

Negotiating Survival: Social Capital and Economic Survival Strategies among Rural Single Mothers in Kedah, Malaysia

Noviatin Syarifuddin¹, Nur Adriana Nadhira Abdullah²

Anthropology and Sociology Programme, Centre for Research in Development, Social and Environment (SEEDS), Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, Malaysia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100601380>

Received: 15 September 2025; Accepted: 20 September 2025; Published: 21 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Rural single mothers constitute one of the most socioeconomically vulnerable groups, facing persistent challenges related to unstable employment, financial insecurity, and extensive caregiving responsibilities. While previous studies have widely acknowledged the importance of social capital in supporting vulnerable households, limited attention has been given to how social capital interacts with broader livelihood strategies to sustain the economic resilience of rural single mothers. Addressing this gap, this study examines the role of social capital in shaping the economic survival strategies of rural single mothers from a sociological perspective. A quantitative case study was conducted among 30 rural single mothers in Mukim Siong, Baling District, Kedah, Malaysia. Data were collected using structured questionnaires complemented by open-ended interviews. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively using SPSS, while qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis using NVivo. The findings indicate that respondents possessed a moderate level of social capital, with interpersonal relationships providing stronger support than institutional or digital networks. Moral support, access to employment opportunities through personal networks, and community relationships emerged as the most valuable social resources. The qualitative findings further identified four interconnected economic survival strategies adopted by rural single mothers: informal livelihood diversification, micro-entrepreneurship, community-based skills development, and financial agency through savings and prudent household financial management. These strategies illustrate that social capital functions not as an isolated resource but as an enabling mechanism that facilitates livelihood adaptation and household resilience under conditions of prolonged socioeconomic vulnerability. This study contributes to the sociological literature by demonstrating that the economic survival of rural single mothers is shaped by the interaction between social capital and adaptive livelihood strategies rather than by financial resources alone. The findings also provide practical implications for strengthening community development initiatives and support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Keywords: social capital; sociology of family; economic survival; rural single mothers; community resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Rural single mothers constitute one of the most socioeconomically vulnerable groups in society because they simultaneously assume the roles of primary caregivers, household managers, and sole income earners. The absence of a spouse often exposes them to persistent financial insecurity, limited employment opportunities, and extensive caregiving responsibilities, increasing their risk of poverty and social exclusion. These challenges are particularly evident in rural communities, where access to stable employment, education, public services, and institutional support remains comparatively limited. Consequently, the experiences of rural single mothers extend beyond individual household difficulties and reflect broader issues of gender inequality, social exclusion, and uneven rural development.

The increasing number of single mothers in Malaysia further highlights the importance of understanding their socioeconomic circumstances. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, more than 901,091 women were identified as single mothers in 2022, representing approximately 8.3% of the national population (Raiham Mohd Sanusi, 2022). Rural households continue to experience substantially lower average monthly incomes than urban households, limiting opportunities for economic mobility and increasing dependence on informal employment and community support (Rebecca Hani Romeli, 2023). These structural inequalities require rural single mothers to continuously adapt their livelihood practices while balancing income generation with childcare and household responsibilities.

This study is grounded in the sociological concept of social capital developed by Bourdieu (1986) and complemented by the perspectives of Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000). Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises social capital as the actual and potential resources embedded within durable social networks that individuals can mobilise to improve their life opportunities. Coleman (1988) emphasises the functional role of social relationships in facilitating cooperation and collective action, while Putnam (2000) highlights trust, reciprocity, and civic participation as essential elements of community cohesion. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that social relationships constitute valuable resources that enable vulnerable individuals to access opportunities, information, and support beyond their economic means. For rural single mothers, social capital therefore represents an important mechanism through which family members, neighbours, community organisations, and local institutions provide emotional support, employment opportunities, financial assistance, and practical resources that strengthen household resilience.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the importance of social capital in improving the well-being of vulnerable households. Social networks facilitate access to employment opportunities, reduce the adverse effects of poverty, and strengthen community resilience (Lubbers et al., 2020; Combinido, 2018). Studies focusing on single mothers have similarly shown that family support, neighbourhood relationships, and community participation contribute significantly to psychological well-being, parenting capacity, and economic adaptation (Bag-ao, 2013; Cruz et al., 2024; Kwan, 2021). Other scholars have reported that rural single mothers frequently diversify their livelihoods through informal employment, small-scale entrepreneurship, and community participation to cope with financial hardship (Graham, 2023; Son & Bauer, 2010). Although these studies have established the importance of social capital and livelihood adaptation, they have generally examined these dimensions independently rather than explaining how social capital facilitates multiple economic survival strategies among rural single mothers.

Within the Malaysian context, studies have predominantly focused on poverty, welfare assistance, entrepreneurship, or women's empowerment, while relatively limited attention has been given to understanding how social capital operates as an enabling resource for sustaining household livelihoods among rural single mothers. Furthermore, empirical evidence integrating quantitative measures of social capital with qualitative insights into everyday survival practices remains scarce. Addressing this gap is particularly important because livelihood resilience cannot be understood solely through financial resources but must also consider the social relationships that enable vulnerable households to mobilise support, diversify income sources, and respond to changing socioeconomic circumstances.

Against this background, this study examines the forms of social capital possessed by rural single mothers and explores how these social resources facilitate their livelihood strategies in Mukim Siong, Kedah. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study extends existing sociological discussions by demonstrating that social capital functions not merely as a source of emotional support but also as an enabling resource that supports informal livelihood diversification, micro-entrepreneurship, community-based skills development, and financial management. The findings are expected to contribute to a broader understanding of household resilience among vulnerable rural communities while providing evidence to support more inclusive community development policies and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What forms of social capital are possessed by rural single mothers in Mukim Siong, Kedah?
2. How does social capital facilitate the livelihood strategies adopted by rural single mothers in sustaining household resilience?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural Single Mothers as a Structurally Vulnerable Community

Rural single mothers represent one of the most vulnerable social groups because they simultaneously shoulder the responsibilities of household heads, primary caregivers, and sole income earners. Unlike two-parent households, they bear the dual burden of generating income while ensuring the welfare, education, and emotional well-being of their children without continuous support from a spouse. These responsibilities become more challenging within rural settings, where employment opportunities, educational attainment, access to public services, and institutional support remain relatively limited. Consequently, rural single mothers are exposed to multiple forms of vulnerability that extend beyond financial hardship and encompass social exclusion, restricted labour market participation, and reduced opportunities for socioeconomic mobility.

