

CHALLENGES IN COOPERATIVE-BASED INCOME GENERATION AMONG ABORIGINAL WOMEN: A CASE STUDY OF AN ORANG ASLI WOMEN'S COOPERATIVE IN TAPAH, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT: *Aboriginal women's participation in income-generating activities remains constrained by structural, gendered, and institutional barriers, particularly in the early stages of collective economic initiatives. This study examines the challenges encountered by Aboriginal (Orang Asli) women in generating income through a cooperative model. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the research focuses on a women-led cooperative established in 2023 in Tapah, Perak. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with three cooperative leaders and seven members and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal four interrelated challenges: (1) a structural mismatch between agriculture-based livelihood choices and women's physical capacity, (2) lack of financial capital to support production inputs and labour needs, (3) absence of a context-appropriate advisory and support system, and (4) an idea-implementation gap in cultural-based income activities. The study demonstrates that income-generation challenges are systemic rather than individual, shaped by gendered labour constraints, financial exclusion, and limited institutional responsiveness. By foregrounding challenges rather than outcomes, the paper contributes empirically to scholarship on Aboriginal women's livelihoods and offers critical insights for designing more realistic and context-sensitive cooperative support mechanisms*

Keywords: Aboriginal women; Orang Asli; cooperative; income generation; qualitative case study; gender

1. INTRODUCTION

Across many developing and middle-income contexts, aboriginal women remain among the most economically marginalised populations, experiencing intersecting disadvantages related to gender, ethnicity, age, and class [1, 2]. In Malaysia, aboriginal women continue to face persistent income insecurity despite sustained policy attention to poverty alleviation and community development. Their economic participation is frequently characterised by informal, low-return activities that prioritise household survival rather than income accumulation, leaving women vulnerable to economic shocks and long-term precarity [3]. Cooperatives have increasingly been promoted as an inclusive mechanism for aboriginal economic development, grounded in principles of collective ownership, mutual support, and democratic participation. For aboriginal women, cooperatives are often framed as culturally appropriate pathways for improving livelihoods while preserving community cohesion and traditional values [10]. However, participation in cooperatives does not automatically translate into sustainable income generation. Women's involvement is shaped by gendered divisions of labour, age-related physical limitations, restricted access to capital, and uneven institutional support [4].

While existing research has examined aboriginal women's empowerment and livelihood outcomes, comparatively little empirical attention has been given to the challenges experienced during the early operational stages of women-led cooperatives. This omission is significant, as early-stage constraints often determine whether cooperatives develop into viable economic entities or remain subsistence-oriented initiatives.

This study addresses this gap by examining the challenges faced by aboriginal women in generating income through a newly established cooperative in Tapah, Perak. Using qualitative evidence from cooperative leaders and members, the paper focuses explicitly on obstacles encountered during the initial phase of operation. By foregrounding challenges

rather than success narratives, the study contributes grounded insights into the structural conditions shaping aboriginal women's cooperative-based income generation and informs the design of more context-sensitive development interventions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Aboriginal Women and Economic Marginalisation

Aboriginal women's economic marginalisation must be understood through an intersectional lens that recognises the cumulative effects of ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic exclusion [1]. In Malaysia, aboriginal communities have historically been positioned at the periphery of national development, with limited access to education, secure employment, land tenure, and financial resources [8]. For women, these structural constraints are compounded by gendered expectations surrounding domestic labour, caregiving responsibilities, and community roles.

Empirical studies consistently show that aboriginal women's economic activities are largely informal and subsistence-oriented, including small-scale agriculture, forest-based gathering, and home-based production. [2,7] While such activities contribute to household food security and social reproduction, they rarely generate sufficient income to improve women's long-term economic security. Aging further intensifies these challenges, as physically demanding livelihood options become increasingly untenable.

2.2 Income Generation Efforts among Aboriginal Women

In response to persistent poverty, numerous initiatives have sought to enhance aboriginal women's income through skills training, microenterprise development, and community-based economic programmes. Common strategies include agricultural projects, food processing, handicrafts, and cultural products [2, 8]. These initiatives often assume that providing skills or start-up resources will enable women to transition into income-generating roles.

However, empirical evidence suggests that such efforts frequently yield limited and uneven outcomes. Aboriginal women may demonstrate strong motivation and creativity yet

struggle to sustain income-generating activities due to low productivity, weak market access, and limited follow-up support. [7]. Short-term training programmes often fail to address structural constraints, such as access to capital, labour demands, and ongoing technical guidance [4].

A recurring issue highlighted in the literature is the mismatch between proposed income activities and women's lived realities. Agriculture, for example, is frequently promoted due to cultural familiarity and land availability, yet its physical demands and capital requirements can exceed the capacities of aging women. As a result, income-generation efforts often remain subsistence-oriented, reinforcing rather than alleviating economic vulnerability.

