

EMPOWERING SINGLE MOTHERS THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT: LESSONS FROM SINGLE MOTHERS IN SABAH

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ABSTRACT

Life can be challenging for single mothers. They are viewed as the most vulnerable social groups in society who often lack educational attainment, skills and social networks; thus, limiting their opportunities to compete in the labour market. Consequently, single mothers struggle to achieve financial independence and to support the well-being of their family. To help single mothers build a better life, it is crucial to provide single mothers with solid institutional support programmes. This paper explores the extent to which the institutional support programmes designed for single mothers are in accordance with the needs and expectation of the single mothers in Sabah. The views obtained from the leaders of the single mother associations show that the support programmes are useful for single mothers; however, the programmes are still inadequate to lift them out of poverty. Suggestions for improvement of the institutional support programmes for single mothers are highlighted.

Keywords: empowerment, institutional support, single mothers, Sabah

INTRODUCTION

There is an increase in the number of single mothers world-wide (Addelyan Rasi, Moula, Puddephatt & Timpka, 2013), and Malaysia is no exception (Ahmad, Sabri, Abd Rahim & Osman, 2017; Endut, Azmawati, & Hashim, 2015). Based on the 2000 Malaysian Census, there were 643,749 single mothers in Malaysia (Malaysia, 2000) and this figure increased to 831,860 as reported in the 2010 census (Malaysia, 2010). A similar trend is also observed in Sabah. It was reported that the total number of single mothers in Sabah in 2000 was 46,859 and the number has increased to 61,717 in 2010 (Malaysia, 2010; Malaysia, 2000). Out of 61,717 single mothers in Sabah, 40,163 (65%) of them fall into the category of working age population (15-64 years)¹; thus, indicating them as one of the groups in the Sabah population that is relevant in contributing to the economic activities of the state. However, single mothers have limited employment opportunities (Omar, Nazri & Che Wel, 2014) and are more likely to work in the informal sector, that offers low-income and job instability (Son & Bauer, 2010; Urban & Olson, 2005). Within this context, it is argued that single mothers face difficulties in participating in the labour market due to the limited skills they can offer (Topimin, Fabeil & Abdullah, 2019). Often, single mothers are described as having low level of educational attainment, lack of skills and social networks and struggling in balancing between work and family responsibilities (Idris & Selvaratnam, 2012; Rembiasz, 2016). Having limited choices for jobs because of these constraints have impacted the well-being of their family. For example, being trapped in financial problems and other stressful situations in their life are a common reality for single mothers (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Generally, it has long been debated that because female-headed households have limited access to productive resources, have lower income-earning ability, and face work-family conflicts, they are more likely to fall into poverty (Moser, 1993). For instance, the issue of poverty is recognised as affecting single mothers more than other groups in the Malaysian population (Roddin, Sultan Sidi, Yusof, Mohamed & Abdul Razzaq., 2011). Being the head of the households, single mothers face challenges in ensuring the stability of their household's livelihoods.

¹ Census of population distribution and basic demographic characteristics 2010, by Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010).

Therefore, it is believed that an institutional support from government or social welfare organisations are crucial for the survival and well-being of single mothers (Addelyan Rasi et al., 2013; Evans, 2011). It is suggested that programmes focusing on skill-based training would help single mothers in increasing their income and allowing them to be socially and economically competitive (Zainal, Abdul Rahim & Sabri, 2017). In this regard, any support programme for single mothers should be able to alleviate their financial hardships and assist them in building a better life. However, the marginal position of single mothers in society and their hardship continues to be discussed in previous literature (e.g. Ndiso, Murega & Eric, 2016; Van Lancker, Ghysels & Cantillon, 2015). For example, it is argued that despite various support programmes that are being provided to single mothers, they continue to live in poverty (Mahat et al., 2019). In addition, previous research shows that single mothers who generate income through entrepreneurial activities struggle to achieve better performance even though they have received institutional support in operating their business (Salwa, Azila & Fidlizan, 2015). Furthermore, it is argued that research which investigates the effectiveness of support programmes for single mothers is more likely to explain the nature than the outcomes of such programmes (Ahmad & Abdul Ghani, 2016). In this respect, the suitability of such programmes to meet the needs of single mothers can be questioned. Therefore, it is the interest of this study to investigate the extent to which the institutional support for single mothers has facilitated their empowerment and overall well-being. Specifically, this paper addresses the following research question:

- Does the institutional support for single mothers facilitate the empowerment and well-being of single mothers?

