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Palawan and Sabah in the oil palm frontier: undocumented Filipino migrant workers and the social reproduction of labour

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the social reproduction of undocumented migrant workers within a stringent labour regime in an enclosed Malaysian oil palm plantation. It illustrates how capital and institutions tolerate irregular migration, creating an intergenerational labour stock that shapes economic and social dynamics. Exploitation commences with irregular migration, extending to toleration of household members for supplemental labour and gendered oppression in productive and reproductive activities. Female workers navigate productive space for social reproduction to sustain three generations of undocumented households. We argue that unpaid social reproduction is interlinked with the paid productive process for labour renewal, which sustains the capitalist system.

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Introduction

Migrant labour has traditionally been important to the growth of plantation industries in Southeast Asia. This is evident in the oil palm plantations in the peripheries of Sabah, Malaysia. The rapid expansion of oil palm plantations in Sabah has raised concerns about labour practices and their socio-political implications, presenting complex challenges for the state's labour market (Gurowitz 2000; Naidu and Moorthy 2021; Rudge 2022). Formal plantation workers in Malaysia are dominated by Indonesian migrants, most of whom are bound to two-year contracts with a single employer. Alongside them, large numbers of irregular migrant workers are present in Peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak, and Sabah (Kaur 2014). In Sabah, these irregular migrant workers primarily come from Indonesia and the Philippines, two of the three countries sharing borders with the state (Lindquist 2012; Pye et al. 2012; Montefrio, Ortiga, and Josol 2014; Cooke and Mulia 2015; Wahab and Dollah 2023)

Labour migration is often driven by the absence of economic prospects in the areas of origin, regardless of whether such migration is regular or irregular. Within the contemporary dynamics of capitalism, migration is frequently perceived as a livelihood strategy

influenced by uneven development, with financial remittances regarded as a crucial mechanism of social reproduction in migrant-sending countries (Delgado Wise and Veltmeyer 2016). However, this emphasis on remittance flows may obscure the direct interactions and dependencies between capitalism and migrants' social reproduction activities within sites of extraction. These dynamics are rooted in historical contexts, where extractive capitalist industries established in the colonial period, often reliant on foreign migrant labour, persist in influencing the contemporary labour and migration regimes of emerging economies (Ronconi 2015; Li 2017; Cousins et al. 2018). Contemporary migration regimes are frequently in place but unevenly enforced, as in the case of Malaysia (Gurowitz 2000; Kaur 2014) and in other developed and developing countries (Lucas 2005; Ronconi 2015). Our case illustrates how undocumented plantation workers, despite rigid labour migration policies, often find ways to circumvent these rules, sustain family ties, and protect both their labour value and personal security.

Social reproduction theory offers a useful lens for probing these dynamics. Debates in social reproduction theory highlight different perspectives: whether unpaid domestic labour underpins capitalist production, whether it structures and sustains social relations, or whether it enables forms of resistance and agency (Bhattacharya 2017; Cousins et al. 2018; Cammack 2020; Gahman 2020 Mezzadri et al. 2024). Other scholars emphasise the gendered division of labour and the exploitation of care work, while others criticise the oversimplification of the complexities of care as a form of social reproduction (Ye et al. 2016; Pattenden and Wastuti 2023; Shattuck et al. 2023).

Building on these strands, the primary objective of this paper is to explore how capitalism is interwoven with the social reproduction activities of undocumented migrant workers within a stringent labour regime and confined oil palm plantation space. We will illustrate how capital and institutions exploit the irregularity of Filipino labour migrants, while at the same time tolerating their presence to ensure a steady supply of labour power. Within the confined plantation space, everyday practices of consumption, care, ceremony, and security form the basis of maintaining and renewing labour across generations. We argue that unpaid social reproduction activities are inseparably linked to paid productive labour, such that the endurance of the capitalists rests not only on waged work but also on migrants' capacity to reproduce life under precarious conditions.

In the succeeding sections, we will provide a broader discussion on the intersectionality of labour migration regimes and their relationship with the capitalist system that shapes the social reproduction of irregular Filipino plantation workers. First, we will present the background of the study site and our research methodology. This will be followed by the introduction of the plantation's labour force and how it is gendered. We will then explore and examine how irregular migrants use the enclosed oil palm plantation as a space for their social reproduction, continuously generating labour power for the oil palm industry.

Labour regime, capitalist space, and social reproduction

Since the 1960s, Malaysia's oil palm industry has experienced significant growth and transformation. Its oil palm cultivation and international trade have increased dramatically and accounted for 34.3% of palm oil exports in 2021 (Pletcher 1991; Giacomini

2018; Naidu and Moorthy 2021). This growth trend resulted in employment opportunities in planting, harvesting, and other auxiliary services in the plantations (Kaur 2014; Naidu and Moorthy 2021). Plantations continuously face labour shortages (Pletcher 1991; Lee 2021), which were addressed by recruiting foreign workers, both regular and irregular (Gurowitz 2000; Kaur 2014).

Since the 1980s, the ongoing expansion of oil palm cultivation has necessitated new foreign labour recruitment and management regimes that pooled plantation workers from Southeast Asia and the rest of Asia through private agencies and contractors (Kaur 2006, 2014; Lindquist 2012; Cooke and Mulia 2015). After the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the Malaysian government established regular migration channels, but irregular migrants from Indonesia and the Philippines increased in East Malaysia (Lindquist 2012; Pye et al. 2012; Montefrio, Ortiga, and Josol 2014; Cooke and Mulia 2015; Wahab and Dollah 2023). During the 1966–1998 labour regime, Malaysia's migration policies forbade documented migrant plantation workers from bringing dependents (Kaur 2014; Li 2017). In the contemporary labour regime, permits for dependents are rarely granted (Puder 2019). Despite the migrant workers' contribution to productive activities, they are excluded from state welfare policies like healthcare (Razak and Nordin 2018) and education for their children (Lumayag 2016; Allerton 2020). These significant shifts in Malaysia's foreign labour policies pose a challenge and burden on migrant workers who are vital to the capitalist system.

