

THE CHALLENGES FACED BY SINGLE MOTHERS IN MALAYSIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Mohamad Nawawy Jusoh & Fatmawati Latada
Pusat Sains Kemanusiaan, Universiti Malaysia Pahang

Abstract

Coronavirus is a type of virus that infects humans, leading to an upper respiratory infection or death. The transmission of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) has caused great distress in many countries, including Malaysia. This study aims to underline the challenges of single mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper will look into three main challenges; single mothers' emotional and psychological state in maintaining the balance between working caring, educating and disciplining their children, their financial distress, as well as additional roles and responsibilities forced upon single mothers during this pandemic. Single mothers are women with children under age 18 headed by a parent who is widowed or divorced and not remarried, or by a parent who has never married. Life as a single mother is associated with high demands and challenges. Social routines that many single mothers rely on to provide stability to their daily lives such as work schedules, sending children to day care or schools, visiting friends and families, are no longer possible as the entire country was put on the Movement Control Orders (MCO), three subsequent MCOs and social distancing requirements. The MCO was implemented in Malaysia to stop the spread of the Coronavirus. This study uses the library research methodology which includes the process of identifying relevant information and analysing other studies from primary sources (government documents and surveys) as well as secondary sources (books, journals, articles, etc.). The researcher was able to develop and express ideas on the issue above. Outcomes demonstrate that single mothers in Malaysia face many challenges, including the difficulty to maintain a sense of authority in their new norm; the struggle to keep food on the table; and the loss of the social support during the Covid-19 Movement Control Order. Single mothers in Malaysia take up so many challenges, roles and burden in bringing up the country's future generation. More assistance and aid should be provided to single mothers in the country to ensure mothers' physical and emotional well-being. It is hoped that the discussion in this paper will be an eye opener to readers that single mothers should also be considered the country's 'front liners' and unrecognized heroes.

Keywords: single mothers, covid-19, Malaysia, challenges

Perkembangan Artikel

Diterima: 2/8/2020
Disemak: 12/11/2020
Diterbitkan: 15/12/2020

Penulis Utama:

Mohamad Nawawy
Jusoh,
Pusat Sains
Kemanusiaan,
Universiti Malaysia
Pahang, Kuantan,
Pahang, Malaysia

E-mel:

hidayahfaizal81@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has overturned millions of family lives around the world, including Malaysia. To curb the issue, Malaysia's government implemented movement control orders. This is obligatory as social distancing is considered a key mechanism in the global effort to slow the spread of Covid-19 (Hartt, 2020). The virus has resulted in loss of life, income, health, and economic stability for many Malaysians, especially single mothers. Many of these unsung heroes needed to take on additional roles during the coronavirus pandemic.

Based on the Malaysia Home and Population Census in 2010 carried out by the Statistics Department, a total of 831, 860 women or 2.9 % of the population were widowed, divorced or permanently separated. Social routines that many single mothers rely on to provide stability to their daily lives such as work schedules, sending children to day care or schools, visiting friends and families, are no longer possible as the entire country was put on the Movement Control Orders (MCO) and social distancing requirements (Eugene Cheng-Xi Aw & Mohamad Fazli Sabri, 2020). They have no one to rely on, but themselves.

The MCO brought a lot of distress for the whole nation, especially for single mothers. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM) in its Single Mothers' Action plan (2015-2020) takes into account single mothers based on these criteria (KPWKM, 2015):

1. Women who are the breadwinners of the family, widowed or divorced, have separated with their partners permanently, and those whose children are not yet married.
2. A woman who has a husband, but they need to take on the role of a breadwinner due to the husband's sickness or disability, and has children who are living with them.
3. Women who has never gotten married but has a foster child or a child out of wedlock.

