

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring Sexual Education Among Malaysian Parents: A Qualitative Study on Approaches Through Diverse Religious Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Malaysian parents face complex challenges in communicating sexual and reproductive health (SRH) to adolescents. Deeply rooted religious beliefs and cultural norms often shape parental attitudes and behaviours, creating barriers to open dialogue and limiting effective guidance on SRH within the family context. **Methods:** The objective of this study is to explore the experiences, views, and challenges faced by Malaysian parents in delivering sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education, with a particular emphasis on the influence and role of religion and cultural norms. A total of 31 parents from different ethnic backgrounds (Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous) and various religions (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism) were interviewed in-depth to explore their views and find solutions that could enhance acceptance. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using Atlas.TI software. **Results:** The study identified two main themes: (1) integrating religious doctrine and cultural practices in SRH education, and (2) how religion and culture shape gender roles and identity. Each main theme encompasses four subthemes. **Discussion:** The acceptance of SRH education among Malaysia's diverse ethnic and religious communities can be improved by adopting an SRH education framework that is sensitive to the country's religious principles and cultural values. The findings can inform national policymakers to design SRH education policies that are more culturally and religiously sensitive, increasing acceptance and participation among diverse Malaysian communities.

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1. Introduction:

Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education is not a new concept in Malaysia; it began in 1995 with the establishment of the Adolescent Health Unit under the Ministry of Health Malaysia (1). Since then, adolescent health services have expanded, culminating in the National Adolescent Health Plan of Action 2006-2020 (2) and the establishment of PEKERTI (Pelan Tindakan Pendidikan Kesihatan Reproduktif dan Sosial Kebangsaan) in 2009 (3). To emphasise the role and

capacity of parents in delivering SRH education, PEKERTI 2022-2025 has enhanced its core pillars by focusing on parental capacity development, which aims to train parents to become effective SRH educators through structured programs run by agencies such as LPPKN, the Ministry of Education (KPM), and NGOs (4). Additionally, PEERS (Pendidikan Kesihatan Reproduktif dan Sosial) was introduced in 2011 to complement school-based SRH education, and the National Guideline on the Management of Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Problems was released in 2012 (5). Despite the comprehensive development of SRH education in Malaysia, the adoption of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) remains incomplete within the community (6).

Recent studies show that parents generally possess good knowledge about puberty, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases, and recognize the importance of SRH education in the digital age (6-12). Parents also exhibit the correct attitude towards SRH education, understanding that it can prevent involvement in illicit sexual activities such as premarital sex, unwanted pregnancy, or illegal abortion (12-15). However, data reveals a significant gap, as the actual practice of SRH education among parents remains low (7, 16, 17). This discrepancy may be attributed to generational differences, as parents were raised in different times (18). This rejection is based on the perception of liberal teachings within CSE (19), which Malaysian parents interpret as exposure to contentious topics such as safe sex practices (pre-marital), pornography, and gender inclusivity including the acceptance of homosexuality (20, 21). Despite various national initiatives promoting parental involvement in SRH education, limited research has focused specifically on how religious and cultural norms influence Malaysian parents' communication practices. This gap restricts the development of tailored interventions that effectively support parents in culturally appropriate and meaningful ways when addressing adolescents' SRH needs. This research aims to understand the religious and cultural perspectives of Malaysian parents and find a balance between adhering to religious obligations and not neglecting essential aspects of SRH education, ultimately enhancing acceptance of SRH education.

