

## So Why All the Fuss About Single Mothers?

The word “ibu tunggal” draws a lot of sympathy among Malaysian public without even delving into any details. However, PSM’s concern and so involvement with the lot of single mothers is beyond sympathy. Sympathy is simply an emotion. It is empathy that is needed. But in order to take concrete action, one needs to understand realities so that the subsequent action does not do more harm.

### **PSM’s experience**

Being a political party that is very much rooted in the lives of the marginalised, PSM’s service centres, members and friends come face to face with the harsh realities of life. One group that was coming consistently for help was women whose husbands were not around or whose husbands were no longer bread winners. In order to understand the nature of the realities of the lives of these women, Dr.JeyakumarDevaraj embarked on a study in SungeiSiput with the help of some friends. Among the salient points raised in this study was the need of single mothers for a safe place for their children while mothers were at work, tuition and access to a public library .

The difficulties faced and requests made by the mothers and children were presented to the Ministry of Women in January 2006. However, there was no response from the Ministry to this effort. Recognising the need for a safe place but given PSM’s limitations of running such a setting, the idea was passed on to an Ipoh based Church group. Transport was arranged for children to be picked up from their homes by 7am and sent home at about 6pm.

The Centre managed by a committee, was staffed by a house mother and a kitchen helper who saw to the children’s meals (breakfast, lunch and evening snack), hygiene and cleanliness. It was a place where children made friends and learnt some basic literacy and numeracy. For this purpose, the house mother, herself a single mother with two young school going children, was trained by a volunteer educationist from out of town monthly. This session was over a period of one week for about one year.

The Centre changed hands in terms of management and is managed completely independently by a Church group. Today there are six other independent Centres in Sungei Siput serving the needs of poor single mothers and their young children, managed by an NGO providing safe places for children. Each Centre is managed in a way that there is always a mother present in each Centre always besides other support staff. Besides providing nutritional support, these Centres also provide tuition support for the children.

### **Growing numbers and deepening issues necessitate a study**

Single mothers continued seeking the help of PSM’s service centres and the background of these women seem to indicate some common characteristics. With the opening of PSM’s Women’s Desk, one of plans made was to take up women’s issues from a working class perspective, as initiated in a small way in 2004, thus departing from other women’s groups. There was a need to understand what the main issues were, what stand and policy directions for advocacy were needed. In addition, the growing economic hardships like rising prices of food, increase in rentals, greater erosion of public transport, further burdened the rakyat.

One of the most vulnerable groups in society, single mothers with low income were standing out as a group. Given demographic changes and social problems in the country, it was possible that single mothers were growing in numbers too. For example, the increase in the detention of men with drug

-related offences, increase in the number of adult male prisoners, death of the main bread winner due to sickness, accidents, were potential cause factors. As PSM was already responding to the needs of single mothers and their families by directing them to the welfare department, the underlying problem of meagre incomes and the attendant inability to meet basic needs, including children's schooling expenses, it was logical then to do an in-depth study at the national level. Such a study would reveal underlying causes thus enabling corrective relevant measures to be proposed to the government for action.

So the Women's Desk liaised with all PSM branches throughout Peninsular Malaysia to contact about five low income single mothers with young school going children. The focus of the study was to investigate the profile of the single mothers, the nature of their difficulties. Specific questions were framed as a guideline to interview these single mothers. As a key focus area was on economic realities these questions related to education levels of the mothers, income earned and donations received, financial support received and their respective sources, food and drink patterns for children under twelve, accommodation issues, expenses related to schooling. One section was left open ended for any other problems faced.

The process of participation of members and the women was a priority so that the study was reliable in spite of limitations of funds and other resources faced. Single mothers interviewed were from both urban, semi urban and rural areas. The process of doing a pre-test and then fine tuning, interviewing and analysis of the interviews took about nine months.

### **The results of the study**

Once analysed, the results matched with experience on the ground. The following points are its main findings:

- The majority of single mothers were between 26 to 31 years old, the majority with no education or primary school drop-outs and 90% with incomes below RM900 and doing jobs in the informal sector
- Children below six were left in the care of older siblings or aged relatives while mothers were at work
- Accommodation was a major problem as rentals were high (RM300) forcing some single mothers to leave their children with different relatives, some constantly shifting houses due to inability to clear rental debts
- None of the children below three in the study were provided with milk purchased with income earned; however, the milk provided was donated. Most children below 12, drank plain tea or coffee. Those who drank milo were from families which received assistance. Children whose mothers owned motorbikes (as an indicator of wealth), also drank plain tea/coffee
- In terms of access to nutrition, children below 12 were served with chicken either once a month or four times a month, cheap variety of fish once or four times a month too. For those who had vegetables, it was limited to one serving a day cooked with vegetables purchased at RM2.00(one bundle) for the whole family. There was one mother who could not purchase any vegetables and could only provide rice with rasam, papadam(a lentil based wafer). Many women cooked once in two days to save on gas and cost. Fruit was hardly provided. Some did purchase fruit once a week. This was limited to about 3 or four pieces of bananas used as offering for deities, then served to children.

