
Indonesia: Oil palm plantations and their trace of violence against women

Women suffer many types of violence committed by oil palm plantations companies' employers, security forces, police and military, which subsequently reinforce patriarchy and their roles and relations within society in general.

In the name of economic growth, the Government of Indonesia is aggressively promoting palm oil as a commodity for competing on global markets. This promotion, however, covers up the fact that oil palm plantations are not only causing deforestation and environmental degradation, but also legal and human rights violations as well as inequality in land tenure regimes. All this leads to abuses, discrimination, poverty, land grabbing, loss of social and cultural systems, social conflicts and much more.

Why are oil palm plantations especially impacting women?

Women confront many injustices attached to their gender role, position and relations to others within the family, community, state and society in general. These injustices intensify with the aggressive neoliberal market and capital flows based on dirty production, greediness and ignorance of a truly socio-environmental sustainability. In this context, industrial oil palm plantations in Indonesia are causing conflicts at the community level while ignoring women's experiences as well as their essential role in social reproduction. Ultimately, women are exposed to the lowest, poorest, marginalized and neglected conditions.

The issue of **women violence and abuse is hardly ever discussed within the palm oil industry or by other relevant actors**. In fact, the reality of violence and abuse against women in and around oil palm plantations is largely omitted from the corporate and government story told about industrial oil palm plantations. In most events addressing extractivist industries, such as the oil palm, pulp or logging industries, women's stories are absent. Often, government policies are focused on expanding production and demand, increasing corporate benefits among others. These policies have no interest in adverting the impacts this industry brings with it. On the contrary, the expansion of these monocultures only worsens the situation of women and communities in general, with pollution of rivers and water sources being only one of many impacts. Women labourers are fully aware of this; yet, they have no other economic choice to keep their family alive.

Research conducted by the National Commission on Violence Against Women together with Indonesian civil society organizations such as WALHI, RMI, Bina Desa, Dayakologi Institute and Debt Watch, found various layers of violence experienced by women in the natural resource sector. (1) By using a feminist political ecological analysis, the research highlights how **violence against women is a reality wherever industrial oil palm plantations in Indonesia were set up**.

Structurally abusing women

With the arrival of large-scale oil palm plantations, women lose access and control over land, which eventually pushes them to become labourers on the plantations. In many cases, women working on

these plantations have little to no legal protection. They mostly have to spray fertilizers and pesticides, which is harmful to women's health.

In a study on oil palm plantations in West Kalimantan, many women expressed they had no idea that their land or family land was now in the company's hands. Women's lack of information is also reinforced by the general situation in Indonesia, in which men generally own the land.

In consequence, **the company considers that it is only important to involve men in the so-called socialization meetings**. Besides the many intimidation strategies used by the companies, the sweet promises of benefits if families enrol in 'plasma' schemes (smallholder or outgrower schemes that are very common in Indonesia and have trapped many families in debt), becoming company workers on their own land, have led many families to eventually lose their land. There is no Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) carried out with the communities, especially with women who will experience excessive and specific impacts when oil palm plantations, that are greedy for land and water, enter their villages. In many places, the burden of searching for water is on women; hence, when there is a water crisis due to drought or pollution, the workload of women gets bigger.

For women living in and around plantation areas, being a "brondol" is a way of survival to meet their families' basic needs. The "brondol," are women picking up oil palm fruits left on the ground. From morning to evening, they walk a long way to reach the oil palm plantations, bearing a high risk of being caught by the companies' security officers. **Despite companies seizing large amounts of land, water, forests and other communal resources, they consider the search for left-over oil palm fruit as theft.**

There are also many women who work as labourers in oil palm plantations. Companies consider women as the more accurate, careful and diligent workers and thus employ many female labourers as seed planters and for applying fertilizers. In particularly the application of fertilizers is actually a very toxic activity and very harmful to women's health. Male workers are forced to bring family members to help them achieve the company targets. One thing is for sure; the wives and children are not included as recipients of a salary. **The labour practices of these large oil palm plantations are widely cited as modern-day slavery.** (2)

The high criminalization of those opposing the plantations has led to many arrests of activists, and even murders. Women who lost their husbands, fathers or sons are forced to earn money for maintaining the family while still taking care of the domestic chores. This double burden is extremely difficult for women starting their overall work before sunrise and ending it long after sunset.

But women suffer other types of violence that are committed by security forces, police and military, which subsequently reinforce gender roles, positions and relations attached to them.

Targeting their "womanhood"

When women struggle to maintain their living space and deny the presence of oil palm plantations, they experience further criminalization and violence.

It is important to note that there is a higher vulnerability for women in fighting for their rights. One of the violations is the one targeting their "womanhood" which aims to silence their fight. The "womanhood" in this case is defined as **the relation of social, cultural and religious constructions to women's functions and roles, which are mostly still strongly influenced by the patriarchal culture.**

Conflicts occurs not only because of the differences in perceptions between local communities and oil palm industry actors, both corporate and governmental, but also because women's knowledge and experience in managing their living resources, particularly as carers and managers of household production systems and social production, has been ignored. It is then fair to say that neglecting an entity having the inherited knowledge and experience as part of social order means neglecting the existence of such entity; and that is definitely a violation of basic rights.

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(1) Meretas Jejak Kekerasan terhadap perempuan dalam pengelolaan sumber daya alam, sebuah tawaran dialog (Komnas Perempuan 2008) https://issuu.com/walhi/docs/temuan_awal-sebuah_tawaran_dialog

(2) See SawitWatch (in Bahasa): <http://sawitwatch.or.id/2016/02/catatan-singkat-akhir-tahun-perburuhan-sawit-watch-2015/>

Article from the WRM Bulletin 197, December 2013, <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/modern-day-slavery-in-oil-palm-plantations-the-outstanding-cases-of-malaysia-and-indonesia/>

Accenture for Humanity United: Exploitative Labor Practices in the Global Palm Oil Industry http://humanityunited.org/pdfs/Modern_Slavery_in_the_Palm_Oil_Industry.pdf

Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism: Forced Labor and Child Labor on Palm Oil Plantations <http://www.schusterinstituteinvestigations.org/#!/slavery-palm-oil-plantations-indonesia/cqcc>