

Issues and Factors of Problematic Families in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper work discusses four current and main issues faced by family institutions in Malaysia, namely single family, divorce, parents with children involved with juvenile cases and domestic violence or abuse (child and spouse abuse). Stratified random sampling of 963 problematic families was chosen from eight districts in one of the many states in Malaysia which is Johor. Contributing factors to problematic families are also identified such as economy, urbanisation, employment, communication and value change. This study has employed the questionnaire and data analysis approach that used the percentage and the highest mean score. The research findings have shown the economy factor as the dominant factor for almost all family problem issues, followed by the factors of unemployment, communication, urbanization and value change. This study also highlights a few programme suggestions to overcome the problems and to strengthen the family institutions such as family and religious education, recreational programme, counseling centre, community trade centre, site visit and parenting programme.

1.0 Introduction

In Malaysia, family institution is the social institution that has become the central of attention. It stands as the most basic and important unit in the process of community development. If the family divided, the social and economic impacts will be felt by the people and the next generation. Thus, the state of a country being forward or backward is the result of family institutions. The current development trends have witnessed a lot of changes in the forms and functions of family institutions. Development plans at both national and state level are expecting positive economic and social progress. Nonetheless, the implementation of development plans has indeed changed the role of family institutions. At first, development plans have opened lots of job opportunities to family members where particularly, many women and people from rural areas had the chance to work in the industrial and government sectors. The increase in employment among women requires parental role to be transferred to or assisted by agents of socialization such as neighbours, domestic helpers, parents, schools, police, religious offices, rehabilitation centres and others. (Yaacob, 1992; Fatimah, 1994).

These agents of socialisation, however, are not able to fulfill the role of family institutions. For example, spiritual relationship may not be established by institutions other than the family institution itself. Spiritual emptiness will lead to many problems where it can be serious domestic problems or external social problems. As a result of working outside, the nature of family members' relationship has become individualistic and egoistic due to pursuing successful careers. Living cost that has increased forces both parents to work. In many cases, family members are required to work overtime in order to sustain the family. At the same time, children upbringing and education are neglected. In reality, all parents care towards their children and aspire to have harmonious and blissful family life. However, the meeting daily expenses scenario has created emotional pressure among parents. Divorce, abuse and juvenile cases can happen due to high level of emotional pressure, besides impatience factor among parents.

According to a study by Malaysia Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM), in 2007, 32.2 percent of first five years of marriages end with divorce while another 27.7 percent goes to marriages of first six to ten years. This means that the first ten years term of marriage is the most critical stage since 59.9 percent of couples end up with divorce. Based on year 2009 record, 135,136 marriages were registered while 27,116 divorce cases have been recorded. Statistics from Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) on violence towards women in year 2007 shows as many as 3,756 cases which later increased to 3,769 in year 2008. The figure decreased a bit in year 2009 to 3,643 cases and in 2010 (as of January to July) 1,871 cases. Women Development Department (JPW) has provided counseling sessions to 3,598 women which include those who experienced domestic violence and abuse cases as of June 2010. JPW has also recorded an increase in women who attended counseling sessions with 32 cases in 2008, improved to 48 individuals in 2009 and as of July 2010, JPW has received 62 cases of women facing domestic violence where almost 60 percent from the reported amount of cases is involving the victims' close family members, especially the victims' husbands.

Meanwhile, 1,010 cases of child abuse were reported as of April 2010 that covers cases on physical abuse, emotional, incest and baby dumping. Statistics on child abuse done by parents shows 808 cases, by siblings (23 cases), by mother's boyfriend (270 cases), by neighbours (26 cases), by relatives (322 cases), by known people (231 cases) while by strangers (110 cases). These cases continued to increase from 2,279 in 2007 to 2,780 in 2008 and further up to 2,789 in 2009. The latest statistics of juvenile cases shows that there are 1.5 criminals among every 1000 students. As a prove, statistics and studies by Non-Governmental Organisation authorities, as well as local higher learning institutions have certainly portrayed the seriousness of crime level among students in both urban and rural areas. The latest statistics provided by Bukit Aman Police Headquarters shows 65 reported baby dumping cases in the first quarter year of 2010 compared to 42 cases during the same period last year. On 12 August 2009, Cabinet has directed that any person involved in baby dumping cases to be investigated under the Penal Code which is under the act of murder or attempted murder.

