

CHILD POVERTY IN MALAYSIA: WHAT DO MALAYSIANS THINK?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Child poverty is an emerging issue in Malaysia. A study conducted by UNICEF in 2018 reveals that 11 percent of children in Malaysia living in urban poverty with 15 percent of children below the age of five are underweight, 22 percent of the children are stunted and only 50% of 5- to 6-year-olds attend pre-school enrolment (UNICEF, 2018). It is truly staggering to think that many of our children lived in poverty. Children who are living in poor households with limited access to nutritious food and education experienced a real deterioration in their living standards. They are vulnerable to many possibilities including material and social deprivation. Poor children have many needs, but money matters the most. In most cases, those needs are often left unattended due to poor parental and household characteristics (Lindquist & Lindquist, 2010; Chou, 2013; Saunders, Brown, Bedford, & Naidoo, 2019). Coming from unfortunate family backgrounds, many of these children suffer material hardship and underachievement in school (Madrack, 2020). According to the report, the number of registered students in school decreased despite the increasing number of children in the current population (Joseph Chin, 2017). This is a worrisome situation as deprivation in life could lead to many problems including underachievement, illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, and many others (UNICEF, 2018). Poor living condition indeed has taken a toll on the lives of children, thus limits their life opportunities in all aspects.

In Malaysia, the issue of child poverty is long-standing and remains ongoing. The growing number of child poverty in Malaysia is reaching a worrying proportion with one out of three children live in poverty (Farhana & Mohd Husni, 2018). How well children are protected? Some have argued that the issue has not received the policy attention it deserved hence, the nature of child poverty is largely hidden in conventional poverty line policies. The existing measures are usually directed to poor households with little attention devoted to the need of children living in poverty. Children were not classified as a separate group for policy consideration. Subsequently, this led to insignificant allocation for the improvement of children's well-being. The implementation of National Family Policy (NFP) by the Ministry of Women, and Family Development recognizes different family structures that create differing needs, but the need of the children living in poverty has been neglected for far too long. Recent policy development witnesses increasing allocation for children from poor families with a maximum of RM 1,000 per family, but money-metric poverty measurement seems inadequate in tackling child poverty. The scope of the policy fails to consider the varying poverty gap between recipients with five and more children and those with one child. This was evident in a few poverty alleviation programs outlined in national development policies, including cash assistance programs.

The complex nature of child poverty suggests varying approaches in measuring deprivation faced by children. It is timely for the government to recognise multi-dimensional child poverty, particularly in a time of the pandemic. Covid-19 had pushed hundred thousand families into poverty, with thousands of more children living in a poor household. In this context, proper consideration should be given to the child living in poor households because of parental characteristics-educational attainment, family structures-single vs. two-parent families, and workless parents as well as children who have lost their parents to the pandemic. They have been deprived in life due to economic insecurity and face major difficulties to continue their living. To date, the global death toll of the Covid-19 has cost over a million children to lose either one parent, both their parents, and custodial grandparent. This signals the need for the government to re-build new strategies by addressing special needs among children who belong to this category. The vulnerabilities that children faced today warrant right-based policy approaches from the government. Their needs must be adequately attended especially in times of pandemics.

