An Alternative Living Arrangement For Older Malaysian

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that older persons in developing countries turn first to family for social care, and elderly parents are accepted to be living with their children when they are physically dependent. Nowadays the provision of care within family becomes more difficult as family size decreases. Women, who are traditionally the main care providers, also increasingly engaged in employment outside the home. Thus, the older persons have to think an alternative living arrangement to secure their welfare. This study seeks to analyze an alternative living arrangement for older persons in Malaysia. Using a multiple-case study design, a total of eight older persons aged between 62-72 years old who live in the modern pondok at the al-Jenderami Foundation, in the state of Selangor, Malaysia, were purposively selected as participants. All participants, who are all single mothers, have opted in at their own wish and have settled in the al-Jenderami for the period of 2 to 6 years. Through in-depth interviews conducted, it can be concluded that there are five reasons why they choose the pondok as their residence. The reasons are: 1) consistent in ibadah, 2) easy to join the jemaah at the mosque, 3) able to mix around and learn together with their peers, 4) can increase the deeds for the afterlife, and 5) be able to focus on the religious learning.

Key words: Older persons; elderly; religious activities; worship; neglected

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a qualitative survey and discusses why elderly people choose to live in pondok as their alternative living arrangement. Compared with the past three decades, particularly before 1980s research on ageing was so strange in Malaysia. The older persons has now become a mode of debates among academicians, and this interest is started to be widespread in recent years. Research suggests that family is still the main source of support for older persons in Malaysia (Masitah and Nazileh, 1988). Following the growing number of older people in Malaysia, an alternative living arrangement of this category of population will become an important issue to all families. Although as points out by Wan-Ibrahim, et al. (2012) in their survey that the percentage of older persons living in a small conjugal nuclear family was quite large (49.5%), there were 21% of the respondents in the survey were living with spouse only. Thus, it seems that older persons will be facing problems in getting family support in the future. This is particularly true as elderly parents nowadays find it more difficult to depend on their children and other family members as family structure in Malaysia faces challenges from within and outside the family in Malaysia (Masitah and Nazileh, 1988). The family support for the elderly has shown signs of weakening. It is anticipated that over the next 40 years as the proportion of older population aged 60 years and older will increase dramatically, the functions of family as care providers in
Malaysia will become problematic. Many of the families find it increasingly difficult to care for their own older persons. Families such as those living under the poverty lines are unlikely to be able to provide adequate economic supports and care for their old parents (Tan, 1993). Therefore the percentage of older persons living in nursing homes as an alternative living arrangement has recently risen significantly. Living in a nursing home is not an enjoyable one. For most of Malaysian, living in a nursing home is the last alternative. Zainab and Wan-Ibrahim (2008) indicate that quite a sizable proportion of older residents in Rumah Seri Kenangan felt they feared facing loneliness. Despite there have been a large number of studies to explore the daily life of older people in Malaysia in recent years, the nature of alternative living arrangement of this category of population based on religious institutions are still relatively unexamined. So far very sparse information is available about the nature of alternative living arrangement of the elderly people based on these institutions.

Although there are studies that have explored living arrangement of older persons, such as Masitah and Nazileh (1988), and Wan-Ibrahim et al. (2012), not many researchers in Malaysia that has conducted research on alternative living arrangements. Thus, many other questions about the alternative living arrangement of elderly people remain unanswered. In an attempt to fill the gap, therefore, this paper aims at analyzing the tendency of Malay elderly in choosing pondok as an alternative living arrangement at older age. Lack of research with in-depth focus on the religious activities for the elderly could be associated with numbers of social forces. One of the forces is that the study of the elderly themselves until the present time is still a relatively new spectrum to the researchers in Malaysia. This is because the discipline of gerontology is still a relatively new research field where its existence has only been felt since the mid-1980s. To-date there has not been a specific study conducted to explore religious activities among the elderly in Malaysia.

Other forces are that of based on the discipline of sociology itself. In this discipline, religious matter, because of it quite difficult to measure, is not the main subject to be discussed. There is one sub area in sociology which also devotes attention to this concept; that is the sociology of religion, but this discipline in Malaysia until now is less popular with no rapid development.

Materials And Method

This qualitative study was conducted to explore the response of the elderly citizens dwelling in pondok as their alternative living arrangement. In conducting this, the study uses the multiple-case study design. Eight elderly residents aged between 62-72 years old who live in the modern pondok at the al-Jenderami Foundation, in the state of Selangor, Malaysia, was purposively selected as the participants for the in-depth interviews. The focus of the interview goes around the reasons why these participants decided to settle down in the pondok as an alternative living arrangement. All the participants, who are all single mothers, have opted in at their own wish and have settled in the al-Jenderami for the period of 2 to 6 years.

