
Tree Plantations Impact Doubly on Women

The invisibility of women is perhaps nowhere greater than in timber plantations. Few women are ever seen working within the endless rows of eucalyptus or pine trees. But plantations are very visible to women, who are in fact greatly impacted by them in different ways.

No wonder then that one of the first documented demonstrations against monoculture tree plantations was led by women. This happened in August 1983 in Karnataka, India, when a large group of women and small peasants of the Barha and Holahalli villages marched on the local eucalyptus nursery. The women protested the commercial eucalyptus trees as being destructive to the water, soil and food systems. They pulled out millions of eucalyptus seedlings and planted tamarind and mango seeds in place. They were all arrested, but their action became a symbol of a struggle that continues today.

In forest-dependent communities, women have no doubt that plantations are not forests, because the former do not provide them with any of the non-timber forest products provided by the latter, particularly food, fuel, material for handicrafts, resources used for housing, household items and medicines. Additionally, they deplete the water resources they depend on. Large-scale tree plantations result in:

- Food scarcity. Women are traditional collectors of different types of food found in forests, such as vegetables, fruit, mushrooms and many other edible products. As forests are cleared to give way to plantations, food is no longer available and women find it much harder to collect the necessary food resources.
- Firewood scarcity. Although there is plenty of wood in plantations, collection of firewood by local people is severely restricted in most cases, thereby increasing the hours spent by women in distant forests to collect less wood than before .
- Water scarcity. Fast-growing tree plantations (eucalyptus, pines, acacia) require large amounts of water and can cause the depletion of water resources for consumption and agriculture. As a result, women spend many more hours a day carrying water, thus resulting in added work burdens for women.
- Medicine scarcity. Forests provide a broad array of medicinal plants, which are usually collected by women. These plants disappear after the plantations are put in place, thus increasing the time spent by women in collecting such plants at longer distances.

Even in the few cases where plantations provide women with some employment opportunities, not only do they not compensate for losses such as those mentioned above, but they add new problems to women's livelihoods.

In Brazil, for instance, in the state of Minas Gerais, women are hired to carry out a number of activities on a par with men -except logging which is a masculine activity par excellence. Hiring of

women workers is based on their greater aptitude to carry out certain tasks, such as growing plants in nurseries, which requires greater dexterity. In some cases too, women are entrusted with the application of ant-killers to the land planted with eucalyptus. It must be said, however, that in some cases female labour simply becomes a form of direct incorporation of cheap labour, contributing to lower the salaries of men workers. Because, as usual, women's salaries are lower than men's for equal types of work.

The labour conditions of women workers have much in common with those of men –low salaries, bad working and living conditions, seasonal work, outsourcing- but some degree of differentiation may be established with relation to their work in tree nurseries. In the nurseries of two large forestry companies in Minas Gerais, a large quantity of reiterated injuries caused by making great efforts have been observed, in spite of which women continue to work, many of them with swollen or bandaged hands. They also suffer from rheumatic diseases, probably caused by their constant exposure to cold water in the nurseries and to a generally cold environment in the wintertime.

As the vast majority of plantation companies, those of Minas Gerais have no specific gender policies, which is detrimental to women and their children. As there are no day-care centres near the place of work, it is almost impossible for women to breastfeed their babies after their maternity leave, thus increasing malnutrition. They usually leave their homes at 5:30 in the morning and return late in the afternoon, having to return home in the company transport, which takes an hour or more as it goes around, picking up all the workers at the plantations. Many women workers do not receive medical care and they are even made to feel guilty for work-related accidents or diseases. Furthermore, they are afraid to complain because they fear losing their jobs or not receiving the basic food basket that the Collective Agreement ensures them and that they count on for their family's basic food.

In sum, the substitution of local ecosystems by monoculture tree plantations result in impacts on local people by eliminating most of the goods and services previously available and impacting more on women through an increase in their work burden and a reduction in the amount of resources collected. At the same time, the scarce jobs provided to women by plantation companies do not compensate for those losses, while adding new problems to their health and livelihoods.

Article based on information from: Shiva, Vandana.- "Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India", Zed Books, 1989; "Seeing the Forest for the People, a Handbook on Gender, Forestry and Rural Livelihoods", Vanessa Griffen, APDC (Asian and Pacific Development Centre), 2001; "Certifying the Uncertifiable. FSC Certification of Tree Plantations in Thailand and Brazil", WRM, August 2003; and information provided by Rosa Roldán, e-mail: rroldan@alternex.com.br