Psychological Well-Being of Young Unwed Pregnant Women: Implications for extension education and programs

Norshidah Nordin*, Rohaya Abd Wahab, Farhana Wan Yunus

Faculty of Education Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kampus Seksyen 17, 40200, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract

This study intends to examine the state of psychological well-being among the young unwed pregnant women who are currently living in KEWAJA shelter home. Adolescence pregnancy is a social phenomenon and has impact on socio-economy of the community and environmental challenges. It could also contribute to the total burden of disability in the community. However, the result of the study showed the level of psychological well-being of the respondents was generally high. This finding has practical implications to extension agents and community development programs. Thus, a multi-pronged community driven programs are needed to reduce risk behavior among these young adults.

© 2012 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license.
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies (cE-Bs), Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.

Keywords: Psychological well-being; single mother; extension programs; environmental challenge

1. Introduction

One of the significant demographic changes in many societies throughout the world has been a raise in the number of families headed by single mothers. This is mainly due to an increased rate of divorce, marital separation, and mothers without partners (Avison, 1997). The Globe Newspaper (2008) reported that 45 percent of all pregnancies in the USA are among women who were not married. The report also mentioned that 77% of the births to unmarried women in 2006 were in their 20s and older. Nevertheless,
alarming reports on out-of-wedlock pregnancies among youngsters in Malaysia are also on the rise. The Malaysian Welfare Department has reported that from January 2010 to April 2010, hundred and eleven (111) unmarried young girls were pregnant (Nazni Noordin et al, 2012). This phenomenon has been heavily criticized by the societies due to the increasing cases of outrages acts of dumping new babies and foetuses (Nazni Noordin, 2012). In addition, Mohd Taib (2011) stated that these cases increment has a connection with the increasingly sophisticated information technology and also due the fragility of family institution. Similarly, Lazarro (2000) also reported that family functioning and stress could contribute to the increase or decrease of psychological well being among adolescents. Therefore, Van Wel, Ter Bogt and Raaijmakers (2002) suggested the importance of parenting roles. They claimed that parents could influence and develop facets of well-being in adolescents that includes the development of identity, positive self image, life satisfaction, social competence, emotional problems, and problem-behaviour.

Given, Malaysian’s strong traditional and religious beliefs, the concerned with sexual morality and non-marital childbearing were met with strong disapproval. Thus, this act and behaviour are often seen as deviant social status.

2. Literature Review

Adolescence pregnancy has imposed negative consequences and outcomes such as unable to attain sufficient education needed to compete in the economy (Sawhill, 2000) often leading to poverty (Tripp and Viner, 2005) and having psychological distress (Huebeck and Neil, 2000). Psychological distress is a serious problem for many adolescents and is characterized by feelings of anxiety, worry, frustration, sadness and withdrawal (Walker, 2002). Zakus et. Al. (1987) reported that factors such as substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, family dysfunctional, anxiety and depression may influence adolescent to pregnancy. Thus, as a result they are treated as nuisance and devalued by the society. Domenico and Jones (2007) reviewed that young females become pregnant intentionally because they have no life goals (Winter, 1997), poor performance in schools and low educational expectation (Turner, 2004), lack of positive role model or attempting to escape from abuse home situation, make these young adults drifted into sexual affairs, thus leading to pregnancy (Brindis and Philliber, 2003). Domenico and Jones (2007) also stated that factors such as family structure, age at first intercourse, goals and child abuse have been associated with adolescent pregnancy.

Logan et. al. (2007) reviewed that an unintended birth can have negative consequences for a mother’s mental well-being and demonstrate lower levels of general psychological well-being during pregnancy. Parallel to that, Avison (1997) suggested that the adverse effects of being a single mother are associated with an increased risk for affective disorder and with increased rates of mental health service utilization. He furthered claimed that psychological distress and psychiatric morbidity experienced by single mothers were due to greater exposure to stress and strain rather than deficits in social competence and personal resilience. Interestingly, there is some evidence to suggest that distress varies due to age, social class and gender (West and Sweeting, 2003). For examples, Nguyen et al (2005) and West & Sweeting (2003) suggested that adolescents have higher prevalence rates of mental disorders compared to other age groups. The rates of depressive and anxiety related disorders are higher than any other mental or behavioural problem within the 15 to 24 year age group (as cited in Dowle, 2005). Studies also found that middle class females reported the highest levels of psychological distress. Besides, distress for both males and females had also increased (West and Sweeting, 2003).

