

## Self-Resilience evolvment among Widowed Mothers in Malaysia

Evolución de la auto-resiliencia entre madres viudas en Malasia

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the experiences of widowed mothers on the evolvment of their self- resilience after the loss of their spouses. This study which adopts phenomenological approach involves six widows as respondents in semi-structured in-depth interviews. Data analysis results using Atlas.ti shows three main themes that emerge in the development of self-resilience among widowed. These themes encompass the following: process of adapting, coping skills and support system. The process of adapting used by widows in developing self-resilience involves emotional, cognitive and behavioral adjustments. Widowed also use spiritual, behavioral, cognitive and emotional approaches as part of their coping skills strategies to increase self-resilience. Support systems that are beneficial for respondent's resilience come from family, friends, employers and the government agencies. Widowed are able to bounce back, to beat the odds after a devastating life events, depending on how far they can adapt and cope, and the amount of support system received. Findings from this study suggest counseling services and interventions for single widowed mothers to focus more on adaptation, support system, and coping skills to increase self-resilience.

**Keywords:** Widowed, Self-resilience, Support System, Coping Skills, Adapting, Counseling.

### RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene como objetivo explorar las experiencias de las madres viudas en la evolución de su auto-resistencia después de la pérdida de sus cónyuges. Este estudio que adopta un enfoque fenomenológico involucra a seis viudas como encuestadas en entrevistas en profundidad semiestructuradas. Los resultados del análisis de datos utilizando Atlas.ti muestran tres temas principales que surgen en el desarrollo de la auto-resiliencia entre las viudas. Estos temas abarcan lo siguiente: proceso de adaptación, habilidades de afrontamiento y sistema de apoyo. El proceso de adaptación utilizado por las viudas en el desarrollo de la auto-resiliencia implica ajustes emocionales, cognitivos y de comportamiento. Las viudas también usan enfoques espirituales, conductuales, cognitivos y emocionales como parte de sus estrategias de habilidades de afrontamiento para aumentar la auto-resistencia. Los sistemas de apoyo que son beneficiosos para la capacidad de recuperación de los encuestados provienen de familiares, amigos, empleadores y agencias gubernamentales. Las viudas pueden recuperarse, superar las probabilidades después de una devastadora vida, dependiendo de cuán lejos puedan adaptarse y sobrellevar, y la cantidad de sistema de apoyo recibido. Los resultados de este estudio sugieren servicios de asesoramiento e intervenciones para que las madres viudas solteras se centren más en la adaptación, el sistema de apoyo y las habilidades de afrontamiento para aumentar la auto-resiliencia.

**Palabras clave:** Viudo, Auto-resiliencia, Sistema de apoyo, Habilidades de afrontamiento, Adaptación, Asesoramiento.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The death of a life partner is a traumatic event that leaves a deep wound, creating one of the most challenging time in a family (Ochoa, 2016). Problems would catastrophize if the living spouse is left with young children. Childrearing would be a challenge doing it by themselves after the death of the spouse. During this period of time, their status would also change to single mothers or single fathers. They might experience depression for a while that may affects their daily life. This process is a part of the emotional adjustment process that deals with the newly changed status (Cairney, Boyle, Lipman, & Racine, 2004; Cairney & Wade, 2002). Hence, it is imperative that they bounce back and find solutions to counter this prolonged negative feeling. They should also deal with the challenges and manage the feeling of sadness that came through their fate.

Resilience is defined by how an individual could bounce back, beating the odds after experiencing unfortunate events and threatening experiences (Lee, 2014; Resnick, Gwyther, & Roberto, 2011; Siebert, 2005; Yong, 2004). Taormina (2015) described the term resilience as an effort to revive, becoming more elastic and flexible to return to normal. This process to bounce back is driven by high level of self-motivation and desire to be a progressive individual. Often times, resilience is associated with positive emotions, which normally comes from the individual themselves (Philippe, Lecours, & Bealieu-Pelletier, 2009), and differs accordingly to the stressors and pressure they are facing (Ong & Zatura, 2010). Among single mothers, self-resilience has been found to relate with the ability to overcome the traumatic event of loss and challenges that come afterward (West, 2012). Resilience is viewed as a dynamic process of adaptation within an individual that is experiencing challenges and adversities (Richardson, 2002; Taylor, 2013).

