
Cambodia: Indigenous women raise their voices to protect their forest and traditional livelihoods from rubber plantation companies

In North East Cambodia different indigenous groups have lived for centuries, preserving an immense and extremely diverse forest ecosystem, maintained intact until the recent decades, when massive forest exploitation started. Indigenous agricultural practices, as in many other forest-covered areas in the world, have contributed to maintain biodiversity and are among the most sustainable so far known.

The subversion of this ecological and social system is full of consequences for indigenous communities and women, as this Bunong woman from Mondulkiri explains:

“The company has cut all the trees to do the plantation. They say that indigenous people cut the forest too. But indigenous people don’t do that! We ask the spirits before cutting, we try to understand from the dreams if the spirits agree, then we cut just small plots to do our fields, and we never cut the big trees. The company instead cut all, so now there are no trees, animals and even vegetables. There were six big forests here around, and lots of wild animals; we could find vegetables, medicines, resin, roots, fishes, fruits.

Now the forest has been cut and the spirits were dismissed, so they don’t help the community anymore. For our elders it is now difficult to be respected by young people. Before, the spirits were around the village and young people were more respectful. The spirits don’t help the community anymore, even if we lack food, or in case of disease.

We are afraid of the company workers, afraid of drug addicts, of rape, and that they will beat our people. Since the last two years we have these people around; we go everywhere accompanied by men, because we are scared. They don’t respect women, so we feel afraid, and we fear that the men of the village may become like the workers, especially the young.”

Commercial plantations not only subvert the ecological environment, but have harsh consequences for the communities. The massive immigration of workers that normally occurs when plantations are established cause the overexploitation of resources like wild animals and fishery, which become scarce and less accessible to indigenous communities. Immigrants will trigger the migration of other non indigenous people, as service providers, and this may easily contribute to change the population balance in the areas. Plantations workers are predominantly males; as a consequence sex provision services start to mushroom in the area, which contributes to devalue the status of women in general, and to introduce a male bias in social life.

In words of a Tampuan woman from Ratanakiri, *“Here there is no more forest around, we have only rubber plantations. Now everybody wants to sell land too; they want to plant cashew nuts, soja beans, or cassava. First they sold land at district level. People have complained about these land sales, but they couldn’t get the land back. So now the villagers follow them and want to sell their land too. They think that if they don’t sell, companies will take the land anyway. Men want to sell land, they don’t listen to women anymore, they want money. They answer back to the elders: ‘if we want*

to live differently it is up to us, is not your business...’ They don’t listen to the elders and sell their land; then they invade other people’s land, disputes erupt, they say it is a private affair, not a community issue, and lots of conflicts start between people and between women and men. Men drink, and when they do not have money, they sell pieces of land to pay the debts! Those who sell their land become poor, and after that become drunkards. Families without land often become heavy drinkers, they are always drunk.”

It is within the communities that intensive commercial exploitation of forestland has more dramatic consequences. The values that this form of development carries are highly destructive for the social fabric of indigenous communities, and human beings in general. Money, individualism, competition and consumerism break up the solidarity pact that animates the communities. Divisions appear between its members, elders and younger, women and men. Market oriented economy is male biased, and men appear to be more easily lured by the appeal of money and cash economy.

Women pay a great tribute to this subversion of their societies and values. Their workload increases, as many of the resources that they use to collect nearby, like firewood, water, vegetables, materials for crafting, tools, medicines, small animals, resin, are no more at hand. When the plantations arrive, indigenous people have to move their fields far away, which forces women to long walks just to reach the field and working at their family farms. If men are enrolled as workers, women are left alone to tend the farms. Women’s work in the family farms assures everyday meals, but is invisible and unvalued, because not inscribed in the cash economy frame. But it is this work that keeps plantation labourers’ salaries low and profitable for the companies. In the male context that this form of neo colonial development is forging, indigenous women’s work is unrecognized and overwhelming, while their status as women starts to be seriously weakened.

For women the forest is much more than mere subsistence: it is also pleasure, a nice place to stay, it is fun, an open door to imagination. As Lun, a woman from Ratanakiri says: *“We women like the forest a lot, is it fresh, and it is fun. We like to go there, we are not scared and we have a nice time. We used to go there, and sleep in the forest, when I was a child with my father and my uncle from the village nearby. It was one of the enjoyable things to do, catching the small fishes and the crabs in ponds, collect the resin, or find small bamboo. Sometimes we could find some special leaves and we used to stay overnight to collect the resin. But now it is difficult, because there is a company, we don’t know how it happened, if the forest was sold or if they just took it, they just put the fence, and a panel to forbid the entry.”*

When the forest is cut, something more than tangible products gets lost. The forest is the refuge of spirits, the source of stories and epopees, the place of challenges and adventures, and the shelter that awaits everybody at the end of the life. And it is also about stars, as told by a Kreung girl from Ratankiri: *“When there are many stars in the sky, some stars come to sleep with the girls, others go to sleep with the boys. I learned from the elders that the stars look after the forest. That’s what I know.”*

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