

## WOMEN AND PALM OIL PLANTATIONS IN INDONESIA

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### Abstract

Indonesia is the world's largest palm oil producer. Oil palm plantations and their processing contribute a large foreign exchange contribution to Indonesia. So important is this sector that it is often dubbed as green gold. But behind the aggressive development of oil palm plantations in Indonesia, there is another side that deserves attention, namely the fate of vulnerable women. The research conducted is qualitative looking at the phenomenon of women in oil palm cultivation by collecting data through literature studies from various sources, namely journals, books, and research that have been published before. The results of the study also found that the condition of women workers in oil palm plantations is far from prosperous. The majority of women workers are casual day laborers without a clear employment contract and rights, so they can easily be dismissed. In addition, women and children often have to help their husbands and fathers who are palm oil laborers meet unrealistic targets to avoid punishment or pay cuts. Considering this, it is important for the Government of Indonesia to issue a special protection policy for oil palm plantation workers to protect and ensure the rights of workers are guaranteed. The study's findings have implications for government policies, such as developing special policies to protect informal sector workers, particularly women, as well as strict laws to protect women and children in the plantation sector. When compared to the Sustainable Development Goals of Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Decent Work (SDG 8), the findings of this study had the opposite influence.

**Keywords:** Government Policy, Labor, Oil Palm, Plantations, Women.

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has been named as the country with the largest palm oil area in the world. According to data from the Ministry of Agriculture in accordance with the "Decree of the Minister of Agriculture Number 833/KPTS/SR.020/M/12/2019", the area of oil palm in Indonesia reaches 16.38 million hectares. However, according to Sawit Watch, oil palm permits have been issued more than 22.3 million hectares spread across 28 provinces and the majority of which are 90% in Kalimantan and Sumatra. (Sawit Watch, 2020)

For Indonesia, palm oil is an important industry that is one of the largest foreign exchange contributions from the non-oil and gas sector. Even palm oil is dubbed as green gold. India, China and the Netherlands are the destination countries for Indonesian palm oil exports. In 2019 Indonesia's palm oil exports reached 29,574,900 tons. However, in 2020 and 2021 it fell to 27 million. Although in terms of amount decreased, in value terms from US\$ 15.6 million in 2019 increased to US\$ 18.4 in 2020 and US\$ 28.6 in 2021. (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022)



**Figure 1. Indonesian Palm Oil Exports 2017-2021**

Source: Processed from data from the Central Statistics Agency, 2022

Indonesia's palm oil exports provide income for Indonesia, related to this decline in palm oil exports, but in 2021 although there was a decrease in palm oil exports, it was inversely proportional to the total price of *Free On Board* goods from Indonesian palm oil as shown in data processed from the Central Bureau of Statistics 2022.



**Figure 2. The Value of Free On Board Indonesian Palm Oil Export 2017-2021**  
Source: processed from data from the Central Bureau of Statistics 2022

However, the development of oil palm has also resulted in conflict. This can be seen from Sawit Watch's records that there are approximately 1,061 cases related to palm oil in Indonesia. The conflict was dominated by tenure conflicts by 51% or 550 cases. In addition, data from Sawit Watch also shows that the majority of conflicts involve local communities and indigenous peoples (Sawit Watch, 2020).

The palm oil industry has changed the social, cultural, and economic fabric at the community level. Global demand for palm oil affects all corners of Indonesia, even remote parts are not spared from the reach of oil palm. This is seen by the view of Ecological Politics put forward by Roberts trying to link between economic structure and power relations which then encourage environmental changes to remote corners of the world and ultimately have relationships that are interconnected with one another. This also shows how global pressures and demand for palm oil contribute to the palm oil industry in Indonesia, resulting in changes in palm oil conditions throughout the country. (2020)

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research method used is a qualitative research method whose research is inductive and has the aim of understanding phenomena that occur in society. Data collection is carried out through literature studies from various sources, namely journals, books, and research that have been published before. The library material obtained is then reviewed and in depth to produce an analysis of the phenomena that occur.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The process of oil palm plantation expansion has a major impact on massive landscape changes, but not only that these changes also have an impact on economic and social changes. Since the beginning, the surrounding community has been affected by the presence of oil palm, but the most affected are vulnerable groups, especially women, who are often excluded in this process. Palm oil is considered a male crop and in the process women and young people are excluded from the decision-making process regarding the entry of oil palm into their areas, this has also been found in the East Kalimantan region (Elmhirst et al., 2017).

