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**The Gendered Dynamics of Indonesia's
Oil Palm Labour Regime**

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The Gendered Dynamics of Indonesia's Oil Palm Labour Regime

ABSTRACT

State oil palm plantations of the New Order were based on a family model, in which women and men were incorporated as workers and farmers through their membership in households. The tendency over the past “neoliberal” decade has been towards casualization and sub-contracting, with the consequence that men and women must compete for work as individuals. Families are relegated to the periphery of the system, making coherent households more difficult to sustain. The contemporary plantation labour regime accentuates the spatial dispersal of family members, as it draws women casual workers from one place, and men contract workers from another in order to maximize “efficiency” and profit. This arrangement emerged at the nexus of ethnic stereotypes and historically constituted labour reserves, combined with the calculative logic adopted by workers themselves as they seek to protect themselves and provide for their families.

Oil palm plantations are massively expanding in Indonesia. They currently occupy around 10 million hectares, and the government plans to double the area to 20 million hectares in the decade ahead. Roughly 40% of the area is planted and managed by smallholders, but the trend is towards an expansion of the large-scale plantation form.¹ Plantations need one worker per 5 hectares, so a plantation of 10,000 hectares has 2,000 workers, recruited from places near and far. This paper uses an ethnographic approach to examine the gendered labour regimes that have emerged on two plantations in Sanggau District, West Kalimantan.² One plantation is state owned. It began planting oil palm in 1980, on the site a former colonial rubber plantation. The other is a private plantation owned by an Indonesian investor. It began operation around 1990 in junction with a state-sponsored transmigration project.

THE STATE OIL PALM PLANTATION PTPN

In the 1980s when it was established, PTPN recruited most of its workers directly from Java. It did not recruit singles, only married couples, and promised them a full set of provisions to support their family life. PTPN hired both husband and wife as full time workers, with the same pay structure and benefits, including pensions. Women’s role as mothers was also supported, as child care was provided. Women and men recruited in the early days appreciate the dignity afforded by their living conditions and their worker status, which they describe as comparable to being members of the civil service. They receive regular wages, and are subject to a bureaucratic regime that is hierarchical but predictable, and offers them far more security than they could find in Java.

¹ For overviews of Indonesia’s oil palm sector and its social impacts in different parts of Indonesia see (Rist, Feintrenie, and Levang 2010; Feintrenie, Chong, and Levang 2010; Obidzinski et al. 2012; McCarthy 2010)

² I am deliberately vague about the exact location of these plantations and disguise individual identities to avoid undue exposure. The research team comprised around 100 students and two faculties from University of Toronto and Gadjah Mada University (UGM) who stayed with worker families for periods of 1-2 months in 20 different sites spread across the two plantations and an attached smallholder scheme. For this paper, in addition to my own field notes and interview transcripts, I have drawn on the fieldnotes and data of my faculty collaborator Dr Pujo Semedi, and three students: Jean-Francois Bissonnette, Nugroho Trisnu Brata and Endang Purwasari. The research was funded by the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council, the University of Toronto, and UGM.

The Javanese workers came through a formal program organized by the Department of Labour. They learned about the opportunity through information sessions. As one woman worker recalled: "Our lurah in Gunung Kidul called us to a meeting and asked if we wanted to go and we said yes, yes, yes. Lots of people wanted to go. In Java we were just getting by (*hidup pas-pasan*); there are too many people and not enough work." Most of the workers came from rural areas, but some were city people from Yogyakarta, including some street thugs who were afraid of being killed by the army that was conducting a "clean-up" campaign known as mysterious shootings (*penambakan misterius* or *petrus*) at the time (1983-5).

The recruits were given the option of travel by boat or plane, and they were given cash for their expenses en route. They had the option of returning to Java after the expiry of their initial 5 year contract, but most of them chose to stay at the plantation until their retirement thirty years later. If they renewed their contracts they were given funds to visit Java to see relatives, including older children they had left behind to continue their schooling. As the quality of schooling in the plantation and in the nearby towns improved, workers kept younger children at home, but many still sent them back to Java for high school. Contact with family in Java became easier during the 1990s as the phone network expanded, and very easy after the introduction of cell phones.

In the 1980s and 90s, the monthly pay of permanent workers at PTPN was supplemented by a rice ration allocated to each adult and child (up to three children). The cost of living was low, as most of their needs were met by the plantation system. Workers recall that they were able to begin saving right away - an impossible goal in Java, where they had lived from hand to mouth. The company took them once a month by boat and later by road to the nearest town for shopping. Overall, their experience is of an institution that takes care of its workers. They often mention the medical attention they are entitled to receive in the plantation clinic or PTPN hospital, and the subsidy their children receive for higher education if they enter state universities.

