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## [13 Replies to 13 Lies about Oil Palm Monoculture Plantations](#)

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On March 8, International Women's Day, we denounce the different forms of violence that **women suffer in and around large-scale oil palm plantations in Africa, Asia and Latin America**. This violence against women is routinely silenced and thus made invisible.

To expose the distressing situation women face, WRM has [updated](#) its booklet ***12 Replies to 12 Lies about Oil Palm Monoculture Plantations***. The publication now includes a chapter **13 about how oil palm companies lie when they say they respect women's rights**. It also highlights the struggles of women who resist and organize to bring an end to the expansion of large-scale plantations and the violence associated with these monocultures

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### **LIE 13: OIL PALM COMPANIES ARE COMMITTED TO DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A POLICY TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

One finds this statement in the documents of oil palm companies,—especially those that are members of the [RSPO](#) as this is one of the "sustainability" criteria of the RSPO seal.

However, the reality is that the different kinds of **gender violence that many women and girls in patriarchal societies suffer daily (rape and sexual harassment, physical, verbal and psychological abuse, and/or harsh beatings) tend to increase dramatically with the arrival of industrial palm plantations in their territories**, regardless of whether the companies are certified.

Added to these forms of violence is the deprivation of farmlands,—with its subsequent impact on food sovereignty and the family economy—the criminalization of the traditional use of palm oil and the contamination of water sources. All of this not only directly and differentially affects women, due to their role in their communities and nuclear families, but it also affects children.

**Gender violence is one of the most serious impacts of industrial palm plantations, and yet one of the least visible.** This happens precisely because those who are affected are women. Out of habit, fear, or shame, or even indifference on the part of the corresponding authorities, women usually do not denounce these abuses. Many times they do not have a voice in their communities or are not heard within their own families. In most cases, women are solely responsible for taking care of their children; and if their children are violated, the women often bear the blame—despite being unable to act upon or react to these abuses.

When women work for palm companies, **they suffer mistreatment, harassment and even sexual violations by foremen or security guards**. "The foremen sometimes harass workers so that they will have sexual relations with them and get a better job," a testimony from Honduras reports.

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In gatherings of women who live in communities surrounded by industrial plantations in Sierra Leone and Cameroon, cases of violence against women who work at palm companies were reported. For example, there were reports of labor exploitation of pregnant women and exposure to pesticides without any protection. Women often work in the tree nurseries, where large amounts of pesticides are used. This especially impacts them, because one of the effects of these toxins is the loss of fertility. In the case of women who are breastfeeding, they put their children at risk by passing on toxins through breast milk.

This also occurs in industrial palm plantations in Asia. In countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, women fumigate with toxic pesticides and fertilizers, which expose them and their children to serious health risks. In most cases, they are not informed, nor do they have protective gear.

Added to this is **overexploitation**: Families living near industrial plantations also grow palm on their plots and sell their harvest to large companies. In these cases women are particularly affected, because they work non-stop and without pay on their small family plantation; and they must also complete the household chores. This is all in a context where they depend economically on men, and are generally not allowed to participate in decision-making about the land.

Violence against women not only occurs when they work for the companies; **women also suffer violence in their daily lives around the plantations**. Companies monopolize their land, and pollute, divert or dry up the rivers. As a result, women and girls are forced to walk much farther to find water and land suitable for food production. If on their way they must walk through plantations, they are exposed to harassment and violence by security guards or policemen. In the few cases where they dare to report what has happened, impunity usually reigns. This leads to their frustration, and it perpetuates the violence. They are forced to walk in groups in order to protect each other. These are situations in which multiple rights are violated: the right to dignity, to food, to access to water, to physical integrity and to freedom of movement.

**They also suffer abuse, beatings and imprisonment when they are seen with small amounts of palm fruits**—which they grow traditionally on a small scale, and which they have managed to maintain after industrial plantations have invaded. Traditional palm is very important for women, since they use it to make essential products like oil, soap and home remedies; women use these products for their own consumption or sell them. When police and/or private security forces find them with fruits or palm oil, they accuse them of theft and beat them. They even burst into the women's homes or the markets where they sell their products, and destroy the oil the women have produced. Testimonies from Cameroon report that if the police find even one bottle of palm oil in their homes, the women—who are more frequently at home—are sent to prison.

Another dramatic consequence is that the pressure to ensure their families' food supply pushes women to emigrate and seek other sources of income. According to a report, in Cambodia, Indonesia, PNG and the Philippines, prostitution is on the rise among women who work in or live near plantations, coinciding with a higher number of cases of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (1).

There is also violence against women when they organize and mobilize to protest against the plantations. They often face discrimination in their families or communities, because in many cases it is not accepted for women to participate in this kind of activity. Furthermore, like many men, they end up in prison for protesting. This has happened many times in Sierra Leone, where even women with children or pregnant women are arrested and jailed, along with their kids.

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In spite of everything, **women are organizing to break the silence and to demand an end to violence**. They are seeking dialogue within their communities, they are bringing cases to the light, and they are calling on the rest of the world support them in their struggle.

(1) [Oil Palm Expansion in South East Asia, 2011.](#)

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