



Women, tree plantations and violence: Building resistances



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This Bulletin articles are written by:

Réseau des acteurs du Développement Durable (RADD) Cameroun / SawitWatch Indonesia / Carro de Combate / la Synergie Nationale des Paysans et Riverains du Cameroun (SYNAPARCAM) / CFR- Learning & Advocacy India / The Natural Resource Women Platform (NRWP) Liberia / Núcleo Tramas da Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC) Brazil / WALHI – Friends of the Earth Indonesia / Centre pour l’Environnement et le Développement (CED) Camerún.

Women, tree plantations and violence: Building resistances

Our Viewpoint

Women and plantations: When violence becomes invisible



Women in Sierra Leone. 2017.

On **International Women's Day**, this bulletin seeks to shine a light on and denounce many of the realities that are generally hidden behind the termed “differentiated impacts” on women who live in and around monoculture plantations.

WRM has been supporting struggles against industrial tree plantations for over two decades. In this process, we have learned about one of the most violent impacts—and at the same time one of the cruelest forms of oppression, exploitation and domination: **sexual abuse and violence against women** as a result of the establishment of industrial tree plantations. As International Women's Day is celebrated on March 8, with this bulletin **we want to help amplify the voices and stories of thousands of women who suffer from this violence; we want to make visible that which is systematically covered up. And we also want to pay tribute to all the women, who—despite adversity—organize, resist, and maintain joy and the hope that another world is possible.**

Historical and Systematic Violence

The establishment of the large-scale monoculture production model required imposing tremendous violence against systems of reproduction of life; that is, systems of collective organization, food sovereignty, ancestral knowledge, among many other aspects. Accordingly, this violence was aimed specifically against women, who are a fundamental pillar of community life. It is worth remembering the plantations of yesteryear in the Americas, and the violence against slaves, which in the case of women was extremely brutal.

Activist and writer, Silvia Federici, claims that “capitalism began with a war against women” (1). Her research has shown how, from the beginning, capitalism required destroying those systems of reproduction, in order to create the need for wage labor and market dependence. And of course, **in order to destroy the diverse systems of reproduction**

of life in the expansion of “capitalist development,” an “effective” and persistent method has been the attack, murder, and stalking of women.

Rape, physical and psychological abuse, harassment, persecution, work in exchange for sex, beatings, violated pregnancies, the presence of armed guards in and around their homes and communities, lower wages and longer work days, unpaid work, continuous use of toxic products without protection, deplorable working conditions, impacts on their reproductive and sexual health, the inability to make decisions on issues related to land, loss of access to the land, deprivation of their livelihoods and sustenance—which translates into harder, more intense and more prolonged domestic work—are just some of the termed “differentiated impacts” that industrial plantations thrust upon the bodies and lives of women today.

The growing militarization of these women's daily lives also glorifies **violent and aggressive models of masculinity**, most of which act with total impunity. This is the same impunity enjoyed by corporations that monopolize fertile lands, contaminate rivers, destroy forests, displace communities and hire private security agents to “protect” their investments.

This daily violence, by the way, **is not in conflict with the dealings of international institutions like the World Bank or the United Nations**, which strongly influence international politics and advocate expanding the capitalist economy to all corners of the planet. Behind their safeguards, codes of conduct and social responsibility, are the policies and projects that strengthen a system, which since its inception was, and will continue to be, **structurally patriarchal and racist**.

Nevertheless, in the midst of this context which is so violent towards them, it is women who are taking the reins to organize and mobilize against this encroachment upon their lands and lives. **Their role in the resistance is essential** and has been the focus of several WRM bulletins (2).

This bulletin features two articles from **Indonesia** that lay out the systemic abuses that women (and girls) living in and around oil palm plantations must endure. One focuses on the many labor abuses, and the other highlights the more structural violence of these plantations. Similarly, three articles from **Cameroon** tell us about the situation of women there who are confronting oil palm monoculture. One focuses on the nationwide impacts and abuses caused by the expansion of these plantations; the second is a recount of the specific kinds of violence that are generated, as well as a call for change; and the third is an article-testimony about how a community has lived and resisted since the company SOCAPALM, arrived on their lands. Another article seeks to summarize the cases of two communities—one in **Guatemala** and the other in **Colombia**—where women are the ones who most vigorously fight to defend their lands and livelihoods in the face of oil palm plantations. An article from **India** warns us of the growing expansion of tree plantations through the government offset program, and how women are not only affected by this, but also a pillar of resistance in the country. Another article from **Liberia** highlights the importance of having a voice in decision-making processes and how women there are organizing to achieve this. Finally, an article from **Brazil** tells us of the dangers and impacts of women's exposure to agrochemicals, which they must handle as a common task on industrial plantations.

This bulletin is thus a **call for direct and radical solidarity** with those women who suffer, resist, organize and mobilize against the daily violence and abuse that industrial plantations cause.

(1) "Caliban and the Witch. Women, the body and Primitive Accumulation," Silvia Federici, 2004. You may download the book for free at:

<https://libcom.org/files/Caliban%20and%20the%20Witch.pdf>

(2) See for example:

Bulletin 211, February 2015: Women in Resistance: Defending Territories and Life,

<https://wrm.org.uy/bulletins/issue-211/>

Bulletin 200, March 2014, The Struggle of Women: Everyone's Struggle, <https://wrm.org.uy/bulletins/issue-200-3/>

Bulletin 187, February 2013, Women Resisting, <https://wrm.org.uy/bulletins/issue-187/>

Cameroon: Urban and Rural Activists Against Industrial Plantations' Abuses Towards Women



"My land, my life". Cameroon. Ph: RADD, 2017.

By the end of 2000, the fever for agricultural lands in Africa for large monoculture operations had accelerated. Today, this fever increases with emerging policies that consider these initiatives to be great development projects that create jobs and added value. For the most part, these projects are well received by national and local decision makers in the areas where they are implemented. It is absolutely necessary to put on the activist hat to demonstrate and establish the need to protect those who are excluded from this system.

«Now is the time: Rural and Urban Activists Transform the Lives of Women» is the theme chosen this year by UN Women–Africa on the occasion of the 33rd International Women's Day. For us activists who are committed to improving the lives of women, this issue gives us the opportunity to question public opinion on the particular case of rural women who are victims of land-grabbing. It is also a good opportunity to talk about the abuses that victimize these women, sharing possibilities to take action in order to intensify struggles against these discriminations and violations.

Abuses Towards Women Who Coexist with Plantations

Let's face it. Large-scale agricultural projects maintain a system of impoverishment of the populations that surround them, instead of offering the development that companies and their allies claim they bring. Women, who are the centerpiece of the family unit, are the most affected.

Throughout Africa, women living in or around large monoculture tree plantations suffer similar abuses:

- **The risk of rape in or around the fields increases for women living near plantations. The rapists usually go unpunished.** Plantations tend to occupy the land that surrounds the communities, and therefore, in order to reach the small parcels where they grow food on the edges of plantations, women have to walk a lot through the plantations. These paths are usually plantation company property, and therefore receive little traffic, with the exception of security guards;

- In areas of industrial exploitation, women living around plantations **are searched, having their privacy violated. They are raped, tortured and dragged to court** because they have a palm nut or a little bit of palm oil, even when these come from their own oil palm trees. **They are prohibited from consuming oil palm by-products**, despite the fact that these products are the basis of their diet. Security guards have even **burst into homes** to inspect what women are cooking, and have turned homes upside down looking for palm oil. **Guards destroy any oil that they find**, even if the women say it comes from their own palm trees. Guards also destroy the traditional oil that women sell in local markets near plantations;

- In order to obtain a means of subsistence, women are forced to work as plantation workers, where they are subject to schedules that make it impossible for them to ensure their children's education;

- **Children's Futures are compromised.** Often under-schooled, children are also precarious and over-exploited workers, even when they are underaged; or they are unemployed. The percentage is on the rise of children living around plantations who turn to drugs, delinquency, or alcohol, and who are regularly jailed;

- Those women who try to resist the advance of plantations onto their community lands are threatened by the system installed by the same companies exploiting their lands, and **their lives are in danger**;

- Lands where women have always produced food for their families are taken away from them. They are often displaced without any reasonable or lasting compensation. They are forced to travel long distances, up to tens of kilometers, to find arable lands. They often rent these lands each season to plan their crops until the soil is exhausted. Consequently, either their families do not have enough food, or they are forced to eat poor quality food. **All communities adjacent to these monoculture tree plantations are characterized by hunger, malnutrition and food dependence**;

- Forests and biodiversity—which are the source of these women's traditional values, and from which they obtain the basis of their economic and cultural resources—are literally destroyed, worsening climate change. This makes women **more vulnerable**, as it drastically lowers their income.

