

CULTIVATING AGENCY: HOW LOW-INCOME WOMEN EMPOWER THEMSELVES THROUGH COMMUNITY GARDENING IN URBAN MALAYSIA

Aicha Lariani¹
Kamal Solhaimi Fadzil¹

ABSTRACT

This study explores the Kebun Komuniti Projek (KKP), a community garden initiative in Pangsapuri Mutiara Magna, Malaysia, to examine its potential as a model for addressing urban poverty, with an emphasis on women. The research focuses on the themes of social support, and patronage to understand the impact of the initiative on the empowerment and resilience of the participants. Utilizing qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews and field observations, the findings reveal that KKP empowers its members through diverse income-generating opportunities, fostering a strong sense of belonging and support networks that mirror kinship. The initiative also develops patronage relationships at the grassroots level, leading to a greater sense of unity and collaboration within the community. The study concludes that the KKP model effectively contributes to alleviating urban poverty among women, particularly those experiencing multiple dimensions of marginalization. The model's emphasis on flexible participation, robust social support networks, and strong community patronage has the potential to inform and complement existing poverty alleviation strategies, in similar low-income groups.

Keywords: community gardening, low-income women, social support networks, empowerment, patronage, urban Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In the heart of Southeast Asia, Malaysia has undergone significant economic expansion in recent decades, creating a thriving middle class and rapidly evolving social structures. Through a series of ‘five-year plans’¹, the government prioritized strategies to promote sustainable and inclusive growth to drive the country's economic progress. According to the World Bank (2022), Malaysia's GDP has grown at an annual average rate of 5.4% since 2010. The country is expected to continue its upward trajectory and transition toward becoming a high-income economy by 2024.

Yet persistent pockets of poverty and income inequality remain and pose challenges, particularly among the B40 demographic which constitutes the bottom 40% of households in the country with a mean monthly household income of RM2,537 (Nair & Sagar, 2015). This group is particularly vulnerable to economic fluctuations, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2022). Recently, the government further prioritized the upliftment of B40 groups in The Eleventh Malaysia Plan (11MP), (2016-2020), with an aim to increase doubling their mean household income to RM5,270 per month. However, some of the earliest efforts to uplift B40 groups were reflected in the First Malaysia Plan (1 MP), (1966-1970) through various initiatives and policies, including providing affordable housing in urban areas (Zaid & Graham, 2011).

The existing literature suggests that low-cost housing is typically intended to serve as a temporary and transitional phase, offering a range of services and resources designed to facilitate the upward mobility of tenants (Noraziah Wahi et al., 2018; Hashim, 2017). Low-cost flats are available through both public and private sectors. The government's official initiative for this is known as Projek Perumahan Rakyat (PPR), which aims to provide affordable housing for low-income households and mitigate the prevalence of slums and homelessness in urban areas (Wan Mohamad et al., 2019; Goh & Yahya, 2011). Moreover, by law, housing developers in Malaysia are required to allocate 30% of their total development plans to low-cost housing, including privately owned housing schemes and condominiums (Noraziah Wahi et al., 2018; Hashim, 2017). An example of private low-cost strata is Kepong's Pangsapuri Mutiara Magna where the participants of this study reside and operate their communal garden.

While it is certainly worthwhile to explore the effectiveness of such poverty reduction initiatives, particularly with regard to the needs of marginalized groups like low-income women (LIW), the present study will primarily focus on providing an understanding of the experiences of the women leading Kebun Komuniti Projek² (KKP) within the context of urban poverty in the country, whilst suitably acknowledging the broader context in which the project is situated.

The Mutiara Magna urban garden is a collective, community-based initiative that has emerged in the context of low-income housing in Malaysia. The KKP started as a small-scale vegetable garden project in 2019, in the space near the Sungai Keroh riverbed. As the effort gained momentum and interest from the community, organized programs were launched, providing resources to the community. Today, the KKP is a sustainable source of income for its members as well as a space for social interaction and emotional support.

Study Aim and Significance

In seeking to add to the scholarly discourse around gender and development, this study contributes to understanding the following two questions: first, how do low-income women in

Malaysia form their own systems of financial and social support, as demonstrated by the Kebun Komuniti (KK)? Second, what is the impact of community-based interventions, such as Kebun Komuniti Projek, on the empowerment of low-income women in urban Malaysia? In turn, the objective of this study is to evaluate the impact of KKP as a community-based intervention on the empowerment of LIW within this context. By studying and understanding the community garden initiative, we can gain insights into the potential for grassroots efforts to support women's financial and social empowerment in urban Malaysia. Qualitative data collection and analysis methods were implemented to achieve a nuanced account of the experiences and perspectives of the women involved in KKP.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT, CHALLENGES AND RESOURCEFULNESS

Women's empowerment has been widely recognized as a concept that goes beyond individual agency and autonomy. It includes social, economic, and political aspects of the individual's experience (Baqutayan, 2020). Given its multi-dimensional nature, it's challenging to devise a definition that is applicable to women across the board. Instead, women's empowerment must be assessed in its relevant social and cultural context. The following definition is of particular relevance to this paper, as it engages the collective action in achieving empowerment, describing it as *'the process of gaining control over one's own life while supporting and facilitating others' control over their lives'* (Aspy & Sandhu, 1999). This perspective acknowledges that individual empowerment is interconnected with that of the collective. In their paper, (Gram et al., 2019) expand on this by differentiating between collective and personal empowerment, the following excerpt explains the relationship between the two:

'Collective empowerment requires a conception of individual empowerment that includes individual possession of interpersonal capabilities, since the ability of groups to achieve collective outcomes usually depends as much on the quality of member relations as on individual abilities.'

