LEFT BEHIND MALAYSIAN AGED PARENTS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH ADULT CHILDREN'S MIGRATION

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Abstract

Migration is a widespread phenomenon throughout the world and it has been under way since time immemorial. While studies have focused on the causes of migration and the impact of migrants, studies focusing on the emotional experience of the left-behind older persons' adjustments in their twilight years after the departure of their adult children, are few and far between. Thus, the perspectives of these left-behind older parents/persons are less understood. This paper aims to contribute to the literature by addressing the gap which will be filled through the experiences of left-behind Malaysian older persons. Drawing on in-depth interviews extracted from a qualitative study that focused on the strength of long-term marriages among Malaysian Chinese couples, this paper captures four older couples' experiences that depict their feelings about their adult children's migration. Analysis suggests that the children's migration was induced by a lack of support and resources, followed by unequal educational opportunities. To deal with the gap left by their children, these older urban parents depend on kinship connection and community support in times of need. Government initiatives may also be able to empower the community in innovating and implementing plans which are tailored to the needs of the older parents left behind by children who have migrated. The living arrangements and recent bereavement experiences captured from the older couples can serve as cues for healthcare professionals and social support providers to assess the risks of social isolation and suicide among these left-behind older parents.

Keywords: Filial Piety, Malaysia, Migration, Left-behind Parents, Social Support For Older Persons

Introduction

Migration has been a part of human history for a long time. The movement of migration has grown significantly since 1945 and more so since the mid-1980s. The phenomenon continues to rise into the new millennium thereby causing immense global changes. The current estimate of international migrants is 244 million, which is 3.3% of the world population (1). The factors often linked to migration include growing inequalities in wealth, the search for better standards of living due to political, ecological and demographic pressures, increase in political and ethnic conflicts and the creation of new free trade (2).

Despite these widespread changes in migration, the collective identities of the migrants as "a simple product of migration and resettlement" is oversimplified (3).

Studies seem to have overlooked the life experiences of migrants with many studies focusing on migration-related social policies that concern labor migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers (4). Due to this, researchers have become more aware that the traditional compartmentalized views of the migration phenomenon based on geographical, demographic and sociological perspectives are obsolete. A more holistic and interdisciplinary approach is necessary in order to understand the interconnected intricacy of migration (5).

With widespread migration and the unprecedented phenomenon of population ageing, studies are now beginning to focus on the relationship between migration and ageing. Researchers have pointed out that existing studies looking at migration and older persons emphasize

four areas - the experience of young migrants who grow old in a foreign country; affluent older people's migration when they grow old; the increasing demand of immigrant workers for old-age institutions; and the impact of the out-migration of young people on the left-behind older persons (6).

Most existing studies present the challenges of mental health among migrants living in the receiving countries and they include suicidal risks incurred from acculturation in late life (7, 8), psychiatric disorders due to the stress involved in making adjustments to the migration process (9), and the difficulties in accessing mental health services (10). In other words, the psychosocial framework of migration studies has gained momentum. In view of the prevalence of migration-related mental health issues and ageing in the receiving countries, studies on the mental health of the left-behind children and spouse used to gain more attention than the left-behind parents (11). However, recent studies have reflected that left-behind parents are more susceptible to depression (12); however multigenerational co-residents have been found to be protective in different populations in different parts of Asia, and family and social support are predictors for better mental health of the left-behind older adults (11, 12).

