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THE FOCUS OF THIS ISSUE: WOMEN ON THE MARCH

Doing honour once again to Woman's Day, thousands of peasant, working and unemployed women are on the march in Brazil. They are marching to express their rejection of the criminalization of social movements, against violence falling on women, against agribusiness and monoculture eucalyptus and sugarcane plantations. They are also marching in defence of food and energy sovereignty and of public investment in peasant farming.

This is happening not only in Brazil. In the five continents the World March of Women invites people to march "in the struggle against privatization of natural resources and public services. We are going to march for food and energy sovereignty and against destruction and the control of our territories and against the false solutions to face climate change."

All over the world there are women who are becoming aware, getting organized, making demands and becoming empowered.

This bulletin is from them and for them.

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OUR VIEWPOINT

- Empowered women: Social struggles and gender consciousness

There can be no doubt that we are immersed in a long and sometimes resisted process of gender awareness regarding social relationships that in general terms have historically placed women in an unequal and subordinate position.

The women's struggle –a freedom struggle stemming from their condition as excluded sector- is, in essence, a social demand for changes in relationships and social structures that, in most societies have restricted women's role -through political, legal, cultural, religious and family systems- to the private and family context. In short, it is a demand for social justice.

In the western world, it is possible to identify old roots of this struggle in the figure of Olympe de Gouges, a French dramaturge and political activist who, in 1791 was the author of the "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen," in clear contrast to the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen." Article 10 of her declaration establishes that "Woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must equally have the right to mount the rostrum," meaning that if women have the right to be executed, they should have the right to speak.

During the twentieth century, the gender issue took on greater visibility as it was addressed by international organizations and processes. The Platform of Action of the Fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1995 was instrumental in this respect, advocating women's full participation in exercising power in public life.

Since then, progressively documents, conferences and international processes have started to formally recognize women's right to participate on an equal standing with men in the fields of power and decision-making. However, statistical data reveal an under-representation of women vis-à-vis men in decision-making spheres, showing that the present situation is not yet in step with this formal recognition.

In other spheres and particularly in the countries of the South, social struggles against the imposition of productive models implying the destruction of communal goods such as water, land, sovereignty and even culture itself, have found women on a level with men and, on some occasions, at the forefront of these struggles. These women, who start getting involved in local struggles usually do so not for themselves but for their children, their family, their community. They have grown along the way, becoming protagonists: they have become empowered, undergoing an individual change, undertaking their own collective action transformed into political action because it attempts to influence public decisions.

This is progress built on pain, courage and the hope of the lives of many anonymous women, such as those from the Ecuadorian mangroves in defence of their food sovereignty

when facing the destructive advance of shrimp farming; the peasant women of the Brazilian Landless Movement defending peasant production, displaced by industrial eucalyptus plantations; the women of Idheze, in Nigeria, who closed down the oil facilities of the Nigeria Agip Oil Company, tired of the community not even being compensated for the contamination they have endured for years; the women of the historical Chipko Movement in the Indian Himalayas, hugging their trees to defend them from the loggers. Women who resist the advance of monoculture tree plantations, women against mining, against dams, against oil and against destruction because they fight for life.

And this awareness engenders other awarenesses, that become steps to either move out of invisibility or out of plain oppression. Women no longer want to be mediated by men. A group of Mapuche women (1) denounced “invisibility, negation and exclusion of Mapuche women by the Chilean State, which has no programmes involving our situation or our way of life.” Likewise they react and accuse that “this is also in great part also true for the Mapuche Movement itself.” They highlight the “invisibility” of Mapuche women in spite of the fact that they have worked “shoulder by shoulder with men, gestated the movement, struggled to obtain rights as members of society and above all, as women.”

The Mapuche women express strongly and clearly that the demand for rights, justice, equity and respect must begin at home. They challenge the concept of rebuilding the Mapuche “pater land” [meaning of the Spanish word “patria”, fatherland] and instead raise the idea of the Mapuche “mater land” [creating the Spanish neologism “matria”] since the origin of their existence is the Mapu Ñuke, their Mother Land. (1)

Just like their Mapuche sisters, women all over the world are incorporating their own claims into collective struggles and making their voices heard with increasing strength, regaining ownership over their place in the world, of their own lives.

Raquel Núñez
World Rainforest Movement

(1) “La matria mapuche”, <http://www.mapuche-nation.org/espanol/html/articulos/art-77.htm>

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LOOKING INTO THE GENDER AND ENVIRONMENT ISSUE

- Connecting environmental currents and gender

Women often play a crucial role in environmental conflicts over oil extraction, mining and logging activities, shrimp farming and tree plantations. These courageous women do not hesitate to challenge political power, local tyrants and armed violence for protecting the surrounding natural resources they and their family depend on. Therefore they protect their culture, way of life, sacred places, livelihood means and so on. Although this phenomenon is widespread, it remains little studied and so is that of the empowerment that women can achieve through these struggles. This article provides a panorama of the different existing environmental currents and their connection with their gender counterparts, in order to

highlight different political ways of considering women's role in environmental struggles.

Environmental currents can support different values going from the most conservative (e.g. conservation in national parks at the cost of indigenous populations' welfare) to the most progressive, where ecological concerns and social equity are intrinsically related as is the case in the socio-environmental mobilizations related to extraction (mining, logging, oil) or production processes (shrimp farming, plantations). In order to understand these distinct positions in the political arena, Martínez-Alier (2002) has proposed to organize them under three broad currents of environmentalism –as detailed below. In addition, we explore how these currents articulate with gender.

First of all, Martínez-Alier identifies the “cult of wilderness” which promotes conservation of a pristine nature free of any human intervention. Its academic support is often conservation biology. Arguably, its feminist counterpart is essentialism, where women and men are regarded as psychologically distinct, as a result of their biological natures, and their attributed roles are therefore not questioned. Women's emancipation, or, better said, their accomplishment, is attained through the valorization of the traditional tasks, characteristics and values associated to their gender. In both cases, the idea is to allocate space or/and bodies to different activities in a dualistic and complementary way, such as industry and conservation –without questioning economic growth– or women and men –without questioning gender relations. “Essentialist” scholars have applied the mythical pristine approach to the relations of women with nature arguing that women are, due to their biology, closer to nature than men. This gave rise to an early branch of ecofeminism (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990; Plant, 1989), challenged by later scholars arguing for a materialist ecofeminism (Mellor, 1997).

Secondly, the environmentalist current of “eco-efficiency” seeks to make economic growth compatible with environmental conservation, by technical change and by economic policies that “internalise” the market's “negative externalities”. Today, it is the dominant current and its foremost academic support can typically be found in environmental economics. It appears in notions such as “ecological modernization”, “clean technologies”, “green accountancy”. It is dominated by technological optimism, and economic growth is seen as enhancing sustainability, as promoted by the World Bank. Increasingly, this current also tends to integrate a gender dimension in its analyses, but in a way similar to the environmental cost approach: as a variable to be internalised. Its counterpart within gender studies manifests itself through political and institutional changes allowing women to access traditionally masculine opportunities and professions by positive discrimination –as a kind of gender mainstreaming. Gender and empowerment questions are generally dealt with in the perspective of women's catching up with men through their insertion in market economy (wage labour, access to property and credit, education). It is often the Western masculine model that determines the norms to be reached, thereby complying with the dominant ideology of development which demands that non-Western societies catch up with industrialized countries through their rapid insertion in world markets.

