

# Husband-Wife Communication and Family Planning Practices Among Malay Married Couples in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu

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## Summary

The role of husband-wife communication in the practice of family planning was studied among the rural Malay couples in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu. It was a cross-sectional study in which a cluster sampling was used to select the study sample. A total of 193 (100.0%) wives and 74 (38.3%) husbands responded to a face-to-face interview. Visual Analogue Scale was used to measure the level of husband-wife communication. Husband-wife communication score was lower on family planning compared to other matters. There was a significant fair agreement on the scores between the husbands and the wives ( $p > 0.05$ ) on family planning. There was a significant association between husband-wife communication on family planning and the current practice of family planning ( $p=0.002$ ). The 'likelihood' that couples who had had good husband-wife communication to practice family planning was about 2.8 times higher compared to those couples with poor husband-wife communication (95% C.I.: 1.4, 5.3). Further research need to be carried out, as the study was limited by certain constraints.

**Key Words:** Visual Analog Scale, Husband-wife communication, Family planning, Malaysia, Cluster sampling

## Introduction

National family planning programme in Malaysia started since 1960s. The proportion of women who had used contraceptive methods showed a significant increased over the years. A report of the Malaysian Family Life Survey-II in 1988 showed the proportion of currently married women who used a modern method increased from 5.3 percent in 1966 to 26.3 percent in 1974, 30 percent in 1984 and 33 percent in 1988 at the time

of the survey. In both urban and rural areas, the contraceptive use prevalence rate was highest among Chinese and lowest in Malays with Indian in between<sup>1</sup>. In Terengganu the prevalence rate of contraceptive use in 1996 was 51.3%<sup>2</sup>.

Most observers of family planning program and of population see the deficiencies in communication activities as one of the limiting factors that prevent family planning program from reaching greater

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effectiveness<sup>3</sup>. However this issue is still not widely addressed. Instead, researchers had placed more emphasis on knowledge, attitudes and practices rather than husband-wife communication with regards to family planning. There had been various studies abroad on husband-wife communication, and in particular on the significant association between husband-wife communication and the practice of family planning. However such information is rather limited locally.

Thus this study is an attempt to investigate some aspects of family planning with reference to the role of husband-wife communication in a local population. It is hope that this study will stimulate interest among local researchers to carry out more research in this area so as to provide sufficient evidence one way or another as to its importance in promoting family planning.

## Materials and Methods

*Mukim* Rusila was chosen as the study area: It is one of the six *Mukim* in the district of Marang. Marang itself is one of seven districts in the state of Terengganu. The population of *Mukim* Rusila is approximately 16,000 people residing in 9 villages and also in a township of Marang. Except for two, the rest of the villages are along the Marang coastline. About 97 percent of the population are Malays, while the remainder are Chinese and Indians. With the exception of *Kampung* Rusila and *Bandar* Marang, the people in these *kampung* (village) inherit the place from their fore parents of several generations. It is essentially a patriarchal society, in which men still play a dominant role in decision-making process in all spheres of daily activities.

As mentioned above, *Kampung* Rusila and *Bandar* Marang, are not typical of the rest of the *kampung* found in *Mukim* Rusila. These two, have witnessed significant changes in its population structure due to its economic transformation that has taken place in the district

of Marang over the past few years. At present, half of the population of *Kampung* Rusila consists of people from all over the states in Malaysia, who are working for the *Telekom Wilayah Timur*, a privatised telecommunication central office for the East Coast region of Peninsular Malaysia. Similarly, the old part of *Bandar* Marang, was demolished and the local residents had been relocated elsewhere.

This is a cross-sectional study targeted at eligible Malay married couples in *Mukim* Rusila. Due to time constraint a cluster sampling scheme was used to provide a representative sample. The sampling frame consists of villages (a cluster). *Kampung* Rusila and *Bandar* Marang were excluded for the reasons above. The rest of the seven *Kampungs* were more or less homogeneous in terms of socio-economic background. These *Kampungs* were accessible to various government health facilities, including family planning services.

A sample which consists of about 200 - 300 living quarters (LQs) was a reasonable number to be studied given the various constraints. Here, it was assumed that each LQs would have at least one eligible married couple. As the size of the LQs in the 8 villages, excluding *Kampung* Rusila and *Bandar* Marang varies from 92 to 450, it was decided to randomly select only one of these. Eventually, *Kampung* Alor Pak Bang (with LQs of 260) was chosen.