In addition, according to Bukit Aman Police Headquarters since year 2005 up to now, there are 472 baby dumping cases reported at the whole country. Throughout year 2009, 79 baby dumping cases were reported where 25 cases were involving baby boys, 29 baby girls and another 25 cases are gender-undetermined due to still at fetus stage. The amount of cases increased dramatically from January to April 2010 when 65 cases were being reported. From this amount, 26 are involving baby boys, 25 are baby girls and 14 fetus cases. Within the same period, 21 teenagers aged under 18 years old were detained due to being involved in baby dumping cases. Reports show that the reason for cases increment has a connection with the increasingly sophisticated information technology. Apart from that, the fragility of family institution due to the busy schedule of working parents to sustain life is also contributing to this problem.

1.1 Research Scope

There are so many family problem issues being highlighted. However, for the purpose of this study, the focus is confined to four main issues which are:- divorce, abuse (wife and children), single family and family being involved in juvenile cases. Respondents were selected from eight districts in the state of Johor which are Johor Bahru, Pontian, Mersing, Kota Tinggi, Batu Pahat, Segamat, Kluang and Muar. 693 respondents have been selected from problematic families of Malay ethnicity to become the research samples.

1.2 Research Methodology

This research has employed the questionnaire method where the selection of problematic family samples was done based on population. The population information was retrieved from various government departments and voluntary bodies. This population is divided into eight districts and problem type. Selection of samples was based on the random stratified method. The samples were 30 percent from the population total amount. The problematic family profile is presented in the form of percentage and done based factors to family problem issues. Mean score is given based on skill 1 to 5. Skill 1 refers 'Totally Disagree' and skill 5 refers to 'Totally Agree'.

1.3 Definition of Concept

Definition of Family

Coleman and Cressey (1993 : 110) defined family as a group of people by marriage, ancestry or adoption who live together in a common house hold. Mahmood (1997) meanwhile, defined family as a social unit that consists of father, mother, children where certain life connection exists between them in that particular social circle.

Problematic Family Concept

A problematic family is referred to as a family that is having serious crisis due to family problems (Utusan Malaysia, 27 September 1990:12). These crises then lead to various negative conditions in the family relationship. These negative conditions may create chaos in a family. Besides that, Coleman and Cressey (1993) listed a few family problems such as divorce, children care, children abuse, domestic violence, single family, full-time working parents and family conflict.

Divorce

Benokraitis (1996) defined divorce as 'termination of a legal and formal marriage'.

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is defined as sexual and physical abuse done by a husband to his own wife and children (Robert, 1993). Physical abuse involves the acts of kicking, slapping, pressing hot objects such as iron and cigarette ash to body as well as hitting using hard objects such as belt and wooden stick.

Single Family

This refers to the phenomenon where either a father or a mother sustains the family due to death of the partner or divorce.

The separation leaves the sense of denial, emotional, unstable feelings, guilty feelings, lose loneliness and relief (Kavanaugh, 1972). They are also pressured by the needs to find job as well as the parenting responsibility such as educating and nurturing children (Wolf, 1996).

1.4 Problematic Family and the Contributing Factors

Based on the overall profile analysis of respondents according to the order of problem issues, single family issue is found to be the biggest issue (49.7%) which is almost half of the 693 respondents. The second biggest problem is divorce (26.6%), followed by having family members involved in juvenile cases (15.4%). Another 8.4% of family problem reported is wife and child abuse. In this study, the contributing factors towards family problem are summed up as: economy factor, unemployment/employment, communication, value change, responsibility and urbanization.