The great diversity of migrants in a host country can create many distinctive challenges for government policy. Any failure to understand the needs and the resources of the specific sub-groups of a country's population can constitute an act of social exclusion which incarcerates their resources (13). Based on this, contextualized migration experiences of the specific older subgroups are important to research; these experiences provide a means for the government to offer the inclusive provision of care and support for these people. In particular, according to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the estimated number of Malaysians aged 65 years and above will escalate from 1.4 million to 5.1 million in 2034, which is 15 percent of the total population. According to the ethnic distribution of older Malaysians, the number of older Chinese will rise from 0.78 million in 2010 to 1.85 million in 2040, which indicates that one out of four Chinese is above the age of 60 years. The high rate of ageing among the Chinese is due to the low fertility, longer life expectancy and emigration. Due to the change of family structure, the demand for long-term health care services will be challenging (14). Utilization of public healthcare services and other public facilities is hindered by crime and an infrequent and inaccessible transport system (15). However, language barrier is a common and yet less documented barrier, in terms of utilization of public services and facilities.

As a result of rapid economic developments, and competing health challenges of Malaysians, the nation is left with limited resources for resolving the rising challenge of age-associated diseases which accompany population ageing (16). Age-associated conditions in turn lead to increased disability and need for social care provisions. Government-initiated programs remain limited and inaccessible for some people, and cater exclusively for the

poor (17). Moreover, working in silos and bureaucracy are still rampant which lead to the lack of integrated support and services (18). A recent study has also indicated that although Malaysia has a variety of social safety net programs undertaken by various ministries, the depth of the social safety net system stays underdeveloped and the core welfare programs are still underfunded (19). In short, the Chinese will age faster than the other ethnic groups, and the demand for aged support and care is exceeding the capacity to supply them.

Relevant to this, the current study aims to showcase the experience of the left-behind older Malaysian Chinese parents by highlighting their emotional experience and social support they receive and the wish for which result from their children's migration. It is hoped that this paper will encourage more studies that focus on the challenges of older parents caused by the impact of their adult children's migration so that both parties can experience better benefits.

Malaysian Context

Developing countries are the main contributors to global migration (1) and this includes Malaysia. Since its independence in 1957 and the implementation of the New Economy Policy (NEP) in 1970, she has been one of the main exporters of students to countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). By 1985, Malaysia was the world's third largest exporter of students to foreign countries. The trend, however, slowed down in 1986 and 1997 due to the economic crises (20). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1995), Malaysia was the top source country for overseas students in Australia in 1993. In terms of emigration, after Singapore, Australia is host to the highest number of the Malaysian diaspora (1, 21). This phenomenon was contributed by Malaysia's preferential policies which had affected many Chinese parents' educational decisions (22, 23).

The Malaysian diaspora is large and expanding; it had a conservative estimate of one million in 2010. The ethnic Chinese made up the highest percentage among the diaspora, followed by the ethnic Indians. The top two reasons cited for such emigration are the lack of job opportunities and social injustice (1), influenced largely by the implementation of protectionism (24). Apart from this exodus of overseas migration, the country also experiences internal migration (including intra- and inter-state migrants) with 71% of the movement being rural to urban migration. Of these, approximately 45.7% of the internal migrants are made up of those aged between 25-44 years which is the highest compared to other age groups. As a result of this movement, the rate of older adults who now live alone or only with spouse amounts to about 30% of the total older population in the country.

The migration movement has caused a change in the family structure, a cause for concern for the wellbeing of older people (25). The outward migration of the young people has caused many older parents to live alone or with their

spouses, with no access to their children's support, since these children no longer live in close proximity to them. In a society which emphasizes strongly on the values of filial piety, adult children are expected to care for their older parents. Due to that, many older people are not open to external support and services (15). For instance, a community-based approach has been advocated to uplift the health status of the older persons; thus, adjusting the care responsibility from adult children to community care would then reduce the burden on adult children (26). However, lack of participation has been found to be one of the factors to hamper community-based initiatives (27). The reluctance to reach out for external support among the older Chinese has caused emotional strain for both the adult children as well as the older parents. Thus, as a result of the migration of their children, the physical, emotional and social needs of these older parents are potentially threatened. In this regard, the impact of labor force mobility on older persons cannot be underestimated.

