

Educating Children on Sexual Matters Based on the Teaching of Islam: The Role of Muslim Parents

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Abstract

The increasing permissiveness towards premarital sexual activities among Malay Muslim teens in Malaysia whose culture and religion (Islam) strongly oppose sexual activities outside marriage is indeed worrying. This scenario may possibly indicate that Muslim children are not getting the appropriate education and guidance in matters pertaining to sexuality amidst living in an era in which exposure to sexual content that encourages free expression of sexuality is high particularly through the widespread access to the internet at young age. Sexuality is a taboo subject in Muslim homes and many Muslim parents are not ready to discuss sexual issues with their children due to embarrassment, feeling of uneasy, and have lack of knowledge to do so (Nurullah et al, 2010, Jahanfar S et al, 2009). This paper discusses sexuality concerns faced by young Muslim adolescents at present with the focus on the responsibility of Muslim parents in educating their children on sexual matters based on the teaching of Islam. This paper asserts that Muslim parents should take the lead in educating their children on sexual matters using the guiding principle of the Quran and sunnah to protect their children against undesirable sexual behaviors that bring disastrous consequences such as unwanted pregnancies, killing of babies, and sexual transmitted diseases.

Keywords: Children, Educating, Sexual matters, Islam, Muslim parents

1. Introduction

Islam recognizes the sexual needs of human for the purpose of both procreation and pleasure. Sex in Islam is a *fitrah* (innate disposition) in which it is a need to be satisfied by humans through the association of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, the fulfillment of sexual needs in Islam must be made in a responsible manner that is within the lawful framework of marriage. Islam is against the concept of free sex and it also prohibits sex out of marriage or adultery (or *zina* in the Quranic term) because of the disastrous consequences it will bring to human lives which include destroying the family institution, opening the door to unrestricted fulfillment of lusts and self gratifications, the spread of venereal diseases, the problems of unwanted pregnancy and killing of fetus through abortion. Thus, those who committed *zina* are committing one of the greatest sins in Islam. The Holy Qur'an says: "And those who do not invoke with Allah another deity or kill the soul which Allah has forbidden [to be killed], except by right, and do not commit unlawful sexual intercourse. And whoever should do that will meet a penalty" (Qur'an, 25:28).

While Islam prohibits premarital sex and unrestricted sexual activities as aforementioned, there is a worrying trend taking place currently among the young Malay Muslims in Malaysia in which they seem to becoming less restrictive in matters pertaining to sexuality, following the trend of the western countries. A study conducted by Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2010 showed the prevalence of Malay Muslim school students' engagement in sexual activities. Out of the 400 Malay respondents aged 13 to 25 years (majority were Form One to Form Five students) that the study employed, more than 300 admitted to having had sex, with 85% stating that they did not regret their actions and found sex very enjoyable (The Sunday Star, July 11th 2010).

Given that sexual intercourse is the antecedent of pregnancy, listening to the experiences of the Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that run shelter homes for unwed Malay pregnant ladies gives us further assertion that the occurrence of premarital sex among Malay young adolescents is on the rise.

Founder of one of the homes reported that it deals with averagely 191 out of wedlock babies a year or 16 babies a month (Harian Metro, 18th October, 2009). What is more worrying according to the founder is that “when the number of cases keeps increasing, the age of the pregnant girls is decreasing, some as young as fifteen years”.

In the writer’s own experience interacting with school counselors, teachers, school administrators and school students over the last one decade, she have found that the involvement of Malay students in sexual activities is increasing, much without the knowledge of their parents. In addition, many of the counseling interns that the writer supervises at the public secondary schools in the past six years encounter with cases of Malay students who involved in sexual activities, including sexual intercourse. The problems that the students shared with regard to their involvement in sexual activities ranging from unable to control sexual desire, feeling of regret, feeling guilty and dirty, feeling stupid, and fearing God’s punishment. Some who disclosed their problem of not being able to control their sexual urges, want help to refrain themselves from continuously engaging in sexual activities. Nevertheless there were some who perceived their involvement in sexual activities as “no big deal” as they claimed it is a normalcy these days and many of their peers also did that.

The increasing permissiveness towards premarital sex among the Malay Muslim teens is indeed worrying. If this trend continues, it is likely that the Muslim youth in Malaysia will be in the same situation as the western societies in which adolescent sexuality is rather free and open, to the contrary to the teaching of Islam. With both the Malay culture and religion (Islam) strongly oppose sexual activities outside marriage; one may wonder why there is a rising trend in the involvement of Malay teens in undesirable sexual activities. This scenario may possibly indicate that Muslim children are not getting the appropriate education and guidance in matters pertaining to sexuality. This paper discusses sexuality concerns faced by young adolescents at present with the focus on the Muslim Malay adolescents and the responsibility of Muslim parents in educating their children on sexual matters based on the teaching of Islam.

