9

Buruh Siluman: The Making and Maintaining of Cheap and Disciplined Labour on Oil Palm Plantations in Indonesia

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9.1 Introduction

The oil palm sector is one of the front-runners in the Indonesian agricultural sector. Since 2007, Indonesia has been the largest producer of crude palm oil (CPO) worldwide. The sector is a major source of foreign reserves for the country as well as a main instrument of poverty alleviation and rural economic development (Rist et al. 2010; Zen et al. 2005). While palm oil remains important for Indonesia's food and household goods industries, since 2006, the country has considered utilising palm oil outputs in the transition towards a bioeconomy. The implementation of a bioeconomy in Indonesia is mainly aimed at achieving food security as well as advancing the development of bioenergy (Sudaryanto 2015). The palm oil sector is considered a strategic sector in achieving both of these objectives.

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While some studies on palm oil development in the country emphasise its positive impacts, many others shed light on the adverse impact it has on the environment and on people's livelihoods (Richter 2009; Colchester et al. 2006). The working conditions of plantation workers are central to these debates on livelihoods. Reports have documented decent work deficits on Indonesian plantations, which are associated with cheap and disciplined labour as an important feature of the plantation labour regime. This chapter takes a closer look at female labour on plantations.

Although there has been increasing interest in taking gender issues into account in discussions about oil palm plantations in Indonesia, two important things are missing in this debate. Firstly, recent debates have largely concentrated on the gendered impacts of plantation work (Julia and White 2012; Li 2015; Elmhirst et al. 2017). Although this is justifiable, as scholars have just begun to take up gender as an analytical framework in assessing plantation works, we should go further and use a feminist lens to trace and understand the production of the social subject, namely plantation labour. Secondly, some studies of oil palm plantations in Indonesia discuss the labour regimes that have been established on plantations, and this includes the gender regime, but they do not sufficiently employ historical analyses of the production of such labour regimes, especially those concerning female plantation workers (Li 2015, 2017). This chapter addresses this research gap. Contributing to the discussions on female labour on oil palm plantations in Indonesia, it seeks to provide a historical analysis of the construction of female labour on plantations, which, until now, has remained underexplored. Drawing on insights from feminist theories, coloniality/modernity scholarship, as well as literature on racial capitalism, this chapter argues that female labour on plantations, often called *buruh siluman*, plays a central role in and maintaining labour relations that rely on cheap and disciplined labour. The next section is structured as follows: I start by drafting a theoretical framework with which to examine the changing role of female labour on Indonesian palm oil plantations. I then discuss the historical development of the plantation labour regime and focus on the (re-)production of women as a specific plantation labour subject. Afterwards, I examine the current working conditions of women on oil palm plantations in Riau, a province that hosts the largest oil palm plantations

in Indonesia. I conclude by discussing the role played by women in the making and maintaining of cheap and disciplined labour on oil palm plantations.

9.2 Moving Beyond Working Conditions: Theoretical Remarks

Working conditions emphasise the labour regime installed in a workplace. As a concept, “labour regime” describes a terrain of struggles between capital and labour that are mediated by the state (Cumbers et al. 2008, p. 373; Selwyn 2011). Among others, discussions on labour regimes enable us to scrutinise how a plantation labour subject is constructed (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010, p. 13) in order to shed light on reciprocities between labour regime and labour agency (Rodriguez and Mearns 2012). This chapter focuses on the macro-labour control regime, which concerns with capitalist relations of production (Pattenden 2016).

Whereas orthodox Marxist analyses treat “primitive accumulation” as the foundation of the rise in capitalist wage-labour relations, this process is ongoing, especially in the Global South (Fairbairn et al. 2014). Although the rise in wage labour, which is a feature of advanced capitalist society, also occurs in the Global South, a large number of forms of non-wage or informal labour remain. Building on Anibal Quijano’s (2000) “coloniality of power”, Manuela Boatcă (2013) introduces the term “coloniality of labour” in order to describe co-existing modes of labour control. Furthermore, expanding Marx’s analysis, Cedric Robinson (1983) argues that capitalism did not break from the feudal order, but rather evolved from it to produce a “racial capitalism” that depends on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide.