Another crucial factor that contribute to self-resilience among single mothers is their support system (Corr & Corr, 2009). Support system may help reduce the burden they carry (Clark & Hamplová, 2013; Correa et al., 2011; Grossman et al., 2009; Guillory et al., 2014; Lashley & Giannoni, 2010; Schrag & Tieszen, 2014), contributes to better self-esteem and mental well-being (Crosier, 2007), provide information and skills so they can learn and apply and adapt with more effective lifestyle (Grossman and colleagues (2009). Support system consists of family, friends, employers, colleagues, and society members (Clark, 2001), as well as NGO and government agencies. Goodman and her research colleagues (2007), developed a ROAD (Reaching Out About Depression) project through focus groups to help single mothers gain support from one another for self-stabilization, identification of needs and enhancement of inner strength. Three main powers emphasized are; a) individual psychological powers, b) socio-political empowerment and c) collective empowerment.

In the Malaysian context, The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development recognized the need of single mothers when it issued The Single Mother Empowerment Plan 2015-2020 (Ministry of Women Development, 2015). The plan sets out 3 main objectives as follows: to increase stakeholder awareness and commitment to empower single mothers' economy; to improve single mothers' social welfare; and to enhance research and development coordination for single mothers. This effort to support single mothers is in line with the governments mission to empower all society members to participate in building a progressive and inclusive society. The dynamic of self-resilience will continue to evolve with the existence of support system which can include both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to help single mothers in moving forward to face their challenges (Davidson, 2008; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Hence, this phenomenological study examines the evolution of self-resilience among single mothers in Malaysia.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The main aim of phenomenology is to explore meaning in an individual's life experiences as closely pictured by the individual themselves (Blomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Frost, 2011). This phenomenological research uses purposive sampling based on the following criteria for selecting the respondents; (i) widow, (ii) have at least one child (iii) have been a widow for at least a year. Six widows have fulfilled these mentioned criteria. All six respondents lives around Klang Valley (Middle of Kuala Lumpur). Table 1 summarizes the background of respondents.

**Table 1 Respondents Background**

Respondents	Academic Qualification	Occupation	Age when become widow	Cause of spouse death	Number of children
PK 1	Masters	Part- Time Lecturer	42	Heart Attack	4
PK2	Masters	Contract Lecturer	45	Heart Attack	1
PK3	High School	Housewife	39	Heart Attack	4
PK4	High School	Teacher	42	Stroke	2
PK5	Junior High School	Housewife	41	Accident	7
PK6	High School	Housewife	28	Cancer	4

Data for this research is gauged through audio taped semi-structured in-depth interviews and probing. Probing helps to build and explore deeper understanding of the phenomena being investigated (Seidman, 2006; Frost, 2011; McLeod, 2001). Five respondents are interviewed at the comfort of their own homes, while the other respondent is more

comfortable meeting at the workplace as she spent more time there. The researcher does not put any time limit for the interviews. Each interview takes about 45 minutes to an hour to end, with the frequency being three to five times for each respondent depending on the readiness of the respondents in sharing their experiences and also considering data saturation. To ensure data credibility, the researcher checks completed transcriptions and emerged themes with each respondent. The whole data is managed using the Atlas ti 7. As suggested by Morse and Richards (2002), the process of interpreting data begins with descriptive coding, topic coding, analytical coding and themes.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes that emerge from widowed mothers' phenomenological experience of self-resilience are as follows; Adjustment process, coping skills, and support system.

#### Adjustment process

Adjustment process is needed in order to help widows to bounce back from the traumatic event that they experience. First thing that should be looked into is when the upsetting experience that becomes overwhelming happened within widows, is how did they accept the new status that falls onto them, from being a wife and mother to being a widower and single mother. Each respondent from this research has shared the adjustments that needs to be done in order to ease their daily lives. They need to adjust their emotions, cognition and manage daily life routines and financial issues. They begin to accept the status that falls onto them once they are able to go through these adjustments process.

