
Indonesia: Exploitation of women and violation of their rights in oil palm plantations

The expansion of oil palm plantations in Indonesia has turned women into landless food buyers and cheap labour, with no adequate safety and health protection, for the plantation companies.

Oil palm plantations in Indonesia are driven by large capital, land availability, cheap labour and the international demand for palm oil. Since 2000, the area of oil palm plantations has been increasing in order to meet the demand of the international palm oil market. Indonesia has announced plans to increase Crude Palm Oil (CPO) production up to 40 million tons per year by 2020. (1) The Indonesian Plantation Fund Management Agency, a state-run agency that represents the plantation industry, launched Indonesia's Vision for 2045 with one target: to increase CPO production to 60 million tons per year. (2)

Indonesia currently has 16.1 million hectares of oil palm plantations, and plans to expand the area occupied by oil palm plantations to approximately 20 million hectares of land, spread across Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku and Papua. **This massive expansion mainly rests on two key factors: low-wage labour and the ease of obtaining land.**

According to Indonesia's Minister of Agriculture, palm oil is one of the largest foreign exchange contributors in Indonesia, with an export value of 250 trillion Indonesian rupiahs per year. (3) Palm oil is an export commodity for the country, as is evident from the value of products derived from palm oil that contributed 75 per cent to the export of the non-oil sector. Beyond that, the presence of oil palm plantations on such a massive scale absorbs a large number of labours - in total numbers. (4) In comparison with the labour provided by small-scale peasant farming – both in terms of numbers and quality of work -, the contribution of the oil palm industry to the labour market looks far less impressive, however.

There are two important things to highlight related to the presence of oil palm plantations. First, the marginalization of peasants, especially women. **Oil palm plantations have turned peasant communities into landless communities and forced them to sell their labour to plantations.** The seizure of land by oil palm corporations and the presence of oil palm plantations are very obviously affecting women's ability to produce food and access land. The expansion of oil palm plantations onto land previously available for peasant farming **is transforming women from food producers into food buyers and cheap labour for the plantation companies.** With their way of life as food producers, their livelihoods and traditional peasant farming practises disrupted or eradicated by oil palm plantations, women are often left with little choice but to seek work as labourers on the plantations. Women who are hired as workers must adapt to the standard routine, work pattern and work mechanisms on the plantation.

"Since the company came, **we were forced to sell our land to the company.** The company accepted us as casual labourers on the condition that we sell our land to the company. The majority of women workers here are those who sold their land to the company. Now we are casual labours", said Ad, a woman working as casual labourer on the oil palm plantation of Sipef Group's subsidiary in

Secondly, for many women, the working conditions on the plantations are very precarious. The labour relations for women on the plantations are characterized by informal arrangements, they often have very short-term work contracts, leaving them without long-term work security. Job engagement is unclear while undocumented work agreements and target-based wage systems prevail. The Indonesian NGO Sawit Watch Association estimated that the number of people working in oil palm plantations in Indonesia in 2016 exceeded 10 million. Of these, 70 per cent were employed as casual labourers, with the majority of casual workers being women. (5) Women work in 15 out of the 16 oil palm plantations work types, ranging from land clearing to harvest.

Labourers' wives: Forced to work without wages

Women workers in oil palm plantations are often overlooked, whereas their presence strongly influences the production process. **Women are not regarded as company labourers, so they do not even get the rights they deserve.**

Plantation companies largely set too high targets for workers harvesting fruit bunches, so harvesters can only achieve them with the help of family members, often the workers' wives. This family support has no formal engagement with the company. **The women supporting their husbands are forced to work without being paid, since it is very difficult for their husbands to achieve the very high harvest targets imposed on them. If the targets are not reached, wage reduction penalties are enforced.** Therefore, the "best" option is to have family members, typically a worker's wife, working with them. Wives mostly pick up the fallen fruit, clean the hurdle, smoothen the midrib and move fresh fruit bunches to the shelter. **They work without adequate safety and health equipment.**

Some plantation companies even establish policies requiring harvesters' family members to provide such free work. If a harvester arrives alone, the worker is considered absent or the foreman will bring in a helper whose wage must be paid by the harvester himself.

At Company LS in North Sumatra, harvesting labours that do not bring their wives to the workplace are considered absent. According to one harvester in this company, "Every labourer that comes to work will be told to bring the helper. If one does not bring the helper, then go home". The Company SLM on Central Kalimantan, has set a working target of 180 fruit bunches per day for harvesters. **It is impossible for one person to achieve this target on a daily basis over a period of time.** A record of 100 bunches is the target of the husband's work, while the rest is the wife's target. Harvest labourers in this plantation are required to bring their wives to the site. If not, the plantation assistant or foreman will bring in someone who helps the harvesting worker. His wage has to be paid by the harvester himself.

