

Hidden Faces, Unheard Voices: Women Oil Palm Plantation Workers in the Philippines and Indonesia

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Oil Palm Plantations in Southeast Asia

The inception of modern industrial plantations was precipitated by colonialism in Southeast Asia. Huge tracts of land concessions were awarded to colonial powers for opening up plantations by local rulers or sultans. Ann Stoler (1983) described these colonial spaces as “microcosms of the colonial capitalist effort, at once compact and enormous ateliers in which racial, class, ethnic and gender hierarchies were manipulated, contested and transformed” (2: 1983)ⁱ. Plantations were specifically constructed spaces where colonial policies came into effect in a way which strongly influenced the lives of labor in these spaces. Workers had been brought in as indentured labor into plantations after the abolition of slavery in 1833. However, conditions for workers hardly differed from those of slaves, as they were exploited through minimal wages compounded by unfair practices and discriminatory laws. Colonial policies were underpinned by capitalist economic motivations, labor were often described as “cheap, socially malleable and politically inarticulate” (1: 1983).

The introduction of oil palm in Indonesia in the Bogor Botanical Gardens in 1848 was an experiment to test the viability of this new crop in Indonesia. There was a severe decline in the production of coffee due to pests and poor soil conditions in colonial plantations in Indonesia and Malaya. At first, rubber and later oil palm were propagated by European planters in order to expand industrial agriculture in the colonies in Southeast Asia.

In 2013, the expansion of oil palm plantations in Indonesia exceeded 11 million hectaresⁱⁱ. While government officials lauded this unmitigated expansion as a positive economic development for Indonesia, serious environmental and human rights implications depicted a different reality. Nevertheless, the Indonesian government has

continued to aggressively woo investors to expand plantations at a phenomenal rate. At present, 60 percentⁱⁱⁱ of oil palm plantations are owned by foreign capital. At the local level, districts and regencies are also keen to attract foreign investors to their areas as these portend development for their constituencies, inclusive of much needed infrastructure and the creation of jobs for the communities.

Currently, the Philippines is the sixth largest producer of oil palm in the world^{iv}. The history of the Philippine oil palm industry began with the establishment of a 280-hectare plantation in Basilan by the Menzi Agricultural Corporation in 1966. The plantation was turned over to farmers organized under the United Workers Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Multipurpose Cooperative when it was covered by the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Programme in 1989. Then in 1967, Kenram Philippines Incorporated converted its existing ramie plantation into a 1100-hectare oil palm plantation with a 20-million ton mill.

On the other hand, non-government organizations in both countries have been virulent in their criticism of the loss of precious forests which have been too eagerly cleared for oil palm profits. Indigenous peoples and local communities have been forced to play the role of vanguards of their precious natural resources. There is a losing battle due to the power and influence wielded by these multi-national companies.

Women workers in the oil palm industry

Women’s participation in this industry has been greatly undervalued by the state and corporations involved. The harsh economic conditions in Indonesia and the Philippines limit the women’s ability to obtain decent work which entails equal wages as men, vital social protection, and social

development as means to eradicate poverty. In addition, limiting cultural beliefs reinforces women's productive and reproductive roles, hence contribute greatly to their oppression. Women workers are expected to perform their roles as wives, mothers, and workers both in the household and workplace. For instance, women workers handle all the household chores as well as provide care for their children and family members with little or no help from their male partners. Women are unable to negotiate household chores with their male partners because they have been socialized to accept these roles as part of their reality as women. Male partners are also socialized to deem household chores as the exclusive domain of their female partners. Although both perform productive work outside the home, women spend a significantly higher amount of time attending to household matters. This leaves them with inadequate leisure time, and much fewer opportunities to improve their economic conditions or to participate in public life.

Women workers occupy the lowest rung of the plantation hierarchy. Most of them are employed as daily wage workers or as it is termed in Indonesia *buruh harian lepas* (BHL) and "loose fruit pickers" in the Philippines. Typically, workers of this category receive remuneration for various tasks performed in a day. Again this is really subject to the practices of the plantation management, where some are very much productivity based and not necessarily on the amount of work produced in a day. The tasks performed by women in this category are as follows:

- Weeding
- Spraying pesticides
- Fertilizing
- Collecting loose fruit
- Maintaining the cleanliness of the tree plate (area surrounding the tree)
- Treatment of pest infected trees

