Reasons Behind the Availability of Family Support of Older Persons in Malaysia

W.A. Wan-Ibrahim and I. Zainab

School of Social Development, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia
Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract: Family support has been widely assumed to enhance well-being of older persons in society. Many older persons all over the world assumed to receive support from their family members as they become physically dependent. Research conducted in Malaysia suggests family is still the main source of support for the older persons. This article seeks to analyze the reasons why some of the older persons in Malaysia did not receive support from their family members. Data for this study were collected from a survey of 214 respondents aged 60 and above in rural areas in the state of Kelantan, Malaysia. Result of this article reveals that there are five reasons behind the availability of family support, which are whether the respondents having children in their family; whether the adult children leaving in the same locality with the respondents; whether the respondents having daughter with academic achievement; whether the respondents having neighbors nearby; and the pattern of living arrangement of older persons. In general result reveals that family members in the study area still continue to provide care and support for their aged dependents.

Key words: Family support • Population aging • Demographic change • Well-being

INTRODUCTION

Population aging represents a human success story of increased longevity [1]. Gerontologists and demographers recognize that the 21st century will be characterized by the aging of the world population. Although developed nations today have relatively high proportion of older people in the population, the most rapid increases are in developing world [2]. The older population aged 65 years and older was estimated to be 426 million in 2000 and 828 million in 2025 which will be 59 percent and 69 percent of this population are shared by developing regions respectively [3]. The widespread normative orientations in developed countries have been identified which stresses the importance of individuality and independence. Although the importance of family as the primary caregiver transcends culture, politics and economic circumstances worldwide [1], the general climate in Western Europe, for instance do not favor a high level of family support [4]. In developing countries research suggests that support from family members is very important for the well-being of older persons. Thus the availability of children in family has been an important issue for husband and wife in their marriage. Considering it’s important, many of the couples started to plan the number of children they will have as early as they get married. Although the cost of raising a child is very expensive, couples still choose to have children in their marriage. Most often the stability of marriage in developing countries very much depends on whether the couples have children or not in their marriage.

People choose to have children for various reasons. Besides the many advantages of having children in family, much of elderly parents assumed their welfare and well-being in later life will very much depended on their adult children [5]. This is particularly true in rural areas in developing countries where the majority of older persons do not covered by pension scheme. Most of these older
persons do not have the opportunity to work in a formal sector. The only opportunity for them is in unorganized sectors that could not give them the opportunity to receive pension allowance when they leave the economic activity. The income level the older persons get from such sectors is very low and most often insufficient for the adequate living. Following these circumstances, the availability of adult children in a family is paramount important. The older persons have to rely very much on their adult children for their old age security. This paper presents the extension of the result of a survey conducted to explore the availability of family support for older persons in rural Malaysia. During that survey, it was noticed that there were some of the older persons did not receive support from their family members. This article particularly seeks to analyze the reasons why some of these older persons were likely not to receive support from family members.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The data reported in this article is part of a larger study conducted on the rural elderly to explore the factors influencing the well-being of these elderly in rural Kelantan, Malaysia. One of the main objectives of the survey is to explore the family support for older person. This study used a mixed method design, which is a combination of the sociological method of face-to-face interviews and the anthropological method of participant-observation. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection. In order to understand the reasons that of why some of the respondents did not receive family support during the study, it is felt necessary to utilize information gathered from unstructured interviews with informants. Major data for quantitative analysis are derived from face-to-face interviews with 10 sub-samples. Information from key informants and field observation also important elements for the study. Population from which samples of the study were drawn, was older people aged 60 years and above in the district of Limbongan, Kelantan, Malaysia. A total of 214 older persons, were selected as respondents using simple random sampling technique.

The respondents in this survey are all from rural areas. Although the majority of older persons in most societies is elderly female, the majority of respondent is elderly man. The average age is 68 years, while the median and the mod of age are 67 and 60 years respectively. The age of oldest respondent is 95. Forty percent of the respondent is in 60-64 years category. The respondent currently married is 143, four divorced and 64 are widowed and three respondents are never married. In the category never married, there are two male and one female. Male respondents currently married outnumber female respondents (112 male compared to only 31 female respondents). In the global reality, older man are likely to be married, whilst older women are more likely to be widowed in most countries in the world [2]. The educational level is very low as all of the respondents are those who were brought up at the time before Malaysia gaining independence. The opportunity for rural population to get a better education at that time was very limited. The elderly woman who did not attend formal school is higher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Literature suggests that family members are the primary caregiver for most of older persons. Especially in developing countries where older populations are increasing very rapidly, families play a critical role [1, 6]. However, urbanization and particularly social change that have taken place in most parts of developing countries are seen to be the main factor of the weakening of family support to the older persons.

The traditional commitments of family will be eroded and will be replaced with the individualism. However, results of the study show that nearly all of older persons in study area received support from their families. It is estimated that 79.8% of respondents received support from family members. It was revealed that family members still continue to provide care and support for their aged dependents. A large majority are living with or near their children. Families, especially spouse, children and grandchildren were the main sources of support. Families were a major source of care. The remaining 20.2% reported did not get support prior to the study. To get a true picture of why these respondents did not get such support, this study conducted an unstructured interview with some of these respondents. It was found that the primary reasons for not receiving support were related to: (1) number of children in family; (2) place of residence of adult children; (3) academic achievement of adult daughter; (4) neighbor living nearby; and (5) living arrangement of older persons.
Number of Children in Family: Whether or not the respondents having children in their family is assumed as an important factor for the support the older person receives. In rural families in Malaysia, children are valued. They are valued as sources of support for later life. Wan Ibrahim et al. [7] in their study found one of the important factors contributed to the frequency of family support among the respondents is the number of adult children the older persons have.

