

Justice at the Margins: Reclaiming Gender Equality Amid Structural Injustice in Indonesia's Palm Oil Plantations

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Abstract

This paper examines the pervasive gender-based injustices faced by women and children working in Indonesia's palm oil plantations. It explores how structural inequalities manifest through economic exploitation, limited access to basic services, and systemic marginalization. Drawing on the philosophical frameworks of Nancy Fraser and Serene J. Khader, the study employs a normative and conceptual methodology, integrating Fraser's tripartite model of justice—redistribution, recognition, and representation—with Khader's theory of adaptive preferences and localized empowerment. The analysis demonstrates that achieving gender equality in this context requires both structural reform and context-sensitive empowerment strategies. As a practical contribution, the paper proposes the development of a mobile community initiative, Pos Kesetaraan, which embodies both theoretical approaches by delivering legal, educational, and health-related support directly to marginalized labourers. The findings suggest that without sustained, multi-scalar interventions, justice will remain inaccessible to the most vulnerable. Ultimately, the paper argues for a reconceptualization of development practices in the palm oil sector, calling for urgent ethical commitment and political action to restore dignity and equity to the lives of plantation workers

Keywords: gender justice, palm oil industry, adaptive preferences, structural inequality, philosophical empowerment

1. Introduction

This paper was originally prepared as teaching material for the Social Philosophy course at the Faculty of Philosophy, STFT Widya Sasana, Malang, and was delivered in the

academic session on November 19, 2024. It seeks to examine the lived realities of women and child laborers in Indonesia's palm oil plantations, where thousands work under deeply distressing conditions. Often functioning as unregistered or undocumented workers, they are excluded from formal labor protections and rendered legally invisible. During official inspections, many are instructed to cease work temporarily to conceal their illegal status. Women laborers endure low wages, heavy workloads, and hazardous environments, and are frequently subjected to various forms of violence—including sexual violence—which is commonly neglected by authorities¹. Meanwhile, children, rather than attending school, are forced into physically demanding and dangerous tasks, thereby robbing them of their right to a future.

The condition of women and child laborers in palm oil plantations is analyzed here through the lens of two relevant frameworks in social philosophy: Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice and Serene J. Khader's gender-based empowerment theory. Nancy Fraser offers a multidimensional analysis of social justice, which includes three central dimensions: redistribution, recognition, and representation. Within this framework, Fraser's concept of redistribution highlights the urgent need for a more equitable allocation of resources to address the economic disparities experienced by women labourers. The dimension of recognition calls for the affirmation of their dignity and fundamental rights, while representation underscores the necessity of their active participation in decision-making processes—participation that is frequently denied in the palm oil sector, thereby reinforcing their structural vulnerability and exploitation.

Serene J. Khader, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of context-sensitive empowerment, particularly in addressing adaptive preferences that often hinder women from realizing their full potential. Adaptive preferences refer to the tendency of individuals to adjust their expectations and desires to accommodate constrained or unfavorable circumstances—a condition frequently observed among women labourers on palm oil plantations. Many of these women may accept exploitative labour conditions as an unavoidable reality, unaware of their entitlement to better standards of work and life. Khader's approach provides a valuable framework for empowering women through interventions that are attuned to their specific socio-cultural contexts, with an emphasis on access to education, skills training, and legal support.

Employing a qualitative methodology, this paper utilizes a literature review drawing from a range of books, scholarly articles, and relevant empirical research, along with an analytical exposition of the theoretical contributions of Fraser and Khader. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive exploration not only of the empirical realities faced by women and children in plantation labour but also of contextually appropriate solutions grounded in the principles of social justice and gender-sensitive empowerment.

The significance of this study lies in its engagement with issues of social justice, human rights, and sustainable development—concerns of urgent global relevance. The injustices faced by women and children in the palm oil sector extend beyond individual suffering, producing ripple effects that influence wider societal structures and the national economy. Implementing social justice principles in this context has the potential to catalyse meaningful

¹ Kompas.id, "Buruh Perempuan Di Kebun Sawit Masih Rentan Alami Kekerasan Seksual," 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/humaniora/2023/06/16/buruh-perempuan-di-kebun-sawit-masih-rentan-alami-kekerasan-seksual>; Theconversation.com, "Di Tengah Pesatnya Industri Kelapa Sawit Di Indonesia, Eksploitasi Buruh Anak Masih Terjadi," 2023, <https://theconversation.com/di-tengah-pesatnya-industri-kelapa-sawit-di-indonesia-eksploitasi-buruh-anak-masih-terjadi-141611>.

change at the local level and to support broader arguments for more inclusive and protective policy reforms targeting vulnerable populations in Indonesia.

By engaging with Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice and Serene J. Khader's gender-based empowerment framework, this paper seeks not only to diagnose the layered injustices faced by marginalized laborers, but also to question the deeper socio-political structures that sustain such conditions. Rather than offering abstract theorization alone, the analysis aims to identify context-sensitive interventions that combine principles of redistribution, recognition, representation, and empowerment. Through this philosophical inquiry, the discussion aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on justice by highlighting pathways toward meaningful and lasting transformation in the lives of women and children working within Indonesia's palm oil sector.