2.3 Cooperatives as a Strategy for Aboriginal Women's Livelihoods

Cooperatives are widely promoted as inclusive economic institutions capable of empowering marginalised groups through collective action [6]. For aboriginal women, cooperatives offer opportunities to pool resources, share risks, and strengthen social capital. In theory, women-led cooperatives can reduce individual vulnerability and enhance bargaining power in markets [11].

Nevertheless, research on women's and aboriginal cooperatives cautions against overly optimistic assumptions. Newly established cooperatives often face significant challenges related to governance capacity, financial sustainability, leadership burden, and regulatory compliance [11]. For Aboriginal women, these challenges are intensified by limited exposure to formal business practices and dependence on external agencies for technical support. Without sustained, context-sensitive assistance, cooperatives risk functioning primarily as social collectives rather than economically viable enterprises [11]. Understanding the challenges faced by women-led cooperatives, particularly in their formative stages, is therefore critical for assessing the realistic potential of cooperative-based livelihood strategies.

2.4 Research Gap

Although existing scholarship provides valuable insights into aboriginal women's livelihoods and cooperative participation, there remains a lack of empirical, process-oriented research that examines challenges encountered during the early operational stages of Aboriginal women-led cooperatives. Most studies prioritise outcomes or best practices, leaving underexplored the everyday constraints that shape women's experiences of income generation. This study addresses this gap through an in-depth qualitative examination of challenges faced by a newly established women-led cooperative.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design to explore challenges encountered by Aboriginal women in cooperative-based income generation. A case study approach is appropriate for capturing context-specific, processual, and experiential dimensions of economic participation that cannot be meaningfully examined through quantitative methods. The study focuses on a women-led Orang Asli cooperative located in Tapah, Perak. Established in 2023, the cooperative is newly operational and remains in the early stages of developing income-generating activities. The cooperative is fully led and operated by Aboriginal women, making it a suitable case for examining gendered and Aboriginal-specific

challenges. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with three cooperative leaders and seven cooperative members. Purposive sampling was used to capture diverse perspectives related to leadership responsibilities and ordinary membership experiences.

Interviews were conducted in Malay, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analytical process involved familiarisation with transcripts, inductive coding, theme development, and iterative refinement. Attention was given to identifying patterns of constraint and interaction among challenges. Ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity guided the research. Participants' identities were anonymised, and findings were shared informally with cooperative representatives as part of ethical knowledge return.

4. Findings

This findings section explains three main aspects derived from the interview data, namely the meaning of generating income through a cooperative approach, the challenges in income generation, and the interrelationships among the challenges encountered.

4.1. Meaning of the Cooperative from the Perspective of Aboriginal Women

Before discussing the challenges encountered, participants articulated a shared understanding of what the cooperative represented for them. For the women involved, the cooperative was not merely an organisational structure or economic entity; rather, it was understood as a collective mechanism introduced to help them acquire skills and generate income in a more sustainable and supportive way. Participants commonly described the cooperative as a platform for learning and self-improvement, particularly in relation to income-generating skills.

"The cooperative is introduced to us so that we can learn how to earn income, not just depend on what we already know." (Leader 1)

Women emphasised that participation in the cooperative was closely linked to their desire to contribute to household income and support their spouses, rather than remaining financially dependent on men as sole income earners.

"We don't want to rely only on our husband's income. We also want to help the family." (Member 4)

Several participants highlighted that generating income through the cooperative allowed them to play a more active economic role within the household, which they associated with increased confidence and dignity.

"If we can earn something ourselves, even a little, we feel better because we are also contributing." (Member 7)

Importantly, participants contrasted cooperative-based activities with individual income efforts, which they perceived as more difficult, risky, and isolating.

"If we do it alone, it is very hard. But in the cooperative, we can do it together." (Member 2)

The cooperative was therefore understood as a means of reducing dependency on individual-based income activities and mitigating the risks associated with working alone.

"Alone, if we fail, everything stops. In the cooperative, we share the work and the problem." (Leader 3)

Collective participation was viewed as especially important given members' limited resources and physical capacity. Working in a group enabled women to pool effort, support one another, and attempt income-generating activities that would be difficult to undertake individually.

"We are not strong enough to do everything alone. In a group, we can help each other." (Member 5)

Overall, participants perceived the cooperative as an empowering collective strategy aimed at enhancing skills, generating income, supporting family livelihoods, and reducing exclusive reliance on male income earners. This shared understanding provides important context for interpreting the challenges discussed in subsequent sections, as it illustrates that women's participation in the cooperative was motivated by agency, responsibility, and a desire for economic contribution—rather than passivity or dependency.

