HOMELESS WOMEN IN MALAYSIA: THEIR CHOICE OR VICTIMS OF SITUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews relevant literature pertaining to women's homelessness in the Malaysian context. The population of homeless people is in a worrying state, especially in big cities such as Kuala Lumpur. This is because the rising number of homeless people, including women has revealed a new trend of homelessness in the country. This trend is similar to the rising number of the homeless women population in many countries, including developing and developed countries such as India, United States, Australia and many others. However, the existence of homeless women in the city of Kuala Lumpur is often being neglected, given less focused and is currently not much research were carried out about this issue. The homeless women population can be categorized as a vulnerable and marginalized group in Malaysia. They have been associated with many negative perspectives such as involvement in crimes, drug addiction, prostitution, being bad mothers and many others. However, behind the life of all these vulnerable women, lies the underlying factors which have resulted in them succumbing into homelessness. It is unsure whether homeless women choose to end their lives in this way or are among the victims of situations (syndicate, domestic violence, human trafficking and others).

Keywords: Homeless women, population, choice, victims of situations

Overview Of Homeless Women Globally

Every country in this world is not excluded from the proliferation of homelessness. In fact, the status of a country (developed, developing or poor countries) does not reflect their country's homelessness issue. There are several categories of the homeless group; male, female, children and family. As being on the street is tough, rough and dangerous, people usually associate homelessness with males. However so, women are not excluded from being involved in this group. People are not cognizant about the existence of homeless women as they are among the hidden (Gaetz et al., 2013). Women homelessness is not a new issue as it has already existed for many years ago.

According to the Sikich (2008), women's homelessness is a global issue as all countries around the world face this similar problem. However, the root causes that lead to women's homelessness are not considered as global issues as each country has different causes that contribute to this issue. In fact, the status of the countries (develop, developing and poor) reflects the types of root causes which lead to the women's homelessness. For example, developing and industrialised countries have different root causes that lead to women's homelessness, such as poverty (Bullock, 2013), migration (Qayyum et al. 2013) and many others; and these countries have their own policy and mechanism to address this issue. The causes that lead to the issue of homeless women are multifaceted, it is a complex situation and depends on the social, economic and political environment of the country. There are several recorded numbers of homeless women in each of the countries. In developed countries like the United States, about 60% of homeless women have children under the age of 18, but only 65% of them live with at least one of their children. While 71% are of these women are single parents (Green Doors, 2008). Homeless women in the United States obtain insufficient health care incentives from the government as compared to women who are not homeless. Subsequently, the United States has the largest recorded number of homeless women since the Great Depression[1].In addition, homeless women in Canada are among

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[1] The United States faced the economic recession (financial and industrial drop) in October 1929.

the hidden[2]. The population of homeless women in Canada is lower than homeless men. In Canada, 73.6% of homeless population refers are male and 26.2% consist of homeless women (Homeless Hub, 2016). Meanwhile, in Germany, out of 254,000 homeless people, 25% are homeless women. Whereas, in Australia, 44% out of 105,000 homeless people are homeless women (Homelessness in Australia, n.d.).

Moreover, in certain developing countries like India also face a rise in homeless women. New Delhi is a spotlight area which consists a huge number of homeless people. Out of 150,000 homeless people, there are 10,000 of that population who are homeless women (Chaudhry, Joseph & Singh, 2014). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, as stated by Chrisanne Chin (moderator for Council of Churches Malaysia Youth), among the homeless people in Kuala Lumpur, 15% of them are women and 22% are above the age of 60 (The Rakyat, 2014).

Similar to developing and developed countries, poor countries also face a rise in the number of homeless women. In fact, the number of homeless women in poor countries are large in amount as the country lacks basic resources such as providing basic needs and goods as well as several support and aids. For instance, Malawi (landlocked country in Southeastern Africa), most of the homeless women live in squatter settlements and slum areas. Furthermore, they are deprived of basic needs such as electricity, water and proper housing (Chirwa, 2014). In addition, Nigeria also faces an increase. Lack of adequate housing, poverty and limited access to basic needs are among the factors that lead to the rising number of homeless women in Nigeria (David, 2011).

Homeless Women In Malaysia
The social pattern of homeless in Malaysia can be seen from the socio-demographic, socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects. In terms of socio-demographic, homeless in Malaysia can be seen mostly among male; however, they're observed the rising number of homeless women (Hussin, 2016). The age of homeless people also varies according to the areas. In terms of socio-economic background, many homeless are among the jobless, or earn low income. The homeless population also came from different ethnicity: Malays, Indians, Chinese or others—this reflects the socio-cultural aspect. Besides, there are not only Malaysians who are among the homeless, but many of them are among the migrants who came to Malaysia from the neighbouring countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar.