This study is contextualised based on the experience of single mothers in Sabah. The choice of Sabah as a research setting was made based on two reasons. First, the number of single mothers in Sabah has increased between the period between 2000 and 2010². In addition, based on a preliminary investigation with two organisations that deal with single mothers' issues in Sabah, it was found that over the years the number of single mothers who are registered with the organisations have also increased. Second, considering that Sabah has been reported as one of the poorest states in Malaysia (Habibullah et al., 2018; Hassan, 2011), it is believed that the increased incidence of single mothers could have an influence on the poverty issue faced by the state. As such, this paper sets to analyse the role of institutional support in facilitating and empowering single mothers in the context of Sabah.

The following section discusses the literature review on the well-being of single mothers and how it is influenced by the role of institutional support. This is followed by the discussion of the research methodology used. Next, the discussion of findings is presented. The final section presents the concluding remarks which highlight the study's contributions, limitations, and implications for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Being a single mother is often seen as a misfortunate situation that has forced women to lead their families. As such, it is not uncommon that research on single mothers is more likely to focus on negative aspects of single mothering. This practice has long been debated as inadequate in providing a knowledge and an understanding about the reality faced by single mothers (Mannis, 1999). Often, single mothers are regarded as marginal groups in society and this view is widely discussed in the women's literature (e.g. Rusyda et al., 2011; Stack & Meredith, 2018). Within this context, the issue of economic and financial hardship of single mothers becomes a dominant area of discussion, particularly due to the fact that single mothers have limited choices in finding jobs. On one hand, this limitation is caused by their lack of skills, knowledge, and experience (Topimin et al., 2019). On the other hand, single mothers struggle to find jobs that enable them to equally fulfil their roles as the provider and nurturer of families (Kamaruddin, Wee & Abdul Majeed, 2012). Therefore, more often than not single mothers are involved in jobs that offer low income and lack of security. To ensure their active participation in the labour market, many single mothers are involved in small business activities as this career provides them with flexibility, thus allowing them to fulfil their familial obligations (Kariv, 2013). However, the involvement of single mothers in small business activities is also full of challenges. For example, it is argued that single mothers have not made a good business success (Ismail, Husin, Abdul Rahim, Mohd Kamal & Che Mat., 2016; Mulia, 2017). In this sense, it can be seen that single mothers are more likely to be in financial hardship either by being workers or owners of small businesses. To overcome the challenges faced by single mothers in performing roles as the income provider of their households, single mothers have to rely on informal support particularly when the public safety net is weak (Radey, 2018).

The significance of an institutional support in empowering single mothers is agreed by many scholars (e.g. Addelyan Rasi et al., 2013; Li, 2020). It is argued that support from government organisations is essential in helping single mothers to develop their potential in income generating activities (Roddin et al., 2011). For example, it is believed that single mothers' involvement in support programmes such as entrepreneurship training and workshops helps to increase the level of resilience and independence that are crucial for business success; thus, improving their quality of life (Hamzah, Djermani & Ben Omran, 2021). In addition, Ke (2016) asserts that various support programmes such as education and training, entrepreneurship, credit facilities as well as information services are significant in alleviating poverty among single mothers. However, several issues can be highlighted concerning the provision of institutional support for single mothers. First, there is a lack of research that focuses on the effectiveness of support programmes for single mothers, and research on this aspect tend to focus more on explaining the nature than the outcomes of the programmes (Ahmad & Abdul Ghani, 2016). Generally, monitoring process has been identified as one of the crucial elements in determining the effectiveness of institutional support (Landig, 2011). However, this aspect received less attention by many support providers (Topimin, 2015) and no comprehensive data can be accessed regarding this matter (Ram & Smallbone, 2003). Second, the provision of institutional support for single mothers is argued as lacking gender sensitivity (Li, 2020). The significance of the gender concept in researching women has long been established in literature (e.g. Oakley, 1981;

² Based on the 2000 and 2010 Malaysian Census (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010).

