CHALLENGES IN SOCIAL ADVOCACY STRATEGIES TO SAFEGUARD THE WELL-BEING OF OLDER ADULTS

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Abstract

Population ageing is a remarkable demographic trend that has been escalating in the 21st century. The substantial increase in the aged has significantly impacted the economy and social structure of society. Consequently, the welfare of the older population became the main agenda for every country in the world. Reaching out to older adults and overcoming marginalisation requires an integrated approach through social advocacy strategies. Social advocacy acts as a variable agent in enforcing legislation through social policies and introducing a practical approach to investing in public education regarding ageing. It is essential to address advocacy barriers, promote the cooperation efforts from the state, and seek involvement from the community in rectifying any injustices towards the older adults. Looking at the scenario in Malaysia, the ageing population poses several challenges for the governments and society, which requires urgent responses and timely anticipation from multi-stakeholders in preparing for the future. The importance of social advocacy strategies was highlighted in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Ageing (2015) through public awareness campaigns on the wellbeing of older adults, challenges, strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations, and encouraging the participation of older adults in dialogues sessions with the government. Social advocacy has been widely used to change the social context, which includes protecting the rights of older adults. Therefore, this study focuses on the challenges of social advocacy strategies faced by civil society organisations in protecting the interests of older adults in Malaysia.

Keywords

social advocacy strategies, civil society organisations, ageing, wellbeing, older adults

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Introduction

Population ageing is a remarkable demographic trend that has been escalating in the 21st century. According to the World Population Prospects 2019 by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs from the United Nations, one in every six people in the world will be over the age of 65 (United Nations, 2019). Globally, there were 703 million older persons aged 65 or over in 2019, and the East Asian and South-East Asian regions show a tremendous increase in the ageing population (United Nations, 2019). In 2021, Malaysia will be populated with 3,648,100 individuals aged more than 60, and it is 11% of the total population (Figure 1). Malaysia has gazetted the legal age for the older adults at 60 years and above as aligned with the World Assembly on Ageing 1982 in Vienna (The Government of Malaysia's Official Portal, 2012). In line with the United Nations (2015) projection, Malaysia is moving towards ageing population trend to become an ageing country in 2030 and experiencing rapid demographic changes due to the increasing number of older adults in the country. The substantial increase in the aged has a significant impact on the economy and social structure of society. Consequently, the welfare of the older population becomes the main agenda for every country in the world. With the incredible amount of spending on pension, healthcare, and social benefits programs catering to the needs of older adults, economic growth and spending expenditure will be severely affected (Md Yusuf, Mohamed, & Ali Basah, 2020).

Malaysian population based on the age group
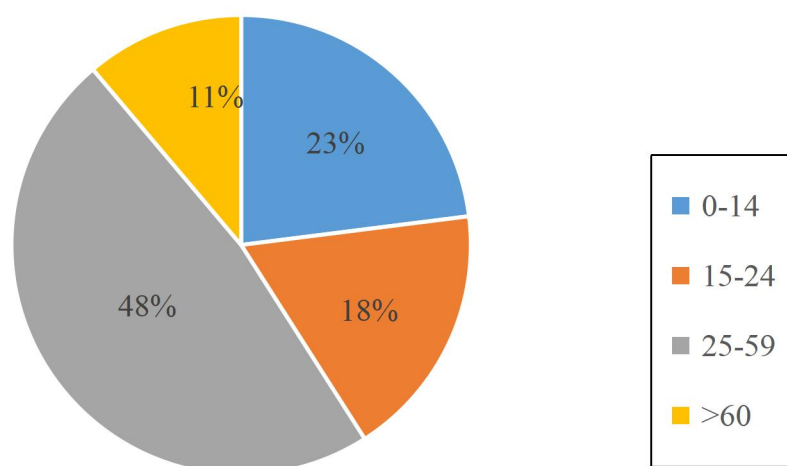
Figure 1. Malaysian population based on the Age Group (Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia 2021)

According to Lee (2017), there are numerous mechanisms and strategies adopted for overcoming the issues. However, the existing efforts have not benefitted the older peoples' needs and rights in all contexts (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). Reaching out to older persons and overcoming marginalisation requires an integrated approach through social advocacy strategies. Social advocacy acts as a variable agent in enforcing legislation through social policies and introducing a practical approach to investing in public education regarding ageing. It is considered a strategy of pursuing changes in policy, attitudes, behaviour, and decision-making in the public interest (Nwalie, 2019). Thus, it is essential to address advocacy barriers and promote the cooperation efforts from the state and involvement from the community in rectifying injustices towards the older adults (Cohen & Marshall, 2017).