Contra to the myth that "locals" do not want to be full time plantation workers, a study carried out in communities around this plantation in 1980 confirmed that local Malays and Dayaks were very keen to access these secure, permanent jobs.³ But the plantation kept on recruiting Javanese workers, 100 more per year, until it was full. Limited recruitment of "locals" is a source of deep resentment. Locals view it as a breach of the promises made when PTPN took their land. "When we ask about jobs, company officials tell us the decisions are made at PTPN HQ in Pontianak or Jakarta." Disappointed candidates suspect that they are excluded on ethnic grounds: Javanese and Bataks, the dominant ethnic groups in PTPN, prefer to hire their own, and brand local Malays and Dayaks as lazy and unqualified, a refrain that has consistently been used to justify recruitment of migrant workers since colonial times.⁴

Managers see the local population - especially the men - as too demanding. Positions hardened further during *reformasi*, when local Malays and Dayaks mobilized to demand a smallholder scheme so that they too could benefit from oil palm. Migrant plantation workers, both managers and field hands, argue that they were the ones who built the plantation through their hard work. They find the claims of "locals" who want plantation land to be returned to them, or demand to be given jobs, unreasonable and opportunistic: "they say all this land belongs to their ancestors; they all want to be supervisors, no one wants to be a worker." After thirty years, migrant plantation workers at PTPN are not integrated into the local society. Some of them have never once set foot in the surrounding villages. A few return to Java on retirement, but most plan to stay in Kalimantan. They buy land in Javanese enclaves close to Pontianak where they feel they will be more "at home," and more secure.

³ (Dove 1985)

⁴ (Alatas 1977)

Permanent Workers at PTPN in 2010, by Ethnic Group and Gender

		Javanese	Batak	Dayak	Malay	Other	Men	Women	Women %
Office, technical	170	81	47	24	18	0	143	27	16
Fieldworkers	713	540	28	86	48	11	442	271	38
Total	883	621	75	110	66	11	585	298	34
Ethnic group %	100	70	8	12	7	1			

The labour regime at PTPN shifted in 2003, the last year in which the company recruited field workers as permanent employees. The aging workforce – mostly recruited in the 1980s – is not being replaced. Neither their own children nor other aspirant workers can obtain secure jobs on the old terms. The shift is justified in terms of flexibility and efficiency, and also in relation to changing labour needs. The palms planted in the 1980s aged together with the workers. In 2005 the plantation started the process of replanting so in 2010-11 only about half the palms were productive. The remaining palms have grown very tall and are difficult to harvest. The task is especially challenging for older workers. They have to attach two or three poles to the curved harvesting knife (*egrek*) to reach the fruit, and injury is common.

To meet the immediate need for harvest workers, PTPN has recruited around 150 young, male workers on two year, renewable contracts (PKWT - *perjanjian kerja waktu tertentu*). The contracts carry no pension provisions, and the wives and children of PKWT are not entitled to health care. They live in plantation housing, since there are many empty houses left by retirees, but their wives must compete for casual jobs. Many of the PKWT are sons of current or retired plantation workers, who aspire to replace their fathers in permanent, full time jobs. They resent their reduced status: "they just want to use us then throw us out" is a common refrain. In effect, PTPN has switched from treating men and women as members of households, to treating them as individuals who have to survive and take care of their families as best they can.

In addition to the workers formally employed by PTPN and listed in its records as permanent workers or PKWT, there are hundreds more male and female workers employed on a casual basis under different systems. One category of casual worker is the BL, a term with one official translation: *buruh lepas* (workers who are let go), and two informal ones: *buruh luar* (outside workers), or *buruh liar* (wild workers). The majority of workers in this category are women, including the wives of PKWT and daughters of permanent workers who grew up on the plantation. Some are landless people recruited from the nearby enclaves. They live on tiny residual pockets of land tucked in between the plantations, forming an in situ labour reserve that the plantations can recruit or abandon at will. They arrive by road and river to start work at 7 am. These casual workers are assigned to (and often recruited by) a field supervisor and paid directly by the company on a monthly basis. In 2011, their pay was Rp 20,000 for a 5-hour work day (7-12), although supervision was lax and the pay so low that women often returned home around 10 am.

A second category of casual worker is employed by contractors, and has no direct relation with PTPN. There is no head-count of their number, gender, or origins, but a sample will indicate the pattern. In 2011, a group of 30 Malay women from a nearby enclave were working on contract at the seed nursery. A mixed group of Batak and Dayak women who came from some distance away were at work cleaning ditches alongside the roads. They lived together in an empty plantation house. Most of the contract workers were men recruited from afar who undertook major projects such as replanting the aging oil palm with new stock; building new concrete houses to replace the old,

rotting, wooden ones; and repairing and extending plantation roads and bridges. A group of 17 Javanese men were working on land preparation for replanting. They came from a transmigration zone near Pontianak, or direct from Java. A group of 15 men working on house building came from Blora in Java, 8 of them recruited as a group. There was a group of 30 men working on road repair who came from Madura, recruited via a Madurese who was based in the West Kalimantan city of Singkawang. Finally, there was group of 5 men building a bridge, two of them Malays from near the Sarawak border while three were Javanese from the transmigration zone. These male workers all lived on the plantation. They made use of the houses that once housed permanent workers, but they did not figure as “residents” in the plantation’s official records. They did not bring their families with them. Some lived in tents erected near their construction site.

