

## **Newspaper Analysis on Filicide and Infant Abandonment in Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Phenomena of filicide and infant abandonment have attracted attention of the public and media in Malaysia. A newspaper analysis was carried out to understand the discourse of filicide and infant abandonment in this country. Data was searched from online archives of local newspapers from January 2005 to October 2015. Filicide and infant abandonment were perceived as a very cruel, sinful and immoral behaviour. Babies were described being abandoned in various heartbreaking conditions. Woman was portrayed as the main suspect or perpetrator. The predicament was believed to be due to various interrelated factors, which include challenging behaviour of the youngsters, lack of parental and family commitment, lack of education and control on sex and reproduction, and negative attitude of the*

*society. Various interventions have been implemented by the government and non-governmental agencies, which include offering baby hatches, homes and adoption; creating awareness through campaigns and seminars; suggestion for sex and reproductive education; improving access to services; and implementing various sentences and suggestion for capital punishment. There is a need for the associated factors and interventions to be informed by scientific and local evidences. Thus, more research on this predicament is warranted.*

**Keywords:** *Filicide, infanticide, infant abandonment, media, stigma, woman*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Filicide and infant abandonment are terms related to each other. Filicide is an act when a parent kills his/her own child [1]. Infanticide is a more common term that describes the killing of an infant who aged less than a year. In Malaysia, as well as in many other countries, infant abandonment is the term used when an infant is placed in an inappropriate site without care, protection or supervision [2]. In the United States, the same act is coined as 'discarded infant' [3]. There are various methods of filicide, which include active act of stabbing, strangulation, suffocation, or passive act of neglect, exposure or abandonment [4].

Filicide and infant abandonment are omnipresent phenomena, which occur throughout history and across cultures. Medieval society committed filicide due to illegitimacy, preference towards the males, physically handicapped or malformation, disabilities, population control, eugenics, religious beliefs and poverty [5, 6]. In current societies, filicide still happens with the rates for filicide of infants in industrialized countries range from 2.4 per 100,000 to 7.0 per 100,000 live births [4]. In the two most populated countries in Asia; India and China, the rates are higher, which

occur in the range of 12.3 to 15.5 per 100,000 live births [7]. In Malaysia, rates of filicide of infants are moderate which ranged from 4.82 to 9.11 per 100,000 live births [8].

There are various factors to explain filicide and infant abandonment. In Asia, such as India, filicide and infant abandonment of female infant might occur because of severe poverty [9]. In China, national policy to control overpopulation might precipitate the act [10]. Some children died together with their parents in the act of filicide-suicide, which had been described in Japan [11] and Hong Kong [12]. In western countries, review studies had suggested that filicide was associated with various factors, such as mental illness, personality disorder, denial of pregnancy and poverty [4, 13, and 14]. In other parts of the world, such as Australia, separation and domestic violence had been suggested to be the precipitants of filicide [15].

Studies on filicide and infant abandonment are made possible by the availability of national registries or proper court, medical, psychiatric or autopsy records [4, 13]. Often, newspaper analysis is carried out as an adjunct for more robust and comprehensive findings. For example, in Japan, data on filicide and fatal child abuse between 1994 and 2005 were collected from leading Japanese national newspaper (Asahi Shimbun) [11]. A total of 933 cases of filicide and 1084 victims under age 15 were identified. From newspaper databases, the authors calculated infanticide rates and made correlational analysis between infanticide rates and several official statistics such as suicidal rates and unemployment rates. Moreover, official surveillance on filicide such as police records may not capture all details pertaining to filicide. Hence, newspaper analysis was carried out such as in Fiji to corroborate official data and clarify missing information [16, 17]. Rarely, newspaper database may provide enough information and large number of cases was detected which may represent sample. For example, in one study in the United States, newspaper surveillance

alone, was carried out between 1997 and 1999 through internet searches of 191 national newspapers [20]. In this study, the authors identified 673 cases of homicide-suicides and classified homicide-suicides into different subtypes which include infanticide-suicide and filicide-suicide. However, the authors reminded readers that the findings may underestimate the true prevalence. Newspaper articles have also been used to explore the accounts of journalists on the phenomenon of maternal infanticide [19]. Taking the newspaper coverage of the story of filicide by Andrea Yates who killed her four children, newspaper articles were used to understand the collective narratives of filicide, cultural myths about women, femininity and motherhood [15].

In Malaysia, there is a serious gap in knowledge regarding filicide and infant abandonment from the public and academic perspectives. Since the last decades, filicide and infant abandonment had been highlighted by the media, especially in newspaper articles for almost every month. However, the discourse of this phenomenon has not been explored and investigated empirically. There has been sparse of information of this problem published in academic journals to assist the authorities in preparing a comprehensive management to curb this act. Thus, the aim of this study was to analyse the discourse of filicide and infant abandonment in this country.

