

Repression by State and Indigenous People Fight: A Study at Bombana, Southeast Sulawesi and Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas, North Sumatera

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Abstract

Structural repression against Indigenous communities in Indonesia, particularly as part of marginalised communities, continues to intensify through various forms of violence by state actors, including criminalization, dispossessions of living spaces, restrictions on access to natural resources, and physical violence that disproportionately affects Indigenous women and their children. In this article, the authors analyse forms of state repression and Indigenous resistance practices in Bombana, Southeast Sulawesi, as well as Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas, North Sumatra. This article employs a qualitative approach using multi-sited ethnography through in-depth interviews, participant observation, ethnographic reflection, and document analysis. The analysis in this study draws on Johan Galtung's framework of structural violence, feminist political ecology of Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, Crenshaw's intersectionality, and Scott's concept of everyday resistance. The findings in this paper reveal that repression operates through direct violence, permeating everyday life in the form of trauma, surveillance, and uncertainties. In this context, the authors find that the Indigenous women experience multiple forms of repression while simultaneously playing crucial roles in sustaining their communities through collective solidarity, ecological knowledge, reproductive labour, and everyday resistance practices.

Keywords: Indigenous communities, Indigenous women, state repression, agrarian conflict, intersectionality, Feminist Political Ecology, multisite ethnography

Introduction

For Indigenous communities, the loss of land represents more than just an economic loss; it also involves the destruction of the fabric of their lives, including ancestral knowledge, social solidarity and the means to sustain daily life. In Indonesia, the expansion of capitalism and development continues to fuel agrarian conflicts, marginalising Indigenous communities through land grabbing, criminalisation and restrictions on access to natural resources (Persoon 1998; Ahmad 2019; Kadir 2019; Aditya & Al-Fatih 2023). All too often, state law is used to legitimise the seizure of customary land rather than protect these communities' rights (Mayastuti & Purwadi, 2025; Erwiningsih & Ali 2023).

The situation is further exacerbated by the state's failure to recognise Indigenous communities, despite Constitutional Court Ruling No. 35/PUU-X/2012 stating that customary forests are no longer state property (Pradhani 2018; Wiratraman 2025). In practice, however, the market-oriented development paradigm continues

to treat customary land as a source of exploitation for the benefit of extractive industries (Buana, 2020; Jalal & Lubis, 2025). Consequently, Indigenous communities in Bombana, Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas have a long history of losing their living spaces, ranging from land grabs and intimidation to the disruption of ecological relationships passed down through generations.

In this context, it is crucial to consider the experiences of Indigenous women from feminist and intersectional perspectives. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) has argued, indigenous women face multiple forms of oppression: as women; as members of Indigenous communities; and as a group whose livelihoods depend on customary lands. When men are criminalised or imprisoned, women are left to shoulder the burden of economic responsibilities and care work. They are also subjected to psychological pressure and threats to their safety. However, as discussed in 'Feminist Political Ecology' by Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter and Wangari (1996), Indigenous

women also play a vital role in safeguarding ecological knowledge, ensuring food security, and sustaining the survival of their communities. Consequently, land grabbing threatens their living space and seeks to undermine their vital role in sustaining life.

Nevertheless, Indigenous women are not passive victims. Drawing on the concept of 'Everyday Forms of Resistance', Scott (1989) shows that resistance can manifest in seemingly simple, everyday practices which are, in fact, full of political significance. Examples include replanting on damaged land, gathering emergency food from the forest, preserving traditional rituals, and maintaining community solidarity in the face of pressure and intimidation (Lubis & Sari 2024; Subono et al. 2025). From a feminist perspective, these actions demonstrate that resistance does not always involve large-scale confrontation; it can also manifest through efforts to nurture and preserve collective memory, as well as to maintain harmonious and sustainable relationships with nature.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, feminist approach using case studies. The selected research sites are Bombana in Southeast Sulawesi and Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas in North Sumatra. The aim is to compare the repression that occurred in Bombana between 1995 and 2002 with what is expected to happen in Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas over five years from 2021 to 2026. This comparison will enable us to examine broader patterns of state-perpetrated violence against Indigenous communities. Furthermore, the research explores the lived experiences, daily practices and forms of resistance of Indigenous communities within the context of distinct agrarian conflicts which nevertheless share similar patterns of repression.

This is because all three regions have experienced structural violence relating to access, administration, religion, land, education, health, and culture from

the state. These three regions were also accessible to us because they are supported by the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN). While this research does not position the research team as entirely neutral observers, it does recognise the interconnection between the production of knowledge and the struggle for Indigenous community rights. We also hope that this research will provide an up-to-date picture of the current situation in these three regions.

Unlike previous research, which has focused on the legal aspects of agrarian conflicts or the criminalisation of Indigenous communities, this paper focuses on the everyday experiences of Indigenous women. This allows us to understand how state repression operates as a system of direct, structural and cultural violence. The following questions will be addressed: (1) What is daily life like for Indigenous communities in Bombana, Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas amidst these threats? (2) What forms of layered repression are experienced by Indigenous communities, particularly women? (3) How do their everyday practices reflect a politics of resistance rooted in knowledge and collectivity? This research will address these issues.