The goal of the men who did short-term contract work was to earn as much money as possible and keep their expenses low, although gambling and visits to local prostitutes sometimes interfered with this plan.⁵ Some of them remitted money to their families monthly; others saved to take money with them when they returned home once a year, around Lebaran. They compared wage rates on different tasks, and also evaluated their own strength. A young man in good health could make Rp 150,000 per day doing the strenuous work of land preparation for replanting, specifically, digging a small terrace for each new seedling.⁶ This job paid Rp 17,000 per terrace, and they could dig 5-10 per day, depending on their stamina, and the field conditions. Yet the risk of injury and exhaustion forced these workers to pace themselves, and make embodied calculations. They noted that if they worked too hard on one day, they were sometimes too sore and feverish to work the next. Since their physical strength was the only commodity they had to sell, it made sense to take care of it. The company took no responsibility for their medical expenses if they were sick or injured. For emergency assistance and daily social interaction they depended upon their co-workers, among whom they often had kin. Some contract workers formed social ties with permanent workers, usually based on shared place of origin, but others were quite isolated. Their main social contact outside the work group was at the informal stores run by plantation residents, where they bought food and charged their cell phones.

A third form of casual work involves sub-contracting by permanent workers themselves. This system is the result of PTPN’s pay structure, which offers a premium (*premi*) to workers who exceed a daily quota for their task. To meet their quota and earn a premium, workers draw on the labour of family members. Male harvesters work with their wives and children who help them to gather the fruit and carry them to the road side. Women maintenance workers call on their children and underemployed neighbours to help them.⁷ Some older men who can no longer harvest the tall palms recruit workers from Java to work in their place, claiming that they are “nephews” who have come to visit and are just helping out. In the rainy season when there are more fruit to harvest, money flows through the premium system and workers from the enclaves also attach themselves to “official” harvesters to gain a share of the bounty.

To summarize: In the period 1980 to 2000, PTPN adopted a household-based labour regime that treated women as workers, and also recognized their role as mothers. After 2000, it shifted to a casualized, more “flexible” labour regime in which women and men find work on the plantation as individuals through various contracting schemes. As casual and contract workers, they are more

⁵ Migrant trajectories and goals are traced in Pye et al. 2012.

⁶ Horse-shoe shaped terraces (*tapak kuda*) are used for sloping land. On wet land, a trench is dug instead (*tapak timbun*). Planting on flat land needs a shallow circle or “saucer” (*piring*) around the base of the palm to keep the fertilizer in place.

⁷ The use of unpaid family labour to meet quotas is noted in (Friends of the Earth 2005, :40; Friends of the Earth, LifeMosaic, and Sawit Watch 2008, :83; Sinaga 2013)

vulnerable to exploitation and they lack the protection of a minimum wage, pension and health care. They no longer feel they are treated with dignity and care: they feel used and abused. Sadly, labour conditions on the private plantation directly across the Kapuas River are far worse.

GENDERED LABOUR IN THE PRIVATE PLANTATION

When it began operation in 1990, the private plantation in the research area did not recruit workers directly from Java with the intention of making them permanent. Rather, it relied heavily on participants in the attached smallholder transmigration scheme, who were waiting for their smallholdings to be assigned. The company also hired men who arrived looking for work, many of them Javanese ex-transmigrants already in Kalimantan, sons of PTPN workers, or spontaneous migrants from Java and Sumatra. The outcome of this recruitment pattern is a core male labour force that is smaller and more transitory than that of PTPN, few workers staying more than five years. Workers are less committed to the company, which they regard as too erratic and unreliable to take care of their needs. Their wives, if present, are not offered permanent jobs. But the men are provided with company housing, and the presence of their families is an important stabilizer. Frustrated though they often are with the company's labour practices, they hesitate to uproot their children and withdraw them from school. Pensions are another stabilizer, encouraging older workers to stay on.

Worker housing is of varied condition. It is of decent quality for managers and factory workers, less good for fieldworkers, and some of it is very poor. Water is a problem: some houses are supplied only with unfiltered water from the Kapuas River, pumped up or delivered by truck into storage barrels. When water is short, residents have to bathe and wash their clothes in stagnant, polluted streams. Workers at all levels of the hierarchy complain about the poor quality of the management, which they attribute to nepotism. Some senior managers have only primary school education, and are not competent to handle complex technical and social issues. Factory workers report that some of their co-workers have insufficient education and training to handle dangerous machinery. Based on comparison with other plantations, the workers' overall impression is that the company is inefficient, corrupt and poorly run. Nevertheless, some of them make a reasonable living there, and save enough to educate their children.

A stormy period in labour relations erupted in 2011, causing workers to question whether they could continue to survive as employees of this company. The company owner fired the general manager and his senior assistants, and replaced them with staff from a Malaysian plantation management company tasked with making the plantation more efficient. The new general manager tightened the labour regime, disrupting the accommodations through which workers had adapted to their situation. Each group of male and female workers is affected differently by these changes. A review of each of the gendered tasks shows how workers understand the value of their labour, and also the difficulty they face in mounting a collective response. The core problem, as workers recognize, is that they are a disposable labour force who can easily be replaced by members of Indonesia's vast reserve army of un- and under-employed workers.⁸

Male harvesters, most of whom are living in plantation housing, are especially aggrieved by the changes which they feel reduce their status from secure permanent workers to casual workers no different from the daily workers (BL). Under the new rules, they no longer receive a base pay for meeting their daily target plus a premium for extra fruit. Instead are paid a flat rate of Rp55 per kilogram. The change enables the company to pay less to harvesters who fail to meet their targets. It

⁸ Similar conditions are reported in Riau among the increasingly casualized labour force on both state and private oil palm plantations (Sinaga 2013)

also devolves all the risk onto the workers: difficult terrain, dry weather, small or sparse fruit, days of work lost due to illness or injury - all the factors that reduce a harvester's individual productivity are absorbed by the worker himself.

