

Exploring the Challenges of Unmarried Pregnancy among Adolescents: A Comprehensive Literature Review

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Abstract

Adolescent pregnancy, particularly outside of marriage, is a significant issue in Malaysia, impacting the lives of young women and posing various challenges. This article reviews the scope of unwed pregnancies among adolescents in Malaysia, analysing data from the Ministry of Health and other sources to highlight the prevalence and trends of this issue. It identifies key factors contributing to teenage pregnancies, including weak family relationships, socioeconomic status, and peer influence. The article discusses the multifaceted challenges faced by pregnant teenagers, including family acceptance, social stigma, effects on physical health, financial difficulty, academic disturbance, and effects on psychological well-being. Additionally, it explores coping mechanisms employed by adolescents and the role of social support from family, institutions, and the community. The study highlights the critical need for all-encompassing approaches to combat adolescent pregnancy, such as enhanced sex education, easier access to reproductive health care, and supporting measures to lessen the harmful consequences on teenagers. The results highlight how crucial it is for everyone to provide support and work together to guide the adolescents and offer the required assistance to lower the number of adolescent pregnancies and improve the lives of those who are impacted.

Keywords: Challenges, Coping Mechanisms, Social Support, Unwed Pregnancy, Adolescents

Background of Unwed Pregnancy among Adolescents in Malaysia

Adolescence, spanning the ages of 10 to 19, is a critical developmental stage marked by rapid physical, cognitive, and psychological changes. This period is foundational for long-term health and well-being, influencing emotions, decision-making, and interactions with the external environment (World Health Organization, 2024). Adolescent pregnancy refers to pregnancies occurring in girls aged 10 to 19. Most teenage pregnancies are caused by rape, sexual abuse, incest, and premarital sex (MyHealth Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2024). In

Malaysia, several risk factors contribute to unwed pregnancies among teenagers. Siong and Tharshini (2020) identify weak family relationships, the influence of information technology, peer pressure, socioeconomic status, and low levels of education as significant contributors to this issue. These factors create vulnerabilities that can lead to higher rates of adolescent pregnancies outside of marriage.

Based on statistical estimates from the Ministry of Health Malaysia, in 2015, an average of 18,000 teenage girls in Malaysia got pregnant each year. Out of this number, 25 percent or about 4,500 cases involve pregnancy out of wedlock (Bernama & Said, 2019). This issue remains a significant concern when there were 41,083 recorded teenage pregnancies between 2017 and 2022. Out of these, 14,561 cases (35%) involved pregnancies outside of marriage (CodeBlue, 2021). The implications and effects of teenage pregnancies, particularly outside of marriage, can profoundly impact the well-being of adolescents, who are often unprepared for parenthood. Given the many challenges associated with early pregnancies, it is essential to provide support and develop appropriate interventions for these teenagers. Addressing this issue effectively can help prevent poor decision-making and unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as abortion or baby disposal, and promote healthier outcomes for both the adolescents and their children.

According to statistics from the Royal Malaysian Police, a total of 256 cases of baby dumping were recorded between 2020 and 2022 (Kadir, 2024). Recently, the same source reported that a group of *tahfiz* students found a newborn baby girl in a box at an Islamic education center in Rantau Panjang, Selama, Perak. A report from Kanyakumari (2019), shared by Deputy Women, Family, and Community Development Minister Hannah Yeoh, stated that from 2010 to May 2019, there were a total of 292 cases where babies were abandoned near residential areas, and another 115 babies were left in toilets. This data has shown that unwed pregnancy among women, especially teenagers, needs to be guided and supported to deal with the impacts of the pregnancy and help them be resilient to face the challenges ahead.

According to Belladiena et al (2019), teenagers who experienced unwed pregnancy felt anxious, sleep-deprived, and overwhelmed during pregnancy. This is because experiencing an unmarried pregnancy causes a distortion of thinking that can affect negative emotions that can further lead to depression (Zaiden & Mahfar, 2022). Majid et al. (2020) explain that teenagers face implications from thinking that they feel ashamed of society and worried about family acceptance. Additionally, unwed pregnant adolescents often face severe emotional challenges, leading to depression, stress, and behavioural issues, including feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, and even suicidal thoughts. Therefore, it is crucial to overcome and come out with proper coping mechanisms to prevent this issue, especially for teenagers. The profound impact of this social issue has left many female teenagers feeling hopeless and deeply depressed as they navigate the challenges of unmarried pregnancy.

Thus, this article aims to provide a comprehensive literature review of the multifaceted challenges faced by unwed pregnant adolescents. It further explores the coping mechanisms employed by these adolescents and the pivotal role of social support from families, institutions, and communities. The study emphasizes the critical need for integrated strategies to reduce adolescent pregnancies and improve the well-being of those affected.

