
The resistance against tree plantations: a woman's fight

Women are impacted by monoculture tree plantations more than anyone else, and they are also key players in the resistance struggles against this predatory model. The testimonies of two women – Choosri Olakig, from Thailand, and Roze Lemos, from Brazil – corroborate this. Even though they come from different contexts and continents, and are dealing with different kinds of plantations, these two women – and their territories – face similar pressures. They also propose similar paths of resistance.

Choosri and Roze, like many other women, are on the frontlines of movements to occupy and recover lands that companies have illegally appropriated. These women's movements seek to ensure that the recovered lands are used to support their communities' livelihoods and collective wellbeing. Both women are part of movements of landless peasants fighting for agrarian reform in their countries. On lands where there was once a single, irregular property with a devastating monoculture, now dozens of farming families are living and producing a wide variety of food.

To challenge the advance of oil palm plantations in Thailand, or eucalyptus plantations in Brazil, means confronting the production of commodities that serve powerful corporate and economic interests. And when you are a woman, this struggle takes on even more significance, since it is also a struggle against patriarchy. As the following testimonies make clear, the fight is against a model of big capital that imposes monocultures on territories and drives women and men from the countryside. This model commodifies seeds, whilst destroying native seeds that have been passed down from generation to generation. This model's monocultures destroy subsistence agriculture, which is an activity mainly carried out by women. This model imposes megaprojects onto territories that have been conceived abroad and which, in many cases, bring with them an increase in the male population. This, in turn, increases cases of sexual abuse, threatening the bodies and lives of women in communities. It is a model of land use that pollutes waters with agrochemicals, affecting women's reproductive systems and the health of the community. And when it does include women, this model generally only does so through precarious and poorly-compensated jobs.

As Roze says, the fight "against monocultures that concentrate power and income in large companies and male landowners," is the same fight against "historical inequalities that mainly affect women". Below, we share their testimonies.

Thailand: peasants communally use land that has been illegally occupied by oil palm plantations

Thailand is the world's third largest producer of oil palm. Most of the country's industrial oil palm plantations are concentrated in the southern region. It was in this region that the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT) was founded in 2008. Since then, this organization of peasants and landless workers has been fighting for the right to agrarian reform in order to build a just society; for communal rights to manage land and natural resources; for the right of peasants and landless workers to have access to new community settlements (1).

Most of these peasants lost their lands to large oil palm or rubber companies. A significant number of the peasants, now landless, went on to provide cheap manual labor for companies in the same sectors. The movement began to take root when the peasants started occupying public lands that companies were illegally exploiting, mostly for oil palm plantations. This was because in the 1970s, as a strategy to combat communism, the Thai government granted 30-year concessions to private companies to exploit vast areas of public land. However, after that period ended, many companies continued to exploit the lands illegally. These were the areas that landless peasants of the region occupied. At that time, they suffered harsh repression, which demobilized the movement for almost eight years. Some of these activists reorganized and founded the SPFT. This movement remains strong, despite constant death threats and intimidation from local oil palm plantation companies. Between 2010 and 2015, for example, four activists involved in the movement to recover land were shot dead.

Women in the SPFT play an active role in the struggle for land because, among other reasons, food sovereignty is closely linked to their access to land. Women are the ones who ensure community food production on collective lands. And Choosri Olakig is part of this movement.

Choosri Olakig: Women are at the heart of our resistance.

My name is Choosri Olakig, from Thailand, and I am a member of the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT). I was a landless farmer from a community in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province in Southern Thailand. Before that, I worked in a factory, but I returned home at the age of 40 to revive traditional agricultural practices.

Our people have long depended on small-scale farming for our livelihoods, as we grow rice, vegetables, and fruits for both home consumption and local markets. In the past, farmland was often shared or lent at no cost among villagers. However, as agricultural production improved and land values increased, conflicts over land also grew. This forced many people to rent land or migrate for work. I wanted to avoid such conflicts, so I joined SPFT to fight for our own land – and specifically, to reclaim an area that had been an oil palm plantation.

Image

Choosri Olakig, from the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT) (Photo: archives)

The Struggle

Our struggle began when we sought to reclaim land from companies whose concessions had expired. Large-scale plantations, especially oil palm and rubber, have taken over vast areas that were once public or agricultural lands. These plantations have brought multiple impacts, such as the loss of access to farmland. This, in turn, has forced many families into debt or insecure work. The plantations have also caused environmental degradation, including soil depletion, loss of biodiversity, and water pollution from chemical use. Additionally, corporate influence and intimidation has led to social division, making it harder for communities to unite. Since the creation of the SPFT 17 years ago, communities have occupied the land, but it still has not been formally recognized or redistributed to them. Plantations continue to dominate the landscape and shape local power structures.