In Malaysia, the ageing population imposes several challenges on the governments and society, which require urgent responses and anticipation from multi-stakeholders in preparing for the future (Tengku Aizan, 2016). The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development has identified the six leading problems associated with older adults: healthcare, basic needs, income and finances, employment opportunities, social inclusion, and security (Mohd Fazari, 2017). The Malaysian government has legislated several social well-being schemes, such as the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) 1951, the Social Security Organisation (SOCSO) 1969, and the National Policy for the Elderly 1995 as ways of providing better living conditions for the older population and safeguarding the wellbeing of the vulnerable group during their ageing years (Taher, Jamaluddin, Mohd.Yusoff, Tahir, & Thambapillay, 2018). The National Policy for Elderly 1995 (revised 2011) is the best practice model and effort which outlined five main components which includes; health, social, economy, spiritual and environmental. The main aim of the National Policy for Older Persons is to enable an individual, family and society to enjoy an efficient and good services that are ageing-friendly and develop an environment that could enhanced their livelihood (Tengku Aizan, 2016).The National Policy for Elderly (1995) was the first policy specifically introduced for tackling the social problems among older adults. It was later improvised into the National Policy for Older Persons (2011) along with the National Health Policy for Older Persons (2008) (Ibrahim, Mat Din, Abdullah, & Hamid, 2020). The policies' ultimate goal is to ensure comprehensive growth in development, the advancement of health and well-being while ensuring a supportive environment for the older people (Jamaluddin, Chuan & Taher, 2015).

The importance of social advocacy strategies is highlighted in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Ageing (2015) through public awareness of older

adults' well-being, challenges, strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations, and encouraging the participation of older adults in dialogues sessions with the government. Social advocacy has been widely used to bring about changes in social contexts, including protecting the rights of older adults. However, there is scarce evidence of studies highlighting the accomplishments of social advocacy strategies in safeguarding the well-being of the baby boomers in Malaysia. Therefore, this study focuses on executing social advocacy strategies in protecting the interests of older adults in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Concept of Social Advocacy

Social advocacy has existed since the 1870s (Schneider, 2019). As studied by Schneider and Lester in 2001, the definition of advocacy in the social work context is tenuous and various. Social advocacy requires good advocacy skills to influence decision-makers in selecting suitable strategies to crusade on important issues that have affected older people (Scourfield, 2021). Schneider and Lester (2001) defined social advocacy as the exclusive and mutual representation of a party in a discussion to influence decision-making. It requires patience, persistence, negotiation, broad support bases, and long-term commitment (Whelan, 2016). The term "advocacy" was first demonstrated in the Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1917 and introduced as a social work job back in 1887 (Schneider, 2019). In the beginning, social advocacy was the most influential idea within social work practice (Hoefer, 2018). During that era, social workers dedicated their lives to improving human well-being, and they used multiple approaches to work with the multi-levels of society (Ruth & Marshall, 2017). The social workers act as an advocates to empower the community by representing the voices of marginal populations such as the older adults into the policy process and proposing policy solutions on behalf of constituencies (Lu, 2018). Without a doubt, social workers play a significant role in shaping public opinion and raising awareness of ageing. (Tsigags, 2017). The act of influencing the decision-making process and promoting awareness on the issue of ageing could be achieved through social advocacy strategy. The social advocacy strategy is a significant instrument for policy change since it requires a great effort from the advocate to promote and push forward on specific issues (Bird, 2016). Social advocacy was almost always concerned with helping disempowered cohorts realise rights, and in that way, it represented an avenue for empowerment (Whelan, 2016).

