

Factors Relating to Premarital Pregnancy Amongst Muslim Adolescents in Malaysia

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Abstract: Pre-marital pregnancy amongst adolescents is a social issue that occurs without regard to culture, religion or social background. Despite Islam being a religion that prohibits pre-marital sex and one that does not legitimise pregnancies as a result of such intercourse, the reality is that many Muslim youths engage in sexual activities before being legally wed. Malaysia is a country that is no exception in facing this issue. In relation to this, a detailed study to determine the factors relating to premarital pregnancies is necessary to help form an intervention programme that may be specifically targeted at the community, namely young Muslim adolescents. This study will discuss the factors concerning Muslim youths and premarital pregnancy in a conservative Islamic state such as Malaysia. A questionnaire was designed and distributed to young female Muslim adolescents who had been pregnant out of wedlock (N = 50) in two Muslim women's shelters in Malaysia: Pusat Bimbingan Raudhatul Sakinah and Pertubuhan Kebajikan Darul Islah Selangor (Perkid). The results of the study found that among the contributing factors that cause young Muslim females to engage in unsafe premarital sex resulting in pregnancy are the parents, peer-influence, mass media and personal issues. Notably however, the study found that the primary factor was the lack of religiosity and religious practice among female Muslim adolescents, despite the efforts of Islamisation in Malaysia to promote abstinence rather than safe sex.

Key words: Adolescent pregnancy, female muslim adolescent, engage, premarital sex, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In a conservative Muslim state such as Malaysia, premarital sex pregnancy out of wedlock is unacceptable according to societal norms and Islam itself. The issue becomes even more critical when the case of pregnancy out of wedlock involves female Muslim adolescents who will be exposed to a variety of risks, medical issues and legal consequences. Before the intervention process can be introduced to avoid more female Muslim adolescents getting themselves pregnant before the appropriate time, a study on the factors relating to what causes them to do so must be carried out.

This study will discuss the factors relating to Muslim youths in Malaysia and their involvement in premarital sex and pregnancy out of wedlock. It is a distinct possibility that these young Muslims do not practice safe sex, i.e., engage in sexual activities without protection and above all without awareness on the negative effects of teen or adolescent pregnancy. In an Muslim state such as

Malaysia that has a stringent foundation in Islamisation and stern Islamic laws (Mohamad, 2010, 2011) it is found that there are numerous cases of premarital sex occurring at an early age resulting in illegitimate pregnancies. This seemingly contradicting situation presents a unique case for a secular Islamic state that tries to inculcate Islamic values into every aspect of its people's lives but cannot control its young women from getting pregnant out of wedlock at an early age. Conversely, in Nigeria the rate of female Muslim adolescents involved in premarital sex reduced noticeably with the execution of Syariah law (Agha, 2008). All of the above thus illustrates clearly the need to view the factors that cause female Muslim adolescents to engage in premarital sex resulting in pregnancy with abortion not being an option. It should be noted that abortion of a fetus without strong medical reason is a crime in Malaysia and is prohibited in Islam.

This study will present the factors that cause female Muslim adolescents to get pregnant at an early age out of wedlock in spite of their surroundings being that of a

conservative Muslim society. Four factors will be discussed, namely, the parents, peer influence, mass media and personal issues.

Literature review: Premarital pregnancy is a social issue which is consistently connected to youths and unsafe sexual practices. The literal meaning of pregnancy out of wedlock is to be with child before marriage, i.e., that sexual intercourse occurred between a male and female prior to their being legally wed. Such pregnancies pose a serious problem in the context of an Islamic state since Islam stresses on abstinence and sex that can be enjoyed within a legal marriage. However, the challenges of modernisation and globalisation have exposed Muslim youths in any Muslim nation to a lifestyle practiced by Western youths. In a recent study in Malaysia, >300 children and adolescent Malays aged between 13 and 25 years were found to have been involved in sexual offences and random sexual activities resulting in pregnancy and abortion (Sarnon *et al.*, 2012). In fact, cases of illegitimate pregnancies and births are statistically among the highest cases in the enforcement of Syariah offences in several states in Malaysia. Female Muslim adolescents who get pregnant out of wedlock in Malaysia are generally involved with substance abuse, unsupervised activities with peers after school and are not concerned with extracurricular activities in school (Omar *et al.*, 2010). There are of course studies on factors relating to pregnancy among female Muslim adolescents such as Rasch *et al.* (2000) however, the focus of that particular study is more on the situation in Tanzania. There is therefore, a need to expand this study by localising it since there is a marked difference from the aspects of economic background, social and cultural issues amongst Muslims in Malaysia. In Malaysia, criminal law prohibits the abortion of a fetus without a valid medical reason. In fact, female Muslim adolescents in Malaysia who get pregnant out of wedlock may be faced with Syariah legal provisions that may lead to severe punishments such as imprisonment. In other words, female Muslim adolescents do not have the luxury of an easy way out when they find themselves pregnant prior to marriage. As a result, a number of these young women choose to abandon their newborn babies after giving birth to them and such cases are becoming increasingly rampant in Malaysia (Mohamed and Baig, 2010). In comparison, Muslim youths in Tanzania opt for illegal abortions (Silberschmidt and Rasch, 2001).

