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IMPEDIMENTS TO HOME OWNERSHIP: PERCEPTION OF LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME TENANTS IN SELANGOR

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Abstract

Home ownership affordability has been a serious issue among the low and middle income households in Malaysia. Main contributors to this issue are low income, high cost of living and growth in income that does not commensurate the rise in property price. This research intends to identify the level of home ownership affordability among those who are unable to have a house and are tenants. In addition, it intends to examine the factors that affect their home ownership affordability. The study focuses on people residing at rented units in Kajang, an urban city in Selangor, where primary data was collected using questionnaire method. The target group was low and middle income households, whose head of household aged between 21 to 50 years and total household income capped below RM7,500. The success rate was 74 percent based on 250 households met. The research findings indicate that the level of home ownership affordability varies by ethnicity, household income and educational level. Meanwhile, four main factors that influence home ownership affordability are price of house, affordable mortgage loan, proximity to workplace and government policy on affordable housing. Majority of the respondents are still pessimistic of their ability to own a residential unit.

Keywords: housing, low and middle income household, affordability, access to housing

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INTRODUCTION

Housing has direct and immediate influence on education, health, political, environment, security, safety, economy and social life of any society (Ariffin, Zahari, & Nadarajah, 2010). Carlson et al. (2011, cited by Salhotra, 2018) state that consequences of inadequate housing include 'worse health, educational, and economic outcomes'. Poor families that do not receive housing assistance are likely affected in their drive to higher education, lower socioeconomic status, and pose higher chances of teenage pregnancy and being malnourished (Salhotra, 2018). In developing countries, the price of house increases faster than its annual household income. Although housing reserve may be adequate by quantity, but as the price is high, those in the lower and middle income groups are unable to achieve their dream of owning a home (K'Akumu, 2007). For the majority in these groups, monthly expenditure on housing instalments forms the single largest category. Quite often, more than 30 percent of their monthly income is spent on mortgage payments (Beer, Kearins, & Pieters, 2007).

It is commonly known that rapid urbanisation and industrialisation attract rural to urban immigration in developing countries. This creates a continuous demand for housing, especially for the immigrants from low and middle income households at urban areas. Shaffer (2015) points that supply in the United States is lower than demand due to restrictions by local government in the provision of housing, mainly from 'zoning regulations, ... approval processes, ... and outdated building codes' (p. 41). Inadvertently, the value of residential properties in urban areas has skyrocketed while population growth in urban areas reduces availability of land for development, leading to an exponential increase in the premium for urban land (Ariöglu, 2002) eventually causes the rise in price of new house. In Malaysia, the price of residential properties in the country grew at 6.45 percent between 2016 and 2017 alone (Valuation and Property Services Department, 2017). The Malaysian government has carried out policies that focus on low income households to purchase affordable house. Yet, the volume offered is still insufficient for this target group (Wan Abd Aziz, Kuppusamy, Doling, & Hanif, 2014).

While attention is given to the low income group, the middle income households have been marginalised due to lack of policies to support them. As a result, the Malaysian government introduced PR1MA houses for the middle income households earning between RM2,500 and RM7,500 per month, with conditions that they must be first time buyers, owner-occupied and units cannot be sold in the first 10 years. For the low income households, the government looked at providing opportunities for them to rent units. The City Hall of Kuala Lumpur has been tasked with this initiative by the Ministry of Finance Malaysia, whereby more than half of its public housing stocks are rented out at a mere RM124 per month for a three-bedroom unit, and RM55 per month for a studio unit. Tenants bear no other costs. These are too attractive to many that they do

not want to own it, which would otherwise cost RM250 per month, excluding the maintenance costs, repairs and taxes (Pros and cons in rent-to-own schemes, 2018). Renting however lead to a shortfall in the sense of belongingness to their unit, facilities and the neighbourhood.

There is still a dearth of work in tenants and home ownership affordability in Malaysia. This paper fills the gap in home ownership affordability, especially discussion on obstacles to home ownership and affordability among the tenants in urban area among low and middle income tenants in Selangor and secondly, factors that cause them to continue being tenants.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Within the mainstream economic theory, neoclassical economic theory appears more established to press for liberalising the market from the state in the provision of goods like housing. The theory states price is determined by an interplay between supply and demand in the market, which moves into an equilibrium price when quantity in demand equals its supply (Khalid, 2010). Neoliberalism theory is widely used to describe liberalisation of government control or protection of the economy which augments corporate control of the market (Kahn, 2007). In China, neoliberal reform has brought significant changes in the provision of urban housing in the 1980s (Wang, Shao, Murie, & Cheng, 2012). In many countries, neoliberal policy has impacted on the housing provision, opportunities and affordability (Forrest & Hirayama, 2009).