Younger harvesters recognize that their income has increased under the new system, but they too reject the change. At the center of the harvesters' grievance is concern about their status as permanent workers. Without a basic wage, how will they get the annual raise set by the province, or the annual bonus that is calculated as a percentage of the wage? Will they still be entitled to pensions? And what will happen to them if they are ill or injured? Do they still qualify as permanent workers under the labour law, entitled to the protections the law guarantees? Since they have no individual written contracts, national labour law is their only point of reference in conflicts with their employer.

A few months into the new system, harvesters went on strike for three days and demonstrated outside the office complex. The managers made them some verbal promises about paid sick days, but these were not followed through. The harvesters' summary is that the company does not take proper care of them as workers, but treats as disposable. Some "local" harvesters recruited from the enclaves left their jobs, and pieced together income by harvesting for smallholders and tapping some remaining rubber. Fifteen permanent harvesters left from one division, leaving 15 of 40 houses empty. They were enticed away as a group by another plantation company that heard about the turmoil, and sent three buses to pick them up without the employer's knowledge. But most harvesters, unwilling to uproot their families, stayed in place.⁹ Significantly, the company renewed its efforts to recruit new harvesters direct from NTB, driving home the disposability of the current work force.

The company's women workers are almost all BL, so casualization is not their main concern. From the beginning, the company has relied on women casual workers recruited mainly from the enclaves to do all of the tasks that are gendered female. Despite their casual status, women workers have to use scarce funds to supply their own equipment - buckets, sprayers, gloves, boots, and parangs. Some of them describe their casual status in positive terms - as a sign of freedom (*bebas, tidak terikat*), but they are only as free as their need for income to support their families allows. They access work through a personalized process, namely by approaching work group supervisors, who are often their neighbours. Access isn't guaranteed: they can be turned away if a work group is full, or if the supervisor isn't inclined to "help" them. Workers who are not on good terms with the supervisor (or refuse to pay kick-backs) can be assigned the heaviest, least lucrative tasks. Their access to credit at the company co-op depends on their supervisor's willingness to stand guarantee: each entry in the credit book has the name of the supervisor alongside that of the worker. Much is at stake in these relations, and long-standing tensions were intensified as women tried to negotiate the new labour regime.

One group of women, those who do the work of picking up the loose fruit and loading it into buckets (*brondolan*), prefer the new system. Their pay was switched from a day rate to a per-kilo payment system. Strong workers can increase their pay, but they absorb the risk of finding few loose fruit and hence labouring for hours with very little return. Their output per day ranges from 2 to 60 buckets each weighing 10 kg, paid at Rp 2,200 per bucket. They consider *brondolan* the least strenuous of the female tasks: "if there is a lot of fruit I can sit down for a while to fill the bucket," one worker observed. But they still have to carry heavy loads from the field to the collection point: 50 kg at a time, 4 buckets on a shoulder pole, one in the hand [*dijunjung*]. They are also at risk of sexual

⁹ (Mintz 1974, 1956) compared the experience of sugar plantation workers who lived in surrounding villages with those who lived in plantation housing and found that the latter returned to work more quickly after a strike, due to their complete dependence on the plantation.

harassment and gossip as they work alone all day with a male harvester, unless he happens to be their husband. Women workers who take their school age daughters to work with them in the holidays keep the girls close.

Women who work clearing undergrowth around the palms with a parang (*babat, piringan*) were also switched from a day rate to a piece rate of Rp 700 per palm, and lost out heavily. Since much of plantation is overgrown, the most they can clear per day is ten palms, giving them an income of just Rp 7,000. Workers can be switched into this unpopular and unrewarding task at any time, on a supervisor's whim or when their usual task dries up for some reason. Typically, this work is done by older women, who are the most vulnerable workers of all.

Under the new regime, women tasked with spreading fertilizer (*mupuk*) or spraying herbicides and pesticides (*nyolo*) were switched from a day rate plus overtime, to a fixed daily pay based on meeting a target. Some of these women are classified as "permanent day workers," a slightly elevated BL status that helps the company stabilize the workforce and discourage stealing of expensive inputs. These workers are entitled to sick leave if they are injured, but the rules for claiming this benefit were tightened: now they have to present themselves at the office to request a sick note (*surat berobat*). Previously, if they were menstruating or otherwise exhausted and needed a few days' rest, they could get a note from the local midwife, and not lose pay. For them, the new policy is further evidence that the company does not care about their welfare.

Women fertilizer workers calculate that the loss of overtime means a reduction in their average monthly income from Rp 1,200,000 to Rp 840,000 (24 days @ Rp 35,000), a loss of about 30%. The fertilizer workers have to spread 350 kg per day, 2 kg per palm on 175 palms. Their stock is loaded into 7 x 50 kg baskets that they carry from the road side into the work area, and load again into smaller buckets of 18 kg slung from the shoulder (*digendong*), enough for 9 palms. The task is especially slow and exhausting on hilly terrain, when they have to climb up and down multiple times to refill their buckets: "sometimes when I'm carrying that fertilizer I feel I just cannot do it anymore, I'm so worn out (*saking capeknya*)... I get a headache from the smell, so much my eyes swell up, and I cry until night."

