

**SUBALTERN WOMEN MOVEMENT: FROM EXPLOITATION TO  
NEGOTIATION**

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**Abstract**

This article underlines that the unequal patterns of social relations does not immediately create dependency, passiveness, and total submission of the dominated to the dominant social class. This phenomenon is clearly shown by local movement of Pace women living around the area of commercial agricultural enterprise. Through their limited power and local resources such as the bounds of genetic relationship, friendship, and communal solidarity, of which they made use as cultural capital in fighting for their family's rights of survival. When life becomes harder, choices are increasingly limited, and unfortunateness transformed itself into certainty, there are always unpredictable choices made by the sub-altern group. They almost always find a way out from completely difficult situation., even though it is just informal, if not illegal.

Key words: women, poverty, gender-biased, local movement, exploitation and negotiation.

**1. Introduction**

In patternistic social institution, the different roles of women and men are undeniable. The gender-biased rural social institution has created imbalanced space between men and women. In terms of job, for example, the tendency to hold dichotomic view is still strong; that only jobs done by men were considered as the real jobs, while those performed by women were never positioned as having social and economic values equal to the ones men do. Domestic jobs/works have been interpreted as a representation of women's given responsibility and obligation. However, in public sphere, women's jobs/works were just viewed as secondary, to help their husband, not as a breadwinner (Sjafri Sairin, Pujo Semedi and Bambang Hidayana, 2002: 96-197)

Even though the social institution is unfriendly to women, the rural women tend not to rebel in doing their roles. This seems to be in contradiction with urban middle class well-educated women who tend to be expressive in articulating their disagreement with anything damaging to them. Rural women that are often stereotyped as boorish, dirty, and uneducated, are actually active in playing their roles to keep their family survive. Regardless of the fact that their works have been labelled as 'women's fate' and 'complementary' to their husband's work, they

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remain doing their works as part of their rational choice and at the same time imperative choice- something that must be done before finding the best action to do to change the condition (Sita van Bemmelen, 1995; Melani Budianta, 2005).

In any case, the small actions, verbal or implied, done by rural women have played big roles and have given significant contributions for their family's survival. This can be understood considering that their husband's income was far from enough even just for their daily basic need (J.C. Scott, 1983; 3; Sjafri Sairin, Pujo Semedi, Bambang Hidayana, 2002:198).

At a closer look, such local action by rural women was not merely their struggle to meet their family's material need, but also as their struggle to get their family's rights; right for food, health, education, and survival, that actually should be the state's responsibility. In relational terms, such women's struggles can be understood as their rebel towards various forms of predominating social system (R.H. Bates, 1981:241).

Therefore, it is interesting to do a study on rural women's movement that is articulated through local action in fighting for the rights of their family's life persistence. Surely, the small roles played by poor rural women are very unique, local, and various. Observing the complexity of such women's local action can lead to an understanding of the local strategies they play to defend their family's survival and to rebel the predominating social system. Cultural strategy includes women's subjectivity as an entity that has an ability to articulate an expression of rebellion (Ratna Saptari & Brigitte Holzner, 1997:209; Anna L.Tsing, 1996:311).

The questions are; how do the poor rural women of Pace defend their family's survival and how does it relate to critics of politic-ideology on patriarchal predominating social system? These are the central issue of this article.

## **2. Pace: A Small Village in East Java**

Pace is a village in Jember, East java, with its majority of Madurese ethnic and minority of Java. With its width of 4853.9 hectare, it has 268 ha for public residence, 99.5 ha for rice fields, 448 ha for unirrigated agricultural field, 1005 ha for commercial agricultural enterprise-365 ha owned by private and 640 owned by the state. The village is on 500-700 m above the sea level and has abundant natural resources especially in farming and agriculture. However, the wide commercial agricultural enterprise does not belong to the villagers. Most villagers are manual labourer or farmhand of the commercial agricultural enterprise managed by state-owned agricultural enterprise (PTPN).

The population of Pace is 16.171, spread into 5000 families. not all of whom work in the agricultural enterprise. Based on the topography of the area where they reside, their economic sector can be categorized into several types. Those who stay around the agricultural enterprise mostly work as manual worker for the enterprise.

Some others reside in the middle part with natural condition of unirigated field, flat but little bit hilly, on which they work. Those who stay in lowland work as small farmer, working on rented field, and farmhand. Many people who reside near market work in the sector of trade, service, and other than agricultural jobs.

Despite the work differentiation in the lives of Pace's society, they generally depend their lives on the leading sector of natural processing such as private agriculture, agricultural enterprise, and corp in unirigated field. This can be clearly seen from their map of the land ownership and control which consists of rice fiels owner (242 people), corp field owner (106 people), field lessee (78 people), and manual worker in agricultural enterprise (5,615 people) (The Profile of Villages in Jember, 2012).