Recognising multidimensional child poverty begins with the public, how the public perceives child poverty and how do we go about addressing it. Since this is a newly recognised issue in Malaysia, the study, therefore, seeks to assess public perception of the rights that constitute child poverty. Given its importance, the study also seeks to evaluate the public perception of the existing measures employed by the government in addressing the need of children living in a poor household. This is to ascertain how well the constitutive rights of the children are protected. As such the objective of the study is twofold: to evaluate the public perception of child poverty in the context of deprivation faced by children that makes a child multi-dimensionally poor and how do Malaysians perceive government initiatives in mitigating the issue.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Children are vulnerable to many possibilities, including life deprivation. Children in some parts of the world live below the poverty line. They have been deprived in life due to economic insecurity and face major difficulties regarding their living standard (Mohaqeqi & Seyed, 2019). Many studies have identified causes of poverty and policies focusing on child poverty. Key family characteristics such as workless households, poor families, family breakdown, education failure, addiction, and debt have been identified as the main causes of child poverty in the United Kingdom (Bastos & Machado, 2009; UK government, 2014). Children from large families are particularly at risk and stand greater chances of being deprived (Bastos & Machado, 2009). In the case of the UK, the government is firmly committed to fighting child poverty by assisting poor families for them to have a sustainable income. Among measures introduced were supporting families into work and increasing their earnings, improving living standards by improving national minimum wage law, helping one-parent families, and preventing poor children from becoming poor adults through raising their educational attainment (UK Government, 2014). Through these policy initiatives, the government aims to end child poverty in the UK by 2020.

In the United States, more than 2.4 million children live in poor households. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), the youngest children stood a greater chance of living below the poverty line (NCCP, 2018). Most of these children have parents who work, but low wages and unstable employment leave their families struggling to make ends meet. The government's proactive action in this context is essential as children who lived

in poverty are most likely to be poor in early adulthood. The study reveals that there is a high possibility for them to live in poverty if the cycle of poverty is not broken. The chances of being poor increased tremendously as the time they spent living in poor conditions increases (Wagmiller, Jr., & Adelman, 2009). To improve the well-being of poor families, the government has implemented several policies. This includes childcare subsidies, Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, Minimum Wage, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), etc.

In New Zealand, child poverty can be attributed to higher unemployment and an increase in the number of single parents. This led to a substantial increase in those receiving social assistance from the government. The broader economic costs and higher unemployment had caused greater deprivation for children living in poor households. Accordingly, 48 percent of poor children in New Zealand are in families with low income (Boston, 2014). In some countries like India, child deprivation is quite common especially for those who live in slum areas. Slum children suffer greatly and are less likely to receive better water supply, sanitation, and drainage services compared to children in different areas (Indranil & Tirthankar, 2016). Slum children suffer from urban poverty and are more susceptible to malnutrition, disease, and lack of access to better health services and education, yet support is limited. Other studies show that minorities are the vulnerable groups to experience child poverty. In Hong Kong, the highest poverty rates are recorded among all minority ethnic groups. As a result, these minorities groups from Pakistan, and Nepal have a higher child poverty rate than Chinese households who constitute most of the Hong Kong population (Cheung & Chou, 2018).

In Malaysia, child poverty is not new, but the problem is largely understudied. The news reported by UNICEF in 2018 came as a complete shock to all Malaysians. Accordingly, urban poverty among children stood at 11 percent (UNICEF, 2018). The percentage signifies the intensity of the issue in Malaysia and the policy gap as children were not classified as a separate group for consideration in poverty alleviation programs. However, there are continuous measures by the government to support children who live in poor households and from financially vulnerable families. This can be seen through several provisions including school aids and other welfare assistance schemes by the government. In 2015 more than 90,000 students were included in poor students' trust fund, more than 500,000 received food assistance and more than 1 million enjoyed the school milk program (Department of Statistic Malaysia (DOS), 2016). This is part of the government's initiatives to alleviate poverty by providing support for children at school. Despite concerted efforts, policy response in addressing child poverty in Malaysia remains inadequate and scarce.

The literature has demonstrated a great deal of variation in the policy options across governments. Though Malaysia has made tremendous progress in eliminating poverty, the problem remains pervasive as not everyone benefited equally, and many unfortunate families and children were still left behind. There is a dearth of study in this area and the issue is under-prioritised. As far as government action is concerned, little attention was devoted to addressing child poverty issues. In this regard, the study aims to examine the issue from a public perspective.

