

# Impacts of Large Scale Oil Palm Plantations on Women

A collection of information



World Rainforest Movement  
<http://wrm.org.uy>

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# A Collection of Articles Published in the WRM Bulletin on the issue of Resistance, Women and the Impacts of Plantations

## **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.

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(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-etranagers-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>

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## 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!

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



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 33<sup>rd</sup> 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 plant 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 Cameroonian 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)*

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## **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/>

## Women say, “We want our lands back!”



Large-scale monoculture plantations “rob women of everything they have as they take the agricultural lands and forests that women depend upon for their livelihoods and for feeding their families”. This is part of the final declaration of a workshop organized in Port Loko, Sierra Leone, in August 2017, which brought together women from Sierra Leone’s Northern, Southern and Eastern regions, together with representatives from Cameroon, Liberia and Guinea. (1)

The workshop aimed at facilitating a space for them to share, exchange and denounce their particular experiences as women faced with an alarming expansion of industrial oil palm plantations in West and Central Africa. Multinational agribusiness, backed-up by governments and security forces, have been occupying millions of hectares of land that belong to communities under the false promise to bring so-called ‘development’. This occupation and imposition has created disastrous consequences for communities, women and their environments.

Women explained how companies have taken and destroyed most of their farmlands and forests while diverting nearby rivers to irrigate the palm trees. They also voiced the harassment, systematic control and violence they face from police and the companies’ security guards if they are found entering the plantation areas or if they are caught with palm nuts in their possession. They are accused of stealing even though they use oil palm trees products traditionally for generations. Women also denounced that the expansion of plantations increased “sexual violence such as rape and other sexual harassment, with a consequence that women are restricted from moving around freely and are afraid of leaving their houses or going to work.”

However, against all odds and despite the abuse and criminalization towards the women who denounce the impacts of plantations, they keep resisting those corporations and their allies in order to get their land and forests back.

The stories shared by the women participating at the workshop in Sierra Leona however, are not isolated stories. Traditional and forest-dependant communities across the world, whether in Asia, Latin America or Africa, whose land and traditions have been stolen by plantation companies, have similar stories filled with resistance, criminalization and oppression.

WRM joins once again the International Day of Struggles against Monoculture Tree Plantations (September 21<sup>st</sup>) as a way to make visible the many stories and voices of local communities against industrial plantations. Voices that are mostly silenced through repression and structural violence and racism imposed since colonial times. Repression, violence and racism that are reinforced by the economic and political powers entrenched in the continuation and expansion of this destructive industry. Governments, certification schemes, pulp and paper as well as biomass energy and carbon companies, land speculators, financial backers, developmental aid agencies, international forestry agencies, mainstream media, among others, are all partners of this and share responsibility.

Women in Sierra Leona declared that they want their land and forests back *“to provide livelihoods that allow for good, healthy lives in dignity for communities.”* This bulletin, launched in the framework of the September 21<sup>st</sup>, hopes to support in breaking the circle of enforced ‘silence’ and is therefore dedicated to the numerous voices and stories resisting the expansion of industrial plantations around the world.

(1) Read the Port Loko Declaration here: <http://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/port-loko-declaration-women-say-we-want-our-lands-back/>

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## Women & Plantations: Pain or Gain? The Nigerian Experience



*The mad rush for land for large scale tree plantations in Africa by transnational companies is fuelling massive deforestation, leading to grave socio-economic and environmental impacts across forest communities and territories of peoples.*

In Nigeria, forest concessions - including reserves and communal farmlands - are being taken over by multinationals and plantation merchants with the aid of some Government officials for monoculture tree plantation to feed international markets enriching private pockets. Rubber, oil palm, cocoa and more recently, gmelina, banana and cassava plantations are the predominant plantations in Nigeria. All of these are geared towards feeding international markets for humans and machines in Europe, America and a legion of countries in the global South. Generally those tree plantations are established without due process including free, prior and informed consent or consideration of community women, men and children who depend on forests for their survival.