Veit and Ware (1983) suggested that psychological well-being and psychological distress are two separate constructs. Psychological distress is the measure of self-depreciation, irritability, anxiety, depression and social disengagement (Lazzaro, 2000). On the other hand, psychological well-being is composed of general positive affect and emotional ties. General positive affect consists of feelings of
happiness, light heartedness and feeling relaxed, whilst emotional ties involve feeling loved and wanted and an absence of loneliness (Veit & Ware, 1983). However, Ryff and Keyes (1995), assert that the study of psychological well-being has been guided by two primary conceptions of positive functioning. The first one came from the work of Bradburn (1969) who had distinguished between the positive and negative affective. Bradburn (1969) claimed that happiness could be able to balance between the two affective domains. The second primary conception emphasized on life satisfaction as the key indicator of well-being. Nonetheless, Ryff (1989) also suggests a multidimensional model of psychological well being that emphasizes on wellness rather than illness. She claimed that psychological well-being consists of six dimensions such as personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and autonomy and positive relations with others. Thus, one who exhibits strength in each of the dimension would reflect good psychological well-being and vice versa. Nevertheless, being young unmarried mothers can be tough on their emotions, finances, health and psychological well being. In many cases, families totally reject their daughters who become pregnant before marriage. More importantly, the issues of adolescents pregnancies is an endemic social concern with damaging health consequences (Bluestein and Starling, 1994) and thus could contribute to total burden of disability in the population (Latiffah et al, 2005).

Hence, the effort to understand psychological well being and its cause is not new but it is an issue that has always raised interest (McMahon as cited in Vazquez et al, 2009). In fact, medical practitioners, psychologists, counsellors and social support groups and community development program which include extension agents, aims at increasing people’s quality of life as one of their main objectives (Vazquez et al, 2009). Given this juncture, perhaps, one of the ways to alleviate problems related to psychological well being of the young adults particularly among the young unwed pregnancy mothers is through providing social supports and designing extension education programs. Etzon (1984) defined social support as an informal social network that provides individuals with expressions of emotional concerns or empathy, practical assistance or appraisal. On the other hand, Rahim and Asnarulkhadi Abu-Samah (2010) defined extension education as a system of non-formal education which provides advisory services using the educational process to help clients in acquiring knowledge and skills to cope effectively with needs and problems facing them in their own socio-economic contexts. They further elaborated that extension education disseminates an array of information on new knowledge and technologies, skills and strategies based on research results to help clients fulfil their needs and solve their problems. For example, in California, cooperative extension program under the Departments of Education and Health Services have large initiatives to develop and implement youth development programs to reduce teen pregnancy (Johns and Moncloa and Gong 2000). However, in the Malaysian contexts, a few non-government or private organizations have provided shelter homes for these young unwed mothers. The KEWAJA shelter home is one of the many types of shelter homes provided by the Malaysian communities to assist and protect adolescents who were pregnant out of wedlock. In fact, this shelter protects them momentarily from relatives and friends. Nevertheless, KEWAJA provides the unwed pregnant mothers that emphasizing on treatment of religious and spiritual aspects. Conversely, there is dearth information related to the state of psychological well-being among young unwed mothers who were placed at the shelter homes. Furthermore, adolescent pregnancy is a complicated issue, and as such, there is no one way, or no right way to address it. In fact, the effectiveness of efforts by parents, schools, and perhaps social supports group advice to remain abstinent contradicts the strong messages delivered by television, movies, and other aspects of popular culture that suggest otherwise (Moses, 1995). Other than that, alarming scenario evident that one in every four teen births in California is a repeat teen birth (Moses, 1995). Hence, there is a serious need for interventions such as extension education programs that are comprehensive and deliver consistent messages to young adults, in all aspects of their daily lives particularly in addressing the issues of psychological well being and also issues related youth development and sustainability community
program. Therefore, this study intends to investigate the state of psychological well-being among young unwed mothers in KEWAJA shelters home and thus, provide suggestions to improve the situation through extension education program.