2. Sexuality concerns of adolescents in Malaysia

There is a growing trend that Malaysian teens are becoming more open in matters pertaining to sexuality, following the trend of the western countries (Mudassir et al., 2010, Abdullah, 2010, Low, 2009, Lee et al., 2006). Globalization of the media especially the internet brings the influence of western culture on adolescents’ sexual practices throughout the universe (Dusek, 1996; Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). Even in cultures where premarital sex is forbidden, for instance in the majority of the Asian countries, there have been drastic changes in the past few decades with regard to sexual practices (Brown et al., 2002; Eaton et al., 2003 cited in Moore & Rosenthal, 2006). Studies of adolescents’ sexual behaviors in a number of Asian countries indicated that premarital sex among adolescents “is not as rare a phenomenon as adults may wish to believe” (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006, p. 130) and that a substantial minority of these young people are sexually active prior to marriage.

Gubhaju (2002) in his study has observed the dissemination of western cultures into the Asian world through globalization and exposed Asian youth to lifestyles which are different from their customary; this includes attitudes toward premarital sex whereby the numbers of Asian adolescents engaging in premarital sex is obviously on the rise despite strong traditional norms opposing it in most of the Asian cultures (Hugo, 2006). Sexual desire and the curiosity to experiment sex are common characteristics of the adolescent phase and currently Malaysian adolescents are being exposed to media content and images without much restriction that lure them to engage in sexual activities. A study on premarital sex among Malay female teens in Malaysia showed that the teens’ curiosity to try out sex is heightened when they view pornography repeatedly from their mobile phones (Salmi, 2013). The more often adolescents view pornographic images, the more they perceive benefits of sexual activity and the greater their risk for early sexual debut (Low, 2009, Knight, 2000).

With regards to sexual matters, adolescents refer to peers more than anyone else (Dusek, 1996; Romer, 2003; Moore & Rosenthal, 2006) and therefore peers become most influential factor in forming adolescents’ beliefs and attitudes towards sex. This is also the case with Malaysian adolescents as revealed by several studies conducted in Malaysia. In a study by A Maha et al. (2010), it was found that out of the 149 Malaysian secondary school students researched, 65% disclosed they did not think sex should be discussed in depth, and they did not speak to parents, teachers, religious teachers, counselors, relatives, doctors or nurses, but speak only to friends regarding sex. Sex is still a taboo subject in Malaysian homes; as such adolescents normally acquire information about sex from their friends rather than from their parents.

All five Malay female teens in the study by Salmi (2013) revealed that they only shared their sexual concerns with their close friends and boyfriends, never with anyone else like parents, family members, teachers or their school counselors.

Another concern of adolescents' sexuality issue in Malaysia is the spreading of sexually transmitted diseases especially HIV and AIDS, Chlamydia, genital herpes, Gonorrhoea and syphilis among the youngsters due to unregulated sexual practices. In Malaysia, cases of HIV and AIDS have risen significantly since 1986. The statistics in 2004 demonstrated that nearly 65,000 Malaysians had been diagnosed with HIV or AIDS, with an average of 19 new cases reported every day. It is estimated that more than half of all new HIV infections occur before the age of 25, especially the age group of 15-19, and most are acquired through unprotected sexual intercourse (UNAIDS Report on the Global Aids Epidemic, 2012).

3. Sex education in Malaysia

Debate on sex education has been taking place for a long time in Malaysia and even though there is constant assurance from the policy makers that they are working on the issue, to date there is still no solid outcome on the matter (Abdullah, 2009, Nurullah et al., 2010). In 2006 the cabinet has approved what was supposed to be a comprehensive Reproductive Health and Social Education curriculum for in-school secondary school students. The curriculum was designed to provide a wide range of vital information about human sexuality in its biological, psychological, socio cultural and moral dimensions (Ning, 2008 cited in Abdullah, 2009). Nevertheless, due to unclear reasons up to date the curriculum is yet to be implemented in the Malaysian secondary schools.