Participant 1 aged 68 years, primary school educated and was formerly a full-time housewife. This participant has a child and has been living in the pondok for five years, and come into the pondok on her own will. Participant 2, the 72-year-old lady, self-employed with eight children has been staying in the pondok for the last six years. Participant 3, aged 68, completed primary education, is also a full-time housewife. This participant have five children, has been staying in the pondok for two years. Participant 4, aged 62, holds a Diploma in Nursing, was a nurse with have five children and has been living in the pondok for three years. Participant 5, the 64 years old factory worker with two children, has lived in the pondok for four years. Participant 6, a 63-year-old housewife, primary education, has five children. She has been living in the pondok for four years. Participant 6, 69 years, had previously worked as a General Assistant at Kuala Lumpur City Council, has five children and has been staying in the pondok for the last three years. Participant 8, 62 years old, high school educated, worked as a clerk, with five children and has been staying in the pondok for five years.

Results And Discussion

Reasons Why Older Persons Choose Alternative Living Arrangement:

Available evidence on why some of older persons in Malaysia choose to live in pondok at older age is limited. Although there are studies that have been conducted to examine pondok itself, studies to explore pondok as an alternative living arrangement for Muslims older persons, are limited. Pondok is an alternative living arrangement for Muslims older persons in Malaysia. It is like a cottage residence, built based on Islamic Religious learning system. Besides to give care to the aged, it also provides a wide range of religious activities to inmates. Particularly for the older persons who want to concentrate fully to the religious practice, they generally choose pondok as an alternative living arrangement. This study found there are varieties of reasons why the senior citizens choose to stay in pondok as their alternative living arrangement at older age. Through indepth interviews, it was found that there are five reasons why they choose the pondok as their residence, which
are: 1) consistent in ibadah, 2) easy to join the jemaah at the mosque, 3) able to mix around and learn together with peers, 4) increase the deeds for the afterlife, and 5) be able to focus on religious learning.

**Consistent in Worship:**

In Islam, consistency in practice is very essential. All Muslims are required to perform religious practices consistently. Little practice if done consistently is considered better than performing inconsistent hefty practices. All participants agreed they are required to perform religious practices consistently. As they accepted, when they were young, they were not consistent in practicing the religion. So now it is the high time for them to make up for past mistakes by staying in pondok. In this pondok, the participants felt they no longer have to think about the busy family life. They no longer have to take care of grandchildren, or they no longer have to think about the house chores. They can submit fully to the religious practice. One of the participants point out that by living in pondok, she can spend the day or night (ikzikaf) in the mosques. Iktikaf grew much reward; I can recite the verses and perform zikir. I accomplish that consistently, for the sake of Allah, fear of Allah. We are utilising our remaining time because we fear Allah. I am afraid to delay. We do not want to be unhurried. We do not want to hold-up unless we are sick”.

**Easy to Perform Jemaah in the Mosque:**

The mosque, Islamic prayer-house, is the best place for prayers. Allah reserves great rewards to those who perform jemaah (congregation) prayers in the mosque. In fact every footstep leading to the mosque is calculated as a good deed. Therefore, all those who wish to pursue and receive goodness from Allah, strive to carry out jemaah prayers in the mosque. A Muslim who does not congregate in the mosque will be viewed negatively by neighbours within the community. In fact the community will also reject those who never join-in the congregation in the mosque. The participants of the study believe Allah will give big rewards if they congregate in prayers at the mosque. For them there is no guarantee they could join the jemaah at the mosque in every prayer time if they are staying at a home outside the pondok community. After all there are participants who stay far away from the mosque which makes them difficult to perform jemaah in the mosque.

By staying in the pondok, the problems of staying far away from the mosque, or disheartened to join the congregation for prayers in the mosque will no longer be the obstacle. Everybody congregates for prayers in the mosque. All my friends are eager to go to the mosques. This would indirectly bring in strength for them to move forward for the congregation the mosque. After all, the mosque is just before your eyes. They were able to consistently perform worship in mosques. One of the participants said, “The main purpose of staying within the pondok is to be able to walk to and forth to the mosque. If we stay outside the pondok, how could we be able to do this? As like the religious lessons, we could find it anywhere, but we want to go to the mosque every prayer-time. Previously, when were we staying outside the pondok community we also feel like joining the iktikaf in the mosque. Now by 11.00pm. or even at 11.30pm. I could go to the mosque for the iktikaf. Interesting! We can perform simple prayers such as reciting 4 Qul daily”