For instance, women in Indonesian plantations start their typical work day at 6:00 a.m. They would attend roll call and receive their assignments for the day. Tasks differ according to the areas

where they are assigned. Tasks also follow the cycle of production. Tasks such as fertilizing, spraying of pesticides, and collecting of loose fruits are physically challenging. Fertilizing involves women working in work gangs (groups) of five people who are assigned to cover an area of up to five hectares consisting of vertical lines called *baris*. There are 70 trees planted per line. The women are expected to scatter about 10 to 12 bags of fertilizer weighing up to 15 - 20 kilograms each. They carry or *gendong* the sacks on their pelvis on one side, scoop up the chemical fertilizers and dispense them around the tree plate. This is done in a semi-bent position to reach the ground with the added weight of the fertilizer bag. Women handling fertilizers are not provided training on how to handle these chemical-based materials. Those interviewed explained that they were provided hand gloves but not plastic overalls to protect their bodies. However, one plantation has begun to implement regulations regarding overalls for women who use fertilizers.

It is rather ironic that the word *gendong* is usually employed to describe the carrying of babies. Women use a thin cotton batik material to support these heavy fertilizer bags on their pelvises. Sweat seeps into their clothing along with the chemical residue of the fertilizer which causes serious health complications. The plantation does not provide medical benefits nor cover industrial accidents for these workers. They work an average of four to five hours per day carrying harmful materials close to their bodies. They also carry very heavy loads: each bag of fertilizer weighs 15 kilograms and they have to use up to 10 to 12 bags per day for five hectares. This amounts to a staggering weight of at least 150 kilograms per day.

Despite being hired by the plantation to perform the tasks on a daily basis for years, the women workers are nonetheless denied permanent employment by the management of the plantation. Out of the three plantations studied involving 47 women workers, only one was permanently employed in Rantau Prapat, Sumatra. Instances of gender-based violence are rampant in hierarchal institutions, especially by higher level superiors

such as assistant managers and supervisors. Several women workers spoke of the harsh treatment they experienced when they were targeted for becoming active in union activities in the plantations. They were also denied employment because of their husbands' involvement in union activities. Wives of labor leaders were constantly harangued by plantation staff during the roll call in the morning. The staff resorted to sexual innuendos which caused the women workers embarrassment.

Locations of Research

Indonesia

I selected the Regency of Labuhan Batu as a suitable site to carry out my fieldwork because of the following factors. Firstly, it is one of the areas consisting of the oldest established plantations in North Sumatra. These plantations were put up during the colonial period and continue to exist to this day. I focused on three plantations which were privately owned by local Indonesian business interests which may or may not have foreign investors. It is difficult to determine this due to lack of transparency on the part of these plantations to disclose such information. That issue is irrelevant for the purpose of this research; however, the fact that it was a privately owned business interest was important.

The plantations were located in the districts of Labuhan BatuInduk and Utara. On average, each plantation exceeds 2,000 hectares and is also actively expanding. Confidentiality has to be maintained at this point due to the sensitive nature of the research, which involved some disclosures by women workers. Their identities must be protected as their revelations may have serious ramifications for them.

Thirty-two respondents selected from three major plantations operating in the area were employed as daily wage workers and mandore (supervisor). The other group consisted of 11 peasant women involved in land contestation with a large national agricultural entity, PT Perkebunan Nusantara III.

These daily wage workers interviewed worked in plantations where labor were being organized by two independent trade unions, SerikatBuruh Perkebunan Indonesia (SBPI) and SerikatBuruh Sejahtera Indonesia–1992 (SBSI-92). Both trade unions were moving actively in the plantations and had established their presence in the plantations since 2008 for SBPI and 2001 for SBSI-92. Due to the fear resulting from intimidation which is still prevalent in plantations, only women who were willing to be interviewed were approached. Prior and informed consent was obtained before interviews and digital photographs were taken of the women. Most interviews were conducted in their homes after their plantation work was completed for the day.

Philippines

Two groups of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries which had taken over the first oil palm plantation established in Mindanao, Kenram Philippines, Inc., namely, Kenram Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Multi-Purpose Corporation (KARBEMPCO) and Mapantig Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Multi-Purpose Cooperative (MAPARBEMPCO), were the focus of my research in the Philippines. These two cooperatives are the most successful people's organizations which have taken over an established plantation and sustained its operations in Mindanao. However, they are quite distinct from each other. KARBEMPCO was organized by previous employees of the plantation, whereas MAPARBEMPCO was organized by villagers who were previously evicted from their hereditary lands by the company. Fifty women interviewed from both cooperatives comprised cooperative committee members, ordinary members, or casual workers known as "loose fruiters". The loose fruiters have the task of collecting loose fruits that drop off the fresh fruit bunches. It is not formal work and most of them are categorized as informal workers.