Emigration, brain drain and internal migration are pertinent issues in Malaysia but yet the impact the migration movements have on the left-behind older parents is little understood. Instead, attention on the influx of refugees has superseded the issue of emigration in Malaysia, despite of the large and continuous expanding number of Malaysian diaspora. For instance, 39 studies showed up in the Scopus database when searching for studies on refugees in Malaysia over the last decade, whereas, no study was found when a search for emigration and older people in Malaysia was conducted in the Scopus database. When the same search was carried out in Google Scholar, only two articles highlighted the social support and care arrangement (15), and the challenges of Chinese older population in Malaysia (14). Studies on the impact of migration on older people in Malaysia is scanty. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to unveil the experiences of four urban elderly Malaysian Chinese couples whose adult children were either residing overseas or had migrated to another state and were no longer living in close proximity with them. The potential risks associated with older couples who live alone and the support structure they would require in such a situation will be discussed.

Methods

The data for this paper emerged from a qualitative study that had focused on the strengths of long-lasting marital relationships among Malaysian Chinese couples. The research paradigm that guided this study was constructivism. The constructivist lens prepared us to be mindful that knowledge is a co-created process. We openly discussed and dealt with – a) our values which could have an influence on the interpretation of the data, b) how we presented ourselves when we interviewed the couples, c) confronting our prejudices, biases and domination of researchers' theoretical framework with peers and self-reflection, and d) we cross-checked our interpretation with the interviewees.

As this research was focused by a constructivist's lens, disclosing the details of the interviewer was one of the crucial aspects in ensuring trustworthiness of this study. The interviewer who undertook this study was a PhD student from the Faculty of Education in the University of Malaya. She is a middle-aged married female, who is also a registered counsellor.

This research was approved by the reviewing panel of the Faculty of Education of the University of Malaya. The age range of the four Malaysian Chinese couples who were interviewed for the qualitative study ranged between 60 to 83 years old. The initial attempt to recruit the older participants to share their life stories was not very successful because Malaysians are generally reserved (28). Referral served as an important approach to recruit these participants because referrals offer trust and credibility. Thus, we initiated referral from peers, colleagues, friends who play influential roles in organizations or their circle of friends. They were informed of the research objectives. To our surprise, the referral network offered their preliminary screening as they selected suitable couples for the research. We also learned how people perceived couples who were suitable for research. Before these senior participants were approached face to face, they were asked if they would agree to an interview over the phone. The researcher then introduced the research objectives and their refusal rights as participants; thus, the participation of the couples in this study was entirely voluntary. In person, before they signed the informed consent form, the research information and their refusal rights were again reiterated and explained to them (29). Each of the individuals was told that they would be assigned anonymity as a measure to ensure confidentiality of the participants. They are given pseudonyms - F indicating female and M indicating male.

The four couples came from different parts of Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. The exploration of life stories was used as the approach to gather the narratives and elicit data. As the participants shared their stories, their late life challenges also unfolded, especially when they talked about their children who no longer resided in close proximity with them. The in-depth interviews were conducted in their respective home setting.

Each interview session lasted between one and a half to two hours. Each couple was interviewed for three to four sessions. The number of interview sessions was determined by the saturation of data. The interview schedules were arranged according to the convenience of the couples. The interviews were recorded with a mobile recorder and transcribed verbatim. Two couples were interviewed in English and two couples were interviewed in Mandarin. The Mandarin excerpts were translated into English by the researcher and back-translated into Mandarin to ensure precision of meanings. The translation was cross-checked by a certified translator.

Thematic analysis was employed for this research. Identifying the codes was conducted after each interview.

The codes were cross-checked with the participants so that the meaning of the codes captured the participants' voices. The codes were tabulated and they were categorized according to the common themes. Formation of subthemes and condensing the subthemes to themes were conducted through peer review as well as member checking.

Results

The results suggest that these left-behind aged parents had rationales for sending their children overseas. The results also highlight the impact of their children's migration on the latter part of their lives.