2. Materials and Methods:

This study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants. In the purposive phase, parents were identified through BKM-ISMA, churches, and parenting workshops. Additional participants were then recruited through referrals from initial interviewees. The inclusion criteria for participation were: having a child aged between 10 and 19 years, the ability to articulate personal views and experiences, and proficiency in either Malay or English. Parents were excluded if they had a history of child abuse or neglect, legal disputes involving their children (such as custody issues), or if their child had disabilities or chronic conditions such as neurodevelopmental disorders, severe mental illness, or chronic neurological illnesses, that could hinder their ability to engage in SRH-related discussions. In consultation with the research supervisor, BKM-ISMA was selected as a strategic NGO partner due to its extensive national network, over a decade of experience in parenting programmes, and its efficiency in recruiting suitable participants within a limited timeframe. The researcher contacted the Chairman of BKM-ISMA through email and WhatsApp, and the organisation agreed to support the recruitment by nominating up to three eligible parents from each of its branches. To expand the participant pool and ensure diversity, snowball sampling was applied, where initial

participants were asked to refer other parents who met the inclusion criteria. This process successfully identified individuals well-versed in adolescent education, including respected parenting speakers, as well as Christian and Buddhist mothers, enriching the study with diverse perspectives. Furthermore, the researcher's active involvement in SRH community programs led to a valuable connection with the Chairperson of the Trustee Board of Visitors at Taman Seri Puteri Kuching, who had attended a related workshop and subsequently facilitated the recruitment of six additional parents from the institution.

Table I: Participants' Characteristic

Participants' characteristic	Frequency
Gender	
Male	9
Female	22
Highest academic qualification	
PhD	4
Master	6
Degree	7
Diploma/STPM	4
SPM	10
Age range	
30 – 39	15
40 – 49	9
50 – 59	5
60 – 69	2
Number of child 10-19 years old	
1	10
2	10
3	9
4	0
5	1
More than 5	1
Household income	
T20	4
M40	16
B40	11
Race	
Malay	20
Sarawakian Bumiputera	7
Chinese	3
Indian	1
Religion	
Islam	23
Christian	5
Buddhism	2
Hindu	1
Interview mode	
Face to face	22
Online	9

This study used thematic analysis to understand SRH communication from parents' perspectives. Following Braun et al. (2019), six phases were applied. Phase one involved data collection. In phase two, data familiarization occurred during transcription, with key phrases highlighted. Phase three involved coding data using Atlas.TI. In phase four, initial codes were organized into themes. Phase five reviewed and defined themes, ensuring accurate representation. Finally, in phase six, a detailed outline was drafted and refined, with meaningful extracts selected to support the analysis. The study was approved by the IIUM Research Ethics Committee and followed the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval for ethical considerations was sought from the IIUM-Kulliyah of Nursing Postgraduate and Research Committee IIUM/313/14/3/1 dated 26 October 2022 (APPENDIX 8) and the International Islamic University Malaysia Research Ethics Committee (IIUM-REC) IIUM/504/14/11/2/IREC 2022-228 on 9 January 2023 (APPENDIX 9). Informed consent was obtained, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured. Transcripts were anonymized, and recordings were deleted after transcription.

3. Results:

The thematic analysis of the data revealed two overarching themes that highlight the complex interplay between religion, culture, and sexuality education. The first theme, "Integrating Religious Doctrine and Cultural Practices in SRH Education," explores the ways in which religious beliefs and cultural traditions influence the development, acceptance, and implementation of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education. This includes challenges in adopting formal educational content, the role of religious institutions as gatekeepers and disseminators of knowledge, and how religion is deeply regarded as the foundation of life by participants.

a. Integrating Religious Doctrine and Cultural Practices in SRH Education

In Malaysia, SRH education is deeply intertwined with religious laws and cultural practices, forming its foundation and significantly shaping its structure, delivery, and implementation within the society. The foundation for the acceptance of SRH education in Malaysia lies in its alignment with religious values. Given that Malaysian society remains deeply rooted in religious principles, harm reduction measures proposed by SRH education providers perceived as conflicting with their fundamental religious beliefs.

i. Challenges in Adopting SRH Educational Content

In Malaysia's multireligious and multicultural settings, many parents reject certain CSE topics, including premarital sex, abortion, contraceptives for unmarried partners, and same-sex practices. It is evident that society remains unable to accept the teaching of techniques such as condom use and safe sex practices to children. This resistance stems from the fact that premarital sex

itself is considered a major transgression in religious teachings. This reluctance spans various religious, ethnic, and educational backgrounds, as highlighted by Mr. Salleh's statements.