Given the global context and increasing pressure on land, as Daley points out in *Commercial Pressure on Land*, women are more likely to be affected differently than men because they are more likely to be negatively affected because they are part of a vulnerable group whose vulnerability is even four times four. First, because of the systemic constraints and discrimination faced by women related to access to ownership and control over land, including the level of legal protection of their land rights. Second, vulnerability resulting from systemic discrimination in socio-cultural and political relations; their role in decision-making is often not considered. Third, vulnerability is related to poverty or the economy where their income is relatively lower than men's. Fourth, it relates to physical vulnerability to gender-based and sexual violence against women. (Daley, 2011)

Women have a position as a weak group in relation to unequal power relations. According to the view of ecofeminism "Ecofeminism (Rocheleau et al., 1996:3) *places the close relationship between women and nature based on a shared history of oppression by patriarchal institutions and dominant Western culture, as well as a positive identification by women with nature. Some ecofeminists attribute this relationship to intrinsic biological attributes (essentialist positions), while others see women/nature affinities as social constructs to be embraced and fostered.*"

According to ecofeminism, women are oppressed by the dominant patriarchal power. Now women are on the edge of power as marginalized people. The process of oil palm entry that changes the landscape and socio-economic aspects has an impact on the surrounding community, but women's groups are not included in the consideration and determination of opinions.

This paper tries to examine the environmental, social, and women's changes that occur due to large-scale oil palm plantations and their impacts on women. The main concern in this paper is the impact, especially for women in the flow of oil palm plantations. This paper is divided into three parts, namely first, women who become casual workers in oil palm plantations, second women who without pay help their husbands in oil palm plantations to achieve company targets, and third gender-based violence experienced by women workers in oil palm plantations.

### **Freelance Women Day Laborers in Palm Oil Plantations**

Massive environmental changes that have an impact on the economy, especially for women who have lost their production base, change their positions and roles that were previously food producers to low-wage laborers. Those who were farmers then lost their arable land making them forced to sell their labor to companies. This condition makes them forced to become laborers in oil palm plantations. Whereas so

far oil palm plantations are considered as job creators, even though those who work in oil palm are those whose livelihoods are lost. (Nugroho, 2017)

People have no other choice but to become laborers in low-wage oil palm plantations because they do not have the educational qualifications required by the company. According to the Palm Oil Workers Coalition, the status of workers in oil palm plantations (2018) is divided into four categories. First, the category of Permanent Workers or known as the Main Work Conditions (SKU). Second, workers with the status of a Certain Time Work Agreement (PKWT) or contract workers who in the work agreement include the length of the work agreement, and third is Freelance Daily Labor (BHL), and fourth is Kernet in oil palm plantations Kernet is considered as the default person of palm oil workers, they are wives and children who come to help their husbands or fathers to achieve the targets set by the company

Freelance Daily Laborers (BHL) are workers who are employed based on attendance without engagement or work agreement with no health insurance or employment security, even though these freelance daily laborers do the core work, namely work in the maintenance department such as spraying fertilizer and pesticide as well as clearing grass. However, the wages of BHL are much smaller than permanent laborers. These BHLs do not have access to health and employment insurance, and they do not have employment bond documents, making them very vulnerable workers. As also found by in the (Li, 2015) West Kalimantan region about labor duties in oil palm plantations that are differentiated by gender, such as the care part is carried out by women, while for men in the harvester section. Not only that, wage differences also occur based on gender, where women get lower wages because according to the perspective of management, women workers are considered to have no skills and the amount is abundant.

Looking at this condition, it can be seen that the position of women in the context of work relations is very weak. Women become casual day laborers and do not have the opportunity to become permanent laborers (Palm Oil Workers Coalition, 2018). Women workers who become BHL do not have access to formal employment agreements such as contracts with companies, maternity leave rights, menstrual leave rights, and health insurance (Muttaqien et al., 2021).

BHL women who work in this care department also do not get work equipment and safety equipment. They are usually only given the equipment once when they first enter, if it breaks it is not replaced by the company so they have to buy it themselves such as boots, masks, and spray tools. Even though these BHL women get a part of work that is very vulnerable to chemicals that have an impact on health

According to a report compiled by the Palm Oil Labour Network of five companies, working conditions are far from healthy and safe. One of the cases revealed in the report is about a female worker who became a Freelance Daily Worker who had a fertilization target of up to 500 kg per day. This is accompanied by their complaints about how their eyes and hands feel irritated and painful after spraying fertilizer due to lack of work protection equipment. (2020)

Women casual day laborers do not have the potential to become permanent laborers or SKUs even though they have worked for decades and do important work in oil palm plantations. This happens because of the thought that women are not the head of the household and the main money earners in a family. In addition, according to Pradipta (2017), women do not become permanent workers because of the need for menstrual leave and maternity leave.

### **Women as "Kernets" (Women Without Wages Help Husbands in Palm Oil Plantations to Achieve Company Targets)**

Workers who work in the harvesting department get a system of working hours and targets. When their working hours do not reach the target, they must increase their working hours without being paid overtime to meet the target, but if the target has been met and there are still working hours they must continue to work. An investigation conducted by Sawit Watch found it difficult for workers in the harvesting sector to achieve the work targets set by the company, not only being harvesters they had to do other work such as cutting off the frond at the bottom of the palm to make it easier for palm fruit to be cut, smoothing the leaf sheath, cutting palm fruit, quoting berondolan, transporting palm fruit, and arranging palm fruit. (2018)

The work demands on harvesters make it difficult for them to achieve the targets set unilaterally by palm oil companies. One of the cases found by the PRAKARSA Association investigation results in West Kalimantan and Central Sulawesi, workers were given an unrealistic workload compared to the number of workers and physical abilities. Workers who cannot achieve the target will experience wage cuts. In North Sumatra and Central Kalimantan, Amnesty International's investigative report (Muttaqien et al., 2021) (2016) deducts harvesters from one-seventh of their monthly salary if the target is not met.