Empowerment as a collective endeavour is key to the upliftment of women as individuals and society as a whole. The Malaysian government has recognized the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment in its policies, such as the aforementioned 11MP. The government has also integrated the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its national developmental policies to be achieved by 2030. Some of the conditions by the UN include the involvement and participation of all people regardless of gender or class (Shahizan, 2021). The implementation of this can make large strides in the development of the country. Increased exposure to local initiatives, presents an opportunity for further assessment of their capacity to influence progress toward achieving the country's SDGs in the future. It is important to recognize both the hope for future progress and the current challenges to women's empowerment in order to address them effectively.

In Malaysia, patriarchal cultural norms and values have historically played a significant role in shaping the status and roles of women within society. These cultural values and beliefs have perpetuated the idea of male dominance and control, leading to significant gender inequalities in areas such as education, employment, and politics (UN Women, 2018; Baqutayan, 2020; Abiddin & Ismail, 2021). As noted by Mirkin, (1984), in their analysis of passive patriarchy, social norms and beliefs surrounding gender roles can be deeply ingrained in a culture and considered natural. Although the literature provides that Malaysian women's participation in labour has risen, there remains a pronounced gender disparity where women are often

underrepresented in higher-paying industries, and receive less social protection and opportunities (World Bank Group, 2019; Baqutayan, 2020). Relevant to this paper, the intersection of these cultural norms and beliefs with economic and political factors presents obstacles to women's empowerment in Malaysia. Despite societal and institutional barriers, LIW in Malaysia have demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in forming their own support networks by strategizing available formal and informal types of support and creating opportunities for themselves (Rashid & Ratten, 2020).

According to Ohmer and Korr (2006), community-based interventions involve systems that are initiated and implemented by the community with the aim of improving the lives of community members. Pyles (2013) describes community-based interventions as a form of progressive communal dynamic, which focuses on building community power and promoting social change. While Kebun Komuniti Projek in Kepong appears, on the surface, to exemplify a fresh produce business endeavour, this paper reveals that the project serves as a community-based intervention for the financial and social empowerment of the disadvantaged participants. More well-known, larger-scale, examples of such communities in Malaysia include the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) in Selangor, which provides support and services to women experiencing domestic violence (WAO, n.d.). Additionally, the Sisters in Islam (SIS) organization works towards promoting the rights of Muslim women in Malaysia through advocacy and awareness-raising initiatives (Sisters in Islam, n.d.). The Sabah Women's Action Resource Group (SAWO) aims to empower women in Sabah through various programs and initiatives, including leadership development and economic empowerment (Sabah Women's Action Resource Group, n.d.).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study focused on the community garden in Kepong, Malaysia. It utilized purposive sampling, which is a commonly used qualitative research technique that targets specific groups or individuals with particular knowledge, experiences, or characteristics relevant to the research question. The participants comprised a group of 8 women between their late 30s and early 60s, who strategize ways to operate the *kebun* daily. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Semi-structured interviews were, recorded and transcribed, facilitating in-depth data on the participants' perceptions, and attitudes towards several contributing players in their daily experiences, including *Jabatan Pengairan dan Saliran, Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia*, NGOs, volunteers, KKP, the activities involved and the participants' group dynamics.

Participant observation was conducted over six months, the researchers visited the garden multiple times a week, engaging in gardening activities, formal and informal community meetings, visiting business suppliers, joining group-organized field trips, and spending quality leisure time in the garden, over meals, or in the participants' flats. Detailed field notes were taken on the participants' behaviour, interactions, and experiences during project activities. Informal conversations were also held with the participants to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives.

In this paper, case study analysis was utilized to explore the factors that contributed to the success of the KKP. This data analysis method involves multiple sources of evidence to answer research questions or hypotheses. It is particularly useful when the research objectives involve an in-depth understanding of a complex phenomenon or situation that cannot be fully explained

through surveys or experiments (Starman, 2013). Data analysis for the case study analysis involved the following steps:

1. Data reduction: The data collected was organized and condensed to identify patterns and themes within the data.
2. Data display: The data was visually presented in a comprehensible manner.
3. Data comparison: The data was compared to identify similarities and differences between different participants' accounts.
4. Conclusion drawing and verification: The findings from the case study analysis were used to draw conclusions about the research questions.

The approach allowed for the exploration of the complex dynamics and interrelationships between various factors contributing to the success of the KKP.

