

Hidden hands: Women in Mining Community in West Sumatra, Indonesia*

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Introduction

‘We are all men, we are vulgar, and apt to lose our tempers quickly’ is the first expression that I heard from the miners when I was set foot in the Ombilin coalmines in April 1995. After visiting various mine locations, hearing miners’ terrifying stories of the injuries, accidents, and killings, I returned back to archival sources. I finally came to a conclusion that physical violence was generalized at every level; miners, managers and the state.¹ Can this symptom be said as one of the symbols of a world dominated by all men? Then what is the role of the women? Unfortunately, this question emerged after finishing writing my dissertation.

In focussing on the proletarianization process of male miners and their entry into the masculine world of the mining community, historians have tended to neglect women's role and the gendered nature of workers’ community.² Indeed, mining communities have often been portrayed as reflecting ideologies of masculinity at various levels, but in doing so, scholars have often understate the ways in which gender ideologies have structured the formation of mining working classes, transformed relations between men and women, and generated specific ideas about masculinity and femininity.

This article will look at the way men and women from the mining community in West Sumatra have been defined by management, and how they responded to workplace and national politics. The shifts in the miners' response from resistance to accommodation and to political protest and confrontation should be seen in conjunction with the social position of women as workers, 'entertainers', and wives. Changes in women's social position and role also inseparable from shifts in labor force recruitment policy by management and the development of national politics. The mining community in the Ombilin coal mines will be taken as a case study. This article will cover the period of the early establishment of the mining company until the end of Old Order regime (1892-1965).

2. The Ombilin Coal Mine and Categories of Labour Force

Located in Sawahlunto about 115 km from Padang, the capital city of West Sumatran Province, this mine was discovered in 1868, and was exploited in 1892 by colonial government.³ At present time, the Ombilin

*Paper presented at a workshop held by The Japan Association for Malaysian Studies, the Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, May 10, 2003. Japan.

¹ See Erwiza Erman, *Miners, Managers and the State: A Socio-political History of the Ombilin Coalmines, West Sumatra, 1892-1996*. PhD Dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 1999; I have presented issues on physical violence at different occasions. For this, see Erwiza Erman, ‘Politics of Resistance and Culture of Violence; The Ombilin Coal-miners, 1892-1925’. Paper presented at a workshop on *Changing Labour Relations in Asia*, held by International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, 19 March 1999; ‘Generalized Violence in the Ombilin Coal-mines, West Sumatra, 1892-1996’, in Freek Colombijn and Thomas Lindblad, *The roots of Violence in Indonesia: Past and Present*. Leiden: KITLV, 2002:105-132.

² M. Thomas Klubock, ‘Morality and Good Habits; The Construction of Gender and Class in the Chilean Copper Mines, 1904-1951’, in John D. French and Daniel James (ed.), *The gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers; From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997:232.

³ There was a long debate in the Dutch Parliament on whether it should be exploited by the state or by a private company. For more detailed information about the debates see, Freek Colombijn, ‘Uiteenlopende Spoorrails. De Verschillende Ideeën over Spoorwegaanleg en Ontginning van het Umbilin-kolenveld in

Coal Mine is called PT. Bukit Asam, Ombilin Unit Production or PTBA-UPO.⁴ In the early years of the exploitation from this mine met about 95% of the colonial state's demand for coal. Although this declined to 65% in the 1930s, its contribution remained a significant amount of the total coal production in the Netherlands East Indies. In the following years especially after Indonesian Independence, coal production from this mine was far more than other mines such as the Bukit Asam coalmines in South Sumatra. But nevertheless, its contribution remained significant, especially in meeting demand for coal needed by PT. Semen Padang, and various other power plants in the region.

Low population density and the availability of other economic opportunities have strengthened assumption a strong bargaining position of local people and the company. A cheap labour force could not be obtained by recruiting local people who mainly were Minangkabau and the inhabitants of Nias (called 'Melayus' in the Dutch sources). In spite of this, a contract working system was not familiar pattern, and the status of a miner was low. Miners were regarded as less than human even up to present. Local people sought work sporadically, when their rice harvest failed or when they needed cash to hold traditional ceremonies or to overcome other economic difficulties. They were casual workers, working especially in certain places such as in transportation of coal, and in workshop that had not relation with digging coal at all. Recruitment of casual workers was unsatisfactory because the supply was irregular and uncertain. As a result of this, the management was continually complaining about the shortage of labour.⁵ This was not a new phenomenon. The estate plantations in West Sumatra had experienced the same problem previously and had to import contract labourers from Java.⁶

To ensure a permanent, regular labour force, the colonial government recruited convicts and then contract labourers from Java especially. The convict labourers were political prisoners and criminals recruited from the prisons in Cipinang, Glodok in Batavia and in Surabaya. Contract labourers were recruited later on, when convict labourers from Sawahlunto were brought to transport goods in the war against Aceh, Jambi, and other regions. Contract labourers were first from China and then from Java. In 1895 there were 1,234 labourers, all of them convicts. Along with the increase in the number of mines, the total amount of the labour force also increased. In 1921 the number of labourers rose to 11,046, the majority of which were convict and contract labourers.⁷

Up to the third decade of the twentieth century there were few women in the mine area, whether they were wives accompanying their husbands or working as labourers in their own right. These women functioned as mine workers, wives, or 'entertainers'. The first category was female labourers recruited by the company from Java as contract or free labourers. Very few women or female prisoners were recruited as convict labourers for this mine. About the cost and procedure of recruitment was the same for both male and female labourers. What different is about recruiter for female labourers. My interviews with family members of the recruited women approved that most of the recruiters for women were also women or married partners.⁸ Jobs available to the women were transporting coal from open-pit mines to the area of collection, sorting coal in three sizes: large, middle, and small, or doing domestic jobs such as cleaning mine hospital, cooking foods in the barracks of male workers and in the big kitchen owned by company.

