

Coping with Difficulties: Social Inequality and Stigmatization on Single Mothers with Low Income Household

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ABSTRACT

Single mothers with lower income and education experience pressure both physically and mentally and they are exposed to stigmatization by society. The purpose of this article is to examine how the status of low income single mothers led to social inequalities and stigmatization in a community. Analysis was based on qualitative interview data from two focus group discussions. The findings revealed that the perceived social inequality by other people towards low income single mothers has led to stigmatization to this particular group. In addition, the stigmatization was strengthened by the culture of society that subsequently labeled single mothers. With low income they were often ignored and treated differently. They received minimal opportunities financially or socially to improve themselves. The abrupt changes from being a married woman to a single mother brought a huge impact on their self-esteem and health. It is highly necessary for the society or the government to educate the society to change their attitude toward single mothers.

Keywords: Low income single mothers, stigmatization, culture and the society, social inequality

INTRODUCTION

Equality is an important issue pertaining to both men and women worldwide. United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2007) through its report for 2010 stated that Malaysia has made significant progress to reduce gender inequalities. However, the degree of gender inequalities is still high compared to some of the high human development countries. This fact is aligned with a report by Hausmann *et al.* (2010) in Global Gap Index 2010. The index shows that Malaysia has dropped 29 spots from 72 to 101 in making efforts to reduce the gap of inequality between men and women. Under the Laws of Malaysia Federal Constitution (2006), Article 8 (1) of the constitution states that all persons are equal before the law and entitled

to the equal protection of the law. Article 8 (2) explains that unless expressly authorized by the constitution, no discrimination against citizens on the ground only of religion, race, descent, place of birth or gender in any law or in the appointment to any office or employment under a public authority or in the administration of any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of property or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment. Both articles express the importance of not exercising any conducts that may lead to inequality. It is clear that under the eyes of law, inequality should not be imposed on any citizens of Malaysia.

Gucciardi *et al.* (2004) define single mothers as persons who are never married, or who are

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separated, divorced, not currently living with a legal or common law spouse or widowed with children. However, for the purpose of this study, single mothers are Muslim women who are divorced, left by the husbands or widowed. The term single mother is defined as a 'woman', most of whom have borne children with the absence of a co-resident husband (Evans, 2011). This definition is in line with the definition given by Nan (2004) who simply defines single mothers as divided into those whose spouses are deceased and those who are divorced. This shows that there is a slight difference in the definition when comparing between the east and the west. In other words, single mothers in Malaysia do not include women who have never been married.

As single mothers, this particular group is exposed to stigmatization. Goffman (1963) identifies stigma as illuminating excursion into the situation of persons who are unable to conform to standards that society calls normal. Stigma can be divided into three categories; morality, sex role violations and victimization (Worrell, 1986). Stigma or negative perceptions toward single mothers are the biggest obstacle for them to play their role effectively within the society (Siti Fatimah, 2011).

Many studies discuss the impacts of stigmatization towards mental health and self-esteem (Fife and Wright, 2000; Murry *et al.*, 2001; Major and O'Brien, 2005; Room, 2005). These studies discuss the impacts of stigmatization perceived by the oppressed group. People with diseases and disabilities, single mothers or any groups who do not belong to the 'normal' stream are often associated with the group. Other than that, studies on stigma are also related to the conceptualization of stigma and its dimensions (Link and Phelan, 2001; Major and O'Brien, 2005; Worrell, 1986; Yang *et al.*, 2007; Stokoe, 2003). The construction of stigmatization starts from a cognitive ability to label a person or a group to certain 'abnormal' category.

Marginalized groups such as low income single mothers, typically experience multiple stigmas and sources of oppression (Sparks *et al.*, 2005). In America, low income is represented

as household income which includes food stamps and unreported earnings that are less than 200% of the poverty level determined by the federal guidelines (Sparks *et al.*, 2005). However, according to the Office of the Prime Minister of Malaysia (2010), low income household is termed as all households with a total income less than or equal to RM2,000 per month. Although numerous help and awareness of equality programs have been conducted by the government and NGOs to overcome these problems, single mothers with lower income and education are still under pressure both physically and mentally. Research on social inequality has found that inequality influences social discrimination in a society (Quinn and Olson, 2003; Belle and Doucet, 2003; Rhodes and Johnson, 2000; Richards and Schmiede, 1993; Nan, 2004). The discrimination comes from many aspects and always occurs to individuals who have very little control over it. In several cases, women experience discrimination not only because of gender but also race and socio-economic status.

Various literatures on single mothers have focused on financial and economic hardship (Brown and Lichter, 2004; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2004; Harknett and Gentian, 2003; Harris, 1993; Peterson *et al.*, 2002; Sparks *et al.*, 2005). In fact, these literatures vastly explain how financial and economic hardship influences mental health status of single mothers and their children. The pressure of handling both paternal and maternal roles is very high because these single mothers are required to juggle the role of both the mother and the breadwinner at the same time. In addition, many single mothers are willing to work but they cannot afford to spend money on childcare. Therefore, many of them seek childcare from supporting system such as their parents or other women. This, according to Gill and Davidson (2001) is perceived as a constant stressor by most women when they have difficulties associated with arrangements of childcare. Hence, this article determines how the status and condition of single mothers have an effect on income, social inequality and society stigmatization.

METHODS

The information gathering for this qualitative research is through focus group discussion. Two groups of single mothers consisting of seven people for each group from Kuala Lumpur participated in this focus group discussion. They are the members of The Single Mothers Association of Federal Territory.

