

## Malaysia's strength in women leadership: success factor in localising the United Nations sustainable development goals

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**Abstract:** Countries worldwide pledged to achieve the targets of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) introduced by the United Nation (UN) by the year 2030. Malaysia, amongst other developing countries, may need to focus on the localisation of the UN SDG led by women representatives, to ensure its success. This research aims to illustrate some of the many strengths that this country has, in achieving the successful localisation of the SDG, which is the existing knowledge of the SDG, and evidence of exhibited commitments to SDG related activities by selected women in focus group studies. Findings from a questionnaire distributed to 628 women representatives in Malaysia suggests substantiated SDG localisation efforts and prioritised goals according to the locality. With further examination on other strengths and weaknesses in the future, this research justifies reasons in entrusting women local leaders to ensure the successful implementation of the UN SDG in Malaysia and to be made a model for similar developing nations of the world.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, women

### 1. Introduction

Moving towards becoming a developed country, Malaysia has embraced the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by streamlining the 17 goals and 169 targets, that is aimed to be achieved by the end of the year 2030, in the nation various developmental plans and policies. At the same time, to successfully localise the SDG, there is a need to study, understand, and adopt the goals to suit the needs of a community accordingly, which varies for every community. However, there are pre-determined essential conditions that are outlined by the UN on how to adapt the SDG to different situations [1]. One of the most significant conditions outlined is the need for strong partnerships and collaborations towards achieving the goals. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Malaysia plays the vital role in assisting the country, by co-operating with various Ministries, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), private sectors, academic institutions, agencies, and individuals. To fully adopt SDG, the nation should utilize existing organizations and structures in Malaysia, such as the Village Development and Security Committee (or locally identified as the Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung, JKKK), Civil Societies, Neighbourhood Watch groups, and the Representative Council of Women and Family (also known as the Majlis Perwakilan Wanita dan Keluarga locally or the MPWK). These current structures have their own sets of targets and objectives in line with respective Ministries or higher-level organizations. However, the fact is often overlooked that all these structures are aiming for the same long-term objective, which is, the empowerment of women, and contributing to the nation's development.

Another condition needed to adapt the SDG locally, is the participation of all, regardless of levels of economy, race, age or gender. However, a call has been made to all the UN member states to ensure that women are fully involved in the localisation of all the SDG [2]. Women hold many leadership roles in communities globally. As observed in the World Survey in the Role of Women in Development 2014, women leaders' wisdom, innovation, accomplishment, and support is essential to search, and create more economically, socially and ecologically sustainable methods in managing local environments. The

Significance of these roles can be seen in communities' adaptive involvement in climate change, governing of resources, and other sustainable development projects worldwide [3].

In Malaysia, women's participation in leadership roles improved throughout the years, as seen in the Global Gender Gap Index with scoring of 0.670 in 2017, from a score of 0.651 in 2006 [4]. Significant improvements in the sub-index include economic participation, with a score of 0.654 in 2017 from 0.592 in 2006, and Educational Attainment with a score of 0.991 in 2017 from 0.985 in 2006 [5]. Despite the typical roles that women leaders hold

in their communities, such as secretary, treasurer, welfare, and administrator, these women are utilising their strengths to improve the well-being of their community [6].

Exploration of the women leaders' strength in the localisation of UN's SDG, which in this research is defined by their awareness and commitment to the SDG, is crucial as women make half of the strength of the nation, representing 48.3% of the Malaysian population. Malaysian women's education enrolment surpasses men in all levels in the country, be it at the primary school level where women account for 97.7% while men are at 96.8% enrolment, or the tertiary level, where women's enrolment is at 49.8%, while men are at 37.8% [7]. This significant differences, reflect on the capabilities of Malaysian women in general, where they continuously pursue education, and it also implies that they see education as vital in their lives.

The objective of this research paper is to examine existing strength of Malaysia, via the Malaysian women representative leaders, regarding their awareness of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG), and their commitment towards it, thus ensuring the successful implementation of the SDG in the country. This paper is divided into five sections. The first section is the introduction, which is followed by, the literature review, the methods and material, with result and discussion. The paper ends with a conclusion of the critical findings, inclusive of the study's limitations and recommendations for further future exploration.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. Sustainable Development and the United Nation (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Definitions of sustainable development have varied interpretations such as alteration of values [8] towards achieving a better-preferred future, or a process that is hands-on to create and pursue a mental picture or concept of society that utilises all the resources sensibly and respects it [9]. Most, however, associate it with the environment and how development is ecologically sustained. Interpretations such as 'sustained change', 'sustained growth' or merely as successful development, which was used most often [10]. As for the concept of sustainability, the usage of the concept started in the field of renewable resources but since has been widely used elsewhere and to a broader concept [11]. Another crucial development of sustainability includes the acknowledged importance of science and technology via the development of human capabilities [12].

