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MULTISCALAR UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT AND THE SOCIOESPATIAL FRAGMENTATION OF LABOUR

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ANGELA SERRANO ZAPATA, M. SOFÍA LUNA SIACHOQUE
**Unpaid Women's Labour driving Value Chain Disintegration
in the Colombian Palm Oil Industry**

ABSTRACT *This study reveals a fundamental driver for the reconfiguration of global value chains: the deliberate appropriation of unpaid women's labour by corporations. Through 12 months of ethnographic research across different segments of the palm oil value chain and by tracing key historical shifts in the Colombian palm oil industry, this research delivers a contextually grounded and historically nuanced perspective on the pivotal role of unpaid gendered labour in shaping global markets. We find three instances of value chain governance transformation intricately linked to the exploitation of unpaid women's labour within the palm oil industry. These instances encompass: (1) the dismantling of workplace care amenities, (2) labour outsourcing, and (3) the expansion of contract farming. These strategies exploit unpaid gendered labour to subsidise palm oil production while deepening labour fragmentation and marginalising women from collective action. As a result, women often take on additional roles to sustain their households while simultaneously providing crucial, yet unrecognised, inputs for the operation of the palm oil industry.*

KEYWORDS *global value chains, gender, labour, palm oil, social reproduction*

1. Gender, labour fragmentation, and value chain dynamics in the Colombian palm oil industry

While the literature on global markets often portrays social reproduction as separate from global production networks (Collins 2014), its exploitation by palm oil companies underscores its role in shaping the global economy. Social reproduction – the labour involved in sustaining life and

communities, including care work, household labour, and the daily maintenance of workers – remains essential to global industries but is often rendered invisible or undervalued (Bhattacharya 2017; Mezzadri et al. 2022). Colombia stands as the fourth largest producer of palm oil, with 86 % of its industry workers being men (DANE 2018; USDA 2024). Over the past six decades, the Colombian palm oil industry has transitioned from a model of vertical integration – where a single firm controls multiple stages of production and processing – to various forms of value chain disintegration, in which different segments of the production process are outsourced to separate firms or independent producers. While existing literature on critical Global Value Chains (GVC) highlights the significance of firms' value-capturing strategies in GVC governance changes (Selwyn 2019), the specific nexus between these strategies, gendered labour exploitation, and social reproduction remains underexplored.

In this context, we inquire: how does the possibility of identifying unpaid gendered labour influence changes in GVC governance? We contend that value chain disintegration emerges as a pivotal tactic for firms to fragment labour along gender lines and subsidise production by exploiting the value derived from unpaid women's work, particularly in social reproduction practices. In the Colombian palm oil industry, firms have produced this fragmentation through three primary mechanisms: (1) the dismantling of workplace care facilities, (2) labour outsourcing, and (3) the expansion of contract farming. These strategies of labour fragmentation undermine overall labour solidarity and further marginalise women from collective action arenas.

Building on previous research on transnational labour solidarity in the palm oil industry (Pye 2021), our study examines the specific mechanisms companies use to fragment labour along gender lines, thereby in the process weakening collective labour action. By analysing these dynamics, we contribute to the literature on GVCs (Selwyn 2019; Werner 2012), labour control regimes (Lerche/Shah 2018; Pattenden 2016), and social reproduction (Bhattacharya 2017; Ojeda 2021). Our findings reveal how labour fragmentation deepens gender inequalities within value chains, with firms leveraging social reproduction practices to disempower workers – particularly women. To reinforce these inequalities, Colombian palm oil firms have restructured their value chains by assigning distinct tasks to men and women, facilitating the appropriation of unpaid or poorly compensated

labour. This industry restructuring extracts greater value from workers through the strategic disintegration of key value chain nodes, such as oil palm cultivation and palm oil processing – often legitimised by state policies promoting flexible labour arrangements and private-sector-led agricultural development.

This paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews the literature on gendered agricultural markets through three frameworks – Global Value Chains, Labour Regimes, and Social Reproduction. We then outline our research methodology and positionality. The following section examines three cases of value chain disintegration related to value extraction from different forms of gendered divisions of labour. The discussion analyses how the debilitation of formal labour enables firms to capture value from unpaid social reproduction practices. The conclusion raises questions for future research on collective action and its limitations in addressing gendered labour exploitation in global markets.

2. Gendered dynamics in global agricultural markets

The intersection of global value chain structures and gender inequalities remains underexplored. This literature review addresses this gap by examining how gendered labour control regimes and the strategic incorporation and outsourcing of social reproduction practices by palm oil companies shape global agricultural markets. The review highlights how firms instrumentalise sociocultural gender norms to justify the devaluation and subordination of women's labour. As a result, gendered labour regimes emerge, shifting costs onto households and effectively subsidising corporate operations.

