



# **BREAKING THE SILENCE**

**HARASSMENT, SEXUAL  
VIOLENCE AND ABUSE AGAINST  
WOMEN IN AND AROUND  
INDUSTRIAL OIL PALM AND  
RUBBER PLANTATIONS**

**Breaking the Silence:**  
Harassment, sexual violence and  
abuse against women in and around  
industrial oil palm and rubber  
plantations

RADD - Cameroon  
Muyissi Environment - Gabon  
Natural Resource Women Platform - Liberia  
Radio Culture - Sierra Leone  
GRAIN  
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Life around industrial oil palm and rubber plantations is marked by violence. This has been no different across West and Central Africa, where governments have handed out concessions covering four million hectares of land for the expansion of industrial oil palm plantations in recent years. Most of these concessions have been awarded to large foreign corporations, such as the European agribusiness company Socfin or Olam of Singapore.

When these industrial plantations encroach onto community land, sexual violence, rape and abuse against women and girls increases dramatically. This happens wherever industrial plantations are established and irrespective of whether the plantation crop is palm oil or rubber.

Most women who suffer incidents of sexual violence in and around these industrial plantations suffer in silence. Few report incidents of assault, rape or sexual harassment for fear of retribution and further abuse by authorities and company personnel. This, in turn, exposes women to more sexual violence and abuse as the perpetrators face virtually no risk of being held to account for the violence they inflict on women. Cultural norms that stigmatize women who are raped, blame them for the assault and expose their families to shame, add insult to injury for these women. Too often, women suffer not only in silence but also alone.

## **Violence and abuse a common threat around industrial oil palm and rubber plantations**

Harassment and sexual violence affect women who work on the industrial plantations as well as women and girls who live in and around these plantations and who have to use the roads that pass through the plantations in order to reach their fields, their water sources, the market town, the nearest school or their kin in neighboring villages. People across the region have identified five broad contexts that expose women to such abuse, violence and harassment:

- Working on the plantations, which is the only way left to feed their families for many women after plantation companies have taken control of their community land and destroyed their livelihoods;
- Collecting foods and materials, such as bamboo for baskets, picking manioc leaves or beans and peppers that they have planted along the fringes of the industrial plantations, and selling food to workers on the plantations;
- Processing oil palm nuts and using traditional palm oil for cooking;
- Defending their land in conflict situations with the companies;
- Exclusion from land use decisions within their families and communities.

The plantation managers and security guards increase the risks of sexual violence, rape or harassment for women because they use their positions of power to carry out these acts or they allow such acts to happen without consequences for the abuser. "Our women cry a lot," a traditional chief in Cameroon once remarked. The situation of 'everybody knows but no-one talks about it' is pervasive, and it must end.

## **Sexual violence, abuse and harassment on the job**

*« If you're unlucky you only get paid  
if you let the guy 'do his thing'.  
It happens all the time. »*

Plantation worker in Liberia

**T**oiling on the plantations is often the only way for women to feed their families. Women's work on the plantations includes many tasks that pose a threat to their health, such as applying pesticides and other chemicals without proper protection and under deplorable working conditions. Women are also regularly paid lower wages than men, even if they do the same job.

Across the region, many plantation companies use subcontractors for the weeding, pesticide spraying, application of other chemicals, cleaning of rubber cups, etc. Men and women seeking work as day labourers or on short contract say it is common practice for the subcontractors to extort payment in exchange for awarding these low-paying jobs, while the plantation companies that outsource this work seemingly do nothing to stop them. For women, this is where sexual exploitation and abuse often starts.

In Liberia, women from communities that have had their lands grabbed by plantation companies were shown pictures on the gender-based sexual violence that other communities affected by plantations face. They responded that what they were seeing in the pictures is also common in their areas.

The women say that the men who hire and supervise contract workers, the so-called contractor heads, regularly demand sex before giving jobs to women, or demand sex before paying them their wages they had earned from work already carried out, or before extending their short-term contracts. The women say that those who refuse are subsequently unable to obtain work on the plantation or are threatened with dismissal. One woman stated: "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."<sup>1</sup>

Sexual harassment from male superiors, security guards and co-workers is also frequent. 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 who worked with the company's security personnel for eight years commented that throughout those eight years, "the issue of women giving out their bodies in exchange for jobs was not a strange thing on the plantation."