Therefore, we need to reconsider why sexual education is necessary in our society, especially since Islamic society is not like the them (western countries), which legitimizes pre-marital sex. I think, discussing condom issues is permissible, but only for married individuals. However, the West does not see it that way. Their sexual education aims to provide a "legal" pathway for things that are contradictory to Islam. In Malaysia, not only in Islamic society but also in other religious communities, such matters are considered offenses. (Mr. Salleh)

Mr. Salleh's rejection of certain topics in CSE stems from its focus on elements conflicting with religious beliefs. He notes that CSE education covers broader, relevant topics like safety and preventing premarital sex. This criticism reflects concerns over SRH's human rights orientation, which may conflict with conservative Malaysian values and religious traditions, as Mr. Asri concurs.

There are things that need to be filtered and adjusted according to our values or norms, Malaysians, right? If we have to follow the UK, we have to talk about various genders, besides she and he, right? But in Malaysia, we don't just blindly copy like that. Surely, we don't want to teach LGBT to young, vulnerable children, right? (Mr. Asri)

Muslim fathers, including Mr. Salleh, Mr. Asri, and Mr. Zaini, opposed including topics such as premarital sex, abortion, contraceptives for unmarried couples, and homosexuality in SRH education. They believe these subjects conflict with their religious values. Both Islam and Christianity condemn premarital sex as a serious sin, reflecting their concerns about aligning SRH education with their faith-based principles.

Certainly, it's evil. I'd describe it as a set of guidelines, rules, and regulations. I'm sure you're familiar with the Ten Commandments, aren't you? One of the principles is that you should not commit adultery. But adultery pertains to marriage, doesn't it? Then there's another aspect, which is sexual immorality. So, premarital sex constitutes sexual immorality. (Mr. Kelner)

Mdm. Sandy, a devout Christian mother, shared that premarital sex causes lasting guilt, reflecting her church's teachings. Despite this, she acknowledges that human weakness can lead to such behaviour:

From a religious perspective, we have always known that premarital sex is against our religion. However, as humans, we have our own limits and capabilities. There may be some who, for whatever reason, have engaged in premarital sex. We can't judge them either. However,

religious leaders should guide them, providing the right perspective on why such actions are wrong. In our religion, our conscience will always speak to us. With religious teachings, we know it is wrong. Our hearts will always tell us that what we are doing is wrong, and we will feel guilty. (Mdm. Sandy)

ii. The role of religious institution in the dissemination of SRH education

Some Muslim participants noted that mosques play a minimal role in SRH education despite their community integration. While Quranic and Hadith principles on SRH are clear, contemporary sexual issues lack extensive discussion. Misunderstandings about SRH education persist, highlighting the need for religious institutions to provide accurate information. Conversely, Christian participants reported church-organized workshops on parenting and communication about SRH. Buddhist teachings also support SRH education, as noted by Mrs. Ho Ting, a Buddhist mother actively engaged in temple lectures.

By participating in the teachings at our temple, I appreciate that my temple offers numerous classes based on divine messages. All the teachings they convey are correct, and fortunately, my son also attends these classes. This makes it easier for me to guide my children in the future, as they receive proper instruction from religious leaders. (Mdm. Ho Ting)

Interviews revealed that Christian and Buddhist institutions often hold SRH-related parenting workshops, but this is less common among Muslim parents. The issue may stem from a lack of awareness about SRH education.

Because teenagers are quite open and exposed to matters related to sexuality, in our church, they are indeed taught about boys-girls' relationships. There are workshops for them. Sometimes they organize youth camps. During that time, we are still friends, but they are indeed taught about boys-girls' relationships. Additionally, there is also marriage counselling. (Mdm. Sandy)

Mdm. Sandy noted that Malaysian parents recognize teenagers are more exposed to sexuality issues and must adapt to manage this. Mr. Kelner stressed that the church should provide SRH education as social support.