2. Research Methods

This study follows a conceptual and normative design rooted in philosophical inquiry. Rather than empirical fieldwork, it draws from a literature review of feminist philosophy, political theory, and reports on palm oil labour practices. Using Fraser's and Khader's frameworks, the analysis interprets structural injustice and adaptive preferences in the plantation sector. Sources include academic texts, NGO documents, and media reports, selected for their ethical and contextual relevance. The study uses thematic philosophical analysis to connect theory with the lived experiences of marginalized labourers, and no statistical tools were employed.

3. Findings and Discussion

This study demonstrates that women and children working in Indonesia's palm oil plantations are subjected to a complex and interwoven system of injustices—economic, cultural, and political—that collectively reinforce their marginalization and structural vulnerability². Nancy Fraser's model explains how redistribution, recognition, and representation must be addressed simultaneously, while Serene J. Khader's notion of adaptive preferences reveals how these injustices are often internalized. The proposed Pos Kesetaraan model responds to these challenges by integrating structural justice and localized empowerment, showing how philosophical concepts can inform practical, community-based action.

The Condition of Women and Child Laborers in Palm Oil Plantations

The condition of women and child labourers in Indonesia's palm oil plantations reveals a profound and pervasive injustice—one rooted in economic exploitation, systemic violence, and restricted access to basic human rights such as education and healthcare³. Women labourers are frequently trapped in unsafe and precarious work, receiving meager wages with little to no legal or health protections⁴. This situation is further exacerbated by their status as

² Cicilia Damayanti, "Kepedulian Dalam Pendidikan Untuk Dilindungi Kesetaraan Perempuan," *Studia Philosophica et Theologica* 22 No. 1, no. 1 (2022): 41–62,

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.35312/spet.v22i1.399>; Edison R.L Tinambunan, "PROPHETESSES MAXIMILLA AND PRISCILLA WOMEN'S HERESIES IN THE PATRISTIC PERIOD," *Studia Philosophica Et Theologica* Vol 18 No (2019): 17–26, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.35312/spet.v18i1.20>.

³ Megawati; Antonius P Sipahutar Naibaho, "Perempuan Disabilitas Dan Hubungannya Dengan Teologi Belas Kasih Katolik," *Studia Philosophica Et Theologica* 24, no. 1 (2024), <https://ejournal.stftws.ac.id/index.php/spet/article/view/589>.

⁴ Atiek Ishlahiyah Al Hamasy, "Women Workers in Oil Palm Plantations Are Still Vulnerable to Experiencing Sexual Violence," *Kompas.id*, 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/artikel/en-buruh-perempuan-di-kebun-sawit-masih-rentan-alami-kekerasan-seksual?>; WRM, "Indonesia: Exploitation of Women and Violation of Their Rights in Oil Palm Plantations," WRM, 2020, <https://www.wrm.org.uy/mg/node/13419?>

casual workers without formal contracts, rendering them ineligible for social security or basic welfare benefits⁵. The labour they perform is often inhumane, and their exposure to exploitative working conditions starkly reflects entrenched structural inequalities within the palm oil sector.

Children are similarly subjected to the harsh realities of labor within the perilous environment of palm oil plantations⁶. Subjected to tasks far beyond their developmental capacities, they are often involved in harvesting palm fruit using sharp tools, carrying burdensome loads, and being exposed to hazardous agrochemicals. These forms of labor not only pose serious risks to their physical well-being but also rob them of their right to education. Many are compelled to abandon schooling prematurely, forced into work to supplement their families' income⁷. This early entry into exploitative labor cements their position within a cycle of poverty—one that offers few, if any, avenues for escape. Rather than being afforded the time and space to learn, grow, and imagine a different future, these children are prematurely thrust into the economic margins of society, where vulnerability and invisibility are the norm.

Land dispossession represents another layer of injustice. Local communities are often persuaded to relinquish their ancestral lands to the state or corporations with the promise of secure employment. However, such promises are frequently unfulfilled. Instead of receiving stable jobs or fair compensation, many find themselves relegated to low-paid, insecure labour positions without contracts or protections. Families who once sustained themselves independently through small-scale farming or entrepreneurship are rendered economically dependent on companies and government structures that rarely act in their best interest⁸. This form of economic dependency consolidates corporate power while systematically eroding community autonomy and resilience.

Sexual violence against women labourers adds another grave dimension to the crisis—one that remains largely invisible in public discourse. Women on plantations not only face physical risks in their daily labour but also endure sexual harassment and abuse, which are seldom reported or addressed adequately by authorities. The psychological burden of such violence is compounded by fear of retaliation or job loss, leading many women to remain silent. In doing so, the cycle of abuse is perpetuated, and the structural violence they endure remains unchallenged⁹ (Kompas.id, 2023; Li, 2015).

⁵ Theconversation.com, “Di Tengah Pesatnya Industri Kelapa Sawit Di Indonesia, Eksploitasi Buruh Anak Masih Terjadi.”