Although the villagers' job mobility is various, they have similarity, namely, they work in informal sector with no promisiing future. Working in informal sector gives almost no social guarantee for their live persistence and welfare. They also face a kind of the same 'social fate' of poverty, powerlessness, marginalization, and oppression as a result of unfair political system. The fact is that 35% of 16.171 villagers are under poverty. In 2010, the number of those who deserve for the government's direct cash (BLT)<sup>3</sup> was 1600 families.

The villagers' educational background are mostly primary education, some finish the primary schools and some dropped off their primary school. Only few of them are able to work in formal sectors with more promising social gurantee. With their limited resources, the villagers got difficulty in accessing strategic economic sectors such as public servants (just 36 people), member of military forces (4 people), officers in state owned company (4 people), private company with persistent income, farmer with vast filed ownership, and merchant with adequate capital. The Pace villagers were diversified in various jobs; 2,403 farmers, 9,706 manual workers in agricultural enterprise, 708 in trade sectors, and only 542 in industrial sectors.

The failure of some villagers to access proper jobs and earnings in their iwn village has prompted them to migrate to other villages for a new source of income. The interviews revealed that around 60 – 70% of the poor families in each cluster had one of their family member migrating to Kalimantan, Bali, Surabaya, Jakarta, even Malaysia. Most of those who migrated were men, especially who had have been married.

The fact that many of Pace villagers who are poor chose to migrate, even though it can be viewed as a rational choice, is ironic considering Pace and Jember in general was known as a favourite destination of migration, especially from Madura and some western parts of east Java such as Blitar, Trenggalek, Ponorogo, Madiun, and some parts of West Java areas. Pace has been changed to be a village

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<sup>3</sup> BLT (*Bantuan Tunai Langsung*/Direct Cash Assistance) is a government program of granting a certain amount of money for the citizen who are categorized as under poverty.

that is not all all interesting to be a migration destination because of its poor economic potential. Indeed, Pace has often been left by its people to migrate to other villages or towns that are economically more promising (Mark A. Collinson, 2010: 1-14).

In fact, the story of the migration by poor Pace villagers cannot be separated from various problems. The rare, even the absence of, field to manage, the limited labour market, the increasingly higher cost of living, and the governmental policies that do not take side with common people, become a strong reason for Pace villagers to migrate (Peter Scholten ed., 2022)

At the moment, the Pace residents have a possession and control of some parts of land for residence (122.5 ha), garden (21.7 ha), crop field (64.5 ha), and rice field (331.5). The data shows that the average width of land owned by the residents is between 250 and 500 square meters. Only very few of them have 2000 square meters or more, namely, the village headman and two residents. Many of them do not have any ownership of land at all, which is not articulated by statistical data (Roger Montgomery and Toto Sugito, 1989; *Journal of South East Asian Studies*, 1980: 351).

The limited land for agricultural work made Pace villagers take a formal and informal schemes through the nearest commercial agricultural senterprise and silviculture to support their economic need. In addition, for the reasons of limited access of formal scheme such as manual workers for planting, coffee, rubber, or cacao picker, and other related jobs such as pruning. Such situations have often been absent in official statistical explanation on economic and political mobility of the residents.

The limitedness of work land ownership, the increasingly narrowing area of work in the commercial agricultural enterprise, and the scarce of natural resources to work on, made most of Pace villagers just able access a small part of economic space available in their village. The very limited economic space compelled them to choose migrating (Peter Scholten ed., 2022). This can be understood that the migration is a rational choice of Pare villagers to be able to expand their economic and political space. At the same time, the poor people who remain staying in Pace, who were mostly women, bore double burden as head of family and breadwinner (Amy M. Russell, 2014: 532–548).

### **3. Defending Right for Survival: Various Local Tactics of Subaltern Women**

The phenomenon met in the study site shows that the women who were left by their husbands for migration remained strong in living their life even though they had to bear heavy burdens (Amy M. Russell, 2014: 532–548). They commonly did not live alone, but with their children and some of their extended family members such as grand mother, grand father, aunt, or parents in law. However, some live just with their children because they do not have any or separated by long distance from extended family members, or because they got divorce.

Despite their husbands' job in migration area, the women could not depend their lives on their husbands' earning. Through their limited power, the women kept responding the poverty repressing their lives by constructive actions. They were forced not to stay passive, but to work hard making use of the available jobs in their village, even though not every day. Most of them work as farmhand, seasonal worker in the commercial agricultural enterprise, collecting firewoods, and other blue-collar works. As they did not have steady income, the women were dependent on the debt and credit among family members or the nearest neighbours. By such actions the women tried to answer the problem of poverty that puts their family's lives in shackles (Alissa Tolstokorova, 2009).

