

Lived Experiences and Narratives of De Facto Single Mothers in Penang Island, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the narrative and lived experiences of de facto single mothers (DFSM), a category of single mothers who, by law, are not ‘single mothers’ but in reality, are living like any other single mothers. In many cases, this category of single mothers is simply referred to as “abandoned wives”. A substantial body of literature exist on single mothers in Malaysia; however, the literature that specifically focuses on the DFSM is scanty. Using in-depth interviews and observation, this article explores the experiences and narratives of five DFSM in Penang Island. Findings have shown that DFSM are more vulnerable and marginalised than legally separated mothers (divorced). Not having a divorce certificate would also mean that they are not legally a ‘single mother’ and therefore, in many cases, are not qualified to be registered as members of Single Mother’s Association and almost often are deprived of government assistance. This has led to what is called a “Double Abandoned” phenomenon when not only are these women abandoned by their husbands (or sometimes families) but also by the relevant institutional agencies. It is suggested that the government should seriously address the struggles and challenges faced by these DFSM so that a better support and facilities are made available to this group.

Keywords: Gender, lived experiences, Malaysia, de facto single mothers, narratives

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INTRODUCTION

This article is based on four months of research (January – April 2015) following the 2014 research on “Empowering Single Mothers through Entrepreneurship” conducted by the Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA), USM.

Based on that project, it was found that single mothers were not a homogenous group. There are other groups of single mothers who are vulnerable, marginalised and abandoned by their husbands. This group is referred to as “De Facto Single Mother” (DFSM). The DFSM refers to those women who are not recognised by law as single mothers, but in reality, they are living and facing hardships like any other single mothers because the structures and dynamics of their family relationship is similar to any divorced household and families (Bakri, 2002). They are still in the marriage because of polygamy or in the process of divorce proceedings, which usually will take years to settle but the wives have to provide materially for their children after being abandoned by their husbands. Based on a polygamy study conducted by SIS (Sisters in Islam) in 2007-2012, 56% of wives interviewed did not get adequate financial support while many others received none at all.

In this article, we argue that the livelihood of DFSM is more vulnerable because they are not legally divorced and therefore, do not have divorce certificate which deprives them from having access to government aid and support. This situation will push the DFSM into multiple vulnerabilities. In order to survive, they have to undertake multiple jobs to make ends meet. The focus of this research is to capture their lived experiences and narratives.

BACKGROUND

This paper defines a single mother as a woman who is not living with her husband and has to fend herself and her children; a woman who is in the process of getting a divorce; a woman who has a husband who is sick and needing special care, thus he is not able to provide for his wife and children, and a woman who is raising her children without the help of her husband (Majzub and Karim, 1999; Bakri, 2002; Wan Ibrahim, 2006). In 2000, there were 620,359 single mothers in Malaysia. The number accounted for widows (529,701) and divorcees (90,655) (Thuaibah @ Suaibah et al., 2004). It is estimated that in Malaysia, single mothers make up 5.4% (505,757) of the total female population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). It is reported that about 5% of single mothers in Malaysia belong to the DFSM category. In the state of Penang, at least two Single Mother’s Association has 1000 single mothers registered with them. However, the actual number of single mothers in Penang is estimated to be much more. It is even more difficult to estimate the number of DFSM in Malaysia because many of them have never registered as members in any Single Mothers’ Association.

Although a substantial body of literature exists on single mothers in Malaysia, those that focused on the narratives and the lived experiences of DFSM are very limited. This paper will examine how DFSM are coping with their lives without the support of their husbands.

De Facto Single Mothers (DFSM)

In Malaysia, DFSM refer to women who are in a polygamous marital relationship or in the process of divorce proceedings which usually take years to settle but in the meantime, the women have to provide for their children, especially after being abandoned by their husbands.

Problem Statement

Several issues pertaining to the status and well-being of DFSM have motivated this research. No doubt the government has provided various schemes and financial credit assistance to single mothers. However, these aids are not accessible to a majority of them. It is reported that fewer than 60,000 of the 500,000 Malaysian women whom are widowed, divorced or permanently separated receive aid as single mothers¹. Only 66,243 of single mothers received aid from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development from January to June 2013. The situation is even worse for single mothers who are 'yet' to obtain their divorce certificate. Even though many programmes have been introduced to empower single mothers, such programmes have not contributed enough to the overall well-being of single mothers. Furthermore, most of the financial aids are only a temporary measure in solving the single mother's financial woes.