Thirdly, we have the current that Martínez-Alier has called “environmentalism of the poor” –or the “environmental justice” movement or “liberation ecology” (Peet and Watts, 1996). This current argues against the negative impacts of economic growth and, more generally, against unequal distribution of economic benefits and socio-environmental impacts of industrialization. It manifests itself through socio-environmental conflicts against the industrial

extraction of natural resources (oil, mining and logging activities) or industrial production of bio-resources (tree plantations, shrimp farming). Such conflicts denounce and challenge the access to natural resources and services and the burdens of pollution or other environmental impacts that arise because of unequal property rights and inequalities of power and income. The protagonists of these conflicts are on one hand the state and/or private companies and, on the other, impoverished populations, rural or urban, made up of peasants, indigenous people or wagedworkers, claiming social justice. This current often remains invisible because it contests the dominant discourse on the economy but also because the category of “the poor” is somewhat vague. The category comprises (1) urban disadvantaged populations, more or less integrated into the market system but unable to make a proper living in it; (2) indigenous groups not integrated into the market and considered as “poor”, though many of them are not such, as they adapt to their surrounding natural wealth without undermining it; and (3) rural populations that have been impoverished by the market system and that fight to protect the ecosystems upon which they depend. Of course, not all poor people are environmentalists, but in many environmental conflicts, the poor are on the side of the conservation of natural resources, because of their own livelihood needs or in order to protect their health. Their idiom is not a unified language; it is often not the language of Western ecology, nor is it that of standard economics: local populations may use the language of defence of human rights, the urgencies of livelihood, the need for food security, the defence of cultural identity and territorial rights, the respect for sacredness. However, the language of Western environmentalism is increasingly used for strategic reasons (communication, visibility, protection), because it fits well into their demands, and because there is a globalization of environmental concerns. Interestingly, the socio-environmental movements who succeed in getting an international visibility are the ones who have combined a specific cultural identity (including territorial rights, livelihood, sacredness) with elements of Western environmentalism (ecosystem conservation, biodiversity). This is the case, for example, of well-known movements such as the Seringueiros one in Brazil (associated with the figure of Chico Mendes), the Chipko movement in India and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya (associated with the figure of Wangari Maathai), but it is also the case of many other more recent movements such as for example the one of FUNDECOL in Ecuador fighting against shrimp farming, etc.

Guha (2000) summarizes the differences between the “cult of wilderness” and the “environmentalism of the poor” as follows: “While Northern greens have been deeply attentive to the rights of victimized or endangered animal and plant species, Southern greens have generally been more alert to the rights of the less fortunate members of their own species”. The academic support for this current would be ecological anthropology, agro-ecology, political ecology and sometimes ecological economics.

The feminist counterpart of this current could be called the “ecofeminism of the poor” or “liberation feminist ecology”. In many environmental conflicts women play a key role –as is the case in the movements mentioned above. The gender division of work, power and access rights to natural resources, implying specific responsibilities, knowledge, and action spheres make women and men perceive differently industrial exploitation. By mobilizing to preserve ecosystems, feminine impoverished populations undertake actions in new spheres, start new activities, and question gender identities and relations within their own society. What is more, in some cases they try to connect with the market system through their own organizational networks. This empowerment moves forward through a bottom-up process. Academic fields that support these movements and analyse the ways that gender

relations structure –and are structured by– environmental management, policies and changes are feminist environmentalism (Agarwal, 1992), feminist political ecology (Rocheleau et al., 1996), socialist or materialist ecofeminism (Mellor, 1997; Merchant, 1992), ecofeminist political economy (Mellor, 2006) and feminist ecological economics (Perkins and Kuiper, 2005; Perkins, 2007; O'Hara, 2009). While the two first fields develop a case study approach, the two subsequent are more interested in the philosophy of economic theory. The last one, for its part, tends to integrate these two approaches incorporating elements of ecological economics, such as time, local economies, valuation, and sustainability.

The role of women in environmental conflicts is often not well known. Sometimes, women instigate the struggle, sometimes they lead and organize the struggle, sometimes they interact with men in the conflicts, sometimes they confront men through the conflicts and sometimes men have leading roles in struggles while women constitute the backbone of the movement. This has different impacts in term of empowerment. Agarwal (2001) proposed a table for analysing the different roles that can be undertaken by women:

Table 1. *Typology of participation*

Form/Level of participation	Characteristic features
Nominal participation	Membership in the group
Passive participation	Being informed of decisions <i>ex post facto</i> ; or attending meetings and listening in on decision-making, without speaking up
Consultative participation	Being asked an opinion in specific matters without guarantee of influencing decisions
Active-specific participation	Being asked to (or volunteering to) undertake specific tasks
Active participation	Expressing opinions, whether or not solicited, or taking initiatives of other sorts
Interactive (empowering) participation	Having voice and influence in the group's decisions

Women's role in environmental conflicts has the potential to redress the unequal distribution of the benefits and costs related to the industrial exploitation of natural resources as well as to challenge local masculine domination. When women take active part in the struggles – either leading, organizing or actively participating in the decisions – they often redefine their social position within their own culture, while at the same time challenging the global economy.

By Sandra Veuthey, e-mail: sandra_veuthey@hotmail.com

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WOMEN: IMPACTED AND EMPOWERED

- Food sovereignty in the hands of mangrove ecosystem women

This story has been cultivated with the thoughts, the experience, the dreams, the words and the hands of women shell-gatherers from the Province of Esmeraldas, in northern Ecuador.

Living conditions there are hard. Access to the communities is usually difficult, there are schools in some locations, but very often the teachers lose heart and leave. The parents must make great efforts and send away their children to enable them to study. The water is no good for consumption and food is getting increasingly scarce.

With the arrival of the shrimp ponds, the mangroves disappeared and the farmhouses disappeared too. Nor were the dead respected either, as they even invaded the cemeteries. People leave, seeking to improve their lives, but they always come back because what they learnt is to gather, to fish and to sow food.

We start this reflection with much joy. For a long time now we have been struggling for the defence of the mangrove ecosystem, we have been talking about how we have been losing food, work and land. They even want to take our dignity away from us. We are trapped between the destruction of primary forests and the shrimp ponds and now, between the eucalyptus plantations and the oil palm plantations that are advancing and threatening to make us disappear.

Approximately ninety of us women sit and talk, sharing every day the gathering of shells from between the mangrove roots. Together we open another door to advance along this path. Rosa, Jacinta, Delfida, Uberlisa, Fátima, Gladys, Digna, Reverside, Anita, Nelly, Albita, Lucety, Ismelda, Nancy, Danny, Daila, Mercedes, María, Andrea, Estefanía, Santa, Lourdes, Marianeli, Flora, Herlinda, Tasiana, Rita, Ramona, Marieta, Carmen, Pastora, Ninfa, are the

women with whom we have been struggling for nearly twenty years now in defence of the mangrove ecosystem, since the eighties, when the shrimp ponds and nurseries started invading the mangroves. We have been fighting for years, “but we are not tired.”

Sharing the warmth of a plate of traditional food, sheltered by the intelligence and picaresque joy of Esmeralda’s shell-gathering women, we crafted this story to share with other women, with other struggles, with other expectations ... and in this fiesta we were joined by Don Garci, Goyo, Cocoa, Edgar, Pirre, La Mona, Fifo, Maximo and Alfredo.

“Like a nightmare that we have to wake up from”

“One day we woke up and it was like a bad dream, like a nightmare. Some with machines, others with machetes, all destroying the mangrove forest; then the fire finished everything off. Large notices were put up ‘Private property – no trespassing’ and some skulls and crossbones appeared on the notices. Then armed guards and dogs prevented the women shell-gatherers from entering the few places left where the mangroves had survived. The guards insulted them, chased them with the dogs and threatened to kill them.

Thus, the story of destruction in the Muisne Canton, in the south of the Province of Esmeraldas began. This happened towards the end of the eighties. It was then that industrial shrimp farming started to destroy the mangrove ecosystem and peasant farms starting from the Province of El Oro.

At the beginning, the population believed in the companies’ offers: “They came like they do during political campaigns, promising us the earth. During the first years it looked as if a bonanza was coming. We all went out to gather shrimp larvae and to fish for egg-producing shrimps to deliver them to the industry. But soon it was all over and here we are, with our arms crossed, with nothing.” The community people never thought that in a few years their lives would be so affected.

