Gender inequality in Indonesian cocoa production

In January 2013 Oxfam visited four communities in Sulawesi, the most important cocoa growing region of Indonesia, as well as the industrial zone in Makassar, the main city. We spoke with more than 20 women and men who work as cocoa farmers and farm laborers and as workers in cocoa processing facilities. Although they do not employ or control them directly, companies like Mars, Mondelez and Nestle depend on the hard work of these individuals to ensure a continued supply of good quality cocoa. But there is little visible evidence that international food and beverage companies are making sufficient efforts to do their part to support those who produce their most precious ingredient. Women in particular face disadvantages. Following is a summary of what Oxfam learned about conditions for women in Indonesia’s cocoa industry.

Cocoa in Indonesia

Indonesia, a tropical country, is the third largest cocoa producer after Ivory Coast and Ghana, providing 15 percent of the world’s cocoa supply. Cocoa is the main source of income for over 1,400,000 smallholder farmers and their families in Indonesia. Smallholders contribute 93% of national production; the remainder comes from state-owned plantations and private estates. But hunger and malnutrition is endemic in cocoa growing regions of Indonesia. Stunting, where children are too short for their age as a result of poor diet and poor health circumstances, has reached an alarming 40 percent in the cocoa growing areas of Indonesia.

Women face inequality across the cocoa value chain. From processing facilities in Makassar where women face discrimination, to the village of Pussui where women farm workers earn 25% less for their work than men. In spite of these obstacles, women in Indonesia are doing everything they can to forge a better future for themselves and their families.

Low and unequal pay

In the village of Pussui both men and women work tirelessly as farmers and farm laborers on cocoa farms. Men typically do the pruning, fertilizing, harvesting and carrying the sacks of harvested cocoa. Women are responsible for sanitation (cleaning and preserving), harvesting, cutting the cocoa pods and drying the cocoa.

Unlike many work environments where rumors about unequal pay for women are whispered about near the water-cooler, women in this farming village are well aware...
that they are paid less for their work. In fact a deal deciding that women receive $1.55/ five hours (Rp.15,000) for their work while men get $2.06/ five hours (Rp.20,000) was struck openly by representatives from both the women’s and men’s farmers group.

The difference in wages is explained as necessary because men’s work is more physically demanding. But women’s work is critical for the quality of the cocoa. Women also do many physically demanding tasks, like hauling water, to support cocoa farms and households, often for no pay at all.

Receiving 25% less than men for your work can add up fast, and women struggle to make ends meet. Sanawiyah a 40 year old widow with two children lives with her parents, and her sister and her sister’s husband and their three children. She cannot afford to live on the income she makes from cocoa so in order to support her family, she maintains 5 goats and grows crops like rambutan, durian, peppers, pecans and bananas. She displays and sells the products in front of her house, sometimes in the market. When this still doesn’t stretch far enough, she has to borrow money from the farmers’ group to stay afloat so she can feed her family. “I have no savings,” she says.

Paltry incomes, low cocoa prices and high risks because of increasingly extreme weather and other threats to cocoa crops are causing many farmers to doubt whether cocoa can sustain their families in the future. Siti a 40 year old farmer from the village of West Rappang says palm oil could replace cocoa if opportunities don’t change. “If the price of cocoa continues to decline, I would rather grow and harvest palm oil". Marhanah, 43 years old and from the same village puts it directly: “Please tell the companies that if the price is not better, it will be difficult to produce in the future... If the welfare of cocoa farmers does not improve, especially for women, cocoa will be replaced.” Villages across the region have been offered palm oil by companies looking for new sources of the crop. Most seem to be holding out for now, sticking with the familiarity of cocoa, but they are aware that parts of Sulawesi have shifted to palm oil production.

