

## Malaysian Lesbian's Stress Level

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### ABSTRACT

This research focuses on *Pengkid*. It is a term or a slang used in Malaysia to refer to lesbians in the *butch* category. They are a group of individuals who are having non-traditional sexual orientation, in which they are sexually attracted to biologically-defined women. This research was conducted in order to focus on their sources and level of stress and a semi-structured interview schedule was administered with 25 *pengkid* participants from Pulau Pinang, Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Participants were recruited through various methods including from Malaysian *Pengkid* official website and snowballing technique. Various challenges related to day-to-day life were reported by participants. However, financial problems, conflicts in work place or study place and conflicts with girlfriends have been identified as their main sources of stress. Since they are supporting families, girlfriends and themselves, they face financial problems almost every month. At the same time, having more expenses compared to their income also caused this problem. Findings show that Malaysian *Pengkid* does not face any kind of problems or stress because of their identity. Malaysia's *Pengkid* seems to face the same problem that is faced by people with traditional sexual orientation and. They also do not have critical stress level and it is still manageable.

**Keywords:** *pengkid, lesbian, stress, life challenges*

### INTRODUCTION

“*Pengkid*” or lesbian is a minority group who draws less attention in this country. This small community group discriminated by the people around them. However, this attitude did not bring any changes in their self. But, it brings conflicts, dissatisfaction, anger and other negative feelings in their self. This kind of attitude or discrimination causes stress and affects their lives. To identify the types and level of stress among lesbians, this research has been carried out with 25 lesbians from three main states in Malaysia.

Lesbian is a sub-category in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and it has been known since ancient times. The term “lesbian” identified as did not have any specific meanings. Basically, this term referred to lesbians' sexual activities with other women in the real or in their fantasy (Smith & Serovich, 2008).

The term lesbian derived from Lesbos Island, Greek which was resided by women (Kartono, 1989). In the year 600 BC a poet, Sappho, sings, praises and encourages homosexual women through his poems (Bieber, 1969; Hyde & DeLamater, 2003). Besides, in

his poems, he described about the daily life of the women, their relationships and their customs. He emphasized on the beauty of women and expressed his love towards women generally through his poetries. Sappho also built a school for girls (Ettorre, 1980) and encouraged practicing sex among them in the island (Kartono, 1989).

In the West, a large number of lesbians categorize themselves as “butch” or “femme” (Bieber, 1969). Generally, the term butch refers to lesbians with manly or masculine characters and they follow the man’s characters in terms of attitude, communications and dressings. Meanwhile, femme refers to lesbian with womanly or feminine characters and is associated with characters like shy, obedient, soft and gentle (Bieber, 1969; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter & Levy-Warren, 2009). In the West, butch and femme are attracted to each other and are allowed to live together and lead a normal life like the heterosexuals lead. (Bieber, 1969).

Meanwhile, “*pengkid*” is the term used among Malaysians to describe lesbians with manly characters. *Pengkid* in Malaysia can be associated with individual with short hair, dresses like a man, covering up feminine appearance such as breasts and does not wear woman’s clothes. They are also attracted sexually to women. In this context, *pengkid* is the same as “butch”.

In the context of this research *pengkid* is the main focus; this research emphasizes on *penkids* and focuses on their stress level. However, many of the current studies focus on lesbians generally and not exclusively on “*pengkid*” or “butch”. Therefore, this research uses the sources which use the terms lesbians as a guide.

The term “stress” originated from a Greek word, ‘stringere’, which means pressured or tight (Cox, 1980). Stress is a negative emotional condition which leads to biochemical, physiological and cognitive changes and behavioral changes which can be expected and

controlled to change the aspects which cause stress or accept the consequences (Baum, 1990). In simpler terms, stress is described as a condition which is deemed as dangerous to physical health or one’s psychology (Smith, Nolen-Hoeksema, Frederickson & Loftus, 2003).

Many studies show that the concept of quality of life relates to an individual’s mental and physical health. Individuals who are unable to fulfill their basic needs or lives with lower social and economic status are prone to stress. This is because they work harder to improve their lifestyle. At the same time, individuals who always face stress due to poor quality of lifestyle also experience poor satisfaction in life. Those who are unhappy as a whole in life also have stress easily and frequently. Individuals with lack of social supports due to their social relationship are also highly prone to stress compared to individuals with all kinds of social supports (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Cohen & Wills, 1985). In whole, stress could affect individuals’ lives quality by creating negative impacts on their mental and physical well-being (Miller & Blackwell, 2006; Wargo, 2007).

