

# **Empowerment of Rural Women in the Agriculture Community through Women Development Programs**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Women are important workforce in many countries. Besides playing the role as housewives, women also contribute to the household income. The Malaysian government recognizes the contributions of women have been established in its socioeconomic development. This is why many programs that focus on the development of women in its Malaysian Development Plans (MP). For example, the 4<sup>th</sup> MP had programs that focused on the participation of youth, women and parent-teachers organizations to enable them to participate and contribute more fully in the development efforts of the nation. The setting of the National Advisory Council on Integration of Women in Development (NACIWID) in 1976, as the national machinery for channeling issues pertaining to women, reflected the Government's commitment to integrate women in all aspects of development. Another aspect that was introduced in the MP was on family health services, where the plan promotes the development of healthy family, well-being of women in the reproductive age-groups and the optimum health and development of children from infancy to school-leaving age. Maternity and child health activities were further intensified in underserved rural and urban areas, including those living in estates and mines. None of the development plans under the New Economic Policy which ended in 1990, gave any attention to issues and strategies for the advancement of women until the 6<sup>th</sup> MP (1991-1995). The 6<sup>th</sup> MP under the new National Development Policy, inclusive of another ten-year Second Outline Prospective Plan from 1991-2000 comprises of strategies for the advancement of women. It emphasized growth led by the private sector rather than by the public sector and focused on human resources development to achieve distributional objectives.

Furthermore, the 10<sup>th</sup> MP (2011-2015) encapsulates the spirit of 1Malaysia to create a fair and socially just society with the national unity as its ultimate objective. A fair and socially just society is where all people, with no exception, have the rights, freedom, and capacity to access services and resources to enhance their well-being, and where the most disadvantaged are given extra support to ensure such success. Under the 10<sup>th</sup> MP, the government introduced an agenda called 'Moving towards Inclusive Socio-Economic Development', in which all Malaysians are equitable to the economic development. Under this agenda, the government provides support towards encouraging greater participation from specific groups that are most in need, for example, rural women. Indeed, one of the main agendas is to empower women, which is part of the efforts to bridge the gap in socio-economic inequalities between men and women.

### **Rural women in Malaysia**

Rural residents, especially within the agriculture community are often associated with poverty because of the lack of economic activities that can generate income. This is more so for women in the rural areas who are associated with low level of education, low participation

in the workforce, and only play their main role as mothers and wives, without any participation in local economic activities. Realizing this situation, the government has established various development programs, especially for women, to enable them to develop themselves and have a chance to be involved in the workforce. The traditional role of women as housewives is still apparent, especially in the rural areas. However, it is evident that rural women today started to participate more in economic activities of the community, parallel with the development of the country. The involvement of women in economic activities of the rural areas are believed to be associated with the women development programs introduced by the government. Therefore, it is timely to examine the extent of the contribution of the women development programs in rural areas, toward rural women's socioeconomic growth. It is also timely to understand the benefits enjoyed by participants of the programs. Likewise, it is also fitting to understand how the programs help toward empowering women in their daily lives within the agricultural community.

Empowerment is defined as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives; set their own agendas, gain skills (or have their own skills and knowledge recognized), increase self-confidence, solve problems, and develop self-reliance, which is both a process and an outcome (UN Women, 2004). It is a process that promotes a person to use their power to control their lives, and to act on issues they consider important. It can be in terms of decision making on family issues, community issues, or any other issues concerning their lives. Despite a very significant increase in women who have become highly educated, the participation of Malaysian women in the workforce is still relatively low compared to its neighboring countries; Thailand (70.0%), Singapore (60.2%) and Indonesia (51.8%) (Malaysian Economic Planning Unit, 2013). The unemployment rate in Malaysia also showed a higher percentage of women than men every year, although the gap has narrowed in recent years (Malaysian Department of Statistics, 2013).