Couple 1

Chai (M) was 85 and Mei (F) was 77. They have been married to each other for more than 50 years. They lived in one of the residential areas in the city of Kuala Lumpur. Chai was a civil servant when he was young. Mei remained a housewife ever since they were married. With a meagre income, they were diligent and thrifty. Their children's education and future were central to them. They had a daughter and a son. Their daughter lived in the Klang Valley; their son resided in Singapore.

Reasons for Migration

Unequal Educational Opportunities

Chai shared his experience about witnessing his son's growth from university placement to the time he eventually migrated to Singapore.

Chai:	We did not have a [privileged] background - no money, no power and no back- up. Our children studied in neighborhood schools from primary school to secondary school and to university. Unlike some people with strong backgrounds, with poor or average results, they can find their way getting into famous schools. My daughter made her way to university. Before she left her secondary school, she scored top marks in her Malay language in a Malay school.
Interviewer:	Yes…
Chai:	Their Malay teacher said to the Malays, did you guys feel ashamed? You lost to a non-Malay person in the Malay language. With her academic performance, it was very easy for her to find a job. As for my son, he could get into local university, but he was not able to choose his major in the university. Some Malay students who did poorer than him were able to choose their major in their university studies[1].

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[1] Malaysian government implemented the New Economy Policy in 1970s, which aimed to restructure economic resources along the racial line. Though the Policy managed to reduce poverty, it failed to address the racial polarization. The "affirmative action" to uplift the social status and education level of the Malays has widened the disparities among the races. For example, instead of meritocracy, race based quota system was adopted for university entrance (22).

Interviewer:	…
Chai:	Eventually, he studied in a private college. He studied business management. Then he obtained his university degree through distance learning. Now he is in Singapore. He did well in Singapore.
Interviewer:	In what kind of circumstances, your son decided to go to Singapore?
Chai:	He met his girlfriend who is his wife now.
Interviewer:	I see.
Chai:	She was in charge of a business management college in Singapore, while my son was working in a private college in Malaysia. After they met and dated for a while, he went to Singapore. He developed his career there.
Interviewer:	Is your daughter in-law a Malaysian?
Chai:	No, she is a Singaporean.

Impact of Urbanization and Emigration

Emotional loss

Chai shared his emotional loss as his children did not live close to them.

| Chai: | Our children are very filial. My daughter and son give us money monthly. Last time my son worked in Kuala Lumpur, he bought a house. He paid for the expenses. But now he is in Singapore, both my son and daughter still give us what we need monthly. They try their best to buy things for us. So now talking about daily life, we feel very contented. The only regret is we do not have family living close to us… |

Difficulty in receiving physical help from children

Chai also disclosed the challenges his family experienced in getting physical help from their children – their long working hours, traffic congestion and distance:

| Chai: | My wife and I have a lot of sicknesses. Every month we make many trips to hospital. I wish my children are with us, but what can you do. The reality is our son is in Singapore. There is no way he can come back. Our daughter has a family. She lives in the Klang Valley, but her work keeps her very busy. [In terms of empty nest], it is quite impossible [for our children to visit us frequently]. Our son is in Singapore; our daughter works. She gets off from work around 5:30 pm. She gets home around 7:30 pm due to the traffic jam. After getting back from work, she still needs to take care of their children and many other things. It is impossible for them to see us frequently. |

Social support – Good relationship with neighbors

Getting physical help from children can be constrained when they are not living in close proximity to their

parents. Thus, assistance from the community becomes instrumental.

Chai:	… The biggest headache for us now is my daughter thinks it is not suitable for me to drive, though I used to have a car. She thinks I am too old to drive. So, it has become inconvenient for us to get around. We have to rely on our neighbors.
Mei:	We live ordinary lives. Year after year, now we are old. You take care of me; I take care of you. Our children are not around. Not much, except you take care of me and I take care of you. Our children are very filial. But they are not with us, so we have to seek help from others. People in this neighborhood are very kind. They are very helpful to us. There is a Christian, who lives opposite of our house, she is very kind. She often takes us to the hospital. She gets sale items for us from the supermarket. It is important to show kindness to one another. She has been very kind to us. She helps us to contact people, to see doctors, to withdraw money from the bank and to shop for grocery.