The statistics of homeless are increasing in all countries, including Malaysia (Homeless World Cup Organisation, 2016); Irsyad, 2016). Women's homelessness also increases, particularly in the city center. Based on a finding from a recent research undertaken in Kuala Lumpur (Hussin, 2016)[3], it is found that the number of homeless women is increasing particularly in the city of Kuala Lumpur. However, there are three main categories of homeless women in Kuala Lumpur based on Mackenzie and Chamberlain's (1992) categories homelessness which are: primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness. Primary homelessness is genuine homelessness, which refers to those who do not have accommodation or shelter and usually sleep on the streets or in buildings. Based on the observations, the primary level of homeless women in Kuala Lumpur refers to those who are insane, old age and suffering from chronic diseases like human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Meanwhile, secondary homelessness are those who are at high risk succumbing into homelessness. These women are those who merely have temporary shelter like a rented room or house. Homeless women in Malaysia who are young and have children with them are usually categorized into secondary homelessness as they are among those who rent a room for safety. Tertiary homelessness refers to homeless women who have shelters which are below the minimum community standard such as sleeping in cars or living in squatter areas (Hussin, 2016).

Besides, finding of the Hussin's research[4] disclosed that the number of homeless women in Kuala Lumpur city is increasing and it also reveals that a majority of the homeless women among those who rent rooms at *Lorong Haji Taib, Lorong Chow Kit, Lorong Tiong Nam* or of that vicinity. Even though they face financial problem or lack of income, they have to rent a room due to safety, especially those women who have children with them. They have to work in order to pay rent mostly as massager, cleaners or dishwashers and many others. These kind of jobs gives them income around RM20 to RM30 per day. Besides staying with children, some of them are also staying with friends or boyfriends. They are among the secondary homeless people, according to the category of Mackenzie and Chamberlain's 1992 (Hussin, 2016).

The trend of women homelessness is increasing in all parts of the world. In America, for example, homeless women are classified as the fastest growing category of the homeless (Weinberger, 1999). In Vancouver (a city in British Columbia, Canada), the number of homeless women make up 23% of the population (Kieltyka, 2016). Meanwhile, in Australia, particularly in Brisbane, the number of homeless women is growing especially among the elderly (Haxton, 2016). In Malaysia, there is no specific number of homeless women as there is no exact number of the homeless people as it is yet to be tabulated (Alhabshi & Abdul Manan, 2012). However, based on a survey conducted by *DBKL,* it prominently evidently proved that the number of homeless people has increased from 600 in 2014 to 2,000 in 2015 (Irsyad, 2016). Moreover, a survey that was carried out by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) revealed that the number of the homeless in Kuala Lumpur was approximately 1,400 people as of then (Rusenko, 2014). In addition, a survey carried out by Kechara Soup Kitchen

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[2] Hidden homelessness refers to those who stay temporarily with friends or family to obtain shelter, live in unsafe and illegal areas or buildings, use all their income or money to pay rental and are unable to purchae basic needs (Canadian Women's Health Network, 2012).

[3] The research monograph is the outcome/findings from a research grant (FRGS) that has been presented during a national series of homelessness and street children issue in Malaysia. The title for this monograph addresses homelessness issue in Malaysia.

[4] Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) was funded by Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). The project title is New Effective Homelessness Eradication Model to Challenge the Conventional Homelessness Theory.

(KSK) disclosed that the number of homeless people (including homeless women) who reside on the streets of Kuala Lumpur was around 1,500 people as of 2014 (Kong, 2014). As homeless women are also categorised under the wide scope of homelessness, it can be presumed that the number of homeless women in Malaysia is also increasing annually and this trend is similar to the pattern of homeless women globally.