⁶ Antara, “Govt Endeavors to Realize Child Labor-Free Palm Oil Plantation Program,” Antara Indonesian News Agency, 2023, <https://en.antaranews.com/news/284976/govt-endeavors-to-realize-child-labor-free-palm-oil-plantation-program?utm>; Reuters, “Amnesty Finds Child Labor at Indonesian Palm Oil Plantations,” Asia Times, 2016, <https://asiatimes.com/2016/11/amnesty-reports-child-labor-indonesian-palm-oil-plantations/>; Unicef, *Palm Oil and Children in Indonesia*, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/indonesia/sites/unicef.org.indonesia/files/2019-09/palm-oil-and-children-in-indonesia.pdf>.

⁷ Kompas.id, “Balada Perempuan Dan Anak Di Kebun Sawit,” 2023, https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2023/07/28/balada-perempuan-dan-anak-di-kebun-sawit-bahan-serial-tor-4k-perempuan-dan-anak?loc=hard_paywall.

⁸ T M Li, *Social Impacts of Oil Palm in Indonesia: A Gendered Perspective from West Kalimantan*, CIFOR Occasional Paper (CIFOR, 2015); Theconversation.com, “Di Tengah Pesatnya Industri Kelapa Sawit Di Indonesia, Eksploitasi Buruh Anak Masih Terjadi”; Theconversation.com, “Apa Yang Gagal Dilihat Oleh Ketiga Capres-Cawapres Soal Buruh Perempuan?,” 2024, <https://theconversation.com/apa-yang-gagal-dilihat-oleh-ketiga-capres-cawapres-soal-buruh-perempuan-222748>.

⁹ Theconversation.com, “Di Tengah Pesatnya Industri Kelapa Sawit Di Indonesia, Eksploitasi Buruh Anak Masih Terjadi”; Kompas.id, “Buruh Perempuan Di Kebun Sawit Masih Rentan Alami Kekerasan Seksual”; Li, *Social Impacts of Oil Palm in Indonesia: A Gendered Perspective from West Kalimantan*, 120.

Health inequities further illustrate the systemic failures faced by women labourers. Constant exposure to hazardous chemicals, physically taxing work, and the lack of access to medical care result in long-term health consequences that often go untreated. The healthcare system, largely unresponsive to their specific needs, adds another layer of marginalization for this already vulnerable group¹⁰.

What emerges is not merely a series of isolated incidents, but a deeply rooted systemic failure to protect and uphold the rights of women and children within the palm oil industry. The convergence of economic exploitation, gender-based violence, and deprivation of education and healthcare demands urgent ethical scrutiny and structural reform. These conditions call for more inclusive and just policy interventions—ones that prioritize human dignity and social well-being over corporate profit. Achieving social justice in this context requires more than rhetorical concern; it demands transformative action grounded in moral responsibility toward those most affected by the uneven development of the plantation economy in Indonesia.

Understanding Gender Injustice in Palm Oil Plantations: Integrating the Thought of Nancy Fraser

Nancy Fraser (1947–) stands as one of the most influential contemporary philosophers and feminist theorists, whose contributions have significantly shaped discussions on social justice, feminism, and democracy. As a Professor of Political and Social Science at The New School for Social Research in New York, Fraser is widely known for her multidimensional approach to justice, which consists of three core dimensions: redistribution, recognition, and representation¹¹. This framework offers a holistic lens through which injustice can be understood not only in economic terms but also within cultural and political contexts—an approach particularly relevant for analyzing the complex forms of oppression experienced by women and children working in Indonesia's palm oil plantations.

Fraser begins with the dimension of **redistribution**, which concerns economic justice and the fair allocation of resources. Redistribution, in her view, is not merely about wealth transfer but also about restructuring the economic foundations that give rise to inequality—such as the exploitative logic of global capitalism¹². In the context of palm oil plantations, women labourers are frequently subjected to low wages, unsafe working conditions, and minimal access to education and healthcare services. Fraser's notion of redistributive justice calls for policies that rectify these imbalances—through improved wage distribution, social protection mechanisms, and greater access to welfare services that ensure a dignified life free from systemic exploitation.

Yet Fraser contends that economic redistribution alone is insufficient, as injustice also takes place on cultural and social levels. To address this, she introduces the dimension of **recognition**, which emphasizes the importance of cultural and symbolic justice. Recognition, for Fraser, does not merely entail affirming particular identities; rather, she advances a **non-**

¹⁰ Palmoilmagazine.com, "Ministry of Labor's Plan: Eradicating Child Labor from Palm Oil Industry in 16 Provinces," 2023, <https://www.palmoilmagazine.com/hot-news/2023/06/14/ministry-of-labors-plan-eradicating-child-labor-from-palm-oil-industry-in-16-provinces/>.

¹¹ N Fraser and A Honneth, *Redistribution Or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (Verso Books, 2003), 76–88; Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care," *New Left Review* 100 (2016): 85; Nancy Fraser, "Capitalism. A Conversation in Critical Theory. A Précis," *Philosophy and Public Issues - Filosofia E Questioni Pubbliche* 11, no. 2 (2021).

¹² Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution Or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, 90; Nancy Fraser, "27. The Theory of the Public Sphere: The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962)," in *The Habermas Handbook*, ed. Hauke Brunkhorst, Regina Kreide, and Cristina Lafont (Columbia University Press, 2018).

identitarian conception of recognition, one that prioritizes *participatory parity*, or the condition in which all individuals can interact as peers in social life¹³. For women labourers in the palm oil sector, recognition means acknowledging their status not only as gendered beings but as full subjects entitled to fair labor conditions, dignity, and equal standing in society.

