

## Barriers to Women's Empowerment: Case Study of Suburban Area in Tawau, Sabah

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### Abstract

Women have important contribution in economic development. In recent years, Malaysia's female labour force participation rate has increased dramatically. However, women's economic empowerment will necessitate the removal of impediments to more productive employment for women, particularly among low-income communities. Consequently, this study aims to investigate the barriers to women's empowerment living in suburban area in Tawau, Sabah. Using a structural in-depth interview, primary data were collected from three selected key-informant respondents in Tawau, Sabah. This study summarise the issues into three themes, namely, low participation in economics activities, gender inequality, and gender violence and mental health issues. The findings of this study demonstrated the importance of a long-term policy commitment to facilitating women's empowerment in suburban areas.

**Keywords:** Women's Economic Empowerment, Suburban Area, Low Participation in Economics Activities, Gender Inequality, Gender Violence.

**Introduction**

In many low and lower-middle income nations, women engagement in socio-economic activities is seen as critical not just for boosting economic growth but also for improving gender equality (Karim et al., 2018). Under the flagship of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is fundamental to the achievement of the 2030 Development Agenda. Empowerment can be defined as improving individual's or group's capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes (Andrew, 2013). The empowerment classified as the community capacity in economic, social, psychological, and political.

However, there are few issues connected to women's vulnerabilities still holding too many women back particularly in rural and suburban areas. Women and girls make up the majority of those living in poverty and are subject to a variety of inequality. A few studies have reported that there are various forms of issue and challenges; unfair treatment at work (Suradi et al., 2013; Kaur, 2007), gender violence (Shuib et al., 2013), and gender inequality (Hirschman, 2016). This holds true for Malaysia as well. According to Abdullah *et al* (2014) rural women in Malaysia faced some form of gender discrimination in managing businesses and employment. Kaur (2007) additional noted that women workers in Malaysia has lack stability in their employment, vulnerable to unfair dismissal, provided with very limited access to training and being denied to a fair promotion in their job.

Nevertheless, previous studies mostly focus on rural area and few urban areas. Considering the scarcity of women's issue and challenges studies in suburban area, this research is relevant to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5) in prioritising women's empowerment. Realising the importance of assessing the challenges faced women in suburban area, this study aims to explore the barriers to women's empowerment living in suburban area in Tawau, Sabah. Given that the state of Sabah in East Malaysia has the highest poverty percentage in the country, with 25.3 percent of the population living below the poverty line (DOSM, 2021), hence, more work is required to eliminate gender bias and empower women at all levels of society in Sabah.

The remainder of this research is structured as follows. The second section contains a focus area of study. The third section contains a review of the literature on methodological and empirical investigations. The data, technique, and variables utilised in this work are described in Section 4. The results and explanations of the empirical findings are presented in Section 6. The last section concludes the study the research.

**Focus Area of Study: Tawau**

Tawau is located on the south-east coast of Sabah surround by the Sulu Sea in the east, Celebes Sea to the south and shares a border with East Kalimantan (now North Kalimantan). The town is approximately 1,904 kilometres from the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur and is 540 kilometres south-east of Kota Kinabalu. The main town area is divided into three sections named Sabindo, Fajar and Tawau Lama (Old Tawau). Sabindo is a plaza, Fajar is a commercial area while Tawau Lama is the original part of Tawau. Almost 70% of the area surrounding Tawau is either high hills or mountainous. The total population of Tawau is 473,344 and the women population is 230,531 in 2015 (City-facts, 2019-2020).

