

# “HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS”: THE COPING MECHANISMS OF FATHER-DAUGHTER INCEST SURVIVORS

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## ABSTRACT

Incest is categorised as a long-standing issue in the Malaysian context, which involves children under the age of 18 years old. The seriousness of the incest issue and its negative implications are undeniable. Among the negative implications of this issue are stress, mental health issue, psychological and physical damage, and in the worst scenario, some of the victims have committed suicide. Due to this situation, this paper presents a website called "Hope for the hopeless" which aims to serve as a platform to communicate, share information and stories with the victims and survivors of the incest issue. This will help to ease their burden and further help others who faced a similar situation. The development of this website benefits not only the targeted groups such as children and relevant agencies, but it also aims to share the research information with the public. Among the uniqueness of this product are: (1) website is originally developed on empirical evidence; (2) utilize the technology; (3) among the earliest works focused specifically on incest issue; (4) enhance child protection and privacy. The development of this product can be used as (1) a platform to communicate and share information; (2) a coping mechanism for incest victims and survivors; (3) a channel of information to relevant agencies; (4) national policies; and (5) international policies. Thus, with the existence of this website, the victim and the survivors of the incest issue can find the right coping mechanism to reduce their stress and cope with the problem.

**Keywords:** Incest, father-daughter, website

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Incest is a form of child sexual abuse that has existed many years ago (Connolly, 2015). Incest was seen as a taboo subject since the issue was debated in the early years. One of the earlier works of Immanuel Kant in 1778 suggested that incest "has been offered for enjoyment", in which both father and daughter claimed to have a consensual sexual relationship that would lead to marriage and children (Ahmad, 2018). Due to many criticisms, the authorities during that time introduced laws prohibiting consensual incestuous sex (Connolly, 2015). The incestuous issue continues to be debated until now due to its complexity which is intertwined with social, political, and cultural differences of a specific nation.

In Malaysia, child sexual abuse including incest has been acknowledged in the country in the 1990s (Ahmad, 2018). Despite that, child sexual abuse, in particular incest, is argued to occur earlier, in the 1980s; however, the incidents remain isolated and unreported. The under-reporting cases of child sexual abuse are not only happening in our country. The international context suggested that feelings of shame, disbelief among people were among the factors for under-reporting of child sexual abuse cases (Johnson & Kenkel, 1991). In a recent discovery, society who happened to know about incest cases happening in their neighbourhood also refused to take action to report the incident to the authority

(Ahmad, 2018). This situation suggested that the existing number of incest cases in the country only representing "the tip of the iceberg" of the total number of incidents that occurred.

While incest is a form of intrafamilial sexual abuse, the traumatic experiences of victims and survivors of incest affect their lives tremendously. According to Loheswar (2021), the survivors of father-daughter incest continue to feel depressed, more likely to distance themselves from their parents, having low self-esteem, self-loathing, low self-efficacy, pervasive interpersonal difficulties, and feelings of contamination, worthlessness, shame, and helplessness. The survivors of incest require strong support from their families and society. Their coping mechanisms in overcoming the traumatic incidents help them to continue to have a better life and family in the future. Hence, this paper presents an initiative for the victims of father-daughter incest to cope with the situation faced by them to ease their stressful and traumatic experiences.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

"Hope for the hopeless" is the name given for an initiative for the victims and survivors of father-daughter incest to cope with their stressful and traumatic experiences. Literature reveals that father-daughter incest is considered a very complex issue. This humiliating relationship is also considered taboo and very embarrassing as well as unacceptable to society not only abroad; in fact, it has also become a taboo among the community in Malaysia. As reported by Ramli (2021) in his article, biological fathers are the highest recorded perpetrators of incest crime in Malaysia.

This initiative is developed based on the doctoral work of the main author of this paper which aims to delve into the coping mechanism and long-term impact of father-daughter incest among the survivors; and is also a part of the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) entitled "Play vs. pleasure vs. pain: Fundamental understanding and assessing the impact of incest sibling on the individual, family, and Malaysian society". Following these two researches, an official website is developed which serves as a platform to communicate, share information and stories with victims and survivors of incest, and wider audiences. On the website, there is a special page dedicated for the victims and survivors of incest to get information, share their stories and expression particularly on how they cope with their stressful and traumatic experiences. This will help to ease their burden and further help others who faced a similar situation.

This initiative provides five (5) main advantages, which are:

1. To share research information with the public.
2. Make official announcements on the website (example: data collection notice, links to questionnaires, and others).
3. Update the research information and status from time to time.
4. Communicate with the public or the visitors through website chat, email that visitor can use to ask if they have any questions.
5. The website serves as a reference for the public and respondents who will be involved in the study to obtain more information about the study.
6. The development of this official website shows that this study was conducted transparently following the ethical procedures of conducting the study

Diagram 1 illustrates the official website developed by two studies that can be accessed through <https://we-care4u.com>, which comprises: (1) home; (2) the story; (3) team members; (4) coping mechanism; (5) media; (6) contact; and (7) be a part of us.



Diagram 1: Official website for “Hope for the Hopeless”

### 3. CONTRIBUTIONS AND USEFULNESS

This innovative idea outlines several contributions and is used not only by the target audiences including victims and survivors but also by the relevant agencies in formulating and strengthening existing programmes and activities to curb the incest issue in Malaysia. Among the contributions and usefulness highlighted are:

***A platform to communicate and share information***—One of the main functions of the website is to enhance communication, provide input towards the visitors, content sharing, and encourages collaboration. As indicated earlier, this website is developed based on the doctoral work and a part of FRGS; thus, it aims to provide information related to the research conducted.