The third dimension, **representation**, pertains to political justice and access to decision-making processes. Fraser argues that injustices cannot be meaningfully addressed if marginalized groups are denied political voice and the institutional capacity to influence the structures that shape their lives¹⁴. Within the palm oil industry, this means that women labourers must be granted real opportunities to participate in workers' unions, local councils, or other forums where labour policies and working conditions are negotiated. Without representation, their capacity to resist patriarchal and exploitative labour arrangements remains severely limited.

Fraser further deepens this analysis through her concept of “**abnormal justice**”, in which she critiques the inadequacy of traditional, nation-bound paradigms for addressing increasingly transnational and complex injustices. The forces of globalization, climate change, and rapid social transformation create what she terms “abnormal” conditions—contexts in which conventional assumptions about who deserves justice, who should deliver it, and in what arena, no longer apply¹⁵. In the case of palm oil labourers, this abnormality is manifested in their simultaneous exposure to local exploitation and global economic forces. Fraser argues that justice must be reconceived on a global scale, with redistribution, recognition, and representation mutually reinforcing one another to confront these emergent challenges¹⁶.

Through this integrated framework, Fraser offers a comprehensive philosophical model for understanding and addressing gender-based injustice. Her theory makes clear that economic, cultural, and political dimensions must be treated as interdependent in the struggle for justice. Nevertheless, her work has also faced criticism for insufficiently addressing the question of individual empowerment within highly specific and localized contexts, such as those confronted by women labourers in palm oil plantations¹⁷. This critique opens space for the work of Serene J. Khader, who brings into focus the importance of context-sensitive

¹³ Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution Or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, 103; N Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (Verso Books, 2019), 133.

¹⁴ M Bélanger et al., *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Representational Pluralism in Human Cognition: Tracing Points of Convergence in Psychology, Science Education, and Philosophy of Science*, Routledge Research in Psychology (Taylor & Francis, 2023), 95; Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution Or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, 132; Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Verso Books, 2013).

¹⁵ Nancy Fraser, “Abnormal Justice,” *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 3 (2008): 77; Fraser, “Capitalism. A Conversation in Critical Theory. A Précis,” 55–58.

¹⁶ V Bozalek, D Hölscher, and M Zembylas, *Nancy Fraser and Participatory Parity: Reframing Social Justice in South African Higher Education*, Routledge Research in Education Policy and Politics (Taylor & Francis, 2020), 90; Rhoda Feng, “Nancy Fraser’s Lessons From the Long History of Capitalism,” 2022, 98, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/qa-nancy-fraser/>; C Vincent, *Nancy Fraser, Social Justice and Education*, ISSN (Taylor & Francis, 2020), 169.

¹⁷ B Bargu and C Bottici, *Feminism, Capitalism, and Critique: Essays in Honor of Nancy Fraser* (Springer International Publishing, 2017); Bozalek, Hölscher, and Zembylas, *Nancy Fraser and Participatory Parity: Reframing Social Justice in South African Higher Education*, 187; Alice LeGoff, “From a Theory of Justice to a Critique of Capitalism: How Nancy Fraser Revitalizes Social Theory,” 2022, 98, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-12662-8_4; K Olson et al., *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates Her Critics* (Verso, 2020).

empowerment. Khader's emphasis on building women's capabilities and confronting adaptive preferences offers an operational and agency-centered complement to Fraser's structural model—thus enriching the philosophical conversation on justice with a more grounded focus on gender equality in practice.

Exploring Gender-Based Empowerment Through the Thought of Serene J. Khader

Serene J. Khader is a contemporary feminist philosopher who currently serves as Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. She is widely recognized for her contributions to transnational feminist theory, gender-based empowerment, and the ethics of adaptive preferences. In her seminal work *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*, Khader examines how women's preferences—particularly in patriarchal contexts—are often shaped by systemic constraints that hinder their empowerment¹⁸. Her framework challenges the uncritical application of Western empowerment models and calls for approaches that are culturally grounded and responsive to local realities.

Khader argues that genuine empowerment cannot be reduced to economic improvement or the formal granting of rights alone. Rather, it must account for the socio-cultural contexts in which women make choices. True empowerment, she maintains, involves the transformation of preferences—especially those formed under conditions of oppression and limited alternatives¹⁹. Adaptive preferences, in her analysis, refer to situations where individuals—often women—come to accept or even endorse unjust conditions simply because they see no viable alternatives, or because social pressures render other options invisible²⁰. In such contexts, women may accept exploitative or inhumane working conditions as a survival mechanism, rather than as a genuine expression of agency.

Khader critiques reductive conceptions of empowerment that equate it with increased access to material resources or formal entitlements. She insists that gender-based empowerment must go deeper—addressing the root causes of adaptive preferences through education, awareness-building, and skill development. This process should enable women not only to recognize injustice but also to envision and pursue alternatives beyond the constraints of their current socio-political realities²¹. Empowerment, in this view, involves supporting women to imagine better lives for themselves and equipping them with the tools to realize those possibilities.