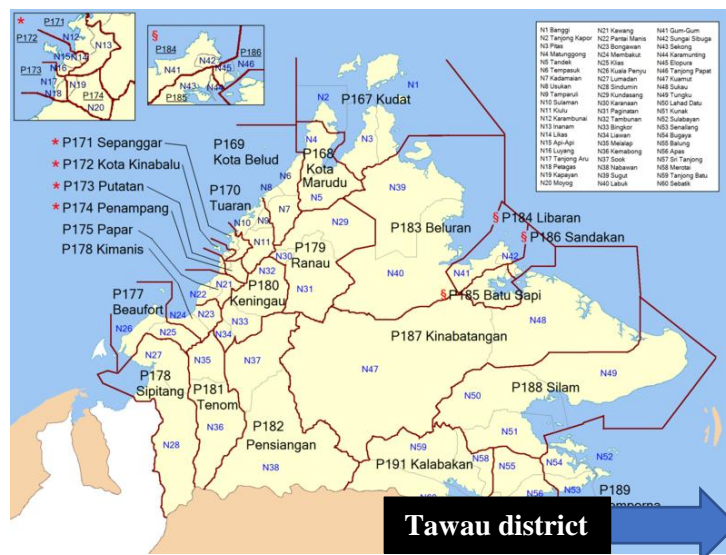


Figure 1. Location of Tawau Constituency in Sabah

Source: Data obtained from Wikimedia Commons, 2021

## Literature Review

The concern of the challenges faced by women has been explored by scholars in the past with respect to a few perspectives such as the issue of employment faced by women, the gender inequality issue and the domestic violence suffered by women.

### Women's Employment and Participation in Economic Activities

According to Kaur (2007), Malaysia's economy has undergone profound transformation since the past four decades. One of the transformations involves the massive mobilisation of women in the workforce. In her paper, Kaur (2007) shed light on the feminisation of labour and the emergence of ethnic division of labour. With paid employment being viewed as male domain, women were being confined to lower-paid employment, farm work or the informal sector. However, the transition of the economy from agriculture-based to manufacturing industrialization has witnessed a sharp increase in the proportion of women participated in the work force. This was in line with Abu Bakar and Abdullah (2007) that had provided support that a substantial proportionally large increase of female participation in the labour force has been found as economy rapidly grows. Abu Bakar and Abdullah (2007) pointed out several factors faced by working women in Malaysia, i) lack of technical and managerial skills, ii) disadvantaged positions of women farmers in terms of lack of access to resources, iii) low earning and employment discrimination, iv) less training opportunity given. In short, there is presence of gender stereotyping in enrolment of certain courses, gender segregation in occupation sectors and gender hierarchies in occupational distribution that can be found.

Meanwhile, Suradi et al (2013) has discussed on some of the issues faced by rural women in the labour market. These issues include low level of education, high level of illiteracy, lack of skills, possessing a primarily agricultural skill set, having no permanent job security and low wages. O'Hara (1998) demonstrated a few important aspects to understand better of the rural women's experience that has been shaped by gender inequality. The aspects considered are: i) residential rural settlements has created access problems to resources, services, paid employment, training, and transportation access, ii) rural women live and work on farm, iii) rural culture and tradition maintain certain beliefs, values and attitudes of a woman's place

in society as reinforced by custom and law. Poor rural women often have no academic qualifications and skills, coupled with single-mother status causes rural women to face immense difficulty in their lives. Suradi et al (2013) advocated the need to empower rural women with life-skills education and developed a conceptual framework based on this need. The relatively low participation rates of female labours in Malaysia have been pointed out by (Lim, 2019). Within the context of the ASEAN region, the female labour force participation rate in Malaysia has been regarded as one of the lowest. Meanwhile, Najib and Majid (2021) revealed discrimination against women in the workplace with evidence of gender income gap exist in Malaysia. By employing multiple linear regression and the Blinder-Oaxaca income decomposition model. They showed that male workers were found to be on average earning significantly higher income than their female counterparts. Besides that, the results also indicated that the income discrimination was highly attributed to the women's marital status due to the gendered norm. On the other hand, Teoh, and Chong (2014) highlighted on the gender aspect on issues related to the development of women entrepreneurship in Malaysia. It was pointed out that cultural barriers, lack of spousal support, gender inequality, few laws to support working families and neglected women entrepreneurs as some of the main challenges to women entrepreneurs.