## **2.0 METHODS**

### *2.1 Data Sources*

In Malaysia, newspapers can be divided into the 'broadsheet' or 'tabloid' format. Broadsheet newspaper is a standard or full sized newspaper that takes a serious look at major national and international events. It publishes news with more fact than emotion. It is often perceived as less biased. On the other hand, 'tabloid' newspaper is smaller and focuses on more sensationalized content, such as crimes, celebrities and sports. Most of these

newspapers have their online version, which are relatively more concise. In order to capture comprehensive discourse on filicide and infant abandonment predicament in Malaysia, data for this study were derived from both types of newspapers. Data were gathered from the online archives of the Star or Star Online (SO), Utusan Malaysia or Utusan Online (UO), New Straits Times (NST), Harian Metro or myMetro (Met), Kosmo (Kos) and Sinar Harian (SH). All of these newspapers are distributed to all over Malaysia and publish new articles in their respective online websites every day. UO is the earliest newspapers published in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language). Other Bahasa Malaysia newspapers published in Malaysia are Met and SH. The SO and NST are English-language newspapers with the former is the largest in terms of circulation in the country. UO and NST are broadsheet newspapers, but the later had been changed into tabloid in 2005. Others are tabloid newspapers.

## *2.2 Data Selection*

Online newspaper archives were chosen because they were readily available and accessible for reviews compared to printed newspapers. In order to retrieve data from the online archives, less scientific, but more common terms that are often used by the public in this country to describe filicide and infant abandonment were utilized. Instead of scientific terms such as 'infanticide,' 'filicide' or 'homicide'; for English-language newspapers, the terms 'killing baby,' 'killing child,' 'abandoned baby' and 'abandoned child' were used. For Bahasa Malaysia newspapers, the terms 'bunuh anak,' 'bunuh bayi,' 'buang anak' and 'buang bayi' were used. The selection criteria included any articles, such as highlights, commentary, opinion, letter or report that described the phenomena related to filicide and infant abandonment in Malaysia. It was not restricted to written articles only; photos that were published together with the articles were also retrieved.

Article published from January 2005 to October 2015 were included.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Data retrieval was done by a research assistant and a trainee psychologist. Analysis was carried out by a senior consultant psychiatrist and a consultant psychiatrist. Thematic analysis was carried out. The process involved repetitive reading and careful line-by-line analysis on the content and themes of each article. Themes portrayed by the photos were also assessed carefully. The emergent themes with a similar message were grouped together to be the main themes. The articles were re-read for further evidence of other emergent themes. The process continued until the articles yielded no more themes. Discussions were done between team members over any disagreement of the themes or content.

Final read of articles was done to ensure that the main theme had represented the overall content and discourse of the articles. Appropriate sentences that represented the themes were chosen to be included in the result. Sentences in *Bahasa Malaysia* were translated into English to be presented in the results section. In order to maximise anonymity, any names of the person or place that was related to the act of filicide and infant abandonment published by the newspaper were changed and bracketed.

### 2.4 Ethics

This study is part of a review of a bigger project to understand maternal filicide and infant abandonment in Malaysia. The project has been approved by Medical and Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

### **3.0 RESULTS**

A total of 279 articles and 115 photos that met the selection criteria were retrieved and analysed. There were five main themes emerged from the searched articles; i) public perception towards filicide and infant abandonment; ii) heartbreaking description of the victims; iii) woman was described as the main perpetrator; iv) the complex interrelated contributory factors; and v) suggestion and argument of strategies and intervention.

#### *3.1 Public Perceptions Towards Filicide and Infant Abandonment*

The public perceptions of filicide and infant abandonment in Malaysia as highlighted by the newspaper articles could be framed into four subthemes; as a criminal behaviour, a sinful act, immoral conduct or a medical issue.

##### *3.1.1 Criminal Behaviour*

‘Cruel! Cruel! Cruel!’ (Met; Feb10, 2011). It was the title of one of the articles published to highlight the phenomenon of filicide and infant abandonment in Malaysia. For many, filicide and infant abandonment in this country was framed as a criminal behaviour. It was described as cruel as other homicidal behaviours. In one of the articles, this act was perceived as harsh as ‘the act of a soldier [from a country] who kills the innocent civilian’ (UO; June 5, 2010). It was perceived ‘as bad as or crueller than the act of killing female babies, which occurred during the medieval age where the society during that time had limited religious knowledge’ (UO; Apr 1, 2010). It was perceived as ‘heartless and heinous act’ (SO; Feb 16, 2010). As a crime, the main intervention was to provide severe punishment to the person who commits the crime. Various sentences which provide different degree of punishments were highlighted in the media. Several articles highlighted the urge for infant abandonment to be

investigated as a murder that allows capital punishment for the perpetrator.