Feminist critique of Marx’s analysis on primitive accumulation points at the absence of female subjugation as an important aspect in this process (Federici 2014). Maria-Rosa Dalla Costa (1971) argues that women assigned the role of housewives are important in producing the commodity of labour power. The nuclear family, thus, is a social factory where this commodity is produced and women as housewives are disciplined. The female subjugation process is also shown by Maria

Mies' (1994) work on the process of "housewifisation" as an important element in the history of capitalist development. Drawing on world-systems theory, Mies connects the processes in the West and those in the colonies to form a systematic and historical process that involves the exploitation of women, nature, and the colonies and that shapes the sexual division of labour both in the West and in the colonies. This is in line with Maria Lugones' (2007) concept of the "coloniality of gender", in which colonisation serves as a gendered act and thus intensifies the gender hierarchies in colonised societies. Mies' work also informs much of feminist subsistence theories (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 2000), which show that: (1) the production of large marginalised masses in the periphery was integral to the capitalist mode of production; (2) this development was based on the economic position of the housewife both in the centres and in the peripheries in the capitalist world-economy.

To sum up, these theoretical insights provide lenses with which to understand the making and maintaining of the plantation labour subject. First, the (re-)production of social differences and sameness are important in capitalist development. Second, primitive accumulation is an ongoing process that is not only manifested in the persistent occurrence of land dispossession, but also in the enduring process of female subjugation. As I will show, the persistence of land dispossession and the process of female subjugation are interwoven processes that constitute female labour on oil palm plantations. In the following, I provide a historical overview of labour relations on oil palm plantations in order to illustrate the construction of women plantation workers, *buruh siluman*, and how this plantation subject is important in sustaining a cheap and disciplined labour regime.

9.3 Women "Coolies", *Nyai*, and the (Re-)Production of a Plantation Labour Subject

Oil palm plantations in Indonesia started in Sumatra in 1911 (Mangabarani 2009), particularly in Deli. Before oil palm, tobacco, coffee, and rubber were cultivated in Deli. The creation of the Deli plantation

society involved the recruitment of “coolies” from Java, Penang, and other places such as China because the local inhabitants were unwilling to work on plantations as wage workers (Bremán 1989). “Coolie” refers to an indentured service that aims to provide cheap and well-controlled labour. Its use followed the dismantling of slavery, and the establishment of a modern racial governmentality of “free” yet racialised and coerced labour (Lowe 2015, p. 24). This contradiction is evident in the practice of indenture labour on plantations in Deli, as its use followed the dismantling of the cultivation system imposed by the Dutch colonial authorities as well as the shift towards an open-door policy.

While women “coolies” were a minority on Sumatran plantations at the time and accounted for a merely 8% of workers in the beginning of the twentieth century, their numbers gradually increased as oil palm plantations expanded and had risen to one quarter of the total workforce by 1930 (Bremán 1989, p. 95). These women were mainly young Javanese as they were considered docile. Women “coolies” worked on plantations as well as in the social reproduction sphere, such as prostitution. The increasing prevalence of Javanese women “coolies” was the result of various factors. The gradual phasing out of the concubinage¹ between European men and native, mainly Javanese, women in the Dutch East Indies, the name for Indonesia at the time, contributed to an increase in prostitution among native women (Ming 1983, as cited in Ingleson 2013, p. 215). As mentioned above, the dismantling of the cultivation system, a system that resulted in the declining welfare of Javanese populations (van Nederveen Meerkerk 2017, p. 40), paved the way for the shift from indentured labour to free labour in Java. Women who could not find work on plantations or factories entered into prostitution. The open-door policies embraced by the Dutch colonial authorities attracted foreign, mainly European, investors. They opened up plantations, such as the Deli plantations, as well as sugar factories in sparsely populated areas of Java or the Outer Islands. As we can see from the case of plantations in Deli, male workers had to be sourced from

¹During the early Dutch colonisation of the Dutch East Indies, only Dutch men were allowed to settle in the colony. This paved the way for the use of native, mainly Javanese, women as sex slaves. It was only when European women arrived in the colony in large numbers in the late nineteenth century that concubinage was gradually phased out.

elsewhere, mainly from densely populated areas of Java. This then led to a rise in prostitution in the newly opened plantations and factories.

