
A Dangerous Place for Women. Stories of Indigenous Women Working in Oil Palm Plantations in Papua

Oil palm plantations are one of the most unsafe spaces for women, not only because of their vulnerable working status packed with injustices and precarities, but also because of the potential for sexual violence and harassment that lurks them in and around the plantation fields.

From ten meters away, I saw a women worker who was carrying a bucket in her right hand and a sickle in her left hand, standing still. We stared at each other steadily for a few moments. She then turned her body, as if she was dodging us. Robertus, one of the local residents who accompanied me while I was conducting a field research on the multiple impacts of oil palm plantations in the Anggai Village, shouted out to her, *'Mama Maria, this is me Robertus'*. She then looked back while narrowing her eyes *'Oh is that you, Robertus?'* It turned out that she had avoided us, because she thought I was a company officer who was conducting a field checking, and she felt afraid.

Mama MY then invited us to enter her work block, which was a stretch of palm tree seedlings that range from one to two years old. Women workers in the company PT. Merauke Rayon Jaya are generally employed in the nursery division. The nursery is a plot in which the young oil palms develop, when the oil palms are big enough, they are planted out in the palm grove. The main duty of these women workers are to take care of them by watering, fertilizing, and protecting them against insects and diseases. Almost no men are assigned to this section, they are mostly placed in the land clearing, traction (production of oil palm trees and repair of transportation) and logging. Most likely, the general assumption that women are good at caring is the reason for this placement.

During my visits, we met other women workers apart from Mama Maria. One of them is Mama PM. She is an Awyu Tribe Indigenous Woman and has been working in the MJR's nursery since 2014.

PT. Megakarya Jaya Raya (MJR) is a subsidiary of the Malaysia-based Menara Group, with a concession area of 39,920 hectares of forests. MJR has been operating in the Kampung Anggai area, Jair District, Boven Digoel Regency, Papua, since 2013. They have already cleared 10% of the total concession area, or about 3,000 hectares, and the deforestation is still ongoing until today. This company was mentioned in a cross-border investigation of the journalist groups Gecko Project, Mongabay, Tempo and Malaysiakini, as part of a mega plantation expansion agenda, known as Tanah Merah oil palm project. This investigation reveals the dirty methods employed by those who control the fate of the forests in Indonesia — through their money, power and political positions. (1)

Mama PM's working hours are from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon. When I asked her about her strongest motivation to stay at this work, she replied, *'Mama will stop working one day, only when my son graduates from his college'*. Her son has just entered his third semester majoring in agriculture at a local college and Mama PM is deeply determined to bring her son to have a degree in Agriculture. *'I may not go to school, but children don't'*. She does not want her son experiencing the same fate as her; uneducated and working as a wage labourer for the oil palm company. She hopes education can change her son's life, though there is a price to pay.

Mama PM would do all her domestic duties at home before six in the morning. Sometimes, she would manage to prepare lunch for herself, and if not, she would remain hungry until she returns home. To arrive at the plantation, she needs to walk; the company does not provide transportation to pick up the workers. It would only take her 15 to 20 minutes to reach the plantation by motorcycle. However, by foot, the mostly clay route – which turns into a mud route when it rains – takes about an hour. Every day, she spends at least two hours walking to and from the location.

While being in the nursery, I noticed that only some of the women workers were wearing rubber boots – the rest were barefoot, and almost none were wearing protective gear such as masks or even gloves. This is certainly worrying, as workers in the nursery division always deal with hazardous chemicals. Every day they must carry out fertilization activities with urea, NPK, Anderson, and others. Especially when it rains, there is a risk that their eyes or skin are getting exposed to the chemicals, causing irritation and itching. Can you imagine that they use their bare hands?

During the early planting activities of the company, workers still received some work tools by the company, but lately these are no longer provided to them. The disposable yellow gloves that are supposed to be used for fertilization activities should be changed every day, but there is no initiative from the company's field staff to replace them. *'We are the one who have to ask them first'*, said a woman.

Next to a wooden-made structure that serves as a resting place for the workers, there is a runnel which is usually used for washing hands and cleaning work tools. The runnel however was not very hygienic, and also possibly contaminated with chemical fertilizers. This might also gradually affect the health and safety of women workers.

Before starting to work in the oil palm plantation, Mama PM fulfilled her daily needs by selling vegetables and gathering Sagoo – a Papuan Indigenous staple food. *'We were free to work as we want, no boss, no rules, but the income we got were uncertain'*. For her, working in the plantations allowed a monthly wage – something she did not get when relying on harvesting and gathering activities. But, to what extent is this true?