A semi structured list of questions was developed for the discussion based on the research objectives. The informants who participated earn less than RM1000 per month and reside in the area of Kerinci and Bangsar. After reviewing the literatures on single mothers, inequalities and stigmatization, a series of semi structure questions asking about demographic information, coping strategies, struggle and interpersonal communication with other single mothers and the mass were constructed and asked to the informants. The discussions were recorded using a voice recorder and later transcribed into Microsoft Word document.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Economic and Financial Hardship

During the focus group discussions, the informants shared their experiences in managing the family financial situation on their own after losing their husbands. Generally, they shared several similarities. The way they expressed their feelings was very intense and emotional. It showed that they really were and still struggling to make ends meet.

After my former husband divorced me, my life was very difficult. I did not receive any help from the government until year 1994. My son was entitled RM50 per month from Welfare Department. I worked very hard..... it was very, very tough.

I was lucky because my husband was a pensioner. After he died, it gives me

the right to receive his monthly pension. Money is a major issue in a big city like Kuala Lumpur. The monthly pension that I received is not enough.

My former husband left me and I have to bear the responsibilities of raising my kids since year 2000. I'm an odd job worker; sometimes people will call me to give them a massage and that's all. I have no monthly income. Technically, I have nothing....

I'm a full time housewife when my husband died 13 years ago. My husband died and I was practically left with nothing. No pension, no EPF. It was dark and I lost my way. I made Nasi Lemak everyday and sent it to hawkers around my house. I do not know how and what to work as I was a full time housewife.

I have no stable monthly income. The first few months after the divorce, I fell sick...very sick. I guess that was due to pressure that I went through.

The informants consisted of women who were either divorced or widowed (Evans, 2011; Nan, 2004). The economic hardship was the first thing they experienced upon losing their husbands and having to start their lives as a single mother (Brown and Lichter, 2004; Gucciardi *et al.*, 2004; Harknett and Gentian, 2003; Harris, 1993; Peterson *et al.*, 2002; Sparks *et al.*, 2005). The pressure of playing dual roles was very demanding and these were affecting their health (Fife and Wright, 2000; Murry *et al.*, 2001; Major and O'Brien, 2005; Room, 2005). Technically, the lack of education and skills has slowed them down in managing their economic and financial stability. All of them also claimed that they have insufficient earnings to support themselves and their children.

Stigmatization and Discrimination

Sometimes, as single mothers, they were exposed to stigmatization due to their status and social inequality. The single mothers were categorized as 'good' or 'bad'. For example, if one became a single mother out of a divorce, she would be labeled as a 'bad' woman. However if the husband died, she was considered to be a 'good' woman. Divorced single mothers were considered bad as the society put the blame on them, accusing them to be the reason of the divorce.

The society has different perspectives on widowed or divorced women. If you are a widow, the society will be sympathetic. But if you are a widow, they always think that you are the reason of the divorces.

Once you hold the title of single mothers, the other married women tend to be protective of their husbands. They were worried that we might steal their husbands. They acted as if were desperate of men.

They were nice to me but they said bad things behind my back. They called me names and they said I was flirtatious.

The neighbors were so nasty to me. They always accused me of doing bad things just because I'm a single mother.

According to the discussion, the negative perceptions toward single mothers were normal to them. They experienced such negativities from neighbors, friends, and even relatives. This is related to the cultural belief that was adopted in Malay communities as a whole. This finding showed that the construction of stigmatization was rooted from the cognitive understanding of a person (Link and Phelan, 2001; Major and O'Brien, 2005; Worrell, 1986; Yang *et al.*, 2007; Stokoe, 2003).

Social Inequality and the Society

The discussion above mentioned about how single mothers were subjected to social inequality because of their status. However, as low income single mothers, they were also seen as unequal individual that received different treatment from the society and even relevant welfare bodies. This is reflected from the discussion below.

I went to Yayasan Salam, but they turned down my application for financial aid. I was very sad, they know that I am a single mother and I have no stable monthly income. Why must they do that?

I went to see an officer of Baitulmal and try to ask for some financial aid. But in return, I waited for nothing. They ended up asking me for things that I cannot produce...documents that I do not have and sometimes they asked for ridiculous things.

When my husband was still alive, relatives come and visit us frequently. When we visited them, I will bring food...or something. But now, they don't. They don't even call. I was also not comfortable going to their house. I feel embarrassed.

I guess that is normal. When we still have money, have a husband, people look up on us. But when I have no privileges anymore, I was distant.

The finding showed that as low income single mothers, this group was exposed to different treatment from the society (Quinn, and Belle and Doucet, 2003; Rhodes and Johnson, 2000; Richards and Schmiede, 1993; Nan, 2004). However, it was interesting to see a different perspective from the west and the east. Nan (2004) in her article did explain dissimilar treatment to the single mothers because of

the status while other studies explained about inequalities of gender and financial income. Again, the reason behind this finding was related to the culture of Malay people. Individuals who were single mothers were often perceived as people with 'less' value than others.

This research discovered that Malay Muslim single mothers were a group of persons who received different treatment from the society. As the informants were from relatively similar background; low income single mothers, low level of education, living among the society of similar characteristics (e.g. low education and low income), the practice of discriminating a person that was considered unequal should not be endorsed. The struggle of single mothers was huge, thus, it was hoped that additional pressure was avoided.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, it is important for the society to change their thinking toward single mothers. The negative thinking has led to many other negative issues such as poverty among single mothers. This condition may affect both single mothers and their children. As stated in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, every citizen is equal in the eyes of law. There is nothing in Muslim religion condoning this act. The teachings of Islam promote the spirit of helping each other. It is very important for a Muslim to carry out the responsibility as a Caliph. The practice of Malay conservative society needs to end as soon as possible so a better way of life can be achieved.

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