The rapid expansion of oil palm cultivation in East Sabah has created a strong demand for migrant workers, highlighting the close connection between productive activities and social reproductive activities in this sector. While plantations offer housing compounds with basic amenities, such as electricity, communal water, basic shops, healthcare, and religious facilities, within their estate, these are tightly controlled and tied to productivity. Ethnographic research shows these enclosed compounds of isolated plantations provide security and comfort, with migrant households settling for the long term (Pye et al. 2012; Puder 2019). The long-term settlement in Sabah gave undocumented migrant workers a social network for care activities. For instance, deported migrant workers would leave their children with their trusted friends, one of the reasons for the circular migration pattern, in the hope of reconciling with their families in Sabah (Hassan, Omar, and Dollah 2010). Most undocumented migrants' children, whether brought in or born in the state, inherit the excluded status of their parents, making them 'invisible' (Allerton 2020).

Malaysia's labour migration regime makes it impossible for documented migrant workers to engage in social reproduction while doing productive work due to the high cost. Migrant workers prefer a situation where the state and capitalist system jointly assume social reproduction and they are granted freedom of movement (Li 2017). Vogel's social reproduction theory extends the class struggle in the productive sphere to what happens in the domestic sphere for the maintenance and replacement of the working class labour power (Vogel 2013; Bhattacharya 2021; Weiss 2021). Fine (2017) added that social reproduction includes how the state, civil society, and the household relate to economic production. Anderson (2006, 2013) argues that states regulate and fragment migrant family life, and markets are amoral, that they purchase not just the labour power but also the 'personhood' of the migrant. Agrarian scholars pointed out that social reproduction and production are in a complicated entanglement of the

household with the wider socioeconomic context (Borras et al. 2021; Mezzadri et al. 2024). Moreover, the exploitation of gendered and generational household labour, through women's triple burden, shapes the accumulation of capital (Kavak and Benlisoy 2025). Capitalism depends on social reproduction, yet systematically devalues it (Vogel 2013; Bhattacharya 2021).

This paper examines the intricate relationship of social reproduction within the capitalist system in a confined oil palm plantation in northern Sabah. To analyse our empirical material, we employ Vogel's (2013) three analytical concepts of labour power, the role of biological reproduction, and the determinant effect of wage labour on the reproduction of labour power as elucidated by Bhattacharya (2021). Labour power pertains to the indispensable commodity under capitalism that needs to be reproduced. Reproduction can occur through three main means: access to subsistence and other services like healthcare, education, and public transportation; generational replacement through childbirth; and maintenance of non-workers like children, the elderly, and people with disabilities (Bhattacharya 2021; Weiss 2021). The second concept concerns how biological capacity is organised socially, specifically, how capitalism is dependent on certain physiological processes that influence social reproduction and reinforce the male-dominated household under capitalism (Weiss 2021). Although Vogel emphasised that childbirth is the dominant form of social reproduction, other forms can take place under capitalism, such as immigration, slavery, and other forms of forced labour (Vogel 2013; Bhattacharya 2021; Weiss 2021). The last concept relates to the perception that domestic labour is value-producing and that women's oppression stems from their disproportionate share in domestic labour (Bhattacharya 2021). This perspective illuminates how unpaid domestic work is one of the things that drives down the cost of social reproduction, which in turn results in the devaluing of waged labour (Weiss 2021).

Research context

The ownership structure of oil palm plantations in Malaysia is diverse: private estates control 61.1%, government-owned estates control 5.5% of the planted area, while independent smallholders and organised smallholders own 16.7% and 16.6%, respectively (Rahman 2020). While plantations dominate the present landscape, the land also has a longer social history. Prior to oil palm plantation development, northern Sabah was home to Indigenous groups such as the Kadazan-Dusun, Rungus, Bajau, Suluk. These groups made a living by shifting cultivation, forest products, and maritime trade. The expansion of oil palm has displaced and transformed these local economies, although Indigenous groups and long-term settlers continue to live around plantation zones and some have become smallholder oil palm producers (Cooke 2012). Interactions between these communities and migrants from Indonesia and the Philippines have become part of the region's everyday social fabric. In 2015, documented migrant workers in Malaysia's oil palm sector were recorded at 352,330 (Ismail, Ahmad, and Sharudin 2015). Based on the ratio estimates of documented and undocumented migrant workers, the latter may be greater (Gurowitz 2000; Lee and Khor 2018). Wahab and Dollah (2023) estimated that around 60,000 Indonesian children live in Sabah oil palm plantations; however, there are no estimates for Filipino children.

The Filipino migrants we focus on are primarily from Southern Palawan, where significant social relations shape migration patterns. Indigenous Muslim groups such as the

Molbog are generally oriented toward fisheries and swidden agriculture (Eder 2010), and mostly retain land ownership in the area. In contrast, migrants from other islands in the Philippines purchased land from the Molbog and shifted agricultural practices from swidden to rice cultivation. This transformation placed Indigenous Palaw'an, forest dwellers who practice swidden agriculture and are historically the sources of agricultural labour, at the bottom of the local class hierarchy. Within these three ethnic groups, landless rural workers face limited livelihood alternatives (Dressler and Pulhin 2010; Montefrio and Dressler 2016). These dynamics help explain the uneven composition of Filipino plantation labour in northern Sabah, where ethnic and religious identities intersect with reproductive squeeze and labour market opportunities in the migrants' area of origin.

Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted on a northern Sabah plantation estate between April and June 2024. A scoping was done in December 2023 in the plantation estate, which we refer to in this article as N.W. Plantation. The first author was able to establish rapport and earn the trust of some of the plantation workers in the estate because of a recommendation from a return migrant who used to live in the same compound and that the author met during fieldwork in Palawan, Philippines. This allowed the first author to interview 35 Filipino irregular migrant workers, 12 of whom are females, from three compounds of the plantation estate. Eight of these 12 women are undocumented migrant workers' spouses. Five of them have children aged 4 months to 21 who were born in or brought into the plantation estate. The interviewed participants are mostly from Palawan ($n = 23$), and the rest are from Zamboanga ($n = 10$), Manila ($n = 1$), and Sulu ($n = 1$). Except for Manila, the migrant workers' areas of origin are among the poorest municipalities in the Philippines (Philippine Statistics Authority 2024). Even though N.W. Plantation is in one of Sabah's poorest districts (Jalilah, Hussin, and Idris 2023), it offers a livelihood for these migrant workers. Three *Mandors*, the workers' supervisors, the plantation manager, and an official from the Sabah Labour Department, Ministry of Human Resources (*Jabatan Tenaga Kerja Sabah – Kementerian Sumber Manusia*) in Kota Kinabalu, were interviewed as key informants. Several attempts to meet with Sabah's Immigration Department failed, constituting a limitation of this paper.

This ethnographic-oriented study collected data using unstructured and semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), process observation, and field notes as data collection techniques. Due to a water shortage, the host household suggested that the first author rent outside the plantation estate. The first author slept in the host family's house on days when data collection concluded late; workers in some compounds offered their rooms as well when interviews or FGDs finished late. The data collection prioritised one-on-one interviews to make participants comfortable with their responses, but FGDs were used in some cases due to the workers' schedules, particularly in one compound, where they must cook dinner, care for carabaos, go fishing, and sign for salary after plantation work hours. Interviews with female plantation workers were conducted individually.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, the authors were required to secure a research permit from both Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah State. Research permits from

Malaysia's Ministry of Economy and Sabah State's Immigration Department to process the Professional Visit Pass were approved in October 2023 and March 2024, respectively.¹ After interviewing the plantation manager, we received permission to undertake fieldwork and interview plantation workers. Verbal consent was secured from the participants prior to the interviews. To maintain ethical standards and protect participants' privacy, this article presents all data anonymously, including participants' information, the specific location, and the name of the plantation estate. Data collection was challenging due to workers' initial reluctance to be interviewed and the disruption of their routines. Upon encountering these issues, the first author explained the study's goals and intended use of the data and reassured them that their identifiers would not be published. As discussed, data collection was adjusted to accommodate workers' daily routines.

Labour force in the enclosed plantation estate

The N.W. Plantation estate is co-owned by a *Dato*² in northern Sabah. The Sabah Labour Department's state policy prescribes that migrant workers should only constitute 20% of the total workforce; however, exemptions are granted to certain critical sectors, including oil palm, oil and gas, and manufacturing, depending upon agreements among the immigration department, labour department, and plantation company. Despite the granted exemptions, it has been emphasised that local recruitment is necessary. The plantation estate under study employs approximately 500 workers, with a demographic composition that reflects the complex labour dynamics in the region. The workforce comprises predominantly undocumented Filipino migrants, accounting for 80% of the total. The remaining 20% consists of Indonesian workers, of whom approximately half lack formal documentation. Many local employees work at the oil palm plantation's management office; some are field supervisors, the *Tuans*, or *Mandors*, who live in the compounds among the workers. The plantation spans around 4,000 hectares and consists of 13 *bloks*, each measuring between 200 to 400 hectares.

Plantation management and public safety institutions have an informal mutual accord to permit the presence of migrant workers in public spaces. The plantation management stated that the local authorities are aware of the presence of undocumented migrant workers in the area and they would not take any measures against them as long as they do not cross the agreed boundary and cause any instability with peace and security. The plantation has an informal way of protecting its migrant workers, which includes the issuance of permits allowing them to be outside the plantation estate only to facilitate social reproductive activities, such as going to the mosque or hospital. However, undocumented migrants know that going beyond the agreed boundary between the plantation and local authorities might entail the risk of detention and deportation.

¹The first author conducted the fieldwork in Sabah. Research permits were obtained with the assistance of the second author, who also served as an institutional referee in accordance with national research regulations in Malaysia. The second author also provided contextual guidance as she has been involved in research on issues surrounding presence of irregular migrants in Sabah since 2000, and editorial feedback through the development of the paper.

²*Dato* is an honorary title given to a person who contributed significantly to the academe, business, or politics. This title is conferred by the King of Malaysia or the Sultan of the State.

Gendered division of labour

The gendered division of labour in the plantation is evident in both the productive and reproductive spaces of the estate. This division of labour is compensated differently, with maintenance workers, predominantly females, receiving lower wages compared to harvesters who receive more (see Table 1). The company's payroll has 500 workers on the plantation, with around 58% engaged in harvesting, 36% in maintenance tasks, and 6% in logistical tasks. Interviews with female workers not included in the company's payroll system reveal that their wages for maintenance tasks are allocated to their husbands' paychecks, which augments household income. This may indicate that more female migrants are on the plantation. Male migrant labour is needed for cutting grasslands, trimming oil palm leaves, and harvesting fresh fruit bunches (FFBs); female labour is necessary for spraying or circle weeding, fertilising oil palm trees, and gathering loose fruits. All work they require and desire to undertake will be documented for their *Mandor's* record-keeping. The *Mandors* might allocate tasks to their workers depending on the requirements of the *blok*.

