Experience of Domestic Abuse among Malaysian Elderly

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ABSTRACT

Domestic elder abuse is a social problem. In some countries, it had affected a large number of the elderly. Although this issue has gained prominence for over two decades, in Malaysia, the information on this is still scarce. Most of the elder abuse cases were not reported and concealed from public knowledge. Victims too, rarely report the abuses perpetrated by their own family members. This study aims to examine the experiences of the elderly in Malaysia who have sustained domestic abuse. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted on ten (10) people aged 60 year and above were residing in Rumah Seri Kenangan (an old folks home) in Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan. Each interview took an average of 15 to 30 minutes and was stopped when the information reached a saturated level. Observation on the physical characteristics of the elderly was done during the interview. The findings showed that majority of the elderly had experienced one or more abuses. The most reported forms of abuse were emotional and financial abuse. The main perpetrators were the adult children or their spouses. Through observation, the study found that the victims had similar characteristics namely physical disability and one or more chronic illnesses.

Keywords: Abuse, elderly, neglect, risks factors, perpetrator

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, an elderly person is also known as warga emas in the Malay language. The United Nations defines an elderly person as aged 60 year and above. Malaysia’s older population is ever increasing because of a longer life span due to the increase in quality of life, awareness on health as well as better medical facilities. At the same time, a decreasing birth rate has caused an aging population whereby the middle aged and older population...
have grown disproportionately compared with the younger population. Based on the experience of other countries, Malaysia will face the risk of elder abuse problems in the future especially after having achieved the status of an ‘old nation’ (Esther, Shahrul & Low, 2006).

At present, there is no specific definition of ‘elder abuse’ (also known as senior abuse) in Malaysia which has been categorised as domestic violence (Mohd Yusoff, 2009). Elder abuse, specifically abuse of elderly parents, is admittedly a social problem (Mohd Anshari, 2007) and a crime against society (Mohd Yusoff, 2009). Although innumerable researches have been carried out on this issue, elder abuse in Malaysia is still very much concealed and has not become a public issue (Abd Manaf, 2002). Elder abuse is not openly discussed by social activists or local academicians. There is also inadequate research on elder abuse in Malaysia. Incidences of abuse have not been completely exposed because of several factors such as problems in obtaining data, difficulties in identifying abuse cases and the reluctance of the elderly to expose their cases although they are the victims. The Malaysian public assumes that elder abuse is a family problem. Indeed, and the abuse occurs under a cloak of secrecy (Mohd Yusoff, 2010). The attitude of certain people in society that accept abuse as long as it does not involve violence (Tengku Aizan et al., 2010), is another reason why victims do not report these cases. The lack of awareness among the elderly about support groups for abuse victims is another reason why abuse cases (Pang, 2000) remain unexposed. Moreover, elder abuse does not receive much coverage in the mainstream media in Malaysia (Mohd Yusoff, 2009). There is no specific agency that collects data on elder abuse cases so data have to be collected from various agencies such as the Social Welfare Department, the police and the Ministry of Health (World Health Organization, 2006).

Elder abuse can be categorised as institutional abuse and domestic abuse (abuse perpetrated by family members). Studies have linked several factors as the cause of domestic abuse. The perpetrators, victims and society all contribute to the occurrence of elder abuse. Elderly who are at risk of becoming abuse victims by their children or family members are those who have one or more physical disabilities that impede them from being independent and depend on other parties such as their children or guardians (Dolan, 1999); this includes those with chronic ailments (Lachs, et al., 1997). Emotional abuse is rampant among the elderly who are dependent on the abuser compared with the elderly who suffer other types of abuses (Amstadter et al., 2010).

The types of abuses experienced by the elderly are physical abuses, sexual abuses, financial abuses or exploitation, neglect and abandonment by family members. In domestic abuse, potential abusers are adult children, guardians of the elderly or close family members. Among the main abusers
are the adult sons, spouses of the elderly (Dolan, 1999) and daughters-in-law (Soeda & Araki, 1999).