- Throughout Africa, **the lovely promises** made to communities by the companies who are grabbing their lands—such as the installation of social infrastructure (water supply, construction of and equipment for schools and hospitals)—**are never met**;
- **Communities do not have drinkable water**, because the groundwater is contaminated by the chemicals used on the plantations;
- In communities surrounding plantations, factories drain their used water, which places women's health and the **health** of their descendants **in permanent risk**;
- All of the misfortunes that befall these women come from the installation of the company that is exploiting their lands.

It is the moment for activists to take action!

We advocate for urgent actions in the short and medium term. More than ever, it is time to express our legendary female solidarity. By simply joining forces, energies, resources and strategies, we can advance the cause against abuses towards women living around monoculture tree plantations. We must express this solidarity through formal and informal alliances which begin at the community level, and which intensify throughout the country and subregions, reaching the level of the African continent and the global level.

The time has come to hear the voices and struggles of those millions of women who live around plantations, and to **radically rise up in solidarity** with them to help them transform their lives. **If we do nothing, we risk being accomplices to the imperialist system**—a system that promises exclusive development, creates new generations of vulnerable populations, amplifies discrimination against women and generates the basis for informal immigration. These problems with the places where they live are what drive young people to carry out feats that risk their lives.

The time for action is now!

Almost three months ago, the Cameroon Association, Network of Actors for Sustainable Development (RADD, by its French acronym), and its allies launched an African petition to stop this repression of women. [We invite you to join, by signing and getting others to sign.](#)

It was after visiting impacted communities in Cameroon, Gabon and Sierra Leone that we felt the need to take these women's grievances to decision-makers. In this petition, women who suffer these impacts—in their vast majority—demand that their land be returned to them. They want to be involved in decision-making processes concerning the management of their lands. By signing this petition, you will help force those who are in strategic decision-making positions to review their policies and rethink the ways in which lands are transferred in African countries.

Intensify Struggles in Defense of Women's Rights

From now on, faced with the precariousness of their situation, affected women are requesting support on the following:

- Legal assistance and guidance for affected women, women leaders and women activists who suffer threats and are dragged to court because they have resisted

multiple abuses. This demand is very important, because denouncing the police is useless and often exposes women to more violence;

- Strengthening of affected women's knowledge about defending their rights. Often, particularly in remote rural areas, women are left without access to information, which is vital in organizing to demand respect for their rights;
- Security for activists whose lives are frequently threatened;
- Creation and development of economic alternatives. These women need to develop income-generating activities to aspire to autonomy;
- Access to social infrastructure (drinking water, energy, education, health...);
- Respect for and application of signed agreements. Once installed, plantation companies who exploit lands fail to respect the social commitments they have made with neighboring populations;
- Review of land transfer processes which do not take into account the opinions of neighboring communities, who are excluded from decision-making spaces and thus discriminated against and disadvantaged.

These are some possible areas of action, among many others, where urgent participation is needed to improve the living conditions of these rural women.

Let us join together with activists worldwide to stop discrimination and abuses toward these women!

Marie Crescence NGOBO

*Executive Secretary, Réseau des acteurs du Développement Durable - RADD, Cameroun
(Network of Actors for Sustainable Development)*

Indonesia: Exploitation of women and violation of their rights in oil palm plantations



Ph.: Sawit Watch.

Oil palm plantations in Indonesia are driven by large capital, land availability, cheap labour and the international demand for palm oil. Indonesia has announced plans to increase Crude Palm Oil (CPO) production up to 40 million tons per year by 2020. (1) The Indonesian Plantation Fund Management Agency, a state-run agency that represents the plantation industry, launched Indonesia's Vision for 2045 with one target: to increase CPO production to 60 million tons per year. (2)

Indonesia currently has 16.1 million hectares of oil palm plantations, and plans to expand the area occupied by oil palm plantations to approximately 20 million hectares of land, spread across Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku and Papua. This **massive expansion mainly rests on two key factors: low-wage labour and the ease of obtaining land.**

According to Indonesia's Minister of Agriculture, palm oil is one of the largest foreign exchange contributors in Indonesia, with an export value of 250 trillion Indonesian rupiahs per year. (3) Palm oil is an export commodity for the country, as is evident from the value of products derived from palm oil that contributed 75 per cent to the export of the non-oil sector. Beyond that, the presence of oil palm plantations on such a massive scale absorbs a large number of labours - in total numbers. (4) In comparison with the labour provided by small-scale peasant farming – both in terms of numbers and quality of work -, the contribution of the oil palm industry to the labour market looks far less impressive, however.

There are two important things to highlight related to the presence of oil palm plantations. First, the marginalization of peasants, especially women. **Oil palm plantations have turned peasant communities into landless communities and forced them to sell their labour to plantations.** The seizure of land by oil palm corporations and the presence of oil palm plantations are very obviously affecting women's ability to produce food and access land. The expansion of oil palm plantations onto land previously available for peasant farming is **transforming women from food producers into food buyers and cheap labour for the plantation companies.** With their way of life as food producers, their livelihoods and traditional peasant farming practises disrupted or eradicated by oil palm plantations, women are often left with little choice but to seek work as labourers on

the plantations. Women who are hired as workers must adapt to the standard routine, work pattern and work mechanisms on the plantation.

"Since the company came, we were forced to sell our land to the company. The company accepted us as casual labourers on the condition that we sell our land to the company. The majority of women workers here are those who sold their land to the company. Now we are casual labours," said Ad, a woman working as casual labourer on the oil palm plantation of Sipef Group's subsidiary in South Sumatera Province.

Secondly, for many women, the working conditions on the plantations are very precarious. The labour relations for women on the plantations are characterized by informal arrangements, they often have very short-term work contracts, leaving them without long-term work security. Job engagement is unclear while undocumented work agreements and target-based wage systems prevail. The Indonesian NGO Sawit Watch Association estimated that the number of people working in oil palm plantations in Indonesia in 2016 exceeded 10 million. Of these, 70 per cent were employed as casual labourers, with the majority of casual workers being women. (5) Women work in 15 out of the 16 oil palm plantations work types, ranging from land clearing to harvest.

Labourers' wives: Forced to work without wages

Women workers in oil palm plantations are often overlooked, whereas their presence strongly influences the production process. **Women are not regarded as company labourers, so they do not even get the rights they deserve.**

Plantation companies largely set too high targets for workers harvesting fruit bunches, so harvesters can only achieve them with the help of family members, often the workers' wives. This family support has no formal engagement with the company. **The women supporting their husbands are forced to work without being paid, since it is very difficult for their husbands to achieve the very high harvest targets imposed on them. If the targets are not reached, wage reduction penalties are enforced.** Wives mostly pick up the fallen fruit, clean the hurdle, smoothen the midrib and move fresh fruit bunches to the shelter. **They work without adequate safety and health equipment.**

At Company LS in North Sumatra, harvesting labourers that do not bring their wives to the workplace are considered absent. According to one harvester in this company, *"Every labourer that comes to work will be told to bring the helper. If one does not bring the helper, then go home"*. The Company SLM on Central Kalimantan, has set a working target of 180 fruit bunches per day for harvesters. **It is impossible for one person to achieve this target on a daily basis over a period of time.** A record of 100 bunches is the target of the husband's work, while the rest is the wife's target. Harvest labourers in this plantation are required to bring their wives to the site. If not, the plantation assistant or foreman will bring in someone who helps the harvesting worker. His wage has to be paid by the harvester himself.

Considering that one harvesting worker covers 2 to 3 hectares of the company plantations, one can imagine how many women work without wage in oil palm plantations in Indonesia. When women are not working to help their husbands, they work as casual labourers without an official working agreement. **Casual labourers' wages are much lower than those of permanent workers, and often do not include social or health benefits.** This model of working relations poses a problem in the context of

workers' protection, not only in terms of wage, but also in terms of job security, health, and other basic rights.

