

"Gender" in the palm oil industry and its RSPO label

The extent of exploitation and discrimination of women within the palm oil industry has become difficult to deny. Companies as well as its certification scheme, the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), have responded with the inclusion of gender-specific policies and guidelines in their operations. But, if the plantation model in itself is understood as a violent, destructive, structurally racist and patriarchal one, can these gender-specific policies do more than cover up this violence and destruction? How, in such context, do these gender policies unfold?

Oil palm plantation companies praise themselves from their programs and policies that claim to give opportunities to women. The multinational company Olam, for example, states in its Living Landscape Policy that all suppliers should achieve “gender equality, equal access and empowerment of women,” as well as having its operations in “full compliance with applicable national and international laws, including human and labour rights” (1) Yet, women living in and around Olam’s oil palm plantations in Gabon have told WRM a different story: “... we can no longer walk alone, as women, we need to go in groups because of the risk of being assaulted by company workers or security guards. We no longer feel safe around our villages. There is definitely an increase of abuse.”

The transnational plantation company Socfin defends its ‘gender policy’ operations in Sierra Leone by saying that about a quarter of their permanent employees are women. Socfin goes on to assert that policies have been established “to protect their work,” and that a “gender committee” has been set up to “discuss women’s issues and grievances.” (2) RSPO has already provided its seal of approval to many Socfin plantations and the company is trying to get its operations in Sierra Leone certified.

In contrast to these company declarations, a woman in Sierra Leone facing the impacts of Socfin told WRM in December 2020 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... 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... the challenges are so much.” (3)

A list of testimonies from women denouncing the many layers of destruction and violence that this industry means for them would be never-ending. One woman said that, “even if you were already working and completed a month’s job but refused to sleep with the headman or supervisor, you will not receive your pay, your name will be missing from the list or you will get paid far less than what was initially promised or due to you.” One young Liberian woman described the reality on the plantation where she worked, “I work two times in the week and during those two days, the headman will always touch all the women’s breasts and butts all of the time, including me.” A woman from Guatemala said, “Often, the plantation foremen blackmail women, offering them work in exchange for sex; if they do not agree to sleep with them, the foremen do not employ them.” Others report that, “you have to sleep with the headmen or supervisors before you can get your food to be sold to the workers.” (4)

In West and Central Africa, oil palm industrial plantations also become a threat to its traditional cultivation and use. Resistance against these plantations thus turns also into a women's fight for their economic independence. Yet, when women speak out, companies make use of the cultural roles assigned to women to marginalize them. As exposed in the booklet "12 tactics palm oil companies use to grab community land," (5) companies will, for example, comment to chiefs and family members that a 'woman's business is in the house and cooking, not criticizing the company'. They will try to make male family members feel ashamed and embarrassed that their wives, daughters or sisters are taking action. As a result, the whole family, and sometimes a big portion of the community, will put pressure on women to stop their protests against the company.XXX

The reality is that wherever these plantations expand in Africa, Asia and Latin America, women living in or around industrial oil palm plantations face an increase in similar abuses, such as (6):

- **rape and torture** in or around the plantations fields, with the perpetrators usually going unpunished;
- **violent arrests or searches** arguing that palm nuts or palm oil have been stolen from the company plantations. This comes with women having their traditional oil production taken away or destroyed, particularly in Africa where women have been producing palm oil for generations. These accusations are largely false and, most importantly, illegitimate, because companies have stolen communities' land in the first place;
- **security guards entering their houses** during the night, supposedly in search of palm nuts or palm oil, exposing women to beatings, abuse and arrests;
- **loss of lands, forests and water sources.** Women are forced to travel long distances to find arable lands, often for many kilometers and often through the plantations, which exposes women and girls to the risk of being raped, assaulted or violently searched;
- **being made landless and forced to sell their labour to plantation companies;**
- being **forced to offer sex in exchange for work;**
- facing serious **health issues due to hazardous and abusive work** tasks, especially when applying agrochemicals. Women and men working on oil palm plantations have described working conditions as akin to slavery. In Indonesia, women and children are often forced to work for free to help men meet the production targets that the company sets as condition for them to receive the full wage for the day; - facing the **destruction of the cultural and social fabric** of their communities' lives.

None of these realities appear in the companies' nice flashing brochures or on their webpages. The sexual violence, abuse and harassment that women suffer as a result of large-scale plantations is rarely mentioned, even during community meetings or in NGO and academic reports. Usually, the shocking extent of this reality only comes out when women meet among themselves. In these conversations, it becomes clear that sexual violence and abuse are an integral part of the large-scale plantation model. (7) The structural patriarchy of the model is usually hidden and reduced to the much-used vague term of 'differentiated impacts'.XXX In response, a video launched on 25 November 2020, the Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, condemns that sexual harassment and violence towards women is another common practice within the oil palm plantation industry, affecting both, women workers and women living in the surrounding communities. (8)

RSPO stands for long-lasting abuse

RSPO is the most widely used voluntary certification system for palm oil companies. It is a partnership between the palm oil industry and a few NGOs – with WWF as a very important one. It delivers a ‘sustainable’ label to palm oil producers, based on a set of principles and criteria approved by its members. What RSPO does **not** do is to question the amount of land grabs, pollution, violation of community and workers’ rights and overall violence embedded in the industry. RSPO facilitates the continued expansion of the industrial oil palm plantations model while certifying it as ‘sustainable’.