In Malaysia, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) act as mechanisms channeling a help to the homeless people (including homeless women). There are several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on helping and giving the aids or supports to the homeless people (including homeless women). There are several famous NGOs that help homeless people such as PERTIWI Soup Kitchen, Kechara Soup Kitchen (KSK), *Dapur Jalanan* and Need to Feed the Need (NFN). These NGOs are very helpful and they are responsible inproviding food, clothing, medication and other necessities. In fact, these NGOs have recorded their own number of homeless people (including homeless women) in Malaysia, especially in Kuala Lumpur. However, these recorded numbers of homeless are merely on the surface and does not address the entire homeless population as a whole. The recorded number of homeless women can be obtained from NGOs and agencies which have recorded their own readings. Those recorded figures represent only homeless women who approach their organisations to obtain help and support. For example, the recorded number of homeless women in Kuala Lumpur is 589 people (Kechara Soup Kitchen, 2015). This figure only represents the population of homeless women who have approached Kechara Soup Kitchen to obtain support and aids. In fact, there are a huge number of homeless women who not approach these organisations.

In addition, there is no exact number or figure of the homeless women population in Malaysia (Foong & Ho, 2010). Besides, there are limited studies or researches pertaining to women's homelessness. In fact, there are limited empirical in-depth researches in this area. Despite so, in accordance with the global trend, the population of homeless women is increasing yearly as there are numerous factors which contribute to this particularissue. In Malaysia, the number of homeless women is increasing yearly (Hussin, 2016). In becoming a developed nation by 2020, Malaysia must not ignore or deny that women's homelessness will pose a challenge that needs to be addressed.

Further, there is no clear policy which directly focuses on addressing homelessness in Malaysia (Alhabshi & Abdul Manan, 2012). This is due to the absence of a clear and specific definition of what constitutes homelessness in Malaysia. The issue of homelessness does not sufficiently receive a lot of attention from the government. Each authority (agencies) in Malaysia has their own definition of 'homeless people' and these definitions contradict one another. Thus, it is complicated to create a data on the exact numbers of homeless population due to various definitions and different understandings on homeless in this country. Based on a study conducted by Alhabshi and Abdul Manan (2012), the life of homeless men and women in Malaysia differs. Most homeless males sleep along sidewalks or shop corridors which they call 'night homes'[5] as compared to homeless women who usually rent rooms to ensure safety. This finding is consistent with the findings of Hussin (2016), which revealed different patterns of homeless between gender in Malaysia.

The Underlying Factors Of Women Homelessness: Their Choice Or Victims Of Situations?

Being a part of the homeless populationis seldom a choice. No one wishes to be a homeless. Regardless of gender, everyone has the chance of succumbing into homelessness. As humans, we are unable to predict what might happen in the future. Sometimes, the situations also lead to the homelessness, such as natural disasters. For example, the tsunami in the year of 2004, rapidly increased the number of homeless people inclusive of women, men, children and families in countries which faced the horrible disaster such as Acheh (MacKinnon, 2008), Sri Lanka (International Recovery Platform, 2013) and Sumatra Island (Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, 2013). A large number of belongings and shelters were destroyed by the natural disaster. Hundreds of thousands of people became homeless. In Malawi, the natural disaster resulted in water logging and flash floods. Hence around 4,600 people became homeless, including women (Chirwa, 2014).

Besides, war also contributes to the rising number of the homeless. For example, in Iraq and Afghanistan, the number of homeless people as well as homeless women who are at risk of becoming homeless is increasing swiftly at an alarming rate. In the year 2012, the number of homeless people who lived on the streets was 26,531 people, compared to 10,500 in 2010. Living as a homeless without having proper shelter or accommodation is tough and dangerous, especially for women (Jones, 2012). While there are many factors contributing to homelessness issue, this paper concerntrates on only three main factors which are poverty, family breakdown and drug addiction. These three factors are believed to be among the most important factors contributing to homelessness issue globally, as well as in Malaysia.

   (1) Poverty

Feminisation of poverty refers to a situation where large numbers of the population are women in poverty. Most of them are among female-headed families (FHF). Feminisation of poverty is a situation or phenomenon which refers to the rising number or several ratios of women who live at or below the poverty line. It was acknowledged by Diana Pearce in 1978 that the numbers of the female-headed families are increasing and the ratio of median income among female-headed families declines from time to time (Pearce, 1978). According to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (2005), 70% in an estimated 1.3 billion people live in poverty around the world which includes women and girls. This situation is recognised as the global feminisation of poverty as women and girls are the fastest growing group which represents the poor and needy. These situations indirectly lead to women's homelessness.

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[5]Shop frontage is a place where homeless males usuallysleep (mattresses with smooth floor, ceiling with strong roof and wall with huge pillars).

In the Malaysian context, most of these female-headed comprise women who are divorced, widowed and single or separated. Many of them are not working, have poor or low education levels and lack of skills. These factors contribute to them being unable to overcome poverty (EIF, 2012).