Research Objectives

Women's involvement as workers in plantations has received very little attention in contemporary

Southeast Asia although even today, they constitute a large portion of the labor within plantations. That I chose to focus my research on them is meant to give voice and visibility to severely marginalized women workers in plantations.

Besides this, mainstream society in Southeast Asia assumes that the plantations sector only employs men. It does not recognize the contribution of women workers in this sector of the economy that contributes to the economic growth of the nations. Women's participation in unions in terms of their activism and organizing thus needs to be recognized and documented.

This study will focus on the following:

- women organizing in plantation unions
- the problems and challenges they face within a male dominated union context
- the issues and concerns championed by the unions. These will be analyzed using a gender lens to see the extent to which women's rights as workers are taken into consideration by the unions.

Methodology

The methodology in itself will be a tool to empower women workers. By using the participatory approach, the project will allow or facilitate the active involvement of women workers in the data collection and analysis. The methodology consists of:

- In-depth interviews with women that reveal their understanding of power structures in the work place and union
- Life history analyses that examine the unique life experiences of women union activists and leaders
- Statistical data analysis of women's union membership compared to women's representation in the union leadership and decision making bodies within the union structure.
- Focus group discussions with women plantation workers to determine the challenges and issues they face.

Social Relations Framework

In the Social Relations Framework developed by Naila Kabear^{vi}, she posits that the household is the space where gender inequalities become entrenched. Women are unable to negotiate household chores and thus end up accepting them unquestioningly due to their social condition. Kabear expands this framework further to analyze and critique policies and programs by looking at the various institutions which directly impact women's lives. These institutions are the state, the market, the community, and the family which were used for the analysis of issues that the women deal with in their lives.

Women's work equals informal work

Women workers are denied equal treatment by plantation management in the three plantations where this research was conducted. They were not recognized as permanent workers and thus denied social security which would have provided them much needed basic protection such as medical benefits, insurances, and perquisites (like rice which was provided to workers apart from wages). According to Barlow, Zen and Gondowarsito (2003), "husbands and wives often operate together"^{vi} as teams and each worker received wages ranging from "RP 400,000 to RP 1,600,000 per month which included wages and perquisites". These findings were derived from a study conducted on oil palm producers in 2002 published by the Malaysia Palm Oil Council. Nevertheless, this was not the case in the district of Labuhan Batu, Sumatra in 2013.

Predominantly, women are denied permanent employment and are categorized as informal workers or *buruh barian lepas*. They perform piecemeal work based on specific productivity- based targets or time-based tasks. They are paid using a different wage scale, one based on daily work or *hari kerja*. This could range from IDR43,800 to IDR44,000 per day depending on the type of work done, which differs from plantation to plantation. Although there is a minimum wage policy for the district of Labuhan Batu determined at IDR1,513,000 per month for the plantation sector, plantations flaunt

this regulation. In addition to this, women workers are also allocated less than 30 days' employment, a common tactic used by the management to deprive workers of full wages. This was also the justification used to deny women workers permanent employment—their working less than 30 days a month. If women challenged this unfair practice, they were intimidated and those who persisted were unfairly sacked.

It is also a practice of one plantation in Indonesia not to hire women such that out of 400 male and female employees, only two women were permanent staff. According to one of the women interviewed, only two women had been promoted and given positions as *mandores* in the twenty years that she had been employed there. These obviously gender biased practices have helped the plantation reap profits at the expense of their women workers. Permanent women employees would be legally entitled to paid maternity leave, menstruation holidays (two days), and adequate medical services. Still, women workers themselves accept this unequal treatment. When asked why they were treated differently from permanent employees, their reply was “because we are only BHL”.