#### Gender Inequality

Based on the Global Gender Gap Index report, the low ranking of Malaysia has clearly indicated that Malaysian women are far from being on par with their male peers (World Economic Forum, 2013). As women are still expected to play a disproportionate role in domestic work, the eradication of barriers for women to participate in employment would likely still leave most women to be at disadvantaged (Hirschman, 2016). In general, the gendered division of labour has been strongly reinforced by the ideology of highly gendered roles at home.

Heilman (2012) postulated that gender stereotypes are considered as fundamental factor to analyse biased evaluative judgments and discriminatory treatment of women in work environments. Jonsen *et al* (2010) agreed that the stereotypes and perceptions embedded in culture has created gender segregation. Realising the importance of advocating gender equality which is under Sustainable Development Goal No. 5, Musa and Husin (2018) provided discussion on the efforts that can be made by the government through legal means to achieve gender equality in Malaysia. They presented the argument of the need to develop gender equality law with evidence of violations of women's right in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, Moorthy *et al* (2022) provided an assessment to determine whether gender inequality affects women's career progression in Malaysia. In their study, they attempt to shed light in determining whether factors such as patriarchy and gender stereotypes has significant impact on women's career progression. Empirical findings from their study revealed that patriarchal systems have cause women to be underrepresented and the domination of men has created obstruction to women's career advancement. This finding extended the analysis by Fhlatharta and Farrell (2017) in concluding that patriarchal and hegemonic cogitation has significant impact not just on women living in rural areas but also women residing in urban areas.

### Gender Violence and Mental Health Issues

According to Heise (1993), gender violence is a significant cause of female morbidity and mortality. It is serious health consequences and a hidden obstacles to both economic and social development. It deprived the full participation of women in the society and economy. United Nations (UN) also views violence against women as a development issue and one of the obstacles to development due to its detrimental effects on the regions or country's economy (Shuib, *et al.*, 2013). Various International bodies have passed resolutions in recognising the violence against women as a grave concerning issue that needs immediate attention. By 1996, the World Health Organisation (WHO) acknowledged violence against women as serious public health issue and called for urgent actions by governments (WHO, 1996).

In recognising the urge of increasing need to address gender-based abuse, studies such as Shuib *et al* (2013); Abdul Rauf and Ayob (2020) has attempted to examine the domestic violence against women in Malaysia. Shuib *et al* (2013) provided a prevalence study that offered a baseline data on domestic violence against women in Malaysia. A prevalence study creates an opportunity for women who suffer of abuse to be opened of their problems and to seek for help. Besides that, the result from their study contributes towards policy formulation. The findings from their study further reported that domestic violence is a real issue among women with husbands or with long term partners or ever married or ever had partners in Malaysia with a prevalence of 8%. It was also revealed that the highest form of violence is emotional abuse.

Meanwhile, Abdul Rauf and Ayob (2020) explored the forms of domestic violence encountered in the Malaysia community. According to Aizer (2010), domestic violence has a negative impact on the mental health of the victims and exposes them to the risk of both physical and emotional stress. This could further cause them to suffer from depression and negatively affect their work productivity. The empirical findings from their study revealed women are more likely to experience domestic violence due to men's power and control over women. The results showed that married women or women who have married experienced at least one form of domestic violence. The most dominant form of violence found in a household is economic violence. Another study by Aiyar *et al* (2002) that focused on single mothers who were abused revealed that most of them were not well paid with low level of education and poor communication skills.