Being permanent casual labourers

One aspect to describe the informalization of the working relations in oil palm plantations in Indonesia is the casual labourers. There are three types of casual labour on palm oil plantations: First, permanent engagement, with an annual contract, where the system and workload of casual labourers are the same as for permanent labourers, but the number of working days per month is limited to below 20 days. Second, semi-permanent engagement, with a contract for specific work at an established rate. In this form of employment, job certainty depends on the presence or absence of "work" with working hours, wages, and targets determined by the plantation companies. Third, outsourcing both officially and unofficially. The majority of workers in this status are women.

Casual labourers in oil palm plantations, which have no job security, are massive. These are usually related to fertilization and chemical spraying work, which is mostly done by women. **Women casual labourers receive lower wages, work without adequate safety and health protection, must provide their own work tools and do not get menstruation leave. They remain as casual labourers for years**, because there is no possibility to switch to another job or to return to their place of origin, not least because the working conditions do not allow to save enough money for this.

Working with toxins

Beyond the informalization of working relations, **the protection of occupational safety and health of women labourers is minimal**. In oil palm plantations, women always have more dangerous duties than men because they are employed for working with chemicals, such as fertilizers, and spraying the pesticides. Companies do not provide protective tools or safety trainings and women carry out these activities without access to regular medical check-ups.

*"I have been working here for 12 years, my work is diverse, sometimes [I am] told to fertilize, jack palm, now I am detecting mould. [At the] time of cultivation, my work target is three hectares; I ever spent 25 sacks [of fertilizers] a day. I moved to the mould detection section because **my lung was perforated by poison**. I do not know why, maybe from the poison of the fertilizer. Indeed, while working with it, I was given a mask, clothes, gloves, but I kept on being exposed to fertilizers day after day. The company never checks our health",* said Nur (38), a women labourer on an oil palm plantation in Central Kalimantan.

The spraying of chemicals is done manually. The worker carries a cap (a spraying device) weighing 20 kilograms and is responsible for spraying a specified area. The average sprayer is required to spend 6 to 10 caps each day. Companies do not provide sufficient personal protective equipment.

Gramoxone, Glyphosate, Rhodamine and Roundup are some of the chemicals used in the spraying process. Companies do not provide information on the potential impacts and dangers of the chemicals used, nor do they provide training on how to reduce the risk of exposure when spraying the chemicals and how to reduce health hazards. As a result, women working as sprayers are vulnerable to work accidents. They frequently experience

occupational diseases such as respiratory problems, burning of their hands, dizziness, blurred eyes and even blindness. (6)

The Indonesian government needs to organize the labour system placing the workers as living subjects. The government as regulator of the industry needs to develop appropriate working principles and evaluation to ensure that the palm oil industry fulfils the labour rights, especially for women. **Palm oil plantation companies have to understand the human rights implications they impose on workers** and must obey the national and international labour laws. Moreover, consumers and importing countries should also ensure their rejection of palm oil produced in exploitative working conditions.

Zidane, Sawit Watch, <http://sawitwatch.or.id/>

(1) <http://www.kemenperin.go.id/artikel/1480/Indonesia-Fokus-Produksi-CPO-40-Juta-Ton>

(2) <http://www.mediaindonesia.com/news/read/57550/produksi-cpo-nasional-sasar-target-60-juta-ton-per-tahun/2016-07-22>

(3) <http://www.tribunnews.com/bisnis/2016/11/24/ekspor-kelapa-sawit-sumbang-devisa-rp-250-triliun>

(4) <http://industri.bisnis.com/read/20141015/99/265233/kadin-indonesia-industri-sawit-serap-21-juta-tenaga-kerja>

(5) Sawit Watch, 2016

(6) In 2015, Perkumpulan Sawit Watch conducted research on the working conditions of women labourers in two oil palm plantations in Central Kalimantan. Sawit Watch found two women workers with a respiratory disease and three others exposed to Gramoxone and Glyphosate fluid, which affected two with dim eyes and the other one was blind.

Guatemala and Colombia: Women facing oil palm plantations



Women in Maríalabaja, Colombia. Ph.: Jheisson A. López.

Oil palm plantations destroy not only the biodiversity of tropical forests, but also peoples and villages who have lived in traditional economies until the arrival of this agribusiness. In many cases, it is women who most vigorously defend their territories.

Guatemala: Exploitative work in exchange for sex

Just 15 years ago, the Petén region in northern Guatemala was rainforest. Then came the HAME Group, owned by landowner Hugo Alberto Molina; and Petén became the spearhead of the expansion of oil palm plantations in this Mayan country. The company became infamous when, in 2015, it became known that it was directly responsible for the ecocide of the La Pasión River in Sayaxché municipality. Some 150 kilometers of the La Pasión River were contaminated by malathion (a pesticide used to kill flies in the palm fruits), leading to massive fish kills. Despite proven irregularities, the company continues to operate without any kind of monitoring.

In the community of San Juan de Acul, **most people bath with, cook with, and even drink this water, even though they know it is contaminated.** There is no need for studies; their bodies let them know through fever, vomiting, itching and skin and stomach diseases. But there is no other water source, and **the State even denied the community the tanks they requested to collect rainwater.** And rains are increasingly scarce, also due to climate change, which the monoculture plantation model accelerates.

In addition to ruining the water, the river ecological disaster eliminated the community's main source of food: fish. *"Before, we would get 50 pounds of fish in two days [about 22.5 kilos]; today, if we're lucky we get ten or fifteen, and sometimes not even that,"* tells one fisherwoman; and she says: ***"We cannot live without water; there is nothing without water."***

The only alternative to hunger is that which caused it: palm. Stripped of their lands and of the possibility of fishing, residents of San Juan de Acul **are forced to accept conditions on the plantations that recall times of slavery.** Says one peasant woman from San Juan de Acul: *"They work long hours for little money, without fixed schedules, and they*

have to buy the equipment themselves. But there is nowhere else to work. If there were another source of income available, they wouldn't take advantage of our need, but we have to eat." They work intense, nine- or ten-hour work days at about 8 US dollars per day, which is below the rural minimum wage.

Women face the worst of it. They work on the plantations but in the worst-paid jobs. Often, **plantation foremen blackmail them, offering them work in exchange for sex; if they do not agree to sleep with them, the foremen do not employ them.** This is what women from several communities in Petén share first-hand, as well as women from the South Coast, where sugarcane monoculture is dispossessing indigenous and peasant communities. Additionally, these same foremen often treat women with greater contempt than they treat their male counterparts. As one female worker summarizes, **"they constantly insult and threaten us."**

And after oil palm?

"There are very few remaining forests, not enough to purify the air. During the last downpour, the water was black; I had to throw out half a bucket," says a peasant woman from Sayaxché. And the rains are scarce. And the land is dying: **"They are killing the land. That root is like a bundle that doesn't let anything grow above it."** That is why they are afraid of what will happen when the plantations leave: **"After 25 years of palm, these lands are not going to be worth anything."**

In fact, a study carried out in the Polochic Valley by researcher Sara Mingorria, from ICTA (Autonomous University of Barcelona), shows that—due to the large amount of nutrients required—**palm monoculture eliminates the organic layer of the soil and leads to infertility.** It takes 25 years for the area in which oil palm was planted to become fertile again, because *"the soil is so weakened that, no matter how much it is fertilized, components are lost and disappear,"* says Mingorria. The researcher adds that these plantations are often called "green deserts" because **"this kind of tree does not allow other vegetation to grow around it" (1).**

When the life cycle of palm ends, companies look for other territories where their investments will be profitable, leaving behind desertified lands, contaminated rivers and dispossessed villages—all of this for the sake of profit of a commodity that is trading up in financial markets (2). That is, if it is not stopped by indigenous and peasant communities' dogged resistance, and especially women's resistance. **"Women are more reluctant to sell the land, and they are the main defenders of the territory: where women are at the forefront of resistance to palm, those resistance movements are more successful,"** summarizes a member of a community organization, who has chosen to remain anonymous, like most of the interviewees for this report. Because in countries like Guatemala and Colombia, **women who defend their territories and ways of life run the risk of paying with their own lives.**

Colombia: The weight of water on women's heads

In the rural areas of Maríalabaja—just 60 kilometers from the touristy city of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia—Afro-descendant, indigenous and peasant communities remember the recent history of paramilitary terror that, from 1998 to 2002, displaced a third of the municipality's 50,000 inhabitants. In Montes de María, paramilitaries perpetrated massacres such as the El Salado Massacre, where, in February 2000, at least 60 people

were killed. Terrorized, people fled in masses, leaving their lands and homes behind; **when they returned, that whole territory—in which until then, rice monoculture and traditional peasant agriculture had coexisted—had been planted with oil palm.** And thus began the struggle for survival of Afro-descendant communities in Maríalabaja.