Education on sexuality in Malaysian schools continues to be carried out on a small scale and incorporated in subjects such as Physical and Health Education, Science, Biology, Moral and Islamic Education (Nurullah et al., 2010). It is likely that one major hindrance to the establishment of formal sex education in schools is the belief (including of parents, the public and policy-makers) that providing thorough information on sexuality to students may influence them to engage in premarital sexual activity (Jahanfar S et al, 2009). Apart from that there are differences in opinion from the public as well as the policy makers on types of sex education suitable for all the obviously diverse Malaysian students. One good example is the request from some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) for instance Malaysian Aids Council and Malaysia and Reproductive Rights Advocacy Alliance Malaysia (RRAAM) that sex education in Malaysia must not only focus on abstinence but it is crucial to also include information and services on contraceptive especially on condoms use (Abdullah, 2009).

According to these groups teenagers need to have the knowledge on contraceptive if the important objectives of sex education which are to curb problems associated with teens' premarital sex such as unwanted pregnancies, killing of babies and contracting sexual transmitted diseases were to be achieved. These parties stressed that besides abstinence, teaching "safe sex" to teenagers is equally important taking into account the reality that young people in Malaysia are increasingly participating in sexual activity and the number of them doing it at an earlier age is also escalating. These views from the NGOs were opposed by many including parents and religious organizations whereby these groups only approve sex education that only teaches abstinence and self-control as well as some facts on human's reproductive system and health.

Studies on sex education among Muslim parents in Malaysia have shown that many of the parents are not ready to discuss sexual issues with their children and the major reasons that they gave were feeling of embarrassment, feel uneasy, and do not have the knowledge to do so (Nurullah et al, 2010, Jahanfar S et al, 2009). The majority of the Muslim parents in the study by Nurullah for instance want sex education to be formally taught in schools as they revealed they did not ready to discuss sexuality matters with their children. The parents also wish that the sexual education if it is to be implemented must be in line with Islamic teaching. Additionally, according to them the instructors of sex education must be knowledgeable in Islam as well as competent to discuss sexuality issues with the students.

4. Role of Muslim parents in educating children on sexual matters

Muslim parents must realize that children must be guided in sexual matters in a more comprehensive manner based on the Islamic perspective so that they will be in the Islamic path pertaining to sexuality. Nowadays children are surrounded by materials that lure them to involve in sexual activity from young. If parents fail to perform this task it is likely the children will resort to other sources for sexual information that can mislead them from the Islamic path which then may harm the children and the society.

It is therefore crucial for Muslim parents to be proactive and open in discussing appropriate sexual matters with their children. Resorting to regard sex as taboo is not a wise choice for parents because children crucially need appropriate guidance in dealing with the existing numerous bad influences on sex. Islam has provided the information and guidelines in sexual matters that parents may use and apply suitably to their children's needs. First fact about sexuality in Islam that parents should observe is sex is part of human life; it is not an unusual matter that parents should avoid communicating it appropriately to their children. For that matter parents should convey this message clearly to their adolescent children that sex is not a thing to be ashamed of or to be treated lightly; but it is also not to be indulged excessively and that is why we need Divine rules to regulate sexuality.

In Islam, educating children in sexual matters begins years before the age of puberty since when a child reaches puberty, he or she is by then accountable on their deeds and sayings (Ulwan, 2003). This can be seen in a *hadith* of the Prophet when he advised parents on teaching children under their care in performing the obligatory five times daily prayers as well as observing the *adhab* (manners) in girls-boys mingling:

“Order your children to pray at the age of seven and hit them at the age of ten (if they do not pray), and separate between boys and girls in beds”. (Muslim)

The Prophet reminded parents in the above *hadith* to train children when they are still very young about the boundaries of girls-boys relationship, so that when they reach the age of puberty and experience the increase in sexual urge, they will have the knowledge and ability to refrain themselves from involving in sexual activities prohibited by Islam that can harm them spiritually, physically and emotionally. He specifically advised parents to separate the place of sleep of girls and boys even though they are siblings and thus are *mahrims* (a male and a female who cannot marry to each other due to close relationship i.e. brother and sister, father and daughter, etc). This shows that even among siblings, there are limitations in boys and girls interaction to each other whereby there are certain manners to be observed, for instance not to sleep in the same bed or room.

Parents are also required to teach their children about respecting the privacy of their parents and seek permission before entering the bedroom of their parents. This is to ensure that the children do not witness inappropriate scenes which may affect or influence them negatively. Allah mentioned in the Qur'an:

"O you who believe! Let your slaves and the children among you who have not come to the age of puberty ask your permission (before they come to your presence), on three occasions: before Morning Prayer (*salatul Fajr*), and when you put off your clothes for the noon rest, and after the late-night prayer (*salatul 'Isha*). These three times are of privacy for you, outside these times, there is no sin on you or on them to move about, attending to each other. Thus Allah makes clear the Signs to you. And Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise." (Qur'an 24:58)

In the above verses, Allah commands guardians of children to educate the children who have not reached the age of puberty to ask permission before entering the room. This is especially emphasized at the times when the parents are usually resting i.e., from the time after *'Isha* prayer to the *Fajr* prayer, and during the afternoon nap where normally people are not properly dressed. It is evident that Islam propagates decency and *haya* (appropriate shyness) or modesty in humans' life as these characteristics are needed to safeguard humans from behaving immorally and destroy their own happiness (Sheikh, 2008). Hence, Islam commands parents and guardians of children to shape the mind and the character of the children before they enter the age of puberty by using the guidelines provided by the religion.

