

## Delving into the Story of an Unwed Mother in Malaysia by Longitudinal Photovoice Methodology

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**To Link this Article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i10/15388> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i10/15388

**Published Date:** 22 October 2022

### Abstract

Regardless of the age of the unwed mother, pregnancy out of wedlock is considered as sinful, violation of the norm and disgrace to the family in most of Asian countries including Malaysia. Although the Malaysian society and authority are concerned on this matter, however, people rarely talk about this topic in public due to shame and stigma. Owing to that, little is known about the perspectives of this marginalized group about their life experiences. The shared data were used to explore the life experiences of an unwed mother in three different life times. The data were then analyzed by using the House-Tree-Person (HTP) analysis. The study found that the unwed mother felt the life in the shelter home as unwelcome, lost of dignity and self esteem. Consequently, it impacted on her later life that she felt more lonely and unable to regain back her dignity and self-esteem that she longing for. The data can be benefited to the Malaysian authority as well as the society to be more sympathetically and acknowledge the experiences of unwed mother. Hence, it will increase the awareness and understanding towards unwed mothers as well as to reduce the stigma on them.

**Keywords:** Unwed Mother, Teenage Pregnancy, Single Mother, House-Tree-Person Test, Malaysia.

### Introduction

In Malaysia, unwed mother commonly defined as a girl or woman having pregnancy or a baby out of wedlock. Unwed mothers also defined as one of the categories of single mothers (Mohd et al., 2021). According to Temblador (1990) the similarities among single mothers possibly that these women shared a very strong belief in the importance of family. It is also noted that the unwed mothers showed strong commitment to having a meaningful relationship with

their children. It is a common practice in Malaysia for a family to send their daughter that pregnant out of wedlock to a shelter home to seek information in regards of adoption procedures, as a place for moral rehabilitation as well as to hide the pregnancy (Saim et al., 2013; Sarnon et al., 2012; Saim et al., 2016). According to the Care Centre Act (2006), it should be function to improve the relationship between the unwed mothers and their families. According to Chong et.al (2020) trust and reciprocity in the family and close friends are considered bonding social capital that can improve their future. Hence, the shelter home service for unwed mothers could be considered as one type of social work interventions in Malaysia. However in the situation of unwed mother in Malaysia, it is commonly practice that the unwed mothers are refrained from having a contact from their family for the first three months of their residing in a shelter home (Saim, 2013). This is a part of the rules of most shelter homes for unwed mothers in Malaysia. According to Saim (2013), although it is not inline with social work intervention, however most of the shelter home viewed this rule as a rehabilitation towards unwed mothers.

Based on researchers' knowledge, to date there is little research constructed from art-based data to explore unwed mothers in Malaysia. However, the study by Jaladin et al (2020) investigating on self-compassion, and decreasing depression, anxiety and stress among single mothers by using art-based activities such as expressive arts drawing, emotion-focused reflective writing and colouring, and singing a motivational song. Hence, the method opted in this study is considerably a new technique to scrutinezed the life experiences of unwed mothers in Malaysian society. This technique is rarely used especially in regards of the focus of study; the life experiences of unwed mothers (Valiquetta-Tessier et al., 2015). The research is based on the drawings by an unwed mother reflecting on her life experiences before and during placement in a shelter home as well as her current situation years after placement. The data is useful to describe the experiences of an unwed mother in Malaysia through the analysis of drawings.

### **Metodology**

This study opted a longitudinal qualitative research (LQR) in which data are collected from the same participants to assess change through time (Saldana, 2003). The main researcher firstly encounter the informant during her placement in a shelter home when she was only 14 years old while residing a shelter home during her pregnancy. She was sent to the shelter home by her father due to her unwed pregnancy. In line with the freedom of expression, the informant was given the intruction by the main researcher to draw something that reflect to her life experiences at the time. The main researcher explored her experiences and her current situation, nine years after the placement in a shelter home by using a qualitative method – photovoice. Through this method, it is believed that the main researcher has built up a good rapport and connection to the informant until today (Saim et al., 2020). The informant and her guardian (while she was in the shelter home) were well aware and consented that the drawings will be used for scientific research.

Photovoice has also been used in art data such as collaging and drawing (Mannay, 2013). The object of the drawings were freely chosen by the informant to reflect her situations. There are three drawings of the informant reflecting her situation of the time; Image 1, Image 2 and Image 3. Image 1 was the first drawing by the informant to experess her experiences before her placement in a shelter home due to her pregnancy before marriage. Image 2; the second

drawing was to describe her experiences while residing a shelter home for about six months. Whilst Image 3; the third drawing was drawn after about nine years she was released from the shelter home. The analysis of the drawings were based on House –Tree-Person (HTP) Test (Oster & Gould, 1987) shown in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3. None of these pictures resembled the informant physically in real life.

### **Analysis**

The data were analysed by using House –Tree-Person (HTP) Test (Oster & Gould, 1987). According to Oster and Gould (1987), the HTP is used as a method to help the clinician in gathering data in regards of an individual personality integration, maturity, and efficiency. Oster and Gould (1987) also noted that the three objects; house, tree and person; were chosen owing to their acceptance by persons of all ages, gender, culture and their ability to stimulate a greater fund of associations compared to other objects as well as to detect maladjustment.

