

Focus Group Discussions with Young People on Premarital Sex and its Consequences

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Abstract

Six focus group discussions were conducted among 59 young people to explore the possible factors of premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment. Thematic analysis revealed three factors associated with the social crises; i)'adjustment with the transition in life'- young people described living in a dilemma between the strong urge for more freedom in sexuality and adherence to religious teaching; ii)' conflict in relationships with parents and peers - receptive versus harsh and punitive parenting style and romantic peers relationship versus self-isolation, and iii)' lacking internal defences' - poor religiosity and lack of psychological skills including self-efficacy and self-control.

Keywords: ex-nuptial pregnancy, infant abandonment, premarital sex, young people

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1.0 Introduction

Around the globe, social norms vary in their strength and the degree of sanctioning young people's sexual behaviour. The level of looseness or tightness of the societies in accepting, condoning, controlling, or punishing young people practising sexual norms are heavily influenced by politics, media, laws and judicial dependency, control and enforcement, religion as well as a threat such as population density, resource scarcity or natural disasters (Massey, Burns, & Franz, 2021). In western countries where concern for human rights, gender equality, freedom of speech, liberal lifestyle, and social behaviour are higher, casual sex, cohabit before marriage, premarital sex or sex outside of marriage, and same-sex marriage are more tolerated compared to those in eastern countries (Lefkowitz, Gillen, Shearer, & Boone, 2004). For example, in the US, the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) shows that among married Americans aged 15–49, 60% had cohabited before marriage (Kerrigan & Bailey, 2021). In contrast, in traditional-patriarchal society such as Middle-east countries, such sexual behaviour are strictly prohibited and may instigate criminal behaviour including honour killing (Ne'Eman-Haviv, 2021).

In Malaysia, a country which the majority are practising moderate Islamic teaching, the prevalence of premarital sex among young people ranges from 2.9- 5.4% is predicted to be increasing (Lee, Chen, Lee, & Kaur, 2006; Nawi, Roslan, Idris, & Hod, 2017). Following the increase of premarital sexual activities, the rate of ex-nuptial pregnancy and the complications of this sexual behaviour are also expected to rise (Hazariah, Fallon, & Callery, 2021). In this country, despite the obvious negative consequences of this triad behaviour, studies investigating the perspective of young people on these social crises are lacking. The gap is clear that the voices of young people are seldom heard, and their opinions are hardly asked to serve as academic references or inform interventions. It is central for the authorities and various stakeholders to understand the views of the young people on factors contributing to these problems as it may inform appropriate interventions, programmes, or solutions suitable to this group of people. Therefore, the objective of this study was to explore the perceptions of young people on the possible contributing factors of premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature Review

Malaysia is a country that has a population of almost 62 percent Muslims (Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), 2021). Islam forbids indecent sexual behaviour such as *khalwat* (illicit proximity), premarital sex, or sex outside of marriage. Such sexual behaviour can be considered as violating the Syariah Laws (Section 20-29, Offences Relating to Decency, Law of Malaysia, Act 559, Syariah Criminal Offences, Federal Territories). This legal provision provides relatively milder punishment than *Hudud Law* (legal provision and punishments specified in the *Quran*). However, despite possible deterrent, preventative,

and pro-marriage policies, the number of young people practising such behaviour does not show decreasing trend (Razif, 2020). The local statistic suggested that from 2019 until January 2020, a total of 25,567 ex-nuptial children (or termed locally as *anak tidak sah taraf*) were registered (Nasrullah & Hilmi, 2021).

Besides potential legal punishment, young people with ex-nuptial babies also experience various other challenges, including difficulty in birth registration, determining the lineage of the baby, negative perceptions on the 'illegitimate status', financial insecurity, and future uncertainties (Bakar, Ahmad, & Bakar, 2017; Raja Gopal, 2014). Given the fear, stigma, and substantial negative consequences perceived by young parents of the ex-nuptial child, many have no choice but to opt for illegally abandoning their ex-nuptial newborn. In a study evaluating police records on illegal infant abandonment, local researchers suggested that the illicit abandonment rates of infants have also increased (Razali, Jaris, Sham, Daud, & Badeshae, 2021). The rates have fluctuated between 13.06 and 16.33 per 100,000 live birth (Razali, Kirkman, Ahmad, & Fisher, 2014). In half of the cases, the infants or foetus were found dead, and a proportion of cases involved adolescents and young people as the perpetrators (Razali et al., 2014).

