
Women oil palm plantation workers in Asia: Gender inequity and exploitation

In Asia, as in many other parts of the world, forest areas have been inhabited by successive generations of indigenous communities. For these peoples, the forest has come to play a central role in their socio-cultural identity and their survival as a community. But today, many of these forests are being cleared and replaced by industrial oil palm plantations – in many cases, on lands granted to companies by the state on the pretext that they were vacant or idle lands!

The arrival of large-scale oil palm plantations has generally implied major changes in the social and economic structure of local communities. The loss of land that formerly provided them with a source of livelihood forces them to go out in search of employment. In the best of cases they can find work with the plantation companies. But these companies do not always hire the local population; often they take advantage of immigrant labour, since these workers are more vulnerable and thus easier to exploit with lower salaries and heavier workloads.

Within this general context, women face an especially difficult situation. As documented in a report by the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP) (1), women who find work on the plantations tend to be employed as sprayers of pesticides and fertilizers, exposing them to severe health hazards posed by chemicals like paraquat. Quite frequently, they are not informed of these chemicals or provided with protective equipment, nor are they protected by health and safety regulations.

In other cases, the pressure on women to provide food for their families forces them to seek alternative sources of income as migrant workers. According to the same FPP report, prostitution is on the rise in Cambodia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines, coinciding with a higher prevalence of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases among female oil palm plantation workers.

In Indonesia, the Suharto government, with the support of World Bank financing, introduced the nucleus estate model in the 1980s. Under this system, oil palm plantation companies were not only granted land concessions by the government to establish their industrial plantations, or so-called nucleus estates, but were also supplied with the harvest from so-called “plasma” or satellite plantations – smallholder estates of two hectares associated with a transmigration scheme. Under this model, the smallholders have a dependent relationship with the companies, which exercise power over them as the only buyer to whom they can sell their harvests (a situation known in economic terms as a monopsony). Women are subjected to double dependence, subordinated to their husbands or fathers, since only men are recognized as smallholders by the nucleus estate companies. Although women, along with their children, typically work on the oil palm plantations, they do so as mere “helpers” of the men, which means they work without remuneration, as revealed in a research report by Sawit Watch and Women's Solidarity for Human Rights (2).

The transmigration programme, which has been implemented in Indonesia since the Dutch colonial era and has led to major displacements of the population, has proven to be extremely useful for the

oil palm plantation industry. Only men are eligible for ownership of smallholdings, and the role of women is limited to being the “partners” of their husbands. This discriminatory policy of the programme has led to the marginalization of unmarried women and widows, who are denied the possibility of participating in the programme and accessing the opportunity to own a “plasma” oil palm plantation.

Relegated to the position of mere wives, women take part in every stage of work on the plasma plantations, beginning with clearing and weeding, followed by the treatment of the land – usually through the spraying of fertilizer – and finally the harvest, in which women are generally responsible for picking up and gathering the fruit that has fallen to the ground. Thus they work, although indirectly and without payment, for the nucleus company which these family plantations supply with palm fruit.

Women carry out these tasks in addition to their domestic chores. And even though the wives of palm plantation smallholders in the Indonesian transmigration programme work alongside their husbands, they have no right to land nor are they recognized as landowners.

The research report by Sawit Watch and Women's Solidarity for Human Rights looked at the situation of the many women from the villages of Olumokunde and Kamba, in the province of Central Sulawesi, who had gone to work at a nursery owned by the oil palm company Jaya Abadi, a subsidiary of the PT Astra group. Some of them are hired as contract labourers, while others are not given a work contract. Women contract labourers usually take their children with them to help them finish their work more quickly. Their work day at the nursery is seven to eight hours, with a one hour break. However, a woman labourer's day usually begins at four in the morning, when she gets up to cook and leave food prepared for her family. In 2010 they were paid approximately 3.6 U.S. dollars (32,800 Indonesian rupiahs) a day; if they worked a full month, they could earn a salary of 86.5 dollars.

The women labourers reported that the company did not provide them with protective equipment or even the adequate tools, so that they often had to bring their own tools like machetes, hoes and buckets. One of the women working in the nursery told the researchers:

When we first started working, the company didn't provide us with adequate tools. We were only given fabric for a facial mask, it's only the last few months the company provided the mask and other tools.

These masks were only provided by the company after the women labourers complained and directly asked for them, because of the toxic products they were exposed to. These include Matadol, an insecticide produced by Syngenta whose product description notes that it can be irritating to the eyes or skin, fatal or poisonous if swallowed, harmful if inhaled, and may cause itching, burning or numbness of exposed skin. The women also work with Decis, an insecticide produced by Bayer and described by the company itself as toxic to fish, aquatic organisms and bees. As for humans, it is fatal or poisonous if swallowed or absorbed through the skin, potentially fatal if inhaled, and severely irritating to the eyes and skin.

According to information gathered at the community clinic in the village of Olumokunde, many of the women labourers are treated for aches in the waist area, stiffness, itchiness and even full-body allergic reactions. The women reported that the company does not provide any treatment for the health problems that they suffer as a result of their work in the nursery.

These are some of the testimonies gathered by the researchers:

It's dangerous working at the company, a lot of diseases or health problems. Have to leave at four and come home only in the afternoon. The children become neglected.

Working in the (company) fields is very hard... You have to accept the heat and being rained on. Apart from the responsibility in the house, there's also the work outside of the house, from morning until the afternoon, and once home there is still more house chores that must be done.

Before the establishment of the oil palm plantations, a large majority of the women in the villages worked in the rice fields. After the rice harvest, they were left with free time and took part in social activities, such as those around the celebration of Independence Day on 17 August. In the past women actively participated in sports competitions and community arts such as vocal groups during these celebrations. But now, the women labourers complain, there is no time left for these activities. According to ibu Lian aka mama Yosua, one of the local women interviewed:

The presence of oil palm is killing the community arts, especially for the women. Proof of this is the women don't participate anymore in the competitions at the 17 August celebrations.

The prospect of earning a salary in a nursery or on an industrial plantation has appealed to many women as a way to increase their household income. Their entry into the monetary economy has also brought about changes in consumption patterns. They now buy more than they used to, and buying on credit has introduced debt, something that was practically non-existent before, and sometimes chains them to salaried work and the company.

It is more than obvious that in Asia, as various research studies demonstrate, working in the industrial oil palm sector has not improved women's lives: gender inequity has persisted or even worsened, while women also suffer exploitation in the workplace both on industrial plantations and in the nurseries.

This article is based on the following reports:

(1) "Oil Palm Expansion in South East Asia: Trends and implications for local communities and indigenous peoples", Forest Peoples Programme, Sawit Watch and others, 2011, <http://www.forestpeoples.org/oil-palm-expansion-in-south-east-asia-trends-implications-local-communities-indigenous-peoples>

(2) "The Oil Palm Plantation System Weakens the Position of Women", Sawit Watch and Women's Solidarity for Human Rights, 2010, http://wrm.org.uy/subjects/women/OilPalm_women_SW.pdf