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The persistence of patriarchy in the palm oil sector: Evidence from the Riau Province of Indonesia

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the reasons why women tend not to make ambitious choices in regards to taking on employment in the palm oil sector. An argument is made for patriarchy being the bedrock upon which women’s career pathways have been circumscribed among young women graduates. The hurdles they face in career choices in the agricultural sector are mediated by the masculine work environment of the palm oil industry as a result of employers favouring men; as well as social expectations and cultural constructs relating to women’s caregiver role in the family, ideal concepts around women’s physical appearance, and spousal selection. The authors demonstrate the primacy of cultural factors shaping

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Indonesia is by far the largest producer of palm oil in the world – a vital cash crop since it is an important component in foods, cosmetics, and detergents as well as a biofuel and a significant generator of income for the country’s economy. Although the industry has been thriving in recent decades, it continues to be a male-dominated labour sector. This is in spite of growing numbers of women receiving degrees in the agricultural programs found across the archipelago. In this exploratory study, the authors investigate the reason for why young women shy away from the palm oil sector. In a country where gender inequality persists in spite of increasing numbers of women receiving a tertiary training in the relevant field. The study affirms that policies to correct the gender gap in the palm oil sector are needed since gender parity in the sector reflects the Indonesian government’s commitment to gender equality not only in education but also to the various international conventions it has ratified.
graduate women’s decisions and the extent to which they have imbibed and conformed these values which stand in contradistinction to those publicly espoused in the palm oil sector; that in turn provides the final push for women to retreat from entering the sector in spite of having the relevant educational qualifications.

Subjects: Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Gender Inequality; Gender Politics; Gender Issues; Gender & Development

Keywords: palm oil sector; patriarchy; gender inequality; workplace; barriers for women

1. Introduction

Indonesia has a large productive population. Coupled with its vast and abundant fertile soils, it is a key major global producer of a wide variety of tropical agricultural products. Close to 30.26 percent of employees in Indonesia are active in the agricultural sector of which palm oil is the most important in the country’s economic landscape. In fact Indonesia stands to be the largest producer of crude palm oil in the world today (Apresian, Tyson, Varkkey, Choiruzzard and Indraswari, 2020). Robust and profitable, Indonesia earned US$22.9 billion from exporting palm oil products in 2017 (Supriyatna, 2019) while during the period January-April 2020, the sector had a total value of US$6.3 billion (GAPKI, 2020). The Indonesian Minister of Economy recently stated that the palm oil sector is the key to Indonesia’s efforts to reach the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since the industry is a significant provider of livelihoods, hiring large numbers of workers on a non-seasonal basis and, in turn, reducing poverty (Pradip, 2018).

Since the establishment of the Perkebunan Inti Rakyat (PIR) transmigration programme under the leadership of President Suharto, which resulted in several thousands of Javanese migrating to the Riau to take on employment in the palm oil industry from the 1980s; the Riau Province has become the largest producer of palm oil, accounting for almost one fifth of the total production of palm oil in 2018. The palm oil plantations in Riau occupy 21 percent of the total national land area devoted to the palm oil industry, making it the largest, planted area in Indonesia for palm oil production (Hirschmann, 2020). Hence Riau was elected the first province in Indonesia to establish an inclusive SDGs Coordination Team (Rencana Aksi Daerah/RAD SDGs) in July 2020, as mandated by the Presidential Decree No. 59/2017. The same Presidential Decree guarantees women empowerment and mainstreaming as well as the removal of discriminatory behaviour including gender bias as priorities, including in the workplace (UNDP, 2019).

Moreover, the International Labour Organization (ILO) mandated the Decent Work Country Program (DWCP) for Indonesia in 2012–2015 wherein gender equality, tripartism, social dialogue, and international labour standards were mainstreamed throughout the DWCP priorities. Several conventions and policies were established for better work conditions: Indonesia has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1983, resulting in Law No. 7 of 1984 to prevent further discrimination towards women and, in turn, implement policies related to the clauses outlined in the Convention.