WestSumatra 1868-1891', in *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geshiedenis der Nederlanden* 107: 437-458.

⁴ Since the economic crises of 1997 and political transition from authoritarian to democratic regime, PTBA-UPO has been facing a lot of problems such as illegal mining exploitation, protests by local community about land compensation for their communal lands, and privatization of the company itself. See Erwiza Erman, *Illegal Mining in West Sumatra: Access, Actors and Agency in Post Suharto-era*. Discussion paper, GSID-Nagoya University, 2003 (forthcoming).

⁵ See Th.F.A. Delprat's complain in 1898 in Mining Archives (Bandung), *Dwngarbeiders te Ombilin Steenkolenmijnen*, VI-A/85. Letter by Delprat, 11/2/1899 no. 127 to the Governor-General.

⁶ S. Stibbe., 'Wervolk ter Westkust van Sumatra', in *Indische Gids* 6 (II) 1884: 698-700.

⁷ Erwiza Erman, *Miners...* 1999: 41.

⁸ This is summed up from my interviews with some daughters of former female workers in Sawahlunto, April 1995.

Table 1 shows the percentage of female to male contract and free labourers from 1910 to 1930. The highest percentage of female labourers was 4.2% in 1911. This may have come about because in 1910 the Labour Inspectors suggested the mining company to recruit more women from Java. Although, the percentage varied in the subsequent years, it remained under 4%. Unfortunately, no information is available about why the recruitment of female labourers varied. This may have come about because in 1910 the Labour Inspectors suggested that more women be recruited from Java. Nevertheless, as a whole, there was little increase in the number of women recruited from Java whether they were labourers, wives or entertainers. Only in 1929 and 1930, did the percentage of female labourers increased, compared to 1926 and 1927 (table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of female to total male contract labourers (Contract and free Labourers), 1910-1930

Year	%	Year	%
1910	...	1921	1.5
1911	4.2	1922	0.4
1912	2.7	1923	0.5
1913	2.1	1924	1.0
1914	3.2	1925	...
1915	2.8	1926	...
1916	1.3	1927	1.4
1917	0.9	1928	1.9
1918	1.0	1929	3.4
1919	2.7	1930	3.1

Source: *Verslagen van den Sumatra-Staatsspoorwegen en de Ombilinmijnen 1910-1916* (Batavia 1911-1917). *Verslagen van de Ombilinmijnen 1917-1923/24* (Batavia/Weltevreden 1918-1925). *Jaarverlagen van 's lands kolenmijnen 1925-1930* (Weltevreden 1926-1931).

The number of female contract labourers increased 6% from 1926 to 1927. In 1926 female contract labourers were only 17.1% of the male contract labourers. Many contract labourers were dismissed because of their involvement in a series of strikes in 1925, 1926, and the communist uprising in 1926/1927. As is shown in table 2, the total number of male contract labourers was reduced dramatically from 4,170 in 1925 to 2,783 in 1927.

Table 2: Comparison between Female and Male Contract Labourers, 1923-1928

Year	Male contract labourers	Female contract labourers (%)
1923	4.196	17.7%
1924	4.801	16%
1925	4.170	21.3%
1926	3.839	17.1%
1927	2.783	23.1%
1928	2.839	22.4%

Source: KITLV, Korn Collection OR 435. No.368, 'Het Ombilin Steenkolen Bedrijf door een Bestuur ambtenaar bezien', 1931: 97-98.

The second category consisted of women who functioned as wives or 'partner' for the male labourers. They went to Sawahlunto with their husbands who worked as contract or free labourers there. Some were also former female contract or free labourers who did not return to Java but got married in Sawahlunto. The yearly company reports do not provide any information about the total amount of female labourers repatriated to Java. This means that the former female labourers remained stayed in Sawahlunto and had become wives or partners for male labourers or housekeepers or 'bed-servants' of the European staff as

found in East Sumatran plantations. Apart from Javanese or Sundanese women, the local women whether they are from surrounding areas of Sawahlunto or from the island of Nias were recruited to work as housekeepers or 'bed-servants' of the European staffs.⁹ Unfortunately I have a lack of information to explain about the married labourers and those who stayed with their families in the town. Only very few male contract labourers married local women because they were regarded as having low status by the local people, even up to the end of 1980s. Only the Javanese foremen who had high status and much money could marry local women.¹⁰

The third category consisted of women who acted as entertainers, either as traditional *ronggeng*, *tandak*¹¹ dancers or prostitutes. *Ronggeng*, *tandak* dancers entertained the miners and were contracted to stay a longer period with the company. They were recruited for four or six months at a time. The dancers were beautiful young women. Two or three times a year (or following completion of the work contract) the company recruited new, more beautiful and young dancers. It is rather difficult to differentiate women into a fixed category. Generally speaking, traditional dancers were also prostitutes. Some former dancers did not return home, but remained in Sawahlunto or were married with contract or free labourers. Others who remained reverted to prostitution. It therefore would be misleading to categorize these three different types of women as one.

The *Ronggeng*, *tandak* dancers had to come to the attention of Dutch officials and Labour Inspectors. There were contradicting comments among Dutch officials on the role of traditional dancers. Van Kol, for example, who visited Sawahlunto at the beginning of the twentieth century, reported that many traditional dancers were recruited along with 439 contract labourers in 1901.¹² He was concerned about the emergence of 'bad elements' because the *ronggeng* dancers's relationship with the male labourers was very vague. Therefore, he warned the Dutch officials that dangerous elements might emerge if women were sold to convict labourers. This is due to the fact that at the same time, convict labourers, all men, tended to become homosexuality. In the following years the role of *ronggengs* seemed more important, because it was discussed by Dutch officials. A Labour Inspector, D.B.W. van Ardenne, who was investigating labour conditions in the coal mines in 1921, reported that there was not enough entertainment for the miners. He said that they were only five groups of *ronggeng* dancers, and he believed that 15 groups were needed to entertain the 1,500 Sundanese labourers.¹³ This did not even include the other kinds of entertainment such as *gamelan* (a Javanese musical group), gambling, and opium. In the following years the recruitment of *ronggeng* dancers continued apace. By 1928, B.H.F. van Heuven, the Assistant-Resident of Solok seized in Sawahlunto, reported that there were 50 groups of *ronggeng* dancers to entertain labourers.¹⁴ Heuven pointed out that this number was far more proportional to the male labourers, noting that it would have a calming effect on the labourers because *ronggeng* dancers could also acted as their 'partner'.

