

Gendered Environmental Discourse in the Palm Oil Sector

Chelsy Yesicha^{1*}, Samsir Samsir², Yasir Yasir³, Andri Sulistyani⁴, and Sesdia Angela⁵

^{1,3,4,5} Communication Sciences, Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia

² Management, Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru, Indonesia

Abstract. The palm oil sector in Indonesia significantly shapes both gender relations and environmental narratives within the framework of sustainable development. Plantation expansion has redefined women's roles in production systems and community livelihoods, revealing persistent inequalities amid the industry's growth-oriented discourse. This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), ecofeminism, and political ecology to examine how gender, power, and environmental knowledge intersect in palm oil-related communication. National policies and media portray palm oil as a catalyst for economic progress while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies and ecological exploitation. The findings highlight that women in palm oil communities often experience unequal labor divisions, limited access to decision-making, and increased environmental health risks. However, women's counter-narratives—rooted in local wisdom and collective agency—challenge extractive and growth-centric paradigms, reframing sustainability through the lens of equity and ecological justice. The study underscores that integrating gender perspectives into environmental governance and policy is essential for advancing inclusive sustainability, social resilience, and ethical environmental communication in the palm oil industry. **Keywords:** Environmental discourse, Ecofeminism, Palm oil industry, Environmental communication, Sustainability governance

1 Introduction

The palm oil industry in Indonesia has a significant impact on gender-based power relations and environmental discourse. This expansion of oil palm plantations naturally changes the role of women in livelihood security and civil society, highlighting opportunities and challenges for gender equality. Women face significant gender gaps in the labor market due to deeply ingrained stereotypes that limit their roles to caregiving, while men are considered breadwinners [1]. Despite progress in education, wages, and job distribution, women's involvement in various important sectors, such as conflict management and governance in plantations, is still lacking. However, women are often not involved in land acquisition negotiations for oil palm plantations, even tho they find alternative ways to resist and claim space to participate [2]. This was briefly one of the negative points of Indonesian palm oil

*Corresponding author: chelsy.yesicha@dosen.unri.ac.id

in the eyes of the world, leading the global palm oil industry to reject Indonesian CPO because it was considered environmentally unfriendly and prone to human rights violations. The question arises as to what impact is experienced by palm oil women on social relationships and livelihoods.

The expansion of oil palm plantations reshapes social relations, generating insecurity, anxiety, and new forms of solidarity among women. In regions such as East Kalimantan, industrial expansion reinforces gendered inequalities in access to and control over resources, leading to food insecurity and limited livelihood options. Women respond to these constraints through local knowledge and adaptive practices that diversify income and sustain community well-being—forms of everyday resistance to structural barriers [3]. Comparative experiences from Papua New Guinea show that gender-responsive initiatives, such as equitable payment schemes for smallholder farmers, can enhance women's participation and reduce intra-household conflicts [4]. However, patriarchal norms and cultural constructions continue to shape women's career trajectories in the palm oil sector, where social expectations and masculine work environments discourage female participation [4]. Environmental degradation further intensifies social conflict and disproportionately affects women, whose voices remain marginalized in decision-making on ecological impacts [5].

This study argues that centering gender in environmental discourse is essential for achieving inclusive sustainability. Women in palm oil communities are not passive victims but active agents who challenge extractive logics and propose alternative pathways for ecological and social resilience. Grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), ecofeminism, and political ecology. The study examines how gendered power relations are embedded within environmental discourses of palm oil and how women's counter-narratives contest patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. By bridging these frameworks, the paper contributes to debates on gender, discourse, and resource economies, while offering practical implications for more equitable policy and environmental governance.

Norman Fairclough's CDA [6] conceptualizes language as a social practice that not only reflects but also shapes power and ideology. Discourse is understood as a site where dominance and resistance are negotiated, revealing how social inequalities are sustained or contested. In the context of palm oil, CDA enables an examination of how state, corporate, and media narratives construct palm oil as a developmental success story, while obscuring gendered exploitation and ecological degradation. By analyzing texts, visuals, and interdiscursivity, CDA reveals the ideological underpinnings of these narratives and how women's voices emerge as critical interventions.