The destruction of the forest results in eviction of communities from their ancestral land, cultural alteration, as well as spiritual contamination. And for women, who have such roles as farmers, fisher-folks, traditional healers and housekeepers, traders, fetchers of water, fuel wood collectors and local midwives, it has a major impact.

Some women have died, many are dying and some have been rendered widows as a result of the impact of monoculture tree plantation expansion in their localities. Others have to migrate to long distances when they lose their source of livelihood, in search of menial jobs to fend for themselves and those who fall under their care.

### **Okomu Oil Palm**

Okomu Oil Palm PLC, a major plantation merchant in Nigeria has been involved with expansion of its plantation since 2000, where 8000 hectares of forest reserve (without a Certificate of Occupancy) for rubber and palm oil plantation was added to the already existing 15,578 hectares.

This activity had led to the eviction and extinction of the communities of Oweike, Agbede and Ijawcamp. The fourth community called Makilolo, is still resisting through the intervention of ERA/FoEN's Community Forest Watch initiative.

Due to the militarization of the community territories by Okomu Oil Palm, people have become tenants in their own land as they are subjected to rigorous security checks before they enter and exit their own communities (see WRM Bulletin 199). Forest community women and people of Makilolo, Agbede, Oweike and Ijawcamp have suffered serious cases of dislocation and livelihood truncation while young women are exposed to different forms of harassment from security operatives.

The company has electricity in all its facilities but communities lack electricity as well as proper sanitary facilities. Pollution of their streams (their only source of water) by the chemicals used in tree plantations has given rise to some health concerns in the area like miscarriages, still births, skin infections, birth defects, bronchitis and a host of others. As caregivers to their families and all those who fall under their care, women are subjected to increased hardship and suffering with more cases of diseases and sicknesses prevalence.

In spite of these impacts on communities, Okomu Oil palm plans to expand its oil palm cultivation by another 20,000 hectares this year under its structured investment of \$75 billion dollars.

### **Michelin rubber plantations**

Local women from communities neighbouring the fast depleting Iguobazuwa forest reserve in Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria, depended heavily on their forest for their medicinal, nutritional and family income needs. But their forests and communal farmlands were suddenly converted by the French Rubber Company, Michelin PLC into rubber plantations to export latex to make car tyres.

Michelin PLC, a French multinational rubber company headquartered in France, had in the past operated in Nigeria as Utagbauno Rubber Estate Limited (Delta State); Waterside Rubber Estate Limited (Ogun State); Araromi Rubber Estate Limited (Ondo State); and Osse River Rubber Estate Limited (Edo State). It now operates as International Rubber Plantation Society (SIPH) and Rubber Estates Nigeria Limited (RENL). This strategy is to distract and deceive people from their parent brand.

The overall impact of RENL's operations in the area has affected community women and people of Aifesoba, Igueihase, Ora, Iguoriakhi, Iguobazuwa Amienghomwan, Obozogbe villages, where over 3,500 hectares of forested landmass and communal farmlands were given to the company without due process, without free prior informed consent of host communities, and let alone conducting a proper Environmental Impact Assessment.

Other major plantation drivers in Nigeria include: Wilmar International (Biase Plantations Limited) in Cross River State and Southgate Cocoa Company Limited in Cross River State where over 7000 hectares of Etara and Ekuri-Eyeyeng community forest is earmarked for cocoa plantation.

Only forest management practices controlled by communities and based on their knowledge and experience will give **Gains to Mother earth, not Pains to Mothers on earth.**

Rita Ikponmwosa Uwaka, Forest & Biodiversity, ERA/FoE Nigeria - Bulletin 200

## Sharing Experiences from other Regions

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



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/> (Bulletin 236)

(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.