Based on a study conducted by Michael et al. (2010), the number of female-headed families in Malaysia is rising. This can be seen from 1995 (653,500), 2000 (711,000) and 2005 (800,000). These figures, evidently portray that the number of female-headed families is increasing yearly. This study also highlighted the main contributors to the rising number of FHF; death of the breadwinner and divorce matters. According to statistics provided by the Syariah Judiciary Department in Malaysia, the number of divorce cases in Malaysia is increasing. Divorce rates of Muslim couples in 2004 (20,916), 2012 (47,740) and 2013 (49,311) as well as non-Muslims 2004 (3,291) and 2012 (9,020) is growing. This leads to the rising number of FHF in Malaysia (Lyn, 2014).

Besides, most of the FHF struggle with extreme poverty in order to survive, especially if they have their children with them. Due to limited resources, they are unable to make adequate choices. In overcoming poverty, they have to work despite obtaining wages that are low in order to survive (Ahmad et al., 2016).

There is a link between feminisation of poverty and women's homelessness. A report drafted by Edgar and Doherty (2001) highlighted that poverty is one of the structural factors that declines the capacity of women to maintain and establish independent homes that directly contribute to the increase of vulnerability to homelessness (Baptista, n.d.). Through this report, it shows the relationship between feminisation of poverty and women's homelessness.

This can be supported through a study conducted by Bullock (2013). He stated that women in the United States attain low levels of income and are lacking of affordable housing. These factors urge women into poverty and indirectly make them homeless. Lack of affordable housing in the United Stated is the main factor that leads women to become homeless, especially when they succumb into poverty.

As discussed above, in the Malaysian perspective, the majority of female-headed families are among those who lack in term of education, skills and others.In fact, most of them are immensely poor as compared to male-headed families (EIF, 2012). So, it indirectly attributes to a higher tendency of women to succumb into homelessness.

(2) Domestic and Family Violence

According to a book, *On the Outside: Pathways In and Out of Homelessness* written by Johnson, Granada and Coutts (2008), there are five typical pathways into homelessness based on the Homelessness in Australia, which are; (1) a substance abuse pathway; (2) a mental health pathway; (3) a youth pathway; (4) a housing crisis pathway; and (5) domestic violence. MacKenzie and Chamberlain (2003) also highlighted that domestic violence is one of the key factors in homelessness pathways, where it is not exclusive to a specific gender.

Domestic and family violence refers to any behavior in a family or an intimate relationship (those who are or have been in an intimate partnership, such as once married, divorced, dating or engaged) which is threatening, coercive, controlling or violent that cause a person to live in fear (Tually, Faulkner & Cutler, 2008).

Most of the women become homeless due to domestic and family violence. There is no other pathway into homelessness for women who face domestic and family violence. A majority of women who become homeless reveal that they are unable to bear any violence anymore. They have reached their limit. Due to safety, it is necessary for them to leave their homes for better or safer accommodation. Based on a study carried out by Nunan (1995) as cited in Tually, Faulkner and Cutler (2008), it illustrated that women who are homeless due to domestic and family violence are conformed into the term as 'housed homeless'. This is also be supported by Wardhaugh (1999) that stated that these women in this situation can be termed as 'homeless at home'. Even though they have a home, their home is not safe for them and they still feel threatened. Hence, these women are forced to leave their homes and seek new accommodation elsewhere.

Based on Chamberlain and MacKenzie's categories of homelessness, most of the women who become homeless due to domestic and family violence, fall under secondary homelessness. These women are not homeless in the "roofless" sense in terms of housing, but their home or house has gradually become unsafe for them to stay as well as for their children. This category is among those at high risk of becoming homeless.

Meanwhile, according to a study conducted by the Women's Aid Organisation (2015), women who are abused in Malaysia are afraid to succumb into homelessness. The majority of them are willing to return back to their house, even though they have been abused numerous times by their partner (spouse). This trend (returning back to their house) can be called as 'departure and return pattern'. They prefer to be abused rather than homeless. Apart from that, there are several reasons that make them return back to their house such as: (1) they are afraid to face homelessness; (2) financial difficulties; (3) concern about raising their children as single parents; and (4) give chances to their partner (abuser). As mentioned earlier, abused women may feel 'housed homeless' or 'homeless at home' as they do not feel their homes as a safe place.