Ecofeminist theory highlights the parallel between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature, both rooted in hierarchical, patriarchal, and capitalist structures. Thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood argue that the devaluation of women's knowledge and ecological practices mirrors the subjugation of ecosystems under extractive economic models [7]. 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. Ecofeminism thus provides a normative and analytical framework for recognizing women's agency in reimagining ecological justice.

Political ecology situates environmental issues within broader political and economic structures, emphasizing how power, access, and control over resources are unevenly distributed. 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.

So, the integrative lens in this article, by combining CDA, ecofeminism, and political ecology, this study constructs a multi-layered analytical framework. CDA focuses on language and representation, ecofeminism highlights the gendered dimension of ecological struggles, and political ecology connects discourse with structural power relations in resource economies. This integrative approach allows the analysis to capture both the symbolic and material dimensions of palm oil, demonstrating how dominant narratives normalize extractive logics while women's counter-narratives articulate visions of sustainability rooted in justice, care, and solidarity. Ultimately, the theoretical framework underscores the central argument of this research: that sustainability must be understood not only as a technical or economic challenge but also as a discursive and political struggle. Recognizing women's voices within this struggle is crucial for advancing an inclusive model of environmental governance that addresses both ecological integrity and social equity.

2 Method

This article is part of a study related to the discourse on palm oil women, which was. This article is part of a broader study on discourses surrounding women in the palm oil industry, previously analyzed through videos circulated on YouTube. YouTube, recognized as a democratically inclusive public sphere, was selected as the research object for its capacity to enable anyone to produce and disseminate narratives — including those of grassroots women [8], who can challenge dominant representations constructed by the state and corporations. In this context, women are positioned as key actors in shaping environmental governance. The discourse found in these videos was subsequently contextualized through field investigations conducted in the wetland regions of Riau. The findings from these investigations became the central focus of interviews carried out in three districts: Kampar, Bengkalis, and Siak.

Data for this article were collected through unstructured interviews involving 15 women working in the palm oil industry, consisting of six plantation owners and nine workers, both permanent and casual laborers. The participants were selected purposively, based on criteria identifying them as workers, managers, or owners of palm oil plantations in Riau's wetland areas. In addition to being directly engaged in plantation activities, all informants expressed their willingness to participate in the interviews.

These data are presented as counter-narratives reflecting women's lived experiences, local wisdom, and collective solidarity. The research gap emerges from the dominance of macroeconomic and national growth narratives in the media and policy discourse, which leaves little room for the representation of women's voices as environmental actors within the palm oil sector. previously analyzed based on videos circulating on YouTube. YouTube, considered democratically inclusive, provides a public space that was chosen as an object

3 Result and Discussion

Ecofeminist literacy emerged and developed by highlighting the relationship between women and nature—as proposed by Vandana Shiva—where palm oil women are not only fighting for economic rights but also actively playing a role against the ecological and social impacts of the palm oil industry structure. 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 [7].

Table 1. Summary of Video Discourses on Women in the Palm Oil Industry.

No	Video / Source	Main Discourse & Analytical Focus
1		Wanita Tangguh di Tengah Sawit NET TV - Lentera Indonesia Ecofeminist narrative — Women are portrayed as capable leaders challenging patriarchal assumptions within plantation management.
3		Daur Hidup Buruh Sawit TURC Channel Labor and justice discourse — Exposes workers' welfare issues and the gendered inequalities within palm oil production.

In official state discourse and mainstream media, palm oil is often represented as an engine of growth and a symbol of national development. Palm oil is positioned not merely as an agricultural commodity, but as an icon of economic pride capable of driving the nation's productivity. Framing this success is usually supported by quantitative data: increased export figures, job absorption, and significant contributions to the country's foreign exchange. In this way, the economic narrative of productivity is attached to palm oil to reinforce the state's legitimacy in the national development project.

However, the dominance of this discourse overlooks other equally important dimensions, particularly the experiences of palm oil women who are at the bottom of the production chain. On the one hand, the productivity narrative justifies the exploitation of women's labor—whether as daily wage workers, family land managers, or domestic workers who support industrial sustainability. On the other hand, the media and the state rarely give space to the voices of women who are truly experiencing a double burden, income uncertainty, and limited access to normative rights. Thus, the development economics narrative serves a dual function: reinforcing patriarchal and capitalist structures while simultaneously silencing the potential for women's agency as agents of change.