Challenges for women in the land occupation struggle

Women in SPFT communities face heightened vulnerability due to the contested nature of the land we occupy. Security risks are constant: women who leave the community may face harassment or intimidation, so we often travel in groups and keep logs of our movements for safety. Economic insecurity is another burden: without formal land rights, women's income sources remain fragile, and families depend on precarious wage labor. Health risks also persist, since many contested lands are surrounded by former plantations where chemical use has contaminated soil and water. And the burden of care is heavy: women shoulder a double workload—maintaining households while also taking part in farming.

Women face both external and internal challenges. Among the external threats are harassment, intimidation, and even military intervention, such as in 2014, when soldiers surrounded our community and detained families for so-called 'attitude adjustment'. There are also legal and policy barriers, such as land laws that now allow agricultural reform areas to be used for industrial purposes – for example, for energy projects. These barriers limit communities to participating in rental agreements rather than having ownership over the land. Social pressures also persist; prevailing cultural norms often discourage women from speaking out or taking leadership roles, despite our significant contributions. Another challenge is economic insecurity.

Women's role in the land struggle

Women are at the heart of our resistance. Our roles include community defense, which we provide by organizing safety measures and promoting collective decision-making to protect the community from external threats; food sovereignty promotion, which we accomplish through organic farming, home gardens, and seed saving to ensure the community's food supply without relying on agribusiness supply chains; and solidarity support, which we provide by sharing food and resources with other communities in the network, especially during crises such as COVID-19.

Women are building alternatives for self-reliance

Women are leading initiatives to create self-reliant, sustainable alternatives. Agroecology and organic farming are central to this, as these practices enable us to produce chemical-free vegetables, fruits, and rice for households and local schools. This strengthens our food security. Another of our

initiatives is community forest restoration to restore biodiversity; we are replanting native trees and creating shared spaces for food gathering, medicinal plants, and biodiversity conservation. Women are also contributing to building the local economy, for example through small-scale food processing, local markets, and cooperative models that maintain value within the community. Women are sharing knowledge, by training other communities in seed saving, organic farming, and community defense strategies. These alternatives are not only a form of resistance to dispossession and dependence on corporations, they also strengthen the communities' independence and resilience.

Brazil: where there were eucalyptus trees before, now there is food

Brazil is one of the giants of pulp production, being the second largest producer in the world behind the United States. A significant part of this production is located in the state of Bahía, where the company Veracel is located. This company operates on 203,700 hectares of land, and since its founding in 2005, has produced at least 21 million tons of pulp. Today, the company is a joint venture between the Swedish-Finnish company Stora Enso and the industry giant Suzano Papel e Celulose (2). The latter claims to be the largest pulp manufacturer in the world.

One of the areas that Veracel illegally used to plant eucalyptus trees was a farm spanning approximately 1,300 hectares. Given that this was a public area, it could not actually be appropriated by a private company. And it was precisely this area that Roze and her colleagues from the Land Struggle Movement (MLT, by its Portuguese acronym) occupied in 2008, founding the Baixa Verde settlement (3). Since then, 91 families living there have been fighting to get state recognition of Baixa Verde as an agrarian reform area, since they transformed this illegal "green desert" into a territory with a social purpose. Where there used to only be eucalyptus trees, now people are producing food through family agriculture.

Over the course of these 17 years, many things have occurred: evictions, attacks on the community, death threats, and legal proceedings. While Veracel – which illegally appropriated the land – continues to go unpunished and enjoys all kinds of protection from the authorities, the Baixa Verde settlement is still awaiting official state recognition. But its inhabitants make clear that, despite the absence of legal recognition, they will continue moving forward with their efforts. Roze and the other women from the settlement have been instrumental in this process, as they are aware of the pressures that these kinds of projects bring, especially for women.

Roze Lemos: 'Women Roots of the Earth' is keeping their ancestry alive

My name is Roze Lemos. I am an activist, mother, and grandmother. My community is called the Baixa Verde settlement. We are rural farmers from the Land Struggle Movement in Bahía (MLT). I am a defender of rights, an agroecological agent, and an agricultural production technician. My training also comes from the land struggle movement. I coordinate a group of rural women farmers called Women Roots of the Earth.

Image

Roze Lemos, from the Land Struggle Movement (MLT), Brazil (Photo: Jheyds Kann)

The impacts of eucalyptus monocultures on the community

Veracel is the main hoarder of public land in our territory, and the State's omission in this situation – or rather, its collusion – is appalling. The result is the proliferation of eucalyptus plantations in public areas, which greatly impacts communities in the region. Eucalyptus plantations affect our community in several ways: socially, environmentally, and economically.

