Women and agrocommodities

Impacts and resistance from a feminist perspective

11/2023
Friends of the Earth International is the world’s largest grassroots environmental federation, with 73 national member groups and millions of members and supporters around the world.

Our vision is of a peaceful and sustainable world based on societies living in harmony with nature. We envision a society of interdependent people living in dignity, wholeness and fulfilment in which equity, and human and peoples’ rights, are realised. This will be a society built upon peoples’ sovereignty and participation. It will be founded on social, economic, gender and environmental justice and be free from all forms of domination and exploitation, such as neoliberalism, corporate globalisation, neo-colonialism and militarism.

We believe that our children’s future will be better because of what we do.

Introduction

Agrocommodities bring a multitude of negative impacts on forests, biodiversity, water and other common natural resources, as well as on the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities regarding their territories and ways of life. These effects reverberate through women’s bodies and territories. Understanding these impacts enables us to grasp the scope of their consequences and to deepen the analysis that strengthens the struggle for gender justice against systems of oppression created by patriarchal structures like agribusiness and the production of agrocommodities. To do so, we draw on the political framework on gender justice and community forest management developed by Friends of the Earth International (FoEI).

In our analysis, we give visibility to women’s strategies of resistance and struggle against agrocommodities and the agribusiness model. We identify and share insights to strengthen this women-led resistance, which in turn strengthens women’s rights and the achievement of gender justice, thus bolstering women’s leadership in the struggle against agribusiness around the world.

As part of FoEI’s struggle for system change, we must end the systems of oppression that devalue women, racialised bodies and gender diversities in territories. The agribusiness model is an extension of a profoundly patriarchal process that determines a single way of producing food and feeding ourselves, one which threatens women as well as forests, biodiversity and the peoples that safeguard these common goods. In contrast to this model, 85% of food produced globally is consumed in the same ecoregion, or at least within national borders. Most of this food is produced far from the reach of transnational corporations.

Those of us who fight for gender justice know that we must include strategies for fostering dialogue and thinking about forests, biodiversity and food sovereignty within that. Life, forests and biodiversity are at the centre of the real life experiences of FoEI member groups, social movements and communities.

What are agrocommodities?

An agrocommodity is any agricultural product produced at an industrial scale, and often internationally traded by agribusiness and part of the agro-industrial system, and the focus is on the system that produces it, and not on the specific product itself. Indeed, most agricultural products are fine when produced by small-scale producers for local consumption and produced in a responsible way, but become problematic when they are produced at an industrial scale.
Agribusiness, monoculture and agrocommodities

The agrocommodities production is part of the capitalist patriarchal economic model that includes privatisation, commodification and financialisation of nature as forms of territory-grabbing for profit. This model also violates women and people’s rights.

The role of transnational companies in the agribusiness model

This model is known for its high dependence on the use of polluting chemicals, as well as reliance on technology and expensive specialised machinery that requires large expanses of productive land, which leads to land grabbing and the exclusion of peasants and family farmers. It uses the same logic of exploitation on women and natural resources. The model is based on monoculture production, which requires the homogenisation of the logics and forms of being on the land, to one which serves solely agricultural production and territorial control. As Karin Nansen of REDES/Friends of the Earth, Uruguay emphasises, the industry is high on the list of contributors to the degradation of nature and, especially, climate change, not only due to the emissions that come directly from agriculture, but because of the entire agroindustrial chain. It contributes to biodiversity loss and destruction, to the pollution and deterioration of water sources and the hydrological cycle, wherein both the quality and quantity of water is affected, and it clearly contributes to the hunger crisis.

Agrocommodities are the result of such industrial scale agribusiness, the focus being on the system of production, not on the specific product itself. They are part of a logic in which corporate power, governmental and institutional support, financing, technological needs and innovations, and global supply chains all come together to privilege exports, whose final processing results in a broad range of consumer products.

TNCs are the main actors in the agrocommodities model, playing a leading role in all stages of production, development, trade, sales and even lobbying in favour of public policies that will ensure higher profits. Agricultural monocultures, tree plantations and industrial meat production are all aspects of the production of agrocommodities, that feed the agroindustrial model of land grabbing. The impacts are not a metaphor, the model violently affects life in territories and, above all, women’s lives and bodies.
Agribusiness, monoculture and agrocommodities

For Shamila Ariffin of SAM/Friends of the Earth Malaysia, the scale of land controlled by the private sector is very relevant, and helps us understand how power is used for corporate benefit. “It’s a business entity, a private entity that controls many areas, because it won’t be just one plantation, no. Perhaps they have only this [one] in this province, but in other provinces they have more, or in other countries. Size matters, and size means two things: the size of the land under cultivation and, let’s say, the cumulative size, the total sum of the different plantations, different areas, etc.”