### *3.1.2 Sinful Act*

The phenomenon of filicide and infant abandonment was also regarded by many as a very sinful act. As reminded by one of the preachers:

*After another-override sin; because maybe they who abandoned the infant have committed adultery, which is a great sin, and then abandoning and killing babies is another great sin*

(UO; Apr 1, 2010)

The society was urged to regard the act as a universal issue that had to be severely condemned.

### *3.1.3 Immoral Conduct*

The act of filicide and infant abandonment was framed by many as an immoral conduct. It was perceived as a sign of declining moral values among youngsters. Socially ill behaviours among youngsters, such as promiscuity, premarital sex and sex out of marriage were blamed as the root of the problem. When moral issue was taken as an explanation, the key solution supported by many, was to suppress teen sexuality. These can be seen through substantial published newspaper articles, which indicated the need for avoiding premarital sex among youngsters.

### *3.1.4 Medical Issue*

A few perceived filicide and infant abandonment as a medical issue. Only two articles highlighted the importance of postpartum psychiatric disorders as the associated factor. A few articles were found discussing health impact associated with this predicament,



such as the obstetric complication of teenage pregnancy and the danger of giving birth without perinatal medical check-up. Those who framed this predicament as a medical issue advocated the need for accessibility to services for contraception, safe abortion and perinatal care to be emphasized as part of the intervention.

### *3.2 Heartbreaking Description of the Victim*

From the total articles, 131 (46.9%) articles described characteristics of the victims. Among the total 115 photos, 35 (30.4%) were photos of an infant who became the victim. The photos mostly captured the heartbreaking condition of the infant, as well as the surrounding place where they were abandoned.

There were three subthemes of how the victims were described. Firstly, articles often highlighted the number of cases and the perceived increase in the trend of infant abandonment and filicide in Malaysia. For example, ‘from 2005 until January 2011, 517 cases of infant abandonment were reported with 230 babies were found alive and 287 found dead. Of these, 203 were boys and 164 were girls, whereas, in the remaining 150 cases, the sex of the infant could not be determined from the autopsy because of severe decomposition’ (Kos; Feb 9; 2011). However, neither rates or prevalence nor incidence had been mentioned in the article. There was also no highlighted comparison of the severity of this predicament in relation to other countries.

Secondly, description on the age of the victim was ambiguous. The term ‘umbilical cord was still intact’ was often used to indicate that the victim was a newborn or a few days old. A few articles included foetus as a ‘product of conception’ in the discourse of infant abandonment and filicide. The implication of ambiguity in determining whether the victim is a foetus, stillborn newborn or lived newborn may result in failure to impose correct sentences. For example, a legal expert suggested that a woman should be persecuted as committing a murder if she abandoned a

foetus or a stillborn newborn. Recent articles highlight that amendment is required to ensure more comprehensive legal provisions. Very limited articles had described a toddler as the victim.

Finally, the general condition of the infant when found abandoned was described. The description could be divided into four:

- A Healthy Infant

The baby who was properly wrapped with clothes and put inside box or bag and put at a place where chances of being found was high, e.g. Within clinic or hospital compound, inside a mosque or temple or in front of significant people's house, such as houses of a childless couple, police officer or teacher. Some of the babies were abandoned with notes, a bottle of milk, diapers and spare clothes.

- An Infant who Survived Despite Being Abandoned

The baby was abandoned and found in neglected condition, without any clothes or protection, and placed at an area where the chances to be found was low, e.g. Abandoned in the car park, next to the building.

- A Victim of Fatal Child Abuse

In this scenario, often there was a proof of physical abuse found on the body of the victim; an infant or a child.

- A Body of an Infant Described in Poor Conditions

As a result of exposure, the victim was found dead with poor conditions such as, 'fifteen pieces of body of an infant who was sliced into pieces were found before being disposed and trapped at a sewage plant' (Kos; May 15, 2015).

### 3.3 *Woman as the Focus of Attention*

Even though some advocating both men and women to share the same burden of filicide and infant abandonment in Malaysia, more women than men were highlighted by the articles; arrested by police as the suspects; sent for rehabilitation and placed in homes; and sentenced to prison for the act. Focus on the cause, responsibility, interventions and punishment to men was sparse.