Similar commitments to improve gender equality emerged in other regulations and initiatives. The Manpower Ministerial Circular Letter No. 184 of 2013 was revitalized with the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Task Force at the national level and the establishment of provincial task forces aimed at protecting workers and employers, irrespective of their contractual status; persons in training, interns and apprentices, workers whose employment has been terminated, volunteers, job seekers and job applicants (ILO, 2018). For the first time violence and sexual harassment in the workplace were covered in the Violence and Harassment Convention No. 190/2019 and its accompanying Recommendation No. 206/2019. Moreover, another set of regulations, Presidential Instructions on Gender Mainstreaming (No. 9 of 2000), was aimed at reducing the gap between Indonesian women and men when accessing and obtaining development training, as well
as increasing participation and control over the development process, and promoting gender equality. But the implementation of all such government policy, whether labour policy, provincial policy, and education policy, remains a huge problem across industries in spite of growing numbers of women having joined the labour force in recent decades.

In 2021, the percentage of working women was 53.34% compared to men among whom 82.27% of the working age population engaged in the labour force (Chau, 2022). But the country’s workforce continues to be dominated by men with some sectors having a more male culture compared to others. Such is the case of the agricultural industries which favours men over women, thereby resulting in not only larger numbers of men in the sector but also men holding decision-making power positions within the sector as well as possessing a larger earning capacity (Lips, 2014). That the workplace is male-dominated reflects the larger patriarchal culture embedded in Indonesian society. At the familial level, patriarchal values continue to thrive: women are seen to be more naturally suited to raising families and possessing the qualities of gentleness and empathy more than men (Saini, 2017). Gender stereotypes spill-over to their male counterparts: they are commonly described as excelling at tasks requiring logic, spatial reasoning, and motor skills—qualities which women are seen to lack. Even among graduate women, they tend to be resigned to “following their husbands’ wishes” on marriage, forcing them to conform to the dominant gender ideology (Priyatna, 2013; Retnaningsih, 2013). In keeping with this ideology, happiness and success for women are measured by marriage, and it is acceptable for women’s careers to be interrupted by marriage and child-rearing duties, leading to the prioritization of families over work demands or resignation from the workforce altogether. Thus, there are many industries, especially in the agricultural sector, that do not see women as “profitable investments”; and the same goes for the palm oil industry.

Gender inequality continues despite the quality of the education offered and higher GPAs obtained by women. Increasingly across Indonesia, access to enrolment for female students is supported with a gender responsive teaching and learning process that permeates curriculum content and learning materials, teacher training and development, student achievement, teacher-student relations, and the safety and security of the learning environment (BAPPENAS, 2013, p. xvi). Cognitive achievement is assessed using the Grade Point Average (GPA); which is the main indicator of educational success regardless of soft skills such as leadership, creativity, teamwork, and persistence. In terms of outcomes, female students have been found to achieve higher GPA scores than male students (Anggraeni, 2018).

Also, despite the ratification of international frameworks and promulgation of national policies on labour by the Government of Indonesia (GOI), as well as trends towards gender-responsive education in the country in recent decades, women are still underrepresented in higher-level positions in some industries. At the Indonesian palm oil company, IndoAgri, for instance, only 1.3% of female employees hold managerial positions even though most of them have achieved the highest level of education i.e., a bachelor’s degree in agriculture (Zein, 2018).

Blackburn (2006) argues that gender issues have not been dealt with adequately in the education system to the extent that gender biases embedded in the education system reflect the conservative values entrenched in Indonesia. This translates into Indonesian women encountering patriarchal values and norms, not only within the private domain, but also in the public domain: including in their efforts to earn a higher degree qualification for improved career opportunities.