An essential point when analysing the agribusiness model is access to land. Women especially see their access to land threatened, and have less power to make decisions about what to produce in their territories based on their own knowledge and their communities’ needs. The pressure to shift from food crops to cash crops carries a higher risk that men will grab women’s lands, water and other productive resources to allocate them to crops with a higher monetary value.

An example of this is the expansion of oil palm plantations in so-called idle or marginal lands in various regions around the world. Their expansion also has a direct impact on biodiversity loss. Rita Uwakwa of ERA/Friends of the Earth Nigeria discusses the impacts on ecosystems. “People are forced to uproot themselves from their ancestral lands, because these companies are growing super-fast, they are looking for concessions that are growing, grabbing new areas. We also know that there is a lot of overdependence on pesticides. These companies use a lot of chemicals to increase their yield. They kill pests and other types of ecosystems and animals that hugely contribute to the land and forest ecosystems.”

The loss of land and territories affects women in various ways, especially rural women who are also economically impoverished, as is typically the case in the global south. They lose traditional knowledge and skills regarding the use of wild plants for food, fodder and medicine. They lose vital sources of water which are grabbed for agrocommodities production. This affects their basic fundamental rights, including the right to water, to food, and to live in a healthy environment, among others.

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Agrocommodities harming communities

Agribusiness and agrocommodities production are part of the capitalist patriarchal economic model of production, distribution and consumption. This includes privatisation, commodification and financialisation of nature as forms of territory-grabbing for profit. In this way, food and food production is homogenised to benefit the interests of TNCs and national and subnational elites. “Agribusiness and agrocommodities production exacerbate the systemic socio-environmental crises that we currently face, and they clearly contribute to greater injustice and inequality. As has been shown, agribusiness is a model that leads to a growing concentration of the agrifood industry, from seeds to end consumers. There is clearly a process of concentration as well as speculation, concentration of profits, concentration of corporations at a global level.”

Communities suffer negative impacts from the imposition of this model — environmental, cultural and recreational. At the same time, economic losses are compounded because although monocultures are often promoted as a form of investment and territorial development to create infrastructure and jobs, the reality on the ground is very different. “Agrocommodities are seen as a sign of development, and it turns out that, in the end, what they create is harm and pain for communities who depend on the land and forests to obtain fruits, food and medicine.”

Meanwhile, peasant men end up migrating to find employment elsewhere, leaving women alone to raise their families and care for the home. Domestic activities create huge workloads; women have double or triple shifts due to care work, and when they also become workers in industrial farms, they find a perpetuation of the conditions that make their lives precarious.

The agribusiness model exacerbates agro-extractivism, it intensifies a modality of land use and distribution — the purpose of production, the way food is grown, etc. — that relies on the monopolisation of arable land and water in favour of private companies. Just as important for the model is the widespread distribution and entrenchment of technological packages for monocultures with an excessive use of toxic agrochemicals that have a negative impact on health and the environment, for which the agrinidustries are rarely held accountable.
Impacts of agrocommodities on women and territories

Women play a crucial role in conserving and protecting forests and biodiversity on our planet. The agrocommodities model affects the material aspects of territory: access to water, a healthy environment, food sovereignty and preservation of knowledge. On the other hand, it increases care work. For example, the use of toxic agrochemicals in oil palm plantations pollutes the water, which in turn harms people’s health, whilst women are generally responsible for taking care of the sick.

There are two broad categories of impacts of agrocommodities on women. On one hand, the model affects the material aspects of territory: access to water, a healthy environment, food sovereignty and preservation of knowledge. On the other hand, it increases care work. For example, the use of toxic agrochemicals in oil palm plantations pollutes the water, which in turn harms people’s health, whilst women are generally responsible for taking care of the sick.

The loss of food sovereignty and associated knowledge, impoverishment, militarisation, rights violations, labour precarity, institutional violence and the lack of access to and enforcement of public policies limits women’s autonomy and increases their vulnerability, workloads and care work.

Nevertheless, women are organising themselves to defend their water, forests, ways and modes of food production. ‘Repression against women continues to be a reality. Violence against women increases on a daily basis, because women are beginning to understand that they cannot keep silent. The time of being silent and submissive, afraid that they will shoot you, has passed; we are seeing a lot of local organising. Women are organising themselves, coming together, speaking with a single voice, and speaking directly to power.22 The following sections analyse the main impacts of the agribusiness model on women.

Impacts on the rights to land, territory and a healthy environment

Plantations and other monocultures characteristic of the agrocommodities model replace forests and biodiversity. This has several serious impacts on women.