Temporal rhythms of social reproduction in the enclosed plantation

Social reproduction within the plantation is not static but unfolds across multiple temporal layers that reflect the rhythms of work, care, and survival that are necessary for the reproduction of labour power and life-making. In this section, we will discuss first the *mandor's* dual role in sustaining and exploiting the labour force on the plantation. This will be followed by the temporal patterns of social reproduction of the workers.

Mandor's dual role: exploitative and supportive

We were given PHP 3000 that we can leave for our family once we agree to go to Sabah. We were told that we need to pay it back, and it will be deducted from our wages. Also, upon agreement, we were supposed to work in the plantation for one year, or else we would need to pay the transportation that they would shell out for us to go there. But, after gaining some friends there, we heard that we do not need to pay that money back to the company. Our recruiter and his brother, who became our *Mandor*, deceived us. They stole

Table 1. Wage system of oil palm activities in the N.W. plantation.

Oil palm activity	Area/output to be accomplished	Wage (MYR 1 = USD 0.21)
Harvesting	1 worker:15 hectares	MYR 42–45 per metric ton
Pruning		
Special Pruning (once a year)	per oil palm tree	MYR 1.20
Progressive Pruning (every 3 months)	per hectare	MYR 16.5
Fertilising	3 kg/oil palm tree	MYR 6 per fertiliser sack ⁹
Spraying/Circling	per hectare	MYR 18
Slashing	per hectare	MYR 40.14
Collection of Loose Fruits	per fertiliser sack ³	MYR 2.80

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

from us. That's the reason why I did not finish the agreement, because we are not being treated fairly by our Mandor.³

At the core of the plantation's labour system is the *mandor*, an intermediary figure between the management and workers. The *mandor* ensures the plantation's smooth operations and manages the welfare of its workers. They are responsible for recruiting labour, enforcing work quotas, recording daily productivity, and mediating conflicts between and among workers. *Mandors* are typically recruited from the migrant communities, giving them a simultaneous and ambiguous role of exploiters and protectors of migrant workers. The *mandor's* power is also derived from their ability to manipulate wages by enforcing deductions from the credit that the workers take from the *kedai* (mini store), and imposing informal debts that keep workers bound to the plantation.

The workers are highly dependent on their relationship with their *mandor*, particularly in ensuring the welfare of the migrant household. Social reproduction facilities on the plantation need the involvement of the *mandor*, such as the operation of the *kedai* in the three compounds, supervision of childcare facilities by the *mandor's* relatives, provision of transportation and translation assistance to the town hospital, and establishment of the informal rotating savings association. The *mandor* is not just central in ensuring the production activities on the plantation, but also crucial in maintaining the social reproduction of the labour power.

Day-to-day reproduction

The most immediate and routine layer of reproduction occurs in the daily balancing of paid labour and unpaid care work. There exists a significant wage disparity related to gender in the context of work and associated occupational hazards. The company indicated that working hours are from 7:00 AM to 4:00 PM, including a one-hour lunch break; however, male migrant workers typically complete their harvesting tasks from 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM, having fulfilled their daily harvest requirement of 1 metric ton⁴, equivalent to approximately 100 fresh fruit bunches (FFB).⁵ Some work until evening, contingent upon their financial situation. The female workers typically work from 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM, with some working until 4:00 PM, including a one-hour lunch break. The majority of female workers often adhere to the designated working hours, in contrast to male migrant workers, who can complete their tasks quickly. The duration of hours worked in the plantation and exposure to chemicals, from fertilisers and herbicides, increases the occupational hazards faced by female workers, notwithstanding their use of self-acquired protective equipment.

In addition to the plantation obligation, female workers are expected to maintain their households before and after their working hours. While some husbands assist in meal preparation, childcare after their harvesting shifts, and other physically demanding chores, such as carrying laundry, the wives are typically the ones who mainly manage and perform these domestic activities during non-working hours. Due to the drought,

³Fieldwork interview with a 41-year old male return migrant worker in Palawan, June 2023

⁴The fieldwork was conducted during a period of drought, when harvesters were expected to collect one metric ton per day per harvester.

⁵Average bunch weight weighs around 8kg to 10kg. The weight of FFBs depends on a lot of factors, such as the type of oil palm species, fertilizer inputs, and rainfall.

females wash the household's clothing at the communal water source typically every two to three days. They also must budget the household income and ensure it will last until the next paycheck. If they are not working, they typically engage in social activities with other female migrant workers. Some will utilise certain spaces inside certain compounds of the estate to cultivate crops, including papaya, banana, corn, and sweet potatoes, and raise poultry for personal consumption. The produce is communal, provided that permission is obtained from the cultivator. Uncompensated household maintenance, which is a social expectation for women, significantly supports the integrity of the plantation labour force.

Each of the compounds will have its *kedai*, often managed by certain *Mandors*, where individuals may purchase their daily necessities and over-the-counter medicines for headaches or flu. A credit system is established that will deduct the accrued expenses from their salary during payday. Occasionally, an outsider enters the estate to sell fish or meat products. A childcare facility for the workers' children while they work on the plantation is also available in every compound. The daycare will accommodate children from Monday to Saturday and is typically overseen by the *Mandor's* wife or another female designated by the plantation management.

