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# DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS, GENDER, AND ETHNICITY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY AMONG CROSS ETHNIC ADOLESCENTS IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

SITI RAUDZAH GHAZALI & AZIZAH AZHAR

## ABSTRACT

*Depression and suicide among teenagers in Malaysia is a growing concern (Kok & Goh, 2011). The objectives of this study were to determine the prevalence of depressive symptoms and its association with demographic characteristics among secondary school students. A cross sectional survey was employed; 386 students were recruited, aged 13 to 16-years-old. Stratified random sampling was performed to choose several secondary schools from rural and urban areas of Sarawak, East Malaysia. The rate of depressive symptoms among secondary school students in this area was 7.8% (30). Among those who reported having depressive symptoms, 43.3% (13) had thoughts of committing suicide, 40% (12) had suicidal ideation, and 16.7% (5) never had any suicidal thought or ideation. Students of Chinese ethnicity were significantly more depressed than other ethnicities. Students who had only one sibling were more depressed than those who had more than one sibling. Students who were staying in urban areas were more depressed compared to students staying in rural areas. While previous studies have reported that girls are more depressed than boys, no significant difference in depressive symptoms was found between genders. Type of schooling, living arrangement, family history of depression, and staying with extended family members had no significant association with depressive symptoms.*

**Keywords:** Depression, Adolescents, Cross-Ethnic, Gender, Malaysia

## ABSTRAK

*Murung dan bunuh diri dalam kalangan remaja di Malaysia semakin membimbangkan. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menentukan prevalens gejala kemurungan dan kaitannya dengan ciri-ciri demografi dalam kalangan pelajar sekolah menengah. Satu kajian keratan rentas telah dijalankan; 386 pelajar telah terlibat, mereka berumur 13 hingga 16-tahun. Persampelan rawak berstrata dilakukan untuk memilih beberapa buah sekolah menengah di kawasan bandar dan luar bandar di Sarawak, Malaysia Timur. Kadar gejala kemurungan dalam kalangan pelajar sekolah menengah di kawasan ini adalah 7.8% (30). Mereka yang dilaporkan mempunyai gejala kemurungan, seramai 43.3% (13) mempunyai pemikiran ingin membunuh diri, 40% (12) terfikir untuk membunuh diri, dan 16.7% (5) tidak pernah mempunyai apa-apa pemikiran membunuh diri atau terlintas. Pelajar berketurunan Cina secara signifikan lebih tertekan daripada etnik lain. Pelajar yang hanya mempunyai seorang adik-beradik lebih tertekan berbanding mereka yang mempunyai lebih daripada seorang adik-beradik. Pelajar-pelajar yang tinggal di kawasan bandar lebih tertekan berbanding dengan pelajar yang tinggal di kawasan luar bandar. Walaupun kajian sebelum ini telah melaporkan bahawa kanak-kanak perempuan lebih tertekan daripada kanak-kanak lelaki, tidak ada perbezaan yang signifikan dalam gejala kemurungan*

*didapati di antara jantina. Jenis persekolahan, status penjaga, sejarah keluarga yang mengalami kemurungan hidup, dan tinggal dengan ahli keluarga besar tidak mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan dengan gejala kemurungan.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Murung, Remaja, Pelbagai Etnik, Jantina, Malaysia*

## INTRODUCTION

Depressive Symptoms, Gender and Ethnicity: An Exploratory Study among Cross Ethnic Adolescents in Sarawak, Malaysia

Adolescence is a developmental stage when many psychological and biological changes occur in one's life. The general public often treats depression as a part of adolescent development or even as a natural process during this stage. Many ignore the fact that depression during adolescence is not a normal developmental phenomenon (Kok & Goh, 2011). A previous study has shown that, when depression during adolescence is untreated, it can persist to adulthood (Lewinsohn et al. 2000). Very commonly, depression in adolescence is associated with poor school performance, substance abuse, conduct disorders, and when symptoms were severe enough it can lead to attempted suicide (Beautrais 2003; Renouf, Kovacs, and Mukerji 1997).

The perceived increasing prevalence of depression among adolescents has sparked concern among educators, community leaders, and healthcare providers in Malaysia. Nationally, systematic reporting on the actual rate of depression and suicide among adolescents is limited, particularly in the State of Sarawak. While this could be due in part to depression in adolescents being under-diagnosed and unrecognized (Reynolds 1994), the lack of serious study of the problem in the Malaysian context represents a troubling gap in knowledge.

Worldwide, nearly twenty years ago depressive disorder in adolescents was estimated only between 4 to 8 percent (Lewinsohn et al. 1994). Six years later dramatic prevalence was reported in the United States, when prevalence of depression was estimated at 32% for males and 38% for females (Scheidt et al. 2000). The most recent study in Saudi Arabia reported similar findings, where 38.2% of high school students were found to have depressive symptoms (Al-Gelban 2007). In Korea, 15.4% of males and 19% of females reported having mild depressive symptoms (Kwak et al. 2008). A study conducted by Fleming and Jacobsen (2009) in Chile reported that 30% out of 8131 middle school students had depressive symptoms. Similar findings were also noted in other studies in Scandinavia and Italy in which about 10% of the studied adolescents sampled were depressed (Arnarson, Smari, and Jonasdottir 1994; Poli et al. 2003; Sund, Larsson, and Wichstrom 2001). The sizable variance in prevalence is probably due to the use of different measurement tools and diagnostic criteria (Al-Gelban 2007; Poli et al. 2003; Sund, Larsson, and Wichstrom 2001) or to the difference in age groups among their participants (Arnarson, Smari, and Jonasdottir 1994; Poli et al. 2003).

In Malaysia, the prevalence of depression among adolescents has been estimated at 10% to 24% (Ramli et al. 2008; Kasmini et al. 1987; Teoh 2010). A study conducted in the year 2007 by