3. Government Responses to Women and Gender Differentiation

This section will try to answer two questions: how did Dutch officials respond to the lack of women, and what was the policy of mining company on gender differentiation? A local Dutch official, H.G. Heyting who functioned as Assistant Resident of Tanah Datar in 1903, was aware that the lack of women was a problem for male labourers. He, therefore, suggested two things. The first suggestion was to recruit 25 unmarried Javanese women from the southern part of Kedu. They were expected to marry male contract labourers and provide an incentive for recruiting other married male contract labourers. Engineer-director A.H. van Lessen agreed to this and tried to convince his superior, W. de Jongh, the Chief of the Sumatran

⁹ This is based on my interviews with sons of Indo-European families in the Netherlands.

¹⁰ Interviews with a former contract labourer, Pak Warso and his son Pak Suwardi Kisut, 22/8/1995. See also M. Joustra, *Minangkabau: Overzicht van Land, Geshiedenis en Volk*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1923:27. Joustra reported that the Javanese men who married local women tended to change their occupation from miner to peasant.

¹¹ *Ronggeng* and *tandak* are traditional dance performances. For a story on *ronggeng* dancer's life, see Ahmad Tohari, *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*; Catatan buat Emak, Jakarta: PT Gramedia, 1982.

¹² Van Kol, *Uit onze kolonien. Uitvoerig reisverhaal*. Leiden: A.W. Stijhoff, 1903:37.

¹³ ARA, MvK, MR 1924/2608.

¹⁴ KITLV, Korn Collection OR 435. No. 368 (1931: 98).

Railways and exploitation of the Ombilin coalmines. His superior said that there was no need to be concerned about the suggestion, because it would in turn increase the cost of production. Economic perspective seemed became more important of the W. de Jongh's policy than social consideration. He said that the company had no problem with labour recruitment, and about 80% of the married male labourers would return to their homeland after finishing their contract.¹⁵ There is no data on whether the 25 women from Kedu actually married male labourers, as neither local Dutch officials nor labour inspectors wrote any reports on this subject in the following years. The mining company staff did not also report on this matter. The second suggestion from Heyting was to build a coolie village for 200 contract labourers in Sawahlunto. This was intended to create a social environment for the labourers, provide them with the opportunity and incentive to form a family and produce a future generation of labourers. In the long run, the company would reduce the difficulty of recruiting labour from outside. Again, the Engineer-director did not agree with these suggestions. He argued that the construction of the coolie village would need a great deal of capital.

This phenomenon is actually not only true for the Ombilin coalmines, but also for other mines located mainly in the Outer Islands. To take one example, in 1864 the Billiton tin mining company tried to recruit 137 Javanese women from Batavia and Semarang, hoping they could become wives of the Chinese male labourers. This was intended to encourage permanent settlements among the Chinese male contract labourers on that island. Attempts to provide the basis of a settled population had almost no effect. This could be proven five years after the project. More than 100 women had given birth to only 26 children. It is not known what eventually happened to the women. Only a few of them returned to Java. This means most of Javanese women remained in that Island. In yearly reports of the mining company is known that religion was a barrier to set up a family. On the one side, this argument is also true, but on the other side, the recruited women might have had illicit relations with the Chinese male labourers who were financially more profitable and more freely. At certain times especially when the Chinese miners were receiving wages, they immediately spent their money to various kinds of entertainment such as gambling, opium, and prostitutes. It might be true the recruited Javanese women had fallen into illicit relations as found as well among the Javanese women in East Sumatran plantations.¹⁶

Although bargaining negotiations between Dutch officials and mining company to build a coolie village were unsuccessful, the issue remained vocal in the following years. This is due to the fact that there was a set of problem in recruiting labourers whether from China or from Java. The abuse of power by the recruiter's agents, competition among them to get more people in villages in Java, all this led to difficulties to the mining company itself. As similar suggestion to years before, in 1910 and 1917 labour inspectors did again the same thing, giving consideration to company to build a coolie village. Although the actors of the company were different, they had still a similar decision as the years before. Engineer-director Van der Kloes said that the state had forced the company to create a Javanese colony as a reserve labor force in Sawahlunto. In order to this, in 1918 the company sent an administrator A. Stark at the suggestion of the central government. He was sent to East Sumatra to do a comparative study. In his report, Stark had written a long report about labour conditions and had suggested similar thing, building a coolie village in Sawahlunto. Again, a final decision would be lie on the company. After studying the report and seeing the relationship between working in the mine and in the plantation, the company decided not to do this, because land in Sawahlunto was too scarce and it was afraid that the Javanese labourers would stop functioning as miners and become peasants.

Although local Dutch officials commented on the absence of female labourers and family members (wife and children), the company remained convinced that bringing women would be unprofitable and too expensive. Female labourers were only permitted to engage in a few specific occupations. More than solely economic motives were behind this labour policy, and the abnormal life of the labourers was maintained up to the second decade of the twentieth century. It is not surprising that only a few female labourers were ever recruited to work, and then only at very limited jobs.

¹⁵ ARA, MvK, Mr 1904/1151. Letter of A.H. van Lessen, 3/6/1904 to W. de Jongh.

¹⁶ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power; Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002: 22-40.

