Women’s Resistance and Struggles: Asserting our Rights to Land, Resources and Livelihood

Struggle of Women Agricultural Workers
BOOKLET 1

2009
**Pesticide Action Network (PAN)** is a global network working to eliminate the human and environmental harm caused by pesticides and to promote biodiversity-based ecological agriculture. Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP) is committed to the empowerment of people especially women, agricultural workers, peasants and indigenous farmers. PAN AP believes in a people-centred, pro-women development through food sovereignty, ecological agriculture and sustainable lifestyles.

**Women’s Resistance and Struggles:**
**Asserting our Rights to Land, Resources and Livelihood**
Booklet 1: Struggle of Women Agricultural Workers

Editor: Judy M. Taguiwalo  
Project Coordinator: Marjo Busto Quinto  
Production Assistant: Shakunthala Devi  
Adviser: Sarojeni Rengam  
Cover Design and Layout: Jennifer T. Padilla and Rowena M. Bayon

**About the Editor**

*Judy M. Taguiwalo is a professor of women and development studies at the University of the Philippines Diliman. She was the founding General Secretary of Amihan, the National Federation of Peasant Women and is currently Chair of the Women’s Committee of the Alliance of Concerned Teachers. She is also a member of the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD).*

P.O. Box 1170, 10850 Penang, Malaysia  
Tel: (604) 6570271 / 6560381  
Fax: (604) 6583960  
Email: panap@panap.net  
URL: www.panap.net  
Copyright 2009  
# Table of Contents

Foreword 5  
Introduction 7  
Overview 11  

Philippines 19  
**Women Hold Half of the Plantation**  
A Case Study on Women Workers of DoleFil in Mindanao  

Malaysia 29  
**Poisoned and Protesting**  
The Mobilisation of Women Pesticide Sprayers Against Paraquat  

Sri Lanka 39  
**Women Workers in Sri Lanka**  

Indonesia 47  
**There is a Voice to be Heard**  
Women’s Struggle in Sambas District, West Kalimantan, Indonesia  
Against the Expansion of Large Scale Oil Palm Plantation  

Indonesia 53  
**The Struggle of Women Labour in an Oil Palm Plantation**  
Portrait of the Women of Nehes Liah Bing Village  
East Kutai District, East Kalimantan Province  

India 59  
**Land Acquisition the Women’s Way**  
The Dalit Women’s Struggle for Land Rights in a Village in India  

Contributors 69
The inspiration for this booklet and this series on Women’s Resistance and Struggles comes from the courage, the resilience, and the resolute commitment of women leaders from the peasant, agricultural workers, indigenous women, and fisherfolk movements in Asia. Their stories of struggle and their determination to continue with the resistance even in the face of threats, harassment and violation of their human rights, are stories of sacrifice, heroism, and a belief in their struggle for women’s and people’s rights. These stories of women’s resistance against tyranny, subjugation, exploitation, violence and their successes motivate and encourage us in our own struggles.

The 3-part series of booklet on Women’s Resistance and Struggles is a result of collaborative efforts from women’s organisations and movements in Asia closely working with various sectors of marginalised women: peasants, agricultural workers, indigenous women, fisherfolk, Dalits, and urban poor women. These booklets paint a picture of the different struggles and resistance of organised women’s groups, and their successes in asserting and reclaiming their rights, as women and as a sector.

This booklet, the Struggles of Women Agricultural Workers, documents women’s experiences in Asia who work long hours with very low wages and in horrendous conditions without any amenities at the workplace. Many of these women agricultural workers work in slave-like situations in plantations and farms without the right to organise and voice their demands and are vulnerable to violence. Another reality is the lack of protection from occupational health hazards particularly their exposure to pesticides and the impact on their health and their children’s health.
With partners from India, Malaysia, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, Booklet 1 presents the various situations and struggles of landless Dalit women in a village in India; of Malaysian plantation workers for their right to health; of Filipino women workers in a giant multinational agribusiness; of Tamil women plantation workers in Sri Lanka; and the women workers of Samba and Dayak Wehea in Indonesia affected by the expansion of palm oil plantations.

This booklet shares the determination and commitment of the women in their struggle to improve their situation, assert their rights and change society’s perception of women as weak and docile. These women have remained vigilant, have united, and have resisted in collectively fighting these oppressions, inequalities and violence.

It is our hope that these stories of struggle will further contribute to the strengthening of women’s participation and leadership, and inspire all women everywhere in their own struggles.

Sarojeni Rengam
Executive Director
Introduction

History tells us that women in agriculture have been strongly asserting their rights to productive and political resources; their rights to define and determine food and agricultural policies; their rights to healthy and safe food; and reclaiming their knowledge, skills and control over resources. For women in Asia, it has also meant the assertion of their rights as farmers, as workers, as consumers, as mothers and as women.

Women have joined hands to reclaim their rights, their knowledge and skills. There is a growing movement of women in agriculture involved in asserting their rights as farmers, as agricultural workers, as fisherfolk, as Dalits, as part of a collective of the indigenous community, working to spread and mainstream ecological agriculture and to mobilise against violence, against globalisation and corporate agriculture.

Women have become involved in different forms of struggle as they carry their fight in their farms, picket lines, street demonstrations, parliaments and urban centres. Women are holding up banners and are in the frontline – from protesting against the incursion of transnational corporations, right up to human rights struggles and the fight for freedom and justice in their own lands and workplaces.

Rural women have been resisting corporate-dominated mal-development and trade liberalisation. All over Asia, women peasants, farmers and workers are organising to drive out transnational corporations such as Syngenta and Monsanto. Rural women are demanding food sovereignty. Women farmers are out in the fields practising sustainable agriculture and livelihoods. Rural women are fighting to take control of their bodies and claim their reproductive rights. Rural women are challenging patriarchy within their families
and communities. Rural women are challenging national policies to incorporate the women’s agenda and become represented in parliaments. Rural women have become leaders, resource persons, and speakers. Women have shown greater strength and courage in the face of increasing poverty, climate change, and looming food and financial crises.

Rural women have been challenged to consolidate the strengths in the resistance against corporate globalisation, highlighting their concerns to avoid being set aside and ignored, and sending out a message that women are resisting injustices, strengthening their movements and not afraid to let their voices be heard.

**Women’s resistance: Reclaiming rights**

The 3-part series of booklets on Women’s Resistance and Struggles: Asserting our Rights to Land, Resources and Livelihood documents the struggles and successes of women in Asian communities in resisting corporate / neo-liberal / imperialist globalisation. These booklets share the various women’s experiences in the communities and lessons in their struggle against globalisation.

The booklets cover 3 important issues on the struggles of women in agriculture across Asia: (1) the struggle of women agricultural workers; (2) rural women asserting control of land, livelihood and resources; and (3) women’s groups opposing globalisation. Each of the booklets contain 4 to 6 caselets that document the various experiences of women’s resistance from various countries in the region.

Booklet 1 compiles the experiences of women agricultural workers and their struggle for higher wages, combating health and occupational
hazards (particularly on the use of pesticides), the right to form associations, combating child labour, struggle against agrochemical and oil palm plantations, among others.

Booklet 2 documents the struggles and resistance of peasant, fisherfolk, indigenous women and Dalits in asserting their control of land, and other resources. The caselets convey the stories of women’s organisations against land use conversions, mining companies, destruction of aquatic resources, and other similar struggles.

Booklet 3 covers the experiences of women’s organisations and movements, which addresses the issues of globalisation and its impact on women, violence against women, patriarchy, and political representation, among others. The caselets present the various strategies and successful stories in organising, lobbying and campaigning for the rights of women.

This documentation of women’s resistance in asserting and reclaiming their rights aims to contribute to the empowerment of women in agriculture, with their stories providing learning and effective strategising for women’s groups to further strengthen their ranks and participate in the overall struggle of the people’s movement in the region.
Overview

By Judy M. Taguiwalo

Testaments of struggle and gains of landless women agricultural workers

Women agricultural workers perform various farm-related work in exchange for wages, mainly in cash or at times in kind. Such work involves regular employment in agricultural plantations or labour for hire during peak agricultural seasons of planting or harvesting. Coming from farming families without land or with limited land to till, women agricultural workers need the income to meet their families’ subsistence needs.

As agricultural workers, women share with the men, the problems of low wages, long hours of work in the fields, insufficient protection from occupational health hazards and limitations to their rights to organise. But women agricultural workers suffer additional burdens due to the prevailing gender segregation in agricultural work, gender-based discrimination, women’s principal role in home maintenance, child bearing and child rearing, and women’s vulnerability to violence.

The abject plight of women agricultural workers is illustrated by the following:

*The average earnings of rural women engaged in plantation work are less than those of men. Many women in agricultural labour end up doing jobs that nobody else would do, such as the mixing or application of harmful pesticides without adequate protection and information, suffering from intoxication and in some cases death. Heavy work during crop cultivation and harvesting can (lead to) high incidence(s) of stillbirths, premature births and death of the child or the mother. Some studies have shown that the workload of traditional “female” tasks, such*
as sowing, picking out, and clearing, is a little higher than the workload of males due to the fact that the latter are assisted by mechanical means during irrigation, ridging and farming.

There is no lack of international covenants promoting and protecting the rights of women agricultural workers. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights\(^2\) (UDHR) guarantees the right to work, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to just and favourable remuneration and the right to form and join trade unions for women and men workers.

