Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH) (e-ISSN : 2504-8562)
2022, Volume 7, Issue 10, e001839
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v7i10.1839

Social Environmental Factor of Unwanted Pregnancy: An Experience of Mothers and Adolescents with An Unwanted Pregnancy

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KEYWORDS:
Unwanted pregnancy
Environmental factors
Mothers
Adolescents

CITATION:
Noradila Mohamed Faudzi, Melati Sumari & Azmawaty Mohamad Nor. (2022). Social Environmental Factor of Unwanted Pregnancy: An Experience of Mothers and Adolescents with An Unwanted Pregnancy. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH), 7*(10), e001839. https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v7i10.1839

ABSTRACT

Unwanted pregnancy among adolescents is a global issue in urban and rural areas around the world. There are many factors that influence the incident of unwanted pregnancy. This study intends to identify the social environmental factors that cause unwanted pregnancies among adolescents. A qualitative research design was employed to gain mothers' and adolescents' perspectives on their experiences of the social environmental factors in unwanted pregnancy. Semi-structured interviews with five Malay mothers and five Malay adolescents took place in a government shelter home, workplaces, and their homes in Selangor. This study employed a thematic analysis to analyse the results. The findings indicate that the four themes of social environmental factors causing unwanted pregnancies among adolescents are (a) family structure, (b) couple problems, (c) father's attention, and (d) peer pressure. All themes are significant in influencing unwanted pregnancies among adolescents. This study provided insights about the hard times, challenges, and stressors that make the adolescents feel uncomfortable and stressed, hence they find someone else to help them ease such feelings. Although unwanted pregnancy is a worldwide issue, the family and the caregiver should pay more attention to the adolescents because it will result in stress and adolescents with a disrupted family structure have an increased risk of unwanted pregnancy. These adolescents may specially benefit from specific preventive programmes in order to reduce the number of adverse outcomes.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature about the unwanted pregnancy issues. This study focused on social environment factors that may contribute to the unwanted pregnancy among adolescents. Besides, this study has got the information from two perspectives, which is from the mothers and adolescents

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itself.

1. Introduction

Unwanted pregnancy profoundly affects both mothers and adolescents who have experienced it. Unwanted pregnancies among adolescents almost always affect their psychological well-being. Not only it shatters the individual's life development but it also prevents them from reaching a better future (Mohamad Nor et al., 2019). An adolescent's life starts from home and family. The family environment can be a powerful source of support for developing adolescents. It includes providing close relationships, strong parenting skills, good communication, and modelling positive behaviours. However, if the environment and surroundings of the adolescent are not conducive, the adolescents tend to feel stressed and may not get enough attention. To deal with this kind of situation, they might find someone else such as a partner for love and attention. A study reveals that girls disclosed feelings of repression, loneliness, and indifference to their parents, leading them to find a partner and have unprotected sexual relations without fear of pregnancy (Sámano et al., 2017). Unwanted pregnancy among adolescents is not just a problem that some adolescents encounter. It also affects many individuals in the adolescents' households as well as those in the community, school system, and government as a whole (Dangal, 2005). Mothers often asked about the well-being and development of adolescents because mothers spent more time with their adolescent children.

1.1. Aim of Study

This study aims to explore on the social environment factors that contributed to unwanted pregnancy among adolescents.

2. Literature Review

Social environmental factors play a vital role in the development of adolescents. Social environmental factors refer to socioeconomic, racial and ethnic, and relational conditions that may influence a person's ability to cope with stress. Adolescent parenthood is strongly correlated with a number of behavioural, social, and environmental factors (Modesto, 2020). The environmental factors that influenced the adolescents' pregnancies such as family structure, parenthood, and peer pressure are also reported in several studies (Macedo Prietsch et al., 2011; Panova et al., 2016; Wamoyi et al., 2011).

Previous research reported that living in a household with one or no biological parent has been associated with the development of health-risk habits and behaviours including unplanned pregnancy in adolescents (Miller et al., 2001; Trevor, 2002). The determinants proposed for explaining the relationship between the single parent family and unplanned pregnancy in adolescents are as follows: lack of supervision of the adolescents' activities and a more tolerant attitude towards risky habits or behaviours by the permanent biological parent (Vázquez-Nava et al., 2013). Another study using binary logistic regression revealed that an increase in positive environmental factors (e.g., household income and parental education) as well as an increase in positive personal factors of parenthood (e.g., parental or peer communication, adolescents'

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academic achievement, and attitudes towards sex) decreased negative behaviours (e.g., risks of teen pregnancy) (Thrasher, 2015).