THE EMERGENCE OF KEBUN KOMUNITI: A COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTION

The KKP operates, informally, as a community-based intervention, within the context of low-income groups in Pangsapuri Mutiara Magna. It is an example of a collaborative approach that prioritizes the active involvement of community members in the project's design and implementation. In all accounts, Mutiara Magna fits most definitions of what a 'home' is, provided at a low cost that is affordable to many low-income groups in the country. Housing plays a significant role in the structure and development of society, not only because it reflects economic growth and prosperity in a country, but also because of its integrated social significance in everyday practices, opportunities and interactions. (Kajimo & Evans, 2006; Adebayo, 2013). No doubt, Mutiara Magna plays an active role in reducing the previously discussed urban squatter and slumming. Sources like PropertyGuru, one of Malaysia's leading sites for real estate, paint a beautiful picture of the apartment complex (PropertyGuru, 2019), the following quotes from their website description is an example of this:

'Mutiara Magna is a breath-taking condominium that is strategically located in a central position facilitating efficient and effective access to world-class facilities, amenities and roads available in the area.'

'Mutiara Magna being a low-cost residential development does not feature numerous facilities. However, there are some of world-class facilities offered in this awe-inspiring apartment that seeks to provide the best living lifestyle to the residents'

Despite these accounts portraying a comfortable living environment of the complex, the reality experienced by the participants of this research and through first-hand fieldwork tells a contrasting story. The apartments comprise 4 blocks; each is 15 stories high with tens of units per floor. The living spaces in the apartments are small and cramped, furniture and personal belongings are squeezed into every available corner, and the adaptability and resourcefulness of the residents are evident in the arrangement of the space. For instance, Mama H, a participant in her 40s, shares her apartment with her mother, who suffers from dementia, her husband, and their four children. The living room doubles as a bedroom with two thin mattresses placed on the floor, in front of the TV, which dominates the space. Underneath the TV is a small electric oven, used for cooking. Food preparation and dining takes place barely 2.5 meters away, on the table across from the screen, adjacent to a small study desk with a shared family computer on

it. The kitchen, bathrooms and two bedrooms tell a similar story of adaptability. Mama H directed a comment at the researcher present, as a first-time visitor saying, ‘*My house is very small; it's not nice*’. Similar sentiments are shared by several of the participants with regard to their dwellings. One participant recited a prayer declaring her intention to relocate to another low-cost housing complex with better facilities.

In the midst of the cramped and limited living spaces of the Mutiara Magna apartment complex, a small garden project has emerged, serving as a beacon of hope and community spirit for the residents. Thus began the KKP in 2019 when a group of women, each facing unique social and economic challenges, utilized an empty space near the Sungai Keroh riverbed to create a small vegetable garden (Malaysiakini, 2020). Interestingly, each woman in the group is given a title preceding their name denoting kinship³. To protect their privacy, only these titles followed by a random letter are used in this account. Tok K, a single woman in her 60s who relocated to Mutiara with her daughter in 2011 after her husband's passing, was among the first who started this initiative. Mama H played a significant role in recruiting additional members. Despite her limited education, which only extended to primary schooling as her parents could no longer afford to further her studies, she achieved a supervisor position at one of Malaysia's leading sanitation companies. When her mother developed dementia, however, she resigned from her position to provide care, as she could not afford external assistance. However, as the garden project grew and took more of her time at home, her youngest daughter decided to terminate her studies to take care of her grandmother. Two of Mama H' juniors, Angah and Baby, who are in their 40s and share an apartment, also resigned from their jobs to join Mama H in her mushroom business at the *kebun*. Baby, who is divorced, supports her son and mother who live in another state. Other members include Ibu E, a working mother of two supporting her parents in Sarawak, and Kak S and Kaktam, who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 and now maintain the garden and share a residence. Lastly, Kaklong, Tok K's only daughter, works at a nearby convenience store. The profiles of the KKP members reveal an array of social and financial challenges, pointing to possible reasons that led to the formation of a collective intervention group.

Empowering Local Communities: An Interplay of Formal and Informal Support Systems

The data collected reports the community's reliance on a combination of formal and informal support networks to ensure its success. By strategizing the tools and resources of government-backed programs, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and local community members, the KKP has created a framework that empowers its participants to take charge of their projects and foster sustainable development.

Formal Support: Government-Based Initiatives

The River of Life project (ROL) by the Jabatan Pengairan dan Saliran (JPS), was launched with the aim of restoring and transforming the Klang River into a vibrant and livable waterfront (Hafez et al., 2019). As part of this initiative, JPS established the ROL Public Outreach Programme (RoLPOP) to engage and empower local communities to take ownership of the river and its surrounding areas (Hafez et al., 2019). It focuses on improving the water quality and river ecosystems of the Klang River Basin through various interventions, including the installation of wastewater treatment plants and the implementation of riverfront beautification projects. RoLPOP 5 is a sub-project under this initiative that targets the Sungai Keroh River in Kepong, where the Mutiara Kebun is also located (Jabatan Pengairan dan Saliran Malaysia, n.d.).

The community members themselves played a crucial role in cleaning the river and starting the garden project. At first, they worked tirelessly for a few weeks, until other volunteers joined in on the effort. Malaysiakini (2020) reported that there were up to 15 members at the initial stages of the garden's formation. As the women's collective efforts started to take shape, they captured the attention and enthusiasm of the wider community, leading to the launch of the RoLPOP 5 program by JPS (Malaysiakini, 2020). The program provided the community with the resources they needed to continue their gardening efforts, including cleaning the river and providing a metal shed to store their supplies and conduct meetings. In line with the program's objectives, efforts were made to beautify the riverfront by adding garden beds, paving stairs for safe river access, and tiling the walkways. Today, JPS regularly visits the garden to ensure the river remains clean, test water quality, and monitor KKP's progress. Despite the government's involvement, the community members have taken on the role of guardians for the river, as reported by Malaysiakini (2020). This sense of ownership legitimizes the importance of maintaining the garden and reflects the members' commitment to fostering a positive relationship with JPS.

Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM)

Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM), is a microfinance organization that provides financial assistance and training to low-income individuals and small businesses in Malaysia, with the aim of reducing poverty and promoting economic development (Saad, 2012; Samer et al., 2015). Established by the Malaysian government in 1987, AIM offers microcredit loans for small business start-ups, home-based businesses, and agriculture, as well as training programs in financial management and business planning (Samer et al., 2015; Al-Shami et al., 2016). The organization received international recognition for its microfinance initiatives, which have been successful in reducing poverty in Malaysia, particularly in rural areas (Al-Shami et al., 2016; Mason, Azmi, & Madden, 2018).

Tok K plays an informal leadership role in AIM's weekly meetings. Her 15-year membership in AIM has positioned her as a leader and a source of social capital. Over the years, her social network has grown, and she continues to connect individuals with opportunities when possible. Moreover, Tok K is often approached by members asking for advice on loan applications and general guidance. Tok K introduced the members of KKP to the AIM community, which encouraged other participants, such as Mama H, to get involved. Mama H applied for a loan to further develop the Cendawan Bongkah⁴ business.

Informal Support: Community Networking and Opportunity

The KKP has established strong informal support networks over the years, including volunteers from educational institutions, NGOs, and community members. These networks have played a crucial role in the project's success, particularly in generating financial and social support for its participants.

For example, the participants developed an interest in cultivating and selling mushrooms, which has become a popular source of income for them. The success of their mushroom farming enterprise has garnered them a reputation within the local community, creating opportunities for collaboration with other organizations. One such collaboration was with Rimba in Town, an organization known for its organics and botanical market. It began when the KK members

were selling their produce by the side of the road and a representative from Rimba in Town happened to pass by. They socialized and shared samples of their products, which the representative loved. She offered them the opportunity to sell their products in a stall at one of KL's malls for three days as part of their Botanical Market Event. Upon interviewing the representative, it was revealed that she was particularly impressed by the community's enthusiasm and passion for their mushroom products. Furthermore, AIM's meetings also offer more opportunities for exposure to the community's initiatives, the *Kebun* team utilizes every opportunity to further their network. For example, they invited the AIM members to visit the *Kebun* to socialize and see the mushroom farm. Moreover, the *Kebun* members often bring samples of their products to share with the community, further expanding their footprint as business owners.

The involvement of volunteers from institutions such as Sunway College, Yayasan Chow Kit, and University Malaya in the KKP not only provides practical support in terms of physical labour but also adds an extra layer of value to the program. These volunteers bring with them a network of contacts and resources that the participants can leverage. Such engagements put the KKP on the map, increasing its visibility and creating more opportunities for collaboration and support. The program has been featured in news articles such as Malaysiakini and social media campaigns, raising awareness about the initiative. This increased visibility can attract additional funding and partnerships, which can further strengthen the program and enable it to reach more participants in need.

COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT IN ACTION, THE KEBUN KOMUNITI

The figure below depicts how the *Kebun Komuniti* initiative functions as a community-based intervention. The success of the project relies on a combination of external factors, including formal support from organized entities and informal networks and opportunities. When leveraged effectively, these resources can serve as powerful tools for achieving empowerment. The women of the *Kebun* Team have skillfully strategized and transformed these resources into profitable businesses, strong social and familial bonds, and support systems, thereby creating a space where they can exercise agency and cultivate sustainable empowerment. In the following sections, we explore the three key themes of empowerment observed in the daily lives of the KKP participants. Those are (1) agency and resilience; (2) financial empowerment; and (3) social support and patronage.