Duan (2011) applied price to income ratio (PIR) and housing affordability index to measure housing affordability in Lanzhou, Northwest China and confirmed that household income is a significant factor of housing affordability. Besides, Lau and Li (2006) used PIR to analyse the changing financial ability of Beijing households in the purchase of commercial housing. Torluccio and Dorakh (2011) identified that housing affordability is not only to be seen as the ratio of apartment cost to citizen's income but also the ability to obtain a loan to buy a house. They pointed that housing affordability in Russia and Belarus continues to be a big challenge. Home ownership affordability issues in Australia have been influenced by demographic change, household income, location, mortgage loan, housing prices, social amenities, economic growth and government policy (Berry & Dalton, 2004; Berry, 2006; Burke et al., 2008; Yates & Milligan, 2007; Sliogeris, Crabtree, Phibbs, Johnston, & O'Neill, 2008).

Wan Abd Aziz, Hanif and Kuppusamy (2010), in their study on housing affordability issues for 1,137 middle income household in major cities in Malaysia, found that housing affordability is greater amongst private employees and majority of the middle income households own houses priced between RM120,000 and RM150,000 in Malaysia except for Kuala Lumpur with a mean of between RM180,000 and RM200,000.

Thus, findings above show that home ownership affordability can be influenced by various factors such as availability of housing loans by financial institutions, construction cost, household income, housing loan interest rates, house price, social amenities, demography characteristics, location, population size, government policies and programmes.

METHODOLOGY

This study was focused on Kajang, a large town situated about 20 kilometres away from Kuala Lumpur with a population of local citizens being at 311,785 (Department of Statistics, 2011). The research targeted on low and middle income tenants only. As such, this quantitative study employs a purposive sampling technique as it required respondents who are aged 21 years old and above, married and still renting a house. Parents visiting eight kindergartens, one vernacular primary school and a convent school in the area form the basis of identifying the respondents, who must be tenants. Once identified, the respondents were interviewed directly or issued a questionnaire if they insisted of being given one to answer themselves.

Being the key instrument, the questionnaire used was developed based on previous studies by scholars in this field such as Trimbath and Montoya (2002), Berry and Dalton (2004), Berry (2006), Burke and Pinnegar (2007), Md. Sani (2007), Yates and Milligan (2007), Sliogeris et al. (2008), Duan (2011), and Torluccio and Dorakh (2011). All questions were closed-ended and based on perspectives of neo-classical economic and neoliberal theories. The five-point Likert scale is used to assess the level of agreement to statements. Home ownership affordability was measured using 17 statements but was reduced to only 14 after a pilot test. The alpha reliability coefficient scores for the items in the pilot test were 0.7799. As many as 250 sets of questionnaires were distributed but only 204 sets of questionnaires were returned successfully. After a review, 19 sets of questionnaires were removed as they did not comply fully to the criteria set. Therefore, only 185 sets of questionnaires were used in this study, with an alpha value of 0.7916 in the final test. We have left the housing affordability level to be decided by the respondents themselves.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis techniques used in this study is quantitative. The factor analysis as an inferential statistical analysis is used in this study based on the data obtained from the survey questionnaire to determine the factors that influence the respondents' home ownership affordability. The factor analysis techniques reduced and clustered the original 14 observed variables into a small number of factors. The second objective of this paper is assisted through the use of Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). Meanwhile, chi-square test was also used to