For the Christian Ibans, I believe the church needs to address this issue, from the altar. If it's not addressed in the church setting, by the Christian community, then there's a lack of communication. As a Pastor, if I don't talk about sexuality, premarital sex, then there's no communication. So, it needs to be discussed, it needs to be taught. (Mr. Kelner)

Mr. Kelner highlighted the church's key role in providing SRH information to the community. He expressed

concern about gaps in SRH education and rising teenage pregnancies, especially among Iban girls in Sarawak.

iii. Religion as the foundation of life

Muslim parents believe religion is the foundation for home education, covering etiquette, modesty, social interaction, and marital relationships. Fathers play a crucial role in guiding families to follow religious principles, ensuring divine blessings. Mr. Salleh, a father and religious leader, emphasized religion's importance in SRH education for his children.

"Faith shapes our lives and guides our children's education. As a lecturer, I see this foundation in academia too. Our community and family relationships thrive on religious principles, which are essential in raising children." (Mr. Salleh)

Mr. Salleh emphasized adhering to religious regulations in all life aspects. "Become someone else" refers to Muslims adopting non-faith identities, escaping religious laws. Similarly, Christian and Hindu teachings underpin family education and SRH, relying on their religious principles. Mr. Kelner noted identity as God-given in Christianity.

If you're liberal, it's not a problem for you. But if you're like me, and you're attached to the church, we're conservative. Because gender ideology concern identity, who you are. And in Christianity, our identity is in Christ, in Jesus. If you can't accept that, then you need to find your own path to where your identity lies. (Mr. Kelner)

iv. Adherence to Christian values

Christian participants emphasized that their lives are governed by the Ten Commandments, fundamental rules for pleasing Jesus. These commandments, along with Biblical condemnations of sexual immorality, shape lifestyles and SRH education. Mr. Kelner noted their importance in determining whether one's life is blessed or not.

Sometimes, some Christians focus too much on the Ten Commandments, to the extent that they overlook other aspects. The commandments say not to commit adultery, but the Bible also mentions sexual morality and various other things, strange things, like fornication and homosexuality, which is also prohibited. The Bible also states that if you are homosexual, you cannot go to heaven. So, these things must be emphasized. (Mr. Kelner)

Religious conservatives in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism in Malaysia reject certain CSE approaches, especially safe-sex practices and abortions outside religiously recognized marriage.

b. Religion and culture shape gender roles and

identity

The second theme, "Religion and Culture Shape Gender Roles and Identity," delves into how religious teachings and cultural expectations shape perceptions of gender, identity, and communication. This theme covers the influence of religious narratives in constructing gender roles, the impact of church leadership in reinforcing traditional gender expectations, practices of gender segregation, and the ways religious norms shape communication techniques within families and communities.

c.

i. The role of religion in constructing gender

Muslim parents value religious principles in shaping children's physical and gender roles. Mr. Salleh emphasized that boys should be prepared for greater responsibilities and leadership, including providing for and protecting others.

Just like with my son. He's been interested in a girl since university, and he's only 22. I told him that if he's really serious, he needs to truly understand and be aware of what it means to be ready and willing to take on the responsibilities of life together. If he's sure about that, then go ahead. (Mr. Salleh)

Mr. Salleh highlighted a man's role as family head and primary educator, while Mr. Remmy noted similar leadership roles in Christianity.

Of course, it's the same in Christianity. The Bible says that men are created to take care of women. We've been given strength, and that's just how it is. (Mr. Remmy)

This point was expressed by the participants to their children when the researcher asked whether religion plays a role in shaping their children's gender identities. Religious education often emphasizes modest dress for women, such as Islam's mandate to observe "aurat" boundaries for dignity. This illustrates how gender identity is shaped by religious values, as noted by Mdm. Atilla.