“With shell gathering, my mother gave birth and brought up ten daughters. We all studied up to college and we never wanted for anything at home. Not luxuries, but we had everything at mealtimes: different types of crabs, such as the guariche, the tasquero, and the mapara; also forest animals, free-range hens and shellfish, clams, mussels, fish. Bananas were more abundant then. At that time, there was food because everyone had their own small farm. People grew food in their front gardens; there were all sorts of herbs, *chillangua*, large oregano, small oregano, cilantro, spring onions, mint and *palo*. We eat *pepa e pan*, peach palm ... everything was abundant. Now a shell-gatherers’ family lives very poorly, shrimp farms occupy the mangroves and the lands that belonged to our grandparents. Many farms have been lost.”

The women shell-gatherers from the Muisne Canton remember how the parish of Bolivar in the south of the Canton was larger, it had mango trees, avocados, orange trees, guavas, lemon and mandarin trees, coconut palms. All the houses had vegetable gardens, with corn, broad-beans, beans, cassava, sweet potato, *zagú*, tomatoes, sweet peppers, chillies, sweet potatoes of all kinds. The women told how they used to go down to the vegetable patch and have everything for the dressing at hand: white onions, shallots. There were aromatic plants too, verbena, mint, thyme, citronella. The women of Bunche and Daule described the same landscape.

We know how the lives of our fellow fishermen, crab gatherers, coalmen have deteriorated because we are all one and the same: women, men, mangroves. The stories, the legends, the dances, the songs...now there is hardly anything left.

In the old days there were great dances in big halls. The people celebrated their feasts to the sound of the guitar. In these parts the guitar was much played. The Black people arrived at the Canton of Muisne in the forties with their drums, their lullabies and praises and they merged with the customs and the culture of the inhabitants of Manabi. All of them went to the mangroves and all of them have made their lives there.

"But what I always say is that what is most important is our political struggle. It must never falter but rather grow. What is most important is to recover our natural enterprise, our mangrove ecosystem. There no one asks us for documents, no one places an age limit, we are humbly received. All the rest is complementary. We will not allow shrimp farming to be legalized, because if the government hands over the lands then they will become more arrogant and will want to humiliate us." These are the words of 24-year old Andrea, mother of three boys and with all the strength of the women shell-gatherers from the Province of Esmeraldas.

The women shell-gatherers from the Canton of Muisne tell how, in spite of their deep grief over seeing the destruction of the mangrove ecosystem and their impotence over the speed with which the ecosystem was destroyed, their thoughts challenged them to find some way out. Fortunately they were together, there were community organizations as by then the Canton of Muisne was learning the story of the Muisne Esmeraldas Peasant Organization (Organización Campesina de Muisne Esmeraldas - OCAME), a strong organization inspired by the Church of the poor.

Today the proposal is to rehabilitate the mangrove ecosystem and with it, recover all that has been lost, because they are even taking away our culture. When the mangrove is reforested, the shells, the small tasquero crabs, larger crabs and other shell-fish will all come back. And community work will come back too because you can do nothing on your own and our communities have always been noted for their support, for reciprocity. Families survive because between us all we support each other, grandfathers and grandmothers, sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, uncles and aunts, mother and father and "whoever is stopping by." Everybody contributes, not only with money but with work, with company, with good advice and this must not be lost.

What is still a bit "low" is work on the farms and the plots, although it has started. But it needs strength because it is like an incomplete body, as if the hands were missing or perhaps the heart. Markets are being organized to sell products from the mangroves and the farms; we call them Food Sovereignty Markets. What we are trying to do is to sell what we produce, what comes from our own land, with no chemicals. We are also taking products out of the mangrove, but with the message that the shell has to be big, 4.5 cm as it is good to sell, the small one must be put back so it can finish growing. We want to do the same with the crabs, sell large crabs, mind the egg producing crabs and mind the mothers who reproduce.

"The fact is that we consider the mangrove ecosystem to be our mother and this is what we have all learnt. Life is there, the mangrove ecosystem is a maternity and it is a natural industry that God has left us as heritage, so we won't be poor."

Long days of reflection, joyful meetings among communities, reforestation of mangrove forests, a political process of resistance is being built, of territorial dispute which, finally is a dispute for power.

For the group of women from the Cayapas Mataje Ecological Reserve, in the north of the Province of Esmeraldas and the Wildlife Refuge of the Muisne Cojimies Mangrove Estuary, in the south of the Province of Esmeraldas. Sent by Marianeli Torres, CCONDEM, Ecuador, e-mail: marianeli@ccondem.org.ec

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- Nigerian Women Bear the Curse of Oil

The communities constantly grapple with the consequences of oil spills, gas flares and other menaces arising from unregulated explorative activities of the international oil companies. Many women in these subsistence communities bear the burdensome task of caring for their families, protecting them from harsh pollution. The rate of cases of cancer, infertility, leukemia, bronchitis, asthma, still-births, deformed babies and other pollution-related ailments are unusually high in this region. From Ikarama to Akaraolu to Imiringi, women are bruised and dying.



Women are the victims of massive crude oil spills on rivers and farmlands "We will mobilize a protest against Agip, Darline Odonogu Samuel declares



Testimony Time...



Testimony Time at Okoroba, Bayelsa State

As one farmer, Marthy Berebo shared, "If I am to undress before you, you will see the extent of the toll this pollution has taken on my body. The whole of my body is racked with aches."

Ikarama, a predominantly fishing and farming community of 10,000 people, also ranks as one of the most polluted communities in the Niger Delta. Settled along Taylor Creek, Ikarama is host to both the Nigeria Agip Oil Company (NAOC) and Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). Shell's pipes that link the Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers States all pass through Ikarama. Shell's Okordia Manifold is also situated in Ikarama. It is assumed that by hosting big international companies like Shell, communities flourish. But the contrary happens to Ikarama, as it finds itself in a deep and dark pool of poverty. The roads have yet to be paved, as promised by the company while the lives of people are becoming worse, with their livelihoods destroyed by the frequent oil spills.



Sometime, women protest,
Women too have rights



Most Niger Delta families are poor
and impoverished



A young lady taking her bath in the
Taylor Creek, at Ikarama,
helping to show the cassava soaked
in bags in the water

Alili Ziah is a widow with seven children. Before, she could still provide for them through fishing but now that the water has been contaminated, her family has been forced to depend on other people's charity. "Whenever I set traps and I go to inspect, they are soaked in crude oil," she remarked. Like Ikarama, Imiringi has been hosting several of Shell's gas flaring sites since 1972. The health implications arising from the open, poisonous flames are enormous. People who live nearby complain of rashes on the skin, redness of the eyes and other complications. Contamination is quite likely since women usually dry their local staple, kpopko garri near these gas flaring sites. Women's reproductive health has also been affected, as seen with the rising number of cases of infertility and birth deformities.

Oil has been Nigeria's lifeblood since the late 1950s, when Shell had its first successful oil well in Oloibiri in the Bayelsa State in 1956. Eighty per cent of the country's wealth is kilometres of flow lines and 400 kilometres of pipelines. It has 349 drilling sites. At the height of its operations, Shell produced one million barrels of crude oil daily. There are prospects that the figure would once more increase.



A women working dangerously
close to a gas flare site



A Women at Ikarama Village in Bayelsa;
what is the fate of rural women



A woman peeling cassava near an
oil spill--polluted livelihood

Yet oil companies have very little to show in terms of its contributions to the communities' development. In fact, they have merely subjected communities to more poverty and disease because of their unregulated means of polluting the land, water and air. In the Niger Delta alone, there are more than a hundred gas flare sites. With the huge money involved in this industry, it not surprising to see conflicts that claim the lives of over 1,000 people annually.

Of the oil companies operating at the Niger Delta, Shell has been deemed as the most notorious as it sanctioned human rights abuses committed by security forces at its employ. Shell arms and pays government security personnel and outfits who are always quick to quell any signs of uprising and carry out wanton human rights abuses. In all of these, women are the major victims, as widows and mothers. They have been the families' pillars on whose shoulders many of sorrow and deprivation fall.

Many women still carry scars and live in deformed bodies as a consequence of the military operatives that paid by Shell moved into the communities with armoured tanks, guns and weapons, shooting and killing hundreds of people including women and children, mowing down entire villages, and maiming thousands, in times when Ken Saro-Wiwa roused the consciousness of the nation and the international community over the environmental injustice in Ogoniland.