Numerous past studies have been conducted to explain the factors that cause female adolescents to get pregnant at an early age. The majority of the studies focus

on medical, psychological and legal aspects. In relation to this, this study intends to see how far the factors proven in these earlier studies occur in Malaysia and simultaneously provide evidence of factors localised to the Malaysian context. There are a variety of factors that cause adolescents to be exposed to the problem of premarital pregnancy such as promiscuity, random sex, uninhibited socialising, family problems, environment, peer influence and the media (Brandt *et al.*, 1978; Weisz and Earls, 1995; Moore and Chase-Lansdale, 2001; Acharya *et al.*, 2010; Sarnon *et al.*, 2012). This study has also found that adolescents with multiple partners frequently engage in sexual activities. Premarital, unprotected sex will ultimately lead to the risk of pregnancy. Other reasons that pregnancy may occur is due to the adolescent in question not being emotionally ready to have sex and fails to recognise the risks involved because of the lack of social and cognitive development. The common result is that they do not use protection that would otherwise be used by adults.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A questionnaire as an instrument of data collection was issued by convenience sampling to the respondents (N = 50) that comprised female muslim adolescents who had been pregnant out of wedlock and were currently sheltered at Raudhatus Sakinah and Perkid, numbering 23 and 27, respectively. The aforementioned shelters are homes run by non-profit organizations to protect female adolescents who were pregnant out of wedlock and to prevent them from experiencing the complications of unlawful abortions. The respondents were chosen through convenience sampling by giving the forms directly to the female youths who were at the home at the time the study was carried out. An initial study was conducted to evaluate the reliability of the information via the internal consistency method by applying the cronbach's alpha multiplier.

Through this method, each research variable was tested for its cronbach's alpha value. The yielding results were: parental factor (0.854), peer factor (0.746), mass media factor (0.920) and personal factor (0.785). Overall, the cronbach's alpha value calculated was 0.925. The reliability of this item was considerably good and was acceptable as discussed by Gliem and Gliem (2003) and Petterson *et al.* (2004). Due to the fact that the cronbach's alpha value for all the variable exceeded 0.7, the research instrument therefore had an acceptable reliability to it. The data analysed from the forms were presented in the form of percentage, frequency and mean.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research analysis shows four factors which cause pregnancy out of wedlock among adolescents: the personal factor, the peer factor, the mass media factor and the parental factor. If the factors are looked at overall, the item with the highest mean value is a weak grasp of religion made me ignore religious rules and prohibitions (mean = 2.90) followed by the item an online relationship through chatting that takes advantage of young females who are easily manipulated by their partners (mean = 2.80), friends are the most important people in my life to present my problems to (mean = 2.70), the level of communication between my and my parents in sharing problems is low (mean = 2.60) and I wanted to try something new without thinking about the consequences (mean = 2.60). Clearly this study shows that the main factor causing premarital pregnancy among female muslim adolescents according to the respondents' perception is the lack of religiosity as a shield to prevent falling into unhealthy social activities. This is followed by the effects of online chatting and poor communication between adolescents and their parents to the point where they go to their friends to share their problems.