The method used for gathering information was a face-to-face interview. A first draft of the questionnaire form was constructed based on the form developed by ESCAP United Nation (1974)<sup>4</sup>. The questionnaires were modified accordingly to meet the present study's objectives.

There were altogether 31 variables to be studied. All questions were close ended in nature. Apart from the usual manner of obtaining information the author had introduced a Visual Analogue Scale (VAS)<sup>5</sup> to obtain information regarding the frequency of husband-wife communication. The VAS consisted of a straight line measuring 5

centimetres in its length. At its extreme left of the line was marked 0 to indicate "No discussion at all", while at the extreme right of the line was marked 5 to indicate "Always have discussion". Twenty Malay couples from a community of security personnel of the University of Malaya served as a pre-test group. To some extent this group is quite similar with respect to social, cultural and demographic characteristics as the study population.

Three staff nurses from nearby health centre (*Klinik Kesihatan*) were invited to participate in the study. The staffs were briefed about the study. The questionnaire was given to them prior to the interview, and the author went through each of the question thoroughly. Any doubts raised were clarified during a half-day training session.

The actual data collection period was started on the 13th December 1996. It was completed two weeks later on the 26th December 1996. Penghulu *Mukim* Rusila and Ketua Kampung Alor Pak Bang were informed about the date of the study. They were requested to announce during the congregation at the Friday solat. This was to ensure that the male spouses knew as well, as their participation was equally important.

During the actual interview, the wives and the spouses were interviewed separately. This was necessary to prevent biases from either party in responding to the questions. Should the husband refused to be interviewed, the interview session was only carried out on the wives.

The case would be considered as non-respondents if there is still no one at home for the third time.

As mentioned earlier, measurement of husband-wife communication on various items was based on Visual Analogue Scale. However, to make the analysis simpler the scores was reduced to two different types of scale as follows:

- I. Ordinal scale
 

0 to 0.9	'Very poor'	husband-wife communication
1.0 to 2.4	'Poor'	husband-wife communication
2.5 to 3.9	'Good'	husband-wife communication
4.0 to 5.0	'Very Good'	husband-wife communication
  
- II. Nominal (binary) scale
 

0 to 2.4	'Poor'	husband-wife communication
2.5 to 5.0	'Good'	husband-wife communication

All the completed questionnaires were checked and compiled. The coded information contained in the questionnaire forms was then transferred to a computer database file. For this purpose a dBASE IV programme was used. Once this was done, the data was read using a statistical package called EPI INFO version 6.0.

All the variables were read and checked for errors. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS for Windows version 7.0) was also used to generate graphical displays as well as for some of the data analysis.

The cleaned data were then subjected to appropriate statistical procedures which included Chi-square tests for association, and linear trend. In some situation a Fisher's exact test was applied. For all the statistical tests, significance level ( $\alpha$ ) was set at 0.05. Where relevant, 95% confidence interval was reported along with the p-value, together with odds ratio.

## Results

Altogether 198 Malay couples were identified in the selected Kampung of Alor Pak Bang. Five were excluded because of the wife's age at 50 years and over. All 193 wives agreed to be studied. However, only 74 (38.3%) husbands were managed to be studied. All of the respondents were Muslims.

For the purposes of this study, either sample derived from husband-wife pair (n=74) and sample comprising of all wives (n=193), or both were used in the analyses wherever appropriate.

As shown in Table I, the mean ages of husbands and wives were 34.6 and 32.0 respectively. Almost half of the wives were in the 20 - 29 years age group, compared to a third among the husbands.

Majority of the wives, 126 (65.1%) and 63 (85.1%) of the husbands got married at the age between 20 - 29 years old. However, about a third (31.8%) of the wives got married at the age less than 20 years. The mean number of living children was 3.4, of which the majority of the couples (83.9%) has between 0 - 5 living children. About 40.4% of the couples has been married for 10 years or more.

A high proportion of the wives (74.1%) has attended secondary education and beyond (Table II). However, only 37 (19.2%) has actually completed at least upper secondary education. There was only about 4.7% of the wives who never attended any form of schooling. Similar finding was also noted for the husbands.

Most of the women (81%) were housewives. On the other hand, only 2.7% of the husbands were unemployed. Of those who were working, the majority (87.8%) were blue collar workers including fishermen. Nearly half of the households were having household income less than RM 500.