Therefore, the women of Pace who were left by their husbands for migration had to play their multiple burden role. They did not only manage domestic chores, at the same time they became head of family who held full responsibility for their family member's survival. In whatever condition they have, like pregnant or sick, the women were demanded to keep working hard both in domestic and non-domestic spheres<sup>4</sup>.

With their capacity as poor people living around the area of commercial agricultural enterprise, the hard works that they did were not far from the available job sectors in their village. Some of them worked on the land they own as their primary source of family income. For women who stay in the upper and middle land with ecological and social condition of dry land, they made use of the land by planting on it subsistence crops having market economic values such as corn, cassava, coffee, and some other sub-tropical plants. While those who resided in low land with the condition of wet field planted their field with rice, corn, soybean, pulses, and the like. In spite of the fact that theoretically such small farming is viewed as less efficient and less productive, for the poor women it was one of important ways to survive, which some experts call cropping mechanism (Puji Suharso, 2002: 28, 63).

As those women did not have adequate reserve funds, many of them, then, were involved in a debt web, not only to family members, relative, or neighbours, but also land lords or capital owners (usurers). The compensation was that when they harvested their farming products, especially rice, corn, and coffee, they directly sold them to the capital owners with the price standard determined by the capital owners.

Not only those who have ownership of land, poor Pace women who did not have any ownership of land also had their dependence on land both farmland and commercial agricultural enterprise. In their effort to fulfill their living cost, they worked hard as farmhands both in farming fields and in the commercial agricultural enterprise, renting some land to work on, or out of agricultural sectors such as

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<sup>4</sup> What was experienced by Mrs As, for example, is one of the evidence of how women left by their husband migrating to Bali when she was pregnant and has to work hard to fulfil her daily living cost by working as farmhand in the PTPN.

manual workers in industries, construction, trading, family servants, and other off farm activities. It was described that Pace residents who have the ownership of rice field are just 242 people and of farm land 106 people. Other people do not have any ownership of land/field; some of them (78 people) rent the field to work on, and the rest (5,615 people) work as farmhands or other than agricultural jobs (Puji Suharso, 2002: 28, 54-63; Monografi Desa Pace, 2012).

In fact, almost none of Pace residents become land lords with a vast land or field ownership. Those who were categorized rich or land lords were no more than three people with the ownership of just two (2) to three and half (3,5) hectare land/field. Based on the land ownership, the so called socially rich group or land lord is no other than those who run the commercial agricultural enterprise (1,050 hectare) and those who managed forestry land (1,578,584 hectare). In this case, what has been stated by Hart and Wolf is essential to consider; that the class structure of farmers are more critical to be viewed from the aspect of land control and the width of land operated, not merely land ownership (Puji Suharso, 2002: 28, 54).

One point of similarity among the poor women with very limited ownership and control of land in their efforts to fulfil their living cost is that they did not depend merely on one sector. In non-domestic domain, they did double jobs, in the morning they worked as farmhands or manual worker in the commercial agricultural enterprise and in the afternoon they did whatever available jobs or household servant. Generally, the women made a distribution of role for their family members; the ones who stayed in the village work in agricultural sector, and some others out of agricultural sectors (Amy M. Russell, 2014: 532-548).

Moreover, the women also did additional jobs such as collecting firewood or wood processing residual, taking some of agricultural products like coffee from PTPN (state owned commercial agricultural enterprise) and PDP, even together with their male family member, they were involved in illegal logging in the forest.

Referring to the small actions done by the poor women of Pace, it is inexorable that what they did are actually a symbolic, cultural, and social resistance as a strategy to do, borrowing Scott's term, protests against a various things promoted by superstructure class. Such small actions, at the same time, function as a weapon to survive in the middle of repressive dominant power (Hery Santoso, 2004: 301).

#### **4. Women, Work, and Equality Negotiation**

Every day, the poor Pace women were always involved in hard works activities, both in domestic and non-domestic domain. For the, the double jobs that they did are just normal routine activities as a customary. This is because they had got used to work hard since their childhood. Being born in poor family, they were accustomed to face difficulties in their daily lives. Such condition did not give enough space of choice for them, except working hard since childhood, so they did not have enough time to play like children in general. Unfortunately, when they grew

up and finished their primary school or junior high school, they were confronted by marriage demand. In Madurese tradition, marriage in young age is part of their tradition<sup>5</sup>.

After marriage, the women were encountered to life condition that was not much different from what they had before marriage. A life condition that is full of deficiencies and underprivileged and demanding them to fully involved to work hard. Indeed, after marriage, the women had to bear the heavy brunt of their family. As a wife, the woman had to be responsible for her household matters, for serving her children and husband, and for managing her family's economic needs. The women held their own awareness that domestic works are their responsibility as women, while they believed that doing non-domestic jobs also are their responsibility to help their husband in providing for family. The women were indoctrinated by religious teaching and their parents' sermon commanding them that women must be able to make husband happy by obedience, respect, and serving<sup>6</sup>.