Lesbians can be categorized as females and homosexuals. Studies carried-out by a number of scholars showed that this could cause mental problems or stress to them. Normally, lesbians often report their problems in relation to their sexual issues, depression and suicidal attempts (Sorensen & Robert, 1997; Matthew, Hughes, Johnson, Razzano & Cassidy, 2002). In reference to the western countries’ research findings, Mays and Cochran (2001) suggested that homosexuals are more prone to psychiatric problems and rates their mental level as poor or fair.

There are various challenges which contribute to lesbians’ stress. It includes lack of social support, marital status, post-marital problems and low income. These are seen as the factors which cause stress in a lesbian’s life

(Rothblum, 1990).

Generally, the quantity and quality of social support heavily affect and the individual's ability in facing stressful situations (Leavy, 1983). A research in England found that women without a close relationship and limited relationship in their lives are ten times more prone to stress compared to women with a close relationship with other individuals (Brown, Bhrolchain & Harris, 1975; Brown & Harris, 1978). Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) acknowledged that lesbians with good social support from their social network have lesser psychological problems including stress.

In the workplace, many lesbians maintain their sexual identity as a secret about to avoid problems. This causes them to be fearful in the workplace. At the same time, they are also afraid of lose their jobs if their colleagues or employer know about their sexual identity. As a result, they have to control their anger when their colleagues discriminate or tease their homosexual behavior and this leads them to experience stressful situations (Albro & Tully, 1979)

Lesbians are also afraid of extra work load if they reveal their sexual identity. This is probably due to their colleagues or employers might take advantage of them. Lesbians are also known for being workaholic and their colleagues may purposely add their workload. Keeping their sexual identity as secret limits their existing social networks (Rothblum, 1990). A research conducted by Lesbian Health Care Survey shows that many of the participants report their concern about losing their jobs due to their sexual orientation and they are always in stressful condition (National Institute of Mental Health, 1978). These things are seen as the factors which cause stress to lesbians in their workplace.

As lesbians have to hide about their sexual orientation from their colleagues, they are always cautious when their colleague discusses about their personal matters in the workplace. In this situation, lesbians have to control their emotions and tolerate their colleagues' negative criticism

and jokes about homosexuals (Hall, 1986).

This situation causes lesbians to always worry, fear, depressed and uncomfortable with their colleagues' conversations. This leads to lesbians distance themselves when their friends discuss about these things negatively. This also causes lesbians to become stressful and quit their jobs and become self-employed.

Rothblum's (1990) argued that many lesbians are employed in a job which provides security for them. However, some lesbians face discrimination and insecurity in their jobs. It was also found that the work place is considered as an unsafe place for lesbians due to many reasons.

**METHODOLOGY**

This is both descriptive and qualitative research, which employed semi-structured interview with the respondents in three major cities in Malaysia; Pulau Pinang, Kuala-Lumpur and Selangor. A total of 25 respondents between 18 and 25 years was identified and a criteria-criteria sampling method was used.

The criteria-criteria of respondents are biologically women (have a vagina), having women's name in their identity cards (*binti* or daughter of) and their dressing is like more men's style. The respondents also covered their breasts with tight clothes to avoid visible feminine, like to perform the activities which men usually do like climbing and other activities. They are also sexually attracted to other women rather than like men.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents Based on their State

State	Total
Kuala-Lumpur	7
Pulau Pinang	8
Selangor	10
Total	25

The number of respondents in this research differed based on the states and their willingness to participate in this research. These three states are chosen based on an assumption that the target group is more focused on big cities. However, this research has been carried out only in three states due to time limitation and financial constraints. Interviews were conducted in shopping complexes, restaurants, recreational parks, 24-hours eateries and entertainment outlets such as cinemas and snooker centres which are considered as main hang out spots for *pengkids*. Researcher used various techniques to gather participants for this research. One of the methods was through the social network, *Facebook*. Besides that, the researcher also used Malaysian Pengkid's National Website (<http://pub7.bravenet.com/guestbook/529352780>) to gather respondents. Due to poor response from all the method used, the researcher used the *snowball* sampling method to gather sufficient number of participants. After interviewing the respondents, they were requested to recommend their friends to the researcher. This method seems very effective as 11 participants were gathered and it completed the number required. The collected data were transferred into tables. To describe the differences, highest to lowest results groupings were adopted.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Findings showed that the respondents faced a variety of problems in their daily life. Some of them reported that they have a financial problem, conflict in working and studying places and conflicts with partners, former partners, family and friends. Some reported that they lost some personal belongings including money, hand phone and employment pass within one month period of time. Some respondents reported that they opted to brake-up from their special relationship, experience sex, misunderstandings and bully. However one respondent reported that she did