2.1 Gendered inequalities in GVC governance

The concept of global value chain governance refers to the forms of coordinating relations between firms, workers, and other actors involved in a commodity chain, and their respective possibilities of value capture (Dallas et al. 2019; Gibbon et al. 2008). Over the past three decades, understandings of GVC governance have evolved from the model of bilateral buyer vs. producer power to more complex and nuanced understandings.

Recent developments conceptualise governance as a result of multiple linkages between actors in a chain, actor types, power transmission mechanisms, and the resulting consolidated forms of power (Gereffi et al. 2005; Gibbon et al. 2008; Ponte/Sturgeon 2014; Dallas et al. 2019). This approach reflects a shift from viewing power as coercive and agent-centred to recognising its more indirect, structural forms and the broader set of possible actors involved, including multistakeholder agreements, governments, and civil society (Dallas et al. 2019). Focusing on the multiple forms of power dynamics in a value chain enables us to investigate the concrete mechanisms through which actors with different forms and levels of power can influence the coordination of exchanges along the production to consumption of a commodity.

The issue of power is crucial because it underpins the instrumentalisation of various forms of inequality, including gender disparities among workers. Scholarship on this issue has revealed that, to enhance competitiveness, firms often reduce labour costs by exploiting unequal social institutions, such as sociocultural constructions of gender, to pay lower wages (Bair 2010; Collins 1995). Collins (1995) examines how cultural gender norms in fruit and vegetable plantations across Chile, Brazil, and Mexico perpetuate a sexual division of labour. This division allocates the most powerful and highly paid positions to men, while relegating women to the lowest-paid and most subordinate roles. Gender stereotypes serve as rationalisations for designating certain tasks as ‘women’s work’ or as supplementary income for married women, presuming that men are the primary breadwinners in households (Collins 2003). Firms exploit these constructs by seeking out workers without alternative employment options, allowing them to pay workers even less so as to extract greater value (Krippner 2001). Firms’ hiring practices often benefit from and deepen gendered occupational segregation and wage inequalities.

Brückner and Sardadvar (2023) expand on this by highlighting the often-overlooked role of households in shaping GVCs. They argue that gendered labour within households and consumption patterns play a hidden yet critical role in structuring value chains. Their work demonstrates how commercialisation, market-oriented reforms, and shifts in consumer demand reshape reproductive labour, access to food, and working conditions in deeply gendered ways. This perspective moves beyond firm-centred

analyses to show how social reproduction both sustains and is reshaped by global production processes.

While much of the literature on gender inequalities in Global Value Chains (GVCs) focuses on how these chains perpetuate disparities, some studies examine the relationship between value chain governance and gendered labour inequalities. A key contribution in this regard is Werner's (2012) analysis of the gendered transformation as driven by upgrading policies. Examining the restructuring of apparel firms in the Dominican Republic, Werner illustrates how firms' efforts to enhance their positions within a value chain – particularly in terms of value capture – necessitate shifts in gendered production dynamics. As firms move up the chain, the relative positions and opportunities available to women compared to men also shift, revealing the gendered nature of value chain restructuring.

2.2 Gendered labour control regimes

Labour control regimes in global value chains produce labour fragmentation and hinder collective action. Labour control regimes encompass the specific mechanisms implemented by firms to exert authority over and to control the behaviour of workers. These mechanisms operate at the intersection of various factors including national labour laws and their enforcement, hiring practices, employer repression, and global trade agreements (Anner 2015; Baquero 2023; Pattenden 2016). Employing these mechanisms, firms are often able to fragment workers in terms of types of employment (e.g. direct, outsourced, and self-employment), ultimately diminishing labour solidarity and collective bargaining power. This situation facilitates the appropriation of higher surplus value by firms (Bernstein 2010; Selwyn 2007; Selwyn 2019; Silver 2003). Hence, global value chains produce, and are produced by, several classes of labour. Even chains traditionally composed of factories, such as garment industries, often use informal labour, for example women homeworkers doing embroidery at home for global industries (Mezzadri/Lulu 2018). In response to these forms of labour fragmentation, workers can employ resistance practices, including forming unions, engaging in strikes or cross border organising, and building and enforcing international accords (Anner 2015; Lee 2007). However, the division and fluidity of employment types makes work-based labour action difficult (Lerche 2009).

