

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Addressing the Issue of Teenage Pregnancy in Malaysia: Elevating Self-Love

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the issue of teenage pregnancy among Malay young women, who are suggested to have the highest proportion of teenage pregnancy rates in Malaysia. Due to limited access to sex education and a lack of provision of reproductive health services, this has contributed to a lack of self-love, knowledge of the self and the skills of managing emotions among young people. This paper proposes an application of a new reflective cycle on self-love and self-knowledge which could help young people in managing the emotional impact of their decision making. Following preliminary consultations with NGO's and experts familiar with the issues facing teenage pregnancy in Malaysia, semi structured interviews were held virtually with seven pregnant Malay teenagers. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts yielded critical insights into the needs and emotional welfare of these young women. Overall, our findings suggest that Malay young people could benefit from the provision of sex and relationships awareness raising programmes and educational and creative self-love empowerment trainings.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Malaysia, Self-Knowledge, Self-Love, Teenage Pregnancy.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Teenage Pregnancy in Malaysia

This study addresses the issue of teenage pregnancy in Malaysia. The latest figures on teenage pregnancy in Malaysia are from 2017 and suggest that around 18,000 teenage girls in Malaysia get pregnant each year (Nagandla and Kumar, 2020). Research from University of Malaysia suggests that this figure is on the rise. (Said, 2019). Although the issue of teenage pregnancy is found across all races in Malaysia, research suggests that the majority of hidden or unwanted pregnancies were from the Malay population (Hartini, 2020; Azmi, 2021; Sharizat, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Indian, Chinese and Orang Asli<sup>2</sup> families were found to be much more accepting of the new arrivals and tended to bring up the babies within the extended family. There appears to be embarrassment, religious concerns and legal implications within Malay families (Hartini, 2020). The main concern here regarding Malay teenagers appears to be pregnancy out of wedlock, which, in Malaysia, is statutory rape (Fatimah, 2022; Jamaludin, 2013; Mohamed, 1993), if still a minor.

The social and health implications of teenage pregnancies include increased exposure to domestic violence, mental health disorders, low self-esteem, substance misuse, sexually transmissible infections (STIs), relationship

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication

<sup>2</sup> Indigenous people of Malaysia



difficulties, financial stress and homelessness (Azri, Adibah, & Haliza 2015, Mann, Bateson, & Black 2020). While teenage mothers are often motivated to do the best for their babies and to continue to develop themselves as parents and into adult life, they may be particularly susceptible to breaches of their rights to healthcare and education (Mann, Bateson, & Black 2020).

This all, therefore, suggests that the high rates of teenage pregnancy are due to many factors including limited access to information, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services, legal implications targeted at teenagers, religious and moral taboos, fear of family and society rejection, shame, knowledge of the self and the skills of managing emotions (Bakari, 2022), which all contribute to a lack of self-love.

The researchers suggest that to improve this state of affairs it is vital to build awareness among young people and their roles in society. In addition, parents, schools, the community, and other relevant parties need to help build a solid foundation amongst teenage boys and girls to learn about themselves along with skills of managing their emotions to enable them to experience happiness and fulfillment.

This study encompasses the principles of self-love and self-realisation. Hence, this research will provide an analytical base for self-love to help educate and empower young people to improve their life choices and to promote practicing self-love amongst adolescents and their parents.

### ***The Two Journeys: Self-realisation & Self-love***

Based on our investigation, and after close analysis of the issues of teenage pregnancy in Malaysia, we realise that self-knowledge and the practicing of self-love plays a vital role in teenage life.

The word 'love' seems to cover a wide variety of feelings, attitudes, and behavior. There are different types of love to consider such as charity, empathy, bliss, good-will, faith, respect, worship, devotion, understanding, amicability, passion, and compassion. Besides, love can be categorised in different forms that can cover from earthly love, to loving the nature followed by spiritual love. These categories could be mentioned as 1) Eros or Romantic love; 2) Philia or Friendship; 3) Storge: Familial love; 4) Agape: Universal love, or Divine love; 5) Ludus or Playful

love; 6) Pragma or Practical love; 7) Philautia or Self-love.<sup>3</sup>

Although self-love is a type of love which can be hard to define, we will try to provide some practical elaboration of self-love and how to practice it. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is no one set meaning to self-love. Self-love may even vary from person to person and there is little academic literature regarding its impact on mental health, which is somewhat disappointing (Irvani, 2007).

Self-love does not require validation or a demand from others. It lies within oneself, the only person who validates this feeling is the person themselves. Self-love means having trust, confidence, and pride in oneself and one's abilities. Practicing self-love means setting boundaries, being mindful, and removing toxic people from one's life. To develop self-love, seek a therapist, write in a journal, and listen to affirmations. (Fielding, Sarah; Mendez, Mayra, 2021). Self-love is about getting in touch with ourselves and our well-being. It is also about nurturing and growing the parts of ourselves that will lead to our happiness. Self-love is self-acceptance, self-forgiveness, self-care, self-control, self-discipline, self-awareness, self-compassion and having boundaries.

Self-Love is a lifelong journey, it is a dynamic process and it needs a life time of 'intention,' 'attention,' 'transformation,' 'action' and 'reflection'. This is why we define self-love as a journey. Reflection is important in this journey, it shows us the continual, never-ending cycle in the journey of self-love. Achieving self-love can provide us with happiness (Tajer, 2021).