Research on the career aspirations of female graduates in the agricultural sector in Indonesia is limited. Based on in-depth interviews with female students and a small number of educators from the agricultural program of a public university in the Riau Province of Sumatra, Indonesia; as well as a handful of staff and women working in the palm oil sector, this paper examines why young women are not making ambitious choices towards taking on jobs in the palm oil sector. It asserts that patriarchy forms the bedrock for why young graduate women tend to retreat from the sector
because of the numerous conditions they perceive to be barriers working against them and, in turn, shaping women’s career decisions. By patriarchy, the authors mean a gender ideology reinforcing men’s superiority, authority, leadership and domination over women in the public and private arenas (Rawat, 2014). More specifically it engenders the “institutionalization of male dominance over women . . . in the family and extension of male dominance over women in society in general” (Sultana, 2012, p. 3), having a spill-over effect on the roles and responsibilities of the sexes and that which would be considered “masculine” and “feminine” according to the cultural and social tenets of the Indonesian people. In the capitalist context, patriarchy could be said to reinforce “a gender binary and hierarchy, a framework or lens that: leads us to see human capacities as either ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ and to privilege the masculine . . . [reinforcing] . . . a culture then, [in which] patriarchy exists as a set of rules, codes and scripts that specify how men and women should act and be in the world” (Gilligan & Snider, 2018, p. 3). In this exploratory study, the authors maintain that patriarchy might be singled out as the key heuristic device to understanding the career pathways of young women in Indonesia, as expressed in: the male-dominated culture of the palm oil sector creating a masculine work environment, on the one hand; and the social expectations and cultural constructs relating to women’s caregiver role in the family, ideal concepts around women’s physical appearance and spousal selection, on the other. The authors argue that the complex interweaving of cultural factors in particular, to which women have made a choice to conform, stand in contradistinction to the values publicly espoused in the palm oil sector; providing the final push for young women to make the decision for not taking on employment in the sector, in spite of having the relevant educational qualifications.

2. Methods

Data was collected in the July-August 2020. The individuals approached to participate in this study included staff working in multinational, national, and state-owned palm oil plantations as well as students and faculty of a public university located in the province of Riau. Because of the small sample size, since only a total of 16 participants were interviewed, the study should be treated as exploratory with the intent of developing subsequent research into the topic. Prior to the interview, the questionnaire as well as a letter detailing the purpose of the research were sent out via email or WhatsApp to the participants. Before the interviews took place, informants were reminded of the purpose of the research and the data being gathered. It was planned that qualitative research would be adopted since it would shed light on the real world experiences of the participants (Gobo, 2008; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) as well as how they would see the world (McCracken, 1988).

In reaching out to palm oil plantation companies, emails were first sent out to 12 corporations, requesting for interviews. Among the corporations contacted, the researchers did not receive any positive replies to the request for an interview. The researchers surmised that the main reason for the rejection could have been because the palm oil industry often receives criticisms from nongovernmental groups: such as the negative impacts the industry has had on the environment as well as concerns related to deforestation and stripping of livelihoods of indigenous communities. The lead researcher used her private contacts and subsequently the team was able to secure access to a multinational palm oil corporation through which the team was able to interview the general manager who was male. Through a female alumnus of the university with which the authors are affiliated, the team was able to interview another manager working in a state-owned palm oil corporation. This time round, the manager was a female. In particular, the interview with the male general manager was very useful since he had many years of experience in recruitment, candidate selection, management, and collaboration with universities.

The team also interviewed five female graduates from the Faculties of Engineering, Economics, and Business Economy. The goal was to understand their reasons for choosing the programs of study they did and why they did not want to take on the position of assistant manager in the palm oil sector. Online surveys were conducted using WhatsApp with twenty-two female students in their last semester of eight semesters of study from four study programs, namely Agro
Technology, Chemical Engineering, Environment Engineering, and Economics and Business. They were included in the research since these study programs produced graduates who in turn worked in the palm oil sector as white-collar employees such as assistant managers or staff working in the accounting and human resources departments as opposed to being manual labourers. The questionnaire circulated among these students focused on their knowledge of the palm oil industry, their future plans in working for the sector, and their interest in taking on a managerial position in the sector. Fourteen students returned the survey, but only nine student responses were satisfactorily answered. Based on the survey data, the team then conducted face-to-face in-depth Zoom interviews with those students to obtain further information.

Face-to-face interviews with administrative staff in the university included the Dean of Economics and Business faculty; Vice dean of academic affairs of Economy and Business, as well as Engineering faculty; Head study program of Agro Technology, and Head department of Accounting. Interviews were conducted with the purpose of understanding the labour market and reasons why some sectors have low numbers of female staff in leadership positions. An in-depth interview with the female head of the Agro Technology Study Program was also conducted to understand gender-responsive curriculum and teaching-learning processes at the university. Interviews were also conducted with a female academic who was in charge of Career Development and Collaboration to understand how the university bridges graduates with the workplace through information dissemination and training.

