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Research paper



Participation and women's economic empowerment: clarifying their relationship in community based organization

Fauziah Ani[1]*, Asnarulkhadi Abu Samah[2], Zahrul Akmal Damin[3], Lutfan Jaes[4], Khairunesa Isa[5], Rosman Md.Yusoff[6], Siti Sarawati Johar[7], Shahidah Hamzah[8]

[1,3,4,5,6,7,8]Centre for General Studies and Co-Curricular, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia
[2]Human Ecology Faculty, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400, Serdang, Selangor
**Corresponding author E-mail: fauziaha@uthm.edu.my*

Abstract

Empowerment and participation are viewed as combined strategy in combating poverty particularly in third world countries. It is considered an effective approach in uplifting the status of economy. As a medium, empowerment and participation is believed to play an important role in determining successful economic activity. Based on this premise, this research is conducted to ascertain the relationship between participation level (decision making, implementation and interest acceptance and how far these three levels effect the empowerment of PWPK members in Johor. Around 366 members from 60 Pergerakan Wanita Pekebun Kecil (Movement of Small Woman Farmer groups) have been selected as respondents using cluster multistage sampling. Research data was collected using questionnaires and analyzed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) assisted by AMOS 21 software. Research findings shows all three participation levels have average relationship with economic empowerment. On the other hand, participation level in interest acceptance is the most significant predictor when compared to all three levels. Hence, to determine PWPK functions as an empowerment medium, participatory level must be enhanced.

Keywords: *Empowerment; Participation; Community Based Organization*

1. Introduction

The importance of women's participation in economic activities cannot be denied. This is proven when United Nation created the declaration for the development of women (1975-1985) which intended to herald women as the main component in development. Women are the targeted group in community development because they are more often than not associated with poverty, lack higher education, lack skills and training.

In line with this declaration, many countries are intensifying effort to empower women by focusing on development activities to decrease poverty level in the rural areas. In fact, women's participation in economic activity is seen by many scholars as their contribution to heighten and improve their standard of living. Women from poor families are actively involved in economic activities to supplement the family income. Poverty encourage women to help her husband and family. It is also an attempt to give freedom to these people to control their own lives (1).

In Malaysia, women's role in socioeconomic development is the primary agenda in development policies. Their importance is always taken into consideration in the national economic planning. The new economic policy (NEP) and National Development Policy (NDP) impresses the importance of women's role in elimination of poverty and realignment of community. The creation of a variety of programs validate the government's commitment in this aspect.

The poverty phenomenon in rural households have encouraged government to intensify their efforts in executing poverty eradication policies and realigning the community. The relatively high poverty rate in the rural sectors have urged the Ministry of Rural Development and other government agencies alongside Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) to find and produce more innovative strategies to overcome this problem. According to the statistics derived from the Small Farmers Census in 2002, 26.3% of small farmers are found to be under the category of extreme poverty and another 35.6% were found to be under the poverty level. The government has fixed that the extreme poverty percentage be brought down to 0% and those under the poverty level be brought down to 0.5% in 2009 (RISDA, 2006). RISDA authorities have fixed their target that the families of these small farmers will get an income of RM 2000 in 2010 (RISDA, 2006).

A variety of efforts have been created under various agencies to validated government commitment to improve the welfare of women in rural areas. In other words, efforts to transform the target group of those who need government aid, to a group who can gain control through active participation. Amongst these are efforts to create Community Based Organization (CBO) like Pergerakan Wanita Pekebun Kecil (PWPK), Perkumpulan Wanita Dinamis (WADIRA), Kumpulan Pengembangan Wanita (KPW), Kumpulan Sahabat (AIM) and others. These women groups are community based organization whose chief function is to manage the community and execute development activities which can have positive impact on their lives.

This article studies how a community development program can empower rural women in a developing country where agriculture yields low returns. Exacerbated by season-dependent agricultural activities, daily yields can severely affect daily income which is used to sustain their livelihood. This group must work hard to overcome challenges of sustaining their income. Hence, they find it tough to improve their standard of living towards one that is more comfortable. The income of small farmers in 2013 is RM

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1,283 per month and declined to RM 753 a month when the price of rubber plunged in 2015 (Amanat Pengurusan RISDA, 2015). Inconsistent earnings indirectly affects the livelihood of small farmers.