According to Brehm (1989), planters had become more favourable to Javanese women “coolies” as new coffee plantations in Serdang shifted towards piece rate. The piece rate enabled planters to accumulate more profits as they discovered that women “coolies” were the cheapest labour on plantations. In general, the gradual increase in number of women “coolies” was in line with the low wage strategy, which gained importance on plantations during the twentieth century (p. 109).

Apart from women “coolies”, the social reproduction sphere on plantations was also the responsibility of *nyai*, which refers to native (mainly Javanese) women who were either concubines or housekeepers. The involvement of native women as concubines might not be straightforward and could be disguised under the colonial euphemism of “housekeeper”, especially after concubinage had been phased out. While the presence of *nyai* was more prevalent in Dutch colonial settlements in Java, their existence saw increasing numbers in the Outer Islands where the Dutch found their footings. On plantations in Deli, marriage was prohibited for incoming European employees, as planters believed that employees with families would not be able to support themselves properly (Stoler 2010, p. 29). Hence, employing *nyai* was seen as a convenient arrangement.

In her elaboration of the “housewifisation” process, Maria Mies (1994) highlights the disruption of subsistence in the colonies. This is evident in the case of Java, where many women “coolies” came from. One of the logics behind the Dutch cultivation system in Java was to teach “lazy” indigenous peasants, who practised subsistence, the virtue of industriousness (van Nederveen Meerkerk 2017, p. 39). The cultivation system disrupted the subsistence system of Javanese peasants, which subsequently had an impact on labour relations (ibid., p. 42). The system, which catered to commercial plantations, contributed to the loss of women’s prerogatives under subsistence agriculture.² Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (2017) connects the changes in labour relations under the

²The typical egalitarian rice-growing Javanese societies viewed rice-growing activities on dry lands and garden agriculture as a women’s prerogative, while both women and men cultivated rice on wetland (van Nederveen Meerkerk 2017, p. 41). The cultivation system forced the male

cultivation system to those in the metropole. The colonial gains made it possible to raise male wages in the Netherlands, which paved the way for the formation of typical bourgeois family ideals, and married women in the workforce became increasingly rare. This process, which Mies argues led to the emergence of Dutch housewives (1994, p. 96), was linked to the disruption of families and homes among estate workers in the Dutch colonies as subsistence agriculture was suppressed. The process that created women “coolies” and *nyai* also involves what Maria Lugones (2007) calls the “coloniality of gender” as it was brought about during colonial encounters. This process was fully realised when plantation workers started to be recruited as families, as discussed in the following.

The increasing criticism of the Coolie Ordinance,³ the labour regime, and the situation of “coolies” on plantations in Sumatra put pressure on European planters. Formal indenture was phased out after 1910, yet the labour relations that followed were only slightly less coercive (Li 2017). The prevailing characteristic labour regime was gradually replaced by the increasing employment of Javanese married workers, which was known as the “family formation” approach (Stoler 2010, p. 31). This led to changes in the plantation labour regime. “Coolie” barracks were replaced by dwellings for individual families or by labour compounds with subsistence plots, which resembled village life. Such plots, however, were insufficient to meet subsistence needs. As Stoler puts it, “nominal land allotments represented both a rationale for depressed wages and a relatively cheap means of providing the semblance of village life” (2011, p. 40). Furthermore, Stoler argues that the semblance of village life, particularly village life in Java, was an important labour control, especially during the shift from indentured labour to free labour on the East Sumatra plantations (ibid., p. 38). The “family formation” approach marks the shift from coercive labour control to the kind that relies on

peasants out of subsistence agriculture, leaving women and children mostly to undertake this activity.