The purpose of social advocacy was to change the policy, program, or stance of a government, institution, or organisation. At the start of any advocacy work, clear goals and specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound objectives (SMART) had to be established (2008) to reach broader goals and particular visions. Social advocacy is a mechanism for clients or groups to achieve certain services when rejected by an institution or service system to bring about changes in an unjust environment. Changes are the general outcomes from the social advocacy effort in upholding the rights of the people who have been mistreated in society. However, advocacy practitioners and evaluators are constantly struggling to reconcile with the demands for measurable effectiveness as well as the complexities of evaluating advocacy (Arensman, 2019). For the context of this research, social advocacy is operationalised as the strategies employed by civil society organisations in safeguarding the basic needs of older adults in Malaysia. It includes all acts or strategies in achieving a healthy, positive, active, productive and supportive older population through optimising their self-potential to achieve well-being in life.

Social Advocacy Strategies by Civil Society Organisation

Social advocacy strategy is a powerful tool for bringing about policy changes through the strong effort from the advocates. This study refers to the civil society organisations facilitating and bringing forward particular issues within society (Bird, 2016). Civil society can be defined as a conglomeration of groups or organisations working in the interest of the citizens but operating outside the government and commerce (Lawrence, 2020). Different problems require different forms of strategies depending on the needs and objectives. Scholars in social work practice identified several advocacy strategies and the most common being lobbying (Suarez & Hwang, 2008, as cited in Crotty, 2011; LeRoux & Feeney, 2015), public education (Gais & Walker, 1991, as cited in Scott & Maryam, 2016), and coalition building (Guo & Saxton, 2010; Mosley, 2011). There is an abundance of civil society organisations that provide services by promoting awareness among communities in the United Kingdom and the United States, such as the Older People's Advocacy Alliance UK (OPAAL), the Age UK, the National Aged Care Advocacy Program Australia (NACAP), the Older Persons Advocacy Network Australia (OPAN), the National Council of Ageing US (NCOA), the Centre for Advocacy for the Rights and Interests of the Elderly US (CARIE) among many others. Each organisation will have its ways of advocating and pursuing its action through various strategies.

However, the most common strategies among practitioners are campaigns and lobbying (Wasay, 2019). A campaign is one of the most favourite tools among social work practitioners in creating public awareness on a specific issue through public education and mass media. There are two types of standard practice media in social advocacy setting: electronic media (television, radio and internet) and print media (newspapers, magazines, books, leaflets and brochures). The most preferred method for reaching the public is via social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). It is undeniable that the power of technology brings about changes in people's minds, beliefs, and attitudes in response to the issues of older adults. For example, hashtags (#AgeingNation, #AdvocacyCampaign, #GenerationEquality, and #UNIDOP) contribute to revamping the existing policies through new ideas and recommendations from the public. Besides that, coalition-building through roundtable discussions between civil society organisations, the Department of Welfare, the Older Adults Department (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development), Ministry of Health, and other representatives are excellent avenues for discussing matters on the well-being of vulnerable groups and ways to improve. Yet, data on social advocacy strategies adopted by the civil society organisations in Malaysia is still unavailable due to the limited and inadequate research, even though there are twenty-four registered Welfare Voluntary Organisations/*Pertubuhan Sukarela Kebajikan* (JKM) that focus on older adults (Department of Welfare, 2016) indicating a low level of advocacy effort amongst Malaysians for the well being of older persons. Further proof is the zero number of representatives from accredited non-governmental organisations for older persons to the Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) on Ageing by UNDESA (United Nation Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021).