Based on this need, RISDA, under the auspices of The Ministry of Rural Development are intensifying efforts to find effective strategies to help the farming community to increase their earnings so that they can upgrade their standard of living. Chief among this include reactivating the role of The Movement of Small Woman Farmers (PWPK) which is made up of small women, wives, children, and female youth of small farmers. As CBO under the auspices of RISDA, PWPK was formed in 1978 meant to empower women to improve the standard of living for their families to a better level through additional economic activities (RISDA, 2006). Additional economic generation activity was created and conducted in groups. These activities were executed based on entrepreneurship and small traditional agriculture based businesses like handicrafts utilizing rubber leaves, snacks, food processing, sewing crafts, groceries, furniture, animal farming etc. Through additional economic activity, RISDA targets earnings of RM 5,000 per month for each small farmer household (Utusan; 2016). Since participation is the important prerequisite to ensure PWPK becomes a medium for effective empowerment and a yard stick for the success of conducted activities, there is a need to identify the participation of PWPK members in developmental activities. Hence, this research seeks to study the influence of participation level on economic empowerment amongst PWPK members in Johor. Specifically, this research views that participation level is the best predictor to economic empowerment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Economic Empowerment Community

Empowerment is now a popular term in research related to women economic development. To empower women in development is the main strategy specifically in relation to economic development. This is because women are seen as clusters who can contribute to the improvement of better standard of living for families. Apart from that, women were often seen as powerless in the economic and social sphere. Lack of power and empowerment depicts low levels of education, control on earnings, less bargaining power, less participation in decision making, less access to production input and source of work opportunities.

Conceptually, empowerment refers to a mechanism where individual, organization or community can obtain a significant control on life and related issues in terms of economy, social, psychology and politics (2, 3). Specifically it means that the ability to understand and interprete problems, making decisions, planning, finding and mobilizing sources, and henceforth executing activities or projects which brings improvements to their lives. Empowerment at individual level is related to organization and community through individual potential such as the wisdom to control life, efficacy in response, social support, reactive development, interpersonal development and mastery in politics, economics and social (2).

Economic empowerment is an important aspect in community development. Specificially, economic empowerment is defined as how far a community is able to increase their economic status in terms of earnings, savings and assets, and the rewards they reap by executing additional economic activity. It refers to the strength of economy either at individual level or collective level which is held by Mayoux as the basis to political and social strength (4). (1, 5, 6) defined economic empowerment as the ability to reap sufficient income to purchase basic necessities such as accommodation, food, clothes, children's education and others to continue living in a comfortable environment. Nonetheless, economic affordability according to (1, 6) is obtained in the freedom to make decisions amongst community members. From there, individuals are able to increase their ability to generate earnings by participating in economic generation activities.

2.2. Participation and Economic Empowerment

In general, participation is the most effective strategy to increase the economic and social level in the community of small rural farmers. This is because most rural women increase their capacity by participating in socioeconomic activities; in decision making and ultimately in doing so, increase their standard of living.

The participation and empowerment of women in CBO is the focus in past researches. They proved that women's participation in economic activities have positive bearing on economic activities. Their participation in CBO depicts their wherewithal to change. They have the ability to confront and overcome limitations, while striving to solve problems either individually or collectively. It is a strong urge to extricate themselves from dire circumstances to one which is socio economically better. Participation takes center stage in the CBO approach.

CBO stimulates the empowerment of community members through participation. Cohen and Uphoff (7) believed that through participation, community members obtain knowledge and skill to allow them to make decisions, mobilize and manage resources and enhance interaction and consolidation. Additionally, Datta (8) sees active participation in CBO predictably can build humanity, spirituality, acceptance, togetherness, loyalty, and commitment amongst members towards socio economic success.

Empowerment issue and its relation to participation has been studied extensively conceptually and empirically. Past researches proved that participation and empowerment are mutually related and has been used widely in community development researches. Scholars also take these two terms as a twin strategy to promote the strength of mankind based on development and social justice and fair opportunities (9). Through participation, their ability is developed to identify problems, to make decisions, to plan and henceforth to execute activities which contribute towards solid development (10).