¹ "Deputy Minister: Fewer than 5% of single mothers receive aid", Star Online, November 2013.

Literature Review

Single parenthood is not a recent phenomenon. However, based on literature review, the study of DFSM in Malaysia is very limited. Studies have shown that the existence of children makes it less likely for low-income single mothers to have financial savings (Zarina & Kamil, 2012). Poverty among single mothers is caused by many factors such as low-income jobs, low-income self-employment, unemployment, low education level, lack of sufficient skills and age factor (Diyana et al., 2009; Isahak et al., 2009; Roddin et al., 2011; Faizah & Azian, 2013; Faizah & Hazirah, 2013). At the same time, single mothers also face challenges such as stigma, conflicting roles and emotional relationships with children, court visits and problems in dealing with ex-husbands (Majzub & Karim, 1999; Wang, 2004; Ahmad, 2006; Rani, 2006; Diyana et al., 2009; Hamid et al., 2010; Sharma, 2012) and the lack of formal support (Endut et al., 2015). Studies have shown that being a single mother is also connected to migration, for example, the wives are 'left behind' by their migrant husbands for extended periods of time. Sometimes, the migrant husbands will send remittances on a steady basis but there are also cases where the husbands disappear after migrating to the city (Kang'ethei & Mafa Itai (2014). In Zimbabwe, the phenomenon of single motherhood is associated with migration, mortality, unplanned births, as well as personal choices to be single mothers (Kang'ethei & Mafa Itai, 2014).

According to Meda (2013), urbanisation acts as a catalyst for change that weakens tradition as well as family ties and loyalties. Hence, the view that single motherhood is common only among women from socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds is incorrect. There are also urban single mothers from the middle and upper class background.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on qualitative research examining the narratives of five

respondents from a total of 15 respondents. They were chosen to present accounts of their journey as single mothers. The respondents were single Malay mothers, whose age ranged from 30 – 60 years old. Table 2 shows the sample of respondents. This paper takes a narrative analysis approach, using the narratives of respondents as empirical evidence from which anthropological information can be drawn (Franzosi, 1998). Teasing out common threads, this paper analyses how respondents construct the meaning of being DFSM.

Table 1
De facto single mothers cited in this article

Respondents (pseudonym)	Age	Age at the time of marriage	Duration of marriage (years)	Level of education	Recent job	Number of children
1. Neema	57	23	33	Standard 6	Not working	5
2. Rosiah	53	21	20	Form 5	Factory worker – supervisor	5
3. Sally	63	21 and 50 (twice married)	32	Standard 6	Not working	6
4. Saffa	34	23	8	Form 5	Factory worker	2
5. Julia	34	18	13	Form 3	Factory worker	5

Vulnerability Phase

The life of DFSM during the abandonment period is explained through three different phases: Phase 1 - when marital problems emerge leading to a marriage breakdown; Phase 2 - separation phase and Phase 3

- adjustment and coping phase. In each phase, the element of vulnerability is very significant, which includes the feelings of shocks and abandonment. The phases are described as below:

Marriage Breakdown and Separation Phase

There are two major issues that could lead to problems in a marriage: unemployed husbands and extra marital affairs. These issues usually lead to an even bigger problem, which would be financial. One of the respondents was in fact abandoned by her husband after practising polygamy. Financial problems as a result of unemployment have led to abusive relationships. One of the respondents, Neema, still remembers the day when her husband used to be very responsible, but after a decade of marriage, he “became another person” after he decided to take another wife who happened to be her good friend at work. She said, “...right after he had gotten married, he seldom came home and never gave me *nafkah* (maintenance) anymore. He used to come back once a week, but then not anymore”. Sally, who is unemployed, claimed that her marriage started to crumble when her husband began affairs with several women. Her husband was unemployed throughout their marriage and she had no choice but to find ways to provide income for the family. Sally said, “...he was bad-tempered and never cared for the children. He would just leave us for a few weeks and sometimes months for several times throughout my marriage. Then, he would come back again and start asking for money and continuously getting angry at his children. After a few years, I said ‘enough is enough’”.

Similar to Neema, Sally described her 15 years of marriage as a “happy marriage”

and never once she expected that leaving him was the best option for her and her children. Sally said, “... he was a good husband but he changed when he was in his 50s after he got involved with some ‘bad people’. One day, I heard from a neighbour that he already pronounced *talaq* (divorce) in front of his friends at the nearby coffee shop. Since then, I never saw him again”.

