

Breaking Barriers: Inclusive Career Strategies for Single Mothers in Sarawak, Malaysia

Chan Siaw Leng

Faculty of Humanities, Management and Science, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 97008 Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia

Abstract

Single mothers encounter substantial barriers to economic security, including limited access to flexible employment and specialized training. This paper presents a comprehensive framework, grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory and Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, for delivering inclusive career services. The analysis identifies four essential intervention pillars, namely wraparound resources, programmatic flexibility, transformational coaching, and community engagement, that address systemic obstacles encountered by single mothers in Malaysia. By implementing these evidence-based strategies alongside inclusive workplace policies, career development professionals can help single mothers enhance their self-efficacy and establish sustainable career pathways.

Introduction

Single mothers in Malaysia represent a growing demographic group that faces disproportionate systemic barriers to economic security. The 2020 census indicates that 910,091 women in Malaysia meet the definition of single mothers, constituting 8.3% of all households; additionally, 72% of single mothers in Sarawak are reportedly willing to work. Despite this demonstrated motivation, interconnected structural impediments frequently restrict access to quality employment and career advancement. These women navigate a “triple burden” of

parenting, employment, and education, which often results in diminished educational attainment, substantial debt, and chronic underemployment.

The challenges encountered by single mothers transcend individual skill deficiencies. Systemic barriers, including limited childcare access, a scarcity of flexible work arrangements, and inadequate training programs, create a cycle of disadvantage affecting both mothers and their children. This paper presents a comprehensive framework to help career development professionals effectively support single mothers, aligning with the emphasis of the APCDA 2026 conference on inclusive career services.

Systemic Barriers and Theoretical Foundations

Single mothers in Malaysia encounter five interconnected barriers: childcare constraints (46.2% cite care responsibilities as the primary barrier), educational attainment gaps (54.1% are high school dropouts), accessibility limitations (15.4% face geographic barriers), employment vulnerability (25% face the risk of termination due to family circumstances), and urban-rural economic disparities. As Olaru and Bolger (2022) emphasized, the absence of flexible work arrangements substantially hinders single parents' ability to maintain full-time employment, often forcing them into involuntary part-time work with lower wages and a heightened risk of poverty.

Effective interventions must be grounded in robust theoretical frameworks. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), articulated by Lent et al. (1994), provides a powerful lens for understanding career development. SCCT posits that environmental factors affect career development by influencing learning experiences (Wang & Liu, 2022). The theory delineates a triadic interaction model centered on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. For single mothers, generalized self-efficacy, or confidence in one's ability to overcome obstacles, is a strong predictor of positive employment outcomes, with research indicating an improvement of up to 35.8%.

According to Bandura (1986, 1997), self-efficacy derives from four primary sources: personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological and affective states. For single mothers, career interventions can intentionally cultivate these factors through growth-mindset development, obstacle reframing, structured mastery experiences,

and exposure to the success stories of peers navigating similar challenges.

Super (1980) conceptualized career development as a lifelong process involving the integration of multiple roles that comprise an individual's psychosocial life space. This framework is particularly applicable to single mothers, as it acknowledges the complex interplay between their roles as parents, employees, and learners. Career counseling must address role conflict and assist single mothers in navigating transitions between these demanding roles.

Four-Pillar Framework for Inclusive Career Services

Wraparound Resources

Single mothers' career success depends on resolving interconnected life challenges. Wraparound support services address holistic needs through coordinated multi-domain assistance, including childcare subsidies, emergency financial assistance, mental health services, transportation support, and coordinated case management. Programs implementing comprehensive wraparound support consistently report positive outcomes in program completion, employment, and long-term economic stability.

Programmatic Flexibility

Traditional career training programs assume full-time attendance and daytime scheduling, parameters that are fundamentally incompatible with the circumstances of single motherhood. Innovative programs redesign program delivery through online and hybrid modalities, part-time certification pathways, integrated on-the-job training, concurrent childcare provision, and scheduling aligned with school calendars. Success requires

intentional design that treats single mothers' circumstances as design parameters requiring creative solutions rather than as deficits.

Transformational Coaching

Traditional career coaching often adopts a transactional paradigm, providing generic information without customization. Transformational coaching prioritizes relationship-building, holistic barrier mitigation, and client empowerment. Practitioners use the Goal, Reality, Options, Will model to structure interventions that address both external structural barriers and internal psychological constraints. This comprehensive approach yields superior outcomes, including enhanced career satisfaction, accelerated earnings growth, and sustained employment, compared to traditional methodologies.

Community Engagement

Single mothers frequently experience professional isolation and lack access to informal networks that facilitate access to career opportunities. Mentorship programs address this gap by providing peer mentorship (connecting mothers at similar career stages), professional mentorship (pairing participants with established professionals), and group mentorship (creating communities of practice). These initiatives expand professional networks, provide targeted guidance, offer role models, and support accountability.

Systemic Policy and Implementation

Malaysia and Sarawak have implemented major government programs allocating RM2 billion in aid, including KIRWaS, KasihNITa, BKIT, SARA, and iSarawakCare. Career development professionals must proactively connect single mothers to these resources. Employers implementing inclusive

workplace policies, including flexible work arrangements, affordable childcare, paid family leave, and a supportive organizational culture, derive substantial benefits, including reduced turnover and enhanced retention.

Evidence-based public policy solutions addressing root causes include universal paid family and medical leave, expanded child tax credits, affordable childcare infrastructure, reformed work requirements, enhanced financial inclusion programs, minimum wage standards, and robust equal pay policies. International evidence demonstrates that nations implementing robust family support policies exhibit relatively high single-mother employment rates and relatively low poverty rates.

Sarawak's diversifying economy presents substantial opportunities. The state's oil and gas sector, rapidly expanding digital economy, growing tourism industry, and emerging renewable energy sector offer high-wage employment pathways for single mothers with appropriate skills and support. Career development professionals should actively connect single mothers with training programs aligned with these growth sectors.

Practical Implementation and Conclusions

Career development professionals can operationalize inclusive practices through concrete strategies: conducting comprehensive barrier assessments, adopting transformational coaching principles, connecting clients to wraparound services, facilitating mentorship and networking, supporting flexible training, advocating for workplace inclusion, practicing cultural competence, engaging in systemic advocacy, quantifying outcomes continuously, and building peer support communities.

Single mothers represent a resilient, capable workforce segment whose potential is constrained by systemic barriers rather than individual deficits. Empowering single mothers requires moving beyond transactional services toward transformational, holistic support systems that address interconnected barriers while cultivating individual agency. By implementing this comprehensive framework grounded in evidence-based theory, career development professionals can help single mothers enhance their self-efficacy, navigate systemic challenges, and construct sustainable career pathways. Malaysia's career development profession has a unique opportunity to advance inclusive, equitable services by leveraging government commitments and Sarawak's economic opportunities to dismantle barriers and create sustainable pathways to economic security for single mothers and their families.

References

- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W. H. Freeman.
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45(1), 79–122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>
- Olaru, E. R., & Bolger, E. (2022). Meeting the career development needs of single parents. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 48(1), 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.4805>
- Super, D. E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 16(3), 282–298. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791\(80\)90056-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(80)90056-1)
- Wang, D., Liu, X., & Deng, H. (2022). The perspectives of social cognitive career theory approach in current times. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1023994. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1023994>