The journeys of self-love and self-realisation, as previously discussed, are continuous. These journeys are a conscious set of steps for people to transform their lives from a negative place to a positive place (Hickson, 1997). For example, from unhappiness to happiness. The researchers are not suggesting that people are unable to love themselves, experience self-love or even achieve happiness without undergoing these conscious steps. These steps provide a five-step plan for making positive changes in one's life when faced with issues or difficulties that one is dealing with. When applying these five themes to the data the researchers made their own

<sup>3</sup> Sociologist Hendrick lists out six types of love in his Love theory which include eros (romantic), mania (possessive), ludus (game playing), storge (best friends), agape (unselfish), pragma (logical) (Hendrick and Hendrick, 1986). Although self-love was not included in Hendrick's theory, Underwood makes the point that self-love can be categorised as 'agape' or undemanding love (Underwood, 2020).

interpretations as to the existence of the themes and not from the conscious awareness of the participants. In other words, the authors did not check their interpretations of the data with the participants.

In the journey of the 'knowledge of the self' (self-realisation) the traveler needs to equip themselves with tools and means that help them elevate their state of being. Fig.1 shows a graphic demonstrating how the two journeys of self-knowledge and self-love are bound together in the roadmap journey of happiness. Although the participants had achieved and practiced certain elements of the five themes, none of them were consciously on the journeys of self-love or self-knowledge.

As we can see from the graphic below (Fig. 1) the first element in the discovery of self-love is a knowledge of the self. The three parts of this element are: position, weakness and strength. There now follows an examination of those parts in relation to our participants. The researchers will gauge the degree to which they find that they both have and recognise that the participants have a degree of self-knowledge.

Fig. 1 shows the reflective journey of self-love, which can lead to happiness and knowledge of the self. It starts with knowledge of self, then intention, attention, transformation, positive action, self-love, happiness, reflection and knowledge of self.

*Self-knowledge*

As discussed, self-knowledge is one of the first steps on the journey of self-love, it is a foundation stone

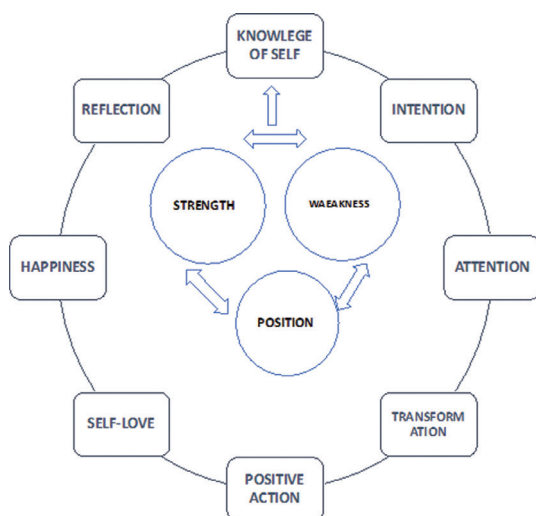


Fig 1. The Journey of Self-Love.

of self-love. To practice self-love, we need to know ourselves, knowing ourselves is all about knowing one's weaknesses, strengths and one's positions in life. It is a lifelong journey. Through reflection, we become aware of these weaknesses, strengths and positions in life.

Based on the above, the path of love requires us to embark on a spiritual lifelong journey. This journey involves various stages and tests that will bring about maturity and growth. The first fundamental stage is this idea of self-knowledge or self-realisation. This is realising who one is, where one stands, and what is one's relation to one's surroundings. (Tajer, 2021)

Human beings can reach self-awareness at the end of this journey of self-knowledge. To clarify one needs knowledge of the self to become self-aware. Knowledge is the sum of what one has found out, while awareness is the ability to directly perceive, feel and therefore be able to act on one's self-knowledge. Before this, they stand at a distance from themselves, outside themselves, and as such their self-love is only partial. If the journey is to have some direction or some purpose, it is important that the seeker begin their struggle with some initial discovery of their identity. They need this awareness of who they are to have a conceptual knowledge of the goals towards which they are moving.

This is the first step in the journey of the self-love.

To assist us in this endeavour we have interpreted the interviews with our teenage participants in the categories of position, weakness and strength.

*Position*

Being aware of our circumstances in life such as our financial situation, legal situation, social status, age, and so on, provide us a framework from where we focus our energy. For example, if their position is that they have no money, they may be unable to pay fines or other financial obligations that are imposed on teenage mothers for getting pregnant. If we are in a country on a temporary visa, we may not be able to work. If we are a child or are an underage person, then it is usually the parents that would make decisions for us. If we are unemployed there may be certain things that we cannot afford. If we suffer from mental health problems, we may not have the ability to stand up for our well-being or access certain state provision. If we are shy, depressed, emotionally unstable or lack courage for example, we may not be in a position to deal with things that are affecting us. So, having knowledge of our position helps us in our journey of self-love and what we need to work on to achieve

this. The process of acquiring this self-knowledge is not always easy and there are many ways for us to gain this knowledge including mind maps, self-reflection, talking with friends, counseling, searching the internet and reading self-help books.

#### *Weakness*

We all have different strengths and weaknesses. As part of our development not only do we need a knowledge of these, but also to transform and build on them. Having knowledge about weaknesses allows us to focus on developing them into strengths. Turning weaknesses into strengths it is an important part of our self-love process. There are many ways to strengthen our weaknesses including training, reading, reflecting on them, journaling, making new friends and other ways to build our knowledge and skills. Strengthening a weakness can be as simple as transforming a destructive emotion into a positive one, such as the ability to transform fear into courage.

#### *Strength*

Knowing what we are good at, where our strengths lie and what we already do well allows us not only to refine these attributes but also to focus our energies in more important directions. For example, if we are good at communicating, we can use the skill to express our needs in gaining the skills required to build our weaknesses. We may be physically strong but emotionally weak, therefore in this case we spend time strengthening our emotions rather than our bodies.