In Malaysia, the extent of the elder abuse problem is yet to be clearly identified and facts about elder abuse have not been made public. Hence, this study intends to examine the abuse experiences faced by the elderly in Malaysia. This study attempts to identify risk factors that lead to elder abuse as well as the characteristics of abuse victims. Although there are numerous risk factors concerning abuse, this study looks into factors related to physical disabilities and chronic diseases only. The elderly selected for this study are residents of Rumah Seri Kenangan in Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan, which is an institutional residence under the auspices of the Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Women, Family and Community. The abuse experience studied is domestic abuse perpetrated by adult children or family members when the elderly were still living with the family members or before they became residents of the institution.

OBJECTIVES
This study aims to explore the experience of domestic abuse among the elderly who reside in Rumah Seri Kenangan in Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan. It intends to identify risk factors as well as characteristics of these elderly victims. The types of abuse studied are domestic abuse namely physical abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, psychological or emotional abuse, neglect and abandonment or forced isolation perpetrated by adult children, guardians or family members when the elderly were still living with the family members or before they became residents of the institution.

METHODS
This study was carried out at Rumah Seri Kenangan in Pengkalan Chepa, Kelantan by examining the abusive experiences of the elderly living there. Ten elderly people aged 60 years and above were selected as subjects of the study. The two methods used were the in-depth interview and observation methods. The characteristics of the elderly, who were the subjects of the study, were pre-determined and referred to marital status, number of family members and the ability to communicate well. The interview relied on questions that were pre-formulated or arranged in a semi-structured format. However, it was an open interview process whereby the researcher was bound by the questions during the interview. The main question adduced was when and why they were in Rumah Seri Kenangan. All the answers given by the participants were recorded. The answers were reported ad verbatim so that the actual meaning is intact. In circumstances that involved informal language or local dialects, the translated meaning is stated in brackets. The observation method was used during interviews with the participants. The physical characteristics of the elderly and their feelings when giving information during the interview were noted in a record book. The observation was intended to get a better understanding of the characteristics of the elderly who had experienced abuse.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Participants’ Profile

All the participants in the study were Muslims, Malays and consisted of six females and four males. Gender and race were not the criteria for selecting the subjects for this study because the main criteria was that the elderly must have be married and must have either children, siblings or close family members. Additionally, participants should be able to communicate well or be capable of legible speech. The participants in this study were between 60 and 82 years old. All the participants lived alone without their spouses due to several factors such as death, divorce or just living apart. Only one participant had a surviving spouse who was living in Rumah Seri Kenangan. Once in a while he would go back to his home. Nine participants had at least two children and one participant, Participant 8, had 11 children (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marriage Status</th>
<th>No. of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Living apart</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60+</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Divorced / Widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>70+</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Divorced More than Once</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>70+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview

Mode of Entry into Rumah Seri Kenangan

Rumah Seri Kenangan is a residential institution made available by the Social Welfare Department for the elderly who fulfil certain entry conditions. The entry into this institution is usually through voluntary application by the elderly or based on recommendations from the Social Welfare Department. When a report is made, the officer from the District Social Welfare Department would carry out investigations and make recommendations to the State Welfare Department on whether to place the elderly seeking protection at Rumah Seri Kenangan. In this study, five residents had been staying at Rumah Seri Kenangan for less than a year, one had been a resident in the institution for more than 10 years. The study found that four participants had entered the institution voluntarily based on their own application while two others were there based on a recommendation by an officer from the District Social Welfare Department. Four participants were sent there by their family members such as their children, grandchildren or nephew and nieces that the elderly had cared for since young (Table 2).
TABLE 2
Period of Stay and Mode of Entry of Participants into Rumah Seri Kenangan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Period of Stay at RSK</th>
<th>Mode of Entry into RSK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>More than a year</td>
<td>Own application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Department of Social Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>More than a year</td>
<td>Own application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>Own application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Sent by family member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Sent by own children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Sent by own children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>Department of Social Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Own application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Sent by grandchild</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview

Reasons for Staying in Rumah Seri Kenangan

There are several reasons for the elderly to stay in Rumah Seri Kenangan. Entry based on recommendations from the Social Welfare Department is usually because the elderly face problems related to caregiving and physical disabilities or chronic diseases. As for voluntary applications, the elderly usually had their own reasons. In this study, all participants who took residence at Rumah Seri Kenangan had problems with their family members. Among the problems were the absence of children or family member who is willing to care for elderly with health problems and physical disabilities, reluctant or not willing to continue living with the children because they have been offended by their children or by their in-laws (either son or daughter in-laws) and a crisis occurred with their children. There was one participant who did not know why the grandchild sent him there. He still had a wife but nevertheless chose to continue living in Rumah Seri Kenangan (Table 3).

TABLE 3
Reasons for Staying in Rumah Seri Kenangan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Reasons for Staying in RSK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Health problems and physical disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Problems related to care giving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Crisis with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Physical disabilities/ Feeling offended by the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Family members do not want to care for them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Do not wish to inconvenience children and their spouses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>Uncomfortable with the care given by the in-law (son or daughter in-law)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Health problems and physical disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>Crisis with the wife/ abandoned by the wife and children/ caregiving problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>Do not know why he was sent there by the grandchild</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview
Participant 3 explained why she chose to live in Rumah Seri Kenangan:

*That child...there was a crises with that child that is why I came here. Well, I am easily offended. I am old now. Hence, if the child does not want to take care of me let me shelter with society then.*

Another participant stated that the reason for staying in Rumah Seri Kenangan was because he had an altercation with his wife and she chased him out of the house.

Participant 9 said:

*I had some money after my father sold the land. I have some money but not much, a little my father gave me and I gave it to my son so my wife got angry and we quarrelled. Then one night... we went to bed. Well, there was some misunderstanding. After that, she chased me out of the house.*

Participant 4 had chosen to leave the son’s home quietly without the son being aware of it. He did this because he was offended by his son’s frequent admonishment.

*I was not comfortable. I left quietly. No quarrels but I was offended by what he had said. It is normal but the way he talked sometimes is direct. “Father, you just watch the television all day”. I was hurt by that.*

Participant 8 explained how he came to be in Rumah Seri Kenangan although he did not voluntarily apply for it.

*Nobody suggested I come here. It is fine to stay here as I cannot see in one eye. I came because some chronic ailments. I went to the hospital and they sent me here because I have problems with my lungs and heart and swelling here and there. I am afraid I might become paralysed.*

**Experience of Abuse**

All the participants had experienced a situation that could be categorised as ‘abuse”, either intentional or unintentional and irrespective if the abuse was mentioned to other parties or not. Almost all the participants had experienced emotional abuse due to the attitude of their children or family members. Four participants had said that family members had financially swindled them (Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Type of Abuse</th>
<th>Abuser/Perpetrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Financial/emotional</td>
<td>Brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Financial/ Neglect</td>
<td>Brother and nephew/niece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Abandoned by family members/emotional/property</td>
<td>Wife and Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Nephew/Niece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Emotional / Neglect</td>
<td>Son and daughter-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>Emotional / Neglect</td>
<td>Daughter and son-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Emotional / Neglect</td>
<td>Wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>Emotional / Financial</td>
<td>Wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Wife and children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Interview*
Types of abuses experienced by participants could be seen from the results of interviews as shown below.

**Financial exploitation**

Participant 1 explained how her brother controlled all matters pertaining to finance and property inherited from their mother. The inheritance was not divided equally among the siblings.

