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Gender-Based Oppression and Sexual Exploitation of Female Contract Laborers in the Deli Tobacco Plantations, 1870–1930

Lister Eva Simangunsong*, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia
Aggy Adinda Ginting, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia
Naomi Magdalena Br Purba, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia
Nita Pardede, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia
Sonia Refinta Matanari, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study examines gender-based oppression and exploitation experienced by female contract laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations between 1870 and 1930. It explores how the colonial plantation system shaped women's position and exposed them to social, economic, and sexual inequality. This research draws on a qualitative literature review of books, scholarly articles, historical reports, and other relevant historical sources. The findings show that female laborers occupied a subordinate position within the plantation workforce. They were assigned low-paid work, subjected to strict supervision, and received minimal labor protection. The gender imbalance within plantation communities also contributed to the expansion of prostitution, exposing women to sexual exploitation and serious social and health consequences. These findings demonstrate that the colonial plantation system exploited women not only economically but also through unequal gender relations and power structures embedded in the contract labor system. By centering women's experiences, this study contributes to the historiography of women, labor, and colonialism in Indonesia.

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*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

listerevasimangungsong@unimed.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

The Deli tobacco plantations were among the most significant pillars of the colonial economy in East Sumatra during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Following the establishment of large-scale tobacco estates by European plantation enterprises, the region emerged as one of the world's foremost producers of premium tobacco. This remarkable expansion depended heavily on the continuous recruitment of contract laborers from Java, China, and India, whose labor sustained the profitability of the plantation economy. To secure a stable workforce, plantation companies institutionalized a contract labor system that imposed stringent regulations and restricted workers' mobility. They reinforced unequal power relations, thereby placing laborers in structurally vulnerable positions.

The contract labor system implemented in the Deli plantations has received considerable scholarly attention within colonial labor historiography. Existing studies consistently demonstrate that plantation laborers endured harsh working conditions, intensive surveillance, inadequate wages, and labor policies designed primarily to maximize the interests of plantation companies. Nevertheless, the majority of this scholarship treats plantation workers as a homogeneous category, leaving the gendered experiences of female laborers comparatively underexplored. Consequently, the distinctive forms of inequality and vulnerability experienced by women within the colonial plantation regime remain insufficiently examined.

Female contract laborers encountered realities that differed substantially from those experienced by their male counterparts because they were subjected simultaneously to labor exploitation and gender-based discrimination. In addition to performing physically demanding plantation work, women generally received lower wages and occupied subordinate positions within the plantation hierarchy. They had only limited access to welfare provisions and institutional protection. Within plantation settlements characterized by a pronounced gender imbalance, women were frequently perceived not only as laborers but also as individuals expected to fulfill broader domestic and social responsibilities. These intersecting conditions fostered an environment in which diverse forms of sexual exploitation emerged and became deeply embedded within everyday plantation life.

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Several scholars have investigated the experiences of women in the Deli plantations and other plantation regions of East Sumatra. Ramayanti and Wisnu (2018) examined the social and economic conditions of female laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations during the period 1870–1930, while Istiyana (2022) analyzed the experiences of Indian women laborers and their position within the colonial labor system. Similarly, Elvira et al. (2023) explored the status of women in plantation society in colonial East Sumatra. Although these studies provide important insights into women's participation in plantation labor and their socio-economic conditions, they devote comparatively limited attention to the structural mechanisms of gender-based oppression and sexual exploitation.

Research that explicitly foregrounds gender-based oppression and sexual exploitation as central features of the colonial plantation system remains relatively scarce, despite their significance in shaping the lived experiences of female laborers. The asymmetrical power relations among plantation companies, European supervisors, male workers, and female laborers demonstrate that women were exposed not only to economic exploitation but also to profound social and sexual vulnerabilities. These intersecting forms of domination reveal that colonial labor relations operated through mechanisms extending well beyond the sphere of production. Accordingly, a more comprehensive gender-sensitive analysis is essential for understanding how colonial authority and patriarchal power jointly structured women's experiences within the plantation economy.

This study seeks to address this historiographical gap by examining the interrelationship between the contract labor system, gender-based oppression, and sexual exploitation experienced by female laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations between 1870 and 1930. In contrast to previous scholarship, which has generally discussed female laborers within broader narratives of colonial labor, this research places women's experiences at the center of analysis to demonstrate how the plantation system systematically produced, legitimized, and perpetuated multiple forms of inequality. By adopting a gender perspective, the study advances the historiography of colonial labor while contributing to the expanding field of Indonesian women's history. It further highlights the importance of integrating gender as an analytical category in understanding the social dynamics of colonial plantation societies.

This study examines the experiences of female contract laborers on Deli tobacco plantations between 1870 and 1930 by focusing on three interrelated dimensions of the colonial plantation system. First, it analyzes the gendered recruitment strategies employed by plantation companies and how colonial labor policies constructed and institutionalized women's subordinate position within the plantation workforce. Second, it examines the organization of the colonial labor regime by investigating the gendered division of labor, employment systems, hierarchical structures, and wage inequalities experienced by female laborers. Third, it explores the relationship between sexual exploitation and social control by analyzing how prostitution, *Kumpul Rebo*, homosexuality, and other forms of gender-based regulation functioned as mechanisms for maintaining labor discipline and sustaining the colonial plantation economy. Through these objectives, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intersections of gender, labor, and colonial power in shaping the experiences of female laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using the historical method to examine the experiences of female contract laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations between 1870 and 1930. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding and interpretation of complex social phenomena by critically analyzing evidence from multiple historical sources (Rachman et al., 2024). The historical method provides a systematic framework for reconstructing past events while revealing the social, economic, and gendered dimensions of colonial labor relations. Accordingly, this approach is particularly suitable for analyzing the mechanisms through which gender-based oppression and sexual exploitation were institutionalized within the colonial plantation system.

The data for this study were collected through an extensive literature review of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, colonial archives, official records, and other historical sources concerning the Deli tobacco plantations, contract labor, women workers, and colonial labor relations. These materials were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, scholarly credibility, historical authenticity, and contribution to understanding the social, economic, political, and gender dimensions of plantation society during the colonial period. Particular emphasis was placed on sources documenting the lived experiences of female laborers and the institutional practices governing plantation labor. Collectively, these documentary sources provide a robust historical foundation for reconstructing women's experiences under colonial rule.