“This was a land of abundance. Every day truckloads of yams, cassava, beans and fruits would leave for Cartagena, even for Medellín. Now there is nothing left, because the land was planted with palm, and there are pests, and the climate has changed and it doesn't rain anymore when it should rain,” laments Catalina (fictitious name). For her and for many others in her community, palm brought disaster upon Maríalabaja. It ended the abundance of food, and most of all, it contaminated the water from the dam—which is the only water that the village has access to: **“The water is contaminated by the agrochemicals used on palm; that's why all the women have vaginal infections; there are many skin diseases, especially amongst the children, as well as kidney diseases.”** Simply bathing, one feels the itchiness. And the task of getting water to drink—which is increasingly difficult to do—falls literally on the heads of women, who must carry heavy buckets of water that they collect from areas of the dam where the water is less murky.

Little older than thirty years old, and with two children, Catalina has become one of the most respected role models in this Afro-descendent peasant community. Her house is a meeting place where neighbors go, seeking help in filling out forms to ask for government assistance or request compensations—given that the Colombian government has recognized this village as a victim of the internal conflict that has bled the country for 60 years. Nonetheless, *“nothing comes our way, just crumbs and harmful actions.”* By harmful actions, she explains that **the assistance they receive only reaches a few people, which divides the community;** or that certain programs introduce cement and brick houses in villages where, until now, constructions have mainly been built out of native materials, such as mud and trees. The traditional homes are not only more ecological, they are climatically cooler.

Catalina rejects the idea of progress that devalues their ancestral ways of life: *“We had well-being, in the sense that we lived well. We didn't have technology, but we lived peacefully.”* She defends the dignity of working the land to produce traditional regional foods, and not to export palm. And she wonders: **“What would happen if we peasants stopped producing food?”**

**Most of the names of workers and activists have been modified in order to protect their identity.*

Nazaret Castro, nazaretcastro [at] gmail.com

Carro de Combate Collective has researched the impacts of oil palm in depth in countries such as Colombia, Indonesia, Cameroon, Guatemala and Ecuador. This research was funded through crowdfunding and with the collaboration of the organization, *Entrepueblos*: <http://carrodecombate.com/>

(1) *Las plantaciones de palma aceitera provocan la infertilidad de los suelos tropicales*, 2017, Institute of Environmental Science and Technology of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (ICTA-UAB),

<http://www.uab.cat/web/sala-de-prensa/detalle-noticia/las-plantaciones-de-palma-aceitera-provocan-la-infertilidad-de-los-suelos-tropicales-1345667994339.html?noticiaid=1345727879056>

(2) *Aceite de palma: una industria modelada por los mercados financieros*, 2017, Carro de Combate, <https://www.carrodecombate.com/2017/03/01/aceite-de-palma-una-industria-modelada-por-los-mercados-financieros/>

Cameroon: Local women besieged by the military, guardians of the palm oil plantations of SOCAPALM



*"Respect des engagements. Respect de l'espace vital. Pour cultiver de quoi manger".
Cameroon. Ph: Synaparcam, 2017.*

The SOCAPALM company, part of the multinational agri-food group SOCFIN (1), has been hiring security guards for its palm oil plantations in Dibombari in south-west Cameroon to prevent local people from harvesting palm nuts. Security companies initially were tasked with policing the plantations. However, **the local population has increasingly witnessed the presence of soldiers, whose interventions have been compared to those observed in war zones.**

One woman living close to the plantations offers her testimony of how women have experienced the abuse of military personnel under the complicit gaze of village leaders.

People have become prisoners in their own villages

"When you want to lock up your house, you find yourself face-to-face with armed men: what are they searching for?"

"There are armed men everywhere"

"Everywhere people are being attacked, beaten, all of that"

Such is the daily life in the village of Mbonjo 1 according to the women who live next to the palm oil plantations of SOCAPALM in Dibombari, Cameroon. This situation led around 20 women to gather on 29 January 2018 and complain to the head of their community that they were tired of the presence of armed guards and soldiers in their town and the plantations that surround it.

"It's not just SOCAPALM that's taken over our land; there are armed soldiers everywhere."

The soldiers have been in our town since 8 December 2017. The women of Mbonjo 1 understand that they are tasked with policing the plantations of SOCAPALM, but we don't want these soldiers behind our houses and inside our kitchens. **Security forces have been beating women and young people, threatening them about the palm nuts, and if that wasn't enough, they linger around behind the women's kitchens.** There is no

longer any privacy in Mbonjo 1 because of the military. Instead of guarding the palm nuts in SOCAPALM's plantations, the soldiers spend their time in the town, forcing themselves on women and young people. They have never provided proof that they are authorized to search people's houses, break down doors or attack local people. Their presence has made life in the town very tense, because the soldiers are abusing their power.

"When we're asleep at night, the soldiers enter our homes. Are there palm trees in our houses? The palm groves are on the hillsides, not inside our homes. That's why we gathered in front of the chief's house, but he just threw us out. He didn't offer us a warm welcome. The soldiers are everywhere, everywhere. What did we do in Mbonjo 1? You want to lock up your home but the soldiers are there, armed. What do they want from us?"

At the moment the women of Mbonjo 1 only have unanswered questions with respect to the presence of the military. They are helpless, without any solutions or information about what's happening to them.

The soldiers' actions frequently take place without any formal authorization that gives them permission to infiltrate our living space without any justification. We still want and aspire to a less stressful environment and living conditions. We didn't choose to be born in Mbonjo 1- it is just our bad luck. It's like a curse. But we still believe we can change this situation and we're determined to do so. That's why we went to see the village chief.

Soldiers who believe they can do what they want

The vast majority of women in this community are afraid of the military. We know that it will be difficult for us to win our fight against these men in uniform. And they're well aware that **any act of violence they commit against us, our children and our husbands will go unpunished.** They're not even worried. They'll soon be transferred somewhere else and will continue to engage in this behavior because they have the **full support of the company.**

Women recognize the power of the company because **court rulings in favor of abused women have never been implemented.** An infamous example is that of a woman who lost her baby when she suffered a miscarriage after SOCAPALM guards beat her. That happened six years ago. In the court of Mbanga, a favorable ruling was handed down to the woman, but SOCAPALM appealed and the case continues in a court in Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon. The next hearing is on 23 March 2018.

Passive village chiefs

"We did not come for the war. We came for peace. But there is already a war between the chief and us, the women of Mbonjo 1."

"We wanted our father's help and that's why we came to see our father; we want peace. But he threw us out. "

This behavior surprised the locals. The women had sought the village chief to find answers to their questions. Sadly, he didn't receive them. Another disappointment that these women must face is that they have no idea who to turn to or how to proceed.

We expected the village chief to listen to the women and defend them. His mission is to protect his people. But he didn't even listen to what we had to say. How is it possible for a chief to see 20 women in front of his house and not even try to understand the reasons for their presence?

More and more village chiefs are benefiting from the assistance of SOCAPALM. In turn, these chiefs take actions that are detrimental to their local people. Their attitude makes us believe that the chiefs are on the side of the others. They act in collusion with the company and let their people die. This self-centeredness also generates a greater gap between the local populations and the company, because those who should act as intermediaries don't receive or communicate the complaints of their people, in order to find valid solutions for both sides to obtain peace and sustainable development.