In order to minimize the spread of COVID-19, we have all been asked to engage in social distancing. As stated by Hartt (2020), it is a set of non-pharmaceutical interventions advocating for physical distance between people and limited human interaction. Hence, the paper will look into three main challenges; single mother's emotional and psychological state in maintaining the balance between working caring, educating and disciplining their children; their financial distress due to loss of source of income as well as the additional roles and responsibilities forced upon single mothers during this pandemic. A specific approach should be implemented through programs involving cooperation of the State government and volunteers from both government officials or from NGOs, especially those campaigning for single mothers.

EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING

Another challenge faced by single mothers during the pandemic is maintaining a good emotional and psychological wellbeing. Covid-19 has hit single mothers particularly hard. Coronavirus and the social distancing that's required to keep families healthy during the pandemic may be putting added strain on singles as access to their support systems weakened. Not only are single mothers overrepresented among the many millions of the newly unemployed, but a large percentage are essential workers, such as grocery clerks, health aides, and nurses (Robbins and McFadden, 2003).

Raising the children alone without any proper guardians give an impact to the children development (Robbins and McFadden, 2003). The scenario on the issue of single mother has to be evaluated holistically by the government, researchers, mass media and our society. There are many ways for the single mother to participate and to be involved with the society such as Single Mother Association, the registered and active society in Malaysia. However, The Movement Control Order has limited their movement, social group, and some even have no one to turn to during this pandemic. Being on 24/7 means that there is no one to pass the baton to when you are having a bad parenting day. This overwhelming pressure may result to emotional and psychological stress for single mothers. Single mothers should be able to share their problems as individuals who are stressed tend to look for sympathy from other individuals who can afford them emotional support and give them peace of mind as (Haleman, 2004).

Another factor which adds to single mothers' emotional is the of catching the Covid-19 virus. Fear makes everything more difficult as it attacks our wellbeing in a variety of ways (Hewstone, 2008). The fact that they still need to leave home during the pandemic for work as carers, medical staff, supermarket workers and bus drivers, creates a dilemma for single mothers with young children. Moms will always worry about what will happen to their children if they get sick. Now the fear of contracting Covid-19 is bearing down on them, especially since so many single mothers are essential workers. According to (Hewstone, 2008), single mothers stress over who will care for their children if they get sick and what will become of their family should they die.

As parents, we shoulder our children's emotional wellbeing. Without a partner, this weighty responsibility falls on a single mother. She must manage the news and conversation that her children absorb with regard to death and illness due to the coronavirus. Her children, like all kids, miss their friends, sports teams, and events, such as concerts, birthday parties, and graduations. The unprecedented challenges she's grappling with on her own are magnified by her sole responsibility to keep her children happy and healthy. All this factors would affect a mother's emotional state.

A research conducted by Kotwal, N. and B. Prabhakar (2009) mentioned that divorced parents are at greater risk for symptoms of depression than married parents. Kotwal and Prabhakar (2009) further adds that poor coping strategies will generate a bad emotional transition to the children. A few cases in Malaysia revealed a poor living and strategies on handling depression by committing suicide and killing own family was a terrible condition where people fails to face the difficulties in life. Moreover, lack of social interaction, no appetite, sleeping problems, mood changes, impairment in thinking and attempts suicidal.

Therefore, children are the most nearest to their family to get affected by these emotional disturbances. A study by Haleman, (2004) revealed that the mother's sadness can make the children experience the same feelings. If the mother is happy, the children will also experience happiness. But if the mother is not happy, the children will also be affected. Living in a house for 24 hours a day every day during the MCO may have also added to the emotional and psychological stress of single mothers.

SINGLE MOTHER'S FINANCIAL DISTRESS

Another challenge that single mothers need to face during the coronavirus MCO in Malaysia is stress and anxiety about their financial state. Life as a single mother is often associated with great demands and challenges. Single mothers with young children in Malaysia represent the most impoverished families in the country compared to those with two parents (Suet-Ling Pong, 1996; Intan Hashimah et al., 2015; Irwan et al., 2015). It is often the case that single mothers as bread winners have low paying jobs, yet are responsible for dependents who are often young children. Therefore, economic hardship and the inability to generate income

represent some of the major challenges for single mothers. It was concluded by Intan Hashimah et al. (2015) that stress among single mothers is mainly related to financial issues.