Article 11 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)\(^3\) reiterates and elaborates on the provisions on employment-related rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as these apply to women. CEDAW emphasizes the “right to equal remuneration, including benefits, and to equal treatment in respect of work of equal value”; to “the right to protection of health and to safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the function of reproduction”. CEDAW calls on all states “to introduce maternity leave with pay or with comparable social benefits without loss of former employment”; “to encourage the provision of the necessary supporting social services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life, in particular through promoting the establishment and development of a network of child-care facilities; and “to provide special protection to women during pregnancy in types of work proved to be harmful to them.”

The InternationalLabour Organization (ILO) Plantations Convention\(^4\) “contains guarantees as to the recruitment (e.g. the recruitment of the household head does not involve the recruitment of household members), employment contracts, wages (e.g. wages are to be paid directly to the worker), annual paid leave and weekly rest, compensation for injury, trade unions (e.g. workers’ freedom of association “without distinction whatsoever”), and maternity protection (maternity leave of at least 12 weeks, at least six of which after childbirth, with additional leave for late delivery or pregnancy-related illness; cash and medical benefits; protection from dismissal during maternity leave; breaks for nursing purposes; prohibition for a pregnant woman to “undertake any type of work harmful to her in the period prior to her maternity leave”).”\(^5\)

These covenants were adopted by the international community in the 20\(^{th}\) century. But now almost at the end of the first decade of the 21\(^{st}\) century, women agricultural workers in Asia continue to struggle for the realization of these rights. The caselets in this booklet document the situation and struggles of Malaysian plantation workers for their right to health and for the banning of a herbicide principally marketed by a huge chemical company; of Filipino women workers in a giant multi-national agribusiness in southern Philippines; of Tamil women plantation workers in Sri Lanka; of landless Dalit women in a village in India; and of Samba agricultural women workers and of Dayak Wehea women labourers affected by the expansion of palm oil plantations in Indonesia.

The caselets underscore the importance of women labour in agricultural work. At Dole Philippines, women comprise 53% of the 3,435 workers in the field and in the cannery and packaging plant of the multi-national

corporation. In Sri Lanka, women account for 65% of the workforce in the tea estates and 90% in the rubber plantations.

Agricultural workers, both women and men, receive low wages which are typically below the mandated minimum wage. Wage differentiation on account of gender persists. In Sri Lanka, Tamil women receive only 200 rupees per day for gathering 20 kilos of tea leaves, hardly enough to buy the basic food requirements of a family. In Andhra Pradesh, India, the legal daily minimum wage is Rs.60 but men receive Rs.30 and women receive only Rs.25 daily wage.⁶

Women’s working hours are stretched by the demands of reproductive work within the home and of work in the fields. In the Philippine caselet, women agricultural workers wake up as early as 2:00 in the morning, report for work at 4:30 in the morning but are only paid for a 6:00 am to 3:00 pm actual work in the field.

Occupational health hazards due to prolonged exposure to chemicals and the absence of protective gear have serious effects for women in general and especially for pregnant women and nursing mothers. These health hazards are very well documented by the caselet from Malaysia. Health concerns are aggravated by the lack of safe drinking water facilities and the absence of regular health personnel in the Golinda Estate in the Kegalle District as described in the Sri Lanka caselet or by the apathy shown by health personnel in the Malaysia study. In the case of the palm oil plantation workers in Indonesia, women temporary workers are not provided with protective gear and have to shoulder the expenses of job-related illness or accidents.

⁶ US$1=LKR114 (Sri Lankan Rupee); US$1=INR47 (Indian Rupee)
While the six caselets do not explicitly tackle globalisation policies, the link between the situation and struggles of women agricultural workers and globalisation can be discerned. Stagnating wages of agricultural workers cannot keep pace with the increase in the prices of commodities, utilities and services. Agricultural production for export, as in the case of the pineapple plantation in the Philippines, the palm oil plantation in Indonesia and Malaysia and the tea and rubber plantations of Sri Lanka, has priority over food production for local consumption. The lack of health services in plantations is the outcome of limited government spending for social services. In all these studies, globalisation policies that prioritise profits over the health and well-being of the women workers and of the environment coupled with patriarchal beliefs and practices account for the double victimization of women: as workers and as women.

The caselets, however, are not mere exposé of the harsh working and living conditions of women agricultural workers under present day globalisation policies. They are also testaments to the determination of organised women as they struggle to improve their situation, assert their rights and change society’s perception of women as weak and docile.

The Dole Philippines’ workers union, the Amado Kadena, has active women union leaders and members. In the Collective Bargaining Agreement won in 2001, the number of days for maternity leave was increased from 45 to 60 days for normal delivery and to 78 days for caesarean delivery. The union also won regular status for the 1,500 contractual workers, many of whom are women. Outside of the union negotiations, 25 women unionists successfully demanded for new raincoats, rain pants and boom shade for workers in the fields.
In Malaysia, Nagama is the face and voice of the countless palm oil plantation women workers who have been transformed from victims to empowered women. Their health destroyed by daily exposure to the herbicide paraquat, their complaints ignored by plantation managers and even health workers; the women with the assistance of Tenaganita, organised and mobilised and won a landmark victory with the declaration of the government of a ban on the herbicide in 2005. While the ban was lifted in 2006 due to pressure from the chemical industry, the Malaysian women workers have remained organised and have learned valuable lessons in developing their strength and in addressing national and international stakeholders in the process of advancing their demands.

Women plantation workers in Sri Lanka, assisted by a non-governmental organization, the Human Development Organization (HDO), won their battle for the suspension of forced sterilization of women in the Kegalle District. Still to be achieved is their demand for the provision of health services to plantation workers especially to pregnant women and their children.

In the Sambas District in Indonesia, women’s groups successfully lobbied the District Head to withdraw the permit of a palm oil plantation company accused of land grabbing. In another village of the district, women successfully negotiated with a palm oil plantation company which acknowledged that the 231.4 hectares of land it has occupied is communal land. In East Kalimantan, Indonesia, female agricultural workers in the palm oil plantation in the village of Nehes Liah Bing created enough pressure through their collective actions and networking to force the Jakarta-based mother company of the local plantation company to negotiate with the workers and to replace the field manager.
Landless Dalit women agricultural workers in a village in Andra Pradesh, India organised themselves into a union and investigated public lands illegally turned into grazing lands by local landlords. Through a combination of legal efforts, rallies and demonstrations and in spite of the attempts of the landlords to frustrate them, the union won the right to the 32 acres of land illegally appropriated by local landlords. While the land is in the individual names of the women who fought for it, the women have agreed that all 40 landless families in the village should have access to the land. The land is planted to 12 varieties of food crops and traditional ways of pest management and organic fertilizer are used. Land acquisition, food security and sustainable agriculture are victories made possible by the determination of the Dalit women and the support of their community.

Through these caselets, the women agricultural workers in the Philippines, Malaysia, India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka have shown that they can bring about positive changes in their lives and working conditions even in the face of what appear to be powerful obstacles such as international corporations, state agencies, plantation owners, big landlords and even community apathy. They have advanced their economic well-being and promoted women’s dignity and gender equality by waging struggles, principally relying on their collective strength and winning broad public support through networking. Through the success of their struggles, the women agricultural workers have shown to themselves and to their communities that they play a crucial role not only in ensuring the survival of their families through their paid work in the fields and unpaid reproductive work at home but also in helping about changes in unequal and unjust social relations in their locality, in the nation and in the world.
Women Hold Half of the Plantation

A Case Study on Women Workers of DoleFil in Mindanao, Philippines

By Kenette Jean I. Millondaga and Grace M. Noval
Women Studies & Resource Center (WSRC)
Southern Mindanao Region

Introduction

Dole Philippines Inc, popularly known as Dolefil, is a fully owned subsidiary of US multinational Dole Foods Company. In the Philippines, Dolefil is famous for its agricultural and industrial production of pineapples. It owns the world’s biggest integrated pineapple plant located in Mindanao, the southernmost island of the Philippines. The integrated plant is composed of a cannery and packaging plant located in Polomolok, South Cotabato and the corrugated box manufacturing plant, international shipping, and wharf facility are in the neighboring city of General Santos.

Dolefil was established in the Philippines on June 19, 1963 when it started operations in 9,000 hectares of land. It then recruited for contract farming small-scale farmers in Polomolok and neighboring municipalities and simultaneously expanded its property through land rentals from other residents of Polomolok. Today, Dolefil operates in 15,507.872 hectares of land. Its net sale in 2005 was P15 million.

---

Dolefil has a total labour force of around 15,000 workers. These workers are ranked as regular and contractual. Regular workers comprise only 30% (4,633 individuals) while contractual workers compose 70% (9,000-10,000 individuals) of the total work force. The company also hires temporary employees from farmers’ cooperatives during peak season in canning and packing.\(^3\)

Among its regular workers, women comprise 53\(^4\) (3,435 individuals) working in either agriculture or manufacturing.

This caselet highlights the situation of women as workers of a foreign-owned agribusiness and how they, as unionists, have achieved a degree of success in improving their working conditions through the collective struggle of their militant union.

