
Brazil: Women's working conditions in tree plantations

In many regions of Brazil, woodlands and areas previously used for agriculture are now substituted by large-scale monoculture tree plantations, recruiting their work force among men, women and children. In the case of Minas Gerais, plantation implies a series of activities carried out by women on a par with men, except logging which is a masculine activity par excellence.

Hiring of women workers was 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.

While the plantations expanded and the work rationale changed, given the technical specificities of tree production, in some cases female labour simply became a form of direct incorporation of cheap labour, contributing to lower the salaries of men workers.

The labour conditions of women workers have much in common with those of men, but some degree of differentiation may be established with relation to their work in the tree nurseries. In the plantations of two large forestry companies (V&M and Plantar), 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.

In these two plantations there are no specific gender policies, which is detrimental to them and to 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 4 months maternity leave, established by law, thus increasing malnutrition. They usually leave their homes at 5.30 in the morning and return late in the afternoon. Added to the workday, they are obliged 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.

In interviews held in Curvelo, Minas Gerias, to women working in plantations, one of the main complaints they made was the basic need for drinking water. One of the women interviewed reported that there were days when the water came out of the watering places very cloudy and reddish, which makes one suspect contamination from the agrochemicals used by these companies, some of which are prohibited on international lists. Perhaps this data should be related with the numerous cases of cerebral diseases of workers that have been discharged and the high incidence of cancer in the zone.

All this takes place in a context of unemployment, misinformation regarding workers rights and loss of access to the natural resources that previously satisfied their needs. Thus, many women workers do not receive medical care, and do not know how to bring their case to court. To this is added that they are made to feel guilty for work-related accidents or diseases. Furthermore, they fear loosing 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.

The plantation companies arrived in the region promising development. They substituted the "cerrado" vegetation by monoculture tree plantations, thus eliminating all the goods and services that this ecosystem provided to its inhabitants and in particular to women. In exchange, they received the "benefit" of jobs such as those described. Is this what they call development?

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