3. METHODOLOGY

The scope of the study is explored quantitatively using a survey questionnaire. The items are adopted and adapted from the extensive literature on child poverty. To appropriately reflect

the poverty status of children, the research instruments are adapted from few studies by Lindquist and Lindquist (2010), Chou (2013), Maryam Abdu and Delamonica (2018), Saunders, Brown, Bedford, and Naidoo (2019). The respondents are required to state their opinions on the policy actions by the government in addressing child poverty in Malaysia, and multi-dimensional deprivations that make the child poor. Responses to all questionnaire items were scored on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. It consisted of 30 closed-ended items that represent three constructs of the research, including demographic data. Survey questionnaires were administered through an online platform. To facilitate the data collection process, the convenience sampling technique was employed and a link to the online survey was sent out via social media. At the time, 169 surveys were completed and returned. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS IBM 22 and descriptive statistical analysis is presented in the form of frequency and percentage to examine public perceptions on child poverty in Malaysia.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Data

Total 169 respondents participated in the study, with 74.6 % and 25.4 % are female and male respondents respectively. In terms of education, many respondents have pre-degree qualifications (55.6 %), 20.7 % have a degree, 14. % have no formal education, and 9.7 % continued their studies up to postgraduate level. On employment status, 40.1 % are students, 18.6 % are working with the private sector, 18 % working with the public sector, 15 % are unemployed, 7.2 % are self-employed and 1.1 % are retirees. In terms of household dependents, 36.7 % are having 4-7 dependents, 33.7 % are having 0-1 dependents, 25.3 % have 2-3 dependents and 4.3 % are having many dependents with more than 8. The study has identified ten (10) household income categories and from the findings, 62.4 % of respondents earned less than RM 5000 thus belong to the B40 group with 34.5 % earned less than RM 2500 on monthly basis. This is followed by the M40 group with 25.6 % and 11 % belongs to the T20 group. Out of 169 respondents, 26.6 % are having unemployed household dependents. This signifies a significant drop in household income levels and parents are having less to provide for what a child need.

The report published by UNICEF implies inadequate policy measures despite the relentless government's assistance through children's well-being programs. Continuous endeavours by the government to eliminate poverty through various national development plans seemed deficient hence children's hardship remains oblivious to many and apparently, children can do very little by themselves to improve their situations. The study shows that 73.6 % of respondents believed that children are affected by poverty more than other segments of the population and 61.6 % believed that children encountered different challenges compared to adult poverty. This explains the need for the government to provide a better social safety net to support children and families living in poverty. In Malaysia, various healthcare aid and welfare aid were provided to disadvantaged families. To ensure everyone is provided, a cash assistance program has continuously been implemented to provide support for specific target groups such as children. Children from poor households received better allocation with a maximum of RM 1000 per family. However such measures are far from sufficient. This is grounded on the fact that the elements that satisfy children's needs and rights are not always can be bought in a market. It is imperative to know that children are not only facing material hardships, the complexity of poverty means children are facing multi-dimensional poverty. As such bold actions from the government are necessary to reduce the

existing high rates of poverty among households with children. Turning to the question of how best to reduce child poverty, experts, in general, argued that this is not a straightforward task. Recognising multi-dimensional child poverty means more needs to be done and inclusive approaches are indispensable. Table 1 presents public perceptions of the government policies to reduce child poverty.

Table 1: Public Perceptions on the Government Policies to Reduce Child Poverty

ITEM	SD	D	LD	A	SA
1. Public exposure to the issue of child poverty is extremely low	1	3	14	96	53
2.No specific actions employed by the government in dealing with child poverty	3	5	30	83	47
3. The government provides adequate assistance to the poor but for children are limited	2	6	21	95	44
4. The government should allocate a special monthly allowance to families (B40 and below) who have children.	2	4	11	80	72
5. The government is very concerned about assisting children from poor families	6	20	50	72	19
6. The financial assistance provided to families during a pandemic is sufficient to cover the expenses of the children	16	36	55	47	13
7. Better welfare policies need to be formulated to address the issue of child poverty in line with the current situation (Covid-19)	1	3	4	78	80