One of the primary drivers behind this labour fragmentation is the exploitation, by firms, of social inequalities. Firms frequently leverage disparities along social status categories, such as gender, caste, and race, to segment workers into various employment categories (Lerche 2009). They often assign the most precarious and poorly compensated roles to those experiencing intersecting forms of oppression. This phenomenon, known as conjugated oppression, illustrates the interconnectedness of class-based exploitation with other manifestations of social oppression (Lerche/Shah 2018). For instance, socioculturally constructed notions of gender often rationalise lower wages and more precarious working conditions for women. These constructs depict women as inherently inferior to men and as naturally suited for specific types of labor – particularly care work such as cooking and cleaning, precarious jobs, or roles seen as merely supplementing household income. This reinforces the gendered segmentation of the workforce and systematically devalues women's labour (Baquero 2023; Collins 2003). Consequently, labour control regimes convert diversity based on gender, race, and geographical origin into income disparities that facilitate value appropriation and also shape the structure of supply chains (Tsing 2009). Global industries take advantage of existing inequalities in places of production to lower labour costs by paying lower wages.

In the context of palm oil plantations, labor fragmentation creates a disciplined and inexpensive workforce, highly dependent on the cheap labour of women. For instance, Indonesian palm oil plantations have historically shifted between internalising and externalising the costs associated with sustaining daily work. Internalisation, which may involve providing food and shelter, is often employed when labour shortages make it attractive for firms or when firms are compelled to do so by union struggles and regulations. Conversely, externalisation, where all the costs of sustenance fall on individual households, occurs when labour markets offer abundant workers or when union influence and regulations are absent (Li 2017; Selwyn 2007). This system of externalisation relies on gender roles which depict women as economically dependent and responsible for domestic labour, thus ensuring cheap and disciplined women workers for the palm oil industry. Firms exploit these inequalities to deepen labour divisions and extract more value, actively constructing the conditions that sustain the very existence of plantations (Sinaga 2021). Despite divisions, global

networks link workers, making transnational labour organising viable, especially given shared spaces and vertical integration in the industry. Moreover, the industry's vulnerability to labour action, driven by the need to process fruit swiftly before it overripens, enhances the potential for collective organising (Pye 2017; 2021). Labour fragmentation in palm oil plantations creates a disciplined and inexpensive workforce, by exploiting gender roles. Despite this situation, workers face conditions conducive to transnational labour action.

2.3 The social construction of social reproduction and the gendered division of labour in agriculture

Social reproduction is central to understanding the conditions that enable industrial agriculture for global markets. The concept encompasses the activities involved in sustaining life and human communities – tasks that have been historically assigned to women, made invisible, and devalued within dominant economic frameworks (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2004; Fraser 2014). This gendered division of labour is not biologically determined but socially constructed, a product of capitalist expansion that has divorced production from reproduction. The rise of capitalism displaced reproduction from the mercantile sphere of production, predominantly assigning subsistence activities to women and wage labour to men. This separation not only obscured the economic value of reproductive labour but also subordinated women, turning their unpaid labour into a mechanism for sustaining capital accumulation (Federici 2004; Fraser 2014). Today's separation of production and reproduction stems from a history of capitalist development that has predominantly assigned waged labor to men and subsistence and care work to women – devaluing the latter while making it essential to the accumulation of capital.

This artificial division – where primarily market-oriented production is recognised as valuable – ensures that capital accumulation relies on unrecognised and unpaid labour. The devaluation of reproductive labour, combined with the systematic exclusion of women from wage-earning opportunities, has created a system of family and community dependence on men's wages, thereby reinforcing gender hierarchies within the working class (León 2017). Even as women increasingly entered formal labour markets from the second half of the 20th century onward, their

work has remained largely de-skilled, poorly paid, and precarious – framed as supplementary rather than as central to household incomes (Barrientos et al. 2004; Fernández-Kelly 2008; Massey 1983). This dynamic persists today, where the global economy simultaneously relies on and undermines social reproduction. Wealthier households outsource care work through commodification, while less privileged communities experience its privatisation, leading to increased precarity (Fraser 2017).

A close analysis of this relation reveals the inseparability of production and both macro- and micro- political-economic relations. In Turkey, the reproductive labour burden imposed on women has led to state policies that render flexible their paid labour, reinforcing their dual role in production and social reproduction (Arslan 2022). Similarly, unpaid reproductive labour structures local production and global trade, demonstrating that economic systems depend on social reproduction to sustain their labour force (Mezzadri et al. 2022). Women's work, often unpaid or poorly remunerated at the household, community, and workplace level, sustains higher-valued and better-compensated economic activities.

In industrial agriculture, this gendered division of labour is actively reshaped by processes of land dispossession, forced displacement, and extractive production. Plantation companies and armed groups intentionally disrupt social reproduction practices in order to facilitate agrarian extraction, in the process exacerbating gendered inequalities in the access to resources and undermining the survival strategies of affected communities (Ojeda 2021). Berman and Ojeda (2020) illustrate how sexual violence has been systematically employed as a tool of dispossession in Colombia, with paramilitary, police, and military actors terrorising peasant communities – particularly women – in order to force their displacement. At the same time, the authors highlight how women facing these threats often navigate spaces of resistance within the limited margins available to them to safeguard their autonomy. Hence, the structural conditions of oppression are met with resistance. Thus, while structural conditions of oppression persist, women actively carve out spaces of resistance within these constraints.

