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## SINGLE MOTHERS AND WELLBEING OF ADOLESCENTS CHILDREN IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:** A single-parent family is coined as a family encompassing a single father or a single mother having their dependent child/children. A single-parent family may take its shape in different ways, such as separation, divorce, desertion, and a parent's death. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most the single-parent families took its shape due to their partner's death. According to Nidhi, Bharti (2009), in the 1970s and 1980s, many single-parent families resulted from separations and divorces. According to Isabel (2014), children raised by single mothers are more likely to underperform in many dimensions, including scholastic achievements and social development, and finally, end up with failure in the labour market. Taken these possible adversities into consideration, the present study explores the quality of life of the adolescent children of single mothers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This study focuses on Health, Self, Family, Finance, Peers and Schooling among the Adolescents of Single Mothers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The study will explore the present conditions in-depth and suggest measures to have a healthy Quality of Life. This research will be conducted by exploring a sample of adolescents aged between 13-18. There is no precise data about the adolescent's population (universe) who live in the Kuala Lumpur City of Selangor District. This study will involve Interview schedule and Focus Group Discussions for the data collection. Based on the previous research, it is anticipated that the overall quality of life among the adolescents from single mothers' families would not be great, so their self-esteem and financial credibility are also expected to be low. The magnitude of starvation among adolescents will play a vital role in their quality of life. Compared to the two-parent households in the cityside, adolescents from single-mother families may have a poor lifestyle.

**Keywords:** Quality of Life, Adolescents, Single Mothers, Kuala Lumpur and Educational Institutions

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## **Introduction**

A single-parent family is coined as a family encompassing a single father or a single mother having their dependent child/children. A single-parent family may take its shape differently, such as separation, divorce, desertion, and a parent's death. In the middle of the 20th century, most single-parent families were formed due to their partner's demise. According to Anderson (2014, p. 378), in the 1970s and 1980s, many single-parent families resulted from separations and divorces. The responsibilities of the single-parent are very much challenging, especially when women lead the household. Single mothers' issues are highly connected with their children's upbringing, considering their future, and settling in life. The majority of single mothers find it difficult to sustain discipline among their adolescent children due to the absence of a male member in the family. As single mothers can be lonely and depressed without their partner's presence, it will be challenging for them to handle their children's responsibilities. Till the time when children are married or get employed, they are almost reliant on their single-parent. After they settle down, the issues are likely to be reduced. According to Meier, Musick, Flood, & Dunifon (2016, p. 649), children whom single mothers raise are more likely to underperform in many dimensions, including scholastic achievements and social development finally, end up with failure in the labour market. Taken these possible adversities into consideration, the present study explores the quality of life of adolescent children of single mothers in Kuala Lumpur.

According to Rageliene (2016, p. 97), adolescence indicates a critical transition from childhood to adulthood, searching for the future in terms of career, families, relationships, and independence and establishing a personal identity within society. In general, adolescents try to separate themselves from their family and are attached to their peer group. A failure to consolidate identity may lead to role confusion in society. In this stage of life, many adolescents find that the pull between the internal pressure of the self and the external pressure of society is tremendous. Considering adolescence as a critical life stage transiting from dependence in childhood to independence in adulthood, this research focuses on adolescent children.

### **1. Single Mothers in Malaysia**

A single mother is another category of female citizens who may be associated with specific demands and challenges in Malaysian society. Conventionally, a single mother in Malaysia is defined as a woman whose husband is deceased and bears the burden of taking care of children of

the marriages upon the deaths, or a woman who is divorced and given the custody of her children (Soniya, 2018). This is because the structure and dynamics of the familial relationship that she is living in are similar to those of a legally divorced or widowed woman. Single mothers in Malaysia, especially those aged 40 years and above often have very minimal savings and often face significant difficulties entering or re-entering the workforce (UNDP, 2012). In 2012, the incidence of poverty amongst female-headed households in Malaysia was 2.1 percent compared to 1.6 percent for households headed by men (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2012). There is no conclusive recorded number of single women in Malaysia. However, in 2010, 808,787 women from the age of 15 were recorded as widowed, divorced, or separated (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2010). This number was equivalent to 8.3 percent of all women in Malaysia. The majority of women who were widowed were in the age group 60-64 years, while the majority of women divorced or separated were in the age group of 40-44 years. A 2009 study found that women aged 40 and above formed 80 percent of low-income female-headed households (Dasimah, Puziah, and Muna, 2009).