Challenges Faced by Unwed Pregnant Adolescent*Family Acceptance*

The importance of reducing the issues arising regarding unmarried pregnancy is necessary in understanding the calamity and experiences of adolescents to help them cope with the fallout of the issue and prepare resilient and healthy youth for the future. These adolescents are fragile and very in need of guidance and experiencing many challenges from the unwed pregnancy can harm their well-being. Majid et al (2020), state that teenagers feel worried about their family's acceptance of them. This matter always hovers in their minds and raises questions whether their family can forgive their actions, or the family is ashamed to accept them. The attitude of family members who cannot forgive them for what has happened often causes them to feel depressed and find it difficult to face challenges (Ahmad & Subhi, 2020).

According to Nen and Hashim (2020), teenagers often face negative reactions from their family members, are isolated from social activities, and are excluded from the family. The early stages of pregnancy create a crisis within the family, disrupting its overall dynamics. However, there was a change after a while. This is evidenced by the willingness of family members to provide financial assistance, take care of the child born, and become a motivator for teenagers to seek protection from existing institutions. Parents felt disappointed and angry when they found out about their daughter's pregnancy. They wished for their daughters to continue their studies. In the end, they tried to accept that condition (Belladiena et al., 2019). Including the decision of whether to give birth to the child or have it adopted, terminate the child, or raise it until it is an adult presents a challenge to family members (Siong & Tharshini, 2020).

Social Stigma

According to Wiemann et al (2005), two out of five adolescents (39.1%) reported feeling stigmatised by their pregnancy. As compared with their non-stigmatised peers, stigmatised adolescents were most likely to report having seriously considered abortion, being afraid to tell parents about pregnancy, feeling that parents and teachers thought pregnancy was a mistake, and feeling abandoned by the fathers of their babies. Shame in front of society has made teenagers feel useless and ashamed to face the society around them (Majid et. al, 2020). Belladiena et al (2019), state that adolescents were ashamed of stigma due to their unwanted pregnancies. They had concerns and worries about their negative image of society. Wainaina et al (2021), found that adolescents faced significant backlash from their families, friends, and communities, including insults and gossip. Due to the stigma from schoolmates and teachers, many were unable to continue their education and experienced discrimination at health facilities. This stigmatization left participants feeling isolated, judged, ashamed, and unworthy. Additionally, the family's preoccupation with avoiding stigma by association led one young mother to feel neglected and lonely, longing for her family's attention and support (Tohid et al., 2021).

Effects on Physical Health

Adolescence is a critical period for physical, psychological, and cognitive development. According to Myhealth Ministry of Health Malaysia (2024), teenagers face numerous challenges as they are often unprepared to care for their babies. Still in school and undergoing their own growth and maturation, they must confront the consequences of pregnancy from

multiple aspects. Medically, teenagers may experience difficult and prolonged childbirth due to their smaller pelvic structure, as well as complications like high blood pressure during pregnancy, which can lead to other issues such as bleeding, seizures, anemia, and even death. Additionally, the health implications for the unborn baby are significant, including the risk of low birth weight (less than 2.5 kg), premature birth (before 37 weeks), and, in severe cases, death. Pregnant teenagers often give birth earlier than expected and may not receive adequate prenatal care, further increasing the risks for both mother and child.

A study by Nwobodo and Adoke (2006), demonstrated that teenage pregnancies are more likely to be complicated by pregnancy-induced hypertension, eclampsia, intrauterine fetal death, anemia, cephalopelvic disproportion, and preterm labor compared to non-teenage pregnancies. During the study period, teenage pregnancies accounted for 11.8% of 4,498 deliveries, with the majority of teenagers (79.1%) being nulliparous. The incidence of pregnancy-induced hypertension, eclampsia, intrauterine fetal death, and anemia was higher among teenage mothers than among non-teenage mothers. Additionally, the rates of cesarean sections and perinatal mortality were significantly higher in teenage mothers. The study concluded that pregnant teenagers face higher obstetric risks than their non-teenage counterparts. Promoting female education, access to contraceptive services, and antenatal care can help reduce both the incidence of teenage pregnancies and the associated health risks.

Recent studies by Indarti et al. (2020) indicate that teenage pregnancy can lead to significant obstetric complications. The results show a higher prevalence of eclampsia, postpartum hemorrhage, preterm birth, low birth weight, and anemia among pregnant teenagers. However, the rate of cesarean sections was found to be significantly lower among this group. Overall, the study suggests that targeted prenatal and preventive programs should be established to prevent teenage pregnancies and mitigate the associated negative consequences.