Social Advocacy Challenges for the Well-being of Older Adults

Population ageing provides excellent challenges for Malaysia's social and economic development (Tey, Saeddah, Bahyah, Chin, Tan, Sinnappan, & Muller, 2015). The main challenges that threaten the quality of life for older people are poverty, inefficiencies in labour markets, and inadequate pensions (Chand & Tung, 2014; Chand, 2018). Based on the household income survey of 2019, the poverty rate recorded among older people in Malaysia is the highest, 41.4% (Department of Statistics, 2020). In overcoming these challenges, civil society plays a significant role through advocacy strategies. Despite the policies implemented by the government, there are still plenty of loopholes and challenges faced by the ageing society in Malaysia that requires government intervention (Tan et al., 2016). The challenges of finance, infrastructure, professionalism, collaboration and support, accommodation,

different socio-cultural backgrounds, and older people's emotional and psychological needs are influenced by the limitations and effectiveness in carrying out the advocacy strategies (Meriam & Abdullah, 2014). The role of social advocacy strategy includes changing the individuals' behaviour, knowledge and awareness (Chapman & Lupton, 1994; Wise, 2001; Rose, 2016). It means that skills and knowledge are the essential elements in advocacy work (Louis, 2002; Gewirtz-Meydan, Weiss-Gal, & Gal, 2016, Lu, 2018). Challenges may arise when advocates are not well-equipped with the skills required.

The concern over ageing is not solely on the livelihood of the old age population but, more importantly, the challenges civil society faces in safeguarding the well-being of older adults. Traditionally, the social advocacy strategy plays an important part in influencing the individuals' behaviour, knowledge and awareness (Chapman & Lupton, 1994; Wise, 2001; Rose, 2016). Knowledge is essential to assist policymakers in defining, formulating and evaluating goals and implementing programmes, besides raising public awareness and support for required policy changes (United Nations Development Programme, 2017). Without proper skillsets, adequate training, awareness, and knowledge, the impact of advocacy is lesser to none, resulting in wastage of resources and prolonged injustice for older persons. In Malaysia, the lack of awareness among the community, including the professionals, will threaten the safety and rights of older adults, more so the abused cases. A study conducted in a healthcare setting in Malaysia depicts an increasing number of unreported abuse and neglect cases due to the poor knowledge of the signs and symptoms among healthcare professionals (Ahmed et al., 2016).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who had common roles and tasks in safeguarding the well-being of older adults. The sample for this study is the civil society organisations that conducts activities or programs involving the well-being of older adults in Malaysia, which includes various categories from the lifelong learning groups, the retiree associations, the senior citizen clubs, the research institutions, and the charity based Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO). A total of thirteen participants representing eight civil society organisation registered with the Department of Social Welfare participated in an in-depth interview. The entire interview sessions were recorded via zoom recorder application and voice recorder with the participants' consent.

Findings and discussions

Four themes emerged from the data. The first theme was the limited funding and budget available in the organisations to operate their programs. The next theme was the lack of coordination between all relevant ministries leading to the poor knowledge of ageing in general among key personnel. Besides, the weak coalitions between the government and civil society organisations was another issue derived from the data. Lastly, the generally low awareness in society concerning the problems and challenges of an ageing nation was also a theme. Each of the themes is discussed further to show the challenges within the organisations when attempting to safeguard the well-being of older adults through advocacy strategies.

Theme 1: Financial constraints

The civil society organisations such as NGOs are increasingly being promoted as alternative care providers to the state, pursuing the same goals but with fewer limits imposed by government inefficiencies and resource constraints (Masefield et al., 2020). Based on the interviews conducted, the participants unanimously agreed that the main problem in operating the organisations was their lack of financial resources. Although there is some financial support from the government, it was deemed insufficient for civil society organisations to execute their work to safeguard the well-being of older adults. The underlying reason behind the insignificant impact of advocacy strategies in Malaysia is the irenic advocacy of older adults' rights. The Malaysian government spent RM575 million on financial assistance that benefitted 137,000 older adults in 2020 ("*Belanjawan 2020*", 2019). Without a well-organised strategy and since the expenditure is expected to increase over the years, overcoming the problem will be a momentous task. Additionally, gauging the advocacy strategies' effects on civil society and closely assessing the progress of initiatives is essential for improvement. According to the participant, the organisation has to impose registration fees and other charges to the members as they have limitied funding for the programs.