Healthcare and education are mediated informally through networks. The plantation company said that there is a small clinic within the estate. However, workers reported that they have never visited a clinic during their stay in the plantation. Workers usually travel outside the estate during any medical emergency. Typically, they would require assistance from their designated *Mandors* or someone proficient in Bahasa Melayu and possessing a motorbike when travelling to the town hospital. The town hospital is located between 18 to 28 kilometres, depending on the location of the compound. This is equivalent to about 90 minutes by motorbike. In extreme circumstances, the company, upon the *Mandor's* request, will provide a company vehicle to transport the worker to the hospital, reducing the travel time to 40–45 minutes. In both cases, the *Mandor* or the workers must get a permit from the plantation office before departure. This permit will be presented to security personnel at the estate's entrance and to local police if requested while in town. This permit serves as a safeguard that legitimises their identity as workers on the plantation estate while being vulnerable and at risk in the town.

According to company representatives, the policy stipulates that all costs associated with workers' hospitalisation, including fees and medications, are to be covered by the company. However, this policy explicitly excludes coverage for workers' dependents. Based on interviews, most workers reveal they have never received any subsidies or financial assistance from the company, either for themselves or their dependents. Workers frequently resort to seeking assistance from male elders residing in various compounds, who possess expertise in traditional healing practices originating from their Filipino heritage. Female elders within the plantation community possess knowledge in traditional midwifery and maternal care practices. Because of this, they serve as the *de facto* primary healthcare providers within the estate.

Religious practices are also being conducted on the estate. During the holy month of Ramadan, Muslim workers face challenges in the workplace due to the combination of heat and dehydration while fasting from sunrise to dusk. The plantation manager stated that while they respect the workers' religious beliefs, it is imperative to continue

with the harvesting of FFBs and the maintenance of the oil palm trees since neglecting these tasks will adversely impact the estate's production output. There is a mosque constructed in one of the compounds for religious activities, while some of the workers go to the town's mosque, adjacent to the hospital. Consequently, the majority will stop working by 11:00 AM and pray at home, and will be unable to attend Friday prayers due to the associated risks of travelling to the town.

Season-to-season rhythms

Since we moved here to the N.W. plantation a few months ago, it has been a struggle to survive. Noryam's wage, my friend, is severely affected because she can only work as a maintenance worker, which is not enough for her. If we do have extra money, since my husband is working as a harvester and I work as a maintenance worker, we loan her money. For meals, we usually just share together, and she shares whatever she can. We came here together, so we should be helping each other.⁶

Over the year, seasonal cycles of the plantation shape labour demands and social life. Work routines create fluctuations in both men's and women's workloads. During the off-peak season, harvesters are burdened with low FFB productivity. These agricultural cycles affect income flow and household labour arrangements. The availability of maintenance jobs offsets the loss, as this is not affected by seasonal fluctuations. During off-peak season, male and female workers typically work until 4:00 PM to augment household income. As most harvesters would complete their work ahead of schedule during off-peak season, they are able to accept additional jobs from their *Mandor* or assist their spouses with maintenance work. For instance, Jeson occasionally inquired whether our field visit to other compounds might be scheduled in the afternoon, as he needed to assist Jenalyn with the fertiliser tasks.

Seasonal droughts intensify reproductive burdens, particularly on women. Access to water is a challenge due to the prolonged drought that the plantation has been experiencing. Consequently, they must do their laundry, bathe, and fetch water from a communal water source. Access to the communal water source differs by compound; some compounds have a nearby water source, while others require a journey of around 45 minutes. The workers, mostly males, are being ferried by a company-provided truck back and forth.

Communal ceremonies offer a temporary reprieve from the physically demanding workload on the plantation. During *Eid'l Fitr*, which marks the end of Ramadan, the workers are aware that the authorities are less visible and inactive during this period, so most of them will go to the town's mosque for prayer, gather, and celebrate either in the compound or in town. Relationships and families are being formed within the plantation estate. A religious ceremony is being arranged at the estate for people who are to be married, celebrated in the compound where the couple resides. Despite the financial constraints, the workers in the compound will contribute some amount or even goods to celebrate the wedding. One *Mandor* is raising chickens in anticipation of another wedding, noting that during the previous wedding in the compound, he gave one of his workers five chickens to serve for the ceremony. The couple's concerns about their

⁶Fieldwork interview with a 28-year old female migrant worker in Sabah, May 2024

financial situation are mitigated by the migrant community's pooling of ceremonial funds, which also marks the beginning of the formation of a new household. These ceremonies reinforce social solidarity within the compound.

Year-to-year transitions

The workers, along with their families when applicable, reside in the three compounds within the estate. These compounds serve as communal living spaces, organised to accommodate both individual workers and family units. Electricity is provided for free but only for specific hours, from 12:00 PM to 3:00 PM and 7:00 PM to 5:00 AM. The plantation company provides free housing accommodations to its workers. The quality and size of these accommodations are differentiated based on two primary factors: the worker's job performance and length of tenure. Notably, this housing allocation system primarily centres on adult male harvesters, reflecting potential gender disparities in employment roles and benefits within the plantation structure. Long-term resident-workers of the estate, combined with good performance and with families, would inhabit concrete housing equipped with proper ventilation and facilities, including a private kitchen and toilet. Workers without families would typically live in housing facilities made of wood, which are almost dilapidated. At the time of the data collection, the company was constructing metal housing, resembling a shipping container box, to transfer workers living in dilapidated houses.

When workers become ill or incapacitated due to an accident, their *Mandor* will inquire if they can still work, even for just maintenance tasks. Workers unable to contribute to labour productivity will be asked to leave the estate; however, this policy is not strictly enforced. For instance, Miguel, the head of a six-member household, has been in Sabah for over 16 years and has worked on the N.W. plantation for ten years; he got sick and was advised to cease working permanently. He was allowed to stay on because of the ongoing contributions of other members of his household to the plantation's operations, such as maintenance workers, driver, and childcare attendant.