The MCO and social distancing requirements further adds to single mothers' distress in managing their finance. Single Mothers' Empowerment Under the 11th Malaysia Plan, there have been numerous economic, social and training programs undertaken by government and NGO's to reduce the occurrence of poverty among women, especially single mothers. For single mothers, natural skills such as cooking and dressing can be developed into a form of entrepreneurship through the training provided. However, since the MCO started, there have been limitations on the provision of financial assistance for single mothers.

A survey done by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM) displays that single mothers, in particular, emerged as the most vulnerable group, with one out of four living below the poverty line index and nearly half reporting loss of income due to the MCO (KPWKM, 2015).

Another survey conducted by the *Institut Wanita Berdaya (IWB) Selangor* or Selangor Women's Empowerment Institute (IWB) shared these findings after polling 442 women in Selangor from March 24 to March 28 during the first round of the MCO. Women in Selangor were financially hit by the movement control order (MCO) and the Covid-19 outbreak as many have lost their source of income during the period. Refer to Chart 1 for a depth overview.

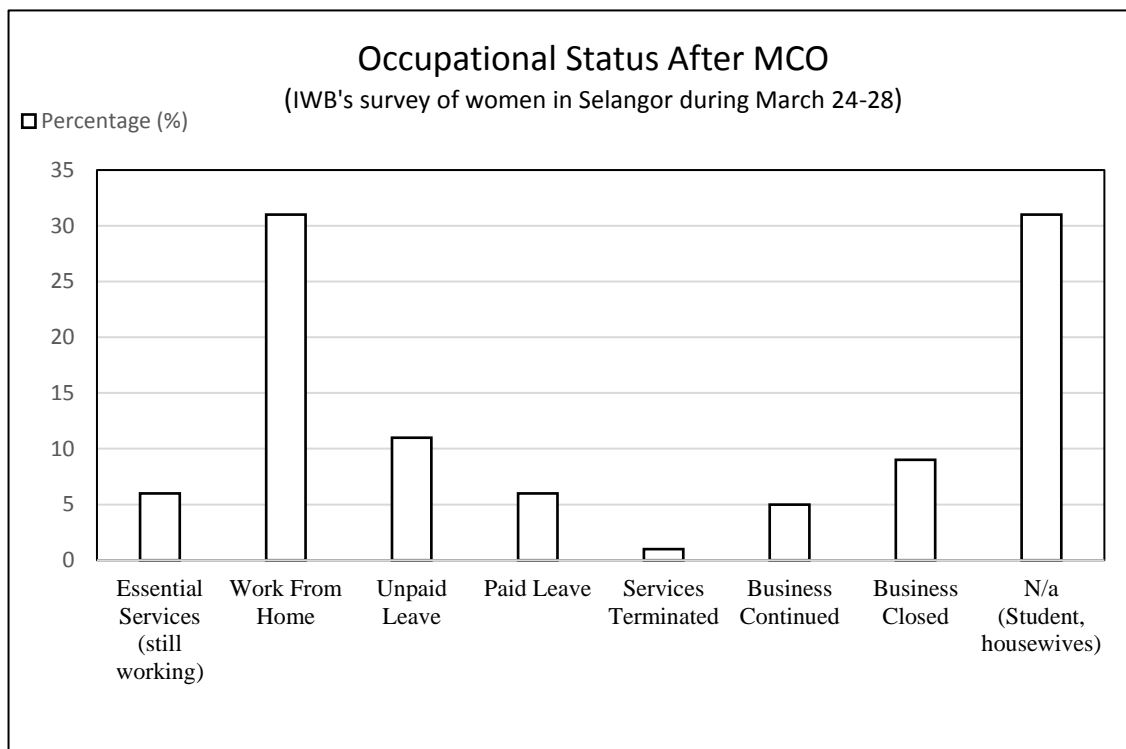


Chart 1: IWB Women Occupational Status After MCO by Malay Mail (24 April 2020)