The research was conducted over three days using a multi-site ethnographic design. Ethnographic principles were applied, including conducting in-depth interviews to collect primary data. Ethnographic reflection and observation were also employed to reinforce the findings (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006; Neuman 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson 2019). The researchers were divided into two teams of two: the first team investigated the experiences of the Hukaea-Laea Indigenous Community in Bombana, and the second team examined those of the Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas Lamtoras Indigenous Communities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with seven Hukaea-Laea community members and six Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas community members, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1.

The Indigenous Communities of Hukaea-Laea, Dolok Parmonangan and Lamtoras Sihaporas

Name	Occupation	Age	Community	Gender	Subject Category
Mansur Lababa	Indigenous Leader of Hukaea Laea	66	Hukaea Laea Indigenous Community	Male	Main Subject
Cici	Son of the Indigenous Leader of Hukaea Laea	35	Hukaea Laea Indigenous Community	Female	Main Subject
Juhania	Woman of Hukaea Laea	56	Hukaea Laea Indigenous Community	Female	Main Subject
Aswarman	Indigenous Community of Hukaea Laea	50	Hukaea Laea Indigenous Community	Male	Additional Subject
Anton Ferdinan	Indigenous Community of Hukaea Laea	50	Hukaea Laea Indigenous Community	Male	Additional Subject
Juminal Noviansyah	Young People of the Indigenous Community of Hukaea Laea	30	Hukaea Laea Indigenous Community	Male	Additional Subject
Heryan Powatu	Poleang Youth	35	Poleang Community	Male	Additional Subject
Sorbatua Siallagan	Indigenous Leader of Dolok Parmonangan	66	Dolok Parmonangan Indigenous Community	Male	Main Subject
Berliana Manik	Wife of the Indigenous Leader of Dolok Parmonangan	58	Dolok Parmonangan Indigenous Community	Female	Main Subject
Marta Manurung	Woman of Dolok Parmonangan	56	Dolok Parmonangan Indigenous Community	Female	Additional Subject
Mangitua Ambarita	Indigenous Leader of Lamtoras Sihaporas	69	Lamtoras Sihaporas	Male	Main Subject
Delima Sinaga	Woman of Lamtoras Sihaporas	61	Lamtoras Sihaporas	Female	Main Subject
Jojo Putri Ambarita	Woman of Lamtoras Sihaporas	-	Lamtoras Sihaporas	Female	Additional Subject

Following a review of the methodology, it was concluded that the study had several limitations. Firstly, the timeframe was too short to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lives of Indigenous communities. Secondly, the limited time spent with members of each community meant that a rapport characterised by closeness and mutual trust could not be established between the authors and the research subjects. Thirdly, as some participants were still experiencing psychological trauma, a support plan was required in case of relapse.

The study uses Johan Galtung's (1990) triangular framework of violence to analyse the repression of Indigenous communities as a multi-layered form of violence involving the actions of armed forces, the application of the law, development policies, and discourses that legitimise the seizure of their living spaces. The authors observe that the state acts not only through direct violence, such as intimidation and criminalisation, but also through structural violence, which restricts Indigenous Peoples' access to land, livelihoods and political rights in a systematic way. This

violence is then legitimised through cultural violence, whereby land dispossession is deemed acceptable on the grounds of development, investment, or conservation.

This research integrates the Feminist Political Ecology framework of Rocheleau, Slayter & Wangari (1996) and the theory of intersectionality of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Indigenous women. This perspective reveals that Indigenous women face interrelated vulnerabilities in their roles as women, as members of Indigenous communities, and as a group whose livelihoods depend on customary lands. Land grabs not only deprive them of economic resources, but also increase the burden of care work, exacerbate emotional vulnerability, and force women to sustain family life while community members are criminalised. However, women from Indigenous communities are not merely victims. They also act as custodians of ecological knowledge, managers of emergency food reserves, and promoters of community solidarity. In times of crisis, they support the continuity of life.

Furthermore, this study applies James C. Scott's (1989) concept of 'Everyday Forms of Resistance' to analyse the resistance practices that Indigenous communities engage in daily. In situations of open confrontation, which often carry significant risks, Indigenous women have developed quiet yet sustained forms of resistance. These include continuing to farm seized land, maintaining networks of solidarity, using local knowledge to survive, and bringing domestic activities into spaces of power to undermine the state's legitimacy. From a feminist perspective, these practices demonstrate that resistance does not necessarily take heroic and overt forms, but can also be manifested through efforts to care for others, sustain life, and maintain relationships with nature amidst constant pressure.