All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia; interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and then translated into English. Data validity was gained by the team sending the transcriptions to the participants for checking. The participants were informed that their identity would be confidential, although their statements during the interview, if cited, would be presented in publications using pseudonyms.

3. Findings

3.1. Students and graduates from related study programs
Female students and graduates suffer from discrimination, and, contrariwise, male graduates enjoy privileges in both the education and career spheres. In Indonesia, including the province of Riau, the numbers of students enrolled in a university and the numbers who graduate are considered more important than the outcome-based assessments of the course objectives. Successful teaching-learning processes are assessed on GPA, length of study, and the number of graduates; but not on the potential for leadership, bravery, persistence, ability to work under pressure, and creativity though managerial positions require those traits.

World Data Atlas for Indonesia in 2015 showed that in tertiary education 52.2% of students were female. Currently, female participation in higher education (ages 19–24) remains higher than male participation by one percentage point (Afkar et al., 2020). At the established public university chosen for this research, the number of female students and female graduates tends to be greater than the number of male students and graduates (see, Table 1). In fact, the enrolment of females at the university is not only greater than that of males but has been gradually increasing over recent years. In terms of achievement measured by GPA, the data collected showed that female students and female graduates achieved higher grades than male students and graduates.

There were also greater numbers of females enrolling and graduating from the Agro Technology, Accounting, Chemical Engineering and Environmental Engineering programs, indicating female students’ increasing interest in disciplines thought to only attract male students (see, Tables 2 and 3).

In 2020, female graduates in the four study programs exceeded male graduates. The Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Business, Vice Dean of Academic Affairs of the Engineering Faculty,
and the Head of the Agro Technology Study Program all stated that female students rated higher on the GPA scale than their male counterparts: as well, females had the best student records.

4. Factors discouraging female graduates from entering the palm oil sector

Although growing numbers of female graduates enrolled in the agricultural program; it was found that gender discrimination continued to persist in the education system. The findings revealed that gender inequality and discrimination were commonly perpetuated by the lecturers as well as administrative and department heads themselves. Interviews with faculty members revealed the extent to which gender biases remained. The female head of the study program stated:

There is no hiring for female positions … They don’t like hiring females as they don’t want the applicant to resign after training and a probation of one and half years because she gets married and follows her husband … Corporations have spent a lot of money during the training process … Females menstruate, become pregnant, have a baby, and take care of him/her after that … So, it is understandable and acceptable that corporations do not hire females for economic reasons … Not all corporations have that policy … Unfortunately, only one out of three candidates was female in the interview for that company … For the competency test female candidates are okay … They will be eliminated during the interview by questions such as, ‘Are you willing to be positioned at any place (meaning, including very remote areas, since the majority of plantations are in that kind of areas)?’ because their answer invariably will be ‘I’ll think about it’ which means, ‘No, thank you’ … Instead the Nursery section offers a position that is more workable and convenient for women due to having fixed working hours, being close to emplacement, and having less field area mobility.

By condoning gender stereotypes and biases, this would have had a negative impact on the kinds of decisions female students and graduates in agriculture, especially since faculty members do not make an expressed attempt to encourage female students to enter the palm oil sector and have them compete with their male counterparts. Instead the biases they hold are subtly imparted to their female students who not only imbibe these gender stereotypical ideas about certain labour sectors being more suited to men while others are more appropriate to female skills and capacities. To this extent then, the agricultural program and, in turn, the education system thereby perpetuates patriarchal norms that are detrimental to the career development of female students.