"....what we want for the older adults are programmes, but they come at a cost. The financial constraints we face limit the number of people and the categories we can assist. It is not our intention to limit our efforts to middle-income people, and we want to go for the B40 people, but to run the program, we need funds. If we had the funds, we would be able to go for a wider segment of the population, including B40 and all...the support from the government is there. Still, we need more financial support from them if we are to extend our services to more needy segments of society ...."

(CS3, 22/7/2021, 10AM)

Due to the issue of financial constraints has hinder certain segments of older adults to be involved in the society. Another participant agreed that the government does provide financial support but it is insufficient to accomodate the program's expenses as it only cover the operation cost.

""...the main donors is government but it is very limited fund...last year we get additional fund, all the while we get the fund to run the office but we cannot use them to run the programs..."

(CS2, 4/8/2021, 3PM)

Theme 2: Inter-ministerial coordination

One of the most significant ideas raised by the participants is the lack of cooperation between the ministerial agencies in synchronising the efforts to fulfil the unmet well-being needs of older adults in Malaysia. The local and national governments play an important role as decision-makers in providing more favourable circumstances for the well-being of the aged in Malaysia. The government is responsible for creating an age-friendly social system through inter-ministerial coordination between all local and government agencies to be put together by 2030. The collective efforts from the ministries will reduce the vulnerabilities among the aged group in Malaysia. Thus, urgent action is needed to address the issues relating to the well-being of older persons through the involvement of inter-ministerial cooperation. Malaysia is one of the earliest countries that introduced the policy for older adults in the Asia Pacific region and has been dedicated to creating an independent, healthy and supportive environment for older adults (Mohd Fazari, 2017). The ultimate goal of the policy is to ensure comprehensive growth in terms of development, advancement of health, and well-being while ensuring supportive environments for the older population (Jamaluddin et al., 2015). Besides, it is also to cater to older persons' developmental needs by creating a high sense of dignity to reach their fullest potential encompassed by their protecting family members, society, and nation (Tey et al., 2015) through a better-quality service. However, the existing services and strategies are not up to the average standard necessary for shielding older people from any harm. Nonetheless, the policy alone is inadequate with a lack of mechanisms and coordination in the implementation (Taher et al., 2018). As mentioned by the participant, the NGO and government agency has been working in silo, without the cooperation between two would eventually results in failure to protect the older adults.

"So in my opinion, I think that the government should have a more holistic Action Plan on Ageing with all the ministries involved. The reason why I say this because right now it's not only the NGO on ageing working in silo, also the Department of Welfare…we should working hand in hand…but we rarely have joint meeting and event."

(CS3, 4/8/2021, 3PM)

The same scenario has been raised as the major issues pertaining to older adults in Malaysia is not solely depends on the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development alone. There is a need for all the ministries to sit together for a better inter-ministerial collaboration.

"But as usual the scenario in Malaysia, we have a lot of nice policies, the thoughts are there, but what's are there? We are good at that and that's something we have to acknowledge but we cannot just be another the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Women (KPWKM) alone. It has to be inter-ministerials or multi-agencies."

(CS6, 22/2/2022, 3PM)

Theme 3: Weak coalitions building

One of the important elements in advocacy strategy is coalitions. Building a strong coalition among civil society organisations enables a louder voice to bring ageing issues to government and public attention. Advocacy by various coalitions has also increased efficiency and effectiveness overall (Okeke, et al., 2021). According to the participants, they are currently preparing for a coalition comprising all ageing organisations in Malaysia. This coalition will take the lead and gather all organisations involved in the welfare and management of older adults to ensure the cooperation between the government and civil society organisations to safeguard the well-being of older adults is not merely on paper. The role of voluntary organisations is undeniably substantial in influencing the decision-making and creating ageing awareness among the public (Tsigas, 2017). If the efficiency of the advocacy work is to be improved holistically, current strategies need to be continuously reviewed and revised. The strength of advocacy depends on the association between the government agencies, NGOs, and society that have common goals in safeguarding the well-being of the older population in Malaysia. Society is the essential element in social work; their participation in decision-making will produce a better outcome (Addario et al., 2018). Social participation from civil society has been shown to improve the well-being of older adults (Townsend, Chen & Wuthrich, 2021). Inadequate commitment

and contribution from Malaysians will hinder the older population from living a good life.