Although in limited jobs, the company did not differentiate in the way male and female contract and free labourers were paid. In 1911 female contract labourers, like their male colleagues, received 20 cents a day for the first contract year as well three meals a day. In 1921 female labourers were paid 30 cents a day (5 cents lower than their male colleagues). The company's annual reports for subsequent years reveal no differentiation in pay between male and female labourers. Differences in pay were based only on the place of work: underground miners were paid more than those who worked on the surface.

The company's discriminative policy with regard to female labourers was especially apparent in the system of promotion. Promotion of female contract labourers was very limited because they were only recruited as partner for male colleagues after completion of their contract. If the female contract labourers had already completed her contract, she could, as hoped by the company, become the wife of a contract or free male labourer. Or a male labourer could pay a ransom of 80 guilders for a female labourer (in 1911) still on contract with the company. A labour inspector admitted that this price was too high, so not many male labourers were interested in ransoming a female contract labourer. Later the ransom was reduced to 50 guilders to provide an incentive for marriages to increase. This is way in which the company thought about how male labourers remain longer at the mines. But the management policy was unsuccessful, not only because the recruited women were too few in number, but also because they themselves preferred to remain single.¹⁷ Maintaining single status provided women with many opportunities to engage in financially profitable illicit relations with male labourers. This is indifferent to what happened in East Sumatran plantations as studied by Ann Laura Stoler.

4. Hidden Hands under the Miners' Politics of Resistance and Accommodation

The pattern of miners' politics until the end of colonial regime can be divided into two periods of time. The first pattern was signed by the politics of resistance from 1892 until 1925/1927. The second pattern from 1928 to 1942 was marked by the politics of accommodation, or collaboration. This section will try to look at the hidden role of women under changing pattern of the miners' politics. The hidden role of women has let us to think about the importance of a nuanced understanding of the miners' politics.

The institutionalized system of controlling the miners by beating them with canes was unsuccessful because it did not result in the disciplined labour force as the Dutch officials hoped for. Proof of its ineffectiveness was the high rate of desertions and work avoidance from 1892 to 1925.¹⁸ In 1922 the average convict labourer had deserted more than once, and by 1924, this had increased to three times a year.¹⁹ The workers' show of resistance by running away and avoiding work was also true for contract workers: for example, between 1907 and 1909, contract labourers tried to escape from the mines an average

¹⁷ My interviews with Pak Warso (93 years old), 4 May 1995; Pak Rusman, 5 May 1995 (85 years old). Both of them were former Javanese contract labourers. Pak Warso had unhappy impression about the Javanese women during the second and third decade of the twentieth century. He described on how clever the Javanese women were especially in their efforts to attract male labourers spending their money to illicit relations. He said: "I heated it very much". Therefore, Pak Warso did not want to marry a Javanese woman in Sawahlunto. After completing his first work contract, he went to his village in central Java, got married a woman there, and went back together with his wife to Sawahlunto. Different from Pak Warso, Pak Rusman who has been living together with his seventh wife in a village in Sawahlunto, expressed his wondering past experiences with *ronggeng* and *tandak* dancers and other Javanese women.

¹⁸ Erwiza Erman, *Miners...* 1999:45; See also Caren van Empel, 'Dark mines: Labour Conditions of Coolies in the State Coalmines of West Sumatra', in Vincent J.H. Houben, J. Thomas Lindblad and others, *Coolie Labour in Colonial Indonesia: A Study of Labour Relations in the Outer Islands*, c. 1900-1940. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999: 158-179.

¹⁹ *Verslag over de Hervormingen van het Gevangeniswezen over 1921 t/m 1925*. Batavia: G. Koll and Co, 1926: 6; C.A.M. Bruinink-Darlang, *Het Penitentiariair Stelsel in Nederlands-Indie van 1905 tot 1940*. PhD. Thesis, Utrecht: Rijksuniversiteit, 1986:143.

of 2 to 2.5 times a year.²⁰ This meant that a contract labourer received punishment by caning about 2 to 2.5 times a year.

No female labourers attempted to escape or avoid work, nor were any involved in the series of strikes and protests in 1925, 1926 and 1927. Although this could suggest that women were more politically passive, that is not necessarily true because it fails to take into consideration the underlying factors of the miners' resistance. The miners' political resistance was not only directed at the misuse of power by state agents, but also at insecure and vulnerable position of the miners themselves. The insecurity and vulnerability of the coolies' barrack and the mines resulted in ethnic conflicts, an embedded culture of violence among convict labourers, and conflict and competition within and between various categories of labourers in their efforts to gain scarce resources such as food, money and women. Thus, the Ombilin case suggests the importance of a nuanced understanding of the miners' resistance as well as the hidden role of women.

Two interesting points should be noted here. First, the limited number of women in the mines caused conflict in the social relations among male labourers because they competed to gain access to women. Second, women found their own ways to respond to the labour policy imposed by the company or the state. As explained above, female contract labourers preferred to remain unmarried rather than be ransomed by male labourers, even though the company had reduced the ransom from 80 to 50 guilders in 1911. The company's annual reports show that no female contract labourers returned home after finishing their working contracts. There was also no indication that women who finished their contract wanted to marry. Figures for married male labourers up to the third decade of the twentieth century remain very low, and even in 1924 only 600 children were born to the miners' families in Sawahlunto.²¹ What we see here is that the women had a strong bargaining position in the world dominated by men.

After 1925/1926 the politics of resistance changed from individual, unorganized resistance to collective, organized protests. Labourers were able to express their demands through a series of trade union strikes in 1925 and 1926. Their struggle culminated in the communist uprising of 1926/1927. The changes were linked to formation of a miners' trade union, the *Persatuan Kaum Buruh Tambang* (PKBT) in 1925 affiliated to the Indonesian Communist Party. The leaders of the PKI were successful in uniting the differing interests of the indigenous people inside and outside the mines by spreading the ideology of class struggle and struggle for independence to those groups. In short, the presence of the PKI and its trade union in the mines had bridged ethnic differences, especially among labourers.