As a casual and temporary palm oil worker, Mama PM receives different wages depending on the number of days she worked in each month. Moreover, Rina, the administrative officer of the PT MJR nursery who is responsible to distribute the wages, is at the same time the owner of a small grocery stall with basic daily needs such as rice, sugar, coffee, tea, instant noodles and cigarettes. Each month, Rina cuts the wages according to the amount owed by the workers to her shop. If Mama PM works for a full month (25 days), then she will take home approximately two million rupiah (almost 140 dollars), from which she would still be deducted the monthly debt at Rina's shop. Her monthly debt usually goes from 600 thousand to one million rupiah (around 42 to 70 dollars).

In addition to this, she still has a debt for the working tools, which need to be bought by workers in monthly instalments that are deducted from their salary. The company might sometimes provide a pair of rubber boots and masks - only if requested by the worker.

Fixed monthly income, as one of the main motives of Mama PM and others to work in oil palm plantations, is more like an illusion than a reality. The bondage of debts as well as the status as a 'casual and temporary worker' sabotages the fixed income. Meanwhile, returning to gathering activities is almost impossible; the forest has turned into plantations.

And this is no exception to the rule. Researchers Julia and White (2) also found a similar motives in

the Hibun Dayak indigenous women who decided to become plantation workers, the need for economic cash competed with the desire to maintain their means of production. Oil palm plantation companies around Indonesia represent many dangers for women workers. YK, an Indigenous Woman of the Moi Tribe, has been working as labourer at a palm oil company in the West Papua Province since 2008. Apart from having very minimal work safety standards, she believes that plantations are also places full of danger. One day, while she was cutting down a tree, she was attacked by a group of bees. She ran as fast as she could to find water, then she hid long enough under the water to deceive the chasing bees. *"I held my breath for a long time, my friend shouted out to me, told me to keep hiding because the bees haven't left yet. After a while, I came out of the water, got fainted, and woke up in the hospital"*. She had fever for days after the incident. *"No one from the company visited me in the hospital. No one"* she said.

RK, another woman worker from the same plantation as YK, tells a similar story. She started working in 2014 as a casual worker for spraying an area of ??two hectares using chemical components such as Vienna, Gallon and Sloar. She had to spray approximately eight lanes with 30-32 trees each, thus the total trees to be sprayed daily was around 240 trees. In 2019, she decided to quit her job after working for five years spraying fertilizer.

Her main reason was the asthma she suffered since January 2019. The doctor's diagnosis at that time was that the asthma was due to stomach acid. Besides that, the asthma was also allegedly caused by the excess of spraying chemical fertilizers. RK had to be hospitalized for two weeks. She and her husband paid the bill themselves, because the company insurance did not apply to the clinics around the village. There had been no collaboration between the company and the clinic. She had to spend almost 1.4 million rupiah (almost 100 dollars) for the medical treatments. While being hospitalized, no company officer took care or even visited her. This neglect and indifference encouraged her to no longer work on the plantation.

No place for women

Another potential and very real danger that specifically lurks women workers in the oil palm plantations is sexual violence. I met a young woman, MG, an Indigenous Woman from the Yei Tribe who is also a former casual and temporary worker from an oil palm plantation that operates around Bupul and Muting, Merauke regency, Papua Province. She was dismissed by the company for taking her menstrual leave. According to her, the company applied strict rules especially for casual workers, no excuse could be accepted if workers could not be present in the field.

MG, a single mom with two children, has to leave her children at home while doing her activities at the plantation. She realized that it was too risky for his two children, but she had no other choice. She was the only life support in this small family. Once a barrack guard from the plantation field verbally abused her when MG refused to respond to his sexually objectifying behaviour. When she found relatives to stay with her children, she stayed to sleep in the company barracks to avoid the travel, but this was not too frequent. MG was afraid when she had to sleep in the barracks alone. The perpetrator was often drunk and forced the door to enter her room. This unpleasant experience really traumatized her.

Oil palm plantations are one of the most unsafe spaces for women, not only because of their vulnerable working status –mostly as casual workers – but also because of the potential for sexual violence that lurks them in and around the plantation fields.

On top of this, it is important to highlight that the inheritance of customary land, which generally

follows male lineage in Papua, causes the exclusion of Indigenous Women from their right to own the land. While women are still given the right to manage and use the land as a source of subsistence fulfilment, this becomes even more problematic when customary land is commoditized.

Palm oil companies arrive to the villages offering promises of prosperity and progress with the condition of “*give me your land*”. In the process of acquiring customary land for transforming it into monoculture land, women are rarely involved and their opinions are unheard. After experiencing marginalization and exclusion from the very beginning of the process of transferring land rights, Indigenous Women in Papua lose access to their forests and livelihoods due to the deforestation and clearing up of land. They, in the end, do not have much choice but getting thrown into the oil palm plantations’ precariates with dangerous working conditions and treatment.

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- (1) [The secret deal to destroy paradise](#), 2018
- (2) Julia & Ben White. (2012) Gendered experiences of dispossession: oil palm expansion in a Dayak Hibun community in West Kalimantan, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39:3-4, 995-1016, DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2012.676544