The exploitation of social reproduction practices in industrial agriculture also restructures gender relations, so reinforcing the divide between production and reproduction that subordinates women (León 2017). This

dynamic extends beyond direct dispossession. Agrarian capitalism extracts not only ecological resources but also unpaid reproductive labour, deepening the feminisation of survival strategies in rural spaces. As Ossome and Naidu (2021) argue, the burden of sustaining agricultural life falls disproportionately on women, reinforcing both their economic and social vulnerabilities.

By foregrounding the social construction of social reproduction, it becomes clear that gender inequalities in global agriculture are not residual or secondary concerns – rather they are foundational to how value is extracted, labor is organised, and land is controlled. Recognising reproductive labor as a key site of capitalist exploitation thus challenges the presumed ‘naturalness’ of the prevalent gendered division of labour.

3. Research methodology: a feminist political economy approach to global value chain analysis

This study adopts an extended case method approach, using ethnographic data to refine and extend social theory (Burawoy 1998). We engage with global value chain (GVC) governance theories that explain how firms wield power to restructure relationships between actors in a value chain by leveraging existing social hierarchies, including gender-based inequalities, among workers (Collins 2003; Mezzadri et al. 2022; Selwyn 2019). Building on this framework, we examine the concrete ways in which firms reorganize production to exploit unpaid women’s labour, allowing them to capture a larger share of value.

To investigate these dynamics, we draw on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2019 in the northeast region of Magdalena Medio, Colombia. Our research includes 62 interviews with actors along the palm oil value chain – plantation workers, small-scale fruit suppliers, company managers, and government officials – including 10 women, reflecting the industry’s gender distribution. During the analysis phase, we conducted two follow-up interviews by phone to refine and expand upon previous findings. In-depth phone interviews were possible due to the rapport and trust established during fieldwork, thus allowing for continued engagement despite not being physically present in the field.

Recognising that interview data captures what participants are willing and able to share at a given moment (Guber 2004), we triangulated interview accounts with direct observation, additional interviews, and written documents. We also analysed secondary literature on gender relations in the national and international palm oil industry.

Our coding process not only captured patterns of labour outsourcing and the gendered division of work, but also revealed how these dynamics are embedded in broader systems of power and inequality. By adopting a relational approach to gender (Lamas 2018), we moved beyond a binary analysis to examine how labour hierarchies are shaped through social relations, industry structures, and historical contexts. This perspective allowed us to refine our codes through an iterative process of flexible coding – developing themes from detailed readings, adjusting and applying codes across cases, and validating patterns through comparison (Deterding / Waters 2018), ensuring they reflected not just women’s experiences but also the ways gendered divisions of labour are maintained and contested within the palm oil value chain.

As feminist researchers, we could not ignore the dominance of men in formal employment and decision-making roles within the sector, as seen by the fact that men make up 86 % of industry workers in Colombia (DANE 2018). Nor could we overlook the crucial yet often invisible labour of women, concentrated in informal and precarious positions. This recognition led us to examine the hidden social relations that sustain production. Using a feminist political economy lens, we analysed how gendered labour hierarchies shape exploitation and structure unequal working conditions (Collins 2014; Mezzadri et al. 2022). By comparing women’s testimonies with men’s experiences, within broader industry dynamics, we highlight how gendered divisions of labour are not incidental but, on the contrary, central to the organisation of production and the extraction of value in the palm oil sector.

4. Three instances of value chain restructuring in Colombia

This study identifies three instances where firms have restructured their value chains to extract value from the unpaid work of women. These

mechanisms involve (1) dismantling of workplace care amenities, (2) labour outsourcing, and (3) expanding contract farming. Together, these findings illustrate how palm oil companies have fragmented their value chains to separate labour by gender, thereby reducing production costs by harnessing the value generated from women's unpaid work, especially in social reproduction activities.

4.1 Dismantling workplace care amenities

Since the establishment of commercial palm oil plantations in Colombia in the 1960s, these plantations have undergone significant changes in workplace amenities. The palm oil industry is characterised by operating in large-scale plantations. This means that each location in the plantation where workers perform their work, is often isolated from essential activities, such as food or healthcare services. Since the 1960s, palm oil workers organised to advocate for better workplace conditions, including these kinds of services in the plantation (CNMH 2018; Interviews, March–April 2019, Giron and undisclosed location). Following numerous challenges, which included legal persecution and other anti-union tactics employed by firms, the 1970s marked a turning point. In the midst of a national strike garnering widespread popular support, the labour union of Indupalma, the largest palm oil company at that time, was officially recognised. Subsequently, other companies followed suit (CNMH 2018; Vargas 2002; Interviews March–July 2019, various places). This recognition and subsequent negotiations led to labour unions successfully advocating for cafeteria facilities and rest areas in plantations paid for by firms (Interview February 20, 2020, by phone). During this period, the palm oil industry experienced significant expansion, with palm oil cultivation in Colombia increasing from 400 hectares in 1960 to 36,673 hectares by 1980 (Fedepalma 1980; 1985). This growth phase was marked by labour struggles to improve working conditions, leading to the establishment of workplace amenities, such as cafeterias in plantations.