Promise Yibari Maapie had her left arm permanently withered as a result of a gun shot. Her daughter Joy also sustained damaging gun shots on her legs. "The soldiers brought pain, sorrow and hunger into my life," she told a reporter. After the infamous Ogoni genocide, there have been several cases, including that of the Odi Massacre in 1999, where entire towns were razed down. It was a retaliatory move by the government's troops, arising from the killing of some military men by militants. In mid 2009, massacres and bombings happened in several villages in the Gbaramatu Kingdom in the Niger Delta. In the process, many women were killed, wounded or displaced. There were reported cases of those who gave birth in the forests and creeks while running away from the military attack. As usual, there were reports of rape by the soldiers.

Women are the foremost victims in the Niger Delta tragedy. Apart from contending with gas flares and oil spills, they also live at the very edge of their lives. When rusty pipelines conveying crude oil burst, farmlands, forests, streams and rivers are damaged. Scores are also killed as in October 1998 when an oil pipeline explosion roasted around 2,000 people in Jesse Town in Ethiopia, West Local Government Council of the Delta State. Worse, government interventions are nonexistent and when they exist at all, they are either belated or half-baked. Besides this, constructions of gigantic drilling projects pollute and alter the communities' water ways, depriving residents' access to water. These impacts are felt most by women. Aside from being farmers, they also provide food and water for the family.

Despite the tragedy that their bodies bear, women have been rendered voiceless in many communities. In most communities, it takes the special intervention of civil society organisations (CSOs) for women to be allowed into the town hall consultative fora where issues affecting the communities are discussed. Men would always insist that the matters to be discussed are too serious for women. In many cases, women cannot claim land ownership. Farmlands usually belong to husbands and fathers. The deaths of their husbands or divorce could spell the end of their stay in those lands. Thus, environmental disasters constitute a double tragedy for women.

Nonetheless, in some communities, women are organising themselves, attempting to undo the malevolent strings of retrogressive customs and take up their destinities into their own hands.

Excerpted and adapted from: "When Blessing Becomes a Curse in the Niger Delta", by Betty Abah, for Women in Action's, the Journal of the ISIS International Women's group in the Philipines, published February 2010 (edition titled: Women in a Weary World: Climate Change and Women in the Global South). Ms Abah is Gender Focal Person of the Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria. E-mail: betty@eraction.org / bettyabah@yahoo.co.uk

The document can be viewed at: http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=28

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- Papua New Guinea: Women in Oil Palm Association become empowered

In late 2008, WRM and Friends of the Earth Papua New Guinea/CELCOR jointly organised a workshop with local women in Papua New Guinea. The workshop referred to oil palm plantations that are being mainly promoted to feed the European market with palm oil (used in products such as cosmetics, soap, vegetable oil and foodstuffs) as well as for the production of agrofuels.

In a country where most of its 5 million population still lives in the rural area and rely on subsistence farming for their livelihoods, the oil palm export-driven production is increasing at the expense of traditional livelihoods.

The workshop gathered women from different provinces and enabled them to express their concerns regarding the expansion of oil palm plantations: possible land shortages due to oil palm expansion; contamination of rivers, streams, as well as soils and the air as a result of the use of agrottoxics in the plantations.

However, they went beyond and also tackled women issues, giving an insight into the impacts of oil palm plantations on their condition as women. They referred to the reinforcement of male control over women through the increasing control of men over the income from oil palm production; the restriction of women's access to garden land as a consequence of the conversion of traditional farmlands to oil palm plantations; social disruption including increased alcoholism and domestic violence.

The meeting served as a catalyst for the need of women to organise themselves, and one of the outcomes of the workshop was a plan to establish an association of women within the framework of the campaign on oil palm issues. In November 2009 Women in Oil Palm Association (WOPA) was established, and this year 2010 it is in the process of being

registered under the Investment Promotion Authority.

The Association was formed with the purpose of:

- “Exposing the impacts of the oil palm industry in PNG on women and children through awareness and community mobilization
- Campaigning for change in government policies, oil palm company management practices on the environment, social and economic livelihood and welfare of the women and children
- Campaigning and lobby for women and children rights against deprivation and violation by the industry
- Uniting affected women to form solid foundation and established a women network to campaign on issues affecting women and children
- Protecting and promoting the rights of women and children
- Acting as a body, a voice or catalyst for the oil palm affected women
- Campaigning and lobbying for the environment and community livelihood to be defended, preserved and managed in a sustainable way.”

The creation of the WOPA is important to raise women's issues in the oil palm industry in PNG. The initiative of the Women in Oil Palm Association is a relief for the women who are quietly campaigning on oil palm issues impacting their livelihoods.

There are many challenges ahead for the women organized under the WOPA. Yet, it is a major step in the process of women becoming empowered to demand for their rights and as they claim “for the environment and community livelihood to be defended, preserved and managed in a sustainable way”.

Adapted from the article "WOMEN IN OIL PALM ASSOCIATION (WOPA)" sent by George Laume, from Friends of the Earth Papua New Guinea-CELCOR, email: glaume@celcor.org.pg. The full article can be accessed at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/PapuaNG/WOPA.pdf>

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- Brazil: Women affected by dams – changes in their lifestyles

The building of hydroelectric dams in Brazil has been marked by a lack of respect for the environment and society and more so by a lack of respect for the affected communities that see how their lives are radically changed and how they are annulled in the name of “capitalist society development.” In Brazil, over 2,000 dams have been built, resulting in the eviction of over 1 million people from their lands. There are federal government projects foreseeing the construction of 1,443 more dams over the next 20 years. These are major works linked to false promises of more jobs and development; respect for nature, cheaper energy for the people and guaranteeing the families’ right to compensation. However, so far the control of dams has been left in the hands of multinational corporations, few jobs have been generated, energy has become more expensive for the workers and compensation has not been paid.

That is to say, there is a dictatorship installed against the people who live on the river banks.

Not only are negative concrete and material impacts involved, such as flooding of forests, cities, schools, homes, but there are non-tangible and affective impacts too, because with the loss of a spatial relationship, other links are also lost such as family ties, community sharing, reference to surroundings – losses that directly affect “feelings,” causing serious damage to the health and welfare of the affected populations.

Changes in habits and economic derivations

We cannot place all the responsibility for unequal gender relationships on hydroelectric projects, but we do know that they have changed pre-existing conditions and that they tend to worsen them. Capitalist and patriarchal society is strengthened by the action of these companies regarding local and structural initiatives (where the dam is being or has been built) of the capitalist model.

The announcement that dams will be built triggers off different reactions and behaviour in men and women. In most cases it will be seen that women show strong resistance to leaving their territory and find it hard to assimilate the possibility of changes in their space. For their part, some of the men are more easily convinced and see a possibility of financial compensation for leaving the area. One of the factors justifying this is that, traditionally men relate to activities generating financial resources (money), while women do not.

On residing in rural areas, most of the people affected by the dams have a close relationship with the land. They use natural resources mainly for food but also use other inputs for family consumption, such as infusions, firewood for cooking and heating, etc. In this respect, women are the first victims of environmental degradation, resulting in immeasurable losses for the communities depending on nature for sustenance.

This is corroborated by the fact that 70% of the families affected by dams in Brazil have not received compensation and in the few cases that their rights were recognized, the new area is much smaller than the previous one. Thus, women lose their little peasant farms and their autonomy. They lose their vegetable patch or garden where they produce a variety of food (orchards, medicinal herbs and farm animals), the area where they experiment with seeds and store them, the area that enables them to supplement their income and enrich the family's diet – spaces where women decide what they are going to plant, how they are going to do it, what seeds to grow, etc.

This change not only implies the loss of a woman's position of power and decision, but also an increase in her economic dependency, for instance in relation to the market and the pharmacy. In communities where, before the advent of the dam, the relationship with nature was maintained as a fundamental factor ensuring the continuity of their lifestyle, in the new context women are those most adversely affected and tend to suffer such negative impacts more deeply.