The United Nations then defines a more holistic characterisation of sustainable development, which includes social, economic and environmental factors [1]. This description applies to all the UN's long-term plan and goals such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). After the worldwide success of the MDGs, the UN member states unanimously agreed to adopt and implement the post-2015 development agenda on the 2nd of August 2015 [1]. The new, more comprehensive planned agenda is an action strategy for the planet itself, for the people living on it and for the prosperity of those people, and it is called the SDG. The SDG consists of 17 goals as highlighted in Figure 1.



Figure 1: UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Source: [13]

However, there were also concerns on crucial issues in the SDG that are not addressed in the defined goals, such as the importance of inter-linkages, dynamics and relations between the goals [14], or the lack of deliberation on an individual's responsibilities and obligations [15]. This research builds on the belief of the individual's responsibilities, with the inclusion of the understanding that every individual has an opportunity to be a leader. It is therefore essential to note that individuals, such as women leaders who have voting power and lifestyle choices that

affect the sustainable development, have a unique position of influence in their society to address the issues of concerns on the implementation of the SDG.

## **2.2. Malaysia and the UN SDG**

Malaysia acknowledged the importance of gender equality and women empowerment via policies implemented and in long-term strategic plans of the nation. One of these is the 11th Malaysia Plan, which is being implemented nationwide, from the year 2016 to 2020 [16].

A comparison between the 11th Malaysia Plan and the SDG showed considerable differences in women's roles towards the development of a nation. The 11th Malaysia Plan consists of singular/ one-dimensional roles of women at any given time, whereas the SDG highlights the interconnectivity of all the goals and how gender equality plays a pivotal role in achieving the goals, cutting across all the sectors at any given time. The significance of gender equality was also differently handled as the 11th MP, includes women's roles and needs in specific subcategories, while in the SDG, gender equality is one of the primary goals and the role of women often highlighted regardless of which SDG was discussed [1].

Malaysia aims to overcome the challenges faced in achieving the set targets and indicators by reinforcing previously adopted agreements such as the UN's Climate Change Conference's COP21 on climate change [1]. However, as an overarching method of implementation, all countries, including Malaysia, were reminded to consider the roles that gender equality and women leaders play in the achievement of the targets and indicators, as widely advocated by various UN bodies [2].

There is, however, a lack of mention on the importance of any leader or front-runner who could be the catalyst to any or all of the SDG implementation. Malaysia's gender profile highlights that there were only 10.4% women in the national parliament [17]. Therefore, this indicates a great need to provide opportunities for women leaders to be the catalyst in successful SDG localization.

## **2.3. Malaysian Women Leaders and the UN SDG**

To achieve success in the implementation of the UN SDG, women leader's political empowerment, and equality of access to a leadership position at all stages, need to be ensured. The progress of gender equality and the successful implementation of the SDGs are endangered with the insufficient increase in women's participation and representation as leaders [18]. Therefore, Malaysia, a country with relatively high scores in three out of four sub-indexes of Gender Gap Indexes [7] recognizes that other than the importance of building alliances, women empowerment is also vital to the nation, in particular relating to the implementation of the SDG.

As the nation's development continues, women parliamentarians are responsible for being a channel between their constituents and the executive branch of the government. They hold the executive office accountable and relentlessly bring the spotlight down on the latest occurring issues. These issues often include women empowerment and gender equality matters that occur locally or internationally and are highlighted by the women parliamentarians for the federal and local government to pay attention to [19].

Other than parliamentarians, Malaysia also has a low percentage of women holding top management positions as civil servants (37.1%) and in the private sector (15%) [20]. These numbers reflect the situation of women leaders nationwide, all the way to the grassroots level, where they have the responsibilities as intermediaries between their constituents and the government [21]. Even though these women may not have as much power or political impact in their community as men, they often do have a voice in matters of the community [22]. Thus, Malaysian women leaders are in an excellent position to make significant changes to the community's development, and the nation's advancement via the benefits of the localization of the UN's SDG.