The study found that the personal factor was the main contributor to the problem of female Muslim adolescents and pregnancy out of wedlock. The item lack of religiosity made me ignore religious rules and prohibitions obtained the highest mean (mean = 2.90) followed by the item I wanted to try something new without thinking about the consequences (mean = 2.60) and the item I did not fear the consequences of fornication (mean = 2.30). This study therefore concluded that a weak hold of religion and the desire to try new things are the internal personal factors that influence adolescents to participate in sex before marriage and ultimately get themselves pregnant. It is this same weak grasp that causes the respondent to not feel guilty about having sex despite Muslims being prohibited from being physically intimate before marriage (Table 1).

This research suggests that the lack of religiosity in adolescents causes them to perform acts that are prohibited in Islam, namely premarital sex. Muslim adolescents who are not very religious have the tendency

to engage in prohibited acts such as premarital sex despite the possibility that they full well know it is prohibited. McCree *et al.* (2003) had proven that adolescents with high religiosity values were more careful and took precautions rather than have premarital sex. His study showed that adolescents with a high religiosity score had better self-efficacy in their relationships with new partners and steady boyfriends in matters concerning sex, STDs, HIV and protection against pregnancy. Those with high religiosity values also tend to have sex much later and generally use a condom. However, his study did not include female Muslim adolescents since Islam has different, more stringent rules. The study conducted by Gold *et al.* (2010) also yielded similar results. However, his study concluded that youths with a high religiosity value would be less likely to pregnant or catch STD's or have >4 lifetime partners compared to youths with a lower level of religiosity. If youths of other religions such as found in the studies of McCree *et al.* (2003) and Gold *et al.* (2010) can take extra precautions to prevent from getting pregnant, surely female Muslim adolescents who have a high religiosity score and perform the requirements of her religion would also be more cautious in any sexual activity she might have. This is because theoretically, a female Muslim adolescent with a high religiosity score would not engage in premarital sex in the first place. The reason for this is that a Muslim with high religious values would perform and practice Islamic requirements and duties more so than a person of another faith as studied by Berry (2012).

In discussing the parental factor, the mean analysis found that the item my level of communication with my parents is low when it comes to sharing problems scored the highest mean value (mean = 2.60) over the other items followed by the item my parents trust me outside the home (mean = 2.50), my parents are so busy at research they lack in giving me attention and supervision (mean = 2.40) and domestic crises made me decide to leave home and socialise (mean = 2.20) (Table 2).

This study also found that weak role-models and parenting skills may also lead to female adolescents engaging in unprotected sex culminating in pregnancy. Earlier studies have found that adolescents have trouble in telling their parents about their problems. When a

Table 1: The personal factor

Personal issues	Percentage				Mean
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
I wanted to try new things without thinking about the consequences	18	20	44	18	2.6
I could not contain my desire when invited to have sex	28	32	30	10	2.2
Weak religiosity made me ignore religious rules and prohibitions	10	24	42	24	2.9
I did not feel fear or guilt of committing the act of fornication	26	32	28	14	2.3
I release stress by having sex	36	42	12	10	2.0
I like having sex	44	32	18	6	1.9

Table 2: The parental factor

The parental factor	Percentage				Mean
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
My parents work cause them to lack in giving me attention and supervision	16	40	36	8	2.4
My parents trust me outside the home and with the activities I'm doing	14	32	44	10	2.5
The level of communication between me and my parents is low when it comes to sharing problems	20	20	38	22	2.6
My parents disowned me when they found out I was pregnant outside of marriage	56	34	10	0	1.5
My parents didn't care about my socializing with boys	38	46	12	4	1.8
My parents did not instill religious values throughout my life	40	32	22	6	1.9
Domestic crises made me decide to leave home and socialize	40	18	26	16	2.2
I was exposed to promiscuous behavior by family members	54	32	10	4	1.6