The more adult children the older persons have, the more likely they will receive family support more frequently. Because of this, husband and wife see having children is an important agenda in family life and thus nuclear family is not a norm in Muslim society. Older persons are likely to live with their married children in the same household. Ullah [8], in his study in Pakistan points the institutionalized idealization of western nuclear family is not the reflection of the larger Pakistani society.

This is also the phenomenon in rural Malaysia. Although family support is widely accepted as responsibility of family members, in the future it is likely that with urbanization and social change, family support will decline as the number of children in rural families decreased substantially. With the success of fertility reduction programs, the family structure has been undergoing considerable changes and as a consequence, a source of support for rural elderly persons becomes problematic. If older persons do not have children, they will be facing problem in getting such support.

The majority of respondents agree that those who did not get support were related to the number of children they have. One of the respondents said “we should have many children as these children can contribute to parents while they grow up and more important they can become an important source of support for us later in life”. With the understanding some of children will eventually die before they reach middle age, we found the majority of families decide to have children as much as possible. During the study, we found that it was adult children, especially women who did most of domestic duties for their elderly parents. The sons give money for food and see the walls and the roof of the house of their elderly parents are kept in good condition. Indeed, adult children play an important role for older persons.

Place of Residence of Adult Children: Besides the number of children in a family nowadays is not as many as before, those who have many children also found it difficult to get such support from their children. Most of the adult children are not living together with their parents in rural areas. Geographical mobility creates barriers to adult children to provide support to their elderly parents. One of the older respondents said: “The problem is, however, not many of these children living in the village. Nowadays many of the young migrated to urban areas to get a better job”. Other elderly respondents added “having children nowadays do not guarantee having someone that can give support to their parents in times of crisis”. Whether or not adult children leaving in the same locality with the respondents is another factor related to the availability of family support. It was also found that some respondents did not have any children living nearby. Although they have children, their children were living quite far away. Nowadays many young people in rural areas moved to urban areas to seek a better life. Children who get better result in their national examination at primary level will also be given opportunities to enter boarding school in urban areas for their secondary or tertiary education.

Academic Achievement of Adult Daughter: Women are expected to make up the majority of the world’s older population [2]. Thus, we can expect that women play a critical role in the context of older persons. In many part of the world, women are the main caregiver for the elderly parents. Although sons are important in some cultures, it is woman who does most of the domestic tasks. Thus, the opportunity of getting sufficient support also depends on the adult daughter of the family. In study area in particular, women are the breadwinners of the family. It is women who do much of the tasks connected to family income. Out of the farm, especially in informal sector, it is also women who play the major role. Kelantan is the state where women play the major role, not only in domestic tasks, but also in much of the tasks outside the home.

In recent years the opportunity for women to get better education and better job is widely opened. Urbanization and increasing opportunities for adult daughter to get better education have altered the nature of family support. The opportunities for adult daughter to get better education have also provided them opportunities to be engaged in employment outside the home when she ended her higher education. As they become more educated and increasingly involved in employment, they tend to have fewer children and as a consequence, the availability of family care for elderly parents will be declining. The employment of women outside the home forced them to be less available in the household which is likely to reduce opportunities for adult daughter to be engaged in family support.
Neighbor Living Nearby: All informants agree that neighbors are also very important for support. In fact, besides spouse and adult children, neighbor is also an important element in an informal support network. Most often, in certain cases, particularly when adult children living quite far away from older persons, neighbors are more important than adult children in providing support and care for the elderly parents. To get such support from neighbors, the house of elderly respondents should be situated not very far from their neighbors. The older persons should have neighbors nearby; otherwise the older persons will not be getting support from neighbors. It was found, the house of some of the elderly was isolated that they have no neighbors who could come to act as support providers when needed. They were living alone or during the three week of the study, there were no neighbors come to visit them. Because of this, these elderly had limited contact with someone providing support.

Living Arrangement of Older Persons: Living arrangements is used to refer to the household structure of older persons, whether they live alone or with a spouse, with children or other kin. It sometimes involves families of different generation live together in the same household. Living arrangement of older persons is one more contributing factor related to the availability of family support. Lack of family members in the home can be a major barrier to family support. Adult children who live together in the same household with older persons will make older persons easier to get support. The size of rural households has decreased significantly in Malaysia because among other things, the members within a family prefer to live independently result in many older persons live alone. It was found that some 49.5% of respondents live in nuclear families, where about 10% out of this figure live alone. Without doubt, living alone result in certain barriers for older persons to get support.

CONCLUSION

Result of the study reveals that family members still continue to provide care and support for their aged dependents. A large majority of them are living with or near their children. Families, especially spouse, children and grandchildren were the main source of support. Although to obtain support is not difficult in rural areas in Malaysia and the majority of older persons in study areas received support from their families, data also show that there were some of the older persons did not get support from their adult children. Through in-depth interviews with informants, it was found that the primary reasons why the elderly respondents in study area did not receive support was because (1) whether the respondents having children in their family; (2) whether the adult children leaving in the same locality with the respondents; (3) whether the respondents having the level of academic achievement of the daughter; and (4) whether the respondents having neighbors living nearby; and (5) whether the respondents having living arrangement of older persons.

REFERENCES