State Repression and the Destruction of Indigenous Peoples' Living Spaces

This research shows that the repression of Indigenous communities in Bombana, Dolok Parmonangan, and Sihaporas does not occur as a single event, but rather as an ecosystem of violence operating through physical, legal, administrative, ecological and psychosocial mechanisms at multiple levels. According to Galtung's

(1990) framework, this violence can be understood as an interdependent relationship between direct, structural, and cultural violence.

In Bombana, state repression was openly carried out through Operations Sapu Jagad I-IV between 1998 and 2002. The state apparatus burned homes, carried out forced evictions, criminalised residents, destroyed food sources, and used armed intimidation against the Hukaea-Laea Indigenous community. The arrests of Indigenous leaders such as Mansur Lababa and Aswarman demonstrate how the state used legal instruments and security forces to silence Indigenous resistance. This direct violence is evident in destructive physical acts: homes were set on fire, livestock were shot, and crops were destroyed. Residents were forced to leave their homes.

Such violence cannot be understood as merely the result of individual repressive acts by officials. Rather, this direct violence was made possible by the structural violence inherent in the state's conservation policies. Indigenous territories were designated as part of the TNRAW without the consent of the communities that had lived in the area for generations. This effectively transformed them into 'forest encroachers' on their own ancestral lands. In this context, state law does not protect the rights of Indigenous peoples; rather, it becomes an instrument for legally seizing their living spaces.

This incident was linked to the dispute with the TNRAW regarding ownership of their traditional lands. The community had originally settled in the area between 1920 and 1933 but were forced to leave in 1953 due to a conflict with the DI/TII. They were only able to return in 1996. Consequently, the Hukaea-Laea community was forced to flee the area. Consequently, the community became scattered across various areas. In 1980, Hukaea, along with other areas, was designated Taman Buru¹ (Sirait, Fay & Kusworo 2000), and officially became part of the TNRAW in 1990 through Decree No. 756/KPTSII/1990. The government claimed 105,194 hectares of land in that location. The process of acquiring land within the Moronene community's customary forest area was carried out without consulting the community (Sirait, Fay & Kusworo 2000). This marked the beginning of restrictions on the rights and access of the Indigenous Moronene people within their customary territory.

In response to these restrictions, the people of Hukaea did not remain passive. In 1987, Hasman Lababa (then known as Tobu Hukaea) wrote to the TNRAW management to protest Recommendation No. 522.52/1983 from the Governor of Southeast Sulawesi to the Minister of Forestry regarding the selection of the National Park site. The Moronene community in Hukaea Village felt that they had never been involved in the decision-making process regarding the use of their customary lands. Furthermore, the designation of the area as a national park made it difficult for them to farm and tend to the ancient graves of their ancestors.

Unfortunately, their complaints were ignored. Both the residents and the National Park authorities maintained their respective positions regarding the Hukaea Village area. The conflict escalated between 1995 and 1997. The authorities continually made physical and psychological threats against the residents who were still living in the Hukaea area. On 23 October 1998, joint forces comprising the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) and National Park officials launched Operation Sapu Jagad I². The Hukaea residents were labelled “forest encroachers”. The authorities confiscated the residents’ machetes, accused the community of breaking the law, and threatened to fine them IDR 200 million. According to the residents, ten individuals who objected to the authorities’ treatment were handcuffed and loaded onto a pick-up truck. Meanwhile, the Southeast Sulawesi Regional Government recorded that twenty-three residents were placed under house arrest, ten were detained at Tinanggea Police Station and eleven were held at Bau-Bau Prison³. The authorities did not stop there; they also burned down as many as 298 residents’ homes. In fact, the authorities used the residents’ kerosene to start the fires. The village was burned down again on 28 December 1997.

According to the archives of the Kendari Pos newspaper, Operation Sapu Jagad was carried out four times. During Operation Sapu Jagad II (23 October 1998), residents fled into the forest as security forces fired their weapons and shot at residents’ homes (Kendari Pos, 2 December 2000). A further 25 homes were demolished by cutting through the supporting posts during Operation Sapu Jagad III on 25 November 2000. Operation Sapu Jagad IV in 2002 was the last in the series. It was similar in nature to the previous operations.

“When it came to the chainsaw (*senso*), they would just go around cutting up our houses and damaging our fences. If they spotted our chickens, the authorities would shoot them. Then they would cut down all our crops (...) We already knew they were coming, so about two days before they were due to arrive, we built houses in the forest (to take refuge in - ed.). When I returned, I saw that only the roof remained” (Juhania, 2026, interview, 17 February).

According to Juhania’s account, attempts were made on several occasions to destroy the house. If a destabilised house did not collapse, its posts were tied together with ropes to bring it down. This destruction was highly systematic in its aim to instil fear in the residents.

A similar pattern was observed in Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas, albeit in a more covert form. While the repression in Bombana exhibited the militaristic character typical of the New Order, the repression in North Sumatra was carried out through administrative criminalisation, surveillance, restrictions on access to living spaces, and collaboration between security forces and corporate interests. Examples of this include blocking access to fields, contaminating water sources, destroying food crops, and using drones for surveillance, demonstrating that state violence has shifted from overt repression towards a more diffuse yet continuous form of control.

In Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas, armed officers entered community areas and forcibly arrested Sorbatua Siallagan. He was arrested while shopping for fertiliser, despite no arrest warrant being presented. He was dragged and pushed into a car without being given an explanation. He felt that the arrest was inhumane.

“(My wife – ed.) and I were on our way to buy fertiliser in Parapat (...) When we arrived, I carried the fertiliser to the pick-up truck, opened the door, and was about to go home. Suddenly, the provincial police chief arrived in plain clothes, grabbed my arms, pulled at my shirt and pushed me into the car. I was yanked around and was confused (...) I said, ‘You are treating me as if I were a pig being caught’” (Sorbitua Siallagan, interview, 25 February 2026).

Neither the family nor the village authorities were informed of the arrest. The family had no idea of Sorbatua’s whereabouts for several hours following his arrest. This caused fear and concern that he had been killed. The arrest was carried out without clear procedures, without a warrant, and without transparency, demonstrating a disregard for legal and

humanitarian principles. Representatives from AMAN and BAKUMSU only managed to locate Sorbatua after visiting police stations individually, having initially received no information. Even arranging meetings with Sorbatua was difficult and restricted.

"We all immediately made phone calls (...) and went with AMAN to the Tiga Dolok police station." Then we looked for him again at the TPL security office (...), but he was still not there. My child asked, "What if Dad was already dead? What if he has been killed?" I replied that I did not know. We continued until evening, when we went to the provincial police headquarters to meet him (...). Finally, we were only able to meet him there" (Berliana Manik, 2026, interview, 25 February).

The criminalisation process continued throughout the lengthy legal proceedings. After spending three months in police custody, Sorbatua Siallagan was re-arrested by the public prosecutor's office after a brief period on bail. He was detained for around ten months in total before being acquitted by the High Court. The charges brought against him, such as land occupation and arson, were not strongly substantiated and were in fact described as fabricated during the trial.

In the Sihaporas case, Mangitua Ambarita requested bail pending trial to support his family, who were experiencing financial hardship. However, instead of being granted bail, he was forced to hand over his ancestral land in exchange for his freedom. He chose to face the consequences and was sentenced to one year in prison in 2004. Arrests continued until 2019 and 2024. Indeed, Sorbatua's son was arrested in 2024.

"(...) 'Forget about a suspension or a temporary release,' the judge replied. 'You are free today. The conditions are that you make a statement saying that the land is not your ancestral land. Secondly, you must agree not to press charges at any time. (...) 'In the end, that was it. Ultimately, I was sentenced to one year's imprisonment'" (Mangitua Ambarita, 2026, interview, 26 February).

The people of Sihaporas also experienced repression in the form of physical violence and clashes. Members of the community, including Indigenous men and women and people with disabilities, were injured in the tragedy that occurred in September 2025. The tragedy took place in the morning. The perpetrators were armed with shields and wore face coverings. Residents were beaten indiscriminately, with women and people with disabilities among the victims. This violence occurred on three separate occasions. The perpetrators fielded

successive waves of hundreds of attackers, whilst the residents numbered only forty. Several vehicles, houses and the residents' protest camp were completely burnt down (Karokaro & Wahyuni 2025; Simanjuntak 2025).

The criminalisation of Sorbatua Siallagan and Mangitua Ambarita exemplifies how the law is utilised to discipline Indigenous communities defending their ancestral lands. This involves arrests being carried out without clear procedures being in place, restrictions being placed on access to family members, and pressure being put on the community to surrender their land in exchange for their freedom. Such repression attacks the community's collective identity, ancestral memory, and very survival.

Ecological Violence and the Severing of Ties with the Environment

This research also shows that the repression of Indigenous peoples is closely linked to the destruction of their communities' ecological relationships with their environments. From the perspective of Feminist Political Ecology (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter & Wangari, 1996), land, forests, water, and fields are not merely economic resources; they are also integral to the social relationships and collective knowledge that sustain the community.

In Bombana, for instance, the destruction of fields and the burning of villages has resulted in the community losing not only their homes, but also access to their food system, traditional agricultural practices, traditional medicine, and the spiritual spaces of their ancestors. Meanwhile, in Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas, ecological changes resulting from the expansion of eucalyptus plantations and the destruction of fields have led to a decline in soil fertility and disrupted the farming systems of indigenous communities that have been developed over generations.

Conversations with participants revealed that the daily lives of Indigenous communities in these areas are inextricably linked to farming as a means of subsistence. Food crops are the main crops grown in the fields. Work in the fields is collective and not rigidly restricted by gender roles. Men and women work together, performing tasks such as hoeing and sharing knowledge about crop types, planting times, and harvest periods.

Crops grown include ginger, chillies, tomatoes, maize, coffee, cassava, and sweet potatoes. Knowledge and skills relating to the fields are shared equally and gradually passed down to the next generation. The produce serves as a collective food source and constitutes the community's main livelihood.

