



# Women in the Palm Oil Industry in Social-Environmental Power Relations: Media Narratives and Women's Agency in the Wetlands of Riau

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Submitted at 2026-03-08,  
Revised at 2026-04-14,  
Accepted at 2026-04-16

**Abstract.** The palm oil industry is a strategic sector in Indonesia's economic development, but its expansion has also given rise to various ecological and social problems, particularly related to gender inequality in labor relations and natural resource management. In public discourse, narratives of palm oil development often portray women as part of economic success, but at the same time their experiences and voices are often marginalized. This phenomenon shows a battle of discourse between the dominant economic development narrative and the social experiences of women in plantation communities. This study aims to analyze how the discourse on women in the palm oil industry is represented in digital media and how women in palm oil interpret and negotiate their experiences in the context of social and ecological sustainability. The study uses a qualitative approach with Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis method combined with an ecofeminist perspective. Primary data was obtained through the analysis of three YouTube documentary videos featuring the lives of female palm oil workers and in-depth interviews with 15 women in the Riau wetland area, namely Kampar, Bengkalis, and Siak. The results show that media representations shape an arena of discourse between the ideologies of industrial capitalism, liberal feminism, and critical ecofeminism. The media often depicts women as productive workers and symbols of resilience, but tends to obscure the structures of exploitation and ecological inequality in the palm oil industry. On the other hand, the experiences of women at the local level show the emergence of critical awareness and social practices that negotiate the relationship between gender, plantation economics, and environmental sustainability. These findings confirm that palm oil women are not only objects of development, but also actors who construct counter-narratives for social and ecological justice in the palm oil industry.

**Keywords:** palm oil gender, discourse, Riau, local wisdom, power relations

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## INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian palm oil sector profoundly shapes gender-based power dynamics and environmental narratives. Plantation expansion has reshaped women's roles in securing livelihoods and engaging civil society, revealing both opportunities and obstacles to gender equity. Women encounter substantial labor market disparities rooted in entrenched stereotypes that confine them to caregiving, while men are viewed as primary providers (Morley & Robins, 1995). Despite progress in education, wages, and job distribution, women's involvement in important sectors such as conflict management and governance on plantations remains limited. However, women are often not involved in land acquisition negotiations for palm oil plantations, even though they find alternative ways to resist and claim space to participate (de Vos & Delabre, 2018). This has become one of the negative points of Indonesian palm oil in the eyes of the world, to the extent that the global palm oil industry has rejected Indonesian CPO because it is considered environmentally unfriendly and prone to human rights violations (Sidik, 2018). This raises the question of what impact this has on the social relationships and livelihoods of women in the palm oil industry.

The development of oil palm plantations affects social relations, causing insecurity, anxiety, and new forms of solidarity among women. In East Kalimantan, industrial oil palm expansion has reinforced gender differentiation in access to and use of customary resources, leading to food insecurity and gender inequality (Toumbourou & Dressler, 2021). Material support was interpreted as a sign of trust, collective labor in the plantation served as a communicative arena that reinforced social bonds, while prayers and words of encouragement functioned as symbolic communication that fostered hope (Angela et al., 2025). Women use their knowledge and practices to diversify livelihoods and negotiate constraints on access to and use of resources, reflecting daily resistance to these constraints. In Papua New Guinea, more gender-equitable payment schemes for smallholder oil palm farmers have increased economic incentives for women, resolving household disputes over labor and income. The palm oil industry can improve gender equality and inclusivity, contributing to economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable supply chains (Azahari et al., 2024).

Patriarchal norms and cultural constructs significantly influence women's career choices in the palm oil sector, with masculine social expectations and work environments discouraging women from seeking employment in this field. Environmental degradation caused by palm oil plantations has sparked social conflicts, which disproportionately affect women. Women's voices are often marginalized in discussions about environmental impacts, highlighting the need to strengthen their experiences and perspectives (Retnaningsih et al., 2022).

Unlike other regions in Indonesia, which often feature complex interactions between environmental discourse, power relations, and gender issues, coverage of the palm oil industry in Riau is dominated by specific media content published on YouTube. As seen in Figure 1, the video series *The Ups and Downs of Women Workers' Lives in PTPN IV Palmco Regional 3 Oil Palm Plantations*, from the Bang AA Elaeis Media Group (EMG) account, which carries the theme *Corporate Ups and Downs and Limited Agency* (Corporate Journalistic Coverage, 2024). This content is skillfully produced by corporate producers, highlighting the company's internal dynamics from a limited perspective. Although it opens up opportunities for gender equality and inclusivity, major challenges remain, such as deep-rooted gender stereotypes, the exclusion of women from decision-making, and the negative socio-environmental impacts of plantation expansion. Overcoming these challenges requires a deep understanding of female workers' experiences and active efforts to amplify their voices in environmental and socio-economic discourse.



**Figure 1.** The Ups and Downs of Women Workers' Lives in PTPN IV Palmco Regional 3 Oil Palm Plantations in Youtube

Source: YouTube Account BungAA, 2024

The palm oil industry has become one of the most influential sectors in Indonesia's economy and global commodity trade. With millions of hectares of plantations and millions of workers involved, palm oil not only contributes to national growth but also shapes the daily reality of communities living around the plantations. However, behind its celebrated status as an economic driver lies a complex interaction between environmental damage and gender-based power relations. Plantation expansion has altered the landscape and redefined social relationships, particularly the role of women in sustaining livelihoods and community well-being.