### The Local Union – AMADO KADENA-NAFLU-KMU

The Alyansa sa mga Mamumuo sa DoleFil alang sa Kalingkawasan ug Demokrasya sa Nasud (AMADO KADENA or Alliance of DoleFil Workers for National Liberation and Democracy) became the official bargaining unit of the workers in March 2001 after a landslide victory over another union, Pawis ng Makabayan Obrero-National Federation of Labor (Pamao-NFL) which was entrenched as the dominant union for 15 years. The victory of Amado Kadena was tagged as the victory of the DoleFil workers.

Currently, the union has a total membership of 4,611 workers, 50% of

---


whom are women. All rank-and-file hourly employees are qualified to become members of the union.⁵

**Workers’ Situation**

As union issues are women’s issues and women’s issues are union issues, the issues raised by the workers are issues shared by all workers, regardless of gender. Particular women’s issues are also raised by the union.

**Wages, Benefits & Deductions** -- Dolefil workers have a minimum daily wage of Php245.00⁶ while the average daily wage is Php433.00. Majority of newly-regularized workers belong to labour grades I-IV who receive less than the average wage of the workers.⁷

There is also a long list of deductions: *Pag-ibig* loan and premiums payment (housing), Social Security Services loan and premium, withholding tax; deductions for dental and medical services, credit from the mini-mart (groceries); contributions to a health maintenance organization, a death aid programme and the Dole Employees’ Cooperative Complex.

---

⁶ $1:Php48
The workers receive from around Php5,000.00 to Php8,000.00 a month on an eight-hour a day, seven-day work week. This is obviously not sufficient to meet the needs of the workers’ families. Women workers need to earn extra income through such means as the making and selling of “kakanin” (native rice cakes for snacks) in their workplace.

In 2001, the union demanded for a Php125.00 daily wage increase. The company only consented to give 5.6 % increase for workers earning more than Php350.00 and only Php17.50 for workers earning less than Php350.00.

**Hiring and Promotion** – Preferential treatment in hiring is given to women on account of management’s perception that women are docile and are easier to control compared to men. “*Babae ang ginadawat kay gabato man daw ang mga lalaki. Ang babae kay mag-bow-bow lang man daw.*” (Women are preferred because men are perceived to fight back while women are perceived to be passive and obedient.)

But with the requirement for higher educational attainment as a basis for promotion, women have less chances of being promoted. Neneth (not her real name) has been working in DoleFil for two (2) decades. She was hired when the company was still in the process of establishing the plantation. No specific educational attainment was then required. Up to now, Neneth remains an ordinary worker. However, the new generation of workers in the manufacturing department is called the “educated” generation. Performance and educational attainment of individuals are now the major factors for promotion.

**Work Hours and Rest** -- Dolefil needs to operate 24 hours a day to meet the international demand for its pineapple-based products. The company has implemented a 24-hour agricultural and industrial production under the mechanism of day and night shifts of workers.
The shifting schedule is done monthly which requires additional efforts for women workers who need to reorganize their company work and household activities every month.

For day shift workers, women have to wake up at 2:00 a.m. to prepare the family’s breakfast, their food for the workplace and to attend to the other needs of the family, especially the children before leaving. They have to be at the assembly area by 4:30 a.m. and are dispatched to their respective areas at 5:00 a.m. They work in the field from 6:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Night shift workers are expected to be at the assembly area by 3:30 in the afternoon and are dispatched by 4:00 pm. They work from 5:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. of the following day. The one and a half hour spent for assembly and dispatching are not included as part of the official work time and is thus unpaid time for the workers.

Women in the agricultural and industrial sections are forced to work overtime, sometimes for another eight hours especially during September and December, the peak production months of the company. They also have to work on Sundays when demanded by management.

**Women’s Health and Safety Precautions** -- Filipino women’s tendency to be “mainantuson” (patient) and hardworking are principal factors why they are more preferred than men. Even during pregnancy or days when they have menstruation, they work as fast and as efficiently as any other worker.

The long hours of back-breaking work of the DoleFil women workers in the field is aggravated by their exposure to chemicals. “*Nagligad nga adlaw pirti nakong burota kay bag-o lang spray ang pinya. Nya nagsulod na kami bag-o lang gali to gi-sprayhan. 2 days lang nagligad gipasudlan na sa amon. Bagaa oi. Dala ko sa ospital. Gisilingan lang ko sa doctor nga ‘kaligo lang na ga.’*” (Yesterday, my whole body became swollen because
the pineapples in my work area were newly sprayed with chemicals. We had no idea that the area was sprayed two days earlier... I was brought to the company hospital. The doctor told me to “just take a bath”).

Many women complained of getting cough, colds, and skin allergies frequently and they said these are due to chemical exposure. The company provides gloves once every two months but these are easily damaged and the workers have to wait for the next issuance. The rain pants have been issued only twice since they started working. The company also issued protective goggles but these are uncomfortable and the lenses turn hazy from the perspiration of the women as they work under the heat of the sun.

In the absence of protected gears while exposed to chemicals during the whole life cycle of pineapple production, women working in the fields use old t-shirts as improvised masks to protect themselves from directly inhaling the chemicals. They also use long-sleeved sweatshirts to cover their arms and improvised rain pants made of plastic that are already exposed to fertilizers. These are individual efforts to protect themselves...
from hazardous chemicals. Aside from that, they are also exposed to the direct heat of the sun and heavy down pour when it rains. “Dati ginahatagan kami rain coat pag ulan para mapugos trabaho pero wala namon ginagamit kay igang ug panington mi.” (Before, we were given by the company rain coats so that we can continue working under heavy rain but we did not use them because they are too hot and make us sweat profusely.)

**Right to Organise** – Women workers are organized as members of the local union, AK-Naflu-KMU. The union has a women’s committee and a number of women leaders hold positions as part of the Board of Directors and as Departmental Union Officers.

The progressive and militant orientation of the union is anathema to the management. All the officers and leaders are under threat of termination including women who are very vocal and articulate in protecting their rights as workers. They experience harassment as exemplified by the required attendance in so-called orientation seminars which are actually attacks on genuine and militant people’s organisations and unions given by the military. Active union members and leaders, including women, are tagged as communists and considered threats to the existence of the company.

**Women’s struggle as part of the workers’ struggle**

The local union, AK-Naflu-KMU, won the certification election in March 2001, which gave it the right to be the sole-and-exclusive representative of all rank-and-file workers of the company. Women actively campaigned for its victory. In the union’s negotiation for a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA), four (4) women were members of the
union panel which negotiated with the company. The four women were selected because of their grasp of workers’ issues, their active union participation and their ability to lead.

While the negotiation meetings were being held, other union members who were not part of the negotiating panel picketed outside the meeting place. Women unionists actively participated in this mass action to show their support for the workers’ panel and for the union demands. They were also among the speakers who updated the workers on the progress of the negotiations.

Women workers’ benefited from the 2001 CBA when the management agreed to raise the number of days for maternity leave from 45 days to 60 days for normal delivery and 78 days for caesarian operation. Another victory was the grant of regular status to 1,500 contractual workers, a large number of whom are women. However, management refused to grant the P125.00 daily wage increase demanded by the workers but instead agreed to a wage increase much lower than what the union demanded.

Even after the close of the negotiations, women unionists managed to win additional benefits for the workers. Twenty-five women unionists from the agricultural department negotiated with the Vice President for manufacturing and won their demand for new raincoats, rain pants and boom shade for those assigned in the agricultural department. They also successfully demanded for the replacement of defective trucks which take workers to and from the assembly area to their work areas.

Women’s creativity and persistence are manifested in how they perform their tasks as unionists. The assembly area for agricultural workers
of DoleFil is not just a venue for interaction among workers but also between workers and their supervisors. Women unionists actively use the area for agitation and education work. They disseminate education materials on current labour and people’s issues. Women consider the assembly time as a chance to discuss and share opinions and ideas on their situation. The company does not prohibit such activity as long as it does not affect their working time. However, some security personnel confiscated their IDs when they were caught distributing flyers and leaflets. In order to prevent the security men from confiscating their IDs, women developed a tactic. “Isuksok namon sa bra ang ID para hindi makuha. Sabay siling nga, ‘sige kuhaa harassment yan’” (We put our ID inside our bra and challenged the security personnel by saying ‘come on, get it, we will charge you with harassment’).

The militant and progressive local union recognizes the strength of women. Although women’s representation in the union leadership is not proportional to the number of women members, they have the bigger number in mobilizing their ranks. The union’s women committee is at the forefront of the celebration of the International Women’s Day (March 8) and actively joins the Labour Day celebration (May 1). Women’s participation in the union and the presence of the committee of women in their organizational structure are manifestations of their special role in organizing and consolidating their ranks. They conduct discussions and seminars for women workers and workers’ wives on topics like Violence against Women and Children and the Basic Women Orientation Seminar. They also conduct leadership training among women, which include topics on how to lead, how to speak in public and how to organize and facilitate meetings.
Conclusion

The feudal-patriarchal system existing in the Philippines causes and exacerbates the multiple burdens of women agricultural workers. While they are forced to extend their work time as dictated by the management, they shoulder the main responsibility of doing domestic and household chores. Because their daily wage is not enough to meet the needs of their families, women workers are forced to work longer than eight hours and to supplement their wages by engaging in other income-generating activities.