***Coping mechanism for incest victims and survivors***—One of the web pages in this website emphasizes the aspect of coping mechanism that is targeted to the victims and survivors of incest issues. Through this page, the visitors can choose which part suits the situation they are facing. For example, the victims or the survivors can choose to listen to any songs or movies that can help to release their stress.

***Channel of information to relevant agencies***—This innovative idea will be a catalyst for relevant agencies to take any actions to cater to the issue of incest. Through this website, the victims of the survivors of this heinous relationship are allowed to share their traumatic experiences through the channel that has been provided which is the official email of the website. All information relating to victims or survivors is confidential and will not be disclosed unless it is required by the relevant agencies.

***National policies***—In Malaysia, there are a few policies that aim to cater to the issues related to children. Among the policies are (1) Child Act (Amendment) 2016; (2) Child Policy 2009; and (3) Child Protection Policy 2009. Although there are a few policies that have been developed to cater to this issue; improvements to the police need to be made commensurate with the seriousness of the child-related issues that often occur. Thus, it helps the responsible parties to come out and amend the new policies that can help to protect the rights of children as a whole.

***International policies***—The development of this website is also beneficial and in line with the development of international policies that cover the rights of children such as the Convention on the Child Rights (CRC) and Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs). SDGs cannot be achieved without the completion of children's rights. Therefore, the right of the children such as good health, quality education needs to be secured from the beginning. This is because there is a potential for those children to protect the future for all of us.

### 4. UNIQUENESS AND NOVELTY

“Hope for the hopeless” represents several uniqueness and novelty of the two research (doctoral research and FRGS grant), which are:

***Website is originally developed on empirical evidence***—The development of “Hope for the hopeless” is initiated by two studies (doctoral research and FRGS grant funded by the Ministry of

Higher Education Malaysia). Based on reviewing the secondary information which includes previous research, articles, newspapers, government documents, and others, these two studies found that communicate online is one of the convenient ways for incest victims and survivors to communicate and share their stories. This is because they can easily hide their real identity and freely talk about their stress and traumatic experiences. Although this research could not get the real identity; however, this paper argues that their main experiences and stories are a priority in addressing the incest issue in the Malaysian context. Further, this initiative will strengthen the existing policies, programmes, and activities that regard the betterment of the family institution.

**Utilize technology**—Since Malaysia is currently upholding the international agenda of the Industrial Revolution, this innovative idea incorporates technology by developing a website that consists of several important web pages that allow people not only in Malaysia but also around the globe to get and access current information related to incest issue. Other than that, this initiative is also relevant to be developed in today's critical situation of pandemic COVID-19 where the majority of people are connected online. As the pandemic has 'locked' people at home for almost 2 years, statistics and reported information by relevant agencies showed that the abuse cases which include incest cases are increasing drastically (Ramli, 2021). Hence, this website enables the new incest victims and survivors to seek help before the situation is getting worsens.

**Among the earliest works focused specifically on the incest issue**—The incest issue has become a taboo topic among Malaysian since many years ago. However, the seriousness of this issue is undeniable. This situation highlights the urgency to conduct research related to this issue in the Malaysian context. One of the innovative initiatives undertaken by these two studies emphasizes the development of an online platform to encourage victims and survivors to get the current information and to share their stories and information. The developed website is arguing to be among the pioneering initiative based on empirical evidence and the current status of incest issue in the Malaysian context. Although there are several initiatives have been undertaken by other agencies such as non-governmental organizations; however, "Hope for the hopeless" prioritized specifically on incest issue which requires high attention and concentration by many parties especially family institutions and government agencies—this is considered as one of the novelties of this innovative idea.

**Enhance child protection and privacy**—As mentioned earlier, the incest issue has been recognized as a long-standing taboo issue in Malaysia. Due to this situation, relevant agencies and parties face difficulties and challenges in finding a significant solution to address this issue effectively. This is because incest victims and survivors find very difficult to share their stories and experiences due to societal stigma and stereotype. Hence, this two-research developed one convenient website for the victims and survivors to exchange relevant information related to the incest issue. The information given and received by many parties will contribute to several positive implications such as enhancing child protection and privacy in the Malaysian context. Child rights, protection, and privacy need to be strengthened from time to time because children are the future generation responsible to run the country.

## 5. POTENTIAL FOR COMMERCIALIZATION

"Hope for the hopeless" has the potential to be commercialized to national and international levels. This website is proposing a model of communication to incest victims and survivors in sharing their stories, information, and experiences. This model can encourage the victims and survivors to freely talk about their stress and traumatic incidents which subsequently can help others. The model used by this website is presented in each developed web page that encompassed unique objectives. This initiative is not aiming for creating high profit; however, it will serve as part of the responsibility of Malaysia to cater to the issue of incest and help the victims and survivors of the issue.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In a conclusion, children are the future of the world. They are the generation of the future who will be responsible for raising the name of the country and maintaining world security. Therefore, their rights, protection, and privacy should be protected. Consequently, the development of this website is intended to promote several objectives related to research that emphasizes the aspect of child sexual abuse, which covered the issue of incest. The importance of the development of this website can be seen through the

information that has been shared through this website where most victims of survivors of incest issues can find the right coping mechanism that can be used to reduce the level of stress, due to the traumatic experiences.

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