

Covid-19, Mortality and Inequality in Sarawak

Juna Liau*, Sharifah Sophia Wan Ahmad and Siti Zanariah Ahmad Ishak

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities

*Corresponding author: ljuna@unimas.my

ABSTRACT

The first two males' mortality in Malaysia due to COVID-19 announced by the authority on March 13, 2020. The fatalities became the major headlines on the media. Although many people discussed 'actively' about COVID-19, however conversations about deaths or funerals of victims from COVID-19 are quite 'passive' during the initial stage of the pandemic. When death occurs, biomedical examiners must examine death causation, mechanism and manners of death because COVID-19-related deaths are contagious. As a results, corpses are managed by authorised personnel with no or limited intervention from family or community members. These social responses to deaths from COVID-19 are paradox as funerals are traditionally communities' responsibility. Due to surging cases of COVID-19, drastic measures are taken by the government globally to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and for social, economy and environment sustainability. This study aims to examine COVID-19 mortality patterns and its socio-cultural dimensions in Sarawak. Data are collected in the duration of 18 months from official sources and from participant observation. Data are analysed in several aspects including age, gender and co-morbidity. The findings show that mortality rates among males are significant higher compared to females. Most casualties occurred among age groups: 70-79, 60-69 and 50-59. The majority of cases have co-morbidity.

Keywords: *COVID-19, mortality, inequality, gender, Sarawak*

INTRODUCTION

In the late December 2019, COVID-19 detected in Wuhan (Hubei, China) and as at Feb 17, 2020 the outbreak has spread to 27 countries, with more than 70,000 cases (Dong, Du and Gardner, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2021). Although WHO announced COVID-19 as global emergency, the media statement by the Sarawak Disaster Management Committee (SDMC) on the March 11, 2020 indicated contrary situation: "Since the COVID-19 outbreak there is no known COVID-19 infection in Sarawak". Most populations especially in isolated geographical locations in Sarawak carried on with their socio-economic activities with no or little fear and with no or limited knowledge about COVID-19 (Liau and Wan Ahmad, 2022).

On January 25, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 detected in Peninsular Malaysia and the cases are traced back to 3 Chinese nationals who previously had close contact with an infected person in Singapore (Elengoe, 2020). According to the SDMC the first cases of COVID-19 in Sarawak was recorded two days after the declaration of COVID-19 as pandemic when 3 people are tested positive. 173 persons are instructed by the authority to be home surveillance and 63 persons-under-investigations (Sarawak Disaster Information, 2020). All these 236 cases in Sarawak are associated with religious gathering in Selangor Peninsular Malaysia from February 28, 2020 to March 1, 2020 (refer Table 1).

Table 1: Number of participants of religious gathering at the Sri Petaling Mosque

No	Division	Number of Person Traced/ Self-declared		Total
		Home Surveillance	Person-Under-Investigation	
1	Kuching	22	6	28
2	Samarahan	57	3	60
3	Serian	8	1	9
4	Sri Aman	3	0	3
5	Betong	7	0	7
6	Sarikei	0	3	3
7	Sibu	21	5	26
8	Mukah	14	1	15
9	Kapit	1	0	1
10	Bintulu	29	0	29
11	Miri	11	18	29
12	Limbang	0	26	26
Total		173	63	236

Source: SDMC, 13 March 2020

On March 15, 2020 the National Crisis Preparedness and Responses Centre (CPRC) of the Ministry of Health Malaysia (MoH) and the WHO reported that the pandemic has spread to 146 countries with 156,162 total cases and 5,612 deaths, while Malaysia recorded 238 cases with no death. In Sarawak, the first death from COVID-19 was reported by the SDMC on March 17, 2020 and the victim was a pastor from the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Kuching Sarawak (SDMC, 2020; Borneo Post Online, 2020). The deaths of the 60-year-old pastor and the 34-year-old man from Johore became the eyes opener for many people who previously not aware of the grave danger of COVID-19. Lockdowns implemented by many countries globally to curb the spread of COVID-19. Malaysia implemented the first Movement Control Order (MCO) (from March 18-31, 2020) to prevent the spread of COVID-19, followed by the second MCO (from April 1-14, 2020), the third MCO (from April 15-30, 2020) and the fourth MCO (May 1-14, 2020). After 8 weeks of lockdown, the authority continued with a range of measure to curb COVID-19 including 'conditional' lockdown, borders surveillance and enforcement of laws.

Information on the COVID-19 cascaded by respective authorities (e.g. the National Security Council (MKN), MoH and SDMC via several platforms including their official websites and social media platforms. Announcement via prime media and social media highlighted the need of everyone to practice new habits such as physical distancing (of at least 1 meter in public places), avoiding crowded places, washing hands and using face masks. Information related to COVID-19 cascaded by the MKN via messages sent to the mobile phones of population members. People with access to the internet can download MySejahtera application that linked to the MoH. Through MySejahtera, mobile phone users can perform several activities such as following COVID-19 updates, identify COVID-19 hotspots, register for vaccination and check-in with MySejahtera before entering all public premises such as supermarkets and cafes. Before the pandemic, family and community members in Sarawak especially the Dayak communities are involved in all funeral proceedings: vigil night, cremation and funeral. Among the Sarawak Malays, they are involved actively in post-funeral rites such as prayers and feasts. During the pandemic when deaths occur these events are divided to two categories: contiguous (i.e. deaths from COVID-19) and not contiguous. Handling of dead bodies and burial related to COVID-19 are managed by biomedical personnel; while deaths that are confirmed 'not contiguous' managed by respective family and community members with adherence to the Standard Operating Procedures.

Despite the availability of significant statistical information and data related to COVID-19 particularly among urban dwellers, the understanding of deaths from COVID-19 in Sarawak is scarce. For instance, the search on Google Scholar with keywords 'anthropology of death, COVID-19 and Sarawak' yielded limited results (from year 2020 - 2021). Although death is part of human life on earth however, research on deaths is limited in Sarawak partly attributed to the fact that deaths are surrounded with taboos and evoked the feeling of fear. Researchers like Lupton (2020), Ward (2020) and Will (2020) suggesting that sociological contribution is needed in understanding social phenomena such as deaths, funerals and