This is also narrated nationally and in mainstream media by Strong Women in the Middle of Palm Oil - Lentera Indonesia program NetTV: Economic Resilience and Ecological Marginalization (National Documentary, 2022). The coverage depicts palm oil as a symbol of development and prosperity, while simultaneously reproducing patriarchal hierarchies and ecological vulnerability. The presentation of palm oil in public discourse tends to prioritize productivity, export earnings, and competitiveness in the global market, overlooking the costs borne by marginalized groups and the environment. Women in palm oil communities experience these consequences disproportionately: they are burdened with reproductive work, participate in plantation work under unsafe conditions, and are excluded from decision-making processes that affect their lives and environment. This intersection of gender inequality and ecological risk reveals the link between capitalist extraction and patriarchal norms in the palm oil economy.



**Figure 2.** Strong Women in the Middle of Palm Oil in Youtube  
Source: (YouTube NetTV Account, 2022)

Existing studies on palm oil have highlighted its ecological impacts—such as deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and greenhouse gas emissions—as well as its socio-economic consequences, including land conflicts and labor exploitation. However, less attention has been paid to how discourse shapes and legitimizes these dynamics, particularly from a gender perspective. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a lens through which to investigate how dominant narratives perpetuate extractive logic and marginalize alternative voices. Simultaneously, the ecofeminist perspective illuminates how the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are intertwined, both rooted in hierarchical systems that prioritize economic growth over social and ecological justice.

This article addresses this gap by focusing on the voices of women in palm oil communities and their expressions of environmental sustainability. Unlike the dominant discourse that frames sustainability in economic or technical terms, women articulate counter-narratives rooted in lived experiences, local wisdom, and collective solidarity. These voices emphasize ecological justice and social inclusion, challenging the growth-centered paradigm that underpins the narratives of the state and corporations. In doing so, they reveal an alternative imagination of sustainability that goes beyond productivity and profit.

Through Fairclough's critical discourse analysis of media coverage and narratives, this study explores the interaction between the discourse on palm oil and issues of gender and the environment. By comparing the dominant narrative with the counter-narrative of women, the analysis reveals how power is reproduced and contested through language, media, and representation. This approach not only reveals the ideological basis of palm oil discourse, but also highlights women's agency as critical actors in shaping environmental governance.

This essay emphasizes how important it is to address gender in environmental discourse in order to promote inclusive sustainability. Results demonstrate that women in palm oil villages are active actors who question extractive reasoning and suggest different routes for social and ecological resilience rather than passive victims. Their viewpoints highlight how systemic injustices must be addressed and minority voices must be acknowledged in order to achieve sustainable development. This study adds to the scholarly discussion on gender, discourse, and resource economics by connecting perspectives from CDA, ecofeminism, and political ecology. It also provides useful implications for advocacy and policy.

Research on the palm oil industry has tended to be dominated by macroeconomic narratives that emphasize the sector's contribution to national growth, increased foreign exchange earnings, and economic development. In many media reports and policy documents, palm oil is often positioned as a strategic commodity that supports national development. However, the dominance of this economic perspective often obscures more complex social and ecological dimensions, particularly those related to gender relations in the sphere of production and environmental management. As a result, the representation of women as actors with experience, local knowledge, and important roles in maintaining environmental sustainability is still relatively minimal in public discourse.

Based on these conditions, this study poses two main questions. First, how does the dominant discourse on the palm oil industry reproduce gender power relations while maintaining an extractive logic oriented towards the exploitation of natural resources? Second, how can the counter-narratives voiced by women in the context of the palm oil industry present alternative perspectives that emphasize ecological justice and social sustainability? By examining these two dimensions, this study aims to reveal the discourse struggle between the dominant economic development perspective and the voices of women, who are often marginalized. In addition, this study also seeks to show how women's agency is not only present as victims of the ecological impacts of the palm oil industry, but also as active actors in shaping more equitable and sustainable environmental management practices.

Norman Fairclough views language through his Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as more than just communication, it's a social practice that both mirrors and actively molds power structures and ideologies. He sees discourse as a battleground where dominance gets reinforced or pushed back against, helping us uncover how inequalities in society either persist or get challenged. When applied to palm oil, this approach lets us dig into how narratives from governments, corporations, and media paint the industry as a symbol of progress, often glossing over the exploitation of women and environmental harm. By breaking down the words, images, and interwoven discourses, CDA exposes the deeper beliefs driving these stories and highlights how women's perspectives break through as powerful counterpoints. In particular, it helps spot the main narratives -typically from official or corporate sources-while revealing quieter, local voices like those of women as secondary but vital ones. (Sulaeman & Mustofa, 2022).

Ecofeminist theory draws a clear link between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, both stemming from patriarchal, hierarchical, and capitalist systems. Scholars like Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood point out how dismissing women's traditional knowledge and earth-centered practices parallels the ruthless extraction of ecosystems to fuel profit-driven economies (Plumwood, 2019). In this framework, the experiences of women in palm oil regions become crucial for understanding how environmental degradation intersects with gender inequality, particularly in challenging traditional patriarchal systems and negotiating gender (Ernanda, 2023). Within palm oil communities, women's embodied knowledge of land, food security, and environmental health offers alternative ways of understanding sustainability that resist reduction to economic metrics. This perspective, therefore, aligns with an approach that views women as producers of knowledge about sustainable living, thereby enriching the discourse on environmental sustainability with an ecofeminist lens.

Ecofeminism thus provides a normative and analytical framework for recognizing women's agency in reimagining ecological justice. A feminist critical discourse analysis further extends this by examining how gendered assumptions and power relations are discursively produced and challenged, aiming for social transformation beyond mere critical analysis (Amalia et al., 2019). Political ecology situates environmental issues within broader political and economic structures, emphasizing how power, access, and control over resources are unevenly distributed. This framework is particularly relevant in understanding the expansion of oil palm plantations, where processes like accumulation by dispossession and territorialization exert control over natural resources and often disempower local communities, particularly women (Sudirman, 2023).

