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Gender norms and gendered impacts of the smallholder oil palm ‘land rush’ in East Kalimantan, Indonesia: Challenging zero deforestation commitments

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The rapid development of zero deforestation commitments by private sector oil palm corporations is seen by many to be a promising approach to reducing and halting deforestation in Indonesia, in a context where state-led measures have apparently failed and where forest conversion is largely driven by the production of agricultural commodities. Although women in oil palm-dominated landscapes play a key role as oil palm producers and workers alongside their responsibility for household food security, critical questions about gender equality have thus far been absent from the zero deforestation policy agenda. The negative effects of corporate oil palm investments on women’s resource access and food security in Indonesia have been well-documented, but much less is known about similar gendered impacts in the smallholder sector. Smallholder investors’ incremental land acquisitions for oil palm may signal entrepreneurialism and rural dynamism, but they also bring complex patterns of agrarian differentiation and dispossession. This paper reports on findings from a study of gender dynamics in an oil palm frontier landscape in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, where rapid expansion of smallholder oil palm investment by returning cross-border migrants and other groups sits alongside an expanding corporate sector. Our study finds that gender norms play an important role in enabling particular kinds of oil palm investment on the one hand, and in shaping pathways to exclusion and dispossession on the other. Moreover, gender may only be understood in interplay with other social fields such as ethnicity or age. Amongst smallholders, we found a less emphatic masculinization of resource access and control, and some instances of women’s empowerment in an emerging smallholder oil palm market. We argue that in simplifying oil palm landscapes, zero deforestation pledges may inadvertently reinforce the kinds of gendered impacts seen in the corporate sector, with serious consequences for gender equality and women’s well being.