Apart from the fear and stigma of illegitimacy and its consequences, other local researchers also suggested several possible contributing factors for these social crises. These include taking illicit drugs, truancy, vandalism, bullying, reading or watching pornography, and masturbation contributing to premarital sexual intercourse (Omar et al., 2010). Other experts also believed that poor sex education and lack of knowledge on sexual and reproductive health could play a role too. Young people are not well informed of managing the hormonal surge, using proper contraception, and lacking assertiveness skills to avoid unacceptable sexual behaviour (Razali, Ramli, et al., 2017). Furthermore, violence against women, including gender disparity, drugged rape, statutory rape, incest, and various other sexual assaults may occur, leading to ex-nuptial pregnancy and illegal infant abandonment (Razali, Fisher, & Kirkman, 2018).

Premarital sex among young people could have various adverse effects on both the mothers and their infants. The social and health consequences include disruption in academic activities, mental health problems, illicit drug use, sexually transmissible infections (STIs), financial constraint, and homelessness. Other than that, it may increase exposure to domestic violence which may be increased during pregnancy (Mann, Bateson, & Black, 2020). For the mothers, young pregnant women have a higher risk for anaemia, perinatal morbidity, miscarriage, pre-eclampsia, preterm labour, low birth weight, intrauterine growth restriction, and many other obstetric complications (Hacker et al., 2021). The triad of premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment also increase the tendency for young people to be marginalised and excluded from society due to stigma and negative perceptions against these behaviour (Razali, Kirkman, & Fisher, 2016). Moreover, acting in concert with violence against women (such as rape, sexual

harassment, and intimate partner abuse), this triad has been shown to associate with criminal behaviour including neonaticide, filicide, or murder (Razali et al., 2018; Razali et al., 2014; Razali et al., 2016).

3.0 Methods

3.1 Study Design, Samples, and Sampling Strategy

We conducted a qualitative study using focus group discussions (FGDs) to gather data from the participants. A total of 6 FGDs of nine to ten young people were conducted. Selection criteria include young people aged 18 to 30 years who could communicate in Bahasa Malaysia or English. The participants were recruited among students of three colleges who came for a community program in one suburban area in Malaysia. The invitation for enrolment to the study was given before the event. A purposive nonprobability approach was used to recruit the participants. Those who fulfilled the selection criteria and gave informed consent were invited for the FGDs.

3.2 Data Collection

Refer to Figure 1 the flow of the study procedure. At the preliminary phase, ten nursing graduates aged 20 to 21 were trained by an expert in a qualitative study to modulate the FGDs. Participants' information sheets were given before the FGDs. The procedures of FGDs were explained together with descriptions of the risk and benefit of the study. Only participants who signed the informed consent form were invited for the discussion. Before each FGD, all participants were asked to fill up a short questionnaire of their background details.

We have tested the feasibility and suitability of the questions during the preliminary phase. The research team developed the questions guide (Refer to Table 1) as prompts to explore possible factors experienced by young people that may contribute to the social crises; the triad of premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment. The research team tested and revised the prompts and pilot-tested in ten university students before the fieldwork during the preliminary phase. During the FGDs, the trained facilitators followed the question guide but asked side questions to obtain more in-depth information about the topics. Enough flexibility to allow open discussions between the participants was permissible. Each focus group was facilitated by those trained facilitators and observed by the research team. Each FGD lasted between 90 and 120 minutes.