In the case of palm oil, political ecology foregrounds the global-local nexus: how international demand and national growth agendas intersect with local communities' struggles. Gender is central here, as women often bear disproportionate burdens from ecological degradation while being excluded from decision-making processes. Political ecology enriches the analysis by connecting discourse to material realities of land use, labor, and livelihood. This interconnected theoretical framework thus provides a robust analytical toolkit for dissecting the complex socio-ecological and power dynamics inherent in the palm oil industry, particularly as they pertain to the lived experiences of women (Mukhlis et al., 2025).

By blending Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), ecofeminism, and political ecology, this research builds a robust, multi-faceted framework for unpacking the palm oil story. CDA zeroes in on how language and imagery shape perceptions, ecofeminism spotlights the gendered side of environmental conflicts, and political ecology ties it all to broader power struggles in resource-driven economies. This integrated lens approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how dominant discourses surrounding palm oil production are constructed, reinforced, and contested by the lived experiences and counter- ' narratives of women. Specifically, this framework will critically analyze how women in palm oil communities articulate their experiences, challenge established power structures, and contribute to alternative perspectives on environmental sustainability and social justice (Lin, 2025). This multi-faceted methodology aims to unpack the complex socio-ecological systems at play in the palm oil industry, drawing insights from women's resistance to environmental degradation (Elmhirst et al., 2017; Harcourt et al., 2020).

This combined lens captures both the symbolic stories and real-world impacts of palm oil, showing how mainstream tales normalize relentless extraction while women's alternative voices push for sustainability grounded in fairness, care, and community ties. Ultimately, this framework reveals the tangled web of gender, power, and ecology in the industry—going beyond surface-level views to expose deeper socio-environmental shifts (Karakoç & Garipoğlu, 2025). At its core, the approach drives home a key point: true sustainability isn't just a technical or economic fix; it's a battle over narratives and politics, where amplifying women's perspectives becomes essential for environmental governance that balances nature and equity.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis/CDA framework. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study is not only on the content of the message, but also on how language, representation, and narrative are produced and used to reproduce or challenge power relations in society. CDA allows researchers to examine the relationship between texts, discursive practices, and broader social structures, thereby revealing how discourse on the palm oil industry shapes and is influenced by power relations, development ideologies, and gender dynamics in society (Fairclough, 2015; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2018).

This study adopts a qualitative approach using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, exploring how media discourses shape and reflect power relations in society. The analysis is carried out in three steps:

a. Textual Analysis

Analyzing three YouTube documentaries on women in the palm oil industry, focusing on language, pronouns, and visual representation of women, corporations, and local communities.

b. Discursive Practices

Investigating how these discourses are produced, disseminated, and consumed, and how they position women within the context of palm oil labor.

c. Sociocultural Practices

Examining the broader social and political context, and how media discourses on economic development in the palm oil industry marginalize women's experiences and ecological concerns.

Data for this study comes from YouTube documentaries and in-depth interviews with women from the Riau wetland areas of Kampar, Bengkalis, and Siak. YouTube serves as a participatory platform, giving local women a space to share their experiences, which are often underrepresented. Data validity was ensured through triangulation, comparing media analysis with interview findings, and member checking to confirm that the analysis aligned with the informants' real-life experiences.

In Fairclough's analytical model, discourse is understood through three main dimensions, namely text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice. This article focuses specifically on the dimension of sociocultural practice, namely how discourse is produced in the context of broader social, economic, and

political structures. This dimension is used to explain the dominant narrative regarding the palm oil industry, which often emphasizes the logic of economic growth and national development. A context that can reproduce gender power relations and extractive logic towards the environment. At the same time, this analysis is also used to identify the experiences and perspectives of women in the palm oil industry, presenting counter-narratives that offer alternative frameworks for ecological justice and social sustainability.

This article is part of a broader study on women's discourse in the palm oil industry in the digital space, particularly on YouTube. This platform was chosen because it functions as a relatively open digital public space that allows various social actors to produce and disseminate their own narratives. Several studies show that YouTube can be an inclusive and participatory medium in building new discursive spaces (Yesicha et al., 2022). In addition, in the digital era, many conventional and online media outlets utilize YouTube as a channel for content distribution as well as an alternative source of income (Mj & Subarkah Eddyono, n.d.). These characteristics make YouTube an important space for the emergence of alternative narratives, including the voices of grassroots women who have the potential to challenge the dominant representations that have been constructed by the state or corporations (Yesicha et al., 2023).

The initial findings from the digital discourse analysis then became the basis for conducting field data collection to understand women's direct experiences in the palm oil industry. The data in this article was collected through unstructured interviews with women involved in palm oil plantation activities in the Riau wetland area, namely Kampar, Bengkalis, and Siak districts. These areas were selected based on their ecological characteristics as peatlands and their role as locations for palm oil industry expansion in recent decades.

The interviews involved fifteen women involved in oil palm plantation activities, consisting of six small-scale oil palm plantation owners and nine plantation workers, both permanent and daily workers. An unstructured interview approach was chosen so that informants could freely recount their experiences, views, and daily practices in interacting with the environment, work, and social dynamics surrounding the oil palm industry. The narratives generated from these interviews were then analyzed within Fairclough's CDA framework, specifically in terms of sociocultural practice, to identify how the women's experiences reflected the discourse struggle between the dominant logic of economic development and alternative perspectives on ecological sustainability and social justice.

Through this approach, the study will map how women are represented in the discourse on palm oil while positioning them as active social agents in shaping meaning, environmental practices, and resource management at the local level.