## 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 averting 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.

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*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](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](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>

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## Guatemala and Colombia: Women facing oil palm plantations



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.*

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**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

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<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/>

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## Honduras: Criminalization of the Garifuna people defending their territory from the advance of the African palm



In the early 17th century, during the colonial era, shipwrecked Africans reached the Caribbean coast, inhabited by the Kalinagu or Caribe people. Over the years, cultural syncretism gave rise to the ethnic identity of the Garifuna people. The fusion produced the Garifuna language, religion and traditions. The Garifuna people settled river estuaries and marshes on the coasts of several Central American countries, where they engaged in fishing and subsistence agriculture.

In Honduras, the Garifuna people live on the northern coast of the country, where they have had a constant struggle for the defence of their territory. In the late 19th century, the state recognised their territorial rights and handed over the first community land titles. In spite of this, in the 20th century, under pressure from transnational banana companies interested in exploiting these lands, the communities began to lose part of their territories. With the endorsement of the state, large areas of Garifuna territory passed into the effective control of foreign companies.

Heedless of the protests of the Garifuna people, the state has allowed history to repeat itself nearly 100 years later: the banana enclave changed into an oil palm enclave. (1)

*The case of the Garifuna community of Armenia*

The banana boom and the arrival of the Standard Fruit Company, with enticing promises of work, led to the displacement of the Armenia community to another site on the coast, also part of Garifuna territory. It was re-established with the name of Nueva (New) Armenia. As years went by, the promised work did not materialize, and territorial pressure and cultural differences with the newcomers were felt. New customs were adopted for land management and ownership. The Garifuna community lost access to nearby forests and coastal areas which had provided part of their food and building materials for houses. Lands under community tenure entered in conflict with the land-grabbing by the transnational banana company, which had the authorization of the state itself.

In the 1990s, African palm plantations also began to expand within Garifuna territory in the vicinity of Nueva Armenia. The National Agrarian Institute and the municipal government acted against each other. While the one said it recognized Garifuna territory, the other handed over those same lands to small cooperatives of oil palm producers.

When the Standard Fruit Company's concession expired, and the company had in any case determined that banana production was no longer profitable, it withdrew from the Garifuna territory around Antigua (Old) Armenia. The company returned the lands to the municipal government, which did not respect the historical rights of the Garifuna people and instead began to distribute land for African palm cultivation.

The new land owners, both at Nueva (New) Armenia and at Antigua (Old) Armenia, have followed the strategy of forming palm producers' cooperatives, as this is a requirement for receiving property titles. Once they have the property titles, they sell the land and palm plantations to a single company. The community says this company belongs to a local economic group, but in fact, its owners are unknown, and they are acquiring a large proportion of Garifuna territory with complete impunity.

Recently, the expansion of African palm plantations has caused the destruction of the remaining forests, pollution of rivers with agrochemicals and the loss of food sovereignty of the Garifuna people. Nearly 80% of the Garifuna territory is occupied by African palm plantations.

The land titles issued by the state in the early 1900s have not been respected by the authorities, and the new company has been occupying and destroying what was left of their ancestral territory. As a result, the Garifuna people have decided to retake their lands and assert their community titles.

In January 2014, heavy machinery could be seen clearing what was left of Garifuna territory. The community lodged a complaint with the municipal government and set up the "Permanent Cultural Resistance Camp" (*Campamento Resistencia Cultural Permanente*) on recovered land near Nueva (New) Armenia. At the camp, some 80 members of the community are resisting the advance of oil palm plantations. In spite of the legal complaint, the company has continued its activities. Day by day, this new agribusiness offensive is taking over a few more meters of land, completely encircling the camp, which now only has an exit to the sea.

