

Oil Palm Farming from a Women's Perspective

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Abstract. This study aims to examine women's perspectives on: (1) division of labor in oil palm farming, (2) parties involved in oil palm community plantations, and (3) problems faced by oil palm farmers. The study was conducted in Sari Galuh Village, Kampar Regency using a qualitative approach through focused discussions with 9 women, which were then analyzed using an interactive model. The results of the study showed: (1) there is a division of labor in the stages of oil palm management, where the work done by women is at the maintenance stage such as fertilizing, spraying pests and planting and cleaning nuts, (2) oil palm companies around their village/district areas are the parties most involved in managing oil palm farming and (3) problems faced by farmers in addition to the low price of oil palm and the high and scarce price of fertilizer, also during *replanting* which causes them to lose part of their income for several years where this increases the burden of life and children's college costs. It is concluded that women are involved and affected in the management of independent oil palm farming.

Keywords: female oil palm farmers, division of labor, Tapung District

1 Introduction

Oil palm farming is an agricultural activity that focuses on planting, maintaining, and harvesting oil palm plants to produce palm fruit, which is then processed into *crude palm oil (CPO)* and palm kernel oil. Oil palm farming has become a very important sector for the Indonesian economy, which is one of the world's major producers of palm oil. This sector provides employment for millions of people, including smallholder farmers, plantation workers, and those working in the processing industry.

The palm oil business in Riau Province is one of the important sectors for the national economy with the control of the area dominated by smallholder plantations. In 2022, 1.76 million hectares (61.44 percent) of oil palm plantations were controlled by smallholder plantations; followed by large private plantations which controlled 1.03 million hectares (35.94 percent) and the remaining 0.08 million hectares (2.62 percent) were controlled by large state plantations [1].

Kampar Regency is the largest area for oil palm plantations in Riau Province. Around 61.90 percent of the plantation area is in this district (1,796,668 ha) with the largest number of farmers, namely 112,578 families. The number of farmers in Riau Province is 685,771 families [2]. Meanwhile, the largest number of farmers in Kampar Regency is in Tapung District, reaching 22,773 families. In this district, the plantation area is the second largest after Tapung Hulu District, namely 78,679 ha with a production of 801,383 tons / ha or 14,979 kg/ha [3]. Although there is no official information on their numbers, female workers also play an important role in oil palm farming. According to the Head of the BPD PKS Company Division, the number of women in the entire oil palm supply chain reaches around 16.2 million where they are involved in the process of land clearing, nurseries, sowing, spraying, maintenance and collecting loose fruit [4]. This is in line with the findings of [5] which states that the role of mothers in working on oil palm plantations is quite large, reaching 48.87 percent. Their work is to help their father's work, namely picking up loose fruit and helping to supervise the oil palm plantation from disturbances of theft of oil palm fruit. Yallita & Mardhiah [6] who studied the division in a palm oil company, that female workers are more often placed in the maintenance, fertilization, and office administration sections considering work risks, worker psychology, and stigmatization of women in the world of work.

Several studies highlight the role of women in palm oil plantations (Koczberski [7]; Lie [8]; Pieris [9]; Mardhiah [10]; Village [11]; Purwaningsih [12]; Yulianti et al. [13]). Generally, women play roles in maintenance activities, such as soil management, collecting fallen palm oil fruits, spraying, and weeding. Koczberski [7] also identified gender inequality in wages for female farmers. Meanwhile, Etuah et al. [14] revealed that women's activities in palm oil plantations positively contribute to empowerment. Women with formal education, access to credit and formal training in agriculture or livestock, as well as involvement in income-generating activities outside agriculture, tend to be more empowered regardless of their community setting outside these conditions. On the other hand, the study of Rowland [15] found that women's involvement in oil palm plantations alters their time allocation and increases their vulnerability to stress due to reduced rest periods.

In relation to the large number of oil palm farming families in Tapung District, Kampar Regency, it is interesting to study the perspectives of women/wives on oil palm farming in smallholder/independent plantations and the extent of their role in this regard. For this reason, this study aims to study: (1) the division of labor in the management of independent farming, (2) the parties involved in smallholder oil palm plantations, and (3) the problems faced by oil palm farmers.