Women's work is considered supplementary to that of the men's because it is not directly related to production. Harvesting of fresh fruit bunches is high-value work because the fresh fruit bunches are the main product of plantations. The organization of work in a plantation is centered on the harvesting and milling of the fruit bunches for the production of crude palm oil. It is highly productivity-based; targets must be met in order to produce the volume to be sent to the milling plants. This is the main source of income for plantations; falling below the targeted volume results in profit loss. Traditionally, harvesting is considered men's work because it requires sheer physical strength to yield and lift fresh fruit bunches. A typical bunch could weigh up to a minimum of 30 kilograms to 50 kilograms. Harvesters are permanent employees who receive higher wages. Women, on the other hand, collect loose fruits which task is secondary to harvesting. Although loose fruits are considered more valuable because they are easier to mill, this task is considered less important because women perform this task.

Women are paid only IDR100–IDR500 per kilogram for loose fruits compared to male harvesters who earn IDR1,500,000 per month. In some plantations, women assist husbands in collecting loose fruits in order to help them achieve their daily target of 1 ton of harvest.

While it is true that this is part of their reproductive role to nurture and support their husbands, it is conveniently co-opted as a means of production by the plantation. In addition to this is, it is also a means to reduce the cost of production because wives are not paid separate wages for collecting loose fruits. Benefits and social security which should legally accompany permanent employment are also denied these women due to the illegal and gender discriminatory practices of the plantation. Unfortunately, it is an accepted practice among workers even though it denies women due recognition for their contribution to an important economic activity that could provide them security and social protection.

Identifying Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs)

According to the Sultan Kudrat Provincial Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), potential ARBs were identified through an extensive process by adhering to the criteria stipulated by law. However, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Programme (CARP) itself was implemented differently for MAPARBEMPCO and KARBEMPCO. Different formulas were used for each area in order to successfully cover the plantation under CARP.

Two groups were identified as Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries of the plantation owned by Kenram Employees Labor Union and land owners, including those who had previously been evicted from Barangay Mapantig. According to Aaron Arumpac the Provincial DAR Officer II, DAR had allowed managers and former officers of Kenram Philippines, Inc. to become beneficiaries despite this being in contradiction to law. The Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law of 1988 clearly stipulates the criteria for beneficiaries under Chapter VII entitled Land Redistribution, Section 22. It states:

The lands covered by the CARP shall be distributed as much as possible to landless residents of the same barangay, or in the absence thereof, landless residents of the same municipality in the following order of priority:

- (a) agricultural lessees and share tenants;
- (b) regular farmworkers;
- (c) seasonal farmworkers;
- (d) other farmworkers;
- (e) actual tillers or occupants of public lands;
- (f) collectives or cooperatives of the above beneficiaries; and
- (g) others directly working on the land.

Arumpac justified that “risk” became one of the keys to Kenram’s (present day KARBEMPCO) success. Their transition from being laborers to being owners was not too difficult because they had all these professional managers “actually managing” during the transition period. The decision of including management level officers as beneficiaries had serious ramifications on the ARB community, however. It advertently caused the creation of a privileged group within the ARB community of Kenram. This group had considerable influence as those belonging to it had been in positions of power for many years prior to the inception of CARP. The social hierarchy which existed prior to CARP’s implementation became deeply entrenched within the newly created ARB community. In actual fact, verily little had changed from being a hierarchy based capitalist owned entity, into a supposedly non-hierarchical workers’ cooperative, power relations remained intact. The system of domination of an elite group of educated, experienced, and powerful men which had always been the status quo was perpetuated and maintained.

Class and gender determined the position of ARBs within this newly consecrated workers cooperative. The structure of the cooperative which was supposed to be non-hierarchical and based on collective decision-making was unable to empower workers who came from the lower strata of the previous organization. Ideally, the main decision making body of the cooperative was the general assembly, which was managed by a board

of directors with the help of a management group (or with the help of management) that was subject to the purview of the general assembly. In the case of KARBEMPCO, the membership of the board was exclusively made up of ex-managers of the previous company who were entirely men. Since 2002, the composition of board of directors has not really changed, with the exception of a single woman member who was also part of the privileged group—she was the company nurse. She has to relinquish her position on the board due the Republic Act 9520 which stipulates that employees are not allowed to be board members. Nevertheless, no other woman has been considered for a position on the board since her. This indicates an implicit operating system that excludes other women who may not come from a similar status as those on the board. It is a “boys’ only club” which further makes it difficult for women to access power at that level.