All respondents report going through emotional adjustment. Mourning the loss helped them become aware of their status as a widow. Crying helps to release feelings such as being pressured, angry, lonely, and helpless. They choose to cry alone inside their bedroom or any other private spaces. These widows choose not to cry in front of their children as not to let them witness the difficulties the family is facing.

*At that time, when he's gone, I still have small children right? During that time, I was mourning as most people have said, not thinking of finding a new one... We just go through with heavy heart and sometimes you feel lonely, cry alone. Sometimes, you feel alone. Being alone, crying alone... no one to tell to.*

(PK1/I3/14:92)

*But I did cry..I cried with stuffing myself with pillow, afraid if people will hear. If I cry a bit it's not satisfying..so if you wanna cry more and dont want people hear you loud,I will stuffed myself with pillow...thats the easiest way,they dont hear they dont see.*

(PK3/I2/2:256)

Majority respondents agree that they need to adjust their cognitive to a more positive perceptions. Respondents are aware of the cultural stigmatization of the status of single mothers. However, PK1 and PK2, PK3 and PK6 in general avoid negative people and talks, and practice being open-minded towards whatever people talk about them.

PK1's life journey is meaningful in her self-resilience evolvement. PK1's first engagement does not receive her parents' blessing. Then she (at 20) marries another man chosen by her family. After three years and three sons, the husband cheats on her and gives her a divorce. This divorce impacts her deeply that she attempts suicide. After twenty years, she meets her old fiancée and marries him and becomes a second wife. However, this happiness is only short lived as her husband passes away a year after that. She becomes a widow at 42, and 4 months pregnant with their first child. As a widow, this loss is bearable compared to the first one because she is consoled by the beautiful memories with this husband. Even though she loses her husband, she sees wisdom in the marriage as she gives birth to a baby girl. The birth is an important contribution to the evolvement of her adjustment and later self-resilience.

PK2 is a widow to a rich husband. They have a good life and beautiful memories of travels and attending parties. She feels her life with him is too short as they manage to get a son only after six years of marriage, then they raise the son together for only six years before he passes away. Her dreams of traveling the whole world with her husband has failed. Now she feels flawed as she no more has a partner even to go out. In her adjustment, she takes measures by avoiding friends and social events.

*Then,theres lots of social events like weddings, social gathering that we used to go together. In the beginning of widowhood, I isolated myself. I said I was lazy to go. I tend to isolate myself because I feel uneasy, shy without the other half.*

(PK2/I3/11:80)

However, by making some cognitive adjustments, she manages to restructure her thinking.

*I felt angry at myself. Why am I punishing myself? I am thinking that..it's just not right to be in people's event..but*

*there are so many invitations and those people are just happy to have me actually. If I continue with this behavior I will lose friends over time.*

(PK2/I3/11:82)

The other adjustment that the respondents need to do are home life and financial managements. PK4's husband receives a VSS (Voluntary Separation Scheme) and stays home to care for their 13 year old autistic child and a daughter and manages the household chores. When her husband passes away because of a stroke, PK4 who is a teacher has to learn to manage the house and their children. Two years after her husband's passing, she registers as a part time university student and manages to complete her studies.

PK5's husband works as a manual worker at the Town Council and they never have enough money for the family. His sudden death in an accident has left PK5 unprepared to face the challenges. PK5 has a hard time adjusting as she is not highly qualified, never work before, and she has seven children from the age of toddler to teenagers. To survive, PK5 rides the van her husband left with eldest son to sell soy beans juice around town. Soon after, the son also meets with an accident and dies. Now, PK5 who does not have a driving licence limits her selling at the stall near the quarters they are living. The researcher's visit to her two bedroom flat shows an unorganized and uncondusive living place for the six growing up children. PK5 reports she manages money by thinking thoroughly before spending on unnecessary items.

Coping skills that were used by widows to increase self-resilience level

When faced with devastating life events in a person's life, there would be challenges that they have to go through. How they recover and weave through these challenges is what we defined as coping skills. After examining all six coping skills from each respondent, researcher concluded that the coping skills that were used by them manifest in four main strategies, which are spiritual, behavioral, cognitive.