To stimulate economic empowerment, CBO seeks to encourage active participation in development activities and at the same time help to build ability which will affect the changes in their lives (11). Researchers who uphold the empowerment theory like (5, 12, 13) believed that through participation, community members are empowered either individually or collectively through CBO.

Past researches proved that participation in economic activity can empower CBO members. According to Barbara A. Israel (1994), empowerment at individual level is related to organization and community through existing individual potential such as the wisdom to control living, efficacy in action, social support, interpersonal development and mastery in politics, economic and social areas. Research by (14-16) proved that participation in economic activity like micro credit increases the socioeconomic status of those with low income such as monthly earnings, savings, asset possession and others. Pursuant to that, Wadiwale (17) believed that there is a drastic change in terms of social status amongst members after participating in women groups such as those with economic and social empowerment.

In another research, (18) found that women who participated in CBO reaped benefits in social, economic, and psychological development. The researcher summarized that women's participation in CBO significantly impacted the life style of impoverished women, especially those in rural areas, and empowered them at various levels not just as individuals but amongst family members, community and the society as a whole.

3. Methodology/Materials

This research uses the inferential quantitative approach which was analyzed using SPSS and SEM with the help of AMOS 21 software. This method is used to discuss and give clear depiction of participation and empowerment of members of PWPK in Johor.

SPSS was used to study the correlation between variables. While SEM AMOS was used to analyze the multiple regression. SEM analysis is a hybrid model which unites two model components; namely measurement and structural model (19).

For this research, 366 members were selected using cluster multistage sampling. According to (20, 21), this sampling method is suitable for studies with big population sizes and which does not have complete list of member names. A few levels of selections were made to represent the population. In the first level; the researcher randomly chose 12 out of 23 PWPK stations which represented the districts of Kota Tinggi (2), Muar (3), Pontian (2), Segamat (2), Mersing (1), Kluang (2). At the second level, 60 out of 119 PWPK were randomly chosen to represent the districts which were chosen at the first level: Kota Tinggi (8), Muar (13), Pontian (10), Segamat (10), Mersing (9), Kluang (10). At the Third level, 6 members were randomly selected for each PWPK and that brought the total to 366 members.

The findings of this research were collected using survey questionnaires given through face-to-face interview and can be divided into three sections. Section A dealt with the demographic background and had questions about district, age, tenure of membership, main job, marital status, education level and earnings. Section B contained questions about the level of participation for members of PWPK in development activity. The participatory item was put forward using participation typology of (7) which encompassed 3 levels which are those which contained decision making and acceptance of benefits. The total item at participatory level is about 32 questions which is measured using 5 point likert scale. The researcher had piloted the research to determine the trustworthiness of the research instrument. The economic empowerment was taken and adapted from (22, 23) which consisted of 2 indicators which are income, savings, and assets. The questionnaires were measured using the marks of 5 scale which ranged from most disagree to most agree. The trustworthiness measure which was more than 0.6 was used in this research.

Two types of validity were tested which were content and construct. Validity of content was checked by experts who were identified and tested through the pilot study. Trustworthiness construct was then tested through Confirmatory Factor Analysis-CFA and the measurement model. The reason for the measurement model is to test the measurement model, discrimination validity, normality and outliers. As with the CFA model, the measurement model must obtain the measurement model by attaining the fixed criteria and the factor value between 0.5 and 1.00. Items lower or higher that that range must be eliminated.

Based on the test, only 13 out of 32 items matched and the construct measure (decision making -4 items, implementation- 5 items and acceptance of benefits -4item) and is used in this research. Meanwhile, in economic empowerment, only 7 out of 9 items remained and the rest were eliminated because of the low risk factor.

4. Results and Findings

Two objectives must be attained in this research. First, to determine the relationship between the level of participation in decision making, implementation and acceptance of rewards and the economic empowerment. To analyze the relationship, the researcher used Pearson Correlation Product Moment SPSS. To measure the level of relationship, the researcher used Cohen and Uphoff (7) to see the strength of relationship between free variables and dependent on which correlation signified by r. Secondly, to determine the level of participation which is the main predictor for economic empowerment. SEM AMOS analysis were used to answer these objective questions.