The findings from online surveys of female students in their last semester at the university showed that should there be an interest in joining the palm oil sector, the majority vied for the position of assistant manager as their preferred career path after graduation. The findings revealed that many believed that assistant managerial positions would be a way out for them in terms of working outdoors and being subjected to sun exposure, which they hoped to avoid. For the most part among many young women pursuing agricultural studies, a common conception is that a palm oil plantation is a place for males since the location of these plantations are in remote areas marked by oppressive temperatures and high humidity. Besides many plantations are close to crime-prone neighbourhoods; are far from traditional markets and grocery stores; and offer few opportunities for a satisfying social life. One Agro Technology female student wanted a career at a palm oil plantation as her second job choice; but it was clear from her feedback that her preference was to start off as a field manager rather than a lower-level job which would have

| Year | Male   | Female | Total  |
|------|--------|--------|--------|
| 2017 | 14,118 | 20,825 | 34,943 |
| 2018 | 14,322 | 20,988 | 35,310 |
| 2019 | 14,065 | 20,947 | 35,012 |
| 2020 | 13,044 | 21,151 | 34,195 |

Table 1. Students by gender, 2017–2020
| Study Program          | Aug-Jan 2016 | Feb-June 2017 | Aug-Jan 2017 | Feb-June 2018 | Aug-Jan 2018 | Feb-June 2019 | Aug-Jan 2019 | Feb-June 2020 |
|------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| Agro Technology        | 1038         | 1000          | 1000         | 906           | 997          | 920           | 1027         | 944           |
| Accounting             | 2096         | 1823          | 1823         | 1636          | 1641         | 1491          | 1516         | 1357          |
| Chemical Engineering   | 645          | 694           | 649          | 650           | 720          | 668           | 680          | 611           |
| Environmental Engineering | 341       | 337           | 337          | 314           | 374          | 336           | 378          | 315           |
| Study Program       | 2017 M | 2017 F | 2018 M | 2018 F | 2019 M | 2019 F | 2020 M | 2020 F |
|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Agro Technology    | 96     | 69     | 81     | 62     | 32     | 43     | 10     | 12     |
| Accounting         | 118    | 243    | 75     | 228    | 56     | 149    | 49     | 136    |
| Chemical Engineering| 36     | 37     | 69     | 73     | 24     | 35     | 31     | 44     |
| Environmental Engineering| 17 | 22     | 19     | 50     | 14     | 36     | 16     | 38     |
 demanded that she work outdoors. Another female student who had rejected an offer to work at a palm oil plantation because, “women are supposed to be elegant (soft voice, submissive to men, neat, and light skinned),” demonstrated what these young women perceived to be characteristics of women which can only be maintained if they found deskbound work and therefore a managerial position rather than a field-based position. Thus it was clear from these narratives that young women were making career decisions co-dependent on values they had imbibed from their own social and cultural environment—values which, while gendered were associated with (gender) subordination expressed in the norms, roles, and behaviour considered ideal by society through socialisation and internalisation (Soman, 2009) and not necessarily “naturally inferior … [because] they hadn’t been allowed the chance to develop their talents” (Saini, 2017, p. 20).

Embracing such gendered norms were widespread in the data. In the in-depth interview with a female Agro Technology student in her 7th semester who was the Head of the Division for Women Empowerment on the executive student board of the Faculty of Agriculture explained her point of view:

My friends decided not to work at a palm oil plantation since the job is uninteresting … It is the kind of strenuous job best suited to males with good stamina; totally not suited to young females who want to keep their white/light skin by avoiding working under the sun … My friends who majored in Plant Protections and completed an internship in palm oil plantations in North Sumatra, also mostly chose to work as a laboratory assistant, a researcher, or in administrative jobs: positions that do not involve a lot of physical activities and sun exposure, are convenient, and not ‘dirty’.

4.1. Cultural considerations
Patriarchy is embedded deeply in Indonesian society: men have the greatest decision-making power in their family. Such gendered norms are prevalent in various dimensions of everyday life, including the decisions women made in the workplace. The female manager we interviewed remarked that because her husband is the head of the household and makes the major decisions in the family; she could not just accept a promotion without consulting him. This attitude was clear from her response to an offer of promotion to a manager position:

I was surprised and responded with, I will consider it by discussing the offer with my husband and children … Give me time for tonight to talk with them! I said my husband’s permission and family support were necessary to avoid conflict … I was anxious about accepting without his permission … I also always remember my father’s message, ‘Any good position you have, you have to obey and listen to your husband.’ … Fortunately, the discussion that night went very well … I always remember my father’s message, ‘Any good position you have, you have to obey and listen to your husband … [There is] no success without men’s support.’