Economically, we have seen a reduction in food production, because the land is full of eucalyptus trees and there is less space for family subsistence farming. Eucalyptus trees demand a lot of water, which reduces the availability of water in springs, streams and aquifers. This affects our family farming and the community's water supply. Additionally, eucalyptus trees cause soil depletion; we have poor soil that has been totally degraded.

The reduction in biodiversity is also significant. As eucalyptus trees replace native forest areas, local flora and fauna are considerably reduced. The use of agrochemicals and chemical fertilizers contaminates our soil, rivers and springs, which deteriorates the water quality of our river and the health of our community.

We feel the social impacts due to the displacement of families, who are often forced to migrate to other locations. Companies like the multinational company Veracel (which operates in our territory) buy land so they can establish plantations, evict people, and make it hard for farmers and poor people to remain in the territories. This leads to a loss of cultural identity, among other things. As a result, our community has lost traditions related to agricultural diversification and the land.

And since the local economy is focused on the commercialization of eucalyptus, small-scale farmers reap few direct benefits. Few jobs are created, because the plantations are mechanized and require almost no labor – unlike diversified family farming, which involves more people in its production process. And this is not even to mention land conflicts; the spread of eucalyptus plantations causes disputes between communities and companies, as happened in our community.

In other words, eucalyptus plantations may generate economic benefits for big companies, but for rural communities like ours, they mean the loss of water, land, biodiversity and opportunities for a dignified life.

Impacts of plantations on women's lives

In our community, eucalyptus plantations cause multiple impacts, and when we look specifically at women, the impacts become even more evident. We are the ones at the forefront of caring for and feeding our families and contributing to community life.

For example, as more plantations occupy lands that could be used to grow food, this causes a decline in family farming – which directly affects women. As women farmers, we are often responsible for vegetable production, productive gardens and commercialization at local markets. These activities also allow us to be economically independent. Therefore, monocultures undermine women's autonomy, by reducing opportunities to generate income from the diversified production of foods and handicrafts and the gathering of forest products.

There are also environmental impacts, such as water scarcity. This affects women from a social standpoint, because it increases our workload, requiring us to exert more effort to provide food, water and adequate care for our families.

Eucalyptus plantations also cause cultural erosion: they weaken community ties and the rural way of life, which women are the primary guardians and transmitters of. The loss of biodiversity also reduces access to medicinal herbs and native plants, which impacts women's traditional knowledge of cultural practices and how to care for our families' health.

With regard to health, the use of agrochemicals and other inputs in farming can cause health problems for women and children, especially in domestic activities related to water and food.

In summary, eucalyptus plantations not only affect the environment and the economy, but they also affect women disproportionately. Plantations directly impact our routines, our autonomy, our health, and our knowledge. For all these reasons, we must grow the resistance and organize.

Women's role in the resistance

When we arrived and occupied the territory where we now live, we began to plant seeds among the eucalyptus stumps. We later perfected the technique, but this is how our resistance started. Many of us rural, peasant women have been leaders in the resistance to the expansion of eucalyptus plantations; we have been defending our territories, native seeds, agroecology and sustainable ways of life. By organizing, we are also strengthening the fight for gender rights, since monocultures concentrate power and income in the hands of big companies and male landowners. In other words, we are guaranteeing that all people have equal rights, opportunities and treatment – recognizing the historic inequalities that mainly affect women.

Alternatives that women are creating

Faced with so many problems caused by the presence of Veracel and its eucalyptus plantations, women from the Baixa Verde settlement came up with an alternative. We organized a resistance group called Women Roots of the Earth. We work with tubers and roots because the cultivation of cassava and other tubers was brought over by indigenous peoples and quilombolas. (4) We are keeping this ancestral tradition alive today in our community, by cultivating these products in an agroecological and healthy way.

Today we are building our first teaching kitchen in the community as an alternative that will help increase families' income and improve nutrition. This will enable us to teach agroecology and healthy eating to other men, women and young people from the territory who want to join the women's struggle and resistance. We use what we produce within the community, such as vegetables, potatoes and squash – in other words, everything that can be turned into food. Through this work, we are innovating, building and becoming stronger as a community. This is, therefore, an alternative to the problems we face from eucalyptus plantations.

References:

(1) Supatsak Pobsuk; [Thailand Programme Officer; Focus on the Global South, 2019. Alternative Land Management in Thailand: A study of the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand \(SPFT\)](#)

(2) A joint venture is a partnership between two or more companies that pool resources, skills or technologies to carry out a joint project or venture, sharing risks, profits, and costs.

(3) Teia dos Povos, 2025. [La lucha incesante del asentamiento Baixa Verde – MLT contra el](#)

[monocultivo de eucalipto \(en portugués\)](#)

(4) Quilombola communities are black communities made up of an ethnic-racial group, with their own cultural identity and a particular historical trajectory that comes from their resistance to slavery and oppression.