When applied to the case of women and child labourers in Indonesia's palm oil plantations, Khader's theory urges us to look beyond material indicators—such as wage increases or improved working conditions—and to attend to the non-material dimensions of empowerment. These include building women's awareness of their rights and enhancing their capacity to resist systemic exploitation²². Practical interventions might involve educational and training programs that prepare women to participate more fully in economic life and advocate for their rights. Such efforts aim to challenge and transform adaptive preferences,

¹⁸ S J Khader, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 57–80.

¹⁹ Serene J Khader, "Identifying Adaptive Preferences in Practice: Lessons from Postcolonial Feminisms," *Journal of Global Ethics* 9, no. 3 (2013).

²⁰ Khader, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*, 91.

²¹ Khader, 100; Serene J Khader, "The Feminist Case Against Relational Autonomy," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 17, no. 5 (2020): 135.

²² A Garry, S J Khader, and A Stone, *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Routledge Philosophy Companions (Taylor & Francis, 2017), 201; S J Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford University Press, 2018), 99; Serene J Khader, "Why Is Oppression Wrong?," *Philosophical Studies* 181, no. 4 (2024): 175.

empowering women to see unjust conditions not as inevitable, but as changeable through collective action and solidarity.

Empowerment, in Khader's view, also entails creating platforms for women to articulate their needs and aspirations, and ensuring their inclusion in decision-making forums²³. In the context of palm oil plantations, this could involve organizing women day labourers into unions or advocacy groups that lobby for more inclusive and gender-sensitive workplace policies. By centering women as active agents of change, this approach envisions empowerment not merely as a policy outcome, but as a dynamic process of resistance and transformation within patriarchal structures.

Khader's framework underscores the necessity of addressing both material and non-material dimensions of empowerment—combining access to fair wages and working conditions with the cultivation of critical awareness, legal literacy, and practical skills²⁴. Within the Indonesian palm oil sector, this means that genuine progress toward gender equality cannot rely solely on surface-level improvements but must also include strategies that elevate women's voices and strengthen their role in both community-level and corporate decision-making structures.

Moving toward gender equality in palm oil plantations thus demands more than symbolic reform; it requires systemic change and deep social transformation. It is therefore essential to examine how Khader's principles of contextual empowerment can be translated into practical strategies tailored to the specific challenges faced by women labourers. In the following section, we explore concrete interventions that align with this approach, with the aim of ensuring that efforts toward justice and equality are not only meaningful but also rooted in the lived experiences of the most vulnerable.

Advancing Gender Equality in Palm Oil Plantations

Gender equality in the context of women and child labourers in Indonesia's palm oil plantations is not merely an aspirational ideal, but an ethical imperative that must be realized through concrete steps and justice-oriented policies. The persistent issues faced by women workers—ranging from low wages, labour exploitation, and sexual violence to limited access to education and healthcare—reflect the deeply rooted injustices that remain unresolved²⁵. These challenges are not only gender-specific but are symptomatic of broader social inequalities entrenched within economic systems and policy frameworks.

The documentary film *Barang Panas* becomes particularly relevant here, as it portrays a reality strikingly similar to the experiences of women and children labouring in palm oil plantations²⁶. The film reveals how marginalized communities, including Indigenous peoples, are frequently sacrificed in the name of national development. Rights to land ownership and livelihood are often disregarded or forcefully taken under the pretext of economic progress and collective welfare. Ironically, such efforts often inflict the greatest harm on those the state is meant to protect.

The narratives in *Barang Panas* mirror the patterns of exploitation and marginalization seen in palm oil plantations, where women labourers and local communities are frequently

²³ Khader, "Why Is Oppression Wrong?," 145.

²⁴ Garry, Khader, and Stone, *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, 222; Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*; Khader, "The Feminist Case Against Relational Autonomy," 176; Serene J Khader and Emily McGill, "Autonomy, Oppression, and Feminist Philosophical Methods," in *The Routledge Handbook of Autonomy*, ed. Ben Colburn (Routledge, 2022), 113.

²⁵ E Hiariej and K Stokke, *The Politics of Citizenship in Indonesia* (Springer Nature Singapore, 2022), 214.

²⁶ "Barang Panas," 2023, https://youtu.be/Cl4kl-r_gL8.

denied their fundamental rights in favor of larger economic interests. These conditions underscore the state's and corporations' recurrent failure to uphold principles of social justice, including the right of Indigenous communities to safeguard their environment and maintain self-sufficiency²⁷. Indigenous populations, who rely on their land for survival, are often pushed to the periphery of development processes that exclude their voices and erode their autonomy.

This injustice is compounded by the prevalent “no viral, no justice” phenomenon in Indonesia, where issues affecting marginalized communities tend to receive serious attention only after going viral on social media²⁸. This trend reveals a troubling dependency on public spectacle to catalyze state response, reinforcing the invisibility of non-viral suffering. Whether on screen or in daily life, the common thread is the legalized dispossession and silencing of marginalized populations under the guise of national progress—often at the expense of their dignity and environmental stewardship.

By highlighting stories such as those in *Barang Panas*, there is a moral imperative to foster collective awareness and concrete action against systemic injustice. Both cinematic and lived experiences serve as reminders that the fight for the rights of women workers and Indigenous communities is not only about resisting exploitation but also about reclaiming the right to live autonomously and in harmony with nature for a more sustainable future.