The review of the past studies past findings has shed light on numerous problems encountered by women. These problems include the challenges faced by women in employment, gender inequality issue and domestic violence challenges. However, very few studies have been conducted with specific focus to the challenges faced by women in suburban area such as Tawau. Besides that, the information obtained from this study could provide deeper understanding of the critical issues encountered by women. This allow the collection of data and a clearer picture on the challenges faced by women to be presented through this study.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach with an in-depth interview. Due to restrictive measures imposed by the authorities during the pandemic, direct or face-to-face

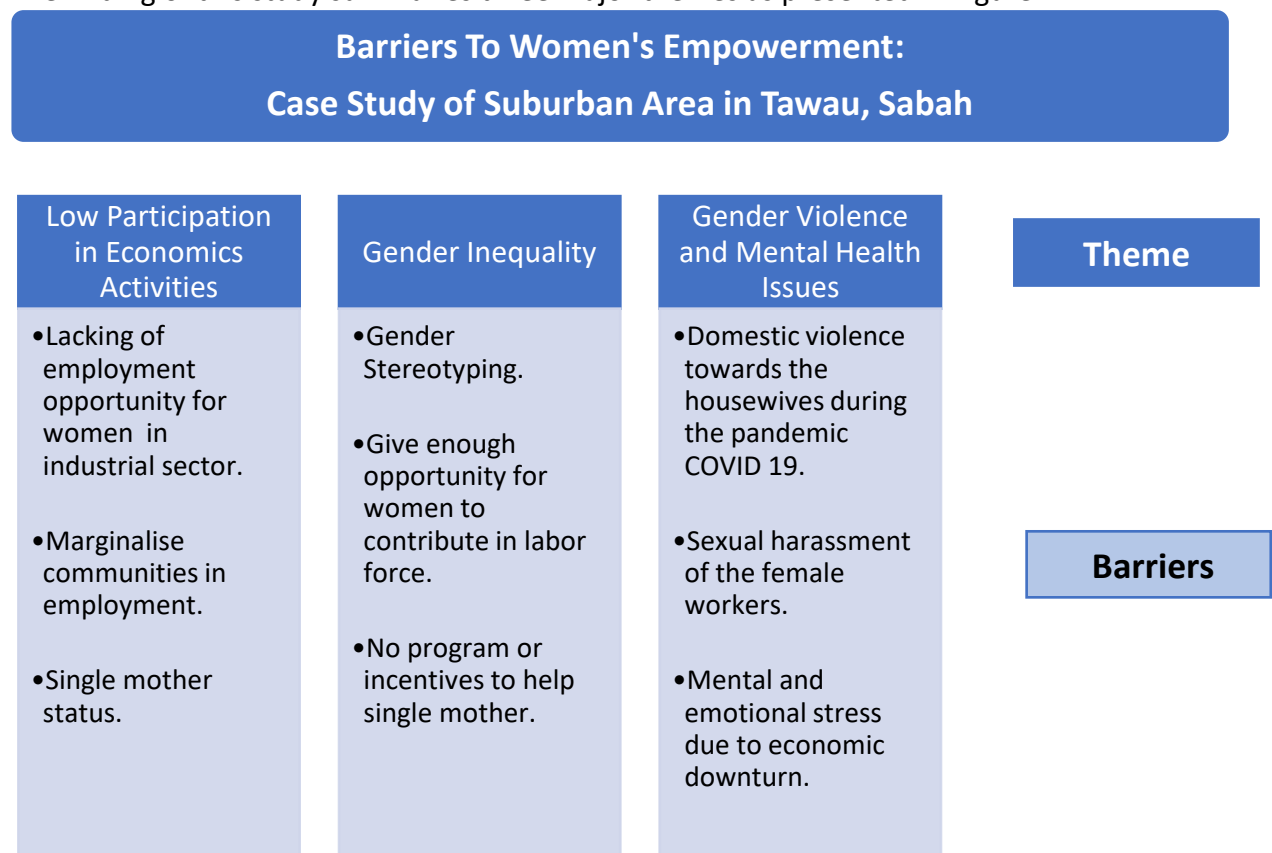
interview for the survey was limited, thus the interview was conducted in a small circle of people. Focus group discussion was implemented for a specific group of people so the activity of generating and sharing ideas can relate to them the new policy, idea, or issue (Breen, 2007). Table 1 shows the status and background profile of the respondents. Subject selection in qualitative research is purposeful, this is to ensure the respondents are selected to best inform in lined with the research objectives and enhance the understanding of the situation of the research study (Sargeant, 2012).