Table 3: The peer factor

The peer factor	Percentage				Mean
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
My friends are the most important people in my life to share in problems with	10	28	44	18	2.7
My friends encourage me to be promiscuous	38	38	22	2	1.9
My friends encourage me to have sex with my boyfriend	36	48	14	2	1.8
I follow the dating trends of my friends so that they don't label me as being out of touch with the times	30	36	30	4	2.1
My friends and I often exchange pornographic collections (CD's, videos and pictures)	38	36	22	4	1.9
I have friends with bad character and who come from broken homes	18	40	36	6	2.3
My friends have criminal records and delinquency issues	34	40	18	8	2.0

young girl is incapable of communicating well with her parents, they may well be misinformed about sex and pregnancy. It goes without saying that ineffective communication also causes parental failure in conveying religious education. The research analysis is parallel to the findings of Guizarro *et al.* (1999) that showed that parental separation or divorce and lack of communication between a daughter and her parents are closely related to adolescent pregnancy. In fact, the families of pregnant adolescents also have lower family problem-solving strategies. Furthermore, a low religiosity value in the family will influence the youth's involvement in sexual activities. A study conducted by Manlove *et al.* (2006) found that parental religious attendance on a daily basis and family religious activities were closely related to a marked delay in young adolescent males and females engaging in sexual relations. This proves that families that practice their religions will also stress on a lifestyle in accordance to that religion's requirements. Parents with a high religiosity value will influence their children's behaviour as found in a study conducted by Shah (2004). When the family itself does not practice Islam, the values and teachings of Islam such as abstinence from sex for those who are unmarried cannot be inculcated in the adolescent.

This study has also shown that peers contribute to the decision of female muslim adolescents to have sex due to unsafe sex practice. The mean analysis showed that the item with the highest value was friends are the most important people in my life to share my problems (mean = 2.70) followed by the items I have friends with

bad character and come from broken homes (mean = 2.30), I follow the dating trends of my peers so that they don't label me as being out of touch with the times (mean = 2.10) and my peers have criminal records and delinquency issues (mean = 2.0) (Table 3).

Among other factors that contribute to the problem of adolescent pregnancy is the mass media. The mean analysis found that the item an online relationship formed through chatting that takes advantage of young girls and women scored the highest mean (mean = 2.80) followed by pornographic video clips sent to my phone influenced me to have sex (mean = 2.30). Other items such as pornographic films influenced me to have sex, pornographic CD's influenced me to have sex with my partner and pornographic websites that are harder to control influenced me to enter into a relationship all had the same mean (mean = 2.20). The research analysis clearly shows that the media plays a vital role in influencing adolescents to have sex, chat and pursue romantic relationships (Table 4).

This study also shows that peers who do not practice the teachings of Islam and fall into promiscuity may influence female Muslim adolescents to have sex, protected or otherwise. As found in the study by Adamczyk and Felson (2006), friends religiosity has the strongest influence on the sexual behavior of adolescents who are embedded in dense social networks in which teens friends are also friends with one another. This means that a good friend who has high religiosity values may be an advisor of sorts and give caution to their friends who have the propensity to engage in sexual

Table 4: The mass media factor

The mass media factor	Percentage				Mean
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Pornographic video clips sent to my phone influenced me to have sex	30	24	36	10	2.3
Pornographic films influenced me to have sex	32	26	32	10	2.2
Pornographic CD's influenced me to have sex with my partner	34	24	34	8	2.2
Pornographic websites that are difficult to control access to encouraged me to pursue a romantic relationship	26	34	36	4	2.2
An online relationship via chatting that takes advantage of young girls and women	12	18	52	18	2.8

activities. This simultaneously illustrates that the decision to have sex and the involvement of female adolescents in sexual activities may well be influenced by their peers and that it is not just up to their own desires.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that there are four factors why female Muslim adolescents in Malaysia involve themselves with premarital sex and consequent pregnancies. The factors are weak religiosity, gullibility, i.e., easily manipulated by new people introduced through chatsites, poor communication with their parents and the desire to try new things sexually. All of the factors proven in this study are parallel to the findings of earlier studies. The main factor which is weak religiosity must be taken account into by the relevant parties that wish to start intervention programs to avoid adolescents from getting pregnant at an early age and out of wedlock. The Islamisation grounds in Malaysia that promote abstinence must be more attentive to youths who are already sexually active and may need more access to contraceptives. If so Malaysia may need to take steps in providing contraceptives to high-risk female Muslim adolescents.

It should also be noted that the research has limitations in that it was only conducted with the involvement of female muslim adolescents in shelters. There are many more female Muslim adolescents that are not protected by an institution of any kind with more complex personal problems than usual. Therefore, these findings may only prove a fraction of the factors that cause female muslim adolescents in Malaysia to get pregnant out of wedlock.

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