Ultimately, in the dominant narrative, women in the palm oil industry are often positioned as secondary labor, whose function is merely to support plantation productivity. This representation means that women's contributions are not recognized as equal to men's, but rather are seen as support staff who "complement" the logic of masculine production. Women are reduced to an extension of the domestic roles they fulfill in the household. As stated by Ngatimin, his experience working in a palm oil company made him trusted as a manager and permanent employee on a privately owned plantation.

The 2-hectare oil palm plantation is managed independently by me and my husband. My interest in buying it grew because oil palm can be harvested every two weeks. We run everything together, following my husband's family tradition. Usually, we hire additional workers to transport the harvested fruit out of the field so it can be sold to the middleman (Toke). The ups and downs of owning this oil palm plantation are most felt during the "ngetrak" (dry) season, when yields decrease but selling prices rise. Conversely, when the harvest is abundant, the price tends to drop. (Ngatimin, Kampar)

Dariani shared her experience of buying her own garden, even tho she is also a permanent employee on someone else's plantation. He still imagines that when he bought the plantation for 100 million. Now it's 200-300 million per hectare.

We bought the plantation with our own savings three years ago, in 2021. My husband and I manage it ourselves, though he takes on most of the work since he knows more about it—I just help where I can. He's also the one who sells the harvest to the toke (middleman) and keeps track of prices. The profit from one month can reach around six million rupiah, while expenses for fertilizer and other needs are about four million per month. Although my husband works as a permanent employee at Mr. Ersas's plantation, I am often involved in pruning activities—removing oil palm fronds—as a daily laborer (Dariani, Bengkalis)

Tasks traditionally associated with women, such as caring for seedlings, cleaning the garden, or tending to plants in their early stages, are seen as a form of "natural care" that seems inherently appropriate. In fact, this burden is often not balanced by formal recognition or fair wages. Women's contributions to maintaining the sustainability of the palm oil production cycle are absorbed into the logic of capitalism and patriarchy, which normalizes cheap labor and the invisibility of their roles.

Furthermore, this logic of productivity also reinforces traditional gender constructions: women are considered diligent, patient, and obedient, making them suitable for repetitive, high-intensity, but low-economic-value work. Thus, the national development narrative that glorifies palm oil productivity actually reinforces the marginalization of women, limits their agency, and turns their labor into a hidden instrument of large-scale economic and political projects.

Ecology is positioned as subordinate to productivity. The environment is not treated as a living space with intrinsic value, but merely as a supporting factor for the sustainability of palm oil production. Forests, land, and water are treated as commodities that can be calculated in economic balance sheets. The dominant narrative frames sustainability within a technical framework (certification, production efficiency), rather than social-ecological justice. The sustainability discourse mainstreamed by both the state and industry places more emphasis on technical innovations such as certification, mechanization, or supply chain improvements. This approach ignores the dimensions of social justice, the rights of local communities, and power relations in resource management.

Health, pollution, and environmental degradation issues experienced by communities—especially women—tend to be overlooked. Direct impacts such as water pollution, reduced access to local food, and increased health burdens due to air pollution or pesticides are rarely included in the official narrative. Women, who serve as household food managers and family health guardians, bear the double burden of this environmental damage, yet their voices remain marginalized.

Based on the presentation above, the counter-narrative of women found is women as environmental guardians. Women in wetland areas within the palm oil plantation sector have daily experiences directly connected to clean water management, family health, and household food security. This provides a different ecological perspective from the economic logic of productivity, which emphasizes resource exploitation. The women's narrative emphasizes that sustainability is not just about economic growth, but about the survival of future generations, challenging the extractive paradigm that harms the environment and local communities.

This ecological perspective of women is implemented in community solidarity, local knowledge, and natural resource management practices based on the values of togetherness and cooperation. They also face challenges such as gender inequality, marginalization in the palm oil industry, and the double burden of being productive workers and homemakers, yet they still fulfill their roles as environmental stewards and agents of socio-ecological change.

Women's narratives also raise the issue of ecological justice by challenging the extractive logic and exploitative capitalism in the palm oil industry. They practice solidarity and advocacy within the community to fight for the right to social protection, health, and sustainable natural resource management. This narrative also confirms that women's ownership of oil palm land is often the result of patriarchal inheritance mechanisms, but it also serves as a symbol of social mobility and a space for negotiating women's status within families and society.