#### *Intention (to act)*

The intention to act is different from actually acting. The intention comes before the action, the action does not always follow the intention. So, the first step into doing something is having a desire to do that thing, the second step is either doing it or not doing it. For example, we may intend to ask our boss for a raise, when approaching him or her, due to lack of courage, we might change our mind and not ask. In the context of the self-love journey intention to act is not enough. For example, for a teenage mother to say that she will bring her children up differently than her parents brought her up, is an intention to behave in a particular way, it does not mean that she will actually do this.

#### *Attention (self-awareness)*

Self-awareness is about being present, paying attention. It is about how and why we are paying attention. Paying positive attention is achieved through an attitude of kindness and curiosity. It is action rather than passive resignation. Positive attention increases clarity and the

effectiveness of how we deal with day-to-day life. This use of attention is similar to mindfulness stress management techniques. They enrich us in all our good, bad, big and small moments of life.

#### *Transformation (negative to positive)*

The ability to evolve, to change or to transform is an important human attribute. It allows us to adapt and deal with new circumstances, overcome difficulties we might face and find solutions to barriers that are put in our way. There are many ways to transform, what works for one person may not work for another, we have to find our own path. Some people when faced with a crisis, freeze and unable to act. In these situations, it is important to reduce the panic one is feeling. This can be as simple as taking some deep breathes, changing one's attention, drinking a cup of sweet tea or talking through the problem with friend. Once we have broken the paralysis, we are then in a position to attempt positive change. It is important to remember that energy never dies, it is just transformed from one type of energy to another type of energy. So, in this context feelings are a type of energy that can be transformed from negative feelings to positive feelings.

#### *Positive action (doing/courage to act/empowerment)*

Not all actions are voluntary or even conscious but, in this context, as noted in the earlier section on intention, above action comes after intention. The courage to act on our intentions is a form of empowerment. For this to assist us in our journey of self-love the actions we undertake need to be of a positive nature. Having an intention to act in a negative way and then performing this negative action does not help us on the journey of self-love. For example, hiding away in a cave without food or water is a negative action and detrimental to our health. So not all actions are positive and assist us on the journey of self-love.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***The concept of Self-love and its need***

As noted by Irvani in 1.2. above, there is no one set meaning to self-love, it may even vary from person to person and there is not much academic literature regarding in impact on mental health. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise the available theories or interpretations of its definition. Sociologist Hendrick lists out six types of love in his Love theory which include eros (romantic), mania (possessive), ludus (game playing), storge (best friends), agape (unselfish), pragma (logical)

(Hendrick, 1986). Although self-love was not included in this theory, Underwood makes the point that self-love can be categorised as 'agape' or undemanding love (Underwood, 2020). However, there are more Ancient Greek concepts for love such as: 1) Agape – love of God for person and of person for God; 2) Eros: sexual love or intimate love; 3) Philia: affectionate regard friendship; 4) Storge: Familial love; 5) Ludus or Playful love; 6) Pragma or Practical love; 7) Philautia: self-love. Self-love does not require validation or a demand from others. It lies within oneself, the only person who actually validates this feeling is the person itself (Boas, 1972).

On the contrary, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud describes self-love as a form of narcissism, he goes on to argue that it has a direct negative correlation with love of others. He wrote in his book, on *Narcissism: An Introduction*, "the more of the one (ego-libido) is employed, the more the other (object-libido) becomes depleted" (Freud, 1914). While it is important to take into account Freud's theory, it is also necessary to recognise that self-love and selfishness are not the same. This is why it is important to make a clear distinction between self-love and selfishness as it is a common misconception that selfishness lies within self-love when in reality self-love is a compassionate and empathic trait. Selfishness, on the other hand, is a trait that lies parallel to narcissism. Narcissists tend to use the people in their lives for their own benefit (Campbell et al., 2002).

As one delves into the meaning of self-love, it is also crucial to differentiate it from self-esteem, as they are two separate things despite being very similar to one another. To practice self-love is to love yourself despite your imperfections or flaws. It is to accept your failures and successes as part of life; to be proud of yourself despite your mundane failures, whereas self-esteem is its more conditional counterpart (Irvani, 2007). A person would put value into their self-esteem when they put positive or negative views towards it depending on the events that happen to them. Both the level of self-esteem and self-love in oneself can affect a person's lives, whether it be in terms of their personal experiences or in their relationships with others.

A Delphi study on the consensus definition of self-love conducted by Jack E. Underwood found that self-love is both an individual and mutual experience in that certain aspects of a person's self-love may be affected by his or her individual attitude and other aspects of it would be changed based on his or her relationship with others (Underwood, 2020). Some may argue that personal upbringing has a great effect on a person's level of

self-love as well (Garfield-Kabbara, 2014; Toomey, 2014; Underwood, 2020). Children often mirror their parents while growing up as they spend most of the time with them during these early stages. In many patriarchal societies which still exist today, fathers are often emphasised as the leaders in a household therefore they have a big influence over the children. Garfield-Kabbara suggests that this is the reason why fatherless children, daughters in particular, have less validation on their own self-worth because of their father's absence (Garfield-Kabbara, 2014).

In a way, a low level of self-love can be related to teenage pregnancy, which may involve teenagers from broken homes or teenagers without fathers. Garfield-Kabbara also emphasises in the same paper on how a person's low level of self-worth and self-love can greatly affect their lives as a whole when she writes, "My father's rejection of me led to a deep unconscious sense of feeling unworthy of love and belonging that radiates throughout the rest of my life and my identity" (Garfield-Kabbara, 2014). Sometimes, teenage mothers experience a lack of self-love or self-esteem during their pregnancies because of the shame they feel, rooted in society's stigma against unwed mothers. This stigma is particularly strong in Malaysia.