(i) Single Family

Analysis shows that from 344 single families, (representing 49.7% in this study), 322 families (93.6%) are from Johor, and from the total amount of problematic single families, 99.1% of them are referring to single mothers. A majority of the single families belong to the ages between 30 to 60 years old where most of them have experienced 6 to 30 years of marriage life. In the aspect of education level, 19.8% has never gone to school, 43.6% went up to primary school, and 23.8% are lower secondary school leavers while only 12.8% are upper secondary school leavers. Meanwhile, with regards to income aspect, 75.4% are getting less than RM500 a month. 22.3% are having the income between RM501-RM1000, and only 2.3% are getting between RM1001-RM2001. For amount of children, 34.6% belong to those who have between 1 to 3 children, 46.2% represent those with 4 to 6 children and another 16.3% have between 7 to 9 children.

Based on the respondents perception on contributing factors to single family gathered from the study, it is found that the highest mean score (4.02) is given to economy factor which is referred to as unable to spend lavishly and quickly run out of income (3.47). They admitted the difficulty to get a proper job due to being only primary and secondary school leavers. Unemployment/occupation (difficulty to get employed in the city) factor is given 3.44 mean score. Due to that, single mothers agree that their emotional pressure is worse in the city. Urbanization factor (life pressure in the city is higher) is also given 3.44 mean score. Being asked about the reason why single family is experiencing high emotional pressure in the city, 67% responded that it is due to having a lot of dependents, 25% claimed that the income is not enough to sustain life and another 4% are always sick. In the opinion of single families, factors such as value change, responsibility and communication with children are not related to their family problems.

(ii) Divorce

Analysis shows that from 184 respondents (representing 26.6% in this study), 163 respondents (88.6%) are from Johor and from the total amount of those who experience divorce, 63.6% are women and only 36.4% are men. From the aspect of marriage duration, 43.5% were married for 1 to 5 years, 21.2% between 6 to 10 years, 10.9% between 11 to 15 years, 9.3% between 16 to 20 years, 7.6% between 21 to 25 years and 5.4% between 26 to 30 years. Meanwhile, for education aspect, 54.9% are upper secondary school educated, 15.2% are primary school leavers and another 20.1% are lower secondary school leavers. Income wise, 27.2% are getting less than RM500 whereas those who get RM501-1000 are of 64.2% and respondents with the salary between RM1001-2001 are 8.6%. With regards to amount of children, 14.7% are childless, 57.6% have between 1 to 3 children, 22.3% are with between 4 to 6 children and 5.4% have between 7 to 9 children. Analysis of family problems at Johor in year 1999/2000 based on education level found that the rate of divorce increases as the education level is higher. This tendency happens because the upper secondary education is found to be able to help them in sustaining life even though after divorce.

The ages of divorced respondents are mostly still young where more than 60% are aged between 26 to 39 years. More than half (57.6%) of the divorced families have 1 to 3 children. Approximately around 43.5% of divorce happened within less than a year to 5 years of marriage. Meanwhile, as for respondents perception towards contributing factors to divorce, it is found that the highest mean score (3.8) is given to economy factor, referring to unable to spend lavishly and quickly run out of income (3.2). Communication factor is put as the second factor. This factor which is divided into a few sub scales has found that respondents view on reasons for divorce is because the spouse or child does not play the role as expected (mean score of 3.6), stubborn children (3.5), nagging wife (3.1) and husband and wife refusing to discuss (3.1). Apart from that, urbanization factor is admitted by respondents as a factor that can lead to divorce (3.4) which is because the emotional pressure in the city is higher compared to in the village. Respondents who are divorced are also in the opinion that divorce happens if the couple always neglect their responsibility to manage the family (3.4). The unemployment/occupation factor is also associated with divorce problem, especially if the job that suits the qualification is hard to find (3.1).

Among the reasons for unemployment are low qualification (40%), no suitable job (27%), and health problem (27%) and having problem at workplace 14%.