Local media, such as documentaries and journalistic coverage analyzed through a critical discourse approach, serve as an arena for advocacy and the reconstruction of palm oil women's identities as resilient and adaptable workers who are also structurally vulnerable. Narrative modalities such as sincerity, pride, and resilience serve as indicators of how women articulate their experiences as agents of change and bearers of socio-ecological sustainability values. The conflicting ideologies in the palm oil women's media narrative resulted in the emergence of three contradictory ideologies.

Table 2. Ideological Tensions in the Representation of Women in the Palm Oil Sector.

Ideology	Core Description
Exploitative Capitalism	Women’s labor is commodified through low wages and minimal protection to sustain productivity.
Patriarchy	Cultural and institutional structures reinforce male dominance and control over land and labor.
Emancipation and Advocacy	Women’s resistance and solidarity demand gender justice, policy reform, and recognition of their roles.

This ideological conflict is not only between patriarchal power and capitalism, but also involves media narratives as a space for advocacy that promotes community solidarity and gender social transformation in the palm oil plantation sector. This development can be a key part of a critical and comprehensive article manuscript in understanding women's counter-narratives as environmental stewards and agents of socio-ecological change, while also affirming the critical position of media in advocating for and transforming gender values in society [9].

The findings reveal a profound discursive struggle between extractive and ecological logics. The dominant narrative, perpetuated by state and corporate media, legitimizes palm oil expansion as a symbol of progress and nationalism. In contrast, women’s counter-narratives highlight environmental degradation, gendered exploitation, and the moral responsibility to protect nature. Women articulate sustainability not through technical indicators, but through lived experiences of water management, health care, and food security. Their resistance takes the form of everyday practices of care and solidarity—what ecofeminists describe as embodied environmental ethics. This transformation from “invisible labor” to “visible agency” marks a critical shift toward socio-ecological justice.

Critical discourse analysis reveals how language and visual representations in palm oil narratives construct unequal power relations [10]. The dominant discourse—using terms such as growth, foreign exchange, and national prosperity—positions palm oil as a symbol of development while reproducing patriarchal hierarchies that reduce women to supportive labor and exclude them from decision-making. This reflects Fairclough’s notion of hegemonic practice, where extractive capitalist ideologies are normalized as common sense [11]. By prioritizing productivity, such narratives obscure the social and ecological vulnerabilities that women experience, reinforcing the belief that both nature and humans can be exploited for economic gain.

In contrast, women’s counter-narratives expressed through documentaries and community practices challenge this logic by grounding sustainability in local wisdom, solidarity, and lived ecological experience [7]. Rooted in ecofeminist and political ecology

perspectives, these narratives emphasize care, reciprocity, and community well-being as the foundation of sustainable development.

They reject the dichotomy between economy and ecology and assert that social justice and ecological justice are inseparable. Within broader power structures shaped by global demand, pro-investment policies, and corporate interests, women’s agency persists through storytelling, documentaries, NGO reports, and collective practices that challenge dominant narratives [12]. These acts of resistance demonstrate that discourse is not merely descriptive but a site of political struggle, where women redefine sustainability from below.

By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), ecofeminism, and political ecology, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how power, discourse, and gender intersect within the palm oil industry.

Table 3. Dominant vs. Counter-Narratives in the Palm Oil Discourse.

Aspect	Dominant Narrative (State/Corporate/Media)	Counter-Narrative (Women/Community Voices)
Core Ideology	Productivity and economic growth as national pride	Ecological justice and community well-being
Representation of Women	Supportive labor; secondary to male productivity	Active environmental stewards and change agents
View of Nature	Resource for extraction and efficiency	Living ecosystem requiring care and reciprocity
Sustainability Approach	Technical (certification, efficiency)	Socio-ecological (justice, equality, interdependence)
Discourse Modality	Data-driven, managerial, patriarchal	Experiential, affective, rooted in local wisdom

The counter-narratives articulated by women have implications that extend beyond local contexts. First, they challenge the narrow, growth-centered framing of sustainability policies by introducing moral and ecological dimensions rooted in everyday experience. Policymakers must integrate these perspectives into environmental governance, ensuring that certification and sustainability programs address gendered vulnerabilities and labor rights. Second, women’s narratives offer a valuable foundation for community-based advocacy [13]. By framing ecological care as both cultural and political practice, these stories can inform NGO and media campaigns that promote gender equity in resource management. Finally, at the transnational level, incorporating women’s voices into palm oil diplomacy and certification frameworks such as RSPO or ISPO can reshape sustainability from the bottom up, making it more inclusive, equitable, and ecologically grounded [14].