The process of emptying the communities that “remained” and were not affected by the flooding of the reservoir, has resulted in the loss of family ties, of relationships with the environment and with the emptying of community gathering places, such as the church. As the communities are emptying, public transport becomes scarcer, rural schools and local health centres are closed down. It is possible to imagine the impact on the lives of women, who have to look after the family, the children, older people, the handicapped, etc. With the shortage and often the suspension of public transport, women's mobility and their potential

access to jobs, study and leisure activities become harder.

These populations were expropriated, not only in the legal sense of the word. These people who lived off the rivers and their banks lost their material working conditions and were uprooted, transplanted geographically and culturally, expropriated from a knowledge and tuning in with the physical environment, with their surroundings, with “abstract” values that are not only of great sentimental value but more importantly, as references that can never be rebuilt nor measured in terms of money.

Affective relationships and women's health

Impoverishment and the trauma of the communities' social rupture have a more serious effect on women, and particularly on their affective relationships and health. In some cases, impoverishment, generated by forced displacement of people and the violent arrival of major works, increase lack of understanding and family de-structuring, abandoning of families, male migration to urban areas, increasing the number of homes where women are the heads of the family, facing the responsibility of bringing up children on their own. Increased domestic violence as a consequence of alcoholism is another effect made more serious by de-structured families and impoverishment.

Regarding health, it is common that home management and family welfare are the woman's responsibility. It is she who controls what is available and what is missing and sees the need to “economise” available resources to ensure their existence for a longer time. This is reflected in the food situation, although cultural models in different regions of the country reproduce gender inequality when food is distributed among the family. In some studies it has been observed that unequal food distribution among men and women in the family was recurrent, especial during greater scarcity, as was the case after the arrival of the dams. “Women and girls are given a smaller helping or are excluded from some items considered as more “strength-giving” (meat for example) as their work is considered to be “light” and demanding “less energy replacement.”

Regarding women's health, the arrival of workers from other regions and states to build the dams and the resulting urbanization of the region are factors that can increase sexually transmitted diseases, particularly AIDS. Cases of teen-age pregnancy also increase, and these mothers are immediately abandoned because once the dam is built, young workers move on somewhere else.

As if such “occasional” relationships were not enough, one of the strategies used by the companies is to hire young men to seduce the girls and thus come closer to their families with the aim of convincing them to leave the community peacefully and not to participate in activities organized by those affected by the building of the dam. The installation of “prostitution businesses,” popularly known as “zones” near the workers' housing has been observed. This strategy on the part of the companies is aimed at “entertaining” the workers who have been far from their families for some time. In some cases the sale of women's bodies is accompanied by the sale of teenagers for prostitution, possibly influencing and facilitating international trafficking in women.

The above mentioned facts are just some of the losses suffered by women as a result of dam building. The consequences on women are innumerable and our objective is to open them up for discussion, emphasizing the problems that directly affect the women who were

forgotten over time, almost making gender issues invisible. Possibly there are many other questions that need to be opened to discussion and taken up for analysis and deeper thought in order to enable women to be recognized as political subjects in the process of social transformation.

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- No shining legacy: Women start organising against gold mining in Thailand

The lush green rice paddies, vegetable fields, forested mountains and quiet villages in the Wangsaphung district of the Loei province of North-Eastern Thailand could be an oasis of rural tranquility, with clean air to breathe, fresh vegetables and fruit to eat and spring water to drink. From the mountainous highlands to the lowlands along the banks of the Mekong River and its tributaries, the fertile lands provide seasonal harvests of macadamia nuts, bananas, lychees, longan, mangoes, passion fruit, tamarind, coffee beans, soybeans, maize, rice, sesame, and rubber. In the past, some small-scale gold panning was carried out along the riverbeds, as the area is rich in minerals, including gold, copper and iron. However, today the land and water upon which the Isaan People have depended for generations has become poisoned by cyanide, arsenic and other heavy metals. The source has been traced to a recently opened gold mining site operated by a Thai company with Australian origins, Tongah Harbour Plc.

In 1996, the Thai Department of Mineral Resources began a process of approval for granting gold mining licence applications in Wangsaphung submitted by Tungkam Ltd. (TKL), a subsidiary of Tongah Harbour that has Australian and German financial support. The Thai Ministry of Industry granted final authorization in 2003 for a lease the size of approximately two square kilometers over twenty-five years. By September 2006, TKL began its operations at the first open-pit gold mine on a mountaintop once designated by the Thai government as a conservation area. To date, only two sites have been opened, covering a total of two square kilometers, as well as an on-site plant for cyanidation and carbon treatment of the gold. As of early 2009, over one hundred mining applications by TKL are pending approval by the Thai government.

Local residents in the area remained unaware of the mining licences, until the TKL's machinery had already arrived. Although TKL has claimed that they took proper steps to hold consultations with the community, there is no documentation available regarding where these consultations were held, who participated, or what was discussed. Local residents claim that these meetings were not publicly announced and that the company handpicked the few people who did attend.

According to local activists, there is no public access to the agreements made between the company and the government or the mining concession certificate that would indicate the type and time frame of the mining activities on the land surrounding their farms. Furthermore, it was not until 2008 that some information was publicly reported regarding the legally required environmental impact assessments (EIAs). These studies were quietly completed

by two Australian firms in conjunction with a Thai company along with Thai faculty from Khon Kaen University, without any input or participation from villagers.

Although Tungkam claims to be committed to “environmental stewardship”, local residents report that some of the most devastating effects of the mining have been related to the loss of clean, local water sources. The mine site has interfered with the route of a natural spring, which originally brought fresh, pristine water from the mountain through Wangsaphung. As a mitigation measure, the company diverted the stream so that it now flows around the periphery of the mine. Residents allege that the spring water has become polluted by not only the mine tailings, but also improper disposal of on-site solid wastes. Since 2006, mass numbers of poisoned fish floating in local streams have been observed on numerous occasions. With elevated levels of cyanide and other heavy metals, this stream runs directly into Loei River, a tributary of the transboundary Mekong River. Furthermore, residents note that contaminated water from the mine flows down the mountain during the monsoons, and they worry that the heavy metals will leach into groundwater. Meanwhile, in the dry season, dust from the mine blows through residential areas, exacerbating respiratory illnesses amongst the local population.

For the first time in known history, farmers are reporting severe water shortages, resulting in dry rice paddies and patches of parched, cracked soil. With the mine tailings pond adjacent to their fields, the majority of residents express fear about the uncertain levels of contamination in the fruits, vegetables and rice they still attempt to cultivate. Given the level of contamination and acidification of the rainwater, residents can no longer rely on gathering drinking water naturally. Instead, they have had to begin buying water, placing a strain on already tight family budgets.

Realizing the need to augment cash incomes in order to afford purchases of food and water, some women are travelling more frequently to the provincial capital to take on temporary day jobs. Ultimately, local residents’ abilities to retain their practices of food sovereignty and self-sufficient livelihoods have been lost, while their rights to food, water, and health have all been stolen. As the ones responsible for cooking, cleaning and water provision for drinking as well as other daily needs, women testify that the household pressures they experience have accordingly increased.

Over the past two years, local residents have begun to report rashes, breathing problems, severely irritated eyes, chronic headaches, dizziness, and weak sensations in their limbs. In addition, the regular and frequent blasting coming from the mine causes not only cracks in housing structures and the shattering of glass windows, but also heart palpitations amongst elders, and chronic levels of distress among children.

After working in their fields and rice paddies, women and men suffer from skin irritations that result in their skin peeling off and opening into festering wounds. Men who work in the mine have experienced distressing health problems, including skin diseases, severe eye and lung problems, insomnia and neurological degeneration. Meanwhile, women report that after washing clothes worn in the mine and the fields, they suffer from rashes on their hands and arms, breathing difficulties and eye pain. Blood tests conducted on children provide solid evidence of elevated levels of cyanide and other heavy metallic contaminants. A recent report, released in February 2009 by Thai government officials also warned residents to refrain from drinking the local water or using it to cook, due to elevated levels of cyanide,

arsenic, cadmium and manganese.

