

# The Price of Indonesia's Palm Oil

Vulnerable and Exploited  
Women Workers





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PAN Asia Pacific  
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*This report contains the key findings of a preliminary investigation on the working conditions of women workers in oil palm plantations in North Sumatra using PANAP's Community-based Pesticide Action Monitoring (CPAM) process.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia dominates the global palm oil production (Hermansyah, 2016). In 2014, 52 per cent of the total global supply of 59.6 million tonnes of palm oil was sourced from Indonesia (Artharini, 2016). This makes the industry a major source of Indonesia's income, generating USD 17.8 billion or about 12 per cent of its export revenue (Siniwi & Al Azhari, 2017). Oil palm plantations cover 14.3 million hectares and employ 10.4 million people, 70 per cent of which are casual labourers (Sawit Watch, 2015). And the industry continues to expand following the government's new investment law (No.25/2007), which encourages foreign investment in vast plantations. In addition, the 2011 Master Plan for Acceleration and Expansion of Indonesia's Economic Development (MP3EI) allocates an additional 29 million hectares for palm oil.

A preliminary investigation by a local organisation however, highlights the price of Indonesia's expanding palm oil industry. The investigation in two RSPO-certified plantations in North Sumatra revealed that women workers are vulnerable to serious labour and human rights violations. Most women are exposed to hazardous pesticides, work without adequate work tools and safety gear, and suffer from a number of health concerns. In addition, women workers are kept as casual employees with below minimum pay, without health insurance and social security, and without or limited access to proper facilities. Such poor working conditions of women workers indicate the failure of the State, plantation companies, and agrochemical companies on their obligations to protect against human rights abuse, due diligence, and to provide access to remedy.

## BACKGROUND

In 2016, the Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific (PANAP) collaborated with a local organisation for a preliminary investigation on the working conditions of women labourers in North Sumatra's oil palm industry, using the Community-based Pesticide Action Monitoring (CPAM) process. Observations and interviews were conducted with 27 labourers, 15 of which were women. The involvement of men workers in the investigation was necessary to gain access to women workers, as it was not common to speak with women in public without their spouses' knowledge or involvement. Out of the 27 interviewed, 11 were permanent workers and 16 were casual workers. The women participants were between 22-41 years old, and have worked in the plantations for three to 18 years. The women were employed as maintenance workers, while the men were either harvesters or foremen (Please see Table 1).

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. Women workers are exposed to hazardous pesticides

Women in oil palm plantations are mainly employed as maintenance workers (sprayers and fertiliser applicators), whose daily work involves constant exposure to pesticides. Hazardous pesticides have been found to be used in one plantation (Plantation B), in particular the herbicides Gramoxone and Roundup. The active ingredient in Gramoxone is paraquat (Syngenta, 2017), which has been largely documented to cause poisoning leading to a variety of health problems and in some cases, human deaths (PAN International, 2015). Glyphosate is an active ingredient in Roundup, which has been found to be carcinogenic (Wylie, 2015). Gramoxone is a product of Syngenta while Roundup is by Monsanto. Both pesticides have been banned in some countries while its circulation is restricted in Indonesia (Musim Mas, 2011). Meanwhile, Plantation A has banned the use of pesticides containing paraquat, in compliance with RSPO.

Pesticides used in Plantation A meanwhile were Glisat, Glinat, and Tiara. Glisat and Glinat are liquid pesticides packed in 25-litre jerry cans, used to control weeds, ferns, and wild palm trees. Tiara is a white powder packed in 500-gram plastic bowls. It is used as paste to enable the pesticides to stick to the leaves.

**Table 1: Respondents' Profile**

Name	Sex	Age Range	Work Status	Job Category	Years of Service
Melati	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	6
Cahaya	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	5
Lestari	F	41-50	Casual	Maintenance	11
Wangi	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	12
Ratu	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	4
Kasih	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	11
Perdana	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	3
Diah	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	5
Netro	M	41-50	Foreman	Harvester	
Eko	M	31-40	Permanent	Harvester	
Mego	M	41-50	Permanent	Transport	
Indah	F	21-30	Casual	Maintenance	7
Jayachandra	F	41-50	Casual	Maintenance	6
Maharani	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	18
Mega	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	5
Melati	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	11
Puspita	F	31-40	Casual	Maintenance	3
Siti	F	21-30	Casual	Maintenance	3
Soleh	M	21-30	Permanent	Harvester	
Rimbo	M	31-40	Permanent	Harvester	
Putra	M	31-40	Permanent	Harvester	
Pratam	M	29	Permanent	Harvester	
Pramana	M	35	Permanent	Harvester	
Perdana	M	25	Permanent	Harvester	
Kulon	M	35	Permanent	Harvester	
Kabul	M	40	Permanent	Harvester	
Gus	M	33	Permanent	Harvester	

Tiara is poured into 25-litre Glisat/Glinat jerry cans and the mixture is transferred into a 1000-litre tank of water (i.e. 120 cc Glisat for 16 litres of water). The plantation also uses Bravo, which is sprayed on trees to control ants and worms. Both plantations use the same fertiliser to strengthen roots, increase foliage and increase and advance fruit production.