The research was conducted through four stages of historical inquiry: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Sjamsuddin, 2007). The first stage, heuristics, involved systematically identifying, collecting, classifying, and documenting historical materials relevant to the research objectives. Both primary and secondary sources were compiled to capture diverse perspectives on female contract laborers, colonial labor policies, plantation management, and social relations within the Deli plantation system. The inclusion of multiple types of historical evidence strengthened the comprehensiveness and reliability of the historical reconstruction.

The second stage consisted of source criticism, which aimed to evaluate the authenticity, credibility, and reliability of the collected materials (Sjamsuddin, 2007). External criticism examined the provenance, authorship, publication date, and historical context of each source, whereas internal criticism focused on identifying potential bias, inconsistencies, and interpretative limitations within the documents. Particular attention was paid to colonial records, as they often reflected the perspectives and political interests of colonial authorities and plantation companies. To enhance the validity of the analysis, evidence from different sources was systematically compared and cross-verified before being incorporated into the historical interpretation.

The third stage involved interpretation, during which historical evidence that had passed the source criticism process was critically analyzed to explain the relationship between the contract labor system, gender inequality, and sexual exploitation experienced by female laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations (Sjamsuddin, 2007). Rather than treating historical facts as isolated events, the analysis situated women's experiences within the broader social, economic, political, and cultural structures of colonial plantation society. This analytical process facilitated a deeper understanding of the structural mechanisms through which colonial capitalism and patriarchal power produced and sustained women's marginalization. Consequently, the study moves beyond descriptive historical reconstruction by offering a critical analysis of gendered labor exploitation under the colonial plantation regime.

The final stage was historiography, namely the systematic presentation of verified historical findings in a coherent, analytically rigorous narrative (Sjamsuddin, 2007). Historical evidence was organized chronologically and thematically to explain the experiences of female contract laborers and to examine how colonial plantation policies, labor institutions, and unequal gender relations collectively contributed to gender-based oppression and sexual exploitation. This narrative synthesis reconstructs historical realities while simultaneously revealing the structural conditions that perpetuated multiple forms of inequality within the Deli plantation system. Through these methodological procedures, the study produces a historically grounded, analytically robust, and academically rigorous account of the experiences of female contract laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations between 1870 and 1930.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Gendered Recruitment and the Colonial Construction of Female Labor

The recruitment of female laborers into the Deli tobacco plantations was driven by both the economic demands of tobacco production and the gendered logic of the colonial plantation system. Following land clearing and cultivation, plantation companies required women for post-harvest activities—including sorting, tying, rolling, packaging, drying, and grading tobacco leaves—that demanded precision and manual dexterity. Beyond fulfilling labor shortages, female recruitment served broader managerial objectives, including reducing labor costs, attracting and retaining male laborers, and supplying women who were subsequently exploited as prostitutes or concubines within plantation settlements (Hartoto & Setiawan, 2020). These practices were reinforced by regulations prohibiting European women from residing on plantations and restricting newly appointed European plantation assistants from marrying or bringing their wives to plantation estates, thereby institutionalizing the sexual exploitation of female laborers as part of the colonial labor regime (Istiyana, 2022).

Recruitment was conducted selectively in accordance with criteria established by plantation management. Prospective female laborers were generally required to be young, physically healthy, and considered attractive, qualities believed to maximize both labor productivity and their perceived social value within plantation communities. Under the *Koelie Ordonnantie*, women were formally assigned to relatively light duties, including sorting, separating, hanging, and rolling tobacco leaves. However, these official responsibilities frequently concealed broader patterns of gender-based exploitation (Herdiansyah, 2017). Historical evidence further indicates that recruitment quotas remained deliberately limited—generally no more than forty women annually—while ensuring that female laborers never outnumbered male

workers, reflecting the strategic role assigned to women within plantation society beyond agricultural production (Lestari & Yasin, 2021).

Figure 1. Deli Plantation Workers
Source: *historia.id, " Eksploitasi Anak di Kebun Tembakau Deli"*, 10 September 2019

The recruitment process was coordinated through labor agencies operating in rural areas in cooperation with village heads, who identified prospective male and female laborers and promoted plantation employment through public advertisements. Despite the rapid expansion of tobacco cultivation, opportunities for female employment remained comparatively limited, and recruited women were distributed unevenly among plantations according to workforce size (Elvira et al., 2023). Most female laborers originated from impoverished rural communities where employment opportunities were scarce, making them particularly vulnerable to recruitment schemes and weakening their bargaining position before entering the contract labor system. These recruitment patterns demonstrate that labor migration represented not merely occupational mobility but also a structural consequence of poverty and unequal economic development under colonial rule (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Istiyana, 2022).

The regional composition of female laborers also evolved alongside changes in colonial labor policy. During the early expansion of the plantations, Chinese women—primarily wives accompanying their husbands and young unmarried migrants—constituted the earliest female workforce, representing diverse ethnolinguistic communities such as the Hokkien, Hakka, Hoklo, and Hock groups (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021). Historical records further indicate that Chinese migrants originated from regions including Guangdong, Hainan, Fujian, Luitsiu, and Koatsiu, each contributing distinct occupational backgrounds to plantation society (Situmorang et al., 2024). As recruitment policies shifted, however, Chinese laborers were gradually replaced by Javanese women from Central and East Java because economic hardship, land scarcity, lower recruitment costs, and administrative considerations made them a more readily available labor force for plantation companies (Tricahyono, 2020).

The recruitment of women, therefore, reflected broader colonial labor policies that systematically relied on socially and economically marginalized populations. Plantation companies deliberately sought female workers because they were perceived as more compliant, easier to supervise, and willing to accept substantially lower wages than male laborers, thereby reinforcing gendered divisions of labor and unequal occupational hierarchies (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Istiyana, 2022). At the same time, women from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds were incorporated into a common labor regime characterized by economic dependency, contractual restrictions, and limited social mobility, illustrating how colonial plantations integrated heterogeneous populations into a unified workforce designed to maximize economic productivity (Perret, 2010; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021).