Police and armed security guards have been working with Tungkam to monitor the mine site and the community, reporting on all who enter the site and surrounding vicinity. In general, local people are too intimidated to speak out publicly about the impacts of the mining, and as a result, the voices of social and environmental justice advocates remain muted. The lack of opportunities to participate in decisions affecting the future of their land and means of survival, as well as the silencing of dissent can be understood as nothing less than serious breaches of political and social rights, guaranteed under national and international laws.

Initially, local residents were frustrated by Tungkam's lack of communication, consultation and openness about their plans for Isaan ancestral lands. After documents about the mining licence were leaked to a local biologist, the information was disseminated amongst the community in 2006. Since then, a small team of concerned residents —the majority of whom are women— formed an ad hoc committee that has been organizing community meetings to discuss the impacts of gold mining on the local water sources, the soil and local vegetables, air quality and people's health. They have held public forums and open discussions, photo exhibitions and workshops. According to committee members, it is mostly local women —and in particular, those from younger generations— who attend discussions about the impacts of the mining, and strategies for changing their situation. In November 2006, an exchange with activists from Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines was hosted in Wangsaphung as part of an international mobilization against large-scale commercial gold mining. According to local women, after this initial international exposure, security was tightened at the mining site. Those trying to investigate Tungkam's operations began —and continue— to be subjected to severe intimidation tactics.

Throughout 2008, local residents helped document the health impacts of the cyanide poisoning. They then proceeded to file complaints with the national human rights and health commissions. A report issued by the Human Rights Commission called on Tungkam to clean up the contaminated areas. However, despite the fact that the commissioners validated community concerns and condemned the company's operations, no remedial action has been taken. Instead, Tungkam has begun publicizing their commitment to "positive corporate ethics", and is sponsoring school festivities, sports tournaments and youth scholarships. For the villagers of Wangsaphung, these initiatives appear disingenuous, detracting from their serious concerns about the lasting legacies of cyanide and arsenic poisoning.

As of late 2009, the Wangsaphung community committee was seeking to halt Tungkam's expansion plans for their gold processing and cyanidation plant. Protests were staged at the local government district office demanding that documents detailing the site expansion be made public. Further demonstrations by civil society networks are planned. Simultaneously, women are organizing weaving and food collectives, which allow them to retain a sense of identity, follow ecologically sensitive principles, and practise self-sufficiency. This groundwork is intended to form a basis of collective solidarity from which to launch into a campaign calling for the closure of the mine, and the prohibition of new mines on Isaan land.

By Tanya Roberts-Davis with the Thai Network for Mining Affected Communities/ Eco-Culture Study Group, email: troberts@alumni.upeace.org

- Women and climate change – most affected and least heard

In a study published recently in Germany on Climate and Development, we find the following statements: "Poverty affects many, too many people – and it affects men and women differently and in different numbers. Most of the poor are women, as poverty research has shown, and this is bound up with the fact that in many countries women and girls continue to suffer legal and social discrimination: They have poorer access to education and health care than boys and men, and they do not have the same economic opportunities, be it because their ability to act is curbed by legal restraints, or because they are unable to move freely, or for other reasons."

The study adds that "There is good reason to believe that one result of the political and social discrimination of girls and women is that they are affected differently than men by the impacts of climate change, a circumstance that exacerbates the poverty and other risks they face." (1)

One of the good reasons for believing that this is true is the fact that most of the people affected by the worst climatic disasters that have happened over the past few years are poor and in their vast majority women. For example, in Indonesia during the tsunami, for various reasons more women were drowned than men: because they did not know how to swim, because they stayed to look after their children until the last moment, because they were locked in, because they found out too late, because their long dresses did not enable them to move fast, because their food reserves were so low that they could not make the effort required to save themselves, etc.

In an article on "Women and Climate Change," Kellie Tranter, an Australian lawyer describes some of the causes of death, such as those mentioned above and shows that during so-called "natural" disasters, more women than men have died: 90% of the 140,000 victims who died during the cyclone that hit Bangladesh in 1991 were women, more women than men died during the heat-wave that struck Europe in 2003 and in the Indonesian tsunami in 2006, 3 to 4 women died for each man. (2)

In a study carried out with women in Germany, Bolivia and Tanzania in 2009 (3), it was revealed that women are more burdened with their daily activities due to climate change. An example of this is shown in the department of Oruro, Bolivia, where "at times of heat-waves the water sources dry up and the remaining water becomes increasingly brackish and less potable. Strong winds sweep away loose earth and dry it. There are also new species of parasites. There is a sort of bug that is causing great damage by attacking the root of the alfalfa plant and killing this forage." Furthermore, with the change in temperature, crops that used to grow easily don't grow anymore and the continuous frosts and rains cause losses. The cattle are also decreasing because of the lack of pastures and because of the appearance of "a new and aggressive type of mosquito that attacks human beings and animals. In short, climate change makes the already gruelling working life of Bolivian women even harder."

Very similar stories are told by the women of Dodoma, Tanzania. Continuous droughts oblige women to "go increasingly far away to get water and sometimes they are forced to

buy it... crops have dropped off in a catastrophic way. This is the cause for the worrying lack of food in the whole village.” Women must use different strategies to survive. Gladis, for example tells us how “...we can no longer count on income from agriculture...I also have a vegetable garden and breed pigs and hens. Also I sew school bags...I make local beer and do occasional jobs.” But they too ask not to be the only ones who make sacrifices. They demand that the government must avoid the continuous logging of trees and burning of forests that are worsening water supply and the climate, while also demanding that the industrialized countries change their lifestyle.

Women cannot continue to be the victims and must take a leading role when climate change policies are being designed. Although some formal recognition has been achieved, it is not reflected either in the proposals or in the structures of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change.

On the one hand, most of the policies proposed as (false) solutions for addressing climate change further exacerbate the situations described above. For example the promotion of large scale crops to be used as fuel and monoculture tree plantations as so-called carbon sinks, have been shown to have negative impacts on forests, soil and water and also on women.

On the other hand, women have serious difficulties in being taken into account, even within the structure of the Convention, contradicting its own statements. In December 2007, in Bali, international leaders declared for the first time that “gender issues are pertinent to climate related policies.” In 2009, the Convention formally recognized the participation of gender and women’s groups. However, recently the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon announced the creation of a “high level” group tasked with no less than investigating potential sources of revenue to support developing countries in their efforts to cope with the impacts of climate change and the shift to low-carbon development pathways. (4) The group is composed of 19 members. All men. The destiny of humankind may be in their hands (5)

Declarations about “gender equity” must be reflected in deeds. Time has run out. Women, while suffering most from the effects of climate change are also essential when seeking solutions. The solving of gender inequality is a question both of justice and of survival.

1. Taken from “Climate Change Adaptation from a Gender Perspective, A cross-cutting analysis of development-policy instruments by Birte Rodenberg for DIE Research Project “Climate Change and Development”, Bonn 2009
2. Published in Mirada Global.com <http://www.miradaglobal.com/>
3. Taken from "Strengthen women. Change the climate!", VEN organization.
4. From the article by Elizabeth Becker and Suzanne Ehlers “Why are women being left out of climate decision-making?” <http://www.grist.org/article/2010-03-08-why-are-women-being-left-out-of-climate-decision-making-u.n/>
5. Additional information from Gender CC press release available at:<http://www.gendercc.net/>

- The invisible women and men who resist against the destruction of their territory in the northern Great Chaco

Living should not have to be a struggle against deadly forces. The life of the indigenous Ayoreo women and men living in isolation (without contact with our civilization) did not used to be a struggle; it was a life lived in and with the land they inhabited, over the course of many centuries. Today, however, through no choice of their own, for these women and men, living has come to mean resisting, enduring – and having to struggle – since the arrival of another world bent on invading and replacing their own world...

Haven't we all faced this same situation, no matter who or where we are? Finding ourselves imprisoned, caught up and trapped in situations of resistance and endurance, when all we really want is to be left alone, to be happy, to live?

