

Abstract

The palm oil industry has emerged as a significant driver of economic growth in numerous countries; however, there is a lack of comprehensive research on its impact on women’s livelihoods. This systematic literature review (SLR) examines academic publications indexed in Scopus from 2011 to June 2025 across Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America—the world’s major palm oil-producing regions. Utilizing the 21st Century Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) by Natarajan et al. (2022) through an intersectional lens and supported by bibliometric mapping via VOSViewer, the study unpacks patterns and regional variations that shape women’s labor, agency, and vulnerabilities within this expansive agro-industrial sector. From an initial pool of 300 articles, 35 Scopus-indexed publications were selected and analyzed, revealing four thematic clusters that represent the dominant research foci from 2011-2025: (1) land rights and tenure; (2) land use and food security; (3) employment, income, and sustainability; (4) participatory approaches to gender dynamics. The findings indicate that women’s integration into the palm oil industry often reflects patterns of ‘adverse incorporation.’ The study offers multi-stakeholder recommendations for voluntary sustainability standards (VSS), governments, and academia. Future research should build on these insights by further exploring cross-regional empirical evidence, generate more longitudinal studies, and applying intersectional analysis to capture the diverse and evolving realities of women’s experiences in the palm oil industry, particularly through participatory methodologies.

Keywords: women, gender, palm oil, sustainable livelihoods framework, systematic literature review.