Behind Every Bunch of Fresh Palm Fruit



Across an oil-palm plantation, its neat rows standing like ranks of Dutch colonial troops, women workers can be seen scattering ‘food’ for the trees so that they remain fertile, grow tall and strong, and yield fresh fruit bunches, known in Indonesia as TBS.

Their gentle hands move as if dancing, scattering fertiliser to the left and right. Yet behind those seemingly graceful movements lies a heavy burden: they must spread 600 kilograms of fertiliser in a single working day, for a daily wage of only around 130,000 rupiah.

They keep going to put food on the table, to feed their children properly, buy their school supplies and pay for their education. These are the thoughts that stay with them as they work.

Another morning

She is awake before dawn has fully broken. She packs a modest meal, makes sure the children have breakfast, then walks towards the plantation. Her gloves are wearing thin. A sack of fertiliser waits to be hoisted onto her back.

That day, the target is no longer 600 kilograms. The foreman delivers news that sounds like a blessing: more land to cover, more fertiliser to spread, and a target raised to one tonne. In return, they say, there will be an extra bonus.

She simply nods. Not because she is sure it will be enough, but because saying no is not an easy option. There are instalments to pay, school fees to meet, and household needs that

take no days off.

A body paid too little

One tonne of fertiliser is more than a number. It means lifting, carrying, opening sacks, pouring and scattering, dozens of times. It means measuring her steps not in distance, but in the oil palms she must pass, one by one.

Her back is growing accustomed to pain. Hands that were once soft are now rough from sacks, fertiliser and the weather. Her feet know mud, roots and a journey that never quite ends.

In the office, that number may be no more than a production achievement. At home, it means rice on the table, decent school uniforms, the books her children need, and the hope that their future will not have to repeat their mother's.

What goes unseen

The greatest danger is the pain no one sees. Backache is treated as normal. Exhaustion is seen as part of the job. Coughing, dizziness or skin irritation are often dismissed because 'it will go away'.

Yet spreading fertiliser puts women workers in direct contact with fertilisers and chemicals, while personal protective equipment and routine health checks are often inadequate. Women on oil-palm plantations also often work as casual daily labourers, with low wages, insecure employment and limited social protection.

No one measures how many years her body can endure. No one asks what happens when her back can no longer support a sack. When that day comes, she may simply be described as no longer productive.

The deceptive bonus

Bonuses are often used to justify raising targets. They look like a reward, but can become a trap: workers are forced to work longer and harder for a small amount of extra money.

What increases, then, is not only the amount of fertiliser spread. Working hours, the risk of injury and exhaustion increase too, along with a debt incurred by the body that the worker's own future must repay.

When pain becomes 'normal'

Over time, the ache is no longer called pain. It becomes part of the morning, part of the walk to the plantation, part of the night before sleep.

A cough is blamed on the weather. Itching is blamed on the heat. Dizziness is blamed on too little sleep. Yet women who spread fertiliser and spray crops face the risk of exposure to

agrochemicals, while protective equipment, washing facilities and regular health checks are often inadequate.

When pain becomes 'normal', the company need not take responsibility. When exhaustion becomes 'natural', the state feels no need to intervene.

The evening after one tonne

That evening, she returns with a heaviness in her step.

The fertiliser sack may be empty, but the burden is not over. It clings to her back, creeps towards her waist, then settles in a spine that is beginning to refuse to be forgotten. She sits in the doorway, holding her breath, as though afraid that even the smallest complaint will make the world demand more of her tomorrow morning.

Traces of fertiliser remain on her hands, despite repeated washing. The sharp smell seems intent on reminding her: today, your body was used for the plantation, not for yourself.

She looks at her palms. Once soft. Now rough, dry and covered in small wounds she has never told anyone about. Hands that once carried her children now more often carry fertiliser sacks. Hands that once packed school lunches now scatter hope among the rows of oil palms.

The children are asleep

Inside the house, her children are sleeping.

One hugs a pillow tightly. Another is still in a school uniform, too tired to have taken it off. On the table lie books, a pencil worn short, and school shoes with thinning soles.

She approaches slowly. She covers the child whose blanket has slipped aside. She touches their hair with fingertips that still feel heavy.

'Mum has to work again tomorrow,' she whispers, almost inaudibly.

Not because she wants praise. Nor because she wants pity. She only wants her children to wake up, eat breakfast and leave for school without feeling that anything is missing.

For her, one tonne of fertiliser is not a number. It is school fees. It is rice in the kitchen. It is medicine when a child falls ill. It is the hardest way of saying, 'Mum loves you.'

A prayer carried to the plantation

Every morning, before leaving, she offers a simple prayer.

She prays that the path to the plantation will not be too slippery. That the sacks will not be too heavy. That the weather will not be too hot. That her hands will be strong. That her children will be healthy. That the kitchen will not be empty. That tonight, she will still be able to come

home.

The prayer is never long. Just a few seconds, spoken as she adjusts her belt and lifts a sack of fertiliser onto her back.

Then she walks.

Towards a plantation that knows no fatigue. Towards a target that is never enough. Towards a bonus that always feels out of reach. Towards a future for her children that she must buy with sweat, pain and time that will never return.

Do not let them disappear into the numbers

It is not enough for companies simply to raise targets and promise bonuses. They must guarantee realistic workloads, decent daily wages, adequate personal protective equipment, regular health checks, and health and employment-related social protection that actually reaches workers.

The state must not stand by while women workers bear a burden that wears their bodies down, little by little. Labour inspection in the oil-palm sector must ensure that occupational safety, wages and employment relationships are no longer areas of recurring failure.

Oil palms will keep growing. Fruit will keep being harvested. Reports will keep recording tonnage, bonuses and targets met.

But do not let this woman disappear into the numbers. Do not let her back pain become merely a story told at night. Do not let her itching hands be dismissed as normal. Do not let her children receive only what is left of a mother whose body is continually drained by work.

Because behind every fresh fruit bunch is a mother enduring pain. Behind every sack of fertiliser is hope carried on a bent back. Behind every rupiah of daily wages is a child waiting at home, hoping their mother returns safely.

She is not a machine. She is not a target figure. She is a woman, a mother and a worker who has the right to a decent life—not merely to work until her body can no longer go on.