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Women’s Work Empowerment through “Re-upcycle” Initiatives for Women-at-home

Rohaiza Rokis*

Abstract: Recyclable issues do not receive sufficient attention, which thus see low awareness among Malaysians. This paper¹ proposes women’s active participation in re-upcycling habits to maintain the ecologically challenging world today. Empowering women-at-home in this way enable them to sustain their own social and ecological well-being. Women can be active participants in community development activities. Even though they may be disinterested to work outside home, their involvement in their community should be encouraged. Embeddedness theory (ET) advocates empowerment of women through re-upcycling actions are to be initiated from home. With the support from community, in turn, these actions can be an economic resources for their households. Malaysian women are most affected by employment opportunities, supports and reassurances from various sectors, such as the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and most importantly, the men in their lives. Depriving them from this socio-economic foundation will further impact the unemployment rate for Malaysia. On the other hand, if strategic planning is implemented by utilising the abundance number of unemployed women-at-home, the socio-economic conditions of the nation can also be improved. Indeed, this paper motivates discussions on the employment policy whereby re-upcycling activities may pave ways for women-at-home to get involved in employment, without leaving their homes.

Key Words: Action research; Community development; Employment policy; Re-upcycling; Social ecology; Women’s empowerment; Women-at-home; Work

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Abstrak: Pemerhatian yang cetek terhadap isu olah-semula menyebabkan kadar kesedaran masyarakat Malaysia berkenaan hal ini adalah rendah. Artikel ini mencadangkan penglibatan wanita secara lebih aktif kepada tabiat olah-semula dalam menghadapi cabaran ekologi dunia kini. Pemerksaan wanita di-rumah atau golongan suri rumahtangga membolehkan mereka mengekalkan kesejahteraan sosial dan ekologi mereka sendiri. Golongan wanita boleh terlibat secara aktif dalam aktiviti pembangunan komuniti. Walaupun mereka mungkin kurang berminat untuk bekerja di luar, penglibatan mereka dalam komuniti patut diberi galakan. Teori pembenaman (*embeddedness theory*) (ET) menyokong kepada pemerksaan wanita melalui aktiviti olah-semula bermula dari rumah. Dengan adanya sokongan komuniti, inisiatif ini boleh menjadi sumber ekonomi wanita tersebut. Wanita Malaysia merupakan antara golongan yang paling terkesan dengan peluang pekerjaan, sokongan dan galakan daripada pelbagai sektor dan pihak termasuklah badan kerajaan, badan bukan kerajaan dan lebih utama lagi, dari suami mereka sendiri. Tidak memenuhi keperluan asas sosio-ekonomi mereka akan memberi kesan kepada kadar pengangguran di Malaysia. Sebaliknya, jika perancangan strategik bagi membantu golongan wanita di-rumah atau suri rumahtangga yang tidak bekerja ini dilaksanakan, keadaan sosio-ekonomi negara boleh diperbaiki. Demikian, artikel ini menggalakkan lebih banyak diskusi berkenaan polisi pekerjaan di mana aktiviti olah-semula mungkin membolehkan lebih banyak ruang dan peluang kepada wanita di-rumah atau suri rumahtangga untuk terlibat dalam dunia kerjaya tanpa meninggalkan rumah mereka.

Kata Kunci: Kajian perlaksanaan, Pembangunan komuniti, Polisi pekerjaan, Olah-semula, Ekologi social, Pemerksaan wanita, Wanita di-rumah, Kerja

Introduction

Globally, an increasing amount of recyclable resources has been generated due to economic development and population growth, particularly in Asia (Yoshida, Shimamura and Aizawa, 2007). Humans in the modernised and highly technological world generate a great amount of recyclable resources in varying qualities – precious, such as metal substances and harmful substances, like toxin. At the same time, the current global movement of recycling is increasing due to the concern with environmental pollution and other problems related to the environment.

Realising the potential of converting the waste into quality resources, this research searches effective ways for the inclusion and participation of women in the re-upcycling activities from home.

Empowering them in such activities lead to an increased use and reuse of wastes, while reducing the harmful effects of the worthless wastes. This is an action research that outlines some policy implications for women's empowerment in domestic recyclable activities.

Today, worldwide demand for resources, particularly economic resources, is increasing amid the onslaught of globalisation. Apart from natural resources, people also find that thrown away home materials, i.e., home garbage and waste, can be potential sources of new economic resources. Thus, this kind of waste should be managed effectively through re-upcycling efforts.

