

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

March 2024

WEPs IN ACTION



PRINCIPLE 6

Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy

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CASE STUDY: Thrive Well Sdn Bhd

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR WOMEN TO CREATE BETTER COMMUNITIES

LESSONS LEARNED

- Acknowledging women's emotional labour in households and addressing their mental wellbeing as primary caregivers is key to creating women's economic empowerment and enabling positive outcomes in the wider community.
- A holistic approach is needed when undertaking community development initiatives, as areas such as wellbeing, economic livelihood and social cohesion overlap.

CONTEXT

The UNICEF and UNFPA 'Families on the Edge' study in Oct 2020¹ and May 2021² reported the serious issue of mental health within low-income urban families in Malaysia. The study found that one in five heads of households and one in four female heads of households are depressed, and one in four household members are experiencing new negative behavioural changes, such as increased tension towards children in the household, a rise in tobacco or cigarette use, higher levels of depression symptoms, and increased family tensions.

Thrive Well is a social enterprise with a mission to expand trauma-informed community mental health services to individuals, communities and organisations, particularly the marginalised and high-needs communities, in a sustainable manner.

From Thrive Well and their partners' engagements with the local communities in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur (urban areas in Malaysia), they find that women have been struggling even more

1. UNICEF Malaysia and UNFPA, Mixed methods longitudinal research on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women and children in lower income families, Issue 2: Status of the households post-MCO, October 2020, Putrajaya, Malaysia: United Nations Children's Fund, Malaysia and the United Nations Population Fund.
2. UNICEF Malaysia and UNFPA, Mixed methods longitudinal research on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women and children in lower income families, Issue 4: Two-steps forward, one step back: The new normal for Malaysia's urban poor, May 2021, Putrajaya, Malaysia: United Nations Children's Fund, Malaysia and the United Nations Population Fund.

since the Covid-19 pandemic in coping with multiple responsibilities such as managing household matters, caring for children and family members. Some women felt financially compelled to start or expand existing businesses to support their families, but were quickly overwhelmed mentally and emotionally which did not allow them to run their businesses efficiently.

K.A.M.I. Sembang, an offshoot programme from Thrive Well's community family programme Keluarga Akrab Mencapai Impian (K.A.M.I.)³, provides mothers with basic psychosocial support in processing their experiences and equips them with the necessary skills to face future challenges. Some forms of psychosocial skills and techniques taught include: relaxation skills using deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and the five senses, exploring what can and cannot be controlled, understanding how behaviours are linked to emotions, and effective communication skills to listen and express oneself.

ACTIONS

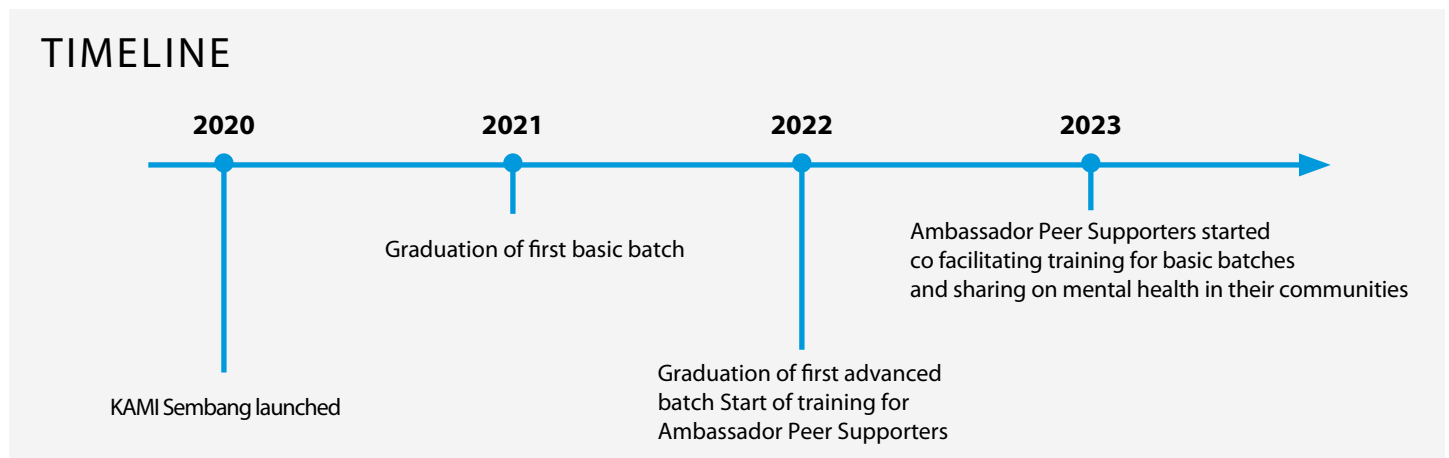
Community Well-being Ambassadors, who play the role of peer supporters, are the key to creating lasting change in low-income communities, and women are often at the heart of communities with working local knowledge. Thrive Well offers participants who have finished the six - eight month K.A.M.I. Sembang programme the opportunity to be trained as Community Well-being Ambassadors, which equips them with further psychosocial and leadership skills to support their respective communities. The main aim is to create a sustainable impact on the social, emotional and physical wellbeing of their communities through quarterly well-being days and monthly sharing sessions.