**Table No. 1:** Divorce Rates 2000-2005 Malaysia

<b>Percentage</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>
Non-Muslim	2.6	5.9	6.4	5.6	6.6	7.2
Muslim	14.7	14.5	14.5	15.3	14.8	15.5
Total	9.9	11.2	11.4	11.7	12.2	12.8

*Source: Chlen and Mustafa (2008)*

Fomby, P., & Cherlin, A. (2007) has said individual-level poverty rates using the absolute poverty line income measures are higher and individual female poverty rates, are unrecorded but certainly much higher than for men. "Single Mothers" have thus risen to be high on the social policy agenda in Malaysia both from having high risks of poverty, and thus forming significant proportions of those claiming social assistance, but also as a result of more general concerns about high divorce rates.

According to Chatterjee, Desai & Vanneman (2018, p. 855), although single-mother families are exposed to a high threat of poverty in many countries, the rate of single-mother families who come under below the poverty line in Malaysia is on a constant increase. The census in 2000 showed that there were 620,389 single mothers within the country. This number increased

in 2010 to 831,860 or 2.9 % of the population. This shows an increase of 211,417 single mothers in the last ten years. Second, according to Yoshida (2004), Malaysian women's unique career path leads to gender inequality at income levels. In the present context, even though there is a steep rise in women's economic participation during the last few years, a substantial percentage of women withdraw themselves from the labour market at the time of marriage and childbirth. When they return to the labour market, many of them take unstable part-time work. These labour trends should make single mothers face higher financial adversity compared with single fathers. These Malaysian contexts may negatively affect adolescent children's quality of life. Izumi (2016) states that more than 80% of the divorces in Malaysia, go through without legal advice and many mothers end up without receiving any support for their children.

## **2. Quality of Life- Conceptual Framework**

According to Dennis, Rebecca, Ivan & Irving (1996, p. 65) Quality of life is the general wellbeing of individuals, outlining the positives and negatives of life. For some individuals, the quality of life may depend on adequate health and access to services. It may be based on luxury, employment opportunities, time spent with peers and family for other individuals. According to the Kidscreen website (<https://www.kidscreen.org>), the quality of life is constructed by ten broad zones of physical wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, emotions, self-perception, autonomy, family life, social support, school environment, social acceptance, and financial resources. The same framework shall be adopted to study the quality of life of the adolescent children of single mothers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Fomby, P., & Cherlin, A. (2007, p. 181) had compared many studies in North America, particularly in the United States of America, only a shallow is known how single mothers influence their children's wellbeing in non-Western countries. There are reasons why Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur) is focused on the present research.

University of Toronto (1997) (<http://sites.utoronto.ca/qol/projects/adults.htm>), defines Quality of Life as a step to which individuals relish the significant opportunities of their lifetime. The three categories of Quality of Life (Being, Belonging & Becoming) were defined with every three sub-categories and based on characteristics that make life suitable for all other people.

Quality of life is a path to measure the dynamic signs of individuals in a community. Indicators usually give facts and information about a particular aspect of an individual. These indicators are very similar to the devices in a truck. To check out the overall performance, we need

to collect much information like temperature, engine capacity, fuel efficiency, comfort, oil pressure, ground clearance, etc. Quality of life can be taken in many different ways. For some individuals, it may depend on adequate health, access to services, luxury, employment opportunities, safety, security, time spent with peers and family. This broad understanding of life quality demands a broad picture of indicators to reflect the individuals' overall aspects best. In most cases, the link between the community and the quality of life is inseparable. In this regard, individuals' insight can be measured through focus clusters, surveys, or individual discussions.

The purpose of the below model is to provide a tool for an adolescent's development that can be used to monitor the significant pointers which encompass the finance, peers, school, family, health, personal life magnitudes of the quality of life in an adolescent. D. Rajan (personal communication, December 23, 2017) reports that this model can be used to assess the prime issues which affect adolescents and contribute to the scientists of how to enhance the quality of life among adolescents.



### 3. Method and Materials of the Study

The study reported had several aims:

- To study the socio-demographic details of adolescents growing up with working single mothers.
- To analyze how single mothers handle the issues in their family.
- To understand family communication and interactions between the single mother and their adolescent child/children.
- To measure the quality of life of adolescent children who are from the single-mother family.