Moving forward, overall trends of research in sustainable development in Malaysia are mostly of women's health, environmental concerns, poverty eradication and gender development issues [6][23][24]. However, in line with the affirmation of the UN's MDG and afterwards, SDG, increased interest was seen among the country's researchers in more holistic and comprehensive areas, such as gender leadership, partnership initiatives, and active institutional roles. Awareness of the importance of these more holistic roles is vital at an individual level, particularly for local women leaders, who can play important roles to help the country achieve the targeted global goals [25].

Therefore, Malaysian women leaders should not only take the proactive measure to understand the SDG but also apply SDG in the development of their niche area. There is a need to exhaustively consider the Malaysian women leaders' roles in understanding the importance of SDG, how it applies to the everyday lives of Malaysian population and at the same time, learn from other countries who may have successfully implemented the goals in their own countries. The women leaders' strength may also be the nation's advantage in ensuring the localization of SDG in the country.

## **2.4. Challenges in Localizing SDG**

Other than their awareness and commitment of the UN SDG, challenges faced by the leaders may also be considered as their strength as they had met those challenges before and solved or worked around them. They may even already possess all the resources needed to address and overcome those challenges.

What the world expects of the society in localising SDG, is for the community to learn, understand, and adjust the goals to suit their needs accordingly. For Malaysia, UNDP Malaysia plays the most significant role in this by assisting various Ministries, NGO, private sectors, academic institutions, agencies, and individuals. Even with the assistance of UN bodies in the country, the Malaysian women local leaders are the best examples to showcase a successful localisation of the SDG, as demonstrated in this research.

With their own community's welfare and development in mind, there is a value for exploration towards what advantages these women have that matches with the requirements to localise SDGs in Malaysia, as those strengths are the solution to the challenges faced locally. Their awareness and commitment towards the UN SDG are paramount in situations like these, especially when a global aim needs to adjust to the local community's needs and the nation's aspirations.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study have been adopted quantitative method. A survey was conducted on 628 women local leaders in both the rural and urban areas of Malaysia. The women are from a sampling of leaders in various types of organizations within the 14 states of the country, from a target population of 234,900 women participating in the workforce in public administration, defence and social security, nationwide [26]. Initial data collected for sampling was from civil societies, private bodies, government ministries, agencies and UNDP Malaysia.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections: demographic information, leadership traits, organizational status and gender responsiveness. The usage of the online survey ensured a more significant reach of respondents and a less costly data collection process. Quantitative data analysis was implemented on the findings of the survey.

The respondent's background and the high level of Leadership Traits demonstrated within the survey showed the reliability of the sample. It may be assumed that they have previously demonstrated excellent leadership skills, gained the trust of the community and are with years of experience as indicated by their election to the current position. The external validity of this research is concluded to be high as the results may apply to other populations similar to the ones chosen. It may even be suitable for other developing countries to emulate and adapt, especially the countries with reasonably similar gender equality profile.

### **4. Result and Discussion**

The frequency of respondent's age is represented by samples from all the states of Malaysia, with the biggest age group representing the respondents are between the ages of 41 to 50 years old (28.7%). The second biggest group represents ages of 51 to 60 years old (25%) and ages 31 to 40 years old (23.4%). A histogram of the age frequency showed a steady increase of women leaders as age increases. However, there was a noticeable steep decline after the age of 60 years (8.1%). An overall view of the educational level of respondent showed that the highest number from the level of education achieved by the respondents is predominantly at a high school graduate level (51.11%). The second highest frequency of education level of the respondents was at the Diploma level (16.56%). It is also interesting to note that there are four individuals equivalent to 0.64% of the respondents, holding the Doctor of Philosophy or Professional Doctorates.

Deductions made from this is that older or less educated women were less technologically savvy and were less inclined to take the time and effort to read and answer the questions in the survey. A cross tabulation between the age groups and the education level of the respondents show a correlation between those two factors. High school is the highest level of education for all age groups, but there were stark differences between the age groups of 31-40 years old and 51-60 years old, where the difference between high school and degree level are 30 and 101 respondents respectively. This difference show that generationally, there is a gap in educational attainment, and this relates to the country's national educational plans from the days of independence. A vast difference between generations demonstrates success in the current generation's educational achievements. The difference also suggests that women leaders, especially the younger generations, realise the importance and need for better levels of education.

The Pareto Line method uses the application of the 80/20 rule, to identify the vital few SDG that the participants showed the most interest in, and the vital few SDG that is related to the activities implemented in the past. The results were then compared to available statistics. The outcome revealed a correlation between the highest frequencies of interest shown with other factors, which are the SDG related activities implemented, the population's current interest, level of knowledge and awareness of their locality's needs.