(iii) **Juvenile**

Family samples whose children are involved in juvenile cases represent 16.5% from the total research samples. It is the third biggest problem in Johor. Majority respondents (85%) of these cases are originally from Johor and 72% are men. The age of parents whose children are involved in juvenile cases are between 30 to 39 years old (25.2%), 40 to 49 (40.2%) and between the ages of 50 to 60 tahun are 28.0%. Within the ages of 30 to 60 years old, it is reported that juvenile cases increase as the parents' age increase. The biggest juvenile cases percentage is among parents aged between 40 to 49 years old. The largest juvenile case which is as many as 63% is reported among families with 4 to 6 children while those with 7 to 9 are at 24.3%. Meanwhile, for marriage term, the largest percentage for juvenile cases is 38% which are between 16 to 20 years of marriage followed by marriage terms between 21 to 25 years (21.5%). Families with the income less than RM500 a month records 40% from juvenile cases samples and almost another 43% parents are getting between RM501 to RM1000. This means that more than 80% of families whose children are involved in juvenile cases are families with low income (less than RM1000 a month).

With regards to contributing factors to juvenile issue, respondents agree that poverty factor is the cause for it. The mean score for economy sub-scale (unable to afford luxurious spending) is 3.71 and (quickly run out of income) is 3.20. Mutual decision is seldom achieved in families with children involved in juvenile cases. The urbanization factor is given the second highest score (3.36) which is to the sub scale life pressure in the city is higher. Migration to the city causes emotional pressure (mean score 3.19). They have also given the causes to emotional pressure which are (43%) having many dependents, (32%) having not enough income, husbands do not provide for the family, drunk husbands and high cost of living. The third factor that contributes to juvenile cases in the opinion of the respondents is the unemployment factor sub scale (hard to find job that suits the qualification) which is given a mean score of 3.32. More than half of the respondents are with the opinion that jobs are hard to find due to low level of qualification. Communication factor which is (spouse always nags- mean score 3.13) is linked as a contributing factor to juvenile cases. Overall, samples for juvenile cases agree that economy, urbanization, unemployment and communication factors are the contributors to juvenile cases in Johor.

(iv) **Domestic violence: Spouse/Wife Abuse**

From the amount of spouse abuse respondents, 75% are originally from Johor. Respondents for this abuse are those who commit the act to their spouses. Due to this, for spouse abuse it is found that men are the most involved in this problem (abusing wife). More than half of those who abuse their wives (55%) are aged between 30 to 49 years old, having between 1 to 3 children (44%) and between 4 to 6 children (42%). Marriage term for wife abuse cases are between 1 to 5 years when more than 30% families are involved. The same goes to marriage term between 6 to 10 years, more 30% are involved in this problem of abusing wives. Thus, critical marriage term is between 1 to 10 years. There are also couples who are married for 11 to 15 years being involved in wife abuse (19%) and another 14% are for marriage term between 16 to 20 years. Most (more than 60%) families who abuse the wives admitted that their childhood lives were not peaceful and their family background were of those that do not practice religion. They (40%) explained that their parents religious knowledge were not so good. For contributing factor to wife abuse problem, respondents perception (highest mean score -3.81) is given to urbanization factor which is explained as migration to the city causes emotional pressure and mean score 3.71 is given to emotional pressure in the city is higher factor.

Communication factor is considered as the second factor. This factor is divided into a few sub-scales, finding that respondents abuse their wives because the spouses do not understand the husbands' wants (mean score = 3.52). Economy factor (cannot afford to spend luxuriously (mean score = 3.48) always experience emotional pressure (3.00) because of not enough salary and high cost of living. The unemployment factor is listed after the economy factor. The mean score sub scale for this factor is 3.32 (difficult to find job that suits the qualification). Respondents have given several causes for unemployment: where 40% view having low qualification, 20% having no suitable job and 20% samples admitted being lazy to work. There are only two value change sub scale viewed as contributing to spouse abuse which are impatience (3.08) and not being in good terms with neighbours (mean score = 3.06). Abuse happens when the spouse frequently neglects the responsibility. Responsibility factor sub scale (spouse frequently neglects responsibility in managing family) is given 3.04 mean score; however abusers denied that they abuse because they have neglected the responsibility to manage the family. In conclusion, abusers perceptions on the contributing factors to abuse are: emotional pressure due to urbanisation, most of communication aspects, emotional pressure due to economy factors, unemployment, value change and responsibility.