In August, police swarmed into the camp, tore down its flag and arrested several of its members. They were charged with illegal occupation of their own land, and were held for over 6 hours. As a result, the other members of the community also mobilized in support, but when they got back to the camp, they found their houses burnt down along with all their possessions. These reprisals however have not intimidated them; on the contrary, with enviable fortitude, the community is in the process of rebuilding their homes. (2)

The communities are on constant alert for possible attacks by the oil palm company or the police. They know that the municipal government will not protect them. “The state does not govern for the poor; it is trampling on the ancestral land rights of the Garifuna people,” said members of the Honduran Black Fraternity Organization (OFRANEH). (3)

Attempted kidnapping, police arrests and evictions are some of the trials suffered by members of Garifuna communities for taking a firm line in defence of their territory. They are therefore taking their grievances to the international fora. At the latest hearings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, in Paraguay in September 2014, the Garifuna people presented their case, and the state of Honduras now faces an international court case.

With the goal of increasing the visibility of this resistance movement, demonstrating that the Garifuna people are not alone in their struggle, and denouncing the impacts of the expansion of African palm monocultures, an international forum was held in September in La Ceiba, Honduras. Latin American organizations and networks met with indigenous, *campesino* and Garifuna communities to discuss the impacts of large-scale monocultures. During the forum, participants visited the community of Nueva (New) Armenia and Resistance Camp, where they were able to verify the denunciations and claims of the Garifuna people.

*Elizabeth Díaz, member of the WRM International Secretariat (Bulletin 204)*

- (1) The state of Honduras denies indigenous status to the Garifuna people (in Spanish), <http://ofraneh.wordpress.com/2014/08/20/estado-de-honduras-deniega-condicion-de-indigena-al-pueblo-garifuna/>
- (2) Nueva Armenia’s struggle for life and sovereignty (in Spanish), <http://www.rel-uita.org/index.php/es/agricultura/soberania-alimentaria/item/5450-nueva-armenia-y-su-lucha-por-la-vida-y-la-soberania>
- (3) Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH-Honduran Black Fraternity Organization), a Honduran federation of the Garifuna people for the defence of cultural and territorial rights, <http://www.ofraneh.org>

## The International Petition

### **Petition: Stop all forms of abuse against women in and around large monoculture tree plantations**

We, women from here and elsewhere, have witnessed the horrible poverty of families living next to large monoculture plantations, particularly oil palm plantations, everywhere these plantations have been established. Women, the backbone of the family unit, are the most affected.

— Women are displaced from the lands on which they have always produced food to feed their families and communities, and food becomes scarce and families go hungry;

— Women are harassed, abused, tortured and dragged into the courts just for possessing some palm nuts or palm oil, even if these nuts come from their own oil palms and are staples for their cooking;

— Some women are even raped in and around the plantations, with the rapists remaining unpunished;

— The forests and biodiversity that provide women with much of their economic and cultural resources, and are the cradle of their traditional values, are destroyed to make way for plantations, further aggravating the consequences of climate change;

— Livelihoods are drastically affected and women are forced to work as labourers in plantations where their wages are too low for them to be able to pay school fees, compromising their children's future. Children end up resorting to theft and are regularly thrown in jail. Without decent jobs, even young children are drawn into taking drugs and end up following their fathers in drinking alcohol.

— Rivers are polluted by chemicals from the large plantations and diseases and other health problems multiply.

— Promises made to communities by the companies are never fulfilled.

We demand respect for the rights of women in and around large monoculture plantations. These women demand that their lands be returned to them in order to continue to enjoy their customary rights to use these lands to produce foods and ensure the food security and food sovereignty of their communities, the well-being of their families, and peace and development in their localities. Women must have control over decisions about the use of their lands.

By way of our signatures, we call for an end to all violence against women and we stand with the families destroyed by famine, conflict, marginalisation, theft, rape, illness, and death due to the monopolisation of their lands by large national and multinational companies. We call on governments to protect the people and for these companies to respect national laws and the lives of local peoples.