As shown by Table III, about half of the wives claimed that their marriage was arranged by their parents. Majority (83.9%) of the wives said that their husbands were the decision makers regarding most of the family matters. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that about 76% of the wives claimed that their husbands gave them some freedom to give opinions on family related matters.

Seven items that are believed to be discussed between husbands and wives were examined for

their level of communication using the VAS.

As shown in Table IV, the mean communication scores seem to be high on items relating to household budget, religion as well as children education and spouses' job for both the wives and their husbands. It is noted that the mean communication scores on family planning was rather low, especially the husbands mean score.

The mean difference in the scores between the wives and the husbands provide some idea about the communication agreement. The lower the difference in the mean score, the more agreeable in the reporting of communication level between spouses. Generally, as can be seen (Table IV), there seem to be a good agreement as reflected by the low mean difference score for all the items, including family planning. However, it is to be noted that the range were rather wide for most of the items, except for family planning (minimum of - 1.6 and maximum of 3.0).

The distribution of scores for communication between spouses on family planning is depicted in Figure 1. The distributions of scores for both husbands and wives seem to be asymmetrical with right skew. The mean score (standard deviation) for the wives is slightly higher, i.e. 2.0 (1.5) compared to the husbands' scores of 1.4 (1.1).

Figure 2 seems to suggest that a high wife's score is accompanied by a corresponding high husband's score, and vice versa. This positive linear relationship was found to be moderate ( $r_s$  of 0.65).

As shown in Table V, there were 14 discordant pairs for which the husband and wife communications did not agree. Of these, 9 are 'Good' with the wife alone, and 5 are 'Good' with the husband alone. However, there is a lack of evidence that husband and wife tended to disagree on their level of communication on family planning ( $\chi^2_{McNemar} = 0.64$  ; d.f. = 1;  $p > 0.05$ ).

As shown in Table VI, the proportion of current user of family planning is much higher (66.2%) among wives who had good husband-wife communication on family planning compared to those with poor communication (41.6%). This difference in proportion is statistically significant ( $p = 0.002$ ). The odds of using family planning given that husband-wife communication is good is 2.8 times compared to those with poor communication on family planning (95% C.I. : 1.4, 5.3).

It is appropriate to assess whether there is an increase in the proportion of current use of family planning with higher level of husband-wife communication. As shown in Table VII, there was a significant increment in the proportion of current use of family planning from very poor (24.5%) to poor (52.6%) to good (63.2%) to very good (70.0%) level of husband-wife communication ( $p = 0.00001$ ).

One hundred and thirteen (58.5%) of the wives and 12 (16.2%) of the husbands had ever practised any form of family planning. As for the current users, 97 (50.3%) of the wives were currently practising any form of family planning. As for the husbands, out of 74, only 9 (12.2%) were currently practising any form of family planning.

Ninety-seven wives (50.3%) were currently practising any form of family planning. Of these, majority (47.0%) used traditional methods which include traditional medicines, herbs (*jamu and maajun*) and *urut* (postnatal massages). Only 29.0% were using oral contraceptive pills. The rest were using other modern contraceptive methods. As for the husbands, only 12 (16.2%) were currently practising contraception. Seven (58.3%) were using condoms, and the rest used withdrawal methods.

**Table I: Demographic characteristic of respondents in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu**

Characteristics	Husband-wife pair		All wives n = 193
	Wife n = 74	Husband n = 74	
Age ( $\bar{x} \pm s$ ) in years	32.0 $\pm$ 7.2	34.6 $\pm$ 7.4	30.8 $\pm$ 6.7
20 - 29	31 (41.9)	24 (32.4)	96 (49.7)
30 - 39	27 (36.5)	31 (41.9)	69 (35.8)
40 and over	16 (21.6)	19 (25.7)	2 (14.5)
Age at marriage ( $\bar{x} \pm s$ )	22.2 $\pm$ 3.7	24.4 $\pm$ 3.7	21.7 $\pm$ 3.7
less than 20	18 (24.3)	3 (4.1)	60 (31.1)
20 - 29	53 (71.6)	63 (85.1)	126 (65.3)
30 - 39	3 (4.1)	19 (25.7)	7 (3.6)
Duration of marriage ( $\bar{x} \pm s$ )			9.2 $\pm$ 6.9
less than 5			62 (32.1)
5 - 9	-	-	53 (27.5)
10 and over			8 (40.4)
Number of living child			3.4 $\pm$ 2.3
0 - 5			162 (83.9)
6 and more	-	-	31 (16.1)

\*The figures in ( ) represent percentages.