2 Research Methods

This research was conducted in Sari Galuh Village, Tapung District, Kampar Regency, Riau Province. The research approach was descriptive qualitative, the data of which were collected through focused discussions (FGD) and continued with communication via Whats Apps (WA) either through groups or personal contacts. The number of informants was nine women who were wives of oil palm farmers. In the focused discussion process, the stages of data collection were as follows: first, dividing the informants into three groups according to the research objectives (so each group consisted of three people). Second, asking each group to discuss the predetermined topic and write it on a piece of flipchart paper. Third, asking them to present the results of the group discussion to then get input from other groups, in order to obtain valid information.

The data collected from the discussion process and from the chat via WA were then analyzed using an interactive model. With this method, the data collection and analysis processes are carried out simultaneously, so that both run in a dynamic relationship. The stages are: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, drawing conclusions and verification [16].

3 Research Results

Characteristics of informants

The 9 informants were aged between 25 and 55 years with most of their education level being high school level. The number of their children ranged from 1-3 children from elementary school to college age. Their land ownership ranged from 2-6 ha and most had been running for more than 10 years. Like almost all other Sari Galuh villagers, they came from Central Java and had lived in the village for more than 15 years. Their daily languages were generally Javanese and Indonesian. The following describes their perspectives on the three topics of this research objective.

Division of labor in oil palm farming

According to informants, the process of productive activities in oil palm plantations begins with clearing land, planting, maintaining, harvesting, “munas” (discarding oil palm fronds), weighing and bringing to the weighing place. Each stage can consist of several activities. From each stage, women are only involved in the maintenance stage as well as planting and cleaning peanuts. In the maintenance stage, women specifically work on fertilizing and spraying pests, grass and "stripan". Meanwhile, men are involved in all stages of the oil palm plantation management process. The following table shows the division of work.

Table 1. Division of labor in managing oil palm plantations

No.	Activity	Perpetrator	
		Woman	Man
1	Clearing land (“ngimas”, cutting down trees and clearing undergrowth)	-	v v
2	Planting: “merun” (clearing land)	-	vvv
3	Maintenance (fertilizing, spraying pests/grass/stipan, cutting grass, “paning/merin” and catharsis (removing small fruit)	vvv	vvv
4	Harvest	v	vv
5	“Munas” (throwing away oil palm fronds)		V
6	Weighing		v
7	- Creating a “carrying market”/harvest road (a road for transporting fruit to the harvest collection point/TPH and		v v V

	other operational activities such as fertilization and HPT census with a minimum width of 1.25 meters). - Hilling up the palm (so that new roots can grow quickly) - Bringing to the Results Weighing Place (TPH)		V v
8	Planting and cleaning beans/mucung	v	v

Source: Primary data

Parties involved in oil palm community plantations

In the independent oil palm farming process, there are several parties involved. They are PT Perusahaan Nusantara V (PTPN V), KUD, Village Government, Peron, PT KITA and PT from outside the region. According to them, the party closest (most involved) to their oil palm plantation process is PTPN V, where this company is considered their foster father. This is related to the partnership and oil palm rejuvenation program where the company helps farmers in providing certified superior oil palm seeds and supports land management to increase oil palm productivity.

The second party involved in their palm oil plantation process is KUD Mandiri Mojopahit. This institution plays a role in sheltering or becoming a forum for farmers. Through the fertilizer sales business unit, this KUD helps existing farmer groups in distributing fertilizer to members, especially plasma farmer members. The transportation business unit helps farmers when transporting their production to the PTPN V Sei Galuh palm oil processing factory. The Village Government plays a role in protecting farmers. As for Peron/middlemen, PT Kita and other PTs (from outside) play a role as collectors of farmers' fruit or as buyers of harvested palm oil.

Problems faced by oil palm farmers.

According to informants, there are a number of problems experienced in the oil palm planting process. The most serious problem faced is related to the low price of palm oil and the expensive and scarce price of fertilizer. The price of fresh fruit bunches in the hands of middlemen ranges from IDR 1,800 per kilo and was even only IDR 700/kg in 2019. In fact, the Riau Provincial Plantation Service has set the price of Fresh Fruit Bunches (FFB) of oil palm for the period 3 to 9 May 2023 for the 10-20 year age group at IDR 2,547.12 per kg [8].

Another problem is when *replanting or* rejuvenating oil palm. *Replanting is an* effort to maintain the productivity of oil palm plantations that are 20 to 25 years old by replacing unproductive plants with new plants. The method can be done by simultaneous felling, gradual felling or *underplanting* , and intercropping [9]. This condition results in reduced income from oil palm harvests in several years. As a result, the burden of meeting basic needs increases, especially for those who have children who are already in college. The following are a number of problems in the oil palm planting process according to informants.