The question that arises now is, how does one cultivate a higher level of self-love? Fielding and Mendez write some ways to practice self-love including practicing self-care, becoming mindful, questioning negative thoughts, setting boundaries, avoiding comparisons between oneself and others and removing toxic people from your life (Fielding & Mendez, 2021). Toomey suggests that taking care of one's well-being starts from the essentials in life such as nutrition, sleep, happiness, productivity and forgiveness (Toomey, 2017). All these simple steps can be a steppingstone to a greater level of self-love. It all starts with the act of self-acceptance and realisation (Garfield-Kabbara, 2014).

It is important to note that self-care is somewhat tied to self-love, as it entails nurturing oneself. In the Delphi study conducted by Jack E. Underwood, the research paper itself did not intend on focusing on the topic of self-care. Yet there was a notable amount of mentions regarding the topic from the panel in their findings, which gave emphasis on how much it relates to a person's level of self-love (Underwood, 2020). In "Daring Greatly," Brené Brown gives a description of 'love', "Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them—we can

only love others as much as we love ourselves” (Brown, 2012). This can be applied to how a person can view his or her self-love. It is not something that is set in stone, stagnant. Self-love is something that is to be nurtured and most importantly, as Brown points out, we can only love others as much as we love ourselves. If we lack self-love, then how can we cultivate healthy relationships with those around us? As mentioned above, there is no sufficient explanation regarding self-love in the literature, however, this paper attempts to provide a practical explanation regarding the journey of self-love. Furthermore, this study investigates how much this concept applies among unmarried young women in Malaysia, for this purpose our target was teenage pregnant girls in Malaysia and exploring their experience and knowledge about self-love. To enable us to embark on this research it is important that we set the context of teenage pregnancy in Malaysia.

### ***Teenage Pregnancy in Malaysia***

A teenage pregnancy is defined as pregnancy occurring among teenagers aged nineteen years or younger (Malaysia: UNICEF Malaysia Communications, 2008). Pregnancies among teenagers have become a common issue in today’s global society. In Malaysia, the numbers of teenage pregnancies are increasing. Statistics from the Department of National Registration of Malaysia show that in 2017 there were 4,992 illegitimate children born to teenage mothers aged eighteen and below (Joibi, 2018).

Marriage is very important in terms of women giving birth in Malaysia and when a pregnancy happens outside of wedlock it is considered to be against the social norms and brings shame and disgrace to the family (Saim, 2014). The unmarried mother is perceived as being an immoral and an ill-mannered person (Silverman et al, 2001), sinful and unacceptable (Macleod & Weaver, 2003).

Pregnancies among teenagers can lead to various negative consequences including: becoming a school dropout, undergoing abortions, infanticide, becoming a victim of child marriage, child sexual grooming and baby dumping. (Hartini, 2021)

Many people, young people in particular, appear to have little knowledge about safe sex and contraception in Malaysia. They live in world of ignorance showered with mixed adult messages about sex, leaving unanswered questions, embarrassment and silence. “The result is not less sex, but less protected sex” (Mawer, 1999).

This study is exploring a path that empowers people, promote the practice of self-love, assists in managing emotions and improving decision making of young people on the one side, while navigating the legal, political and religious implications on the other. This study is aiming to fill the gap and improve life chances, the quality of relationships, building of self-love, elevating knowledge of the self and improving skills to manage their emotions. In this context the study examined young people’s reports of positive and negative emotions related to self-love and self-knowledge.

The authors believe that it is important to address self-love principals among young people and how they might practice it. As Bransen (2015) suggests, self-love is a precondition for self-knowledge and that self-knowledge is an ordinary practice of rationalising and appropriating actions. Exploring strategies in communication and learning skills in how to manage their emotions would assist parents and young people in understanding and assisting their children, while helping them to manage their emotional health and how to practice self-love. This research is a bridge to a theory of how young people can learn how to practice self-love.

The authors found no published studies on how to build the awareness of self-love, and the skills of managing emotions among young people, the role of parents, schools, the community, religious institutions and the media about teenage pregnancy in Malaysia, hence the importance of this research.

### **Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval for this study was provided by HELP University. Essentially, we assured that all of our research participants were able to voluntarily participate and were able to leave at any time without having to provide any reasons. The research process sought to do no harm and to empower the participants. All the participant’s names have been changed, including any traceable information to protect their identity.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this qualitative exploration study, seven young unmarried girls (three of which were pregnant and four who had recently given birth), who were residents in a nongovernmental shelter based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, were interviewed. These residents were all aged over 17, two of them were aged 20 and 21 years

respectively. The authors included the two elder girls as they were treated the same way as the younger ones by the shelter. They were all unmarried Muslims. They all had different life experiences and were at different trimesters. We interviewed these seven residents using a video call via the Zoom platform during the COVID pandemic lockdown (Hickson *et. al*, 2022). These interviews explored challenges faced by the institutionalised young unmarried women who had decided to continue their pregnancy. We examined the data using a thematic analysis and compared them across the seven cases. The themes we started with were position, weakness, strength, intention, attention, transformation, positive action and empowerment. After our initial pass of the categories, we took out empowerment as we felt this was too close to one of the other categories: positive action.

This presented us with our final five thematic categories of self-knowledge, (position, weakness and strength), intention, attention, transformation, and positive action to work with.