The recruitment of female laborers should therefore be understood as an integral component of the political economy of colonial capitalism rather than merely as an administrative mechanism for securing labor. By transforming women's economic vulnerability into a dependable source of inexpensive labor, plantation companies simultaneously stabilized their workforce and reproduced social hierarchies founded upon gender, class, ethnicity, and colonial authority (Elvira et al., 2023; Tricahyono, 2020; Pelzer, 1985). Consequently, the recruitment process constituted one of the principal mechanisms through which colonial capitalism intertwined labor exploitation with patriarchal social

relations, ensuring the continued profitability and stability of the Deli tobacco plantation system (Said, 1977; Pelzer, 1985; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021).

Following the recruitment mechanisms implemented by plantation companies, the regional origins of female laborers also evolved in response to changing labor demands and colonial recruitment policies in East Sumatra. During the early expansion of the Deli tobacco plantations, female workers were recruited only in limited numbers because plantation companies primarily prioritized physically strong laborers for land clearing and tobacco cultivation. The earliest female laborers were predominantly Chinese women, consisting mainly of wives accompanying their husbands and young unmarried migrants seeking employment, while the Chinese workforce itself comprised diverse ethnolinguistic communities, including the Hokkien, Hakka, Hoklo, and Hock groups (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021). These communities contributed to the plantation labor force's multicultural composition and marked the initial incorporation of women into the colonial plantation economy.

Historical records further indicate that Chinese migrant workers originated from various regions, including Guangdong, Hainan, Fujian, Luitsiu, and Koatsiu, each possessing distinctive occupational backgrounds that influenced their roles within plantation society. The Kwangtung community engaged in occupations ranging from blacksmithing and tailoring to plantation labor and prostitution, while the Hailam community was widely employed as domestic servants and cooks. The Hokkien were renowned as merchants and among the earliest Chinese groups to participate in plantation work in East Sumatra. In contrast, the Hakka community was distinguished by the cultural practice of *footbinding* and commercial entrepreneurship. Meanwhile, the Hoklo and Hock communities supplied a substantial proportion of plantation laborers, many of whom originated from economically disadvantaged regions before later settling in Belawan and Bagan Si Api-Api (Situmorang et al., 2024).

As the plantation economy expanded, however, recruitment strategies gradually shifted from Chinese migrant labor to workers from Java. This transition was driven by several interconnected factors, including restrictions on Chinese migration, financial crises affecting plantation profitability, the relatively high costs of recruiting Chinese workers, and recurrent disease outbreaks that disrupted labor mobility. Plantation companies consequently recruited increasing numbers of Javanese women, particularly from rural areas of Central and East Java, where poverty, land scarcity, and limited employment opportunities created a large pool of economically vulnerable workers with relatively weak bargaining power (Tricahyono, 2020). These changes demonstrate that recruitment policies were closely aligned with colonial efforts to secure a stable, disciplined, and inexpensive labor force capable of sustaining plantation production.

The changing regional and ethnic composition of female laborers demonstrates that colonial recruitment strategies were deeply embedded within broader socio-economic inequalities. Women from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds were incorporated into a common labor regime characterized by contractual restrictions, economic dependency, and limited social mobility despite their different origins (Perret, 2010; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021). Their migration to the Deli plantations, therefore, represented more than occupational mobility; it reflected structural inequalities within the colonial economy that compelled women from impoverished communities to accept exploitative employment under the contract labor system (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Istiyana, 2022). Consequently, the recruitment of women from economically marginalized regions became one of the principal mechanisms through which colonial capitalism secured an inexpensive labor force while simultaneously reproducing intersecting inequalities based on gender, class, ethnicity, migration, and colonial power (Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977; Tricahyono, 2020).

The organization of female labor in the Deli tobacco plantations reflected a gendered division of work that was fundamental to the operation of the colonial labor regime. Under the *Koelie Ordonnantie*, women were formally assigned to tasks classified as "light work," including sorting, tying, hanging, and curing tobacco leaves; weeding nursery plots; sweeping plantation roads; and inspecting crops for pests and diseases (Sembiring et al., 2023). Although these duties were officially regarded as less physically demanding than those assigned to men, they required considerable precision and manual dexterity and constituted indispensable stages of tobacco production. The allocation of these responsibilities demonstrates that labor organization was shaped not only by production requirements but also by gendered assumptions regarding women's abilities and their place within the plantation hierarchy.

Beyond their officially assigned agricultural duties, many female laborers took up supplementary occupations that reflected the exploitative social order of colonial plantation society. Prostitution emerged not as an occupation freely chosen by women but as an institution closely integrated into the plantation labor regime and sustained through

coercion, structural violence, and the deliberate tolerance of plantation authorities. Plantation companies facilitated the sexual exploitation of female laborers not only to satisfy the demands of male workers but also to reduce labor turnover and maintain workforce stability, thereby extending women's labor beyond agricultural production into mechanisms that simultaneously reinforced managerial control and economic profitability. These conditions illustrate that women's contributions to the plantation economy extended beyond productive labor and became inseparable from broader systems of social regulation and labor control.

Figure 2. Female Laborers Planting and Watering Tobacco
Source: *koranjakarta.com, " Melacak Jejak Perbudakan di Perkebunan Tembakau Deli"*, 08 Juni 2022

The integration of prostitution into plantation life further reveals how gender, ethnicity, and physical appearance shaped women's position within the colonial labor hierarchy. Plantation authorities frequently perceived Chinese women as more physically attractive and fairer-skinned than Javanese women, producing racialized and gendered stereotypes that influenced their social status and occupational roles. Conversely, Javanese women were more commonly associated with prostitution and were often treated according to these discriminatory assumptions (Malik et al., 2024). A separate group of women served as concubines for European plantation officials, enjoying relatively better living conditions and material privileges while simultaneously facing severe restrictions, including the prohibition of pregnancy and the refusal of European fathers to acknowledge children born from such relationships. Literary accounts further reveal the profound psychological consequences of these unequal relationships, including emotional distress and suicide among concubines who became pregnant (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; D. M. Sinaga, 2018).