One of RSPO’s standards is to promote ‘gender equality.’ According to RSPO, compliance with their 2018 principles and criteria is required in order for certification to be awarded to a company. (9) The principles related to “sustainable livelihood and poverty reduction” require that “everyone engaged in palm oil production has equal opportunities to fulfill their potential in work and community with dignity and equality, and in a healthy working and living environment.” A gender committee is supposed “to raise awareness, identify and address issues of concern, as well as opportunities and improvements for women”, and it is required that there be “no harassment or abuse in the workplace” and that reproductive rights be protected. This is supposed to guarantee “safe and decent work” as well as respect for human rights. The 2018 document goes on to give “guidance” on each of its principles and criteria. In relation to the gender committee, the guidance calls for “programmes provided for particular issues faced by women, such as violence and sexual harassment in the workplace” and says that the committee “should include representatives from all areas of work [and] will consider matters such as: training on women’s rights; counselling for women affected by violence; child care facilities to be provided by the unit of certification; women to be allowed to breastfeed up to nine months before resuming chemical spraying or usage tasks; and women to be given specific break times to enable effective breastfeeding.”

Women, however, tend to be restricted to low-paying, arduous and demeaning tasks, including the spraying of pesticides. These are tasks that are extremely dangerous for women and their reproductive health.

Additionally, RSPO has a Human Rights Working Group – including a specific sub-group for gender – which is supposed to ensure the successful implementation of the RSPO principles and criteria that are relevant for the protection and respect of human rights. (10) The Working Group consists of the multinational companies Sime Darby, Agropalma Group, Wilmar, Bunge, Unilever, Kellogg’s, and the Dutch bank ABN-AMRO, together with the NGO Solidaridad, and is co-chaired by representatives from Cargill and Oxfam Novib. Considering that corporations dominate the Working Group by a margin of four to one, perhaps it is not surprising that despite the nice words and seemingly stringent policies, women continue to face abuse, harassment and violence on oil palm plantations, whether these plantations are RSPO certified or not.

It is crucial to ask, how can a Human Rights Working Group of a certification scheme that claims to guaranty ‘ethical production’ of palm oil does not even bother to officially include any voice from local groups or affected communities in their structural organization? And even more importantly, shouldn’t such Working Group exclude any participation of the companies being certified? The answer to these questions lies on the fact that RSPO was created by the companies themselves to allow this industry to continue and expand and therefore, benefits, above all, the companies that it certifies.

A declaration from a 2019 meeting of the Informal Alliance Against Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa states, “Women and girls in these plantation areas experience the deepest injustices and inequalities. Their dignity is violated and they suffer daily human exploitation. From obligations to

meet quotas for the collection of palm fruits to sexual favours demanded by company security guards who accuse them of taking fallen palm fruits from the plantations, they suffer the most severe humiliations, often in silence.” (11)

Moreover, an article published by two Associated Press (AP) journalists in 2020 which documents sexual abuse, harassment and rape of women and girls on oil palm plantations in Malaysia and Indonesia underscores that this violence crosscuts across regions. The journalists note that “of the nearly 100 grievances lodged [with the RSPO] in Indonesia and Malaysia in the last decade, ...women are almost never mentioned.” (12) Yet, they reveal how perpetrators of rape and harassment on plantations sourcing palm oil to the supply chains of some of the biggest names in the US\$530 billion beauty business are going unpunished. These “labor abuses regularly occur industrywide”, they write, including on plantations bearing the RSPO’s green stamp.

RSPO is thus helping oil palm plantation companies not only to greenwash their destructive operations but also, as the feminist movements call it, to “violet wash” their operations. Activist writer Larry Lohmann describes how corporate ‘gender policy’ documents never even raise the question of why physical and sexual violence against women is such a systemic aspect of this industry. Instead, such documents are being used by plantation companies and their associated certification schemes to contain and weaken feminist movements and women-led struggles, merely giving a different coloration to an underlying patriarchy. XXX The women’s voices whose land has been taken over by industrial oil palm plantations confirm once and again that, contrary to the corporate propaganda with their gender-specific policies that claim to benefit and improve women’s lives across the industry, quite the opposite is true, – the palm oil industry brings violence, despair and abuse.

Whose voices will you hear now?

(1) [Olam Living Landscapes Policy](#), April 2018

(2) SOCFIN Group, Socfin’s response to Fian’s “[Draft report extracts made available to Socfin before publication – Provisional title: Land Conflict in Malen –Analysis and lessons learned from a human perspective](#),” p. 5.

(3) WRM Bulletin 253, [Sexual Exploitation and Violence against Women at the Root of the Industrial Plantation Model](#), 2020

(4) [Breaking the silence: Industrial oil palm and rubber plantations bring harassment, sexual violence and abuse against women](#)

(5) [Promise, Divide, Intimidate, Coerce. 12 tactics palm oil companies use to grab community land](#), p. 40, Tactic 7: Exclude and marginalise women; the violence against women that companies never talk about

(6) WRM Bulletin 236, [Covered under the shade of oil palm companies in Cameroon: A recount of the abuses that women suffer](#)

(7) Idem (5)

(8) Video: [Violence and sexual abuse against women in oil palm plantations MUST END](#)

(9) RSPO, [Principles and Criteria](#), 2018

(10) RSPO, [Human rights and social standards](#)

(11) Meeting report, Informal Alliance Against Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa, Cote d’Ivoire, 2019

(12) Mason M. and McDowell R, Rape, [Abuses in palm oil fields linked to top beauty brands](#), Associated Press, November 2021

