

Through Thick and Thin: Barriers to Volunteering among Malaysian Senior Volunteers

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ABSTRACT

Senior citizens represent an overlooked asset that holds the potential to meet society's needs by leveraging their extensive experience and skills instead of being the traditional receiver of care and service. Senior volunteerism is often regarded as one of many positive measures to promote productive ageing. To encourage participation as volunteers in later life, there is a need to understand the various limitations experienced by current volunteers, specific to this age group when carrying out their voluntary work. A qualitative research design is employed for this study where a total of 51 senior volunteers aged 60 years old and above participated in six focus group discussions to share their experience on the barriers faced by senior citizens while volunteering. The discussions were then recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed to extract themes encompassing barriers experienced by senior volunteers. The following themes were proposed upon analysis: (1) health issues, (2) time, (3) financial constraints, (4) stigma and perception, and (5) access to volunteering information. The challenges identified shed light on senior volunteers' resilience while providing valuable insights to policymakers and volunteer organisations for the retention and promotion of senior volunteerism in Malaysia.

Keywords: Barriers, productive ageing, qualitative, senior citizen, volunteer

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) has reported that in 2024, 8.1 percent of Malaysia's population will be 65 years old and older (UNESCAP, 2024). By 2040, this figure is projected to be 14.5 percent, solidifying Malaysia's status as an aged nation (DOSM, 2024). As Malaysia

attains this demographic milestone, it is imperative to develop effective ageing measures to manage the challenges ahead.

Current older adults are derived from the generations of baby boomers with extensive education and experience. By engaging the older adults as contributors to the community by way of volunteerism, we can simultaneously address the challenges an ageing population poses in the long run. There is robust documented evidence of the positive impact of volunteering on the physical health, social, and mental wellness (Ling et al., 2023), enhanced quality of life (Lehane & Scarlett, 2024) and overall well-being of older adults (Nichol et al., 2024). However, most volunteering opportunities are sporadic with low participation rates by the elderly (Hansen & Slagsvold, 2020; Lai, 2024). Furthermore, although the culture of volunteerism is evident and widely practised in Malaysia, there is little documented evidence of volunteering efforts among older adults. There is a critical need to understand the barriers to volunteering among Malaysian seniors to enable stakeholders and organizations to provide senior-friendly volunteering opportunities and environments, thereby encouraging volunteers to invest time and resources towards productive ageing. Thus, this paper aims to identify the challenges experienced by senior volunteers when carrying out their voluntary work. From these challenges, recommendations are proposed to overcome these barriers and encourage volunteerism among senior citizens.

There are two pertinent theories that address the limitations experienced by older adults when they volunteer. From a sociological perspective, Role Strain Theory which was introduced by Goode (1960), refers to the stress faced by people when they are unable to meet the multiple demands or simultaneous roles demanded of them (Li et al., 2023). Eventually, they faced conflict when failing to fulfil the obligations expected by the role. For example, older adults with caregiving responsibilities or familial obligations may volunteer less than those without such commitments. On the other hand, Resource Theory (Foa, 1993) assumes that one's ability to volunteer is influenced by resources such as time, money and financial concerns that they possess. For instance, seniors plagued with health issues or with limited financial means would find it challenging to be continuously involved in volunteer work. Hence, these theories provide a key foundation for this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative method to understand barriers experienced by senior volunteers when carrying out their voluntary work.

Location

The focus group discussions (FGD) were held in Kuala Lumpur and Kuching, Sarawak. The locations were chosen based on the highest rate of elderly population aged 60 and above, according to DOSM (2024).

Sample Size/Sampling Criteria

Selection was made via purposive and snowball sampling to get various senior representations from non-governmental associations, government agencies, local communities, religious bodies and those volunteering in a personal capacity. Purposive sampling was used as the most appropriate sampling to answer the research question, whereas snowball sampling was employed to obtain a hard-to-reach population (Pasikowski, 2024). As a result, 51 informants (aged 60 years and above) who volunteered for at least 12 months were chosen to participate in six focus groups, in accordance with the point of saturation as recommended by Hennink and Kaiser (2021). From the total number, 35 informants were programme participants of *Bengkel Sukarelawan Jiwa Malaysia untuk Warga Emas* proposed by Malaysian Social Institute while the rest were obtained via volunteer recommendation and sourced through social media.

Data Collection

Groups were each assigned a moderator who led and moderated the FGD sessions with the aid of an interview protocol. Note-takers were also present for all groups to observe and take note of the various expressions, behaviours, and statements deemed necessary to contribute richer data to the study. The discussions were then audio-recorded to ensure that critical information was captured.

Data Analysis

The recordings were transcribed, thematically organized and analysed with the aid of Nvivo software to extract several themes encompassing barriers experienced by senior volunteers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Upon analysis, five themes (and six sub-themes) have emerged: (1) health issues, (2) time management (caregiving responsibilities and other commitments), (3) financial constraints (personal commitment and activity fund), (4) stigma and perception (family and community support), and (5) access to volunteering information. Consistent with the findings from the literature, health issues appear to be a critical challenge to senior volunteers (Hansen & Slagsvold, 2020). Despite cutting-edge health technologies, the modern lifestyle brings many health problems to older adults as they age. Older adults with good health will be more inclined to volunteer compared to those with poor health. Furthermore, senior citizens with decreased capacity/capability or cognitive impairment may pause or stop volunteering entirely. For instance, volunteering sessions may be deferred when senior citizens recuperate from health issues, as experienced by the following informant:

“I’m not going (to volunteer) because of my health...I fell, and I couldn’t come back because doctors say I must wait to do stitches and all that...” (Informant 4, FGD 2)

