

“What’s wrong with *mak*?”: Understanding Menopause among Young Malay Adults

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Abstract

Menopause is a time of life where women make the transition from a reproductive stage to a non-reproductive stage. This transition (and all that it entails in terms of symptoms and discomfort) is kept secret and women do not tell family members about their experiences. In most instances, information about menopause and issues related to it is passed on by friends who are older or the nearest kin, other than the parents. **Objective:** The aim of this study is to explore how young Malay adults actually come to understand what menopause is as well as its related symptoms. **Methods:** This study employs ethnographic methods (participation observation and in-depth interviews) with a sample of fourteen young Malay adults aged 24-38. All of them have mothers who are experiencing menopause. Qualitative approach was used to analyze data. **Results:** Knowledge about menopause in urban Malay society is transmitted by their mothers’ capacity to engage in prayer, fasting and the teaching of religion. On the other hand, stories about menopause were told ‘around’ rather than ‘about’ menopause. With regard to mood swings and sensitiveness, these symptoms have to some degree altered their communication with their mothers. These children expressed concern for their mothers acting out of character outside the house and would do their best to please them in words and behaviour. **Conclusion:** Family members remain confused or unsure of what is happening and how best to respond to their mothers’ behaviour due to menopause. They only learn about menopause through informal ways, particularly through observation.

Keywords: menopause, observation, taboo, sensitive topic, *Malay*

Lately *Mak* frequently *naik angin* (bad tempered). Sometimes over small matters. I don't understand. She was not like this before. I ask my father why and he replied 'Road-tax expired!' I scratch my head...

(Reza, 24)

1. Introduction

This above anecdote gives a clue to the complex understanding of menopause held by Malay people, and perhaps people from other cultural groups as well. Stories are told 'around' the topic through reference to the symptoms, but the word 'menopause' was not mentioned in the anecdote so the story was not literally 'about' menopause. My interviews with some of the family members of the menopausal women in my study, particularly with their adult children, have shown that menopause is a topic that often creates confusion. Most menopause women in my study mentioned that their mothers had not taught them openly about menopause when they were younger. Instead, they were advised to deal with menopause when 'their time came' or to consult a doctor. Similarly, even though I found myself talking to women who were in my own mother's age group, I had somewhat paradoxically never spoken with my own mother about this topic, until of course she showed curiosity in my research and I responded willingly with useful information.

Malaysian society, because of cultural and religious mores, has a very restricted notion about sex education. Even if sex is discussed in a formal way, such as in the academic curricula of sex education, many aspects of sexuality are omitted from the learning process to conform to the cultural and religious restrictions. Discussion about sex is taboo and is generally regarded as *kotor* (dirty) (Mohd Ali, 1985). Furthermore, any issues regarding sexuality are considered *lucah* (obscene). In many ways, menstruation and menopause are associated with discussions of sex because they signal the ability or non-ability to conceive. Similarly in the Korean culture, talking openly about menstruation, pregnancy, sexual relationships and menopause is also regarded as taboo (Kim cited in Im & Meleis 2000). Among the Malays, religious teachers are responsible for teaching sex education to children (Mohd Ali, 1985) though this is limited to issues pertaining to puberty, prohibition of sex before marriage and its consequences, menstruation and *mandi hadas* (ritual bath). In this study, I contend that Malay women (and men as well as their adult children for that matter) learn about menopause in a very informal way, often through observation and what is not said and done, rather than by explicit education about the matter.

2. The Study

The aim of this study is to explore how young Malay adults actually come to understand what menopause is as well as its related symptoms. To elicit an understanding of how young Malay adults learn about menopause, the ethnographic approach was employed (in-depth interviews and participant observation were carried out). This approach was seen as the most suitable approach because it provides a degree of flexibility (O'Reilly, 2005; Punch, 1998). This approach allows the researcher to listen to 'voices of the silenced, othered, [and those] marginalized by the

social order' (Pranee Liamputtong, 2007: 7). Since this method employed an open-ended approach, it allows participants to speak about their feelings and experiences using their own words (*emic* perspective) (Pranee Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) rather than to follow a set of pre-determined questions that are usually employed in survey research.

There were fourteen young Malay adults aged between 24-38 years old who participated in the study. All of them have completed their tertiary education and are working in Kuala Lumpur. Out of 14 participants only three are married. The choice of studying these young adults did not stem from pragmatic deliberations alone. The participants have achieved a level of understanding about reproductive health and they have mothers who are experiencing menopause. In addition, the Malay society has experienced tremendous social and cultural changes, over the past 20-30 years, and it is seen as something that would not only be interesting to study but also something not sufficiently researched before.