Labour in cafeterias was mainly conducted by women (CNMH 2018; Interview, June 2023, by phone). In plantation cafeterias, while over the years the job became less harsh, it still involved demanding working conditions. In the words of a former cafeteria cook:

“When I arrived at the mess halls, I had to work on the stoves, in the pots, and everything; many of my colleagues had to work with firewood, it was tough; they had to wake up much earlier, but not me. I was fortunate that when I started working, everything was already well organised, and yes, I never had to work with firewood, while many of my colleagues had to work very hard” (CNMH 2018: 106, translated by authors).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, women workers were responsible for the physically demanding task of cooking for plantation workers. During this time, they were employed directly by the plantations, so their labour was compensated for by the palm oil producing firms.

However, in the 1980s and 1990s, anti-union violence weakened the unions, leading to the outsourcing of various workplace amenities, including cafeteria services, as unions played a diminished role in resisting these changes. During this period, companies such as Indupalma and Palmeras de la Costa dismantled cafeterias and plantation labour was outsourced from direct employees to third-party contractors. While these changes eroded working conditions, overall employment rates for plantation workers – mostly men – remained stable (CNMH 2018; Serrano 2023). For instance, in Indupalma, then the largest palm oil producer in the country, there were 1,880 direct employees in 1977 and no indirect employees (Castaño 2019; Lizarralde 2008). By 2008, however, women’s employment had declined significantly. Some women were still employed in cleaning, but all cafeteria workers were dismissed, profoundly affecting their income and livelihoods. As one former worker recalled: “There were many fellow women workers for whom it was tough because they were still single mothers at the time, and it was really hard for them with their families.” (CNMH 2018: 186, translated by authors). Despite losing formal employment and union membership opportunities, many of these women remained at the forefront of collective action. They took on leadership roles in mobilisations, organising and leading marches against the escalating violence in their communities (CNMH 2018). The weakening of labour unions resulted in deteriorating conditions for all workers, but women – both through their loss of employment and their continued activism – bore the brunt of these transformations.

Beyond the loss of their income, some of these women still had to provide food for plantation workers in their families, but now in an unpaid capacity. Others had additional jobs and had to assume the responsibility of supplying food for workers to take to the plantation. According to a former palm oil worker whose father was employed on a plantation in the 1990s, due to the dismantling of cafeteria facilities in plantations, “workers’ wives had to take on an important role. They had to wake up at 3:30 in the morning so that by 4:30, when the worker left home, they would have the lunch ready” (Interview, June 2023, by phone) for the worker to take to the plantation. Subsequently, “many women, including my mother, would go out to work. They would do laundry, as my mother did, clean houses, cook” (ibid.). This unpaid labour, previously compensated for by firms, resulted in women working additional shifts to provide a crucial input for workers’ labour in a context where eating inside the plantation is the only viable option and is fundamental to the production of palm oil.

As women’s employment in plantations declined, so did their opportunities for collective action within formal labour structures. Testimonies indicate that most remaining workers were men (CNMH 2018), while women, pushed out of formal employment, were excluded from unions and labour protections. However, rather than becoming politically passive, many took on leadership roles in mobilisations, organising marches against escalating violence. Social reproduction work, still essential to the industry, remained largely unrecognised and uncompensated, further reinforcing their structural marginalisation.

4.2 Outsourcing labour

In the mid-1990s, several palm oil companies undertook massive layoffs and introduced new hiring practices, including outsourcing harvesting tasks to third parties. This shift was possible largely because labour unions were not able to offer resistance after being severely weakened by systematic and targeted anti-union violence in the previous decade (Serrano 2023). A new hiring mechanism, known as ‘associated worker co-ops’, was adopted by multiple firms to transfer labour costs to workers, who received payment based on harvest outcomes and were responsible for their own tools and social security. Indupalma, a pioneering company in this approach, observed indirect co-op hires surge from 46 in 1995 to 900 in 2000. Despite a 2011 government decree penalising misuse of this

model, it had already been in use for two decades (CNMH 2018; Universidad Externado de Colombia 2007).