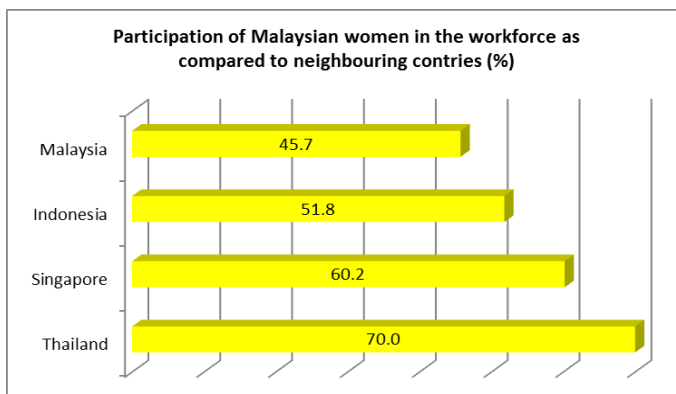


Figure 1: Participation of Malaysian women in the workforce as compared to neighbouring countries

Source: Economic Planning Unit, Malaysia (2013)

Recognizing this situation, the government encourages women participation in the labor market and it hopes to increase the number of women in the decision making positions (10<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Plan). This strategy aims to eliminate gender preference and to provide support to either women in general or especially for those facing difficulties in life such as widows, single parents and low-income earners. This is also in line with the objectives of the Malaysian National New Economic Model (NEM). The NEM is designed to be the catalyst to unleash Malaysia's growth potential, to drive Malaysia forward from its current stagnant situation to be a high income economy which is both inclusive and sustainable (Figure 2). The NEM focuses on the human dimension of development where income disparity is

actively addressed, to narrow the economic differences prevalent in the society (Malaysian National Economic Advisory Council, 2010).

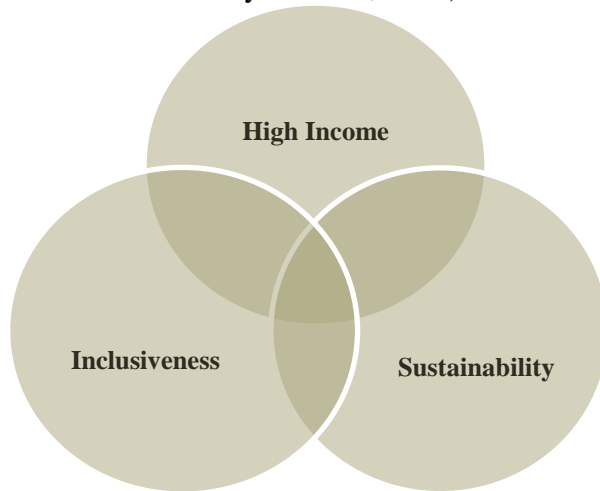


Figure 2: New economic model  
Source: National Economic Advisory Council

For the next section, this article is organized as follows:

1. Understanding the socio-cultural values of women, particularly Malay women in the historical context.
2. Reviewing the contribution or impact of women development programs on the economic position of rural women within the agriculture community.
3. Highlighting the key success factors of the programs.
4. Making recommendations for the formulation of policies and strategies that can be done to increase the involvement of women in rural areas in the agriculture-based sector.

### **Understanding socio-cultural values of women in Malaysia**

Malaysia is a multiracial country, with three main ethnics, the Malay, Chinese and Indian. This paper focuses on the Malay community that represents about 63% of the Malaysian population. The Malay's socio-culture is believed to exist more than 500 years ago. Before independence, the Malay community still follow the old traditional socio-culture beliefs. For example, the girls are expected to do all household activities such as to help their mothers to cook, clean and wash clothes. Some of them will start to carry out responsibilities to take care of their smaller siblings, and even help their parents to work in the fields. This traditional culture plays an important role in shaping the social inclination of the Malay children including specific skills, such as sewing clothes and crafting activities.

Traditionally, the practices of educating young girls are carried out by mothers, aunts and sisters who teach them the skills needed to carry out all household affairs. Only after independence most of the girls receive formal education. The Malay community begin to realize the importance of formal education for women, and the number of girls entering primary schools and institutions of higher learning increased. However, the purpose of education and the orientation of the lessons still continue to be traditionally based on the needs of a woman as a housewife. Under another traditional Malay culture, such as the "*adat perpatih*" (a customary law in Negeri Sembilan, one of the states in Malaysia) a woman has a better position in the socio-economic culture. A woman has the right to own the property inherited by her parents and that right is sustained even after marriage.