Although no specific information is available about the gender and background of the strikers, we should not assume that women were completely passive in this context. My interviews with the former miners' wives reinforced the argument that women had played important role behind the scenes in the political activities. Many women from the coolies' barracks prepared meals for strikers. Another indication is that the important role of house servants in European families. The house servants had given detailed information of the house conditions and daily activities of the owners to the followers of the communist uprising. Unfortunately, their European masters previously knew their activities. Many European families regarded them as dangerous and then dismissed house servants before the uprising broke out. What we see here again is that in a small community, family, hidden women's hands had become a social force in the mining society.

The second pattern of the miners' politics shifted from resistance to accommodation (1928-1942). This politics of accommodation took the form of increased rates of work attendance. There is no strong evidence that the accommodation politics were simply a result of the political pressure exerted by the state, especially after the communist uprising. The conciliatory attitude was not only associated with the absence

²⁰ ARA, Mvk, Mr 1911 no.218. Report of Labour Inspector, Stibbe, 12/11/1910.

²¹ Mining Archives, *Arbeid aangelegenheden Mijnbedrijven* VI-A/5. Report of Labour Inspector Deibert, 3 July 1924.

of strong leaders in radical political parties, as shown by Ingleson in the case of Java,²² but was also linked to the effects of the economic depression and the changing face of the mining society.

Since the leaders of the political parties involved in the communist uprising had been imprisoned or executed, labour movement momentum in West Sumatra and Java declined. This was followed by repressive state actions that made it impossible for Indonesian people, including miners to protest openly in their struggle for justice. At the same time, the Depression had forced management to restrict mine production and reduce the labour force both at middle and lower level. These factors suggest that the politics of accommodation was a rational decision by the miners, taken after considering the pros and cons of the situation, and loss and benefit for their own family.

Before seeing the role of women in the miners' politics of accommodation, we need to appreciate the growing presence of women and married miners in the context of changing management policy. The changing management policy to recruit more women and free male labourers with their family cannot be separated from international pressures and internal attacks in the Netherlands Indies itself. International Labor Organization had warned the Dutch colonial government to abolish slavery in countries that still used penal sanctions for convict and contract labourers in production. If not, various export commodities produced by convict and contract labourers in their colony would be suffered in international market.²³ In addition to international pressures, internal attacks from politicians in the *Volksraad* and journalists in mass media had changed state and management policy in recruiting labor force. The open discussions coincided with the liberal rule of Governor General Fox in the Netherlands Indies. In the discussion, attacks were directed at companies that ignored the social welfare of the miners. Reports by labour inspectors about miners' complaints that they missed their family, that they had no moral support for work, that there was a great deal of homosexuality and conflicts over women, all this strengthened the argument for a change in labour recruitment policy.

Changes in labour recruitment policy can be seen as follows. By 1934 management no longer recruited contract labourers under penal sanctions. Contract labourers were replaced by free labourers. In 1937 convict labourers were no longer supplied to Ombilin. For mining company itself, changes from convict, contract labourers to free labourers were caused by the difficulty of recruiting labourers. Convict labourers were difficult to come by, because most of prisons in the Netherlands Indies had used convicts for productive jobs in terms of coping with the Depression. Another point is that working contract and convict labourers with penal sanctions had led to significant economic losses to the company itself. The high rate desertions and work avoidance were regarded as the miners' protests towards the abuse of power of the company's agents by beating them with canes. Faced with the dilemmas the process of abolishment of slavery in the Ombilin coal mines had run faster than that in East Sumatra or in other places in the Outer Islands. Management policy to avoid the building of mining community in previous years was replaced by its strong support to establish a community. It was expected that establishing a mining community would bring favourably affect reproduction of future generations of labourers. This is old song with a new policy. After long negotiating process between actors from different state agencies and after receiving international pressures, a human new policy would be implemented.

New labour recruitment policy had a positive impact on labour composition. This can be seen in the following figures. The percentage of female contract labourers rose from 17.7% to 22.4% in 1928 (Table 2). The female contract labourers were worked at certain places in the mines, but also and more importantly as house keepers for the increasing number of European and Indo-European families. Therefore, the unequal ratio between males and females reduced. From December 1929 to March 1930 9.9% of the total labour force was married, and 30.7% was female. The positive impact can be also seen from the status of

²² John Ingleson, 'Worker Consciousness and Labour Unions in Colonial Java', *Pacific Affairs* 54 (3), 1981a: 485-502; Idem, *In Search of Justice; Workers and Unions in Colonial Java, 1908-1926*. Asian Studies Association of Australia, Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986.

²³ For a discussion on international pressure for the abolition of convict and contract labourers in Indonesia, see Peter Keppy, 'Labour Relations in the Late-colonial Indonesian; The Case of the Manufacturing Labour Regulation of 1941', in *Masyarakat Indonesia*, 14 (1), 1998:2050.

labourers. The average number of married male labourers rose from 40.7% in 1931 to 56.44% in 1933, and reached 62% in 1934.²⁴

The increase in female labourers and wives was intended to serve the needs of the male labourers and to keep them from political activity. This policy was successful, attested to by the large presence of labourers. The rate of attendance for labourers rose between 1929 and 1934. The lowest attendance was in 1929, especially for contract labourers who had signed their contract under the penal sanction (67%). Compare this with the rate of attendance of convict, free, and casual labourers, which was above 88% in the same year.²⁵

It is the traditional male attitude of the company that restricted the role of women to serving men. One indication of this is the fact that after finishing their contract female labourers were expected to remain in the town, marry male labourers and become mothers for their children. The company also established a family allowance that became a crucial stimulus for men and women to marry. The family allowance was a bonus paid to married miners with children. In addition, the company also distributed staples in an amount defined by the company. These included rice, oil, and salted fish, which were distributed to each member of a miner's family, and were intended to reinforce a husband women's dependence on their husband's wage from the very creation of the mining community.