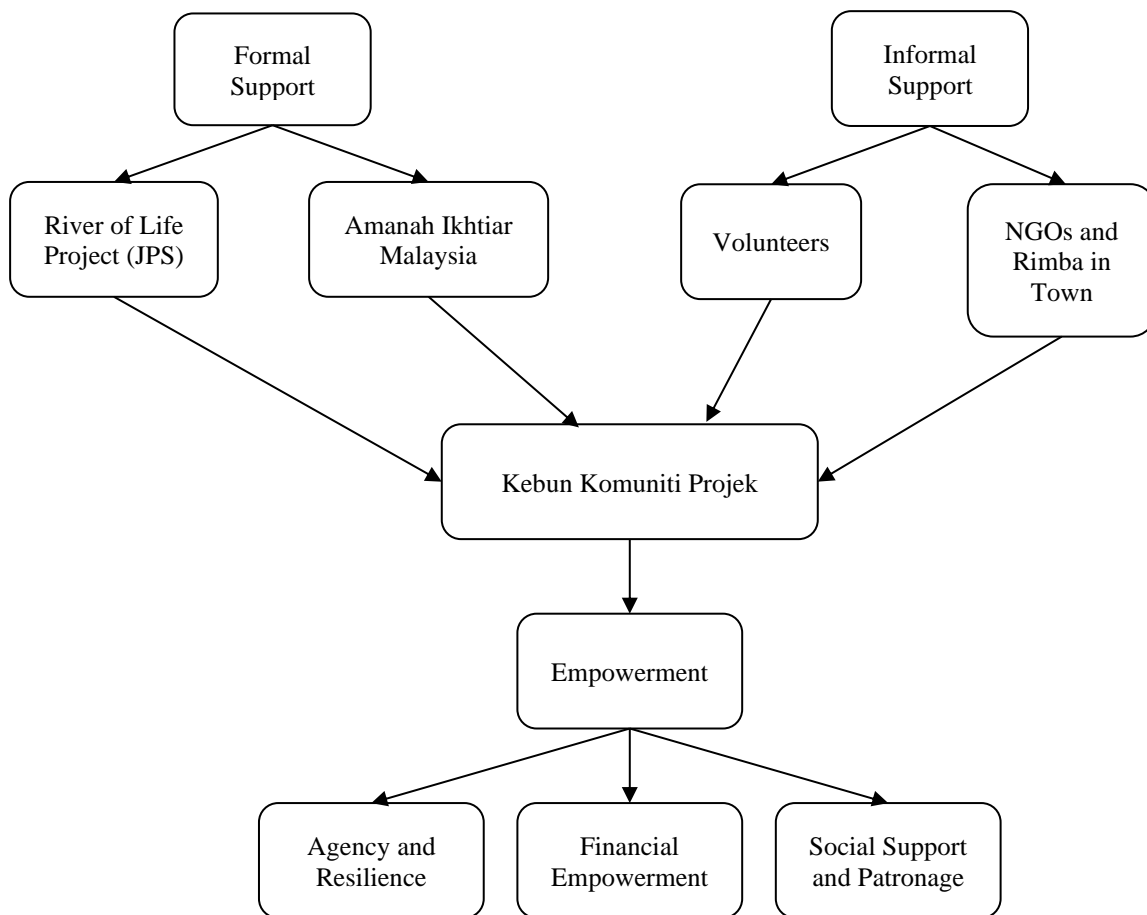


Figure 1: Key themes of empowerment

Agency and Resilience

As the program garnered legitimacy from formal entities like RoLPOP 5, the community formed its own roles. Interestingly, the Chairman of the organization is the only male directly involved in the project. Referred to as Pokngoh, his contributions and involvement are usually centred around formal interactions with JPS and designated events with institutions like Sunway College, University Malaya, and Yayasan Chow Kit. Informally, it is agreed upon by all members, including Pokngoh, that Tok K is the effective leader of the team. The appointment of a male Chairman as the formal leader is a valuable and effective strategic decision, allowing the women to navigate the patriarchal social norms in Malaysia. For example, Mama H explained that including Pokngoh’s name in their society registration application might increase their chances of approval. Similarly, his name was in every business license application they sent to Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur, (DBKL). Furthermore, as an officer in enforcement, his arrival at the *kebun* in between his shifts, fully dressed in uniform plays a role in controlling threats such as robbery and vandalism. It is believed among the team members, that Pokngoh’s leadership commands respect from the larger community in Mutiara Magna. Although Pokngoh’s formal role is at the top of the hierarchy, he is Tok K’s younger cousin, therefore, socially, Tok K has more authority in that regard. No doubt, the Chairman provides value in more ways than one. The women respect him and see him as a security figure, they also include him in their social activities like cookouts, and celebrations and keep him informed on all major happenings in the KKP.

The rest of the participants contribute to the structure in various ways. Tok K is the prime decision maker in the mushroom and garden initiative. The gardening work begins every day around 9:30 AM, the remaining members answer to her as she is the first to arrive at the *kebun*. She begins every day by raking the leaves and burning them to clean the garden and ward off insects like mosquitos and flies. Shortly after, Mama H would join her after driving her daughter to work. Both women would have a daily discussion on the major activities they would undertake that day. Mama H is the investor and does much of the difficult taxing physical labour. She is also the architect of the garden as she built a second, much-improved mushroom shed in the garden. She cemented the ground and supervised her husband, whom she would recruit from his day job, and the rest of the members including the researchers in building the internal metal structure and wiring. Furthermore, Kak S is the accountant of the group. Upon observation, it was evident that she is rigorous in her work, often seen sitting inside the shed carefully allocating budgets or counting expenses along with Kaklong by her side. Ibu E, once described as a daughter-like figure to Tok K, joins the team every day after her work and pays close attention to detail in every task she undertakes. Despite her age, she engages in heavy labour such as harvesting, river cleaning, and cementing. In the evening between 6-7 p.m., the rest of the members come into the *kebun*, often helping with cooking dinner for everyone and cleaning the garden.

By engaging in community gardening and related activities, the team can exercise their decision-making abilities and enhance their personal and collective strengths (Mosedale, 2005; Sharma et al., 2020; Chumo et al., 2023). Such decision-making within the community contributes to the member's overall ability to withstand hardship, in other words, resilience, as they are better equipped to face social and financial challenges (Mosedale, 2005).