Table 2. Problems in the oil palm planting process

No.	The problem	No.	The problem
1	Low palm oil prices (below Rp. 1,800/kg)	7	The credit agreement value for replanting is too high
2	The high and scarcity of fertilizer prices	8	The existence of “palm ninjas”/palm fruit thieves from palm fruit to production fruit
3	Garden paths lack maintenance	9	Lack of understanding about fruit that is suitable for harvesting, so that many are sorted/rejected at the PKS
4	Requires additional manpower in the maintenance process	10	There are no funds for independent <i>replanting costs</i> , so you have to take out a high-interest loan with a long term.
5	Lack of fulfillment of basic needs during the <i>replanting period</i> (which requires a minimum of 5 (five) years)	11	Lack of occupational health and safety guarantees
6	Difficulty paying for children's school fees (high school & college) during the replanting process	12	Whether or not the tumpeng sari system is permissible during the replanting period (from PTP/KUD)
		13	Many cattle/goat farmers graze wildly in oil palm plantation areas.

Source: Primary data

The following is an expression from Mrs. S, who has a garden of around 2 hectares and has been planting oil palm for more than 10 years about the problems faced by oil palm farmers:

“The price of fertilizer is expensive, the price of palm oil is cheap. The impact is that fertilizer cannot be purchased. This has an impact on production which has decreased because large palm oil yields depend on fertilizer. Now there are no results. Even then I have to be clever in sharing, for bank debts and children's college.”

4 Discussion

The results of the focused discussion of this study found that the role of women in oil palm plantations is at the maintenance stage, planting and cleaning of nuts. At the maintenance stage, women specifically carry out activities such as fertilizing and spraying pests, grass and "stripan". The findings of this study are in line with several study results [7]; [13]

Koczberski [7] stated that in the case of a husband and wife or in one family member, usually the role of the wife who works as a fruit bunch collector can help to make her husband's harvest achievements a success who happens to work as a harvester. The case study of "loose-fruit mama" from Papua New Guinea teaches that a woman/mother/mama can also be "empowered" by playing a role in contributing to help collect loose fruit where the payment scheme for the woman is separate from her husband. This is a fairer perspective and provides space for women to be able to feel the results of their own hard work. These "loose-fruit mamas" get more economic incentives to optimize their performance and become empowered because of it . According to Yulianti [13] who studied in South Kalimantan, the role of women is divided into two, namely the role before the oil palm plants produce (TBM) and the role in managing oil palm plantation farming when producing (TM) and the role when the plants produce (TM). The role at the TBM stage is seen in the following activities: checking for dead plants, inserting plants, measuring plant growth, maintaining plates, pioneer roads and stiles, making carrying roads, installing harvest bridges and TPH, fertilizing plants, sand shoots and ablation, controlling pests and diseases of oil palm plants and irrigation management/straining. The roles at the TM stage include: maintaining plates, roads in the garden and stiles, fertilizing plants, controlling pests and diseases of oil palm plants and harvesting and post-harvest activities. Study Lie [8] also found that garden maintenance activities that are usually carried out by female workers include chemical maintenance of the fence, collecting loose fruit and cutting discs. Compared to female workers, men's work generally gets a more permanent job status and a more promising wage level. In her study of female laborers on oil palm plantations, Pieris [9] concluded that women's involvement in oil palm farming practices is quite large, both as plantation owners and laborers on plantations, where more than 60% of agricultural workers are women. The distribution of many female workers in the division of labor for maintenance, fertilization, and office administration, creates injustice [6]. Village study [11] in Kasoloang Village, North Bambaia District also found that the participation of female farmers in the village was 11.51 person-days, with details of 2.76 person-days for planting, 1.6 person-days for fertilization, and 7.10 person-days for harvesting. The average income per hectare is Rp. 15,103,823. Their contribution is 11.23% or Rp. 4,677,312. The rest is male labor. Meanwhile, Amalia & Oktarina [19] who used data on the performance scores of PTPN IV palm oil factory workers at the PKS ABS unit found that the average performance scores of female workers occupying clerk/administration and assistant operator positions were better than those of male PKS workers.

5 Conclusion

From the results of focused discussions with women from oil palm farming families, it was concluded that women are involved in the management of independent oil palm farming. In addition, they are also affected by the *replanting stage* which causes them to lose some of their income which makes their living expenses (including education costs) heavier. From these findings, it is recommended that banks help finance this stage with low interest rates.

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