Against this backdrop, gender equality in palm oil plantations must be framed as a vital part of the broader struggle against systemic injustice. A social justice-based approach emphasizes that gender inequality is not an isolated issue but a reflection of deeper structural failures. To move toward meaningful equality, a multifaceted strategy must be implemented—one that is not only sustainable but also contextually grounded:

- **Collective Organizing and Solidarity:** Supporting the formation of labour unions and solidarity networks that focus on gender equality and labour rights. Through advocacy groups and organized labour, women workers can access platforms to voice their concerns and collectively pursue justice²⁹.

- **Evidence-Based Policy-Making:** Grounding policy interventions in empirical research to ensure they accurately address the realities and needs of women workers. Data-driven approaches can help identify the systemic impact of existing policies and guide more effective reform³⁰.

- **Education and Awareness:** Promoting awareness of labour rights and gender equity through education and public campaigns. With improved understanding, women workers can more actively resist unfair labour conditions and advocate for change³¹.

- **Ethical Consumption Practices:** Encouraging consumers to critically evaluate the origins of the products they purchase—particularly those linked to labour exploitation.

²⁷ D E Gilbert, *Countering Dispossession, Reclaiming Land: A Social Movement Ethnography* (University of California Press, 2024), 215; Hiarij and Stokke, *The Politics of Citizenship in Indonesia*; Li, *Social Impacts of Oil Palm in Indonesia: A Gendered Perspective from West Kalimantan*.

²⁸ Gilbert, *Countering Dispossession, Reclaiming Land: A Social Movement Ethnography*, 155; Hiarij and Stokke, *The Politics of Citizenship in Indonesia*, 187.

²⁹ R Pyburn and A van Eerdewijk, *Advancing Gender Equality through Agricultural and Environmental Research: Past, Present, and Future* (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2021), 195.

³⁰ J Jendrius et al., *ICGCS 2021: Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Gender, Culture and Society, ICGCS 2021, 30-31 August 2021, Padang, Indonesia*, CCER (EAI Publishing, 2022).

³¹ C M Y Park and B White, *Gender and Generation in Southeast Asian Agrarian Transformations*, Critical Agrarian Studies (Taylor & Francis, 2019), 199–203.

Supporting ethically certified goods puts pressure on industries to adopt more just and sustainable practices³².

- **Social and Technological Innovation:** Developing technology-based solutions that empower women workers, such as anonymous reporting apps to safely document rights violations. Such tools can provide secure channels for expression without fear of retaliation³³.

- **Digital Advocacy Platforms:** Utilizing digital media to amplify the voices of women workers through petitions, social media campaigns, and other forms of online mobilization that bring national attention to plantation labour injustices³⁴.

- **Recognition and Formal Acknowledgment:** Valuing the contributions of women workers within the palm oil supply chain through inclusive corporate policies. Recognition can take the form of formal employment status, certifications, awards, or public acknowledgment of their essential roles³⁵.

- **Capacity-Building Programs:** Establishing training and mentorship initiatives that enhance women workers' skills and prepare them for better employment opportunities. These programs can help break the cycle of exploitation and foster economic independence³⁶.

Achieving gender equality within the palm oil industry requires more than rhetorical commitment; it demands tangible, transformative action rooted in justice and respect for human dignity. Each of these strategies contributes to an integrated framework aimed at dismantling systemic inequities and empowering the most vulnerable. It is through this holistic and participatory approach that a more equitable and humane future for plantation labourers may be forged.

Envisioning Gender Equality in Palm Oil Plantations: Integrating Critique and Innovation

In the context of the entrenched injustices experienced by women and child labourers in Indonesia's palm oil plantations, the path toward gender equality must extend beyond improvements in wages and working conditions. It must also encompass deeper, context-sensitive empowerment strategies. While the theoretical frameworks provided by Serene J. Khader and Nancy Fraser offer essential insights, their approaches are not without critique.

Khader cautions against empowerment models that romanticize adaptive preferences—situations in which women appear to choose suboptimal or unjust paths as a result of internalized oppression. Genuine empowerment, she argues, must challenge and transform these preferences rather than simply improving material conditions. However, some critics contend that an overemphasis on deconstructing adaptive preferences without attending to immediate material needs risks ignoring the practical realities faced by women in oppressive environments³⁷. While Khader's idealism is intellectually compelling, pragmatic concerns—

³² E V Shabliy, M J Crawford, and D Kurochkin, *Energy Justice: Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation* (Springer International Publishing, 2022), 183.

³³ P H Cook and L Wirén, *Embedding Sustainability: How to Drive Organizational Transformation* (Kogan Page, 2024), 133; C E Sachs et al., *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Agriculture*, Routledge Environment and Sustainability Handbooks (Taylor & Francis, 2020).

³⁴ Cook and Wirén, *Embedding Sustainability: How to Drive Organizational Transformation*, 158.

³⁵ Gilbert, *Countering Dispossession, Reclaiming Land: A Social Movement Ethnography*; Pyburn and van Eerdewijk, *Advancing Gender Equality through Agricultural and Environmental Research: Past, Present, and Future*, 108.