Couple 2

Shun was 68 (M) and Yen (F), 71. They were both school teachers before their retirement. They had two sons who live overseas and three grandchildren. Through social media, they remain in close contact with their children and grandchildren.

When sharing their decisions to have two children, while Yen was worried about the recurrence of the May 13 riots, Shun showed concern about the costs of overseas' education. In particular, most non-Malays in Malaysia at that time, and now, stood a lower chance of entering local universities while private education overseas was expensive. The following depicts their experience as to why they just had two children:

Interviewer:	So how did you decide to stop at two children?
Shun:	Actually, we were thinking of the opportunities you know, education opportunities and our financial resources at that time… Education for children because it is getting more and more expensive. So, the main thing is we think about the future. Their education especially, you know.
Yen:	I was thinking the conditions in Malaysia might not change. If another May 13 happened, at least one person can carry and take the children and run. That was in my mind all the time.

Reasons for Migration

Unequal Educational Opportunities and Job Opportunities

In the 1970s, the opportunities for entering local universities were very slim for the ethnic Chinese and Indians with the implementation of racial quotas in local universities (30). Even when ethnic Chinese and Indians students qualified for places in local universities, they were not always given places in the courses of their choice. Shun disclosed his rationale:

Shun:	So, I think this [Malaysian University of Science], only just opened. The government will not send them there. I don't know where they were going to send them you know. You might not get University of Malaya. They will reserve it a lot for the Malays. You will not get MU. My oldest boy's result wasn't too bad, quite good. I think he should be able to get into engineering. Then he might not be able to get a course of his choice… So, we were thinking about more of the future. If they couldn't get the course of their choice, they got to take whatever course the government gave them, whether they like it or not, they have to study. There were no twinning programs, no private campuses…

As this was going through their minds, Shun was also concerned with their children's job opportunities after they graduated from local universities.

Shun:	So, we were thinking, even if they qualified for the local higher education, after that, what will be the job opportunity? Are they happy? What about the next generation? So, in a way, we don't like them leaving Malaysia, but two of them decided to become citizens of other countries. The effect was very sad for us.

Impacts of Migration

Emotional loss

Shun described his sadness after leaving their children in Australia while he and Yen decided to come back to Malaysia:

Shun:	So, when they left, the first year was terrible.
Yen:	(Quietly listened)
Shun:	We were counting every day.
Interviewer:	You left them in Australia, right?
Shun:	We came back.
Yen:	We came back. We came back to work.
Shun:	We came back to work.
Interviewer:	So that year was…

Yen:	Ya... that year...
Shun:	Yes...
Yen	That year was terrible year because he missed them so much...

Living away from their children was not only hard for the couple, it was also a sad experience for their children.

Shun:	... In fact, my second boy when he gave it up, he said he had to renounce his Malaysian citizenship, he felt very sad (silent). He even told me, he should come back and settle down here.

Risk of fall

Living separately from their children has increased their vulnerability as they age, especially when they were burdened with illnesses. Shun and Yen described how they had to cope when Yen fell sick at the time when their children were not around, as exemplified in the following excerpt.