**Table 2. Pesticides and Fertiliser Used in the Plantations**

	Plantation A	Plantation B
Pesticides	Glisat, Glinat, Tiara, Bravo	Gramoxone, Ally, Roundup
Fertiliser	Urea, KCL/MOP, CRV Dolomit, NPK	Urea, KCL/MOP, CRV Dolomit, NPK

## 2. Lack of adequate work tools, PPEs, washing and medical facilities

Some women use chemicals under poor conditions that further increase their risk to exposure. In both plantations, not all women were provided by the companies with adequate work tools and PPEs. In fact, in Plantation B all seven women workers who participated in the investigation were not provided any work tools and safety equipment. Instead, the women workers wrapped scarves around their faces to cover and protect them from the strong odour. Women workers spend between IDR 228,000 (USD 17)<sup>1</sup> and IDR 645,000 (USD 48.50) to purchase their own PPE and work tools. Fertiliser applicators on average spend IDR 228,000 (USD 17.00) to purchase PPE and tools while sprayers spend around IDR 645,000 (USD 48.5). And if unable to afford such, some women continue working without the proper safety gear and work tools. Meanwhile in Plantation A, the company provides PPEs and work tools to all women sprayers who participated in the investigation. Such was not the case however for the fertiliser applicators who spend an average of IDR 143,000 (USD 11) for the needed tools and PPE. In some instances, tools and PPE break thereby increasing the financial burden on women workers.

In Plantation A, washing facilities for workers were provided such as clean bathing water sourced from the artesian well located in the plantation and antiseptic soap. Sprayer tanks are washed in sterile rooms located in the division office. Such was not the case in Plantation B however wherein women workers had to bring their own water for drinking and cleaning their faces. Women workers felt that medical care in both plantations was slow and insufficient and preferred to seek medical attention from outside.

## 3. Inadequate training and access to information

Women workers had either very limited or zero knowledge about the pesticides they are using, and the hazards of these pesticides. Trainings conducted in both plantations were not adequate to fully inform the women about the pesticides. In Plantation A, women workers knew the pesticide and fertiliser brand names based solely on the product labels. According to the participants, the product labels were in English and the text were too small. Also, the women did not perform the mixing and that they did not have the chance to read the labels because they were focussed on their work targets. Once every three to six months, the foreman and the field assistant conduct one-hour safety trainings on pesticide application, which is theoretical. Meanwhile, in Plantation B, women did not know what pesticides they were using as the mixture in jerry cans prepared by the foreman were not labelled. A worker mixes the pesticide at the central office, which is poured into water tank trucks and distributed to sprayers in the field. According to interviews in Plantation B, in case of accidental spills, women workers would ignore if they consider the spillage to be minor. They would wash themselves in the river when they itch after the spills, and would continue to work in their wet clothes afterwards.

<sup>1</sup> 1USD = 13278.00 IDR

**Table 3: PPE and Work Tools for Maintenance Workers in Plantation A**

	PPE/Work Tool	Provider	Cost	
Sprayers	Mask	Company		
	Gloves	Company		
	Boots	Company		
	Goggles	Company		
	Apron	Company		
	Sprayer (Inter)	Company		
	Clothes (long sleeves and trousers)	Company		
Fertiliser Applicators	Bucket	Worker	IDR 16,000	USD 1.20
	Plastic bowl	Worker	IDR 2,000	USD 0.15
	Clothes	Worker	IDR 40,000	USD 3
	Boots	Worker	IDR 85,000	USD 6.40
	Mask	Company		
	Gloves	Company		
<b>Total</b>			<b>IDR 143,000</b>	<b>USD 11</b>