The study on 442 women in Selangor found that 25 per cent had lost their jobs for several reasons including termination of employment contracts, business closure or being placed on unpaid leave. Another 43 per cent were found to have lost their source of income. Generating family income is the main problem faced by single mothers during this pandemic. Many programs have been developed and planned for single mothers' entrepreneurial development such as training programs organized by the Department of Women's Development and other relevant agencies (Suet-Ling Pong, 1996; Intan Hashimah et al., 2015; Irwan et al., 2015).

In addition, numerous programs are being developed to train single mothers in becoming skilled entrepreneurs. Although various forms of assistance and programs are implemented by the government in helping single mothers, there are many single mothers who are still living in poverty. This is partly because many of them have low levels of education, no job experience and are unaware of the channels for financial aid and assistance. In addition, an over-reliance on the financial assistance from the government agencies such as *Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat* and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development could reduce single mothers' drive to increase their own potential.

ADDITIONAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR SINGLE MOTHERS

The corona virus crisis is harsh on all families. But for single mothers, having to suddenly manage children whose schools, day care, playgrounds, and entertainment facilities are closed and can be especially overwhelming. Single mothers already hold multiple roles and responsibilities. Apart from being the sole breadwinner of the family, she is also obliged to attend to her children's welfare and well-being.

Under the government's movement control order where non-essential services and schools have been temporarily shut, women are shown to require assistance for the double burden of caring for their families while working (Intan Hashimah, Azman Azwan & Noraida Endut, 2015). This results in additional roles and responsibilities for single mothers who has already taken on several roles in the family.

With single mothers particularly hit hard and forced to manage their family's daily routine as well as working from home whilst caring for their children without a spouse to lighten the burden. Besides that, they also need to manage time to educate and discipline their children; acting as both a mother and father. During the MCO, single parents have to take on the role as teacher, a personal trainer, a full-time cook and children's entertainer, to name but a few. These roles are undertaken in attending to the needs of their children.

Haleman (2004) notes that a majority of single women had dependents including children, elderly folks or disabled. Those who have dependents have more burden of helping to take care of their family, a spouse who is disabled or ill. Getting through the actual day-to-day quarantine life, juggling working from home or dealing with the consequence from sudden unemployment, is challenging enough. Not to mention, the isolation from their friends in their social network, makes the task of single parenting feel impossible. How do these women do it?

CONCLUSION

Malaysia has had relative success in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, with deaths under at time of writing standing at 124. The government started with a strict lockdown measures in March and gradually conducted more lenient Movement Control Orders throughout the year. Subgroups of the general populations like single mothers might be particularly vulnerable to develop mental health problems. Furthermore, people with a low socio-economic position may experience greater social and economic burden due to unemployment, low financial reserves and precarious working conditions (Van Dorn, Cooney, & Sabin, 2020). Besides that, frequent consumption of news about COVID-19 in social media seems to increase the perceived distress (Gao et al., 2020). The MCO has brought a lot of distress for the whole nation, especially for single mothers. Some of the main challenges single mothers had to face were emotional and psychological distress, financial woes, as well as added burden and roles at home.

The increase of households headed by single women is an important issue, partly because these mothers are responsible for raising and to socialising future generations of a nation. Therefore, many suggestions and recommendations were put forward to improve the quality of

life of single mothers. In addition to education, Zarina and Anton (2012) suggests that the accumulation of assets and savings are one of the ways to obtain a better livelihood and escape the vicious circle of poverty. Efforts and programs to alleviate poverty among single mothers should also be focused on inculcating self-dependency.

Most importantly, single mothers should be empowered to improve their well-being and quality of life; therefore, many studies focus on entrepreneurship as a practical solution for single mothers to generate income (Rohayu et al., 2011; Nor Asiah Omar et al., 2014 Irwan et al., 2015; 2016). The researcher also believes that the involvement of single mothers in entrepreneurship could potentially empower them to attain self-dependency and sustainability.