4.1. Relationship between Participation with Empowerment

Based on the table below, research findings showed that participation in implementation and acceptance of benefits had a significant and strong relationship with economic empowerment which is the value r=.622, p<.05 (the acceptance benefits) and r= .558, p<.05 (implementation). Participation in decision making had a significant relationship in decision making and average with economic empowerment with the value of r= .305, p<.05.

Table 1: Relationship between Participation with Empowerment

Variable	X1	X2	X3	Y1
X1(Decision Making)	1			
X2 (Implementation)	.430	1		
X3(Acceptance of benefit)	.441	.597*	1	
Y1(Economic Empowerment)	.305*	.558*	.622*	1

*Correlation is significant at 0.05 (2-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 (1-tailed)

Seen in PWPK context, this research demonstrates that participation of PWPK members in implementation and acceptance of benefits by economic generation activities have heightened their ability in terms of earnings, savings and asset possession. Participation of PWPK members in implementation be in directly or by contribution in cash or in effort; or in managing activities related to their ability in terms of earning, saving and finances. The same goes to benefit acceptance where PWPK members who obtained aid, knowledge, facilities, expertise and experience are more inclined to increase their ability in terms of economy. Adversely, PWPK members who participated in decision making process only managed to garner average increase in their economic empowerment. Consistent with other studies (Saidu, 2014; Li, 2006; Ohmer, 2007; Mohammad, 2010, (Muhammad, 2009), deduction can be made that active participation in activities are closely related to the empowerment process of members who participated in PWPK development activities. It shows that empowerment of members can be attained significantly through participation in PWPK.

4.2. Participation level as a predictor to economic empowerment

Based on the objective of this study, 3 hypotheses were tested. Hipotheses (H1, H2 and H3) test the participation level as a significant predictor on economic empowerment as follows:

H1**:** Participation level in decision making serves as a significant predictor to economic empowerment.

H2 : Participation level in the implementation serves as a significant predictor to economic empowerment.

H3: Participation level in acceptance of benefits serves as a significant predictor to economic empowerment.

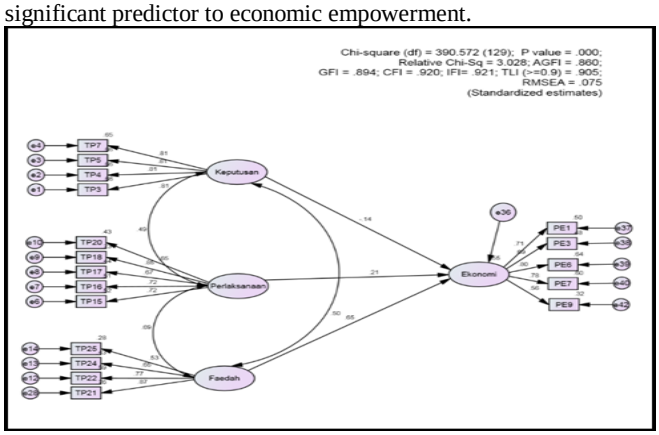


Fig. 1: Structural Model

The structural model above demonstrates the relationship of each variable predictor and dependent variable exhibited through parth diagram. The relationship of the three participation levels which

are decision making, implementation and benefit acceptance with economic empowerment. Based on this direct relationship, the participation construct is labeled as a predictor to empowerment. This analysis is used to test how far participation influences empower community members to increase their prosperity especially in the economic aspect of life.

Table 2: The Influence of Participation level on Empowerment

Hypothesized Relationship			B	β	S.E.	C.R.	P
Economic	←	Decision Making	-.095	-.14	.034	-2.76	.019
Economic	←	Implementation	.172	.21	.024	2.49	.007
Economic	←	acceptance of benefits	.709	.65	.026	3.26	.001

Research findings in the table above shows the three levels of participation (decision making, implementation and benefits acceptance) as significant predictors to economic empowerment. Based on these findings, the researcher hence rejects the hypothesis HO for all three subconstructs (H1, H2 and H3) and henceforth supports assumption of (7) and past studies (1, 24). For decision making value $\beta = -.14$, $p = .019 < 0.05$, and implementation with the value of $\beta = .21$ and value $p = .007 < .05$ and benefit acceptance with the value of $\beta = .65$ dan $p = .001 < 0.05$. Apart from that, based on the structural model, $R^2 = .56$ shows 56% variants in the economic empowerment explained by the three levels of participation (decision making, implementation and benefit acceptance). Standardized Coefficient Value β also shows the levels of participation in benefits acceptance as the most significant predictor of economic empowerment influence.