Despite the loneliness they endeavour to overcome in Sabah, the undocumented migrants at the N.W. plantation have formed their families and social ties with their fellow workers on the estate. *Mandor* Jake, having been in Sabah for 12 years and employed on the N.W. plantation for three months, brought 20 workers together with their dependents to the plantation. They are struggling financially due to being allocated just half the area of one *blok*, necessitating that these 20 workers divide the production output of this land. Consequently, each worker could only cultivate six to seven hectares, impacting their income. The *Mandor* and his workers expressed remorse about their relation to the N.W. plantation. They have no alternative but to remain and anticipate that their group will manage a larger land area. Relocation is a final option because of the associated risks, and the decision of their *Mandor* holds greater significance for them because of their loyalty and respect for him.

I came here to the plantation when I was 18 years old. I was not going to school, and I did not have anything productive to do in Palawan. Besides, I miss my parents, that's why I decided to come. I have met Jeson here and we have been married for two years already. I was not able to work when I was pregnant with our second child. My husband worked harder in the plantation during those times in order to provide for our growing family ... Life here is

comfortable, our housing is decent, and we have free electricity, unlike in Palawan, where electricity is expensive and always a problem. But during the drought season, it's hard. We could not even use our washing machine now because there's no water from the tap. I need to go to the communal water source just to wash clothes and dishes.⁷

The families formed on the estate typically result in the birth of stateless children from undocumented migrants. Jenalyn went to the N.W. Plantation from Palawan to join her parents, who had been working there for several years. She decided to stop studying in the Philippines at the age of 18. She has been assisting her parents with plantation work by performing maintenance work, such as collecting loose fruits and applying fertilisers. She met Jeson, who has been in Sabah for seven years and in the N.W. Plantation for four years, in the same compound where her parents reside. They formed a relationship, married in 2022, and currently have two daughters. During Jenalyn's pregnancy, when she was unable to work, Jeson worked from morning until evening to increase their household income. This is but one vignette of the households formed on the estate. Almost every day, stateless children will occupy their time playing in the estate's recreational field, as their status precludes access to education. Basic literacy and numeracy are being taught after working hours by the parent, often the father, who attended school in the Philippines. The majority of these children speak Bahasa Melayu, whereas just a minority are proficient in the Filipino language. Children who grew up at the estate acquired literacy and spelling skills via social media engagement and messaging applications on their mobile devices.

Over time, families acquire household appliances, mobile phones, and motorbikes through a Pakistani merchant with a monthly payment scheme. Although a truck is available to ferry workers to their designated work area, male workers deem acquiring a motorbike vital, particularly for those who intend to partake in after-work engagements. Conversely, *Mandors* are expected to have motorbikes, as their mobility is essential for work, and they also function as the primary mode of transportation for health emergencies involving their workers. Some households own a brand-new refrigerator for storing purchased meats and a washing machine to help the female spouse with household maintenance. The acquisition of these goods marks their embeddedness within the estate despite their undocumented status.

Generation-to-generation reproduction

The N.W. plantation is significantly dependent on undocumented migrant workers. The plantation manager is aware of the border control situation and the prohibition of child labour in the country. The company is prepared to assist and finance the acquisition of necessary work permits for its workers; however, workers' lack Philippine passports and there is an absence of consular services in Sabah. Despite company policy prohibiting dependents on the plantation, their presence is an open secret, and the manager tacitly condones the situation. Furthermore, he stated that their presence on the plantation is advantageous as they may assist with all aspects of plantation operations, especially in maintenance tasks. He emphasised that while minors may assist their

⁷Fieldwork interview with a 23-year old female migrant worker in Sabah, May 2024

parents at their discretion, they are prohibited from employment and inclusion on the payroll until they reach the age of 18.

The presence of children in the plantation estate, combined with inaccessibility to education and exposure to their parents' precarious work, facilitates the intergenerational transmission of labour. As most minors aged 11–17 lack daily activities beyond recreational activities in the field, they will assist their parents with plantation work. Aida, a mother of two, shared that her oldest son began assisting her with maintenance tasks after noticing her exhaustion from transporting fertiliser bags and applying them to oil palm trees. The mother refrained from compelling her child to work, recognising the occupational hazards inherent in plantation labour and wishing to save her son from potential harm. Male and female children would assist their mothers with less physically demanding tasks, such as loose fruit collection, while other capable male minors would assist their fathers in harvesting FFBs or in slashing and clearing grasslands. This supports the findings of Wahab and Dollah (2023) that children of documented Indonesian migrant workers aged 12–17 are already engaged in oil palm activities. The unpaid support that children offer their parents serves as a training ground, a conduit of knowledge for the skills required in the labour demands of the oil palm plantation.