The constant fights and being left alone to take care of the family for several weeks and sometimes months worsens the already abusive relationship. At this stage, the respondents realise that they have to make a major decision, either to continue in the marriage or to leave their husbands for good in order to protect themselves and their children from becoming victims of domestic violence.

Dealing Phase and Coping Phase

Respondents claimed that the dealing and the coping process after being abandoned by their husbands were the most emotional periods of their lives. They felt betrayed, shocked and numbed as well as ashamed. The first thing they did after being abandoned was to move back with their parents while waiting for their emotions to stabilise before taking the next step to seek their ‘rights’ and to legalise their separation by visiting the Religious Department. It took months for them to pluck up the courage to go to the Religious Department to seek advice on their status and to find out the procedures for an application for divorce.

Finding out my rights: Journey to the Court House

The courthouse experiences were the most emotional and exhausting journey as described by the respondents. Throughout this journey, they felt embarrassed, abandoned and “numbed” as they did not know their options for the future. Neema narrates, “... my husband kept on pestering me to stop going to the Religious Department as he didn't want to divorce me”. When asked whether she really wanted to get a divorce, Neema took some time to say, “...I don't want to ask for a divorce...if I kept on asking for a divorce, I will be accused of “shaking up the Arasy of the Lord”. I will commit a sin if I kept on asking [for a divorce] because he did not want to leave me and he will never let that to happen.

Sally, who had been twice divorced, described the journey to the courts as tiring and exhausting - physically and mentally. For her, a divorce certificate was not important anymore as she would banished any thoughts of remarrying. She said she had just wanted to lead a “peaceful life” with her children “...I have gone through the first marriage and now the second. It was tiring and exhausting. I just couldn't care less to get the divorce certificate. Really...I don't want to have this unnecessary suffering”. Frequent trips to the Religious Department not only caused them physical and mental stress but they had a huge impact on their working life and their relationships with colleagues and employer. Jamilah, for example, who worked as a factory worker, had sacrificed

her entire annual leave allocation to visit the Religious Department. She argued, “...I spent this year to seek assistance from the Religious Department and now I don't have any more annual leave to take. My manager warned me if I kept on taking leave, I will lose my job. At this moment, my job is more important than the divorce certificate.”

The foregoing described the vulnerabilities as experienced by these single mothers throughout their abandonment phase. In the first two phases, the respondents had to deal with emotional vulnerabilities due to constant confrontations with their husbands leading to the breakdown of their marriage.

Livelihood Diversification

Finance and childcare are the two biggest challenges faced by the DFSM. A majority of them have to find new sources of income (Mustari, 2006). Many seek employment in the factories. This development has seen a massive increase in the employment of women especially young, single women from rural areas (Kinnaird and Momsen, 1993), in the factories. The majority of Malay female factory workers were rural-urban migrants or those who came from a rural background and who became factory workers to reduce their economic dependencies on their families (Ackerman, 1980; Jamilah 1984). The DFSM view factory employment as the gateway to earn better monetary income. Embarking into micro-businesses is another strategy for livelihood diversification. These are low-productivity enterprises that are relatively

simple and home-based, with limited potential for long-term growth (Downing, 1995; Ali et al., 2004). It also does not require much time to be devoted to enterprise management and development.

CONCLUSION

The narratives presented in this article show that the abandonment phase experienced by the DFSM has drastically changed their livelihood strategies. The DFSM are forced to increase their income throughout their abandonment phase pushing them further into a vicious circle of poverty. The discussion also revealed that the major vulnerability faced by the DFSM is on not having a divorce certificate. A divorce certificate is considered a “gateway” for single mothers to seek suitable assistance but the narratives presented above shows that the journey to get the certificate is an arduous one. They face multiple vulnerabilities when the challenges are coming from both sides, from the husband who either have disappeared or not willing to cooperate and also with the lack of assistance from the relevant government agencies. The lack of livelihood resources which include human, social, financial, physical capital and livelihood diversification has forced them in a world of “multiple vulnerabilities”.

This study has contributed to the understanding of the lived experiences and narratives of de facto single mothers that has been practically ‘ignored’ in the study of single mothers in Malaysia. Rather than viewing the challenges faced by these

DFSM as individual struggles, more efforts are needed to critically examine the lack of state support and to evaluate policy-making to ensure good governance has been practised.

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