## RESULT

As explained earlier, Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis framework is used to explore the three main dimensions of discourse: text, discursive practices, and social practices. At the text level, the analysis focuses on word choice, pronoun usage, and visual structures that construct the position of subjects such as women, the state, and local communities. Critical discourse analysis of the documentary *Wanita Tangguh* shows how the representation of women farmers is not only shaped by language, narrative, and visual choices, but also operates within a broader field of power. At the textual level, the use of pronouns such as "we" serves to blur the distance between the filmmakers, the subjects of the documentary, and the audience, thereby building emotional solidarity. Meanwhile, the emphasis on work, resilience, and family values attached to women reveals a symbolic strategy to elevate the figure of female farmers as agents of change. The findings show that in many mainstream media narratives, women are often implicitly positioned as domestic actors or economic supporters of the family, while their representation as environmental actors or decision-makers is relatively rare. Conversely, in alternative narratives, especially in documentaries and testimonials, women are represented as guardians of ecology, managers of local knowledge, and actors who articulate criticism of the expansion of the palm oil industry.

At the discursive practice level, several narratives were found that reinforce the discourse of women in palm oil, namely 'strong women'. These narratives are produced, circulated, and consumed in the media

space. The two videos (NET TV: millennial leaders; EMG: the ups and downs of Tandun workers) construct heroic narratives that place women as the main leaders in palm oil plantations. The focus on empathy for the personal experiences of the figures covered as "first educators" and pillars of civilization creates a linear storyline: from initial challenges to victory, which reinforces the image of women's resilience in a masculine sector.

Positive narrative language dominates, with lexicon such as "millennial farmer" and "leader" glorifying women. However, contradictions arise through direct quotes such as "there are still many challenges who sneer at my abilities as a leader because I am a woman," which acknowledges gender stigma while reproducing the dominant narrative of patriarchy through recognition of external doubts. In this article, discourse types on women in palm oil Industry refers to; Economic Development: Women as development agents, economically empowered, productivity drivers. Patriarchal: Women as family supporters in marginalized domestic roles. Ecofeminist: Women as ecology guardians, critiquing palm oil's environmental harm. Women's Resilience: Women's strength amid challenges. These discourses reveal media's multifaceted portrayal of women's roles, from economic impact to ecological resilience.

Gender representation seeks to dismantle male dominance by portraying women not only as land managers, but also as agents of economic change for their families and communities. Phrases such as "opportunity is always the way... that palm oil is good" position them as promoters of the palm oil industry, shifting the stereotype from victims to empowerers, even though they remain tied to a pro-palm oil corporate narrative.

The video implies an ecofeminist perspective by linking women's "nurturing" qualities (such as precision and harmony in the spirit of "eat or not, just gather together") to land sustainability. Environmental issues such as fertilizer price conflicts are raised as common threats to women's economies, promoting inclusive gender literacy: women as guardians of socio-ecological harmony amid palm oil expansion. It can be summarized that the practices in this video reproduce the power of the palm oil industry through positive representations of women, while partially challenging gender stigma. However, women's agency is limited to nurturing and pro-industry roles, without any in-depth criticism of the environmental impact.

Mainstream media tends to reproduce development discourse that emphasizes the economic contribution of the palm oil industry to national growth, thereby reducing sustainability issues to matters of industrial productivity and efficiency. In contrast, independent documentaries and community narratives open up space for counter-discourse that highlights women's experiences in facing ecological impacts, such as land degradation, agrarian conflicts, and health risks. In this context, alternative media serve as a space for articulating the voices of women who have been underrepresented in the development discourse. However, the representation of women in both texts remains within the framework of an empathetic narrative that emphasizes agency without fully dismantling the patriarchal ideology within the extractive industry structure. As a result, the potential for ecofeminist-based counter-discourse remains limited and, in some ways, actually reinforces the dominance of the palm oil industry.

Meanwhile, at the discourse practice level, NET TV implements elite-aspirational advocacy discourse practices: national TV productions with heroic narratives of millennial leaders who dismantle gender stigma ("scorn") while promoting palm oil as "good." Widespread consumption via broadcast shapes progressive public discourse, shifting women from domestic stereotypes to economic agents, but bound by industrial hegemony. Meanwhile, EMG Tandun uses grassroots-corporate representation discourse practices: immersive YouTube productions with authentic testimonials from female workers ("sincerity," "no pressure"), normalizing field solidarity through reflective interviews. Viral consumption among palm oil stakeholders reinforces empathy and the image of "*happy workers*," building an inclusive discourse from below but limiting structural criticism. Both reproduce palm oil power through selective empathy: NET TV's top-down transformation, EMG's bottom-up normalization, creating a partially inclusive gender discourse that promotes literacy but maintains the industry status quo. From a discursive

practice perspective, this documentary was produced in the context of the need for a counter-discourse to the dominant narrative that often marginalizes women's roles. The production process involved story selection, visual framing, and distribution through digital channels that allowed a wider audience to access it. Online distribution also opened up space for diverse consumption practices, from simply watching to using it as material for critical discussion about gender, work, and ecology. Thus, this documentary is not only a medium of information, but also an instrument of advocacy and public education.

At the level of social practice, this coverage intervenes in ideological structures that have long ignored women's contributions to the agricultural sector. It challenges the stereotype that productive work in the fields is the domain of men, while showing how the values of care, detail, and sustainability promoted by women are key to agricultural sustainability. Thus, this documentary facilitates a shift in perspective, from seeing women only as supporting labor, to seeing them as key drivers capable of integrating family, socio-cultural, and environmental economies.