**Table II: Socio-economic characteristics of respondents in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu**

Characteristics	Husband-wife pair		All wives n = 193
	Wife n = 74	Husband n = 74	
Education attainment			
Never attend school	3 (4.1)	1 (1.4)	9 (4.7)
Primary education	12 (16.2)	15 (20.3)	41 (21.1)
Secondary and above	59 (79.7)	58 (78.3)	143 (74.1)
Occupation			
Housewife / Unemployed	60 (81.1)	2 (2.7)	156 (80.8)
Blue collar job	7 (9.5)	65 (87.8)	17 (8.8)
White collar job	7 (9.5)	7 (9.5)	20 (10.4)
Household income*			
Low income (< RM500)	-	-	88 (45.6)
Middle income (RM 500-899)			47 (24.4)
High income (RM900 and >)			58 (30.1)

\*Figures in ( ) represent percentages. † As stated by the wives.

**Table III: Family related characteristics of respondents in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu**

Characteristics	Husband-wife pair		All wives n = 193
	Wife n = 74	Husband n = 74	
Arrangement of marriage			
Self-arranged	37 (50.0)		99 (51.3)
Family-arranged	37 (50.0)	-	94 (48.7)
Decision-maker			
Wife	4 (5.4)	1 (1.4)	17 (8.8)
Husband	64 (86.5)	68 (91.9)	162 (83.9)
Others	6 (8.1)	5 (6.8)	14 (7.3)
Freedom given to wife			
Never-little	13 (17.6)	-	46 (23.8)
Sometimes-full	61 (82.4)		147 (76.2)

\*Figures in ( ) represent percentages.

**Table IV: Husband-wife communication scores on seven items discussed between husbands and wives of respondents in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu.**

Items	$\bar{x} \pm s$ score (wife) n = 193	$\bar{x} \pm s$ score (husband) n = 74	difference between husband and wife scores (minimum, maximum) n = 74
Budget	3.4 ± 1.4	3.1 ± 1.0	0.20 (- 2.8, 5.0)
Religion	3.3 ± 1.2	3.4 ± 1.0	- 0.39 (- 3.1, 2.0)
Children education	2.9 ± 1.7	3.0 ± 1.2	- 0.17 (- 4.0, 4.5)
Job	2.8 ± 1.4	2.7 ± 1.0	- 0.11 (- 3.1, 5.0)
Family planning	2.0 ± 1.5	1.4 ± 1.1	- 0.29 (- 1.6, 3.0)
Current issues	1.7 ± 1.4	1.8 ± 1.0	- 0.22 (- 2.8, 4.0)
Recreation	1.3 ± 1.1	1.5 ± 0.8	- 0.19 (- 3.0, 3.2)

**Table V: Agreement between husband and wife on husband-wife communication scores of respondents in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu**

		Level of communication		Total n = 74
		(wife) Good	(husband) Poor	
Level of communication (husband)	Good	9	5	14
	Poor	9	51	60
<b>Total</b>		<b>18</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>74</b>

**Table VI: Husband-wife communication on family planning and current use of family planning of respondents in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu**