Thrive Well also aims to destigmatize mental health within low-income communities, as seeking support for mental health issues is not widely accepted. Women or mothers often bear the brunt of emotional labour – especially post-pandemic when these communities were grappling with the transition - yet they do not have tools to help them cope. K.A.M.I. Sembang gives them direct access to mental health support for themselves and others as well as skills to deal with life challenges. Most of the on-ground team members delivering K.A.M.I. Sembang are professionally trained with a psychology background, and comprise of clinical psychologists, counselors and Masters and Bachelor degree students.

Despite the increasing demand of individual therapy, Thrive Well's Managing Director Ellisha Othman recognized that a preventive approach would work best for larger communities who do not have the luxury of time or the means for individual therapy. Because there are many socioeconomic determinants of mental health, family and community-based approaches in such a context present the best opportunity to support an individual's mental well-being. Hence, group programmes were proposed with the idea of mental health professionals working together with social workers, residents associations, local community leaders and NGOs to support the mental health of mothers holistically.

The programme measures improvements in participant resilience using the Brief Resilience Scale questionnaire⁴, and general quality of life using the WHOQOL questionnaire⁵.

Thrive Well also keeps track of the number of participants graduating from the programme itself and the number of Ambassadors. Change in knowledge, skills and attitude of the mothers are also taken into account.



3. A community development programme that aims to strengthen emotional resilience, build self-advocacy skills and develop healthy communication within families in underserved B40 (income bracket of less than USD \$1000 a month) and marginalised communities. It aims to build replicable intervention programmes that better support young people and families exposed to adversity through participatory and inclusive approaches.
4. Smith, B. W., Dalen, J., Wiggins, K., Tooley, E., Christopher, P., & Bernard, J. (2008). The brief resilience scale: assessing the ability to bounce back. *International journal of behavioral medicine*, 15(3), 194-200. The Malay version is translated by Thrive Well Community Development Team.
5. World Health Organization. WHOQOL: Measuring Quality of Life: Bahasa_Malay_WHOQOL-BREF. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/tools/whoqol/whoqol-bref>

CHALLENGES

Some of the biggest challenges in implementing the programmes were community trust, participant engagement and pandemic-related restrictions.

When going into new communities, Thrive Well realized that community leaders and members were very wary of new organisations requesting to conduct programmes. The process of convincing them took multiple visits and meetings, including informal engagements during festive activities for both sides to get to know each other and build trust. They needed to see the sincerity and commitment first before allowing anyone to enter the community. To obtain buy-in from new communities, Thrive Well also used a participatory approach in designing programmes which took into account voices of the community to encourage commitment to the programme as well as their involvement.

As the demographic group mainly comprised mothers, participant attendance presented a challenge due to their numerous responsibilities, ranging from caregiving to managing their own businesses. K.A.M.I Sembang often had to compete with more pressing priorities for the women. The team had to ensure close

engagement with participants even beyond formal programme hours to build genuine rapport and commitment to attending the programmes. Furthermore, The Thrive Well team will discuss the proposed dates and times with the participants before the programme commences. In cases of prolonged celebrations like Raya or significant political events, which many women might be involved in, the team will reschedule sessions after discussing it with the participants. The team nurtured relationships with the participants by visiting them at their stalls, inquiring about their family members' well-being, and celebrating their achievements—even when the programme was not in progress.

Pandemic-related restrictions also caused challenges in conducting on-ground activities, which is the ideal format for mental health support programmes. Nonetheless, the team dug deep and was creative and resilient in combining online activities in various formats, conducting phone calls, as well as collaborating with local community leaders to reach women and enable as much benefit as possible during times of restricted physical interaction.

