

# CHILD CARE PATTERNS AND PREFERENCES IN URBAN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has undergone tremendous social change in the past two decades and is indeed changing rapidly today. Aside from the changes in the physical appearance of its cities and countryside - some for the better and some for the worse, there has occurred also phenomenal change of a social nature in Malaysian society. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the large numbers of people who today flock to urban centres in search of education, livelihood and a better life. In this large area of rapid social change, many phenomenon occur that are not only undesirable but go unnoticed until it is too late for them to be remedied.

One of these areas of rapid and possibly unnoticed change is that of child care in the urban as opposed to traditional rural setting. The traditional care of the child by the natural mother within a nuclear or extended family was made possible by the traditional and cultural concepts of the role of a woman or a mother in society. Women's place was thought to be in the home and

education was discouraged if not frowned upon. When they did go to school, women seldom worked even on graduation and even when they did, they usually stopped when they got married. It is therefore of considerable interest to see changes occurring in the traditional concepts giving way to an age when today we see women learning, working and earning in their own right as equals with men.

However, the traditional role of women as mothers and housewives also safeguarded the child in the capable hands of the biological mother, while denying her right to work outside the home. With rapid social change, the question of "who looks after the child if mother works" has become important. This is further compounded by the fact that aside from the working mother of today, are also rapidly diminishing family ties, living space and increasing cost of living. All these phenomenon are most visible in the urban setting where these social and economic pressures are great. The urban areas are also the areas where the threat to the healthy care of the child is most serious.

The psychological effects of the disrupted mother-infant relationships are possible in both mothers and their offspring. Some children brought up in residential nurseries have been noted to have serious psychological problems (Wolkind S.N., 1974). Robertson and Robertson (1971) have also reviewed the effects on young children in brief separations from their mothers. The effects on the young mother who because of her job loses out on

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the skills and joys of motherhood have not been extensively studied. With growing emphasis on the educated and employable young mother with social, economic and inflationary pressures on her, there will be a greater likelihood of the number of working mothers growing. Some of these mothers out of necessity or choice will resort to temporary and others longer term child care arrangements without much consideration being given to psychological ill effects.

It is therefore necessary to know what working families do in urban Malaysia today for care of their children and whether these are any different from the traditional child care patterns in Malaysia.

### PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This study was done to determine the nature of child care patterns that exist in an urban area of Peninsular Malaysia among lower income mothers and to gather an idea of the parents' views of child care and working mothers.

### METHOD OF STUDY

The study was done over a two-month period in an urban area of Peninsular Malaysia (population 250,000). The study consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews of mothers and expectant mothers attending a post-natal and ante-natal clinic in Petaling Jaya. Eighty-three consecutive respondents were interviewed during this period and their responses tabulated and analysed. These are presented and discussed.

### RESULTS

Of a total of 83 women interviewed, 34 (41 percent) were Malays, 31 (37.4 percent) Chinese and 16 Indians (19.2 percent) (Table I). Most of the women interviewed were between the ages of 21 and 35 years (82 percent). Seven women were aged 20 years and below. (Table II). Most of the women (89 percent) had been married for less than ten years. Forty-two percent had been married for less than three years. (Table III).

The respondents were largely below the age of 25 at the time of their marriage (70 percent) and only 7 (8.4 percent) were aged 30 years or more. Twenty-four percent were below 20 years of age at the time of their marriage. Those aged 20-24 years at the time of their marriage formed the largest

**TABLE I**  
**ETHNIC GROUPS OF MOTHERS**

Ethnic Group	No.	%
Malay	34	41.0
Chinese	31	37.4
Indian	16	19.2
Arabic	1	1.2
Eurasian	1	1.2
Total	83	100.0

**TABLE II**  
**AGE GROUPS OF MOTHERS**

Age in years	No.	%
Less than 20 years	7	8.4
21 - 25	26	31.3
26 - 30	27	32.5
31 - 35	15	18.2
36 - 40	8	9.6
Total	83	100.0

**TABLE III**  
**NUMBER OF YEARS MARRIED**

No. of years	No.	%
0 - 3 years	35	42.2
4 - 6 years	25	30.1
7 - 9 years	14	16.9
10 - 12 years	3	3.6
13 - 15 years	1	1.2
More than 16 years	5	6.0
Total	83	100.0

**TABLE IV**  
**MOTHERS' AGES AT MARRIAGE**

Age in years	No.	%
15 - 19	20	24.1
20 - 24	38	45.8
25 - 29	18	21.7
More than 30 years	7	8.4
Total	83	100.0

group (45 percent) (Table IV)

Most of the women had 3 children or less at the time of the survey (89 percent). Thirty (or 36 percent) had only one child and 13 (15.7 percent) were expecting their first child. (Table V)

**TABLE V**  
**NUMBER OF LIVING CHILDREN**

No. of children	No.	%
Nil (Expecting 1st child)	13	15.7
1 child	30	36.2
2 children	18	21.7
3 children	13	15.6
4 children	4	4.8
5 children	1	1.2
6 children or more	4	4.8
Total	83	100.0

**TABLE VI**  
**CHILD CARE PATTERN OF WORKING WOMEN**

Child care agent	No.
Self (planned by expectant mothers)	3
Relatives at home	7
Relatives nearby (Day Care)	5
Relatives in foster care	9
(including 4 expectant mothers)	
Child-minder (paid, Day Care)	3
Total	28