**Table 4: PPE and Work Tools for Maintenance Workers in Plantation B**

	PPE/Tool	Provider	Cost	
Sprayers	Sarong hijab	Worker	IDR 15,000	USD 1.13
	Socks	Worker	IDR 15,000	USD 1.13
	Boots	Worker	IDR 100,000	USD 7.5
	Clothes for work	Worker	IDR 100,000	USD 7.5
	Hat	Worker	IDR 15,000	USD 1.13
	Spray tank	Worker	IDR 400,000	USD 30
	<b>Total</b>			<b>IDR 645,000</b>
Fertiliser Applicators	Bucket	Worker	IDR 16,000	USD 1.20
	Plastic bowl	Worker	IDR 2,000	USD 0.15
	Clothes	Worker	IDR 40,000	USD 3.00
	Boots	Worker	IDR 100,000	USD 7.5
	Mask	Worker	IDR 50,000	USD 3.75
	Gloves	Worker	IDR 20,000	USD 1.5
	<b>Total</b>			<b>IDR 228,000</b>

#### 4. Health effects of pesticide exposure

Of the 15 women who participated in this investigation, 13 reported to have suffered similar symptoms such as dizziness, headache, blurred vision, excessive sweating, hand tremors, nausea, skin rashes and miosis, among others. Women experienced dizziness and headaches right after spraying, and believed that excessive sweating and blurred vision were side effects of pesticides exposure. The results also indicate that these symptoms were more widespread among women respondents in Plantation B, which compared to Plantation A, provided less protection for women workers. There were also reports of accidental spills when lifting the sprayer tanks onto their shoulders. Two women participants in Plantation A reported no health concerns from pesticide exposure.

Workers in Plantation B who experienced symptoms did not inform the management, feeling that it would be “useless”. The women shared that when they report exposure or poisoning to the foreman, response was slow. Clinics located inside the plantation, according to the women, did not provide sufficient medical attention and prescribed only headache medicine regardless of health concerns reported. The women instead, seek medical attention outside the plantation and at their own expense.

The table below summarises some of the health concerns women associated with their exposure to chemicals.

**Table 5: Health Effects of Pesticide Exposure**

Name	Symptoms
Melati	Dizziness, headache, blurred vision, hand tremor, skin rashes and irregular heartbeat
Cahaya	Dizziness, blurred vision, excessive sweating and anaemia
Lestari	Dizziness, headache, blurred vision, excessive sweating, hand tremor and miosis
Wangi	Nothing
Ratu	Excessive sweating
Kasih	Excessive sweating
Perdana	Excessive sweating
Diah	Nothing
Indah	Blurred vision, hand tremor, nausea, vomiting, difficulty of breathing and skin rashes
Jayachandra	Dizziness, headache, blurred vision, excessive sweating, skin rashes and diarrhoea
Maharani	Dizziness, headache, blurred vision, hand tremor and difficulty of breathing
Mega	Dizziness, headache, excessive sweating, insomnia, difficulty of breathing, skin rashes and irregular heartbeat
Melati	Dizziness, headache, excessive sweating, hand tremor, vomiting, insomnia, difficulty of breathing, skin rashes and irregular heartbeat
Puspita	Dizziness, headache, blurred vision, excessive sweating, hand tremor, miosis, excessive salivation, nausea, vomiting, insomnia, difficulty of breathing, skin rashes, diarrhoea and irregular heartbeat
Siti	Dizziness, headache, excessive sweating, hand tremor, difficulty of breathing and skin rashes.

Two cases of acute poisoning were documented. In one plantation, Gramoxone leaked from a sprayer tank and covered a woman worker's entire body. She jumped into the pond to wash off the chemical and continued to work. A medical examination by the company doctors revealed blood poisoning, but she was never informed as to the cause, and the short and long-term effects on her health. Since then, she was no longer allowed by the company to work as sprayer but re-assigned to do weeding. While she has no health complaints at the time of the interview, she hopes to undergo blood analysis to know what really happened to her. In another plantation, a participant shared that two of her colleagues suffered from acute poisoning. One woman's hands were rotting while the other coughed blood for a week. Both sought medical attention from outside, as the company did not provide any assistance.

**Figure 1: A sprayer mixes Gramoxone and Ally with water from a nearby ditch.**



## **5. Casual, underpaid and overworked**

Women maintenance workers were casual and underpaid, and in some instances, overworked. All women who participated in this investigation were casual workers, working less than 21 days in a month – a strategy employed by the plantations to avoid promoting the women maintenance workers into permanent status. Permanent workers need to work for at least 25 days per month according to Indonesia's Manpower Law. The women workers work for 12-18 days in a month, starting at 6 am and ending the shift at around 2pm. Also, the women workers had no work contracts or agreements.

Furthermore, women workers were overworked but underpaid. Sprayers were required to spray seven to eight tanks to cover 1.5 hectares per day, depending on whether the land is covered with bush or not. Fertiliser applicators meanwhile are tasked to apply up to 1 tonne of fertiliser daily. Worse, they receive far less than the district minimum wage. Casual workers were receiving anywhere between IDR 59,000 (USD 4.5) to IDR 80,000 (USD6) per day. All casual workers in both plantations did not receive social security such as health insurance, accident insurance, death benefit, and pensions.