Respondents admitted that wife abuse can happen even in these situations:

- abuser has good relationship with in laws
- abuser is friendly with the children
- wife is caring towards family members' health
- abuser is not drunk/ not jealous

From the aspect of value, when the respondents were asked for the reasons for abusing/hitting the wife, they responded: 62% spouses (wives) like to brag, 54% spouses do not help with family expenditure, more than 70% wives like to demand for materials, 57% wives are big spenders and 47% are because their parents also do the same action (abusing).

Child Abuse

The percentage for child abuse cases in this study is 4.0% and the original Johorians involved are 84%. The respondents are leaders in family which are fathers (40%) or mothers (60%). They are those claimed to have abused their children or they claim that their children are abused by their spouses (either the father or mother). More than half (54%) families who abuse children are aged below 39 years old. Among them who abuse children, more than 50% samples reported to have the income of less than RM500 per month. Another 32% samples are getting between RM501 to RM1000 per month. A minority of 3% are getting more than RM2500 per month. The percentage of child abuse decreases when the income increases. More than half of the abusers are also having less children (1 to 3 children) only while another 28% have 4 to 6 children. Abusers or those who claimed their children are abused were also requested to share the causes for spouse/child abuse. More than 20% responded, spouses do not help with the family expenditure or like to demand for things.

As many as 18% responded that the spouses/children spend unnecessarily and almost 12% have the opinion that they abuse due to having learned it from their parents. It can be summed up that families who abuse their children can give a bad life experience which is later followed by the children. The abused children will repeat the cycle by abusing their own children later on. As for respondents perception on contributing factors to child abuse, the highest mean score (3.61) goes to economy factor which is cannot afford to spend luxuriously and quickly run out of income (3.18). The second factor goes to communication aspect. Respondents are with the opinion that child abuse can happen if the spouses nag a lot (mean score 3.5), also due to stubborn children (3.2) and spouse being abused to give lesson (3.1). The urbanization factor is admitted by respondents as the third factor that can lead to abuse which is referring to the statement life pressure in the city is higher.

1.6 Conclusion

The conclusion for contributing factors to problematic families is summed up in the Table A below.

Table A Contributing Factors to Problematic Families in Malaysia

Problem Type	Factors according to respondents perception (Arranged based on Importance)
Single family	Economy, Unemployment Urbanisation
Abuse	Economy, Communication, Urbanisation, Responsibility, Unemployment
Juvenile	Economy, Urbanisation, Unemployment
Wife Abuse	Urbanisation, Communication, Economy, Unemployment, Multiracial Family Relationships, Value change, Responsibility
Child Abuse	Economy, Communication, Urbanisation

About half of the problematic family samples gathered in this study consist of single families, followed by 26% of divorce problem, and almost 16% are figured under juvenile problem. 5.0% are under abuse of partner and 4.0% are abuse of children. Majority of the problematic families are salaried less than RM1000 a month. This clearly shows that the trends and profile of problematic families in Malaysia have a strong connection with Malays with low income, among single families and those with moderate education. This has clearly shown that the trends and profile of problematic family in Malaysia have a close connection with Malays with low income, single families and those with moderate education. Meanwhile, the factors that contribute to their problems are economy factor which is the main factor, followed by communication, urbanization and unemployment factors. Therefore, the authorities responsible to overcome or reduce family problems need to focus the programmes or strategies that are specified to the aspects mentioned. Programmes to increase both the standard of living and source of income need to be prioritized because they will give big impacts to these problematic families. By this, the rate and level of problematic families in Malaysia can be reduced from time to time.