

Age at First Marriage of Single Mothers in East Coast, Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a cross-sectional study conducted to explore age at first marriage of single mothers in three states in East Coast of Malaysia, which are Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang. East Coast is known with high prevalence of single mothers in Malaysia. The high prevalence of divorce in the East Coast of Malaysia makes the area an interesting site for examining the issue of divorce or single mothers in Malaysia. Research findings outside Malaysia show the incidence of single-parent families has increased significantly in recent years, and the majority of the single-parent is single mother. This present article analyzes age at first marriage of single mothers in rural areas in East Coast in Malaysia. More specifically, it analyzes; (1) sociodemographic profiles of single mothers in rural Malaysia; (2), age at first marriage of single mothers; and (3) reasons behind the early age at first marriage among single mothers in rural areas in East Coast in Malaysia. This study is basically employed descriptive research as the main objective of the study is to provide information about some aspects of single mothers in rural Malaysia. Descriptive research is employed if the researcher wants to study or answer questions such as what, and how. Descriptive research is directed at making careful observations and detailed documentation of a phenomenon of interest. To meet these objectives, 500 single mothers in East Coast, Malaysia were selected as respondents. They are selected for the study through a chain referral sampling. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, and analyzed descriptively. Results of the study reveal that the youngest age at first marriage of single mothers is 13, while the oldest is 47 years old, with the age at first marriage most commonly found is 18 years old. The incidence of marriage at early age amongst respondent occurred because of they are belong to the generation of the 1950s or earlier where at that time most of the population marry at young age. Min age at first marriage for all respondents is 20 years old, whilst median age at first marriage is also 20 years, which means half of the respondents commenced their marriage at the age of 20 years and below, and another half began their marriage at the age of 20 years and over. It was found that not many single mothers who began their marriage at the age of 30 years and over.

Keywords: Family; single parent family; single mother; family change

1. Introduction

The present paper presents the result of a cross-sectional survey conducted in rural Malaysia to analyze age at first marriage of single mothers in East Coast in Malaysia. Although research on various aspects of family in Malaysia has successfully been conducted and a wide range of information about it has been documented, many questions regarding age at first marriage among single mothers are still unanswered. Rather, lots of research initiatives on this aspect are still needed. Thus, to get an empirical answer on these questions, this research was conducted. Data gathered on this issue will give us a true picture of age at first marriage and many other related issues such as divorce rate of rural population in Malaysia. This information is important if we are to help rural population to maintain their harmonious living and stability of marriage. Age at first marriage among single mothers is also felt necessary to analyze because prior to developing any appropriate social and economic policies addressing family problems, understanding empirical situation on age at first marriage is particularly important.

2. Objective

This present article analyzes age at first marriage of single mothers in rural areas in East Coast in Malaysia. More specifically, it analyzes; (1) sociodemographic profiles of single mothers in rural Malaysia; (2), age at first marriage of single mothers; and (3) reasons behind the early age at first marriage among single mothers in rural

areas in East Coast in Malaysia.

3. Literature Review

Since Malaysia gained her independence in 1957, the family institution has changed considerably. Problems such as family instability and increasing in divorce related problems, are no longer considered as individual problems, but have become critical social problems in Malaysia (Zainab Ismail, Wan Ibrahim Wan Ahmad and Asyraf Hj Ab Rahman, 2014). In such situation, particularly in recent years, the number of single mothers is rising significantly. In Malaysia, a normal family normally composes of a father, mother, and children. This normal family has changed, and as a consequence, there are families that compose of only a father, or a mother and children. Such family is called single parent families. Single parent family is a family headed by a parent residing with a child(ren) less than age 18, but not residing with a spouse or with the child's other parent (Casey and Maldonado, 2012). Many Malaysian couples have become a single parent every year due to the death of a spouse, divorce or abandoned by a husband. This single parent family may include immediate family members besides grandparents or other extended family members. It is easy to imagine problems arising from the absence of a father or mother in the household. From the daily observation, the majority of single-parent families in Malaysia have been single mothers. Single mothers are generally defined as mothers or females who head the household, and have unmarried children under 18 years living in the same household as their dependents.

In Malaysia, the incidence of single mothers, among other things, is related to age at first marriage. Many evidences suggesting that the couples with early age at first marriage will have greater risk of divorce. In demography, early marriage is defined as those who marry at the age of 19 or younger, or in other words, marriage before the age of 20. Marriage before the age of 20 is most prevalent in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Bulatao, 1984). Decades ago, over half of all women aged 15–19 reported have been married in these regions. The proportion of women married in this age group was only 17 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, and only 2 percent in East Asia (Henry and Piotrow, 1976). Early marriage is still common in Islamic countries in the Middle East. In a study conducted by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) it was found that in 2013 in Jordan, besides Jordanian, Syrian and Palestinian were reported with high prevalence of early marriage. Early marriage as registered in Jordanian shari'a courts, by nationality (2013) was 12.7 percent (Jordanian), Syrian (25.0%), and Palestinian (17.6%). The report also highlighted that early marriage is a long-accepted practice in some parts of the Syrian population.