The women and men who make up the six or seven groups of Ayoreo living "in voluntary isolation" – a status and categorization that they have not chosen, but rather one that has resulted from a process of extermination and external pressures – currently represent a tiny but significant human minority. In the past, the indigenous peoples who lived throughout the Americas, with their diversity of worlds, were the majority, while the "isolated" minority were the first settlers and invaders.

Today, these isolated Ayoreo groups continue their way of life in the forests of the northern part of the Great Chaco region, travelling by foot throughout their particular group territories, from place to place. Along the way, they find life and give life to every corner of their rich and varied geography, which we tend to perceive through our outsiders' eyes as merely a uniform stretch of forested area over the Chaco lowlands. In our language shaped by economic thinking, we describe their nomadic movements as a means of ensuring "resources" for their survival: water, so precious in the arid Chaco region, animals to hunt and eat, fruit that grows in the forests. But these women and men do not look at their surroundings through eyes that only see what is useful, or define everything on the basis of scarcity. To them, the forests of the Chaco are not poor, but rather full of riches. For those who "still" live in these forests, to live does not mean to survive and to struggle, and it never has -until now. Meanwhile, for us Westerners living in "modern" societies, it is impossible to imagine a life that is not subjected to economic pressures, to the need to struggle to "earn a living". For many of us, this is the only way to live that we know, and it consumes all of our energies.

But the forest people we refer to as isolated do not need to "earn a living". They have earned it simply by being born, and they continue to find it, and in turn to recreate it, with every step and every new day. They do not look upon the world in which they live as an enemy, in the way that our world is viewed an enemy to us. Their world – they call it "eami", which means forest, and also means world – contains, shelters and protects them. It is a world with which they live in intimate, mutual communication: they feel it, they see it, they recognize it, they pronounce its names. They respect it, they fear its tremendous powers, and they know how to protect themselves from those powers. They know that there is a way to coexist with the world that is the right way to live, the good way to live. And when people are able to live this way, without harming the world, communicating with it and taking only one's share, the result is a sacred equilibrium that kept this planet alive for a very long time, before our era, the product of many equilibriums carefully maintained by women and men from many worlds. The Ayoreo world is only one of them...

Actually, we do not really know exactly how they are, at this moment in time. We have learned what their lives were like before, and had always been, through the testimony of other Ayoreo who were forcibly uprooted from their world by missionaries, and have been able to tell us about their lives. But when it comes to the groups who are still living in isolation today, no one has contact with them. All we can do is discern and gather – like fruit from the forest – the signs of their existence and their movements, and interpret them in the light of our knowledge and our intuition. In the far north and northeast areas of the Chaco, there are isolated groups who are still fairly well sheltered by relatively large expanses of intact forests. Although more and more of this forested land is being cleared, it is still a relatively peaceful area. The same cannot be said of the area to the south, which is closer to the towns and cities of the Central Chaco. The women and men living in isolation in this area now hear and receive the message of the destruction of the forests and their total and utter disappearance every day. And their daily movements are now marked by this destruction. Many of their places have become “non-places”: spots on the planet that have lost their faces and names, disappeared forever, and which in the Ayoreo world have ceased to exist. On the other hand, in our world, these dead Ayoreo places are given new names and become places on our map (a map of death?), connected by our roads, shaped by our projects, productive by our definition, classified by their degree of usefulness for our own purposes. Some become cattle ranches, others, future soy bean plantations (if Monsanto achieves the trumpeted feat of developing drought-resistant seeds).

In the meantime, these more exposed groups of isolated Ayoreo live and move among the cattle company ranches, always invisible, but with nowhere left to go to escape the noise of the bulldozers working day and night to knock down more and more trees, or the trucks roaring past on the countless roads that have carved their land up into grids.

Do these isolated Ayoreo women and men know what they are struggling against? Some time ago, they used to leave feathers and shamanic symbols along the borders of their world, in an attempt to halt its disappearance, but all in vain. They must realize that what they are facing are forces more powerful than those of their own world, forces that speak other languages. And they must be beginning to doubt their own powers, and to feel threatened and weakened.

This time of the year, the months of February and March, is the season for wild chili peppers, and it is the Ayoreo women who walk through the forests picking them. This year, these women will be harvesting them with greater fear, with greater precaution, with the incessant roar of machinery ringing in their ears. There will be fewer peppers to gather. They will no longer be able to pick the peppers that grew in places that no longer exist. Like the wild chili peppers, the caraguatá plant also belongs to the world of women, who weave its fibres into bags and other woven goods, like textile diaries that record their experiences, beliefs, hopes and dreams.

The female gatherers are endangered in the same way as the plants they harvest, just as the male hunters are endangered in the same way as the animals they hunt. And as a result, the independent, diverse and unique powers of their world are endangered.

Deforestation, an abstract word when written here, in this article, is a relentless and concrete reality in the northern Chaco, and it is slowly destroying the life and equilibrium of the Ayoreo world. It is destroying freedom and independence, life that does not depend on money or

supermarkets: self-sustained and sustainable life.

To struggle does not always mean to wage war and attack. Sometimes it is a silent, invisible and peaceful flowering. The women – and men – of the isolated Ayoreo groups are struggling against deforestation. They are doing it by being there, by clinging to their way of life, inseparable from the life of their territories. Sometimes to struggle simply means to exist and to persist, to believe in oneself and be strong, to recognize and be conscious of one's own wealth.

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- The Garo Women in Bangladesh: Life of a Forest People without Forest

Sicilia Snal (25), is a Garo woman of the forest village Sataria in the Modhupur sal forest. It is merely a 62 thousand acres forest patch, yet the third largest forest of Bangladesh, a country having one of the lowest per capita forest coverage on earth. Sicilia has to routinely visit the nearby forest to collect firewood. This is a traditional right that she and other villagers have always enjoyed.

Nowadays this historical native forest has lost all but its name. It has come down to less than ten per cent of its original size. This has made the life of the Garos, who still try to cling to the forest, challenging. Many have been killed, tortured, put into jail on false cases, women raped and made to migrate to cities to become industrial workers, beauticians, housemaids, etc.

With little formal education in the remote village, Sicilia supplements cash income for her family by selling labour on a daily basis. An additional burden placed on her is the collection of fuelwood from the nearby forest that has been reduced to mere shrubs.

Her life dramatically changed on 21 August 2006. Early in the morning on that day she went to collect firewood as usual. On her way back home, she and a few other Garo women put down their head loads to take a rest for a while. All of a sudden, to their great surprise, a forest guard shoots her from behind with his gun. Sicilia is hit. More than a hundred pellets enter her body; some penetrate her gall bladder and kidney. She fell unconscious. A surgery at a medical college in the nearest town [Mymensingh] removes her gall bladder.

Some pellets still remained in her kidney and could only be removed after she gave birth to her third child. With about a hundred pellets all over her back and hands, she is now restricted from any hard work. Like in other cases, she has not got justice in court. Her case is added to a few thousand other cases that are still pending in the local court.

Bihen Nokrek (35) of Joynagachha, another forest village, was shot to death by the Forest Department (FD) guards in the wee hours of 10 April 1996. A one-member judicial inquiry committee headed by a local court magistrate, produced only a final report, which, according to a FD source, said that the fire [that killed Bihen] had been justified. Bihen Nokrek leaves behind his wife and six children only to languish in poverty and insecurity.

Renu Nekola, a Garo woman of Kakraguni Village in the same area served more than a month and a half in jail for "damaging forests" in 1992. According to Nekola, she was arrested while collecting firewood from the forest on 12 December 1991. Nekola, with a small axe in hand, was caught and charged with cutting a live tree. The magistrate of a local court punished her with one month in jail. However, she had already served one month and 23 days in jail before getting the verdict under the forest act.

Sicilia Snal, Bihen Nokrek and Renu Nekola are descendants of a matrilineal Garo tribe that first settled to this forest centuries back. They had a long journey from Tibet. The majority of the Garos live in the Indian State of Meghalaya. The forest was dense and full of life at one time. The people grew everything. For centuries they used to practice slash and burn cultivation as well on the high land, locally known as Chala.