Women's work empowerment and global policies

In its general concept, empowerment is an increase in power. Women's empowerment refers to women gaining control in various sectors. In their household, women's empowerment embraces the idea of contributing to the household income, making household decisions and having ownership of assets, equality in marriage, motherhood freedom and the right to contraception and safe abortion (Parveen and Leonhauser, 2004). In the socio-legal sector, women's empowerment is about having access to resources, like political and legal awareness (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). Women's empowerment is about having a right of entry to education, gender awareness and also freedom of movement (Beteta, 2006; Sen, 1999).

As much as women's empowerment is seen as a necessity by today's standards, nevertheless, it is still a hotly debated topic in developing countries. Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) attribute this situation due to lack of interpretation of the concept. Rohaiza (2011:2009: 2005) finds social cultural factors obstruct its existence.

The World Bank championed the 'gender equality is smart economics' slogan in 2006. It urges women to increase a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), yet it ignores the persistent presence of fundamental gender inequalities. Ironically, the World Bank's 2009 report concurs that gender inequality is due to an unequal market economy associated with the unpaid work of household maintenance and subsistence of society (ibid, 2009). For a real functioning of gender equality, women should have full access, equal participation and conscious decision-making power on matters concerning their own life (Pandey and Okazaki, 2004).

Many women cannot identify their capabilities easily, what more to empower themselves to better their situation. Women's empowerment implies the ability to strengthen their potential in the socio-economic sector, particularly in the developing countries. According to Sen (1999), the lack of money in households is an important factor impacting rural development. The fact that women have less control over money contributes to their low status (Mehra, 1997), which further situates them in an under-privileged condition. According to the report of the Malaysian Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (2007), empowering women indicates a mutual respect, equality of opportunities, equality in day-to-day life and overcoming of prejudices. The commitment from Malaysia is also positive. According to the former Women, Family and Community Development Minister, Datuk Seri Rohani Abdul Karim: "the government has implemented various economic empowerment and poverty eradication programmes such as Development of Women Entrepreneurship Initiatives (DeWI), Women Site Women Bazaar (LaWa), 1Azam, and Two-Year Exit Entrepreneurship (2YEP) that continues to provide direct welfare assistance and facilities to improve themselves and get out of the poverty trap" (The Sunday Daily, 7 August 2017).

Many studies have found that the income earning activities of women can improve not only their position in the household but also contribute to family welfare, particularly to food and children's education, as well as to the wider society (Mayoux, 2008; Mehra, 1997). The UN Women (2013) declaration states: "Empowering rural women is crucial for ending hunger and poverty. Denying women's rights and opportunities means denying their children and societies a better future".

Undeniably, women's role in community development is relevant for the sustained survival of society. Women who work and earn income enhance not only their socio-economic standing in the household (Sen, 1999), but also affirm their presence in society.

Community development and women's empowerment for socio-ecological sustainability

Community development is a concept that endeavours the empowerment of members in a community. In addition, Sanders (1966) defines "community development" as a process that depends on local participation in aspects of life, such as decision-making, socio-

ecological development and resource utilisation. Kotler and Keller (2006) view that "community development" is possible if members work together through sustainable organisations that provide them with employment and income. Micro and small enterprises are recognised as a major source of employment for many developing countries (Kotler et al. 2008). In the same report, Kotler et al. (ibid. 2008) find that women are the owners and operators of these cottage industries, which are relatively concentrated in a constricted range of activities, like craft products and food processing.

To eradicate poverty in Malaysia, women can be active participants in the community development activities. Even though they may be disinterested to work outside home, their involvement within their community should be encouraged. For instance, their participation in the re-upcycle activities. This empowerment effort can be initiated even from home. In turn, it can be an economic resource for the households (Battilani and Schroter, 2012). The survival of any empowerment efforts depends on the presence of social and economic components.

In such a programme, viability largely depends on how it is designed to meet the needs of the women. There are pulling factors for women's participation in this community programme. Among them are training, credit and technical assistance to upgrade the quality and increased demand for women's labour (Buvinic, 1989; Mercer, 2002).

Women's work empowerment can be seen as a supply chain that plays a significant role in developing a country (Mayo and Craig, 1995). Malaysian women are most affected by employment chances, support and reassurance from various sectors, such as the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and most importantly, the men in their life. Depriving them from all these socio-economic foundations, will further contribute to the unemployment rate in Malaysia.