The women's burden became heavier when they played their role as head of family because of being left by their husbands for migration. In such condition, they were made responsible for their family's fate. Therefore, they became fully involved in both domestic and non-domestic works. Even though they were heavily under pressure by dominative social system, they did not become powerless at all, instead, they keep doing sub-cultural, often personal, actions, which were unsystematic and short term-oriented (to fulfil family daily needs), to save their family's survival. By small actions that were sometimes regarded as illegal by supra-structure, the women were able to maintain their right for their family's survival (Shahadat Hossain, 2005).

The daily struggle experienced by the Pace women -the works they did, small actions they performed- have raised a kind of re-definition of how they perceived themselves in relation to their family, society, the works that they did, even the state (MariaCaterina La Barbera, 2015). As an example is when they stayed around the PTPN area but they did not have access for jobs in it, they did not do many radical protests. On the contrary, they preferred to take accommodating politics by making use of some surrounding areas to plant some crops, taking a small part of the plantation results from PTPN and PDP such as coffee to enjoy by their family members when they ran out of coffee, or to sell when they run out of money. These

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<sup>5</sup> Parents in the village concern much if their girls do not get married soon, they are afraid if the girls will be *perawan tua* (single women getting older), which give them a social consequence of shame. Thus, young age marriage for Pace residents, especially in the upper land that is dominated by Madurese, is not merely related to parents' inability to fund for their education, but more about tradition. In addition, there is a traditional view of the older generations that education for women is not really important compared to education for men. They questioned the use for high education for women if finally they have to get married soon with men who will provide for their lives, as stated by a young mother.

<sup>6</sup> The view that women have to obey, respect, and serve their husband is confirmed by men. In this case, it is evident that religion and traditional knowledge have, borrowing Foucault, power relation that in turn position men as ordinate and women as subordinate.

can be considered as forms of new political economic reproduction that they arranged as an ammunition to resist the ruler of the commercial agricultural enterprise, PTPN and PDP (Scott, 1976).

Even though the Pace women had a perception that the works they did are a form of their obligation to help their husbands, they symbolically confirmed that the works they did were not just secondary or complement (Ester Boserup, Su Fei Tan, Camilla Toulmin, 2007). This is because of the fact that the works done by their husbands in migration area did not provide the whole family needs. This, at least, was mentioned by the women such as *bu As* and *bu Ilmiyati* who frankly stated

“Actually we want our works appreciated by our husband. We want domestic chores were not viewed as merely women’s responsibility, but should be husbands’ as well, our casual jobs out door, even though not always financially productive, not to be seen just as a peripheral job, but to be regarded as a real job like what husbands did”.

If we take a closer look, we will see how local domain such as household, informal sectors’ jobs, and religious study group of *Muslimatan*, has been a place for Pace women’s movement to build their identity and, at the same time, to negotiate equality between women and men. Although essential change did not happen, their small movements utilizing local-traditional arena of contestation had revealed a counter discourse in resisting the ideological status quo and patriarchal social structure around them. With their hard work, they had more courage to raise their voice or protest if their husbands blame them for any problems or mistakes in their family life (Mansour Fakih, 1996).

Thus, Pace women tended to choose the approach of negotiating and simultaneously resisting politics in developing a relation with men, especially in the family life domain. In a flash, such kind of approach made women remain in their subordinate position. Nevertheless, through such flexible, not radical, approach, the women kept capable of fighting for their rights of their family’s survival (Einat Lavee, 2016).

## 5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of migration indicated the complexity of poverty problems occurred in Pace, especially for women. The women had to play their roles as head of family, as well as caring for their children and other family members. At the same time, their increasing daily essentials could not be covered by husbands’ earning from migrant jobs, which made them work hard to fulfil their family’s cost of life.

The limited farming land and agriculture that could be managed by women made them not have many choices except making use of formal and informal scheme available around the village to support them economically. However, informal scheme such as nipping the products of farming and agriculture like coffee or cacao and illegally making use of a very small part of the agricultural enterprise’s land to



grow some plants, sometimes, more dominantly characterized the economic activities of the women compared to the formal scheme such as planting worker, pickers of coffee, cacao, and rubber, and some other labour relations.

Owing money to each other among extended family members or neighbours, or even to the land lords or capital owners, was also one of the strategies of their survival. Consequently, their agricultural products, especially corn and coffee, were sold to the capital owners with the standard of price determined by the capital owners alone. Even though it harmed them economically, the women kept doing it because of their life emergency, they had no choice. With such actions they tried to answer the problems of their self identity as a subaltern group and simultaneously fight for their family's survival.

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