## Mundemba and Port Loko Declarations

### **Mundemba Declaration: Women and the expansion of oil palm plantations and industrial palm oil**



Women resist industrial palm oil (Photo: JVE-Cameroun)

Considering that the aspiration to human dignity is a common ideal for humankind, and that the United Nations Charter asserts this aspiration in its preamble and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

Considering the key role women play in the global economy, a role also recognized by the Millennium Development Goals;

Considering the role that women play in the local economies of each country in the region;

Considering the pivotal role that women play in maintaining their families, which is at the heart of our societies;

Aware of the fact that women are always at the forefront of the struggle against poverty, through their many interventions, especially in the field of agriculture;

We, leaders of groups of women affected by the expansion of industrial monoculture plantations, particularly oil palm plantations;

We, national and international organizations involved in the struggle for the rights of women and local communities in Africa, Latin America and Asia, signatories of this declaration, met from 27 to 28 January 2016 in Mundemba, south-western Cameroon;

**After having:**

- shared testimonies of the painful daily struggle of women living in and around oil palm plantations and analysed the impact on women and families of the rapid, brutal expansion of monocultures promoted by multinationals in different communities and countries;
- considered the numerous social, economic, environmental, cultural and culinary advantages of traditional palm oil; and
- exchanged strategies and solutions that women who have become victims of land grabs, particularly for the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations, have put in place to defend their interests.

### **Having found that:**

- Monoculture plantations, particularly oil palm plantations:
  - trap women living in and around such plantations in a system of growing impoverishment that affects the whole family;
  - \* rob women of fertile agricultural lands once used for family agriculture through which women fed the family and the entire community; this threatens the food security and sovereignty of populations in and around these industrial plantations; these plantations are causing the disappearance of many agricultural and cultural practices thereby contributing to the disappearance of many traditional crafts and skills, causing entire communities to become dependent on consumerism due to the loss of autonomy in food production;
  - \* cannot feed families in the way that women's family farming does;
  - \* are a threat to the conservation of biodiversity and contribute to the loss of non-timber forest products, which are an important source of income for women, because they cause massive and rampant deforestation, thus also worsening global warming and climate change;
  - \* lead to the disappearance of traditional oil palm cultivation, the traditional, medicinal, nutritional and cultural virtues of which are valued by women for their contribution to the wellbeing of the family and society as a whole;
- The creation of land policies and the transfer of land are often carried out without real involvement of the women who are affected; and
- Plantations of oil palm trees can never replace a forest.

### **We reaffirm our commitment to invest in:**

- investigate and document cases of abuse and assaults experienced by women living around and in large-scale industrial plantations, particularly oil palm plantations, and to widely distribute this documentation;
- establish a platform for action and exchange among women engaged in the struggle for the defence of their interests that are threatened by tree monocultures and particularly oil palm plantations;
- establish a multi-stakeholder platform (private sector, local communities and NGOs) with the participation of women leaders;

explore the creation of a support fund for women in and around the agro-industrial plantations who have become victims of abuse;

- support the development of economic alternatives for affected women;
- engage in advocacy for the greater involvement of women in decision-making on land rights issues and land sales;
- promote traditional oil palm cultivation;
- create a women’s observatory focused on the large-scale transfer of land and the impact of monoculture plantations on family farming;
- strengthen the capacity of women to better defend their interests and give them the tools to resist the many forms of abuse caused by large-scale agro-industry; and
- support studies that explore legal frameworks and advocacy for influencing legislative and regulatory reforms in related sectors.

## **WE RECOMMEND**

### **To public authorities**

- make the problems associated with the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations a national priority;
- create multi-sector policies adapted to the situation of rural women affected by the expansion of industrial oil palm; and
- enact legislative and regulatory reforms (that strengthen women’s rights) related to the expansion of industrial oil palm.

### **To donors and technical partners**

- provide support in various forms to actions that strengthen women’s struggle against the expansion of industrial oil palm;
- take every opportunity in their co-operation with public authorities to raise the issue of the detrimental impacts of the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations; and
- support women’s initiatives to promote the cultivation of traditional oil palm and the use of traditional palm oil and other products in order to strengthen rural livelihoods.