Research problem and significance

According to forecasts prepared by the Okayama University (Yoshida, Shimamura and Aizawa, 2007: 102), the amount of waste generated around the world stood at 12.7 billion tons in 2000. It is estimated to grow approximately 19.0 billion tons in 2025 and to approximately 27.00 billion tons in 2050. Asia is predicted to generate a dramatic increase in the amount of waste (Tanaka, 2006). For Malaysia in particular, it is

predicted that the increase in waste generation will be 1.4 kg per person per day in 2025 compared to only 0.81 today (Zamali Mohd. Lazim and Abu Osman, 2009). That would be a tremendous increase for Malaysia, which must be handled properly and managed effectively. One of the ways is to manage the waste from home, which is the originating point of most wastes.

A review of literature shows that many studies dealing with waste in Malaysia have concentrated on the awareness towards solid waste management (Periathamby, Fauziah and Kahlil, 2009; Rafia, Muhammad Mehedi, Rulia, Jarita, 2013); efforts for waste recycling determination (Azahan, Jamaluddin and Samsu, 2002; Nasir, Rakmi, Chong, Zulina and Muhamad, 2000); the handling of municipal and private waste (Nasir, 2002; Juzhar, 2002; Zaini, 2003); and the administration of household solid waste recycling efforts (Moh and Latifah, 2014).

Taking on this academic challenge with the major purpose of improving women's sustainability of life, this action research attempts to put various major issues into context. One aspect of concern is with women's empowerment and participation in recyclable thrown away home materials for their socio-ecological sustainability. Recyclable issues have been discussed before, but the awareness about it among Malaysians is still low (Carol Boon-Chui Teo, 2016). It is pertinent for this research to address the issue further by including women's participation in re-upcycling activities.

Consequently, this research heads for a change and improvement that may indirectly influence policy.

Research objectives and methodologies

The objective of the research is to explore the possibility for women-at-home to participate in re-upcycling activities for household economic improvement. To achieve that, the research reviewed several studies on empowering women as a part of the community development process and determination. Various international policies of the United Nations, the World Bank as well as the Malaysia government on women's empowerment in the country, were reviewed, that are relevant to women's empowerment and community re-upcycling efforts to improve women's socio-economic status.

Prominent social research methodologists have opined that exploratory research is one technique that is most suitable to find the unknown or less understood situations or seeks new insights (Bryman, 2004; Davis and Hughes, 2014). Since the case of women's participation in re-upcycling activities is yet to be documented fully, it is the utmost aim of this research to explore the possibility of employment opportunities for women-at-home. This is particularly true for some rural women in Terengganu as well as other states in Malaysia. Due to the persistent customary practices (or 'ādat), some women are mostly affected by limited access to job opportunities. Empowering the marginalised or oppressed group to be in charge of their lives through direct action (Brown and Strega, 2005) is significant. Based on a case study of women's experiences in the recycling activities, this action research explores the potentials of upcycling through empowerment efforts.

The case studies helps to develop a constructive understanding about a single case or a small number of cases (Robson, 2011), where it examines a phenomenon in its natural setting (McKenzie et al., 1997). Additionally, observation generates knowledge about specific issues (Robson, 2011), particularly when the participant observation technique involves the natural course of asking questions while observing the targeted social phenomenon. Finally, interviews help to elaborate on the issues related to the research objectives by posing specific questions (Blaxter et al., 2010; Fontana and Frey, 2005). These data were recorded, which was transcribed verbatim, and later thematically analysed with the assistance of Atlas.ti7 qualitative software analysis. For the field notes of the observation, networking map analysis were applied.

Sample unit, case study and analyses

To tune in with the research objective, the research selected women who work in "RiD", a recyclable company in Terengganu as a case unit. They were five women waste separators whom were involved in this research project. These women were the hired workers who separate recycle goods, particularly plastic-based materials and paper-based materials, which exchanged with the public and collected by the company throughout the village.

These sample was observed and interviewed on the site to explore their work activities. All of them live nearby “RiD”. Their houses are either at the sides of the company or a little bit away from it. All of the arrived to work by foot. Thus, the sample fit well with the criteria of women-at-home. They do not really leave behind their households and cares for the sake of work. As quoted, “I can just run back, if anything needed at home”. By having this work-household arrangement, their spouses do not feel so much that their women are away from home. At the end of the day, spouses like to receive extra income been brought to the household. It is indeed irony, as being traditional as they are, these male spouses appreciated the monetary outcome out of working by their women. Additionally, neighbourhood connection played a vital role in supporting their work too. Community embeddedness is seen to be an important aspect for their work continuation.

