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## [What do the struggles of women facing land grabbing in Mexico, Sierra Leone and Indonesia have in common?](#)

In the framework of International Women's Day, WRM is relaunching the podcast [Women's struggles for land](#), with stories from women's collectives from the coastal area of Chiapas in Mexico, the Malen Chiefdom in Sierra Leone and the Kapuas river area of Central Kalimantan in Indonesia. While their stories appear quite different from each other at first glance, we find many commonalities and a strong connection between them.

### **Different stories, same underlying patterns of oppression**

The women from all three collectives share a common experience: Companies have attempted to grab thousands of hectares of their land and turn it into oil palm plantations. In Indonesia, the women have also faced a forest carbon project and another large-scale agriculture project that have threatened their vital life spaces. In all of these situations, the companies behind the projects have promised the communities a better life and economic benefits.

The women talk about how the companies took control of, and restricted access to, the lands and forests they use; they talk about how the companies destroyed and polluted forests and water sources. The way the women describe the impacts of corporate land grabs usually differs from the way men talk about land grabs. For the women who shared their stories, being able to access land is crucial, because they have many reproductive and caretaking responsibilities connected to the land. Women depend on the territories to plant their seeds and crops, to get traditional medicine, and to collect materials for tools and handicrafts. In the episode from Indonesia, we hear about the importance of forests not only as a place to plant crops or collect medicines, but as a territory to care for and respect in rituals and ceremonies.

The episode from Indonesia also addresses another issue: Due to companies' prohibition of women from entering forests, there has been a loss in traditional knowledge on how to plant rice in the forest.

For women in Sierra Leone, being able to access their traditional oil palms is a constant concern after corporations take control of community lands. These traditional oil palm plantations are of vital importance for women across Western and Central Africa. Women produce a wide range of products from traditional oil palms, which provide them with essential income. This income is what helps women pay for their children to attend school.

Another common theme in all three episodes centres on the impacts caused by the massive

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application of fertilizers and agrottoxins on the plantations, and the release of wastewater from oil palm fruit processing mills. Some of the consequences of this include polluted water, reduced availability of water, and the need for women and girls to walk longer distances and spend more time securing water for their families' needs. In the episode from Mexico, the women share that the water can no longer be used to wash clothes, let alone to drink.

These impacts reveal a pattern of oppression and violence against black and indigenous women in Indonesia, Sierra Leone, and Mexico. This is not mere coincidence. The exploitation and oppression of women is an integral part of the capitalist logic by which these companies operate. Companies not only benefit from, but reinforce existing patriarchal, racist and colonial structures of oppression and inequality.

In the episode from Mexico, we hear about another form of corporate exploitation. In addition to invading the lands that women use, companies invade women's bodies. The corporate capitalist modus operandi is built not only on the exploitation of the land, but on corporate control, violence against women's bodies, and the exploitation of women's work and labor. The women from Mexico share that their workload massively increases after corporations take control of community lands. Meanwhile, the women from Sierra Leone say that no land means no money. One of the women wonders how she can put food on the table for her children if she cannot access land. We also hear about the physical violence and invasion of women's bodies that is integral to the corporate plantation model. When women walk through the plantations, they face abuse, violence, rape, and (false) accusations of collecting oil palm nuts left behind by the fruit pickers in the industrial plantations.

In the three episodes, we hear women talk about being cut out of decision-making regarding land, which highlights how capitalism feeds on patriarchy and colonialism. In the episode from Sierra Leone, we hear how male chiefs and leaders excluded women from decision-making about land. It does not matter how much women depend on the land; meetings where land use is discussed are usually 'men only' meetings. Corporations tap into this patriarchal 'tradition', knowing that it is usually women who ask the difficult questions and who may prevent communities from signing a contract to hand their land over to the company.

## **Resistance**

Women around the world have started to fight back. The ways they do so are different, as the stories from Mexico, Sierra Leone and Indonesia also reveal. Resistance is diverse and context-specific, reflecting the various ways black, indigenous, and other women in grassroots communities organize. Even though the women do not describe their struggles as feminist struggles, experiences such as theirs are diverse expressions of popular feminism.

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Their testimonials emphasize the importance of coming together and creating women's collectives to nurture resistance. They talk about how essential it is to have safe spaces where women can share what is happening in their homes, communities and territories. Sharing their experiences with other women is an important part of recognizing that the violence and oppression that women face is systemic; that companies take advantage of men's exclusion of women from important decisions on land; and that women face the same violence and oppression wherever plantation companies take over community territories. In Sierra Leone, women are demanding that their lands be returned to them, and they insist on being fully involved in decisions about community lands. Women in Indonesia are expressing their rights, and they expect them to be respected. They have begun to organize actions to stop the corporate projects that harm them.

The women who share their stories in this podcast are concerned not only about their lives, but about the lives of other women too. In solidarity with other communities facing the same threat, women from Mexico have traveled to these communities; they have alerted the women not to fall into the trap of believing the companies' false promises, and to be aware of the negative impacts of industrial oil palm. Likewise, the women from Indonesia have invited young women from their villages to join their group, sharing their experiences and motivating them to continue the struggle.

The conversations in the podcast provide much food for thought. The women sharing their stories are not only fighting against oil palm monocultures and land-grabbing companies. Through their struggles, they are also exposing and denouncing the systematic oppression of women. They are fighting against decisions made about the use of their territories that heavily impact their bodies, families and communities. This podcast highlights the various ways in which women are struggling to defend not only their territories, but their right to have a voice in the decisions that profoundly affect their lives

March 2025, WRM International Secretariat

***Listen to the podcast on [YouTube](#) or [Spotify](#). Available dubbed in English, Spanish, French, Portugues and Bahasa Indonesia.***