It is vital for Muslim parents to begin teaching their children early on *haya* (shyness) or modesty for instance not to reveal their *aurah* or socializing freely with the opposite sex so that they may develop the right concept of *haya*. The prophet stresses on the importance of modesty when he says:

“Modesty is a part of Iman.” (Bukhari and Muslim)

“If you don't feel ashamed, then do whatever you like.” (Abu Mas'ud)

About the time of the maturity age, parents may teach the children on the topics of procreation, the reproduction process, menstruation, childbirth and marital relationships (Sarwar, 1996) which information is abundant in the Qur'an and *hadith*. Children at this stage of development may also be taught on matters like “not to go near to things that may bring them to unlawful sexual relationships via interactive discussions using the Qur'an and *hadith* as the sources of information. It is imperative to note that when Allah outlawed *zina* (adultery) in the most central verse on adultery in the Qur'an His command is “not to come near *zina*”:

“Nor come nigh to adultery: for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil, opening the road (to other evils).” (Qur'an, 17:32)

It is clear in the above verse Allah prohibits the ways and acts which are preliminary introduction to entire process and approaches of adultery. Therefore it is vital for parents to clearly explain to their children in an interactive manner of the need to stay away from things that can bring to unlawful sexual activities. Parents may share with the children on the following Quranic verses and from there initiate active interaction with the children to educate them on staying away from *zina*:

“Tell the believing men that they should reduce/lower their gaze and guard their private parts and tell the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their private parts” (Qur’an, 24:31)

“Do not follow in the footsteps of *Shaitan*, for verily, he is for you an open enemy. He commands you with evil and immorality.” (Qur’an, 6:142)

By using the above Quranic verses and *hadiths*, parents may also remind the children on the present’s time influences that may possibly bring to prohibited sexual practices like pornography and other type of sexual-inclined materials. They are not only in abundance today but can also easily be obtained and accessed especially through the electronic media. Parents should discuss with the children in a healthy and educative manner on this matter so that the children will really understand the negative effects of associating themselves with these things. Parents should also provide adequate supervision on their children’s activities particularly on internet usage but it needs to be done in a moderate manner. Overprotective may make children “prisoners in their own homes” which is detrimental to their emotional wellbeing. It may also make children never learn to take responsibility or handle situations on their own, thus while it is essential for parents to provide adequate supervision it is also imperative not to do it excessively.

Parents should also at this time openly discuss with their children about the repercussions of premarital sex such as causing malevolence injures upon the family and persons’ religiosity, dignity, honor and genealogy, may lead to unwanted pregnancy and sexual transmitted diseases. Apart from that, parents should also explain its implications from the religious, health, psychological and emotional aspects (Sarwar, 1996). When puberty comes normally at the age of 13-14, with proper guidance on sexuality as discussed above the child is expected now to understand the sexual regulations imposed by Islam and the reasons for its imposition. They may understand that Islam prohibits free mingling between different sexes for the benefit of their own selves, the human race and for the healthy development of society.

5. Conclusion

Hence, Islam does not prohibit sexual fulfillment, it only regulates human’s sexual behavior in order to protect one’s dignity and morality which Islam regards as vital for the healthy spiritual development of the person as well as for the well-being of the whole community. Guidance on sexual matters is a duty that Muslim parents need to undertake effectively in order to tackle the problem of unregulated sexual practices especially among young adolescents. Today’s Muslim parents must be conscious on the negative influences that the present “borderless world” can bring to their children’s lives particularly with regard to sexuality. The major influence comes from the western culture that propagates a liberal lifestyle compared to a more conservative lifestyle of the Muslims’ culture which is visibly appealing to many of the Muslim adolescents. Islam provides guidelines on sexuality because human has the tendency to indulge in excessive sexual gratification by following their desires blindly as mentioned in the aforementioned Quranic verses. Muslim parents need to guide their children to be “a master of own desires, not a slave to lusts” in order to protect one’s dignity and morality which Islam regards as vital for the healthy spiritual development of the person and the community.

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