Isolation, poor infrastructure, limited access to credit

Most women and men cocoa farmers find little support and are often isolated from public services, banks, hospitals, markets and schools by long distances and poor infrastructure. Farmers face difficulty accessing clean water and power is only available five hours every day. Roads to the farms and linking rural areas to cities are heavily damaged. Farmers say they never go to banks for loans to help buy tools or fertilizers because there is no public transportation and hiring a vehicle is too expensive. This also makes it challenging for farmers to sell their cocoa. Instead of being able to access the higher prices their cocoa would fetch in the nearby town, the poor roads and lack of transport mean farmers often have to settle for the lower prices offered by the village traders.

These challenges are borne more heavily by women for whom it is harder to make the journey to the market. Sumarni a 27 year old farmer from Batupanga Daala has 0.25 acres of land with 200 cocoa trees, while her husband has 0.5 hectares of land with 400 trees. She says she never travels far from her village. The distance to town is too far, hiring a car is costly, the roads are damaged and there is a lack of adequate public transportation.
Women also have more household burdens than men. After tending the cocoa fields in the morning, and coming home to take care of her husband and her two children, feed her flock of chicken and water her cow, Sumarni must also collect water. Every afternoon, she takes four jerry cans full of water (20 liters) and carries them the 10-15 minutes to the house along a hilly, steep path. During the dry season when the river is shallow, Sumarni has to dig as deep as 30 cm to get clean water. When the rains carry runoff to the river she has to go looking for other sources of clean water - for cooking and bathing for the whole family, including her in-laws. Working in the fields and doing domestic work is very time consuming, and Sumarni has little time for other activities, such as participation in training with the local farmers’ group.

Exploitative working conditions

*Names have been altered to protect the identities of the workers. Oxfam’s Behind the Brands scorecard does not assess company policies in factories.

Oxfam heard reports of exploitation and discrimination against women from across the cocoa value chain in Sulawesi including export factories where women who face problems while they work often have no way to complain or fight back.

Arti is a laborer at a cocoa exporting factory in Makassar. She says she has been working as a laborer in cocoa processing since 2008. She works without a legal contract, and is paid just Rp. 50,500 or $5.25 USD per day. But Arti often goes for more than a week without receiving any wages at all, as she only gets called in when there is a stock of cocoa. The money she makes is less than the minimum wage and does not stretch to cover the cost of food, water and her rent. She pays about $15.50 per month for a dark and stuffy 2.5 x 2.5 square meter room made of galvanized aluminum in a workers compound.

Arti says she does not receive the legal rights that workers should get under Indonesian law, such as Worker’s Social Security. She says she is often scolded and insulted by the supervisor at the factory who calls her an ‘animal’. "We are scolded even though we work properly," said Arti. She even reported being hidden in the back of the plant when 'guests' from outside visit. “After the guests left I was asked to work again.” Yet she says she does not dare to fight this discrimination. “I never complain, I take it for granted, for fear of being fired.”

Munir works part-time at a cocoa exporting plant located in Makassar. Munir says the plant where he works has 34 male workers and no female workers. He says this is because some years ago the factory management fired all the women after some had been demanding their rights, such as wage increases and other worker protections, such as menstruation leave. This right under Indonesian employment law gives women the option of two days leave per month, and is aimed at those doing physically demanding jobs where long hours and overtime is the norm, such as factory workers. Many of these women suffer from anemia and especially during their periods they are particularly vulnerable and physically weak.

Finding ways to scrape by

4 The legal minimum wage in Makassar is Rp. 1,265,000 per month. For casual workers it is Rp. 60,238 per day, which is calculated by dividing the monthly minimum wage by 21 days.
Even under difficult circumstances and with little assistance women are seeking ways to support their families by working together. Nasriyah, a 40 year old farmer from the village of Pussui has been the chairman of the women’s farmer’s group Siasayangngi since 2008. The group provides guidance to its 25 members, helping them diversify their crops and add new sources of income. The group plans training programs, creates "demonstration plots" and vegetable gardens, and teaches members skills for their home gardens.

The members are diverse and they work creatively to save, borrow money and take advantage of their vegetable gardens together - so that no members go hungry. Nasriya hopes that women farmers’ hardships can be overcome by empowering women so they can thrive.