Fertilizer workers are affected by the late arrival of the truck that delivers workers and fertilizer to the fields. If it arrives late, they are still working in the heat of the day. On a good day, they can be finished by 10am, but more often it is after noon. Women help the slower ones to finish so they can all go home. "The company wants to claim our hours," said one women worker, "but it isn't reasonable. The return we get just doesn't fit the work we do." There is a gendered dimension to their sense of grievance, as their supervisors are usually men who do none of the heavy lifting, but just stand around watching. The gendered hierarchy is reflected in the ways workers move around the plantation: male supervisors and drivers sit in the cabin of the trucks, while women stand in the back.

The workers tasked with spraying (*nyolo*) had their work restructured in the same way as the fertilizers workers: they were switched to a fixed daily quota of 12 spray tanks, with no overtime. Rain is an additional risk they have to absorb, as they are sent home without pay on days when it is too wet to spray, and receive no pay for half-finished tanks. They often work for less than a full month because the company runs out of chemicals. They are especially vulnerable to injury. In addition to the strain of carrying buckets of water up from the river, carrying the tanks on their backs, and continuous pumping action with the right arm, they suffer burns where the chemicals touch their skin. They also experience damage to their lungs, manifested in a burning sensation, shortness of breath, and chronic coughing. These problems have been traced to the chemical

gramaxone (Paraquat), banned in many countries, but still commonly used in Kalimantan.¹⁰ The women do not wear masks which they say make it impossible to breathe. Instead, they tie scarves loosely around their mouth and nose. The effects of the chemicals are severe enough to disable women, and stop them from working after 15 years. The company's response to the health risk is to provide the women with a tin of milk per month - surely a boost to their strength, but no cure for lung damage. Besides, the supply of milk is erratic. In 2011 the women had received none for several months. They feared it had been stopped under the new regime, further evidence of the company's lack of care.

A group of 6 sprayers from one of the enclaves, supported by their supervisor, went on strike for 6 days to protest against the new rules, but the company threatened to send thugs to intimidate them. Another group of women workers went to inquire at the office about the withholding of 5 days from their December pay: "if we are paid by the day it should really be per day, how can they say it was 22 days in December when we worked 27? They say there is no money. We are just claiming our rights." These women were quite sure the company had stolen from them. Changes in the pay structure for different tasks are not so easy to classify as theft. The women feel aggrieved, but they are acutely aware of their disposability, and afraid they can be replaced by workers from elsewhere, leaving them with nothing: "We have to hold on, where else would we go?" one worker lamented.

For landless women in the enclaves, there really is no other work to be had, as the arrival of the company and its linked smallholder scheme has robbed them of the opportunity to tap rubber or grow rice. Some women who can get by without the income from the company have resigned, or plan to do so, but most keep working, and attempt to defend themselves in small ways. One woman summed up her approach thus: "if we're not smart about it, they will tire us out." Another woman described how much harder defending oneself had become. "The rules are tighter, wages are tighter. We cannot get ahead, we are really suffering." Her friend added that the system is out of balance: tighter rules would be fine, if the pay increased to match. She emphasized the extremely heavy work they had to do - so hard it gave them pain - something an onlooker couldn't fully understand. This worker was also acutely aware of their disposability. Her mother had stopped work due to injury, and a manager had responded to her distress with a callous remark: "if you're too old to work, you should stop, we only need workers."

Men who worked in the transport sector also experienced an increase in risk under the new regime. Drivers retained their previous base rate plus premium system, but the company proposed to change the loaders (*hokmen*) to a kilogram based system with no base pay. This meant that the loaders would not be paid for days when the truck broke down, and would lose income when transporting small loads. "The company wants us to do charity work, work for free," said one loader. The loaders were the only group to reverse the changes through a successful strike action. For three days in 2011, all 24 *hokmen* who manned the company's 8 trucks stayed home, and achieved a reinstatement of their basic pay. Their success was linked to the strategic nature of their work: without loaders, heaps of harvested fresh fruit bunches rotted by the roadside and the factory had to close, causing significant, direct and immediate loss to the company. None of the women workers have this leverage.

¹⁰ (Tenaga Kita and PAN 2002; Julia and White 2012)

MIGRANTS VERSUS LOCALS IN LABOUR RECRUITMENT

Company managers regard women workers as unskilled, and since the enclaves are full of women who need work, the women are self-disciplining: they show up reliably every day. Managers have a different view of men recruited from the enclaves, who they regard as lazy and unreliable. More specifically, local Malay and Dayak men are often tempted away to do harvest work for smallholders, who pay much more per kilo than the plantation core. Male migrant workers in the plantation core also do occasional harvest work for smallholders, but they are careful not to be absent too often, as they value their jobs and free housing. Most of the migrant workers do not have motorbikes, so they cannot travel to the smallholdings, some of which are quite remote. They also lack social relations with smallholders, since the core plantation housing is isolated from the surrounding village society. These are precisely the considerations that led colonial plantation managers to favour migrant workers over locals: the idiom is one of native laziness, but the fact is that migrants are more dependent on the plantation, hence more easily disciplined.¹¹ In 2011 company managers noted that they were expecting to fire their unreliable "local" harvest workers as soon new recruits were in place. Hence they were actively recruiting migrant harvesters from NTB, especially valued because of their previous experience working in Malaysia.