While women’s work accounts for half of the company’s productivity, this work remains undervalued and unsafe. And while women workers are preferred by the company based on the perception that they are docile and more hardworking compared to men, their reproductive rights and reproductive health are not considered.

As women assert their rights to involve themselves in political activities, and as they continue to challenge the status quo, their participation and creativity contribute to the strength of the workers’ union. Women’s active participation in the union is a crucial factor in advancing the workers’ interest in general, in ensuring improvement in women workers’ working conditions and in the transformation of long-held feudal views on women.
Poisoned and Protesting
The Mobilisation of Women Pesticide Sprayers Against Paraquat in Malaysia

By Anita Whittle*
Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP)

This caselet documents the plight of women pesticide sprayers in Malaysia who successfully fought to ban the use of paraquat, a highly toxic chemical herbicide, in the country. In particular, it highlights the work of the women’s organization Tenaganita in the mobilization of these workers to campaign against an agricultural TNC giant to stop the use of paraquat in Malaysian palm oil plantations. The caselet also spotlights how a woman pesticide sprayer, Nagama Raman, became an empowered advocate of the rights of women plantation workers and successfully influenced the campaign on an international level.

Women working on palm oil plantations in Malaysia

Palm oil plantation was introduced in Malaysia at a time when very few jobs were available to women. Many women moved into the industry and were assigned jobs as sprayers of pesticides; in 2002, there were

* Compiled from the reports and publications produced by Tenaganita and PAN AP.
30,000 women spraying potentially toxic pesticides on a daily basis.¹

Living conditions in the plantations are generally very poor, medical care is inadequate and estate management as a whole is oblivious and unsympathetic to the social and health problems faced by women workers. The most alarming breach of plantation workers’ rights has been the daily poisoning they endure as a result of their spraying.²

The health risks of Paraquat

Paraquat is a highly toxic chemical herbicide used throughout Malaysian palm oil plantations and applied daily by work gangs typically composed of women.³ Exposure can occur through skin absorption and inhalation and it cannot be used safely under working conditions in Malaysia.

Syngenta, a Swiss-based agribusiness corporation, is the dominant producer of paraquat which it markets under the trade name Gramoxone. With a share of 20% of the pesticide market, herbicide sales account for 38% of Syngenta’s business.⁴ Paraquat is the most deadly

---

³ Rengam, et al. (2007).
herbicide scheduled under Class 1(B) of the Pesticides Act 1974 and its use has been questioned and discussed for decades by international regulators, NGOs and the scientific community.⁵

Paraquat poisoning in Kapar

Kapar, in Selangor, is just one district of many in Malaysia where women sprayers fell ill due to paraquat poisoning. The daily use of paraquat was in direct breach of Article 11 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which states that women have ‘the right to protection of health and safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the function of reproduction’.⁶

Nagama Raman worked in the Kapar district on a plantation called Jeram Estate. In Kapar, pesticide spraying was among the few paying jobs available to unskilled women. On a daily basis, the sprayers had to dilute the paraquat concentrate with water before pouring the solution into four-gallon canisters which they carried on their backs as they sprayed areas of often long distances. Nagama recalls mixing the paraquat with her bare hands “because I was not aware of what this would do to me...”.⁷

Women on the Kapar plantation began to suffer fatigue, blurred vision, frequent tearing of the eyes, giddiness, itchiness and rashes. They experienced difficulty in breathing, loss of appetite and discolouration and peeling nails. Sores appeared on their backs where the skin was constantly in contact with the chemical due to leaking spray tanks. When

the women sought medical help, they faced gender bias in the health care system and were given inadequate concern and treatment by the medical staff within the estate.

When Nagama experienced fatigue, poor vision and sores in her genital area she sought treatment from a private clinic outside of the estate and was told by her doctor to seek other work. Nagama’s attempt to discuss the workers’ health problems with the estate conductor were continually dismissed as that of just one individual and ignored, despite the fact that other women were experiencing similar symptoms.

Here, like many plantations throughout Malaysia, the women faced gender bias and insufficient care in the health care system, the industry and the workers’ union. Whilst the women of Jeram Estate mobilized themselves to form a day-long workers’ strike, they lacked external support and were unable to draw further collective strength through unionisation. Women agricultural workers in Malaysia are rarely members of farmers’ unions, as they are not regarded as farmers and if allowed to become members, they have little say on setting agendas or priorities. Nagama felt she lacked the support of the union, saying, “The National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) served no purpose, so I decided not to seek its help. I felt the union had failed the workers.” An alternative form of collective action was needed.

**Tenaganita’s aid in mobilizing and empowering the women workers**

In 1991, Irene Fernandez established Tenaganita (Women’s Force) in response to the health problems and discriminatory social environment

---

of women workers in Malaysia.\textsuperscript{10} Tenaganita has been heavily involved in campaigns against the health impacts of hazardous pesticides and the banning of paraquat. Promoting and protecting the rights of women pesticide sprayers in the oil palm plantations in Selangor was an initial focus of the organisation. With the aid of Tenaganita, women paraquat sprayers in the Kapar plantation and throughout Malaysia became empowered and mobilized to fight against their mistreatment.

Working closely with women plantation workers, the organisation ran medical examinations, surveys and interviews with women plantation workers which clearly demonstrated poisoning due to paraquat. Tenaganita conducted a systematic health monitoring programme over a three month period which confirmed constant poisoning. Nose bleeds, tearing of the eyes, contact dermatitis, skin irritation and sores, nail discoloration, dropping of the nails, and abdominal ulceration were all symptoms of paraquat poisoning experienced by the women monitored. At the time, relatively few exposure and intervention studies regarding occupational exposures had been performed.\textsuperscript{11} As a result of the programme, Tenaganita and PAN AP produced, “Poisoned and Silenced” in 2002, which identified paraquat as the main offending poison within the TNC controlled palm oil plantations. The report recommended the banning of paraquat along with all WHO class 1 pesticides.\textsuperscript{12}

The women’s close involvement in the daily monitoring programme gave them an opportunity to record the symptoms they were experiencing and a better understanding of their deteriorating health. But the main hurdle for the plantation workers seemed to be the feeling of helplessness among women as a deep-rooted result of patriarchy.\textsuperscript{13} Empowerment was

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., p. 142.
\textsuperscript{11} Wesseling, Catharina et. al (Submitted July 24, 2001), p. 14.
\textsuperscript{12} Rengam et al (2007).
crucial for the women to take a stand and mobilise. Tenaganita organised workshops which successfully educated the women on the effects of pesticides such as paraquat, raised their awareness of the exploitative and subjugated nature of their situation in the plantations and developed awareness of their rights as women agricultural workers. Tenaganita also developed leadership training programmes so that women could develop self-confidence and take up leadership positions in the trade union and bring the issue of pesticide poisoning into the union agenda.

With the support of Tenaganita, women sprayers from ten plantations formed an activist group. Nagama took part in several training programmes and found they raised her awareness of her rights as a woman and a worker, empowering her to further activism alongside Tenaganita.\textsuperscript{14}

**Involvement of women plantation workers in the campaign against paraquat**

Armed with the results of the study, Tenaganita and PAN AP led a national campaign to ban the use of paraquat. In August 2002, the demands were met and Government officials made the groundbreaking decision to ban the use of paraquat in Malaysia. As of August 27 and with immediate effect, applications to register or re-register paraquat would be rejected. All applications at the time would be stopped. Previously registered products such as Gramoxone were to be phased out by 2005.\textsuperscript{15}

But the fight was far from finished. Syngenta, which was the largest agrochemical company in the world at the time, tried to persuade the Pesticides Board to overturn the decision made on the company’s most important product.\textsuperscript{16} A global campaign was launched against paraquat

and Syngenta in 2004, in which the women plantation workers played a vital role. Building the authorities’ understanding of the realities of the women’s daily exposure to the pesticide became an important strategy.

The Malaysian Government caved to industry pressure and announced that it was reconsidering the ban in April 2005.¹⁷ In response, Tenaganita and PAN AP facilitated the presence of the women plantation workers at a parliamentary session, enabling them to make direct interventions on their calls to ban paraquat worldwide. The women lobbied at the Parliament House with signs of “PARAQUAT KILLS”, spoke in press conferences and interviews about the effects of paraquat on their lives and presented a memorandum to the members of parliament, resolving never to give up their fight to maintain its ban. In May, the Pesticides Board and Minister of Agriculture were urged by the campaigners to remain strong under industry pressure. The women plantation workers were actively involved and dialogue sessions between the

Nagama Raman became involved with Tenaganita in 2002, and after building her confidence through their training and awareness sessions, she became an outspoken advocate for women affected by pesticides like paraquat. She began to travel with Tenaganita and PAN AP to campaign at forums and conventions throughout the world. At the second Conference of Parties of the Prior Informed Consent Convention (PIC COP2) in October 2005, PAN AP facilitated an intervention by Nagama during a PAN AP organised side event. The meeting was well-attended, with FAO officials, industry representatives and approximately fifty delegates representing the participating governments in which all continents were represented. Nagama recounted the realities of working conditions of women pesticide sprayers, the unsuitability and ineffectiveness of protective gear and the terrible impact on her own health. After her presentation, the US Environmental Protection Agency representative asked, “Why isn’t she giving a presentation in the main PIC meeting?” Another listener declared, “This is what we all need to hear!”  