not have any problems within one month period before the interview conducted.

Financial problem was the main problem reported by 13 respondents. They reported, "*Every month I will face financial problem even I did not get my monthly period*" and "*My only problem is money*". It was found that the lesbians facing financial problems due to less salary and higher expenditure.

Those respondents who reported having problems within one month period time before this research agreed that they faced different kind of disturbances. Some of them reported that they had disturbed sleeping, loss of appetite and thinking excessively about problems. Next, they faced a lack of concentration, headache and disturbed breathing during the problem. There are some respondents reported that they fell in sick, forgot to eat and had stomach pain when having problems. Some of them also felt lazy to go to work and had dizziness when they had problems within a month period before and until the interview day. However, some reported that they do not feel disturbed when they have a problem.

Respondents reported, "*I can't sleep when I have a problem*", "*Normally I lost my appetite when I have a problem*", and "*I will think too much and hard to be happy whenever I have a problem*". In conclusion, most of the respondents who reported have problems in their lives; will have a difficulty to fall asleep. This is because they excessively think and worried about the problem.

The first feeling that a lesbian who involved in this research is reported are they feel anger, disappointed, annoyed, worried and disturbed to the problem that they face. However, few respondents reported that they feel crying, unsatisfied or irritated. Some of them also reported that they feel like want to run away, suicidal thoughts, fear and stress as their feelings when they have problems. Feeling of revenge,

unsatisfied, extreme anger, feeling like strangling others, feeling socially unproductive and confused were also reported by the participants.

Findings showed that respondents had different feelings when they have a problem. For example, "*I feel so sad when I have a problem*" and "*I feel angry and irritated when there is a problem*". Basically, respondents in this research felt sad when they have a problem in their life. This finding concludes that respondents felt disappointed due to their inability to settle the problem.

Most of the respondents reported that they prefer to discuss directly with the persons concerned to solve their problems and some respondents reported that they used to ignore it. However, those who have reported facing financial problems borrowed money from their family members and friends to solve it. Some of them reported that they used to keep silent and share their problems with their friends. However, some stated that they resorted to different ways to solve the problems like sharing with former partners, apologizing, lodging a complaint with the police and being self-defense.

Results from participants varies such as "*I prefer to discuss to those involved to solve my problem*", "*I prefer to ignore or pretend like do not know when I have a problem*", and "*I prefer to owe from my family members or my friends when I have financial problems*".

It was found that most of the respondents were active to solve their problems rather than remaining inactive. They also reported that discussing with those involved seems the best way to overcome the problems compared to not discussing.

Most of the respondents opted smoking as the best way to avoid their stress. There are some respondents reported that they prefer to sleep, hang out with their friends and pray to reduce their stress. Next, playing, sharing with a partner and passing time in *karaoke* also preferred by them. Some reported reading,

clubbing, listening to music, listening to Al-Quran recordings and laughing as their coping styles to alleviate the stress. However, only one respondent acknowledged self-harming as a strategy to vent anger and overcome her stress. Another respondent said that they will hang out in their motorbike, chit-chat with their friends, be alone, fishing, cry and keep silent. With these, screaming, blogging, singing, consuming alcohol, driving too fast, spending time on the mountain, shopping and watching movies also mentioned by the respondents.

Basically, every respondent has her own way to overcome stress. They report, "*smoking is the best way for me*", "*I sleep more to solve this stress*", "*Hang out with friends and spend time with them is the best way I like to adopt to overcome my stress*". However, smoking is not the main way for respondents in this research to overcome their stress. For them, it makes them conscious and they forget their problems for a while.

This research shows that lesbians have variety of stress factors. However, financial problems, conflicts in working and studying places, and conflicts with partners are the main challenges faced by them.