The gendered organization of labor was reinforced by a wage system and contractual regulations that systematically disadvantaged female workers. Despite their indispensable contribution to tobacco production, women were consistently concentrated in occupations offering lower wages, limited authority, and virtually no opportunities for occupational advancement, reflecting deeply entrenched patterns of gender inequality within the colonial plantation economy (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Istiyana, 2022; Elvira et al., 2023). Plantation companies deliberately relied on inexpensive female labor to maximize profitability, while contractual regulations restricted women's mobility, constrained their ability to negotiate wages and working conditions, and intensified their dependence on plantation management (Hutagaol & Simangunsong, 2020; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021). The interaction between low wages, restrictive labor regulations, and limited social mobility demonstrates that the plantation system functioned not merely as an economic institution but also as a mechanism of social discipline that secured workforce stability and ensured the continued accumulation of colonial profits (Herdiansyah, 2017; Tricahyono, 2020; Said, 1977).

The organization of female labor should therefore be understood as a central component of the broader colonial labor regime rather than simply as a system of workforce allocation. Women's experiences demonstrate that economic exploitation was inseparable from gender inequality, as female laborers were systematically positioned within subordinate occupational hierarchies while simultaneously subjected to contractual restrictions, wage discrimination,

and multiple forms of sexual exploitation. These interconnected mechanisms reveal that colonial capitalism depended not only on labor discipline and the gendered division of work but also on institutionalized inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, and class to sustain plantation productivity and maximize corporate profits. Accordingly, the experiences of female laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations illustrate how the colonial labor regime transformed productive labor into a broader system of economic exploitation and social control (Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977; Tricahyono, 2020).

The Gendered Labor Regime: Work Organization, Labor Hierarchy, and Wage Inequality

The labor system in the Deli tobacco plantations was organized through a rigid hierarchical structure that reflected the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and colonial authority. European women occupied the highest social position, followed by Chinese male laborers, Chinese female laborers, Javanese male laborers, and, at the lowest level, Javanese female laborers. This hierarchy institutionalized unequal access to authority, wages, and social status while consistently placing women below men regardless of whether they served as plantation officials or contract laborers (Sari, 2020). Consequently, the plantation labor system functioned not only as an economic institution but also as a mechanism for reproducing racialized and gendered inequalities within colonial society.

Figure 3. Hierarchical Division of Labor Between Male and Female Workers in the Deli Plantations
Source: KITLV 179012

The contract labor system implemented on the large plantations of East Sumatra represented a distinctive model within the colonial plantation economy. Its uniqueness is derived from the large-scale recruitment of thousands of contract laborers from Java, whose employment was financed and regulated by well-capitalized European plantation companies. During this period, the traditional socio-political structure of East Sumatra underwent a profound transformation as increasing numbers of Javanese migrants and their descendants, later known as *JaDel* (*Jawa-Deli*), became an essential component of the plantation economy. Most of these migrants originated from impoverished rural communities in Java. They accepted contractual employment as wage laborers because deteriorating economic conditions in their places of origin left them with few alternative livelihood opportunities (Istiyana, 2022).

Within this labor regime, the division of labor between male and female laborers was explicitly structured by gender. Female laborers were generally assigned agricultural activities classified as relatively light work, including planting and watering tobacco, whereas more physically demanding tasks were reserved for male workers. Throughout the working day, women remained under the close supervision of plantation managers, whose authority extended beyond labor discipline to the regulation of workers' daily conduct. Although female laborers received wages for their work, the contractual framework afforded them only limited autonomy and few mechanisms to protect their rights within the plantation system (Istiyana, 2022).

The female labor system established in the Deli plantations was designed not merely to organize production but also to institutionalize labor discipline and social control. Through the contract labor system, plantation companies

exercised extensive authority over workers' mobility, working conditions, and everyday lives, thereby ensuring a disciplined and dependable workforce. Female laborers occupied an especially vulnerable position because their dependence on plantation management was reinforced by patriarchal gender norms that restricted their social and economic autonomy. Consequently, women had little capacity to negotiate employment conditions or challenge the authority of plantation administrators, illustrating that the labor system functioned simultaneously as an economic arrangement and an instrument of colonial governance (Herdiansyah, 2017; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021).

The experiences of female laborers further demonstrate how gender fundamentally shaped the operation of the colonial plantation labor system. Women were frequently regarded as supplementary workers whose labor was indispensable to plantation production but whose contributions were rewarded with fewer benefits, lower wages, and weaker institutional protections than those afforded to male workers. Such perceptions legitimized discriminatory labor practices and reinforced women's subordinate status within the plantation hierarchy. As a result, female laborers experienced multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage arising from their dual position as contract workers and as women living within a patriarchal colonial society (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Elvira et al., 2023; Istiyana, 2022).

The organization of the female labor system also reflects the close relationship between colonial economic priorities and labor management mechanisms. Plantation companies required a stable, disciplined, and inexpensive workforce to sustain tobacco production, and the contract labor system became the principal instrument for achieving this objective. By restricting workers' autonomy, limiting labor mobility, and maintaining economic dependence on plantation authorities, companies minimized labor resistance while ensuring the uninterrupted supply of labor required for plantation operations. These practices demonstrate that colonial labor policies were inseparable from the broader objectives of colonial capitalism, which relied upon institutionalized systems of labor control to maximize productivity and profitability (Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977; Tricahyono, 2020).

The female labor system in the Deli plantations should therefore be understood as a fundamental component of the broader colonial order rather than merely as an administrative mechanism for organizing labor. The interaction between contractual restrictions, gender-based discrimination, racial hierarchies, and unequal power relations systematically positioned female laborers at the lowest levels of the plantation social structure. These conditions reveal that the exploitation experienced by women was deeply embedded within the institutional foundations of colonial plantation production and cannot be explained solely through economic considerations. Instead, the experiences of female laborers illustrate how colonial capitalism simultaneously reproduced labor exploitation, patriarchal domination, and social inequality throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977; Elvira et al., 2023).

The contract labor regime was further reinforced through a wage system that institutionalized economic inequality while maintaining workers' dependence on plantation management. The transition from forced labor to contractual wage labor following the abolition of the *Cultuurstelsel* in 1870 did not fundamentally eliminate exploitation. In practice, compulsory cultivation frequently exceeded the officially prescribed limits, compensation often fell below promised levels, many forms of labor remained unpaid, and crop failures were unjustly attributed to villagers despite existing regulations. Although plantation employment gradually shifted toward a contractual wage system, labor recruitment and working conditions continued to reflect the structural inequalities that characterized the colonial plantation economy (Susanto, 2025).