Of the total articles, 84 (30.1%) articles described women as 'teen mum', 'young mother', 'unwed mother' or 'woman' whom were responsible for the act and became the suspect or the main perpetrator. In contrast, only 30 (10.7%) articles described a man as the main suspect or the main perpetrator. Focus on woman was further highlighted when 19 (16.5%) of the photos published was the photos of the woman who became the suspect or being charged as the perpetrator. In contrast, only 3 (2.6%) of the photos showed a man as the suspect.

Newspapers description of women who committed filicide and infant abandonment could be classified into four groups. Some of the examples were described as:

- Female Student in Their Secondary or Tertiary Education

Many articles highlighted female students as the perpetrator, such as:

*Police had successfully traced the female student who was believed to be the main suspect of an abandoned infant who had been found dead in a sewage plant of [local university]*

(UO; Sept 3, 2013)

- Female Youngsters from Low Socioeconomic Position

Most of the women were those who came from a low economic class and worked in various unskilled employment sectors:

*She relied on courtesy of the villagers to bring up her children. Cutting lemon grass at the other's farm before selling it for only RM2 per bundle. On the day of the incident, she did not receive any payment that caused her to be unable to buy milk. The suspect was said to be awoken from sleep when her youngest child from six siblings was very hungry and asked for milk... The suspect was brought up in a house that was worse than a chicken coop*

(UO; Aug 22, 2010)

They were predominantly women in late teenage to early twenties:

*The suspect was 20 years old and unmarried, gave birth alone by herself at her family house. It was informed that the infant was a mature infant, as a result of the relationship between the women, a factory worker, with her boyfriend.*

(Kos; Sept 18, 2012)

- Immigrant Woman

The woman who committed filicide and infant abandonment came from neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia and Myanmar, as in: 'An Indonesian maid is accused of murdering her newborn infant and dumping the body in a rubbish bin' (SO; June 16, 2007).

- Woman with Mental Illness

Another group of woman who suffered from mental illness, as described in an article: 'Mentally ill mother

jailed for 10 years – killing her own infant by covering its face with pillow’ (Kos: Oct 28, 2009)

### *3.4 Complex Inter-related Contributory Factors*

Thirty five (12.5%) articles highlighted on the opinion, suggestion and discussion on probable causes of filicide and infant abandonment phenomena in this country. It was believed that this action was a complex predicament that rooted ‘across numerous sectors of life, work and living’ (SO; July12, 2012). The subthemes related to the intercalated probable causative factors highlighted in newspaper articles include the challenging behaviour of youngsters, lack of parental and family commitment, lack of education and control on sex and reproduction, and attitude of the society.

#### *3.4.1 Challenging Behaviour of Youngsters*

Youngsters were mostly blamed for their challenging behaviours, which was often described as ‘socially ill and immoral behaviours’. The behaviour of becoming promiscuous and practicing premarital sex was blamed to give rise to adolescent pregnancy and pregnancy out of wedlock. One of the articles published the seriousness of this predicament by giving a statistic; ‘According to the National Registration Department, there were 257,411 newborns without fathers or ex-nuptial infant registered between 2000 and 2008’ (NST; March 10, 2009). Some perceived that the immoral behaviour was influenced by the lifestyle of the western society that allows open relationship between men and women, such as:

*Young people nowadays often imitate the lifestyle of 'Mat Salleh', which is too social, and they mingle freely between men and women. Promiscuity exposes teenage girls to out-of-wedlock pregnancy and then dumping their infant to cover the shame.*

(UO; July 7, 2010)

Socially ill behaviours among youngsters were also attributed to the lack of authority and parental control on the widespread access on pornographic photos and videos through the internet. The government was blamed for failing to provide an appropriate censorship mechanism, regulation and enforcement; while parents were blamed for not having time to monitor and specifically filter their youngsters' online activity. Watching pornographic movies could make youngsters to become sexually aroused and triggered them to try such acts. Apart from pornography, another disturbing problem was that many youngsters used social websites to look for new friends. Some even became the victim of drug-induced rape by their new 'unknown' friend.

#### *3.4.2 Lack of Parental and Family Commitment*

One of the articles had highlighted the worry of a minister that infant abandonment and filicide in this country might be due to the collapse of the family system. She claimed that, 'parents were too busy with work until they have no time with family and children. Weakened family ties were perceived as part of the root of the problems. Parents failed to be a listener and help their youngsters to solve their problems. Some parents even chased their youngsters away and were ashamed to admit them as part of the family anymore if they committed any wrongdoing.

*We could accept a child who is physically handicapped, we could accept a child who is mentally handicapped, but why, we could not accept a child with moral handicapped?*

(UO; Aug 22, 2010)

Parents had forgotten that unconditional love was important to avoid the youngsters from feeling marginalized and choosing their own pace of life.

