Blood on the Tips of Oil Palm Leaves

A Chronicle of Green Expansion, When the World Needed Oil

A quarter of a century ago, when Europe lay beneath the snows of war and petroleum prices crept upwards like an insatiable snake, the fate of thousands of women across this archipelago was mortgaged to a thorny tree. Those were years when superpowers competed for influence, tanker convoys in the Strait of Malacca served as the global economy's arteries, and palm oil—the liquid gold of the tropics—became the favoured substitute for soybean and other vegetable oils whose supplies had been disrupted by political storms in distant lands.

Indonesia, then only a few decades into independence from colonial rule, opened its doors wide to investors. Forests in Sumatra and Kalimantan were cleared relentlessly, replaced by orderly green expanses of oil palms, like imperial troops lined up awaiting orders. Large companies with foreign capital and connections to the centres of power received land concessions the size of Javanese duchies.

They benefited from geopolitical turmoil. War in Ukraine disrupted sunflower oil supplies, drought in Latin America damaged soybean harvests, and global demand for cooking oil, biofuels and oleochemicals never subsided. On paper, palm oil was the saviour. Foreign exchange poured into state coffers. Officials spoke of thousands of trillions of rupiah. The commodity contributed 3.5% of Gross Domestic Product. As many as nine million people were said to work in the sector, directly or indirectly.

Yet, as the ancient Latin saying has it, **"Quidquid luce videt, tenebris absconditur"**: what is seen in the light is also concealed in darkness.

A Bleak Picture beneath Broad Leaves

The archives of the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM), alongside investigations conducted by civil-society organisations in 2024 and 2025, reveal a bleak picture of life for plantation workers. During 2024, Komnas HAM received 44 complaints concerning business entities. Of these, 6 involved employment and 21 involved agrarian conflicts.

In West Kalimantan, investigations into six oil palm plantation companies uncovered distressing findings. Of approximately a thousand workers assessed, around 800 had experienced serious violations of their rights. Unclear employment contracts, no health coverage, minimal occupational safety and health standards, and no social security were everyday realities.

One union official there spoke bitterly: "Of five companies, three agreed to improve working conditions after being warned. But two companies—one in Ketapang Regency and one in Sanggau Regency—continued to ignore the issue, despite being summoned and warned by the government."

This is where we begin to see those most exposed: women. They are the backbone of the fresh fruit bunches delivered to mills each day.

Women's Lives at Dusk

Oil palm plantations cover 3.2 million hectares in West Kalimantan, around 22% of the province. More than 500,000 people depend on them for their livelihoods. Most are women employed as casual daily workers (BHL). *This casual status is a subtle trap.* They work like permanent employees, arriving in the morning and leaving in the evening. They apply between 600 kg and 1,200 kg of fertiliser, spray chemicals and, in some cases, harvest fruit weighing tens of kilograms. On paper, however, they are not permanent workers. Statutory rights such as religious holiday allowances, old-age benefits, menstrual leave and maternity leave become no more than bedtime stories.

Yublina, Chair of the West Kalimantan Federation of Oil Palm Plantation Workers' Unions, has repeatedly voiced this distress:

> "Some women on oil palm plantations are still denied menstrual and maternity leave because they are classified as casual daily workers, even after more than five years of service. Wages can also be unequal. The work is just as demanding as men's, but the pay packets differ. Men receive allowances while women do not, particularly women working as assistants."

There is also the double burden. After returning from the plantation, they must still care for children, husbands and households. Their bodies scarcely ever truly rest. With healthcare limited—and often unavailable to women—the burdens continue to mount. More distressing still is the story of Fatimah, a 67-year-old woman in Ketapang Regency. She worked at PT Aditya Agroindo for 13 years but remained a casual daily worker. Her body is frail and her steps slow, yet she still walks through the plantation every day.

When illness led her to ask to stop working, the company ignored her. She never received BPJS health coverage. Whenever she had a cough or fever, she had to pay for treatment herself. The home she shared with her husband was a simple tin-roofed hut. In later life, when her days should have been filled with grandchildren's kisses and prayer, Fatimah still carried the weight of survival because the state and the company neglected their constitutional obligations.

"Fatimah's case is only one of many involving women on oil palm plantations. This is not only about employment status. It is about humanity."

Poison Creeping into the Blood

A silent threat also enters their bodies. On plantations, women work with chemicals, pesticides, herbicides and synthetic fertilisers. Without adequate personal protective equipment, toxins enter through their skin and are inhaled into their lungs. Research shows

that long-term exposure can cause skin irritation, reproductive disorders, infertility and even cancer.

These are real experiences on the ground. Yet when workers report occupational diseases, companies often argue that the illness was pre-existing or refuse responsibility because the worker is only a casual daily employee.

Where Is the State?

We must therefore ask: where is the oversight? Where are the officials who receive reports and hold awareness sessions every year?

On paper, the government has not remained entirely idle. Minister of Agriculture Regulation No. 33 of 2025 on Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) Certification binds companies to 36 labour indicators, including gender equality and a prohibition on child labour. A Plantation Office programme also allocates revenue-sharing funds to social security. In practice, however, a chasm separates rules from reality. A district labour-office head may say that no violence against women has been reported in their area.

But no reports does not mean no incidents. Women workers are often afraid to speak out: afraid of dismissal, threats, repression and even criminalisation. The analysis is simple but bitter: this neglect persists because women workers, especially casual daily workers, have no bargaining power. They are almost invisible on company balance sheets.

Companies exploit regulatory loopholes. Someone may spend 13 years as a casual daily worker without becoming permanent, without health coverage or a pension. Yet this clearly contradicts the principles of justice and legal certainty mandated by the 1945 Constitution and Labour Law No. 13 of 2003.

Companies reap enormous profits. Even during the pandemic, palm oil production contributed around Rp250 trillion to state coffers, and in 2024 it was estimated to contribute around Rp88 trillion once again. Behind those extraordinary figures are women returning home with hands itching from fertiliser, aching backs from heavy loads, and hearts hurt by a sick child whose treatment they cannot afford.

"When a sector is recognised as strategic but its workers remain unprotected, that is an irony. Oil palm plantation workers are still treated like slaves," a labour activist said.

Voices That Must Not Be Silenced

Beneath Kalimantan's burning sun, among rows of oil palms that never stop bearing fruit, these women keep working. They are mothers, wives and the mainstay of their families. They are part of the vast machine driving the national economy. Yet their bodies are the last frontier, repeatedly violated by toxic chemicals, unequal pay, insecure employment and a state whose eyes remain half-closed.

> "We are not only oil palm plantation workers. We are mothers, cultivators,

> guardians of land, language and life, and guardians of generations to come."

If we are to tell a story of national progress, we must therefore include a chapter about their struggle: the women at the tips of oil palm leaves, whose blood and sweat flow without recognition, yet sustain us all.

Teraju Indonesia Advocacy and Campaign Team

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