### **Selection of participants**

The researchers opened up a general call for participants to be included in this research through existing contacts, web searches and posting on social media groups. We eventually chose to target a non-government shelter for Muslim young unmarried pregnant girls. The Director of the shelter gave the researchers open access to interview any of the shelter residents who were happy to be involved in the research.

The participants of this research lived in a non-government shelter for unmarried pregnant Muslim teenage girls. The shelter was set up and run by a social activist who found herself helping single mothers at her own house:

*"I'm doing social activist work since 2009. But this house only 3 years, since 2019 January. Because I started from my own house. I kept 2 single mums one time, 2 single mums one time in my own apartment. Can't take too many requests. There's still requests to be with me, to stay with me, to help them. So, I decided to open this house, at least I can keep more than 15 persons at one time. We have so many waiting lists, I think about 7 to 9 waiting list, but we can't accept all because of the accommodation. I can show you. This is how it looks like. they have bed"* (Bainun, 2021).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication

The teenage residents of the shelter had basic living conditions provided. This included their own bed, their own clothes rack, and access to YouTube until 11 p.m. They also had to join their religious classes and basic educational classes. They had counselling sessions provided. The main rule for being allowed to enter the shelter was that the parents must be informed; they must know where their daughters are. The residents were allowed up to thirty minutes per month to speak to their parents, other than that they were not allowed to have their mobile phones or other communication devices on them. Following birth, to leave the shelter, their parents had to pick them up.

The researchers proceeded to interview seven of the young women who were pregnant and living in the shelter about their perceptions of self-love in relation to their feelings about their current situation.

All of the research participants had had at least one boyfriend in the past and most of them became pregnant by said boyfriend. Only one participant involved, revealed that her pregnancy was a result of rape, "I was a victim of rape but I didn't lodge any reports to the police.... it was a stranger." The event was described as traumatising for the participant, and when asked whether she would tell her child of the incident, she said, "I would probably tell her; it might take time for me to explain to her but I would try to slowly talk to her about it—I don't know how to tell her about the true incident." This inhibition and lack of communication, between everyone concerned, about the subject of sex and relationships appears to be a major contributing factor in the high rate of teenage pregnancy amongst Malay Muslim young women.

### **Data collection**

We prepared in advance of our interviews an interview guide containing a list of questions covering the range of issues we were interested to explore with our participants. We used the guide to structure our interviews, but otherwise sought to keep the conversation free flowing, allowing for a degree of spontaneity.

The interviews were conducted virtually, over the video and audio-conferencing application Zoom. At the time of our interviews, a nationwide Movement Control Order, imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, prevented us from travelling to interview the participants in person.

Four of the interviews were conducted in English while the remaining two were conducted in *Bahasa*

*Melayu* (Malay language) as the participants were more conversant in that language. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and were transcribed and/or translated into English as necessary.

### **Data analysis**

Transcripts were analysed collaboratively by both members of the research team.

It took the researchers several steps to analyse the data. Initially, we transcribed the recorded interviews, we then translated the interviews that were in Malay language to English. We then checked the interviews for accuracy. Following this we familiarised ourselves with the interviews, and then went through the transcripts looking for six themes that we had categorised. We put quotes from the transcripts into the categories related to the six themes after which we reflected on those six themes and brought them down to five themes. We then checked through and discussed our interpretations with each other. Finally, we applied the principles of self-love to the data.

As discussed in this paper, self-love is a journey that people undertake in their lifetimes. This can be a conscious or unconscious journey. It would appear that some people are naturally inclined towards self-love whereas the majority of us have to make conscious decisions about applying the principles of self-love to our lives. Indeed, some people, go through their lives without experiencing self-love at all. During the data analysis process, we looked for signs where we could see our research participants practicing self-love, whether that be consciously or unconsciously.

There can be many barriers to successfully practicing self-love. These barriers can include internalised oppression, external oppression from parents, colleagues, peers and the authorities. The authors believe that the way to overcome all of these oppressions is through the conscious awareness and practicing of the principles of self-love, which we have outlined in this study.

The researchers utilised the following five concepts in the data analysis:

- 1) Self-knowledge (of weaknesses, strengths and positions in life)
- 2) Intention (to act)
- 3) Attention (self-awareness)

- 4) Transformation (negative to positive)
- 5) Positive action (doing/courage to act/empowerment)

### **Results, Discussion and Recommendations**

We start this section with an exploration of the degree of self-knowledge of the participants:

#### **Sarah**

##### **Self-knowledge**

###### **Position**

**Sarah** was a victim of rape, which caused her to suffer anxiety and depression. This was exacerbated as she had a difficult relationship with her friends and family. The only person she could go to for support was her grandmother.

*"I was a victim of rape ... because I was scared and I didn't have anyone else ... it totally scared me. Depression, anxiety ... I'm not too close with my mother, even my father. Even my siblings too. I was only close with my grandmother ... I bottle up my feelings. I don't even tell my friends because I don't trust anyone. They're all so toxic; family, friends."*

Sarah recognises her position of being raped and not very close with her parents. She demonstrates a degree of self-love by being able to get support from her grandmother.

###### **Weakness**

Despite Sarah recognising some of her emotional weaknesses, she is currently unable to turn these into strengths. She has difficulty with authority figures such as the police and even her parents. In addition, she tells us that she also has difficulty in managing her physical desires.

*"I didn't lodge any reports to the police ... I considered like giving [my daughter] up for adoption but my family doesn't want me to do that." "However, as I said, once you start doing something like sex, you'll start getting that itch to do it more and more."*

###### **Strength**

Sarah understands the basic concept of self-love, can speak both Malay and English, tries to get support from her parents and take some steps in self-care.

