well as not getting the opportunities or access to social facilities such as employment, healthcare, education and housing (Subhrajit, 2014; Sherriff et al., 2011).

Therefore, this study is important to determine the dominant factors that motivate teenagers to become involved in lesbianism. This information needs to be shared with the public who usually only see this issue in a general viewpoint, without knowing the root causes of the issue and how social seclusion from society can bring about psychological effects onto individuals involved in homosexual activities, especially teenagers.

Methodology

This study used the method of in-depth interview to explore the respondents' experience and it is characteristically more extensive, open, unstructured and is not necessarily rigid. This interview method also enabled the researchers to dig into and explore the study theme. Therefore, the researcher constructed 15 questions that formed two parts, namely personal information (five questions) and homosexual tendencies (10 questions). These interview questions were based on previous research. In this matter, six respondents from around Kuala Lumpur were asked for their agreement in participating in this study.

Through the snowball sampling technique, the criteria of the chosen respondents include teenage girls who are 1) aged between 15 to 19 years old, 2) Malay and 3) Muslim. The snowball sampling technique was among the main techniques used to conduct sampling of hidden populations (Heckathorn, 1997). In this sampling technique, respondents chosen have been asked to name potential candidates within their social network (Meyer & Wilson, 2009). During the interview process, the researcher gave the respondents sufficient time to answer all

questions and the average duration of the interviews is between 20 to 30 minutes per respondent. The interview process is more flexible, ie it depends on the respondent's feedback and their readiness to carry on with the interview. The researcher analysed all data from recorded tapes, categorizing significant statements during the transcribing process and then compiling them under comprehensive themes for further content analysis.

Results and Discussion

Based on the interviews with the respondents, the researcher gained several sub-themes that are related to the inclination of teenage girls to become involved in homosexual activity. Among them are bad experiences with men, compatibility with their lesbian partner and childhood experiences.

Bad Experiences with Men

In this aspect, only three respondents stated that they were nearly raped, experienced a divorce, or had no trust in men. The following are extract from the interviews related to the sub-theme of bad experiences with men:

..... I never had any experience or incident that made me be in "awe" of or made me want to get close with men. I consider men only wanting fun and their victims are women....

..... I am bored with living with men. I got married and then divorced. I want to be in an environment that allows me to build a safer life, without men to bother my life....

..... I was nearly raped by the husband of a good friend and then once again by a male friend whom I had considered able to end my phobia towards men...

Based on the extracts from the interviews, it is clear that the negative perception of the respondents towards men became the foundation of their choice of a homosexual identity. Loewenstein (1985) opined that bad experiences with men made women turn away from men. Simari and Baskin (1982) revealed that sexual abuse and negative sexual experience can cause individuals to become involved in homosexual activity, especially teenage girls. Ahmad et al. (2015) also conducted a study on lesbians and found that one of the respondent's ex-boyfriend took advantage of her and caused her to feel unsafe; this experience caused her to have a negative view of men. A negative environment, lack of satisfaction from a heterosexual relationship cause women to move to more meaningful relationships (McCabe et al., 2011).

Compatibility with their Lesbian Partner

The researcher found that all respondents stated their satisfaction and comfort towards the relationship with their lesbian partner. The following are interview extracts related to this sub-theme:

.....I like women but only to give the feeling of comfort and being loved to them. At the very

least, I would like to make them understand that there is still someone around them who will not hurt them no matter what happens. They are really wonderful ...

..... I take care of her and her child. We live together...

..... I always hang out at her place and she accompanies when the family is not at home. We share our problems. Always together. She understands my heart. We understand each other. We go to the same school...

..... I am happy. This is enough. She takes care of me well. She knows how to treat me well...

.... It is better with women. Easier. Men are complicated. A lot of nonsense...

.... I don't care anymore. I care for her. Whatever... Let me choose my happiness...

The above interview extracts illustrate the respondents' compatibility with their partners. This is because their need for affection, attention as well as sexual needs can be fulfilled and respondents also made comparisons with their relationships with men. This was also supported by Md Yusof et al. (2014) who stated that the mutual understanding among homosexual couples is good and of better quality due to similar thinking styles, and is considered better than that in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, they are also more inclined to place their affections towards commitment and responsibility as well as sex which add on to their trust in each other.

According to Sinnott (1999), lesbians feel that a homosexual relationship is a way of exploring love and sex that is free from responsibilities and risks compared to relationships with men. Apart from that, Peplau dan Amaro (1982) also opined that the factors causing the feelings of love and satisfaction in lesbian relationships are mutual love and commitment to creating a happy relationship. Research by Irwin (2009) also found that women who have homosexual partners derive more happiness and higher social support compared to unattached lesbians, an important mechanism to heal from past relationships.

Childhood Experiences

Referring to the outcome of the interviews, only one respondent had a childhood experience that influenced her distrust towards men. The following is the interview extract related to this sub-theme:

.... I never had any experience or incident that made me be in "awe" of or made me want to get close with men. I consider men only wanting fun and their victims are women. My sister became a victim of domestic violence and a cheating husband. I went through my childhood seeing my uncles getting divorced and hitting their wives. My aunt was abused until she was bruised and had a broken lip by her husband who was a drug addict...

Based on the interview extract, the respondent had seen various physical abuse towards women in her immediate family, that is her sister and her aunt. This has caused the respondent to no longer see the real role of men since childhood. Even though the respondent did not experience this herself, but children observe and learn from whatever that is around them. Experience through social learning enforced the memory of her negative perception of men. Even more so since the victims are among her close family members. She began to see the improper role played by men, in this case the husbands of her sister and her aunt at that time.

The social environment during childhood as well as family and peers influence the formation of an individual's personality, attitude and behaviour. From that perspective, the formation of an individual's sexual identity may be influenced by childhood experiences. There is evidence that gender confusion during childhood may be closely related with an adult's sexual identity (Bailey & Zucker, 1995). A study by Bailey and Zucker (1995) also explained that, based on retrospective reports, lesbians are more likely to remember themselves being a tomboy when they were young compared to their experience becoming a heterosexual female. This may also be caused by their childhood environment that was influenced by guidance or experience of adults. In addition, the collapse of a family institution also drives the inclination of teenagers to become involved in homosexual activity (Ahmad et al., 2015). At a time when they are faced with confusion regarding their sexual identity (homosexuality), attention and support from the family especially the parents are most needed. Even so, family conflict can cause teenagers to seek support from outside the home, of which the benefit is unknown (Ahmad et al., 2015).

Conclusion

This study has brought forward the dominant inclination of teenage lesbians around Kuala Lumpur, that is the compatibility with their lesbian partner, where a majority of lesbians state that they feel happy being with their lesbian partner especially in the aspect of their need for affection and attention. Apart from this, there are respondents who went through bad experiences with men that further strengthened their distrust in men and relationships with men. There were also a number of respondents who grew up in an environment that formed their negative perception towards men. Therefore, this study is important for the documentation that can be made as reference and give other researchers the opportunity to carry out similar studies. It is also hoped that this study will help the community, especially families, social welfare bodies and agencies, to form services and provide more effective social support to teenage girls who are facing the same issues.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin for funding the study under Research Acculturation Grant Scheme (RAGS/1/2014/SS02/UNISZA//1).

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