Financial Disturbance

Every individual requires basic needs such as shelter, food, and clothing as fundamental support and resources for survival. Similarly, young mothers need financial support to afford basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing for themselves and the baby (Wainaina et al., 2021). However, Nen and Hashim (2020), found that many of these adolescents face financial instability, largely due to a lack of savings to cover the costs and expenses of raising a child. Because these teenagers are often too young to work, they typically must rely on others, such as family members, for the necessities of life. In some cases, adolescents choose to work themselves to provide for their needs and those of their baby, with some even working overtime to save money for childbirth preparations. Despite this, pregnancy brings additional financial demands that are sometimes beyond what the parents can provide (Phiri et al., 2021).

Academic Disturbance

For the future of adolescents and the demands of youth in building strong nations, academics and education are essential for career development, particularly in professional settings. However, pregnant adolescents often face significant disruptions in their education. Tohid et al (2021), note that none of the young women in their study aspired to pursue further education; their immediate priority was working to earn enough money for survival and child-

rearing. These young women appeared self-reliant, independent and determined to maintain their pregnancies, raise their children, and support themselves and their families.

Nen and Hashim (2020) discuss cases where some teenagers were forced to drop out of college, despite their desire to continue their studies. This situation can have long-term effects, as a lower level of education often limits job opportunities. If this trend continues, there is concern that teenagers may face a bleak future due to their low educational attainment (Siong & Tharshini, 2020). Additionally, adolescents report significant challenges in finding employment. Many struggle to afford daycare, and some are denied job opportunities because of the need to care for their babies (Wainaina et al., 2021).

Effects on Psychological Well-being

Adolescents are often exposed to a range of problems that can significantly impact their psychological well-being. Nasir et al (2015), found that adolescents with low cognitive distortion, moderate levels of depression, loneliness, and self-esteem received only moderate social support. Despite this, they still lacked adequate support, making them vulnerable to worsening long-term depression and loneliness.

Other studies indicate that adolescents experience moderate to severe stress, manifesting in various emotional disturbances. Symptoms include depression, social isolation, difficulty sleeping, dry lips, excessive sweating, loss of appetite, headaches, anxiety, worry, negative thoughts, low energy, and unstable emotions. Psychological issues also include feelings of sadness, anger, fear, shock, stress, and guilt, often exacerbated by shaming (Samsuddin et al., 2019).

These issues can lead to severe consequences, including suicidal thoughts or the tragic acts of baby-dumping and infanticide. Wainaina et al (2021), found that participants who experienced embarrassment, shame, hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts highlight the critical need for support from their surroundings and effective coping mechanisms. Adolescents exposed to such psychological distortions require proper training in coping strategies.

Zaiden and Mahfar (2022), note that both managers and former trainees in institutional settings recognize that addressing depression and cognitive distortions is crucial for adolescents. Untreated depression and cognitive distortions can negatively impact both the mother and her baby, with risks including premature birth, low birth weight, and impaired intrauterine growth. Therefore, implementing various interventions is essential to support these teenagers and prevent further psychological and physical harm.

Coping Mechanisms among Unwed Pregnant Adolescents

Effective coping mechanisms are essential for adolescents to make informed decisions and handle life's challenges. These strategies help individuals navigate their difficulties and can vary widely in their approach. For instance, Arshadh and Muda (2020), found that unwed pregnant adolescents often employ coping mechanisms such as hiding their pregnancies from their parents and choosing to abort their babies. In contrast, Wainaina et al (2021), reported that some adolescents cope by isolating themselves, socializing with other mothers, or engaging in risky behaviors such as drug use and risky sexual relationships.

However, not all coping mechanisms are constructive or beneficial. Therefore, it's crucial to study how institutions can support adolescents in developing effective coping strategies. Nor et al (2019), identified three key themes in their research: transformation of self, transition to motherhood, and spiritual strengthening. These themes represent positive turning points in the adolescents' lives, leading to personal growth and positive change.

Phiri et al (2021), noted that adolescents often use a combination of emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies. Emotion-focused strategies include concealing the pregnancy, dropping out of school, self-isolation, and anger towards partners. Problem-focused strategies involve attending counseling sessions, participating in peer support groups, and continuing their education. Ahmad and Subhi (2020), emphasize that adolescent resilience is achievable through individual efforts, as well as support from family and the community.

Social Support

Humans are social animals as we rely on each other's presence to strive and survive through connection in supporting one another. According to House's theory (1981), social support is the experience and perception of being taken care of, having help from others available, and being a part of a network of supporting individuals. There are four domains of social support from this theory which are appraisal, instrumental, emotional, and informational. Appraisal support refers to the communication of expectations and feedback from others such as feedback from communities. Instrumental support is defined as having tangible assistance such as finances, tasks, and services. Emotional support can be explained as having a reliable alliance that is built on companionship, affection, and intimacy. Informational support refers to support through guidance and advice.