- School expenses were a burden; these included transport cost (about RM50 to RM70 per child), uniforms, shoes, food at school. The mothers wanted tuition for the children but this was unaffordable
- Health of mothers was a problem

Our study resonated with that of The State of Households study by Khazanah Research Institute (November 2014). The Khazanah Study shows that lower income households spend a higher proportion of income on food, housing and utilities and that this group would be disproportionately affected by rising food and utilities prices (see Chart 13 pg 18 and Table 4 pg 19).

### **Consulting a broader society**

Although PSM initiated the single mothers study, it was necessary to consult with groups engaged with single mothers on the ground in order to validate the results of PSM's study and experience. Such a consultation, it was hoped, will help provide a peek into the scale of the problems faced by single mothers. This work with one of Malaysia's most vulnerable groups was all the more necessary given the wealth of the nation but with growing income inequality. In addition, as a "caring society" it was necessary to work to improve the welfare of poor women and their families in order to break the vicious cycle of poverty and its attendant social ills.

Invitations were sent out to several NGOs, Church groups and Women's groups to reflect also some degree of Malaysia's ethnicity. In total, representatives from eight other groups came together to discuss the PSM study over several meetings, and in consultation with their respective groups. A coalition called Jaringan Rakan Ibu Tunggal was formed. The representatives unanimously supported the findings and made some additions.

Together, the group worked on a memorandum expressing difficulties faced by single mothers and proposed recommendations for consideration by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) cognisant of the fact that there were 830,00 households headed by women in 2010. It was also noted that this figure would certainly have risen in the five years since its report. Assuming 40% of households headed by women to be below RM1500, it was necessary for the government to step in to take appropriate measures to reach out to the single mother families.

This Memorandum was presented to the Honourable Minister's representative at Putra Jaya on 25 February 2015.

The memorandum focused on the low income issue and its impact on housing, food and housing, besides the problems of education, transport and psychological related issues.

#### **Problems:**

1. Low and unstable income: 90% of mothers earned less than RM1000, an income that did not allow them to meet basic needs of housing, food, transport and schooling for their children. Food which was served was not nutritious nor balanced.
2. Housing: rentals swallowed a big portion of their income. Those who purchased homes, ended up having their homes auctioned given their inability to meet loan commitments. A large number of mothers too resided with relatives.
3. Child Care: Child care was difficult to access when mothers had to go to work. Children were generally left on their own, with no lunch served for them and no help for school- work. Such a

situation gives no promise of a future for the children and thus the cycle of poverty continues to the next generation.

4. Transport: Transport costs eats up another big portion of meagre incomes. With visits to hospital, school and work place and the lack of public transport in many places, their burden increases further. They sometimes have to resort to taxis in some places.

5. Health of single mothers: their health, i.e. socio-emotional, physical, spiritual and emotional health is compromised, thus affecting the health of single mothers.

6. Welfare aid: The help provided by JKM is insufficient (maximum of RM450).

Recommendations proposed hinged on the “bigger picture”, that of getting a national data base to identify poor single mothers and addressing root causes. These are:

1. The need for a national data base in order for MWFCDC to implement and monitor an effective programme. An in depth study and so a special programme for single mothers needs to be put in place.

2. Voucher system for single mothers earning less than RM1500 and with children below 18 years of age, for food, transport, rental, child care (under 10 years) and quality community based preschool, as well as vouchers for shoes and school uniforms.

3. Transport passes (like those issued for students)

4. Subsidies for purchasing low cost housing at controlled prices

5. Welfare department related recommendations: ground visits by counsellors, review the effectiveness of drug rehabilitation programmes at detention centres, reaching out to all families of male prisoners (i.e. those with school going children)

6. Skills training programme and financial support for business initiatives

7. Insurance scheme for single mothers

### **Response from the Honourable Deputy Minister**

The Jaringan was given an opportunity to have a dialogue with the Honourable Deputy Minister of MWFCDC, YB Chew Mei Fun on July 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 to discuss the issues presented in the memorandum.

YB Chew referred to current programmes implemented by the Ministry as a response to the recommendations contained in the memorandum. These included help for the support of single mothers, i.e. RM100 per child and not for the single mothers, she reiterated.

The Jaringan argued that RM760 as a qualifying income for assistance was an unrealistic figure, given that the estimated average monthly household expenditure, according to the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Plan Strategy Paper II was identified as RM2015.

It further argued that the maximum RM450 provided by JKM went for school transport payment thus leaving food and nutrition issues unresolved.

The Deputy Minister could only refer to the milk programme implemented by the Ministry of Education as a solution to overcome nutritional deficiency. The Jaringan revealed cases of children below three years old consuming plain tea and coffee in the midst of an affluent country like

Malaysia. While the Jaringan supports breast feeding, poor single mothers have limited access to nutritious food, making it difficult for them to do their best for their children.