RESULTS

From 2020 to 2022, K.A.M.I Sembang has completed seven basic batches (each with 30 participants, totaling 210 participants), four advanced batches (each with 15 participants, totaling 60 participants) and began training their first batch of Community Well-being Ambassador (four participants). In 2023, they continued with three basic batches (each with 30 participants, totaling 90 participants), four advanced batches (each with 15 participants, totaling 60 participants) and at least two new Community Well-being Ambassador batches (each with four participants, totaling eight participants).

The K.A.M.I. Sembang programme was attended by at least 210 women across six communities from 2020 - 2022, at least half of which reported an increase in their resilience and quality of life scores post-programme. Apart from that, the overall satisfaction rate of the programme was consistently above 80 per cent with programme participants also giving qualitative feedback of how skills learnt have been applied to their lives.

Most importantly, the programme has made significant strides in destigmatizing mental health. Initially, when Thrive Well

introduced mental health consultations and therapy sessions to the participants during their first session, there were no takers, possibly due to stigma or fear. However, as the rapport between the Thrive Well team and the participants grew stronger, and trust developed within the community, some women began approaching the Thrive Well team personally. They opened up about their issues and life challenges, eventually opting to enroll in therapy sessions.

Additionally, Thrive Well encouraged participants to express their interest in consultation or therapy sessions through pre-assessment and post-assessment forms. This approach aimed to normalize the process and increase the likelihood of these women seeking help. As a result, a total of 30 women from the served communities have now signed up for mental health consultations outside of the programme.

Just in 2022 alone, 120 women successfully graduated from the basic programme and there are currently 12 Ambassador Peer Supporters in-training to further support their communities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Thrive Well recommends other companies undertaking similar community measures to consider:

- **Start with short introductory sessions so that potential participants have a teaser of what to expect before they commit to longer duration programmes.** As communities are often wary of outsiders and what is expected of them, this approach eases them into the process by helping them see what you have to offer.
- **Provide holistic support.** Providing other forms of support such as meals, incentives for behaviour change and attendance, childcare, and transportation if needed can be an effective means of reducing barriers to attendance and reducing attrition.
- **Community involvement in planning.** Programmes are more appealing when potential participants and respected community members serve on the programme planning and advisory board. Their knowledge is culturally specific, and can assist in important decision making pertaining to the program. Recruiting facilitators from the previous

participants also adds value to the program as they have a better understanding of the community's needs.

- **Create simple materials that can be shared digitally.** Create easy-to-understand marketing materials about the programme that can also be distributed digitally to a broad audience in the community.
- **Partner with financial service providers or entrepreneurial NGOs.** From Thrive Well's experience, while mental health support is the priority, it is obvious that basic financial needs among the women is something that cannot not be ignored as it is extrinsically linked to their wellbeing. Women or mothers sometimes cannot afford to close their stalls or stop their business to attend sessions. Developing collaborations or arrangements with other agencies or NGOs for future programming would support holistic women's economic empowerment efforts.

THE ROLE OF WEPs

Signing on to the WEPs in 2022 has made Thrive Well more aware and mindful of specific needs of women participating in community programmes, as well as employees of Thrive Well, such as the need to account for potential child care help or time off flexibility to care for family members. There is an increased sense of understanding that we cannot adopt a one size fits all approach and need to constantly adapt to create a more supportive environment for all to thrive together.










QUOTES

Participant A | Age: 48 years | No. of children: 2

"Before this I wasn't sure whether I was stressed or not when I suddenly felt like crying, felt tired, felt left out. I thought it was because of my own weak attitude. Apparently those were symptoms that I was feeling stressed. Through the program organised by Thrive Well, I can now overcome the problem of stress. I can channel my stress into something positive. The important thing is that I can plant the feeling of care and love in myself."

Participant B | Age: 47 years | No. of children: 3

"I used to think a lot, now my blood pressure is stable. I used to always have headaches, now I can solve the issues. Now that my emotional health is better, my physical health has also improved. I am more friendly / warm with my children. My children used to now share secrets, now they share and become friends because I validate their feelings. They support me going for this program because they saw the changes in me."

- Principle 1  Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.
- Principle 2  Treat all women and men fairly at work– respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination.
- Principle 3  Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers.
- Principle 4  Promote education, training and professional development for women.
- Principle 5  Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
- Principle 6  Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.
- Principle 7  Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

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