By the agreement of the state’s authority, “RiD” uses a barter system for recyclable goods. Apparently, such a programme is the first to be initiated in the country. The programme encourages people to bring in thrown away, recyclable items to be exchanged for items, such as food, beverage containers, recyclable bags as well as money. Based on the interviews with the owner of “RiD”, most people whom they dealt preferred to have money in exchange of the recycled goods that they brought to the company.

However, this research is of the view that efforts can be further improved – for the sake of the environment. Based on research observation, “RiD” must not only rely on exchanging and collecting these reusable wastes. It should make use of the ever available domestic thrown away wastes from nearby households. Therefore, instead of having only five women waste separators, the company has the whole village or neighbourhood to work on this re-upcycling activities. Empty shampoo bottles, finished detergent containers, outdated newspapers, metal scraps, broken glasses, plastic shopping bags, old cloths – are all recyclable and reusable for a “new breath of life”.

It is a challenge to deal with the thrown away home materials or to put it simply, household wastes. Waste is mostly perceived as unclean and thus unwanted. Humans normally do not want to know how the waste is disposed. Some others may have little awareness about the wider environmental implications once waste is discarded. However,

there are evidences that some waste can be either valuable such as iron and steel scraps (Yoshida, Shimamura and Aizawa, 2007) or possess useful qualities if they are to be reused and redone, especially when they are transformed into specific goods and services. Not only these materials can be recycled, they can be upcycled too through the creation of new products. In this way, the thrown away home materials can be better managed and put into smarter use.

The re-upcycling activity is well on its way to meet this objective. Being close to home due to their physical and emotional attachment, women-at-home are definitely the right target group. By the support of the community and those people near to them, women-at-home can be economically productive too. The upcycled products that are made of recycled materials receive a universal demand. With the changing tastes in fashion among consumers, the upcycled products do not only have utility purposes but most outstandingly the idea of "giving a new life" attracts them (Hailstone. 2017). For instance, the creation of elegant handbags (Fig. 1), which is made of recycled plastic packaging and bags. All sorts of pretty brooches (Fig. 2) made of plastic containers. Also, an ever-stylish looking coin purse from shredded newspaper (Fig. 3). These recycled products do have potential buyers around the globe (Martin and Schouten, 2012)².

Fig. 1: Upcycled handbags made of sweet packaging and plastic bags



Fig. 2: Brooches made of plastic bags and plastic containers



Fig. 3: Coin purse with shredded newspaper designs



**Sources: Author's own collections of upcycled products made of recycled materials*

The influence of community participation in re-upcyclable activities are extremely important to bring in major positive changes. Thrown away home materials have the potential for social ecological sustainability. If priority is rightly set, participatory development may lead to income generation (Kotler et.al. 2008). Women's equal participation in the planning process provides employment opportunities for them (Kotler and Keller, 2006). This policy initiative process may lead to more active participation among women. This initiative focuses on women's socio-economic empowerment, particularly in job creation, vocational training and literacy.

Embeddedness Theory (ET)

The whole case of this research fits well with the embeddedness theory, formulated by Granovetter (1985). ET describes how economic behaviour affects social relations. According to this theory, humans react and respond to the social relations that surround them. Their actions are

constructed and deflected by their consciousness, beliefs and purposes in life. Indeed, development is an effort of empowerment.

Asian community like Malaysians still adhere to traditional values and normative system (Mohd. Azizuddin et. al., 2009). As illustrated earlier, the woman samples are "home-grounded" women whereby they were pleased about the work-household arrangement that they have. They work by getting the approval from spouses and receiving supports from the community. In fact, the overall success of many community programmes including among African countries depend on community involvement (Chirenje, Giliba and Musamba, 2013). Commitment of the participants in any community programme provides a good foundation for community development.

Kanter (1972) describes this relationship as mutual and communal between the authority and its people, based on the principle of "what is given to the community and what the community receives". The description is well suited to women in a community who are involved in recyclable activities. Individuals who manage thrown away home materials may have the urge to fulfil material and/or spiritual needs (Levi and Litwin, 1986; Kotler and Armstrong, 2004).