³⁶ Park and White, *Gender and Generation in Southeast Asian Agrarian Transformations*, 155.

³⁷ R W Peters, *Implementing Inequality: The Invisible Labor of International Development* (Rutgers University Press, 2020), 123; I Robeyns, *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined*,

such as adequate pay and safe working environments—remain pressing and cannot be sidelined.

Fraser, conversely, centers her analysis on structural inequalities and the imperative of fair redistribution as a foundational condition for empowerment. From her perspective, without equitable access to resources, true empowerment remains out of reach. However, Fraser's focus on systemic change has been critiqued for insufficiently accounting for the nuanced cultural and social dynamics that shape women's everyday experiences—especially in rural and patriarchal settings such as palm oil plantations. Her solutions, while theoretically robust, may appear overly generalized and disconnected from the lived realities of marginalized women in such local contexts³⁸.

These critiques reveal the need for empowerment models that are both conceptually grounded and contextually adaptive—responsive to the lived realities and cultural nuances of women and children in plantation environments. *Pos Kesetaraan* (Gender Equality Post) emerges as such an innovation: a mobile community hub that bridges theoretical ideals and practical interventions³⁹. Rooted in principles of participation, inclusivity, and local capacity-building, it delivers essential services—from legal aid and health care to education and advocacy—directly within remote plantation zones. By leveraging simple, low-tech communication tools and fostering local ownership through volunteer participation, *Pos Kesetaraan* transforms isolation into connection and dependency into agency. It stands as a living model of situated justice, demonstrating how incremental, community-driven efforts can lay the groundwork for broader structural change.

From Plantation Peripheries to Empowerment Hubs: The Evolutionary Trajectory of *Pos Kesetaraan*

In recognition of the persistent gap between “access” and “agency” for women and children in palm-oil plantation settings, *Pos Kesetaraan* is conceived not only as a mobile service unit, but as a transitional **empowerment hub** designed to bridge structural injustice, local culture, and everyday survival. This model responds to a crucial reality: despite growing attention to gender issues within the sustainability agenda of the palm-oil sector, “several initiatives have not successfully reached their objective because of the limitations in operationalising gender perspectives into sustainability standards”⁴⁰.

Phase I – Outreach and Basic Access

In remote plantation zones, institutional support rarely reaches women workers or child labourers. Drawing from mobile-health interventions for marginalized worker groups, low-income environments must first have “basic physiological (e.g., water, food, sleep, shelter) and safety (e.g., basic healthcare, security) needs met” to enable deeper empowerment⁴¹. Within *Pos Kesetaraan*, this translates into prioritized services—maternal check-ups, child

JSTOR Open Access Monographs (Open Book Publishers, 2017); Olson et al., *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates Her Critics*, 166.

³⁸ R Aguilera, *The Glass Half-Empty: Debunking the Myth of Progress in the Twenty-First Century* (Watkins Media, 2020), 147; C Johnson, *The Politics of Gender Equality*, n.d., 165; Olson et al., *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates Her Critics*.

³⁹ Siskaforum, “KESETARAAN GENDER DALAM PEMBANGUNAN KEBUN SAWIT BERKELANJUTAN,” 2023, <https://siskaforum.org/kesetaraan-gender-dalam-pembangunan-kebun-sawit-berkelanjutan/>.

⁴⁰ Rini Hanifa, “PERSPEKTIF GENDER DALAM KEBERLANJUTAN SAWIT,” *Masyarakat Indonesia* 43, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14203/jmi.v43i1.715>.

⁴¹ Shannon Guillot-Wright, N Miles Farr, and Ellie Cherryhomes, “A Community-Led Mobile Health Clinic to Improve Structural and Social Determinants of Health among (Im)Migrant Workers,” *International Journal for Equity in Health* 21, no. 1 (2022): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-022-01630-7>.

health sessions, and legal-rights briefings—delivered directly in plantation compounds. These actions meet urgent needs while establishing trust and presence within communities.

Phase II – Participatory Capacity-Building and Voice

After access is secured, the hub advances toward co-creating local capacities among women and children's collectives. The initiative trains plantation-based women volunteers as peer educators, facilitating sessions on labour rights, reproductive health, and education for children. This approach resonates with research on community health-worker empowerment, which highlights the importance of developing identities as “agents of change and advocates for the community ... ensuring accountability of service-providers”⁴². Within the plantation context, *Pos Kesetaraan* enables women to negotiate local norms and mobilize social action, turning dependency into agency.

Phase III – Structural Feedback and Advocacy

Beyond local capacity, *Pos Kesetaraan* channels community-generated data, testimonies, and networks into institutional reform by linking with labour unions, NGOs, and government offices. The approach reflects Nancy Fraser's insistence that fair redistribution is a foundation for empowerment but adds a culturally grounded dimension by connecting it to local realities. As shown in West Kalimantan, “51 % of women work as oil-palm farmers and farm labourers, yet access to land, working capital, and training remains dominated by men”⁴³. The initiative therefore seeks to correct this imbalance by equipping women to collectively voice demands for fair resource access and safer working environments.