### **To local and international NGOs**

- take up and join women’s struggle against the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations;
- advocate for clear, effective and appropriate solutions to the problem of expanding industrial oil palm plantations and make this a national priority; and
- strengthen the capacity of women so that they may be better equipped for the struggle against the expansion of industrial oil palm.

## To women

- take the lead in the struggle against the expansion of the industrial palm oil industry;
- organise associations and networks in order to be stronger; and
- denounce any violation of rights caused by the expansion of the industrial palm oil industry.

*Mundemba, Cameroon, 28 January 2016*

## Port Loko Declaration: Women say “We want our lands back!”



Women met from 14 to 15 August 2017 in Port Loko, Sierra Leone

### ***Women and the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations***

**We, leaders of groups of women affected by the expansion of industrial monoculture plantations, particularly oil palm plantations, coming from all regions in Sierra Leone and different countries from West and Central Africa;**

**We, national and international organizations involved in the struggle for the rights of women and local communities in Africa, Latin America and Asia, signatories of this declaration, met from 14 to 15 August 2017 in Port Loko, Sierra Leone.**

Considering the pivotal role women play in maintaining their families and securing food for their children;

Considering the essential role of land to produce food for our families;

Considering the importance and diversity of the traditional use of oil palms, ranging from food to building materials to medicines, providing over 30 different products of great importance for women's livelihoods;

Considering the impacts and human rights violations suffered by women, specifically the dramatic increase of sexual violence against women and children, as a consequence of concessions to oil palm companies that invade communities' territories;

Considering the duty of governments to protect the rights of people and women, as enshrined in several international human rights related conventions that they have signed;

Aware of the fact that women play a central role in the struggle against land grabbing and the deprivation of their communities;

**We denounce:**

– monoculture plantations, particularly oil palm plantations, for robbing women of everything they have as they take the agricultural lands and forests that women depend upon for their livelihoods and for feeding their families.

– the expansion of oil palm plantations for leading to a substantial increase of local food prices due to the loss of agricultural land for food production and the resulting need to import food from far away areas, additionally threatening food security.

– companies for coming with lots of promises (such as schools or hospitals) that never fulfill.

– the lack of participation of women in decision making processes related to oil palm plantations, as they are neither invited to meetings nor ever consulted, and women in the countries of the region are not even allowed to own or buy land.

– that, as a result, only men are involved in these decision-making processes and that families without male members are excluded.

– chiefs and paramount chiefs who accept bribes, which often leads to concessions being granted without the consent of the women and the community as a whole.

– companies for not employing local people, but bringing in outsiders, or if they do hire some local people, discriminating against them and providing them with the lowest ranking jobs with precarious working conditions, such as dangerous tasks involving the application of agrotoxins without adequate safety equipment.

– plantation companies and those family members who only see women as laborers.

– the long hours that women laborers must work, putting their children at risk.

– the expansion of plantations for causing women and children to suffer from increased violence and sexual violence such as rape and other sexual harassment, with a consequence

that women are restricted from moving around freely and are afraid of leaving their houses or going to work.

– the intimidation and criminalization of women who denounce the impacts of plantations and the violation of their rights.

**Women demand:**

– full participation for women in all decisions regarding the land. Women want the right to own and make decisions over land.

– the right for communities and women to say no to industrial oil palm plantations.

– the respect of the rights of communities.

– the right for women to speak freely.

– that, at the very least, the conditions for handing over lands to companies and the respective contracts are revised and the companies fulfill their promises.

– access to education and safety for their children.

– their lands back from industrial plantation companies.

– protection against intimidation and violence for women and human rights defenders.

**We, Women want our land and forests back so that we can have an agriculture that feeds us. We want a change that allows us to provide livelihoods that allow for good, healthy lives in dignity for our communities.**