



Gardening in mosque courtyards: Elderly women's agency and capabilities in collective practices

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Received Date: March 27, 2026

Revised Date: July 14, 2026

Accepted Date: July 30, 2026

ABSTRACT

Background: Older women are often perceived as no longer socially or economically active. However, in Palopo City, older women affiliated with the Nurul Yaqin Mosque have transformed neglected mosque land into a productive garden. This phenomenon demonstrates their agency and highlights how a faith-based social environment can support capability expansion in later life. Drawing on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, this study examines how collective gardening practices enable older women to exercise agency and construct meaningful roles. **Methods:** This qualitative study employed an ethnographic approach. Data were collected through informal interviews with five older women, participant observation, and supporting documentary sources during an eight-week period at the Nurul Yaqin Mosque, Palopo City, between March-May 2025. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation. **Findings:** Older women participate in gardening for three main reasons: supporting household food self-reliance, using their leisure time meaningfully, and maintaining physical and mental well-being. Gardening also provides a space for knowledge sharing, social interaction, and solidarity. The women experienced enhanced well-being, social participation, and expanded capabilities through access to fresh vegetables and stronger social networks. Nevertheless, they continue to face physical, emotional, environmental, and institutional constraints. The mosque courtyard serves as an enabling environment through which older women transform available resources into meaningful functionings, including food production, social participation, and collective contribution to community well-being. **Conclusion:** This study demonstrates that older women are active agents who expand their capabilities through productive, collective, and faith-based practices. The findings highlight the role of mosque-based community spaces in supporting active ageing, social participation, and empowerment. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** By integrating aging, gender, religion, and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, this study contributes to the literature by showing how mosque-based environments can facilitate capability expansion, social recognition, and collective empowerment among older women in a localized Indonesian context.

KEYWORDS: agency; capabilities; older women; mosque-based gardening; productive aging.

1. Introduction

The global older adult population has reached 1.4 billion and is projected to reach 2.1 billion by 2050 (WHO, 2025). In Indonesia, approximately 29 million people, or nearly 12% of the population, are classified as elderly, with this proportion projected to reach 20% or around 50 million people, by 2045 (Rokom, 2024). Older adults experience physiological,

Cite This Article:

Kahfi, M. A., & Jamaluddin, F. (2026). Gardening in mosque courtyards: Elderly women's agency and capabilities in collective practices. *Interaction, Community Engagement, and Social Environment*, 4(1), 147–162. <https://doi.org/10.61511/icese.v4i1.2026.3657>

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functional, cognitive, and psychosocial changes, alongside life transitions such as retirement and the loss of spouses, friends, or siblings, which may contribute to physical, psychological, and socio-economic challenges (Ilmi et al., 2018; Maulidia et al., 2022; Nofalia, 2021; Praghlapati & Munawaroh, 2020). Social stereotypes that portray older adults as inactive, dependent, and burdensome to their families may reinforce these challenges (Santoso, 2019). However, older adults require continued stimulation, social interaction, contact with nature, and physical activity to support their health and well-being, as those who do not engage in physical activities are 1.4 to 1.6 times more likely to experience impaired cognitive function than those who remain physically active (Agustana et al., 2023; Anira et al., 2019).

One approach that can be used to assist older adults is gardening. Magfirah & Fariki (2018) indicated that gardening therapy has been proven effective in normalizing blood pressure in older adults with a history of hypertension. This is further supported by studies by Febriyona et al. (2023) and Nurlianawati et al. (2023), who found that gardening activities promote relaxation and reduce feelings of loneliness among older adults. In addition to having a positive impact on health, gardening also contributes to household food self-reliance and improved access to nutritious food (Arifin et al., 2022; Mberu et al., 2022) and increases the income of elderly households (Br. Simbolon et al., 2021; Umatin et al., 2021).

Against this broader context, a distinctive phenomenon was observed at the Nurul Yaqin Mosque in Palopo, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia where a different social dynamic was observed among older adults, who are generally perceived to be in the post-retirement phase with limited activities. Some elderly individuals, particularly female congregants, remain active and productive in the mosque courtyard through gardening activities. Rather than being an externally imposed program, the gardening initiative was voluntarily organized and maintained by older women within the mosque community.