Male migrant workers from NTB and NTT arrive periodically at the plantation office in groups of 10-30, recruited by labour brokers who attempt to place them in return for a fee. These attempts sometimes fail. Brokers may promise the workers that their passage will be free, but the company refuses to reimburse travel costs. When this happens, the workers can accept the debt, try a different company, or return home. Although there are rogue brokers, and cases of coercion and entrapment sometimes dubbed "modern slavery," the company has no means to lock down its plantation fields or houses to prevent indebted harvest workers from absconding.¹² Nor does it hold the workers' identity cards, a common practice to guard against worker flight. Indeed the workers, wise to company practices, leave their identity cards at home, and bring only photocopies with them. A group of disgruntled workers acting collectively can also put up fight. In 2010 a group of 23 NTT workers threatened to riot if they were not permitted to move to another plantation.

Company managers find that small scale recruitment via personal networks is the most effective. In March 2011, eight harvesters were recruited by telephone by an NTB worker who started work at the company two years previously. The workers each borrowed Rp 850,000 from kin or village moneylenders towards their travel costs, money they had to repay with 100% interest. "Repay double," (*kembali dua*) is the standard loan system in NTB.¹³ These men had all worked previously in Malaysia and left after three years when their visas expired. To return to Malaysia, they have to pay a formal labour broker to prepare their passports and conduct the arrangements. The costs are high: Rp 4.5 million for work in oil palm, Rp6 million for work in construction. These amounts double when they pay interest on borrowed funds. Lacking capital of their own, and unwilling or unable to borrow sufficient funds in their home villages to pay these fees, they opted to try their luck in Kalimantan instead. They recognized that their earnings in Kalimantan would be lower, but they still hoped to be able to accumulate funds to finance the projects they had in mind. For some of them, the goal was to save money to finance a return to Malaysia. One older man wanted to pay for the university

¹¹ (Alatas 1977; Breman 1990)

¹² Colonial plantations were locked down at night, and workers kept deliberately isolated from the surrounding population. Even police and government officials were not permitted to enter (Breman 1990, :33). A contemporary case of entrapment was reported in <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-07-18/indonesias-palm-oil-industry-rife-with-human-rights-abuses>

¹³ (Lindquist 2010)

education of his youngest son, who was finishing high school. "If we stay in NTB," he said, "the most we can earn is enough to get by from day to day. The daily wage is only Rp 50,000. What we are looking for here is the possibility to earn more than we spend, to get ahead."

All but one of the eight men was married, and all were landless or near-landless. Their wives worked in NTB as agricultural labourers, the only work available if they stayed at home. Their alternative – if they meet the age and other criteria – is to leave their families to work far away, as maids in Saudi Arabia. The men hoped that their work in Kalimantan would enable their wives to stay at home. Their target for income for work on the plantation was Rp3 million per month. The plantation had plenty of palms to harvest, but they were tall and the fruit undersized, so the men were not sure how many kilograms they could harvest per day. They also had to pay various start up costs. Unlike in Malaysia, where their employer provided good houses, fully equipped, this company provided them with the bare minimum: a two room unit in an old wooden barrack building shared between 4 workers, without mattresses, pillows, mats, lamps, or any kitchen equipment. The company supplied the electricity for one light bulb, but the water situation was poor: they were given one drum, which a company truck filled every two days with water from the Kapuas, not enough for 4 people who had to use it for drinking, cooking, and bathing. They had to buy their own harvesting tool (*egrek*) for Rp 800,000. For a further Rp 400,000 they could buy a wheel barrow to transport fruit from the field to the road side. The costs were deducted from their pay at Rp 100,000 per month for each item. Lacking capital on arrival, they had no choice but to buy their goods, equipment, and food on credit from the company store.

Despite the bleak living situation and uncertain wage prospects, the new recruits were encouraged to stay by the example of the worker who had recruited them. This man had been at the plantation for two years, and in that time he had managed to set himself up and make progress. He had his own equipment. He had also bought a motorbike and formed some links outside the plantation core, enabling him to take on extra work harvesting for smallholders on his days off. His success suggested to the newcomers that it was probably better to stay in one place and adapt to it, rather than move again and start over, incurring more expenses without necessarily getting a better return. But in the meantime, they were not remitting any money to their families, and they worried about how they were surviving. They also worried about whether their wives would remain faithful to them, in view of the long separation and absence of funds.

Sustaining families under precarious work conditions is a huge challenge. It takes a toll on the health and dignity of individuals, and undermines social relations and possibilities for extending care. How long male migrant workers stay away from home depends on their family situation, and also on their goals in migration. Some of them have specific financial goals, e.g. to pay off debt. For some, the prospects for work and livelihood in their home areas are so bleak that they expect to be away from home more or less permanently. They see their lives in terms of suffering, mitigated only by the satisfaction of earning sufficient money to make the sacrifice worthwhile. To achieve this goal, they must make good decisions about when to move on, and when to stay put; limit spending; and try to avoid injury.