3. Objectives of The Study

- To identify the level of psychological well-being among the pregnant unwed mothers.
- To examine whether there are significant differences between psychological well-being and demographic variables, namely, age, hometown and educational level among the pregnant unwed mothers.

4. Methodology

This study was based on conceptual framework that was adapted from Veit & Ware (1983). It utilized a survey method and descriptive in nature. A self report questionnaire was used to gather information related to the objectives of the study. The instrument with 10 items measuring psychological well-being was adapted from Heubeck & Neill (2000) and Veit & Ware (1983). It measures the positive and negative indicators of psychological well-being. The items asked the respondents to rate on a five point scale how they had been feeling during the past months. In this study, high state of psychological well-beings indicates a person is psychologically stable in terms of mental health, happiness and social-ability. The reliability of coefficient of the scale was found to be 0.883. The samples were drawn from the KEWAJA Shelter Home, in Kuala Lumpur. Fifty (50) pregnant young unwed women who were placed temporary in the shelter home participated in this study. Descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency count and standard deviation were used to assess the level of psychological well-being. Independent-sample t-tests and ANOVAs were used to explore between-group differences.

5. Findings

Table 1 displays the profile of the pregnant unwed mothers. The age distribution of the pregnant unwed mothers revealed that the majority 60% (30 respondents) were between 21 to 30 years old. It is also shown that 10% (5 respondents) of these young pregnant unwed mothers were less than 20 years old. On the other hand, there were about 30% (15 respondents) pregnant unwed mothers who were in the adult category were aged between 31-40 years old. In terms of respondents’ academic qualification, the result depicts that the majority of respondents, 52% (26) hold Malaysian certificate of education Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and 14% (7 respondents) with Lower Malaysia Certificate of Education (PMR). There were about 26% (13 respondents) of the pregnancies unwed mothers with diploma certification; while only 4% (n=2) were degree holders. Regarding the respondents hometown, the result showed that majority 75% (38 respondents) lived in the areas as compared to only 25% (12 respondents) that lived in the rural areas.
Table 1: Profile of the respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic profiles</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 20 years old</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 30 years old</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 40 years old</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMR</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPM</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hometown</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>75.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1. Analysis on the level or state of psychological well-being among the pregnancies unwed women

Table 2, displays the level or the state of psychological well-being among the pregnant unwed women. The finding showed that majority or about 54% (27 respondents) of the respondents felt moderate psychological well-being. However, about 30% (15 respondents) of these pregnancies unwed women felt high psychological well-being. On the other hands, about 16% (8 respondents) of these pregnancies unwed women felt low psychological well-being. Hence, this results could be inferred that majority of these pregnancies unwed women who were placed at the KEWAJA shelter home were psychological stable in terms of their mental health, happiness, and social-ability.

Table 2: The Levels of psychological well-being among the pregnancies unwed women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Frequency (n=50)</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean= 2.26,  Std Deviation= 0.6703
5.2. Analysis significant differences between place of hometown and psychological well-being among the pregnancy unwed women.

Based on the independent t-test shown in table 3, there was no significant differences in psychological well-being base on respondents’ place of hometown; where \( t = -0.641, \ p = 0.435 \). Therefore, the result indicates that the hometown, i.e. whether the respondents lived in the city or rural areas do not show any significant effect on the psychological well-being of these pregnancies unwed women.

Table 3: Independent t-test result for psychological well-being based on place of hometown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>std dev</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.118</td>
<td>.91618</td>
<td>-.641</td>
<td>28.31</td>
<td>.435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.300</td>
<td>.60453</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3. Analysis on significant differences between education level and psychological well-being among the pregnancy unwed women.