Interviewer:	What kind of health problem do you have?
Shun:	She had a...
Yen:	Knee problem.
Shun:	At first, she had problems with giddiness, it was like after one day of flu, suddenly, she could not walk properly.
Yen:	(Smile)
Shun:	So, we went down to the car park. Luckily, there was a younger lady who was helping me. I could not hold her by myself because she was a little heavy. So, I had to help her into the car. That lady helped her get into the car. I told her, you got to go to the hospital and let the doctor check on you. She was very scared of going to the hospital you see. She refused. So, we came back. She was like in a daze you know. I was so scared she had a stroke.
Interviewer:	How old was she then?
Shun:	She was 69.
Interviewer:	Oh ok....
Shun:	She was already in the car. I said, now I send you to the hospital. Let the doctor check you thoroughly. She refused to go. So, the second day, that night, luckily, I had already prepared the room downstairs. The bed was very low. So, she slept there. I didn't give her too much water to drink because drinking too much water will cause her going to toilet often...
Interviewer:	Mm...

Shun:	Whenever she wanted to get up to the toilet, I had to wake up and take her there. And it was very dangerous. If she fell on me, two of us would fall down. Then after going to the toilet, I took her very slowly, I thought I had helped her to bed already. I let go after I put her in bed. But she just fell on the floor and sustained a few knocks.
Yen:	(laughed)
Shun:	Then the second day, I took her. We went to Bangsar, a private clinic there. She could not sit up properly. She fell. Her knees sort of hit the...
Yen:	The divider.
Shun:	And then that gave her the knee problems. So, giddiness, plus knee problems.

Anxiety towards living arrangements after the death of a spouse

With their children living overseas, they were also concerned about their living arrangement should one of them die.

Yen:	We prefer to be here [in Malaysia], because this is where all our neighbors and all our friends are.
Shun:	The most worrying part is for the one left behind. So then, if I'm alone. Let's say I or she alone, physically capable, it is alright. But if we can't manage physically, then that is the time to think about something else.

Couple 3

Hock (M) was 67 and Ling (F) was 65. Hock was the main bread winner of the family before retirement. They have three daughters. All their children live overseas. Their children left them after they had completed their high school education.

Reasons for Migration

Lack of Institutional Support and Financial Resources

Hock shared his rationale for sending their children overseas.

Hock:	In Japan, students are able to support themselves through working part time. That was the advantage. Meanwhile, there were a lot of scholarships offered without bonding. They have good system. That's why I chose Japan.

As they had financial constraints, they had chosen a country with available resources for their children to obtain tertiary education without total reliance on parental support.

Hock:	Because my children were from an Independent Chinese School[2], so going to Japan was the best.
Ling:	They had to find their way out. We did not have much money.
Hock:	We supported them the first year.
Ling:	First term only, I think. We only gave five thousand (Malaysian Ringgits) each. The rest they had to earn themselves.
Hock:	They could work and study in Japan.
Ling:	They appreciated the opportunity.

Impacts of Migration

Emotional loss

Ling described her emotional loss after her daughters left, one at a time:

Interviewer:	When did the stage of empty nest start?
Hock:	At the 12th grade.
Ling:	They left when they were at their 12th grade. I found it difficult to get used to it… one by one they went overseas. I cried, but I didn't cry in front of them. I felt the emptiness. No children around.

Social support received

During festive seasons, no children were around and their absence amplified the older parents' sense of emptiness. With siblings living close by, they helped to buffer the older couple's sense of loss.

Ling:	Some people want their children to live close to them. They would not allow their children to go overseas. They think that is happiness.
Hock:	Like a friend of mine, he never let his children go overseas to study. All his children were educated locally.
Ling:	That's why he picked on him – you sent all your children overseas.
Hock:	Ya, during festive seasons there was nobody around.
Ling:	Nobody was around.
Hock:	However, we seem to live in a long house. Many siblings who live nearby came to visit us during the Chinese New Year.

Couple 4

Heng (M) and Lili (F) were in their 80s when we met. They had been married for 59 years. Heng used to work as a civil servant. Lili contributed financially by selling jewelry among her network of friends as she was a full-time housewife. They disclosed that their financial pressures gave them second thoughts about sending their children overseas for tertiary education. They had actually hoped that their children could receive education from the University of Malaya. However, due to the government's education policy, Heng and Lili had to resort to sending their children overseas.