Women also play active roles in the traditional economy. For example, in rice cultivation, women will carry out special tasks such as sowing seeds, taking care of seedlings,

transplanting, and weeding, while the men will carry out hard jobs such as plowing, managing the irrigation system and harvesting. Rearing chickens is also considered women's work. Tasks associated with the production of rubber were split between men and women. On the East Coast, wives help their husbands returning from the sea by unloading, sorting, gutting, and net mending. The women in that area also assist the men in processing, distributing and marketing of fishes. On the East Coast, women are active farmers and traders. They sell food, wood, flowers, poultry, and other retail goods that they produce themselves or purchased from bigger traders. It can be seen that women in all states are involved in agricultural production and sales. In addition, many women also contribute to their family's income by getting paid from teaching the *al-Quran* (religious book of Islam) to children, sewing clothes or selling handcrafts, all of which can be done at home.

Women have always had great responsibilities at home, especially those who are married. They are responsible for cooking, cleaning, sewing, mending, child-bearing and child-caring, and other household chores. In addition, they are also directly involved outside the home as farmers. More than half of the women in agricultural community work in fruit or vegetable farms, and paddy fields. Approximately one-third of the women in the agricultural community are also involved in the cultivation and management of rubber plantations, cocoa, coconut, coffee, tea and a variety of cash crops. Few women are employed in oil palm plantations except for weeding. In the fisheries sector, the participation of women seems to be more active in certain areas in Peninsular Malaysia such as Kelantan, Terengganu and Kedah. They usually catch fish in the coastal areas and not from the deep waters, where the catch is meant for the domestic market and for their own consumption. Women are more involved in activities such as unloading, sorting, gutting, net mending, and processing.

Rural women are generally very active in various economic activities despite the fact that married women are burdened with great responsibilities at home. Some of them get help from their husbands to do the heavier work, such as clearing the land in paddy fields or carry heavy pails of latex. The activities relating to sales and marketing are usually done by men because it takes long hours to leave home to go to the marketing areas located in urban counterparts. According to the Gender Inequality Index (GII) which reflects gender-based inequalities in three dimensions – reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity, Malaysia has a GII value of 0.210, ranking it 39 out of 149 countries in the 2013 (UNDP, 2014). This can be interpreted that, although it did not show a highly significant difference regarding the development between men and women, but there is still plenty of room for improvements to be done to empower women in Malaysia.

### **Contribution of women development programs toward occupation and income**

A study was carried out to determine the contribution of the government's development programs for women in Malaysia. Participants from three women development programs were chosen as samples. The respondents who participated in this study were 149 women from *Kumpulan Peladang Wanita* (PeladangNita) or Women Farmers Group, 75 from *Kumpulan Wanita Nelayan* (KUNITA) or Women Fisheries Group and 32 from *Kumpulan Pengembangan Wanita* (KPW) or Women Extension Group. Government agencies and departments are responsible for monitoring of these programs. With respect to the profile of the respondents, the majority of them (50.8%) are in the age group of 46-60 years old, followed by the age group of 31-45 years old (27.0%). The youngest in the group is 19 years old, and the maximum age of respondents reached 86 years old. Most of the women participants surveyed are secondary school leavers, and only 3% of participants hold a degree or diploma. In terms of marital status, 79% of them are married, single mothers (17%) , and

single ( 7%). In terms of the number of family members, the married woman has at least five members in their family where their biological parents also live together.

The respondents were also interviewed to determine the impact of the programs on their level of decision making process. It was found that the program has improved the way the rural women make decisions. After joining the program, they were more confident than before. It should also be emphasized that married women make decisions without disregarding the opinions and guidance of their husbands. Indeed, this is consistent with the socio-cultural values that are still strongly held by rural society. In the Malay society, a husband and wife have mutual respects, and that a husband remains the head of the family who should be highly respected by the wife and children, although the wife is equally successful. Empowerment of women creates self-confidence and triggers the realization that they actually have control over their personal development. These women accomplished psychological empowerment that enhanced their self-esteem, which enable them to have a paradigm shift from being passive to becoming more active in the local community and society in general.