(3) Drug addiction

The involvement in drugs among homeless either among women or men is not a new issue. As has been homeless women, they are very vulnerable and easy to succumb into any other social problems such as drugs. The number of homeless women who take drugs are not surprising as they are exposed to any type of drugs on the streets. In accordance with the global trend, the number

of homeless women who engage with drugs is rising as compared with women in low income households (Goodman, Fels & Glenn, 2011).

Based on the study conducted by Homeless Link (2015), it shows that among 3,555 homeless people in England, there are 31% of women taking cocaine, heroin and methadone as compared to 29% of men. Besides, a study conducted by Lawless and Corr (2005) stated that most of the respondents (355 homeless people in Ireland) are involved with drugs while being on the streets. Most of the women in their study are drug addicts.

Furthermore, all the respondents in a study (General Health and Background of Street-based Sex Workers) that was conducted by Jealand Salisbury (2004) admitted that they were having problems with drug addiction when they are homeless.
Notably, most of the homeless women who are among drug addicts have been rejected by their own families (Clark, 2014). Once their family gets to know about their immoral behavior in drugs, they automatically are rejected and isolated from their own family members. As a result, they do not have any temporary shelter to stay in. Thus, being on the streets is a last resort for them. However, moral support from their own family members is the best way for them to return normal. In the Malaysian context, as according to a study conducted by the Malaysian AIDS Council (2014) shows that, one of the respondents (homeless women who are drug addicts) said that she needs family support to make her stop consuming drugs. It means that strong moral support from family members make them have the urge to fight drug addiction. Without family acceptance, they have no sense of direction. As a result, they ended their life as homeless.

Discussion And Conclusion
The number of homeless women in Malaysia is rising yearly (Irsyad, 2016). Even though there are no recorded number of homeless women, but based on the global trend, there is a tendency that homeless women are also increasing in Malaysia.

There are many factors that contribute to the emergence and existence of homeless women in Malaysia such as poverty, domestic and family violence, drug addiction, migration, family problem and many others. Some of the causes of homelessness problem maybe similar to the experience in other countries in the world. However, there are instances due to differences and changes in the environment,the causes of homelessness in Malaysia to some extents are different from other countries.

The government of Malaysia plays an important role in addressing homelessness issues that cover homeless women. There are several efforts taken by the government in relating to homelessness such as the establishment of *Anjung Singgah, Ops Qaseh, Pusat Transit Gelandangan Kuala Lumpur* and *Desa Bina Diri (DBD)*. Despite the initiatives taken by the government, the population of homeless people still increasing. This ponders more questions into the problem—whether the existing government actions and initiatives are effective in dealing the homelessness issue in the country. Thus, the government, as well as related agencies, have to play more active roles in dealing with this issue effectively.

The issue of homeless women must not be ignored as it will create more severe negative impact not only to the society but also to the whole country. Women are among the vulnerable groups, having different needs and exposed to all kinds of risks. In tackling women's homelessness requires effective cooperation, coordination and good understanding between all parties in public agencies, private agencies, communities and the NGOs in order to come out with better solutions. For example, the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) acts as a medium channel between the public and government. In order to know the exact situation or factors that lead towards this issue, the DSW has to approach this group (homeless women). Then, that information will channel to the upper levels (such as Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development to come out with appropriate solutions in solving this issue. Besides, any voices or suggestions from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) also need to be heard and taken seriously by the government. This is because these NGOs like KECHARA Soup Kitchen, *Dapur Jalanan*, Pertiwi Soup Kitchen and others have close relationships with this group (homeless women). In fact, they know more in detail about this issue as well as the root causes toward the existence of this group. Hence, having good relations with any parties will formulate into good solutions in solving this issue.

On top of that,the impacts from the rising number of homeless women also need to be focused by the government as well. The impacts of women's homelessness can be towards the individuals, society and country. The government should have the way forward actions in solving this issue. Even though it is hard to remove the number of homeless women as well as homeless people, at least the number of homeless women can be reduced from time to time. Besides, the cycle of homelessness can be considered as legacy as it involved family institution that consists of women, men and children. This paper believes that, several strategies should be taken in preventing the homelessness cycle from continue.

Besides, as stated by Alhabshi and Abdul Manan (2012), since there is no proper or adequate definition of homelessness yet in Malaysia (also can be included homeless women as they are a part of the homeless group), it is timely one standard definition of homelessness to be developed and agreed upon by all parties. This is because it will give a clearer understanding in classifying this group,which enable a policy to be formulated to address and eliminate homelessness in this country.
This paper focuses on one part of the Master research work undertaken by the main author.

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