Whilst in Jordan early marriage is still prevalence, in Arab World as according to Rashad, Osman and Roudi-Fahimi (2005), universal, early marriage is no longer the standard it once was in Arab countries. The average age at marriage for both men and women is rising. Women throughout the Arab region once married in their teens or at early 20s, but in recent decades, however, early marriage has decline sharply. The pattern of late marriage has already developed in Western Europe since in the 17th century (Hajnal, 1965). This is due to the fact that a couple who wish to marry should have resources to set up an independent household. By the 19th century, nearly 70 percent of Western European women stayed single through their early twenties (Bulatao, 1984).

There are various factors effecting age at first marriage, including socioeconomic factor. Bulatao (1984) who reviews the determinants of marriage timing in developing countries analyzed by several demographers concludes that one of the socioeconomic factor that effect marriage timing is female education. From several studies by these demographers, Bulatao (1984) summarized that the average women with seven or more years of education marries at least 3.5 years later than the average woman with no education in 10 out of 14 developing countries. Today, we have witnessed age at first marriage has rising. Modernization, particularly advanced in education of the majority of the population, has resulted in most women and men tend to move to marry at later age. With the advancement in education, particularly for women, has widened their opportunities to be involved in various formal workforces.

4. Materials and Method

This study took place in the states of Terengganu, Pahang and Kelantan, situated in the East Coast of Malaysia. East Coast is chosen as a study area because it is known with high prevalence of single mothers in Malaysia. The high prevalence of divorce in the East Coast of Malaysia makes the area an interesting site for examining the issue of divorce or single mothers in Malaysia. Respondents for this study are 500 single mothers in East Coast, Malaysia. Due to lack of information on the number of these single mothers in these three states, the researcher

found it was quite difficult to create a complete list of single mothers to be used as a sampling frame. Thus, the respondents are selected through a chain referral sampling. In this case, when the first respondent is determined, the consequent respondents are selected through the information gathered from the earlier respondents. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews. From the study, a wide range of data about single mothers was gathered. Relevance to this article is data about age at first marriage and the reasons of why these single mothers are married at early age. This study is basically employed descriptive research. Descriptive research is employed if the researcher wants to study or answer questions such as what, and how. According to Bhattacharjee (2012) descriptive research is directed at making careful observations and detailed documentation of a phenomenon of interest.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Sociodemographic Profiles

Single mothers which are analyzed in this paper numbered 500 persons, selected through a convenience sampling. From these 500 single mothers, 427 from Terengganu, 42 from Pahang, and 31 from Kelantan, where 473 are locals, the remaining are migrants. The majority of these single mothers are coming from rural areas. Analysis on the age of the respondents showed that age of the youngest is 26 years old, while the oldest is 70 years old. More than 80 percent of these single mothers are aged between 54 years and below. Min age is 44.5 years, with the mode and the median age is also 45 years. Thus, it can be said that the majority of single mothers of this study were those aged 45 years and over. Most of these single mothers are only educated at primary school level. Their income level is very low. Although there are single mothers who reported that sometimes their monthly income can reach RM5000 a month, income for most of these single mothers is only RM300. More than half are living below the poverty line according to Malaysia standard.

Nearly all of single mothers are local people. Among the migrant single mothers, some of them are from Southern Thailand and Indonesia. They moved from their place of origin for various reasons; some are because of marriages, some for family reasons, and others to get a better job by involving in informal sector selling food for local people.

5.2 Age at First Marriage

It has been found that the youngest age for age at first marriage among single mothers in this study is 13, while the oldest age is 47 years old, with the age at first marriage most commonly found is 18 years old. This means that there has been existed among respondents who had already married at the age of 13. These respondents were among those who belong to the generation of the 1950s or earlier, which is now began to enter old age category. Min age at first marriage for all respondents is 20 years old. More over median age at first marriage of respondents is also considered low, which is 20 years, which means half of the respondents commenced their marriage at the age of 20 years and below, and another half began their marriage at the age of 20 years and over. Examine the age at first marriage in this study; it was found that not many single mothers who began their marriage at the age of 30 years and over. When this age is categorized into four categories, roughly half the respondents commenced the marriage at the age of 19 years and below (Table 1).

Table 1:

Age at First Marriage of Single Mothers

Age at First Marriage (Years)	Number	Percentage
19 and below	221	49.6
20 - 24	202	45.3
25 - 29	19	4.3
30 and above	4	0.9
Number	446	100.0

The same number is also found for the age of 20 – 24 years old. This means that more than 90% of the respondents had commenced the marriage at the age of 24 years and below. Only about five percent are those had

been married at the age of 25 years and older. This indicates that although many single mothers in the study starting their first marriage at the later age, many also had commenced their marriage at the younger age. The result of this study is not too different with some of results of other studies concerning the same aspect in Malaysia. Wan Ibrahim Wan Ahmad (1990), for example, which examines the age at first marriage in Kuala Balah, Kelantan, has shown similar results. The results of his analysis shows that as much as 45% of women in that study in the late 1980s had been married at the age of 19 years and below. Wan Ibrahim in that study, had categorized the age at first marriage of 19 years and below as early marriage. This type of marriage is most commonly found among the Malay population in rural areas in Malaysia during that period.