This action underlines the deep malaise that SOCAPALM has generated and maintains in our local communities. **Women have become prisoners in their own village, where they constantly feel afraid.**

They grabbed our lands to exploit them. SOCAPALM needs to respect our privacy in our homes. We're tired of all this abuse by the security forces, affecting both ourselves and our families. We feel alone and abandoned. We fight the best we can to make our environment livable. **We call for solidarity to be shown beyond the limits of our village. This is a cry of alarm that we raise to safeguard our right to life, our freedom. Although we are forced to suffer hunger and are condemned to poverty, we do not accept that they even take away our freedom. That's all we have left.**

Marie Noël ETONDE

President of the Women of the National Association of Peasants and Local residents in Cameroon (SYNAPARCAM - Synergie Nationale des Paysans et Riverains du Cameroun)

** Read more about the impact of SOCAPALM on the village of Mbonjo: "Land grab in Mbonjo village, Cameroon displaces population and disrespects ancestral burial grounds," article written by Jaff Bamenjo, coordinator for RELUFA, *Joining Hands Cameroon*: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/together-justice/2017/12/06/palm-plantation-invades-ancestral-lands/>

(1) In 1968, the government of Cameroon created SOCAPALM, the national palm oil company. It was privatized in 2000 and sold to the SOCFIN Group, an agrifood multinational controlled by the Belgian family Fabri (50.2% of shares) and the French group Bolloré (39% of shares). To learn more about the impacts of SOCFIN plantations in Africa please see: <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/socfins-plantations-in-africa-many-places-of-violence-and-destruction/>

India: Plantations uproot women from their customary forests



For the past 30 years, Uma Bai Netam, a Gond tribal woman, has been growing millets with her husband on 5 acres (around two hectares) of forest land in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh. Years of cultivation and habitation still did not make her the lawful owner of these 5 acres until the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest-Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA). The FRA, for the first time, sought to correct the ‘historical injustice’ against forest-dwelling communities by recognizing their customary rights to own, access, use and manage forests. **FRA recognizes women as equal rights-holders to resources, by recognizing them as joint title-holders to individual plots of land, and as equal members of the core decision-making body of the *Gram Sabhas* (village assemblies).**

But if Uma Bai thought this meant she could at last live and work on her land with dignity, she was mistaken. Jointly with her husband, her Individual Forest Resource right (IFR) over 2.5 acres was formally recognized after 2010 (1), but the other 2.5 acres were soon taken over by the state Forest Department to grow teak plantations. These teak plantations spread over 63 hectares of Community Forest Resources (CFR) in her and the neighbouring villages. Already struggling with impoverishment, losing half her cultivable land prevents Uma Bai from growing millets to the same extent as before. For Uma Bai, this means a hefty loss of Rs.10-11,000 annually (160 US dollars approximately).

Industrial plantations to compensate forest destruction elsewhere?

The teak plantation covering Uma Bai’s land is part of India’s forest offset programme called Compensatory Afforestation (CA), introduced as a measure to ‘regenerate’ forests lost to development projects in India. The state Forest Department sets up plantations in other locations to compensate for the diversion (and destruction) of forests for development projects, like mining, irrigation and infrastructure. In 2002, the *ad-hoc* Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) was set up at the orders of the Supreme Court of India to administer CA funds collected from ‘user agencies’, or companies, in exchange of forests diverted for projects. According to the government’s own records, by 2016, an amount over Rs. 40,000 crores (around 6.2 billion US dollars) had been collected from such ‘user agencies’ (2). In 2016, the Government of India enacted the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act (CAF Act) to institute a formal

mechanism for disbursing these funds, which today stand at Rs.50,000 crores (around 7.8 billion US dollars), and counting.

The CAF Act transfers this large amount of money to the rent-seeking colonial-era forest bureaucracy, completely excluding communities and the *Gram Sabhas* from decision-making. The centralization of India's forest governance in the hands of the Forest Department was instrumental in the dispossession of forest-dwelling communities in the first place. While the FRA was enacted to break the stranglehold of the forest bureaucracy by vesting rights over CFR and empowering *Gram Sabhas* to govern forests, its promise for democratic forest governance remains under-achieved, with only 3 per cent of the potential CFR having been formally recognized in more than 10 years. In Chhattisgarh, where Uma Bai lives, no CFRs have been recognized at all. Along with government functionaries and mining lobbies, the strongest resistance to the implementation of FRA comes from the same forest bureaucracy.

By re-centring the role of the forest bureaucracy in forest governance, now with access to these large amounts of funds, **the CAF Act has the potential to pull the brakes on even the small gains in the recognition of forest-dwelling communities' rights of governance under the FRA.** The forest department has been forcibly taking over CFR and IFR lands for establishing compensatory tree plantations. According to a study carried out by CFR-Learning & Advocacy (3), a forest rights group, in the forest-rich states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh, **CA plantations have routinely been set up on community commons, cultivable land, and sites of cultural significance. Community lands have been fenced off, sometimes with wire-fencing and others with armed guards, to prevent people's access to resources.**

A mono-culture that violates women

For women, who have a closer relationship and dependence on the land and forests, this has created an environment of fear and harassment. Responsible for meeting their own and the household's livelihood and income needs through the collection of minor forest produce, women now encounter grave hardship in meeting these daily needs for nutrition, fuel, non-timber forest products, medicinal herbs and income.

In several areas, the Forest Department has cleared dense natural forests to replace them with monoculture commercial plantations. The CFR Learning & Advocacy study found that out of 2,548 CA plantations undertaken in 10 states, 60 per cent were monoculture and of commercial species, with teak and eucalyptus together comprising more than 25 per cent of the trees planted. This has wrecked havoc for local communities and the natural diversity of plant and animal species in forests. For example, teak plantations have completely destroyed the habitats of the *Kutia Kondhs*, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) living in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, and has brought their food basket of almost 80 different types of millets down to 25. **The ultimate displacement, and complete deprivation from forest access and use has caused distress migration within the community for the first time ever. The ensuing change in their cultural fabric and way of life is irreversible.**

Across different villages, **women remain defiant at the continuing efforts of land-grab and harassment as a result of these plantations, and are resisting through legal and political means.** In pockets of Jharkhand and Odisha, plantations have become a rallying point for the formation of mandatory Forest Rights Committees by the *Gram Sabhas*, often

at the initiative of women. In Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, communities have organized into groups to spread awareness about their Community Forest Resources rights. They have protested, forcefully stopped these plantations and complained to government officials. Opposition to these forcible and destructive plantations have been countered by the Forest Department with violence against men and women, as with the *Kutia Kondhs*, and by lodging forest offence cases against tribals and PVTGs.

As the lives and livelihoods of forest-dwelling women change in such drastic ways on account of CA plantations, their insecurity of tenure often prevents them from having a voice in decision-making processes. Their claims for Community Forest Resources, Individual Forest Resource and Community Resources recognized by the FRA are rejected by government authorities, kept pending year after year, or their exercise denied. The Forest Department has not approached the *Gram Sabhas* to seek their consent before setting up these plantations. Sometimes the consent has been procured coercively through violence and harassment. Communities already losing forests to development projects are hit hard a second time when their land is taken for compensatory commercial plantations. In this scenario, **the spaces for women to assert their rights for participation in decision-making are undercut by institutional as well as cultural factors.**

By all accounts, CA plantations are neither good for the environment nor for the people. Forests, once ravaged, cannot be 'replanted'. Evidence from numerous instances across the globe bear testimony to the fact that it is only with secure tenure for communities, particularly the women within them, that forests can be conserved and protected.

As the primary users of forests, holders and think-tank of traditional-knowledge, women are the core and backbone in the process of resource conservation. In India there are thousands of forest protection groups, led and managed predominantly by women, who have successfully increased forest cover, regenerated streams, rebuilt destroyed wildlife habitats, and curbed illegal poaching and smuggling. Yet, their role in forest conservation and restoration is hardly ever acknowledged in official discourse on forest protection and restoration.

The message is clear: forest conservation and regeneration requires not monoculture commercial plantations controlled by the Forest Department, but the stewardship of communities, with women taking centre stage in the process. **By securing women's rights to forests, the FRA provides a roadmap for bringing women's knowledge, experience and authority in forest governance to the forefront.** This requires active interventions to overcome policy-level, institutional and cultural barriers that marginalize women's participation in decision-making.

*Dubey. Sanghamitra and Chitkara. Radhika
(With inputs from Tushar Dash and Soma K.P)
Members of CFR- Learning & Advocacy*

Sanghamitra Dubey is associated with Vasundhara and member of national CFR-learning and advocacy process,

[sanghamitra \[at\] vasundharaorissa.org](mailto:sanghamitra@vasundharaorissa.org) / [sanghamitradubeyikk \[at\] gmail.com](mailto:sanghamitradubeyikk@gmail.com)

RadhikaChitkara is an independent researcher and member of national CFR-learning and advocacy process [rchitkara \[at\] llm17.law.harvard.edu](mailto:rchitkara@llm17.law.harvard.edu)

(1) The FRA broadly identifies three kinds of resource rights: Community Forest Resource rights (CFR), vesting the rights of governance and ownership over the customary forest boundaries in the *Gram Sabha* (village assembly); Individual Forest Resource rights (IFR) covers land occupied, inhabited or cultivated by a household; and Community Resource rights (CR) over minor forest produce, grazing lands, intellectual property etc.