From the 628 respondents, 67.0% chose only six to 10 goals that they were interested in, indicating interest in specific issues out of all the 17 SDGs. The four goals with the highest frequency selected by the respondents are 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' (62.58%), 'No Poverty' (60.35%), 'Good Health and Well-Being' (55.57%) and 'Sustainable Cities and Communities' (54.46%). Analysis of the survey reflects the women leaders' primary areas of concern for sustainable developments for their locality. The goals with the highest percentage, as highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' Interest in the Implementation of SDG.

SDG NUMBER	SDG	FREQUENCY	%
SDG1	No Poverty	379	60.35
SDG2	Zero Hunger	215	34.24
SDG3	Good Health & Well-Being	349	55.57
SDG4	Quality Education	292	46.50
SDG5	Gender Equality	263	41.88
SDG6	Clean water & Sanitation	218	34.71
SDG7	Affordable & Clean Energy	168	26.75
SDG8	Decent Work & Economic Growth	393	62.58
SDG9	Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure	307	48.89
SDG10	Reduced Inequalities	221	35.19
SDG11	Sustainable Cities & Communities	342	54.46
SDG12	Responsible Consumption & Production	177	28.18
SDG13	Climate Action	130	20.70
SDG14	Life Below Water	98	15.61
SDG15	Life on Land	104	16.56
SDG16	Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions	248	39.49
SDG17	Partnerships for Sustainable Development	282	44.90

The interest shown, or lack thereof, for specific SDGs, reflects the respondents' awareness of their community's needs, and their need to improve their community at a more national and international level. The SDGs that were not selected suggests issues that needed less attention in the respondents' community at the time of the survey. In a public awareness survey done in 2014, Malaysians showed an increase in the awareness of STI importance compared to 2002 (from 77.9% to 94.5%), however, the public is most interested in new inventions and technologies (83.7%), compared to environmental pollution (72.7%) [27]. The survey's finding is consistent with the respondents' view of theirs and their community's interests.

The cumulative percentage was plotted on a Pareto chart, as seen in Figure 2. The SDGs that fall to the left of the Pareto line (dotted line) drawn in the figure are the 'vital few' goals that show the most significant causes of SDG awareness/ interest in the respondents. Consequently, 11 out of the 17 goals were considered vital and seemed to suggest are a high probability of confirming the research question, that the Malaysian women representatives are very much aware of the UN's SDG. Therefore, the few goals in the order of most vital for respondents are displayed in Table 2.

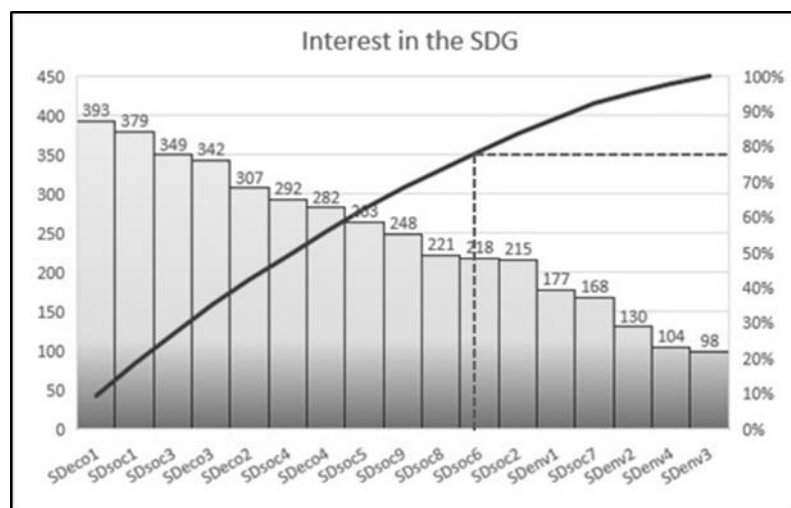


Figure 2: Participants' Interest in the SDG.

Table 2: Most Vital Few Goals in SDG Awareness.

No.	SPSS Label	SDG
1	SDDeco1	Decent Work & Economic Growth
2	SDsoc1	No Poverty

<b>3</b>	SDsoc3	Good Health & Well-Being
<b>4</b>	SDeco3	Sustainable Cities & Communities
<b>5</b>	SDeco2	Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure
<b>6</b>	SDsoc4	Quality Education
<b>7</b>	SDeco4	Partnerships for Sustainable Development
<b>8</b>	SDsoc5	Gender Equality
<b>9</b>	SDsoc9	Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions
<b>10</b>	SDsoc8	Reduced Inequalities
<b>11</b>	SDsoc6	Clean water & Sanitation

In analysing and cross-referencing available statistics and the nation's current situation in both rural and urban areas, issues prioritised by the respondents in the survey were mostly in line with the local communities' current needs and wants. The findings imply that these Malaysian women representatives are not only in tune with their communities' needs, and the nation's development plans, but they are also very much aware of the UN's SDG, and how, the goals may be adapted in assisting the betterment of their communities.