As for now my brother,...my late parent's inheritance is there, leaving behind some land and property. The house, well, is only a low-income house. And the land is about 4 hectares, so I have about more than a hectare. My sister is in Melaka, and have 3 other younger siblings, my brother is privy to them but it has been more than 10 years now... because we have plans to sell, from just leaving it that way, it would be better we sell it so that we could use the money. Because my brother holds the trust for the land. If we were to ask him, he would say, “What do you want to do with the money?”. We would then ask what he would do with the money. You have everything, including money. Of course, we need money. We do not know, may be soon we would sick or something, we would need money too.

When before, when our late mother was around, she took all the jewellery, approximately thirty thousand (ringgit) or more. She said this division was for daughters only, there were 3 daughters. She said, “this for whom and whom.

So, err..this thing I will hold it in trust. When we ask him about it, he would say that someone had burgled his car and took the jewellery. You all imagine can you, he said ...impossible to leave it in a drawer, madness! You are a police officer, right? Would he leave it in the drawer? He said someone broke into his car. Nonsense we say, unless you would go and sell it.”

(verbatim transcription of interview data)

Participant 2 explained about the rent collection on his house that was accrued to her while she was staying in Rumah Seri Kenangan. All responsibility pertaining to collection of rent was handed over to her brother. In the beginning, her brother had handed over all the dues but as time went on she did not receive any of the collected rental monies due to her from her brother.

Money? There is no money, I am not holding any money, my elder brother lah. There are some working people living there. You have been getting the money for a long time, haven’t you? I do not know who has taken the money. This boy has a lot of siblings. He has not given any money. Only for Hari Raya. Nothing after that.

Participant 4 said that his pension gratuity enabled him to purchase two houses but both the houses were in his wife’s name. When he became paralysed, they separated and the wife carried on living in the house.
There was some (money) but it’s all finished now. Was (the money) given a lump sum. Bought two houses. My wife is staying there now. In my wife’s name, both the houses. What a waste.

Participant 8 explained how the proceeds from his business were given to his wife. However, his wife left him for another man and he finally divorced her.

I had left the money in her name. How stupid of me. Because of her, I had trusted women. The hundred and eighty thousand is mine”.

Another participant, who also had experienced financial abuse perpetrated by his child, said:

Had put the money in his account (child). If this case could be taken to court, I would do it because I am really angry with my child. It is as if I did not know anything about it (Participant 9).

Emotional abuse

Several participants narrated the emotional abuse they had undergone. Most of their out-pouring did not clearly mention that they were emotionally hurt but their narration indicates that they had chosen to live in Rumah Seri Kenangan because they were neither wanted nor appreciated by their children’s families or their family members. Participant 5, in expressing her feeling, said:

People do not want old folks. Now I am old, nobody wants to accept me so it is better to live here, Praise to Allah (Alhamdulillah). My prayers are complete; my food is taken care of. I am old now; whatever I do is not right. They are young so we do not see eye-to-eye.

Participant 8 explained that he is mentally tired and confused when thinking about his household.

When I think about my household, I get very anxious. If only I do not remember Allah the Almighty, I would get all confused. I am 61 years old now but because of my mental stress, I look 92. I do not mean to dig up matters but looks like I am a very unlucky man and husband. I am sad and I have not seen happiness. I do not know what happiness is.

The out-pouring of participant 4 about his feelings and emotions of being abandoned by his children him can be seen in his explanation below.

Sometimes we fight among ourselves, I feel hurt. There is tension in the air. I do not know, the children should come looking for me since I had left the house. I am depressed because it is as if I have been abandoned. That is why the children do not come to see me. I do not know, I feel that I have been abandoned.

Participant 6 felt hurt by the actions of his son and daughter-in-law who gave excuses for not wanting to care for her such as their pay was inadequate, no one to take care of her and a form of retribution because his mother (Participant 6) never took care of him when he was a child.
He said he would get a maid but could not afford one. He drives a taxi. He feels sad too. He says it is difficult; she (the wife) has to go and teach in the morning. My son did say “Mother did not care for me, so why do I bother”. I do not want to stay with him (son), stressful. Daughter-in-law, well.., she is only a daughter-in-law. She said that even when her mother comes here she does not give any money to her.”