*"Self-love is accepting yourself and forgiving yourself. To forget the past and to love yourself more than others ..."*



*[I'm], bilingual ... I told my parents that I was a victim of rape ... I always mark on a calendar my period dates."*

Sarah recognizes her position in life and is thus able to get support. Although she recognizes some of her weaknesses, she is unable to turn them into strengths and continues to have difficulty with authority figures.

### **Intention (to act)**

Sarah works best when she is given motivation and support from other people and not when she feels she has been judged by them. She has made decisions to bring up her own daughter differently than how her parents brought her up, giving more love and attention, so that her soon to be baby girl did not repeat the same mistakes as she did.

*"[I can talk to people] when someone had the same situation as me and don't judge my story. They give me motivation and support ... of course I will teach [my daughter about sex and relationships] because I don't want it to happen to my future daughter. I don't want the same mistakes to be repeated ... I think I will give more attention, give more love with my future daughter ... I won't even do the same things my parents did with me because I know what I feel so I don't want my future daughter to feel the same way towards me."*

Sarah has not shown an ability to apply principles of self-knowledge in her life. Although she is able to act in variety of situations, generally she does it under guidance.

### **Attention (self-awareness)**

Sarah is fully aware of her situation, pain, anxiety and depression. She also understood her lack of connection with God, parents and friends. There is evidence that she uses this self-awareness to make improvements in her life and follow the path of self-love.

*"I was a victim of rape but I didn't lodge any reports to the police ... It totally scared me. [I suffered] depression [and] anxiety ... They [her grandparents] gave me support, self-love, emotional love ... I feel disappointed with myself because I think I wasn't really connecting with God and I didn't get much attention from my parents. I got most of the attention from my grandparents. I was in pain."*

### **Transformation (negative to positive)**

Sarah's experiences of rape and pregnancy have had a transformative effect on her. She has built bridges with her parents and has a positive vision for her future. One could argue that she has learned from her experiences and manage to turn what was negative into a positive.

*"[In future I might better protect myself against rape] by not living in crowded share homes. I would probably find a place of my own or just opt to not move away from my hometown [and] just live on with my parents ... I feel grateful because they [family] are accepting of me and my baby even though at first, I was trying to convince them to put the baby up for adoption ... After the incident, my relationship with my whole family slowly became stronger, mainly with my mother. My relationship with my father improved a bit."*

### **Positive action (doing/courage to act/empowerment)**

Sarah demonstrated courage by telling her parents that she was a victim of rape. This was a risk as such communication is generally taboo in Malaysia.

*"I told my parents that I was a victim of rape."*

### **Philafah**

#### **Self-knowledge**

##### Position

**Philafah** was from a broken home. She was brought up by her father and has not seen her mother since she was a small child. She was unable to share much with either of her own parents. Likewise, her own child's father has been absent and she does not feel that he wants to take any responsibility for it.

*"I felt sad that he didn't want to take up any responsibility [for the child] ... I don't really share much about that with my father ... I haven't been in contact with her [my mother] since I was a little kid."*

##### Weakness

Philafah understood the principles of safe sex. Despite this knowledge she still engaged in unprotected sex which cause her to get pregnant. Although risk taking can be seen as a sign of courage, she did not mitigate these risks which the authors feel is a sign of weakness.

*"I understood what [safe sex] was...[but] "I felt that I wanted to try out new things... "I knew that [I could get pregnant] but I still wanted to take the risk."*

### **Intention (to act)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to intention to act.

### **Attention (self-awareness)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to attention.

**Transformation (negative to positive)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to transformation.

**Positive action (doing/courage to act/empowerment)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to positive action.

**Donna**

**Self-knowledge**

Position

Donna was 17 years old when she became pregnant. Her mother reported her to the police and she was held in custody. Despite living with her boyfriend and not having relations with any other men, her boyfriend denied any responsibility for being the father of the child. She still wanted to marry him but her parents would not let them because they had different religions and she was underage. She was thus forced to separate from her boyfriend and was moved into the hostel.

*“When I was held at the police station, I still had my phone with me and I tried calling my boyfriend. I asked him to get me out of there. I was scared, I just wanted to go home. Then my boyfriend said to me that the baby was not his. He didn’t claim it to be his child. This came out of the blue and I thought to myself, “Why doesn’t he want to take responsibility for the child when I was living with him the whole time?” It was just so sudden. We have different religions and my mother didn’t allow us to get married because of that reason as well as the fact that I’m underage.”*

Weakness

Donna, once she became pregnant felt that she had lost control of her life and was forced to do things she did not want to do. As written in the ‘position’, Donna was forced down a particular path when her mother reported her to the police. It was at this point that the authorities and her parents took control of her life.

*“Actually, it wasn’t my choice to break things off. I was forced to do so.”*

Strength

Before becoming pregnant Donna was an independent girl working and living on her own. She also demonstrated courage by initially telling her mother about her pregnancy and then forgiving her mother for reporting her to the police.

*“He [her boyfriend] first approached me while I was working [and living on my own], after I ran away from home. Then after the COVID-19 pandemic hit and stores had to close down, I didn’t have anywhere to go so I asked for his help. At that point, we both had a mutual romantic interest for one another so we just lived together. [After the police came and I was arrested] I was sad because I had already made plans to—how do you say it—I was already planning on marrying him because I had that positive pregnancy test. I really didn’t expect my mother to file the police report against me because I genuinely thought her intentions were to just come see me and my boyfriend. I have always accepted my mother. I think that she did the police report because she loves and cared for me.”*

**Intention (to act)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to intention to act.

**Attention (self-awareness)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to attention.

**Transformation (negative to positive)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to transformation.

**Positive action (doing/courage to act/empowerment)**

Donna had the courage to leave home, get a job and her own place to live. She also found strength to tell her mother about her pregnancy despite the probable repercussions that this could bring. It was unfortunate for Donna that the result of her positive action was curtailed once her mother had reported her to the police.