Existing studies consistently demonstrate that rural single mothers are disproportionately affected by structural inequalities that constrain their capacity to improve household well-being. Graham (2023) argues that lone mothers frequently experience persistent financial insecurity because they must balance paid employment with extensive caregiving responsibilities, often resulting in unstable labour force participation and prolonged economic hardship. Similarly, Mills and Hazarika (2003) found that single mothers living in non-metropolitan areas encounter greater barriers to workforce participation than those residing in urban settings due to limited employment opportunities, transportation constraints, and childcare responsibilities. These structural disadvantages reinforce cycles of poverty by restricting access to stable income and reducing opportunities for long-term economic advancement. Likewise, Son and Bauer (2010) observed that rural low-income single mothers continuously negotiate work and family responsibilities, frequently relying on flexible and informal employment arrangements to accommodate childcare obligations.

The socioeconomic vulnerability experienced by rural single mothers should therefore be understood as a consequence of structural conditions rather than individual limitations. Nelson (2006) emphasises that single mothers actively reconstruct family life despite economic adversity by continuously balancing financial responsibilities and caregiving roles. Similarly,

Turner (2020) demonstrates that low-income single mothers exercise considerable agency in sustaining household well-being despite facing racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities. These findings suggest that rural single mothers should not be viewed merely as welfare recipients or passive victims of poverty but rather as active social actors who continuously negotiate available opportunities to maintain household stability. Their everyday decisions regarding employment, family responsibilities, and resource mobilisation reflect ongoing efforts to respond to structural constraints while ensuring the survival of their households.

Within the Malaysian context, the socioeconomic challenges confronting rural single mothers remain significant despite various government initiatives designed to improve household welfare. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), more than 901,000 women were identified as single mothers in 2022, many of whom reside within the B40 income category and rural communities where employment opportunities remain limited. Previous Malaysian studies similarly report that rural single mothers experience lower household income, unstable employment, and restricted access to productive resources, making them particularly susceptible to persistent poverty (Wahab & Jamil, 2024). While government assistance, zakat institutions, and community development programmes provide important support, these interventions often function as supplementary resources rather than long-term solutions for improving household resilience. Consequently,

many rural single mothers continue to depend on their own adaptive capacities and available community resources to sustain everyday livelihoods.

Taken together, the literature indicates that the survival of rural single mothers cannot be explained solely through economic deprivation but must be understood within a broader sociological context characterised by structural inequality, gendered responsibilities, and unequal access to opportunities. These circumstances require rural single mothers to continuously negotiate their livelihoods by mobilising available resources and adapting to changing socioeconomic conditions. Understanding how these women navigate structural constraints therefore provides an important foundation for examining the role of social capital as a resource that facilitates economic survival and strengthens household resilience.

Social Capital as a Sociological Resource

Social capital has long been recognised as an important sociological resource for understanding how individuals and communities mobilise relationships to overcome structural constraints. Unlike economic capital, which refers to material assets, or human capital, which emphasises education and skills, social capital is embedded within social relationships that provide access to information, support, trust, and opportunities. Among the seminal scholars of social capital, Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2000) provide complementary perspectives that explain how social relationships function as valuable resources in everyday life. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises social capital as the actual and potential resources embedded within durable social networks that individuals can mobilise to improve their life chances. Coleman (1988) highlights the functional value of social relationships in facilitating cooperation and collective action, whereas Putnam (2000) emphasises trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement as the foundations of cohesive and resilient communities. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that social capital extends beyond interpersonal relationships and constitutes a strategic resource that enables individuals to access opportunities otherwise unavailable through economic resources alone.

For vulnerable populations such as rural single mothers, social capital assumes particular significance because it compensates for limited access to financial resources and formal institutional support. Family members, neighbours, friends, community organisations, and local institutions often provide emotional encouragement, employment information, childcare assistance, financial aid, and practical advice that help households cope with economic uncertainty. In rural communities, where employment opportunities and public services are relatively limited, these informal networks frequently operate as an alternative social safety net. Consequently, the ability of rural single mothers to sustain their households depends not only on their individual capabilities but also on the quality, strength, and accessibility of the social relationships surrounding them.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate the positive contribution of social capital to household resilience and poverty reduction. Lubbers et al. (2020) argue that social networks enable disadvantaged households to manage poverty by improving access to employment opportunities, information, and community resources. Similarly, Combinido (2018) emphasises that social capital should not be viewed merely as a productive asset but as a social process that strengthens solidarity, trust, and reciprocal relationships within communities. These social interactions enhance individuals' capacity to respond collectively to economic hardship and reduce vulnerability through mutual support. Such findings suggest that social capital performs both instrumental and psychosocial functions by facilitating resource mobilisation while simultaneously strengthening individuals' sense of belonging and social connectedness.

Research focusing specifically on single mothers similarly highlights the critical role of social capital in supporting household survival. Bag-ao (2013) found that family cohesion and supportive interpersonal relationships strengthened the resilience of former single mothers during periods of family transition. Likewise, Cruz et al. (2024) reported that Filipino single mothers relied heavily on social networks to obtain emotional support, financial assistance, and practical resources when facing economic hardship. In Singapore, Kwan (2021) demonstrated that stronger social capital connectivity contributed positively to the well-being of low-income single-parent households by expanding access to information, institutional support, and community resources.

Collectively, these studies indicate that social capital functions not merely as an emotional support system but also as an enabling mechanism that facilitates adaptive responses to socioeconomic challenges.