Here lies the core finding that is the focus of this study on discourse, namely the sociocultural dimension in which the discourse of women in the palm oil industry cannot be separated from broader power structures, including global capitalism, patriarchy, and natural resource politics. Analysis of the sociocultural dimension of the two videos shows that the social practices represented complement each other in shaping the construction of women's identities in the palm oil industry. In the video *Lika-liku Hidup* (The Twists and Turns of Life) produced by EMG, the social practices that appear to be grassroots-adaptive. At the situational level, the narrative presents the daily reality of female palm oil workers who live in limited plantation housing facilities, depend on salaries, bonuses, and allowances from the company, and play dual roles as workers and breadwinners for their families. At the institutional level, state-owned companies such as PTPN IV are represented as providers of social benefits, for example through "good" working relationships with foremen and educational support for workers' children through scholarship programs, although concerns about the future after retirement remain. Meanwhile, at the sociocultural level, the narrative shows solidarity among female workers, who are described as a "trio," as well as values of togetherness, sincerity, and resilience. In this context, palm oil is not only understood as a source of livelihood, but also as a symbol of social mobility and hope, for example, through the success of sending children to college.

In contrast, the *Strong Women* video aired by NET TV shows more *elite-aspirational* social practices. At the situational level, women are represented as leaders who are capable of managing large-scale palm oil plantations while challenging the stigma against female leadership in the agribusiness sector. At the institutional level, palm oil companies are depicted as spaces that enable equal opportunities for women, while farming communities are positioned as economic partners who jointly build the productivity of the palm oil sector. At the sociocultural level, the narrative highlights family values and the tradition of nurturing, which is reflected in expressions such as "makan tidak makan asal kumpul" (eat or not, as long as we are together), and positions palm oil as part of the harmony between social life and the environment. Within this framework, palm oil is represented as one of the important pillars of modern economic development and civilization.

Overall, the two reports form a complementary discourse on women in the palm oil industry. EMG's narrative reproduces the hegemony of the industry through the adaptation practices and survival strategies of women workers at the grassroots level, while NET TV's narrative does so through the aspirational representation of women as leaders and agents of change at a higher level. The combination of the two produces an image of palm oil women as persistent, inclusive, and contributing to the sustainability of the industry. At the same time, this discourse also indirectly normalizes the social, economic, and ecological dependence of communities on the palm oil industry. The dominance of the development narrative reflects the economic interests of the state and corporations in maintaining the legitimacy of the palm oil industry as a strategic national sector.

However, the experiences of women in palm oil communities show that the expansion of this industry also produces unequal power relations, in which women often bear the ecological and social burdens without having equal access to decision-making processes. Based on findings from interviews with women in the palm oil industry in the Riau wetlands, it appears that discourse on the palm oil industry is shaped not only by the dominant narrative of economic development, but also by the daily experiences of women who live and work within the structure of the industry. The interviews confirm the authenticity of the narrative, namely that palm oil women are owners, workers, and economic supporters of their families, such as Ngatimin and Dariani, who also manage their own plantations with their families.

*Purchased with his own savings three years ago in 2021. At Mr. Wirda's plantation, he is often involved in pruning (removing palm fronds). Meanwhile, he manages his own plantation with his husband. The profit from one month can reach 6 million rupiah. For fertilizer, etc., she only spends at least 4 million rupiah per month. She still remembers when she bought the plantation for 100 million rupiah. Now it is worth 200-300 million rupiah. (Dariani – daily laborer and owner of the field interview)*

*Together with her husband, she owns a 2-hectare plantation. They manage this plantation themselves. Her interest grew because palm oil is harvested every two weeks. She joined because of her husband's family. They usually hire other workers to transport the harvest so that it can be bought by the middleman. The ups and downs of owning a palm oil plantation are evident during the dry season, when the harvest is reduced but the selling price is high. Conversely, when there is a lot of fruit, the price is low. (Ngatimin - Permanent worker and owner, field interview)*

Meanwhile, Viki Nurlala and Surmiarty chose to become daily workers because of the flexibility, and Sunarti played a dual role as an employee and garden owner. The text highlights the unique work processes (clearing, pruning, weeding) and the ups and downs of managing the orchard, selling the fruit, and the harvest season. These experiences reveal the interrelationship between power relations, development ideology, and gender dynamics that shape social practices at the local level.

*I used to work at PT Johan from 1995 to 2007 as a census officer. At that time, my job was to conduct snake censuses, crop or production censuses, and also count palm fruits. After about nine years of working, I quit because I had to take care of my sick husband. Now I am 62 years old. For the past four years, I have been working with my second husband at Mr. XX's plantation as a permanent employee. My salary used to be around one million rupiah, but now it is around four million. I usually help my husband clean palm fronds and spray pesticides. Sometimes I also collect fallen fruit to sell myself, as this can supplement our income as workers." (Ngatini, field interview)*

This shows that power relations are evident in the relationships between workers, small farm owners, companies, and market actors such as *toke* as buyers of crops. Women who own farms, such as Ngatimin and Dariani, show that land ownership gives them greater bargaining power in determining production and family income. However, for workers such as Viki Nurlala, Surmiarty, and Sunarti, power relations are more evident through their dependence on daily work systems, weekly wages, and access to facilities provided by companies. The presence of institutions such as PT. Johan, which provides social security, rice, holiday allowances, and menstrual leave, demonstrates a form of institutional protection, but practices such as late wages also reveal the power imbalance between companies and workers. In this context, women are in a constant position of negotiation between the economic needs of their families and the work structure controlled by the palm oil industry.

The development ideology is reflected in the way the community perceives palm oil as a source of prosperity and economic mobility. Many informants view ownership or involvement in palm oil plantations as an opportunity to improve their welfare, as seen in Dariani's experience of buying a plantation with her own savings and seeing a significant increase in land value. Similarly, the biweekly harvesting system and relatively stable income potential make palm oil a promising commodity. However, experiences with price fluctuations and the *ngetrak* season show that commodity-based development logic also brings economic

vulnerability. Thus, the development ideology that promotes palm oil as an engine of national growth is also reproduced in the practices of local communities, albeit colored by adaptation strategies to deal with market and environmental risks.

