



# SETTING UP AND STRENGTHENING GENDER COMMITTEES IN THE PALM OIL SECTOR

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# What is a Gender Committee?

A gender committee is typically set up to oversee an organisation's initiatives to advance gender equality and women empowerment in the workplace, including awareness raising, policy implementation and worker engagement. The range and scope of a gender committee varies per organisation. In some cases, the committee is also responsible for receiving and managing complaints related to sexual harassment and sexual violence. A gender committee can be referred to with various terms, such as women's committee, gender equality or equity committee, committee on gender equality and women empowerment, etc. The table below sets out the definitions and responsibilities of gender committees as followed by the Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower:

	<b>RSPO Principles &amp; Criteria 2018, 6.5.1</b>	<b>Ministerial Decree Number 88/2023 on the Guideline on Prevention and Handling of Sexual Violence at the Workplace, issued by the Indonesia Ministry of Manpower</b>
<b>Definition</b>	(C) A gender committee is in place specifically to raise awareness, identify and address issues of concern, as well as opportunities and improvements for women	A task force on the prevention and handling of sexual harassment at the workplace. Prevention is established by planning and implementing a company's policy (to prevent sexual harassment at the workplace).
<b>Team composition</b>	Representatives from all areas of work, male and female	The task force members must be an odd number, with at least 3 people. They consist of a chairperson, secretary, and at least one member who represents employers and workers or the trade union. If a LKS Bipartite structure exists in the company, the task force is part of the structure of the LKS Bipartite.
<b>Roles</b>	Education for women and awareness of the workforce, which includes violence and sexual harassment in the workplace, training on women's rights, counselling for women affected by violence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. To receive complaints promptly and without discrimination;</li><li>2. To record complaints in an orderly and accurate manner;</li><li>3. To collect and document information as part of the complaints handling.</li><li>4. To inform deputies about steps that they can take: e.g. to report a case of sexual violence to the police and/or companies so that the company can put sanctions in place to the perpetrator.</li><li>5. To provide assistance to deputies.</li></ol>



# The Core Principles of Gender Committees

In the Siak-Pelalawan Landscape Program (SPLP), CNV Internationaal, alongside Proforest and Daemeter, encourages and assists the setting up of gender committees in palm oil producing companies, mainly plantations. The following core-principles are important preconditions for this:

**Trust building:** One of the functions of a gender committee is to offer a safe space for women to share their concerns and experiences. Trust building is therefore very important. Organizing social activities for women can be a means to contribute to an open environment where women feel free to open up, but is not a goal in itself. This is to improve the vulnerable position of women workers in the workplace by actively addressing issues and working towards concrete improvements. Therefore, it is important that the committee is taken serious by the company management and the labour union, which is connected to the other core principle:

**Making connections:** It is crucial that the work of, and the concerns raised by the gender committee, are not only seen as ‘women issues’; but are also disseminated to male workers. By raising awareness on topics such as the double burden of women workers, occupational health and safety, or sexual harassment, male workers will become more likely to support women in vulnerable positions, signal and report cases, and contribute to prevention. To make the topic of improved labour conditions for women an integral part of the agenda in social dialogue and collective bargaining processes, it is also important to build strong connections between the gender committee and the labour union at the company level.



# Why to Establish Gender Committees on Palm Oil Plantations

**Women workers make up a significant part of the workforce\* in the palm oil sector and take on different roles in the production process, such as:**

- Trees care or maintenance
- Seedling
- Fertilizer spraying
- Applying herbicide and pesticide

Despite fulfilling all these tasks, many women workers are informal workers, meaning that they do not have, or only have a temporary contract. Therefore, they often receive low(er) wages, have little or no access to paid leave (including maternity leave), cannot claim social security, severance payment, or other rights that permanent workers enjoy. Particularly for families with a single breadwinner, this has a big impact and can also have negative effects on the welfare of other family members such as their children.

\* Due to the poor contractual status of many women workers, official numbers are lacking and estimations vary. A [research](#) conducted by CNV-I, GAPKI and Hukatan in 2019 estimated that 50% of the palm oil workers is women, while according to the Palm Oil Smallholders Union (SPKS) women even make up 86% of the labor force. See: ([UNDP, 2021](#))

Because of their domestic responsibilities, many women workers face a double burden and have limited time to be active in a trade union. Therefore, their voices and perspectives are underrepresented in processes of social dialogue and are not sufficiently taken along in decision making, resulting in women workers being at a higher risk of:

- Exploitation
- Discrimination
- (Sexual) harassment
- A lack of protection, including their sexual and reproductive rights

Setting up and supporting gender committees is thus not only a 'tick-the-box' exercise to meet audit requirements. It is an essential platform that should contribute to the representation of a crucial part of the workforce and contribute to improving their working conditions.

## **2. It is good for business, which means:**

- It contributes to a safer and healthier workplace, particularly for women workers
- It increases retention rates which contributes to higher productivity.
- It reduces business risks of human rights violations.
- It demonstrates the company's commitment towards sustainability and responsible business conduct.
- It is part of compliance to RSPO standards and national legislation.

# Setting up and Supporting Gender Committees

- As set out in the definitions on page 1, a gender committee should have a **board** that consists at least of a chair person, a secretary and a representative of the workers. Ideally, members are both male and female workers.
- The **objective and roles** of the gender committee should be clear and agreed upon by the company management in consultation with the committee; what responsibilities does the committee have? Even though this is set out in national regulations (see page 1), in practice this often turns out to be unclear.
- **Commitment from the company management** is an important precondition and strongly influences the capacity and thereby the functioning of gender committees. Commitment should be reflected by:
  - Allocating sufficient **budget** for the committee to organize activities and trainings (Think of +/- EUR 3.000 on annual basis).
  - Providing the gender committee with good **facilities**, such as a physical space/room where they can meet, and allowing them to use company transportation to travel to external trainings or meetings. If this is not available, costs for transportation should be reimbursable.
  - The time that is dedicated by board members to the committee should count as **regular working hours** and should not be considered as additional or voluntarily.
  - Appointing someone from the company management as advisor of the gender committee.
- Workers who take up roles in the committee often do not have sufficient knowledge on gender equality, women and labour rights and occupational health and safety and should thus receive **training** on these topics. **Technical assistance** should be provided to support committees to set objectives, draft workplans, and set an agenda for meetings with other stakeholders.
- Gender committees should **meet regularly** and keep minutes of meetings (i.a. for audit purposes). Especially in the start-up phase it is important to also meet with, and establish connections with other stakeholders that they need to cooperate with, such as the labour union(s), local Manpower Office, and the Women empowerment and Children protection office. This should be facilitated by the company.





## Box 1. Sexual Harassment and Violence in the Palm Oil Sector

Sexual harassment and violence are unfortunately growing problems on palm oil plantations ([AP, 2020](#)). These forms of gender-based violence mostly affect women, who are often hesitant to speak out. Their precarious employment status and being afraid of losing their job is one of the obstacles, next to feelings of shame, fear of potential retaliation, or a lack of trust in, or knowledge about the available complaints system.

A gender committee can play an important role in informing workers about their rights, create a space to talk and share experiences, develop a reporting mechanism, bring cases or concerns under the attention of the company's management, and think along in measures that can contribute to prevention. However, this responsibility should not be outsourced completely to the gender committee; the company management should also have supporting policies in place. These are ideally drafted in consultation with an expert. Also for the handling of cases of sexual harassment/violence, consultation with experts is advised and/or other authorities such as the Women Empowerment and Children's Protection Office, or the police should be consulted. It is also important that these cases are handled in confidentiality and that the identity of the person affected is protected.







## First Steps to Include a Gender Lens in your Company

- Develop or update the company's policies about gender equality and the rights of women workers. Ideally in consultation with the gender committee if already in place, or an independent expert on gender.
- The policies should be incorporated into all company regulations, such as a collective bargaining agreement, the code of conduct, and the contracts or work agreements that apply to all workers, consultants, interns, sub-contractors, and suppliers.
- Develop a concept note on the (envisioned) role of a gender committee. Reference can be made to the above mentioned regulations, or other good practices. Include which resources and facilities will be provided for the committee.
- Conduct an independent, internal assessment about possible risks that influence the social and economic conditions of women workers. A worker's survey is recommended to obtain first-hand data.
- Include the topic of gender equality and the rights of women into the introduction program for new employees, as well as education and training program for all staff.
- Besides mainstreaming gender equality in the company's policy and regular training programmes, extra attention can be paid to these topics during special occasions such as women's day, occupational, health and safety Day, May Day, etc.
- Provide or improve adequate working facilities and infrastructure to ensure a safe and empowering working environment for all workers. Think of good lighting, gender-separated toilets and provide housing facilities that ensure enough privacy.

## Box 2: Good Practices

Since 2023, as part of the Siak Pelalawan Landscape Program, 12 new gender committees were set up\* and several existing gender committees were strengthened. The members of these committees have attended various trainings and thereby improved their knowledge of the crucial role they can play in improving the working conditions for women workers on the palm oil plantations. Companies have drafted or improved their gender policies and have communicated this to all workers. Several cases of sexual harassment have been addressed and measures were put in place to prevent future cases from occurring.



Workers in PT Mitra Unggul Pusaka in front of the banner informed about the types of sexual harassment

## Box 3: Setting up Gender Committees - Challenges and opportunities

While setting up a gender committee is not so much a challenge in itself, ensuring its functioning and working towards the desired impact within the given context can be. This requires commitment and resources, which companies are not always willing to provide. Convincing them to invest in a gender committee and not just considering this as an audit obligation is an important first step, but can be challenging. Besides, working towards better conditions for women should not only target women, but requires the involvement and support of all workers and therefore requires communication, allyship and in some contexts a cultural or behavioural change. Therefore, a carefully designed process is needed and making progress takes time. Building strong links between gender committees and trade unions is an opportunity to increase the leverage of both parties. Opportunities are also seen in including gender committee members in the management of trade unions, which are now often male dominated. This will ensure that the voices of women workers are also represented in the bipartite cooperation body (LKS).

\*Of the companies where these 12 new committees were established, 11 companies are member of ISPO, 8 are member of RSPO and 8 are members of GAPKI.



## About SPLP

SPLP is a private sector led initiative in the districts of Siak and Pelalawan in Riau province, Indonesia. SPLP believes that collaborative efforts between local governments and stakeholders can be more effective in achieving positive palm oil production for forests and people at the district level, rather than acting alone or only through a company supply chain.

Coalition members (Cargill, L'oreal, Musim Mas, Neste, Pepsico, Unilever) and supporters (Danone, Sinarmas) jointly form the SPLP Platform, which is facilitated by the Daemeter-Proforest Partnership: two leading organisations in the area of responsible sourcing and production of agricultural commodities with strong technical and practical expertise in developing landscape programmes.

Within the social dialogue working group, SPLP supports the establishment and improvement of Gender Committees of several palm oil companies in Siak and Pelalawan through training and technical assistance. In its implementation CNV Internationaal is taking the lead and cooperates with the District Governments, namely the Office of Transmigration and Manpower and the Office of Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, and Birth Control, as well as trade unions.

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