Spiritual approach looked into how widows overcome problems by getting closer to the Creator. Widows pray a lot to the Creator, being grateful and believing in the good things and unseen benefits by accepting their fates. Reciting the Quran, especially certain popular surahs is found to be helpful in helping them cope with loneliness. PK5, believe that by donating to the poor, she will get back more from God.

*When you recite the Yasin, that feeling of loneliness, no more. During reciting Yasin, at least half an hour like that, you feel calm.. Then you feel relaxed, and you can lie down and automatically go to sleep peacefully.*

(PK1/I2/13:32)

*Theres lots of people who are more needy, thats why Allah opens moms heart. When you are here, you see it yourself. You feel you are worse. You see theres more worse people then you are. Since then lah, lots of opportunity comes to me since I gave her a bit. Not much, just a little. I helped her, with the little money I had thats all.*

(PK5/I2/18:112)

Behavioral wise, respondents do different things to cope according to their education level and social exposures. PK1 (university lecturer) and PK4 (school teacher) choses to continue their studies, attends counselling session, becomes volunteers, watches motivational programs and seminars, and making self-disclosure, making herself busy by personal activities and school activities. PK3 chooses reading as a coping strategy.

*Thus, there's lots of knowledge you can find here and there. By reading things? and that helps a lot right? Meaning you don't have the knowledge what single mothers have.? Then, you stop thinking asking ..What to do, What to do next, what to do next? Ok...so me instead of asking, I prefer reading.*

(PK3/I4/4:66)

Respondents agree that thinking positively is a coping strategy. For PK 2 and PK6, reminiscing the good memories of their late husband's evidently make them stronger and able to bounce back from devastation. Looking at old photos and talking about their memories in fond ways help them feel more positive.

*After my husband passed away, I have that single mother status and that's the most important right. The utmost important thing for myself and the other thing is the memory of my late husband that gives me more strength to take care of his descendant, to be a better person. As what they said good human being.*

(PK2/I2/10:190)

Support system and types of supports

All respondents express that a good support system is a need, no matter in what form. Support systems here refers to an individual or a system that provides material supports, motivations and inspirations to respondents in facilitating

them to bounce back from devastation of losing their husbands. Five support systems emerged are families, friends, neighbours, employers and government agency.

PK1, PK3, PK4 and PK6 receive support in the form of encouragements from family and friends. Some activities that gives opportunity to share their stories and problems are through visits to relatives houses and lunches with friends. PK6 also obtains financial support from her deceased husband's side of the family. PK4 appreciates her school principal who is supportive enough to let her go out to manage her children in between office hours.

PK2 lives quite a stable life, mentally and physically. Positive attitude from PK2 makes her see how her child is her main source of inspiration to carry on. PK2 feel that having a son is a motivation for her to be strong and have a purpose in life.

Meanwhile, PK5 gets more support from her neighbors. She can rely on them to take her and the children to go to hospital in case of emergencies. PK5 also receives monthly help from Welfare Department and staples from Zakat Center.

*That day, after my husband passed away, they (the Zakat Center) gave 15kg rice, 5 kg oil, 5 kg flour, 5kg sugar. Every month they gave a bit of money.*

(PK5/II/17/64)

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this research specifically is to understand resilience among widows. By understanding lived experiences as well as issues and challenges faced by widows, the researcher identifies the association between resilience development process that happens within single mothers begins with devastating events that happened in their lives. The integral findings of this research shows evidence that widows who have lost their husbands have potential to increase self-resilience. Improvement in resilience is a continuous process that begins from the death of their husbands and eventually progresses linearly with the adjustment process that is needed, support system received and applying coping skills. Adjustment process generally happens after the death of their husbands, widows have to go through the phases of sadness as suggested by Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005). Grieving on someone's death is a normal reaction. However, there will be times when it will come forward as painful and tiring. Understanding this sad events and taking the right steps to overcome this grieving period is an important element to recover and bounce back from the devastation faced. For individuals that have positive attitudes, they are more prone to make quicker adjustment as compared to widows that bear negative attitudes.