Polluted water and drought forces women to travel long distances – often by foot – to obtain herbs, fodder or drinking water. The paths they travel cut across territories where the agrocommodities model is in place, which means women face a higher risk of sexual violence and harassment along the way.

Deforestation is another negative impact that translates into women losing access to their forests and livelihoods. Between 2013 and 2019 alone, almost two-thirds of tropical deforestation was attributed to commercial agriculture. Soybeans, palm oil and cattle are the main causes of illegal deforestation worldwide. Other products like cacao, rubber, coffee and maize plantations have similar effects, as they are also leading drivers of deforestation with devastating results.23

Peasant agriculture produces up to 80% of the food in non-industrialised countries and women are responsible for 60-80% of this production. Furthermore, women play a crucial role in conserving forests and biodiversity on our planet.
"Forms of organising range from the importance of recognising how women access land, changing the collective management of land and seeking forms of access, and fair and communal use of land as opposed to private property. This must be regulated by the community.”

Lourdes Willis

However, only 30% of rural women own agricultural land, and they lack access to means of production. They also experience institutional violence when attempting administrative procedures to get access to land titles. Moreover, women face challenges in participating in decision-making spaces, even though they are responsible for agricultural activities to sustain their families.14

This (forced) inability to engage in decision-making, to build spaces for peoples’ power, and to participate in them based on their own organisational forms and principles for a dignified life, is an infringement not only of these rights but also of the right to a healthy environment. Excluded from spaces for political participation and decision-making, women are unable to continue promoting comprehensive forest and biodiversity management in their communities. Meanwhile, they are oppressed by the structural violence they face, which is exacerbated with the installation of agrocommodities. This situation underscores the fragility of the interdependence between our lives and our territories. For example, the rise of agrocommodities is endangering the lives of communities around the world, and in defence of their natural resources and soil. Monoculture-based ecosystems and the territorial fabric by overexploiting produce on their territories and for whom, aligned with the logics of life in indigenous and peasant communities, changes in sowing and harvesting dates, and increased spread of pests and diseases due to higher temperatures and rainfall.15

This puts a lot of pressure on agricultural areas. As a result, women experience reduced food options for their families. As forest areas are deforested, it becomes more difficult to obtain firewood, fodder and produce to supplement their families’ diets. At the same time, areas for the provision of basic goods at the regional level are decreasing, and spaces in forests for spiritual practices are also being lost.16

All the points above are connected to the loss of women’s knowledge about agrobiodiversity. Widely diverse wisdoms regarding the use, management and distribution of forest produce linked to peasant and family agriculture, health and food improve soil fertility and are effective conservation practices. Traditional knowledge and the management systems in which women participate are crucial during food crises. When they disappear, dependence on men increases: “Women can go out in groups to fish for the day. But, when the ecosystem is affected, for example by the expansion of oil palm, crocodile sightings become more common because [the animals] lack food. So, [women] can no longer go out alone. They must be accompanied by men because, obviously, they are afraid of crocodiles. This affects their ability to bring food and money home. Fishing is very profitable for women, they obtain their own income from selling fish.”17

Impacts on water and its control

The agribusiness model hinders access to water, as well as water quality and availability. Plantations consume huge amounts of water, and capture rivers and adjacent water bodies. It is therefore no accident that they are located in regions with a lot of water available for the production of staple crops.

In 2015, in the Sayaxché municipality, Petén department of Guatemala, the company Reforestadora de Palmas del Petén Sociedad Anónima (REPSA) – owned by the HAME Group – polluted 150 kilometres of La Pasión River. This affected the ecosystem, causing the death of 50 tons of fish. Local communities absorbed this harm, and, on top of it all, were criminalised for fighting against it.18

With water sources fenced off in communities near plantations, women are forced to pay for transport or walk longer distances to access clean water.19 This not only compromises livelihood strategies for food production and household activities, but also means they have to buy more food, increasing dependence on industrialised products and directly affecting their families’ diets.