Most of the participants in this study chose to live in Rumah Seri Kenangan because they did not want to inconvenience or create problems for their children’s family. Participant 8 said:

I have children. He said he has to think about it, he means me of course. Firstly, I want to go to my daughter’s, her husband is my son-in-law. So, no matter how good I am because of me they would fight. Hence, when I think about their household, I am stressed and depressed.

From the interviews recorded, none of the participants mentioned that they had been physically abused by their children or family members.

Disability and Chronic Diseases

Based on the observations during the interview, it was found the majority of the participants had physical disabilities. Three of them were wheelchair-bound while three had problems related to communication, eyesight and hearing. Out of ten (10) participants, seven (7) had chronic ailments such as diabetes, high-blood pressure, heart problems and asthma. Most of them were on a daily medication (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Physical Disability</th>
<th>Type of Disease Suffered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Amputated leg and on a wheelchair</td>
<td>Diabetes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Communication problem</td>
<td>High-Blood Pressure / Diabetes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Eyesight problems (blind)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Paralysed/ Communication problem/ on a wheelchair</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Hearing</td>
<td>High-Blood Pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Asthma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>High-Blood Pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Eyesight (blurred)/ wheelchair</td>
<td>Lungs/Heart/ High-Blood Pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Diabetes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview

The findings of this study had conclusively shown that elderly in Malaysia are not exempted from becoming victims of domestic abuse. Most of the elderly did not reveal their true feelings but rather chose to isolate themselves from family members by applying to become residents of the institution. Most of them...
had decided to continue living in Rumah Seri Kenangan until their demise rather than going back to live with their children. Their feelings were rather fragile. What their children do and say could hurt their feelings and they repress their emotions. To avoid these situations from continuing, most of these elderly take the initiative to live in Rumah Seri Kenangan. There are private elder care centres for those who could afford them.

This study believes in the Malay saying that ‘parents are able to care for a number of children but conversely, several children are not capable of caring for their mother or father’. The perpetrators of emotional abuse may not realise that their actions have an effect on their parent’s emotions. On the contrary, in cases of financial abuse, an absence of intention cannot be a legitimate reason for the occurrence of such an act. It is difficult to accept the fact that a child or family member of an elderly could commit financial abuse towards the elder without realising it.

The findings of this study are consistent with a study that found sons and daughters-in-law (Soeda & Araki, 1999) to be the main perpetrators of abuse compared with other individuals. The majority of the elderly in this study had physical disabilities that forced them to live with their children. In line with earlier studies (Lachs et al., 1997; Dolan, 1999), the present study shows that disability and chronic disease factors could become risk factors in cases of elder abuse.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that domestic elder abuse exists in Malaysia. Without an in-depth study involving the elderly, these facts would be difficult to substantiate since elder abuse is still not a public issue. Cases involving elder abuse have not been exposed widely to the Malaysian society. Only through in-depth interviews with elderly could the emotions and feelings of the elderly be understood. For those who are not courageous enough to take any action, they would continue to bear the burden of their emotions in silence. However, for those who unable to deal with emotional issues associated with living with their family would choose an old folks home as a centre of refuge. The study showed some participants wished to continue living in this institution until their last days. It was disappointing to find the elderly who have had many children whom they had laboured and cared for many years only to spend their last days in an elder care centre. Based on the findings of this study it is hoped that relevant authorities take appropriate steps to manage this social issue. There is a need for more studies and research in this area via research grants or funds. Awareness programs aimed at the public and elderly should be initiated and intensified. Education on the rights of the elderly and societal obligations, especially the children, needs serious consideration and implementation so that elder care centres and Rumah Seri Kenangan do not become centres of refuge for the elderly abandoned by their own children.
REFERENCES