In the past, knowledge of traditional medicine was an integral part of daily life, in addition to farming. However, the medicinal plants on their ancestral lands have been damaged. The arrival of the TPL company in the area has resulted in the loss of various plants that were previously cultivated and protected by the Indigenous communities of Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas. Bamboo, a plant passed down from their ancestors and used for medicinal purposes, has been felled and destroyed, making nature-based healing practices increasingly difficult.

The company's activities have affected not only the land and medicinal and ancestral plants, but also staple crops in the fields, such as cassava. Significant changes began to be felt from around 2019. In that year, cassava plants that had grown and were nearing harvest were sprayed in the early hours of the morning, between three and five o'clock. This damaged the plants and rendered them unproductive. By the time this was discovered at half past five, the spraying had already been completed. The community did not know what had been sprayed and the plants could not be saved.

The daily lives of communities in Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas, for whom farming is central to meeting daily consumption needs or providing a primary source of income, have been disrupted by restricted access to their fields and communal land. This has had a direct and significant impact on people's lives. Furthermore, planting eucalyptus in the area has affected land productivity, leading to ecological changes and threatening the livelihoods of Indigenous communities in Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas.

"(...) As long as the land is planted with in eucalyptus trees, there will be no yield at all unless we apply a lot of fertilisers. If we want to manage land that has previously been used to grow eucalyptus, we will need to stop planting there for at least a year to allow the soil to become fertile again. This is after it has been harvested, of course. If we plant straight away after harvesting, the crops will not grow well" (Marta Manurung, 2026, Interview, 25 February).

The disruption caused by eucalyptus also occurs within the ecosystems of customary territories. Environmental systems and farmlands developed by communities over generations are damaged by various factors, which can lead to environmental imbalance. Galtung interprets the fact that the soil in the fields must wait a year to become fertile again and ready for replanting as a disruption to the ecological balance necessary for survival and well-being, which can lead to ecological degradation (Galtung 1990).

The presence of corporations and the state within the living spaces of Indigenous communities demonstrates how development based on resource extraction appropriates communities' ecological spaces. Land previously used for collective production is transformed into industrial concession areas. In this context, agrarian conflicts concern not only land ownership, but also power struggles over knowledge, livelihoods and environmental management.

Furthermore, the people of Sihaporas have suffered significant economic consequences because of these repressive measures. They have lost their livelihoods due to being unable to access their fields. Consequently, they have become dependent on external aid from sources such as churches and solidarity networks, which provide necessities such as rice, sugar, and instant food. Indeed, it has been suggested that without this support, the community could potentially face starvation.

Restrictions on access to the Sihaporas area are not limited to the fields. The roads leading to the customary lands and fields have been dug up to a depth of around five metres using heavy machinery, preventing the community from accessing their land. Furthermore, checkpoints and security patrols have been set up to restrict their movements. Consequently, the community is unable to cultivate their fields or harvest their crops. The people of Dolok Parmonangan have experienced the same situation. They have had their access blocked and restricted by checkpoints and their crops have been destroyed. They have not been able to access sacred sites, such as the graves of their ancestors, for years.

Their fields, which provide them with a livelihood, have been forcibly taken away, and their crops are frequently destroyed, uprooted or looted. Furthermore, heavy machinery has been used to uproot crops on a massive scale, and crop burning has also taken place in

Sihaporas and Dolok Parmonangan. The community has been unable to resist due to the imbalance in numbers and strength.

In Dolok Parmonangan, repression has also impacted essential resources such as water. According to the experts, the community's water sources have been damaged and polluted, including by waste being dumped in waterways. As a result, the community can no longer use these sources and must find alternative, more limited options.

The people of Dolok Parmonangan also experienced psychological intimidation. This took the form of taunts and drones flying over their fields.

"This man, Sorbatua Siallagan, has even had a song written about him. I mean, who would not get upset? Sometimes, when he drove past, he revved his engine on purpose just to start an argument. What was the point of him being clever?" (Marta Manurung, 2026, interview, 25 February).

"(...) So, that man's drone was circling around. My grandchild cried and cried until he had nightmares that night and kept saying, 'I'm scared, I'm scared'. Apparently, the drone came again early the next morning and flew right over my house too. My grandchild started crying again, saying, 'Grandpa, I am scared; it is coming again (...)'. Last night, we were working there too. As soon as the drone started circling, the children got scared (after the concession was revoked, the drone flew over the Dolok Parmonangan area for two days - ed.)." (Marta Manurung, interview, 25 February 2026).

Furthermore, repression can manifest as restrictions on cultural practices and traditional knowledge. For instance, limited access to customary territories may prevent communities from carrying out rituals or visiting their ancestors' graves. This hinders the transmission of traditional knowledge to future generations.