To understand how young adults come to terms with menopause, interviews were transcribed after completion. Significant and important statements made by the young adults were selected to give a brief representation of their understanding about menopause.

3. Findings

Most participants claimed that they were not aware of their mothers' menopausal symptoms. In general, knowledge about menopause is obtained by the young adults through their observation of elder members of the family. From my data, the findings are presented in the following section:

3.1 Learning about menopause through observation

In my study, I found that my participants learned about their mother's menopause through observation – by noting their mothers' daily practices like praying five times a day, complete fast of 30 days during Ramadhan and no more pregnancies. This situation is acknowledged by the menopausal women who were interviewed earlier. They too observed their own mothers' daily activities and behaviours. Aside from observation, menopausal women also sought information from friends by listening to stories, reading women's magazines and books and other media. Family members, especially sons and daughters, tended to know very little about their mothers' experiences of menopause. Many were uncertain when their mothers acted out of character; whether the behaviour was associated with menopause or not. In fact, most of them had no idea about menopausal symptoms.

Some young adults who were interviewed recalled the effect that menopause had on their mothers. Dewi, aged 29 who works as a personal assistant in a private company told me:

I was uncertain whether *Mak's* change of behaviour was related to the symptoms or because of the pressure of managing our big family. I noticed *Mak* frequently complained of joint pain, numbness and wrinkled skin. At one time, I bought some anti-wrinkle cream for her but she continued complaining. I recalled *Mak* vomited for a week and it was alarming when

she could not get off her bed. She spat, could not cook, and had fever and a cough. Was she pregnant again and why *Mak* sleep in *adik*'s room for several nights? Why had she left father to sleep alone? Surprisingly, my father did not complain. Instead, he said that *Mak* had many children and she could choose to sleep with any one of them she liked. One thing that I couldn't comprehend was *Mak*'s unpredictable mood. I noticed she easily 'snapped' over small reasons and sometimes there was no reason at all for her to get angry. When *Mak* 'snapped', she would break the glasses in the kitchen or scold us. I suspected *Mak* is suffering from a disease because she frequently urinates too. What's wrong with *Mak*?

Like Dewi, Sabrina, a bank officer in her late twenties, noticed some behavioural changes in her mother's physical appearance and mood. Sabrina is the eldest of two siblings with her younger brother having just completed high school. Her father, aged 58, retired from the army and now spends his time running a small business in the city. Sabrina's 55 year old mother, who worked in a government office, started to be very grumpy. Sabrina recalled that her parents had an argument:

I overheard my mother saying that father was an 'old man but still wanted to have sex!' I was not interested in the argument as it was 'a personal matter', but clearly I was confused about what was going on. One night, I noticed that my mother had slept in the guest room and father complained. It was during breakfast that my mother provided further clues for me to work out what was going on. I remembered my mother said she was *very hot* last night and she has *no interest* in sleeping with her father. At this point, I was still uncertain and it did not occur to me that my mother exhibited menopausal symptoms. To me, it was an adult issue and something that was quite clearly awkward. The following week, to my surprise, I recollected that my mother came home from her office with blonde hair. I was speechless. My mother said she felt good with her new hair colour and believed it gave her new confidence. Is she out of her mind?

Some adult sons noticed behavioural changes in their mothers as well. Azman, aged 29, for example, is the second child in his family and is a primary school teacher. Like Dewi and Sabrina, his mother also exhibited some behavioural changes:

Nura: Tell me what you know about menopause?

Azman: Not much. What I know is that women stop menstruating around the age of 50. They don't have babies.

Nura: How do you know that your mother is going through menopause?

Azman: I have hunches as she never tells me or my sisters. I realized when she never misses teaching the children to recite *al-Qur'ān*. Previously, once a month she must postpone the class because she's having her *off day* [due to menstruation]. She will not teach for about six to seven days. Then, she will not pray. When her *off day* ended, the class resumes. She will also pray as usual.

Nura: Did you notice any behavioural changes?

Azman: Certainly! I guess my mother has entered another world. A world of tiredness and inefficiency. Just like my late grandmother who had entered the same world. Previously my mother was very active and energetic. She cooked and cleaned very fast. She participated in women's activities in the neighbourhood. Now she seems very tired, rarely wants to go shopping or travelling and she is forgetful. She prefers to stay at home or to visit her grandchildren who live nearby. Lately my mother is becoming very sensitive. We have to be very careful of what we say or do at home. I try to minimize speaking to my mother. I fear my words will hurt her even though I didn't mean it.