When they have a problem, it led to difficulty in sleeping and cannot concentrate on their tasks. This is because they always think about the problem and its consequences and they ways to sort it out. These situations cause their performance affected and their employers also made complaints.

The findings revealed that this minority group did not have any critical problems which can affect their lives negatively. Basically, they are having the same problems as other people having in their normal life. At the same time, those problems still can be solved by many ways. According to the findings, lesbians, in Malaysia, face problems like other people face in their day-to-day lives. As discussed before, there are a variety of causes for lesbian's stress. However,



financial challenges, conflicts in working and studying place, and conflicts with partner noticed as their prominent stress.

Sorenson and Roberts (1997) and Mathews et al. (2002) in their research reported that lesbians face many challenges because of their sexual orientation and identity. However this research found that lesbians in Malaysia did not have problems regarding their sexual identity but they have other challenges which have been mentioned before, including financial problems, conflict in working and studying places and conflict with their partners. It can be assumed that Malaysian does not have any problems with lesbians or they accept lesbians' identity. Other than that, Malaysian people also able to recognize this group even there are some similarities with men makes this minority group did not face identical problems. This shows that even though lesbians discriminated by people they are still accepted in the society. This may be because of positive human sense among individuals about this minority group. Other than that, some might be thinking that by accepting lesbians' sexual identity, they might eventually help lesbians to change.

Regarding expenditures, lesbians reported that they earn for their families and partners and for themselves. Higher expenditures and low salary caused them to face financial problems. Rothblum (1990) in his research reported that lesbians tend to face problem of lack of income, less social support and other issues. Kurdek (2005) also reported that this minority group spends for themselves and also for their partners. The increased expenditures caused financial challenges almost every month.

Lesbians, who are look-alike men, tend to play an important role as sons in their families. They have to endure a lot of expenses for their families. Their demography shows that they have male siblings in their families but respondents are still playing an important role in their families due to many reasons. However the male siblings were

recognized as irresponsible, still studying, unwilling to work or share their family burden. Their parents also depended on respondents rather than on the male siblings due to many reasons. This forced them to become their families' financial hope and they are obligated to spend their earnings to fulfill the family expectations.

Regarding the challenges at their working place, respondents reported that they had conflicts with their colleagues. However, the conflicts did not caused due to their sexual identity but it is caused by dissatisfaction with their colleagues' attitudes and their personality. Colleagues were perceived as creating problems which involve their personal matters and it makes them unhappy. And it makes them stress because they feel unsatisfied with their colleagues' behaviors which sometimes become sarcastic or make them feel ashamed in their workplace.

Albrodan Tully (1979) revealed that lesbians have to hide their real sexual identity to avoid many problems in their work place. Hall (1986) also conceded that lesbians have to limit their communications with their colleagues to avoid them from identifying about their real sexual identity. However, findings of this research denied these findings because respondents in this research did not hide their real sexual identity or limit their communications in their working place. However, problems with colleague are caused by selfishness and personal attitude which the respondent refused to elaborate. This finding clearly shows that lesbians in Malaysia did not hide their real sexual orientation to their colleagues.

Lesbians face conflicts with their partners because of the jealousy of their partner. Lesbian's partners tend to be jealous when they find that their *pengkid* partner is having relationship with other women especially with their ex-relationship. This jealousy causes conflicts and affects their relationship.

However, this finding is opposed Kurdek's (2005) research. According to Kurdek, the

driving style, sexual and financial aspects are found as the causes of conflicts with lesbians' partners. Kurdek did not include jealousy as a factor of conflict in romance relationships. Lesbians' partners might worry to lose their 'boyfriend' and they been jealous. They also tend to worry that their 'boyfriends' will have affair with their former girlfriends. This kind of thinking make lesbians' girlfriends feels stress and there will be conflicts in their relationship.

When they are having a problem, lesbians will have disturbed sleeping and lost concentration on their tasks. This situation happens because they are pre-occupied with the problem, the way to solve and also the consequences of the problem. It causes inconvenience in their performance and their colleagues tended to complain about that.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study showed that lesbians in this research did not have any critical problems that can affect their life. They are having the same problems that most of the people experiencing and it is still can be solved. Therefore, this suggests that lesbians' stress level is stable and need not to be worried and it is still manageable.

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