**TABLE VII**  
**OCCUPATION BEFORE AND AFTER MARRIAGE**

Occupation	Before Marriage		After Marriage	
	No.	%	No.	%
Unemployed before marriage/Housewife after marriage	12	14.5	54	65.1
Fully Employed	70	84.3	28	33.7
Part-Time Employed	1	1.2	1	1.2
Total	83	100.0	83	100.0

**TABLE VIII**  
**COUPLES' PREFERRED OCCUPATIONAL CHOICES FOR MOTHER**

Preferred Occupation	Husband's choice		Wife's choice	
	No.	%	No.	%
Work (employment outside)	14	16.9	55	66.3
Child care	50	60.2	24	28.9
Not sure	19	22.9	4	4.8
Total	83	100.0	83	100.0

### Principal Child Care Person

There were 28 (33.7 percent) women who were working among the 83 women interviewed. Of these 21 (25.3 percent) were mothers with children and 8.4 percent were expecting their first child. The 21 working women used a variety of child care methods. These included relatives in foster care (5), relatives at home (7) and relatives nearby (5). None of them used paid domestic helps. (Table VI)

### Mothers' Occupations - Before And After Marriage

Out of the 83 respondents, 70 had held jobs previously (84.0 percent). However, 42 (50.6 percent) had given up their jobs at the time of the survey. Only 12 had not been previously employed. Thus, it was seen that 28 women (33.7 percent) who were previously employed continued their work even after marriage. Overall 65 percent (54) of the women were housewives and 28 (34 percent) were engaged in full-time work. (Table VII)

### COUPLES' PREFERRED OCCUPATIONAL CHOICES

While the mothers' occupations before and after marriage varied considerably, the preferences of vocation shown by both mother and father showed interesting differences. The husbands overwhelmingly preferred their wives to care for children rather than work outside - 60.2 percent vs. 16.9 percent. However, 19 (22.9 percent) were not quite sure what the wives should do. Wives on the other hand were equally certain that the majority preferred to work (66.3 percent) and only 29 percent (24) preferred child care. Only 4 wives were not sure what they wanted to do. (Table VIII).

### DISCUSSION

This study showed several interesting aspects of child care among largely lower income families in an urban setting in Malaysia. The sample of 83 attenders at an urban Maternity and Child Health Clinic was largely made up of Malays, Chinese and Indians below the age of thirty years. Most of them had less than 3 children (mean number of children being 2.2) which is well below that of the figure of 4.1 quoted by the Malaysian Family Survey 1966/67 and 3.9 by the Malaysian Family and Fertility Survey 1974 (NFPB, 1979). Most of them married before the age of 25 years (70 percent) and had been married for six years or less at the time of the survey. In this relatively young sample, there were 28 (33.7 percent) who were in full-time employment. These included 7 who were expecting their first child. Only 3 of them had planned to give

up their jobs to care for their child while the others and those with children preferred various types of child care mostly depending on relatives at home or outside. Three mothers preferred to leave their child care to paid child-minders. Though only a third of the sample consisted of working women, they were more numerous than seen in rural areas where only 11.4 percent were in full-time employment (Deva and Deva, 1980). Child care among working women in urban areas is a problem especially among the lower income groups. This is due to at least two factors - that of increasing number of nuclear families with few resident relatives and the high cost of paid domestic helps and their poor availability.

Even though only 33.7 percent of the married women were working after marriage, a surprising 84 percent had held full-time jobs prior to marriage. The fact that a full 50 percent of the women gave up working after marriage to become housewives was found to be largely due to social and domestic reasons. The vast majority said that their decision to leave their jobs was determined by marriage and husbands' choice. This was despite the fact that in lower income families, the extra income of a working mother was in most cases equivalent to 60 percent of the husbands' income. This phenomenon of giving up what may be seen as lucrative income in favour of child care may be seen as a healthy factor that keeps the mother-child bond going despite economic pressures.

However, their reasons for giving up their pre-marital jobs were, it appeared, the result more of pressure from the husbands rather than because of the wives' preference for child care. When asked what they preferred to do if child care arrangements were available, a surprising 66.3 percent opted for an outside job, and only 29 percent preferred to care for their own children. The husbands had almost the opposite view, with 50 (60.2 percent) opting to have the mothers caring for the children full time and only 14 (16.9 percent) opting for a working wife. However, 19 (22.9 percent) of the husbands were not sure and many of these felt that it was up to the wife to decide.

## CONCLUSION

It appears that though the vast majority of the respondents (65 percent) were housewives and care for their own children, 84 percent had been working full time prior to their marriage. Why they gave up their jobs seems to be for two principal

reasons: that of child care and that of their husbands' wishes. However, sixty-six percent still preferred to be working women rather than housewives if given a chance though 60 percent of their husbands were against this view.

We have therefore a delicate situation that confronts the heretofore traditional role of women in a marriage. Mothering by biological mothers seems to be facing a threat from the increasing numbers preferring to work in jobs rather than care for their children. What seems to keep them from working is largely tradition, husbands who prefer their wives to be housewives and the acute problems of getting alternative child care. But these barriers may crumble with a larger number of husbands being uncertain of what the role of their wives should be. In this survey, 21 percent were not sure what their wives should do.

The threat of erosion of maternal child care is a very real one to many urban low income communities in a developing economy. It is made more of a problem with rapidly rising inflation and cost of living. This brief survey shows that most women in this group still care for their own children with little help despite the numerous pressures. Traditional child care is still holding out but only just.

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