
Invisible women are becoming increasingly visible

In his novel “The Invisible Man”, H.G. Wells tells the story of a scientist who succeeds in making himself invisible, and the problems that unfold as a result.

In real life, women have been struggling for many years against the problems caused by the social invisibility to which they are subjected, in which most of the work they do is equally invisible and greatly undervalued.

And although women wage this battle on a daily basis, the 8th of March – International Women’s Day – is a good opportunity to give greater visibility to their struggle.

The Friends of the Earth International’s Forests and Biodiversity Programme and the World Rainforest Movement wish to contribute to this goal by sharing information about what is perhaps one of the least visible issues: the differentiated impacts of monoculture tree plantations on women.

This bulletin presents the findings of three studies jointly carried out by the two organizations in Nigeria, Papua New Guinea and Brazil. While the realities in these three countries may differ widely, they all share the common denominator of the impacts caused by these plantations on communities in general and on women in particular.

The testimonials gathered not only provide detailed information on the impacts of monoculture eucalyptus, oil palm and rubber tree plantations, but also highlight some of the worst aspects of “development” policies promoted by governments for the sole benefit of big corporations.

The starting point for these policies is to convince communities that they are “poor”. It does not matter if the food they eat is abundant, healthy and nutritious, if the water they drink is pure, if the forests provide them with a wide range of goods and services. They are poor because they do not have money, and they will only be able to overcome their poverty – and be happy – once they manage to have money.

This is when the corporations come in, operating with the protection of governments and the support of legal frameworks, promising the people what they supposedly need to stop being poor: jobs, money and development. It does not matter if very few of these promises come true. The only thing that matters is that the people believe them – and especially the men, who usually have more power and will be among the very few who “benefit” from the promised jobs. Poorly paid, dangerous, seasonal employment, but at least it gives them access to the money that will supposedly lift them out of poverty.

Thus, communities that were self-sufficient up until this point become incorporated into a monetary economy and come to depend almost entirely on money to satisfy their basic needs. This means depending on a corporation and becoming “slaves on their own land,” as a woman from Papua New Guinea described it. And it is when this happens that they effectively do become genuinely poor.

For women, the establishment of monoculture tree plantations does not only signify greater impacts on them than on men. In addition, the resulting social changes serve to disempower women even more in relation to men when it comes to decision-making at the community level and even within the home.

In the face of this reality, we are beginning to see a growing number of women starting to organize as women and undertaking different kinds of action to change the situation in which they and their communities now find themselves. Their efforts include demands for the return of their land, compensation for the damages caused, restoration of the forests that have been destroyed, the suspension of further plantation activity, and the elimination of existing plantations. The specific actions they undertake are conditioned by their own particular social and political realities, but they all involve a degree of risk, since the corporations have the backing of the state, including the state's repressive apparatus.

Ironically, the disempowerment brought about by the corporations' activities is becoming a catalyst for a new empowerment of women. Once invisible members of the community, they are now finding their own voice, and making it heard increasingly louder.

Unlike the title character in Wells' novel, the invisible women of the plantations, like many other woman, are becoming increasingly visible. And this is not a work of fiction: it is real life.

Forests and Biodiversity Programme, Friends of the Earth International - World Rainforest Movement