Furthermore, *Pos Kesetaraan* integrates **low-tech communication tools** such as SMS and voice calls to sustain outreach in areas with limited internet access. Such tools have proven effective elsewhere, as “mobile-phone programs can influence gender relations ... by enabling greater participation in health and decision-making”⁴⁴. Technological simplicity ensures inclusivity without reinforcing digital inequalities.

The innovation of *Pos Kesetaraan* lies in its cultural embeddedness. It draws upon values of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and *asah-asih-asuh* (mutual nurture) while reinterpreting them through a feminist ethics of care. In doing so, it transforms traditional moral codes from instruments of compliance into instruments of emancipation. This culturally sensitive design is essential given that “women in the plantation sector are also vulnerable to sexual harassment and sexual violence, and face wage gaps and limited access to financial resources”⁴⁵. By integrating relational ethics and gender-justice principles, *Pos Kesetaraan* functions both as a service and as a symbolic site of moral transformation.

Empowerment in plantations cannot exclude children, who are often drawn into unpaid or quota-based labour. UNICEF reports that “children are assisting family members to meet

⁴² Kerry Scott et al., “What Do We Know about Community-Based Health Worker Programs? A Systematic Review of Existing Reviews on Community Health Workers,” *Human Resources for Health* 16, no. 1 (2018): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-018-0304-x>.

⁴³ Rozidateno Putri Hanida Keppi Sukesu, Rudi Febriamansyah, Jendrius Ritha F. Dalimunthe, Jedda Ayu Ingrida, Iwan Nurhadi, Yuerlita, “Gender and People's Oil Palm Plantations: Study of the Impact and Potential of Women Sosial Entrepreneurship in the Dayak Ethnic of West Kalimantan,” *Tuijin Jishu/Journal of Propulsion Technology* 45 (2024): 3, <https://propulsiontechjournal.com/index.php/journal/article/view/7632>.

⁴⁴ Larissa Jennings and Laina Gagliardi, “Influence of MHealth Interventions on Gender Relations in Developing Countries: A Systematic Literature Review,” *International Journal for Equity in Health* 12 (October 2013): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1475-9276-12-85>.

⁴⁵ Cargil, “Cross-Sector Collaboration Increases the Role and Empowerment of Women in Palm Oil Plantation Communities,” [cargil.co.id](https://www.cargill.co.id/en/2022/cross-sector-collaboration-increases-the-role-and-empowerment), 2022, <https://www.cargill.co.id/en/2022/cross-sector-collaboration-increases-the-role-and-empowerment>.

harvesting quotas ... [and] piece-rate payment systems can serve as an indirect driver of child labour”⁴⁶. Nationally, about 1.05 million child workers are employed across economic sectors, with 27.63 % in agriculture, including plantations⁴⁷. *Pos Kesetaraan* addresses this by combining educational outreach, family counseling, and collaboration with local schools to prevent the normalization of child labour.

Ultimately, *Pos Kesetaraan* aims to evolve into a **networked ecosystem of gender-equality posts** across plantation regions, functioning both as service centers and advocacy nodes. It embodies a mid-scale intervention—neither token micro-project nor abstract macro-policy—operating at the intersection of feminist critique, cultural embeddedness, and material justice. Through persistent presence, community ownership, and structural linkages, it transforms care into collective power, and survival into solidarity.

In essence, *Pos Kesetaraan* redefines equality not as a static policy goal but as a living, evolving practice rooted in empathy, reciprocity, and situated justice. It represents an ethical reorientation—from external intervention to internal awakening—where women and children are not merely beneficiaries but co-authors of transformation. By reframing plantation peripheries into spaces of care, dialogue, and resistance, the initiative demonstrates that genuine equality emerges not from imposed reforms, but from the collective moral labor of those who dare to imagine justice differently.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that achieving gender equality in Indonesia’s palm oil plantations requires a multidimensional strategy that integrates structural reform with localized empowerment. Drawing upon Nancy Fraser’s notion of redistributive and recognitive justice, and Serene J. Khader’s critique of adaptive preferences, the analysis underscores that transformation cannot rely solely on economic inclusion or legislative change. It must also challenge the deep-seated moral and cultural hierarchies that normalize women’s subordination and child exploitation. *Pos Kesetaraan* emerges as both a theoretical and practical response—an intervention that embodies participatory, context-sensitive justice while offering a replicable model for inclusive empowerment in rural, gendered economies. Beyond improving welfare, it reimagines plantation communities as ethical spaces where solidarity, care, and resistance intersect to generate social transformation.

Nonetheless, the study acknowledges certain limitations. As a conceptual and qualitative exploration, it does not yet incorporate longitudinal field data or comparative case studies across different plantation regions. Future research could therefore investigate the long-term efficacy of *Pos Kesetaraan* through participatory action research, mapping its socio-economic impact, adaptability, and potential integration into national labour policies. Moreover, intersectional perspectives—considering ethnicity, migration status, and ecological vulnerability—remain vital for understanding the complex realities of plantation life. In light of these findings, a final and pressing question must be posed: *How long will we allow justice to be delayed for those whose suffering sustains our consumption? What are we willing to sacrifice—comfort, profit, indifference—to ensure that the rights and dignity of women and children in palm oil plantations are no longer postponed, but finally realized?*

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