This awareness suggests that these leaders no longer need to be introduced to the SDG and that they are ready to take the next steps in localising SDG into their community. They have even identified which goals are vital to them and which need to be prioritised. Responsibilities of SDG implementers in Malaysia will be significantly streamlined with the needs of the local community and the development of the nation if these local women leaders are directly involved in the process.

Interestingly, in a Public Awareness of STI Malaysia 2014 survey, Malaysians were asked about their views on the emerging topic of climate change. The survey found that 89.7% of Malaysians has read or heard of climate change. A majority of them (88.7%) expressed their willingness to change their lifestyle in order to reduce emissions and climate change impacts [27]. The survey's finding suggests an improvement of awareness and interest in the environmental clusters of SDG.

The existence of commitment towards the SDG is seen in the implementation of SDG related programs in the past by the respondents. The four goals with the highest frequency of commitment selected by the respondents, as highlighted in Table 3, are 'Good Health and Well-Being' (64.49%), 'No Poverty' (57.64%), 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' (41.72%) and 'Quality Education' (41.72%). An overall analysis of the existence of commitment shows that the implementation of SDG related activities is mostly affected by several challenges, such as the lack of funding and other resources. However, the women leaders were creative in successfully ensuring their implementation of these SDG related activities.

Table 3: SDG Activities Implemented by Respondents.

No.	SDG Number	SDG	Frequency	% age
1	SDG 3	Good Health & Well-Being	405	64.49
2	SDG 1	No Poverty	362	57.64
3	SDG 8	Decent Work & Economic Growth	262	41.72
4	SDG 4	Quality Education	262	41.72
5	SDG 16	Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions	246	39.17
6	SDG 5	Gender Equality	234	37.26
7	SDG 2	Zero Hunger	218	34.71
8	SDG 11	Sustainable Cities & Communities	192	30.57
9	SDG 17	Partnerships for Sustainable Development	192	30.57
10	SDG 6	Clean water & Sanitation	190	30.25
11	SDG 9	Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure	179	28.50
<b>12</b>	SDG 10	Reduced Inequalities	173	27.55
<b>13</b>	SDG 12	Responsible Consumption & Production	139	22.13
<b>14</b>	SDG 7	Affordable & Clean Energy	117	18.63

15	SDG 13	Climate Action	88	14.01
16	SDG 14	Life Below Water	72	11.46
17	SDG 15	Life on Land	59	9.39

In line with Malaysia’s National Blue Ocean Strategies (NBOS) of rapidly delivering high impact programs and activities to the public at low costs [28], the women leaders have cooperated with various agencies, Ministries, private companies and NGOs in implementing activities related to the SDGs. Co-operations between the local authorities, agencies and organizations ensured that a more significant number of activities might be implemented, at a fraction of a cost, with mutual benefits to all parties involved.

From the analysis of sustainable development activities previously implemented by the women leaders in their locality, the exceptionally high percentages of frequencies in specific activities suggests a high level of commitment of the SDG as there are track records of SDG related activities already implemented, as disclosed in the survey, which was consistent with the UN SDG. The cumulative percentage was plotted on a Pareto chart, as seen in Figure 3. The SDGs that fall to the left of the Pareto line in the figure are the “vital few” goals that reflect the most significant commitment of SDG from the respondents.

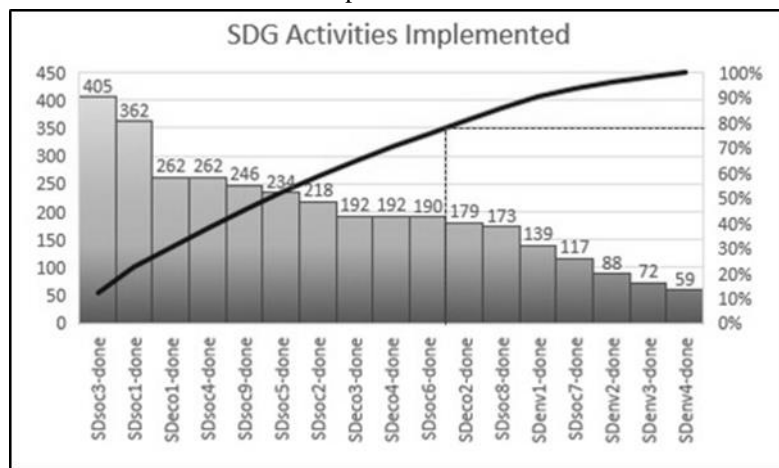


Figure 3: SDG Related Activities Implemented.

