The Availability of Family Support of Rural Elderly 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: Research findings outside Malaysia show the availability of family support has been widely assumed to enhance well-being of older persons in society. Although at the early stages of economic development, family-based support systems provide a principle source of old-age security, the responsibility of taking care of the aged dependants is gradually shifting to public support as the developmental process proceeds. Thus, because the level of economic development varies, the level and the nature of family support vary substantially between nations. Furthermore, family support is also likely to be different between urban and rural areas. The majority of the elderly in Malaysia are likely to reside in rural areas. This article seeks to analyze the availability of family support in rural Malaysia. Utilizing data from a survey of 214 respondents aged 60 and above in rural areas, this article presents evidence that the family support is very important for rural elderly in Malaysia. The majority of the elderly receive support from family members. Rural society until now still maintained a rather strong traditional value despite the eroding effects of the process of modernization and still provides the major social security for their elderly members. Data reveal that, to obtain support is not difficult for the elderly. Family members acknowledge the care of their elderly parents as their responsibility.

Key words: Family Support · Older Population · Population Aging · Demographic Changes

INTRODUCTION

One of the key themes in gerontological research and practice have been regarding the availability of support to older persons. In developing countries, support is a primary factor that enables older persons to survive and maintain their well-being. In developed countries public transfers play a significant role in supporting the older persons, while in most developing countries support for older persons is provided mainly by family members [1]. Thus, in developed countries, government plays a significant role in supporting older persons whereas in developing countries, the family is the main provider of care to older persons. Although the states have assumed primarily responsibility for the income and acute medical care for the aged in developed countries, most of the care of chronically ill older persons is still provided by family members [2]. One form of support, which is the focus of this paper, is family support. Research suggests that at the early stages of economic development, family-based support systems provide a principle source of old-age security. The responsibility of taking care of the older persons is gradually shifting to the public support as the developmental process proceeds [3]. This means older persons in developed countries frequently will be depended on government for support, whilst in developing countries; older persons have to depend on their family members for support. This is because, among other things, developed countries have more resources for the maintenance of the quality of life of older persons.

Research findings outside Malaysia show that the availability of family support has been widely assumed to enhance well-being of older persons [4]. Although through the history, the human population has lived a rural setting, nowadays urbanization has becomes a new trend all over the world [5]. Wan Ibrahim et al. [6] while discussing the provision of care to the elderly in Malaysia, stress the rural older persons still get support
and care from family members where they live together with their children until death. However, due to the modernization, urbanization and industrialization, the traditional function of the family in supporting the elderly persons in rural areas seems to be changing. Urbanization and industrialization process will reduce kin availability in family and as a consequence this process will pose problems on family support [7]. Kin availability refers to the number of family members who will potentially be available to elderly individuals when various forms of care are needed [8]. In many societies, kin availability is associated with family size of older persons. The rapid decline in fertility all over the world has greatly reduced the number of children in all families that can provide support to the elderly when needed.

Following the growing number of older persons in almost all societies in the world and as most of the support to older persons in developing countries is provided by family members, the availability of children has becomes an important issue. Declining in family size means the number of children per family become smaller. It is also means fewer children that can be hoped for taking care of the elderly members. A considerable number of adult children of the elderly are also moving away from rural areas to urban areas to search for better employment. If the number of children per family become smaller and the children available in family moving to urban areas, then, who will be taken care of the elderly in rural areas? Research suggests older persons turn first to the informal network of kin, friends and neighbors for social care [9]. Is it possible for family members in Malaysia continue to provide care and support to their elderly members? If not, to whom could these elderly depend for their old age security? Despite a large number of studies to explore the daily life of older people in Malaysia in recent years, many questions about the family support is still remain unanswered. The present article therefore presents the results of a survey conducted on the availability of family support of rural older persons in Malaysia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study focused on the availability of family support of the elderly in rural Kelantan, Malaysia. 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 in the late 1998 and early 1999. To explore the continuity and change, several field visits were also conducted between 2000 to 2005 and between 2006 to 2010. This study took place in the district of Limbongan, Kelantan, Malaysia. The district was chosen as a study area because the district has a large number of older population as compared to other districts in the state. Besides that, the majority of the population in Kelantan is living in rural areas and involved in the traditional agriculture sector.

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. In recent years, mixed method design is becoming increasingly recognized as a major design along with quantitative and qualitative methods. It is an integration of two major research paradigms; that is quantitative and qualitative methods, in a single study. Thus, this study employs both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection.

Major data for quantitative analysis are derived from face-to-face interviews, while data for qualitative analysis are derived from unstructured interviews with 10 participants. 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. Out of the whole population in the study area, a total of 214 older populations, were selected as respondents for quantitative analysis using simple random sampling technique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio Demographic Profiles: Thus study is conducted in Kelantan, Malaysia. The majority of respondents in the state are living in rural areas. The majority of respondent is elderly man. The average age was 68 years, while the median and the mod of age were 67 and 60 years respectively. The age of oldest respondent was 95. 40% of them were in 60-64 years category. The respondent currently married was 143, four divorced and 64 were widowed and three respondents were never married. In the category never married, there was two male and one female. Male respondents currently married outnumber female respondents (112 male compared to only 31 female respondents). The majority of male respondents still have spouse. Analyzing the educational attainment, the level of education of the respondents was low. More than half of
them were never attend formal school (57.5%). Although the number of respondents who attended formal school was quite big (42.5%), around one-third has only completed an elementary school level. At that time in Kelantan, not many people attended formal school beyond elementary school level. Those who completed an elementary school level at that time will have good opportunities to be employed in formal sectors as clerk, policeman, or even elementary school teachers.

