
Mapuche Lavkenche Women's Resistance to the Chilean Forestry Model

The Network of Women's Organizations of Tirúa, in south central Chile, is deploying strategies for life to prevail in this region. This territory has been threatened by the massive invasion of tree plantations, which state policies continue to promote.

This article provides context about the work of the Network of Women's Organizations of Tirúa, in south central Chile. The network is deploying strategies for life to prevail in this territory, which has been threatened by the invasion of tree plantations (1).

The Chilean Forestry Model and Conflict

The forestry model in Chile is installed mainly in rural areas in the south central part of the country—in what is called the Bío Bío and Araucanía regions, according to political-geographic divisions. The plantation industry is based on the systematic development of large-scale monocultures of exotic pine and eucalyptus species, to supply pulp mills, sawmills and wood products mainly for export.

During the Chilean dictatorship (1973-1990), large areas of land were handed over mainly to two family groups. On one side, the Matte family group owns the holding company, Paper and Cardboard Manufacturing Company (CMPC by its Spanish acronym), with subsidiary Forestal Minico—which manages 667,468.7 hectares. On the other side is the Arauco company of the Angelinni clan, which has an estate of 1,116,788 hectares. **Together, they own 64% of plantations, 100% of pulp mills, 81% of paper and cardboard plants, 75% of wood board plants and 37% of wood chip production (2).**

The dictatorship also implemented the **Decree Law 701 for forestry promotion**, which reimbursed or subsidized 75% of the costs of planting, management and administration, in addition to eliminating taxation. Decreasing costs of manual labor and economies of scale allowed large plantation companies to cover almost all of the planting costs with this state subsidy—which was originally to be in effect until 1998, but was extended until 2013. This Decree provided **important and unprecedented incentives to plant monocultures in forests and on lands declared to be apt for forestry.**

According to official data from the National Forestry Corporation (CONAF, by its Spanish acronym), forestry plantations covered 3,316,789 hectares by 2014 (3). Several investigations recognize that in that same area, the Chilean State has taken 11 million hectares from the indigenous Mapuche people, who now live on just 300,000 hectares (Seguel, 2002: 173).

This situation has caused a **high level of social conflict, especially with the Mapuche people**, who since the late 1990s began to show active resistance to the collusion between plantation companies and the Chilean State. Mapuche historian, Fernando Pairicán (2013), points out that the pivotal moment that ignited the *wallmapu* (entire Mapuche territory) occurred in December 1997, when three truckloads of wood from the Arauco forestry company were burned in the area of Lumaco. The Mapuche communities of that commune stated their intention to reclaim lands from the

forestry company, arguing that they had ancestral and sovereign rights in that territory. From that moment on, they began **an escalation of effective territory reclamation processes, which has caused an excessive increase in police presence in several areas. In these areas, the work that takes place on the plantations is guarded by a strong contingent of highly armed police**—paid for by the taxes of all Chilean citizens.

Network of Women's Organizations of Tirúa

The Network of Women's Organizations of Tirúa brings together self-organized women seeking to improve the lives of all women, by carrying out productive initiatives that respect the environment and value ancestral resources and knowledge. They also undertake the organized defense and collective care of their territory, its water, forests, and biodiversity—which are threatened by the plantations—taking on an active role in the defense of the *lavkenche* territory (3).

The women of the network are mainly Mapuche, and they are all peasants who live in different parts of the Tirúa commune. The Network is made up of 27 women's organizations that collectively produce vegetables in their gardens, produce native trees, weave on looms, dry herbs, collect lawen (medicinal plants) and fruits from the forest -maqui (Chilean wineberry), hazelnut, mutilla (Chilean guava), among others- and prepare products with what they have in their fields: jams and preserves, toasted flour, corn, merquen (smoked chile pepper) and ñocha (fibrous plant used to make baskets and others)—both to consume and to sell. Production is mostly for their families, but something is left over to sell or barter with a neighbor or relative.

Since 2014, women have become important agents of change in their territory. They have taken a stand through daily resistance, and have used their intuition to generate alternatives. **They embody both a radical critique of development methods, and a proposal centered around another way of living life.** They are providers of seeds for daily resistance, for daily work of caring for biodiversity. The women of the Network are defending and promoting *iltrofill mongen* (respect for everything that lives), **and they are an alternative to the extractive plantation model.**

How Are They Restoring Balance?

First, they say: Stop eating badly—cold cuts, meat from the city; You have to raise animals, grow your plants at home and water them with your water; Know what you are eating, know what water you are drinking; Pay the *ngen* [protective spirit] of water with offerings, so that it protects you.

Second, **in practice, women are removing eucalyptus from their lands** through various strategies, and it is not an easy task. They are pulling out pine and eucalyptus trees and planting native trees and plants. They are protecting the headwaters of their watersheds, protecting springs and taking care of the water.

Third, they are maintaining, strengthening and disseminating critical discourse against plantation companies, and are raising awareness of Chilean state policies that are responsible for the very serious current situation.

Fourth, they are bringing back economies of care—that is, those tasks associated with human reproduction—and placing them at the center. This sphere surpasses the boundaries of care in the home, toward care of the *ñuke mapu* (*Mother Earth*), taking into account their descendants and life in the community.

The women of the Network show that the Mapuche people's reclamation is not just for lands; it is also a cultural reclamation, for knowledge. This unifying logic is essential. From this perspective, they are able to see those who planted pine and eucalyptus trees in their territories not as traitors, friends or enemies, but as people who were deceived: They are their parents, their husbands, the neighbor—people who fell into the game because their confidence in their own ideas was weak. Therefore, to reverse the situation, it is not necessary to remove those people from the community; but rather to strengthen their confidence, and preserve the abundance that the territory provides to those present and those to come.

As can be seen, this is another way of confronting the advance and intensification of the plantation model. The women's model is one from the ground up, from the earth. Clearly, different values underpin the work of the Network. It rejects the capitalist economic paradigm, or at least moves forward with that intuition. It reclaims connections as a structuring matrix, rather than ideas or—even less so—numbers. **It does not want identical pine and eucalyptus trees that all have the same age, appearance and commercial fate; rather, it calls for diverse forests.**

The Network is continuing to fight so that the driving force behind its plans, strategies and actions to overcome difficulties is care—which is an eminently collective issue. Centuries of care constitute a tradition that must be shared, now that we are in a critical situation where extraction is imposing death. **To disregard the work of care is to further perpetuate the invisibility of women.**

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(1) This article comes out of the master's thesis, *“Resistencias de mujeres lavkenche al modelo forestal chileno”* 2019, Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology, Chiapas—Mexico. The field work was carried out from August to December, 2017.

(2) [National Forestry Corporation \(CONAF, by its Spanish acronym\)](#) - Consulted in November 2016

(3) The Mapuche people (*Mapu* land, *che* people) are as diverse as a forest. There are different territorial identities that are named after the elements that characterize them: *puelche* (people from the East), *pikunche* (people from the North), *lavkenche* (people from the coast) and *williche* (people from the South). Each of these names expresses the inseparable link between a specific geographic space and the people who inhabit it.

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