Within the Deli plantations, wages were determined according to four principal criteria: occupational category, gender, age, and ethnicity. Workers employed in plantation fields generally received lower wages than factory workers because industrial tasks were considered to require greater technical skill. Gender was another fundamental determinant of remuneration, with male laborers consistently earning higher wages than female workers, and older workers receiving greater compensation than younger employees. Ethnicity likewise shaped wage allocation, as Javanese laborers generally earned lower wages than Chinese workers despite performing comparable work (Elvira et al., 2023).

Although the wages of female laborers gradually increased over time, they remained substantially lower than those of their male counterparts. By the end of the nineteenth century, Javanese women earned approximately 4.5 *gulden* per month, increasing to 8.4 *gulden* in the early twentieth century, with wages distributed twice monthly. These earnings were significantly reduced through mandatory deductions for security deposits, work equipment, clothing, and food, leaving women with only limited disposable income (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018). To supplement their wages, some

female laborers engaged in prostitution, earning approximately 0.50 *gulden* per client. In contrast, Chinese women generally received 1 *gulden* per client, revealing the racialized valuation of women's bodies within the colonial plantation economy (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018).

Figure 4. Wage Payment to Female Laborers
Source: *wawasansejarah.com, "Nasib Kuli Perempuan di Perkebunan Deli"*, 24 September 2023

Male laborers consistently received higher remuneration throughout the colonial period. By the late nineteenth century, Chinese male workers earned approximately 6.7 *gulden* per month and Javanese workers about 6 *gulden*. In comparison, by the early twentieth century, Javanese male wages had increased to approximately 9.90 *gulden* per month (Junaidi et al., 2026). Similar deductions for deposits and work equipment were imposed on male workers, who also spent part of their wages on prostitution services and a monthly prostitution tax imposed by plantation authorities, reflecting the institutional acceptance of prostitution within plantation society. These practices demonstrate that plantation wages remained inadequate relative to the labor performed and failed to provide workers with a reasonable standard of living despite increasing plantation profitability (Junaidi et al., 2026).

The wage structure, therefore, represented far more than a system of financial remuneration; it functioned as a central instrument of labor discipline and colonial governance. Female laborers occupied the most disadvantaged position because their work was systematically assigned lower economic value, their wages reinforced dependence on plantation authorities, and their limited bargaining power constrained opportunities to improve either their working conditions or their social mobility (Hutagaol & Simangunsong, 2020; Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021; Herdiansyah, 2017). Wage discrimination thus operated simultaneously as an economic mechanism for maximizing plantation profits and as a social mechanism for reproducing patriarchal and colonial power relations. Accordingly, the interaction between contractual labor, hierarchical work organization, and unequal remuneration demonstrates that the colonial plantation economy relied upon labor control, gender inequality, and institutionalized economic dependency to sustain productivity and preserve colonial authority (Elvira et al., 2023; Istiyana, 2022; Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977; Tricahyono, 2020).

Sexual Exploitation and Social Control in the Colonial Plantation System

Brothels established within the Deli tobacco plantations were an integral component of the colonial labor regime rather than merely places of entertainment. Their primary function was to satisfy the sexual demands of contract laborers while simultaneously enabling plantation companies to reclaim a substantial portion of workers' wages after each payday. Similar to gambling establishments, brothels were deliberately incorporated into plantation settlements to encourage laborers to spend their earnings immediately after receiving payment, thereby reinforcing their economic dependence on plantation management (Saragih et al., 2025). Plantation owners also derived considerable financial

benefits from prostitution, gambling, and alcohol sales, while collecting taxes from gambling operators and liquor vendors operating within plantation settlements (Darini & Anggraeni, 2021). Consequently, prostitution became embedded within a broader economic system designed not only to generate additional revenue but also to reinforce labor discipline and sustain the profitability of plantation enterprises.

Figure 5. Female Laborers Working as Prostitutes
Source: *netralnews.com, "Hindia Belanda Pernah Punya Rumah Sakit Khusus Penyakit Sifilis"*, 18 Juni 2024

The organization of prostitution formed part of a broader strategy through which plantation authorities maintained workers' economic dependence. Payday activities systematically deprived laborers of the wages they had only recently received, as male workers commonly spent their earnings in gambling houses and brothels. In contrast, female laborers purchased goods at the plantation night markets. As a result, many workers became indebted to supervisors or plantation owners, leading them to accept wage advances and renew their labor contracts to repay accumulated debts (Sembiring et al., 2023). Plantation companies deliberately manipulated this cycle of debt through the systematic organization of prostitution and gambling, thereby limiting workers' ability to challenge exploitative conditions and ensuring a stable, disciplined, and economically dependent labor force throughout their working lives (Saragih et al., 2025). Consequently, the combination of economic exploitation, debt dependency, and managerial manipulation condemned many laborers to prolonged poverty and social marginalization within the colonial plantation economy.

Figure 6. Female and Male Laborers Engaging in Sexual Relations
Source: *voi.id, " Lonteku di Batavia"*, 16 November 2020

The institutionalization of prostitution also produced serious public health consequences within plantation communities. According to Van Kool's observations cited by Breman, female laborers generally arrived at the plantations free of venereal disease, indicating that infection commonly occurred only after entering plantation life. The expansion of prostitution also affected the Dutch colonial administration because many Dutch soldiers contracted sexually transmitted infections after colonial authorities permitted military personnel to cohabit without marriage or obtain sexual services until 1920. Health records from Binjai, cited by Breman (1997), report that "Of the deaths at a plantation hospital in 1904, more than half were women—44 out of 82 patients" (Ikhsan & Saidin, 2023). Annual reports of the *Deli Maatschappij* further document repeated outbreaks of cholera and high mortality among plantation laborers between 1869 and 1919, demonstrating that the plantation labor system exposed workers not only to economic exploitation but also to severe health risks associated with overcrowding, poor sanitation, and extensive labor mobility (Ayu, 2021).