*“I ran away from home [before I was pregnant, I wanted to earn money for myself and my family] and at the time, I was living with my boyfriend and my mother only found out because I called her.”*

**Olivia**

**Self-knowledge**

Position

It appears to the authors that Olivia feels that ignorance would have kept her away from indulging in sexual relations. She blames knowledge of sex as the cause of her pregnancy.

*“I feel like if I did know more, I wouldn’t be in the situation right now [being pregnant] I’d rather just not know about sex at all. Because after I finish school, I started working.*

*My knowledge about sex in general, threw me into this situation."*

Olivia does not appear to have learned from her experience of pregnancy in that she still believes that people should not undertake any sex and relationship education before they engaged in it.

*"I won't teach my daughter about that [safe sex]. At least not until I'm getting married or old enough to get married. Because my mum accepts the baby and my mum agrees with the same thing that my daughter shouldn't be taught anything about sex and relationships until she's getting married."*

#### Weakness

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to weakness.

#### Strength

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to strength.

#### **Intention (to act)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to intention to act.

#### **Attention (self-awareness)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to attention.

#### **Transformation (negative to positive)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to transformation.

#### **Positive action (doing/courage to act/empowerment)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to positive action.

### **Andi**

#### Position

Andi was still pregnant when we interviewed her. She did not communicate particularly well with her mother; her parents were divorced and she had lost contact with her biological father. Andi was the eldest of nine children and felt the responsibility of an adult, particularly in terms of not wanting to feel like she was a burden on the family. The researchers were unable to ascertain why Andi had been sent to the shelter, but she said her mother would accept the baby once she had given birth and returned home.

*"I don't really share [with my parents] because I'm the eldest daughter of 9 siblings ... my mum's got a lot on*

*her plate... I'd rather keep it to myself ... my mum's okay with my situation right now. I feel if I had had a closer relation with my mum in the beginning then I would not be pregnant right now."*

#### Weakness

It appears that Andi finds it difficult to ask for help or share her concerns to anyone in her life. The researchers regard this as a weakness. It maybe possible to have a counter argument of this being strength but in the context of self-love the ability to seek assistance and communicate ones concerns in life with others is important.

*"I don't really share [with my parents] ... I'd rather keep it to myself ... I don't want to tell the father because I'd rather take care of the baby on my own."*

#### Strength

The researchers could find no data regarding any specific strengths that Andi might have in relation to self-love.

#### **Intention (to act)**

Although her answers felt rather sterile, Andi's plan for her future was in her words to try and become a better person for everyone around her.

*"My plan for my child is to get a job, work ... I become a better person as a whole and am able to take care of my mum, my siblings and also my daughter."*

#### **Attention (self-awareness)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to attention.

#### **Transformation (negative to positive)**

The researchers did not find any data relating to transformation.

#### **Positive action (doing/courage to act/empowerment)**

She took action in her relationship by deciding to leave the father of her baby as she felt the father no longer understood her as a person.

*"I decided not to be with him anymore. Because I feel that he doesn't understand me as a person."*

### **Susana**

#### **Self-knowledge**

#### Position

The data provided by Susana was possibly lacking due to the Director of the shelter observing the interview. Susana,

who was still at school, felt that pregnancy has now held her back in life with her education being to suffer.

*"My studies have kind of been held back ... I can't really focus on school and all that I am still in high school form five."*

Weakness

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to weakness.

Strength

Despite, as already mentioned, Susana was speaking in front of the Director of the refuge, and felt strongly enough to speak about her future role as a mother. Unlike most of the other girls in the refuge she wants to teach her child about sex and relationships so that he does not repeat the same mistake that she made.

*"I don't want to repeat the same mistakes I've done in the past ... when my son grows up, I'm going to teach him how to not make the same mistakes I did."*

**Intention (to act)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to intention to act.

**Attention (self-awareness)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to attention.

**Transformation (negative to positive)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to transformation action.

**Positive action (doing/courage to act/empowerment)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to positive action.

**Zeyni**

Position

Zeyni left home when she found out she were pregnant. Despite this her mother forced her to attend the shelter by threatening to throw away her school certificates. This would have resulted in her not being able to go on to university. Zeyni's relationship with her mother is unsupportive and she relies on her grandmother for emotional support.

*"When I found I was pregnant, I actually lived on my own ... I left home around five months ... but at eight months pregnancy, my mum sent me to a shelter home because she was embarrassed by the baby... my mum and me have*

*a problem so we don't talk that much. So She is not really supporting me 100%. everything I tell my grandmother she will give me emotional support and give me advice and everything ... I don't want to go to a shelter home my mum sent me. I was forced to be here ... I'm currently studying as a degree student, so my mum said if I don't go to a shelter home, she will just throw all my certificates and stop me from studying."*

Weakness

Zeyni was an ambitious woman who wanted to complete university degree and go on to work. She was unable to stand up to her mother to assert her rights or to live her life the way she wanted to. She allowed herself to be bullied and manipulated subject to her mother's own needs. Additionally, like all the other participants we spoke to, Zeyni stopped contact with the father of the baby

*"... I don't want to go to a shelter home my mum sent me. I was forced to be here ... I'm currently studying as a degree student, so my mum said if I don't go to a shelter home, she will just throw all my certificates and stop me from studying ... He wanted [her boyfriend] to get married, but I decided to leave him because I don't think he can be responsible for the baby."*

Strength

Before attending the shelter, Zeyni demonstrated a number of strengths including the ability to find and pay for her own apartment and to reflect on her own experiences, particularly in reference to educating one's children and finding ways to communicate with them.