Research findings also examine the good support system that can help respondents to increase self-resilience. Hope is also found through good support system, ensuring that they are not alone in this tough journey. They can be helped through emotional and physical approach. This findings is in line with past research that suggests the needs of support systems to help groups of widow in countering their issues and future problems in life (Clark & Hamplová, 2013; Correa, Bonilla, & Reyes-MacPherson, 2011; Grossman, Hudson, Lefler, Jodell, & Titilola, 2009; Guillory et al., 2014; Lashley & Giannoni, 2010; Schrag & Tieszen, 2014). They also propose that single mothers to get social support as means to lessen their burdens. In fact, not only to lessen their burdens but they can also apply what they have learned from their support systems. This support systems does not only focuses on family and friends but it expands to community as well on the importance of giving motivational booster for single mothers (Clark & Hamplová, 2013).

Coping skills strategies that are used by respondents came in forms of spiritual as their main coping skills followed by cognitive, emotion dan behavioral. From spiritual aspect, this finding in line with with studies conducted by Zaizul, Salleh, Jaizah, Khareng and Zarkavi (2018) where Quran recitation has the potential to provide peace of mind. Looking at the approach of REBT theory (Corey, 2011), in helping client to understand irrational beliefs, for example a single mother whom have lost her husband, Death is A, meanwhile loneliness is the belief of the single mother (B) towards her husband's death. In the case that the single mother believes, the passing away of her husband will be causing her worthlessness and the end of her life thus affecting her feelings (C) which is sad and lonely. Thus, the sadness and loneliness was not because of A but because of B. To help the single mother, she needs to identify her irrational beliefs. Then, this belief is to be dispute (D) by questioning and evaluating that beliefs until she could recognize and differentiate rational beliefs and irrational beliefs. After process (D), the single mother will come to a new belief that replaces the irrational beliefs (E). This new belief then would anchor the single mother to be more resilient and soon be able to bounce back, continuing her daily life facing the reality.

As a counsellor, the researcher have learned few main things to take account into for professional counsellors when they receive single mothers as their clients. Firstly, counsellor needs to know the critical time that the client went through. Early stages of losing your loved ones are the times that should be filled with great empathy and support from significant individuals. At this particular stage, single mothers are exposed to negative emotions such as depression, loneliness dan sadness whereby all this emotions need to be release. Considering how respondents of this study were given chance to reflect and reminisce their live experiences through the interview with the researcher, they began to marvel at their strengths that they didn't know they had it in them. The same experience can be lived

through counselling session as well.

From counselling context, counselling process can actually empower single mothers and help them acknowledge that the healing agent of devastation comes within themselves. Due to this healing agent being from within themselves, counsellor should facilitate client in seeing the importance of recovering and to bounce back from this. In other words, this is where the term resilience can be perfectly illustrate. With the existence of such research, counsellor gets to learn and cultivate ways to increase self-resilience within single mothers after realizing that they are the integral part of the healing agent.

Discoveries from the understanding of this increase of self-resilience concept of this research could also pave ways to educate single mothers especially on ways to bounce back from devastating events. Although this research did not specifically tackle on the therapy, techniques or treatment plans for widow as a whole, but the findings gives a general view on how single mothers can improve and increase self-resilience to carry on with their lives. Early exposure on resilience can help counsellor to be more prepared when faced with the same issue. Having equipped with the knowledge of this concept, counsellor could build appropriate intervention that caters to the needs of single mothers by incorporating resilience as part of their live

## 5. CONCLUSION

In short, this research looked into the lived experiences of widowed single mothers which face with a lot of challenges and how they recover from it. Single mothers are not groups of people that are often wrongly stereotyped as the negative groups. They also have potentials to recover and bounce back with the existence of resilience and durability in them. Resilience that they showcased are not static process. It is a dynamic process that can be developed and cultivate through adjustments, receiving good support system and by applying suitable coping skills. It is hoped that this research gives a new perspective on single mother's groups. As a recommendation for future studies, building an appropriate intervention for single mothers associating with the context of increasing self-resilience would be ideal.

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