The company's predominantly male attitude was also evidenced in the case of entertainment. Various kinds of entertainment such as gambling, *ronggeng* or *tandak*, football clubs, etc. were more directed at entertaining men than other family members. The company tended to subordinate the position of women and the family to the men. Not only did these entertainments leave the male labourer in debt, but by spending the money on the various kinds of entertainment, men could not give all their wages to their wives. Bu Ruiyah (76 years old in 1995) described how her father and first husband went gambling straight after work. She said the habit was common in Sawahlunto. 'Every Saturday and Sunday, or after receiving their salary, my father or my husband went directly to the gambling rooms or watching *ronggeng*'.²⁶

The family's dependence on a miner's wages encouraged the male labourers to work without protest, even though it was a time of state pressure (after 1927) and poor economic conditions (the Depression affected everyone since 1929). My interviews with former male labourers suggest that they did not protest because they were afraid of being dismissed. It was also difficult for men to look for additional income outside the mine, because the company had closed opportunities for working extra jobs not related to the mine. The presence of family encouraged the collaborative politics by the male labourers. Furthermore, establishment of the mining community can be seen as an early attempt at the formation of a mining culture. The adaptation process to the world of the mines started earlier among the children of the miners. It should not be surprising that many people in the mining community viewed working in the mines as a status symbol. My interviews with some families of former miners are the basis for this argument. Many former miners hoped that their sons not daughters could replace their father's jobs as the miners. This is due to the fact that going into or working underground mine was regarded as expression of the characters of masculinity.

What were the survival politics women engaged in under the layers of repression by state, management and their husbands? Women or wives took initiatives, setting up various kind of associations such as '*arisan sekampung*', '*arisan sebarak*', '*arisan teman sekapal*'. All associations functioned created a strong solidarity among members and were useful in coping crisis in household. Through these associations they could mutually help each other, even up to present. Other initiatives are making and selling traditional food, either at the barracks or in the Sawahlunto market. They also collected firewood in the forest, planted vegetables or worked as house servant for Europeans.²⁷ Bu Semi (92 years old in 2000) described her role

²⁴ Mining Archives, *Jaarverslag van de Ombilin Mijnen 1934*, no. 2502.

²⁵ Mining Archives, *Arbeidersvoorziening van de Mijnbedrijven II*, no. IV. Secret letter of Engineer Director V.H. Ploem, 10/8/1929 no.14 to the Head of State Mining Companies.

²⁶ Interview with Bu Ruiyah, Sawahlunto, 22/5/1995.

²⁷ Interview with Bu Ruiyah, 22/5/1995; Mrs Ketty Urban, 13/12/1994.

in the household economy.^{27a} Bu Semi's experience provides an interesting example. She came to Sawahlunto with her husband and daughter in 1926 and described her experiences as follows.

“ I told my husband that he did not need to go on strike, because I was afraid that he would be punished by having his salary withheld. You know many people were dismissed and repatriated to Java, because they went on strike several times. His salary was 30 cents per day at that time. That was not enough. When my daughter was six or seven years old, I thought that I could leave her to look for additional income. In Java I was also familiar with selling various kinds of food at my mothers' food stall. In Sawahlunto I started to buy *krupuk singkong* (cassava chips) made by the miners' wives in the barracks. My daughter helped me to collect *krupuk* from other women, and I took them to Padang. I cooperated with five women. I stayed there for a few days and then would return to Sawahlunto, bringing back other basic necessities to be sold on credit to people in the barracks (Sawahlunto, 20 October 2000).

There are two important points we might underline from Bu Semi's story. Women were not only important in helping to alleviate the economic difficulties and the layers of above pressures, but also in defining the form of their husband's political participation.

5. Turbulent Periods (1942-1949)

The Japanese occupation and the Indonesian Revolution were turbulent periods for Indonesian society. In the Ombilin coal mines, the society endured ongoing destruction of the mines by the Dutch (before the Japanese occupation) and by the Indonesian populace (before the Dutch returned to Sawahlunto in 1948). Oil and coal were two mining commodities regarded by the Japanese as especially important, and were subsequently exploited by the Japanese military as well as by a semi-official government company, the Hokkaido and Steamship Co., Ltd.²⁸

There were some changes in the management system during this period. The lack of skilled labour caused the Japanese to promote many Indonesians to higher positions than they had enjoyed before. Those advanced were mostly Minangkabaus who held important positions the company following Indonesian Independence. Other changes can be seen from the status of labourers and the position of the mining community. Free and contract labourers were indeed disappeared, but then they were back to convict labourers, or *romusha*, employed not just in the mines but also for the projects vital to Japanese war needs. The labourers could no longer watch the *ronggeng* or *tandak* dancers, because the Japanese manager or even Indonesian managers after Independence did not provide these diversions. Although the labourers were under the iron discipline of the Japanese company, they were no longer confined in the cage of production. They could have social contacts with local people. Social contacts with local people had let beneficial to the labourers and their family members, especially with regard to the use of local economic and social resources in difficult times.

Politics of labourers under turbulent periods can be divided into two forms: politics of resistance and politics of accommodation. Whether the labourers tended to resist or accommodate would be depended on their background and motives. Unmarried labourers followed the politics of resistance. It was easier for those who had no family to stop working or run away from the mine, and to earn a living in other places within or outside West Sumatra. Those who were married could not afford to stop working. They were forced to produce as much coal as possible for the war effort. They were also forced to survive in the mine under harsh working and living conditions, and even without getting a salary. Under harsh working and living conditions, we see again the role of family members in overcoming economic difficulties and managing their households. Women had invented their own ways in order to cope with economic difficulties. What Pak Suwardi Kisut, the son of a Javanese contract labourer told what his mother did for their meals.

^{27a} I have explained this issue in more detail in my article, see Erwiza Erman, 'Women in Crises in Mining Community in West Sumatra', paper presented at workshop 'Women in Crises, Past and Present', organized by WIVS, Leiden 9-12 December 2000, published in *Awareness* (journal of the Association of Women for Action and Research, Singapore), July 2001. Vol.8.