In the matrilineal Garo society women own property, do everything, can independently choose their husbands, and are seen everywhere doing all types of hard work in the fields and houses with an air of freedom, in sharp contrast with women in the Muslim majority society. While in the Muslim society the women are bound by many restrictions, the Garo women are equal to their men. They smoke tobacco and drink with their men. They do not get too angry if some have committed even adultery. Offences committed can be peacefully settled in exchange for a few pigs that are consumed by the whole village in a festive mood. This is a beautiful people with beautiful minds growing in the forest. This picture is never to be seen in the majority Bengali villages.

These children of forests, who once lived a peaceful life in the forest villages, are now exposed to the outside world due to the fast vanishing forest. The recent major factor for the dramatic loss of native forests in Modhupur and elsewhere is monoculture plantation with exotic eucalyptus and acacia trees funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank. The monoculture plantations in short rotations have severe and multiplier effects. More recently, outsiders have initiated massive-scale commercial banana and pineapple plantations among other things.

Without forests, the life of the Garo women in particular has become tough and risky. Fuelwood and forest foods that women have always collected from the forest have become scarce. They still go to the forest that is reduced to mere undergrowth and have to face "goons and guns". The Forest Department armed guards, the military at times, groups of forest bandits, and the traders from outside—all together—cause insurmountable difficulties for the Garo women in particular. Sicilia Snal and Renu Nekola are just two of thousands of women who face bullets, rape and other types of harassment in their daily lives in the forests.

The severe deforestation, plantation and invasion by outsiders into the forest villages force the Garo women to migrate to the cities. A stunning fact about the Garo women in the capital Dhaka is that if you visit any beauty parlour [for women], you will see Garo girls working quietly and smilingly. They are also found in the physiotherapy centres. They are the ones most trusted as housemaids in the houses of the foreigners. A few thousand Garo girls and women, uprooted from their land and forest, make an eye-catching difference in the capital. They are exceptional women with very different values. Types of work that "pollute" other women from patriarchal societies cause them no "pollution". Their psyche makes them truly equal to men. So wherever they are, they are the change makers.

The Garo women take the income that they make in the cities back to their villages. The forest has disappeared from around most of their villages, but they stand strong and teach people in other societies the lessons they need to learn. They smile against all odds they face. They do not have titles to the land they build their houses on in the forest villages, but they are the ones who hold the seeds of the forest. Given a chance, the forest can flourish again if in their hands.

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- Brazil: For whom and why do women struggle?

What is happiness? We can find many answers and we may even consider that being happy is a strictly personal matter. However, at least two aspects of happiness are universal: we all want it and it would be hard to find someone who could declare him/herself happy when confronting hunger, homelessness or when lacking access to the knowledge constructed and accumulated by humanity.

How are we in terms of the 'happiness index? From the standpoint of being a woman, poor, very poor. From the standpoint of being peasants and working women, very poor. From the standpoint of being mothers, poor.

Poor, why?

In the home, domestic chores are still considered "feminine tasks," while men who say to have already overcome male chauvinism "help out," but do not take on these chores as their own. Attributes commonly assigned to women are used to discredit and belittle people, for instance as in some of the sayings of football fans. To be a "little woman" is to be nothing, it is to be a slave, an object.

To be a mother is not only to "suffer in paradise." Very few work places, schools and public and private spaces have child care centres so that mothers can effectively be in activity, whatever this may be. On looking for a job, the question "do you have children?" can be the beginning of ruling you out. In general the individualism that has been so cultivated in modern times does not recognize children as a collective responsibility, as persons whose welfare must interest everyone. Children are uniquely their mother's responsibility.

As workers we still receive less for the same work outside the home. Many heads and bosses also consider women workers as sexual objects. And as peasant women, we suffer directly from the negative impacts of the advance of capitalism on rural areas, in the way of proceeding of transnational agribusiness companies.

In addition to all this, we are subjected to violence every day and, what is even sadder, with a high rate of this violence practiced by fathers, husbands, sons, uncles, grandfathers...that is to say, violence born inside the family.

Let us go back to the issue of peasant women. It might seem that a "natural" course of

human development is for trades to disappear, as with the Industrial Revolution, so the disappearance of peasant women would also be “natural” as “modernity” advances in rural areas. It might also seem that city inhabitants have nothing in common with what happens out in the countryside, such as the violence of agribusiness companies against peasant women and men.

Considering what we eat, we can see two options in the cities: “industrialized” food and “natural” food. By industrialized food we refer to the fast-food chains and ready-made meals produced by Bunge and other corporations. By natural food we are talking of milk, cereals, fruit, vegetables, and so on, 60-80% of which are produced by peasant women and men.

The effects of both food options are there to see. High obesity, cancer, suicide, and depression rates and a wide variety of illnesses based on McDonald type diets. We never hear about people getting ill from eating healthy food produced by peasants.

For this reason, the task of producing food which is essential for the happiness of any person cannot be a business and, throughout history, peasant women have been protagonists in guaranteeing food for all.

The business of transnational companies such as Monsanto, Syngenta, Nestlé, Bayer, Cargill, Dupont, Basf, is not to produce food, but to produce profit. Along this eternal profit-seeking path, they are trying to exterminate peasants. And those first hit are peasant women.

Where agribusiness advances, peasants retreat. The few remaining jobs are held by poorly paid and much exploited men. For women the alternatives are to migrate to the cities, remain at home, in total dependence or to become prostitutes.

For society as a whole, this means fewer jobs, less food, less housing and more violence. What happiness can this model build, if even the pride of knowing and being able to produce food and peasant identity, inherited and perfected by each generation, can be stolen by agribusiness companies?

When a company patents a seed - an asset of the peoples that should be at the service of humanity - it is stealing the knowledge built up over time by peasant women and men.

In various regions of Brazil, pulp mill companies are expanding their green eucalyptus deserts. In Bahia, in Espiritu Santo, in Maranhão, in Rio Grande do Sul, Stora Enso, Votorantin/Fibria, Suzano, are evicting indigenous peoples, Afro-descendent people, peasant men and women from their lands and installing their cloned armies, under the form of eucalyptus trees and under the form of soldiers.

We, peasant women, indigenous women, black women, women from the Landless Movement and Via Campesina, are rising up against the transnational companies' death project. On this 8th of March we are reaffirming our struggle because 8 March is a day for roses, but it is still a day to continue struggling, to topple down eucalyptus trees and the hunger they represent.

We proclaimed in our manifesto that **“It is not only food that we want, we want healthy food, we want food sovereignty!”** In Brazil, according to research carried out by the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), 80% of the people without access to income are

women. Changing this situation involves building up food sovereignty.

What is Food Sovereignty? It means that the people – women, men, young people, senior citizens – decide what they want in their food and it means being able to produce and consume healthy food in the necessary amount and in accordance with their culture. Food sovereignty implies a cultural transformation, in which new relationships between people are contemplated.

Some people attempt to disqualify our struggles, calling us delinquents and ignoramuses, they compare us to those who acted by destroying machines when the blood of textile workers started to be shed during the Industrial Revolution.

What is our crime? Cutting down eucalyptus trees to plant food? Preventing collective assets from being stolen, such as seeds, rejecting patented transgenic seeds? Proposing to build a society with bread, water, air, education for all? Is this the crime and the ignorance?

In order to build food sovereignty, we need to fight against agribusiness and the encroachment of the green eucalyptus desert. Food sovereignty is the basis of the happiness of peoples, as it implies abundant, healthy and accessible food and new relationships between people and between people and the environment.

Men, you need to bear in mind that a woman who lives with and who struggles next to a man who declares himself “machista”, is like a slave living with someone who declares him/herself to be pro-slavery. What kind of a relationship of equality and respect can exist in such a situation?

When we struggle for a new society, with food sovereignty, we struggle for our personal and collective happiness. On International Working Woman’s Day we continue to struggle for food, but it is not only food we want, we want food sovereignty, we want to enjoy a happy life in our countryside.

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