The analysis was done based on the discussions among the researchers. The drawings (Image 1, Image 2 and Image 3) were analyzed by size, and itemised based on characteristic, color, description of the drawing characteristic, meanings based on the HTP and further analysis by researchers. The size of the image is considerably significant to indicate informant's self-esteem (Buck, 1981).

According to Haxhiymeri (2015), the size of normal drawing commonly occupies no more than half of the A4 page. If the size of a drawing is larger, this may be a sign of personality features such as aggression, grandiosity, and compensatory defenses. On the contrary, if the size of image is tiny this may be an indication of inadequacy, inferiority, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and a weak ego (Hammer, 1980). The result of the analysis also shown to the informant for verification. The analysis is based on House –Tree- Person Test by (Oster and Gould, 1987).

### **Image 1: Bad Eye**

Image 1 was the first picture drawn by the informant to express her life experiences before placement in a shelter home. The drawing is most likely an image of a horrifying early teenager clown that could be described as the informant could be pretending to be happy with the fake smile. The picture was drawn with the big head and full of frame. It was colored between dark brown to black. The HTP analysis found it is preoccupied of fantasy life. While the eyes were drawn with black big size eyes, eye lashes and sparkling. The HTP described that the informant might have a vision processing problem. The mouth was drawn with big excessive size, slightly pink with black shadow. The HTP analyzed that as immaturity oral aggression or orally erotic that it seems abnormal. There was also a caption 'Bad eye' that could be meant looking for victim.

Image 1: The drawing to reflect her situation before residing a shelter home.



Table 1  
The analysis of Image 1 based on HTP

Item	Description	Color	Meaning based on HTP
Size of the image	Full of frame	Dark brown to black	Aggression, Grandiosity, Compensatory defenses
Head	Big head Full of frame	Dark brown to black	Preoccupied of fantasy life
Eyes	Big Eye lashes Sparkling	Black	Vision processing problem
Mouth	Big Excessive size	Slightly pink with black shadow	Immaturity oral aggression, Orally erotic, Abnormal
No neck	-	-	Loss self-esteem, Loss of independent
Only focus on the face	-	-	Low self-esteem
No ears	-	-	Hearing issue
Hairless	-	-	Loss of dignity
No hands/ feet	-	-	Hopelessness, Lack of self-worth
Caption 'Bad eye'	Big	Black	Looking for victim
Image like horrifying clown	Full of frame	Brown	Pretending to be happy with the fake smile

The researchers analyzed the picture drawn with big head that could be meant the informant's mind was fully thinking of fantasy that most probably related to sex or the needs of love from fatherly image or any family members. Whilst the big sparkling eyes could be meant as processing the problems at the time, while big excessive mouth could be meant

probability of self-harm. The picture also drawn focused only on face without neck, ears, hair and hands or feet. The researchers analyzed that as a sign of low self-esteem, hopelessness, refused to listen to any advice, lack of self-worth or dignity and loss of independent.

### Image 2: Exclusive

Image 2 was the second picture drawn by the informant to express her life experiences when she was residing a shelter home during her pregnancy. The drawing in Image 2 showed a beautiful teenager but expressing sorrow so deep that might hurt her in later life. The picture was drawn with big head that almost full of frame although not as big as the first picture. The head was colored with dark brown to black, big eyes with eye lashes. These two characteristics are most likely as the first picture. However, the mouth in the Image 2 was thin, pierced lips and colored with red and slightly black. The lips seem indicating to sad feeling. The informant also drawn the Image 2 with considerable normal size neck, colored with brown and shades. The informant only drawn one ear with three pierced on it.

The researchers analyzed the picture in Image 2 drawn with big head that indicating the informant 's mind was fully thinking of fantasy, most probably related to sex or the needs of love from fatherly Image or any family members. Whilst the big black eyes with eye lashes could be meant the informant processing but suppressing the problems at the time.

Image 2: The drawing to express her experience while residing in a shelter home



Table 2

*The analysis of Image 2 based on HTP*

Item	Description	Color	Meaning based on HTP
Head	Big head, almost full of frame	Dark brown to black	Preoccupied of fantasy life
Size of the image	Full of frame		aggression, grandiosity, and compensatory defenses
Eyes	Big, eye lashes	Black	Vision processing problem
Mouth	Thin lips, Sad, Pierced	Slightly black, red	Sad feeling
Neck	Considerable normal neck	Brown with shades	-
Ear	3 pierced	Brown with shades	Hearing issue
Hairless	-	-	Lack of dignity
No hands/ feet	-	-	Hopelessness, Lack of self-worth
Facial expression	sorrow	-	-
Image – feeling beautiful	Almost full of frame	Brown with shades	Sorrow

Moreover, the thin, pierced, and sad indication lips could be meant emotionally suppressed with tendency of self-harm. There was only one ear drawn with three pierced on the picture could be indicating that the informant carefully listened to advises. The neck was drawn with considerable normal size that could be indicating that the informant has had self-esteem and internally confident. The picture also drawn with hairless indicating lack of dignity or self-worth. Whilst no hands or feet indicating loss of independent.