Table 4 displays ANOVA analysis on the psychological well-beings and education levels of the respondents. Based on the One-Way ANOVA test, the results showed, there were no significant differences in the psychological well-being of the pregnancies unwed women based on their educational levels ( \( F=0.550; \ p= 0.700 \)). This finding indicated that education levels of the respondents do not have any effect on their psychological well-beings.

Table 4: one way ANOVA result on psychological well-being based on education levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>1.650</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.412</td>
<td>.550</td>
<td>.700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>33.728</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>.750</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35.378</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4. Analysis significant differences between age and psychological well-being among the pregnancy unwed women.

Table 5 displays ANOVA analysis on the psychological well-beings and age of the respondents. Based on the One-Way ANOVA test, the results showed, there were no significant differences in the psychological well-being of the pregnancies unwed women based on their age ( \( F=1.627; \ p= 0.207 \)). This finding indicated that the age of the respondents do not have any effect on their psychological well-beings.

Table 5: one way ANOVA result on psychological well-being based on age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between groups</td>
<td>2.291</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.145</td>
<td>1.627</td>
<td>.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within groups</td>
<td>33.087</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>.704</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35.378</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Conclusions and Implications

Generally, the findings revealed that 84% of the unwed women were experiencing moderate to high level of psychological well-being. Thus, this reflects that these young unwed pregnant mothers of Kewaja shelter home, at this point of time, were relatively happy, light heartedness and feeling relaxed (Veit and Ware, 1983). Conversely, Lau (1971) reported that unwed women as a group tend to be shy and withdrawn, and many are reticent in a one-to-one relationship to express the feelings and fears that are common to pregnant teenagers. However, the possible explanation to this finding suggests that the availability of social support and the extension services provided by KEWAJA shelter home might have minimise problems faced those young pregnancy women. Therefore, social support group might has provides an outlet for feelings fears and questions among these young mothers. Parallel, in a study done by Chung et al (2000) stated that facilities such as concerned, personal support for unwed mothers and a program promoting support and hope from families, friends and unwed father are necessary to promote hope and health in unwed mothers. Therefore, the unique program carried out by KEWAJA may have affected the psychological state of well-being among these unwed women. Perhaps, these young unwed women felt there are a lot more sense of security and stability when seeking voluntarily to stay in this type of shelter home. What is unique about KEWAJA is that it is administered by Muslims and filled with Islamic activities. The implications over organizing and implementing those activities helped this shelter home to support the unwed mothers physically, emotionally and spiritually. In other words, the strategies employed by KEWAJA which can be said to be religiously and spiritually grounded had somehow supported the emotional and the spiritual needs of the unwed mothers staying there.

The results also showed that there were no significant difference between psychological well-being and place of hometown (rural or urban area), education level and age. This study is in line with the study done by Sodi (2009). What this implies in other word, is that, regardless of age, place of stay or hometown and education level, the phenomenon of unwed mothers may occur across demographic factors. This then is not a phenomenon limited specifically to one type or section of the community but apparently anywhere and anyone becomes a breeding ground for it. The phenomenon of unwed young women cut across all the demographic factors and as such what type of strategies are suited and more appropriate to be developed then needed to be examined in the actual context or situation where these phenomenon is happening.