Therefore, the phenomenon of 'kernet' emerged to reach the target of the harvesters (Palm Oil Workers Coalition, 2018) . Harvesters bring their wives and children to help achieve their targets so as not to receive sanctions or wage deductions (Amnesty International, 2016) .

These 'kernets' help with the work of their spouses or fathers without receiving wages, and they also do not receive work equipment or protective equipment by the company, such as gloves, masks, and boots. Cases like this actually occur in many oil palm plantations, but the foremen seem to not care about it. According to the Palm Oil Labour Network (2020), companies often make the argument that they have never recruited child labor by companies. However, the high workload on workers has indirectly created child labor.

### **Gender-Based Violence Experienced by Women Workers in Palm Oil Plantations.**

The condition of women in oil palm plantations often also gets gender-based violence. An independent investigation by the Associated Press shows that sexual violence is still experienced by women workers in Indonesia and Malaysia. Investigations were conducted in twelve companies for those indicated to be affiliated suppliers of large cosmetics companies. This condition has also been discussed by Sri Hartati in her research in Bengkulu, Sexual harassment is also experienced by oil palm plantation workers in the form of non-verbal actions such as being held and kissed, as well as verbal actions such as dirty speech when joking, being seduced, and even persuaded. (Mason & McDowell, 2020) (2000)

This condition shows how the position of women is very vulnerable and weak because usually this treatment they get from the foreman as their superior so that they are unable to protect themselves because of the position of subordination ( Hartati, 2000) . This, of course, makes them reluctant to report their abuses because they are worried about no longer being employed and losing their source of livelihood. Those who have the courage to report the violence they get do not get the justice they want, the perpetrators of violence continue to carry out their activities as usual.

It was also discussed about (Li, 2015) how women who collect brondolan (palm fruit that falls to the ground) are at risk of sexual harassment and gossip because they are in working conditions all day working with male harvesters.

The findings of this study suggest that the Indonesian government should immediately formulate and implement special policies to protect informal sector workers, particularly women, such as recognition of work relationships, social security, leave rights, and protection against unilateral layoffs.

Women and children's engagement in helping to fulfill unreasonable work targets, frequently under threat of punishment or wage cuts, shows concealed exploitation in the field. Accordingly, the state must strictly enforce regulations protecting women and children in the plantation sector, as well as tighten oversight of work practices that violate human and worker rights.

Aside from that, it has an impact on sustainable development objectives, namely SDG 5, in which women workers stay trapped in a cycle of poverty due to an unjust and unequal working environment. Then, SDG 8 calls for collaboration among the government, businesses, and civil society groups to enhance working conditions, promote social certification in palm oil enterprises, and improve labor governance. We can also see another thing on the corporate side where palm oil plantation companies have a greater social responsibility to ensure fair, safe and humane work practices in their operational environment.

## CONCLUSION

The position of marginalized women in hierarchical structures in decision-making processes as well as their positions that are discriminated against in jobs in oil palm plantations. Women are considered as supplements or additions in the work of breadwinners, making women's position as workers very vulnerable. The position of women workers in this case is often considered trivial and can be replaced easily, so that women's voices and demands are often ignored. In addition, the work of women workers who spread fertilizers and pesticides and treatments is paid less than harvesters, although women also do the core work of plantations. But in reality, women are a group that gets constant pressure in the flow of oil palm plantations. It can be seen that in their daily activities they not only work as palm oil laborers, they also take care of daily households such as washing, cooking, and taking care of children. In addition, they also often help their husbands who are palm oil workers to meet the targets set by the company without being paid. Moreover, with the potential for gender-based violence experienced by women in oil palm plantations.

The things that have been described above previously show how women have a very heavy burden in the flow of oil palm plantations in Indonesia. It is like sinking carried away by the rapid development of oil palm plantations that are not friendly to women. This shows the heavy pressure experienced by women as a vulnerable group in the flow of oil palm plantations. Especially with the increasing demand for palm oil globally, of course, it is increasingly tempting for Indonesia to encourage the development of palm oil in Indonesia, but we need to realize and then follow up to empower the position of women in oil palm plantations by fulfilling their rights.

Empowering the position of women as labor workers in oil palm plantations and in general labor workers in Indonesian oil palm plantations needs to be started with policy guarantees that specialize in protecting the rights of oil palm plantation workers. Without the guarantee of this policy, it will be difficult to be able to fulfill and

protect the rights of workers in oil palm plantations. So it is important for the Government of Indonesia to immediately issue a policy of protection for oil palm plantation workers, considering how important this sector is to the government and its contribution to Indonesian government revenue.

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