Despite these contributions, existing studies have predominantly examined social capital in relation to psychological well-being, poverty reduction, or social support without adequately explaining how it shapes the broader livelihood practices of rural single mothers. Much of the literature treats social capital as an independent determinant of well-being rather than exploring its interaction with multiple economic survival strategies. Consequently, limited attention has been given to understanding how social relationships enable rural single mothers to diversify income sources, participate in micro-enterprises, acquire new skills, and strengthen household financial management simultaneously. This limitation is particularly evident within the Malaysian context, where empirical research has largely focused on welfare assistance, entrepreneurship, or poverty independently rather than examining how social capital integrates these dimensions into a comprehensive survival strategy.

Drawing upon Bourdieu's (1986) sociological perspective, this study argues that social capital should be understood as an enabling resource that facilitates the mobilisation of livelihood opportunities rather than as an outcome of social participation alone. Social relationships create access to employment, knowledge, financial assistance, and community resources that strengthen household resilience and enable rural single mothers to negotiate persistent structural constraints. This perspective provides the conceptual foundation for examining how social capital supports the development of multiple economic survival strategies among rural single mothers in Kedah, thereby extending existing sociological discussions beyond conventional interpretations of social support and community participation.

Economic Survival Strategies among Rural Single Mothers

Economic survival strategies refer to the adaptive actions undertaken by individuals or households to secure income, maintain basic needs, and reduce vulnerability under conditions of socioeconomic uncertainty. For rural single mothers, survival is rarely achieved through a single occupation or source of income. Instead, it involves the continuous diversification of livelihood activities, mobilisation of available resources, and strategic utilisation of social relationships to sustain household well-being. Such strategies are shaped not only by financial necessity but also by structural constraints associated with gender, caregiving responsibilities, limited employment opportunities, and rural disadvantage.

Previous studies consistently show that livelihood diversification is one of the most common survival strategies adopted by rural single mothers. Graham (2023) argues that single mothers frequently combine several income-generating activities to cope with persistent financial hardship rather than relying on a single occupation. Similarly, Son and Bauer (2010) found that employed rural single mothers often engage in flexible and informal work arrangements that allow them to balance employment with childcare responsibilities. Mills and Hazarika (2003) further reported that limited employment opportunities in rural areas compel single mothers to participate in casual labour and other forms of non-standard employment to maintain household income. Collectively, these studies suggest that livelihood diversification represents an adaptive response to structural labour market constraints rather than an individual occupational preference.

Beyond informal employment, micro-enterprise has emerged as an increasingly important strategy for strengthening household livelihoods among vulnerable women. Small-scale businesses provide opportunities for single mothers to generate supplementary income while maintaining flexibility in managing domestic responsibilities. Cerven (2013) argues that education, training, and institutional support enhance the ability of low-income single mothers to participate in income-generating activities, although structural barriers often restrict business expansion. Similarly, Celero (2021) observed that economically vulnerable single mothers actively seek alternative livelihood opportunities beyond formal welfare assistance in order to improve long-term household security. These findings indicate that entrepreneurship among single mothers is frequently motivated by economic necessity rather than business ambition, with most enterprises remaining small-scale because of limited financial capital, market access, and entrepreneurial experience.

Human capital development also constitutes an important dimension of household survival. Participation in vocational training, educational programmes, and skills development initiatives enhances individuals' capacity to improve employment prospects and diversify income sources. According to Saha (2021), human capital and social capital are mutually reinforcing, as knowledge and skills become more valuable when supported by strong social networks that facilitate access to opportunities and information. Cerven (2013) similarly argues that educational participation among low-income single mothers contributes to long-term socioeconomic mobility when accompanied by supportive institutional environments. Nevertheless, previous studies indicate that rural women frequently encounter barriers to continuous learning because of childcare responsibilities, limited financial resources, health constraints, and geographical isolation. Consequently, opportunities for human capital development often remain underutilised despite their recognised importance in reducing household vulnerability.

Another critical component of economic survival concerns financial agency, referring to the ability of households to manage limited financial resources strategically in order to ensure long-term stability. Financial resilience extends beyond income generation and includes prudent budgeting, emergency savings, debt management, and prioritisation of children's education and household welfare. Nelson (2006) argues that single mothers actively construct family stability through everyday financial decision-making despite constrained economic circumstances. Similarly, Turner (2020) demonstrates that financially disadvantaged single mothers consistently prioritise their children's future while carefully allocating limited household resources. Bag-ao (2013) further highlights that resilient single-mother households strengthen family well-being through disciplined resource management and supportive family relationships. These findings suggest that financial management represents an adaptive strategy that enables households to cope with uncertainty while maintaining long-term family resilience.

Taken together, the existing literature demonstrates that the economic survival of rural single mothers is achieved through the integration of multiple livelihood strategies rather than dependence on a single source of income. Informal employment, micro-enterprise, human capital development, and financial agency function as complementary strategies that enable vulnerable households to respond to changing socioeconomic conditions. However, previous studies have generally examined these strategies independently, providing limited understanding of how they are collectively facilitated through social capital. This observation highlights the need for a more integrated sociological perspective that explains how social relationships enable rural single mothers to mobilise multiple survival strategies simultaneously in negotiating everyday economic challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative case study design, complemented by qualitative inquiry, to examine the role of social capital in shaping the economic survival strategies of rural single mothers. Mukim Siong, located in Baling District, Kedah, Malaysia, was purposively selected as the study site because of its rural socioeconomic characteristics and the prevalence of economically vulnerable households. The case study approach was considered appropriate as it enables an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their real-life context, particularly among marginalised communities.