In Sihaporas, repression has also escalated into horizontal conflict. Consequently, groups have formed to oppose the Indigenous communities' claims, creating divisions within the communities themselves. This shows that the conflict is not just between the communities and the corporation but has fragmented into conflicts between different community groups. All forms of repression do not occur in isolation, but rather as a layered sequence of events. When viewed through the lens of Galtung and Farmer (2005; 2009), the repression experienced by the Indigenous communities of Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas is not only economic destruction, legal criminalisation, physical

violence, psychological intimidation, and restrictions on living space and culture, but also a form of social and economic inequality. How does this inequality undermine the survival of Indigenous communities in the region?

The presence of the armed forces also indicates surveillance and pressure. Community members who continue to work in the fields are accompanied by police and the military. The community has criticised the state apparatus for safeguarding the interests of those they regard as 'colonisers'. The authorities themselves acknowledge that they are carrying out orders from their superiors, which illustrates how the power structure operates.

"I once told a military officer, 'Sir, I know that armed forces are supposed to guard the border to prevent colonisers from entering. But instead, you are protecting the colonisers so that they remain safe during our struggle' (Sorbatua Siallagan, 2026, interview, 25 February).

The conflicts and ecological destruction occurring in Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas directly impact the daily lives of Indigenous communities. Damaged fields have led to a loss of the community's primary sources of food and income. Water pollution disrupts the community's access to basic necessities. Restrictions on access to ancestral graves and ritual spaces demonstrate that the destruction of Indigenous communities' social and cultural memory constitutes ecological repression.

Indigenous Women and Gender-Based Repression

Women face serious threats, albeit in different forms. While men are more likely to experience physical attacks, women are more often subjected to psychological abuse and intimidation. Andi Nurwati, the wife of Mansur Lababa, is a woman who has suffered psychological abuse. Operation Sapu Jagad I resulted in her husband being imprisoned for one year and 15 days without a clear court ruling, leaving their three young children without a parent. Andi was forced to take on the entire financial burden and responsibility for caring for the family. Like other Hukaea women who were separated from their land and husbands, Andi experienced multiple layers of structural violence at the hands of the state, resulting in collective and generational trauma.

Cici, Andi's daughter, recounts the story of the structural violence faced by her mother. Cici clearly

remembers several incidents, despite being just a child at the time.

“My mum (Andi Nurwati) was told to run away (by Mansur Lababa - ed.). To hide amongst the community (...) What I remember most clearly is when the authorities picked up my father and sent him to prison. Just as they were about to take him away, my mother was still pleading for help and refusing (to be evacuated - ed.). However, my father told his brother to go and fetch my mother and take her out of the village. It was my mother who kept going back and forth to sort out my father's meals whilst he was in prison” (Cici, 2026, interview, 16 February).

Based on Cici's account, Andi Nurwati experienced significant psychological distress while Mansur Lababa was in prison. In addition to moving Baubau to live near her husband and care for him, Andi also had to look after their three children alone. As the family's livelihood, which had previously been supported by farm produce from Hukaea and Mansur's salary as a civil servant, was cut off completely, Andi had to find a way to generate an income. She eventually opened a small grocery shop in Baubau, which she relied on to support herself, her husband and their three children. Furthermore, she had only just given birth to her youngest child at that time.

While the authorities did not directly threaten the women with physical violence, they nevertheless created an atmosphere of fear. Forced evictions, the burning and demolition of homes, and the criminalisation of their husbands and sons subjected the women of Hukaea to immense psychological pressure. They were plunged into a food crisis as their food sources were frequently destroyed. Their livestock was also frequently seized or killed.

In these circumstances, they were forced to take charge of their families and flee into the forest. To survive, the women of Hukaea were compelled to harvest *ondo yams* (*Dioscorea hispida*), also known as forest yams. If not properly processed, these yams are poisonous. While on the run, they often shared food with one another to ensure that all community members had enough to eat. This highlights the vital role of Hukaea women in applying their ecological knowledge to ensure the survival of themselves and their community. Their ability to harvest and process *ondo yams* — a specific form of knowledge passed down through the generations — played a crucial role in the community's resilience during times of conflict.

Within the FPE framework, the resistance of Hukaea women who access emergency food sources from the forest is not a neutral act of access, but rather an act of necessity. This oppression is closely linked to the power relations between Indigenous communities and the state (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter & Wangari 1996). They do not control these resources of their own volition, but rather use them to sustain their daily lives. The survival practices of Hukaea women demonstrate how state violence forces them to navigate their lives while maintaining the sustainability of their community through collective knowledge and solidarity.

It should also be recognised that Andi Nurwati, as the wife of an Indigenous elder in her community, faces more severe threats. Violence against women is often more complex than it appears, involving many hidden layers. For instance, when Mansur Lababa was imprisoned, Andi Nurwati frequently received kidnapping threats against herself and her children. She continues to face threats to her agency as a woman, even after leaving her village, as evidenced by the layers of violence she has experienced. This traumatic experience still brings her to tears to this day.