Thus hiring women is not a priority in the palm oil sector. Women for cultural reasons do not seem to be confident they can make independent decisions about such matters neither are male palm oil managers confident in investing in female managers. A male general manager said:

In every interview session for hiring I had, I questioned if the female candidate knew the consequences of applying … I always say: please rethink your situation now … You’re still single. When you start working, you will already be 24, 25 or even 27 or 28 … It is not easy to find a spouse (husband) here … What do you think? A further tricky question is if you’re already working here and are single then you find a husband and get married, will you continue to work here or resign to follow your husband? A female candidate’s response is mostly, ‘It’s okay for me and I will work here’: but still the interviewer does not trust the female candidate’s answers.

4.2. Graduate women’s career aspirations
In spite of managerial positions in many national and international private palm oil palm plantations operating in Riau coming furnished with a reasonable salary, facilities, and benefits to new
graduates; most female graduates desire to work as civil servants instead. Stereotypes of civil service jobs in Indonesia are that they involve fewer demanding duties, have a less structured workday, less harsh penalties for poor performance, and carry a higher social status. Among these young women, the civil service is a more prestigious career choice. The previously quoted female manager attempted applying for a job in the civil service after gaining her master's degree and marrying but was unsuccessful. So, then she tried for employment with a state-owned plantation (PTPN V) that, fortunately, gave an opportunity to married females.

In spite of large, international, and private palm oil plantations offering attractive salaries and employee benefits, this did not motivate students and alumni to apply for a career in the industry. Our findings were that if female graduates were not eligible for the civil service, did not want to or were ineligible to work at a privately owned palm oil plantation, then their choices were still for state-owned plantations whose locations were not far away, had better infrastructure nearby, and more chances to transfer to administrative positions in the headquarters section.

4.3. Gender unequal recruitment regulations and processes

Discrimination against female graduates is worsened when actual regulations for payments and recruitment have never been truly challenged by the government despite legislative lip service to equality. The Indonesian national government programs for investment attractions in agriculture sectors sacrifice women's opportunities, careers, and benefits. Women managers/staff are classified as being single (KO or Family Zero), meaning no benefits are provided to husbands and children, unless the female is a widow, or her husband is disabled because of an accident (a physician's certificate is compulsory).

The state-owned corporation is a role model providing guidance for payroll and leave systems. Badan Kerja Sama Perusahaan Perkebunan Sumatera (BKS-PPS) has applied gender inequality regulations for women managers/staff since 1967. Health insurance from the corporation is only for the female worker; there is no cover for her husband and children. However, male managers/staff have family benefits including full health insurance. This unequal regulation applies to every palm oil plantation corporation. For example, online hiring advertisements and information accessed in the current recruitment page: https://ppm-rekrutmen.com/ptpn/pendaftaran have stated that the applicant must not be older than 28 years old as per 1 November 2020; must be single, be willing to remain single for the training period, and preferably be male. When this issue was put to a multinational palm oil plantation's general manager, he confirmed the situation, without expressing any negative feeling about the discrimination practised in the industry.

When asked to comment on recruitment advertisements worded, “male is preferable”, or even “only for a male”, and whether this was a kind of discrimination against women, one interviewer condoned the bias saying:

That is fine. There is nothing wrong with that. That work is only suitable for men since it needs the stamina necessary for a lot of physical work under the sun. Let males take it … We don't want it … There is no objection (to the wording in the ads) from most of my female friends.

Generally young women were found to be more inclined to choose other career paths as they too thought the work “unsuitable” and “unfeminine”. As well as finding that managerial positions in palm oil corporations were an unpopular job choice, the interviews with female alumni indicated that promotion to manager from assistant manager took longer for women and involved encountering biased thinking. One alumnus working at a state-owned palm oil plantation since 2005 was a manager at her previous plantation for seven months, and a manager for 11 months at her current one. She explained that at that time she sought work (and even currently), the recruitment information for the job she applied for contained the wording, “a male is preferable”, but there was no requirement for being unmarried during the process of recruitment up until the training period was completed. However, if she applied currently, she would be disqualified owing to her status as
a mother with one child. She went through five stages; from document verification, a paper and pencil examination, a health examination, psychological testing to interview tests. During the interview session, to her surprise, she encountered sexist questions and biased statements.