Besides, some studies found that teenage pregnancy was more likely to occur in adolescent girls who lived with neither parent (Habitu et al., 2018; Mathewos & Mekuria, 2018). This is consistent with other published studies that reported living with neither parent may lead to a high likelihood of teenage pregnancy (Brahmbhatt et al., 2014; Santos & Rosario, 2010). Family background is one of the main risk factors for teenage pregnancy. Some studies have noted that living with both parents reduced the risk of teenage pregnancy (Maness et al., 2016; Mmari & Blum, 2004; Mmari & Sabherwal, 2013). These studies concluded that teenage pregnancy was more likely to occur in adolescent girls raised in a single-parent family than in a two-parent family. Living with neither parent was found as a risk factor for teenage pregnancy. Furthermore, we found that several sociodemographic factors exhibited a non-uniform increment and reduction in the risk of teenage pregnancy (Tabei et al., 2021).

In addition, adolescent girls who grow up in an unsafe and unpredictable environment might have negative future aspirations which would make them take risky decisions. On the other hand, the adolescent girls may learn about sexual intercourse indirectly through their friends that had experienced pregnancy at an early age (Aluga & Okolie, 2021).

2.1. An Ecological Theory of Adolescent Pregnancy

According to empirical research, adolescent pregnancy is a complicated and dynamic process that involves the interaction of individual, sociodemographic, familial, and relational variables. Therefore, when considering adolescent pregnancy, the bioecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) is useful since it makes it easier to conceptualise it as a multifaceted phenomenon in terms of its causes and effects (Pedrosa, Pires, Carvalho, Canavarro, & Dattilio, 2011). According to the ecological theory the child's immediate, perceived environment (for example, their interactions at home) is referred to as the microsystem, which is the model's most fundamental analytical unit.

The microsystem, which is the layer nearest to the child, contains the objects the youngster may physically interact with. A child's relationships and interactions with her immediate environment are all included in the microsystem (Berk, 2000). Families, schools, communities, and childcare settings are examples of structures in the microsystem. At this level, relationships have an effect in both the child's direction and away from the child. This study focusses on social environmental factors of unwanted pregnancy of adolescents. Environmental enabling factors enable a motive of behaviour to be realised and are ecological elements that are effective at the mesosystem level. Relationships between individuals and between organisations are two of these variables. There are parents, classmates, and neighbours at the level of interpersonal connections. Important environmental enabling factors that contribute to the early onset of sexual activity for both sexes as well as the decline in the use of condoms and the number of sexual partners for girls include family structure and performance, issues with friends and neighbours, the amount of family supervision and the attitude of the family members toward condom use, adolescents' access to condoms, school involvement in this matter, and the number of children (Corcoran, Franklin, & Bennett 2000).

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3. Method

The participants were selected through a purposive sampling process that enabled the researchers to include those participants who actually met the inclusion criteria for the purpose of this study (Maxwell, 2005). This is a phenomenological study, which consists of in-depth interviews and multiple interviews with participants. Fifteen in-depth, semi-structured, and face-to-face interviews were conducted to explore mothers' and adolescents' experiences of environmental factors that contributed to an unwanted pregnancy. The study took a period of six months at a shelter home, the participants' houses, and workplaces starting from April 2019 to September 2019. The language used in the interviews was Bahasa Malaysia, which is the national language of Malaysia and the native language of the Malays. Mothers were selected because they lived with and looked after the adolescents. The in-depth interviews conducted to gain stories from the research participants were guided by an interview protocol which was developed based on the three-series interviews by Seidman (2006). The analysis of qualitative data is an iterative, progressive, and recursive process rather than a linear and straightforward process (Seidel, 1998). Analysing the results by using thematic analysis allows the researchers to focus on inductive and idiographic rather than deductive and nomothetic approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the demographic backgrounds of the participants who were interviewed.