3.3 Data Analysis

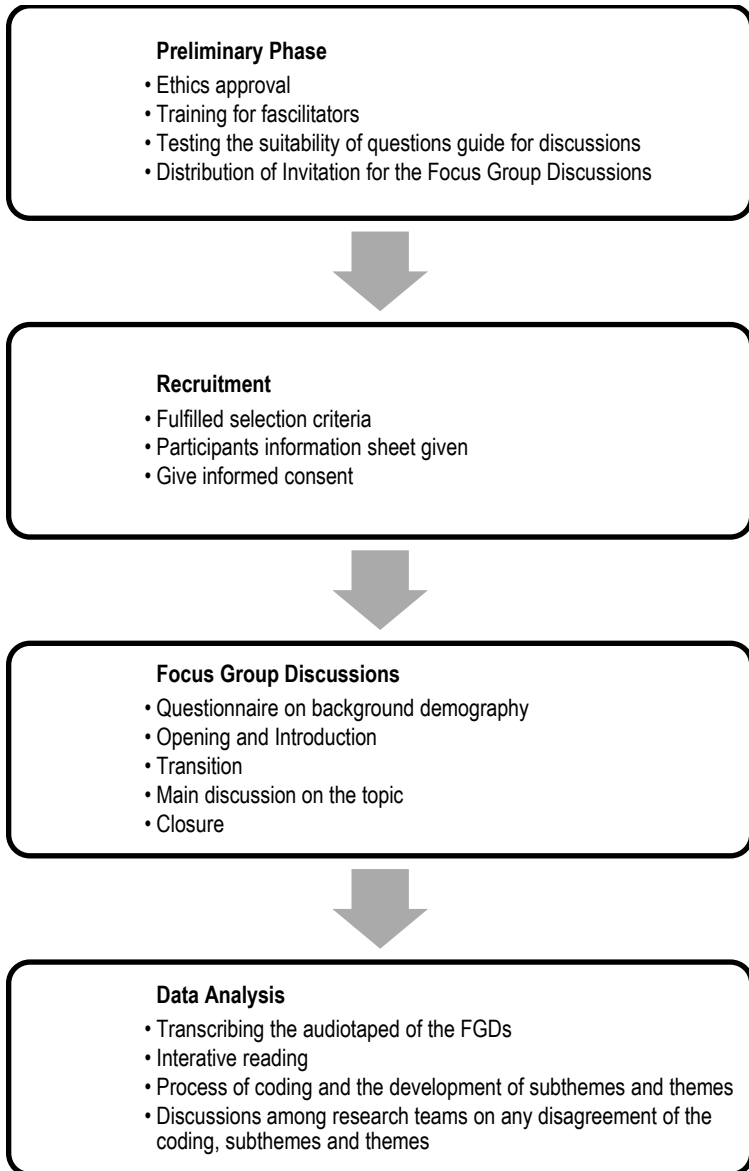


Figure 1: Flow Chart of the Study Procedure

The FGDs were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim manually in Microsoft Word. The transcripts were read iteratively to ensure the researchers clearly understand the data. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity, and all quotes were encoded using the qualitative data analysis software (QDA Miner) program. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Iterative readings allow us to understand in detail the content of the FGDs. All descriptions in the transcripts were coded.

Table 1: Focus Group Question Guide

Question Type	The Questions
Opening	1. What is your name? Where are you from?
Introduction	2. Ask participants for examples of common social problems experienced by adolescents or young people in this country.
Transition	3. Thinking about 'premarital sex', 'ex-nuptial baby', and 'baby abandonment', what comes to your mind?
Key	4. Imagine that you have a friend which such problems. What could be the possible contributing factors to her condition? 5. If it occurs to other people, what are other factors that you know might contribute to the conditions?
Ending	6. Do you have any last remarks about this condition?

The subthemes were developed from similar descriptions. Then, subthemes were grouped to become the main themes. Discussions between research members were done on any disagreement regarding the codes, subthemes, and themes. The credibility of this study was achieved through group discussion and a checking process between members of the researchers. We have planned the research with a proper timeline, rigorous data analysis, and record-keeping to ensure its conformability and dependability. This study has also used specific criteria for participants' selection to ensure the transferability of these research findings to other young people. In providing the reliability of data interpretations, doubts or disagreements were discussed with other researchers until consensus was reached. The study was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA.