Thus, the discourse battle in the palm oil sector illustrates the ideological conflict between extractive logic and ecological justice. The dominant narrative reinforces the hegemony of capitalism and patriarchy, while women's counter-narratives present resistance through solidarity, local wisdom, and ecological knowledge. This fight opens up new space to redefine sustainability, not just as green growth, but as a project of social-ecological justice that is inclusive and gender-equal.

4 Conclusion

The palm oil industry in Riau and other regions of Indonesia presents a complex interaction between environmental discourse and gender-based power relations. Despite opportunities to improve gender equality and inclusivity, significant challenges remain due to deeply ingrained stereotypes, exclusion from decision-making processes, and the detrimental social and environmental impacts of plantation development. Addressing these issues requires a

deep understanding of women's lived experiences and active efforts to amplify their voices in environmental and socioeconomic discourse. In sum, the article situates the palm oil industry as a contested discursive space where narratives of growth and sustainability are negotiated. It highlights the urgent need to incorporate women's voices into environmental governance and policy-making, not merely as beneficiaries but as central actors in reimagining sustainability. Such inclusion is vital for ensuring that environmental policy addresses both ecological integrity and social justice, moving toward a more equitable and resilient future.

References

1. D. Morley, K. Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*, vol. 264, London and New York (1995)
2. R. de Vos, I. Delabre, *Spaces for participation and resistance: gendered experiences of oil palm plantation development*, *Geoforum* **96**, 217–226 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.08.011>
3. T.D. Toumbourou, W.H. Dressler, *Sustaining livelihoods in a palm oil enclave: differentiated gendered responses in East Kalimantan, Indonesia*, *Asia Pac. Viewp.* **62**, 40–55 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12265>
4. D.H. Azahari, S. Ratri, R. Amalia, *Mainstreaming gender role in oil palm villages in achieving SDGs*, *IOP Conf. Ser.: Earth Environ. Sci.*, IOP Publishing (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/1308/1/012064>
5. U.O. Retnaningsih, et al., *The persistence of patriarchy in the palm oil sector: evidence from the Riau Province of Indonesia*, *Cogent Soc. Sci.* **8**, 2112825 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2112825>
6. N. Fairclough, *Discourse Representation in Media Discourse*, *Sociolinguistics* **17**, 125–139 (1988), [Online]. Available: <http://pascal-francis.inist.fr/vibad/index.php?action=getRecordDetail&idt=11947685>
7. V. Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*, *J. Int. Womens Stud.* **20**, 228 (2019)
8. C. Yesicha, F.H.T., S. Wahyono, *Technologization of Discourse: Indonesia's Food Estate in Documentary*, *Eur. Alliance Innov.* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.11-7-2023.2340597>
9. A.N. Valdivia, *Media Studies*, (2003)
10. N. Fairclough, I. Fairclough, *A procedural approach to ethical critique in CDA*, *Crit. Discourse Stud.* **15**, 169–185 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2018.1427121>
11. F.L.B. Meijboom, F.R. Stafleu, *Farming ethics in practice: from freedom to professional moral autonomy for farmers*, *Agric. Human Values* **33**, 403–414 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-015-9641-8>
12. Z.L. Mai-Bornu, *Green Criminology in the Niger Delta of Nigeria: Why African Women's Voices Matter*, *Int. J. Crime Justice Soc. Democr.* **13**, 41–50 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.3248>
13. I. Carvalho, *Digital media and feminist activism: reclaiming inclusive urban spaces in the post-digital era*, *Cidades Comunidades Territórios* **49** (2025)
14. A.R. Singh, A.D. Sehgal, B.S. Thakur, *Digital activism on social media: a corpus analysis of #Chakkajam tweets during farmers' protest in India*, *J. Content Community Commun.* **22**, 126–146 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.31620/jccc.06.25/12>