“She once told me that after my father was taken away by the authorities to there (Baubau Prison - ed.), my mother was picked up by relatives from her village because there were rumours that (Andi Nurwati and her three children) were going to be abducted. WALHI escorted her. They also helped my mother leave the village. They were afraid that she would be targeted to force Mansur to abandon his village. But that did not happen” (Cici, 2026, interview, 16 February).

This situation aligns with Crenshaw's (1991) assertion that violence against women is intertwined with their identities as Indigenous individuals, their position within the agrarian class, and gender dynamics. Indigenous women experience various forms of severe violence, including psychological pressure, threats to their families, economic burdens they bear alone, and collective trauma passed down through generations. In Andi Nurwati's case, for instance, her husband's imprisonment resulted in legal consequences and forced a total reorganisation of the family's social and economic roles. This illustrates how state violence can extend into the domestic sphere. These three frameworks therefore demonstrate that power operates structurally, ecologically, and intersectionally, placing women in the most vulnerable positions, while also

positioning them as pivotal figures in their daily struggles for survival and resistance.

Repression as Violence that Permeates Everyday Life

The experiences of Indigenous communities in Bombana, Dolok Parmonangan, and Sihaporas demonstrate that state violence extends beyond visible acts of repression such as arrests, beatings and the burning of homes to include criminalisation. According to James Scott (1989; 1990), rebuilding destroyed homes, replanting damaged fields, sharing food whilst displaced, maintaining communal watch posts, and upholding customary practices are all examples of 'everyday resistance'. Although these practices may seem simple and non-confrontational, they are essential for upholding the community's dignity, autonomy, and survival amidst state and corporate domination. In this context, Indigenous communities are upholding the dignity and autonomy of their communities.

Seeking refuge in the forest, making use of wild food sources, and rebuilding homes and villages may seem 'ordinary', but it constitutes everyday resistance. However, this constitutes everyday resistance. Everyday resistance often takes informal forms and appears non-confrontational, yet it is effective in sustaining collective resistance (Scott, 1989; 1990). This is precisely what the women of Hukaea have done throughout their community's conflict with the state.

Through the lens of FPE, the everyday resistance practised by the people of Hukaea can be interpreted as survival strategies intertwined with power relations concerning access to, and control of, resources. Rather than taking the form of open confrontation, such as demonstrations or direct action, this resistance takes the form of what Scott terms 'everyday resistance'. These practices also reflect a common theme in global grassroots environmental movements: the struggle to survive; to uphold the right to a decent environment; to protect life-supporting systems from destruction; and to repair existing damage (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter & Wangari 1996). Everyday resistance serves as a response to repression and an active effort to safeguard the sustainability of life amidst structural inequalities, with women leading the way both socially and ecologically.

Initially, the Moronene community in Tobu Hukaea fought alone. However, whilst detained in

Baubau, Mansur Lababa began corresponding with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) capable of advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples, including Haris Palisuri, who was Director of WALHI Southeast Sulawesi in 1996.

One way this civil society group showed solidarity was by setting up a makeshift primary school for children in Years 1-3. Juhania, a teacher by profession, organised this with the help of other activists, setting up the makeshift primary school on 17 July 1999. Juhania and the other activists worked to enable a child in Hukaea to take the primary school leaving examination, despite having been refused entry to the examination at several other schools. There was no primary school in Hukaea itself capable of organising the examination. Thanks to the advocacy and resilience of these individuals, the child was able to take and pass the examination.

Resistance was pursued through legal channels, advocacy, and building solidarity networks with civil society organisations. Collaborating with the Hukaea community and NGOs revealed that the struggles of Indigenous peoples occur not only locally, but also within broader legal and political contexts. This demonstrates that Indigenous communities are political actors who continually devise strategies for survival and collective resistance, rather than being passive groups.

With the support of these civil society groups, the women of Hukaea — including Andi Nurwati and Juhania — organised a protest involving the occupation of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) office for 11 days. They occupied the space and carried out daily activities there, such as eating and bathing, causing a commotion that 'disrupted' the local government. The children of Hukaea also participated in the protest, moving their classrooms and play areas to 'formal' spaces such as the DPRD office.

Following the collapse of the New Order, daily resistance and legal lobbying gradually bore fruit, securing legal standing for the Hukaea community's customary land ownership. In 2015, the Bombana Regency Regional Regulation (Perda) No. 4 of 2015 on the Recognition, Protection, and Empowerment of the Moronene Hukaea Laea Indigenous Community in Bombana Regency was issued. This regulation also served as the first legal guarantee recognising the Hukaea community's living space within their

Indigenous territory. Further legal legitimisation followed in the form of the Bombana Regent's Decree No. 1459 of 2023 on the Designation of the Hukaea-Laea Indigenous Area.