Nagama’s articulation of her personal experience was invaluable and the success of her presentation shows the importance of enabling women workers to be heard directly at a global level. Whilst the Malaysian government announced that it would temporarily lift the ban in October 2006, and has not yet re-enacted it, this caselet remains a success story for the women plantation workers of Malaysia.20

**Successful mobilisation of women plantation workers**

Several important elements contributed to the successful mobilization of women plantation workers to ban paraquat in Malaysia. Tenaganita’s empirical research on the ill-effects of the herbicide on women workers’ health and the dissemination of the results through the publication of “Silenced and Poisoned” provided the basis for the organizing, education, mobilization and lobbying components of the campaign.

The continuous mobilization of women agricultural workers played a key role in the campaign to ban paraquat. Aided by Tenaganita and PAN AP, the women plantation workers voiced their concerns at an international level. Furthermore, the immediate involvement of the women plantation workers at each stage became a major strength of the campaign. Their successful mobilization is a genuine success story of women agricultural workers in resisting the forces of globalisation.

The women plantation workers have continued to forward their campaign and Tenaganita has facilitated the alternative Women’s Sprayers Group, Hak Kesita, which was formed in order to actively deal with critical issues affecting women plantation workers and to organise and mobilise them in their fights for their rights. There are now fifteen

---

20 Rengam, Sarojeni on behalf of the Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific, Open Letter to His Excellency Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Re: Temporary Lifting of Malaysian Paraquat Ban. 6 October 2006.
women’s groups throughout Malaysia. Three training programmes have been conducted to raise awareness and continue to mobilise the women. The groups were also able to reach out to contractual workers who are deprived of minimum health care from their employers. Tenaganita has also been working to implement a gender policy framework in palm oil plantations of Malaysia.

Nagama became the face of the women plantation workers. She is a strong advocate for women’s rights, declaring, “It is time that women increase their political involvement. Only if women become politically involved in getting parliamentary seats can there be change.” Despite failing health, she continues to assist in the organisation of women plantation workers, raising their awareness of their health and rights and empowering them to challenge the patriarchal conditions of plantations.21 22

Women Workers in Sri Lanka Plantations

By Ponniah Logeswari
Human Development Organization (HDO)

Introduction

The Human Development Organization (HDO) is a non-governmental, non-profit making and non-racial development & human rights organization that works with underprivileged and marginalized communities for the promotion and protection of human rights and rights to development in the plantations and rural areas of Sri Lanka. HDO is registered with the Department of Social Service, Sri Lanka, accredited by the United Nations and affiliated with various international organizations.

HDO was formed by a group of university students and plantation/development workers in 1990. The plantation community in Sri Lanka is a very underprivileged, oppressed and exploited community. The tea and rubber plantation economic system perpetuates the dependence of poor workers on the plantations. Women’s status in the plantation sector produces a continuous lag in opportunities for them in education, health, politics, employment, and development; while their worth as individuals and as equal partners in the family and in the community is barely recognized. Given this situation in the plantations, HDO believes
that social change through promotion & protection of human rights, and empowering the people is the way towards the attainment of sustainable development and equality in society.

The struggle of Sri Lankan women developed with the British rule. In the latter part of the 1930s, the Denoughmoor Commission recommended the grant of franchise to the people of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and this period saw the emergence of women’s fronts and the formation of trade unions where the women took active part. The same period marked the emergence of women’s organizations, national struggles and the class struggle of the plantation workers.

This caselet deals with the conditions and struggles of women workers in Sri Lanka’s plantations. Plantation workers in Sri Lanka are the descendants of South Indian workers who were brought to work in the plantations over 180 year ago. Women workers are a crucial component of the plantation work force. The problems faced by the plantation workers encompass the absence of basic political rights such as the right to citizenship and to vote as well as the absence of the right to expression and to movement. They also suffer from low wages, occupational health hazards brought about by the use of herbicides and pesticides and issues of food security because of the perennial increase in the cost of living. Child labor is prevalent and the right of plantation children to education is limited. In addition, women suffer from gender-based violence and cannot exercise their reproductive rights.

**Conditions of Women Workers in the Plantations**

Women workers in the plantations compose 53% of the workforce. They contribute greatly to the productive sector in an economy where tea and rubber play major roles as foreign exchange earners. However, the privatization in the 1990s of formerly state-owned plantations leading
to the multiplicity of small landholders has swollen the ranks of the unemployed and underemployed especially among women.

A major issue for women plantation workers is the wage issue; they work long hours but are not paid according to their labor. Any increase in their wages is determined by a wage collective agreement signed once every two years between the three major plantation trade union centers and the Employees Federation of Ceylon (EFC). Ordinary workers are not involved in the bargaining and the collective agreement does not include relief to the workers in the event of major changes in the cost of living in between agreements.

In 2004, there was a struggle regarding the amount of wage increase that should be granted to plantation workers. Women workers of the Kotagala area plantations agitated for wage increase under the guidance
of HDO. This agitation from Kotagala reached other areas as well through campaigns in various plantation districts especially in the city of Kandy.

May Day, which before merely served as a workers’ holiday with pay, became a forum for plantation workers to demand for their rights. In 2006, when the plantation trade unions were undecided and divided on the question as to how much increase in wages they should ask, the plantation women workers on their own conducted island-wide agitation campaigns for a reasonable increase in their wage. It is noteworthy that while men dominated the decision-making process in the unions and at home, more women than men participated in the campaign for an increase in wages.

**Health and Reproductive Rights**

Health is another major issue confronting women and children alike in the plantation sector. Maternal and child mortality rates are high. Although there are maternity wards and dispensary facilities in some plantations these are mostly without health personnel such as nurses or midwives and the required medicines and health equipment are lacking. Electricity and safe drinking water facilities are non-existent. The Golinda Estate in the Kegalle District is an example of the inadequate health services and absence of basic energy and water facilities.

While some estates provide for Estate Medical Assistants (EMA), these medical personnel visit the estates only once a week. Therefore when workers fall ill in the absence of the EMA, they do not have access to any health personnel. Workers with ailments seldom seek treatment in the urban medical institutes because this would cost them their day’s wage plus the cost of traveling. More often, than not, workers rely on home remedies which do not always work.
Mothers delivering their babies at home and in the fields are common in the plantation. Though the International Labor Organization (ILO) requires that workplaces should have health facilities; the plantations do not even provide such basic requirements as toilets or drinking water facilities. The absence of toilets makes it difficult and highly inconvenient for women workers to answer the call of nature. It is not surprising that many of them suffer from various urinary infections. Compulsory family planning has been experienced by women plantation workers. The plantation companies and the Plantation Housing and Development Trust have arrogated to themselves the right to determine the size of plantation families. Sterilization of women has been reported.

The intervention of organizations such as HDO has resulted in the suspension of sterilization for the last two years in the Kegalle District. In the meantime the campaign for the plantation health sector to be absorbed into the national stream has been brought to the attention of the government.

**Violence against women and children**

Violation of women’s and children’s rights and violence against and abuse of women and children in the plantation sector, which is an old practice under the patriarchal system, persist. Though education has been made compulsory for children between the ages of 5 to 14, there is an increasing number of plantation children who drop out of school to seek jobs as domestic helpers. Poverty has rendered impossible the possibility of plantation children reaching college. Some children as revealed in the cases of teenagers Archunan Loganathan (Velli Oya-Hatton), Lingeswaran (Bogahawatta) and Krishnaweni (Ketaboola), have mysteriously died. Plantation women who have migrated to other countries have been subjected to sexual and physical violence. A case
in point is that of a widow with two children who left plantation work to go to Abu Dhabi to work as a domestic helper, leaving behind her two children. Kalaichelvi left on November 1997 and nothing was heard from her until the news of her death was received on August 1999. Her orphaned children are now dependent on their uncle.

HDO has conducted awareness-raising on the problems of migrant workers. It has also launched nationwide campaigns to highlight children’s rights to education and anti-child labour campaigns. HDO believes that its campaign has contributed to the formation of national organizations to defend the rights of children and women.
Poverty and its impact

The World Bank’s 2002 Poverty Assessment of the country places plantation workers as the poorest sector where the incidence of poverty is 7% higher than the national level. Government safety nets and programmes hardly reach the plantation sector, leaving behind plantation workers much worse off than their urban and other rural counterparts.

The World Bank’s 2007 Poverty Assessment points out that plantation workers who are in possession of National Identity Cards (NIC) and other necessary documents are able to move out of the estate to seek employment in other areas and are in a position to earn added income. Those without such documents do not wish to risk being arrested or detained for security reasons and thus have to remain in the plantation.

Many plantation women do not have these documents and HDO has launched vocational training, livelihood support and self-employment programmes for plantation women. These programmes increase the chances of women to earn additional income and place them in a better position to participate in decision making within the family and in the community.

HDO succeeded in taking to the United Nations the civil and political rights issues of the plantation workers with Indian Tamil origins which contributed to pressure the Sri Lankan Government for a solution. This culminated with the government passing the Grant of Citizenship to Persons of Indian Origin Act No. 35 of 2003. Under Section 2 of the Act, “any person of Indian origin, who on the date of coming into operation of this Act, (a) has been a permanent resident of Sri Lanka since October 30, 1964 or (b) is a descendant resident in Sri Lanka of a person who has
been a permanent resident of Sri Lanka since October 30, 1964, shall be granted the status of citizen, with effect from such date and be entitled, in like manner and to the same extent, to all the rights and privileges which a citizen of Sri Lanka is entitled to by law.”