5.3 Reasons behind Early Age at First Marriage

To get a clear picture of why the majority of single mothers in this study had married at a very young age, we take the initiative to conduct an in-depth interview with two informants, aged 55 and 78 years. From the interviews we concluded that there are four reasons why these single mothers had married at a very young age. The reasons are (1) the norms of community at that particular time; (2) low level of education, (3) the opportunity to be involved in formal sectors was limited, and (4) life hardness of the family.

The norm of the community at that particular time is that daughters should marry at earlier age. Early marriage is a norm. Yet, daughters who did not marry after age 25 or older are considered as *anak dara tua* (old virgin). *Anak dara tua* is used to label adult daughters who did not marry after that age. It used to refer to adult daughter who is pure, untouched and has not married although her age is beyond 25 or 30. The concept is too negative. Marriage should produce many children in the family. Early marriage is generally associated with high fertility and early childbearing (Rashad, Osman and Roudi-Fahimi, 2005). For parents in rural Malaysia, the bigger the numbers of children the couple have the better. At the time of this study conducted, high fertility rate is a norm. Although transition from high to low fertility in most of developing countries are in progress (Bulatao, 1984), high fertility is still evidence in many parts of the world. Yet in a significant number of developing countries fertility decline has not begun. Spouses married at earlier age at that time because they wanted many children. Children are seen as has social and economic benefits. Children could help parents in various economic activities whether in term of labor, or in other practical help such as caring their younger siblings. Thus, children are crucial as they could contribute to lighten the household economy.

Low level of education of the population was also play a crucial role. The level of education attainment of the population in rural Malaysia decades ago, in general, was very low. At that time, whether male or female stops their school age at the very young age, mostly because the facilities for formal education were very poor. Formal education was regarded as a luxury item and exclusively for children who socialized in elite families. The study area was located in rural areas, and all rural areas in Malaysia at that time do not have adequate facilities for formal education. Marriage at young age is a consequence of low level of education of the population. Formal education, particularly for female may delay marriage because it increases woman's opportunity to be involved in formal sectors.

The crucial links between education and early marriage can be observed in a study conducted by Rashad, Osman and Roudi-Fahimi (2005) who study on marriage in the Arab world. They found that more-educated women marry later than their less-educated counterparts. In the United Arab Emirates, the average age at marriage for women with secondary or higher education is 27, as compared with 18 for those with no education. In Oman, they also found that those with high school diplomas marry on average at age 25, while those who never went to school are married on average by age 19 years. The positive links between education and early marriage can also be observed in UNICEF study (2014). UNICEF in its study on early marriage in Jordan found that there was a strong links between education and early marriage. Poor performance at school could be a reason for a teenage daughter to begin looking for a husband. For such a teenage daughter, there was little point to remain in school because it was better for them to marry.

The limited opportunity to be involved in formal sectors was one more factor that determined early marriage of these single mothers. Frequently the involvement in formal sector may delay the marriage. Our informants believe that if the respondents had been involved in employment in formal sector, they were likely to delay their marriage. This is because of the economic benefits they will get from the involvement in employment in the formal sector. Their parents also were likely not to advice their adult daughters to marry at young age because of the same reason.

Early marriage of single mothers in the study areas was also related to the life hardness of their parents. In Malay society, early marriage, particularly for daughters, has been considered as a means to release the economic

burdens of the family. Some parents give permission for their daughters to marry because they perceive they could transfer the responsibility of caring their daughters to someone else. Marriage requires a man has his own income to support his own family. Thus, more often the young man who takes step to marry in rural areas in Malaysia has had the resources needed. Thus, releasing daughters to marry will also mean to release the economic burdens of the family.

6. Conclusion

The present paper has discussed the results of a cross-sectional study on age at first marriage of single mothers in Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang, East Coast of Malaysia. Research findings show that the incidence of single-parent families, particularly single mothers, has increased significantly in Malaysia in recent years. This is due to the fact that divorce rate has increase significantly. The study reveals that the majority of these single mothers were categorized as early marriage, a term used to refer to marriage at a very young age, at the age of 20 years of age or younger. Although family institution has changed considerably, early marriage is still evidence in rural Malaysia. The youngest age at first marriage of single mothers is 13, while the oldest is 47 years old, with the age at first marriage most commonly found is 18 years old. There were not many single mothers who began their marriage at the age of 30 years and over. Married at a very young age is common in rural Malaysia. This type of marriage is most commonly found among the Malay population in rural areas. According to informant there were for reasons of why these single mothers had married at a very young age. Those reasons are the norms of community at that particular time; low level of education, the opportunity to be involved in formal sectors was limited, and life hardness of the family. All tghese reasons have been discussed in the present paper.

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