Reasons for Migration

Unequal Educational Opportunities

Heng:	The children were our priorities.
Interviewer:	Ok.
Heng:	We gave them the best that we could afford. It wasn't easy, but somehow we managed. With the few hundred dollars salary (Malaysian Ringgit) that I earned, we managed. It was not easy. Particularly, the eldest boy and the eldest daughter were just one year apart. And my eldest son was in the express class. Do you know what that means?
Interviewer:	What?
Heng:	One year faster.
Interviewer:	Oh ok.
Lili:	Double promotion.
Heng:	Although the sister was 15 months older, he caught up and they took their exams together. We couldn't afford to send both overseas. He got straight As, but he could not get into the University of Malaya. He wanted to do engineering.

Their children had attained many accomplishments overseas and Heng and Lili were very proud of all their children.

Impact of Migration

Diminishing Contact with Children

Heng and Lili respected their sons' decisions to stay overseas. However, as age and illnesses caught up, regular travel to visit their children has become a challenge for them.

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[2]   Chinese Independent schools are self-funded private schools. They offer secondary education in Mandarin language. The United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia (UCSCAM, the association of Chinese school teachers and trustees), also known as the Dong Jiao Zong, formulates the curriculum used in the schools and organizes the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) standardized test. The Chinese schools, however, are independent of each other and are uniquely different in management.

Heng:	… Normally, when we made a visit, they never made us feel in the way or unwelcomed. They were just happy that we could be there as much as we could. We had in fact made a trip to US this November until she fell ill. So, things didn't work out that way. Knowing they probably were thinking of coming back next year. We just wait for it. Because we have traveled to US three times, it takes a long time, America to Melbourne, you know.
Lili:	From US to Australia.
Heng:	Three times… 20 odd hours. It's getting a bit difficult for me. I just hope I don't lose my sanity, but I have the right to hope.

When older parents are distanced from their children, they may suffer from emotional setbacks. They may also be at risk of falling, especially when one of the spouses has to assume the caretaking role alone. However, neighbors and siblings are valuable as they help to buffer some of the repercussions caused by a lack of adult children's support.

Discussion

The findings highlight emotional loss, inaccessibility to children's support, anxiety towards the living arrangements after the death of one spouse, and the risk of falling due to one spouse's sickness. These concerns resulted from the absence of their adult children who had emigrated and did not live in close proximity. Alongside the lack of physical support from adult children, it appears that the support of long-term neighbors and nearby siblings as well as the remittance from the children were pivotal for the older couples. It gives them a sense of security. The findings noted in this paper also disclosed how the government's policy influenced the older couples' decision towards their children's emigration.

The findings gathered from the interviews not only unveiled the effects of this preferential policy, it also highlighted the social and emotional losses of the older persons whose children lived overseas or were not in close proximity. The emotional experiences of the left-behind older parents are rarely discussed, even in the studies on the elderly in Malaysia, even though social isolation in urban areas have been rampant (31).

Although the risk of suicide was not mentioned in this study, the anxiety towards the death of the spouse was apparent among the couples in this study. In Malaysia, older persons with high suicidal risk are characterized as "the older male, living alone following the recent demise of a loved one and suffering from a chronic illness" (32). Although the capacity to cope with bereavement varies from one individual to another, older couples who are dependent on each other without the support of their adult children tend to have a higher chance of living alone when the spouse passes away. That might be followed by the risk of social isolation and depression.

This paper has provided evidence which showed that social and emotional losses of older couples had been buffered by the support given by neighbors and nearby siblings. Neighborhood relations were developed from their long-term residence in the same neighborhood. In this regard, long term neighboring relations that induce reciprocal kindness between neighbors is an essential support for the older persons. Interactions with family, community and environment represent a major source of social support; they act as good buffers for reducing suicidal risks among older persons (32, 33). However, with high levels of internal migration and the large influx of foreign workers into cities and neighborhoods, averaging about 2.3 million in the year 2010, the establishment of communal support among the neighbors has become more challenging.