#### Defining single mothers

The Jaringan also raised a point of the need to improve the Ministry's definition of single mothers. Its current definition " seorang ibu tunggal yang telah ceraikan hidup/mati masih tanggunganak/Ketua keluarga yang tanggung suami yang sakit serta tanggung anak-anak/ wanita yang ambil anak angkat" was too narrow. The Jaringan said that the status of single mothers needs to include women still married but deserted by their husbands, husbands in rehab centres, prisons and alcoholics. These categories of women too need assistance desperately.

#### Statistics on single mothers

Once more, the Jaringan recommended the Ministry to conduct an in depth study of single mothers and submitted several questions on statistics related to single mothers in the work force as well as unemployment among them. These questions included data on educational status ( no formal education, primary school education, secondary education and tertiary education); percentage in the working age category, percentage in the labour force, unemployment rate among single mothers, main occupational categories.

#### Child Care Centres

In response to a single recommendation of the seven, YB Chew said that teh Ministry was working very hard on TASKA given very high costs of child care. The government, she said, was giving RM250 subsidy to government servants. The neighbourhood of Putra jaya alone needed 500 child care centres. The Jaringan expressed strongly that Child Care Centres provided by the government must be set up in low income areas as a matter of priority.

#### Holistic Measures

The Jaringan expressed that the Ministry needs to go beyond social work and work hand in hand with NGOs at the grass root level in order to address problems of single mothers. Financial help extended by the government is not only small but also diminishing in value. A "bits and pieces" approach is not sustainable in order to bring poor single mothers and their families out of the vicious cycle of poverty. Holistic measures are needed to address the structural causes of poverty along with the potential role of the Ministry as the "lead agency"

The Jaringan as a voice of single mothers once again expressed he need for teh Ministry to acknowledge and address the problems of single mothers and their children as an urgent national issue.

#### Single Mothers speak up at Kajang on 23<sup>rd</sup> August

As there was nothing concrete from the government to the memorandum, so a group of single mothers came together on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2016 calling attention to their problems and needing

government response to the problems of a wider group of single mothers through a press conference.

### **Special Action Plan for Single Mothers**

The Prime Minister announced a Special Action Plan for Single Mothers on August 23<sup>rd</sup> 2015. Again this plan did not reflect programmes to benefit all poor single mothers but only for selective mothers. There was nothing of the recommendations made by the Jaringan in February 2015 in the Special Action Plan for Single Mothers. There was no reference to a national data base which would have been essential to ensure there was a safety net for every vulnerable single mother and family.

### **Ministry Responds to the Memorandum**

Almost one year later, MWFCDC responded to the Jaringan's memorandum on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2015. While the Ministry generally responded positively to some of the recommendations, the Jaringan felt that the Ministry could do more and called for a press conference on International Women's Day, reiterating the issues raised and focusing on the need to increase the Poverty Line Income (PLI) to include more single mothers.

RM720, as justified by the Ministry was certainly an unacceptable PLI. The Ministry's response was criteria for selection for aid was means tested and that the RM720 was sufficient to fulfil food and non-food items to ensure that members of the household will remain healthy, actively function in society. It further stated that the PLI was based on WHO's balanced food concept and took into consideration household demographic characteristics such as size, composition, age, weight and gender.

The Jaringan instead proposed a more reasonable figure of at least RM1000 reflecting current cost of living. The Jaringan held on to other recommendations of February 2015 which included government funded day care centres and quality community based preschools, besides food vouchers, transport support, subsidised housing and counselling services. This Press Statement was endorsed by organisations. The Jaringan's response to the Ministry's reply to the Memorandum was submitted on May 16 2016 to the Minister, the Deputy Minister, the Director General of the Department of Women's Development.

In addition, the advocacy for the challenges faced by single mothers and families was brought to another level by meeting with the Women's Parliamentary Caucus on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2016. A group of single mothers together with some representatives from the Jaringan voiced problems faced and asked the women MPs to lobby for a budget double the present amount. Present were the Chairperson YB Datuk Azalina and about six other Members of Parliament. This meeting was arranged through the help of YB Kasturi Patta. It was a short meeting and the group requested for a meeting with the full Women's Caucus at the next Parliamentary sitting. In the meantime, Jaringan members would continue the work with the single mothers.

### **Conclusion**

Any initiative cannot be taken in silo. More civil society groups must come forward in the push to change policy in favour of the poor. If the government's PLI remains at RM1000, then assistance must be forthcoming from government to shoulder the burdens of vulnerable single mothers and their families. The very comprehensive proposals put forth by the Jaringan like vouchers, Child Care Centres within walking distance in every poor neighbourhood, subsidised housing for the poor, the availability of counselling services in poor neighbourhoods are all very sound recommendations. Society stands to gain from such care of the poor. Making a fuss on behalf and with poor single

mothers will simply mean less school drop outs, less juvenile crime, healthier children and mothers and so, happier families. Punishing children for the faults of their fathers, or for other reasons cannot be tolerated. So is this too much of a fuss?

Veronica Anne Retnam

Coordinator

JaringanRakanIbu Tunggal

July 4<sup>th</sup> 2016.