My four children are all grown up now, they are also working in the plantation, and that was the reason why my husband was not asked to leave, even if he became disabled. I am also working as a maintenance worker, and my youngest son and daughter help me; it's faster if it's the three of us. I already have a granddaughter from my second-born daughter. She's the joy of our family now. She's already three years old. But I wish that we could go back to the Philippines so she could go to school. We just need to save enough money so we can go back. We came here together as a family, and I hope we will leave this place as well as a family.⁸

Several migrant workers at the N.W. plantation came to Sabah accompanied by their spouses and children, attributable to the scarcity of opportunities in their areas of origin and the absence of relatives to care for their children. Miguel came to Sabah with his wife and four children at the invitation of his cousin, who worked at another plantation. In 2009, their children were aged five, four, three, and one year old. During the initial years, financial challenges arose since he was the sole breadwinner while his spouse attended to the children. He assumed an increased workload to support his family. Currently, their children can augment the household income, as three of them are already employed by the plantation company. Their son is now a driver of a truck that transports harvested fruit bunches to the weighing station. He acquired the skill to drive the truck throughout his adolescence from other auxiliary workers of the plantation. Their younger daughter is performing maintenance work alongside her mother, while the youngest son assists. The eldest daughter, who has a three-year-old daughter, was employed by the company to manage the compound's childcare facility. The two vignettes presented in this paper illustrate the mutual dependency of migrant workers, who require jobs for survival, and the oil palm company, which profits from the presence of the workers' dependents to sustain plantation operations. The plantation thus reproduces not only daily labour but the very workforce it requires across generations.

⁸Fieldwork interview with a 46-year old female migrant worker in Sabah, May 2024

Compounding this cycle are the stateless children on this estate. Lacking citizenship in either country, these children are raised entirely within the estate and often identify more with Sabah than with being Filipino. Their language is *Bahasa Melayu*; their community is the plantation; their prospects are circumscribed by the only space they have ever known. These children are seen as strangers in both countries, as a stateless child born from an undocumented migrant worker in Sabah and a child who may acquire citizenship in the Philippines, yet may face difficulties in society owing to their self-identity.

The migrant workers recognise their status as undocumented migrant workers in Sabah and are cognizant of the agreed boundaries they must not transgress. They adhere to the socio-cultural norms and refrain from actions that might jeopardise their safety by interfering with public security measures in Sabah. The majority acquired proficiency in *Bahasa Melayu* not alone for communication but also to assimilate with the locals. During discussions with local residents in town, mostly shopkeepers and transportation personnel, it was noted that the presence of Filipino workers in Sabah is essential due to their contributions to the oil palm industry, as well as the construction and service sectors. They are essential for stimulating the local economy, as they contribute to the profit of their businesses. Furthermore, one of them stated that Filipino migrant workers are in Sabah to earn a livelihood; like other individuals, they require income to sustain their families.

The undocumented migrant workers in the N.W. plantation still intend to return to the Philippines. The workers exhibit a clear awareness of the company's residence policy, which explicitly links housing rights to labour productivity within the oil palm plantation. This policy stipulates that individuals who cease to contribute to the plantation's productive output may be required to vacate their company-provided accommodation. Such a policy underscores the precarious nature of housing security for plantation workers, effectively tying their right to shelter directly to their capacity for labour. Parents with young children aspire to leave sooner to ensure their offspring receive an education and have a better future. However, when asked about their intended departure, none were able to provide a definitive timeframe. They seek to accumulate a sufficient amount of savings, although they lack clarity regarding the precise sum and the intended purpose of these savings. Having worked on the oil palm plantation for years, and in some cases for decades, they are deeply entrenched in the Sabahan soil.

Discussion

Many Filipino migrants who come to Sabah seeking work do so because of very poor conditions back home, where jobs are scarce and wages are low compared to those in Sabah. This highlights how agrarian change through agricultural squeeze drives cross-border migration. These processes are not unique in our case; they resonate with experiences across South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where similar patterns of migrant-dependent agrarian capitalism are emerging. Across the Global South, plantation economies have restructured themselves in response to global commodity demands, but often without creating secure, dignified employment for their migrant workers. Typically, as in our case, capital intensification requires cheap, flexible, and often irregular migrant labour, whose social reproduction is externalised onto families, communities, or informal arrangements.

The N.W. plantation functions as an enclosed yet informal site where undocumented migrant workers struggle within the capitalist system, with the policies enacted by state institutions and the company's management practices intersecting to facilitate the social reproduction of labour power, thereby sustaining the labour process, consistent with Vogel's (2013) argument. The plantation company provides the necessary means for the social reproduction of its labour power, but is limited to providing electricity, water, and housing. Furthermore, the feature of the N.W. plantation as an enclosed space offers a degree of protection for undocumented migrant workers against apprehension, detention, and deportation. However, it also constrains their freedom, not only in terms of mobility but also in their bargaining power regarding wages and external opportunities, as noted by Kaur (2014) and Li (2017). The issue extends beyond the confined space that marginalises individuals from the labour market and society; it also encompasses the stringent border regime of the state, to uphold political sovereignty and social stability (Kassim 1997), which obstructs the regular migration process for these individuals.

The organisation of migrant life within the plantation reflects the layered temporalities of social reproduction, daily tasks of care and maintenance, seasonal work cycles, long-term aspirations for the household, and intergenerational labour succession. Labour power requires social reproduction, necessitating the availability and accessibility of means of subsistence for its maintenance and renewal. In this process, women are mostly oppressed in various ways. Filipino undocumented migrant women are tasked with fulfilling the essential tasks for social reproduction. They engage in more productive activities that are being exploited by the capitalist system, where the compensation for their labour-intensive and hazardous tasks is undervalued. Nonetheless, childbearing diminishes their capacity to provide surplus labour, so relegating them to a subordinate class due to the biological and social roles imposed on women. Due to their devalued and underpaid labour, combined with their undocumented status, women are forced to work at a lethal pace to support household maintenance. These rhythms echo what Kavak and Benlisoy (2025) and Allerton (2020) have described in their studies of migrant households, where women in particular bear the burden of performing both paid labour and unpaid reproductive responsibilities, often under regimes of surveillance, exclusion, and statelessness. The estate, thus, becomes not only a site of production but also a confined and controlled space of reproduction, where children are socialised into plantation labour and families reproduce the workforce in conditions of deep legal and economic precarity. This intersection of care, migration, and exclusion challenges the binary of productive versus reproductive labour and reveals how capital selectively supports social reproduction only when it serves accumulation (Vogel 2013; Sharma 2020).

