
Indonesia: Violence against Women Workers in Oil Palm Plantations

[\(Available in Bahasa\)](#)

Exploitative working conditions in the oil palm plantations' industry in Indonesia are persistent and the main victims are mostly women. Although this situation is often overlooked, the production process of the world's largest producer of palm oil is strongly influenced by its existence.

The recurrent story of Indonesia's "success" as the world's largest producer of palm oil is in reality not followed by the similar success story for women workers in the oil palm plantation industry.

Exploitative working conditions in this industry are persistent and the main victims are mostly women. This situation is often overlooked; yet, **the production process of palm oil is strongly influenced by their existence.** Women handle 15 out of the 16 types of work that take place in oil palm plantations, included harvesting. (1)

Oil palm plantations companies hire permanent and temporary workers (casual workers, contract workers and day laborers, known as *kernet*). The maintenance sector, which includes spraying, fertilizing and cleaning work, is not usually seen as core activities, so workers in this sector are mostly with non-permanent working status. Most of these workers are women and they work under precarious working conditions. (2)

Women work in the plantations' maintenance sector for many years and are never granted permanent status. They face increased health risks since they are in direct contact with the chemical substances that are used in the plantations every day. Their rights for menstruation leave, maternity leave, routine checkups, and proper toilets and lactation facilities are never provided by the companies. Generally, the employment relationship is not documented properly in a written agreement. Information related to wages and working hours are delivered verbally by the foreman. **Women workers in oil palm plantations often face gender injustice in the form of marginalization, discrimination, violence and harassment.** (3)

Pregnant Women: Non-stop Working for the Company's Profits

Indonesian NGO Sawit watch found out in early 2019 that **five women workers with one to three months of pregnancy experienced a miscarriage in one oil palm plantation in center Kalimantan, mostly caused by their heavy workload.** *"Pregnant workers are kept in jobs such as weeding, fertilizing, spraying and collecting loose palm fruits. Those are hard work. The husband of one of the pregnant women worker asked the company management if they could give his wife a rest period or minor jobs, but the management did not approved it",* said one worker. The plantation's labor union also demanded that pregnant women should not work or be given minor desk jobs, but the company management responded that everything is already arranged at the Kuala Lumpur Central Office in Malaysia.

Menstruation leave is also complicated even though, according to Indonesian labor regulations, all sectors and companies should give this right to their women employees. But there is no guarantee for

women to get this right. *“A company doctor said to a woman worker who wanted to process her leave: Are you serious that you want to take a menstruation leave? Don’t you have shame?”*, voiced a woman worker.

Women workers with their status as casual or contract workers have usually **no proper reproductive health**. They are employed to harvest fruit bunches. The target depends on the working plot, known as *Ancak*. If the *Ancak* is in a swamp, the target is 1,25 hectares but if it is inland, the target is 1,5 hectares. Usually, companies do not provide specific protection equipment to work in a swamp *Ancak*, known as *Ancak Rawa*. According to a casual worker, an *Ancak Rawa* will bring water up to an adult’s waist, and they are not provided with special clothes. ***“We just work, from morning to evening. Half of our body, from the ankles to waist, remains under marsh water. There are no special clothes provided by the company. If we request to have it, they will ban us, we will not be hired anymore”***, said a woman worker.

Women’s Health at the Service of Oil Palm Companies

It is never easy for women working in oil palm plantations to access health services provided by the companies due to complicated bureaucracy. If they want to request a sick leave, the management seems to complicate the process. In several cases, **women who already have recommendations for a sick leave by the company clinic keep working due to management decision**.

In PT TN East Kalimantan, the company, which has 12,437 hectares, provides one clinic for the whole estate. Based on workers’ information, the procedure to obtain health service is too bureaucratic and the availability of medicines at the clinic is also limited. *“One medicine is used for all the illness”*, said one of them.