4.0 Results

4.1 Background of the participants

A total of 59 young Malay people, 44(74.6%) female, and 15(25.4%) male, aged between 18 to 29 years old mean age (\pm SD) of 21.3 (\pm 1.8) joined the 6 FGDs. All of them were students in tertiary education; 51(86.4%) were in their first or second year of university study, and 8(13.6%) were in college study. Their studies were either supported by their parents (n=29; 49.2%), scholarship (n=17; 28.8) or other financial resources (n=8; 13.6%). All of them were unemployed except for one who did a part-time job. All of them were single, never married which less than half (n=22(37.3%) were in a close relationship, and the remaining were not.

4.2 The emergent themes

Table 2 describes the subthemes and the themes that emerged in this study. Three themes gathered from the thematic analysis.

Table 2: The subthemes and the themes

The subthemes	The themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moving from village to urban area Changes from tight parental control to lenient college regulation 	Adjustment with the transition in life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peers relationship; romantic relationship versus self-isolation Parental relationship; receptive parenting versus harsh and punitive parenting 	Conflict in relationship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor religiosity Lack of psychological skill; self - efficacy, and poor self-control 	Lacking internal defences

Theme 1: Adjustment with the transition in life

Young people in this study described that lack of adjustment with the transition in life could have contributed to the triad phenomena of premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment. A few of them suggested the experience of adjusting to the new environment as a "culture shock". Young people had to live with family in their village in rural areas to college in urban areas. They described that most who came from a well-controlled environment; previously lived in rural areas under close supervision by parents at home

and teachers at school felt a lack of control by college authorities in terms of students' social behaviour. According to most of the participants, college authority provided a permissible environment and lenient disciplinary action for couples who showed intimacy. The result, according to them, was having ex-nuptial pregnancy and then infant abandonment. As described by one of the participants who was living in a rural area before her study,

“We came from the village (kampong), then came to the urban area to continue our education. Then, we followed the culture of those in town, left behind village culture. The culture of holding hands is uncommon when I was in my village. Now that I am in the hostel, that behaviour (holding hands between the couple) is too bad. It is a culture shock for me! The guard (on the campus) did nothing. When sitting together, of course, we want to do sex. So when you get pregnant, then the easy way is to dump the baby”. Translated, Mala, 23

Theme 2: Conflict in relationships

The participant described two meaningful relationships which strongly influenced how young people adjust to the transition in life; i) Peers' relationship and ii) Parents and Family relationships. The pattern of friends or peers' relationships, according to them, can be divided further into two patterns of relationships. These types of relationships may increase the tendency for premarital friends to end up having ex-nuptial pregnancy; romantic relationship vs isolation.

Many participants suggested that the main factor for having ex-nuptial pregnancy is that young people started to have a romantic relationship. The trajectory to premarital sex in the context of college students described by the participants began when the students felt pressured to conform to the college culture that most college students should have a special partner. One of the girls suggested that students without a special partner would feel ostracized from others. At the same time, they felt compelled to abide by the religious belief and social perception that having a romantic relationship out-of-wedlock is forbidden and transgressive. As a result, young people would find (non) proper ways to maintain the relationship. One of the students described the situation in detail,

“Romantic relationship begins with (two young people) being as a couple. Initially, (they) were sending messages at night without parents' knowledge. Although parents have reminded (them) not to be a couple (having a romantic relationship) since such behaviour is forbidden, the young people kept going out at night. They were telling lies; instead of going out with a female friend, (she) went out with a male friend. Lastly, it ended up with (premarital sex and then having ex-nuptial pregnancy)”. Translated, Anna, 21

Other participants suggested further that the pathway then continued with the behaviour of holding hands, then patting. Such intimate relationships often occurred in secluded areas such as dark places, a park, inside the car or bus. A few participants described that young

women and girls might quickly get deeply in love and obsessed with their partners. Interestingly, one of the indications that convince the partner that they love their partner is sexual intercourse. Hence, as a preventive measure, many participants believed that going out in a group, instead of just together as a couple, perhaps can stop premarital sexual activities from occurring. They also suggested that it is appropriate to have many friends of the opposite gender but limit to casual friendship or non-romantic relationships.