The experiences of the Hukaea Indigenous People exemplify structural violence, as defined by Galtung (1990). Through systematic conservation policies and military operations, the state prevents the community from meeting its basic needs. Forced evictions, the burning of hundreds of homes, criminalisation, and the seizure of livelihoods are not only forms of direct violence, but also part of a system that legitimises injustice. According to the FPE framework, land grabbing also signifies the severing of communities' ecological ties to their living spaces. This includes the loss of local knowledge systems, such as traditional agricultural practices, medicine, and forest management based on Indigenous wisdom (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayer & Wangari 1996). In such crises, women play a central role in ensuring the sustainability of life by applying their ecological knowledge, for example in processing emergency food. This illustrates how women's bodies and labour are a crucial focal point within imbalanced environmental politics.

Despite facing repeated and multi-layered pressures, the communities of Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas have maintained their primary demand: the full return of their customary lands. Resistance was also evident when the communities collectively visited the company's posts or operational areas. Their resilience and determination remained steadfast, and eventually, following protracted negotiations in Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas, the company's checkpoints were dismantled. This occurred after the revocation of the company's concession, which had restricted access to land in Sihaporas, as well as to springs and ancestral graves in Dolok Parmonangan.

Resistance is not confined to times of conflict; it is also evident in everyday life through efforts to preserve their way of life. Despite their crops being repeatedly damaged or uprooted by heavy machinery, the community continues to cultivate its land. These replanting efforts demonstrate their enduring resilience. Farming activities are also carried out collectively to avoid the risk of violence, particularly against women. No one acts alone anymore. Every activity is undertaken together as a form of collective protection. Mutual aid

has once again become the primary survival strategy in conflict situations. The community's command post in Dolok Parmonangan is collectively guarded, regardless of age or gender.

Women in Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas play a vital role in the struggle. They are at the forefront of dialogue efforts, directly confronting those who arrive with repressive equipment. They strive to create space for dialogue and defuse conflict, despite still being beaten when clashes erupt. Nevertheless, the women of Dolok Parmonangan and Sihaporas continue to take their place on the front line. They step forward and stand firm to prevent the conflict from escalating further.

The struggle is realised through efforts to regenerate knowledge. The younger generation participates in customary practices and daily activities so that they can understand and continue the struggle. This involvement takes the form of hands-on practice rather than mere narrative, ensuring that the values of the struggle and customary knowledge are passed down.

Closing

This research reveals that the oppression of Indigenous communities in Bombana, Dolok Parmonangan, and Sihaporas is not an isolated incident, but rather part of a cycle of structural violence that is continually reproduced through the legal system, security forces, and development policies. Colluding with the interests of extractive capitalism, the state seizes land and resources while simultaneously undermining Indigenous communities' ecological, social, and cultural relationships with their environment. In such circumstances, violence manifests not only as evictions and criminalisation, but also as daily fear, environmental degradation, loss of food sources and the burdens of life passed down through the generations.

However, this study also shows that Indigenous communities do not always remain passive. Despite ongoing repression, they persevere through activities such as farming on ancestral lands, conserving forests, fostering community solidarity, and transmitting ecological knowledge to future generations. This resistance demonstrates that survival encompasses more than mere endurance; it also involves upholding dignity, preserving collective memory, and fostering equitable relationships with nature.

In this regard, Indigenous women play a particularly significant role. As women and members of Indigenous communities, they face multiple layers of vulnerability and are directly affected by agrarian conflicts. However, they are also the driving force behind community sustainability. They care for their families in times of crisis, manage shared resources, preserve ecological knowledge, and play an active role in the struggle. They should therefore not be viewed merely as victims, but as political agents who safeguard life and create opportunities for a fairer future.

At its core, agrarian conflict is not just about land ownership; it is also about who is deemed entitled to live, to be heard and to have their existence recognised. This research reveals that development which disregards Indigenous communities and destroys nature is essentially a normalised form of violence. Consequently, conflict resolution cannot rely solely on administrative or security-based approaches. Instead, a shift in perspective is required that places Indigenous communities — particularly Indigenous women — at the centre of decision-making. Their daily lives demonstrate that fairer ways of living have long existed — ways that protect nature, build solidarity, and prioritise sustainability over exploitation.

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Footnotes

- 1 Taman Buru was the precursor to Rawa Aopa Watumohai National Park.
- 2 Operation Sapu Jagad was a joint operation carried out by the Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI), the Buton Regional Government (at that time, Bombana Regency was part of Buton City), the Buton Regional Government's Forestry Department, and TNRAW officials. The aim was to relocate settlements and enforce discipline amongst the residents of Hukaea. On Monday 9 November 1998, Kendari Pos reported that the Southeast Sulawesi Regional Government had stated the operation's aim was to 'clear the forest conservation area of human encroachment' (Newspaper No. 49/Year 30/1998). (Newspaper No. 49/Year 30/1998).
- 3 Those arrested included Mansur Lababa and Aswarman.
- 4 The arrest of Sorbatua Siallagan is documented in other sources. For example, Simanjuntak, M. (2025, 17, 06). Mahkamah Agung Tolak Kasasi Jaksa, Sorbatua Siallagan Bebas: Kemenangan Ini Hasil Perjuangan Kolektif. <https://aman.or.id/news/read/2118>.