Deprivation of basic human rights

The context of plantation as being located in an isolated and inaccessible location still holds true today. Despite, going through infrastructure improvements, plantations remain largely undeveloped. This could be due to the practice of plantation companies not to invest in human capital ever since the colonial period. Basic amenities such as clean drinking water and decent housing are severely lacking in the areas surveyed. Drinking water available to workers is supplied by the plantation where it is treated prior to delivery in the workers’ homes twice a week. The supply is considered sufficient regardless of the size of the household but as it is not, workers also collect rain water for their drinking water. They do this through homemade funnels attached to the rooftops. There are shops within the plantations that also sell drinking water at a higher price than the plantation workers could afford. The price of petrol sold in the plantation is likewise significantly higher than it is outside, causing workers to resort to debt. Prices of consumables are likewise higher due to the remote location of the plantations. Health facilities in the plantation are only available to permanent workers and their families. Even so, the quality of services rendered

and of the medicines was deemed paltry by the workers. They often had to go to clinics outside to purchase higher quality medication. In case of emergencies, it was difficult to reach the nearest hospital as this was quite far from the plantation.

Trade Unions' Participation

Women's participation in the trade unions remained limited. They were rarely organized because the trade unions themselves lacked resources to organize the workers who lived in isolated areas. More often than not, one organizer covered the entire regency which made it impossible to organize effectively. In addition to this, some organizers were averse to organizing women whom they considered difficult to organize. It was a personal bias that was prevalent in the organizers whom I interviewed. This was discriminatory and did not benefit women overall. Hence, women's participation was limited to non-decision making roles in the union.

Management policies – divide and rule

I observed antagonism between the communities living within and outside the plantation. The community outside the plantation is made up of people living in adjacent villages. When business interests were set up in the rural areas, they are meant to benefit the communities in these areas. However, this is not the case in the context of plantations, in which its opening is often contested by the communities near it. The competition for fertile farming land is high and villages usually lay claim on the land but lack formal land ownership documentation so that despite having cleared the land first and making it arable for years before the encroachment of business interests to their areas, they are unable to defend their ownership claims legally. A case in point would be Bukit Perjuangan where farmers were able to stake a claim in the areas usurped by PTPN III. They managed to carve out their area through the demarcation of boundaries using identification pillars supplied by the authorities.

When plantations are set up, there is often no consultation with the existing communities in the area. The sharing of resources such as natural and infrastructure becomes contentious. Conflict also arises due to the poor management of these two groups; the business interest is usually more successful because of its financial resources and political clout to pressure authorities in its favor.

When plantations are established in rural areas, expectations for employment are high among local communities. However, due to the conflicts that arise from competition for shared resources and the usurpation of land rights, there is a lot of mistrust on both sides. It is common practice for plantations to hire workers from outside the immediate area because of the reasons stated above. Hence the antagonism between the local community and plantation employed workers grows. It becomes even more complicated when plantations expand illegally to the farming areas of adjacent communities. Then workers become the front line of defense whenever clashes erupt between these two groups.

Again, the plantation also uses the “divide and rule” tactic to keep workers in line. It is not unusual for management to hire villagers nearby as BHL for a period of time. The demand for jobs is high among both workers and villagers; management has a willing pool of labor it can employ. This consolidates the bargaining power of the plantation which can dictate its terms and conditions. For instance, wives of unionists are targeted by *mandores* and assistant managers who deny them jobs if their husbands carry out strikes in the plantations. Then villagers from outside the plantation are brought in to take over the women's jobs. This causes considerable stress within households as well, because wives then pressure their husbands to desist from union activities as it affects household economic conditions. There is also disunity between the two groups which are equally disadvantaged by the unethical practices of the plantation management. Union organizing is affected by disunity as they are unable to see beyond their superficial differences and work

together. In this case, BHL who are predominantly women become political pawns to be intimidated and exploited by plantations. As they are without legal responsibilities, plantations are able to push their agenda of capital accumulation through the exploitation of workers.

Resistance and strength

Spirituality

One of the most telling aspects of women in the Philippines is their constant reference to prayer and God. They believe that their hardship is more bearable due to their constant prayers. Among Christians, church going and prayer meetings are strong practices. Women organize themselves for weekly prayer meetings, which generally involve the family. The women also remember to pray when they face personal tragedies like the loss of loved ones and during times of calamity. All their homes are adorned with Catholic icons and religious paraphernalia. They also receive aid from various churches; transportation to church is an expense that they highly prioritize.