Conclusion

The struggle of Sri Lanka’s plantation workers dates back to two centuries. The HDO has been at the forefront of the current efforts of civil society organizations in Sri Lanka to promote and protect the rights of the plantation workers, majority of whom are women. Through awareness raising and education and creation of support programmes and through organising and launching of campaigns, HDO contributes to the plantation workers’ efforts to improve their lives and to work for equality and social justice.
There is a Voice to be Heard
Women’s Struggle in Sambas District, West Kalimantan, Indonesia Against the Expansion of Large Scale Oil Palm Plantation
By Laili Khairnur
Pontianak West Kalimantan and Sawit Watch

“Oil palm for biofuel was to have been one of the best solutions in saving the planet from greenhouse gases and global warming. Instead the forests are being torn down in the headlong rush to boost palm oil production.”¹

Biofuels, climate change and other environmental issues are hot topics discussed by many parties such as the government, politicians, NGOs and the private sector at the national and international level. But generally these discussions are limited only to the elite and the educated. Women in rural villages have not been part of these discussions as they have limited access to information.

But rural women directly feel the effects of climate change. They actively manage the natural resources as theirs and their families’ lives depend on the protection and sustainability of the land, rivers and forests. Their children’s future is threatened whenever the state and the private sector destroy these resources for economic reasons.

Palm oil is a form of vegetable oil obtained from the fruit of the oil palm tree. Its popularity as a vegetable oil is due to the belief that it is “free from artery-clogging trans fats, formed when fats are hydrogenated to make them more solid and extend their shelf life”. But the current emphasis on biofuels as a substitute for fossil oil has resulted in the expansion of oil palm plantations in Asia. With the European Union’s objective of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 20% in 2020 through the use of biofuels, large companies have intensified the deforestation of many areas in Indonesia to increase palm oil production.

In Sambas, West Kalimantan, a palm oil plantation giant has been found by environmental groups to “be involved in land right conflicts, working

---

without approved environmental impact assessments, lacking due consultation with local communities and being involved in deforestation and forest fires”.

This caselet documents the struggle of women in 16 villages in Sambas District, West Kalimantan, Indonesia against large-scale palm oil plantation. Around 400 women are members of women’s groups in these 16 villages and they are in the process of forming the Union of Sambas Women. This is based on interviews with the women in the district.

**Impact of Palm Oil Plantation Expansion in Sambas District**

1. Majority of the farmers are involved in the production of rice, orange, rubber and other crops. The women are concerned about the constriction of land for small-scale food and cash crop production which have resulted in reduced harvests and in reduced income.
2. The palm oil plantations have converted communal forests into private reserves making access to forest and natural resources more difficult. For the women, the forest is the source of wood, fruits, and rattan, which are important to their livelihood.
3. River pollution due to chemical inputs associated with palm oil processing and erosion runoff due to deforestation has diminished the people’s use of rivers for their daily existence.
4. With deforestation, floods have become common occurrences during heavy rains. For example, the women say that waters reached as high as two meters in Senujuh village after two days of continuous rain.
5. Forest fires and methane released from dried peat-lands result in smoke pollution affecting the health of the communities especially women and children and have interrupted the schooling of the

---

children as the smoke is too thick and too dangerous preventing them from going to school.

6. The expansion of palm oil production has led to internal community conflicts. The community is divided among those against and those in favour of palm oil production.

7. Turning communal forests into preserves of private companies essentially dispossesses the Sambas people of their heritage and their future.

**Organising and Mobilising Women and Working with Community Organisations Against Oil Palm Plantations**

Organising women in the Sambas District meant first organising at the village level. These entailed the holding of seminars, workshops, training and other capacity-building initiatives. The determination and the solidarity required to take back the management of resources can only be developed by developing critical awareness among the grassroots women.

The women of Sambas District participated in the negotiations between the community and the oil palm plantation. The perspective of grassroots women helped keep the negotiation process from being manipulated by the company and prevented some of the community men from monopolizing and taking weak positions during the negotiations.
At the village level, the organised women became coordinators in the mobilization of the community in demanding the rights to the land occupied by the palm oil plantation.

The women’s groups also developed a credit union for them to access credit at reasonable interest rates and to develop income-generating activities such as handicrafts using non-timber forest products.

**Positive Results of the Struggle**

Working in solidarity with community organizations, the women’s groups of Sambas through a community demonstration was able to pressure the head district of Sambas to rescind the permit of a palm oil plantation company accused of land grabbing.

In Senujuh village, the representatives of the women’s groups successfully negotiated with a palm oil company to acknowledge that the
231.4 hectares of land the company used to managed is communal land. The women’s groups have gained the respect of other organisations in Sambas because of their militancy and they have become an inspiration for other villagers to organise themselves.

**Lessons Learned**

Under an unjust and unfair social system, poor women are vulnerable. They can overcome this injustice and vulnerability by fighting and struggling for a just and fair system. To become advocates, it demands toughness, militancy and wisdom. Such characteristics emerge from communities when they are faced by issues that affect them such as the danger to their land, livelihood and resources.

Such is the case of the organised women in the 16 villages of Sambas District. Their struggle against the palm oil plantations is a struggle for their children, for their livelihood, for their communities and for their heritage. In the process, they have built their own organizations, have developed confidence from their successes in negotiations and in their mass actions and have won tangible victories vis-a-vis reclaiming their land. They have also learned the importance of relying on their own strength and on the importance of support from sympathetic legislators and media in the face of the lack of support from certain government offices.
The beginning of the oil palm plantation in East Kutai, East Kalimantan, Indonesia

The oil palm plantation in East Kutai started in 1999 as a community development project of Kaltim Prima Coal, a coal-mining firm. The project was part of the company’s social accountability to the community. Through the collaboration with the local government, funds were extended to the plantation company to provide free seeds of palm trees to the community. Using these seeds, the community people planted palm trees on 9,000 hectares of land which they managed. Around 4,500 families benefited from this project.

In 2004, the local government established one (1) million hectares of oil palm plantations and 40% of this area is located in East Kutai District, Muara Wahau sub-district at Nehes Liah Bing village. At present, PT
Tapian Nadenggan, a company which is part of PT Smart\(^1\), owns 38,000 hectares of large scale oil palm plantation in the district.

**Anti-worker policies and practices of the oil palm plantation company**

Nehes Liah Bing is a village of indigenous people, the Dayak Wehea. Its population is around 2,651. Farming is the main source of livelihood.

The presence of PT Tapian Nadenggan created many conflicts with the community around the issues of unfair labour practices and lack of safeguards against occupational health hazard. Prior to the start of its plantation operations, the company promised to prioritize the hiring of members of the local community as workers. But in reality, the company recruited workers from outside and hired only 43 workers from the village. Of this number, only six were hired as regular or permanent workers while 37 were hired as temporary workers. Many of the plantation labourers are women who work as pesticide sprayers and as weed cutters.

As women comprise many of the agricultural workers and majority of the temporary ones in the oil palm plantation, they are at the forefront of

\(^1\) “PT SMART Tbk (“SMART”) is one of the largest, publicly-listed, integrated palm-based consumer companies in Indonesia. SMART currently has palm plantation with total coverage area of almost 130,000 hectares. SMART also distributes, markets and exports consumer palm-based products such as cooking oil, margarine and shortening.” http://www.smart-tbk.com/, accessed August 22, 2009.
the struggle against unfair labour practices and lack of safeguards against occupational health hazards.

**Women struggled against the following:**

*First:* struggle against the lack of protection against occupational health hazards. When temporary workers suffer from pesticide poisoning due to the absence of protection during spraying, or when they hurt themselves because of their weeding activity or when they meet serious accidents in the field, the company does not provide access to health services.

*Second:* struggle against wage difference between permanent and temporary workers and lack of allowances for the latter. While temporary and permanent labourers work the same number of hours in the field or in the office, the former receive only Rp 34,000/day² without any other benefits. Meanwhile, permanent labourers receive Rp 860,000/month and also 1.5 kilos of rice. Workers have to provide their own working equipment such as the tank for spraying and the axe to cut weeds.

*Third:* struggle against discrimination in the hiring of local people. In spite of the company’s promise to give preference to the villagers in hiring, there are more migrant workers hired by the plantation company.

*Fourth:* struggle against gender discrimination in promotion. Women personnel have no opportunity to aspire for supervisory or managerial position in the company. The company said that they will never put a woman as a foreperson even if the woman has good capabilities in the field.

The four issues above were the reasons why the women in the oil palm plantation at Nehes Liah Bing Village decided organise and to take

---

² 1 USD = 10,065.00 Indonesian Rupiahs
collective action. The violation of women’s rights to equal wage for equal work, to protection against occupational health hazard, to job security and to end gender discrimination raised their consciousness.

The strategies adopted by the women of Nehes Liah Bing Village

Consciousness-raising and organizing: A female labour organiser from the district labour organization initiated the process by organising discussion groups to talk about the issues of the community and of women workers who struggle against the oil palm plantation company; and to discuss their rights as labourers, as women and as citizens.