Furthermore, gender dynamics are clearly evident in the dual roles of women in the palm oil industry. Women are not only involved in domestic work, but also actively participate in various production activities such as collecting fruit bunches, pruning, fertilizing, and spraying pesticides. Many women initially entered this sector to help their husbands, but in practice they have become important contributors to the household economy. In addition, the flexibility of being a daily worker also allows women to take on work in several plantations at once, thereby expanding their economic role. At the same time, this experience also shows that women must continue to negotiate their domestic and productive roles, thereby forming a distinctive identity as resilient and adaptive "palm oil women." This comprehensive approach facilitates a deeper understanding of how discursive practices maintain or challenge existing power dynamics and ideological formations in socio-environmental issues (Ernanda, 2023).

Ecofeminist literacy emerged and developed by highlighting the relationship between women and nature—as conceived by Vandana Shiva—in which women in the palm oil industry not only fight for economic rights, but also play an active role in combating the ecological and social impacts of the palm oil industry. Shiva describes the relationship between development, ecology, and women, and connects nature with women, implying that the death of nature is actually the death of women (Shiva, 2019).

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that discourse on the palm oil industry is not only shaped by the media or development policies, but also produced through the lived experiences of women at the grassroots level. The power relations between companies, workers, and the market; the development ideology that promotes palm oil as a symbol of prosperity; and the gender dynamics that place women in dual roles together shape the way society understands and interprets the palm oil industry. In this context, palm oil women are not only part of the industrial structure, but also social actors who actively negotiate meaning, economic strategies, and community solidarity in their daily lives.

Interestingly, observations from videos and interviews show that all informants are migrants and not native to Riau. This condition shows that women's involvement in the palm oil industry is also related to migration dynamics and economic opportunities in plantation areas. In this situation, women—both as plantation owners and workers—continue to negotiate with the economic, social, and environmental structures that shape their lives. They not only play a role as producers, but also develop various strategies to adapt to the dynamics of the palm oil industry, from managing family income sources to dealing with market uncertainty and changing working conditions. Through these practices, palm oil women demonstrate strong adaptability while building agency in responding to the social and ecological changes arising from palm oil plantation expansion (Mukhlis et al., 2025).

## DISCUSSION

From an ecofeminist perspective, this situation demonstrates the link between the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women in an economy oriented towards resource extraction. The analysis in this article does not rely on a single form of representation, but examines the consistency and differences in discourse across various media, including news coverage, mainstream media, and testimonies from women in palm oil communities. This approach allows for the identification of dominant narrative patterns as well as spaces of resistance that emerge through women's life experiences. In addition, the researcher's reflexivity is also an important part of the analysis process, given that this study departs from a critical perspective that seeks to give space to voices that have been marginalized in the palm oil industry discourse.

The integration of these various perspectives allows for a more comprehensive reading of how gender bias, power relations, and forms of female resistance are mediated through media representations of environmental conflicts. Thus, this analysis reveals how dominant discourses normalize the extractive logic of the palm oil industry and how women construct counter-narratives that emphasize sustainability based

on ecological and social justice. In this framework, the ecofeminist perspective is important for understanding how women are not only positioned as victims of environmental impacts, but also as actors who articulate alternatives to exploitative development models. As Vandana Shiva argues, the relationship between women and nature is often forged through daily experiences related to food, health, and ecological sustainability. In the context of palm oil communities, these experiences shape the ecological knowledge that forms the basis for women to challenge development narratives that are solely oriented towards economic growth.

This analysis specifically discusses how various textual and visual representations both reinforce and challenge conventional gender roles and environmental narratives, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between discourse, power, and socio-ecological justice. This analysis is structured to first present the dominant narratives promoted by mainstream media regarding the palm oil industry, followed by an examination of counter-narratives expressed by women in palm oil communities. This dichotomous presentation explains the mechanisms through which hegemonic discourse normalizes extractive practices and patriarchal structures, while simultaneously highlighting the marginalized voices of women and constructing an alternative framework for environmental and social justice.

The reconfiguration of access to and use of land perpetuates intersectional social inequality, framing these challenges within the broader context of Indonesian palm oil governance (Sinaga, 2024). This analytical lens reveals that the expansion of palm oil plantations in areas such as Riau Province, as described in several Indonesian narratives, disrupts established socio-ecological systems and exacerbates environmental crises such as drought and forest fires, which directly impact women's livelihoods and traditional ecological knowledge. These disruptions require a deeper examination of how media representations, such as those found in documentaries and news articles, depict gender struggles for environmental justice. Such portrayals often reveal the activism of women such as Sukinah, Lodia Oematan, Aleta Baun, Eva Bande, and Farwiza Farhan, who challenge corporate power and patriarchal structures in their defense of the environment.

### **Dominant Narrative: Economy, Productivity, and National Development**

The emergence of the narrative of palm oil as an engine of growth in Indonesia. Through the media and the state, palm oil is positioned as an "economic savior" and a symbol of national pride. This is in line with the narrative that highlights the positive impact of palm oil on the environmental, social, and economic aspects of local communities, even though plantation expansion also causes social and ecological problems. However, it should be noted that the expansion of palm oil plantations is often correlated with an increase in social conflicts, especially between farmers and companies, and has a negative impact on the environment and livelihoods of local communities. Furthermore, this narrative often ignores case studies that show significant population displacement and ecosystem damage due to oil palm plantation expansion (Sudirman, 2023).

The narrative surrounding the development of the palm oil industry is generally framed as an economic success story that emphasizes its contribution to increased exports, job creation, and foreign exchange earnings. However, this dominant framing often obscures the various social and environmental impacts that accompany it, such as economic inequality between community groups and environmental degradation, including a decline in groundwater quality. On the other hand, a number of qualitative studies show that the perceptions of local communities, including female plantation workers, are not entirely negative. Many of them view the existence of palm oil plantations as an opportunity to improve their family's economy, even though at the same time their social activities become more limited due to the demands of work in the plantation sector.