Women in Indonesia, on the other hand, organize for religious purposes, for an event they conduct called *wirit*. The leadership of the *wirit* is also held exclusively by women Muslim members of the community. During the *wirit*, members congregate in a selected home of a member for prayers and discussions on religious matters. They have a committee that prepares snacks and tea for the event. They also have a “kitty” to which they contribute for emergencies and their contributions are recorded in detail. The peasant community in Bukit Perjuangan organized women members through the *wirit*, educating them regarding their rights as pioneers. Strategies and plans for community organizing are developed in these meetings among the women.

Transgressing

In the Philippines Sultan Kudarat is famous for *kalakat* weave (*kalakat ply*). The weave is an inexpensive building material which is mixed

with hollow blocks and used for walls in most houses. It is easily replaced and sells at PHP 120–90 per square meter. These characteristics of the weave may explain why one of the women I interviewed in depth, who was a loose fruit picker, engaged in the act of appropriating palm fronds for her cottage industry that produced this weave.

She had a weaving hut in the periphery of the plantation and collected discarded palm fronds from the plantation, weaving about 10 to 16 pieces per day. This provided her extra income besides her husband’s cooperative dividends and her wages which amounted to PHP1,000 per month. Despite the regulations and penalty imposed by the plantation management, she would procure palm fronds at PHP1 from the security guards to fulfil the supply for her raw material. She justified that her wages were too low to support the schooling expenses of her three children who required around PHP400 a month each for their transportation. They usually hired a tricycle to drop them off in a school eight kilometers away.

Organizing for rights

One respondent from Indonesia was wrongfully terminated by the management of a plantation. She had suffered an industrial accident which resulted in an injury. When she sought compensation from the management of the plantation, she was denied any due to her status as a daily wage worker or *buruh lepas harian*. In fact, she was humiliated and stopped from working by the assistant manager. When she approached the trade union, she faced worse vilification which saw management target her character. In addition to this, management also tried to cut her off basic amenities provided to workers of the plantation. When the assistant manager tried to disrupt the supply of drinking water to her home, her reaction was to confront the management alone and demand that it be reinstated. She also became educated on her rights as a worker through her interactions with the trade union Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia-1992, and lodged an official complaint with the

Department of Labor in Labuhan Batu. Despite the immense pressure exerted by management, she remained steadfast and refused to withdraw her complaint. She is currently awaiting a decision by the Labor Department with regard to her case. It is not uncommon for a daily wage worker to submit to the discriminatory practices of the management of the plantation. This rare case in point illustrates one woman's ability to access justice through the trade union. Most workers are intimidated by management if they are found to be participating in trade union activities. It is especially risky for daily wage workers who are terminated arbitrarily without much justification. This woman worker also challenged patriarchal norms by standing up to a male dominated structure which tried to silence her.

Another similar case of arbitrary dismissal documented involved two women who worked as sprayers in a plantation. They were provided a letter from the management informing them of their dismissal due to a newly imposed age limit for workers on the plantation. They approached SBSI-92 which helped them secure their jobs. They faced a lot of intimidation to give in to the plantation management, which tried to offer them a paltry severance package. However, the Labor Department decided in favor of the women workers. They were reinstated--a moral victory for them who felt completely victimized by the plantation management.

Entrepreneurship

Women in the Philippines have opportunities to set up little stores in order to augment their incomes. For instance, one woman who was trained as a beautician put up a home spa business. She also was an agent for a multi-level marketing company which trades household items, make-up, and women's clothes called Sophie Martin. She is a single mother with four school-going children whom she supports on her own. She could not procure work in the neighboring town as there were not too many spas employing at the time. She thus decided to start a home spa business within the *barangay* or village to sustain her family. Ever

since she started, she has been able to also save and set up a store within her *barangay*. Her older children provide childcare for their younger siblings to enable their mother to carry out her work outside.

Premium on education

It is clear that the women whom I studied were resilient despite facing serious challenges. They were able to invest in certain aspirations which were vital to their survival. Education is seen as an important social capital that they invested in. A large portion of their income was allocated to it. In the Philippines, school fees account for the largest expense in all of the households. Though there were few children from workers' households who obtained college degrees, they nevertheless took great pride in saying that they provided their children with secondary school education. College education is still a luxury in Mindanao because slots in public institutions of education are limited, compared to those private colleges which are plentiful. Some of the more prevalent courses are service-related, such as nursing, education, criminology, computer studies, and business management. One of the women interviewed in the Philippines, a committee member of the cooperative, proudly recalled educating her niece^{viii}. Although she went through immense hardship, she felt her niece's educational achievement was a personal victory. She also talked about how she was denied the opportunity for higher education due to the early demise of her father. She learned to be resilient by observing her mother who managed to raise them well.