4.2 Challenges Encountered by Aboriginal Women in Cooperative-Based Income Generation

Analysis of interview data revealed four interrelated challenges that constrained income generation among cooperative members. These challenges did not operate in isolation; rather, they interacted cumulatively, shaping the cooperative's inability to move beyond subsistence-oriented activities. Importantly, participants did not attribute these difficulties to lack of effort or motivation, but to structural, gendered, and institutional constraints embedded in their everyday realities.

i. Structural Mismatch Between Agricultural Livelihood Choice and Women's Physical Capacity

A central challenge identified was the misalignment between agriculture as the chosen livelihood activity and the physical capacity of cooperative members, most of whom were older women. Agriculture was selected because it was familiar, culturally accepted, and perceived as the most accessible option. However, participants consistently described agricultural work as physically demanding and increasingly incompatible with their bodily strength.

"We choose farming because it is what we know, but the work is very heavy for us now." (Leader 2)

Tasks such as land clearing, soil preparation, and carrying produce required sustained physical strength, which many members felt they no longer possessed. As a result, farming activities were deliberately limited in scale.

"We plant vegetables, but only a small area. We cannot work long hours like before." (Member 5)

This limitation had direct implications for income generation. Rather than producing surplus crops for sale, members prioritised household consumption.

"What we plant is mainly for our own family. If there is extra, only then we sell." (Member 3)

Consequently, agriculture functioned more as a **subsistence strategy** than an income-generating activity. This mismatch formed the foundation for subsequent challenges, particularly financial constraints and dependence on external labour.

ii. Lack of Capital to Support Agricultural Activities and Labour Needs

The second major challenge was the **absence of financial capital**, which constrained both production inputs and labour arrangements. Participants reported insufficient funds to

purchase seeds, fertilisers, tools, and other basic agricultural necessities.

"Everything needs money — seeds, tools, fertiliser — but we don't have capital to start properly." (Leader 1)

Because members were unable to perform heavy physical tasks themselves, hiring male workers was seen as necessary. However, the lack of financial resources made this option largely unattainable.

"If we want to clear land, we need to pay men to help. But where do we get the money?" (Member 7)

Several participants described how planned agricultural activities were abandoned once costs were calculated.

"When we talk about farming, it sounds possible. But when we calculate the cost, we stop." (Member 2)

This created a cycle of constraint with low capital limited production, low production generated minimal income, and minimal income prevented capital accumulation. Over time, this cycle reinforced members' reliance on subsistence practices rather than commercial engagement.

iii. Absence of a Context-Appropriate Support and Advisory System

Participants also highlighted the lack of sustained, context-appropriate advisory support as a significant barrier. While some external training or guidance had been provided, it was perceived as short-term, generic, and poorly aligned with members' realities as Aboriginal women with limited capital and advancing age.

"People come to give talks, but after that, we are on our own." (Leader 3)

Participants felt that existing support assumed a level of financial capacity and business readiness that they did not possess.

"They teach business as if we have money to invest. But we start with nothing." (Member 6)

Without ongoing guidance, members struggled to adapt when initial attempts failed.

"When something doesn't work, we don't know who to ask or what to change." (Member 4)

The absence of an advisory system that understood their social, financial, and physical constraints limited learning, problem-solving, and confidence. Over time, this reduced members' willingness to attempt new income-generating activities.

iv. Idea-Implementation Gap in Cultural-Based Income Activities

Despite these constraints, participants demonstrated strong ideas and motivation, particularly regarding income activities based on Aboriginal culture, such as traditional food, attire, and cultural products. However, these ideas rarely translated into sustainable income due to a pronounced gap between ideas and implementation.

"We have many ideas, especially about our traditional food and clothes." (Member 1)

Participants expressed uncertainty about how to operationalise these ideas, including issues related to production standards, pricing, and promotion.

"We don't know how to sell to outsiders or how to promote properly." (Member 8)

Several members described previous attempts that ended in failure, leading to discouragement.

"We tried before, but it failed. After that, we were afraid to try again." (Member 3)

Although effort and cultural knowledge were present, the lack of procedural and market knowledge prevented successful commercialisation. Over time, repeated failure weakened confidence and reduced participation in further initiatives.

4.3 Interconnection of Challenges

Importantly, these challenges were mutually reinforcing rather than isolated. Physical limitations necessitated hired labour, which required capital that members lacked. The absence of advisory support limited members' ability to redesign activities that better suited their capacity. Meanwhile, the failure to implement cultural-based ideas further reduced income opportunities. Together, these constraints created a structural environment in which income generation remained limited despite members' willingness to work and collaborate.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into how Aboriginal women understand, engage with, and experience cooperative-based income generation, particularly during the early stage of cooperative operation. Taken together, the results demonstrate that the challenges encountered are **structural, gendered, and institutional**, rather than stemming from individual deficits, lack of motivation, or resistance to change. This aligns with existing research which highlights that Aboriginal women's economic participation is shaped by intersecting forms of marginalisation related to gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic exclusion [1, 8].