In another oil palm plantation in North Sumatra, casual women workers are not facilitated with health insurances. If they suffer an illness, the company will not take care of their condition. They do not have the right to paid-leave. If they do not come to work, they will not earn wages. It is different with permanent-workers, since their leave will still be paid at the end of the month. *“If we don’t work, we will not earn any wage. If we get sick, we still come to work. Moreover, we can not go to the company clinic because we are only casual workers”*, said one woman in North Sumatra’s oil palm plantation.

Casual Working Status: Company Reasons for Irresponsibility

“We work from Monday to Thursday with a wage of Rp. 106.000 per day [around US 7.50 dollars]. Our maximum number of working days is of only 16 days per month. We clean weeding, collect loose palm fruits, collect empty palm bunches”, said one daily casual worker in North Kalimantan.

“Casual workers sometimes help to fertilize. We have to spend two bags of fertilizer per day (each bag contains 50 kilo). This should be spent on the same day. It is up to you when you go home, but the bags should be finished first’, as one casual worker told Sawit watch.

The PT Agro Kati Lama (PT AKL) company, which is part of the Belgian agribusiness group SIPEF, operates oil palm plantations in South Sumatra. This company employs more than 1.200 casual women workers through 6 contract companies (third parties). Women work in the maintenance division with an average working period of only 8 days per month. They mostly earn their **wages directly from the foremen, without clear pay slips. The amount of their salary is only written in unofficial bills, without any stamp or the name of the payer**. Women who were hired via a third party are obliged to sign a letter stating that they will not sue for health insurance, religious holiday

allowances and recovery costs caused by work accidents.

According to the women, since they joined PT AKL, they never received any working or protection equipment, they had to arrange something independently. They have also never been informed about the health impacts related to their work with sprayers and fertilizers. They often ask the company when it could provide them with adequate equipment, but there has been no answer at all. Lately, PT AKL has provided some incomplete stuff and only for some of the workers.

Moreover, the company is not responsible for working accidents. The two women who suffered an accident in 2017, have not yet received any compensation from PT AKL. They turned the responsibility over to the subcontractor.

The regulations that govern employment within monoculture plantations in Indonesia are not so clear to mandate labor protection, especially for women. **The government is even now exercising direct violence against women through many of its policies: industrial plantations expansion, flexible employment, and the absence of women workers' protection and rights fulfillment in the palm oil sector.**

Although it is true that the government of Indonesia, the world's largest producer and consumer of crude palm oil, has issued a policy to recognize and respect labor rights, this policy is only applied in written agreement. Wilmar, for instance, issued a Corrective action plan and children protection policy to guarantee the fulfillment of labor rights, Golden Agri-Resources, through its subsidiary company SINARMAS Tbk, is one of the signatories of the UN Global Compact (UNGC). At the consumer level, Colgate-Palmolive, Kellogg, Nestlé, Unilever and Wilmar claim to be working to improve the working conditions throughout the palm oil supply chain in Indonesia. Field facts however show that **thousands of workers, especially women, working in the oil palm plantations industry are employed with serious precarious conditions, facing discrimination and in a hazardous working environment.**

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Sawit watch, Indonesia, <http://sawitwatch.or.id/>

(1) [Sawit watch investigation](#)

(2) Guy Standing, "[The Precariat](#)", 2011

The New Dangerous Class states that Precariat refers to the absence of guaranteed permanent employment, the absence of protection from arbitrary dismissal, the absence of guaranteed protection from work accidents or illness caused by work, unavailability of safety and health information, lack of opportunity to gain more skills and knowledge through internships, trainings for the sake of increasing competencies, minimum wages and absence of social security. Precariat have also no guarantee over the rights as citizens, including allying to an association.

Some forms of precarious works involve all the forms of undesirable work, including low-paid wage work without any allowances (health, pension fund, bonuses, etc.), involuntary overtime work, working in hazardous conditions as well as in informal sector.

(3) See WRM Bulletin article, March 2018, [Indonesia: Exploitation of women and violation of their rights in oil palm plantations](#), Zidane, Sawit watch