It is worth noting that agency manifests in various forms and often entails significant responsibility, which can lead to stress and anxiety for leaders (Raelin, 2011). Therefore, resilience becomes a required practice to be exercised to ensure the sustainability of the KKP initiative. Such examples of anxiety are manifested through the community's beliefs in phenomena such as black magic and the evil eye. In the same vein, Tok K enforces specific rules necessitating informal governance through both explicit and implicit means to maintain social control and formal agency in the garden. For instance, she ensures the mushroom shed remains 'pure' by only allowing non-menstruating women to enter. Uttering religious phrases like 'Bismillah' or *in the name of God* is obligatory when planting seeds. She also sprinkles salt and holy water around the community shop to repel black magic. As an informal leader, Tok K experiences the burden of her role, which is evident in the protective measures she observes. Rather than attributing body pains she experiences to age, like knee pain, migraines, and fatigue, she associates it with being under the effect of black magic. Furthermore, she believes her daughter is unable to find a suitable husband is the result of such black magic imposed by a person in their small circle who wishes ill upon them. To counteract negative effects, Tok K plays the Quran on the radio continuously in her flat, bathes with holy water purified by an Ustaz, and keeps several fish in her apartment. The presence of fish believed never to sleep, is thought to ward off evil while she and her daughter sleep. This phenomenon goes beyond Tok K, as a few of the *kebun* members believe they have been impacted as a result of their proximity to the group leader. As the community navigates the complexities of maintaining agency within a cultural context marked by superstitions and supernatural beliefs, resilience emerges as a key factor in sustaining their efforts and ensuring the long-term success of the initiative.

Financial Empowerment

Financial empowerment allows individuals to improve their living conditions, invest in their families, and gain a sense of financial security and independence (Al-Shami et al., 2016; Saad, 2012; Samer et al., 2015). The Kebun Komuniti Projek contributes to the financial well-being of the participants by providing multiple sources of income through the sale of produce and products, creative use of available resources, and leveraging collaborative partnerships. The garden itself grows fresh produce in the form of mushrooms, vegetables like spinach, chilli, and fruits like mangosteen, jackfruit, and banana. The members then sell their organic yield and create niche products such as homemade snacks like '*Cendawan Goreng*'⁵ and '*Bayam Brazil Goreng*'⁶ at least three times a week within the Mutiara complex and at organized events when the opportunity arises.

As previously discussed, KKP regularly collaborates with Rimba in Town. Past partnerships with the organization were successful on at least two fronts, first, the profit generated per day was in the hundreds, which is substantial considering that most of the community's products cost RM 5. Second, the elation the group experienced after long 14-hour workdays, is indicative of the level of drive and purpose this initiative provides for its members. Rimba in Town further invited the KK to sell their products in several locations, including Sentul, and Merdeka Square during Ramadan, providing the community with large exposure to the often tourist-filled crowded locations. Kaklong described this collaboration as her favourite in comparison to other experiences saying '*Rimba in Town is the best, so organized, they take care of everything and so many people come*'. The Kebun team prioritise maintaining a relationship with the event organizers, through social media platforms like their Facebook group and Instagram account.

Moreover, the community members also consume their own produce, share the responsibility of food and labour, and repurpose unclaimed or discarded items to upgrade their garden infrastructure, such as building a shed using recycled wood and crafting a table from a large wooden wheel. The participants actively maximize the use of their resources. For instance, they practice crop rotation, interchanging between different types of spinach like water spinach '*Kangkung*' and '*Bayam Brazil*'. This helps to maintain soil fertility, reduce pest problems, and increase the overall yield. One example of the resourcefulness of the community is their savvy use of expired *Bongkah* '*Bongkah Rosak*'. They established an agreement with mushroom cube suppliers to purchase their defective product at a low cost. The women then engaged in the labour-intensive task of sorting, cleaning, sifting and breaking them apart to turn them into organic fertilizer. They utilize organic fertilizer in their own gardens, which contributes to healthier soil and more abundant crops, and sell it as a product along with their organic produce.

By engaging in these diverse income-generating activities, the community members not only reduce waste through sustainable gardening practices but also create economic opportunities for themselves by generating new income streams and reducing the need for expensive enhancement tools and synthetic fertilizers. This economic empowerment enables them to become more financially independent, alleviating their vulnerability to economic shocks and fostering a sense of self-efficacy (Sharma et al., 2020).

Social Support Group and Patronage

The KKP fosters a supportive network for its members, by nurturing strong relationships and a sense of community. The participants' backgrounds and profiles reveal a diverse group of individuals, some of whom may be considered social misfits due to factors such as widowhood, limited education, and financial challenges. In light of these diverse backgrounds, strong bonds have developed among the members. For instance, Tok K discussed her relationship with Ibu E as a mother and daughter relationship, explaining that when her only daughter was away for studies, Ibu E was the only one to take care of her like a daughter would, and stood by her side nursing her when she had a health incident that required long term rehabilitation and care.

While kinship is normally formed through blood relations or marriage, fictive kinship is a form of chosen family, which extends the same obligations and expectations of support as its traditional counterpart (Chatters, Taylor, & Jayakody, 1994). In the *Kebun Komuniti*, the members have established a form of fictive kinship by assigning familial titles to one another and genuinely embodying these relationships. This sense of connection not only strengthens the bonds within the group but also contributes to its sustainability and success (Chumo et al., 2023). Familial connections allow members to expect support from one another without demanding formal payment. While such social transactions may be considered a form of patronage, it's important to differentiate between this internal patronage and the patronage involving the broader Mutiara community. By participating in sustaining the team, members of this fictive kinship receive social, financial, and moral support.