In the study by Baney et al (2022), it was found that pregnant adolescents receive both positive and negative forms of social support. Positive support predominantly includes emotional and instrumental support. However, informational support was found to be lacking, and appraisal support from the community was reported as negative. Similarly, Peter et al (2016), found that pregnant adolescents with anxiety reported lower levels of perceived social support across all domains, including affectionate, emotional, tangible, informational, and positive social interaction. Older teenagers perceived lower social support in emotional and informational domains, while those with low socio-economic status reported reduced support in the material domain. Additionally, women not living with a partner experienced less support in affectionate and positive social interaction domains.

Positive support in any domain is crucial for sustaining well-being. For example, Jun et al (2024), found that university students with high social support and self-efficacy had lower depressive tendencies, which helped them regulate negative emotions and improve their overall mental state. Conversely, poor social support among teenagers is linked to their coping mechanisms, resilience, and mental health (Saim et al., 2019). Nasir et al (2016), observed that adolescents exhibited moderate levels of loneliness, social support, and depression. The study highlighted a significant relationship between loneliness and depression, and between social support and depression, with loneliness being a key predictor of depression. Lonely individuals are more prone to depression, and those with inadequate social support are more likely to experience loneliness. Therefore, effective social support

from family and institutions is vital for improving adolescents' psychological well-being and fostering resilience.

Support from Family

In the context of family support, a study by Belladiena et al (2019), highlights that parents often become the primary decision-makers when their children become pregnant. Families are typically the first to provide essential social and financial support, which can lead to improved psychological well-being, a positive attitude, and a sense of acceptance among adolescents. However, pregnant adolescents may still experience anxiety, sleep deprivation, and feelings of being overwhelmed.

Conversely, Mohd Khir et al (2020), found significant negative relationships between social support from friends, family, and other important parties, and self-esteem with levels of depression. Higher levels of support from these sources, as well as higher self-esteem, were associated with lower rates of depression. This suggests that both social support and self-esteem are critical factors in influencing depression among students.

Nen and Hashim (2020), emphasize that support for teenagers should extend beyond mere protection to include financial assistance, counseling, and access to education. These resources are essential for helping adolescents build resilience and secure a better future. Additionally, Ahmad and Subhi (2020), found that support from family was perceived as a protective factor, helping informants better manage the challenges and pressures they faced.

Support from Institutions and Community

Apart from support from family and friends, communities and institutions also play a crucial role in helping adolescents care for themselves and their children. By offering support and developing strategies for better well-being, communities, and institutions can reduce stigma and assist adolescents in improving their prospects. For example, some informants reported that activities conducted while staying in shelters helped them build resilience against the difficulties they faced. This has been viewed as a protective factor that strengthens resilience (Ahmad & Subhi, 2020). Nordin et al (2012), found that 84% of adolescents experienced moderate to high levels of psychological well-being, suggesting that effective interventions from shelters may have contributed to minimizing their problems. Additionally, adolescents responded positively to modules provided by shelters, indicating a willingness to embrace change for the better (Jodi & Mansor, 2019).

Moreover, mothers who participated in mothers' groups outside their local area reported significantly higher scores in social capital, social support, and mental well-being compared to those who did not attend such groups. Engaging in local mothers' groups can provide valuable psychological support and social capital, positively impacting mental health (Strange et al., 2015). Laurenzi et al (2020), also noted that interventions had small to moderate beneficial effects on positive mental health and school attendance. Overall, social support for pregnant adolescents can be effectively delivered through various groups and methods. Developing comprehensive strategies to enhance their well-being is crucial for helping them succeed in the next stages of life.

Conclusion

In summary, the issue of teenage unmarried pregnancy is multifaceted and has profound effects on individuals and society. This article has explored various challenges associated with unmarried pregnancy, including family acceptance, social stigma, physical health impacts, financial difficulties, academic interruptions, and psychological well-being. These challenges can lead to significant emotional distress, such as anxiety, guilt, and hopelessness. Additionally, the broader societal implications of single parenthood, such as the alarming rise in infant dumping incidents and ongoing discrimination, underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that prioritizes the needs and rights of teenagers.

Families and organizations must actively support teens facing unmarried pregnancy by providing practical assistance. This includes promoting comprehensive sex education, expanding access to reproductive health services and contraception, and fostering supportive environments at home and in the community. Furthermore, combating the stigma and misconceptions surrounding single parenthood is essential to fostering acceptance, empathy, and understanding. Although the challenges ahead may seem daunting, we must remain committed to creating a society where every individual is empowered to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. By uniting in collective action and implementing targeted strategies, we can significantly reduce the incidence of adolescent unmarried pregnancies and build a more inclusive and hopeful future for all.

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