While most workers in associated worker coops were men, this arrangement exploited women's labour. This situation occurred as some male workers brought female relatives to collect pieces of fallen fruit without proper protection or fair compensation, in a job commonly known as 'pepera,' signifying their responsibility for gathering the fruit ('pepa') from the ground. Conversely, men were primarily responsible for harvesting the large bunches of fruit from the palms, from which the 'pepas' fall. As geographer Diana Ojeda (2021: 92) explains:

"peperas are not contracted by palm owners, they are directly paid by the male workers (their partners, fathers or brothers) according to the weight of the fruit picked. Male workers get paid as well by weight. In our conversations, women usually complained about the job conditions: the unbearable heat, the risk of snake bites and the fact that a full workday leaves them no more than two dollars, when they do not do it as 'a favor' in support of their loved ones."

In a context of labour outsourcing and the deterioration of working conditions, experienced directly by men who were often previously directly employed by the plantation, women face even more precarious working conditions. These women receive little to no payment, subject to arbitrary decisions by men relatives. Meanwhile, although companies did not compensate women for their work, they benefited from this labour, as the fruit collected from the ground contributes to the companies' oil extraction process. *Peperas'* work enables companies to optimise their production by utilising even the small fruit on the ground, often overlooked in plantations, without providing compensation for that labour. Consequently, women's work in this context effectively subsidises plantations (Ojeda 2021). At the same time, as Ojeda and Berman (2020: 1594) highlight in a separate study, the unpaid labour women perform to subsidise the plantation can also introduce care into it, challenging its "corrosive incompatibility with life." As mentioned earlier, in Montes de María women often undertake long journeys to provide water for plantation workers, due to its absence within the plantation. Thus, women's unpaid labour can simultaneously sustain palm oil production while contesting its extractive logic.

4.3 Expanding contract farming

In the early 2000s, palm oil companies underwent a significant shift towards increased contract farming, resulting in profound implications for the gendered distribution of labour and the subsequent benefits for companies from this realignment. Following a substantial decline in union strength, driven by direct anti-union violence and labour flexibilisation in preceding decades, palm oil companies encountered reduced resistance from unions towards outsourcing production through contract farming. Consequently, companies have intensified the disintegration of the palm oil extraction process, increasingly incorporating small-scale producers as suppliers and transferring associated risks and costs onto them. This shift moves from a model of vertical integration, where a single firm controls multiple stages of production and processing, to various forms of value chain disintegration, in which different segments of the production process are outsourced to separate independent producers. (Serrano 2024). By 2018, 4,200 of the 6,000 palm oil growers were external contractors supplying palm fruit to large-scale palm oil producing companies (Fedepalma n.d.; Ministerio de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural 2018). This strategic outsourcing not only enabled the expansion of palm oil cultivation into conflict-ridden regions of Colombia but also allowed firms to evade responsibility for the safety of plantation labourers.

In Colombia, there has been a tight relationship between oil palm crops and paramilitary violence since the 1990s. Municipalities cultivating palm oil have experienced over double the displacement rates as compared to others (Rey 2013). This correlation is substantiated by research exposing the working mechanisms behind this connection. Oil palm crops have served as a means to transform landscapes, materialising paramilitary displacement and facilitating money laundering for these groups (Ballvé 2013; Grajales 2021; Ojeda 2016). Paramilitary violence and subsequent forced displacement, far from being ‘bad for business’, has facilitated international trade through enabling forced displacement and violence against groups antagonistic to palm oil corporations (Maher 2015). This violence has often been supported legally and economically by state institutions.

Firstly, in other regions, the military has collaborated with paramilitary forces in massacres and other forms of armed violence that resulted in forced displacement, which was followed by the establishment of oil

palm plantations. Secondly, this illegally obtained land has been laundered through state institutions and laws that have facilitated the process. Thirdly, such legal status allowed the owners of illegally obtained lands to apply for subsidies contemplated in the national development plan and to apply for foreign aid (Ballvé 2013; Grajales 2011). In conclusion, the state and the paramilitaries have been key actors in the expansion of palm oil crops in Colombia.

Even in the case of several small-scale palm oil projects, paramilitaries played a pivotal role. Elvira, a small-scale oil palm grower in the northeastern region of Magdalena Medio, Colombia, explains that guerrilla groups present in the area in late 1990s and early 2000s opposed farmers in the region who were planting oil palm. Then, in the early 2000s, “the paramilitaries arrived. When that was happening, since the moment that palm projects became a possibility, the paramilitaries arrived, and that’s how the palm could happen, because the paramilitaries arrived.” (Interview, October 2019, San Vicente). The introduction of palm crops in Elvira’s region followed a shift in the dominant armed actor from guerilla to paramilitary groups. This transition heightened risks for local inhabitants. Crucially, it was during this period – when palm cultivation became viable – that palm businesses restructured their operations, adopting contract farming. This arrangement externalised the security risks associated with workers’ labour.