The people in Kelantan are quite different from the people of other parts in Malaysia. Most of them are not difficult to help others. This situation is probably a result of socialization process whether through family in particular, or through the Islamic da’wah movement conducted by the state government in general. Many mosques and prayer houses were built everywhere in Kelantan. More importantly, the PAS-led government is always emphasizing Islam is a way of life that should be translated to every aspects of public life of everybody. Because of that, Islam has been a major social force in daily life in Kelantan. One of the situations where we can observe this phenomenon is in family life of older persons. The study revealed that all of older persons received support from their families. Data show that family members still continue to provide care and support for their aged dependents. As shown by Wan Ibrahim et al. [6] older persons in rural areas still get support and care from family members. Most of them live together with their children until death. Thus, in this case getting family support is seen not to be difficult in rural areas. Data also reveal that a large majority of the respondents are living with or near their children. To obtain support from these sources is not difficult for them. Families, especially spouses, children and grandchildren were the main sources of support. Family is a major source of care for this older respondent. In three weeks before the study, overall, an estimated to be 79.8% of the respondents received support from family members. The remaining 20.2% reported did not get any support at all in the weeks. Those who received support, they received all five kinds of supports closed to 90% or even higher, except in terms of “helping other than money or goods” (60.3%). In terms of financial support, from 214 respondents, 200 of them (93.5%) received this kind of support, while those who did not get support are not significant. Giving money to older persons is a common practice for the Malays in Kelantan. Even when a person comes to visit older persons, especially if the older persons are poor, before leaving the house, the custom is, the visitors usually leave some money. This is intended to lighten the burden of the elderly.

The Availability of Family Support: 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 [10]. This section analyzes whether the older persons are given support from family within a time frame of three weeks before the study conducted. This support is in the form of care as well as material support related to financial, goods and help for home repairing, house cleaning, including help to pay local bills.

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For the respondents who live alone and had children lived nearby, quite often they did not cook their own rice. At home these elderly respondents usually will be taking care for her/his grandsons while her/his daughter go shopping or cooking food in the kitchen. As an exchange, they are given rice and other daily needs. There are also respondents who get support from family members in the form of repairing the damaging in the home, such as repairing roofs or water pipes, replace wall or lamp that is not work. A total of 73.4% of them get this kind of support. In the form of help around the house and help pay local bills, the 87.4% and 84.6% of the respondents get these supports in three weeks prior the study. Only a small number of respondents did not get such support.

Informal unstructured interviews with several respondents show that they do not worry about the need of support from family. Most of them agree that their children and other relatives do not dare to neglect their elderly parents. This is particularly true because Islamic teachings places great importance on the family ties and taking care of elderly parents is one of the obligations in Islam. Since Islam was introduced, it began to have a powerful influence to the people in Malaysia in general and in Kelantan in particular. Most of adult children are trained to have a great respect for their parents. Inculcating Islamic values to the young children in family are given great attention. Adult children understand that the main duty of their parents, besides to provide food, shelter and clothing, is also to provide love, affection and
education for them. All of these eventually promote a powerful effect on the behaviors and attitudes of the young in the study area.

Informal unstructured interviews also reveal that most of older persons do not worry about the need of support from family because they have an alternative source of support. For the Malay community, they also can turn to pondok as an alternative source of support. Although Pondok, a cottage residence, is built for the purpose of Islamic religious learning, it is also an alternative living arrangement for Muslim older persons in Malaysia. Besides to provide a wide range of religious activities to inmates give care to the aged, it also functions as sources of support at old age.

CONCLUSION

Research findings outside Malaysia reveal that the availability of family support has been widely assumed to enhance well-being of older persons. This is particularly true for the majority of older persons in developing countries living in rural areas and engaged in the traditional agriculture sector. They do not covered by any financial support for old age security. The majority of the respondents did not used to be working in the formal sectors that give them the opportunity to get financial support from the government. This article seeks to analyze the availability of family support in rural Malaysia. It presents evidence that family is particularly important for providing support for older persons. The findings also indicate that despite modernization and urbanization process the families still maintained a rather strong the traditional values. The majority of the elderly receive support from family. As many of them are living in extended family, the majority of them receive support from family as the family still maintained a rather strong traditional value despite the eroding effects of the process of development and modernization. Clearly, families have provided the major emotional and material support for the elderly. Although most of older persons avoided moving into the homes of their adult children, the family still provided the major social security for their parents. The family members acknowledge the care of elderly parents as their responsibility. The article concludes that although the majority of the elderly in rural Kelantan do not face problem in receiving support needed, the government must develop suitable support systems to ensure its sustainability in the future.

REFERENCES