Gardening activities at the Nurul Yaqin Mosque began in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictions on social activities and public mobility encouraged older adults to seek safe and healthy activities outside the home. The previously underutilized grounds of the mosque were subsequently transformed into a collectively cultivated garden that provided opportunities for physical activity and social interaction.

A group of five to seven older women voluntarily manages the garden, undertaking activities ranging from soil preparation and planting to maintenance and harvesting. Among these participants, five older women were interviewed as key informants for this study. Participants consume the produce and share it with elderly congregants, widows, and economically vulnerable families. These practices illustrate the development of a simple mosque-based garden into a space for productive activity, social interaction, and community support. Previous studies have often examined older adults as recipients of externally designed health, welfare, or community programs (Agustana et al., 2023; Batara & Hamzah, 2021; Febriyona et al., 2023; Suharti et al., 2023), while less attention has been paid to how they independently create and sustain meaningful activities within their own social environments. However, less is known about how older women exercise agency and pursue valued activities through self-organized collective practices in faith-based community settings.

To examine this phenomenon, the study employs Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, which emphasizes individuals' substantive freedom to pursue lives they have reason to value. This framework enables older women to be understood not only as beneficiaries of gardening activities but also as active social agents who make choices, mobilize available resources, and shape their later lives. Within this perspective, the study examines how the mosque environment and everyday gardening practices shape the opportunities available to older women to pursue activities they value. Therefore, this study examines how older women exercise agency and expand their capabilities through collective gardening practices in a courtyard of a mosque and explores the socio-environmental factors shaping this process. By focusing on older women at the Nurul Yaqin Mosque in Palopo, the study contributes to the literature on ageing, religion, and community-based participation by

demonstrating how faith-based environments can support capability expansion and meaningful ageing.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design and data collection

This study employed a qualitative research design using an ethnographic approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the practices, meanings, and social dynamics surrounding gardening activities among older adults in a mosque setting (Spradley, 2006). Ethnography was selected because it enables researchers to closely observe everyday routines, social interactions, and the meanings that participants attach to their activities within a naturally occurring social environment. Data collection was conducted over an 8-week period between March and May 2025. Research data were collected through participant observation of gardening activities undertaken by older adults in the Nurul Yaqin Mosque courtyard in Palopo City, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. The observation period covered routine gardening activities under different weather and planting cycles, allowing the researcher to observe recurring patterns of participation, interaction, and garden management practices. In addition to observation, informal interviews were conducted to explore the subjective experiences, motivations, and interpretations of the participants regarding gardening activities within the mosque environment. Supporting documents, including mosque activity records and photographs of gardening activities, were also used as supplementary data sources.

Descriptive quantitative information related to gardening activities was also documented during participant observation to provide contextual support for the qualitative findings. This included the approximate size of the cultivated area, frequency of visits, duration of gardening sessions, harvest quantities, and estimated weekly savings. Data were derived from repeated field observations, field notes, and information provided by participants during informal interviews. The cultivated area was estimated based on field observations, while the frequency of visits and session duration were identified through recurring observation patterns and the accounts of participants. Harvest quantities were documented based on observed harvesting activities and participant estimates. Weekly savings were estimated by comparing reported harvest quantities with prevailing local market prices during the fieldwork period. These descriptive figures were intended to contextualize the ethnographic findings rather than provide precise statistical measurements or statistical inferences.

2.2 Participants and sampling

The study involved five key informants selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) active congregants of the Nurul Yaqin Mosque, (2) aged 60 years and above, and (3) participating regularly in gardening activities, including planting, watering, maintaining, or harvesting the garden. The relatively small number of informants reflects the ethnographic nature of the study and the limited number of older women who consistently participated in the gardening initiative. Data collection continued until no substantially new themes emerged from repeated observations and interviews, with recurring patterns identified across the five informants. Therefore, this study aimed not to achieve statistical representativeness or macro-level generalization but to generate deep qualitative insights into a localized community-based gardening practice and the meanings attached to it by older women.

2.3 Researcher reflexivity and trustworthiness of data

Given the ethnographic design, researcher presence in the field formed an integral part of the data collection process. The researcher participated in the observations while

maintaining a reflexive stance throughout the study. Field notes were used not only to record observed activities and interactions but also to document reflections and potential biases. To minimize subjective interpretation, observations were continuously compared with interview data and documentary evidence.