Refusing threats, such as "Agree to me in the bush before I give you the money" or refusing to "Register first in the green building" [the plantation], often comes at a high price for women. If a supervisor takes action at all after women report the abuse, the women may get paid part of the wages they are due but face ongoing threats. Companies have no functioning policies in place to prevent and end sexual exploitation and abuse on their plantations. For these companies, the absence of registered cases is evidence enough that the problem does not exist, even though 'everybody knows it happens all the time'. Where action is taken, women tend to be pushed into accepting 'hush-money' while the abuser will keep his job and often continue to harass and abuse because he faces no serious threat of losing his job or facing legal charges. One woman working at a plantation described how a nursery supervisor not only fired an employee he had harassed and who had refused his requests for sex but also fired the women working with her whom she had told about the harassment.

A number of women in Liberia also reported that they gave up their jobs on the plantation because they were "not ready to do two jobs." They took this difficult decision despite the context of extreme hardship in which they live, caused by the loss of community land to the plantation companies, leaving them without land to grow food to feed their families. "The hardship in our communities is very unbearable, especially having your kids sleep for days without a proper meal," one woman noted. Another woman added, "If we still had our land, no woman would want to work for the company or give sex for food to live."

What makes this situation even more intolerable is the silence that surrounds the sexual violence and abuse. In communities affected by plantations across the region, most women feel that they cannot even report these incidents of violence and abuse to the police or inform their families.

Similar incidents of sexual violence have been reported from women working on industrial oil palm plantations in Central America. "Often, plantation foremen blackmail women, offering them work in exchange for sex; if they do not agree to sleep with

<sup>1</sup>For obvious reasons, names of plantations or villages are withheld where concrete accounts of sexual violence and abuse are mentioned. The experiences cited have been shared during visits of the organisations publishing this briefing to communities across the region. On those occasions, many of the women shared information they had heard, seen or experienced in relation to harassment, sexual violence and abuse against women in and around industrial oil palm and rubber plantations.

them, the foremen do not employ them", one woman describes the situation in an article on [Guatemala and Colombia: Women facing oil palm plantations](#) for the WRM Bulletin in March 2018.

## **Sexual violence, abuse and harassment against women securing food for their families**

*« Tu veux les feuilles de manioc,  
moi je veux le sexe »*

Woman relaying comment  
by security guard on plantation  
in Cameroon

In West and Central African countries, food production rests predominantly on women's shoulders, and across Sub-Saharan Africa, women produce close to 90 per cent of the local foods. In this context, when plantation companies take over community land with their industrial oil palm or rubber plantations, they destroy the land women rely on to produce food, feed their families and secure a livelihood by selling food on local markets. Women are then left without land close to their homes to cultivate and provide for their families and community. Their only options are to try and grow some cassava and beans along the pesticide-infested fringes of the industrial plantations, to pick cassava leaves from the meagre plants growing among the oil palm plantations, and to collect dead sticks inside the plantation, and to sell food to plantation workers – often prepared from produce bought from outside the region because their own land is occupied by oil palm or rubber plantations. Or they need to walk long distances on desolate company roads with little traffic to reach their faraway garden plots or land they rent in neighboring villages further away from the plantations.

With all these activities, women are forced to spend time – often on their own - inside or on the fringes of the industrial plantations. This exposes women to sexual violence and abuse, particularly from security guards who patrol the company plantations. "Let me do my thing or I kill you" or "You want the manioc leaves, and me, I want sex" are commonly uttered threat, women reported. One woman in Liberia explained that in her experience, "to pass through the plantations is a problem especially when it is after six in the evening. If you decide to travel at night, expect to be raped."

Women selling food to workers on the plantation face similar violence and abuse than women working on the plantations. Many report that "you have to sleep with the headmen or supervisors before you can get your food to be sold to the workers." While most women who have experienced this violence and abuse are forced to suffer in silence, the perpetrators can brazenly boast about the abuse - without the slightest

risk of action being taken against them by either the police or the company. This pervasive inaction allows the abuse to continue.