I remember in my last process of recruitment for an interview, a question raised, ‘Are you ready to work at the plantation as an assistant manager where most of your field supervisors (Indonesian: mandor) are male?’ If they resist your instruction, won’t you be scared? … I answered, ‘I am a strong woman who is not scared of anyone!’ … In the first period of field work on the sub-estate (Indonesian: afdeling) at Sei Pagar, most employees were upset seeing four new females … This led to statements such as, ‘Who are the four women wearing white uniforms (for assistant manager) in this place?’ When told, they said: ‘They are our new assistant managers? How can women become our assistant managers!’ The female manager stated, ‘I don’t have any expectation working in the field, I am just brave’ … People asked me, ‘Did you hear about the rumour and the news that a man was killed by a tiger here? Don’t you think about it?’ … I responded with: ‘I have a good intention working here, God bless me when I am doing a good deed.’

Gender biases in the selection and promotion processes were also openly expressed among employers in the palm oil sector. The interview with a male General Manager of a multinational corporation gave the perspective of a prospective employer of female graduates. At the stage of the competency written test, most candidates, male and female, scored well, but when they were engaged in the real work/field, the results differed, favouring the employment of males. The goal of the field trip is to introduce the standard expected for employment at the organization, so the perceived “test” justified a pro-male attitude. He shared policies in his corporation management aimed at mitigating losses during training and from resignations and as they were based on cost effectiveness, these policies did not ensure gender equality.

5. Discussion
The reasons for young women not pursuing careers in palm oil plantations in Indonesia were shaped by patriarchal norms. That women saw their role to be primarily responsible for household and caring tasks and playing a supportive role to their husbands. The values upheld in Indonesian society are that a woman should be a mother who is busy with children, who cooks for and supports her husband, obeying him if he orders her to serve him, or accepting the rights of the husband to determine their social life; and that such values concomitantly construct how ideal women look, act, and gain happiness (Deshpande et al., 2020). Moreover, career decisions made by a young woman who desires to seek for employment in the palm oil industry are often placed within the cultural framework of a husband being perceived to be more commonly the key decision maker in the family. It is not surprising then that all the female participants stated that a palm oil plantation is not the best place for them to have “a good life” and to find “happiness”, assuming that happiness was bound up with being married, playing a supportive role to husbands, and having a family. In this case, being married, bearing, and taking care of children, rather than advancing one’s career, are indicators of “happiness”; conversely, Indonesia’s patriarchal culture does not tolerate educated, unmarried, career orientated women.

Patriarchal cultures also construct how ideal women look, act, and gain happiness, aside from being responsible for household and caring tasks (Deshpande et al., 2020). Cultural values associated with a woman’s physical appearance continued to be a consideration in career decisions regardless of their having received a university education. Many young women were not able to shake off cultural ideologies linked to skin colour and social class to which they have been socialised into (Salva, 2019). Because working in the field is common in the palm oil sector, Agung and Amani (2018) claimed that outdoor work is less attractive for a woman since working in the sun leads to darker skin tones unfavourable in Indonesian society. Besides, women themselves also devalue one another for having darker skin. Darker skin is deemed to be ugly (Saraswati, 2012), associated with working in the fields and, therefore, rural poverty; while light skinned colour in a woman is a standard for beauty, prestige, and social status in Indonesia, as well as living a more comfortable, cosmopolitan indoor life, out of
the sun. Hunter's (2002) research is applicable to Indonesia, demonstrating how in the hierarchy of skin colour there is privilege in being light skinned, and skin colour stratification and patriarchy interact to limit a woman's life opportunities. And as people fail to adhere to beauty standards, other people will make them feel excluded or socially rejected (Berry, 2008) or even less attractive and less desirable which in turn would affect their marriage prospects among men from the middle and higher classes—values which drive young women further away from the palm oil sector.