This study employed source and methodological triangulation to enhance data credibility (Sugiyono, 2010). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from observations, interviews, and documentary sources. Methodological triangulation involved combining participant observation and informal interviews. During the post-fieldwork analysis phase, the field data gathered between March and May 2025 were subsequently synthesized and cross-examined with contemporary scholarly literature, including studies published in 2025. This process enabled the interpretation of the findings within the most recent academic discussions on ageing, gardening, and capability development.

2.4 Data analysis

The data were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns related to gardening practices, motivations, benefits, constraints, agency, and capability development. During the data reduction stage, the researcher organized and focused on the data according to the study objectives. The selected data were then presented in the form of systematic descriptive narratives to illustrate gardening practices and their significance for older women. The final stage involved identifying patterns, themes, and interrelationships among categories emerging from the field data, which were subsequently interpreted using Amartya Sen's Capability Approach.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Factors influencing elderly gardening

The enthusiasm of older adults for gardening reflects their resilience in navigating the various limitations associated with ageing. Many older adults experience physical decline, changing social roles, and psychological adjustments in later life. Nevertheless, gardening provides an important opportunity for them to remain active, productive, and socially connected. Field findings indicate that the involvement of older women in gardening activities in the courtyard of the Nurul Yaqin Mosque is driven by an intersection of economic needs, the desire to maintain meaningful daily routines, and efforts to preserve physical and psychological well-being. During the eight-week data collection period between March and May 2025, three of the five informants are widows, and four of the five informants no longer have a stable source of income other than family support. Under these circumstances, utilizing the mosque's vacant land, estimated at approximately 50m² based on field observation, emerged as a rational and meaningful strategy for maintaining both livelihood and social engagement.

One of the primary factors motivating older women to engage in gardening is the need to independently meet household food needs. Retirement and widowhood often place older adults in economically vulnerable situations, particularly when regular sources of income diminish while daily expenses remain unchanged (Maulidia et al., 2022; Suberi, 2019). Gardening becomes a practical strategy for maintaining access to fresh and nutritious food under such conditions.

Based on field observations and participant estimates during the eight-week data collection period, the garden was estimated to produce approximately 1-1.5 kg of water spinach, 0.3-0.5 kg of chili peppers, and around 0.5 kg of tomatoes and scallions per week. Based on prevailing local market prices during the data collection period, these harvests were estimated to generate household savings of approximately Rp 30,000-Rp 50,000 per week. Although modest, these savings were meaningful for older women living under

limited economic conditions because household food expenditures were reduced while ensuring access to fresh vegetables. One informant explained:

"If we harvest vegetables from the mosque garden, we do not need to buy them from the market. Even though it is not much, it helps reduce daily expenses." (Informant 2, age 67 years old)

The produce harvested from the garden is consumed directly by participants and is occasionally shared with neighbors and economically vulnerable congregants. Therefore, gardening not only reduces household expenses but also promotes healthier dietary practices. Garden-grown vegetables provide essential nutrients that contribute to physical health and overall well-being (Akbar et al., 2020; Hawa et al., 2021). Community gardening among older women functions as a form of household food self-reliance and communal dietary support, particularly among those who have lost stable income following retirement or widowhood. The ability to cultivate and access fresh vegetables through collective gardening allows older women to reduce their dependence on market purchases while maintaining greater control over their daily nutritional needs. These findings align with those of Anira et al. (2020) and Seo et al. (2025), who showed that gardening contributes to consumption autonomy and a stronger sense of economic security among older adults.

Another important factor encouraging older women to participate in gardening is the need to meaningfully organize their leisure time. Retirement and the loss of a spouse often result in significant changes to daily routines and social interactions (Sa'adah, 2017). As former responsibilities diminish, many older adults experience feelings of emptiness, boredom, and loss of purpose. Four of the five informants reported spending considerably more time at home before the mosque garden became active. The establishment of the garden created a new routine based on recurring observation patterns and participants' accounts during the eight-week data collection period, with participants visiting four to six times per week, especially after Fajr prayer and before Maghrib. These regular activities provide structure, purpose, and social interaction opportunities. One informant stated:

"Before there was a garden, I spent most of my time at home. Now I have a reason to come to the mosque every day and meet my friends." (Informant 4, age 71 years old)

Gardening activities involve more than planting and harvesting. They also provide opportunities for reflection, social interaction, and personal fulfillment (Martini et al., 2024). Participants derive satisfaction from observing plant growth, solving cultivation problems, and achieving successful harvests. These experiences foster a renewed sense of accomplishment and responsibility. Gardening also helps older women rebuild social connections that may have weakened after retirement or widowhood. Collective gardening creates opportunities for cooperation, knowledge exchange, and mutual support among participants (Anira et al., 2020; Magfirah & Fariki, 2018). Through these interactions, gardening functions as a productive activity and a mechanism for maintaining social belonging and preventing loneliness.