²⁸ Erwiza Erman, 'Dutch and Japanese Policies in the Mining Sector', paper presented at a workshop on *the Japanese Heritage*, organized by NIOD, Amsterdam, November 1994.

At Tangsi Baru I saw that nobody was wearing proper clothes. They wore cloth made from jute. People died every day, not because of illness, but from lack of food. They lost all their teeth. I was lucky, because my mother was inventive. My father got cassava from the mine. My mother cut them, and soaked them. Afterwards, they were hung up to dry, soaked again. Only then were they cooked, mixed with bananas, and rice. That food is filling (Interview with Pak Suwardi Kisut, 22-8-1995).

In the following years or the years after Indonesian Independence, the labourers were also divided in two: remained working in the mine or following the guerilla groups fighting in the jungles. Those who stayed in the town and of course under the worsening working and living conditions continued the same survival strategy they had pursued in the previous years. To overcome economic difficulties, labourers and their family members had used not only local sources but also cooperate with local people. During this time many Javanese women had worked at rice fields at surrounding areas of the mine.

6. Political Protest and the Unity of Interest (1950-1965)

The economic recovery following the Indonesian Revolution was very slow and uneven. Apart from the lack of capital and strong dependence on foreign source of finance, the state faced separatist movements such as Darul Islam in West Java and in Aceh, and then the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (PRRI) rebellion in central Sumatra. These separatist movements totally absorbed the government's attention.

The Indonesian coalmines also experienced indifferent fate. Much of the machinery had become old and was breaking down. In addition, the state-owned railway companies that had been the greatest coal consumers faced rising debts. Moreover, the state was unable to repair or modernize the mines, and coal began to compete with oil as the main source of fuel. All this led to a collapse in coal production. The company suffered continual losses, especially in 1951 and the following years, and in 1958 the PRRI local rebellion caused further difficulties. The company became an arena for various political groups and military factions of both supporters and opponents of the PRRI and the central government.

In relation to plans for renewal in 1954, and again in 1964, the company had recruited more people to work in the mine. Table 3 below shows the development of labour force, including all levels as well as labourers. In 1950, there were only 1,526. By 1953 this number increased to 2,214 as new labourers were recruited together with their families from Java. After 1953, the number decreased to 1,371, because many labourers were dismissed by the managers as punishment for their involvement in the strike. Between 1955 and 1958 the total number of labourers remained fairly constant. But in the years 1958 and 1959 the total number of labourers dropped each, because many of them, especially the non-Javanese, left the mine and joined the PRRI, reflecting a regional protest to central government. The labour force again increased from 1,946 in 1960 to 3,082 in 1965. This increase was caused by the recruitment of new labourers from Jakarta and other cities in central Java. For example, on 8 March 1963, 200 unemployed people from Jakarta were hired for the Ombilin coalmines. A second and third groups followed their countrymen. In all, there were 319 people. They were *preman* or unemployed people, and a group of 'volunteers' (*sukarelawan*) from the Indonesian army, recruited to fight for the liberation of West Irian. Some of them had been sent to Kendari (Southeast Sulawesi) and Irian, while others had remained in Jakarta, where they waited for an indefinite period of time. Both *preman* and the volunteers were young men and unmarried. There were women, but as in previous years, they were very few, and worked only in the sorting of coal, and low administrative matters in the office. The increase of labour force did bring any result in coal production. Coal produced by the company was unable to regain the production figures of the pre-Independence years.

Table 3. Development of Labour Force, 1950-1965

Year	Total number in labour force	Year	Total number in labour force
1950	1,526	1958	2,199
1951	1,565	1959	2,088
1952	2,001	1960	1,946
1953	2,214	1961	2,025

1954	1,371	1962	2,083
1955	2,064	1963	2,269
1956	2,026	1964	2,472
1957	2,199	1965	3,082

Source: PTBA-UPO Collection, *The yearly report of the PTBA Ombilin 1995*.

Although the Indonesian coalmines were experiencing difficulties, the state was relaxing its controls on political parties and trade unions. This was especially felt by the contract labourers who stayed in the barracks. Political leaders also went into the mines, appealing the collective consciousness of the mining community and encouraging them to be more daring. Under such conditions the boundary between the world of politics and the world of work, between political control and labour control became blurred and in some cases the two overlapped.²⁹ In these circumstances the mining community that was very closed before 1942, became involved in formal politics and many informal associations.

Table 4 this below shows development of political parties in the town and in the mining company before 1960 and afterwards. Until 1960 the Masyumi and the PSI were strong parties, but afterwards both were completely eclipsed, disgraced by their involvement in the PRRI rebellion. A new balance of political power emerged that was born of fusion of three ideological streams: Nationalist, Islamic, and Communist, or called Nasakom. Subsequently these streams were represented by the Indonesian Nationalist Party, or PNI, the Nahhatul Ulama or NU for religious traditionalists, and the PKI.³⁰ Before 1960 the PSI and the Masyumi vied for power with the PKI, but after 1960 its main competition was the Functional Group (later called *Golongan Karya*, or Golkar).

Table 4. **Political Parties and Trade Unions at the Ombilin coalmines, 1950-1965**

Year	Political Parties	Trade Unions
1945-1959	- Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI) -Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) -Masyumi	-Indonesian Miners' Trade Union/All Indonesian Congress of Workers (SBTI/KBSI) -All-Indonesian Worker's Central Organization (SBTI/SOBSI) -Indonesian Islamic Trade Union (SBII)
1960-1965	-PKI -Indonesian National Party (PNI) -Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) -Functional Group	-SBTI/SOBSI -Marhaenist Workers' Union (KBM) -Indonesian Muslim Trade Union (Sarbumusi) -Coalmine <i>Karyawan</i> Union (PKBT-SOKSI)

Source: Erwiza Erman, *Miners...* 1999: 145, 187-188.