I always remind Khadijah (my daughter), Khadijah is growing up... as a girl, Khadijah must maintain the boundaries of her aurat. Don't make other people feel uncomfortable with how you dress at home. Khadijah is not a child anymore. (Mdm. Atilla)

A similar advice was given by Mdm. Ratna, who shared the guidance she provides to her children when they return home from boarding school during the holidays: I told them... Fatimah, Sarah... your brother is at home. If you need to shower, bring your clothes into the bathroom and change there. Also, don't wear shorts in the house. Show some respect to your brother. (Mdm. Ratna)

Religion plays a crucial role in shaping children's identity, especially girls, by promoting modesty at home to prevent issues like harassment. This aspect should be integrated into SRH education. Christian parents also noted a shift from traditional modest dress codes to more revealing modern trends, as discussed by Mrs. Debra. I'm surprised by how revealing the kids' clothes are these days, even when they're going to the religious occasion! They don't know that back in the day, our moms made us wear modest clothes. Haha... [laughing]... (Mdm. Debra)

ii. Influence of church leadership on gender roles

The researcher, unfamiliar with church gender processes, found Mr. Kelner's insights enlightening. He explained that while traditionally only men were priests, recent changes now include women, reflecting the church's evolving gender roles.

The Bible offers examples of diverse forms of spiritual leadership, and many believe that both men and women can serve as priests. The inclusion of women in priesthood has contributed to a more welcoming and compassionate church environment, including greater openness toward LGBTQ+ individuals and perspectives. (Mr. Kelner)

Mr. Kelner's statement that "With more women in ministry, the church becomes more accepting" highlights how female leadership fosters empathy and inclusivity, positively impacting the church's stance on LGBTQ+ issues and breaking traditional barriers.

iii. Gender segregation in religious and cultural contexts

In Islam, gender segregation in worship, such as separate areas for men and women during "solat" (prayer), contributes to gender affirmation. From a young age, children learn these roles, as highlighted by Mdm. Hidayu.

As a Muslim, I've always seen how we've separated the interactions between men and women. If we truly follow our religion, you can see this difference even in the mosque. I really encourage my husband to take our son to the mosque because that's where he first learns about his gender (Mdm. Hidayu)

Islamic dress codes shape adolescent gender roles and identity, with Muslim parents supporting these guidelines. Mdm. Dayana emphasized that adherence to these codes is a key method for constructing gender identity.

Islam has long taught that men and women have different roles and dress codes. For men, clothing should cover from the waist to the knees, while women's clothing, including the hijab, should cover from the shoulders to the feet. That's the difference between men and women,

and I've been teaching my children this from a young age. I just don't understand the phrase you used earlier, "gender affirmation." ... (Mdm. Dayana)

iv. The role of religion in reinforcing communication techniques

In discussing communication techniques, participants frequently used concepts of reward and punishment, with Muslim parents focusing on worldly consequences and Christian parents referencing violations of The Ten Commandments.

I always remind them, if they do something forbidden by religion like free sex, Allah knows... the angels record the deeds. We will sin and Allah will punish our disobedience with torment in hell later... (Mdm. Husni)
The term "torment in hell" highlights Islam's concept of retribution involving heaven and hell. The Quran mentions "hell" (al-Nar) 126 times, using vivid depictions of severe punishment to remind believers of the afterlife, often seen as "scare tactics." Madam Pavma noted that Hinduism's 28 codes of misconduct, from the Garuda Purana, guide her in shaping her children's character.

Why did you do that? Like people say, the blazing fire in hell, will fry you in hot oil. It's there. Like people say, Garuda Purana. That's why I say, our religion teaches us, we need to teach. Like when I go to the temple, they will give lectures, I will let my child listen. I also listen. (Mdm. Pavma)

Mdm. Ho Ting, a Buddhist, uses karma and tales of retribution from Buddhist teachings to guide her child's character development, emphasizing how such concepts strengthen character based on religious principles.

Yes, as far as I know, Buddhists have three beliefs. Firstly, if you do something bad, it will come back to you. Secondly, if you do something bad, it will affect your next generation. And thirdly, at the end of your life, if you create bad karma, you will not have a good rebirth in your next life. (Mdm. Ho Ting)

The researchers plan to investigate whether scare tactics in parenting induce only temporary fear. Mr. Salleh argues that such warnings align with religious teachings, where divine texts frequently use them.

