Women say, “We want our lands back!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Women in Sierra Leona declared that they want their land and forests back *“to provide livelihoods that allow for good, healthy lives in dignity for communities.”* This bulletin, launched in the framework

of the September 21st, hopes to support in breaking the circle of enforced ‘silence’ and is therefore dedicated to the numerous voices and stories resisting the expansion of industrial plantations around the world.

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