Nura: Did your mother seek any treatment for her symptoms?

Azman: Not that I know. I brought her to see a doctor not long ago but it was about her muscle pain. Not specifically on menopause. But one day, she shouted at me 'Buy me menopause pill, buy me menopause pill!' Menopause pill? I have no idea what it looks like or where to buy it. If she asked me to buy Panadol, I know where to get it. That was the first time I heard she mentioned the word menopause.

Dewi, Sabrina and Azman noticed some behavioural changes in their mothers but were not completely sure whether the changes were associated with work or pressure of managing the family. All of them agreed that their mothers had never spoken about menopause as it was a topic that most mothers did not openly discuss with their adult children. They all expressed their concern about their mothers acting out of character outside the house. With regard to mood swings and sensitiveness, these symptoms have to some degree altered their communication with their mothers. All of these children expressed concern for their mothers and would do their best to please them in words and behaviour. Nevertheless, they remained confused about what was really happening and how best to respond.

3.2 Listening to stories 'around' menopause

The young adults I interviewed shared their experiences about listening to stories told 'around' rather than 'about' the topic. Stories were told in a subtle way and they had to pick up the clues or make sense of what they heard. As Zila, aged 38 said:

I guess we come from a different generation ... my mum and I. My mum's generation is not very open on certain subjects like sexuality. It is a sensitive topic to be discussed. She told me about menstruation, but other topics are told in a very general manner. A lot of the time, middle-aged people don't discuss *this* [menopause] openly. We heard other people's cases, but not our own mum. Previously when I was at school or currently at the office, my friends and I used to compare stories with one another about old women have bad tempered and they are 'very hot' [have hot flushes]. That is how I found out some things like hot flushes and mood swing.

Like Zila, Kamal, a senior executive at the Central Bank of Malaysia, also raised the same issue. His own mother, Sofiah, has bad mood swings. Kamal recounted the following:

I don't understand why lately my mother is grumpy. Maybe this is what people said *umur dah meragam* [grumpy due to old age]. I heard among my aunties they said that they easily get mad and they always complaint the room is hot although the air-cond is on. My father frequently advised us not to argue with our mother as it will make her more 'unstable'. I guess the older you grow, it's like that.

Interestingly, these participants also learned some words to describe menopause through informal conversations with their fathers and elderly family members. The conversations they had or listened to did not use the term menopause or *putus haid* in the Malay language. Parents or family members avoid being entirely explicit and they expect their children to be able to pick up the cues. In other words, they provide part of the information and children are expected to fill in the rest. Terminology can be

used in many different ways. For example, Chirawatkul and Manderson (1994) who studied women in Thailand found that local terms or idioms were used when the women were talking to their husbands or friends about menstruation and menopause. In this study, my participants indicated that their fathers used particular words and phrases to describe their mothers' menopausal condition, for example *umur dah beragam* and *dah pencen* (Table 1).

Table 1. Variations of terms use to describe menopause

Terms	Literal meaning
<i>Dah off</i>	already off
<i>Dah pencen</i>	already retired
<i>Tayar tak ada bunga</i>	tyre which has no grip
<i>Road-tax dah expired</i>	expired road-tax
<i>Umur dah beragam</i>	grumpy age

These participants continued to use Malay terms to describe their mothers' menopausal symptoms. For example, a hot flush is referred to as *panas-panas* (hot-hot) and mood swing as *marah-marah* (angry-angry). In a similar manner, Lock (1993) found that Japanese women used particular terminology to describe 'the change' (*konenki*).

3.3 The unexpected way to learn about menopause

Another way the young adults in this study learned about menopause is through the most unexpected way – from me! When asked them about their mothers' menopausal symptoms, all of them were unsure what the 'symptoms' were but they noticed some changes had taken place in their mothers' social interactions and memory:

Malik: My mother is very sensitive lately. It was not like this before. I have to be extra careful talking to her.

Sheena: Sometimes her face turns red. Frequently wiping her sweats in a cold room.

Liza: My mother frequently complaint she is tired although she did not do heavy work.