See further information on the Forest Rights Act in the WRM bulletin article of August 2014:

<http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/india-forest-struggles-at-the-crossroads/>

(2) See further information on the Compensatory Afforestation Fund in India in the WRM bulletin article of August 2015: <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/deforestation-funds-more-plantations-the-new-compensatory-afforestation-fund-bill-in-india/> ; and an action alert on the CAF Act from September 2016 at: <http://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/india-support-forest-dependent-communities-against-plantations-expansion/>

(3) Community forest rights learning and advocacy (www.cfsla.org.in)

Liberia: Women raising their voices in decision-making processes



Liberia. Ph.: Natural Resource Women Platform.

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!

The Natural Resource Women Platform (NRWP), [nrwomenplatform \[at\] gmail.com](mailto:nrwomenplatform@gmail.com)

Agribusiness and environmental injustice: impacts on the health of rural women



Ph.: Núcleo Tramas (UFC)

In recent decades, Latin American countries have been subjected to interventions resulting from development policies based on the intense exploitation of natural resources and the export of primary goods with low added value. This has strengthened sectors such as agribusiness and mining (SVAMPA, 2012). In Brazil, this has led to the advance of agricultural frontiers, resulting in **a series of environmental injustices and impacts on health**, given that the model of agribusiness production is characterized by the expansion of single crop plantations, the concentration of land, mechanization of the means of production, the proletarianization of rural populations and by the intensive use of chemical fertilizers and agrottoxins (RIGOTTO, 2011).

In response to this situation, the Work, Environment and Health Center (TRAMAS Nucleus) of the Federal University of Ceará (UFC) Medical School has undertaken studies and research for over ten years on the **impacts on the environment and the health of populations in areas where agrottoxins are used**. The main focus of our research has been the Chapada do Apodi territory, which is located in the region of Baixo Jaguaribe in the State of Ceará in northeast Brazil. Since the 1980s, Chapada do Apodi has suffered the negative consequences of irrigation policies that have transformed it into one of the main areas of agricultural development in the semi-arid northeast region of the country, particularly following the establishment of the Jaguaribe-Apodi irrigated perimeter.

As early as 2010 the UFC Tramas Nucleus reported that the spread of agribusiness - and consequently of single crop plantations- had brought about violent processes of deterritorialization and disrupted the way of life and production of local communities. The results of the research highlighted **a serious picture of environmental and human contamination due to agrottoxins and the worsening of social problems** capable of affecting the environment, work and health of the population of that territory (RIGOTTO, 2011).

Understanding that the negative **consequences of the processes of environmental injustice fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable segments of populations and thus on women**, in 2013 the UFC Tramas Nucleus launched the *Study on exposure and impacts of agrottoxins on the health of rural women in the Baixo Jaguaribe Region, Ceará*. The research, which considered gender inequalities, focused on the ways in which

the organization and gender division of labor and job insecurity in the agribusiness production chain have impacted the health of workers. The studies also provided analyses of the territorial transformations that this model of production has generated and the resulting changes to the social determinants of health that directly affect women.

Gender division of labor and job insecurity

Researchers have found that women's work is impacted by an **accentuated sexual division that relegates them to very specific jobs**. In addition to unhealthy working conditions, work commonly set aside for women is fast-paced and involves a lot of movement in addition to a series of skills such as dexterity, focus and patience. As Marcondes et al. reminded us (2003), **by associating women with the sphere of reproductive work, these skills are seen as naturally feminine and, therefore, are not duly valued, although they are widely exploited by employers**. Women's qualifications are thus denigrated and do not engender improvements in wages; in fact, the opposite is true, as we observed that **women are paid less**, given that productivity bonuses are higher for men - at least double - although the increase in the production of male workers depends directly on the accelerated labor output of the women.

Another issue related to the gendered division of labor is the idea that the work undertaken by women should be lighter. However, further analysis showed that **the tasks performed by women are associated with other risks such as repetitive movements, intense work pace and incorrect postures**. Many workers suffer from WSI/WRMD (Repetitive Strain Injury and Work-related Osteomuscular Disturbances) due to unfavorable postures, repetitive efforts and the inability to move freely. However, complaints about these matters were being treated by companies as non-specific and women encounter significant resistance to changing tasks or even to receiving adequate medical attention (ROCHA and RIGOTTO, 2017).

One of the aggravating factors of the unhealthy conditions of the work performed by women is **exposure to unknown chemical products and agrotoxins**, which is characteristic of an agricultural model based on single crop plantations. The ABRASCO Dossier warns that among "the health impacts related to the agribusiness production process, the most relevant to human and environmental health are contamination and acute and chronic intoxication caused by the use of agrotoxins" (CARNEIRO *et al.*, 2015, p. 109, *our translation*). We observed that the intensive and abusive use of agrotoxins, lack of information and inefficient product labeling make it difficult for workers and the general public to perceive risks. We verified that research participants did not know to which chemical products they were being exposed, although all of them complained about the smell of the products and said that, depending on the activity to which they were assigned, they could feel the effects on their bodies of exposure to the agrotoxins. They presented symptoms such as irritation in the throat, the eyes and respiratory systems. The research also identified a series of violations of rights committed by companies, such as subjecting workers to **strenuous workdays that exceeded that determined by present legislation; non-payment of overtime, in addition to being forced to carry it out; unhealthy work environments that expose women to the risk of accidents; habitual moral harassment; neglect in terms of the specific rights of pregnant or breastfeeding workers** (ROCHA and RIGOTTO, 2017).

Although the women reported that agribusiness offered the chance to take part in productive work, we observed that this participation was both precarious and subordinate,

reproducing and accentuating the gender inequalities existing in society. **In addition, the double workday becomes even more intense, as women remain responsible for family chores and need to reconcile these with the long workdays imposed by companies.** The increase in the participation of women in the productive sphere does not reduce their participation in the reproductive sphere. On the contrary, the changes caused by the new uses of their time promote a perverse connection between productive and reproductive work that deepens inequality between men and women.

Reflecting on the health-sickness process of women living in a territory impacted by agribusiness requires an understanding of their participation in the world of productive work and the ways in which the productive sphere is articulated with the social reproduction of life. The research thus revealed that the **territorial changes imposed by single crop plantations have an impact not only on those that are employed by such companies, but all the women who live in that territory, who are also exposed to processes of vulnerability.**

The changes reported by women in Chapada do Apodi as potentially harmful to their physical and mental health include loss of access to land; concentration of water rights in the hands of large companies, which has led to water shortages; the pollution of water and soil by agrottoxins; increased food insecurity; **the intense migratory flow of male workers caused by the seasonal nature of work in the companies, leading to an increase in cases of early pregnancies and sexual exploitation;** an increase in drug trafficking, possibly driven by the disorderly expansion of municipal districts; and an **increase in violence** (SILVA, RIGOTTO and ROCHA, 2015). These changes impact the social determinants of health and fall more heavily on women given that in a patriarchal society marked by gender inequalities, they are still the most responsible for the work of social reproduction and, therefore, for the healthcare not only of themselves, but also of family and community units.

They are also the ones that play a leading role in overseeing the health risks and grievances generated by the agro-export model. For example, they have observed the **birth of children with congenital malformations and cases of precocious puberty in girls**, cases that were studied by Aguiar (2017) through clinical anamnesis, evaluation of the environmental and occupational exposure of family units to agrottoxins, analysis of the active ingredients of agrottoxins in blood and urine, as well as in the water consumed in their homes. In the eight cases studied, the research established a relationship between illness and agrottoxins, confirming the perception of the women of the community who had already drawn this conclusion.

Thus, we observe that **women build bridges and weave connections between situations of environmental injustice and agrottoxin pollution with the increase in processes of vulnerability and impacts on health**, such as: increased cases of cancer, the emergence of cases of congenital malformation and of precocious puberty, the incidence of cases of WSI/WRMD, among other health ailments that have increased exponentially in their territory since the arrival of the agribusiness companies. Therefore, in the community context, they have been the most responsible for the dialogue established with the University, presenting demands for research and pointing out ways that help us to understand and analyze the complex situation that develops from the environmental injustices unleashed by agribusiness in the aforementioned territory.