Data were collected through structured face-to-face questionnaires administered to 30 rural single mothers who were selected using purposive sampling. Respondents were required to meet four inclusion criteria: (i) being a single mother, (ii) having at least one dependent child, (iii) residing permanently in Mukim Siong, and (iv) having experienced single motherhood for at least two years. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, social capital measured using a five-point Likert scale, and open-ended questions designed to explore respondents' economic survival strategies. To complement the survey findings, field observations were conducted throughout the data collection process to enhance contextual understanding of the respondents' everyday livelihood practices.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics in IBM SPSS Statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores to describe respondents' socio-demographic characteristics and levels of social capital. Responses to the open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis in NVivo, enabling the

identification of recurring themes related to economic survival strategies. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a more comprehensive understanding of how social capital supports livelihood adaptation among rural single mothers.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, respondents were informed about the objectives of the study, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured that their identities and personal information would remain confidential and anonymous. Although the findings are limited to a relatively small sample from a single rural community and are therefore not intended for statistical generalisation, the case study provides valuable contextual insights into how rural single mothers mobilise social capital to negotiate economic survival under conditions of structural vulnerability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Community of Rural Single Mothers

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents provides important insights into the structural realities experienced by the community of rural single mothers in Mukim Siong. As presented in Table 1, the respondents represent a diverse age distribution, although the largest proportion comprised women aged 51 years and above (30%), followed by those aged 31–35 years (23.3%) and 41–45 years (20.0%). This pattern suggests that single motherhood in rural communities is not confined to younger women but extends across different stages of the life course. Older single mothers are likely to experience compounded vulnerabilities as they continue to shoulder caregiving responsibilities while simultaneously facing declining physical capacity, reduced employability, and limited access to sustainable income sources. The coexistence of younger and older single mothers also reflects the varied pathways into single motherhood, including divorce, widowhood, and prolonged marital separation.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Socio-Demographic	Items	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Age	31 – 35 years	7	23.3
	36 – 40 years	3	10.0
	41 – 45 years	6	20.0
	46 – 50 years	5	16.7
	51 years and above	9	30.0
Occupation	Government Sector	4	13.3
	Private Sector	9	30.0
	Small and Medium Enterprise (SME)	5	16.7
	Recipient of Zakat / Social Welfare Department / Government Assistance	6	20.0
	Recipient of Employees Provident Fund (EPF)	1	3.3
	Rubber Tapper	3	10.0
Educational Level	Others	2	6.7
	No Formal Education	2	6.7
	Primary School Certificate (UPSR)	2	6.7
	Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR)	1	3.3
	Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM)	14	46.7
	Malaysian Higher School Certificate (STPM) or Equivalent	5	16.7
	Degree	6	20.0
Number of Children	1 -2 children	17	56.7
	3 – 4 children	7	23.3

	5 children and above	6	20.0
Duration of Being a Single Mother	1 – 3 years	13	43.4
	4 – 6 years	3	10.0
	7 – 9 years	4	13.3
	10 years and above	10	33.3

N=30

Employment patterns further illustrate the economic conditions confronting rural single mothers. Although 30.0% of the respondents were employed in the private sector, employment was generally concentrated in occupations characterised by modest wages and limited job security. Others earned their livelihoods through small and medium-sized enterprises (16.7%), government employment (13.3%), and traditional rural occupations such as rubber tapping (10.0%). More notably, one-fifth of the respondents (20.0%) relied primarily on financial assistance from zakat institutions, the Department of Social Welfare, or other government welfare programmes. This finding reflects the continued dependence of many rural single mothers on formal social protection mechanisms to supplement household income. Rather than indicating economic inactivity, the data suggest that many respondents combine paid employment with welfare assistance as a strategy to cope with persistent financial hardship. Such livelihood diversification is a common survival mechanism among economically vulnerable households in rural settings.

Educational attainment reveals another important dimension of socioeconomic inequality. Nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) possessed the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) as their highest educational qualification, while only 20.0% had completed tertiary education. Meanwhile, a small proportion reported having only primary education or no formal schooling. This educational profile has significant implications for labour market participation, as limited educational qualifications often restrict access to professional occupations and higher-paying employment. Consequently, many rural single mothers remain concentrated in low-skilled occupations or informal economic activities that provide limited opportunities for career progression, income mobility, and long-term financial security.

Household composition further shapes the socioeconomic experiences of the respondents. More than half (56.7%) were responsible for raising one or two children, while 43.3% cared for three or more children. Although households with fewer children may experience relatively lower financial obligations, raising children as the sole household provider remains a considerable challenge, particularly within rural communities where employment opportunities and public services are comparatively limited. For respondents with larger families, financial pressures become even more pronounced as household resources must be distributed across a greater number of dependents, increasing demands related to food, education, healthcare, and daily living expenses. These findings demonstrate that family size continues to influence the intensity of economic vulnerability among rural single-mother households.

The duration of single motherhood also reflects varying stages of adaptation and resilience. Approximately 43.4% of respondents had become single mothers within the previous one to three years, suggesting that a substantial proportion were still adjusting to significant emotional, social, and economic transitions. In contrast, one-third (33.3%) had lived as single mothers for more than ten years, indicating prolonged exposure to the responsibilities of single parenthood. These contrasting experiences suggest that the needs of rural single mothers are not homogeneous. Newly single mothers may require immediate emotional support, financial assistance, and social adaptation programmes, whereas long-term single mothers may prioritise sustainable livelihood opportunities, economic empowerment, and strategies for long-term household resilience.

Overall, the socio-demographic characteristics presented in Table 1 reveal that rural single mothers experience multiple and interconnected forms of vulnerability shaped by age, educational attainment, employment opportunities, household responsibilities, and the duration of single parenthood. Rather than functioning as

isolated demographic characteristics, these factors collectively influence the respondents' capacity to achieve economic stability, social participation, and long-term well-being. The findings therefore reinforce the importance of adopting holistic community development approaches that integrate social protection, economic empowerment, educational opportunities, and capacity-building initiatives. Such integrated interventions are essential for strengthening the resilience of rural single mothers and enabling them to move beyond short-term survival towards sustainable socioeconomic development.