Likewise, before joining the women development program, 60% of the 256 women surveyed were full-time housewives, 19% were self-employed, 14% were private sector employees, while the remaining 7% were government employees. After participating in the programs, 65% of them are running micro-scale agro-based businesses. The main source of income for the women participants were also examined to see the difference between their former situation and their situation after joining the program. More than 76% of the respondents informed that they used to depend entirely on the income of their husbands before participating in the development programs. However, there appears to be a significant change whereby 47% out of the same respondents stated that their main source of income is from their agro-based businesses. The women development programs were found to have reduced their dependency on their husbands alone, increase their household income and indirectly alleviate their husband's burden as the sole breadwinner, while helping to strengthen the economic position of the family.

Some issues and challenges faced by entrepreneurs and business owners who are the alumni of the programs were identified as follows:

- Private-owned business and operation run by family members - Most companies managed by the rural women participants of the development programs are privately owned by the individual and her family. The majority of the businesses are categorized as agro-based industries and classified as micro enterprises. Micro enterprise refers to company with the annual sales of less than RM200,000/year or have full-time employees of less than five people (SME Corporation, 2014). The average annual sales of the business are RM10,000. Most of the business used family members that include children, brothers and sister as their workers, but some of them also hired local and foreign workers.
- The purpose of starting a business is to increase family income. For those who are married, their initial goal is to join any economic activities to reduce the burden of their husbands as a sole income earner. The women development programs in which they participated had motivated them to realize their intention, with the help of other participants. The members in the programs encourage each other and provide guidance, and advice needed based on their experiences.

- Informal knowledge and managerial skills - Previously, participants who manage micro businesses have few managerial skills and possess informal knowledge on the process and know-how to run a business. They did not gain much formal education, and most of them do not have a method or system in terms of financial records, marketing tools, managerial skills, proper business plan, and other operational skills. They learn from the experiences of other entrepreneurs, friends and family members. Furthermore, the participants also learn how to set up a business and business management skills from the training or courses organized by the government institutions.
- Constraints or problems encountered - Financial constraint, marketing problems, and shortage of labor or human resource are the top three challenges faced by the women entrepreneurs. Indeed, they faced problems in obtaining funds for working capital and to finance their businesses from conventional banking institutions. Besides that, they are also lacking in marketing their products. Several indicators were used to assess the socio-economic changes that occur after their participation in the programs, namely self-income, freedom of movement, family and community recognition, interaction with external parties, knowledge and skills, training opportunities, children decision making and financial decision making. It was found that all the stated indicators showed an increase of more than 50%, except for ease of getting credit and asset ownership which remains unchanged. Another problem is in obtaining skilled labor as well as maintaining the existing human resources. Most of the workers in the food-processing business are part-timers who are waiting for a better higher-paid jobs. Thus, they lack motivation and interest in doing their jobs efficiently.

### **Key success factors**

The important aspects such as leadership, teamwork, persistence, and an entrepreneurial spirit are the main factors for successful women development programs. In addition, other key factors contributing to the success of these programs can be categorized as follows:

- i. Inputs, equipment or financial assistance by government agencies. Among the aids received by the participants of the programs are the work or business premise, financial assistance, provision of inputs such as seeds or fertilizers, machinery like mixers, ovens, packaging machines, etc. This type of assistance mostly encourages the creation of economic activities among the participants that directly motivate them to become agricultural entrepreneurs.
- ii. The role of extension agents. One of the main contributors to the success of the program is the extension agent's role in delivering information, new technologies, application techniques, and in providing solutions to problems faced by the participants. The authority of extension agents, especially from the government institutions are highly recognized by the rural women mainly because they are seen as the link to get the latest information on policies or other available opportunities. The extension officers are also recognized as the

best person who will bring their problems to the knowledge of the government authorities to be solved.

- iii. Relevant courses and training. Among the courses or training under the supervision of the women development programs are in the areas of food processing, business management, marketing strategies, business record-keeping, packaging and labeling, as well as other advanced courses such as GMP, HACCP, Halal. All the relevant training and courses are attended by participants of the programs to strengthen their knowledge of entrepreneurship to ensure the sustainability of their businesses. A sustainable business will provide the means for them to earn an income and achieve a better quality of life.
- iv. Involvement in community activities. The activities include communal work, weddings or celebrations that need cooperation between all the participants with other women folks in the village. All these communal work drives the rural women to lead the activities involving the welfare of their community members.
- v. Human capital and spiritual activities. These include motivational talks, lectures, and spiritual activities aimed at improving personality and to increase self-confidence and skills of the participants. Regular meetings were held monthly in which discussions on recent issues, sharing of ideas, and brainstorming among members occur.