- To study how single mothers' issues influence their adolescent child/children's quality of life.
- To suggest measures to have a healthy quality of life

A leading Non-Profit Organization and the Prime Minister's Awardee for best model NGO Perkhidmatan Sosial Pembangunan Komuniti (PSPK) working for single mothers, was approached to collaborate for the research. The organization mobilized the participants for the research. A convenient sampling method was used to collect data from the respondents. The study's purpose was to get a deeper understanding of the adolescents regarding their quality of life, socio-economic background, family, and ethnicity were also studied. All the adolescents and their mothers who were approached for the study purpose agreed to participate in the study. All the adolescents who came forward for the research were studying in school. They occasionally did some part-time jobs to support their family. All the single mothers were employed. Orientations were given before the interviews and focus group discussions; every participant was explained about the study's purpose. The participants were also given an option to opt-out after the orientation, but no one opted out. The orientation lasted for almost 15 minutes.

All the thirty-two adolescents from single-mother families were interested in being a part of this research study. For this research, a Kidscreen instrument for quality of life was used to examine the objectives. The reliability and the validity of this scale are 0.89 and 0.55, respectively. Focused group discussions were conducted with adolescents and their mothers (single-parent families). The adolescents were asked about their quality of life. One focus group discussion was conducted with eleven single mothers, and two focus group discussions were conducted with eight adolescents in each group. The single mothers asked explained about their family life. Some concerns were clarified before the interviews and some after the interviews.

The study has got a couple of limitations that should be acknowledged. The first and possibly most significant is that only Thirty-two adolescents and eleven mothers were considered for the research interview, whereas many adolescents from single-mother households live in Kuala Lumpur. Repeated interviews which are longitudinal are preferred for gathering information in regards to felt experiences. The number of participants was restricted due to time and resource constraints. Secondly, as the single mothers worked in different locations, it was decided to research a commonplace. Finally, the respondents answered in their local language in which the

researcher was not familiar. However, the researcher built a friendly atmosphere by getting a translator's helping hands (local Non-Governmental Organization) to get reliable information. The women were feeling shy and were also not comfortable answering all the questions the interviewer asked.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

Language and culture are inseparable from a community. Malaysia is a country with diverse culture, and therefore, there are many different languages. The major languages in Malaysia are English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. It is identified that 41% of the respondents are Ethnic Malay, 34% are Ethnic Indian, and 25% are Ethnic Chinese.

Monthly income is significant for every family. Based on the income, the family can make a budget, and it is crucial for running a smooth family. The wage of income one gets differs from occupation to occupation. More than half of the respondents, i.e. 53.1% earn from less than 2000 MYR per month. 37.5% of the respondents earn from a range of 2001- 4000 MYR per month. 9.4% of the respondents earn 4001- 6000 MYR per month. It is understood that most respondents fall under the poverty line, which is set as MYR 2208 by the Government of Malaysia.

Quality of life is a comprehensive and holistic concept psychologists generally consider as individuals' satisfaction, wellbeing, and happiness. Quality of life, the degree to which an individual is healthy, comfortable, and able to participate in or enjoy life events. Half of the respondents, 53.12% have a low level of quality of life. 40.62% of the respondents have a moderate level of quality of life, with only 6.25 % of the respondents having a higher quality of life. It is also noted that the variable family has contributed to the dependent variable quality of life to the extent of 42.5 % and occupies the top position, followed by finance has contributed to the extent of 29.5 % and occupies the second position, the variable personal life has contributed to the extent of 14 % and occupies the third position.

Family life is usually assessed by the way how the family members communicate among themselves. Effective communication is a skill to express ourselves both verbally and non-verbally in a proper method. This means expressing worries, views, wishes, wants and seeks guidance in times of necessity. Communication is a two-way spell. Effective communication is a knack for connecting with individuals by breaking down barriers and building channels. Good communication is needed for healthy family life. The mothers in the focus group discussion

revealed that they try to spend time with their children daily, but they hardly get time due to their work timings. In the mornings, they make it a point to have breakfast together, and on Sundays, the whole day is spent with their children. It becomes challenging when the child is a single child because nobody is at home to take care of the children in their mother's absence.