Table 1: Demographic Background of Adolescents

Name	Age	Religion	Education	Siblings	Week of Pregnancy
Anis	16	Islam	PT3	2 of 2	32
Kamila	16	Islam	PT3	1 of 4	32
Sera	15	Islam	Will sit for PT3	1 of 4	36
Jaja	16	Islam	Left school	5 of 12	32
Nisa	16	Islam	Will sit for SPM	10 of 10	20

Table 2: Demographic Background of Mother of Adolescents

Name	Age	Religion	Education	Number of Child	Marital Status	Occupation
Anis's mother	46	Islam	Form 3	2	Single mother/ Separated	Store Assistant
Kamila's mother	39	Islam	Diploma	4	Remarried	Housewife
Sera's mother	40	Islam	Diploma	4	Married	Teacher
Jaja's mother	47	Islam	SPM	12	Married	Housewife
Nisa's mother	52	Islam	SPM	10	Divorce	Housewife

4. Findings

Based on the data collected, a total of four themes which revealed the environmental factors that either caused or are associated with unwanted pregnancies among adolescents were identified. The four themes are (a) family structure, (b) couple problems, (c) father's attention, and (d) peer pressure. The feedback from participants during the interviews and participants' diaries were quoted to validate the findings from the themes. To answer the research questions, the participants' statements were

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grouped as reported in the data. The participants emphasised four themes associated with the environmental factors and adolescents' pregnancy.

4.1. Family Structure

A good environment will promote better child behaviour and development. The mothers mentioned that family structure was related to their daughter's pregnancy incidents. Family structure in this study includes the extended family. Two mothers were in a polygamous marriage and one mother had to care for her husband's wife. Anis's mother had to live with a few families in one house. Kamila's mother remarried and her daughter felt uncomfortable with her stepfather. Jaja's mother had to take care of her granddaughter because one of her daughters was divorced and she had 13 children in the house. The crowded environment and stress affected the mothers' relationship with their daughters. They were uncomfortable, did not have privacy, and the stress was too much to handle.

> *We live with her step-grandmother and my siblings; they are also married. So, I have no space to talk freely with Anis. I can see Anis did not feel comfortable in that house. (Anis's mother)*

> *I know that Kamila did not feel comfortable with her stepfather. That is why she wanted to move out and live with her grandmother, but her grandmother always nags at her. (Kamila's mother)*

The adolescents felt uncomfortable with the family structure, which influenced the relationship with their mothers. Anis had to live with her step-grandmother and aunts' families because her mother did not have enough money to rent a house. She felt that her grandmother did not like her, which caused her to run away. Kamila did not like her grandmother because her grandmother always believed what other people said about her without asking her. She felt uncomfortable living with her stepfather because her grandmother and aunts warned her about bad stepfathers. Nisa disliked it when her parents got divorced; she regarded her father as non-existent. Sera always said that her father always stayed longer at her stepmother's house and her father rarely came home. Sometimes Sera and her siblings went to her stepmother's house. Jaja had to live with her 11 siblings in a small flat and her mother needed to take care of her sister's daughter as her sister was divorced.

> *I do not like when my parents divorced, after all I felt that my father does not exist. My mother also has to take care of my father's wife. (Nisa)*

> *We live in this house with my 11 siblings and my niece. It is crowded and sometimes I always go out to find peace. (Jaja)*

4.2. Couple Problems

This concerns the mother's spouse who is the husband. The mothers shared about their partners giving them a burden. Anis's mother's husband disappeared, two mothers experienced unfairness in polygamy, Jaja's mother had a husband who was not understanding, Kamila's mother had trouble in getting her daughter to get to know her new husband, and Kamila's biological father did not give alimony and visit Kamila. These experiences gave them a hard time, which made them upset and teary.

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He never came to visit Anis, Anis does not even know her father. He just disappeared like that, I cannot reach him. When I was with him, he was addicted to glue and his friends were younger than him. (Anis's mother)

He did not give alimony to us, everything was under me. I need to open order and sell something like cookies or dessert to ease our financial burden. (Sera's mother)

He slapped me in front of my daughter, Nisa. Nisa was just a child then. My husband was addicted to drugs, and he got angry easily. (Nisa's mother)

Four of the adolescents discussed the relationship problems faced by their mothers and their mothers' partners or couple problems, referring to their fathers. Anis did not know anything about her father as she had never met him. Kamila struggled to get close to her stepfather because she felt uncomfortable due to the gender difference and her biological father did not make any contact with her since she was seven years old. Sera said her father always compared her mother with her stepmother; she knew it hurt her mother so much. Nisa mentioned that her father never came home. Even before her parents' divorce, her father rarely came home although he lived near them. Her father never cared about their family. She had also seen her father took drugs. All these four adolescents' statements show that some of the fathers did not fulfil their responsibilities as a father should.