Secondly, volunteers often mentioned the constraint of time as a significant barrier to volunteering. Upon retirement, the elderly are no longer attached to work-related commitments and thus, should have the luxury of time to contribute to society (He et al., 2025). However, senior volunteers experienced the need to prioritize more crucial commitments such as caregiving and home responsibilities, as stated by the following informant:

“A lot of people say, what? Too busy, no time, no time. But yeah, this is the challenge. You see, like even in our small community, it’s very difficult to get people to come together to do a lot of charity.” (Informant 7, FGD 1)

Moreover, senior volunteers stated that available volunteering opportunities often emphasise inflexible time commitment, which does not necessarily accommodate older adults as highlighted by the following informant:

“Even though that’s something I’m passionate about, I think the organiser wanted someone like (to commit) every day, and I didn’t have that. So, I said, I probably couldn’t commit to that sort of timeline even though I wanted to.” (Informant 3, FGD4)

Third, financial constraints appear to hinder seniors from consistently volunteering. Among limitations related to financial constraints are money spent on travelling to reach volunteering locations, i.e., payment of tolls and gas, public transportation fees, and contributing financial support to causes or charities they believe in. On the other hand, senior volunteers also mentioned the need to prioritise paid work or caregiving responsibilities over unpaid work such as volunteering, and their statements correlated with the findings by Lu et al. (2021). This is mentioned by the following informant:

“Now volunteerism, so much so not paid again. You got to come out with your own money to volunteer. And time...time is money.” (Informant 1, FGD6)

Meanwhile, informants faced stigma and negative perceptions from their own family and relatives concerning their involvement in voluntary work. For senior volunteers, family or relatives’ support is crucial in their journey of continuous volunteering. However, the lack of support among family members, relatives or friends who do not understand their passion for volunteering, often leads to disagreements or conflicts as reflected by the following informant:

“My family, for example, are not very supportive. They will question why I would want to be involved in unpaid work and trouble myself at this age?” (Informant 3, FGD1)

Additionally, ageism has been highlighted as a negative perception that can diminish the participation rates of senior volunteers. Among the concerns highlighted are the unclear division of volunteer roles and scepticism from volunteer organisations on their capability to handle volunteering work at an old age, which is attuned to the findings of Nickrent et al. (2024). The informant highlighted this issue in the following statement:

“I was once involved in an ad-hoc volunteering programme for COVID-19. I suffered from a slipped disc, but I was doing fine. However, people kept on questioning my ability to volunteer by asking “Are you sure you can do it?”” (Informant 3, FGD3)

Finally, the lack of access to volunteering information and limited awareness of volunteering opportunities specially catered for this specific age group may also hinder seniors from volunteering. The elderly who are not well-versed in the latest technology or have limited access to social media may find it challenging to access the latest volunteering opportunities promoted online. Thus, current volunteering opportunities are usually sourced through word of mouth or from their network of close friends or the community.

The findings are summarised in Figure 1.

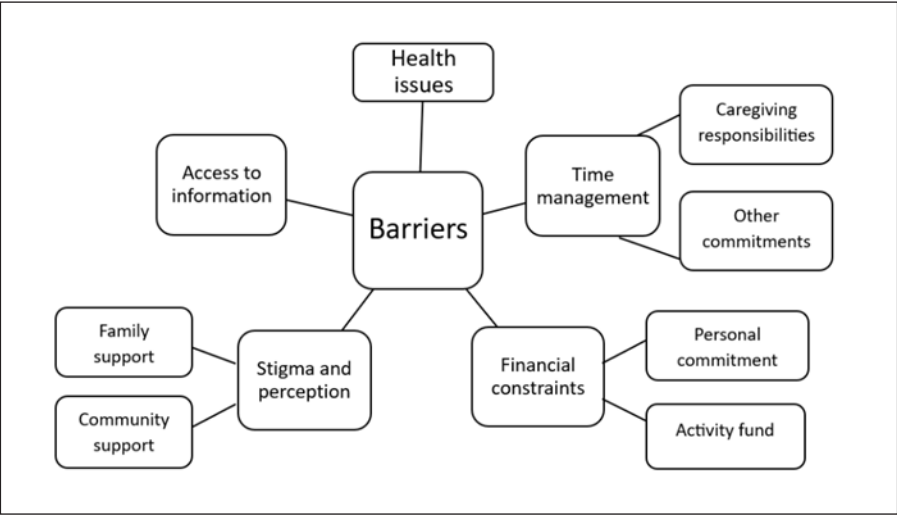


Figure 1. Barriers to volunteering
Source: Author’s work

CONCLUSION

This study calls for an understanding of the challenges experienced by senior volunteers when carrying out their voluntary work and how it impacts the volunteering scenario in Malaysia. Barriers such as health issues, time management, financial constraints, stigma and perception and access to volunteering information support the findings of previous literature. The barriers identified further lend credence to Role Strain Theory and Resource Theory and how they drive volunteer behaviour among Malaysian seniors. These barriers, if not addressed, may leave senior volunteers feeling unappreciated and eventually may reduce their frequency of volunteerism or they may stop altogether. To overcome these challenges, strategic volunteer recruitment and retention mechanisms should be carefully planned to improve their resilience and empower volunteering as one way to promote productive ageing. The government and decision-makers may consider incorporating senior-friendly volunteerism measures in current ageing policies and activities. Furthermore, local authorities and local leaders may encourage seniors to be more involved in volunteering by conducting and sponsoring volunteer outreach programmes as well as promoting volunteering opportunities in their area. Finally, volunteering entities may cater towards senior citizens' needs by considering their availability and flexibility to volunteer compared to their younger counterparts, expanding partnerships with other volunteering organisations as well as providing training and support to further develop their skills and talents.

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