Scott, 1986). This concept is helpful in grasping the complexities of women's lives and gender relations. In this respect, the absence of the element of gender sensitivity in the design of institutional support for single mothers could lead to the failure in meeting their needs (Li, 2007). Third, there is an argument of the irrelevant approach used in providing institutional support for single mothers that affects its effectiveness. In this respect, it is suggested that assistance programmes for single mothers should use a more integrated approach by minimising the element of social aid and promoting economic opportunities (Evans, 2011). This approach could help to assure single mothers' long-term subsistence adequacy and further enhance their capabilities. In addition, it is argued that there is an issue in the implementation of support programmes particularly in terms of the limited knowledge on single mothers possessed by the support providers (Idris & Selvaratnam, 2012). Therefore, these issues have provided the foundation to further explore the roles that institutional support has in empowering and improving the well-being of single mothers.

In Malaysia, institutional support for single mothers is as part of a larger national goal aimed at integrating women into the country's development process. Some of the initiatives include the formulation of the National Policy for Women (NPW) in 1989, the inclusion of women's issues in a separate chapter of the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995) and the formulation of the National Action Plan for the development of women in 1992. The institutional framework for women is further enhanced by the establishment of the Ministry of Women and Development in 2001 and was renamed the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, as it is known today. The ministry oversees issues concerning women in the country's development process. It has the responsibility of strengthening the family institution and play a significant role in helping single mothers. A department that is known as the Department of Women Development (DWD) was established and is placed under the ministry. The department is present in all thirteen Malaysian states, with the goal of improving the efficiency with which women's concerns are dealt with throughout the country. In the context of Sabah, the significance of the DWD in empowering single mothers is apparent. It is evident that any socio-economic activities that are provided by the department are mainly targeted to single mothers. The establishment of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and DWD is regarded as a major contribution of the institutional framework for women and single mothers in Malaysia. It is through these establishments that specific initiatives for single mothers are realised. For example, the ministry was given the responsibility to work on the National Action Plan to Empower Single mothers [2015-2020] by focusing on three major aspects; to empower single mothers, to improve the social welfare of single mothers and to optimise research and standardisation on single mothers (Mahat, Mahat, Ahmad Mustafa & Wan Ismail, 2019). To improve the living conditions of single mothers, it is the interest of the Malaysian government to encourage single mothers to have a sustainable source of income. Consequently, various income generating programmes or initiatives are provided for single mothers in the country that has led many single mothers to be involved in income generating activities (i.e. I-Kit Program). Although there is a range of support programmes that have been provided for single mothers relating to income generating activities, the effectiveness of such programmes in uplifting the financial independence of single mothers is unknown, particularly when it is widely discussed that single mothers in Malaysia still live-in poverty (e.g. Mahat et al., 2019; Mulia, 2017; Roddin et al., 2011). Consequently, the suitability of the institutional support for single mothers is debated in the women's literature (e.g. Endut et al., 2015).

After taking into consideration all single mothers-related issues that are highlighted in the women's literature such as the inadequacy and lack of comprehensive scope of research on single mothers in Malaysia (Evans, 2011; Sabri, 2019), the significance of institutional support for them (Addelyan et al., 2013) and the issue of ineffectiveness of such support (Ahmad & Abdul Ghani, 2016; Mahat et al., 2019), there is a need to conduct a research on single mothers that can provide us with information beyond the descriptive context, as well as a deeper understanding of single mothers' living situations. Therefore, it is the interest of this study to investigate the extent to which institutional support for single mothers has empowered them, particularly in terms of strengthening their households' economies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To investigate the extent to which current initiatives for single mothers have empowered them, a qualitative research strategy (Creswell, 2014) that focuses on a narrative approach (Butina, 2015) and capitalises on in-depth interviews (Patton, 2015) was adopted. The decision to use a qualitative research technique in this study was based on several important considerations. Being a single mother is always related to a misfortunate situation that forces women to be the head their household (Topimin et al., 2019). Being the provider and nurturer of households, whether by choice or by force, is an unpleasant experience for single mothers because of the hardship and distress they face. Therefore, a more participatory research approach should be used to help single mothers manage their feelings and thoughts while participating in a discussion about their lives (Addelyan Rasi et al., 2013). Furthermore, in-depth interviews also allow women's voices to be heard, exploitation to be reduced, women to not be treated as objects to be controlled by the researcher's technical procedure, and feminism's emancipatory goals to be realised (Bryman, 2015), thus can help to empower women (Creswell, 2013). In addition, single mothers should not be treated as 'objects' in a study (Sarantakos, 2013: 35). As such, the use of narrative analysis allows single mothers to tell their stories and convey information about themselves naturally (Butina, 2015), enabling researchers to extract detailed narrative descriptions and in-depth meaning from their stories.