The importance of self-belief which underpins inherent strength is of utmost importance as it influences any effort undertaken in enhancing the single mother's quality of life as a whole (Rohayu et al., 2011; Nor Asiah Omar et al., 2014 Irwan et al., 2015; 2016). This is because the expectations of mothers, particularly those of single mothers', vary according to age and personality especially after reaching midlife. Past studies have linked single mothers' personality traits with their social role, which plays an important role in shaping their self-esteem as single mothers (Newton & Stewart, 2013).

A study by Kotwal, N. and B. Prabhakar. (2009) which looked at the effects of self-esteem in relation to feelings of shame and guilt, found that these feelings of shame and guilt are the product of self-reflection caused by lack or violation of social norms or standards in a society. Hence, single mothers' belief system should become an effective 'coping system' which is seen to change according to skills and readiness in facing new challenges, taking advantage of available social network or support system (Rafiah & Siti Sakinah, 2013).

For some single mothers, religious beliefs and conviction are central in sustaining their daily life and fostering inner strength. This suggests that religion and faith play an important role in not only coping with the emotional stress during the coronavirus pandemic, but also in shaping the perception of single mothers and acts as a coping mechanism. Additionally, faith may also have a significant effect on life decisions made by single mothers, influencing family stability and responsibility towards children (Kotwal and Prabhakar, 2009), all of which are in fact synonymous with the multicultural society and religion in Malaysia. Haleman (2004) concurs with this view as he too is of the opinion that religious belief and faith are a source of strength, which contributes towards the resilience of low-income single mothers facing economic pressures.

Apart from religious values, a study by Wan Ibrahim Wan Ahmad and Zainab Ismail (2010) who studied the profiles of single mothers abandoned by their husbands found that economic impact and the responsibility of raising children, greatly influence the single mothers' self-belief. Individuals under stressful situations will tend to seek sympathy from other individuals capable of providing emotional support and reducing anxiety (Hewstone, 2008). Hence, social and welfare services provided by various government agencies and NGOs should be able to provide single mothers with the opportunity to empower themselves with the necessary life skills (Haleman, 2004) like strong will power, which stem from a positive and rational belief system.

A specific approach should be implemented through programs involving cooperation of the State government and volunteers from both government officials or from NGOs, especially those campaigning for single mothers. Social Welfare Department affirms that only a small number of single mothers are registered and obtained aid from the Ministry (Royahu Roddin, 2011). Even though there are a handful of good channels to obtain aid, there are still numerous reported cases on poverty, socio economic, emotional and psychological issues among single mothers.

It is our social duty to reach out to this vulnerable group as they tend to hide their marital status and avoid the normal stigma from the society. Besides that, the attitude of the community towards single mothers need to change and be integrated. This is to enable issues and challenges faced by single mothers to be addressed in a more strategic and structured manner, thereby contributing towards enhancing single mothers' physical and emotional well-being. It is hoped that the discussion in this paper will be an eye opener to readers that single mothers should also be considered the country's 'front liners' and unrecognized heroes.