#### *3.4.3 Lack of Education and Control on Sex and Reproduction*

Another important focus of discussion on the probable cause of filicide and infant abandonment phenomena in Malaysia was the lack of education and control of sex and reproduction. Teaching children about sex and reproduction, is 'taboo' and is not a part of the culture of the Malaysian society. Parents rarely teach children about sex. For those parents who do make time to educate about sex to their youngsters, attentions were often given to daughters more than sons:

*In our culture, the question of moral education and character building, the emphasis is only given to daughters. The boys should also be given the same education, as in the cases of teenage or unwed mothers, without the male's role, pregnancy will not occur.*

(UO; April 14, 2010)

The unavailability of formal sex education at school was perceived to make the matter worse. Without the knowledge of sex, youngsters who were naïve could easily be the victim of sexual assault; dating rape, acquaintance rape or statutory rape.

A part of the reasons for not having sex education was illustrated in a letter to the editor of one of the newspapers:

*Many local interest groups have over the years lobbied for the implementation of a comprehensive sex education program over the years but to their dismay, conservative and orthodox thinking bureaucrats and policymakers have rejected the*

*idea based on the reason that sex education will expose and tempt our children to experiment with sex.*

(SO; March 20, 2014).

#### *3.4.4 Attitudes of Society*

The society, in general, was also perceived as being responsible for this predicament. Youngsters who were pregnant out of wedlock or having ex-nuptial infant were 'too scared or too ashamed' to face the society because they were judged by their parents, family, colleagues, neighbours, authorities and their surrounding community as having committed a great sinful act of adultery. Their fear of negative perceptions of the society was more than the fear of the punishment of infant abandonment. In addition, the society was also blamed for low embracement in religious practice and being less concerned about neighbourhood matters and became more individualistic.

#### *3.5 Suggestion and argument on strategies and intervention*

Many believed that filicide and infant abandonment were complex and advocating comprehensive measures. These include collaboration between various parties, which are the general society, surrounding neighbourhood and friends; various government agencies and respective authorities, non-governmental organizations and private sectors, teachers, counsellors, health providers, family and parents; and lastly, legal and enforcement authorities. The subthemes highlighted in the newspaper articles in this section were; society, family and parental role, infant hatches, homes, adoption, campaigns and seminars, sex and reproductive education, access to services and sentences and the urge for capital punishment.



### 3.5.1 *Society, Family and Parental role*

Malaysian society were urged to ‘not pointing their fingers only to the women’ (SO; Feb 14, 2010) and ‘provide care, not judgment’ (SO; Oct 3, 2010). Society should learn to forgive the youngsters for their mistakes and give them a second chance in life. The most important suggestion highlighted by one of the articles: ‘We have to change our own values: stop stigmatizing unmarried women who are mothers and children who are born outside of marriage’ (SO; Aug 22, 2010).

Family and parents should know, be aware and continuously practice appropriate authoritative parenting, as well as to educate their children and youngsters, both females and males, on responsibility and ways to protect, care and respect their sex and reproductive system. Being a good listener and spend more quality time to get to know and understand children's problem had been suggested in the articles.

### 3.5.2 *Baby Hatches*

Substantial articles published on the intervention implemented by government agencies and respective authorities, as well as by the non-governmental organization. One of the most common measures that captured the attention in newspaper articles was ‘*pelindung bayi* or baby hatch’. There were 11 (3.9%) articles that mentioned or explained the procedures and aim of baby hatch and 11 (9.5%) photos related to baby hatch alone were published.

Baby hatch is a service offered by the NGOs, such as OrphanCARE, and a private hospital where a safe room measuring about one square meter was built where a infant can be placed anonymously instead of being abandoned at an inappropriate place. Currently, there are 12 baby hatches available in Malaysia. Many countries have adopted the same strategies, such as the United States (Safe Haven), German (*infantklappe* or *infantfenster*), Italy

(*culle per lavita*) and Japan (infant post box). The articles explained the procedures in details regarding infant hatch; once the infant was placed in it, it would trigger the lighting, air-conditioning and the alarm system of the infant hatch. The alarm would alert the caretaker, who would then, immediately fetch the infant. The hatch was monitored by a CCTV, which focused only towards the infant. As an alternative, parents could also surrender their infant personally without using the hatch. Then, a police report and medical check-up would be made.

There was no article that specifically compared the procedures or legal provisions related to baby hatches in Malaysia and other countries (such as comparing Malaysian laws and Safe Haven Laws in the US). Even though baby hatch seems to be beneficial, some had voiced their concerns that it might not solve the root of the problem. They claimed that even though 45 countries worldwide have almost similar intervention, the number of abandonment had not been reduced; instead, more babies are being placed in the baby hatch. Recent articles highlighted that the available infant hatches are underutilised because public have misunderstanding that the service is illegal and they have fear of being arrested of using such service.