Explanation which supports this decision is based on the assumption of (7) that the participation of community members especially in rural development is not only at decision making level but also encompasses all levels which includes and benefit acceptance. Each level affects differently the living standard of community level differently. Rationally, members who view economic activity as an opportunity as way to improve their life will be more inclined to participate actively in all levels of participation. The finding of this study is also supported by past researches of (1, 14, 15, 23) which proves that participation in economic activity enables the improvement of socio economic status of those in the low income group in terms of monthly earnings, savings, asset possession and others.

Even though typology of participation by (7) clarifies that the highest level of participation is decision making, followed by implementation and benefit acceptance; nonetheless research findings show reverse direction. If all three levels are compared, research findings show that benefit acceptance is the strongest contributor and most significant in influencing the economic empowerment of PWPK members, followed by implementation and decision making. Rationally, PWPK members are more inclined to participate in economic activity to reap benefits either in the form of material, social or personal. Participation in benefits acceptance is a priority as the majority of PWPK members have limited resources. Benefits received in the form of loan and financial aid, expertise, knowledge, experience and facilities encourage them to be more active in economic activities and henceforth improve their socio economic level remarkably compared to those who did not receive any benefits.

On the other hand, decision making is the lowest predictor to economic empwoerment and this finding is consistent with another finding (Saidu, 2014; Li, 2006; Ohmer, 2007; Mohammad, 2010, Muhammad, 2009). Research findings are related to the lack of knowledge by PWPK members to come out with ideas and planning to intensify economic empowerment.

5. Conclusion

The main idea behind the additional economic generation activity is to assist the community to gain additional earnings to change the economic status of community members towards a better standard of living. Empowering impoverished community members through economic activities seem to be an effective solution to lessen the rate of poverty. Hence, CBO like PWPK is the best track for community members, especially the women members to intensify their ability in economic aspect and henceforth improve the prosperity of their lives. In line with the community development goals to attain prosperity, this study suggests ways to continue participation in development activity where community members can change their way of life towards a significantly better way of living. Through participation of community members are guided and trained to manage and optimize local resources to enhance their standard of living. Through participation, community members have the oportunity to develop their apacity and ability to identify and increase their self potential. Participation also accords opportunity to influence and share power collectively; power to decide and power to control their livelihood (Asnarulkhadi dan Aref, 2011; Nikkhah, 2010). This is a type of participation which is dynamic, active and responds to the needs of locals and the environment. The importance of attaining development goal is penultimate while active participation in development process is given a priority. Participation is also seen by Moser (25) as using both end approach.

Even though the results show that acceptance of benefits is the main predictor, the three levels of participation which are decision making, implementation and benefit acceptance contributed significantly to their economic empowerment. This clearly proves that PWPK is an effective medium to execute additional economic generation and henceforth can intensify additional income, saving and household assets.

In general, these three levels of participation which are decision making, implementation and benefit acceptance as significant contribution the economic empowerment of PWPK members in Johor. The result of this findings proves that PWPK is an empowerment medium through their participation in development activity.Their participation in additional economic generation activity can incerase thier earnings, savings and household assets. If compared in all three levels of participation, benefit acceptance is the most important predictor to economic empowerment of PWPK members, followed by implementation and decision making. The findings of this research describes that in PWPK context, the participation of members in PWPK activity did not reach the highest level which is participation in decision making. The majority of members who participated in PWPK intended to reap benefits did not participate actively in the process of decision making which is believed by many researches to positively impact on better livelihood in the long term. Active comunity members are poised to reap benefits either in terms of material (facility, assistance, financial ad) and non material (personal psychology, social capital).. Benefits in terms of community organization contexts are viewed at empowerment level and dimension. The higher the level of participation, the higher their empowerment is and the more benefits are gained.

In conclusion, PWPK operates as CBO which plays an instrumental role to stand out in the rural community development. The creation of PWPK do not only give a positive impact on the empowerment of its clients but also to improve their quality of life. Additionally it also contributes to the country's development. Nevertheless, the level of empowerment depends on how far the members use the organization as a medium to empower them to control and overcome problems which impacts their lives.

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