Social Capital Indicators among Single Mothers

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the social capital indicators among rural single mothers in Mukim Siong. Overall, the findings suggest that the respondents possess a moderate level of social capital, with stronger interpersonal support networks than institutional or information-based connections. This pattern indicates that social relationships remain an important coping mechanism for rural single mothers, although opportunities to access wider community resources and organised development programmes remain relatively limited.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Social Capital among Single Mothers

Variable	Likert Scale					Mean
	1(SNA)	2(NA)	3(N)	4(A)	5 (SA)	
I obtain important information through social media or community WhatsApp groups.	3(10.0%)	15(50.0%)	0(0.0%)	7(16.7%)	5(10.0%)	2.87
I feel comfortable asking friends for help when needed.	4(13.3%)	10(33.3%)	3(10.0%)	12(40.0%)	1(3.3%)	2.87
I participate in entrepreneurship programmes or community cooperatives.	3(10.0%)	15(50.0%)	0(0.0%)	7(23.3%)	5(16.7%)	3.00
I receive support from my neighbours or the local community.	0(0.0%)	11(36.7%)	5(16.7%)	9(30.0%)	5(16.7%)	3.27
I actively participate in community activities or single mothers' support groups.	1(3.3%)	4(13.3%)	6(20.0%)	15(50.0%)	4(13.3%)	3.57
I have an extensive network of acquaintances within the community.	1(3.3%)	4(13.3%)	6(20.0%)	15(50.0%)	4(13.3%)	3.57
I know people who can assist me with employment or business opportunities.	1(3.3%)	3 (10.0%)	4(13.3%)	15(50.0%)	7(23.3%)	3.80

I receive moral support from my friends to keep striving and moving forward.	1(3.3%)	3(10.0%)	4(13.3%)	15(50.0%)	7(23.3%)	3.80
--	---------	----------	----------	-----------	----------	------

The highest mean scores were recorded for the statements *"I know people who can assist me with employment or business opportunities"* ($M = 3.80$) and *"I receive moral support from my friends to keep striving and moving forward"* ($M = 3.80$). These findings demonstrate that respondents generally have access to supportive interpersonal networks capable of providing emotional encouragement and practical assistance related to employment or income-generating activities. Such relationships represent valuable forms of social capital that enhance resilience by facilitating access to information, opportunities, and psychological support during periods of economic and personal hardship.

Similarly, respondents reported relatively high levels of agreement regarding their active participation in community activities or single mothers' support groups ($M = 3.57$) and having an extensive network of acquaintances within the community ($M = 3.57$). These findings suggest that many rural single mothers maintain meaningful social interactions within their local communities despite the multiple responsibilities associated with single parenthood. Participation in community organisations not only strengthens interpersonal relationships but also creates opportunities for knowledge sharing, mutual assistance, and collective problem-solving. Such community engagement contributes to the development of bonding and bridging social capital, both of which are recognised as important resources for improving social inclusion and community resilience.

Support received from neighbours and the surrounding community recorded a moderate mean score ($M = 3.27$). Although many respondents acknowledged receiving assistance from neighbours, the findings indicate that community support remains inconsistent across households. Variations in neighbourhood cohesion, social trust, and the availability of informal support systems may explain these differences. Nevertheless, the presence of neighbourhood support remains an important protective factor that can reduce social isolation and strengthen community solidarity among vulnerable households.

In contrast, the lowest mean scores were observed for obtaining important information through social media or community WhatsApp groups ($M = 2.87$) and feeling comfortable asking friends for help when needed ($M = 2.87$). Half of the respondents disagreed that they obtained important information through digital community platforms, suggesting that online communication channels have not yet become a primary source of information exchange among rural single mothers. This finding may reflect limited digital literacy, unequal access to digital technologies, or weaker integration into online community networks. Likewise, the relatively low level of comfort in seeking help from friends may indicate the persistence of self-reliance, social stigma, or concerns about burdening others despite the existence of supportive interpersonal relationships.

Participation in entrepreneurship programmes or community cooperatives also recorded a comparatively low mean score ($M = 3.00$). Although some respondents reported involvement in organised economic activities, half indicated that they did not participate in such programmes. This finding highlights a potential gap between the availability of community development initiatives and the actual participation of rural single mothers. Limited awareness, time constraints arising from caregiving responsibilities, transportation barriers, or insufficient programme accessibility may restrict their engagement in entrepreneurship and cooperative activities that could otherwise enhance economic empowerment.

Overall, the findings reveal that social capital among rural single mothers is primarily built upon close interpersonal relationships, moral support, and informal community networks rather than structured institutional participation or digital information networks. The respondents appear to benefit more from bonding social capital derived from family members, friends, and neighbours than from linking social capital associated with formal organisations, government agencies, or community development programmes. These findings suggest that strengthening institutional networks, improving access to entrepreneurship programmes, and expanding digital

community engagement could further enhance the social capital of rural single mothers. Community development interventions should therefore focus not only on increasing financial assistance but also on fostering inclusive social networks that connect vulnerable women with information, employment opportunities, skills development, and broader community resources.

Economic Survival Strategies among Rural Single Mothers

The interview findings reveal that rural single mothers employ various economic survival strategies to cope with persistent financial challenges while fulfilling their responsibilities as the sole providers for their households. Rather than depending on a single source of income, respondents demonstrated considerable adaptability by combining multiple livelihood activities according to available opportunities, personal capabilities, and household needs. These strategies extend beyond income generation to include participation in small-scale entrepreneurship, community-based skills development, and prudent financial management. Collectively, the findings suggest that economic survival among rural single mothers is characterised by continuous adaptation to changing socioeconomic circumstances through the mobilisation of available household and community resources.

Navigating Economic Insecurity through Informal Livelihood Diversification

The interview findings indicate that participation in informal economic activities constitutes the primary strategy adopted by rural single mothers to maintain household income under conditions of economic uncertainty. Respondents consistently described engaging in multiple forms of casual, seasonal, and home-based employment to supplement their earnings. These livelihood activities were generally characterised by flexible working arrangements that enabled respondents to balance economic responsibilities with childcare and household obligations.