It is worth noting that employment conditions for Indonesian workers in Malaysia are also precarious, and do not support men and women as members of households. Around 70% of Malaysia's oil palm workers are foreign, mostly Indonesian. Indonesian workers are divided between the legal part, and those who enter Malaysia illegally or overstay. Legal workers are forbidden by the terms of their visas from bringing their families. They are also limited to a maximum term of 5 years. After expiry they often slip into the illegal workforce, which serves the plantations as a convenient labour reserve. Illegal workers can be recruited for short term contract work or during peak harvest seasons, without their employers paying levies or taking responsibility for their welfare. Illegal

workers also do the low-paid maintenance work that is gendered female in Indonesia, revealing the mutability of workforce segmentation.¹⁴

PROSPECTS FOR THE YOUNG GENERATION

Some young people whose families have prospered through oil palm smallholdings enjoy expanded opportunities for education and off-farm work. For other young people, the arrival of oil palm means the loss of access to land and the possibility of a future as farmers, combined with the lack of work that pays a living wage. Young people in the enclaves who grow up surrounded by oil palm on all sides see no prospect that they will ever be able to farm. They will inherit no land from their parents, and the wages they can earn are so meager they do not permit accumulation. Like their parents, they must survive on whatever casual work the oil palm plantations provide. "If the company gives us work we eat," said one young man, who worked as a hokman loading the oil palm fruit into trucks. Young women follow their mothers into casual daily wage work for PTPN or the private company. They too leave their homes each morning around 5am, carrying buckets, spray tanks and other tools they need for their daily work.

Women workers wait by the Kapuas for the boat that takes them across the river to PTPN, or they walk across the foot bridge to the private company's trucks that take them off to the section of the plantation where they will work that day. The group is bigger in school holidays, when children go with their mothers to help them complete their tasks and earn a little extra money. Mothers have different approaches to the education of their children. Some women do their best to prevent them from working too young and tasting money, so they keep their focus on school, at least until the end of primary. Others rationalize taking their children with them to work in the plantation as training, and as a lesson in the value of money: "otherwise they just ask us for money all the time; they do not know how tiring it is to work." Few workers can afford to send their children to school beyond primary level. If they could afford it, the purpose would be to bring prestige to the family, because they recognize that it is not a sound investment. They see boys and girls from well off families sitting around at home, unwilling to do to farm work but without other options.

The outcomes of investment in education are especially discouraging for girls. The statistics for 2012 show that girls comprised 56% of the junior high school (SMP) graduating class in the sub-district, and 53% in the District of Sanggau overall.¹⁵ Yet most of these educated women do not find jobs in the formal labour force. Among workers with SMP certificates in the district in 2012, 74% were men. At the high school level, 78% were men. Only after university does women's educational attainment translate into more formal sector jobs: men 64%, women 36%.¹⁶ Securing office jobs requires heavy pay-offs many families cannot afford, and factory jobs are also scarce. Industry employs only 2% of the formal labour force in the District (4,873 jobs), mostly in plywood factories. Of these industrial jobs, women hold only 18%.¹⁷ In the 1990s, during the timber boom, some women in the research area worked in Pontianak in plywood factories for a few years before they married, a period they look on fondly as a source of adult autonomy and city experience. Oil palm is the main product booming in the district today, but no one has built factories to process the oil into food or cosmetics, creating jobs for young people who desperately need them. Most of the palm oil is exported crude,

¹⁴ (Pye et al. 2012; Kaur 2014)

¹⁵ BPS Sanggau Jumlah Peserta Ujian SMP dan Yang Lulus Menurut Kecamatan (2012)

¹⁶ BPS Sanggau Jumlah Penduduk berumur 15 ke atas yang bekerja menurut tingkat pendidikan yang ditamatkan (2012)

¹⁷ BPS Sanggau Banyaknya Usaha Menurut Jenis, Jumlah Tenaga Kerja dan Nilai Investasi Tahun 2011-2012; BPS Sanggau Penduduk Berumur 15 Tahun Ke Atas Yang Bekerja Menurut Lapangan Usaha Utama (2012)

and when manufacturing eventually emerges, it will most likely be in Java, where the labour reserve is even larger, and wages corresponding low.

Lacking options, young women high school graduates from the nearest town make the commute daily to join the young women from the enclaves who undertake casual daily wage work on the plantations. It is not the work they aspired during their school days. Their parents invested in their education so they could do “clean” work, preferably in an office. Oil palm work is horrible, but it pays better than work in town as a waitress or shop attendant for around Rp 400,000 per month, a sum so low the women sometimes supplement it by sex work.¹⁸ Young women working on the plantation often arrive for work in unsuitable clothes, eschewing the layers of baggy clothing with which older women try to protect themselves in favour of tight jeans and T-shirts. Perhaps the young women are trying to hold on to the self-image they formed when they were at school. On their breaks from work, they play with their cell phones and listen to Korean and Japanese pop music. Young men with or without education have more room to maneuver. Their parents expect them to leave home to find work where they can, in mines or plantations, or as rubber tappers in upriver areas which are not yet covered with oil palm. The extent of male outmigration is difficult to trace. The sex ratio in the sub-district (111) and in the district of Sanggau (108) does not capture how many “local” men leave from the enclaves, which for them are dead-ends, while male migrants move in to barrack housing located just a few kilometers away, in the plantation core.¹⁹

