

5-21-2026

Gender, Customs, and Oil Palm: Reframing Iban Women's Roles in Sarawak's Changing Forest Landscape

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Recommended Citation

Sebli, L., Gembar, C., John, D., Jiton, C., & Dugun, D. (2026). Gender, Customs, and Oil Palm: Reframing Iban Women's Roles in Sarawak's Changing Forest Landscape. *Forest and Society*, 10(1), 232.

<https://doi.org/10.65844/2549-4333.1252>

Available at: <https://scholarhub.unhas.ac.id/fs/vol10/iss1/13>

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender, Customs, and Oil Palm: Reframing Iban Women’s Roles in Sarawak’s Changing Forest Landscape

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of the oil palm industry significantly shapes gender roles within Iban society, revealing a complex interplay between tradition and modernity. Contemporary research underscores the fundamentally egalitarian nature of Iban society, a crucial context for understanding evolving gender relations. While Iban women primarily manage domestic responsibilities, this occurs within a framework promoting equality, where all individuals are valued and afforded equal rights and opportunities. In subsistence farming, men often support heavier tasks, highlighting a collaborative approach to gender roles. However, the increasing complexity and stratification of the gendered division of labour, particularly exacerbated by oil palm cultivation, introduces new dynamics. These changes directly influence women’s roles in this evolving landscape. Despite existing literature on women’s contributions to traditional paddy cultivation and their involvement in oil palm work, the conversion of forest to agricultural land profoundly affects gender relations and labour divisions in Iban communities. This raises critical questions about women’s access to and control over land resources, their participation in economic decision-making, and their leadership roles. Furthermore, the intersection of indigenous customary practices with contemporary agricultural systems presents unique opportunities to explore women’s agency within capitalist agrarian transformation. Yet, this area remains largely under-examined. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the evolving gender roles, division of labour, and resilience of Iban women within the oil palm economy, challenging Western patriarchal-capitalist assumptions. The discussion is structured around three key phases: the subsistence, commercialization, and commoditization phases, using narratives from Iban women smallholders and leaders to illustrate these transitions.

Keywords: Iban women, Gender roles, Oil palm economy, Women’s agency, Resilience

Received 29 September 2025; accepted 2 February 2026.

Available online 21 May 2026

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<https://doi.org/10.24259/2549-4333.1252>

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