Sexual Exploitation and Violence against Women at the Root of the Industrial Plantation Model

Patriarchal oppression is inseparable from the industrial plantation model, and it is at the base of how companies generate profits. Companies target women, including due to their fundamental role in community life. Women in Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and Cameroon, who are at the frontlines of resistance, shared their perspectives with WRM.

European colonizers relied on large-scale monoculture plantations to impose their rule on peoples and territories across the global South. Their enforced plantation model - planting one single specie typically on the most fertile and flat land with sufficient water sources available - continues to this day. This seizure of vast amounts of land and dispossession of local populations was -and still is- kept in place by oppression. Uneven power relations routinely discriminate against indigenous peoples and traditional communities, and, in particular, women.

The violence inherent in the colonial plantation model does not spare systems of reproduction of life. That is, systems of collective organization, food sovereignty, community care, cultural and language diversity, ancestral knowledge, among many other aspects. The parts of these systems of reproduction that cannot be commercialized are usually made invisible. They are thus not recognized as work. The associated tasks usually rest on women's shoulders. Thus, plantation companies' violence also targets women in their role as pillar of community cohesion. Patriarchal oppression is inseparable from the industrial plantation model, a model that remains at the base of how plantations companies generate profits. (1)

Women confronting the industrial oil palm plantations that are managed by the Luxemburgian-Belgian SOCFIN company in Sierra Leone told WRM that,

"the company takes advantage of women's labour in so many ways… When the company has already taken over the land, women are most times left with no option but to work for the company. Because they cannot go back to their farms and do their normal activities; they cannot stand up for their families; they cannot take care of their children; they cannot even take care of themselves or put food on the table. They cannot grow food as usual for their own use, so they now depend on buying it from the markets. They are left with no option but to seek a job in these plantations, with this company.

And they are not well paid. The companies are very well aware that women have no other alternative, so they decide how much to pay them, and even how to treat them. Women have to walk from very far away places every day to work, and then return back, on very long walks, exposing themselves to violence.

Their children, most of them, are also going wayward. Because if you cannot take care of your children—especially girls—when they need you most, they will go for anything a man can give them to survive. So the challenges are so much."

Women confronting the palm oil company PalmCi in Ivory Coast told WRM that,

“Oil palm companies overexploit women. I can assure you that women are very useful for them; they are outstanding workers for the companies. Harvesting fruit all day without resting, day after day for years.

When the Malaysians visit the plantations, these women have to hide and avoid being seen by them. Why do they hide them if the work they do is legal? Other women are forced to cover their baby’s mouth with their hand to muffle their cries and avoid being detected. The companies overexploit women for profit. That is what is happening.”

And women confronting the Socapalm oil palm company in Cameroon, a company that is also part of the Socfin Group, told WRM that,

“Women from different villages in the area have to walk far to come to this very small plot of land. It is the only place we could find to set up our small garden plots. Look, the potatoes are very small. The oil palm plantation is right over there, too close. Nothing grows well because the plantations are right there. As you can see, that is all the land there is [for us to use]. Look at how we are suffering. This little field cannot produce enough for our families. The land produces very little because we have to plant on the same plot every year. We lack land to grow our food. Socapalm has taken our land. Socapalm has taken it all.”

Once companies set up and operate their industrial plantations, sexual violence and oppression against women and girls considerably increases. Rape, physical and psychological abuse, harassment, persecution, work in exchange for sex, beatings, intimidation, violated pregnancies, presence of armed guards in and around people's homes and in communities, low wages, deplorable conditions and long working days, unpaid work, constant use of toxic products without protection, impacts on women's reproductive and sexual health, lost access to land, water, livelihoods and sustenance—which translates into harder, more intense and more prolonged domestic and communal work—are but some of the impacts of industrial plantations that are often not named but just called “differentiated impacts”. (2)

The perpetrators of these horrific and constant violations against women’s bodies, lives and minds almost always get away without punishment.

The women from Sierra Leone added that,

“Violence against women goes on without much intervention from our local authority or the police. If you are against the company, nobody will listen to you.

Women have been arrested. They have been molested and beaten – for crimes most of them will deny – and been taken to the police to face charges. Nobody seems to care about what is happening to us. Nobody wants to know or take any action against the perpetrators. There are a lot of challenges that we face with these plantations. Sometimes there are accidents. If you are harmed doing work, or faced with any other challenge, you will be fired without them even considering taking care of you. You will be left to spend your own last dime.

As it is now, the community itself is observing a curfew. Because after 12 midnight, you will not see any woman outside. Everybody knows it will be safer for you to stay indoors.

And to crown it all, there is this fear that has been spread amongst us, since the last incident where we lost two people in our community. It was very brutal. When the police and the army came in, it was very brutal. They made a lot of forceful arrests, including me. I was arrested very late at night. I was asleep, my door was forcefully opened, and I was brought out, beaten, and taken to be detained"

In this regard, the women from Ivory Coast also said that,

"Women are victims of physical and other abuses. Women are beaten and unjustly accused as a pretense to demand favors from them. There is also sexual abuse but this is kept under wraps. They are told: "I saw you in our plantation stealing fruits, 'You take care of me and I'll take care of you'," is what they say, meaning, 'I'll let you go with the fruit if you have sex with me.' This abuse is indeed growing because the plantations are still there and the rapists are also still there.

Are the perpetrators punished? You must be joking; who will punish them? They will claim that you entered private property and deserve what you got. They will ask whether you have a "long arm" as we say here, whether you have a powerful person in your family or know an influential member of the government who can support your complaint. Nobody has been punished for these crimes, despite the broken arms and the traumatized children and women. These crimes go unpunished because might makes right."

It is also in the interest of the companies and their financial backers (regional and Northern countries' development banks, the World Bank, financial consultants, etc.) that the domination of a patriarchal model, in particular the violence and abuse against women that is part and parcel of this industrial plantation model, stay invisible for consumers, and thus, without consequences for those who perpetrate that violence.

Yet, against all odds, women are at the forefront of the resistance and the defence of life.

The women from Sierra Leone told us that,

"We have been doing our best over the years in staging or organizing protests; we have been moving from one community to another, sensitizing other women in different communities—not to give in to the agreements being done on our behalf. We have been requesting inclusion in every aspect of land deals in our community. We have been making sure that we remind our authorities that we do not want anything from Socfin. That we want our lands back.

In this context, on November 25th, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Informal Alliance against Industrial Oil Palm Plantations came together to denounce the violence and sexual abuse that thousands of women living in and around industrial oil palm plantations face in their daily lives, particularly in West and Central African countries. The video stands in solidarity with all the women who organize to resist these plantations and who are left alone to suffer this violence and abuse in silence.

You can see the video in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese here.

*** All the names for this article have been kept anonymous for security reasons.*

(1) Plantation patriarchy and structural violence: Women workers in Sri Lanka
(2) WRM Bulletin 236, Women and Plantations: When violence becomes invisible, 2018; Breaking