³The Coolie Ordinance came into place in 1888. It regulated employment practices on the plantations during the colonial period; it is deemed more coercive as the regulation was perceived as legitimising the exploitation that occurred in the earlier period (Said 1977, p. 69).

disciplinary power. Stephanie Barral (2014) describes the latter as paternalistic labour relations that exercise strict control over workers' working and private lives. Thereby the "family formation" approach obscures depressed wages. By allowing workers to bring their families into plantations, planters obtained additional labourers. These additional labourers consisted mainly of workers' wives. In other words, the "family formation" approach changed the ways in which women were involved in plantation labour. Recalling the feminist critique of the nuclear family as a site where women are disciplined, and the perception of Javanese women as docile, women were (re-)produced as disciplined plantation labour.

Despite the different labour regimes, women continue to shoulder the burden of productive and reproductive work. Their double role on plantations become the *raison d'être* for employing women as casual and unpaid labourers, who are subsequently considered cheap labour on plantations. This is evident in the following case study of plantations in Riau, where I discuss the current role of women workers and their working conditions.

9.4 Working Conditions of Female Labour on Oil Palm Plantations in Riau

Riau is an Indonesian province with the largest oil palm plantations in the country. In 2010, oil palm plantations covered 2 million hectares in the province and produced almost 30% of Indonesia's CPO output (Directorate General of Estate Crops 2011, p. 9). As part of my doctoral thesis (Sinaga 2020), I conducted a field research in three company-operated plantations as well as smallholder-owned plantations in Riau in April 2012. One of the companies is a parastatal company, while the rest are private plantation companies. The latter are subsidiaries of two foreign-owned groups considered "big" players in the oil palm sector in Indonesia and Malaysia. Both of these groups operate a substantial number of oil palm plantations in Indonesia. I interviewed 21 workers aged between their mid-20s and mid-50s, twelve of whom were women.

Fig. 9.1 Employment structure on large-scale plantations (Source adapted from Siagian et al. 2011, p. 5)

It is difficult to find exact figures for the number of workers employed on oil palm plantations in Indonesia given the rampant practices of employing casual labour.⁴ As Fig. 9.1 shows, the employment structure on large-scale oil palm plantations can generally be depicted as a pyramid with the staff at the top and plantation workers on the lower ranks (Siagian et al. 2011, p. 5). Plantation workers are divided into “SKU” (*Syarat Kerja Umum*: general work requirement)⁵ workers, non-permanent workers and unpaid labourers, with the latter two at the bottom of the pyramid. There are four types of non-permanent workers (Assalam and Parsaoran 2018). The first type refers to contract workers,

⁴Estimates suggest that around 21 million people are employed both directly and indirectly by Indonesia’s oil palm plantations (Indonesia Chamber of Commerce and Industry, cited in Mongabay 2019). Sawit Watch estimates that 70% of the workers on plantations are day labourers (Koalisi Buruh Sawit Indonesia 2018).

⁵Although workers in this category are also considered permanent workers, they do not always have contracts and/or receive payslips.

who work for a period of two years in accordance with the national labour law. Contract employment applies to harvesting activities. The second type is daily casual workers, who are mainly responsible for maintenance activities. The third type is daily outsourced workers, which refers to assistants employed to collect loose fruit. The fourth type is subcontracted transport workers.

The structure of employment and classification of workers discussed above are confirmed on the plantations operated by private and parastatal companies visited in Riau.

As it is the case on most oil palm plantations in Indonesia, the women on plantations that I visited work as either paid or unpaid workers. There is a gendered division of labour on oil palm plantations: harvesting is male-dominated as it is considered physically demanding, while maintenance is female-dominated. As mentioned above, most of the maintenance activities are carried out by casual workers. Women are only hired for maintenance work under SKU contracts on one estate managed by a private plantation company. The overseers, however, are (fore)men. The companies claim that female labourers lack leadership capabilities. On the other estate managed by a parastatal company, female workers undertaking maintenance activities are the wives of the harvesters responsible in that area. Another type of work carried out by women workers on plantations is daycare work, assuming daycare facilities exist on the plantations. As unpaid workers,⁶ women assist their harvester husbands to collect loose fruit. On plantations owned by smallholders, women workers predominantly serve as unpaid workers helping their husbands.