Conclusion

Women in the plantations are relegated to the periphery on the basis of their gender. They have been conditioned to accept lesser roles within the community. A few practices have evolved from this inherent injustice to permeate all aspects of their lives.

There are very few organizations in Indonesia and the Philippines which focus on empowerment of these women. Going by the demand for palm oil

at present, the prospect of seeing more women absorbed by this industry appears daunting. Both countries have high rates of unemployment so poverty is a serious problem. The development promised by this industry can be harnessed to benefit women, but it has to be done with policies, regulations, and safeguards that empower women.

Recommendations

Overall, there is very little attention given to women agricultural workers in the informal sector in both countries. Firstly, there needs to be recognition of women's work within a formal structure that ensures their rights and entitlement. There also needs to be better implementation of labor laws in both countries to ensure that women are ensured dignified work which offers them social protection and job security. There needs to be more accountability and transparency regarding employment policies implemented in plantation companies which are predominantly discriminatory to women. Women should also be able to access mechanisms that guarantee them justice and protection from exploitation by capitalist corporations. Both Indonesia and the Philippines have ratified the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as part of their commitment to uphold women's rights. However, women workers in oil palm plantations are undocumented and so isolated geographically that their issues are not highlighted. A lot more focus needs to be directed toward regulating multinational agribusinesses which are able to move capital, control labor, and influence policies in countries which are dependent on foreign direct investment. Despite the existence of international standards such as those set by the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), workers are still exploited by the unfair practices employed by capitalists. It is impossible to monitor and address the violations that take place in such inaccessible, guarded, and private spaces as oil palm plantations.

Trade unions must be strengthened and encouraged to increase women's participation and representation in decision making positions. There needs to be

specific programs that are well funded to strengthen women workers' capacity to take on leadership roles in unions. Unions also need to be a lot more sensitive to the needs of women members and must also create spaces for them to voice their concerns. Women need to be the focus of labor organizing activities which enable their participation, and not merely be granted basic level membership. Women labor organizers need to be developed and empowered to engage with women workers. Cooperatives must take women's participation more seriously. The Cooperative Development Authority of the Philippines ought to develop more targeted programs to train women cooperative members to take on decision making roles. They need to be developed and groomed for leadership positions within their respective cooperatives which have long been the exclusive domain of men. This is with specific reference to the two cooperatives studied; access needs to be created to enable women to participate more meaningfully. This was previously highlighted by a research conducted by Jeanne Illo (1992) of various cooperatives in the Philippines where women were not able to access the board of directors which is the main decision making body of cooperatives^{ix}.

A general lack of awareness at the societal level in largely conservative communities also compounds women's subordination and oppression. There needs to be more concerted effort by religious authorities, local government, and local leaders to commit to gender equality.

NOTES

ⁱStoler, Ann "In the Company's Shadow: Labor Control And Confrontation In Sumatra's Plantation History 1879 – 1979", Ph.D. dissertation, 1983.

ⁱⁱIndonesian Oil Palm Statistics, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱSawit Watch, "Human Rights and Agribusiness: Plural Legal Approaches to Conflict Resolution, Institutional Strengthening and Legal Reform", workshop proceedings, November 28 - December 1 2011, Bali.

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^{iv} Villanueva, Jo. "Oil Palm Expansion in the Philippines" Oil Palm Expansion in South East Asia: Trends and Implications for Local Communities and Indigenous People. Eds. Marcus Colchester and Sophie Chao. Forest Peoples Programme, 2011.

^v Kabeer, Naila (1994) "Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought", London: Verso.

^{vi} Barlow, C., Zen, Z. and Gondowarsito, R. (2003) "The Indonesian Oil Palm Industry" Economic Journal. Vol. 3. No 1. Malaysia Palm Oil Board.

^{vii} A.Arumpac, personal communication, 15 November, 2012.

^{viii} Estela Dolor, personal communication, 28 October, 2012.

^{ix} Illo, Jeanne. "Members But Not Leaders : Finding a Niche for Women in Cooperatives: The NATCCO Enhancement of Women's Involvement in Cooperatives Project", Ateneo de Manila University, 1992.

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