Figure 7. Female Laborers as Objects of Male Pleasure
Source: *news.detik.com, "Pelacur, Penghibur, dan Mata-mata"*, 05 November 2022

The existence of prostitution within the Deli plantations should therefore be understood not as a matter of individual morality or personal choice but as a structural consequence of the colonial plantation system. The rapid expansion of plantation enterprises, the disproportionate ratio of male to female workers, women's limited economic opportunities, and the operation of patriarchal colonial institutions collectively intensified female laborers' vulnerability to sexual exploitation (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Susanto, 2025). Plantation authorities exercised control not only over labor but also over workers' housing, social interactions, personal relationships, and access to economic resources, transforming women's bodies into instruments of labor discipline and colonial profitability (Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977). Female laborers consequently experienced overlapping forms of oppression as contract workers and as women, illustrating that prostitution represented one manifestation of a broader system of gendered exploitation and colonial domination (Elvira et al., 2023; Istiyana, 2022). Ultimately, the institutionalization of prostitution reveals that sexual exploitation was not a peripheral consequence of plantation life but a fundamental mechanism through which colonial capitalism reproduced unequal power relations while maximizing economic productivity (Susanto, 2025; Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Tricahyono, 2020).

Homosexuals constituted one of the social phenomena documented within the early plantation communities of the Deli tobacco estates. According to Jan Breman, Chinese laborers were among the earliest groups associated with homosexual practices in the plantation environment. Breman also records cases of sexual abuse involving underage Javanese boys, which should be understood as acts of exploitation and coercion rather than consensual same-sex relationships. Intimate rivalries occasionally resulted in violent conflicts among Chinese laborers. At the same time, male prostitution also formed part of plantation life, with male prostitutes reportedly occupying designated beds in labor barracks furnished with curtains and decorative ornaments (Aini et al., 2025). These accounts indicate that sexuality within the plantations was shaped by the distinctive social conditions created by the colonial labor regime.

Historical evidence further suggests that homosexual practices were not always concealed within plantation communities and, in certain circumstances, occurred openly among laborers. Wahyu, in his undergraduate thesis, argues that the absence of partitions separating workers' sleeping quarters facilitated the visibility of homosexual practices among Chinese laborers. Plantation administrators reportedly became aware of these activities only after a medical examination linked an illness suffered by one laborer to sexual contact with another man (Affandi et al., 2024). According to the same study, such practices persisted even after the arrival of larger numbers of female laborers, particularly when male workers lacked the financial means to pay for the services of female prostitutes (Affandi et al., 2024). These observations suggest that patterns of intimacy within the plantations were influenced by the material conditions and social organization of plantation life rather than by individual preferences alone.

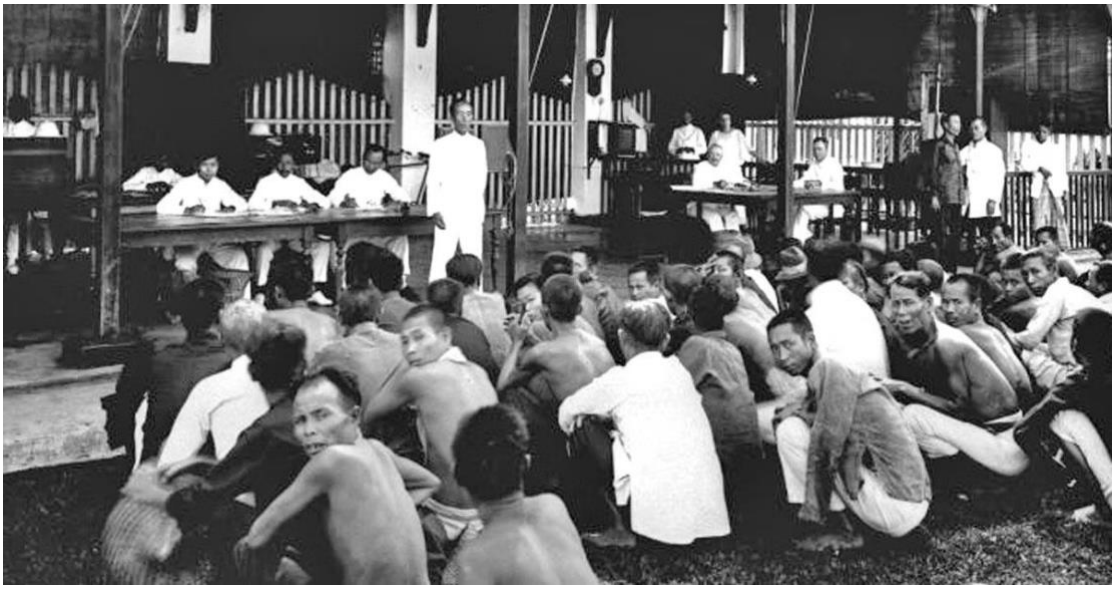

Figure 8. Laborers in the Deli Tobacco Plantations
Source: *historia.id, "Penyambung Lidah Sukarno dari UI"*, 28 Juni 2019

The emergence of *homosexuals* within the Deli plantations should therefore be interpreted within the broader demographic and social conditions produced by the colonial plantation system. Plantation settlements were characterized by pronounced gender imbalances, geographical isolation, restricted mobility, and the concentration of migrant workers from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, all of which shaped everyday patterns of social interaction and intimacy (Perret, 2010; Tricahyono, 2020). At the same time, colonial authorities closely monitored workers' personal lives whenever particular forms of behavior were perceived as threatening labor discipline or social order, demonstrating that sexuality itself became an object of colonial surveillance and regulation (Fahmi, 2025; Pelzer, 1985). Examining homosexuals within this historical context, therefore, provides a more nuanced understanding of how sexuality intersected with migration, labor organization, and colonial authority, while emphasizing that these relationships cannot be separated from the structural conditions of the contract labor system that shaped plantation society (Fahmi, 2025; Perret, 2010).