Maintaining health is another major motivation for gardening participation. In later life, physical activity becomes increasingly important for preserving mobility, reducing disease risk, and maintaining independence (Budiono & Rivai, 2021; Rahman, 2016). Based on recurring field observations, gardening sessions typically lasted approximately 35-50 minutes and involved light physical activities such as watering, weeding, sweeping leaves, walking around garden plots, and harvesting vegetables. These activities provide moderate exercise without placing excessive strain on the ageing body. Gardening promotes flexibility, muscular strength, blood circulation, and balance (Magfirah & Fariki, 2018; Nurlianawati et al., 2023; Widyastuti et al., 2019). Gardening serves as a practical alternative to formal exercise for many participants. As one informant explained:

"I like gardening because it keeps me moving. Here, I can water the plants, walk around, and spend time with my friends." (Informant 1, 70 years old)

Beyond physical benefits, gardening contributes significantly to emotional well-being. Outdoor activities, interaction with nature, and regular social contact help reduce stress, loneliness, and anxiety (Mugihartadi et al., 2022; Nurlianawati et al., 2023). Two informants reported a history of hypertension and described subjective improvements in their perceived physical and emotional well-being while participating in gardening. These findings support Butterfield & Daniels (2025), who identified a positive relationship between gardening participation and quality of life among older adults. Table 1 summarizes the three main factors motivating older women's participation in gardening and their related capability dimensions.

Table 1. Factors motivating gardening participation and related capability dimensions

Main Factor	Field Findings	Significance for Older Adults	Capability Dimension
Meeting the Household Food Needs	Growing vegetables, reducing food expenditure, and sharing harvests	Self-reliance of household food and communal dietary support	Economic and nutritional capabilities
Structuring Leisure Time and Maintaining Meaningful Roles	Establishing daily routines, social interaction, responsibility, and purpose	Enhanced social participation and sense of meaning	Social and agency capability
Maintaining Physical and Mental Health	Light physical activity, reduced loneliness and stress, and improved mobility	Improved physical fitness and emotional well-being	Health capability

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the motivations of older women to engage in gardening extend beyond their immediate economic, social, and health needs. These motivations were associated with opportunities for autonomy, social participation, and meaningful engagement in later life. From a capability perspective, these motivations represent the pursuit of opportunities to live in ways they have reason to value despite the constraints associated with ageing, retirement, and widowhood (Sen, 1999). Thus, gardening emerges not only as a response to practical needs but as also a meaningful strategy for remaining active and engaged in community life.

3.2 The benefits of gardening for older adults

The findings reveal that gardening provides multiple benefits for older women, extending beyond food production to include social, physical, and psychological dimensions. These benefits were described by participants as contributing to their well-being and continued engagement in community life. Gardening serves not only as a productive activity but also as a meaningful social practice for older women involved in the Nurul Yaqin Mosque garden, through which they maintain social participation, physical health, and emotional well-being. One of the most significant benefits of gardening is the knowledge sharing and social interaction it provides. Gardening requires practical knowledge of cultivation techniques, seed selection, soil management, planting schedules, and pest control. Many older women have accumulated valuable knowledge that can be transmitted to others through years of experience.