"...we try not to work in silos, if all come together, stronger voice, more powerful voice then the government will listen to us because we are all from NGOs or CSOs that helping the government... we have been proposed to build a coalition for ageing as a way to bind all the relevant agencies to meet and throw some ideas."

(CS3, 4/8/2021, 3PM)

Thus, this clearly shows that the importance of having a colitions building would be a great effort in encouraging the participantion from all sectors involving the well-being of older adults. However, in order to start the coalition is another challenges as action speaks louder than words.

"...more room for improvement in the sense we need to bring our position up to par. Maybe they are not aware of collaboration and working together; it is just words...."

(CS1, 27/7/2021, 10AM)

Issue 4: Lack of awareness

The process of ageing is inevitable, where individuals experience biological, psychological, and sociological changes. The older people should be promoted as an asset of a nation that can continuously contribute to the country's development. As mentioned during the National Senior Citizen's Day 2020 at Putrajaya, ageing promotion should be emphasised earlier through education. The disputes among the older adult communities demand a multidisciplinary systematic approach by involving the government bodies and service agencies, academicians, gerontologists, NGOs and the society in establishing robust support systems that are efficient for older adults to embark throughout their golden aged journey. According to the participant, Malaysia is currently in the preliminary stages of legislating an act for older adults, which was to have been presented in June 2021. It is critical to raise awareness of this issue, so older adults can receive the necessary support services and rehabilitation to improve their level of independence (Harithasan et al., 2019). If we are to address the concerns of the ageing population, there is an urgent need to increase the awareness not just to the older people but also to the younger generation. The nature of advocacy strategies involves a firm commitment from the members to protect the older population's well-being through education. Thus, the growing concern in promoting awareness among the current generation is determined by the strength of advocacy in

achieving the goals (Wise, 2001; Cohen, 2017). The participants has strongly agreed on the significance of awareness as the issues of ageing are not always been highlighting in our society.

"Awareness, awareness, awareness is very important, I saw issues of older people not in their radar at all especially among students...even me myself I did not know until I joined the NGO...awareness is very important, what we did is not enough, once in a while is not enough, go to university, those who know are in small numbers and only from the gerontologist, medical or social work background, how about the rest? They need to know how to take care of their parents...."

<div align="right">(CS1, 27/7/2021, 10AM)</div>

Conclusion

The growing number of older persons living in their later years is a crucial consideration for policy development. Additional accurate research data on the appropriate advocacy strategy will help an effective policy response to an ageing population. Besides, it will result in an improved policy and ageing-friendly country within 30 years gap before Malaysia is declared an ageing country. The pragmatic, innovative policies and programmes that support the family institution and older persons should be implemented, considering the diversity among older people, families, communities, and the multiplicity of ageing issues. Therefore, the independence, self-worth, and dignity of the elderly will not be compromised, allowing them to be integrated into the mainstream of development. However, the themes highlighted in the findings should be addressed by the stakeholders with implicit efforts. 1) civil society, especially the NGOs, should be treated as government agents as they voluntarily advocate for older adults' rights. Injection of financial support will relieve the advocates from the constraints and promote more participation in advocacy. 2) inter-ministerial coordination mainly focuses on government structure and practices. Though Malaysia has access to extensive data from the department of statistics, efforts to safeguard this vulnerable group's well-being are insignificant mainly due to the lack of coordination at the ministerial level. This study suggests good corporate governance at all levels and generous data sharing is vital for the programme's success. 3) the efforts of civil society in promoting collaboration can be improved through better communication between parties. Prioritising the common goal above particular interest will enable the coalition to be heard and acknowledged better. 4) advocacy activities are relatively low in Malaysia, only supported by the small number of organisations registered with the Department of Welfare. However, the Malaysian youth is moving towards active campaigning for

issues close to their hearts. It is an excellent opportunity for the advocates to invite more participation from the young Malaysians as this movement will also shape their future. They will want a say in the type of Malaysia they will be inheriting in 10 years?

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