Considering that one harvesting worker covers 2 to 3 hectares of the company plantations, one can imagine how many women work without wage in oil palm plantations in Indonesia. When women are not working to help their husbands, they work as casual labourers without an official working agreement. Casual labourers' wages are much lower than those of permanent workers, and often do not include social or health benefits. This model of working relations poses a problem in the context of workers' protection, not only in terms of wage, but also in terms of job security, health, and other basic rights.

Women labourers: Being permanent casual labours

One aspect to describe the informalization of the working relations in oil palm plantations in Indonesia is the casual labourers. There are three types of casual labour on palm oil plantations: First, permanent engagement, with an annual contract, where the system and workload of casual labourers are the same as for permanent labourers, but the number of working days per month is limited to below 20 days. Second, semi-permanent engagement, with a contract for specific work at an established rate. In this form of employment, job certainty depends on the presence or absence of "work" with working hours, wages, and targets determined by the plantation companies. Third, outsourcing both officially and unofficially. The majority of workers in this status are women.

Casual labourers in oil palm plantations, which have no job security, are massive. These are usually related to fertilization and chemical spraying work, which is mostly done by women. **Women casual labourers receive lower wages, work without adequate safety and health protection, must provide their own work tools and do not get menstruation leave. They remain as casual labourers for years**, because there is no possibility to switch to another job or to return to their place of origin, not least because the working conditions do not allow to save enough money for this.

Women labourers: Working with toxins without proper protection

Beyond the informalization of working relations, **the protection of occupational safety and health of women labourers is minimal**. In palm oil plantations, women always have more dangerous duties than men because they are employed for working with chemicals, such as fertilizers, and spraying the pesticides. Companies do not provide protective tools or safety trainings and women carry out these activities without access to regular medical check-ups.

"I have been working here for 12 years, my work is diverse, sometimes [I am] told to fertilize, jack palm, now I am detecting mould. [At the] time of cultivation, my work target is three hectares; I ever spent 25 sacks [of fertilizers] a day. I moved to the mould detection section because **my lung was perforated by poison**. I do not know why, maybe from the poison of the fertilizer. Indeed, while working with it, I was given a mask, clothes, gloves, but I kept on being exposed to fertilizers day after day. The company never checks our health", said Nur (38), a women labourer on an oil palm plantation in Central Kalimantan.

The spraying of chemicals is done manually. The worker carries a cap (a spraying device) weighing 20 kilograms and is responsible for spraying a specified area. The average sprayer is required to spend 6 to 10 caps each day. Companies do not provide sufficient personal protective equipment.

Gramoxone, Glyphosate, Rhodamine and Roundup are some of the chemicals used in the spraying process. Companies do not provide information on the potential impacts and dangers of the chemicals used, nor do they provide training on how to reduce the risk of exposure when spraying the chemicals and how to reduce health hazards. As a result, women working as sprayers are vulnerable to work accidents. They frequently experience occupational diseases such as respiratory problems, burning of their hands, dizziness, blurred eyes and even blindness. (6)

The Indonesian government needs to organize the labour system placing the workers as living subjects. The government as regulator of the industry needs to develop appropriate working principles and evaluation to ensure that the palm oil industry fulfils the labour rights, especially for women. **Palm oil plantation companies have to understand the human rights implications they impose on workers** and must obey the national and international labour laws. Moreover, consumers and importing countries should also ensure their rejection of palm oil produced in exploitative working conditions.

- (1) <http://www.kemenperin.go.id/artikel/1480/Indonesia-Fokus-Produksi-CPO-40-Juta-Ton>
- (2) <http://www.mediaindonesia.com/news/read/57550/produksi-cpo-nasional-sasar-target-60-juta-ton-per-tahun/2016-07-22>
- (3) <http://www.tribunnews.com/bisnis/2016/11/24/ekspor-kelapa-sawit-sumbang-devisa-rp-250-triliun>
- (4) <http://industri.bisnis.com/read/20141015/99/265233/kadin-indonesia-industri-sawit-serap-21-juta-tenaga-kerja>
- (5) Sawit Watch, 2016
- (6) In 2015, Perkumpulan Sawit Watch conducted research on the working conditions of women labourers in two oil palm plantations in Central Kalimantan. Sawit Watch found two women workers with a respiratory disease and three others exposed to Gramoxone and Glyphosate fluid, which affected two with dim eyes and the other one was blind.