

Sumatran Women: Not Just Flood Victims

News:

The flood disaster on the island of Sumatra has claimed 1,071 lives as of December 19, according to Abdul Muhari, Head of the Center for Disaster Data, Information, and Communication at Indonesia's National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB). In disasters, women and children often become double victims due to structural vulnerabilities, including the neglect of women's reproductive health needs. The Banda Aceh Legal Aid Institute (LBH) has emphasized that in every disaster, women are consistently the most affected yet least visible group—a pattern once again confirmed in the current crisis. Amid emergency response efforts, LBH assisted a case of sexual harassment involving a female student seeking shelter, underscoring how gender-based violence intensifies during emergencies.

Beyond being victims of flooding, Sumatran women are also exploited by the greed of capitalism, particularly within the massive palm oil industry. As of July 2025, approximately 16.2 million workers are employed in Indonesia's palm oil sector, with women contributing across the entire supply chain—from upstream to downstream activities. For more than three decades, around 4.9 million women have worked as casual daily labourers (BHL), performing physically demanding tasks such as fertilizing, pesticide spraying, planting, and weeding. These jobs expose them to serious health and safety risks, as well as the threat of sexual violence, especially given the remote and isolated nature of palm oil plantations.

The palm oil industry is the primary driver of deforestation in Sumatra, with forest loss projected to exceed 7 million hectares by 2023. This environmental destruction not only heightens hydrometeorological disaster risks but also creates a profound social crisis by exploiting millions of women. An analysis by the *Kompas* Data Journalism Team found that over the past 34 years, forests in Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra have shrunk by 1.2 million hectares—nearly 100 hectares lost every day for three decades. During this same period, millions of Sumatran women have borne the cost of this destruction through exploitation in the palm oil industry.

Comment:

There have been numerous warnings about the double dangers of the toxic narrative of “capitalist women's empowerment,” which ultimately serves only the oligarchic interests of capitalism. The Sumatran floods in early December 2025 further exposed to the world that Sumatran women are double victims of industrial capitalist exploitation, both in the short and long term.

Sumatra has become a key site of frontier capitalism—a new frontier where capitalism expands to accumulate profit by extracting natural resources, commodifying and exploiting women's labor, bodies, and social spaces, and transforming multiple aspects of women's lives. Christian Lund, in *Nine-Tenths of the Law*, identifies North Sumatra and Aceh as classic examples of frontier regions continually reshaped by global commodity expansion, from colonial-era plantations and forestry to contemporary palm oil and energy infrastructure. Over the past two decades, this frontier has reached its most aggressive form through the rapid expansion of the palm oil industry. Millions of hectares of forest have been cleared, peatlands drained, and vital water catchment areas converted.

Therefore, promises of welfare for Sumatran women—framed through encouraging them to work as a means of poverty reduction and empowerment—are not only false but deeply manipulative. This narrative of prosperity is illusory, as it conceals the reality that the predatory capitalist economic system exploiting Sumatra's forests is itself a primary driver of poverty and the systematic disempowerment of women, both locally and globally.

Under this system and the policies that sustain it, millions of Sumatran women will continue to endure severe economic hardship, regardless of whether they participate in paid labor or not. They remain double victims of the greed of capital. As Allah Almighty says: **﴿ظَهَرَ الْفَسَادُ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِي النَّاسِ لِيُذِيقَهُمْ بَعْضَ الَّذِي عَمِلُوا لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ﴾** **“Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He [i.e., Allāh] may let them taste part of [the consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness].”** [QS. Ar – Rum: 41].

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