REFERENCES

- Ciotti, M., Ciccozzi, M., Terrinoni, A., Wen-Can Jiang, Cheng-Bin Wang and Berdardini, S. (2020). The COVID-19 Pandemic. Volume 57, 2020 – Issue 6. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20008198.2020.1780832>
- Denmark F. & Paludi M. A. (2008). Psychology of women: A handbook of issues and theories. Praeger Publishers.
- Eugene Cheng-Xi Aw & Mohamad Fazli Sabri (2020). Single Mothers' Subjective Well-being: Empirical Evidence from Malaysia. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/>
- Haleman, D. L. (2004). Great Expectations: Single Mothers in Higher Education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 17(6). Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0951839042000256448>
- Hart, M. (2020). Covid-19: A Lonely Pandemic. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23748834.2020.1788770>
- Hewstone, M. (2008). Introduction to Social Psychology; A European Perspective (4th ed.). Blackwell.
- Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim, Azman Azwan Azmawati & Noraida Endut. (2015). Stress, roles and responsibilities of single mothers in Malaysia. *SHS Web of Conferences*, 18, (3), 1–7. Retrieved from <http://www.shs-conferences.org>
- Kotwal, N. and B. Prabhakar. (2009). Problems faced by single mothers. *Journal of Social Science*, 21 (3): 197-204.
- KPWKM (2015). Pelan Tindakan Pemerkasaan Ibu Tunggal 2015-2020. Retrieved from <https://www.kpwkm.gov.my/kpwkm/uploads/files/Dokumen/BUKU%20PELAN%20TINDAKAN%20PEMERKASAAN%20IBU%20TUNGGAL.pdf>. pada 18 April 2018.
- Larson, R.W. and S. Gillman. (1999). Transmission of Emotions in the Daily Interactions of Single Mother Families. *Journal Marriage Family*, 61 (1): 21-37.
- Merril Silverstein, Dongmei Zuo, Jinpu Wang, Vern L. Bengtson, (2019). Intergenerational Religious Participation in Adolescence and Provision of Assistance to Older Mothers, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 10.1111/jomf.12592, 81, 5, (1206-1220)
- National Action Plan to Empower Single Mother 2015-2020. Retrieved from <https://www.kpwkm.gov.my>
- Robbins, L.R. & McFadden, J. R. (2003). Single Mother; The impact of work on home and the impact of home on work. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences Education*, 21 (1), 1-10.
- Rohayu Roddin (2011). Poverty alleviation among single mother in Malaysia; Building entrepreneurship capacity. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2 (17), 92–99.

- Rohaya Roddin. (2012). Pendekatan Model baru Pembangunan Usahawan Wanita Luar Bandar Bagi Tujuan Pembasmian Kemiskinan, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn, Malaysia. Retrieved from <https://childmind.org/article/single-parenting-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/>
- Selangor Women's Empowerment Institute's (IWB) survey on 442 women in Selangor (March 24- 28, 2020) Retrieved from https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/2069470/?utm_source=showcase&utm_campaign
- Shen, K., Yang, Y., and Wang, T. (2020) Diagnosis, Treatment, and Prevention Of 2019 Novel Coronavirus Infection in Children: Experts' Consensus Statement. *World J Pediatr.* 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20008198.2020.1780832>
- Stoppler, M. C., (2020). Medical Definition of Coronavirus. Retrieved from <https://www.medicinenet.com/coronavirus>
- Suet-Ling Pong. (1996). School participation of children from single-mother families in Malaysia. *Comparative Education Review*, 40, 231–249.
- Trevisanuto, D., Weiner, G., Azzimonti, G., Amir Hussein Abubacar Seni, Bosco, J., Tylleskar, T., and Putoto, G. (2020). Management of Mothers and Neonates in Low Resources Setting During Cpv19 Pandemic. *The Journal of Maternal-Fetal & Neonatal Medicine.* Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20008198.2020.1780832>
- Van Dorn, A., Cooney, R. E., & Sabin, M. L. (2020). COVID-19 Exacerbating Inequalities in the US. *The Lancet*, 395(10232), 1243–1244. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20008198.2020.1780832>
- Wan Ibrahim Wan Ahmad, and Zainab Ismail, (2010) *Kualiti hidup dan harapan masa depan ibu tunggal melayu muslim di Pantai Timur Malaysia*. *Islamiyyat : Jurnal Antarabangsa Pengajian Islam; International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 32 . pp. 173-202. ISSN 0216-5636
- Zarina Md. Nor & Anton Abdulbasah Kamil. (2012). Sustaining the livelihood of single mother through wealth creation and saving opportunities: A long road ahead. *International Journal of Trade, Economics and Finance*. 3 (2), 126–131.