This presence of paramilitary groups led to a gendered division of labour. The burden on women in oil palm fruit supplier farms, particularly in terms of providing sustenance for their families – an essential role traditionally assigned to women – intensified significantly. Women found themselves negotiating constantly with paramilitary groups to safeguard a portion of their crops and animals for their family’s subsistence. Elvira (Interview, June 2019, San Vicente de Chucuri) recalls a time when soldiers arrived to her farm:

“About 100 of those damn soldiers, mixed with paramilitary members, arrived to the farm. They told me to sell them a batch of chickens and I sold them four (...). Suddenly the turkeys came back and I did not see the grey turkey nor a big chicken they had asked me to sell and I had refused to because I wanted to get offspring from it. They were cooking that chicken in the other pot.”

When she confronted them, one of the soldiers told the other, “look, you have something to pay with – meaning that he could shoot at us with the rifle” (ibid.). This burden put a strain on her family responsibilities, as Elvira explains: “Any chickens I can sell are for buying panela [unrefined whole cane sugar] and salt, and the ones I don’t sell, I keep them to slaughter them myself and feed the kids. You gotta see that I have kids to feed.” (ibid.). Given that women have been historically constructed as primarily responsible for household reproduction and sustenance, crises that undermine the ability to sustain life place a disproportionate burden on them.

In this context, palm oil firms outsourced crops and, consequently, the responsibility for safety to small-scale farmers. A significant part of this burden fell disproportionately on women, who shouldered the responsibility of ensuring subsistence in the midst of an armed conflict, a task both arduous and dangerous. Crucially, this shifting of risk onto women was not just a consequence of palm oil expansion but a key factor in enabling it.

Paramilitary groups played a central role in this process, not only facilitating the spread of oil palm cultivation but also deepening a gendered division of labour that placed even greater burdens on women. As palm oil firms externalised production and security risks, women bore the consequences, navigating both economic precarity and direct threats from armed actors. Meanwhile, paramilitary-backed security further entrenched patriarchal structures, limiting women’s autonomy and possibilities of collective action. In restructuring palm oil production, contract farming also reinforced the marginalisation of women’s labour and political agency.

5. Unveiling labour fragmentation: Gendered dynamics in the restructuring of palm oil value chains

This analysis contributes to the literature on Global Value Chains (GVCs), labour control regimes, and social reproduction by revealing how labour fragmentation deepens gender inequalities and shapes value chain structures. It underscores the fact that firms appropriate social reproduction practices, which are socially constructed as being the responsibility of women, by weakening labour and further subordinating women. They achieve this by restructuring the industry through various forms of power.

In Colombia, palm oil companies have strategically reconfigured their value chain structures to extract value from social reproduction without compensating for this work. This transformation has far-reaching implications: it fragments labour along multiple axes of oppression, undermines collective action, and reduces the cost of palm oil for global markets.

Unpaid labour, particularly in the realm of care, plays a crucial role in linking local production to global trade (Mezzadri et al. 2022). Our research highlights a key mechanism through which this occurs: firms deliberately restructure value chains to appropriate value from social reproduction practices that are either not remunerated or poorly remunerated. In Colombia, palm oil companies have terminated cafeteria and plantation workers, while outsourcing key tasks to women, such as those of preparing food for plantation labourers or overseeing their safety. By relegating these reproductive activities to a form of unpaid labour, firms effectively increase the value they capture while externalising costs (Ojeda 2021). Though these changes may appear localised, their impact extends across the industry. Plantation companies' strategic externalisation of social reproduction not only facilitates agrarian extraction but also actively reshapes global trade dynamics.

This situation underscores the significant interplay between class and gender relations, shedding light on how the weakening of unions serves as a pivotal mechanism in exacerbating gender inequalities. In this case, class oppression in the form of anti-union violence was a condition of possibility for the exacerbation of gender oppression. As such, our research contributes to revealing how labour fragmentation stems from firms exploiting conjugated oppression, which involves assigning the most precarious and poorly compensated roles to those experiencing multiple, overlapping forms of oppression (Lerche/Shah 2018). A consistent theme across the three cases examined in this paper is that past instances of anti-union violence facilitated labour flexibilisation. This situation not only led to the outsourcing of plantation labour overall but also enabled firms to exploit unpaid reproductive work in the production of commodities. While the weakening of unions impacted both male and female workers, it disproportionately devalued women's labour. This finding adds to the literature that shows how firms exploit different inequalities to increase profits (Tsing 2009), by exposing how action in what is conceived as one field of inequality can impact another field and, in the process, create favourable conditions for firms' profitability.