These social restrictions often go hand in hand with unequal land ownership structures, which ultimately affect the welfare of local communities. In addition, in many cases, the ownership and

management of oil palm plantations is still dominated by men as heads of households. This situation highlights a paradox in the narrative of oil palm development: the promised expansion of plantations is expected to increase household income, but in practice it can also create livelihood vulnerability due to the reduction in the diversity of community livelihoods (Amalia et al., 2019).

The utilization of women in the logic of productivity is represented, among other things, as secondary labor, not as primary actors. Although women play an important role in the palm oil production chain, their contributions tend to be considered as supplementary to family income rather than as independent primary employment (Dedeoğlu & Karakurum, 2025). This focus on productivity and export figures often obscures the reality of exploitation and gender inequality experienced by women workers, whose work is often not formally recognized and valued equally to that of male workers. This inequality is exacerbated by frequent agrarian conflicts resulting from palm oil plantation expansion, where local communities lose their customary and private land, limiting their options beyond becoming plantation laborers (Rochgiyanti, 2022).

Domestic roles are still carried over into the workplace: caring for seedlings, cleaning gardens, informal work without decent wages. This practice exploits traditional gender roles and exacerbates economic inequality, especially amid the increasing transformation of livelihoods into oil palm plantation farmers. Furthermore, the impact of oil palm expansion is also manifested in gender-based time use dynamics, which show that women often bear a heavier workload and have less time for social activities, self-care, or rest than men (Rowland et al., 2022). This situation creates complex vulnerabilities for women, where their involvement in the palm oil sector, although often seen as a driver of family economics, can actually reinforce cycles of poverty and dependency. This is in line with findings that women's positions in the palm oil economy are often more vulnerable and dangerous, such as jobs as daily laborers spraying chemicals or fertilizing plants (Fair, 2021). Women's involvement in maintenance activities such as weeding, fertilizing, and collecting fruit bunches often reflects gender-based division of labor that places them in lower-paid jobs with less formal recognition (Purwaningsih et al., 2020).

The dominant narrative places sustainability within a technical framework (certification, production efficiency), rather than socio-ecological justice. This has implications for the marginalization of local voices and women who are most affected by environmental degradation due to oil palm plantation expansion. Women oil palm workers often face a double burden of work, integrating public and domestic work, which significantly affects their time and energy. The health, pollution, and environmental degradation aspects experienced by communities—especially women—tend to be overlooked. In fact, women's contributions to the household often include unpaid work related to subsistence farming, which is important for capitalist accumulation but tends to be ignored in conventional economic analysis (Backhouse et al., 2021). The lack of gender-sensitive analysis within these frameworks further exacerbates existing inequalities, particularly regarding land ownership and accessibility for women (Melketo et al., 2023).

### **Women's Counter-Narratives: Solidarity, Local Wisdom, and Socio-Ecological Sustainability**

Women are no longer guardians of the environment. There has been a shift whereby capitalist ideology has taken root in the lives of women involved in the palm oil industry. Women's daily experiences with clean water, family health, and household food provide an ecological perspective that differs from the current logic of productivity. This role is often overlooked in development discourse dominated by extractive economic approaches, even though women are intrinsically involved in maintaining the sustainability of natural resources (Purwaningsih et al., 2020; Li, 2014). Ecofeminism offers a powerful analytical framework for understanding how patriarchal structures that oppress women also contribute to the exploitation of nature (Chinsya, 2024; Mulyati & Saleh, 2024). In this context, women, especially indigenous women, are often at the forefront of efforts to preserve the environment because of their closeness to nature and their traditional role in resource management.

The narrative of women in the palm oil industry emphasizes sustainability as a means of ensuring the survival of future generations, rather than merely economic growth. This perspective highlights the interconnection between ecological and social well-being, underlining the importance of preserving local wisdom in facing the impacts of climate change and deforestation. Therefore, efforts to empower women, especially those involved in environmental management, can significantly contribute to achieving a sustainable and sustainable natural life. The ecofeminist view argues that women have a higher sensitivity to environmental preservation than men, as they are often considered to be closely connected to nature. However, the strategic role of indigenous women in climate change mitigation and environmental preservation efforts is often hampered by structural and cultural issues.

Practices of mutual assistance, local women's networks, and community advocacy become spaces for articulating resistance. These collective movements are often based on traditional knowledge and shared experiences, empowering women to demand ecological and social justice and reject the hegemony of extractive corporations. This solidarity also serves as a mechanism to overcome the impacts of climate change and deforestation, especially for indigenous women who experience multiple layers of oppression due to extractive economic practices. Ecofeminism is relevant in analyzing these relationships, as it claims that there is a connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature, highlighting that the exploitation of nature often parallels the oppression of women (Rifandini & Triguswinri, 2020).

Women's testimonies underscore the importance of solidarity in addressing the impacts of palm oil, such as in dealing with waste or access to food. Historical, cultural, and social domination of women and nature are interrelated, so that oppression of women and environmental crises can be understood through the same lens of political power (Rifandini & Triguswinri, 2020). Traditional knowledge about cropping patterns, land management, and alternative food consumption forms the basis of counter-narratives. This local wisdom, passed down from generation to generation, is an important foundation for sustainable climate change mitigation efforts. Evidence shows that Indonesian women have proven effective environmental management practices, such as cleaning household waste and managing waste for recycling or composting. Furthermore, the use of this traditional ecological knowledge contributes to collective adaptation strategies, as seen in communities that learn from past experiences to negotiate their rights with corporate entities (Pierce Colfer & Prabhu, 2023). Women propose a sustainability model based on balance between nature and humans. This approach is rooted in the understanding that environmental damage and social oppression, especially against women, stem from a capitalist development paradigm that ignores ecological values (Karmilah & Sastrosasmita, 2024).