Moreover, the findings of this study also showed that willing remittance from children is a crucial support for the left-behind parents. Left-behind parents feel proud and perceived their remittance as a form of filial piety (15). Adult children's remittance can positively lead to better health due to accessibility of medical care, and older persons who received financial support from their children are less likely to experience financial difficulty (14). Supporting parents is a deeply rooted Asian cultural practice which is embedded with care and love. But when financial support is made mandatory by law, that form of support becomes mechanical and loses its essence.

The evidence drawn from the interviews described in this paper indicated that it was not only the parents who were saddened by their children's migration to another country; in fact, the evidence showed that the adult son of Couple 2 actually felt sad towards renouncing his Malaysian citizenship. Couple 1 had disclosed that although their daughter lives in the Klang Valley, they were not expecting her to pay frequent visits because of her long working hours, the traffic congestion and the demands of her own family and children. All these factors were equally high on the list of the older couples. Clearly, the provision of adequate support for aged parents has become a dilemma for both the parents and their adult children alike. In this context, the perceived lack of support from adult children should not simply be labeled as a weakening of filial practices. Therefore, taking the measure of imposing legislation to enhance filial piety may be counterproductive, particularly in the context of prevailing social changes and high migration. In fact, many Asian countries are resorting to elderly care policies which include a mixture of family support, extra-familial informal support and formal services (33). In other words, innovative solutions for social care for older persons involving families, the community, the government and formal and informal care services need to be formulated.

Recommendations

Promoting good neighborhood relations is fundamental not only for the purpose of ensuring the availability of support for older residents but also for other people and

other issues, such as working couples with young children. For instance, crime rates in many neighborhoods have been increasing. To resolve this issue, many neighborhoods have formed formal and informal groups to form voluntary security patrols, increasing neighborhood surveillance and crowd-funding the salaries of security guards. Study has also shown that more than 60% of the community tend to participate in social activities through accessible religious centers and residents' associations (25). Based on this, the government's initiatives to promote elderly care could be extended through the link of empowering and supporting the religious leaders, community leaders and community members in innovations and implementations. Optional housing subsidies which support family members living in close proximity with a housing area that ties in with a bundle of services can be formulated to enhance independence among older persons. Creating a conducive environment that offers the support of relatives when the adult children's support is lacking (34, 35) is another alternative. Apparently, solutions need to be locally adapted to the needs of the respective neighborhoods, all of which are likely to have unique as well as common issues.

Identifying older people who are socially isolated is problematic. Some older people are house-bound but they are not necessarily socially isolated. For instance, some house-bound older people take care of their grandchildren and their social support comes from their grandchildren. Meanwhile, the scale to assess isolation is based on the Western framework where the interplay of cultural factors is often overlooked. Despite the seriousness of social isolation, the complexities of assessing social isolation often deter its detection in primary care (36). Based on the findings, living arrangements and recent bereavement experiences of older persons whose children are not living in close proximity can be cues for social workers or health professionals in assessing the notion of social isolation at the primary care setting as well as in social services. These cues can be used to assess the risk of suicide and social isolation and at-risk older persons can be referred to community resources for treatment or care.

Conclusion

The experience of the older couples in this study underscores the significance of understanding the migrants' left-behind aged parents or family members' wellbeing from the perspectives of the sending countries, as migration and population ageing are pertinent issues now. The diversity of older communities needs to be considered in policy making and action plans in order to effectively enhance the wellbeing of all older persons. The dynamics of emigration and its impact on the economic status of the nation and the social support for older persons should not be overlooked. Family and communities remain pivotal in ensuring support for older persons. Steps should be taken to encourage the involvement of family, community and government support in order to ensure that the social and psychological needs of our older generations are adequately met.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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