



## Suicidal ideation among single, pregnant adolescents: The role of sexual and religious knowledge, attitudes and practices



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### ABSTRACT

Pregnant adolescents are a high-risk population for suicide. However, a knowledge gap still exists on how sexual and religious knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) influence suicidal ideation (SI) in teenage pregnancy. We aim to explore the interplay between psychiatric diagnoses, sociodemographic factors and KAP of sexual and religious issues as risk factors of SI among 114 pregnant Malaysian adolescents from 6 rehabilitation centers and a tertiary hospital. Single sexual partner was an independent predictor of SI, suggesting the role of less sexual experience as a risk factor for SI after controlling for major depression. Participants who were unsure versus those who agreed with the statement that most religions' viewed sex outside marriage as wrong had a lower risk of SI after controlling for major depression. Pregnant adolescents with a single sexual partner were significantly associated with current SI. Ambivalence towards religious prohibitions on premarital sex may protect against suicidal ideation.

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### Introduction

#### *Mental health burden of teenage pregnancy*

Teenage pregnancy has emerged as a public health problem in both developed and developing countries worldwide (Bearinger, Sieving, Ferguson, & Sharma, 2007; Klein, 2005). In addition to established negative physical health consequences in both mother and child, there is a growing body of research that has highlighted the mental health morbidity and mortality

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among pregnant adolescents (Hodgkinson, Colantuoni, Roberts, Berg-Cross, & Belcher, 2010; Siegel & Brandon, 2014). Previous research has focused on depression in pregnant teenagers whereby Troutman and Cutrona (1990) showed that 16% of pregnant adolescents met criteria for Major Depressive Disorder.

#### *Suicidal behavior & teenage pregnancy*

Suicide is among the most serious consequence of depression in pregnancy. In Bangladesh, Fauveau and Blanchet (1989) reported that suicide was one of the commonest sequelae of illegitimate pregnancy. These authors found that unmarried pregnant adolescents had a three-fold risk of suicide compared to married pregnant women. Freitas, Cais, Stefanello, and Botega (2008) showed that the rate of current suicidal ideation among Brazilian pregnant teenagers was 16.3% and the rate of previous suicide attempt was significantly higher in pregnant (20%) compared to non-pregnant teenagers (6.3%). Risk factors associated with suicidal behavior (ideation and attempts) among pregnant adolescents include psychiatric disorders such as major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder and social anxiety disorder, physical abuse, prior abortion, low education, and parental bonding styles such as paternal neglectful parenting and maternal affectionless control (da Cunha Coelho et al., 2014).

#### *Suicidal behavior & adolescent risky sexual behaviors*

In general, adolescent sexual behaviors are deemed risky when they result in adverse consequences such as unwanted pregnancies and sexually-transmitted diseases (STIs) (Mirzaei, Ahmadi, Saadat, & Ramezani, 2016). Sexual practices that increase the risks of those negative outcomes are also considered risky behaviors such as early sexual debut (age less than 15 years at first intercourse), multiple sexual partners and inconsistent condom use (Boislard, van de Bongardt, & Blais, 2016). With regards to suicidal behavior, risky sexual behaviors such as inconsistent condom use and being diagnosed with an STI were significantly associated with suicide attempts in adolescents (Houck et al., 2008). Stephens and Holliday's (2014) study among juvenile offenders found that suicidal ideation was significantly associated with having engaged in oral sex besides other non-sexual factors such as alcohol abuse and being incarcerated.

#### *Religiosity, adolescent sexual & suicidal behavior*

The delineation of the boundaries between normative psychosexual development and risky sexual behaviors in adolescents has been an area of growing research (Boislard et al., 2016; Vasilenko, Lefkowitz, & Welsh, 2014). Factors that influence adolescent sexual behaviors are multifaceted and culturally-dependent (Vasilenko et al., 2014).

Adolescents from collectivist cultures tend to conform to more conservative sexual norms compared to adolescents from individualistic cultures (Boislard et al., 2016). Higher religiosity (Manlove, Logan, Moore, & Ikramullah, 2008; Miller & Gur, 2002) has been associated with less adolescent risky sexual behaviors i.e. delayed onset of sexual involvement (Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003); and protective against suicidal behavior in the general population (Mota, Cox, Katz, & Sareen, 2010; Wu, Wang, & Jia, 2015).

#### *Focus of current study*

As previously highlighted, teenage pregnancy is a negative sequelae of risky sexual behaviors as well as a significant risk factor for adolescent suicidal behavior. Therefore, it is important to elucidate the mechanisms that may contribute to the association between risky sexual behaviors and suicidal behavior in pregnant adolescents.

Factors that influence adolescent sexual behaviors are multifaceted and culturally-dependent (Vasilenko et al., 2014). Cultural nuances that shape a given society's attitudes and values system need to be considered with regards to risk and protective factors for risky sexual as well as suicidal behavior in adolescents (Boislard et al., 2016). This is especially pertinent among pregnant teenagers, as attitudes and religiosity (Manlove et al., 2008; Miller & Gur, 2002) have been shown to influence sexual risk behaviors and psychological well being, including suicidal behavior among adolescents in general (Mota et al., 2010). Qualitative research has suggested that societal pressures experienced by pregnant teenagers can affect their moral decision-making on themes of sexuality, youth motherhood and marriage to the extent that this marginalized population has been faced with stigmatization akin to "social death" (Miller & Gur, 2002). Wong (2012) found that sexual knowledge and attitudes were significantly associated with cultural norms and religious values among multiethnic adolescent Malaysians with a Malay-Muslim majority whereby the ethnic composition in the general population is as follows: Malays (54.5%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%), indigenous groups (12.8%) and other ethnic groups (0.7%) (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2011).

Nevertheless, a considerable knowledge gap still exists in terms of delineating the role of sexual and religious attitudes as correlates of suicidal behavior among pregnant teenagers, especially in a culturally conservative Asian society. From a clinical and public health standpoint, it is important to identify factors that are unique to a particular sociocultural context, as this will have implications on the development and implementation of culturally relevant suicide preventive strategies.

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