Knowledge shared by older adults is often practical and directly applicable, ranging from natural composting techniques to identifying soil conditions suitable for specific crops. Older women frequently share traditional cultivation methods that may be less familiar to younger generations. This process not only enriches other participants but also provides emotional fulfillment for the elderly themselves (Siagian & Sarinasiti, 2022). Many participants expressed satisfaction in being able to continue contributing to their

community despite no longer holding formal occupational roles (Lestari & Lessy, 2022). One participant explained:

"I often teach others how to choose seeds and when to plant them. Even though I am old, I still feel useful because I can share what I know." (Informant 3, age 68 years old)

The mosque garden also functions as an important social interaction space. Almost every gardening session is accompanied by informal conversations about health, family matters, daily challenges, and personal experiences. Such interactions help prevent social isolation, which is frequently experienced after retirement or widowhood (Sa'adah, 2017). This finding supports Larnyo et al. (2024), who identified community gardens as important sites for social cohesion and community engagement. Another informant stated:

"The garden is not only for planting vegetables. We come here to talk, laugh, and spend time together. It makes us feel less lonely." (Informant 4, age 71 years old)

Gardening therefore serves as an ongoing mechanism of social support that strengthens belonging, companionship, and emotional security for the older women in this study. Through collective gardening activities, they maintain meaningful social relationships and remain actively involved in community life. Gardening also provides important physical health benefits (Agustana et al., 2023; Nurlianawati et al., 2023). Maintaining physical health is increasingly important in later life because it contributes to independence and reduces vulnerability to illness. Gardening provides older women with opportunities to remain physically active through routine activities such as bending, walking, watering plants, carrying light equipment, sweeping leaves, and harvesting vegetables.

Field observations showed that gardening sessions involved light physical activities such as bending, walking, watering, and harvesting. These activities help maintain flexibility, muscular strength, blood circulation, and bodily coordination (Magfirah & Fariki, 2018; Mugihartadi et al., 2022). Several participants who had previously spent much of their time sitting passively around the mosque became increasingly active in maintaining the garden during the later weeks of the eight-week data collection period. One participant reported noticeable improvements in mobility after regular participation in gardening activities. As one participant explained:

"Since I started gardening regularly, my body feels lighter and my knees are not as stiff as before." (Informant 1, age 70 years old)

These findings are consistent with Anira et al. (2020), who reported positive associations between horticultural activities and physical functioning among older adults. In addition to its social and physical benefits, gardening significantly contributes to psychological well-being. Many older adults experience loneliness, anxiety, boredom, or loss following retirement or widowhood. Gardening helps address these challenges by providing opportunities to connect with nature, establish routines, and experience a sense of achievement (Mugihartadi et al., 2022; Raudhoh & Pramudiani, 2021). The most prominent psychological benefits identified in this study were feelings of usefulness, pride, and accomplishment. Participants consistently described feelings of satisfaction when observing plants grow successfully and eventually become ready for harvest. One informant explained:

"I feel happy when the vegetables grow well. I feel proud when we harvest them because the plants survive through our care." (Informant 1, age 70 years old)

These experiences strengthen self-confidence and self-esteem (Kusumawaty et al., 2018; Raudhoh & Pramudiani, 2021). Gardening also functions as a form of self-expression through which older women can exercise creativity, preserve memories, and maintain a sense of authorship over their environment. Furthermore, regular participation in

gardening reduces boredom and strengthens engagement with everyday life (Kaharuddin et al., 2021; Widyastuti et al., 2019). Gardening contributes to the restoration of social dignity by positioning older women as active contributors rather than passive recipients of care.

Taken together, these findings indicate that gardening provides physical, social, and psychological benefits while creating opportunities for older women to exercise and develop their capabilities. From the perspective of Amartya Sen (Sen, 1999), the benefits observed in this study reflect the ability of older women to convert available opportunities into valued ways of living. In Sen's terminology (1999), the daily practices of planting, watering, weeding, maintaining crops, harvesting vegetables, and sharing produce with others represent achieved functionings, namely the practical realization of capabilities in everyday life. Through these activities, older women convert available opportunities into meaningful outcomes that enhance well-being, autonomy, and social participation. One participant emphasized this sense of agency:

"No one forces us to garden. We come because we want to. It makes us feel healthy, useful, and closer to our friends." (Informant 2, age 67 years old)

Therefore, the mosque garden functions as an enabling social environment that supports capability expansion. In addition to providing physical resources for cultivation, it creates opportunities for interaction, cooperation, mutual support, and social recognition. While Sen's (1999) Capability Approach emphasizes individuals' substantive freedoms to pursue lives they have reason to value, this study's findings highlight how collective and community-based environments enable and shape these freedoms. In this sense, the capabilities of older women emerge through the interaction between individual agency and the supportive social and religious environment of the mosque.

a



b



Fig. 1 (a) The mosque courtyard as an enabling social environment where older women engage in collective gardening activities; (b) vegetable seedlings as productive resources supporting gardening practices and capability expansion.