### *3.5.3 Homes*

Other intervention implemented by the government agencies and NGOs were homes for women or female youngsters who were vulnerable, such as unwed pregnant women or victim of rape. Some example of the homes run by the government agencies was School of Hope and Taman Seri Puteri, while those supported by the NGOs are Rumah Persinggahan Darul Sakinah, Rumah Sinar Salam, Ray of Hope, Rumah Sahabat SIDIM, Kem Modal Insan Kewaja and OrphanCARE. These centres offered shelter and a safe environment during the critical pregnancy and the perinatal period for vulnerable women and female youngsters, as well as

providing counselling. Up to December 2011, since the opening of the School of Hope in September 2010, eighty-two pregnant, unwed girls had attended the school with 64 babies were brought up by their own mothers at the school.

#### *3.5.4 Adoption*

Malaysians were urged to be open to ‘the idea of fostering which is a temporary situation before legal adoption’ (SO; Aug 20, 2009). Adoption does not only serve as one of the alternatives for those who could not bring up the child, but also gives an opportunity for childless couples to have a child. The aim was that each child deserves love and care from a family. Babies placed on the infant hatch would be fostered and then arranged for legal adoption. Women or youngsters at homes who were unable to bring up their child would also be advised to choose this alternative. All adoption process must go through the Social Welfare Department and abide by the Registration Act and Sharia Laws (for Muslims). The process of fostering was fast, but for legal adoption to take place, it might require about two years for Muslims and a shorter period for non-Muslims. Up to 2012, OrphanCARE, which offered infant hatch, had facilitated adoption for 64 babies and more than 1,600 couples had registered to be foster parents.

#### *3.5.5 Campaign and Seminars*

Private companies, hand in hand with the government agencies, had launched several campaigns and seminars to help create awareness among society, especially youngsters on the preventive measures to curb this predicament. These included various campaigns, such as ‘*Kami Prihatin* (We Care)’ campaign, which was launched in July 2010. It aimed to remind the youngsters on

the impact of socially ill behaviour that could be associated with unwanted pregnancies, leading to newborn abandonment. Another campaign with the same message was ‘You Are Wise; Avoid Zina (sex outside marriage)’. Another campaign; ‘Yes I Can’ was initiated with the aims to empower youngsters to manage their sex and reproductive health wisely and educate them the appropriate choice and use of contraception. Seminars to create awareness on this predicament were also conducted. An example of the seminars was ‘Say No to Infant Dumping’ that targeted youngsters and school students.

### *3.5.6 Sex and Reproductive Education*

Sex and reproductive education are vital for youngsters, not only to understand their biological and physiological changes, but also for both male and female youngsters to respect each other and most importantly, to equip them with an informed decision. One of the articles highlighted the opinion of one of the activists:

*It is the Government's responsibility to provide a high quality sex education in school and out of school programs to inform the young about the chances of getting pregnant, the risks of unrestrained sexual desire, as well as advice on what to do if they get pregnant.*

(SO; Aug 22, 2010)

As an answer to the call from public on the need for proper sex and reproductive education, according to the minister, sex and reproductive health module, as well as gender inequality subjects, were initially drawn up for ‘high risk group’ made up of Form 3 (Year 9) and Form 6 (Year 12) students and a pilot project was carried out in five urban schools by the National Population and Family Development Board. Following that, a more comprehensive policy and educational module on sex and

reproductive health module called PEKERTI has been introduced to be implemented at adolescent centres (called kafe@TEEN), National Services and schools.

### 3.5.7 Access to Services

Campaign and education is not complete without providing services, which are accessible to the public. In order to facilitate public to seek for help, a free hotline, Talian Nur 59999 was set up in 2007 to provide counselling and step-by-step guide to the proper procedures to give up the infant, and information related to the predicament. There were also 58 Nur Sejahtera clinics for public to consult and refer such cases freely. Welfare department officers were suggested to standby around the clock and to perform outreach intervention. More importantly, agencies that dealt with such predicament should be more client-friendly and should essentially understand the emotional needs and the burden suffered by those youngsters and family. One article highlighted that;

*Authorities need to be open so that they do not scare the young and unwed mothers from seeking help...Even getting help is an ordeal... There are many people who scolded them when they registered for consultancy. They just want to lecture, or prosecute them, instead of helping them... We can refer them to hospitals for medical help but if they only get nagged and lectured by the nurse and doctors, there is no point.*

(SO; Aug 22, 2010).