The findings show that informal employment encompasses a wide range of income-generating activities, including rubber tapping, peeling areca nuts, processing anchovies, drying agricultural produce, and undertaking temporary farm labour. Respondents explained that these activities were usually performed whenever employment opportunities became available and were rarely undertaken on a permanent basis. Consequently, household income depended largely on the availability of work within the surrounding rural community.

One respondent explained that she occasionally accepted work processing anchovies and finger cod whenever employment was offered by a local intermediary. *"Sometimes I get paid to peel anchovies. Peeling ten kilograms earns about RM17, and occasionally I am offered finger cod processing instead. It depends on whatever work is available."* (Informant 2)

Rather than maintaining a fixed occupation, respondents adjusted their economic activities according to local demand, demonstrating considerable flexibility in generating household income. The findings further indicate that access to these employment opportunities is facilitated through established relationships within the local community, where trusted individuals act as intermediaries connecting workers with available jobs.

Seasonal agricultural activities also emerged as an important component of livelihood diversification. One respondent described earning additional income through peeling and drying areca nuts during harvesting periods before the produce was collected by local traders. *"When there are plenty of areca nuts, I take up work peeling and drying them before a local buyer comes to collect the harvest."* (Informant 6)

The interview suggests that agricultural seasons create temporary employment opportunities that enable respondents to supplement household income during specific periods of the year. However, because these activities depend on harvest cycles, they do not provide a consistent or predictable source of income throughout the year. Respondents therefore frequently combined seasonal agricultural work with other forms of casual employment to ensure continuity of household earnings.

Livelihood diversification also varied according to changes in household circumstances. One respondent explained that she had previously worked as a rubber tapper on privately owned plantations but gradually reduced her participation after her adult daughters entered the workforce and began contributing financially to the family. *"I used to tap rubber on other people's farms. After my daughters started working, they helped support the younger siblings and contributed to household expenses."* (Informant 5)

This finding demonstrates that household livelihood strategies evolve over time in response to changes in family composition and economic circumstances. While respondents initially relied heavily on physically demanding work to support their children, financial responsibilities gradually became shared as older children secured employment. Consequently, household income became increasingly diversified through contributions from multiple family members. Another respondent described undertaking temporary planting work on neighbouring farms whenever labour was required. *"Sometimes I work on other people's farms planting trees, but they only call me occasionally because the work is not always available."* (Informant 4)

This narrative reflects the temporary nature of informal rural employment. Respondents frequently accepted short-term work whenever opportunities arose, although employment remained unpredictable and dependent on external demand. As a result, respondents were often required to remain flexible and prepared to undertake different types of work according to local labour requirements.

Overall, the interviews demonstrate that livelihood diversification is characterised by the combination of multiple informal income-generating activities rather than dependence on a single occupation. Respondents continuously adjusted their employment patterns according to seasonal demand, available opportunities, and household responsibilities. Flexible work arrangements enabled them to remain economically active while fulfilling caregiving duties, although irregular employment also contributed to unstable household income.

The findings further reveal that livelihood diversification extends beyond individual employment choices. Access to temporary work frequently depended on interpersonal relationships within the community, including relatives, neighbours, local traders, and informal intermediaries who provided information regarding available employment opportunities. Such networks played an important role in enabling respondents to secure casual work despite the absence of formal recruitment channels.

Taken together, the findings indicate that informal livelihood diversification represents a central component of the economic survival strategies adopted by rural single mothers. Rather than relying on a single occupation, respondents demonstrated considerable adaptability by combining seasonal agricultural work, casual labour, and other informal economic activities according to prevailing circumstances. These livelihood practices enabled households to generate income despite fluctuating employment opportunities and continuing economic uncertainty, while allowing respondents to balance productive work with their caregiving responsibilities.

Micro-Entrepreneurship as an Adaptive Strategy for Household Survival

The interview findings indicate that micro-entrepreneurship serves as an additional livelihood strategy adopted by rural single mothers to supplement household income. Unlike formal business ventures, respondents' entrepreneurial activities were generally small-scale, home-based, and highly dependent on immediate market demand. Participation in these activities was often initiated through opportunities introduced by family members or close acquaintances rather than through formal entrepreneurial programmes or structured business planning. The findings show that respondents engaged in micro-enterprises with the intention of generating supplementary income rather than establishing sustainable businesses. Their entrepreneurial activities included becoming product sales agents and producing homemade food products for sale within their local communities. These businesses were typically operated independently with limited financial resources, minimal marketing experience, and without additional labour support.

One respondent explained that she had previously become a sales agent for a car air freshener brand after being encouraged by her younger sibling. Although the opportunity enabled her to earn additional income, she admitted

experiencing difficulties in promoting the products and attracting customers. *"Sometimes I become an agent selling Bliese car air fresheners, but I don't earn much because I'm not very good at promoting or selling the products."* (Informant 2). This finding illustrates that entrepreneurial opportunities are available within rural communities but are often constrained by limited confidence and marketing skills. While respondents demonstrated a willingness to participate in income-generating activities beyond wage employment, the absence of business experience reduced their ability to expand these activities into sustainable sources of household income.

Another respondent described producing homemade coffee for sale through social media and personal orders. Although she recognised the potential to generate additional income, the production process required considerable time and physical effort because all stages of production were completed independently. *"Sometimes I sell homemade coffee, but it is difficult because roasting and preparing everything takes a long time. I do everything by myself, so I only make it when customers place orders. It is not really my main source of income."* (Informant 6)

The interview demonstrates that home-based businesses remain highly dependent on customer demand and individual labour capacity. Production is generally undertaken only after receiving orders, limiting opportunities for business expansion or consistent income generation. Respondents also reported that balancing business activities with domestic responsibilities restricted the amount of time available for production and marketing.

Overall, the findings suggest that micro-entrepreneurship functions primarily as a supplementary income-generating activity rather than a primary livelihood strategy. Respondents demonstrated initiative in identifying economic opportunities within their communities; however, their businesses remained relatively small because of limited marketing knowledge, insufficient business management skills, inconsistent customer demand, and the absence of additional labour support. Consequently, entrepreneurial activities were primarily used to complement household income alongside other informal employment rather than replacing existing livelihood strategies.