Economic hardship in female-headed households is a common finding across international studies of poverty and 1990s research on female poverty in Malaysia using the 1991 Census supported such findings with a strong link between single female-headed households and poverty (UNESCAP, 2000). The single mother strives hard to support her children financially. As mentioned earlier, a substantial percentage of women withdraw themselves from the labour market at the time of marriage and childbirth. When they search for jobs after their divorce, they are forced to start from scratch or start a low paying job. The adolescents are well aware of the financial crisis at home, and they try their best not to spend more money unnecessarily. Some adolescents also help their mothers by going for a part-time job during their vacations.

Personal life is regulated by the personality of an adolescent to a greater magnitude. Security is a state of thought in which one adolescent is prepared to accept the costs of one's conduct (Blatz, 1967). The adolescents revealed that they expect much privacy at home, and they do not like their mothers or siblings, disturbing them while they are using their gadgets, especially their phones. Moreover, they do not disclose to their home if they go on for a date. They further reported that their mothers trust them a lot despite their shortcomings. During the conversation at home with their mother, they speak a lot about career and their aspirations.

Peer influence is when you **choose to do something** you would not otherwise do because you want to feel accepted and valued by your friends. Peer influence was very much part of the adolescent's lifestyle. They spent most of their time with peers apart from schooling and family. Whenever they had to buy something expensive, they always consulted with their peers. The adolescents always wanted to have things that their peers had, so they trouble their parents in this regard. Adolescents have always turned to their peer group in extreme ways when parental support is low.

The involvement in education shows their aspiration of adolescents to come up in life. We live in an entrepreneurial and competitive sphere where the triumphs in education rockets the probabilities of healthy paid professions and stretch an ascent in their living standards. The mothers

in their discussion revealed that, their adolescents always had some issues at school. The mothers further revealed that the teachers told them that there is always a fluctuation in their wards' concentration levels. However, some adolescents give their best and try to achieve higher grades. The adolescents revealed that they do not attend schools unnecessarily. The younger adolescents grab the other pupils' attention in class did generate an impression of as though they are masterminded. However, it was said in the discussion that their career interests purely inclined late adolescents' interests.

Children between the age of 10 and 18 years are often thought of them as a healthy group. Nevertheless, many severe diseases in adulthood have their roots in adolescence. For example, tobacco use, poor eating and exercise habits, lead to illness or premature death later in life. The adolescents revealed that they were more interested in sports and physical activities and told that they did not give much importance. In their discussion, the mothers shared that the children were provided with a balanced diet daily, but still, their children enjoyed eating outside food. Most of the children, especially the Ethnic Indian people, were found obese. The adolescents were quickly disturbed by seeing other children enjoying themselves with their own families. The adolescents reported that they long for their father's love, but they do not want to hurt their mother.

## **5. Suggestions**

Suggestions are given in areas where it needs to improve, so the researcher tried to suggest some workable suggestions based on the research study's finding after careful analysis and interpreting the data. Few suggestions are as follows:

- Educate or conduct awareness programmes to control the divorce rates
- Impart quality education to the children through activity centres
- Provision of adequate training and skill up-gradation for women in the area of tailoring, food processing, basket making, typing, and computer education for their sustained income
- Providing awareness programs about their rights and schemes available for them
- Creating more employment opportunities for women to increase low-income families' income level
- Establishing a Rehabilitation and a Counselling Centre for the marginalized single mothers

- Schools must be provided with counselling centres to cater to adolescents' mental needs to establish character and virtues
- Initiating researches to help in government policymaking
- Drugs, Alcohol, and cigarette selling must be restricted and should be sold to individuals above 18 to prevent adolescents from buying them

## Conclusion

Quality of life is the general wellbeing of individuals and societies, outlining negative and positive life features. It observes life satisfaction, including everything from physical health, family, education, employment, wealth, religious beliefs, finance, and the environment. The quality of life is usually low in adolescents who come from single-mother families, but it defers from place to place.

In this study, it is found that more than half of the adolescents did have a low level of quality of life. All the adolescents who participated in the research were regular to schools. There were no school dropouts. Many Single mothers, along with adolescents, were not aware of their rights and schemes. The critical factor which contributes the highest to the quality of life among adolescents is family life. As said earlier, to enhance the quality of life, adolescents should spend much time with their family members to become responsible individuals and shoulder the family's burden in the future. One of the least factors which contributed to the quality of life is education. Most of the adolescents did not think that education can transform their lives. Swami Vivekananda once said, "We want that education by which character is formed, the strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one's own feet".

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