In contrast, the participants described another type of relationship. It was related to those who tend to be socially isolated; those who preferred to occupy their time alone and spend time browsing the internet and using their mobile phone. They described further that this type of young people tends to watch pornography. This type of behaviour, according to the participants associated with sexual assault. They expressed that when those who like to isolate themselves having uncontrollable sex drive, they might have sex by force or non-consensual sexual relationship, sexual assault, or rape.

Young people in this study suggested the crucial role of the relationship between family, parents, and their children. In detail, they described lack of bonding between parents and young people, lack of warmth and love from the parents and family, poor parenting, and poor discipline at home could predispose young people to premarital sex and eventually abandoning their baby. The participants suggested two types of parenting; i) receptive parents who understand the challenges faced by young people. Young people would be comfortable sharing their problems (including having ex-nuptial pregnancy) with this type of parent. On the contrary, according to the participants, there are ii) very harsh and punitive parents, making it difficult for young people to disclose and share their problems with them. One of the participants explained,

"There are two types of parents. Some are open-minded, and those who could not accept the facts, this is the dangerous one! If you suddenly tell them about having ex-nuptial pregnancy, you can die because of being punished by this type of parents!" Translated, Alin, 22

Theme 3: Lacking internal defences

The participants described another factor contributing to premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment lacking internal defences. The internal element required for young people can be divided into two areas: i) religious adherence and ii) psychological skills. They believed that not only lack of knowledge, but most important was lack of religious practice would contribute to the phenomena. One of the participants described that,

"Perhaps the main factor is the religious factor. We cannot blame our parents. Parents have provided us with enough religious knowledge. Perhaps, it is our fault....we know, but we

don't want (to practice). We follow other people's behaviour. We do things which are beyond the (religious) boundaries". Translated, Zainab, 20

Apart from religion, the participants suggested the importance of psychological elements. They indicated that the phenomena occurred due to a lack of self-efficacy and self-determination to control their behaviour. She suggested that,

"This matter relies on ourselves. Despite how high your religious practice is, and whether you socialise with good friends or not, we should know how to look after ourselves. It depends on ourselves. We should be internally strong to avoid such matters". Translated, Syura, 21

5.0 Discussion

In this study, the young people described during this phase of development who practice premarital sex or sex out-of-wedlock are in crises to choose between fulfilling internal (their sexuality needs) and conforming to external (college culture, societal religious, and moral values). Biologically, it is well known that during this stage, the great challenge for young people is the spurts of sex hormones such as testosterone and estrogens. The surge in these hormones results in cascades of hormonal, chemical, and neurological reactions that drive young people to sexual activity (Pringle et al., 2017). Intense sexual urges resulting from hormonal surges create profound emotional connections and intimacy, as well as an increase in libidinal impulses (Willoughby, 2012). In premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment, such forces may outweigh other internal elements such as moral values or religious teaching.

Between 18-23 years of life, experts in the science of human development also suggested that young people are experiencing a significant challenge to regulate their normal sexual and developmental transformation of "emerging adulthood" (Gilmore & Meersand, 2019). Young people at this age are struggling to change from obedient childhood to the new phase of development of becoming one with autonomy, sexuality, self-identity, self-determined values, and career pathways (Gilmore & Meersand, 2019). A similar predicament experienced by young people in this study suggested that most of them struggle between the need to strictly adhere to religious teaching that forbids premarital sex or to follow their strong urge for sexual intimacy.

Furthermore, another crucial factor is in adjustment to the new sociocultural and environment of the college. These essential elements include the level of supervision, monitoring, and disciplinary action. Lack of control, inadequate monitoring, and poor disciplinary action from campus authority may allow young people freedom to practice their choice of lifestyles and behavioural patterns. Before campus life, parents and teachers may

have taken the responsibility to ensure continuous control. On the other hand, while in college, minimum supervision received by the students may give them more freedom to express and practice their chosen sexual and social behaviour. For example, in a review study that investigated the behaviour of "hooking up" among college students, similar results were found. The authors of the review suggested that perhaps, the shifts in the pattern of intimacy throughout the recent decades occurred because the culture of parents being the "gatekeeper" has reduced, and peers' oversight has been reinforced (Stinson, 2010).