The labourers and their families were involved in formal political representation inside the company. In general, most labourers were members of the communist trade union. Its strength lay in their more modest

²⁹ Erwiza Erman, *Miners...* 1999:172.

³⁰ For a good introduction and review about Soekarno's ideas on this three streams, see Ruth Mc Vey, 'The Strategic of Triangle: Indonesia', *Survey* (1963) 54: 113-122; Ibid, *Nationalism, Islam and Marxism: The Management of Ideological Conflict in Indonesia; Introduction to Sukarno, nationalism, islam, marxims* (Modern Indonesian Project), Ithaca: Cornell University, 1970.

attitude adopted by its leaders and their willingness to give labour problems a central place, compared to other trade unions which were more elitist and more concentrated on religious issues like socialist and nationalist trade union and SBII and Sarbumusi trade unions. The communist trade union's concern can be seen in a set of demands to management especially for improvements in their basic needs. Outside the company the labourers and their families were involved in social and cultural organizations. Some of which were affiliated with the PKI such as *Pemuda Rakyat*, *Barisan Tani Indonesia* and *Gerakan Wanita Indonesia (Gerwani)*. Other associations such as musical, sports, and religious groups were also set up. *Ketoprak*, *Kuda Kepang*, *Arisan*, *Randai*, *Keroncong* to mention some of them were examples where the mining community created various forms of solidarity. These associations had become a locus of communication among the town people and also a place where political choices and actions were defined.

The involvement of mining community in formal and informal representation inside and outside the company had made the border of the world of work and the world of politics, between the world of political control and labour control very thin, blurred and sometimes the two overlapped.³¹ What more interestingly is the unity of interest of the labourers and their family members and dramatic changes in women's function and role. Like their husbands, the women or wives performed more than one task. They now had both domestic and public roles. They not only took care of their children, husbands, cooking, washing, and other domestic roles, but they, too sought additional income by preparing snacks, planting vegetables, and more strikingly, attending meetings, following various forms of courses, *arisan*, and even military training. They also helped collect contributions of rice and money from barracks residents for their husband's and their own organizations. The women activists such as Djalinus, Subranti, Martini, Satidjah and Gadis had mobilized women for various activities in Durian, Surian, and Sikalang villages such as *arisan*, mutual assistance in times of need (such as deaths, births, and marriages), anti-illiteracy courses, co-operative shops, sports, political courses and so on. After 1960, the women activists mobilized women for military training. For instance, about twice a week 20 to 30 women reported for military training, wearing long shirts and trousers and holding bamboo spears. They were especially eager in the villages of Durian and Sikalang, far from the control of management. The training was led by members of the *Pemuda Rakyat*, which planned that the women would be sent as female volunteers, helping the Indonesian military struggle for West Irian.

The unity of interest in the struggle for their rights was certainly not the intent of the company when it created a community of stable households. In contrast with the events of the Depression period, when state control was strong and the labourers, with the support of their families, were more accommodating. In the period of democracy state control and the Indonesian economy were both weak, the labourers with the economic and political support of their families became more militant. The democratic political climate allowed them to protest more openly, struggling to improve their future by means of labour strikes in 1953. Women had important role in the preparation for strikes. They had prepared food for strikers, and even had gone together with their husbands on the streets of the town, demanding the improvements in their basic needs in front of the member of National Parliament, Werdojo.³² What motivated the women in their activities can be seen from the following statement by a 'miner's wife:

I had to prepare and bring some snacks to the branch office of the SBTI-SOBSI in the village of Durian. I was ordered by my husband to do this. I did not mind because I felt it helped my husband in the struggle for our future. I had to help the organization because it had helped me so much, my husband, especially when our daughter passed away (Anonymous, 19 April 1995).

The women's support for their husbands' struggles through the trade union (SBTI-SOBSI) increased after 1960. Together with their husbands, they demanded improvements in working and living conditions from the mining company in general meetings held by the leaders of the communist trade union. Although there

³¹ See Erwiza Erman, *Miners*...1999:172-173.

³² Erwiza Erman, *Hidden Histories: Gender, Family and Community in the Ombilin Coalmines (1892-1965)*, CLARA Working Paper, no.13. Amsterdam: 2002:17.

were no strikes during the 1960s, the miners remained vocal in their demands, which were sometimes successful.

7. Some Preliminary Notes

This essay had described politics of the labourers and its relation to the role of the women in the mining community in the Ombilin coalmines, West Sumatra. During the period under study, politics of the labourers were fluctuated, shifting from resistance, protest, to accommodation and to political protest and confrontation. Changes in the politics of the labourers cannot be treated isolated from changing composition of the mining community, shifts in labour force recruitment policy by management and the state, and political developments at national level. There was the kind of ideology behind the changes in labour force recruitment policy that were imposed by the company. Changes in labour force recruitment policy from single males and limited female labourers to married labourers and to the establishment of stable families and communities cannot be separated from economic and political considerations of the state and the company.

Until the third decade of twentieth century, there were hidden hands of the women that defined the patterns of politics of the male labourers. The male labourers who tended to be resistance or collaboration cannot be separated from their social relationship and status with women as 'partners', entertainers, and wives. In relation to this, we see the importance of a nuanced understanding of the mining communities. After studying this case, the mining communities portrayed as reflecting ideologies of masculinity should be asked here. From Indonesian Independence to the end of Old Order regime, the women came to surface. Their role was no longer limited to domestic sphere but extended to public sphere. They were involved in formal and informal representations, attending various kinds of meeting, and participating together with their husbands within a set of demands for better life. Women did no longer take part behind the shadow of the men. During this time, when state control was weak and the role of society became stronger, we see the emergence of the unity of interest between men and women, husbands and wives. Unfortunately, this article is unable to see how the negotiating process of men and women, wives and husbands was carried out. (Maret, 2006)