
Liberia: Women raising their voices in decision-making processes

The voices and stories of forest-dependent women are often rejected, unheard or silenced, which makes it easier for companies to grab community land. But what happens when they start to raise their voices?

The voices and stories of forest-dependent women are often rejected, unheard or silenced. **Women are often denied an active role in local decision-making processes, especially when it comes to decisions around land issues.** They are not taken seriously yet they are the ones carrying out most of agriculture-related activities while depending on forests to collect food, medicine and water for their families and communities. This is a very prevalent form of violence against women.

The absence of women's voices in decision-making processes has led to protests, conflicts and riots around large-scale land concessions, especially for oil palm. Women get together and start demanding concession companies leave their land. **Denying women meaningful participation in decision-making processes has made it easier for concession companies in the first place to take control of community land.**

A Platform to raise women voices together

The Natural Resource Women Platform (NRWP) was created in 2010 under the name Liberian Forest Women Platform. **The Platform was set up as we increasingly recognized the importance of what it means to have a voice:** the right to self-determination, to participation, to consent or dissent; to live and participate, to interpret and narrate. Forest-dependent women from Liberia's 15 counties converged and formed the Platform as a way of organizing against the marginalization faced at the hands of rural-base elite women –whom are called to decision-making meetings on behalf of forest-dependent women-, the violence and abuse imposed by large-scale concession land developments as well as the incessant challenges in the face of changing climate.

In 2012, following progress made by the Liberian Forest Women Platform, other women - such as women who migrated from rural communities to urban settings in search of a livelihood as marketers, sand miners, rock crushers or in the charcoal production as well as women involved with *Gogbachop* (out of town businesses) - felt the need to join the Platform. Their argument was that they, too, suffer from the same problems and challenges facing forest-dependent women; that is, women who depend on the forest for their livelihood through the collection of medicinal plants, food, mushroom, honey, country spices, wood, palm oil, pestles as pounding utensils etc. After several consultations, during the Alliance for Rural Democracy biannual meeting held in 2012 in Kun Town, Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia, the Liberian Forest Women Platform opened its membership and changed its name to a more inclusive name: The Natural Resource Women Platform.

During the formation of the Platform, women agreed on the aims and objectives that would govern and guide its activities. These include: to create a connection between all natural resource-dependent women based on respect for one another and high concern for each other's ideas; to gather and record natural resource-dependent women's knowledge concerning land ownership and their rights to

the forest; to support the voices of these women against the wrong use of their communities' resources, including their involvement in the decision-making processes, through their organization and learning activities in order to control and take care of their resources; to promote more opportunities and rights for women to take part in sharing the benefits of their resources as well as to find easy means for them to get to the markets to sell their products; to provide spaces through which they can share ideas and experiences in their search for justice; to struggle for equal rights and women's ownership of natural resources and forests to reduce their poor living conditions; to strive for erasing the idea of looking down upon themselves; to point out the role and importance of natural resources in communities' histories in Liberia.

A matter of power

Preventing women to have a voice is a way to impose on them decisions that will fundamentally determine women's lives, including doing things that might be against their will, desires, interests, health, believes and/or survival. If women voices are heard in decisions around the use of and control over land and forests, they can better organize and carry out activities that can help reduce some of the community's livelihood challenges.

Human rights advocacy has become very popular in recent years in Liberia and human rights defenders are struggling to amplify the voices of women affected by violence. Large-scale land acquisition for mining, agriculture and forestry undermines the basic rights of local communities, including their rights to life and communal land. **The issues of women's full and equal participation in public life should also guarantee non-discrimination in all aspects of political, economic, and social life as well as full and equal participation in decision-making and access to power at all levels.** Being unable to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes increases the severe challenges women face to find a livelihood for their families and communities where large-scale land developments encroach on community land, while increasing the violence enforced when communities protests against such encroachment of large-scale land developments on their community land. It is like living with a burden of death hanging out there.

For example, a woman human rights defender was victim of arrest. She was beaten and tortured for speaking out against large concessions that took away her customary land and forests that she has depended upon for all her life. The decisions discussed ignored her –and other women'- ideas on the importance of land and forest use for their livelihood and the challenges/problems she would face when the land and forest is no more, was not taken into consideration, neither was an alternative livelihood that could match the absence of the land and forest.

Liberia has signed key international instruments that recognize and guarantee equal rights for women, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and especially the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It is clear that the full and equal participation of women in decision-making should set the stage. Many times, **the voices of women have proven to be dynamic voices of change, galvanizing everyone to get involved to claim their rights, strengthen their communities and protect their forests and land.** Denying women meaningful participation in decision-making processes has made it easier for plantation companies to take control of community land.

This is the voice of a woman human rights defender regarding one of Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL) oil palm plantation:

“My grandfather was born here and I have been here over the years until now. All along, we have been enjoying our native land until Golden Veroleum came. When they came, we did not deny them. We were told that the company needed land for nursery for their oil palm. Later, we got to know that they were here to plant on all our lands and they told us that the land is not ours but of the government. Where do they expect us to stay, in the sky? We don't agree with their operations anymore. They deceived us. Let them leave. We do not want them here”.

To stop women from having a voice and opinion in decision-making processes at any level they wish to participate is a form of violence against them. Women need to and must have their voices truly heard!

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