
Aridity and death vs diversity and fertility: a women's view of plantations

International Women's day is around the corner and we would like to pay homage to the countless women struggling for their rights by sharing parts of a recent research (1) carried out by two women in Brazil which, on the one hand, provides a broad account of women's struggles against plantations in that country and on the other hand provides testimonies from local women on how those plantations have impacted on their lives and livelihoods.

The authors' opening paragraph explains that "On 8 March 2006, International Women's Day, before the break of dawn, 2,000 women from Via Campesina occupied the Aracruz Celulose corporation's tree nursery in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Their faces hidden by purple scarves, the women waged a lightning attack, destroying thousands of eucalyptus seedlings. Their goal was to draw the Brazilian public's attention to the impacts of monoculture eucalyptus and pine plantations on local populations and ecosystems ... In their statements, the rural women protestors equated the green deserts of eucalyptus plantations with aridity and death, and highlighted the relationship between diversity and fertility, factors that make life possible, and monocultures and desertification, which represent death."

The research contains numerous testimonies about how Aracruz Celulose's eucalyptus plantations and pulp mill affected local communities in general and women in particular. For instance Maridéia, an indigenous Tupinikim woman remembers the days before the arrival of Aracruz: "It was so wonderful to have the river open to us. We washed clothes, we collected water for drinking, for cooking... You could catch fish, you could scoop them up with a sieve. All those women... there would be so many there together! It was the place to wash clothes. You would finish washing clothes, then take a swim and leave, you know?"

Those were the good old days. Then Aracruz arrived and "destroyed everything we had, it destroyed our forest, it destroyed our river, the fish, the hunting" (ROSA, Tupinikim village of Pau-Brasil).

Based on the testimonies of women, the report concludes that "In this new context, some of the impacts experienced by men and women are similar, but others are gender-specific. With the loss of territory, women have lost their farms, places to plant their gardens, to raise small animals and to grow medicinal plants.

The replacement of the forests by eucalyptus plantations led to the loss of food formerly supplied through gathering, hunting and fishing. The destruction of the tropical rainforest also led to the disappearance of rivers and streams, which were once the meeting places for women and a privileged space for sharing female knowledge. Indigenous and quilombola women have been forced to live with the pollution of their surroundings by the agrochemicals used in monoculture industries. The disappearance of the forest has also meant the loss of the raw materials used in the production of utensils and crafts, an activity that was primarily the domain of women in indigenous communities.

The loss of biodiversity has also signified the loss of a large number of natural medicines derived from the plants, roots and animals of the forest. It has deprived Guaraní indigenous women, who

formerly used plants to stimulate and reduce fertility, of the right to family planning, leaving them hostage to contraceptive pills and tubal ligation. In addition, indigenous and quilombola women can no longer find the vines, trees and animal fats they once used for medicinal purposes.

Some indigenous women, bearers of a wealth of knowledge about native flora and fauna, have become domestic workers, day labourers, babysitters and cooks for Aracruz Celulose officials. The obligation to take on these new tasks has impacted on their role as mothers, forcing them to give up breastfeeding their children at a very young age or to leave them with others while they are still infants, in order to look after the children of urban women.

Faced with these drastic transformations, these populations have built alliances with social movements and NGOs that support their struggle. Today they are joined together through a network aimed at further strengthening their capacity to resist. Women, who also play a leading role in these battles, have also embarked on a process of organising in specific spaces to discuss the impacts of eucalyptus monoculture on their lives and ways to contribute to resurrecting the way of life of their peoples.”

“Indigenous and quilombola women, who for so many decades have shared the impacts of eucalyptus monocultures, are now seeking to share their organisational experience, discovering the paths to freedom together. These women are increasingly joining together, giving each other strength in their shared struggle against the oppression of agribusiness and the patriarchy.”

Although the above illustrates a specific situation in a certain region of Brazil, we know that countless women living near plantation areas in a wide range of countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia will see their problems reflected in this research. On this new International Women’s Day we hope that this documented evidence will serve their struggles to stop this tree plantation model which symbolises “aridity and death” and to move towards a type of development that represents “diversity and fertility, factors that make life possible.”

(1) Barcellos, Gilsa Helena and Ferreira, Simone Batista (2008).- Women and Eucalyptus: Stories of Life and Resistance. Impacts of Monocultures on Indigenous and Quilombola Women in the State of Espírito Santo. WRM, January. http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Brazil/Book_Women.html