On the other hand, patronage between the KK and Mutiara's wider community can be understood more traditionally as a reciprocal relationship where one party provides resources, guidance, or assistance to another party, with the expectation that the latter will repay the favour with loyalty or support (Radey & McWey, 2019; Chumo et al., 2023). The participants contribute to the locals by maintaining an inviting garden that is open to all, nurturing a sense of community, and providing sustenance and support through affordable fresh daily produce. As the researchers spent more time with the *Kebun* team, they witnessed firsthand the group's unwavering commitment to creating a sustainable business venture that benefits not just themselves, but their wider community. Three times a week, the participants would sell their fresh produce from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., on a simple table at the roadside entrance of Mutiara Magna by pricing their products lower than local supermarkets to ensure affordability for residents. Typically, an additional few grams of free produce would be given away to the customers as a gesture of '*Sadaqah*'⁷. When asked about this practice, Tok K replied, '*We give what we can. If we help people, God will help us.*' The residents in Mutiara's low-cost flats show patronage in their appreciation for the project's efforts, participating in financial support by purchasing the community's produce, and social support by visiting their booth at different events and supporting the initiative's exposure on social media. The practice of giving and receiving support is an example of empowerment in action fostering a resilient and interconnected community that thrives collectively.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this research was to explore the potential of the community-based intervention, *Kebun Komuniti Projek*, in addressing urban poverty among women in Malaysia. The research questions focused on understanding how the KKP contributes to the

empowerment of its participants and how it can serve as a model for similar initiatives. The study aimed to examine the role of social networks, patronage, and intersectionality in shaping the experiences of urban women with low income, living in low-cost flats.

The study employed a qualitative research design, drawing from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and secondary data sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the KKP's impact on its participants and the larger community. The analysis revealed that the KKP successfully addresses the challenges of empowerment in urban poverty through the development of social networks, fostering strong patronage relationships, and recognizing the intersectionality of the participants' experiences. The project's emphasis on collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and capacity-building contributes to the overall sense of empowerment among its participants.

The findings of this research suggest that the Kebun Komuniti Projek serves as a sustainable model for women and community empowerment as well as poverty alleviation, particularly among urban women who experience multiple layers of marginalization due to factors such as low income, low education achievement, and limited access to family or kin networks. The project's approach to developing social networks that mirror kin networks, allowing for flexible participation, and fostering patronage relationships at various levels (e.g., residents, resident associations, government agencies, and NGOs) effectively addresses the complex nature of urban poverty. Ultimately, the Kebun Komuniti Projek demonstrates the potential of community-based interventions to empower marginalized individuals and create lasting, sustainable change.

¹ A five-year plan is an outline of Malaysia's development goals and strategies within a 5 year period, it targets various economic sectors and further serves as a reference for efficient allocation of funds and resources.

² The term 'Kebun Komuniti Projek' refers to the community garden initiative in which the participants are involved. The project is titled in Malay, and 'kebun' means garden in the language. For the purpose of this paper, the terms 'Kebun Komuniti Projek', 'kebun' 'community garden project', and 'garden' will be used interchangeably to refer to the initiative.

³ The group members use familial respect titles to refer to each other, including "Tok" for grandmother, "Mama" for mother, "Ibu" for mother in Malay, 'Kaklong' for the firstborn, 'Angah' for the second born son/daughter, "Baby" for the youngest in the group (socially), 'Itam' for the ninth born child, 'Kak' for sister and 'Pokngoh', for uncle.

⁴ "Bongkah Cendawan" is a Malay phrase that translates to 'block of mushroom' in English. It refers to the process of cultivating mushrooms, where a block of substrate, typically made from sawdust or other organic materials, is inoculated with mushroom spores and allowed to grow into a fruiting body. The bongkah, is commonly used for growing oyster mushrooms, which are a popular ingredient in many local dishes. The process involves carefully controlling the temperature and humidity of the growing environment to ensure optimal conditions for mushroom growth.

⁵ 'Cendawan Goreng' is a Malay term for fried mushrooms. It is a popular snack and side dish in Malaysia and can be commonly found in food markets and stalls.

⁶ 'Bayam Brazil Goreng' A Malay term for fried Brazilian spinach. This dish is made by frying seasoned and battered Brazilian spinach leaves until crispy. It is a popular snack and side dish in Malaysia and can be commonly found in food markets and stalls.

⁷ 'Sadaqah' is a term used in Islamic charitable giving, meaning voluntary charity or giving of one's wealth