I do not know about my father, I never met him since I was a baby. He never gives anything to me. (Anis)

I know my father takes 'ice' too. I have seen it when I tried to peek at what he was doing. (Nisa)

My father always compared my mother with my stepmother. He said my mother gets angry easily and my stepmother is calmer. (Sera)

4.3. Father's Attention

In terms of father's attention, four mothers stated that their daughters lacked paternal attention due to their fathers being busy, fathers' disappearance, divorce, and stigma. They expressed sadness because their daughters did not get attention from their husbands like other children. However, one mother said her daughter was pampered and spoilt by her husband. She did not like it because her daughter took it for granted.

Due to my husband's disappearance, Anis lacks her father's attention. She did not know about father's love because they never met at all. I think that is why she is seeking love from a different gender. (Anis's mother)

My husband is rarely at home and never cares about my children. He never knew about our children's school performance and never attended any activity at school. (Nisa's mother)

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All these four adolescents also rarely get attention from their fathers, especially after their parents' divorce.

> *I do not think about my father, he is rarely at home. I think he does not exist in my family. I only have my mother and siblings. (Nisa)*

> *The last time I met my father was when I was seven years old. After that he never came to visit me. (Kamila)*

4.4. Peer Pressure

Apart from that, peer pressure influenced the mothers' relationship with their daughters. All mothers agreed that peer pressure had a massive impact on their daughters because they changed when they befriended the wrong people. Their daughters became rude, always lied to them, skipped school, and had other behavioural problems. They were downhearted seeing the changes in their daughters and that their daughters were disrespectful to them.

> *At first, she just befriended her school friends. After that her friends started asking her to hang out with young adults aged 20 and above, so it made me more worried. She always hangs out and sometimes she did not come home. (Anis's mother)*

> *She is okay before this, but when she mixes with her friends, she's a bit different, she becomes rude and always rebels. She comes home late at night and does not attend school. (Jaja's mother)*

The adolescents mentioned peer pressure impacted them. Sometimes their peers may proactively influence them to behave in certain ways and at other times they may just be following along. Several types of peer pressure can result in poor decisions as well as a confused mindset for adolescents. Anis recalled that when she wanted to go out, but when her mother did not permit her to do so, she would rebel and insist on going out just because she had promised her friend. Nisa was influenced to try drugs because her boyfriend was a drug addict. Kamila deceived her mother so she could go out because her boyfriend asked her to meet him and spend time together. Jaja said that her boyfriend forced her to have sex. She said she quit school because she was influenced by her friends who were school dropouts. Sera deceived her mother and sneaked out because she wanted to meet her boyfriend, whom she met on social media.

> *I take drugs when I am with my boyfriend. He is 10 years older than me. I always get drugs from him. I am willing to sleep with him, not being forced. (Nisa)*

> *I lied to my mother. I said I wanted to throw away the rubbish or buy something at a shop nearby our house. So that time I meet my boyfriend and have sex about 15-20 minutes. (Sera)*

5. Discussion

The impact of environmental factors was raised by the participants in this study. These included the impact of family structure, couple problems, father's attention, and peer

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pressure. The environment surrounding the adolescents is associated with their well-being, both directly and indirectly. The first aspect of the environment that affects adolescents is family structure. The participants in this study were from different family types. Three participants experienced divorce, two experienced polygamies, and one was from an intact family. Due to divorce, the mothers lived with different family members in one house. Those in a polygamous marriage also had to live with different family members. The mothers had to take care of the grandchildren because their other daughters were divorced. The unstructured family types caused stress and affected the adolescents' emotions and behaviour. This is similar to a previous study which revealed that adolescents and young adults growing up in post-divorce families displayed more internalising and externalising problematic behaviour than those of intact families (Vandervalk et al., 2005). Besides that, parental marital status (divorce) was found to have statistically significant associations with teenage pregnancy (Habitu et al., 2018). In a study on substance use and family structure, the results suggested that youth from families in which their mothers and fathers were present reported less alcohol and cannabis use than youth from several other types of families, including those with joint custody arrangements (Hoffmann, 2017).