Mayara Melo, professor at the Center for Health Sciences of the Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia and researcher at UFC Tramas Nucleus.
Raquel Rigotto, coordinator of UFC Tramas Nucleus and member of GT Health and Environment of ABRASCO.

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Indonesia: Oil palm plantations and their trace of violence against women



Ph.: Sawit Watch

In the name of economic growth, the Government of Indonesia is aggressively promoting palm oil as a commodity for competing on global markets. This promotion, however, covers up the fact that oil palm plantations are not only causing deforestation and environmental degradation, but also legal and human rights violations as well as inequality in land tenure regimes. All this leads to abuses, discrimination, poverty, land grabbing, loss of social and cultural systems, social conflicts and much more.

Why are oil palm plantations especially impacting women?

Women confront many injustices attached to their gender role, position and relations to others within the family, community, state and society in general. These injustices intensify with the aggressive neoliberal market and capital flows based on dirty production, greediness and ignorance of a truly socio-environmental sustainability. In this context, industrial oil palm plantations in Indonesia are causing conflicts at the community level while ignoring women's experiences as well as their essential role in social reproduction. Ultimately, women are exposed to the lowest, poorest, marginalized and neglected conditions.

The issue of **women violence and abuse is hardly ever discussed within the palm oil industry or by other relevant actors**. In fact, the reality of violence and abuse against women in and around oil palm plantations is largely omitted from the corporate and government story told about industrial oil palm plantations. In most events addressing extractivist industries, such as the oil palm, pulp or logging industries, women's stories are absent. Often, government policies are focused on expanding production and demand, increasing corporate benefits among others. These policies have no interest in adverting the impacts this industry brings with it. On the contrary, the expansion of these monocultures only worsens the situation of women and communities in general, with pollution of rivers and water sources being only one of many impacts. Women labourers are fully aware of this; yet, they have no other economic choice to keep their family alive.

Research conducted by the National Commission on Violence Against Women together with Indonesian civil society organizations such as WALHI, RMI, Bina Desa, Dayakologi Institute and Debt Watch, found various layers of violence experienced by women in the natural resource sector. (1) By using a feminist political ecological analysis, the research highlights how **violence against women is a reality wherever industrial oil palm plantations in Indonesia were set up.**

Structurally abusing women

With the arrival of large-scale oil palm plantations, women lose access and control over land, which eventually pushes them to become labourers on the plantations. In many cases, women working on these plantations have little to no legal protection. They mostly have to spray fertilizers and pesticides, which is harmful to women's health.

In a study on oil palm plantations in West Kalimantan, many women expressed they had no idea that their land or family land was now in the company's hands. Women's lack of information is also reinforced by the general situation in Indonesia, in which men generally own the land.

In consequence, **the company considers that it is only important to involve men in the so-called socialization meetings.** Besides the many intimidation strategies used by the companies, the sweet promises of benefits if families enrol in '*plasma*' schemes (smallholder or outgrower schemes that are very common in Indonesia and have trapped many families in debt), becoming company workers on their own land, have led many families to eventually lose their land. There is no Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) carried out with the communities, especially with women who will experience excessive and specific impacts when oil palm plantations, that are greedy for land and water, enter their villages. In many places, the burden of searching for water is on women; hence, when there is a water crisis due to drought or pollution, the workload of women gets bigger.

For women living in and around plantation areas, being a "*brondol*" is a way of survival to meet their families' basic needs. The "*brondol*," are women picking up oil palm fruits left on the ground. From morning to evening, they walk a long way to reach the oil palm plantations, bearing a high risk of being caught by the companies' security officers. **Despite companies seizing large amounts of land, water, forests and other communal resources, they consider the search for left-over oil palm fruit as theft.**

There are also many women who work as labourers in oil palm plantations. Companies consider women as the more accurate, careful and diligent workers and thus employ many female labourers as seed planters and for applying fertilizers. In particularly the application of fertilizers is actually a very toxic activity and very harmful to women's health. Male workers are forced to bring family members to help them achieve the company targets. One thing is for sure; the wives and children are not included as recipients of a salary. **The labour practices of these large oil palm plantations are widely cited as modern-day slavery.** (2)

The high criminalization of those opposing the plantations has led to many arrests of activists, and even murders. Women who lost their husbands, fathers or sons are forced to earn money for maintaining the family while still taking care of the domestic chores. This

double burden is extremely difficult for women starting their overall work before sunrise and ending it long after sunset.

But women suffer other types of violence that are committed by security forces, police and military, which subsequently reinforce gender roles, positions and relations attached to them.

Targeting their “womanhood”

When women struggle to maintain their living space and deny the presence of oil palm plantations, they experience further criminalization and violence.

It is important to note that there is a higher vulnerability for women in fighting for their rights. One of the violations is the one targeting their “womanhood” which aims to silence their fight. The “womanhood” in this case is defined as **the relation of social, cultural and religious constructions to women’s functions and roles, which are mostly still strongly influenced by the patriarchal culture.**

Conflicts occurs not only because of the differences in perceptions between local communities and oil palm industry actors, both corporate and governmental, but also because women's knowledge and experience in managing their living resources, particularly as carers and managers of household production systems and social production, has been ignored. It is then fair to say that neglecting an entity having the inherited knowledge and experience as part of social order means neglecting the existence of such entity; and that is definitely a violation of basic rights.

*Khalisah Khalid, Head of Campaign and Network Department
WALHI – Friends of the Earth Indonesia*

(1) Meretas Jejak Kekerasan terhadap perempuan dalam pengelolaan sumber daya alam, sebuah tawaran dialog (Komnas Perempuan 2008)

https://issuu.com/walhi/docs/temuan_awal-sebuah_tawaran_dialog

(2) See SawitWatch (in Bahasa): <http://sawitwatch.or.id/2016/02/catatan-singkat-akhir-tahun-perburuhan-sawit-watch-2015/> ;

Article from the WRM Bulletin 197, December 2013, <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/modern-day-slavery-in-oil-palm-plantations-the-outstanding-cases-of-malaysia-and-indonesia/> :

Accenture for Humanity United: Exploitative Labor Practices in the Global Palm Oil Industry

http://humanityunited.org/pdfs/Modern_Slavery_in_the_Palm_Oil_Industry.pdf ;

Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism: Forced Labor and Child Labor on Palm Oil Plantations

<http://www.schusterinstituteinvestigations.org/#!slavery-palm-oil-plantations-indonesia/cqcc>

Covered under the shade of oil palm companies in Cameroon: A recount of the abuses that women suffer



Ph: Miriam Gahtigah/IPS

The food and financial crises of 2008 unquestionably led many investors to pounce on Africa, which is one of the foci of large-scale land transactions. Investors are increasingly requesting large areas of arable lands, which are mostly used by communities. Foreign Direct Investments are also tied to the acquisition of agricultural assets (1). Frequently, these demands for land are made with a view to installing vast agricultural monoculture systems. These companies' presence in developing countries in general, and in Cameroon in particular, keeps bringing complications for communities.

We can mention companies operating in Cameroon (non-exhaustively), such as PAMOL (Cameroon), HEVECAM (Singapore), SGSOC (United States), SOSUCAM (France) and SOCAPALM (Luxembourg). As the primary users of lands, women are often the most affected. They condemn the destruction of their livelihoods for the sake of company profitability, which causes food insecurity. They also condemn job instability, as well as the lack of freedom to come and go through the areas they formerly cultivated, for fear of reprisals.

This article aims to explore the situation of women in and around industrial plantations in Cameroon. It **shows the damages and abuses that women suffer, in regards to the land and society.**

Land conflicts: Violation of land use rights, violence and intimidation

The expansion of industrial plantations, such as oil palm in Cameroon, require large areas of land, which consequently diminishes the spaces that local communities—and in particular women—previously used.

“Biofuels' demand for land threatens to displace crops such as cassava, peanuts, sorghum and corn in order to benefit this fuel. Non-edible products (...) also directly compete with agricultural products for fertile land (...), represent a threat to poor communities and drive food prices up...” (2) Rural women are most affected by this situation, as they use the land and its products as a source of income and subsistence for their homes. **Land scarcity is one of the main causes of the difficult situation of women living in and around industrial plantations. In addition, plantations are increasingly surrounding and engulfing communities.** This situation creates a real problem in the management of

relations between companies and neighboring populations, who denounce the mistreatment and documented cases of violence.