An in-depth interview with two leaders of single mother associations were conducted. Due to the COVID-19 crisis and the implementation of the movement control order, researchers are unable to conduct more interviews with other leaders of the single mother associations in the research area. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, and the data was transcribed for analysis. The narrative was analysed following Creswell's (2013) steps: reading the narrative, coding, bracketing text according to codes, and interpreting evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the empirical evidence on the extent to which the institutional support for single mothers can facilitate their empowerment process. The discussion revolves on three aspects: the economic well-being of single mothers, the understanding of institutional support for single mothers and how the institutional support has been implemented.

The economic well-being of single mothers

Box 1: Financial distress of single mothers

Both single mother leaders interviewed agree that the financial crisis is the most pressing issue facing single mothers who are members of the organisations they manage. They stated:

“I’ve been widowed for more than 30 years. I’ve been involved in helping single mothers since then ... formally and informally. As a single mother myself, I personally faced loads of challenges in ensuring the survival of my family. Luckily, I was a full-time employee ... which means I can assure that every day we had food on our table. However, the single mothers that are registered with my association now have different stories. Even though they are the members of this association ... I didn’t see their life get better. They come to me with a basic issue ... need money for food for their children’s necessities ... they have no permanent jobs. Some of them have babies and young kids, so it is not easy for single mothers to work. Some of them are able to find work, but there are additional costs associated with leaving their children in the care of others. It is quite often that these single mothers were housewives before they become single mothers. Therefore, without prior work experience and a lack of education ... it is a challenge for them to find decent jobs.”
(Participant 1)

“Some of our members are working ...so, there are not as many problems in this group. They need assistance, but it is usually in terms of improving their family’s well-being, for example ... they are looking for better opportunities for their children. There are also single mothers who work part-time in their neighbourhood, doing house chores. There are also single mothers who sell local cakes to earn a living, but their income is inconsistent. They struggle to ensure the stability of their household’s livelihood. Their well-being is affected greatly by the family’s economic condition. (Participant 2)

The narrative in Box 1 illustrates the financial hardship faced by single mothers. The data reveal that single mothers struggle to meet the general criteria for employment, particularly in terms of their level of education and previous work experience, thus limiting their job prospects (Topimin et al., 2019). The fact that most single mothers had never worked outside their homes before becoming single mothers is one of the key reasons for this situation. The views shared by the leaders of the single mother associations show that single mothers tend to engage in jobs that have low-income. The findings of this study reveal that single mothers who work in the informal sector have low resources and job insecurity, which is consistent with previous studies (Son & Bauer, 2010; Urban & Olson, 2005). The money earned from this employment is frequently insufficient to cover a family's basic necessities, causing single mothers to struggle in providing a good standard of life for their family. This situation indicates the poverty challenge that single mothers face as highlighted in previous research (e.g. Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Also, this finding conforms to the earlier discussion that single mothers in Malaysia still live in poverty (Mahat et al., 2019; Mulia, 2017; Roddin et al., 2011). Consistent with previous research, as the primary income earners for the family, the issue of domestic and work responsibilities become more complex for single mothers (Idris & Selvaratnam, 2012; Rembiasz, 2016). It is apparent that single mothers have fewer choices for jobs and are more likely to be employed in low-wage jobs. The nature of low-wage jobs is normally associated with a lack of flexibility, no benefits, no standardised work schedules as well as no job security. Consequently, working in the informal sector means single mothers must contend with the difficulties of juggling work and family commitments. As such, the work-family conflict is more critical for single mothers than married mothers.