**Mix Around and Learn Together With Peers:**

As for the elderly or anyone, friends or buddies are important. Peers can inspire in whatever activity in our life. In religion, peer has a very significant role to play. Good peers serve as a personal guide to a more positive path. If someone has a close friend who possess bad behaviour, the friendship will lead the said person to adopt some bad behaviour too. That is why Islam is concerned about who can be our closest friend because it will influence our behaviour. Thus, participants in the study choose to reside in the pondok, where they can mingle with peers who have similar interests and preferences. All older persons who choose to live in the pondok have same desire to boost-up their submission in the worship to the Almighty. Therefore, by integrating with peers who share some similar interest, indirectly it will enhance the desire to perform more worship. In addition, there are peers who know more about religion. They can also function as an informal teacher to other older persons. Whatever is taught by the teacher in mosques that are poorly understood, can be clarified by such friends while back to their pondok. Therefore, peers can be an informal guide for learning and teaching.

**Adding Good Deeds for the Hereafter:**

Wan-Ibrahim & Zainab (2011) in their study in rural Terengganu found that one of the reasons behind the participation of the elderly respondents in religious activities is seeking God’s blessing. The respondents want to dedicate the last years of their life to Allah. For them Islam is both here and hereafter. Increase the good deeds for the day hereafter is the duty of every person who claims to believe in the Hereafter. This is because the Hereafter is the real place to live. In the afterlife, rank and wealth is useless. What will be brought are the good

deeds and good practice. Therefore everyone is responsible for their good self to pound up their very own good deeds. Islam teaches men that our lives do not end in this world. Some of the respondents in this study said: "Life on earth is impermanent; the world hereafter is the last stop. One day all men will die and they will see God. In the Hereafter, there will be reckoning on what we have done during the life of this world. Lost are for those who do not have good deeds and practice. The older persons will have less time to perform an abundance of deeds. Death is coming closer. Today or tomorrow they may die. If we die without sufficient supply, we are great loss. Consequently, we want to spend our old age by performing good deeds so that we may amplify our supply for the day hereafter. That is why we chose the pondok. We want to die here". Most of the participants want to spend the remaining of their age by doing good deeds and worship Allah without any interference within the busy family.

Expand Religious Knowledge:

Another reason why older persons choose to live in pondok is because they can explore more about religious knowledge. To them, previously they have insufficient time and chances to learn the religious knowledge; some are due to their hectic day-to-day work schedule. Now, they are retired, having lived in the pondok, they have ample time to explore the religious lessons further. While living in the pondok could deepen their religious knowledge by learning from various religious teachers who regularly teaches at their mosque. Various religious programs are held in the pondok and these are very beneficial to the elderly citizens to participate. A participant stated that, "It’s a good thing that we are here, at this age what else are we searching for. Nothing other than knowledge we are seeking here. Our children wouldn’t be able to assist us, only Allah does.” It is particularly true because Islam is not just life on this earth. What is more important is the hereafter. Thus, what Islam aims at is a balanced life between life on this earth and the life the hereafter, or in the words Sharif (1998) a balance between the economic and spiritual forces.

All the participants agree that knowledge is very crucial. Islam urges every Muslims to always expand their knowledge. In Islam, knowledge is not just about human being, but also about the hereafter, about the Creator, the Prophets, Revelation, Day of Judgment, Angels, and so on. The role of knowledge is to help fulfill the purpose of our creation: to worship Allah (Ferrar, 1999). Accepting that our purpose here on this earth is to submit to Allah’s Will, it is obvious that knowledge of the hereafter, and of the Creator, is of the utmost importance (Ferrar, 1999).

Conclusion:

Following the growing number of older people in Malaysia in recent years, living arrangement of this category of population will become an important issue to all families. Research suggests that family is still the main source of support for older persons in Malaysia, but it is anticipated that the functions of family as care providers in Malaysia will become problematic. This paper discusses why elderly people choose to live in the pondok as their alternative living arrangement. From the in-depth interviews, we obtained five reasons why older participants in this study opt to choose the pondok as their residence, which are; so as they can be consistent in performing their worship, easily able to join the jemaah in the mosque, able to socialize and learn together with religious peers, can perform good deeds for the afterlife and capably to further enhance their religious knowledge. Participants in the study overall said that the opportunity to be admitted into the pondok is comparatively difficult. Typically, the participants are very happy with their opportunity to live in the pondok because they want to spend their golden days by performing more good deeds and want to submit to the Almighty Allah without interference of the daily chores within their busy family life. They also said that they are able to multiply prayers and can always be able to practice iktikaf (sleep/ worship/ recite Quran etc.) in the mosques, a practice that are unable to accomplish in the past.

References

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