Examining this process helps to illuminate the key factors that contribute to the challenge of collective action in the palm oil industry. While the expansion of the industry has led to a growing agricultural workforce interconnected through global value chains (Pye 2021), the transformations in the value chain structure of firms in Colombia over the past five decades have exploited combined oppression and divided workers along classifications of labour and gender. These changes have facilitated labour control regimes that fragment workers and hinder collective labour action.

The transformation of global value chain structures reveals the complex power dynamics shaping these networks and the multiple forms of power that influence GVC organisation. In the Colombian oil palm industry, firms have strategically exploited pre-existing gender inequalities – such as the disproportionate burden of social reproductive work placed on women and men’s control over women’s bodies – to assign different types of work across various locations, pay scales, and conditions, thereby fragmenting the workforce. This fragmentation enables firms to appropriate unpaid or undercompensated labor, particularly from women, while maintaining better-paid positions for men. As a result, a new industry structure emerges that facilitates the extraction of value from this labour.

Moreover, the deliberate disintegration of specific nodes within the palm oil value chain further enables this exploitation while preserving corporate control over profit-maximising activities. The role of the state, illegal actors, and firms in reshaping value chains is also crucial. Restructuring through illegal means often gains legitimacy by means of state policies (Grajales 2021; Maher 2015), with violence functioning not as a barrier to international trade but rather as a facilitator. In this context, we highlight how the state actively contributes to the deepening of the gendered division of labour through legal and economic policies.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper has examined how gender inequalities, labour fragmentation, and value chain restructuring shape the palm oil industry, revealing the mechanisms through which firms diminish collective labour action while maximising profits and minimising risks. The industry’s restructuring has deepened women’s economic dependence, rendered their contributions

invisible, and expanded their unpaid labour burdens, further restricting their capacity to organise. These transformations raise pressing questions, such as: What avenues for resistance and collective action remain possible under such conditions? How do workers, particularly women, contest their dispossession despite these constraints?

While large-scale organising is constrained by labour control regimes, resistance persists through everyday struggles over work and survival. Women in precarious positions assert autonomy and reclaim control over their labour and livelihoods in multiple ways. Former plantation employees have led protests against violence, while women family members of plantation workers engage in care activities that challenge plantation extraction. Elvira's defiance – resisting the complete loss of her chickens despite threats from armed actors – illustrates how the struggle for sustenance itself becomes a site of resistance. These acts of defiance reveal the tensions and points of contestation that continue to shape labour relations in the industry.

Examining these processes helps reveal the key factors that contribute to the challenge of collective action in the palm oil industry. While the expansion of the industry has led to a growing force of agricultural labour interconnected through global value chains, the restructuring of firms' value chains in Colombia has systematically exploited forms of combined oppression, dividing workers along lines of labour and gender. These transformations have facilitated labour control regimes that fragment workers and obstruct collective action.

Labor mobilisation, however, is not confined to formal work in plantations. The broader structures that divide and weaken workers also shape possibilities for organising, particularly as unpaid and informal labour – often carried out by women – remains largely invisible. Understanding how these dynamics operate across different sites of production and reproduction is crucial to identifying the conditions that enable collective action and shape global value chains, such as that of the palm oil industry.

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ABSTRACT Dieser Beitrag zeigt eine zentrale treibende Kraft in der Rekonfiguration von Globalen Wertketten auf: die vorsätzliche Aneignung der unbezahlten Arbeit von Frauen durch Unternehmen. Aufbauend auf zwölfmonatiger ethnografischer Forschung in verschiedenen Segmenten der kolumbianischen Palmöl-Wertkette zeichnen wir wichtige historische Veränderungen dieser Industrie nach. Unsere Forschungsergebnisse eröffnen eine kontextuali-

sierte und historisch nuancierte Perspektive auf die zentrale Rolle unbezahlter vergeschlechtlichter Arbeit bei der Gestaltung globaler Märkte. Wir identifizieren drei Formen der Transformation von Wertketten-Governance, die eng mit der Ausbeutung unbezahlter Arbeit von Frauen in der Palmölindustrie verknüpft sind: (1) den Abbau von betrieblichen Sorge- und Versorgungseinrichtungen, (2) Arbeitsausgliederungen, und (3) die Ausweitung vertraglicher Landwirtschaft. Diese Strategien zielen auf die Subventionierung der Palmölproduktion durch die Ausbeutung unbezahlter Arbeit von Frauen ab, während sie gleichzeitig die Fragmentierung von Arbeiter:innen vertiefen und Frauen vom kollektiven Handeln von Arbeiter:innen ausschließen. Infolgedessen übernehmen Frauen zusätzliche Aufgaben in der Haushaltsversorgung, während sie gleichzeitig entscheidende, jedoch nicht anerkannte Beiträge zur Aufrechterhaltung der Palmölproduktion leisten.

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