The understanding of institutional support for single mothers

Box 2: Lack of suitable support mechanisms

Both research participants bring attention to a specific issue regarding the lack and suitability of institutional support for single mothers, which has an impact on their empowering process. Regrettably, single mother organisations are frequently viewed as a key institution that can help them to overcome their financial difficulties. They stated:

“For most of them ... being the members of this association is seen as crucial to resolving their problem. However, our capacity here is so limited. The main issue of our members is very basic ... the survival ... financial issue ... so, there must be an adequate support mechanism in place to deal with this issue. I am fortunate in that I am surrounded by wonderful people. They are the main financial providers of this association's operations. My friends, my family members ... also a few politicians who are also my friends ... have helped me a lot in giving financial support to run this association. Of course, the government is willing to help, but its financial assistance has so far been limited to specific projects ... project based. I write a proposal outlining the programme for single mothers that I intend to implement as well as the funding requirements. At the end of the day, often, the amount received is less than the amount requested. So, whatever plan I have for assisting single mothers, it is subject to the amount of money available to this association. (Participant 1)

“There are 250 single mothers who are currently registered with us. Do you know what the main difficulty is that these women are dealing with? Financial! I have to tell them that this association cannot help them with their financial difficulty ... this association is not a charity ... that even this association struggle with its financial problem. It is a common perception among single mothers that this association could help them ... but we can't. We have been without funding for years... We survive on the savings that the association still has... well... being in the domain of the single mother... Isn't it all about surviving? If we want to empower single mothers ... we need the right support mechanisms. How are we going to empower them? Do we want to support them survive in the long run? Is the assistance provided to single mothers assisting them in achieving financial independence in the future? So far, the majority of members here have received welfare support, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis. (Participant 2).

The need of institutional support for single mothers is acknowledged by both leaders of single mother organisations. Single mothers, in general, require institutional support to secure their survival. As revealed in this study, single mothers' earnings from an employment or economic activities provide them with a lower income, preventing them from acquiring the financial resources needed to support their family. Thus, institutional support is relevant in assisting the survival of single mothers, as discussed extensively in previous literature (Addelyan et al., 2013; Evans, 2011). However, the leaders of single mother associations that were interviewed argue that the existing support mechanism is ineffective in facilitating the empowerment of single mothers. One of the issues highlighted is in terms of the welfare approach adopted, which will only encourage single mothers to become more reliant on support programmes. What is required is a support programme that can help single mothers in achieving long-term financial independence. These findings are consistent with the argument in previous research on the value of institutional support for single mothers, which focused more on social welfare aid than establishing economic opportunities (Evans, 2011). The study's findings also reveal that single mothers are more likely to seek assistance from single mother organisations. In this respect, single mother organisations are seen by single mothers as institutions that can assist them in overcoming life's challenges. However, the two leaders of the single mother associations give an insight into the association's inability to help single mothers with their financial problems. These findings provide two indications. First, single mothers could be unaware of the institutional support that is available. Second, the possibility of single mother associations to be one of the main institutions in providing institutional support to single mothers.

The implementation of institutional support for single mothers

Box 3: Access to support programmes

During the interview sessions, the two leaders of single mother associations highlight several issues that are related to the implementation of support programmes for single mothers.

Access to support programmes:

“There are single mothers who have been abandoned by their spouses. When they seek for assistance, they need to provide evidence ... a divorce paper. This is ridiculous. There is also a situation in which single mothers are required to deal with an online application. Do you think that an online application is suitable for single mothers?” (Participant 2)

“Sometimes I realise that the same person is getting assistance ... or that the same person has always participated in a programme. For single mothers, a first-come, first-served approach is unacceptable. We must understand that there are different categories of single mothers, each with its own set of limitations. So, it is necessary to comprehend how each category has different types of barriers in gaining access to assistance programmes. Even single mothers have different interests. There are also cases in which single mothers were selected to join courses on sewing, hoping that they can start their own income generating activities based on the knowledge gained. However, some of the single mothers have no interest in sewing and would not be able to earn money from such activities.” (Participant 1)