Building Human Capital through Community-Based Skills Development

The interview findings reveal that participation in community-based training programmes represents another strategy adopted by rural single mothers to strengthen their economic capacity. Respondents described attending various courses, workshops, and community development programmes organised by government agencies, local organisations, and community centres. These programmes provided opportunities to acquire practical knowledge and skills that could potentially contribute to household income generation and improve daily economic management.

The findings indicate that respondents participated in training programmes covering diverse areas, including agricultural practices, food preparation, food packaging, hygiene management, and basic computer skills. Although participation was generally occasional rather than continuous, respondents viewed these programmes as valuable opportunities to gain practical knowledge that could be applied in their everyday lives.

One respondent explained that she occasionally attended agricultural talks organised by RISDA as well as community programmes conducted by local women's organisations. *"Sometimes I join programmes organised by RISDA where they give talks about agriculture. The local women's group also organises cooking classes and other activities at the community workshop."* (Informant 2)

The interview indicates that community organisations provide accessible learning opportunities for rural women despite limited educational backgrounds. These programmes expose participants to practical information that may contribute to agricultural productivity, food preparation, and household economic activities. Another respondent shared her experience of attending workshops related to food processing and packaging, particularly in the production of traditional snack products. *"I attended workshops on food hygiene, packaging techniques, and how to determine whether the products remain suitable for consumption."* (Informant 1)

The respondent explained that these workshops introduced practical techniques for maintaining product quality and improving packaging methods. Such knowledge was considered useful for reducing product spoilage and increasing the quality of home-produced food products intended for sale. Basic digital literacy also emerged as one of the learning opportunities available within the community. One respondent described attending computer classes organised by the village community centre before experiencing health problems. *"The community centre organised computer classes, and one of the instructors taught me before I had my stroke. However, because of my age, I found it difficult to understand everything that was being taught."* (Informant 4)

This account highlights the willingness of respondents to acquire new knowledge despite age-related challenges and health limitations. Although not all participants were able to fully utilise the skills acquired, the findings suggest that rural single mothers remained receptive to opportunities for personal development whenever accessible programmes were available. Overall, the interviews demonstrate that community-based skills development forms an important component of respondents' economic survival strategies. Participation in training programmes enabled respondents to acquire practical knowledge related to agriculture, food production, product management, and basic digital skills. Nevertheless, participation was generally irregular and depended on programme availability within the community. Furthermore, respondents reported that age, health conditions, domestic responsibilities, and limited opportunities for continuous training influenced the extent to which newly acquired knowledge could be translated into income-generating activities. Despite these constraints, the findings indicate that respondents continued to participate in community learning initiatives as part of their efforts to improve household livelihoods and strengthen their economic capabilities.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the economic survival of rural single mothers is shaped by the dynamic interaction between structural constraints and individual agency. Although respondents faced multiple disadvantages, including limited educational attainment, unstable employment, caregiving responsibilities, and prolonged economic insecurity, they consistently adopted adaptive livelihood strategies to sustain their households. Rather than depending on a single source of income, respondents diversified their economic activities through informal employment, micro-enterprise, community-based skills development, and prudent financial management. These findings support Graham (2023), who argues that single mothers frequently employ multiple coping strategies to navigate persistent financial hardship, and Mills and Hazarika (2003), who found that rural single mothers encounter greater barriers to labour market participation due to limited employment opportunities and caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, Son and Bauer (2010) observed that rural low-income single mothers often balance paid work with family obligations by adopting flexible employment arrangements. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that livelihood diversification among rural single mothers in Malaysia is not merely an economic necessity but an adaptive process that enables them to respond to changing household circumstances while maintaining family stability.

The findings further underscore the importance of social capital as a critical resource that supports livelihood adaptation and household resilience. Although respondents reported only moderate levels of social capital, interpersonal relationships within families, neighbourhoods, and local communities played an essential role in facilitating access to temporary employment, emotional encouragement, and practical assistance. Informal networks frequently connected respondents with income-generating opportunities and provided moral support during periods of economic uncertainty. These findings are consistent with Lubbers et al. (2020), who contend that social networks enable economically vulnerable households to cope with poverty by improving access to resources and opportunities. Likewise, Cruz et al. (2024) found that Filipino single mothers relied heavily on family and community support to strengthen their coping capacity and psychological resilience. The findings also resonate with Combinido (2018), who emphasised that social capital extends beyond economic exchanges by fostering trust, reciprocity, and collective solidarity within communities. However, the relatively low participation in entrepreneurship programmes, community cooperatives, and digital communication platforms suggests that respondents possess stronger bonding social capital than bridging or linking social capital. This observation is consistent with Kwan (2021), who reported that low-income single-parent households often

benefit from close interpersonal relationships but experience weaker connections with formal institutions capable of expanding economic opportunities.

Another important finding concerns the limited capacity of micro-enterprise and community-based training programmes to generate sustainable economic mobility. Although respondents demonstrated initiative by operating small-scale businesses and participating in community training programmes, these activities generally functioned as supplementary rather than primary sources of household income. Entrepreneurial activities remained constrained by limited marketing knowledge, inadequate business management skills, inconsistent customer demand, and insufficient financial resources, while the effectiveness of skills development programmes was often restricted by domestic responsibilities, health conditions, age-related limitations, and irregular programme availability. These findings correspond with Cerven (2013), who argued that educational and skills development opportunities can improve the socioeconomic prospects of low-income single mothers only when supported by broader institutional mechanisms that facilitate sustained participation and economic advancement. Similarly, Saha (2021) emphasised that human and social capital are complementary resources, suggesting that knowledge and skills alone are insufficient unless accompanied by supportive social networks and institutional opportunities. The present findings therefore indicate that capacity-building programmes should extend beyond one-off training activities towards continuous mentoring, market access, and business support to enhance their long-term effectiveness.