Table 1  
*Status and background profile of respondents*

Respondent	Participant S	Participant A	Participant R
Status	Single mother with six children	Single mother with two children	Single
Background profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrepreneur</li> <li>• MPKK (Majlis Pengurusan Komuniti Kampung)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrepreneur</li> <li>• Head of the Member of political party</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrepreneur</li> <li>• Member of the political party</li> </ul>

**Finding and Discussion**

The finding of this study summaries three major themes as presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Barriers to Women's Empowerment**

### Low Participation in Economics Activities

The first theme focuses on the problem of women unemployment in Tawau. The economic empowerment refers to fair distribution of economic benefit or generating income, nevertheless, the finding shows that women who want to work have a harder time finding a job than men. Majority respondents claimed that the women's lack of engagement is mainly due to a lack of employment opportunity for women. The respondents are also women entrepreneurs, and the following are some of their issues as extracted from the interviews:

*Tawau still lack employment opportunities for women, there is not many factories and some job such as car seller mostly dominated by men ... - Participant R*

Other than that, when it comes to finding a job, the issues of societal discrimination based on race, social status and language barriers also occurred especially for the marginalised group as retrieved from the interviews:

*Most job opportunities for example in big companies or factories are monopolized by the Chinese, while the Malays sometimes you need to have strong "cables"...in the private sector those who know how to speak Chinese language have the opportunities...- Participant R*

Age and appearance are a reality of today's job market, when it comes to getting a job, being a single mother can be rather difficult, especially given their age. As age is frequently used as a criterion for employment, which is a concern because single mothers have a limited job market, and some employers consider a person's attractiveness when hiring, the following extracted from the interviews:

*It is difficult especially for a single mother to find a job considering some of their age for example, in Supermarket, a clerk mostly they want under 25 years old and the majority of the single mother or widowers are over 30 years old...so is there any opportunity for them?... - Participant A*

*Some companies or sectors look at the person's beauty level, if you're not beautiful..., there is such a thing. But there are also those whose sectors do not look at the person's appearance, but this is what happens...- Participant R*

The issue of eligibility for people with various credentials is also a problem, as career opportunities for people with certificates are limited, and job selection based on suitable eligibility might lead to an increase in unemployment.

*Many have diplomas, degree certificates that they have taken at university, but these job opportunities do not exist, so there is discrimination such as 'Ok you don't have a computer certificate, you don't have this certificate, this job is for people who have this only'...- Participant R*

Thus, this indicates that Tawau needs to expand their job market, more research needs to be done on what type of job opportunity suitable so proper training can be given to the women

in rural areas. It is also important if the employer can reconceive and review one's position to let more opportunities for women in rural areas.

### **Gender Inequality**

During the interview, the respondents admitted that there is gender inequality in Tawau. The respondents believed that it is critical to provide equal trust and opportunity for women to undertake the industries dominated by men, as well as opportunities for single mothers to earn a living and appropriate programmes or incentives to assist single mothers to thrive. The following comment from the respondent explain the situation:

*Mostly contractor are men...we as a woman also interested to become a contractor but projects all given to men, it is not impossible that these women cannot be contractors...- Participant A*

This study indicates that, single mothers who work as entrepreneur faced problem to sell and market their products, such as handicrafts, agriculture, or other production due to limited time and household workload. It was obvious that, without co-operation and collaboration of the local community to help the single mother, the single mother is more vulnerable to economic insecurity and competition. Extract from the interview as follows:

*It is better if we have an organisation or cooperative for the single mothers...- Participant S and Participant A*