**Table 6: Work Schedule of Women Workers**

Time	Task
5:45 am	Arrival at division office
5:45 – 6:00 am	Morning briefing by foreman and assistant
6:00 – 6:15 am	Pick up work tools and food supplies at home
6:15 – 6:30 am	Depart for work site using own transport (motorcycle)
6:45 am	Breakfast at the work site
6:45 – 7:00 am	Preparation for work
7:00 – 10:30 am	Spraying/fertiliser application
10:30 – 11:00 am	Break
11:00 – 1:00 pm	Spraying/fertiliser application
1:15 pm	Finish work and clean and store work tools
1:15 - 2:00 pm	Take a bath and change into clean clothes (not in all instances)
2:00 pm	Arrive home

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The poor working conditions of women workers in both plantations indicate violations of Indonesia’s labour laws. The failure of both companies to provide adequate PPE and work tools to all its workers violates Law No. 1 of 1970 on Occupational Safety and Regulation of the Minister of Manpower and Transmigration No. 08/MEN/VII/2010 on Personal Protective Equipment which requires companies to provide PPE and work tools to its workers, free of charge (ILO, n.d.). In addition, the companies’ practice of hiring casual workers with no work agreements violates Indonesian Law, Article 56 of Law No. 13 of 2003 on Manpower stating that –

*(1) A work agreement may be made for a specified period of time or for an unspecified period of time.*

*(2) A work agreement for a specified period of time shall be made based on (a) a term; (b) the completion of a certain job (ILO, 2004, p. 15).*

Both plantations also do not comply with the minimum wage in the district, and with Law No. 3 of 1992 on Social Security and Law No. 40 of 2004 on National Social Security System, which mandate companies employing at least ten people, to pay for social security.

This investigation also found violations of human rights. The exposure of women to hazardous pesticides without sufficient equipment and precautionary measures, violates the right to the highest attainable standard of health and healthy working conditions, as stated in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Centre for International Environmental Law [CIEL], 2015). In addition, the women workers’ lack of awareness about the identity and hazards of pesticides they are using in the plantations violates international human rights standards, which require information to be “available, accessible, functional and non-discriminatory” (CIEL, 2015, para. 6). Article 19 of the International Covenant

on Civil and Political Rights states that “everyone has the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds” (CIEL, 2015, para. 6). Similarly, the ILO’s Chemicals Convention (c.170) states that workers have the right to be informed about the chemicals they are using in the workplace and the hazards, and that employers have the obligation to provide workers with such information and to precautionary measures (CIEL, 2015). Under the same convention, “[w]orkers shall have the right to remove themselves from danger resulting from the use of chemicals when they have reasonable justification to believe there is an imminent and serious risk to their safety and health” (CIEL, 2015, para. 8). The findings also indicate violations of the FAO Code of Conduct.

The presence of these human rights abuses in the plantations indicate the failure of the State, the plantation companies, and even agrochemical companies (Syngenta and Monsanto) who sell hazardous pesticides, on their obligations under the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The Guiding Principles are based on three pillars: (1) states have the obligation to protect against human rights abuse through effective and appropriate policies and regulation, (2) businesses to undertake due diligence and transparency regarding risks about their activities and products and (3) access to judicial and non-judicial remedy for human rights victims (Human Rights Resource Centre, n.d.; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011).

From these conclusions, PANAP and its partner organisation call for all oil palm plantations to fully comply with the provisions and principles of ILO, Free and Fair Labour in Palm Oil Production, FAO International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides, and RSPO on wages, employment status and the use of harmful chemicals and international human rights standards. Specifically, the following are recommended:

1. Women workers who reported health concerns must be provided by the company with adequate medical attention and compensation.
2. Women workers must receive labour benefits due them.
3. Women workers must receive sufficient trainings on the pesticides they are using, including its proper use, hazards, and measures to mitigate risks of exposure.
4. The local government must closely monitor and ensure compliance of companies with labour laws and policies on hazardous pesticides.
5. Local government must ban the trade, distribution and use of highly hazardous pesticides.
6. Oil palm plantations must decrease in the short-term, and cease in the long-term, the use of hazardous pesticides.

*Note: The names and some identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants.*

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**PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP)**, one of the five regional centres of the Pesticide Action Network, is dedicated to the elimination of harm upon humans and the environment by pesticide use and the promotion of biodiversity-based ecological agriculture/ agroecology. PANAP works together with more than 100 partners to advance food sovereignty, gender justice and environmental sustainability.

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