From the analysis done, 10 out of all 17 goals were deemed vital, and this seemed to suggest a high probability of confirming the research question, which reflects the existence of commitment from the Malaysian women representatives, in their actions in implementing activities related the UN SDG. Therefore, the goals in the order of most vital for respondents are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Most Vital Few Goals in SDG Commitment.

No.	SPSS Label	SDG
1	SDsoc3-done	Good Health & Well-Being
2	SDsoc1-done	No Poverty
3	SDeco1-done	Decent Work & Economic Growth
4	SDsoc4-done	Quality Education
5	SDsoc9-done	Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions
6	SDsoc5-done	Gender Equality

7	SDsoc2- done	Zero Hunger
8	SDeco3- done	Sustainable Cities & Communities
9	SDeco4- done	Partnerships for Sustainable Development
10	SDsoc6- done	Clean water & Sanitation

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Despite limited resources, as indicated in the survey, the women leaders have managed to implement most of the SDG related activities nationwide. This signifies a firm commitment as the leaders are aware of the existence of SDG and its' importance to their locality.

An excellent example of the displayed commitment is via the implementation of programs and activities under the Komuniti PERWANI (PERWANI Community) groups. PERWANI stands for Perkumpulan Wanita or Women's Group, where the idea behind this program is that women leaders are the drivers of the nations' and communities' development. From the information gathered, these Komuniti PERWANI groups were responsible for activities implemented relating to multiple SDGs at the same time, such as good health and well-being, poverty eradication and the supply of clean water and proper sanitation, in one disaster relief activity [29]. This activity was implemented during a significant flood in rural Kelantan, one of the states in Malaysia, where a few groups of Komuniti PERWANI organised donation drives and volunteer work that was participated by other women from many other states in the country. In a magnificent show of community leadership, these women managed to gather basic needs items, distributed the items to hundreds of flood victims, while working together with local authorities to clean up houses and making sure that the houses were safe and habitable again. At the same time, they managed to bring other PERWANI groups from different states to work together towards the same goal. It was the perfect example of women leaders showing significant commitment to SDG related activities. Other than the good governance that they have shown, the women leaders have also displayed creativity and ingenuity in implementing activities with limited resources, despite the many challenges faced.

There are various other examples of this kind of leadership locally, and it suggests that the Malaysian women representatives are capable of implementing the SDG in their communities and beyond. However, what seems apparent is that the leaders lack resources and further guidance from the government and organizations on the way forward to the SDGs. It is therefore quite apparent that findings of the survey show evidence of both awareness of the UN SDG, and actions reflecting of commitment towards the SDG from Malaysia women representative leaders. It is an advantage to the nation as this is an untapped yet full of potential, a pool of human resources, and as women empowerment grows within the nation. There is further possibilities and potential as women take up more leadership roles in the country.

## 5. Conclusion

The key findings of this study are that the Malaysian women representatives are very much aware of the SDG, and have shown commitment towards the implementation of the SDG related activities. The commitment shown was accurate and in line with the interest shown towards the SDG, where the three most prioritised 'vital few' SDG identified for both commitment, and interest, are 'Decent Work & Economic Growth', 'No Poverty' and 'Good Health & Well-Being'. At the same time, this reflects the perception that good health and well-being could be ensured if the community or locality is financially secured.

There are limitations to the study, which include other strengths that could be further examined, such as leadership traits and gender awareness, which are an integral part of the successful implementation of SDG in any nation in the world. Therefore, it could be suggested that this study be extended to other types of strengths of a women leader, and it may also be extended to weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The outcome of the suggested research could interestingly be build up to create an algorithm where a leader's strategic value may be identified and could be recognized as a tactical factor in successfully implementing any program, in any country.

Increasing the participation of women in the implementation of SDG has been a tremendous collective action and the main agenda of countries around the world. As highlighted in related literatures, existing international data sets have not taken into account the participation of women in local politics, even though that is where women tend to be more active in many countries in the world, and that at the local level is where the women leaders' presence often makes a noticeable difference [30].



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