This interpretation is consistent with Ilyas (2022), who demonstrates that mosques in Palopo serve not only as places of worship but also as centers of education, social welfare, and community development. The mosque's multifunctional role enables it to become an important social infrastructure that supports participation and collective action. Improved health enhances participation, strengthens belonging, and reinforces recognition and self-worth. Gardening also functions as a process of symbolic repositioning from a broader sociological perspective. While ageing is often associated with dependency, passivity, and withdrawal from productive roles, the mosque garden challenges this dominant narrative by positioning older women as knowledge holders, cultivators, and contributors to collective well-being. Their continued involvement demonstrates that ageing is not merely a process of decline but also of capability expansion, social participation, and meaningful contribution. Consequently, the benefits of gardening extend beyond individual well-being and become part of a broader process through which older adults reclaim visibility, dignity, and social worth within community life (Choi et al., 2023; Liamputtong & Sanchez, 2020).

3.3 Challenges faced by older adults in gardening

Although gardening offers numerous benefits for older adults, various limitations often prevent them from fully enjoying and sustaining this activity. These challenges arise not only from physical decline but also from psychological, social, environmental, and structural factors that influence the motivation, capacity, and continuity of gardening practices among older adults. Field findings reveal that these constraints do not simply function as barriers; rather, they are continuously negotiated through adaptive and collective strategies developed by the older women themselves.

One of the most significant challenges experienced by older adults is the physical decline associated with ageing. Many older adults experience mobility-related difficulties, including bending, standing for prolonged periods, or lifting relatively heavy objects (Peine et al., 2021; Wilantika et al., 2021). Gardening activities often require repetitive bodily movements, such as digging, planting, watering, loosening soil, sweeping leaves, and moving seedlings (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2022). These activities can become physically demanding for older adults experiencing joint pain or chronic illnesses. The field data provide clear evidence of these limitations. Three of the five informants reported experiencing knee pain, two self-reported a history of hypertension, and one frequently experienced back pain after prolonged bending. These challenges were particularly evident during activities requiring greater physical effort, such as loosening soil and moving polybag seedlings. As one participant explained:

"Sometimes my knees hurt when I have to bend for too long. When that happens, others help me finish the work." (Informant 5, age 73 years old)

Despite these limitations, physical decline did not automatically prevent gardening participation. Instead, the older women developed collective adaptation strategies in which physically demanding tasks were distributed according to their individual capacities. Participants routinely assisted one another whenever someone experienced difficulty completing a task. This finding is consistent with Praghlapati & Munawaroh (2020), who identified physical adaptability as a central theme in gardening and ageing studies.

In addition to physical limitations, emotional and psychological challenges influence the participation of older adults in gardening. Experiences such as widowhood, loneliness, anxiety, and emotional fatigue often affect motivation and willingness to engage in everyday activities (Prima et al., 2019; Yusselda & Wardani, 2016). Gardening can become difficult for some older adults when emotional burdens dominate their daily lives. One informant reflected:

"After my husband passed away, I did not feel motivated to do anything. Coming to the garden helped me to slowly become active again." (Informant 3, age 68 years old)

Social isolation further compounds these challenges. Two of the five informants lived alone, making social support particularly important. Without opportunities to share experiences, exchange knowledge, or collaborate with others, gardening can become monotonous and less meaningful. These findings confirm that social engagement is essential for sustaining enthusiasm and supporting emotional well-being among older adults.

Beyond physical and emotional challenges, environmental conditions also affect the sustainability of gardening activities. Previous studies have shown that community gardening initiatives are highly dependent on climatic stability, as excessive rainfall, prolonged drought, and extreme temperatures can reduce crop productivity and discourage gardeners from continuing to participate (Liamputtong & Sanchez, 2020; Lin et al., 2024). Such environmental uncertainties become particularly significant for older adults because physical limitations often reduce their ability to respond quickly to changing cultivation conditions.