Another management to tackle the issue of unwanted pregnancy that was highlighted in the articles was the suggestion of the Government to improve the accessibility of contraception and safe abortion services to youngsters. Public was also reminded of the mantra, 'Be in charge of your own body!' and 'Stay infant-free unless you want the infant' (SO; Apr 17, 2011).

### *3.5.8 Sentences and the Urge for Capital Punishment*

Newspapers also provide information regarding legal aspect of filicide and infant abandonment. Several sections of the Law of Malaysia were often documented in the newspapers relevant to this predicament. These include: Act 574; Penal Code: i) Section 317 (Exposure and abandonment of a child under 12 years by a parent or person having care of it; ii) Section 318 (Concealment of birth by secret disposal of dead body; iii) Section 309A (Infanticide) and Section 309B (Punishment for Infanticide); iv) Section 307 (Attempt to murder); v) Section 304 (Punishment for culpable homicide not amounting to murder) and vi) Section 302 (Punishment for murder) and Act 611; Child Act, Section 31 (Ill-treatment, neglect, abandonment or exposure of children). The former two Penal Codes were the most common punishments documented and read as:

Section 317: Whoever, being the father or mother of a child under the age of 12 years, or having the care of such child, exposes or leaves such child in any place with the intention of wholly abandoning such child, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years, or with fine, or with both

Section 318: Whoever by secretly burying or otherwise disposing of the dead body of a child, whether such child dies before or after or during its birth, intentionally conceals or endeavours to conceal the birth of such child shall be punished

with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years or with fine or with both.

The perceived increment in the phenomenon of infant abandonment and filicide as highlighted by the media has encouraged debate for severe sentences or capital punishment; Section 307 or Section 302 for the case in which the abandoned infant was found to be alive or dead, respectively. For the proponents, the current punishments (such as imprisonment) might be very lenient that they did not create fear to prevent a person from abandoning their infant. For them, capital punishment was justified and should be a lesson to others and that it would not be taken lightly by the society. It was believed to be 'a heinous act and the capital penalty are in keeping with religious teaching that forbids such act' (UO; Aug 13, 2010).

On the other hand, the oppositions believed that prevention was better than punishment. In their opinion, the root of the problem such as managing the socially ill-behaviour among youngsters should be the focus of intervention:

*Why do we only chant slogans 'prevention is better than cure', but act rather just the opposite; pruning shoots, but reluctant to poison the root cause of these social ills?*

(UO; Aug 17, 2010)

It was also argued that most often the act was influenced by unstable emotion of immature mothers. Most of them had denial of pregnancy that made them unaware of their gravid status. They often had poor problem-solving ability that made them chose no other alternative than abandoning the infant. In contrast to murder in Section 302, the act was often committed outside the bounds of sanity and the act was often not pre-planned. Some of the women who committed such act were the victim of rape or incest themselves; for this reason, they did not deserve severe

punishment. In addition, others believed the evidence from western countries showed that punishment would not offer the solutions for the problems.

The debate became serious when the platform of discussion continued in the parliament. The Cabinet had agreed with the capital punishment, and the act of abandoning a infant would be investigated by police as attempted murder or murder. However, the ultimate decision was in the hand of the Attorney General to choose the most appropriate sentences. Some who include a former high court judge had voiced their concern about the challenges that could be faced should Section 302 was used, which include: the murder cases would not bailable, thus suspect who mostly female youngsters would be subjected to unnecessary stress of imprisonment while waiting for the proceeding and the verdict; the element of 'intent' was required and difficult to prove, and murder would not consider if the infant was aborted or was born as stillbirth. In order to assist the police to investigate the case thoroughly, DNA bank and analysis was suggested to be used for the investigation of the cases.

#### **4.0 DISCUSSION**

Media is able to entertain, inform and educate as well as having great influence to create an image and determine the social, cultural and political agenda of a society. By selecting, reporting and highlighting certain topics while removing others, the media could set public awareness and consciousness to a particular issue [21]. In Malaysia, the media in particular newspaper reports has able to transform filicide and infant abandonment into a greater social problem. Through newspaper reports, the act of filicide and infant abandonment have been portrayed as a criminal, cruel and immoral behaviour, which for some, indicates deterioration of social and moral values of its people. At the individual level, highlights on filicide and infant abandonment, indirectly have



reinforced the existing stigma on the perpetrator; most often the individual who is a single parent of an illegitimate child. Exaggerating such stigma gives no benefit, but might precipitate more filicide and infant abandonment. The stigma of illegitimacy had created ‘infanticide panic’, which became an issue of major cultural concern in some European countries during their era of the industrial revolution [22, 23].