Being aware of the discrimination exercised by recruiters has implicitly shaped young women’s desires to work in the palm oil sector. In terms of inequality in the recruiting system, the women interviewed knew that men were the preferred candidate in job vacancy advertisements. Although arguments have been made for men being the preferred choice for jobs in the industry with work efficiency being stated as the main factor (Sulistyaningsih & Rumondang, 2008), this is tied up with men not needing “feminine leave”. Moreover, unlike women, men do not resign to join their spouses after training and probation. Gender injustice is obvious when it is the unmarried woman who becomes the successful female candidate for the job with the consequences that they receive no family benefits as regulated by Badan Kerjasama Perusahaan Perkebunan Sumatera/BKS-PPS, 1967 or the Cooperation Agency of Sumatera Plantation Companies, 1967 (“Surat Edaran Menteri Tenaga Kerja Nomor: SE-07/MEN/1990 Tentang Pengelompokan Upah,” Surat Edaran Menteri Tenaga Kerja Nomor: SE-07/MEN/1990Tentang Pengelompokan Upah, 2016).

Patriarchy is evident in the discriminatory practises around recruitment, promotion, and payroll processes prevalent in the palm oil industry. While women continue to be treated as subordinate to men, these employment practises characteristic in the industry tended not to be challenged by young female graduates but instead they seemed to “accept” it as normative and, in turn, have internalised as part of their common-sense framework, assuming this is how the agricultural sphere works. Undoubtedly, the perceptions of the characteristics of managers in the palm oil industry seemed also to feed into the stereotypes female students and graduates had of the sector. They thought that managers of a palm oil plantation should have masculine traits, such as independence, bravery, leadership, decision maker, and good stamina; as well as assertiveness and boldness (Bursztyn et al., 2017; Carrim & Nkomo, 2016) and muscles, bravery, a high degree of stamina, and tolerance of sunlight (Youngs, 2004)—traits required for outdoor activities and demanding qualities held by men rather than women. Commonly these women thought these characteristics to be an obstacle to their attracting a desirable prospective husband since these features were deemed to be contradictory to ideal womanly traits or feminine qualities—which acted to further convince young women that the sector was not for them but for men. Moreover, they believed the “rough and tumble” qualities demanded of workers in the field make it impossible for women to compete with men in the sector.

6. Conclusions
The study found that there are three factors explaining why women do not end up in the palm oil sector: cultural norms and values, corporation discriminatory practices, and gender discriminatory regulations. In other words, the palm oil plantation system weakens the position of women, as asserted by Khidhir (2019). He mentioned that the injustice experienced by women happens because women play three roles at the same time: as employee, mothers and wives. Women continued to think in patriarchal terms as well as hold fast to patriarchal norms and values and were blind to gender disparities and discriminations rather than questioning them. Inequality in roles, responsibilities, and recruitment is seen as “normal” and acceptable for them even if they had the relevant educational qualifications to enter the palm oil sector: seeing instead the sector to be a world belonging to men. These roles and responsibilities have long been embedded in the New Order's gender ideology of State Ibuism widely promoting the idealization of women’s mothering and domestic roles and, in turn, discouraging women from exercising their public roles (Dewi, 2015; White & Anshor, 2008). Thus for many women, jobs in the sector were thought to be “not feminine” and antithetical to the “ideal” woman in Indonesian society and would choose instead to sacrifice their careers in favour of being “good” potential wives, thereby reinforcing the very values that are used against them.
Undoubtedly corporations have a crucial role to play in shaping young women’s perception of the palm oil industry. While many women are hired in palm oil plantations, their status is often precarious (temporary) since they tend to be employed on contracts or through outsourcing without benefits. Women do socially acceptable work (such as weeding and so are susceptible to pesticides and herbicides); or are employed as palm oil pickers (and in this case, they are seen to help their husbands to meet a higher target). Moreover, employers are aware that the hiring of women is not seen to be cost effective and attractive since women commonly resign from work when they have to follow their husbands on his career path.

The role of the university in shaping perceptions should not be overlooked. In the public sphere such as the workplace, graduate women could continue to find themselves having to negotiate the obstacles inherent in a patriarchal society. If gender stereotypes are replicated in the experiences of female students, the university certainly plays a role in perpetuating widespread perceptions about the inferiority of women graduates. Hence the combination of a multiplicity of factors have come to construct young women’s perception of their capacity in joining the palm oil industry.

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**Author short summary**
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