Networking: The organizing at Nehes Liah Bing village is linked to the network at the national level. This linkage provides the local organization with information related to the Indonesian labour policy and also opens outside support to the local struggle. Local women realize that their problem is not isolated as the regional government is targeting to build a 400,000-hectare oil palm plantation in East Kutai. Consequently, the women gain strength from the fact that their struggle against large-scale oil palm plantation is shared by other communities.

Collective actions: Demonstrations are held by the local workers’ organization which are participated in even by non-members. The actions against the oil palm company are made to demand that it fulfils its promises to the village and to the labourers especially on hiring preferences to the local population. Collective actions were also made to pressure the Human Resources (Labour) Department of East Kutai District to intervene in the company’s violations regarding the treatment of temporary workers, labour wages and the lack of accountability of the company.

Building alliances: The village organization works with national NGOs such as Sawit Watch to bring its case to Indonesia’s Human Rights Commission.
The various violations of human rights of the workers and of the community are documented and presented to the Human Rights Commission which has the mandate to ensure that justice is served to the community.

**Initial Gains of the Struggle**

While the struggles against large-scale oil palm plantation in the Nehes Liah Bing village are still ongoing, these have yielded initial positive results.

The issues and struggles of the women’s organization in Nehes Liah Bing village have been taken up by one of the biggest national newspapers of Indonesia, *Kompas* and have been featured in the local paper, *Tribun Kaltim*.

As a result of the widespread exposé of the problems in the village, PT Smart, which is the Jakarta-based mother company of PT Tapian Nadenggan, was compelled to send a representative to visit the village. The mother company has also initiated negotiations with the plantation workers and the community people. It has also replaced the field manager of the palm oil plantation.

At the local government level, the women’s organization of the village has brought to the awareness of the officials the complaints against the plantation company. Because of local and national pressure, the local government was forced to facilitate the negotiations between the village workers and the company. While no satisfactory agreements have been reached as yet, the women’s organization has been successful in involving the local government in intervening in the case.
The most significant result of the struggle was the raised awareness of the village, particularly the women, of their rights and of the need to take collective action against the violations of their rights by PT Tapian Nadenggan.

**Lessons Learned**

This documentation of the struggle of women agricultural workers of Nehes Liah Bing village proves once again that the image of women as docile and subservient is a misconception. In the face of unjust working conditions and broken promises from a big company, women workers develop the courage and solidarity to advance their rights and demand for justice and accountability.

While the women workers must principally rely on their own strength, their experience has shown that involvement of other organizations, support from the media and forming alliances are important considerations to ensure that their demands are heard and won.
Background

Landlessness for forty (40) Dalit families in Marthuvari Palli Dalitawada, a hamlet in Jogivari Palli Panchayat of Sadum Mandal means a life of poverty and exploitation. All the agricultural lands in the locality are in the hands of 20 landlords who belong to the Reddys, the dominant caste of this village. The Dalits are agricultural workers earning wages below the legislated minimum wage of Rs. 60 per day¹. But women labourers receive lower pay than men: Rs. 25 per day compared to Rs.30/- per day.

As the Dalits do not get employment for more than 75 days in a year, they are forced during lean seasons to borrow from the landlords who charge usurious interest rates from 60% to 100% per annum. The loans usually come with the condition that the borrower must work for the landlord until the debt is repaid. Nevertheless, the loans are insufficient to ensure the survival of the Dalits and distress migration has become

¹ 1 USD = 47.8741 INR
inevitable for at least 50% of the Dalit families. Parents go to Bangalore (about 250 km away) to work as construction workers for six months. Poverty, debt and absence of parents result in many instances to child labour, early marriages for girl children and illiteracy among the children.

Organising the Women of Marthuvari Palli to Struggle for Land

The APVVU Mandal Union organised a *padayatra* (foot march) in February 2006 in Sadum Mandal to strengthen the unionisation of landless agricultural labourers in Mandal. Six Dalit women from Marthuvari Palli participated throughout the 5-day *padayatra*. Recognizing the need to be together to discuss their own issues, the six women from the Marthuvari Palli village formed a separate union unit within the village, whose membership grew to 77 women.

Marthuvari Palli had 32 acres of grazing lands. The Dalits thought even these grazing lands belonged to the landlords and therefore there were no idle lands in the village. They were completely ignorant of the availability of government lands in their village.
While the men continued to migrate and also work in submission to the landlords with low wages, the Dalit women in the village decided to make use of the provisions of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) to get employment. The NREGA ensures 100 days employment for rural workers. In Marthuvari Palli, this means working on an approach road to the hillocks near their village. This road also approaches the grazing lands of 32 acres.

Chendramma, the union leader, investigated the status of the 32-acre grazing land and discovered that these were government land, illegally under the control of landlords. She began to suspect the Village Revenue Officer (VRO’s) version of the vacant land as being grazing land. Hence she applied for the status of land under the RTI (Right to Information) and confirmed from official records that the land was government waste land not allotted to anybody.

With this important information, several rounds of discussions were held among the Dalits in the village which resulted in the agreement that the Dalits would take up the task of land appropriation with the women leading the struggle. This struggle was not an easy one.

The first step taken, the Dalit application for clearing the bushes and shrubs on the identified 32 acres of land under the NREGA, was turned down by the Mandal Development Officer (MDO) who supported the landlords’ claim that the land was for grazing. The women union leaders from the village submitted the land records from RTI which proved that

---

2 The Notified grazing land cannot be distributed to individuals for cultivation and other purposes. Grazing lands are considered as public land reserved for grazing purposes only. But in reality the majority of grazing lands are occupied by the dominant people and in many cases Dalits are not allowed to use these lands. Where there are a lot of hillocks and irrigation tanks, there is no need for reserving grazing lands, as is the case in Maruthuvari Palli.
the land was idle government land. However, the officials succeeded in forcing the Dalit men to withdraw the applications submitted under NREGA.

Subsequently within a period of two months, the women decided to drop the idea of land appropriation but again applied for work under NREGA on the same lands. However this time, the Dalit women had support from the district union of APVVU (Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vruthidarula Union) and had media coverage, when they submitted their application for work to the MDO. A discussion with the District Project Director was initiated to expose the interference of landlords. Again the women failed to get favorable support from the District Official. The District Official used as justification to deny the women’s application the failure of the latter to go though the Grama Sabha (Village General Body Meeting), a requirement for the processing of the application.

The Grama Sabha decisions are always dominated by upper caste landlords. Generally Grama Sabha meetings are also not properly announced further ensuring landlord domination of the proceedings. The Dalits are not allowed to sit at par with the landlords in Grama Sabhas. Any voice raising the concerns of Dalits is not entertained. Participation of outsiders, particularly those who advocate for the Dalits, is not welcomed. The landlords charge outsiders of trying to divide the village and break the so-called peace and unity among the villagers. So, while recognizing the importance of participation in Grama Sabha meetings, it is always difficult for Dalits to actually do this.

How did the women confront the obstacle presented by the Grama Sabha requirement to hear their application for work? On May 19, 2008, the entire village staged a dharna (demonstration) in front of the Mandal Development Office to expose the bias for the landlords of the office. The media also exposed the issue in the newspapers. One of
the demands of the demonstration was that the Grama Sabha meeting should be attended by the District Panchayat Officer, and that meeting should be organised with proper advance information to every one in the village. After two days of demonstration, the District Panchayat Officer agreed to participate in the Grama Sabha meeting so that Dalits could also join with district officials as witnesses.

Subsequently, on June 16, 2008, a Grama Sabha was organised in the village. The Dalits held many preparatory meetings prior to the Grama Sabha to build their unity and to ensure effective participation in the Grama Sabha. The efforts of the landlords to prevent the participation of the Dalits such as providing liquor and giving Rs.100 for each family to visit relatives outside the village failed. The people took the money and the liquor but still attended the Grama Sabha. The Dalits succeeded in getting approval for NREGA work on the 32 acres of land, after proving with the factual data collected through RTI, that the land was not reserved for grazing purposes. This was the first victory of the Dalits’ collective effort against the landlords and unhelpful bureaucracy. Further, the women-led collective action not only strengthened the women’s unity, it also developed the positive self-esteem among them.

**Successful struggle for Land Appropriation in the Face of Landlord Resistance**

The NREGA work provided an opportunity for all job cardholders to get employment for 20 days and this time they decided to take over the land for cultivation before they applied for the titles.

The general saying in Telugu among the poor about the law is “CHATTLANNI VUNOODIKI CHUTTALE” (“Laws and Legal systems work as relatives to rich people”). Similarly another saying about the legal system is “COURTUKU POYINAVADU, KATIKI POYINAVADITO SAMANAM”
(“Stepping inside the court is equal to entering the graveyard as a dead body”. ) These two sayings have emerged from the experiences of the rural poor as the laws have loopholes in favor of the rich. Hence, the poor are generally reluctant and scared of going to courts, while the rich take advantage of this and exploit the judicial system for their own interests.

The Dalit women of Maruthuvari Palli were fortunate that their union, the APVVU has more than two decades of experience in using the law and courts as tools for asserting the rights of Dalits. It has been organizing people even to defend cases in court. Therefore, APVVU decided to play a key role in building the case of Maruthuvari Palli at the Sr. Civil Judge Court, Piler and also the District Court, Chittoor by filing a caveat to prevent the landlords from getting any injunction orders to prevent the Dalits’ entry into the disputed land.