Field observations conducted in April 2025 revealed several environmental challenges affecting the mosque garden. During periods of heavy rainfall, approximately half of the spinach seedlings showed signs of root rot. In subsequent weeks, several chili plants wilted before reaching optimal fruit production due to high daytime temperatures. These environmental conditions directly affected harvest outcomes and occasionally reduced group morale. Even on a small scale, crop failures generated feelings of disappointment because gardening involved considerable time, physical effort, and emotional commitment.

Nevertheless, participants continuously adapted to these environmental challenges by modifying planting schedules, selecting more resilient crops, and adjusting cultivation practices (e.g., altering watering frequencies or installing temporary shading) according to weather conditions. These adaptive responses demonstrate that environmental constraints do not automatically terminate participation but instead encourage the development of practical coping strategies.

Another challenge is the limited support provided by external institutions. Research on community-based gardening consistently highlights the importance of institutional assistance, including access to seeds, fertilizer, training programs, infrastructure, and extension services, in sustaining long-term participation and improving productivity (Keen, 2025; Larnyo et al., 2024). The informants indicated that the gardening initiative at the Nurul Yaqin Mosque continues to rely largely on the resources of the congregation. Assistance from local government agencies in the form of seedlings, fertilizer, gardening equipment, or technical guidance remains limited. As one participant stated:

"We buy most of the seeds ourselves. If the government supported us, we could grow more vegetables." (Informant 2, age 67 years old)

Lack of institutional support restricts opportunities for garden expansion and increases dependence on self-managed resources. Similar findings have been reported in studies of community gardens where limited external assistance constrains development while simultaneously encouraging local innovation and self-reliance (Keen, 2025; Lin et al., 2024). In response, participants developed practical solutions such as rotating watering schedules, producing compost from household kitchen waste, and dividing responsibilities according to individual physical capacities. These adaptive strategies demonstrate how older women mobilize available resources to sustain collective gardening despite structural limitations.

These challenges demonstrate that opportunities for meaningful participation are shaped by personal, social, and environmental conditions rather than existing without limitations. In this study, physical decline, emotional vulnerability, unfavorable weather, and limited institutional support created constraints on the continuity and intensity of gardening participation. Nevertheless, these constraints do not entirely diminish their opportunities for meaningful participation, as participants continuously mobilize social support, collective labor, and locally available resources to sustain gardening activities. This finding is consistent with recent applications of the Capability Approach that emphasize the importance of social arrangements in supporting older adults under constraints (Gumelar & Qomar, 2025).

The mosque environment plays a crucial role in mitigating these limitations. The mosque provides access to companionship, collective problem-solving, emotional support, and practical assistance in addition to providing physical space for cultivation. These social resources help older women cope with individual limitations through mutual assistance and shared responsibility. This finding supports studies highlighting the importance of community-based and faith-based spaces in fostering social participation, belonging, and well-being among older adults (Choi et al., 2023; Liamputtong & Sanchez, 2020).

This situation demonstrates that the agency of older adults becomes particularly visible when it is negotiated within structural constraints. Rather than positioning themselves as passive recipients of ageing-related limitations, older women continuously develop adaptive mechanisms that enable them to sustain meaningful activities in later life. Therefore, the challenges they face reveal both their vulnerability and their capacity to

redistribute tasks, provide mutual assistance, and sustain participation within a limited support system. Such findings resonate with Sen's conception of agency (Keen, 2025; Sen, 1999), which emphasizes people's ability to pursue goals they value despite structural constraints, as well as older adults' active shaping of their social environments through collective action and mutual support.

Although older women encounter numerous constraints, they continue to cultivate vegetables, maintain social participation, share harvests, preserve physical activity, and contribute to community life. Their ability to sustain these activities under limited resources and age-related decline demonstrates the importance of collective adaptation and resilience in later life. Thus, the mosque garden becomes not only a site of production and well-being but also a space where resilience, adaptability, and mutual support are continuously practiced. This finding aligns with recent research (Liamputtong & Sanchez, 2020; Lin et al., 2024) demonstrating that collective participation, social networks, and shared community practices strengthen resilience in later life rather than solely through individual coping capacities. Collective adaptation, resource mobilization, and shared resilience are empirical patterns that raise broader theoretical questions concerning the nature of capability and agency in later life.