First, the study highlights that Aboriginal women's participation in the cooperative was driven by a clear sense of **agency, responsibility, and aspiration**. Participants understood the cooperative as a collective mechanism introduced to help them improve income-generating skills, contribute to household income, and reduce exclusive reliance on men as sole income earners. This finding is consistent with prior studies that emphasise Indigenous women's active roles in sustaining household livelihoods despite structural constraint [2, 3]. Rather than being passive beneficiaries, the women in this study actively sought opportunities to enhance their economic contribution, reflecting a form of **practical agency within constrained conditions**.

However, despite this positive and empowering understanding of the cooperative, the findings reveal a significant gap between the intended role of the cooperative and its practical outcomes. One of the most critical constraints identified was the structural mismatch between agriculture-based livelihood choices and women's physical capacity. While agriculture is commonly promoted due to cultural familiarity and land accessibility, previous studies have also cautioned that such activities may not always be suitable for women, particularly when physical demands are high and labour support is limited [4]. In this study, the mismatch resulted in reduced production scale and a shift towards subsistence-oriented activities, reinforcing findings that Aboriginal women's economic efforts often remain survival-focused rather than market-oriented [8].

Closely linked to this mismatch is the persistent lack of financial capital. The absence of capital constrained women's ability to purchase inputs and hire labour, thereby limiting productivity and income generation. This supports existing literature which identifies financial exclusion as a major barrier to Indigenous entrepreneurship and income generation, particularly among women [3]. The findings further illustrate how capital constraints interact with other structural factors—such as physical limitations—to create a reinforcing cycle of low productivity and low income. This reflects broader patterns of **low productivity traps** identified in gender and agriculture studies [4].

The findings also underscore the importance of institutional support in shaping cooperative outcomes. Participants reported that existing support mechanisms were often short-term, generic, and not aligned with their specific needs. This resonates with previous research indicating that development initiatives targeting Indigenous communities frequently lack sustained engagement and contextual sensitivity [7,9]. Without continuous advisory support, women faced difficulties adapting when initial efforts failed, leading to reduced confidence and limited progression beyond early-stage activities.

Finally, the study identifies a pronounced **idea-implementation gap** in cultural-based income activities. While participants demonstrated strong motivation and creativity, particularly in leveraging traditional knowledge, the absence of market knowledge and technical skills prevented successful commercialisation. This finding is consistent with studies on Indigenous entrepreneurship, which highlight that cultural assets alone are insufficient to generate income without appropriate support in product development, marketing, and value chain integration [11, 8]. Importantly, these challenges did not operate in isolation. Instead, they were mutually reinforcing, creating a structural environment in which cooperative-based income generation struggled to move beyond subsistence despite women's willingness to work collectively. This supports arguments in cooperative literature that newly established cooperatives often face compounded challenges related to governance, financial sustainability, and capability development [6, 9]. Without alignment between livelihood design, physical capacity, financial resources, and sustained institutional support, cooperatives risk functioning primarily as social collectives rather than economically viable enterprises.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges encountered by Aboriginal women in generating income through a cooperative approach during the early stage of cooperative operation. Drawing on qualitative evidence from a women-led cooperative established in 2023, the findings provide a nuanced understanding of how cooperative-based income generation is both envisioned and constrained within Aboriginal women's lived realities.

The study shows that Aboriginal women do not approach cooperatives as passive beneficiaries. Rather, they understand cooperative participation as a means of acquiring skills, contributing to household income, supporting their spouses, and reducing dependency on men as sole income earners.

This agentic understanding underscores the social and economic significance of cooperatives for Aboriginal women. However, the findings also demonstrate that strong motivation and collective intent are insufficient to overcome structural barriers.

Key challenges identified include the mismatch between agriculture-based livelihoods and women's physical capacity, persistent financial constraints, lack of context-appropriate advisory support, and an unresolved gap between ideas and implementation in cultural-based income activities. These challenges interact cumulatively, reinforcing subsistence-oriented outcomes and limiting the cooperative's capacity to generate sustainable income.

The study contributes empirically by foregrounding challenges rather than success narratives and by highlighting the importance of early-stage cooperative dynamics. It underscores the need for cooperative development strategies that are sensitive to women's physical capacity, financial realities, and learning needs. Without such alignment, cooperatives risk reproducing existing patterns of marginalisation rather than serving as viable pathways for Aboriginal women's economic participation.

Future research could examine how alternative livelihood designs, targeted financial mechanisms, and sustained mentorship models may enable women-led cooperatives to move beyond subsistence and realise their intended economic and social potential.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study is funded by Universiti Sains Malaysia under Grant EO48: Community Engagement Project.

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