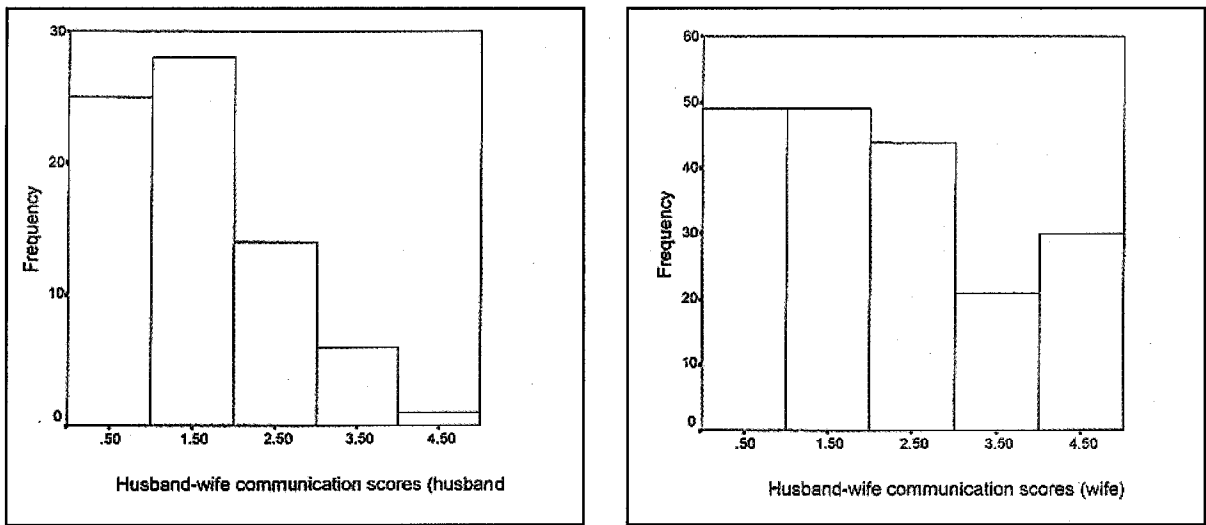
Husband-wife Communication on family planning	Current use of family planning		Total
	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	
Good	45 (66.2)	23 (33.8)	68 (100.0)
Poor	52 (41.6)	73 (58.4)	125 (100.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>97 (50.3)</b>	<b>96 (49.7)</b>	<b>193 (100.0)</b>

$\chi^2_c = 9.68$  ; d.f. = 1 ; p = 0.002

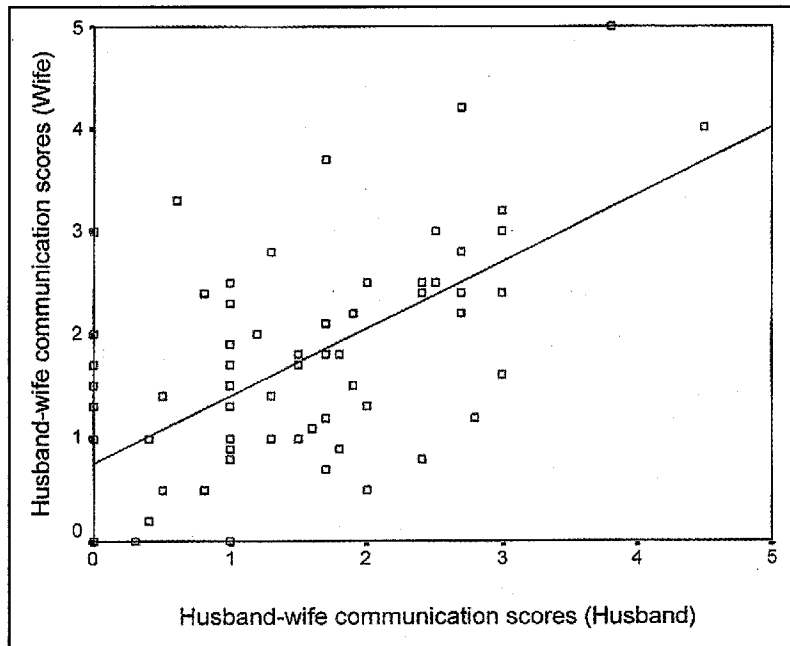
**Table VII: The trend in current use of family planning with level of husband-wife communication of respondents in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu**

Current use of family planning	Level of Husband-wife communication				Total
	Very Poor	Poor	Good	Very Good	
Yes	12 (24.5)	40 (52.6)	24 (63.2)	21 (70.0)	97 (50.3)
No	37 (75.5)	36 (47.4)	14 (36.8)	9 (30.0)	96 (49.7)
<b>Total</b>	<b>49 (100.0)</b>	<b>76 (100.0)</b>	<b>38 (100.0)</b>	<b>30 (100.0)</b>	<b>193 (100.0)</b>

$\chi^2_{trend} = 17.65$  ; d.f. = 1 ; p = 0.00001 \*Figures in ( ) represent percentages.



**Fig. 1: The distributions of husband-wife communication scores for the husbands and wives respectively of respondents in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu.**



**Fig. 2: The relationship between husband and wife in husband-wife communication score respondents in Mukim Rusila, Terengganu.**



## Discussion

Knowledge, attitudes and practices studies of adopters and non-adopters of family planning are quite established in Malaysia<sup>6,7,8,9</sup>. However, research on the role of husband-wife communication on family planning practice is still lacking.