## **Violence and abuse against women using traditional palm oil**

**A**mong the many plants that women in West and Central African countries use, oil palms have a special importance. The local population uses many of the products derived from oil palms in their daily lives: from the traditionally produced oil – the most important one - to medicines, building materials, etc. For women, the processing of traditional palm oil is also an important income generating activity. Or at least – it was, until villages become encircled by industrial oil palm plantations. Once the oil palms in the plantation start bearing fruit, some 4-5 years after they have been planted, women report continuous harassment, violence and abuse over the use of traditional palm oil. From that moment, women living inside and around the plantations are always at risk of being accused of having stolen nuts from the company plantations and of being searched, beaten, arrested and sexually abused by company guards and police who accuse them of theft.

If a woman or girl is found with some oil palm nuts picked from the ground inside the plantations, the risk of being beaten or sexually abused is very high.

In Cameroon, one woman reported how she had been severely beaten by guards because she refused to give up the palm oil that came from her family's own little oil palm grove and which she was carrying with her while being transported on the plantation roads. These roads are the only connection between her family's groves and the town where she has been living since oil palm plantations had destroyed her family's livelihood. Another woman reported that when she was pregnant she was accused of stealing palm nuts and beaten so badly that she later miscarried. Company guards had burst into her home to inspect what she was cooking and dragged her to the police station, falsely accusing her of using palm oil made from stolen nuts in the food she was cooking. Even though the court handed down a judgement in favour of the woman, the company, SOCAPALM (owned by the Belgian-French owned company Socfin), appealed and nearly seven years after the incident, the case continues in a court in the city of Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon.

Many women report that guards will confiscate or destroy any palm oil they find, even if the women insist that it comes from their own family oil palm groves. Women reported incidents of guards even destroying the traditional palm oil that they were selling at local markets near the company plantations.

## **Violence and abuse against women defending their land in conflict situations with the plantation companies**

**F**rom Cameroon to Sierra Leone, communities face violent conflicts and clashes with police and army personnel brought in to protect corporate oil palm plantations. "There are armed men everywhere," say women in the village of Mbonjo, in Cameroon. The soldiers were called in to police the plantations of SOCAPALM. "We don't want these soldiers behind our houses and inside our kitchens," women demanded from their village chief, after security forces have been beating women and young people, threatening them for supposedly stealing palm nuts without providing any proof. "And if that wasn't enough, they linger around behind our kitchens," the women said, "When we're asleep at night, the soldiers enter our homes. Are there palm trees in our houses? The palm groves are on the hillsides, not inside our homes."

In Sierra Leone, a violent conflict between security forces and community people was reported in the Socfin plantations in early 2019, which led to the death of two and the arrest of 15 people. In another conflict over the company's occupation of community land, the Women's leader the Chairwoman of the Malen Land Owners Association (MALOA) and two others were arrested and detained for several days. In an article published by Culture Radio, the Chairwoman described how she was molested and beaten by security personnel. "A lot of people fled to the bushes for fear of arrest or being beaten because there was a list of people purported to be members of MALOA and supporters of Hon Shiaka Sama, who had been advocating on our behalf concerning our lands," a village member explained, describing the situation as one where "our rights have been tampered with, our children are out of school, our husbands have fled to other villages and the border areas, all we had was looted from us and we were left with nothing. We now depend on family members and friends in other towns for survival."

Women in the villages affected by the Socfin plantations are reported to have identified sexual violence, teenage pregnancy and early marriage as among the most painful consequences of Socfin's occupation of their land. Like the women in Mbonjo, the women of Sahn Malen have been calling on the government to withdraw all armed security personnel so that they can return to their communities. They are also demanding that their land be given back so they can return to their farms and use the land for their own agricultural activities and be able to take care of their families. "We want to see our dignity as women being restored. Our young girls should remain as girls and not mothers. Our right to assembly, movement and food is all we ask for" said one of the women involved in the women's struggle for the return of their land.



## **Excluding women from land use decisions exposes them to violence and abuse when community land is handed to plantation companies**

**T**he land handed over by central governments as part of industrial oil palm or rubber concessions is almost always occupied by forest peoples or peasant communities. It is often part of the ancestral territory of communities who are living on the land and for whom the forest provides a livelihood. And while women are often at the forefront of the struggle for the defense of their land, traditional customs can still often exclude them from decision-making over the use of the land they depend on to feed their families.