The institutionalization of prostitution within the Deli tobacco plantations was closely linked to the broader objective of attracting and retaining male laborers. Unlike many Chinese laborers, who, according to historical accounts, were frequently associated with homosexual practices within plantation settlements, Javanese laborers generally depended on the presence of women to fulfill their social and sexual needs. Consequently, beginning in 1873, plantation companies annually recruited hundreds of women from Java under specific selection criteria, including youth, physical health, and, whenever possible, physical attractiveness. Although these women were officially employed to perform relatively light agricultural tasks such as picking tobacco caterpillars, washing tobacco leaves, and drying tobacco, many were also expected to engage in prostitution as part of a deliberate strategy to encourage male laborers to remain under contract with plantation companies (Fahmi, 2025).

This strategy became particularly visible during payday celebrations, when plantation settlements were transformed into centers of commercial entertainment. Female laborers performed as *ronggeng* dancers in plantation night markets, while prostitution was organized through networks of pimps, many of whom were Javanese supervisors responsible for supervising the *ronggeng* troupes. During these performances, male laborers expressed their interest

by offering cash tips. A dancer then symbolically selected a client by pulling him with a scarf, after which both withdrew to plantation barracks or secluded locations. According to Liesbeth Hesselink in *Prostitution and Gambling in Deli*, a single sexual transaction was valued at approximately half a *gulden* (Octavia & Simangunsong, 2020). Although severe economic hardship and inadequate wages compelled many Javanese women to engage in prostitution, historical evidence also indicates that not all female laborers were willing to enter sex work despite the considerable financial pressures they faced.

The recruitment of women for these purposes illustrates that plantation companies regarded female laborers not only as agricultural workers but also as instruments for maintaining workforce stability and reducing labor turnover. Beyond their productive responsibilities, women were expected to perform social, domestic, and reproductive functions that supported the cohesion of plantation communities and encouraged male workers to extend their employment contracts (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Elvira et al., 2023). Such expectations reinforced patriarchal gender norms while simultaneously positioning women within subordinate roles that served the economic interests of plantation companies. Consequently, the incorporation of women into plantation society fulfilled multiple objectives, including labor provision, social regulation, and the maintenance of labor discipline (Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977).

The use of women as a mechanism for attracting and retaining male laborers demonstrates the close relationship between gender relations and the economic priorities of the colonial plantation system. By integrating women into broader labor-control strategies, plantation companies secured a stable, disciplined workforce while minimizing labor shortages and recruitment costs (Tricahyono, 2020; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021). These conditions reveal that women's social and reproductive roles were deliberately incorporated into the plantation economy as part of a wider system of colonial governance. Accordingly, gender functioned not merely as a social category but as a fundamental instrument through which colonial capitalism organized labor, strengthened managerial authority, and sustained long-term exploitation within the Deli tobacco plantations (Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977; Istiyana, 2022).

Kumpul Rebo emerged as one of the social practices that characterized everyday life within the Deli tobacco plantations and reflected the broader transformation of social relations under the colonial plantation system. Alongside the institutionalization of prostitution, frequent changes of sexual partners became increasingly common among plantation laborers. Unmarried Javanese female laborers could readily establish cohabiting relationships with male workers without entering into formal marriage, as such unions often required nothing more than a verbal agreement. Within the overcrowded plantation barracks, couples commonly separated their sleeping areas from those of other laborers by hanging old sacks as makeshift partitions, illustrating both the precarious living conditions and the erosion of conventional family structures within plantation society.

According to H.H. van Kol, a Dutch Socialist parliamentarian, in his treatise *Uit Onze Koloniën* (*From Our Colonies*), published in 1903, the widespread prevalence of prostitution accelerated the transmission of syphilis throughout plantation communities. Women bore the greatest social consequences of these conditions, frequently giving birth to children conceived through prostitution or non-marital relationships while lacking the economic means to support them. Many were therefore compelled to relinquish or sell their infants, a practice regarded as marking the emergence of child trafficking in Deli. These conditions illustrate how women disproportionately shouldered the long-term consequences of economic deprivation and sexual exploitation within the colonial plantation system. Prostitution gradually declined only after the global economic crisis of the 1930s forced numerous plantation companies into bankruptcy (Situmorang et al., 2024).

Within this social environment, *Kumpul Rebo* functioned as more than a routine communal gathering. Although presented as a regular social event, it simultaneously served as an institutional mechanism through which plantation authorities supervised workers, disseminated information, reinforced labor discipline, and maintained order within plantation settlements (Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977). By regularly assembling workers, plantation management strengthened its capacity to monitor laborers, discourage absenteeism, suppress resistance, and ensure compliance with plantation regulations, thereby supporting the stability of the plantation workforce (Herdiansyah, 2017; Tricahyono, 2020). These practices demonstrate that colonial authority extended beyond labor regulations into the organization of workers' everyday social lives.

For female laborers, participation in *Kumpul Rebo* also reflected the gendered organization of social life within plantation communities. Women were expected to conform to behavioral norms established by plantation authorities and reinforced through local power structures, limiting their social autonomy while reproducing patriarchal relations

within the plantation environment (Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Elvira et al., 2023). Consequently, *Kumpul Rebo* should be understood not merely as a communal gathering but as an integral component of the colonial plantation regime, where labor management, social regulation, and colonial authority converged to sustain workforce discipline and reinforce unequal power relations. Through institutions such as *Kumpul Rebo*, plantation companies integrated everyday social practices into broader mechanisms of surveillance and colonial domination that supported the continued operation of the plantation economy (Pelzer, 1985; Said, 1977; Darini & Anggraeni, 2021).

The Deli tobacco plantations achieved international prominence by producing cigar-wrapper tobacco widely regarded as among the finest in the world. Under the leadership of Jacobus Nienhuys, extensive fertile lands between the Ular and Wampu Rivers were transformed into large-scale plantations, supported by favorable environmental conditions and substantial European investment, which enabled Deli tobacco to dominate international markets for several decades. This success attracted additional Dutch capital and established East Sumatra as one of the world's leading tobacco-producing regions (Harahap & Ramadhani, 2019). However, the prosperity of the plantation economy gradually declined because of land occupation, changes in agrarian policies, the nationalization of plantation enterprises, and rising import tariffs imposed by the United States, all of which weakened the international competitiveness of Deli tobacco and undermined the long-term sustainability of plantation production (Armani et al., 2020).