see whether the level of home ownership affordability is significantly influenced by respondents' demographic background.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 185 participants in the survey, 51.4 percent were females. This may be incidental due to the method employed by the study, which accepted the head of household or the spouse residing at the unit. The majority of respondents were ethnic Malays (57.3%), followed by Indians (21.1%), Chinese (16.2%) and Others (5.4%). Almost one quarter of respondents (25.4%) have completed higher secondary school or MCE/SPM academic qualification followed by lower secondary schooling or SRP/PMR qualification (24.3%), 14.6 percent had a diploma and only 11.9 percent had a degree. In contrast, only 1.1 percent of total respondents had post-graduate degree. Meanwhile, a large proportion of respondents' spouses have completed lower secondary schooling (26.1%). As a result, majority of them are blue collar workers. Almost all (97.3%) households had one or two persons working. Distance of respondents' workplace was recorded as follows: below 3 km (23.4%), 3.0 – 5.9 km (18.1%), 6.0 – 8.9 km (4.6%), 9.0 – 11.9 km (9.9%) and 12 km and above (33.9%). Almost two-thirds (66.9%) of the tenant respondents paid a monthly rental of below RM500, while those for RM500-799, RM800-1099, and RM1100 and above accounted for 25.4 percent, 7 percent and 0.7 percent, respectively. The tenure of occupancy at the time of study was 22.2 percent for below 2 years, 25.4 percent for 2 – 3.9 years, 17.8 percent for 4 – 5.9 years, 17.8 percent for 6 – 10 years, and the remaining 16.8 percent have resided there more than 10 years.

Figure 1 presents reasons why the respondents were still renting a unit than to own one. A total of 72.5 percent of the respondents cited financial reasons while 14.1 percent wanted a unit near their workplace.

The plan to purchase a house whether it is new or a house that was occupied before may be influenced by various factors such as ethnicity, total household income and the affordability level. Table 1 verifies that there is almost no discernible difference in the proportion of tenants by ethnicity (Malays and Indians) in terms of affordability to purchase a house that is priced below RM150,000. However, a larger proportion of the Chinese could afford a house that is priced more.

Among the low income tenants, more ethnic Indians (28.6%) could afford a house that is priced between RM100,000 and RM150,000 as compared with 5.8 percent by Malays and 15.4 percent by ethnic Chinese.

For the middle income tenants, a large proportions of the Malays (59.2%) and Indians (54.6%) of the middle income tenants could afford a house that is priced between RM50,000 and RM150,000. The proportion for the Chinese is lower at 35.2 percent, likely contributed by the fact that a larger proportion of this group could afford houses priced over RM150,000.

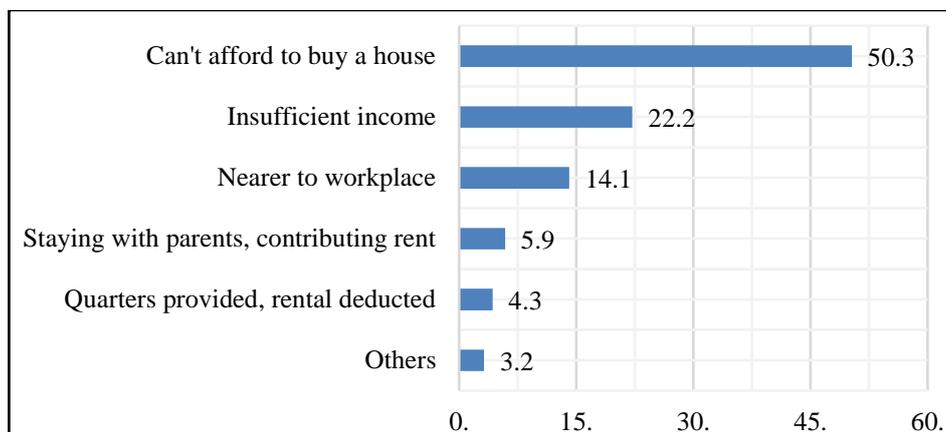


Figure 1: Reasons for residing in rented unit (%)

Note: "Others" include 'have not decided yet', 'intend to purchase unit elsewhere', and 'blacklisted by financial institution'

Table 2 displays affordable price according to household income. About 43 percent of respondents from low household income group (RM500-RM2,499) are likely to buy a house priced below RM50,000 only. On the other hand, the corresponding proportion of respondents for the middle income household is expectedly low at 13.2 percent. However, 42.9 percent of those from the middle income households (RM2,500-RM7,499) are able to purchase a house priced between RM100,000 and RM200,000. Only about 15 percent of the latter income group could afford a house priced RM200,000 and more. This confirms household income as one of the significant determinants of home ownership affordability, consistent with the findings of Duan (2011).