REFERENCES

- Abiddin, N.Z. and Ismail, A. (2021). Gender and labour force participation in Malaysia: Current research and future direction on gender egalitarianism. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 10(2), 348-360.
- Adebayo, C.O. (2013). Comfort factors in low cost houses: Case study at Batu Pahat, Johor Malaysia (Doctoral dissertation, Master Thesis, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia. Malaysia: Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia).
- Al-Shami, S.S.A., Razali, M.M., Majid, I., Rozelan, A. and Rashid, N. (2016). The effect of microfinance on women's empowerment: Evidence from Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 22(3), 318-337.
- Aspy, C.B. and Sandhu, D.S. (1999). Empowering women for equity: A counseling approach. American Counseling Association.
- Baqutayan, S.M.S. (2020). Women empowerment is needed to boost gender equality in Malaysia. *Current Res. J. Soc. Sci. & Human.*, 3, p.96.
- Chatters, L.M., Taylor, R.J. and Jayakody, R. (1994). Fictive kinship relations in black extended families. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 25(3), 297-312.
- Chumo, I., Kabaria, C., Shankland, A., Igonya, E. and Mberu, B.(2022). Complementarity of formal and informal actors and their networks in support of vulnerable populations in informal settlements: Governance diaries approach. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10.
- Government of Malaysia. (2015). Eleventh Malaysia Plan 2016-2020. [online] Retrieved on April 22, 2023, from <https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/sites/default/files/11th%20Malaysia%20plan.pdf>
- Gram, L., Morrison, J. and Skordis-Worrall, J. (2019). Organising concepts of 'women's empowerment' for measurement: a typology. *Social Indicators Research*, 143, 1349-1376.
- Hafez, A.D.M.A., Mohd, D.P.I.D.L., Basri, I.H. and Omar, A.D.R.C.(2019). Gross Pollutant Traps to Enhance Water Quality in Malaysia. Singapore : Partridge Publishing.
- Jabatan Pengairan dan Saliran Malaysia. (n.d.). Our story. Retrieved on February 22, 2023, from <https://rolkl.jwp.gov.my/en/our-story>
- Kajimo-Shakantu, K. and Evans, K. (2006). The role of banks in the provision of low-income housing finance in South Africa: Can they play a different role?. *International Journal of Strategic Property Management*, 10(1), 23-38).
- Mason, C., Azmi, W.N.W. and Madden, R. (2018). Aiming for greater financial inclusion through sustainable development: The story of AIM (Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia). Asian Institute of Finance.
- Malaysiakini. (2020, August 17). Launching of Community Garden & Sungai Keroh River Care Education Centre. Retrieved on February 22, 2023, from <https://www.malaysiakini.com/announcement/538928>
- Mirkin, H. (1984). The passive female the theory of patriarchy. *American Studies*, 25(2), 39-57.
- Mosedale, S. (2005). Assessing women's empowerment: towards a conceptual framework. *Journal of International Development*, 17(2), 243-257.
- Mutiara Magna details, flat for sale and for Rent | PropertyGuru Malaysia (2019) PropertyGuru. Available at: <https://www.propertyguru.com.my/condo/mutiara-magna-1556> (Accessed: 2023).

- Nair, S. and Sagarar, S. (2015). Poverty in Malaysia: Need for a paradigm shift. *Institutions and Economies*, 95-123.
- Ohmer, M.L. and Korr, W.S. (2006). The effectiveness of community practice interventions: A review of the literature. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 16(2), 132-145.
- Pyles, L. (2013). *Progressive community organizing: Reflective practice in a globalizing world*. New York: Routledge.
- Radey, M. and McWey, L.M. (2019). Informal networks of low-income mothers: Support, burden, and change. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 81(4), 953-967.
- Raelin, J., (2011). From leadership-as-practice to leaderful practice. *Leadership*, 7(2), 195-211.
- Rashid, S. and Ratten, V. (2020). A systematic literature review on women entrepreneurship in emerging economies while reflecting specifically on SAARC countries. *Entrepreneurship and organizational change: Managing innovation and creative capabilities*, pp.37-88.
- Saad, N.M. (2012). Microfinance and prospect for Islamic microfinance products: The case of Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia. *Advances in Asian Social Science*, 1(1), 27-33.
- Sabah Women's Action Resource Group. (n.d.). About us. Retrieved on February 22, 2023, from <http://www.sawo.org.my/about-us.html>.
- Samer, S., Majid, I., Rizal, S., Muhamad, M.R. and Rashid, N. (2015). The impact of microfinance on poverty reduction: Empirical evidence from Malaysian perspective. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 195, 721-728.
- Shahizan, S. (2021). Malaysia's strength in women leadership: success factor in localising the United Nations sustainable development goals. *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education (TURCOMAT)*, 12(2), 604-613.
- Sharma, S., Mehra, D., Akhtar, F. and Mehra, S., (2020). Evaluation of a community-based intervention for health and economic empowerment of marginalized women in India. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), 1-16.
- Sisters in Islam. (n.d.). About us. Retrieved on February 22, 2023, from <https://sistersinislam.org/#>
- Starman, A.B. (2013). The case study as a type of qualitative research. *Sodobna Pedagogika*, 64(130). Retrieved from : https://www.sodobna-pedagogika.net/en/articles/01-2013_the-case-study-as-a-type-of-qualitative-research/
- Women's Aid Organisation. (n.d.). About us. Retrieved on February 22, 2023, from <https://wao.org.my/about-us/>
- World Bank Group (2019). *Breaking barriers: Toward better economic opportunities for women in Malaysia*. Retrieved on February 21, 2023 from : <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/malaysia/publication/breaking-barriers-toward-better-economic-opportunities-for-women-in-malaysia>
- World Bank. (2022). *Malaysia*. Retrieved on February 22, 2023, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/malaysia/overview#1>
- Zaid, N.S.M. and Graham, P. (2011). Low-cost housing in Malaysia: A contribution to sustainable development. Proc., Energy, Environment and Sustainability, eddBE2011 Proceedings, 82-87.

¹ Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya.