

**THEY, THE BRAVE:  
NARRATIVES OF WOMAN'S AGENCY IN THE PEASANT  
MOVEMENT IN WONGSOREJO, BANYUWANGI**

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**ABSTRACT**

**T**his article aims to examine the gender-based agency at work in a peasant movement in Wongsorejo, Banyuwangi. This movement, which began after the fall of the Soeharto regime, is reclaiming peasants' rights over land which was seized by a private company. Initially, men took action on initiating this movement, which is connected to other peasant movements in several parts of Java. Men also acted as leaders of the movement, including in determining agendas. They took risky yet masculine political actions, and some ended up being sentenced by the courts. However, there are also narratives which indicate that women have actually contributed significantly to the movement. They have efficiently mobilized mass support for political demonstrations, committed espionage on the company, and informally been involved in the movement's agenda discussions. They are the ones who perform daily acts of resistance, such as silently disturbing the company's activities, protecting male activists targeted by the company, and bravely acting as witnesses during the court process for activist kidnapping cases. However, women's contributions are often neglected and invisible, as many people only look at formal political processes. This article will answer the question of how, and in what condition, gendered agency has been part of the peasant movement to reclaim land rights.

Keywords: peasant movements, women's agency, women organizing, daily resistance, rights to land

**INTRODUCTION**

**Context: Peasant Resistance Movements and Civil Awareness**

The general context of this paper is the peasant movements and land conflict which have offered important narratives on developmentalism in Indonesia. After more than three decades under the New Order, during which farmers and other peasants faced extensive political pressure that limited their space and stymied their courage to speak out, the political openness following the fall of the New Order has given fresh wind to peasant resistance movements. The historical background of these movements can be used to better understand why these farmers and peasants remained silent when their land was seized on a massive scale in the early years of the New Order. The main cause of this silence was the threat of social and political ostracism which came with the labeling of such peasants as supporters or sympathizers of the Communist Party of Indonesia, which had been forbidden in 1965; anyone branded with such a label faced extraordinary social and political repercussions.

In Wongsorejo, land conflict began in 1980, when land-usage rights (*HakGuna Usaha*, or HGU) over 603 hectares of kapok (*Ceibapentandra*) plantations were given to PT Wongsorejo. This land had been a major source of income for the generation of residents who had lived on and managed the area since the 1950s. PT Wongsorejo's HGU rights over the land ended in 2012, and in 2014 these rights were converted to building-usage rights (*HakGunaBangunan*, or HGB). On this HGB land, the Banyuwangi government intends to build the Wongsorejo Industrial Estate, Banyuwangi (IEB), an industrial complex. At first, the Regent of Banyuwangi intended to build this complex on 2,000 hectares of land which was located far from residential districts. However, this plan was recently changed to use 220 hectares of land belonging to PTPN XII. Ironically, this change in area and location has led to conflict between the company and the residents of Bongkoran Village over this 220 hectares of land.

The emergence of the peasant movement in Wongsorejo, as with the emergence of numerous peasant movements throughout Indonesia, occurred after the fall of the New Order. Several community members were inspired and influenced by the rise of similar movements in various parts of Indonesia. Their awareness of the need and willingness to defend their rights were piqued. These were later reinforced by the involvement of several civil society organizations, including the Surabaya Legal Aid Center and the Association of East Javan Farmers (Paguyuban Petani Jawa Timur, or Papanjati). Community organization began, and the Organization of Farmers for Wongsorejo, Banyuwangi (Organisasi Petani Wongsorejo Banyuwangi, or OPWB), was soon established. Initial membership included some 1,000 residents of Bongkoran Village, Wongsorejo, but internal organizational dynamics and the company's active intimidation efforts have led to a drop of membership and support for the peasant movement. Presently, only 287 peasant families remain actively involved with the organization. Altogether, they are responsible for 220 hectares of land; on average, each family works  $\frac{3}{4}$  hectares of land.

The processes and narratives behind the peasant movement in Wongsorejo have generally reinforced its plans and activities. The openness now available in politics has appeared to offer political space for this movement, but the farmers, as part of the lowest classes in society, have faced numerous hurdles and dead-ends in their political struggles. Demonstrations and efforts to influence public policy have been done unceasingly by the peasant movement in Wongsorejo since its establishment. However, even as the farmers attempt to reach out to policymakers, they are met with strong resistance. Criminalization, violence, intimidation, and seemingly endless roadblocks have tainted the peasants' struggles. Furthermore, existing policies, which give greater emphasis to the interests of capital-holders (who are considered to be more capable of contributing to and stimulating development) has increasingly marginalized the peasants. This can be seen, for instance, in the Banyuwangi Regency's above-mentioned decision to use the 220 hectares of land in Bongkoran for the construction of an industrial district.

An illustration of the winding road taken and violence faced by OPWB can be drawn from the organization's experiences since its establishment. On 28 September 2014, ten farmers were beaten by a group of men thought to have been hired by the company. On 12 January 2015, another farmer, Busana, and his wife were beaten with a pistol by three people who are suspected to

have been Marines. Another case occurred in the beginning of 2015, when three farmers (Sulak, Usman and Djali) were taken into custody by the Police and accused of committing violence against and threatening employees of PT Wongsorejo. This arrest was tainted by threats of violence against the wife of Nursadin; a scythe was held to her neck.<sup>1</sup> This act of violence culminated in court proceedings which, on 22 May 2015, found the three Bongkoran farmers guilty. They were sentenced to four months and fifteen days imprisonment. Further violence occurred on 18 January 2016, when PT Wongsorejo began to enact its plans to construct a post on the disputed land. Resistance from local peasants resulted in physical conflict between women and the company. Two of the villagers, Saypul Bahri (25) and Mrs. Samsul (50), were rendered unconscious and rushed to the hospital.<sup>2</sup>

Numerous efforts have been undertaken, both by OPWB and by other organizations that support the movement, to reinforce it and protect farmers. For instance, OPWB has been greatly and actively supported by Kontras Surabaya. OPWB protested the planned development of an industrial district on the disputed land. The protest, filed by 287 families, was followed by a letter, dated 12 March 2015, from the National Commission for Human Rights that recommended that the Regent of Banyuwangi cancel development plans.<sup>3</sup> Several organizations have also worked against the acts of violence perpetrated by security forces and by persons hired by the company. The Institution for Victim and Witness Protection (Lembaga Perlindungan Saksidan Korban, or LPSK) has protected seventeen farmers from Bongkoran, Wongsorejo.<sup>4</sup>

Where, however, is the position and narration of women in this struggle, this peasant movement? What is the position and narration? The following article explores that narration, focusing particularly on how women and gendered agency are involved in social movements, including peasant movements. Understanding gender sensitivity in social movements means more than simply identifying clear patterns of women's participation in said movements. It requires an examination of how gender, as a social system, operates within a specific social, political, economic, and cultural context. This also illustrates, as in numerous contemporary research projects, how gender intersects in social movements with other social systems that influence disparity, including race, ethnicity, and class. The opportunities had by men and women to participate in political movements are influenced by their positions within broader social and political structures; as such, gender analysis must appreciate differences in mobilization patterns, structures, and communications networks (Kuumba, 2002).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://m.tempo.co/read/news/2015/01/17/058635537/konflik-tanah-3-petani-wongsorejo-diciduk-polisi>, accessed on 21 December 2015

<sup>2</sup> <http://membunuhindonesia.net/2016/01/sengketa-lahan-petani-kampung-bongkoran-dengan-pt-wongsorejo/>, accessed on 21 September 2016

<sup>3</sup> <http://faktanews.co.id/terkait-rencana-kawasan-industri-bongkoran-wongsorejo-pemkab-banyuwangi-tidak-tahu-surat-komnasham/>, accessed on 21 December 2015

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.antarane.ws.com/berita/486485/lpsk-lindungi-17-petani-wongsorejo-banyuwangi>, accessed on 3 January 2016

<sup>5</sup> Kuumba, Bahati (2002, August), "You've Struck a Rock: Comparing Gender, Social Movement and Transformation in United States and South Africa", *Gender & Society* 16(4), 504–523, <https://libcom.org/files/You've%20Struck%20a%20Rock.pdf>, accessed on 21 September 2016.

## Women and Gender Narratives in Peasant Movements<sup>6</sup>

As with most social movements, the narratives which most commonly emerge in the public's eye in the Wongsorejo peasant movement focus on the strong leadership roles played by men. This can be seen from the structure of the organization and its leadership, as well as the selection of issues and development of strategies. Within the organizational structure of OPWB, for instance, all members are men; representation is determined per housing block, with representatives all being men (as the heads of households). Likewise, meetings and strategic discussions are automatically subject to male authority, and these meetings and discussions between men can last until late at night.

However, in practice, the role and contributions of women are an integral part of the OPWB movement and its activities. It is women who seek maneuvering space, who take subtler roles in ensuring the movement's sustainability. Several examples of women's flexibility and significant contributions to the movement include:

*First*, women are the backbone of the OPWB movement's mass mobilization activities. In various crisis situations, mass mobilization has proven to be completed most quickly and effectively if it relies on women. This was observed directly by the writer one evening towards the end of October 2015, when a small crisis broke out after PT Wongsorejo parked one of its trucks on the disputed land. Within minutes, news had spread and numerous women had gathered in front of the security post at the OPWB secretariat. The following day, at 7 a.m., dozens of women were waiting on site, garbed in *caping* (conical bamboo hats) to secure the disputed land. They gathered and boisterously awaited commands. Several of them came from the village of Tukpitu, which was a 40-minute walk from Bongkoran. These women were not simply physically present: they brought their daring with them when they had to go face-to-face with security force. Several women stated that they had brought plastic bottles of pepper or sand and hidden them behind their shirts; these bottles were to be used as weapons for self-defense if, in this crowded and tense situation, the gathering developed into physical conflict. For the entire day, the women abandoned their household, kitchen, and farming activities to secure the disputed land. The researcher observed that the number of women on location was significantly greater than the number of men. Several of the male farmers met stated that the women of Wongsorejo are highly militant in their demonstrations, both in the villages and at the government offices visited by OPWB.

*Second*, strategies of resistance have also been influenced considerably by the OPWB's everyday struggles, in which women are some of the main actors. Yan, or so she will be called here, is a woman who leads her community while working as a merchant and farmer. Yan tells how, when the kapok trees were first planted in Bongkoran, she and another village woman snuck into the plantation and poured pesticides over the seedlings to kill them: Once the seedlings were tall enough, Yan would climb over the fence and pour her mixture, which was made with petrol, over the seedlings. This was done furtively, at night, and even Yan's husband did not know. As a result of these actions, dozens of kapok trees were killed and had to be replaced by the company. The skilled choice of time, tools, and materials indicates both the

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<sup>6</sup> For safety reasons, all women's names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.

courage and intelligence of these women in their day-to-day acts of opposition among the peasant movement. Aside from this, women—as with men—have also taken an important role in observing the situation. They have even spied on the company activities and movements which are considered dangerous to the farmers. They do their observation furtively, using opportunities such as when they collect grass and when they cross the company's land while going to or returning from the market. Women are considered relatively less suspicious than men, who are often met with opposition, and this opportunity is utilized by women to gather information and observe the situation.

*Third*, women show courage in their actions which ensure the safety of men, their families, and the community. These brave activities have included, for instance, their efforts to ensure the safety of their husbands or other family members who have been threatened by security personnel or by men hired by the company. In such situations, the gender constructions in effect mean that it is the men who are targeted for 'cleansing' or 'securing' by the security forces, because such action is held to be capable of weakening or even stopping the peasant movement. However, in situations of crisis, when husbands and other family members are in danger and have been targeted by the security forces, women transform to protect men. This can be seen, for instance, in the protective actions undertaken by Nurand Siti, the wives of Nursadinand Busan, both of whom had had sickles held to their necks. It can also be seen in the experience of Ning, whose husband saved himself by becoming a migrant worker in Kalimantan after being targeted by the company and its spies in Wongsorejo—Ning's fellow villagers. After her husband was safe, Ning took on the role of family head, including when she faces intimidation from the company's spies. When her husband had yet to find gainful employment in exile, she had to bear the financial burden of earning enough to support her family. Of course, protecting (male) family members is not a risk-free endeavor, and again this shows women's capacity and courage.

*Fourth*, women have been willing to take steps to promote and further the legal process. Challenging the view that women are weak and lack the courage to face the legal system, *Mbah Nah* has taken part in residents' court case against the violence committed by the security forces against the farmers. *Mbah Nah* is a woman, aged in her 60s, who works mostly as a farmer but has also served as a witness in court. She is a vocal woman, despite not having received a formal education. Her courage, as she stated explicitly when she was met, is based on her understanding that the farmers are fighting for their rights and the truth.

*Fifth*, at the organizational level, the urgings and influence of women help explain the rise of the Organization of Women Farmers of Wongsorejo, Banyuwangi (Organisasi Petani Perempuan Wongsorejo Banyuwangi, or OP2WB), the women's branch of OPWB which has served as a means for women farmers to become more involved in the movement since it was established in mid-2015. When the writer conducted field research in Wongsorejo, women welcomed OP2WB warmly. However, they recognized that its leaders had much to learn about organizational management, and that OP2WB had yet to conduct many activities. The rise of OP2WB can be understood as progress, as the organization serves as a vehicle for and recognition of women's contributions,

roles, and power. However, the organization must also be received with some caution; one must ask whether OP2WB is actually a way to box in women. Such a concern is not groundless, as OP2WB's mandate has been limited to traditional women's issues such as healthcare and clean water, whereas the core organization remains a space for and under the authority of men. This concern should be addressed through changes or achievements within the dynamics of OPWB and OP2WB.

### **Tracking Women's Agency in the Wongsorejo Peasant Movement**

The emergence of women's agency in peasant movements, such as the one discussed here, illustrates the dynamics and reveals the agency of women. The above description of the mechanisms of gender-based agency shows the importance of informal networks which can quickly become important foundations for resistance, as well as connectors of women from all walks of life. Though women work through non-formal channels, including household evening gatherings and discussions in orchards, it cannot be denied that their speed and mobility contributes significant strength to the peasant movements. This supports the conclusions reached by Purkayastha and Subramaniam (2004),<sup>7</sup> who examined women's agencies in third-world countries—even when they were less visible, less prominent, more fragmented, and more distant from the universal approaches (i.e. approaches which have been firmly established upon the biases of developed nations such as those of America and Europe and which dominate various studies of women's agency).

Furthermore, the examples and illustrations above also cast light on how women influence broader and more sustainable social changes. The transformative agency approach (Kabeer, 2005)<sup>8</sup> does not only look at inequality, but also attempts to initiate and facilitate the lengthy process of transforming power relations within patriarchal social structures. When women take roles and positions which are more commonly held by men—for instance, as leaders and as heads of families—are they recognized and given greater and more open space for influencing others? Though indicators are still in their early stages, it appears that conflict and discord offers women the opportunity to escape the rigid limitations of their roles and gives them space to have greater influence. They can thus, in turn, build more fluid gender constructions and powers. Formally, men (still) serve as household heads, but women can and have been shown to be able to take over such leadership roles. Formally, men are often the leaders of peasant movements such as the one discussed here, but in day-to-day resistance it is the women who are at the forefront of their communities' opposition. Women's experiences allow them to become protectors of their husbands, brothers, and sons. This indicates both that a shift has occurred and that it has been recognized by different peasant communities,

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<sup>7</sup> Purkayastha, Bandana & Subramaniam, Mangala (eds.) (2004), "The Power of Women's Informal Networks: Lessons in Social Change from South Asia and West Africa", Lanham: Lexington Books. p. 142, as quoted in Dejorio, Rosa (2005, Summer), "Review of the Power of Women's Informal Network", in *Wagadu* 2  
<http://webhost1.cortland.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/dejorio.pdf>, accessed 20 September 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Kabeer, Naila (2005), "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal",  
<https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/232742/original/Kabeer%2B2005.pdf>, accessed on 20 September 2016.

because it has had a tangible effect on men's safety. This shift has been received well, at least in times of emergency, but this can also be seen as both a test of women and an opportunity for women to prove their capacity as change-makers.

Transformative processes behind the emergence of women's agency should serve as point of reference and important note for future research. There is no single, magical formula which is equally effective in all social contexts, and as such processes for researching the agendas of renewal and empowerment need to be designed and implemented as part of a social project to realize gender-responsive narrative of agency. The identification of empowering and disempowering social structures must be part of the homework of all peasant organizations and communities, as it is through this identification that new keys of social reform can be implemented effectively and thus provide a real contribution to change.