From the perspectives of the two leaders of single mother associations, the narratives in Box 3 show how institutional support for single mothers has been implemented. In general, both leaders agree that the existing programmes benefit single mothers, especially in terms of gaining skills in fields that are strongly related to women. The practice of providing women’s related skills to single mothers is a common approach used by support providers. This finding corresponds with Sethuraman & Duvvury’s proposition (2007) that women’s empowerment programmes tend to promote on sustainable livelihood and access to key resources by providing knowledge on specific economic activities. However, some crucial aspects have been identified as being critical in impacting the programmes’ performance. First, the findings reveal that accessing support programmes for single mothers is hampered by bureaucracy. The data suggest that some techniques for gaining access to support programmes are ineffective for single mothers. For example, the application process is complicated by conditions imposed on single mothers, such as the need to provide a valid divorce certificate and to apply online. The issue of bureaucracy in accessing support programmes is a common issue for women in general (Topimin, 2015), and our study adds to the evidence by focusing on single mothers. Since the abilities and constraints of single mothers vary, there are times when single mothers are unable to take advantage of the assistance programs provided due to delays in submitting applications. Also, the findings of the study show weaknesses in the process of selecting single mothers for a particular support program. The inclusion of single mothers who are not interested in the assistance programme (for example, involvement in a course) will have impact on the program’s effectiveness.

Box 4: Focus of support programmes

The two leaders of single mother organisations emphasise the need of ensuring that assistance programmes for single mothers are tailored to their specific needs. They stated:

Focus of support programmes

“Some common courses attended by single mothers are related to women’s nature ... baking, cooking, sewing ... doing handicrafts ... these courses are good. However, if we expect single mothers to earn money after attending these courses, we must provide them with more than simply exposure; they need to learn how to get started ... have the necessary skills and interests... have an adequate money as capital ... otherwise, the programmes will give no impact on single mothers” (Participant 1)

“I believe that single mothers should have more options in terms of courses offered to them. I’m aware that cooking and baking, as well as sewing courses, are the most popular options for single mothers. Single mothers might benefit from a more up-to-date training that reflect the current situation. Give single mothers something that reflect their situations. The younger single mothers have different interest from the older groups. For example ... the young ones prefer beauty courses to cooking courses” (Participant 2).

The narratives in Box 4 demonstrate that single mother assistance programmes mostly focus on courses that are generally connected with the world of women, such as cooking, sewing, and producing handicrafts. Although these courses provide single mothers with exposure and knowledge, not all single mothers are interested in them. Basically, single mothers in their twenties and thirties are rarely interested in taking an out-of-date course. Endut et al. (2015) emphasise the need of compatibility between institutional support and single mothers. In this respect, this finding provides evidence on the issue of gender insensitivity in the design of institutional support for single mothers as highlighted in previous research (Li, 2020), suggesting that the gender-related issue continues to undermine the complexity of gender relations for single mothers. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need of offering a comprehensive support programme, particularly for ensuring that single mothers may benefit from the knowledge gained through participation in economic-generating activities such as entrepreneurship. These findings reinforce earlier research findings that emphasise the necessity of employing varied approaches for each age group of single mothers in providing supporting assistance, particularly to help them realise their entrepreneurial potential (Rembiasz, 2016).

Box 5: Monitoring process

The two leaders of single mother associations highlight that the effectiveness of support programmes for single mothers can be affected by the lack of monitoring process.

Monitoring process

“There are occasions when the equipment given to single mothers is sold to other people. It shouldn't have happened in the first place. But ... it is unfair to put all the blame on single mothers. They are in need for money ... perhaps sewing is not their thing. That's why I said ... give them something that is tailored to their needs. If all recipients of assistance programmes are closely monitored, we may be able to avoid a situation like this. I do understand that monitoring could be a challenge for government organisations ... they may not have enough people. They must, however, find ways ... maybe work closely with associations and let them do the monitoring to their members. But this thing must be arranged strategically. This is not a charity work ... acknowledged it as it should be.” (Participant 1).

“After all we want to help them ... so that they can stand on their own two feet. To do that ... we need to support them from the beginning to the end. Know what they're doing and how well they're doing. To monitor single mothers... a complete database is needed ... and this issue needs to be resolved as well” (Participant 2)

The narratives in Box 5 reveal the aspect of monitoring of institutional support. The views shared by the leaders of single mother associations indicate that the monitoring process of the support provided to single mothers is hardly being carried out. This finding supports Ahmad & Abdul Ghani's (2016) argument on the lack of initiatives to monitor the effectiveness of the support programmes for single mothers. The lack of a structured monitoring method has an impact on both single mothers and the organisations that help them. In a situation like this, a single mother is unable to use such assistance to improve her financial status in the long run. Meanwhile, the institutions that provide such assistance are unable to ensure the long-term viability of the programmes, which could cause wasteful spending (Diyana, Doris & Nor Aini, 2009). Consequently, the impact of support programmes for single mothers cannot be adequately captured. The importance of continuous monitoring systems of institutional support has been discussed in previous literature (e.g. Landig, 2011), though lack of research has been conducted in relation to support for single mothers. This research shows that a comprehensive database is a crucial component of successful institutional support and may be used to monitor its effectiveness, an argument that was previously highlighted by Ram & Smallbone (2003).