Even now, the reality for many women in West and Central Africa is that chiefs and community land owner committees make decisions without involving the women who grow the food that feeds the families in their community and beyond. In Gabon, like across the region, neither state nor customary law adequately protect women's access to land and their involvement in decision-making over land use. On the one hand, the law authorises the establishment of industrial oil palm plantations in the immediate proximity of villages, destroying women's fields and gardens. On the other hand, the rigid interpretation of traditional customs regulating heritage and access to land excludes women from the key discussions over how the community land that women depend upon will be used, and whether it will be handed over – often against women's will – to plantation companies.

The exclusion of women from decision making over the use of community land exposes them to sexual violence and abuse and to being beaten and jailed when they defend their communities' future in conflicts over land with the plantation companies. As Cameroonian activist Michèle Ongbassomben remarks, "it seems clear that we must find a way to reconcile customary law and common law so that women can enjoy secure access to land, and at the same time, take precautions to prevent their villages from losing their traditional heritage. Certainly we must look beyond political reforms and adopt a real change in both men and women's behaviour vis-a-vis women's right to land; given that women's right to land is essential not only for themselves, but also to ensure collective food security."

## **Shining a light on what is systematically covered up**

**T**he 8th of March, International Women's Day, provides a moment to shine a light on one of the realities of the industrial tree plantation model that is systematically covered up and remains invisible: the sexual violence, abuse and exploitation of that women endure. It is time to expose the cruel reality that has for too long been hidden behind what many reports on the impacts of industrial oil palm plantations

euphemistically refer to as "differentiated impacts on women".

It is also an important moment to remind ourselves that despite the suffering and violence they endure, women are not merely victims. In many places where corporations have violently taken control over their land, women are organising and demanding an end to the abuses that they and their communities are suffering since industrial plantations destroyed their livelihoods. They demand a return of their land. Women demand that they be part of decision-making processes about the fate of their communities land and they are demanding that companies return land that they have grabbed from the communities without their consent.

On the 8th of March - International Women's Day we join the women who live in and around industrial oil palm and rubber plantations in their call to action:

**STOP the harassment, sexual violence and abuse against  
women in and around industrial oil palm and rubber plantations  
IMMEDIATELY!**

## **Media reports, NGO publications and forthcoming articles which contributed to the preparation of this briefing:**

**RAAD, Cameroon:** Les violences sexuelles dans les grandes plantations de monoculture d'arbres au Cameroun. Email: radd2009@yahoo.fr

**Muyissi Environment, Gabon:** L'impact de l'insécurité foncière sur les femmes vivants dans et autour des plantations de palmier à huile au Gabon.

**Natural Resource Women Platform, Liberia:** A report on sexual gender-based violence against women in and around rubber plantations in Liberia. nrwomenplatform@gmail.com

**Aminata Finda Massaquoi (2019) Sierra Leone:** Malen women cry for help. <https://www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/28769-malen-women-cry-for-help>

**Madeleine Ngeunga & David Akana (2019), Cameroun:** Des femmes qui refusent de se taire: <http://infocongo.org/fr/cameroun-des-femmes-qui-refusent-de-se-taire/>

**Bread for All (2019):** Struggle for Life and Land – Socfin's Rubber Plantations in Liberia and the Responsibility of Swiss Companies: <https://breadforall.ch/rubber-group-ousts-farmers-in-liberia/>

**Compilation of WRM Bulletin articles (2018):** Impacts of Large Scale Oil Palm Plantations on Women: <https://wrm.org.uy/books-and-briefings/impacts-of-large-scale-oil-palm-plantations-on-women/>

**Michèle Ongbassomben (2016):** Women and Property in Cameroon: Laws and Reality: <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/women-and-property-in-cameroon-laws-and-reality/>

## **More information:**

**Statements** from informal alliance meetings:

- 2016 in Mundemba, Cameroon: <https://wrm.org.uy/other-relevant-information/mundemba-declaration-women-and-the-expansion-of-oil-palm-plantations-and-industrial-palm-oil/>

- 2017 in Port Loko, Sierra Leone: <https://wrm.org.uy/other-relevant-information/declaration-no-to-abuse-against-women-in-industrial-oil-palm-plantations/>

**Petition** initiated by the Cameroonian Association, Network of Actors for Sustainable Development (RADD, by its French acronym) and the informal alliance to stop this repression of women and handed over to the Cameroonian Minister of Women and Families on 8 March 2018: <https://wrm.org.uy/actions-and-campaigns/petition-stop-all-forms-of-abuse-against-women-in-large-monoculture-tree-plantations/>