In some of the enclaves in the research area, parents are so desperate about the prospects for their children that they are planning to mobilize to reclaim land from the state plantation, which they believe seized their land illegitimately. Unless opportunities for decent work expand, they continue to see land as the best guarantee for the future. They do not accept their landless or near-landless condition as permanent. Young people, especially young Dayak men, also refuse to accept this condition, and some of them talk in heroic terms about mobilizing to take back their ancestral land. These conditions can easily lead to violence: violent attempts to reclaim land from the plantations, or more often, violence directed against migrants who are an easier, more vulnerable target.²⁰ Around one hundred Madurese families were evacuated from the research area in 1997, purportedly to save them from attack by Dayaks from other areas.²¹ They have not returned. From the perspective of some of the “locals,” the entire transmigration program is illegitimate. It robs them of land, and leaves the younger generation without a place to farm. It also reduces their capacity to exercise jurisdiction over their own affairs, since customary authority is displaced or corrupted by the massive presence of the plantations. It is unlikely that the local population’s claims will recede over time. Indeed, they may become more intense, in keeping with the increased level of political and economic marginalization, and the grinding, everyday violence of dangerous work for minimal pay.

Among young Malays and Dayaks in the smallholding zones, especially zones where the locals have retained plenty of rubber, the future prospects are much less bleak. Many of them can expect to inherit land from their parents. Even if land in their families is scarce, young men can earn good

¹⁸ (Sirait 2009, :65)

¹⁹ BPS Sanggau Jumlah penduduk Menurut Kecamatan, Jenis Kelamin dan Sex Rasio (2012). The pattern described here – women in the enclaves working for the plantations on a casual basis, and/or engaged in sex work while men migrate out is also noted by (Sirait 2009, :65; Friends of the Earth, LifeMosaic, and Sawit Watch 2008, :92-3).

²⁰ (Sirait 2009, :ix)

²¹ The violent eviction of Madurese migrants is discussed in (HRW 1997; Klinken 2008; Potter 2009, :122). The morphing of so-called vertical conflicts (people versus company, or versus state) into so-called horizontal conflicts among ordinary people is widely reported in Indonesia.

incomes harvesting oil palm for their neighbours, around Rp3 million per month, equivalent to a school-teacher's pay. Young women can also earn well tapping rubber, around Rp 1 million per month (20 days @ Rp 54,000), enough to buy the consumer goods they desire and save for setting up their own households. Young women in these communities tend to marry early, and worry about finding responsible husbands. Some young men with cash in hand engage in excessive drinking, gambling, and spending on consumer items, notably motorbikes. Most of them, however, eventually settle into adult family roles. Women who retain access to rubber trees to tap can limit their dependence on their husbands. They also assert joint-control, if not formal ownership, over their oil palm smallholdings.

CONCLUSION

The current direction of oil palm development in Kalimantan is towards intensification of the large scale plantation form, but with a twist: core plantations have abandoned the New Order system of hiring couples and supporting families in favour of a casual workforce segregated along ethnic and gender lines. They draw women workers from nearby enclaves, and male workers from afar, separating families and providing no guarantee incomes from dispersed sources will be sufficient for family support. As these plantations take up progressively more and more land, they preclude opportunities for the local population to maintain rubber groves, or develop oil palm smallholdings on their own terms.

Indonesian plantations today operate under a neoliberal logic in which the "development" mandate of the New Order has been abandoned in favour of maximizing efficiency and profit. For plantation managers, the challenges of running a "neoliberal" plantation are distinct: how to recruit reliable male harvesters and tie them to the plantation, while maintaining the "efficiencies" of a casualized, gendered labour regime. Efficiency means paying the lowest possible price per unit of work extracted. For maintenance tasks, gendered female, the cheapest source is the abundant pool of women in the enclaves who are desperate for work. Efficiency in relation to male harvesters means recruiting migrants who will harvest for a lower price per kilo, but not employing their wives, or bearing the cost of reproducing their households. Hence plantations recruit men from the transmigration areas, i.e. Javanese born in Kalimantan, or men who come directly from Java, NTT or NTB, leaving their families behind. Men without their wives are prone to high turnover, but this is not a problem so long as there is an endless supply, and the costs of recruitment and startup can be passed down to the worker.

Workers on contemporary plantations must also think about efficiency, make calculations, and worry about risk: the risk of injury, the risk of taking on debt to pay for travel, the risk their families will fracture, the risk that no matter how hard they work they will not get ahead, but merely make enough to survive from day to day. Unlike plantation workers in the New Order, today's workers must bear all of these risks themselves, yet they have very little control over their work environment. While their experience is one of severe constraint, employers emphasize that their workers chose to do plantation work, hence the workers must take responsibility for the outcomes. Workers are individualized, and made responsible for their fate. This, in essence, is the labour regime that has emerged on both the state and private plantation in the research area, across Indonesia, and in Malaysia as well. Today's plantations are highly profitable extractive machines. They provide jobs but mostly bad ones, and they wreck livelihoods, bodies, and family lives.

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