3.4 *Theoretical contributions*

This study contributes to the Capability Approach by providing an empirical refinement of how capabilities are generated in later life, showing that they are socially and spatially co-produced within faith-based community environments. While Sen (1999) emphasizes the substantive freedoms individuals possess to pursue lives they have reason to value, the present findings suggest that these freedoms are also shaped by collective social arrangements that function as conversion factors, the mechanisms through which available resources are translated into actual functionings. The mosque courtyard functions not only as a physical resource but also as a social infrastructure that facilitates cooperation, mutual assistance, knowledge exchange, and social recognition, enabling older women to convert available resources into valued functionings despite physical decline and limited institutional support. Therefore, the findings suggest that faith-based community spaces should be understood not only as social settings but also as institutional conversion factors that enable older adults to transform available resources into valued functionings. This study extends existing applications of the Capability Approach by showing how a religious community institution can function as a conversion factor that supports capability expansion in later life.

Furthermore, this study contributes to capability scholarship by illustrating that agency in old age, including resilience in the face of physical, emotional, and structural constraints, is sustained through collective rather than purely individual action. Existing applications of the Capability Approach often center on individual freedom and personal choice; in contrast, this study demonstrates that reciprocal social relationships, shared responsibilities, and community participation lead to capability expansion and the resilience that accompanies it. The findings illustrate how collective capability operates in faith-based community settings, whereby older adults expand their substantive freedoms and collectively sustain resilience through collaborative practices embedded in local religious communities (Assaad et al., 2022; Gumelar & Qomar, 2025).

Finally, the study broadens the contextual application of the Capability Approach by highlighting the importance of faith-based institutions in supporting meaningful ageing particularly in religious communities with cultural embeddedness. Rather than viewing mosques solely as places of worship, this study conceptualizes them as enabling social environments that generate opportunities for participation, dignity, and well-being. This suggests that religious community spaces should be recognized as important institutional contexts for capability development among older adults, particularly in non-Western societies where religion remains closely integrated with everyday social life (Choi et al., 2023; Liamputtong & Sanchez, 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest that the

Capability Approach can be more fully understood when greater attention is given to the relational, collective, and faith-based contexts through which capabilities are generated and sustained in later life.

4. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that gardening in mosque courtyards is not merely a routine activity for older adults but a meaningful social practice through which older women actively shape the quality and direction of their later lives. Their participation is primarily motivated by three interconnected factors: supporting household food self-reliance, meaningfully structuring leisure time, and maintaining physical and mental health. From the perspective of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, gardening enables older women to expand their capabilities and exercise agency through performing tasks such as planting, harvesting, sharing produce, maintaining social participation, and contributing to community life. These capabilities are shaped not only by individual choices but also by social and structural conditions. Despite physical decline, emotional vulnerability, environmental uncertainty, and limited institutional support, participants can sustain meaningful activities through collective adaptation, mutual assistance, and social solidarity. Therefore, this study contributes to a relational understanding of capability development by demonstrating that faith-based community environments can collectively support resilience and capabilities in later life. In this context, the mosque functions not only as a place of worship but also as an enabling social environment that provides access to social networks, collective support, productive resources, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Although this study is based on a small qualitative sample of five key informants within a single mosque-based gardening initiative, it provides contextual and analytical insights into how community spaces can support meaningful ageing. As a preliminary model, the findings suggest that local governments, religious institutions, and community organizations can strengthen such initiatives through accessible gardening resources, tailored technical assistance (e.g., ergonomic urban farming techniques), technical assistance, and training programs. Future research should examine similar faith-based community spaces across diverse regional, cultural, and religious contexts to further explore the relationships among social environments, collective capability, resilience, and meaningful ageing.

Acknowledgments

The authors sincerely thank the older women who participated in this study and the management of the Nurul Yaqin Mosque in Palopo City for their valuable support and cooperation throughout the research.

Author Contribution

M.A.K., contributed to data analysis and drawing conclusions. F.J., contributed to data organization, review, and editing. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical Review Board Statement

Formal ethical review board approval was not obtained for this study. The research involved minimal-risk qualitative methods based on participant observation and informal interviews regarding gardening practices. All participants provided verbal informed consent, and their anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study.

Informed Consent Statement

Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Not available.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly to assist with grammar and language checking and ResearchRabbit to identify relevant scholarly literature. These tools were used solely to support language editing and literature discovery. The authors independently reviewed and verified all suggested revisions and references and take full responsibility for the content, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions presented in the manuscript.

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