The human soul needs to be provoked, but at the same time, it needs to be treated gently and persuaded. That's why in Islam, when talking about the truth, it's not just about sharing good news, but also warnings (scare tactics). If you do good, there's a reward, either in this world or the hereafter. But if you don't, it's a mistake and there are consequences. We need to instil this in them. If it's only encouragement without warnings, it wouldn't work. All laws in the world, including in the West, have warnings and punishments. Why? Because they believe that without these, people would live without rules. (Mr.

Salleh)

Madam Ratna suggests combining scare tactics with logical explanations and scientific evidence in SRH discussions to positively impact children. Integrating these with religious teachings can strengthen adolescents' piety and faith.

It's true that we tell them about the religious consequences they might face, like sin ("dosa"), reward ("pahala"), and punishment in hell. However, it's also important for us as mothers to understand the visible and logical effects, the scientific aspects if there are any... (Mdm. Ratna)

4. Discussion:

This research explores the challenges faced by Malaysian parents in embracing Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as a modality in sexual education. It supports the perspective of NGOs like FRHAM, which finds it difficult for a religiously conservative society in Malaysia to accept secular values within CSE-based SRH education (22, 23). Nonetheless, the study delves into how conservative religious values, such as those in Islam or Christianity, serve as a life foundation, shaping gender and identity, and addressing concepts of sin and the consequences of pre-marital sex or homosexuality. This aligns with the situation observed among British Muslims in the United Kingdom, who also resist integrating CSE into their family education.(19)

Religion's role in gender separation has greatly contributed to the effectiveness of SRH education. For instance, gender separation in religious settings strengthens adolescent identity and fosters appropriate social behaviour. Moreover, religiously endorsed preventive measures,—such as dress codes, respect for parents, and parental role modelling—create supportive environments that complement and enhance the comprehensive aspects of SRH education, as highlighted by Zulaiha (2018). (24).

These intrinsic values shape societal attitudes and resistance towards CSE (25). The situation is exacerbated by the misconception that all SRH education encompasses CSE. This research suggests that parents are more likely to accept teachings that align closely with Islamic or Christian values. Teachings that support fundamental religious concepts, such as sanctity, morality, and the preservation of family and lineage, are more readily accepted by parents in Malaysia (26). However, this research also identified a gap in the role played by mosques, which often lack SRH-related programs for the Muslim community compared to churches and Buddhist temples that incorporate parenting elements into their courses. Therefore, SRH educators should address this gap to ensure that SRH knowledge reaches Muslim parents who may be seeking available sources and support.

While this research offers valuable insights into SRH education, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, there is an imbalance in respondents, with only nine fathers compared to a larger number of mothers, potentially skewing the findings. In this study, the number of fathers (n=9) who participated was relatively small compared to the number of mothers (n=22). The limited participation of fathers in this study mirrors a broader societal trend where men often perceive themselves as less responsible or socially sanctioned to discuss sexual and reproductive health (SRH) matters with their children. This gender imbalance may be influenced by social desirability bias, whereby fathers refrain from engaging in conversations viewed as sensitive, taboo, or traditionally associated with maternal responsibilities. Additionally, many parents exhibited conservative viewpoints, possibly reflecting social desirability bias. Further interviews with a broader spectrum of parents could enrich the findings. Despite these limitations, the participation of parents provides crucial insights into SRH education.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the influence of religious values on Malaysian parents' acceptance of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education. Parents are more receptive to SRH content aligned with Islamic or Christian teachings than to secular-based Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). While religious values offer strong moral guidance, a gap remains in mosque-based SRH programs. Unlike churches and Buddhist temples, mosques often lack parenting or SRH-related initiatives. Addressing this gap with culturally and religiously sensitive programs can improve parental engagement and support faith-aligned SRH education, ensuring adolescents receive appropriate guidance within their community and belief system.

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