The degradation of local wisdom practices in environmental management partly stems from migration dynamics, whereby many actors in the palm oil industry are migrants who are not fully connected to the ecological values embraced by local indigenous communities. This condition has the potential to marginalize the local knowledge practices of indigenous women, while at the same time encouraging patterns of natural exploitation that are in line with industrial production logic. From a critical perspective, this situation can be understood as a manifestation of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, which positions nature and women's labor as exploitable resources. Therefore, efforts towards ecological justice require the deconstruction of the social and economic structures that perpetuate these inequalities.

The relevance of the ecofeminist approach is evident in efforts to understand women's resilience in the face of social and ecological crises, including in the context of community adaptation to the characteristics of wetland areas in Riau. A number of studies also show that narratives of women's resilience in the face of disasters and environmental change can be a source of alternative knowledge about ecological justice, which is often passed down through oral traditions and community experiences. This perspective emphasizes that women, especially in indigenous communities, are often the group most affected by environmental damage caused by extractive economic activities. However, they also play an

important role as agents of change who are able to promote sustainable practices in natural resource management (Rusmadi & Rusmadi, 2016).

### **The Battle of Discourse: Extractive Logic vs. Ecological Justice**

The ideological clash that emerges in the dominant narrative in the palm oil industry operates through extractive logic that emphasizes productivity, capitalization, and economic growth. In contrast, women present a logic of ecological justice that emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature, intergenerational sustainability, and human rights as the basis for balanced development. This battle of discourses reflects an epistemological conflict between a paradigm of development based on material gain and a perspective that prioritizes biophysical sustainability and social welfare. In this context, gender inequality is not neutral, as women are often the group most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and extractive economic practices. However, the ecofeminist perspective shows that women's closeness to nature and their role in resource management make them important actors in efforts to address the environmental crisis (Rifandini & Triguswinri, 2020).

The media and the state often reproduce the ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism that support extractive development models. In contrast, women offer forms of resistance through community organizing, land rights advocacy, and the reaffirmation of local wisdom. This resistance manifests not only in collective action but also through counter-narratives that challenge the hegemony of conventional development (Dalupe, 2020). Ecofeminism views the domination of women and nature as rooted in patriarchal and anthropocentric paradigms that regard both as objects of exploitation. The implications of discourse through dominant narratives have a major influence in shaping policy and public opinion, while the counter-narratives of women in the palm oil industry seek to deconstruct the logic of extractive development by highlighting its social and ecological impacts (Chinsya, 2024). From an ecofeminist perspective, the life experiences of women, especially those from local communities, offer alternative knowledge about the relationship between humans and nature that is often overlooked in conventional development. Therefore, strengthening women's counter-narratives opens up space for more inclusive advocacy and participation in environmental governance, while challenging the ideological roots of exploitation that are intertwined with capitalism and patriarchy.

In the context of the palm oil industry, women palm oil workers are important actors in understanding the power relations between economic development, the environment, and gender. The ecofeminist perspective shows that the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women often go hand in hand in commodity-based production systems. This condition is evident in women's limited access to strategic resources such as land and water, which ultimately reinforces economic dependence and deepens gender inequality in plantation communities (Djana, 2025). The ecofeminist approach helps explain that the experiences of women in the palm oil industry are not only related to their role in production, but also to their position in maintaining environmental sustainability. However, these capabilities are often marginalized by development paradigms that emphasize economic growth and industrial productivity. As a result, palm oil plantation policies still tend to be economically and patriarchally biased, with limited attention to gender perspectives and the socio-ecological impacts experienced by local communities (Agarwal, 2009).

Therefore, integrating a gender perspective into environmental governance is important to promote more equitable and sustainable development. In line with ecofeminist arguments, efforts to overcome the ecological crisis need to be accompanied by a transformation of social structures that place women and nature as objects of exploitation, while recognizing the role of women as important actors in sustainability practices (Wiyatmi et al., 2016; Karmilah & Sastrosasmita, 2024).

## CONCLUSION

Media representations and the experiences of women in the palm oil industry in the Riau wetland region reveal that discourse on the palm oil industry is dominated by narratives of development that emphasize its contribution to national economic growth, productivity, and job creation. This narrative is reproduced through mainstream media and corporate coverage that portrays palm oil as a symbol of economic progress while presenting women as "strong women" who support the sustainability of the industry. However, this representation also normalizes extractive logic and perpetuates patriarchal structures in labor relations and resource management.

On the other hand, the experiences of women in the palm oil industry revealed through interviews show a more complex perspective. Women not only play a role as workers or economic supporters of their families, but also as actors who actively negotiate their position within the industry structure. They are involved in various production activities such as collecting fruit bunches, pruning, and managing small-scale plantations, while also carrying out domestic roles in the household. In their daily practices, women in the palm oil industry develop economic adaptation strategies, community solidarity, and ecological knowledge related to land management, family food security, and environmental sustainability.

These findings show that the dominant discourse on palm oil is not entirely accepted passively by women in plantation communities. Instead, women construct counter-narratives that emphasize the importance of socio-ecological sustainability, community solidarity, and a balance between economic needs and environmental conservation. Thus, women in the palm oil industry are not only positioned as victims of the industry's impact, but also as social actors who have agency in building alternative frameworks for environmental and social justice. In essence, the discourse battle over the palm oil industry takes place not only in the media, but also in the lived experiences and social practices of women at the local level.

**Acknowledgment:** This article is part of the external publication of the outstanding research from the University of Riau in 2025.

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