*Single mothers and single fathers that have businesses need to be assisted by providing them initiative or moratorium to help their business...- Participant A*

Working in the workforce as a woman with children comes at a hefty cost. The nursery is also crucial to assist working men and wives who cannot afford to send their children to day-care. The monthly wages, according to the key informant, are only adequate to cover the monthly day-care bills if the parents send their children away during working hours. Extracted from Participant R:

*My sister has two children, when they were sent to the nursery or day-care, one person cost RM450 so if two children it close to a thousand ringgit, so my sister's salary is really only for the nursery or day-care...- Participant R*

The lack of opportunities for single mothers and the cost of women participating in the workforce are discussed in this interview as a challenge to renewing equal rights for both genders and realising their full potential.

### **Gender Violence and Mental Health Issues**

Women were subjected to gender violence as well as mental health issues. Domestic violence against housewives, as well as child abuse, is extremely important for the community or society to be aware of, especially during the COVID 19 pandemic. However, based on the finding, what equally worrisome, more occurrences of unemployed husbands pressuring their wives to be the primary breadwinners. Extracted from the interview as follows:



*The wife is forced to work because the husband lost his job... No household can be peaceful when burdened by debt here and there. So domestic violence, suicide and child abuse... it happens...- Participant A*

*Domestic violence cases happen in my area last year that involve 3-4 people. Indeed, her husband also doesn't work. So, the wife who works. Washing toilets and wiping windows in the village. Take a wage... RM20. Is it enough? They want to buy rice. ... I have made a complaint to a certain department to ask for an opinion on how this person is always beaten by her husband, right? But then I don't follow up because there are cases that they (victim) don't want to follow up...- Participant S*

Sexual harassment of female workers creates emotional stress. According to the key informant, who is also the MPKK of the kampung, she has received five incidents of sexual harassment so far. Extracted from the interviews:

*There is one case recently, the girl 19 years old, she works in the furniture or the grocery store. She is from the rural area (Sebatik Island) so she has to stay at the owner's house, I approached her because I saw her standing just beside our street she tell me there is sexual harassment and said more of the girls staff extremely stress with the working environment...- Participant S*

During the Covid19 epidemic, mental health and emotional suffering are also common because to the economic crisis. According to the interviews, the number of divorce cases is on the rise, as is the number of suicides:

*When the economy falls, this affects the mental state and causes emotional distress, thus the occurrence of suicide... a lot of households falling apart. This reality does happen...- Participant S*

There is currently no special organisation or non-governmental organisation (NGO) for women to complain about or discuss their difficulties. This is crucial so that women can get advice from others. Extracted from the interviews:

*There is not yet a special organisation for women to speak about their problems... There is a welfare department, but they also have other responsibilities... Counselling for women who needed help because a majority of them is single mother or wife whose husband is not working...- Participant A*

As a consequence, it is difficult for individuals to seek aid, and they are likely to be ashamed because this is not a common issue in society. Awareness is critical for the entire community, and additional methods are required to assist these women in maintaining a healthy living.

### **Concluding Remark**

The structural in-depth interview provided a clear picture of the real issues and challenges faced by suburban women in Tawau. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper that offered insights and advances the knowledge of the critical challenges encountered by

suburban women in Tawau. Some of the highlighted challenges includes the barriers of employment to women, gender inequality issues, gender violence and mental health issues. The interview on participants provided important information that bridge the research gap of the difficulties faced by women in suburban area of Tawau. The finding in this study suggested that the obstacle in women empowerment in Tawau, Sabah persists. Thus, the result from this study will be useful for future studies to be conducted to obtain better understanding of major issues surrounding suburban women in Malaysia. This research can be use by the policy makers as an information to plan solution projects and reform policies that can solve these critical problems. Besides that, building community organizations in sub-urban area is essential to promoting women empowerment, address gender-based violence, and minimize the obstacles faced by women in the society.

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