For some years, in fact, **women living in and around agroindustrial plantations in Cameroon have suffered physical and psychological violence**, mainly when seeking their livelihoods—which have become scarce due to the presence of these industries. Their gardens, which were once close to their homes, are now a considerable distance away. For the WHO, violence can be defined as *“the deliberate use of physical force or power—whether threatened or real—against oneself, another person or a group or community, which causes or is likely to cause injury, death, psychological harm, developmental disorders or hardship.”*

There have been cases of assaults and rapes that have sometimes even led to the death of these women. For their part, the women were only trying to secure their families survival, by picking some palm nuts in the company's plantations. **Accused of theft, they suffer assaults, almost always at the hands of security workers hired by the companies.** In addition to enduring constant verbal aggression, they must also tolerate threats and physical attacks.

Indeed, there are already many documented cases of violence from the plantations of **the company, SOCAPALM**, perpetrated by contracted security employees (3). While these assaults and rapes have diminished in frequency somewhat, it is important to point out that this situation has already generated a kind of psychosis among the women who live near the plantations. One woman who lives near a plantation in this area explains to us that she used to be able to go out to the field alone early in the morning, but that now this is not advisable. She says that **women go in groups, for fear that plantations watchmen will attack them.** In short, these rural women, who for the most part have not had schooling and are ashamed of their situation, often prefer to keep silent about the abuses they have suffered from the companies' presence. **This situation is very clear; yet, it will continue to be ignored if civil society remains silent.** In addition to the atrocities mentioned, there are other forms of abuse that women working in agribusinesses suffer.

Social Abuses: Between injustice and the separation of families

The combination of certain risk factors—such as land scarcity, pressure placed on the land, the food crisis and declining revenues from rural plantations—has pushed women seeking better welfare to find work in neighboring agribusinesses. Women are then forced to work on plantations where they face many other injustices, and which causes the separation of families. **Their schedules prevent them from really being able to take care of their children**, since they do not have fixed work schedules.

Mrs. X believes that *“working in these companies is very distressing, and in the worst case, can mean almost falling into slavery. The workload sometimes doubles when we finish ahead of time, because the count is done on a task-by-task basis; that means that as long as the task is not finished, it doesn't count.”* These women sometimes have very difficult tasks to carry out given their physical conditions, but for fear of dismissal they feel obligated to comply; they also run the risk that the task they have completed not be counted at the end of the day. In her opinion, women *“don't have the right to speak and their complaints are not taken into consideration; on the contrary, complaints favor the loss of bonuses and benefits.”* On top of this, their salaries do not allow them to prosper or to take care of their families.

Coercion and injustice seem to be the daily fate of women who live near plantations. **They do not have the right to complain, for fear of retaliation that could lead to disciplinary action.** *“We cannot complain, [as] the immediate consequence would be a transfer that doesn't take your marital situation into account. I lived in Douala with my family; they assigned me to Kribi, so I had to leave my husband and children,”* and she adds: *“It is too unfair and sad.”*

Another category of women who work in agribusinesses are those recruited by intermediaries. These women are not entitled to any benefits (insurance, medical coverage, maternity leave, etc.)

In conclusion, it is clear that foreign investors' behavior on fertile lands in Cameroon is a burning issue that deserves to be taken very seriously, especially because women's rights are often trampled—despite that, as we know, women are the mothers of society in Africa. So, those living near plantations are daily demanding that their rights be taken into account; meanwhile, those working in the companies demand justice and better working conditions.

Michele ONGBASSOMBEN, *michelebatende [at] yahoo.fr*
Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement (CED), www.cedcameroun.org

(1) According to government figures, Cameroon received 348.2 billion CFA francs in foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2013. Only 4.1 billion CFA francs corresponded to the agricultural sector. See: <http://www.investiraucameroun.com/gestion-publique/2309-5666-le-cameroun-a-capte-348-milliards-de-fcfa-d-investissements-directs-et-rangers-en-2013>

(2) MUNZARA, A. 2011. Land grabbing undermines food security in West Africa, FECCIWA/ACCEAO

(3) <http://www.cameroonvoice.com/news/article-news-2706.htm>

RECOMMENDED

World March of Women: International Women's Day Declaration

On the 8th of March 2018, International Women's Day, we from the World March of Women, diverse women from all peoples, races and ages, come together once again to reaffirm that we will keep marching until we are all free from all the oppression from the patriarchal, capitalist and colonial system; we will continue to use our feminism as a way of life, and the streets as the space to amplify our demands. We denounce and resist the political worldwide context marked by the growing economic, social, political, climatic and ideological crises, in short, we denounce the total war environment where we, women, are the most affected! Read the declaration here: <https://marchmundialblog.wordpress.com/en/>

Certifying oil palm company Socapalm despite evident abuses

The sixth and latest issue of the magazine "*Trait d'Union*", a trimestral magazine and liaison of the associations of populations surrounded by oil palm plantations from SOCAPALM, workers' unions and oil palm planters, was released. The magazine shares over 15 relevant articles highlighting different aspects of the struggles surrounding these oil palm plantations in Cameroon. This time, we want to emphasize two articles:

* **Violation of rural women's rights living around agro-industry companies: the end of the taboo?**, which stresses the many challenges and abuses women have to undergo not only due to the company's land grab and their loss of livelihoods but also due to the physical and sexual violence employed by the plantation company's security forces.

* **Socapalm, a contested ISO 14001 certification!**, which explains in detail the reasons why the oil palm company should not have received in 2017 a renovation of this certification. Used for cleaning its image, the renewal of the certification has not taken into account the many offences and violations the company does to the local populations and the environment. Download the magazine (in French) here:

<http://www.palmespoir.org/index.php/telechargements/category/2-trait-d-union-mag-archives>

***Yakuchaski Warmikuna* (Women Messengers of the Rivers)**

An audiovisual production made in indigenous Shiwiar territory in the Ecuadorian Amazon exposes the reality and resistance of peoples against the extraction of common goods, and in particular the struggle of women as givers of life and defenders of the land and water.

Watch the video in Spanish at: <http://www.radiotemplor.org/?p=10579>

Marching forward: Women, resistance and counter-power:

The Transnational Institute's State of Power 2018 report highlights three interviews with women activists who have displayed incredible courage, determination and creativity to confront corporate power and state violence. From Honduras, South Africa and India, the interviews attest to the instrumental role women have played in their respective struggles, the ways communities have refused to be cowed by the politics of terror, and the importance of movements to remain autonomous, rooted in communities and intelligent and holistic in their strategies and tactics. Read further here:

<http://longreads.tni.org/state-of-power-2018/women-resistance-counterpower/>

The Brazilian Energy Model and Violations of Women's Rights

The Movement of Dam-Affected peoples in Brazil (MAB, by its Portuguese acronym) warns that the construction of dams affects women more intensely, and that it is women whose rights are more brutally violated. A well-known tragedy is the incentive for prostitution and trafficking of women—problems which take place with companies' complicity. Earlier this year, the police dismantled a brothel on the highway that accesses one of the Belo Monte project construction sites, where there were women—including minors—living in conditions of slavery and private imprisonment. In spaces where dams are built, women are a mere commodity to entertain workers.

Read the article in Portuguese here: <http://fama2018.org/2018/02/26/o-modelo-energetico-brasileiro-e-violacao-dos-direitos-das-mulheres/>

Women and palm oil: A day in the life of a female palm oil worker

A video from the Center for International Forestry Research shows a day of Magdalena Pandan, a 35-year-old oil palm plantation worker in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, who rises before dawn every day to carry out her duties toward her job, her family and her crop lands. See video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilw_6r-PVug

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Editor-in-Chief: Winfridus Overbeek

Managing Editor: Joanna Cabello

Editorial Assistants: Elizabeth Díaz, Lucía Guadagno, Jutta Kill, Carolina Motoki y Teresa Pérez

WRM International Secretariat

Avenida General María Paz 1615 office 3. CP 11400. Montevideo, Uruguay

Phone/Fax: +598 26056943

wrm@wrm.org.uy | <http://www.wrm.org.uy>