The analysis found that 72.7 respondents with only primary school education could afford to buy house at RM50,000 and below. Meanwhile, 80.0 percent of respondents with SRP/PMR certificate could afford a house below RM100,000, followed by 89.4 percent of respondents with MCE/SPM certificate could afford a house valued at RM150,000. All respondents who had Form Six/STPM qualification could afford houses below RM150,000. Among those who have a degree, it is noted that 90.9 percent of respondent could afford a house at a higher ceiling up to RM300,000. This illustrates that the higher the educational attainment, the higher the affordability level for a house of their choice.

Table 1: Affordable price of house by ethnicity

Affordable Price of House (RM)	Ethnicity				Total N (%)
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Others	
Households: Both Low and Middle Income					
< 50,000	28.3	26.7	33.3	10.0	52 (28.1)
50,000-99,999	40.6	16.7	28.2	30.0	62 (33.5)
100,000-149,999	16.0	16.7	28.2	30.0	36 (19.5)
150,000-199,999	8.5	23.3	10.3	10.0	21 (11.4)
200,000-249,999	1.9	10.0	-	-	5 (2.7)
250,000 and above	4.7	6.7	-	20.0	9 (4.8)
Total N (%)	106 (100.0)	30 (100.0)	39 (100.0)	10 (100.0)	18 (100.0)
$\chi^2 = 27.83, df = 15, p \leq 0.05, \text{ significant}$					
Households: Low Income only ^a					
< 50,000	42.3	53.8	39.9	100.0	40 (42.6)
50,000-99,999	48.1	15.4	28.6	-	36 (38.3)
100,000-149,999	5.8	15.4	28.6	-	13 (13.8)
150,000-199,999	3.8	15.4	3.6	-	5 (5.3)
200,000-249,999	-	-	-	-	-
250,000 and above	-	-	-	-	-
Total N (%)	52 (100.0)	13 (100.0)	28 (100.0)	1 (100.0)	94 (100.0)
Households: Middle Income only ^b					
< 50,000	14.8	5.9	18.2	22.2	12 (13.2)
50,000-99,999	33.3	17.6	27.3	33.3	26 (28.6)
100,000-149,999	25.9	17.6	27.3	11.1	23 (25.3)
150,000-199,999	13.0	29.4	27.3	-	16 (17.6)
200,000-249,999	3.7	17.6	-	-	5 (5.5)
250,000 and above	9.3	11.8	-	22.2	9 (9.9)
Total N (%)	54 (100.0)	17 (100.0)	11 (100.0)	9 (100.0)	91 (100.0)

Note: For *a* and *b*, the income categories are retained for easy comparison, but χ^2 estimates are withdrawn due to excessive empty cells.

Table 2: Affordable price for a house by monthly household income

Affordable Price of House (RM)	Household Income (RM)				Total N (%)
	500-1,499	1,500-2,499	2,500-4,499	4,500-7,499	
Households: Both Low and Middle Income ^a					
< 50,000	46.2	41.2	16.9	3.8	52 (28.1)
50,000-99,999	34.6	39.7	33.8	15.4	62 (33.5)
100,000-149,999	15.4	13.2	27.7	19.2	36 (19.5)
150,000-199,999	3.8	5.9	10.8	34.6	21 (11.4)
200,000-249,999	-	-	3.1	11.5	5 (2.7)
250,000 and above	-	-	7.7	15.3	9 (4.8)
Total N (%)	26 (100.0)	68 (100.0)	65 (100.0)	26 (100.0)	185 (100.0)
$\chi^2 = 59.8, df = 15, p \leq 0.01, \text{ significant}$					

	<i>Low Income Households</i>	<i>Middle Income Households</i>
< 50,000	42.6	13.2
50,000-99,999	38.3	28.6
100,000-149,999	13.8	25.3
150,000-199,999	5.3	17.6
200,000-249,999	-	5.5
250,000 and above	-	9.9
Total N (%)	94 (100.0)	91 (100.0)
$\chi^2 = 39.2, df = 15, p \leq 0.01, \text{ significant}$		

Level of Home Ownership Affordability among Tenants

Table 3 shows that the level of home ownership affordability between low and middle income tenants is, as expected, different.