The discourse of filicide and infant abandonment in Malaysia reflected a bias of the media and society in favour of man. A woman is most likely to be blamed because society in Malaysia is holding to the traditional assumption that; ‘Women were designed by nature to be mothers and that they instinctively want to rear every infant they bear’ [24]. As the woman must be there as a mother, when an infant is found abandoned, no other person would be blamed but the mother. Women have been portrayed to be responsible, even though, there has been neither clear evidence nor empirical research that indicates such conclusion in Malaysia. Such discourse probably has also been influenced by the findings of many earlier researchers in filicide from other countries – predominantly developed countries. Ever since the modern landmark study of filicide [1], woman has been found by many researchers to be responsible for the action [4, 14]. Only in the most recent studies of filicide in the US, which involved a 32-year period dataset of 94,146 filicide arrests has denied the conclusion and indicated that man as equally common as a woman to be the filicide perpetrator [25].

Media in Malaysia has illustrated various complex, interrelated factors (such as challenging behaviours of youngsters, the lack of parental and family commitment, the lack of education and control on sex and reproduction, and the attitude of society) that might contribute to filicide and infant abandonment in this country. However, media in Malaysia have missed the opportunity to present filicide and infant abandonment in a broader context of

gender inequality and violence against women. It has been suggested gender inequality was associated with the high rate at which women kill [26] and countries with higher gender inequality seem to have higher rates of filicide [8]. Instead of portraying women as the perpetrator, media in Malaysia should focus its attention on the unequal treatment of women in this country. It is evident that women in Malaysia have been given lesser opportunities in employment, property, and political participation [27, 28]. These inequalities limit women's access to appropriate services and sources of care and support to maintain their physical and psychological health. Such disparities also deprive women of making autonomous decisions about their fertility management and reproductive health. The low in contraceptive use in Malaysia in comparison to its neighbouring countries could be one of the examples of how women are not given appropriate knowledge, awareness and access to manage their fertility [29].

On the other hand, media could be use in beneficial manner to promote health and behaviour change. Through careful application, media could be used as tools to educate public regarding filicide and infant abandonment. For example media can be used to create awareness of the need of eradicating violence against women and children which most often discussed only among selected group of people. Public should be educated through media that gender inequality and oppression against women in Malaysia associate with the increase in cases of intimate partner violence [30, 31], adolescent pregnancy [32], rape, incest and violence against migrant workers [33]. In another country, a series of interviews with women who had committed filicide clearly illustrated that these women had experienced various adversities throughout their life. Many were neglected and brought up in a violent family environment and later in life became the victims of domestic violence [34]. Living with intoxicated, drunken, physically, sexually or emotionally abusive family or spouse could increase

the likelihood for women to be the victim of sexual assaults - rape, incest and marital rape which contributed to unwanted pregnancy [35, 36] ; a condition which increases the risk of filicide and infant abandonment [4, 14]. Regular highlights on true scenario of such social problems and routine discussions of how public could seek for help should they experience such situations may assist in prevention of violence as well as filicide and infant abandonment in this country.

The Malaysian government, non-governmental agencies and volunteers should be congratulated for their attempt to tackle this issue with various interventions such as conducting campaigns and seminars, providing infant hatches and homes as well as creating awareness of sex and reproduction. However, most of the interventions that have been highlighted were adopted from other countries, which have different sociocultural background from Malaysia. For example, the use of infant hatches (*infantklappes*) has been criticised for not reducing the incidence of neonatal death and infant abandonment in Germany, but instead, violating the right of the child [37]. The negative reaction to the implementation of infant hatches has also come from the United Nations. According to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), infant hatch violates the article 7 and 8 of Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that every child has the right to know their parents, family and nationality [38]. This is because; most often the unwanted infant is placed in infant hatches anonymously, leading to difficulty to trace the parents. For this reason, in the era of evidence-based practices, more concrete evidence through scientific understanding of the associated local factors is vital.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

To our knowledge, this is the first newspaper analysis that has been carried out to understand the phenomena of filicide and

infant abandonment in Malaysia. Conclusion has to be made with caution because the most recent articles were not included in the analysis. Another important limitation is that media reports are somewhat biased [39] and may not accurately represent the opinions of the Malaysian population.

Filicide and infant abandonment are serious social issues that have to be tackled wisely. Most often, women are blamed and put responsible for the crime. Their sufferings as the victims of gender inequalities and oppression are seldom recognised. There is a need for local evidence to understand the root of the problems, subsequently used to manage and curb filicide and infant abandonment in this country. Media should be used in positive manner to assist in prevention of filicide and infant abandonment.

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