Next is the couple problem. In this study, the mothers had experienced divorce, polygamy, and disagreement. The divorced mothers did not get alimony, the mother in a polygamous marriage neither received a fair share nor allowance, and the mother in disagreement with her partner always quarrelled. The mothers were stressed and felt distracted. The adolescents could see their mothers' conditions and it affected their behaviour, emotions, and cognitive development. This study is consistent with previous research in which the results have clarified that children may develop behavioural, cognitive, affective, and physical symptoms when they experience varying degrees of parental relationship distress or couple problems (Bernet et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the father's attention and involvement are necessary for the healthy development of adolescents. As adolescents, especially daughters as they grow up, it can be difficult for the fathers to figure out where and how they fit in. However, as long as the fathers try to spend some quality time with their adolescent children, it will be helpful for their development and relationship. Most of the adolescent participants in this study were neglected by their fathers due to divorce and busy schedules. The mothers admitted that their adolescent children lacked their fathers' attention. This study is consistent with a study by Yoon et al. (2018), which indicated that higher quality of father involvement and attention was associated with lower levels of internalising and externalising behavioural problems. Another study provides evidence that the frequency of father-adolescent engagement in shared activities during early to mid-adolescence can influence youth development (Ibrahim et al., 2017). The study findings showed that the father is an important figure in the development of adolescents and the father can improve the relationship by being closer to his adolescent children.

Besides that, peer pressure is a major influence on adolescents' development. The mothers in this study stated that their adolescent children were influenced by their peers and friends. The adolescent children also felt the same way because they befriended the wrong people and were involved in immoral behaviours that led to unwanted pregnancies. This is similar to a study by Fakari et al. (2017), which listed eight categories of facilitators of unwanted pregnancies among adolescents; one of them is peer pressure because friends and peers become more significant as part of the adolescents' identity that is formed in the peer group. Moreover, a study in South Africa

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reported that one of the key psychosocial variables is peer pressure (56.3%), which is a contributory factor in high pregnancy rate (Mushwana, 2015).

In conclusion, the above-mentioned themes that emerged in this study are the mothers and adolescents' experiences of the environmental factors that cause unwanted pregnancies among adolescents. There are several studies that support this perspective. However, other stressors or factors will also contribute to adolescents with unwanted pregnancies. In sum, it is crucial to be aware and understand the essence of the experiences that the participants have gone through.

5.1. Implications for Counselling

Some practical implications with reference to the findings become the main contributions to the current literature in counselling practice. The findings point out that mothers and adolescents encountered unique experiences of environmental factors that contribute to the unwanted pregnancy. An understanding of the uniqueness of their experience is of utmost importance in being able to sensitively respond to their needs. Specifically, the implications can be directed towards enhancing the current practices of counselling in the school and rehabilitation sector. Particular psychosocial attention needs to be focused on the emotional states of adolescents and their mothers during the rehabilitation period. Therefore, the counsellor's role should be integrated in the rehabilitation centre to help the adolescents by involving family members throughout the pregnancy journey to provide social and emotional relief. Furthermore, counsellor education programmes could be improved by addressing the specific needs and concerns of the adolescents and their families with regard to the provision of support and assistance in reducing unwanted pregnancies. In this regard, counselling techniques and strategies can also be of significance in providing emotional respite for the adolescents and mothers. In addition, the findings provide a background information to the counsellors to improve their resilience in dealing with adolescents or caregivers of adolescents with unwanted pregnancy.

6. Conclusion

Positive environments are needed in the development of adolescents either from the family, community, school, or friends because these can prevent the adolescents from involving in social problems, specifically unwanted pregnancy. Although the mothers are caring and responsible, there are other factors and stressors such as people and environment surrounding them that affect their daily life. In the context of Malaysia, unwanted pregnancy is still a taboo and people hardly accept such occurrence. Schools should arrange some programmes about sexuality that will be beneficial to students. The community should be aware of the happenings around their residences. Religious departments should act on the fathers who are irresponsible. Nowadays the challenges to raise children are more difficult, hence all parties should cooperate to prevent the arising number of unwanted pregnancy cases among adolescents to help them achieve a better future.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers have got an approval from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) to run the research. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the University of

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Malaya Research Ethics Guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

Acknowledgement

Part of this article was extracted from a doctoral thesis submitted to University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

Funding

This study received no funding.

Conflict of Interests

No potential conflict of interest reported by the authors.

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