The main thrust of this present study was to determine the association between husband-wife communication and the current practice of family planning. It was shown in this study that when VAS was used to measure husband-wife communication on several items in which husband and wife would 'normally' discuss, the results were consistent with studies that used other scales<sup>4</sup>. As determined, spouses seem to have high level of discussion on matters pertaining to household budget, religion, children education and job.

A study done by Arokiasamy in 1986 on 110 married men found about 81% of them had discussed family planning with their wives<sup>7</sup>. In another study done in Felda communities in Gemas, Negeri Sembilan in 1987, also showed that husband-wife communication about family planning was not rare among Malaysian community<sup>10</sup>. Similarly studies done in other countries also gave similar findings. In Sri Lanka, Kane had found that family planning communication between spouses was very common although significant difference were observed according to wife's education, number of living children, place of residence and religion<sup>11</sup>. De Silva found in Sri Lanka that 78% of wives and 74% of husbands had ever discussed family planning<sup>12</sup>. A study done in Togo also showed that 40% of currently married women did discuss about family planning with their husbands<sup>13</sup>. Approximately 22% of the wives in Pakistan reported that they had discussed family planning with their husbands<sup>14</sup>.

There are various explanations as to the varying degrees of husband-wife communication found in these studies. Notably, these studies were carried

out in different populations, and therefore were subjected to demographic, social, economic and cultural differences. Also, the methods of assessment were found to be different, as is the case in this present study where VAS was used to measure the husband-wife communication.

It is obvious that husband-wife communication about family planning was present in different societies. However, the above data should be interpreted with caution as the presence of husband-wife communication on family planning does not necessarily lead to the adoption of family planning practice.

It had been said that family planning is rather a sensitive issue to be discussed. This was supported by findings that showed among other items discussed between spouses (such as budgeting, religion, children education, job) family planning was lower in term of the score. This could be attributed to the fact that living in a male dominated society, such discussion is considered prohibitive to some couples. It was shown by Saisujata that family planning was the least discussed in his study<sup>15</sup>. Reddy also found that inter-spousal communication on family planning was less frequent as compared to communication on other general matters<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, as in the present study, Muslim couples were less likely to communicate with their husbands on family planning, and it suggested the existence of social and cultural obstacles to communication between spouses<sup>11</sup>.

In this study, it was shown that there was a significant statistical association between couples who had had discussion about family planning and the current adoption of family planning among the wives ( $p=0.002$ ). This is further supported by the significant finding of higher proportion of user of family planning as the husband-wife communication got better ( $p=0.00001$ ). Other studies done elsewhere also showed similar findings<sup>4,11,14,15,17,18</sup>. The likelihood of using family planning when the user had good husband-wife communication about family

planning as compared to those who had poor husband-wife communication on family planning was 2.8 times higher (95% C.I. 1.4, 5.3). Similar finding was shown in Togo, where women who had discussed family planning with their spouse were almost 4.5 times higher than those who did not have to have ever used family planning<sup>15</sup>.

In answering to the hypothesis - "A good husband-wife communication is associated with the current use of family planning", the finding in this study was based on the analysis that did not consider the effect of confounding and interaction on the association between husband-wife communication and the current use of family planning. There were multiplicity of factors that explain the use of family planning. Among these were demographic, social, economic, and family related variables. These variables were collected and studied. However, to understand fully the inter-relationship of these variables with the factor of interest (husband-wife) and outcome variable (the use of family planning), requires the use of multivariate statistical technique. However, this analysis is beyond the scope of the study at this stage.

As a conclusion, this study found that there was a fair agreement between the scores of husbands and wives on the perception of their level of communication on various items including

household budget, religion, children education, and family planning. There was relatively higher level of husband-wife communication pertaining to household budget, religion, and children education compared to family planning. There was a significant association between husband-wife communication and the current practice of family planning. Furthermore, the better the level of communication between spouse the greater the proportion of spouse practising family planning. Therefore, in order to facilitate the above the husbands should be included in the family planning programme such as having both wives and husbands attending the post-natal check up. At the same time health education could be given through health talk, especially on the importance of husband-wife communication on family planning. There should be more local research in the area of husband-wife communication on family planning in the future. This will eventually provide sufficient evidence about its relevance and importance towards the successful implementation of family planning programme in Malaysia.

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