Furthermore, their engagement with fellow migrant workers in the N.W. plantation facilitated the formation of social relationships and ties. The tolerance of dependents inside the estate as a social arrangement exploits the relationships formed between women and men that may eventually reproduce labour power. Several undocumented migrant workers on the plantation established families in a state that chose not to recognise their presence. The marriage or union of Filipino undocumented migrant workers contributes to biological reproduction by having and rearing children, which is essential for the generational replacement of labour. These practices align with social reproduction theorists who argue that the capitalist system externalises the cost of labour renewal onto families (Vogel 2013; Bhattacharya 2021). While the formal economy often renders

reproductive labour invisible, feminist scholars argue that it is structurally indispensable and strategically devalued (Federici 2012; Bhattacharya 2017; Allerton 2020; Weiss 2021).

By situating the plantation as a reproductive frontier, this study contributes to broader critiques of how postcolonial states manage their borders, reproducing labour regimes that rely on migrants while denying them political and social recognition (Sharma 2020; Anderson 2013). Like Syrian farm workers in Türkiye (Kavak and Benlisoy 2025), Burmese sugarcane cutters in China (Borras et al. 2021), and Zimbabwean farm workers in South Africa (Jinnah 2017), the Filipino migrants in Sabah exist in a space of tolerated exploitation, where capital benefits but the state refuses to recognise their rights or humanity. These patterns reveal how social reproduction is politically dislocated. Migrant workers' strategies for sustaining households, through informal education, kinship support, and care networks, represent both adaptation and resilience to these regimes. The plantation's informal enclosure illustrates how migrant lives are shaped not only by work but by their continuous struggle to reproduce themselves within hostile institutional landscapes.

The majority of the migrant workers interviewed left the country irregularly because in regions like Palawan, access to birth registration and other identification documents, such as passports, is limited due to historical marginalisation, bureaucratic barriers, geographical isolation, and even lack of awareness (Hunter 2019; Petcharamesree 2023; Petrozziello 2024). Yet despite their undocumented conditions, these migrants still maintain familial ties with the area of origin, and have a desire to have their children born in Sabah to return to the Philippines, file for a late registration of identity, and receive education there. This suggests parents understand the importance of education for their children (Peddie 2021). But they do acknowledge that their children will not be able to access any kind of formal education in Sabah because of their undocumented status. Their conduct exemplifies a survival strategy that is influenced by exclusion rather than disregard for the law.

The children of undocumented workers face the peril of statelessness, as Kassim (1997) articulated, 'illegality breeds illegality,' an 'invisible' (Allerton 2020) labour power of the capitalist system. The stateless children of Filipino undocumented migrant workers, who lack access to education, are more susceptible to child labour since these are the sole activities available to them, corroborating the findings of Wahab and Dollah (2023). Kaur (2014) stated that plantations were confined spaces with restricted prospects for personal growth. While a large portion of stateless children in the plantation might end up being plantation workers, other migrant households exert all feasible efforts to escape an exclusionary system. Migrant workers are leveraging their sole capital, labour power, to save and aspire to invest in their children's education, as they perceive it as the sole means to disrupt the intergenerational continuum of labour as an oil palm worker.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the Sabah oil palm plantation operates not only as a site of reproduction but as a space of complex, informal, and gendered social reproduction. Filipino undocumented migrant workers are indispensable to the function of the plantation economy, yet they remain legally invisible and institutionally excluded. The existing

labour migration regime complicates the regular migration process for all stakeholders involved in the oil palm industry. Their daily survival, child-rearing, and community life are enabled not through state support but through informal agreements with employers, kin-based networks, and their own labour across generations. Filipino undocumented migrant workers are always vigilant due to their undocumented status. However, the extra layer of protection afforded by the company through informal arrangements with local institutions offers enhanced security for them and their dependents.

Migrant households carry the reproductive burden of sustaining the plantation's labour force. Women's dual roles in productive and reproductive work, and the involvement of stateless children in unpaid labour, all point to a regime that displaces the costs of social reproduction onto those who are most structurally marginalised. This study contributes to the wider discussion of the social reproduction of labour power under the capitalist system by emphasising the need to address the exploitation and intricate dynamics inherent within stringent labour migration regimes. This research highlighted the capitalists' exploitation of labour of care and renewal, and the intricate relationship of unpaid social reproduction activities with paid productive activities, illuminating the wider discussions on power dynamics and structures within social reproduction. Our case demonstrates that capital's support for social reproduction activities is aimed at serving its own interest.

The plantation regime in Sabah reproduces its workforce without state support, formal labour protections, or legal permanence. Yet within this regime, migrants foster a sense of solidarity and belonging that allows them to endure, and for some, these relationships may culminate in family formation. Nonetheless, undocumented status relegates them to the periphery of society, rendering them susceptible to exploitation. This exploitation is gendered due to the significant disparities in the division of labour and wages, both in the productive and reproductive spaces. Their presence and resilience point to the contradiction of a system that both exploits and excludes, that criminalises migrants while depending on their social and labour contributions. Labour migration, as an element of social reproduction, illustrates how workers and their families navigating irregular pathways are still constrained by prevailing social structures and institutions that make them susceptible to capitalist exploitation. This study challenges migration governance models that treat reproduction as external to labour and calls attention to the intergenerational, gendered, and spatial dynamics that underpin the survival of irregular migrant households in global commodity chains.

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