The above interview excerpts indicated that the young adults were uncertain about what was going on with their mothers' behaviours and they expected me to translate the changes and experiences into menopausal symptoms or not. Although my role was not as a doctor to confirm that their mothers were going through menopause, I responded that the changes did appear to be associated with menopause and ageing in

general. After they heard the explanation and were shown brochures on menopause brochures, they now understand that their mothers are exhibiting some menopausal symptoms. Most information, particularly information about symptoms, HRT and the menopause clinic were introduced during the interview. Interestingly, the participants had never come across any of the materials that were brought to them. Instead of using the material to probe the discussion, the materials were used as a source of information about menopause.

4. Discussion

Menopause is most definitely a challenging topic as it is not widely discussed in Western societies and virtually never discussed in most non-Western societies. Menopause, like other private and personal experiences is regarded as taboo. It is discussed predominantly in the medical context and the private sphere, between the doctor and the woman. Most participants in this study agreed that their mothers never spoke about menopause with them. Murdock (Beyenne, 1986: 48)(cited in Beyenne 1968, p. 48) claims that ethnographic findings on menopause are “scanty, anecdotal, inconsistent or peripheral” compared to other topics of study. Of course since the late 1960s this research has increased somewhat (see Lock 1993). Nevertheless, the research area is neglected with social taboos contributing principally to the rareness of the research (Agee, 2000; Im & Meleis, 2000). This makes research in the area difficult. Rice and Manderson (1996: 2) highlight the fact that “issues about reproductive health, including menopause, are un-spoken mainly because women want to maintain discretion and privacy”. Similarly in Malaysia, menopause is a sensitive issue and is regarded as belonging in a private realm. Most women will disclose information about their menopausal status only to their doctors or among women of a similar age who may be experiencing similar symptoms and concerns.

In Malaysia, menopause as a topic is not included in the sex education curricula; it is also not well explained in science subjects as part of the biological process which affects women’s reproductive capacity. As explained earlier, it is notable that overt discussion about sex, even something that is more oriented to bodily changes such as menopause, is avoided, even between mothers and daughters. Thus, much information about menopause is learned in a very covert way. Another way of explaining knowledge about menopause is to say that it becomes a kind of tacit knowledge that is not openly acknowledged, but nevertheless, is understood in a very informal way.

Interestingly, among Malay women, topics like menstruation, pregnancy and the post-partum period are discussed at length, but not menopause. The young adults spoken to, felt that their mothers regarded menopause as either private or too insignificant to discuss even with their daughters. Through the interviews, it was found that not only had menopausal women desisted from questioning their mothers, their young adult children too were not encouraged to make enquiries of them. Even Malays who are urban and educated are not encouraged to ask too many questions about issues of sexuality. Those who ask questions regardless are regarded as ‘showing disrespect’ (Zamani, 2002: 172). In addition, parents impose sanctions upon their children to make them fearful of asking questions, thus discouraging them from asking again in the future. Hence, most Malay children’s experience of asking about sexuality is shadowed by the fear of punishment and is seen as pointless because they would be

unlikely to be given a 'straight' answer. This study is similar to Agee's (2000) who studied the transmission of menopausal knowledge among African-American and Euro-American women. The African-American women's main reference for learning about menopause was through looking at women who fanned themselves in church due to hot flushes. In other words, knowledge about menopause among African American women is transmitted in the public space of the church and not in the privacy of the home. Similarly, knowledge about menopause in urban Malay society is transmitted by the menopausal woman's capacity to engage in prayer, fasting and the teaching of religion. However, in one sense while they are 'pure' and free from the pollution of menstruation, they are subject to misunderstanding by their families and many are burdened by the discomforts of menopausal symptoms.

Since menopause is a natural human process that women will undergo in their later life, young adults feel it should be discussed more openly. After being interviewed, the participants said menopausal women 'needed to open up', especially with family members and friends about the issue of menopause and how it affects them. As indicated earlier, menopause is not discussed directly between close family members. By contrast, friends may discuss one another's mother's menopause, but they will not discuss this with their own mothers. It is not an easy matter to 'open up' about menopause and there is a level of ignorance and naivety, not just amongst women experiencing, or having experienced menopause, but also amongst the general community.

5. Conclusion

Malay parents, in general, do not talk openly about sex in front of their young adult children or discuss with them the issues relating to sex or bodily functions, for example as a preparation for puberty, the teenage years or marriage. Young adults are expected to experience these transitions for themselves, but of course while these things are not spoken of in an overt way, they must learn about sex and bodily processes in some fashion. In most instances, information about sex and issues related to it (in the case of this study, menopause) is passed on by friends who are older or the nearest kin, other than the parents.

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