The legal procedures in acquiring government land require that persons applying for land ownership should cultivate the land for at least a year. In cases of land appropriation, the union’s strategy is to occupy the land and cultivate it collectively so that the cultivation status can be entered in government records. This will help in establishing that the government land is cultivated by the persons applying for land ownership. It is necessary to prove that the four stages of farming - tilling, sowing, weeding and harvesting have been done. As the Dalits do not own cultivation animals, the union sought the help of SAHANIVASA, an organization which has a tractor that is always available for land appropriation. After the Dalits filed the caveats in the courts on June 14, 2008, SAHANIVASA sent a tractor to assist the Dalits to take over the land.

When the landlords cannot bend the law for their own purposes, there are four more options they can employ: 1) physically attack Dalits while they are entering on the land, 2) file false complaints against the leaders
— most of the time using upper caste women as complainants — and put pressure on the police to register non-bailable attempted rape cases on the Dalit men, 3) use their political & financial status to corrupt the bureaucracy to work for them, and 4) divide Dalits within the village so as to use one group against the other. In the struggle of the Dalits in Maruthuvari Palli, the landlords used all four methods. However, the unity of the Dalits in the village and the solidarity extended by neighboring Dalit villages who are also union members, frustrated the attempts of the landlords to prevent the land acquisition.

The Dalits of Maruthuvari Palli collectively approached the neighboring Dalit villages (who are also members of the union) to support them in the land appropriation by way of physically presenting big numbers to surround the land while the tractor is tilling the land. Around 700 people from four neighboring villages joined the Maruthuvari Palli Dalits in order to support the land appropriation. At about 10:30 AM landlords sent upper caste women armed with chilli powder to attack the tractor driver and also the people. This being the experience in all other places,
the tractor driver wore a helmet while tilling the land and all the Dalit women gathered around him in a human chain to physically block the entry of upper caste women on the land.

Failing to prevent the cultivation of the land, the landlords then went to the police station and filed a complaint against the leaders of five villages with the allegation that the Dalits have attacked their women and attempted to rape them, showing torn cloths as evidence. In fact, the common decision and practices in the union is that the people campaigning for the land as part of APVVU will not be involved in any violence and also not dehumanize anybody. While this is the firm decision and practice in the union, the landlords who are very aggressive obviously do not adhere to these principles. The landlords also sent the women and old men who used abusive language against the Dalits. Youth organizations supporting the Dalits filed a complaint with the police station against the upper caste women and old people demanding that the police register a case under local laws as they have used abusive languages against the Dalits.

It is difficult for the Dalits to attain justice as the police usually side with the landlords but they have realized that pressure can be put on the police to force them to register the complaint against the landlords. Dalits from five villages staged a dharna in front of the police station demanding for justice. After two days of demonstrations the police registered the case.

The cases filed by the landlords and by the Dalits are non-bailable. While the people were prepared to go to jail, the landlords were not. Therefore, the latter approached the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) to call on both parties to arrive at a settlement. In exchange for the Dalits withdrawing the police case against them, the landlords agreed to withdraw their case against the Dalits and to stop their
interference in the land acquired by the Dalits. But the landlords have not stood by their promise after the court cases were withdrawn; the landlords have supported another caste community, the Yadavas to lay claim on the land.

**Land Titling to the Women and Biodiversity in Agriculture**

As a general decision in the union, Maruthuvari Palli Dalits have agreed and also stand by the pre-condition of land appropriation “to assign the land in the names of women” in recognition of the fact that the women led the movement for land and also took all risks of divisions, pressures from their men and landlords, and the non-cooperation of the bureaucracy.

Dalit women of Maruthuvari Palli stood boldly against all pressures and put up the application to the district collector on August 15, 2008 demanding the government to issue the titles on verification of cultivation status. Followed by the District Collector’s promise, the government has appointed a surveyor to measure the land and prepare the documents for titles. A demonstration was organised again on October 17, 2008 in front of Mandal Revenue Office in the context of Stand Up and Take Action Campaign demanding for the immediate allotment of the land titles in the names of the women.
Land ownership for women not only gives economic security, it also provides space for decision-making process in the family. In Maruthuvari Palli, the women decided to take on biodiversity agriculture where every family is going to harvest food crops which will give them at least four months’ food in the families. They have grown 12 varieties of mixed crop which is to be harvested in a month’s time. Traditional way of pest management is practiced and no chemical manure is applied.

**Conclusion**

While the Dalit women still have to obtain titles to the land as the law requires three years of cultivation prior to the grant of titles, they now possess control of the land. The successful land appropriation of the Dalits of Maruthuvari Palli once again proves that landless women who are organised develop the determination to struggle for land in spite of many obstacles placed in their way. The organised Dalit women of the village did not succumb to pressures from the landlords, politicians, police, the courts and in certain instances, even the men in their families, to desist from pursuing their struggle for agricultural land. They were supported by their membership in a bigger union which assisted them in accessing legal information, in facing their court cases, in linking them with other organisations in the neighboring villages and in gaining media coverage.

The Dalit women play an important and reliable role in the ongoing quest of the Dalits for social dignity and equality in India. In the process of their struggle for land, the Dalit women of Maruthuvari Palli displayed tremendous bravery and determination, relied on their collective strength and advanced their struggle for equality with men.
Contributors

Philippines

Kenette Jean I. Millondaga is the Executive Director of Women Studies and Resource Center-Southern Mindanao Region Inc.

Grace Noval is the Research Consultant of Women Studies and Resource Center-Southern Mindanao Region Inc.

Women Studies and Resource Center-Southern Mindanao Region Inc. (WSRC-SMRI) is a research- and advocacy-based organization in Davao City, Philippines. It focuses on the local issues of women and the people’s issues in general. WSRC-SMRI started in 1983 as a representation of women’s voices in Mindanao. Until now, WSRC-SMRI continues to envision and adhere to a gender-fair society, “We dare to struggle; now we are ready to reap its gain.”

Malaysia

Anita Whittle completed a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Journalism, English and Political Science followed by a Graduate Certificate in Journalism, Media and Communications. She worked with PAN AP as a volunteer helping various campaigns and programmes, specially the Save Our Rice Campaign and the Women in Agriculture Programme.

Pesticide Action Network (PAN) is a global network working to eliminate the human and environmental harm caused by pesticides and to promote biodiversity based ecological agriculture. Pesticide
Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP) is committed to the empowerment of people especially women, agricultural workers, peasant and indigenous farmers. PAN AP believes in a people-centred, pro-women development through food sovereignty, ecological agriculture and sustainable lifestyles.

Sri Lanka

Ponniah Logeswari, from Kandy, is one of a few feminist activists who work with the plantation people in Sri Lanka. Logeswari is the Coordinator of the Human Development Organisation (HDO) and President of the Women’s Solidarity Forum (WSF). She also conducts researches on women’s reproductive rights, wages and health rights.

The Human Development Organization (HDO) is a non-governmental, non-profit making and non-racial development & human rights organization that works with underprivileged and marginalized communities for the promotion and protection of human rights and rights to development in the plantations and rural areas of Sri Lanka.

HDO was formed by a group of university students and plantation/development workers in 1990. HDO believes that social change through promotion & protection of human rights, and empowering the people is the way towards the attainment of sustainable development and equality in society.

Indonesia

Laili Khairnur is the director of Lembaga Gemawan organisation in Pontianak West Kalimantan and a member of Sawit Watch.
Darto Wojtyla is the president of National Forum of Serikat Petani Kelapa Sawit (SPKS) and a member of Sawit Watch.

Lembaga Gemawan (Lembaga Pengembangan Masyarakat Swandiri/The Institution of Swandir Society Empowerment) has been a result of a long process of reflection of several student-activists contributing toward social transformation, and evolving into an actual social movement within its political & economic complexity. It was also established to empower the local communities being the silent majority of the society.

Sawit Watch is an Indonesian Non-Government Organisation, with a group of individuals concerned with the adverse negative social and environmental impacts of oil palm plantation development in Indonesia. Sawit Watch’s (Oil Palm Watch) individual members work in 17 provinces where oil palm plantations are being developed. Sawit Watch seeks to promote social justice through a rights-based approach.

India

P. Suria Rajani is a Post Graduate in History, working as the Executive Director in SAHANIVASA, an NGO involved in building the capacities of rural workers and in strengthening the unionization process among them. Maruthuvari Palli land campaign is one of the activities supported by SAHANIVASA.

Andhra Pradesh Vyasa Vruthidarula Union (APVVU) is a state level federation of unions of agricultural workers, fish workers & harvesters, small & marginal farmers and forest workers. It is spread over in 15 districts of Andhra Pradesh state of India having members
of 5,73,500. The main focus of APVVU is to release the bonded labourers, organised landless for the land reforms, and promote biodiversity agriculture. APVVU has been one of the pivotal organisations which campaign for progressive social legislations viz., NREGA, (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), Right To Information Act, Forest Dwellers Act, SC & ST (POA) Act. It has been instrumental against anti-people policies and also against pro-neoliberal policies in the state such as Special Economic Zones, Costal Zone Management Act, and also against the WTO & World Bank anti-people funding projects.