According to Murphy and Cunningham (2003), the whole context of social relations and economic behaviour encompasses social ecology. The term, 'social ecology' is derived from the Aristotelian concept of 'eudaimonia' or flourishing (ibid, 2003). Of late, the definition of social ecology encompasses the relations of institutional and socio-cultural contexts of community and environment. Social ecology motivates a pragmatic philosophy about persistent ills of society, among them, being poverty. Thus, women's involvement in economic action is always welcomed.

Socio-ecological policies for women's empowerment in community development through re-upcycling activities

Women's empowerment effort will be effective with the application of embeddedness theory (ET). Women's participation in a community programme such as re-upcycling requires supports from community, particularly the 'blessings' from their husbands. At most times, women will receive 'blessings' when the husbands realised economic potentials for their households. ET provides the relationship between economic

behaviours and social relations. Thus, eventually this will lead to the provision of employment opportunities from home and consequently household income.

Managing thrown away home resources requires various means of management. The two most important aspects of managing the recyclable resources are searching for economic value and identifying the environmental impact. Harmful items, such as hazardous waste, should be handled by the authority. On the other hand, useful resources, such as metal, plastics, cardboard, paper, among other ordinary products, that are safe and durable, can be reused by effective techniques of redoing and remodelling.

Understanding the on-going academic discussions on women's empowerment and recyclable activities among women, this research proposes to include political, social and economic aspects in the new policies.

Political aspects: The success of the empowerment policies for women depends largely on meeting women's needs. For their involvement in recyclable activities, women should be provided with specific information and awareness about what kinds of thrown away home materials can be recycled. In addition, a clear policy should be directed towards having specific skills training and technical assistance on redoing and remodelling those materials. Another policy aspect is on the marketing strategy so that their empowerment effort can generate income and credit. One way is to emulate the cooperative system where everything is in its place – from selecting the potential recyclable materials, to redoing and transforming them to other useful products and finally, to marketing them, especially to those specific target buyers who are interested in buying recyclable items. A definite way is to urge the community members to participate in community development programmes. Policies must be legislated based on issues of organisation, participation and mobilisation in community activities. When a community gets involved in its socio-ecological surroundings, the people will feel the need to participate in decision-making to improve their material and social well-being.

Social aspect: Patriarchal structure issues, such as gender subordination, women's lack of freedom, restricted female mobility, unequal division of labour and domestic violence that govern the

community and households may also need to be addressed. In this case, it is recommended to establish initial briefings and trainings for both men and women in the household on having extra income through women's employment.

Economic aspect: Most importantly, the habits and routines of recyclable actions must be understood. This will lead to either the success or failure of the policy. Perhaps, the attraction to earn immediate cash by women will determine its relevancy. Additionally, policies should be put on the right promoting and marketing track. In doing so, it is necessary to familiarise the innovation and quality control of those recycled thrown away home materials produced by women from home. The re-upcycling activities enable the realisation of social enterprises. A "social enterprise" is defined as a business that conducts trade in the market in order to fulfill its social aims (Martin and Thompson 2010; 6). In this project, its principle is "to give a new economic value" to those waste materials so that it may benefit those who participate, in particular, and others, in general.

Conclusion

Based on the existing discussions, women's empowerment effort is one of the most fundamental aspects for women's improved socio-economic status. They should participate in community development programmes to enhance their decision-making influence for their own sustainability – socially and materially. This is possible if they, especially women-at-home, get involved in the "work-from-home" project. The government, NGOs and other authorities must initiate proper policies so that this "work-from-home" project can be fully materialised. By identifying the political, social and economic aspects, this research hopes to advance further in empowering women towards a better socio-ecological well-being, particularly through re-upcycling activities. The utilisation of the embeddedness theory in the policy initiatives for women's empowerment programme is relevant. The theory emphasises on developing economic behaviour, collectively among all members. It requires responses to the social relations. In this case, if a woman is fully conscious of the importance of socio-ecological sustainability, then she may be able to provide positive reactions to sustaining the environment. A well-planned policy on women's empowerment that include the local normative values must be initiated in order to gain economic well-being.

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Endnotes

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² The California Integrated Waste Management Board offers a comprehensive on-line directory of companies that sell recycled-content products ranging from paper, other office supplies, landscape and garden supplies and even construction materials at <http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/rcp/>. The directory lists several businesses that sell a given recycled-content product and contact information for each firm.

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