Undeniably, political and public attention to this issue has thus far been lacking. 88 % opine that public exposure to deprivation faced by poor children is low. In the context of policymaking, an issue can be elevated to agenda-setting through public pressure, and this might contribute to effective policymaking. Public opinion has much impact on public policy, the more salient the issue the greater the response will be and vice versa. In this regard, low public exposure would reduce the saliency of the problem, thus reduce government responsiveness. In many ways, child poverty was considered as minor and 82 % agree that aids to children are inadequate, though the government is very concerned about assisting poor families (53 %). The government investment in welfare assistance schemes has largely improved but assistance for children is far from satisfactory. As matter of fact, 63.3 % argue that welfare assistance provided during the pandemic was insufficient to meet children's needs. More credible approaches are needed in addressing child poverty, especially in times of pandemics. 93 % agree that is timely for the government to formulate new strategies to cater to poor children and bereaved children due to Covid-19.

Table 2 presents types of deprivation and respondents were asked to state their agreement or disagreement on widely acknowledged multiple deprivations faced by poor children. Departing from the conventional monetary approach, scholars recognized various deprivations by measuring the complexity of multi-dimensional child poverty. Such multiple deprivations as limited access to education, sanitation, information, health, and nutrition which constitutes the constitutive rights of the children are embedded into an overall measure of child poverty. Does the multi-dimensional framework agree with Malaysians? From the descriptive analysis, school dropout, lack of electronic devices for online learning, lack of attention from parents due to the need for overtime work, and lack of nutritious food are strongly perceived to be associated with child deprivation. For instance absence of parents at home means that children have additional responsibilities (babysitting, cooking for themselves, etc). This fact denotes

that children in the context of poverty and deprivation encounter some challenges and these challenges are often more acute because of lack of financial resources.

Table 2: Public Perceptions on Types of Deprivation faced by Poor Children

Item	SD	D	LD	A	SA
1. Lack of nutritious food is one form of deficiencies faced by poor children	0	3	13	67	82
2. The inability of the parents to provide proper healthcare (seek treatment at private clinics) is one form of deprivation faced by poor children	2	6	28	67	65
3. Inadequate bedrooms is one form of deprivation faced by poor children	0	8	17	71	70
4. Lack of attention from parents due to the need to work overtime is one form of deprivation faced by children	0	5	17	63	80
5. The inability to buy toys is one form of deprivation faced by poor children	7	21	60	53	26
6. School dropout is one form of deprivation faced by poor children	0	7	4	54	96
7. Growth problem is one form of deprivation faced by poor children	3	6	20	75	63
8. Limited internet access is one form of deprivation faced by poor children	0	5	17	73	72
9. Lack of electronic devices (Laptop, smartphone) for online learning is one form of deprivation faced by poor children	0	6	9	64	86
10. Child living in poverty is only 'temporary' (transitory state)	19	22	59	54	13

Meanwhile, 52 % believe that parents' ability to buy toys is not related to child deprivation. The likelihood of living in poverty is not to be measured based on this aspect. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents (59 %) however, believe that for most children poverty appears to be a permanent state. This is particularly true as family type, family dissolution, and unemployment do consistently push children into poverty and they might spend their entire childhood in poverty. Indeed, these are the challenges faced by today's policymakers.

5. CONCLUSION

Child poverty is detrimental to a child's development. Building on these arguments, the study confirmed the need for more credible, conscious, and sound policy measures hence early policy intervention will improve child outcomes. The existing money-metric poverty measurement seems inadequate and such measures are far from satisfactory. Children are multidimensionally poor and the pandemic exacerbating the situation further. In turn, this requires policymakers to approach the problem from a multi-dimensional perspective. The multi-dimensional child poverty recognizes multiple deprivations ranging from education, sanitation, health, information to nutrition. Acknowledging these dimensions means children deserve a special policy. Therefore the study calls for the government to reframe the policy problem so that child poverty is not perceived as a minor concern but rather as an issue about the right and well-being of the children.

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