### Image 3: Hurt in Peace

Image 3 was the third picture drawn by the informant expressing her life experiences years after the placement at the shelter home. She was 23 years old when she drew Image 3. Comparing to the previous drawings, Image 3 was more intense and heart-wrenching. She titled her drawings as "Hurt in Peace". The drawing in Image 3 showed a woman wearing high neck white brownish shirt or blanket with sad tears. The picture was drawn with considerable normal size head, colored dark brown to black. The eyes were normal size with thick eye lashes and crying with tears. The mouth on Image 3 was drawn with very thin lips, excessive long and sealed. The previous pictures showed the image with no hair, but the drawing in Image 3 was drawn with thick and long hair covered the shoulders until the chest. The hair was colored with black and white. There was a signature in the middle of the chest.

Image 3: The drawing to express her life experiences nine years after the placement at the shelter home



The researchers analyzed the picture in Image 3 indicating that the informant most probably in a very stressing situation. The white high neck shirt or blanket seems like a white old linen shroud that normally used to wrap a dead body for burial indicating she was long in the stressful situation. The head in Image 3 was drawn considerably normal size, colored with dark brown to black indicating that she was going through a normal life. The normal size eyes with thick eye lashes and crying with tears indicating that the informant processing the worst situation or problem at the time. The excessive long, thin lips but sealed might be indicating of abnormal aggression that could be meant whatever she said was meaningless or ineffective for the people around her. It also possibly the meaning of she was silence by force to suppress her feelings. She drew chest length hair with black and white covering her shoulders. It could be means the informant seeing her self of getting wiser and older.

The black signature was placed in the middle of the chest indicating her focus was on the present situation rather than looking for future or the past. Interestingly in the previous pictures, there were no background. However, Image 3 having a background that seems like in a place such as a tunnel or a chimney. A chimney is a symbol of warmth (Woodruff, 1960), intimate relationship and sometime associated with phallic symbol of significance (Haxhiymeri, 2015). The researchers indicating this could be meant that she was trapped in the intimate relationship. Similarly with the previous pictures, Image 3 also has no neck and no ears that indicating to lack of confident and does not want to listen to others or carefully listen to advice.

Table 3

*The analysis of Image 3 based on HTP Discussion and Conclusion*

Item	Description	Color	Meaning based on HTP
Size of the image	Full of frame		aggression, grandiosity, and compensatory defenses
Facial expression	Sad and crying		
White shirt/blanket	Old white shirt/blanket	White and brownish	
Head	Considerable normal size	Dark brown to black	
Eyes	Normal size, thick eye lashes, crying	Black	Vision processing problem
Mouth	Excessive size, Thin lips, sealed	Black	Abnormal aggression, silence by force
Hair	Covered shoulder, long till chest	Black and white	See herself as getting wiser and older
Signature	In the middle of chest or neck area	Black	
Background	Seems like in a place like a tunnel or a chimney		Chimney is a symbol of warmth, intimate relations and sometimes associated with phallic symbol of significance
No neck			
No ears			Hearing issue

### Discussion and Conclusion

According to the Malaysian Care Centre Act 1993 (2006), a shelter home should be function as residential care, rehabilitation, and protection. However, in Malaysian society, it is commonly practicing that the unwed mothers being placed in a shelter home as a place for the punishment or/and repentance due to being pregnant out of wedlock. But, the life experience of unwed mothers being placed in the shelter home is not as expected and deceiving.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the unwed mother felt the life in the shelter home as unwelcome, loss of dignity and self-esteem. Consequently, it impacted on her later life that she felt lonelier and more unable to regain back her dignity and self-esteem that she is longing for. It is also not in line with the aims of social work intervention; to empower individuals. It is supported by Saim et al (2019) noted that, on average unwed mothers increased their depression by approximately 0.03 per cent during their stay in a shelter home. Hence, the experience of unwed mother living in a shelter home seems traumatize that affected their later life. It is a strong indication that the so-call-intervention for unwed mothers being placed in shelter home might develop depression and jeopardized their mental health. This study finding suggested to the social workers, policy makers as well as the Malaysian authority to scrutiny the issue of unwed mothers being placed in a shelter home. As shelter home means of protection and rehabilitation, hence proper intervention should be



taken accordingly. This data can be a strong justification to the Malaysian authority as well as the society to be more sympathetically and acknowledge the experiences of unwed mother. Therefore, it will increase the awareness and understanding towards unwed mothers as well as to reduce the stigma on them.

### **Acknowledgments**

This article is based on research under FRGS/1/2016/SS06/UKM/02/1 Developing Empowerment Intervention Module for Unwed Mothers in Malaysia (Pembinaan Modul Intervensi Pemerkasaan Ibu Tanpa Nikah di Malaysia). The drawings are in the process of applying intellectual property (IP) under the National University of Malaysia with the registration number: UKM.IKB.800-4/1/4323.

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