CONCLUSION

This study aims to investigate the extent to which the institutional support for single mothers has facilitated the empowerment process of single mothers. Several points can be concluded from the research findings. First, this study adds to the growing body of knowledge showing how single mothers struggle to provide for their families' needs (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009; Ndiso et al., 2016; Van Lancker et al., 2015). Within this context, single mothers are more likely to engage in informal employment which bring two impacts on the well-being of their families. In one aspect, their jobs provide them with lower income, making it difficult for them to meet the family's basic necessities. In addition, working in the informal sector exposes single mothers to unfavourable working circumstances, which exacerbates the challenge of balancing work and family commitments. Second, the significance of institutional support for single mothers is established in this study (Addelyan Rasi et al., 2013; Li, 2020). However, there is a need for support providers to ensure the suitability of the support programmes for single mothers. The programmes must be able to reduce the use of social aid approach and replace it with a more conclusive approach that can help single mothers achieve long-term financial independence. In addition, this study revealed that single mother associations have the potential to become one of the relevant institutions for giving support to single mothers. Within this context, the nature and types of activities organised by single mother associations can be expanded to give greater impact to single mothers. Single mother associations can actively participate in the empowerment of single mothers rather than simply forwarding names of single mothers to other organisations' support programmes. Finally, this research uncovers a number of flaws in the way single mother support programmes have been implemented (Endut et al., 2015; Idris & Selvaratnam, 2012; Li, 2020; Li, 2007). It is suggested that support for single mothers should be free of bureaucracy and procedural issue that would cause the application process to be delayed. Furthermore, support programmes should be designed with the idea that there are various types of single mothers, each with their own set of strengths and limits. In addition, a rigorous monitoring strategy should be devised in order to capture the impact of the programmes on single mothers. We conclude that a thorough analysis on the needs of single mothers should be carried out prior to the implementation of

support programmes. Any improvement on the three aspects of the implementation of the institutional support highlighted in this study can help to empower single mothers, thus, increasing their chances of achieving and maintaining the well-being of their families.

This study investigates the influence of institutional support in the empowerment process of single mothers and how the implementation of the support improves their well-being. In this sense, this study offers a new research perspective of single mothers that departs from focusing only on the negative aspects of single mothers. Within this context, this study demonstrates the significance of the concept of gender sensitivity in providing support for single mothers. As such, this study has responded to the scarcity of research on single mothers as well as the need to incorporate a gender perspective into the development of policy and initiatives for single mothers (Li, 2020). Furthermore, this study has demonstrated how and why single mothers continue to be marginalised in society even in the presence of institutional support in their environment. The understanding about the reality of single mothers and their empowerment process can help policy makers to design support programmes that meets the need of single mothers, thus increase the effectiveness of such programmes. Therefore, this study has responded to the need in delivering institutional support efficiently by achieving the highest impact and utilising the lowest cost, thereby preventing the possibility of wasteful spending by the government (Braidford, Stone & Tesfaye, 2013, Diyana et al., 2009) particularly during the current economic situation.

This study has limitations that warrant future research. The data of this study was collected from two leaders of single mothers' associations. Future research can add more involvement from other single mother associations in different geographical areas to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon of single mothers in Sabah. In addition, this study only captures the views of the leaders of single mother associations, no views from single mothers and government organisations as well as women's non-profit organisations that deal with single mother issues were obtained. Future research can incorporate the views of these parties to gain further insights on issues concerning single mothers. Finally, future research can be extended to other states in Malaysia to provide some cross-cultural findings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by Fundamental Research Grant Scheme, Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia (FRGS/1/2020/SS01/UMS/02/1)

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