*"In my opinion, parents should have the knowledge before they become parents, they should know the ways to communicate with their children, how to educate their children, to raise their children with love, and how to teach their children, so their children didn't get involved in the sex thing, to drop out or have social problems ... at first, I didn't live with my parents when I was pregnant ... I rented a house on my own and lived there with my friend."*

**Intention (to act)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to intention to act.

**Attention (self-awareness)**

Zeyni is aware of her own physical and mental health and the need to take care of these, so that she is able to look after her own child.

*"I am taking care of my health to take care of my son. So, I can be strong to raise my son."*

### **Transformation (negative to positive)**

The authors found no data they could interpret as relating to transformation.

### **Positive action (doing/courage to act/empowerment)**

Although Zeyni is unhappy living at the shelter. She continues to endure it so that she can continue to study.

*"I don't want to go to a shelter home my mum sent me. I was forced to be here ... I'm currently studying as a degree student. So, my mum said if I don't go to a shelter home, she will just throw all my certificates and stop me from studying. I don't want to stop studying."*

### **Conclusion**

As discussed earlier in this paper, teenage pregnancy appears to be a bigger issue with the Malay population than the Indian, Chinese, or Orang Asli people of Malaysia. The authors believe that this is due to the following reasons: Firstly, the Muslim population are both embarrassed and lack knowledge about sex education. Secondly, the religion and laws relating to sex education amongst Malays is confusing to young people and their parents. Thirdly, due to the above there is a lack of communication and discussion about sex education. These points contribute towards higher rates of teenage pregnancy, and to concealing incidents when they happen. One of the common factors the authors found with the girls in the shelter is that they were encouraged to break ties with their children's father, all of the girls we interviewed had stopped contact with the children's father after they had entered shelter. For example, one of the girls the authors interviewed was in a relationship and living with her boyfriend, when she found out she was pregnant she contacted her mother as she was scared and unsure what to do. They wanted to get married, her mother said she would help but instead reported them to the police which ended in the girl being forced into the shelter and losing contact with the boyfriend. In fact, the girls lost all control over their lives once they had been admitted to the shelter, despite being offered a basic religious education and counseling, they were not allowed to leave the shelter until the baby was born and they had reconciled with their families, they had their mobile phones taken away from them, they had to submit to the shelters time keeping and schedule, they were not allowed any visitors and they were not allowed to leave the premises, fearing that may plan to escape from there.

As can be seen from the interviews, several of the girls prior to becoming pregnant and entering the shelter were strong willed, ambitious and empowered. There was also evidence of unconscious self-love. Some of the girls recognised their self-love but were unable to practice it in their lives. Indeed, the authors go further than this and suggest that the experiences the girls faced during their pregnancies appeared to suck out the self-love and confidence in them rebuilding their lives. The authors acknowledge that the shelter was being run with the best of intentions within a legal and social context, but still only one of the girls, the authors interviewed, had a positive transformation from the experience, it enabled her to build bridges with her parents, and helped to provide her a positive vision for her future.

Finally, the anecdotal evidence of the researchers and their sources for this paper suggests that the non-Muslim population of Malaysia appear to be more accepting of children born out of wedlock. Generally, parents of pregnant girls are happy to help bring up the children without too much embarrassment or controversy. Amongst all the races in Malaysia, research suggests, that the Orang Asli are the most accepting of raising children born out of wedlock, from rape or other similar situations.<sup>5</sup>

### **Recommendations**

Sex education in Malaysia varies tremendously. Amongst the Malay population there is not only a lot of stigma but also a lot of prejudice and inhibition to talk about the subject at any level, especially with young people. The authors feel that learning strategies for communicating sex education would greatly assist in the lessening of this issue. For example, due to a lack of communication even the concept of sex education is misunderstood. Many Malays feel that sex education is about teaching people how to have sex rather than teaching people about relationships, health and building one's self-knowledge. This includes the ability to be able make decisions that will impact more positively on people's lives.

### **Contributions to field of study**

The authors have made two significant contributions to this field of study. The first is designing and applying the

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<sup>5</sup> Personal experience and communication from Orang Asli sources given to Hickson, one of the researchers. Hickson has lived on several occasions during the past fifty years.

new explanation for the concept of self-love. The second is the designing of a self-love reflective cycle that includes five categories.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article. This article is the sole work of the authors and has not been presented or published elsewhere.

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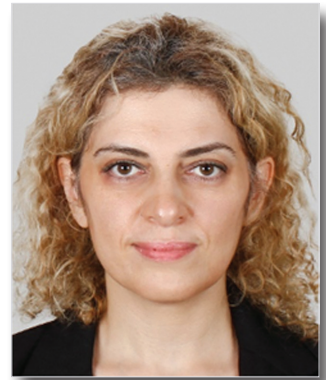
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She completed her PhD at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 2014, winning the best PhD student award with a dissertation on "The Ingredients, Stages and Experience of Love: A Parallel Exposition of Jalaluddin M. Rumi and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy." Her BA and MA degrees were completed at the Islamic Azad University in Tehran, Science & Research Branch, again focusing on mysticism. She continued the same line of research doing a post-Doctoral program at ISTAC, IIUM.

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