Figure 9. Female Laborers Experiencing Oppression in the Deli Plantations
Source: KITLV A237

The decline of tobacco production became increasingly apparent during the early twentieth century as protectionist trade policies, particularly those adopted by the United States, reduced international demand, while declining soil fertility, shrinking cultivation areas, and global economic instability further constrained production capacity (Pelly & Ratna, 2022). The crisis deepened during the First World War, when disruptions to international trade reduced purchasing power in major tobacco-consuming countries and led to large quantities of tobacco accumulating at the Port of Belawan as exports to Europe became increasingly difficult. To minimize financial losses, plantation companies dismissed large numbers of laborers despite the provisions of the *Koeli Ordonnantie*, which prohibited the termination of employment before the expiration of labor contracts. Following recommendations from the Dutch East Indies Council and colonial administrators, the *Koeli Ordonnantie* was formally abolished in 1915 (R. Sinaga et al., 2026).

The deterioration of the plantation economy accelerated further during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia. Rather than restoring tobacco cultivation, the Japanese administration converted approximately 160,000 hectares of plantation land into food-producing agricultural areas to support the Greater East Asia War. At the same time, Japan's surrender subsequently created a prolonged power vacuum within plantation management. Although laborers were formally granted the right to return to their regions of origin following the abolition of the *Koeli Ordonnantie*, the continued enforcement of the *Poenale Sanctie* preserved coercive mechanisms of labor discipline, even as many workers chose to remain in East Sumatra and pursue alternative livelihoods as traders, farmers, agricultural laborers, and workers in other sectors. These political, economic, and institutional transformations ultimately contributed to the nationalization of Dutch plantation enterprises. They marked the collapse of the colonial plantation system that had dominated East Sumatra for decades.

The decline of the Deli tobacco plantations resulted in widespread unemployment, particularly among contract laborers whose livelihoods depended entirely on plantation work. While some workers returned to their regions of origin, many others settled permanently in East Sumatra, contributing to rapid population growth and the emergence of increasingly diverse communities through intermarriage among Javanese, Chinese, Indian, and local populations. Although a considerable number of Indian laborers eventually returned to Tamil Nadu, many former workers established new livelihoods as farmers, traders, and wage laborers beyond the plantation sector. For numerous laborers, the collapse of the plantation economy also marked the end of the violence and coercion that had characterized colonial labor relations, allowing them to pursue more stable and dignified lives (Silvana & Fitri, 2021).

For many female laborers, however, the end of plantation employment did not signify the end of suffering. Women who had been compelled to engage in prostitution remained especially vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, particularly syphilis. At the same time, years of exploitation left many with chronic physical illnesses, psychological trauma, and enduring social stigma. Their meager earnings prevented them from accumulating meaningful savings, and many returned to their hometowns without economic security or social recognition, often bearing the responsibility of raising children who received no paternal acknowledgment. These experiences demonstrate that the consequences of colonial labor exploitation extended far beyond the termination of employment and continued to shape women's lives long after they had left the plantations.

The decline of the Deli tobacco plantations also transformed the broader social, economic, and demographic landscape of East Sumatra. The contraction of plantation revenues weakened the economic position of the Malay sultanates and local aristocracy, whose prosperity had long depended on land concessions granted to European plantation companies. In contrast, former plantation laborers continued to experience poverty and social marginalization. At the same time, plantation migration fundamentally reshaped the region's demographics, as communities from Java, China, and India increasingly outnumbered the indigenous Malay population and helped develop new urban economic centers. Although the introduction of the 1892 concession model formally recognized certain community rights, its implementation remained highly problematic, as plantation expansion frequently encroached upon village lands and laborers continued to experience abuse, coercion, and inhumane treatment under the *Poenale Sanctie*, which institutionalized forced labor and legitimized arbitrary practices by plantation companies (Hutagaol & Simangunsong, 2020).

The disappearance of female laborers from the Deli plantations should therefore be understood within the broader transformation of the colonial plantation economy rather than merely as a consequence of declining labor demand. Changes in international commodity markets, labor policies, and political conditions reduced the need for female workers, yet the structural inequalities they experienced persisted long after the plantation system had collapsed (Situmorang et al., 2024; Pelzer, 1985; Ramayanti & Wisnu, 2018; Istiyana, 2022). Although colonial narratives largely marginalized women's contributions to plantation production and community survival, their experiences reveal that they were active historical actors whose lives were profoundly shaped by the intersecting forces of colonial capitalism, labor exploitation, gender inequality, and social transformation. Consequently, the history of female laborers occupies a central place in understanding both the collapse of the colonial plantation system and the enduring legacy of colonialism in East Sumatra.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the experiences of female contract laborers in the Deli tobacco plantations reveal that exploitation within the colonial plantation system extended far beyond labor relations alone. Although women were

recruited to meet the expanding labor demands of plantation companies, they remained positioned at the lowest levels of the colonial labor hierarchy. They were subjected to unequal wages, restrictive labor regulations, limited social mobility, and multiple forms of sexual exploitation. These findings demonstrate that the Deli plantation system operated through the intersection of labor control, gender inequality, and colonial power, transforming women into both productive workers and objects of social and sexual domination. By placing women's experiences at the center of analysis, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the gendered dimensions of colonial plantation labor. It enriches the historiography of labor and women in colonial Indonesia.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The analysis relies predominantly on historical records produced by colonial governments, plantation companies, and other official institutions, which inevitably reflect the perspectives and interests of colonial authorities rather than those of the female laborers themselves. Consequently, important aspects of women's lived experiences, including their personal agency, everyday survival strategies, and forms of resistance, remain only partially documented. These limitations highlight the continuing need for critical source interpretation and for incorporating alternative historical materials that can recover marginalized voices.

Future research should broaden the evidentiary base by incorporating archival collections, plantation records, newspapers, personal correspondence, oral histories, family archives, and other contemporary sources that may offer richer insights into the everyday experiences of female laborers. Comparative studies involving women employed in other plantation regions of the Dutch East Indies would also provide a broader understanding of how gender, labor, and colonialism interacted across different colonial contexts. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches integrating gender history, labor history, colonial studies, and social history would facilitate a more nuanced analysis of the structural mechanisms through which colonial plantation systems institutionalized economic exploitation and gender inequality across Southeast Asia.

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