With regard to wages, SKU workers receive a basic salary and premium payment. Each SKU worker has a daily target to meet. If workers exceed their target, they receive a bonus—an additional payment alongside their basic salary. Loose fruit collected are calculated separately. This system triggers the employment of assistants or unpaid workers. Harvesters clearly desire to get the highest possible premium payment. As such, they employ assistants when daily targets increase, especially

⁶Bearing in mind the difficulty of estimating the number of casual labourers on Indonesian oil palm plantations, it is even more difficult to calculate the exact number of unpaid women workers on plantations.

during peak seasons. While assistants can be their relatives or friends, harvesters usually bring their wives and/or children. One SKU harvester stated that when his wife does not help him, his daily yield drops by as much as 50% (male plantation worker, Interview no. 1). This shows the importance of women working as unpaid workers on the plantations.

Women in paid work are mainly casual workers, which means that they do not receive regular income. On one of the plantations operated by a private company, women casual workers not only lack a regular income, but also struggle to gain enough working days in a month in order to earn a living wage. Furthermore, on the other plantation operated by a private company, women who work in maintenance are employed as SKU workers but are still paid less than the minimum wage.⁷ Besides facing the issues related to minimum wage,⁸ women SKU workers are also disproportionately affected by the fact that the indicators of decent living needs used to set minimum wage levels are gender-biased and thus do not take into account women's decent living needs. As unpaid workers, the income of female workers is tied to the income of their husbands. As mentioned above, these workers actually play a significant role in increasing their husbands' income. This confirms the argument of feminist theories discussed earlier on how female subjugation is important in capitalist relations of production.

On the issue of working hours, workers commonly start working at 7 am. The wives of harvesters arrive at the same time as their husbands, or a bit later. In some cases, they finish working at the same time as their husbands (usually 5 pm on company-operated plantations and 1 pm on plantations owned by smallholders) or earlier. The payment system (e.g. basic salary and premium) encourages harvesters to work overtime. Without helpers or assistants, harvesters would have to work longer on the plantations to meet their targets. The working hours of female maintenance workers are shorter than those of harvesters. Depending on the

⁷On estate Y, SKU workers receive Rp 1,133,500 + *premi*. The stipulated minimum wage amounts to Rp 1,389,450.

⁸The indicators of decent living needs are drawn up by the central government under Permenakertrans No. 17/2005. The regulation lists 46 items serving as the basis for a decent living needs survey at the regional level. Workers have demanded that the government revise the regulation to include 122 items.

kind of maintenance activities they undertake and on the company's regulations, they may be provided with a break. Although the length of working hours seems quite modest, in the sense that there is no excessive overtime (as might be the case with factory workers), it is worth remembering that plantation work is physically demanding.

Furthermore, women workers carry a double burden: they work on the plantations as well as at home.⁹ At home, they are responsible for reproductive activities. As such, every day, working women have to wake up earlier and go to bed later than their husbands. Most of the women workers I spoke to only cook once a day because they do not have the time or energy to do so more often.

9.5 Cheap and Disciplined Labour as a Key Feature of Labour Relations on Oil Palm Plantations

The discussion about the situation of female workers on plantations in Riau reveal at least four key features female workers are facing today. First, women working as paid casual workers are illustrative of the precarious situation that these women face in terms of irregular income. This situation is exacerbated when women work for too few days in a month to sustain a living wage. Second, while some women workers are employed as permanent workers, their wages are below the stipulated minimum wage. Also, the gender-biased decent living indicators used to determine minimum wage disproportionately affect women. Third, women working as unpaid labourers face income dependency despite the significant contribution they make to the income of their spouses. Fourth, women bear the brunt of oil palm plantation developments, which is demonstrated by the double burden carried by women workers.

