
Corporate appropriation of women's struggle: 'Purplewashing' in the activities of big NGOs

Around the world, more and more women identify themselves as feminists. The growth in feminism in recent years has been accompanied by the capture of the movement by capitalism. In this regard, the number of transnational corporations and organizations like The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) that incorporate into their activities the discourse of women's individual "empowerment" and sexual diversity has increased.

It is more and more common for these organizations to position themselves as organizations responsible for improving women's living conditions, giving them more opportunities and visibility. Thus, they link women's freedom to the fact that they take up positions of power within the capitalist logic. Popular feminism starts from the assumption that the emancipation of women will never be complete in a society where the labor of most of the population is appropriated by a capitalist minority; territories of collective use are appropriated by private interests; and much of the population is structurally exploited. This is why feminism must be anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-colonial in order to truly serve as a tool of women's emancipation. We believe in the kind of feminism that places its bets on popular self-organization and builds alliances with other subjects in struggle, walking together towards a horizon of transformation.

The "colorful" capitalism of transnational corporations and NGOs, on the other hand, does not provide real answers to the problem of the exploitation of women and of peoples all around the world, and does nothing but continue expanding the exploitation of labor and the incorporation of nature into its accumulation process. Their profits increase also on the basis of the exploitation of female labor without any rights. This process of appropriation of feminism is known as 'purplewashing': a strategy of appropriation of struggles that serves to improve corporations' image in the eyes of the public, while at the same time driving a process of commodification and neutralization of the feminist critique of the system.

This "multicultural neoliberalism with a 'human face'" is a type of strategy where States and international agencies incorporate "professional" feminist organizations to integrate the gender dimension into their programs. (1) Out of this process there emerge, for example, "gender equality policies". These are documents that all the large conservationist organizations have, full of good intentions, but devoid of any actual political commitment. It is a shrewd way to de-politicize conflicts and reduce the critique of patriarchal capitalism to questioning the "sexism" present in individual behaviors inside the organizations, thus removing the systemic character of oppression. (2) Within this logic, the (false) solution for gender inequality is on the market, via its "social" projects. In other words, investments in "gender programs" ultimately – and as per usual – have the intent of positively impacting corporations' profits through the washing of their image. (3)

One example of this is the oil company Chevron, one of the greatest violators of Indigenous People's rights throughout the globe. It has established a partnership with a feminist fund in Brazil, the ELAS fund, to develop economic entrepreneurship projects with women from local communities (4). This dynamic of corporate funding of feminist actions is a trap. These are strategies that reinforce two

kinds of misleading discourse. One is that there is no alternative outside of the business logic, and that working strategically with these partnerships might change corporations' behavior. Another argument is that it is better that companies invest in women rather than continuing along the same logic of having only male leaders. These are rationales that remain hopeful vis-à-vis the activities of companies and major transnational organizations. However, the systematic violations of communities' rights all over the world do not let us forget that there is no room for naivety in relation to such actors. The objective of enhancing women's and communities' autonomy over their bodies-territories is always incompatible with the intrinsic logic of any capitalist corporation, namely, to continuously amplify its control over 'natural resources' and over other people's labor.

The “gender policies” of big NGOs

In previous WRM bulletins we have talked about how big conservationist NGOs in practice behave like companies. (5) It is no different in the case of 'purplewashing'. Like transnational corporations, big NGOs have increasingly placed their bets on selling a feminist image to the world.

This trend may be seen in big conservation NGOs like The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Conservation International (CI) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). It also happens in smaller organizations, such as Solidaridad.

All these organizations have their own “gender policies”, documents where they record their supposed commitments to equality between men and women. Conservation International, for example, states that it builds gender equality by directing the benefits of projects equally to men and women, hence increasing women's access to and control of resources, and promoting women in leadership roles. A study by this organization about a protected area in the Philippines states that “conservation initiatives too often overlook or insufficiently address the fundamental rights of women to participate in, and benefit from, conservation projects, programs, and policies”. (6) The organization has also created a program in support of female indigenous leaders in countries of the Amazon region, meant to “promote the ideas and actions of Indigenous women to conserve the Amazon and maintain climate stability”. (7)

However, when we analyze the actions of Conservation International in the communities' territories, we see that its conduct does not strengthen communities by respecting their knowledge and practices. The organization has been accused by the Association of Amerindian Peoples (APA) of disrespecting the territorial rights of Indigenous Peoples in Guyana, owing to its involvement in the creation of a protected area in the south of the country with no consultation of Peoples in the region. (8) In a more recent case in Peru, a project led by Conservation International that is trumpeted as a success story in fact brought about forced evictions, loss of livelihoods, destruction of about ten homes (most on Mothers' Day) and other impacts on communities. (9) How could it be possible to support local women's organizations and conduct “feminist” actions without at least respecting peoples' self-determination over their territory?

Another example: The Nature Conservancy launched its “Women in Climate” initiative, which intends to gather female leaders in efforts against climate change. (10) The webpage of the initiative starts off with a discourse on the importance of women's political participation and the inclusion of women of all sexual orientations, affirming a “feminist” approach. However, when we reach the program's strategic plan, we see that the perspective is business as usual: it is based on the goals of the 2030 Agenda – a major failure of the UN system (11) – and reinforces the importance of so-called nature-based solutions, the new name for commodification and financialization of nature and of the commons. (12)

NGOs may also act towards purplewashing agribusiness. This is the case, for instance, of a project by Dutch-based NGO Solidaridad, which works to ensure traceability and low carbon soybean production in Brazil. Furthermore, it concerns itself with ensuring “female participation” in agribusiness.

One of the initiatives that this NGO supports is the production of Fazenda Laruna, headed by estate owner Claudia Liciane Sulzbach, located in Balsas, Maranhão state. Fazenda Laruna has 1100 hectares of farmland devoted to growing soy, corn and beans. In an interview, the owner stresses her great concern with “good practices” in production, socio-environmental certification and the affirmation of the “strength of women in agriculture”. It is a very explanatory example of combining the “greenwashing” of agribusiness with ‘purplewashing’, which supposedly promotes “women’s empowerment”. It is not a kind of isolated initiative, considering that there is a yearly event in Brazil called “National Congress of Women in Agriculture” where entrepreneurs like Cláudia stand out by telling their stories.

In practice, we know that soybean production is one of the main causes of socio-environmental conflicts in Maranhão, and that “sustainable” and low carbon soybean production is no more than a fairytale. (13) This type of “climate-smart” agriculture perpetuates the same injustices as “classic” agribusiness, maintaining the unjust distribution of land in Brazil, socio-economic inequalities and the power of transnational corporations.

The experiences of “successful” women in agribusiness are major exceptions and have nothing to do with the experiences of millions of peasant women, rural workers who are mostly black, have no access to land and have to fight incessantly for their right to land and against monoculture soy plantations. (14)

While so-called “successful women” promote themselves on the back of such initiatives, the overwhelming majority of women continue to suffer the impacts of the destruction of nature and of the exploitation of labor in their territories. Or, as Tica Moreno puts it, corporations’ actions “are aimed at breaking the ‘glass ceiling’, while the vast majority of women are ever more bound to sticky floors, more akin to quicksand”. (15)

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