The issues of unwed pregnancy young women have become a national agenda, particularly when it was related to the issues of baby dumping and abortions (Nazni et al (2012). Hence, this study provides empirical evidence on the understanding of state psychological well being of the young unwed pregnancy young women, particularly, those who were placed in shelter homes. Interestingly, the findings suggested that these young adults were relatively happy and socially stable, perhaps due to the social support provided by Kewaja shelter home. Social support showed a positive correlation in promoting health and wellness (Dollete, Steese, Phillips, & Matthews, 2004). However, what is more important is providing knowledge and skills to improve quality of life to these young adults and sustainability of the future community and healthy generations. In fact, greater effort needs to be made to address issues like young adolescent pregnancy within the broader context. The risk for teenage pregnancy does not exist within a vacuum. Teenage pregnancy is but one form of increasingly common risk-taking behaviour among today's adolescents (Moses, 1995). This study provides some anchor point for government and non-government agencies to establish educational interventions program in order to safe guard the well being of the future community. In this context, extension agents play important roles in educating its clients. Besides, extension education seeks to induce voluntary behaviour change among its clients through their involvement in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the extension programs. However, the solution must come from many elements of society such as parents, religious institution, the schools, state
and local legislatures and government agencies. There is a critical need for government and the non-government agencies to plan multi-pronged program to educate these youngsters, for example through community driven programs. However, in designing extension program, change agents should also be sensitive to cultural and individual needs of the community in the effort to reduce young unwed pregnancy women. Understanding cultural appropriate and locally relevant interventions might increase the effectiveness of effort to reduce these problems. Consequently, in order for change agent to plan for program for young adult education, they should focus on the interventions that have two attributes; firstly, the context is organization and secondly, the desired outcome is learning –knowledge and expertise that will impact the performance goals of the host organization (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 1998). Hence, when designing a program for young adults, Hiemestra and Sisco (1990) suggest allowing individual control and appealing directly to the needs most meaningful to the individual.

In responding to young unwed pregnancy women issues, extension programs need a broad perspective, including strategies that develop family strengths and enhance parenting skills, and provide information about reproduction and contraceptive services. Besides, sex education program should not only be taught at school level but also at community level. This approach is needed in order to provide awareness and understanding about reproductive system and health at community level. Apart from this, there is a need to build spiritual well being and psychological well-being program at the community level. Literature has used the constructs such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, happiness, distress, stress, anxiety and depression as measured of psychological well-being (Syed Iman et al, 2009). Therefore, young adults and community at large should also be given knowledge and skills in enhancing their spiritual and psychological well-being. Research shows that spiritual well-being is positively correlated with many aspects of health (Syed Iman et al., 2009). Studies have also provided support for spirituality and religiousness as a buffet against risk behaviour and a support for positive attitudes and actions among youth (Wagener et al., 2003). In this sense, the extension agents should work closely with social support groups and community members such as KEWAJA shelter home to offer assistance, guidance, advice, consultation and counselling. In the context of extension education, professionals such as lecturers, educationists, counsellors, religious personals, doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists could provide services, curative measures and education to these young adults about psychological health and quality life. Besides, local universities should also provide avenue and expertise in doing research particularly on the risk behaviour among young youth and their related problems and ways to reduce risk behaviour. However, according to Domenico and Jones (2007) programs aimed at preventing unwed pregnancy women must be a long term and comprehensive, while incorporating important components such as early interventions, sexuality education, counselling, health service, adolescent domestic violence and youth development.

In sum, the phenomenon of unwed mothers in a country like Malaysia is a challenge that comes with the impending outcome of globalization and modernization regardless of race, ethnicity and religion. Needless to say, this is a social phenomenon that needs to be recognized and given appropriate attention as well as strategies in the future. This is more pertinent as in the case among Muslims who made up the majority of the Malaysian population. It is widely known that Islam is a religion that upholds strongly the chastity and the modesty of Muslim women whereby rules and strict guidelines were given in any relationship between unmarried men and women. It is a culture that is less sympathetic towards unmarried women who are pregnant. However, finding a solution to address this issue and environmental challenges does not mean that the government and the country is condoning any activities related to illicit sex but rather this is strategy that should be seen in its’ immediate sense and context. Any forms of actions that may lead to a state of better sense of one ‘self’, identity, state of well-being and betterment for the future communities should be promoted and developed to the fullest. Nonetheless, due to the limitation of the study, future research needs to be carried out to further investigate the relationship
between psychological well-being and extension education program. Besides, further studies on longitudinal research methodology which may be useful to validate the framework for psychological well-being and extension education research are suggested.

References