I argue that tracing the historical construction of plantation labour subject is important in order to understand the above findings. Tania M. Li (2011, p. 288) argues that cheap, abundant, and disciplined labour

⁹A study by Surambo et al. (2011) also shows the double burden of work carried by women workers on oil palm plantations in Central Sulawesi province.

acts as a significant backbone for profit-making on oil palm plantations in Indonesia, whether or not they use contract farming. Citing Ann Stoler's (2011) important work on Indonesia's plantations in Sumatra, Li argues that labour reserves achieved through transmigration programmes found their inception during the colonial period when planters and colonial authorities were debating whether to recruit family or individual labour. I propose to extend the historical analysis to the labour relations on plantations in Sumatra during the colonial period. As discussed earlier, the shift in labour relations on oil palm plantations marks the change from coercive to disciplinary power. Nonetheless, cheap and disciplined labour remains an essential feature of labour relations on plantations. As I argue here, women play a vital role in the making and maintaining of cheap and disciplined labour.

As discussed earlier, ongoing primitive accumulation involves interwoven processes of land dispossession and female subjugation. In the case of Indonesian oil palm plantations, this is demonstrated by the process of land dispossession, which simultaneously restructures gender relations, and which more or less resembles the shift in gender relations that followed the implementation of the cultivation system discussed earlier. Since this chapter does not focus on land dispossession, I draw on recent studies of this issue (Julia and White 2012, p. 1002; Li 2015; Elmhirst et al. 2016) in order to provide a better picture of these interwoven processes. These studies show how this process expropriates lands from indigenous and local people as well as the resulting shift in gender relations, mirroring the "family formation" approach. The latter refers to a gendered land tenure in which the husband is considered the household's head, providing men greater access to income as well as in decisions to sell or mortgage. This practice is essentially used in the various contract farming schemes.¹⁰ As land dispossession also makes subsistence farming obsolete (Federici 2019, p. 77), some of the local or indigenous people may be able to keep a part of their subsistence plots, while the rest is converted to oil palm plantations. Indeed, as it is argued, the remaining importance of subsistence principles among indigenous people is an

¹⁰Under the New Order period, during which the initial oil palm development in the post-independence era was pursued, the state assigned gendered roles to women as wives and mothers, known as "state ibuism" (Suryakusuma 2011).

outcome of plantation companies' efforts to recruit labour from elsewhere (Elmhirst et al. 2016). Companies are able to sustain a cheap and disciplined labour force through depressed wages and ethnic diversification. Women are mainly responsible for these remaining subsistence plots. Nonetheless, women are not only responsible for reproduction, but also for work on the oil palm plantation plots (Julia and White 2012, p. 1003) in order to sustain a minimum living wage. This demonstrates the arguments of feminist subsistence thinkers on the importance of non-wage labour for capitalist accumulation. The consequence of this process is that female labour becomes intensified. The gender dimensions of oil palm development, therefore, simultaneously reverse gender relations from more or less equal to unequal relations with women carrying more of the burden.

Findings from my case study on oil palm plantations in Riau are in line with other studies of working conditions facing women workers on oil palm plantations in Indonesia (Assalam and Parsaoran 2018; Sawit Watch 2017; Li 2015). The poor working conditions facing women on oil palm plantations are generally associated with their presence on plantations as invisible labour, so-called *buruh siluman*. Some argue that these poor working conditions are the result of oil palm developments, while others contend that these situations actually show how cheap and disciplined labour is intrinsic to oil palm developments (Li 2011). As I have shown in this chapter, tracing the historical construction of women as plantation labour subject sheds light on processes through which women as cheap and disciplined labour are (re-)produced on the plantations. Rather than viewing the decent work deficit on plantations as a negative impact of oil palm development, this chapter argues that labour relations that rely on cheap and disciplined labour constitute the capitalist development of the oil palm plantation sector in Indonesia. As the palm oil sector is increasingly regarded as a strategic sector in the country's transition towards bioeconomy, the social inequality in terms of the exploitation of women as cheap and disciplined labour contextualises and is being reproduced in the development of the sector.

List of Interviews quoted

Interview no.	Gender and job position	Business type	Date and place
Interview no. 1	Male plantation worker	Parastatal estate	07/04/2012, Riau

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