## **Recommendations**

Women are important workforce for the economic development of a country. Hence, the policies should focus on the involvement of women in the workforce. Among them are as follows:

- i. Encourage the participation of women in the workforce, by giving them more authority or power within the scope of women's development program objectives or perhaps through associations of farmers. Through existing programs, women in rural farming communities are seen to be involved quite extensively in the cultivation and production line. Similarly, more women began to engage in manufacturing as small or micro entrepreneurs. However, there are areas that women are still lacking, which is the marketing side. Women's participation should be promoted aggressively since this study has proven to be successful in raising the income of rural women in agricultural entrepreneurship.
- ii. Participants truly respect and highly recognized the knowledge of extension agents, especially those from government agencies and departments. They expect help, advices and guidance that would be useful either for their business or for the group they joined. Therefore, strengthening the role of development and extension agents are very important so that they can provide effective advice related to business management. In addition, the extension agents can promote appropriate technologies that meet the needs of the participants, for instance to increase productivity or make the work process more efficient.

- iii. Establish a monitoring team from relevant agencies and departments consisting of the same officers. This is to ensure continuity and understanding about the development program and the issues pertaining to it. This recommendation arises from the present scenario where the monitoring officers are kept changing and thus, participants must notify repeatedly the issues or problems that they are facing. The monitoring efforts that involve changing officers will not be effective.
- iv. Establish a partnership or network between rural women development programs with universities or educational institutions. Students in universities and educational institutions will be given an early exposure of the development program and their objectives. The students will also be potential human resources in agriculture and agro-based industries in the years to come. This is also another way to create interest among youth to participate in agriculture, which will resolve some negative views of working in the agriculture sector and agro-based industries. Furthermore, it may be the answer to solve the problem of shortages of manpower in the field.
- v. One of the problems yet to be resolved is the difficulty for rural women to get a business loan because they run a small-scale business, and generally banks will not approve their loan applications. Less than 10% of entrepreneurs created from these development programs can be categorized as small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The rest of the majority run micro businesses. Therefore, it is proposed to establish a mechanism that can assist these micro-scale women entrepreneurs in accessing credit.
- vi. Most of the women entrepreneurs are involved in micro-scale businesses. To improve these businesses, the government may introduce a policy where larger and established companies need to collaborate with micro-scale businesses for a certain period of time. The idea is for the bigger players to exercise their corporate social responsibilities (CSR) by guiding the smaller players toward the development of the country which they can later give back to their community.

## **CONCLUSION**

From both the historical and current aspects, both customary and religious law do not restrict women from working and having the opportunity to play an active role in the country's economy, beyond the limits of only being a wife and mother, and household chores. They also have the opportunity to exercise their influence directly or indirectly in terms of decision-making. The traditional role of women as homemakers are still held strongly in the majority of the society. However, it does not stand as a hindrance for women's development programs in rural areas to produce a positive effect on the economic position of rural women through income generated from their involvement in micro agro-based businesses. Social empowerment among women participants can be seen through the increase in the level of their decision-making, although the views or guidance from their partners remain accounted for, in line with the socio-cultural practices of the community.

The implementation of the Women Development Programs are in line with Malaysia's development plans to enhance the role of women in initiating, planning,



implementing and monitoring the activities within their community's development. These programs are successfully carried out and has transformed thousands of women in rural communities to become entrepreneurs, leaders and self-confident women when making decisions. However, there are several things that can be given more attention to when planning for new programs. For example, certain aspects such as transparency of aid distribution or other form of assistance should be refined for a fair and well distributed fund. This will help to achieve its objectives to empower rural women directly and the agriculture community indirectly. The key success factors as well as the recommendations may be used as a basis for the future establishment of programs for rural women's development or other programs with similar objectives. The objectives under the National New Economic Model, particularly the national inclusive agenda may then be materialized.

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