While striving to find balance during the transition in life, young people in this study described the crucial element of having stable relationships with both parents and family and friends. Those who ended up having premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and tend to abandon their baby are those who experienced conflict in these two relationships. They received a lack of family support and inadequate guidance from their parents and family. The participants described lack of parent-child bonding, lack of warmth and love from the parents and family, poor parenting, and poor discipline at home might put young people at risk for premarital sex and eventually involve infant abandonment. Other local researchers have also described the importance of parents and families in providing positive elements for their children (Razali et al., 2016).

Moreover, local researchers suggested the vital role of parents and family in collaborating with teachers at school (Khalaf, Low, Merghati-Khoei, & Ghorbani, 2014). Parents also should actively involve in sharing knowledge with their children on sexuality (Razali, Ramli, et al., 2017). According to other researchers elsewhere, including parents' attitudes on young people's sexuality; parents' marital and childbearing behaviour (such as perceptions on out-of-wedlock pregnancies, educational background, employment patterns, and communication. (Shabrina & Nursasi, 2018). The importance of the practice of attachment between parents and their children may also determine the sexual behaviour of young people. It was suggested that young people with insecure attachment might have more hooking up behaviour than those with secure attachment (Stinson, 2010). Young people who have poor quality in the parent-child relationship may have more attraction to their peers and close friends than with parents and family. Opinions from friends and colleagues are very influential to young people's sexual relationships and behaviour. If their friends practice free sexual relationships with their partners, young people will incline to follow (Behulu, Anteneh, & Aynalem, 2019).

Our study highlighted another crucial element for adjusting during this emerging adulthood period, the strength of internal defences. The two elements were religious adherence and psychological skills. A few local researchers believed that a lack of commitment to spiritual practice might predispose young people to engage in premarital sexual activities. Other than that, it transgressing the teaching of religion (Islam) that forbids free social and sexual relationships with '*non-mahram*' or unmarriedable kin (Minhat,

Ismail, Jafri, Zulkefli, & Ahmad, 2021). Such behaviour were believed to eventually increase their tendency for having an ex-nuptial infant and infant abandonment. Other local researchers have also described the importance of religiousness concerning these phenomena (Awaluddin et al., 2015). Elsewhere, further studies among young people of different religions have also shown that the level of religiousness determines sexual behaviour (Lefkowitz et al., 2004).

Moreover, according to young people in this study, another pivotal internal defense was psychological skills such as self-efficacy and self-control. Local experts also suggested similar attributes and other psychological skills such as problem-solving, assertiveness, and coping skills (Razali, Daud, & Bahiyah, 2017). According to the literature, apart from the level of knowledge on sexuality, equally important is embracing religion and having good psychological skills to ensure young people could manage their stress and conflict related to sexuality (Khalaf et al., 2014). However, the crucial role of sexuality education in addressing the sexual behaviour of young people was not highlighted by young people in this study. Perhaps, in Malaysia, sexuality education is integrated only in the primary and secondary school curriculum, and no emphasis is given to incorporate this element in the syllabus of tertiary education (Khalaf et al., 2014; Razali, Ramli, et al., 2017). Hence, it is suggested that the authority implement continuous sexuality education from primary to tertiary education so that young people are empowered with enough knowledge to decide on their sexuality.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment are disturbing social phenomena among emerging adults in Malaysia. It is critical to understand the opinion of the young people on the contributing factors of this triad directly from themselves to address the root causes and prevent this from happening expediently; hence more studies are required. The emphasis also should be given to ensure the young generation are responsible and well informed to choose the best way for a healthy relationship and well-adjusted with the transition in life. So that social crises such as premarital sex, having ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment could be prevented. Moreover, empower positive psychological skills, adherence to religious practice, enhancing sexuality and reproductive knowledge, and embracing a healthy parent-child relationship should be the fundamental strategies to address these phenomena.

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Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study highlights young people's perceptions on the contributing factors for premarital sex, ex-nuptial pregnancy, and infant abandonment among their population. Parents, families, college authorities, mental health professionals, and the public must understand their roles and responsibilities to curb these issues. Their roles include proper parenting style and attachment with young people, embracing and practising religious advice, setting up adequate rules and guidelines for college students, and enhancing sexuality education and psychological skills.

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