Finally, the findings reveal that household economic resilience extends beyond income generation and encompasses prudent financial management as an essential component of livelihood sustainability. Despite experiencing financial constraints, respondents consistently demonstrated financial agency by maintaining savings for emergencies and prioritising their children's educational needs. These practices reflect a long-term orientation towards household well-being rather than merely responding to immediate financial pressures. The findings support Nelson (2006), who argued that single mothers actively construct family stability through everyday financial decision-making despite constrained economic circumstances. Likewise, Turner (2020) demonstrated that low-income single mothers frequently exercise careful financial planning to safeguard their children's future, while Bag-ao (2013) highlighted that family resilience among single mothers is strengthened through strategic resource management and supportive family relationships. Collectively, the present study suggests that strengthening the economic well-being of rural single mothers requires integrated interventions that combine livelihood diversification, entrepreneurship development, continuous skills enhancement, financial capability programmes, and stronger institutional support. Such a comprehensive approach would not only improve household income but also reinforce long-term economic resilience and sustainable community development among rural single-mother households.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of social capital in shaping the economic survival strategies of rural single mothers in Mukim Siong, Kedah, from a sociological perspective. The findings demonstrate that social capital extends beyond interpersonal relationships and functions as an enabling resource that supports household resilience under conditions of structural vulnerability. Although respondents reported moderate levels of social capital, family members, neighbours, friends, and local communities emerged as important sources of emotional support, employment information, and practical assistance. These social resources enabled respondents to mobilise opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible through economic capital alone.

The study further reveals that the economic survival of rural single mothers is achieved through the integration of multiple adaptive livelihood strategies rather than reliance on a single source of income. Informal livelihood diversification, micro-entrepreneurship, community-based skills development, and prudent financial management collectively enabled respondents to cope with financial uncertainty while fulfilling their caregiving responsibilities. These findings suggest that social capital facilitates not only social support but also the mobilisation of livelihood opportunities that strengthen household resilience and improve the capacity of vulnerable households to respond to persistent socioeconomic challenges.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the sociological literature by extending Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital beyond its conventional interpretation as a relational resource. The findings demonstrate that social capital operates as a mechanism through which rural single mothers negotiate structural constraints and develop adaptive economic survival strategies. Rather than viewing survival as a passive response to poverty, the study highlights the agency of rural single mothers in mobilising social relationships, community resources, and individual capabilities to sustain household livelihoods. This integrated perspective enriches current discussions on social capital, livelihood strategies, and household resilience within the context of vulnerable rural communities.

The findings also have important policy implications. While financial assistance and welfare programmes remain essential, sustainable empowerment requires interventions that strengthen community networks, expand livelihood opportunities, improve entrepreneurship support, enhance continuous skills development, and promote financial capability among rural single mothers. Strengthening collaboration among government agencies, local communities, non-governmental organisations, and community-based institutions may further enhance the long-term effectiveness of poverty reduction and women's empowerment initiatives. Such integrated approaches are consistent with the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single rural community and involved a relatively small sample, which limits the transferability of the findings to other geographical contexts. Future research should consider comparative studies across different states or rural settings and employ larger samples to examine variations in social capital and livelihood strategies among rural single mothers. Longitudinal research may also provide deeper insights into how social capital evolves over time and influences household resilience across different stages of single motherhood.

Overall, this study concludes that the survival of rural single mothers is not determined solely by economic resources but is continuously negotiated through the mobilisation of social capital and diversified livelihood strategies. Recognising and strengthening these community-based resources is therefore fundamental to promoting sustainable household resilience and inclusive rural development.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

REFERENCES

1. Bag-ao, B. V. C. (2013). Family Strengths in the Separation and Reunification of Former Single-Mothers. *Development*, 10(4), 332-352.
2. Celero, J. O. (2021). Settling for welfare? Shifting access to welfare, migration and settlement aspirations of Filipina single mothers in Japan. In *Migration to and from Welfare States: Lived Experiences of the Welfare-Migration Nexus in a Globalised World* (pp. 87-104). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
3. Cerven, C. (2013). Public and private lives: Institutional structures and personal supports in low-income single mothers' educational pursuits. *Education Policy Analysis Archives/Archivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas*, 21, 1-27.
4. Combinido, P. G. (2018). Social Capital Beyond the "Capital". *Philippine Sociological Review*, 66, 5-28.
5. Cruz, H. F. D., Domingo, P., Lim, M. E., & Del Rosario, A. (2024). Resilient Bonds: Social Capital, Coping Strategies and Challenges of Filipino Single Mothers in Umingan, Pangasinan. *Isabela State University Linker: Journal of Education, Social Sciences and Allied Health*, 1(2), 1-12.
6. Davis, E. E., & Weber, R. B. (2001). The dynamics of child care subsidy use by rural families in Oregon. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 83(5), 1293-1301.
7. Graham, H. (2023). Being poor: perceptions and coping strategies of lone mothers. In *Give and Take in Families* (pp. 56-74). Routledge.

8. Kwan, J. Y. (2021). *Singled Out: Household and Family Structure, Social Capital Connectivity, and the Well-Being of Low-Income Single-Parent Households in Singapore*. University of California, Los Angeles.
9. Lubbers, M. J., Small, M. L., & García, H. V. (2020). Do networks help people to manage poverty? Perspectives from the field. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 689(1), 7-25.
10. Mills, B. F., & Hazarika, G. (2003). Do Single Mothers Face Greater Constraints to Workforce Participation in Non-Metropolitan Areas?. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 85(1), 143-161.
11. Nelson, M. K. (2006). Single mothers “do” family. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68(4), 781-795.
12. Saha, L. J. (2021). Cultural and social capital in global perspective. In *Third international handbook of globalisation, education and policy research* (pp. 777-788). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
13. Son, S., & Bauer, J. W. (2010). Employed rural, low-income, single mothers’ family and work over time. *Journal of family and economic issues*, 31(1), 107-120.
14. Turner, J. L. (2020). Black mothering in action: The racial-class socialization practices of low-income Black single mothers. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(2), 242-253.