Table 3: Affordability level between low and middle income households

Description	Low Income Households	Middle Income Households
Affordable Price (RM)	100,000 and below (80.9%)	100,000 - 200,000 (42.9%)
Affordable Deposit (RM)	5,000 or below (78.7%)	10,000 or below (81.3%)
Affordable Monthly Housing Loan Payment (RM)	500 or below (81.9%)	Below 800 (81.4%)

Source: Survey results

Perception of Government Policy in the Provision of Affordable Housing

Data available from the study show that almost three quarters of respondents (73.5%) were still dissatisfied with the performance of the government on public home ownership. The respondents were unsure (46.5%) whether the National Housing Policy could bring house prices down in the future. This study shows that the government policy is still unsuccessful on the provision of affordable housing as viewed by the respondents. It also reflects that 16.5 percent of the middle income households and 14.9 percent of the low income households feel pessimistic that “National Housing Policy will force house prices to decrease in the future”. Furthermore, 27.5 percent of the middle income households agree that the government’s housing policy was ineffective on home ownership in urban areas. These distributions show some extent of discomfort with the ability of the government in handling the provision of affordable housing.

Factors Affecting Home Ownership Affordability

We used 14 statements to explore factors influencing home ownership affordability premised on perspectives of neoclassical economic and neoliberal theories. They are housing price, household income, daily expenditure, interest rates, monthly instalment, housing loan, economic crisis, public amenities, transportation, network, nearby workplace, supply affordable housing, perception of National Housing Policy, government policy and enforcement.

The employment of a factor analysis using the principal component model in this analysis reduced these variables into several key factors using orthogonal rotation (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Although Field (2005) suggested critical factor loadings to be 0.4, we set a higher critical factor loading at 0.5. Four factors were produced – labelled as Affordable Mortgage Loan (monthly instalment, housing loan, household income, daily expenditure and fear of economic crisis); Housing Price (enforcement, interest rates, housing price and supply affordable house); Proximity to Workplace (nearby workplace, transportation network and public amenities) and Government Policy on Affordable Housing (national housing policy and government policy).

In real terms, Affordable Mortgage Loan allows an individual to submit an application for a loan, and once approved, he/she worries whether he/she can afford to pay the monthly housing loan instalment. This behaviour which focuses on affordable mortgage loan is as predicted by neo-classical economic theory. Meanwhile, on Housing Price, people complain that they could not afford to buy a house due to constant increases in house price as the latter is determined by the market forces causing the poor to remain being tenants. The neoliberal theory widely applies in the Malaysian housing market.

Proximity to Workplace, contributes to home ownership affordability because people prefer to stay in places nearby their workplace, public infrastructure and facilities to save time and cost. The final factor Government Policy on Affordable Housing, relates to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and Ministry of Finance which are directly involved in addressing the problem of housing affordability. Nevertheless, according to neoliberal theory, the government should stay away from intervening in the market. On the contrary, the Malaysian government attempts to assist the low income group to own a house through national housing policy and applies minimal intervention in the upper band of housing industry (Wan Abd Aziz et al., 2014). Private developers are not keen to produce housing units for the low income people as they gain too little from it.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the finding shows that a large proportion of the middle income tenants in Kajang could afford to buy house priced at RM100,000 to RM200,000, while the majority of low income tenants could only afford a house price less than

RM100,000. These are still difficult to find due to the high housing prices in Kajang contributed by its proximity to Kuala Lumpur and Federal Government Administrative Centre of Putrajaya. Meanwhile, they still prefer to be tenants at Kajang due to proximity to their workplace. This somewhat mirrors the finding of Cox and Followill (2018) whose exploration of historical data in few US cities found that home ownership is not always the best decision. Furthermore, they also worry whether they can afford to pay the monthly housing loan instalment once they secure a loan. With these compounding reasons, they are most likely to continue to stay in rental homes than to buy a house at current scenario. But, being a tenant does not free them from rises in the rental rates.

Although the government has implemented various programmes and activities to ensure the people, especially urban low income group, have access to housing market, there exists a serious impurity in the imbalance between demand and supply of housing units. Home ownership affordability cannot be solved just by giving subsidy or zero deposit to purchase a house. It is because owning a house does not just involve the payment of deposit but also involves the commitment to monthly instalments for the next 25 years or so, involving the burden to commit about one-third of their income. Thus, buying a house and the ability to hold on to home ownership are two different things. Then comes the need to commit a deposit for the unit. Providing a low public assisted interest rate for their housing loan may help.

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