Meanwhile, the use of toxic agrochemicals also contaminates water sources. Not only does resistance to pests increase, but people and organisms are poisoned, and women’s reproductive health is harmed (for example, the cases of hormone-related illnesses due to the soybean plantations in Argentina).20

Examples of water impacts can be found in the case of oil palm plantations in Africa, which are drying up communities. “The quality of the groundwater underneath the soil also decreases because, that is, the water also flows into the rivers and the communities use those rivers, they need access to water and most of the time that water is contaminated and the soil is polluted. This affects the communities’ crops, and clearly, they drink this same water. They don’t have access to modern wells that may exist in other cities, they depend on natural water bodies, rivers, streams, this is their source of water. This affects women, because women and girls are the ones who go to these rivers to fetch water, and when they use this contaminated water, it affects women, especially women in age of reproduction.”21

By criminalising the women who defend their water bodies, corporations also seek to control women, committing violence against them. They fence in the communities and the women who seek access to water. This results in the oppression of women, they are stripped of the possibility of strengthening their participation in local water management structures.
Impacts on women’s health

The intensification of toxic agrochemicals affects the health of plantation workers and adjacent communities. Contaminated water causes illnesses, especially among children who drink it. It also contributes to malnutrition, which further increases women’s care work. On the other hand, the resources and technology to provide care and medicines for people who are ill, or access to medical equipment, create economic burdens for women. Their own health is not exempt. For example, many plantations use glyphosate, an herbicide to control weeds that is banned in many countries due to its toxic effects. The use of this agrochemical is linked to tumours, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, birth defects, miscarriages and Alzheimer’s disease.

As the boundaries between forests and plantations are extended, this commodifies spaces for foraging for medicinal plants and healing spaces in forests. The lack or shrinkage of spaces used for practising spirituality, coupled with conditions of oppression and profound inequality, has a negative impact on women’s emotional health. In fact, due to the violence they experience, women regularly consider suicide. This situation exacerbates the feminisation of care work, which reinforces the sexual division of labour.

Women derive their income from selling their produce, and they are paid only when they are needed. For example, many small-scale family farmers grow cocoa, just as the plantation workers who are employed by the corporate agribusiness, but they are paid only when the demand is high. This increases the risk of violence against women, perpetuated by labourers who are outsiders to the community. These situations limit women’s right to free movement and pose a setback to their independence and autonomy.

More domestic and care work

When land is leased or licensed for plantations, the money is usually managed by men, who tend to have a different logic than women when it comes to caring for their families. Women tend to prioritise spending money on food for the family, education, health, and care for children and the elderly.

Women derive their income from selling their agricultural products in local markets, and this is often the basis for their families’ sustenance. This situation exacerbates the feminisation of care work, which reinforces the sexual division of labour (the fundamental basis for oppression of women).

When these expenses are threatened, women seek paid work, typically as labourers on plantations. They thus become subordinate to a model that takes advantage of their economic and employment needs, with adverse labour conditions that often violate their rights. In some cases, however, they risk their lives migrating without documentation. The presence of women in the agrocommodities model is harmful to their health, and directly affecting their food security and health check-ups which are necessary when working with toxic agrochemicals.

Violence against women

The expansion of agribusiness has created situations of fear; violence, sexism and sexual harassment for women, perpetrated by labourers who are outsiders to the community. These situations limit women’s right to free movement and pose a setback to their independence and autonomy. Criminalisation affects women, as they are subjected to criminal persecution, stigmatisation and prejudice. Additionally, women continue facing other types of oppression linked to the assigned gender roles that they are expected to play in society. Furthermore, their families pressure them to abandon the defence of territory and activism for fear that they will be jailed or killed. Finally, when their sons, husbands and brothers are jailed or prosecuted for defending the territory, women use the income from their partners or family members.

A Global Witness report regarding documented killings of human rights defenders notes: “50 of the victims killed in 2021 were small-scale farmers, highlighting how the relentless commodification and privatisation of land for industrial agriculture is putting small-scale farmers increasingly at risk.”

Small-scale family agriculture is threatened by large-scale plantations, export-led agriculture and the production of commodities over food.

Sexual violence and oppression of women and girls is increase considerably with the imposition of the agrocommodities model. These are only some examples: rape, physical and psychological abuse, harassment, persecution, work in exchange for sex, beatings, intimidation, pregnancies from rapes, presence of armed guards inside and around homes and communities, and domestic violence on paydays.

It is alarming to see that, even under certification schemes such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), the use of hazardous pesticides and other chemicals continues to be promoted, again endangering women’s sexual and reproductive health, and directly affecting their food security and sovereignty.

In the sugar cane plantation in Pernambuco, Brazil, pregnant women work until the last moment, endangering their health. Additionally, women’s access to childcare and to health check-ups which are necessary when working with toxic agrochemicals.

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Rita Uwaka
ERF - Friends of the Earth Nigeria
Women defending and building other models

The agrocommodities model affects women in several ways and they are organising themselves to defend their water, forests, ways and modes of food production.

The agribusiness model promotes ways of production and inhabiting territories that respond to patriarchal logics. These logics run counter to community forest management, agroecology, and livestock or animal management practices, which contribute to a comprehensive sustainable management of soil, land and forests. In this analysis, we exposed the impacts on women from a gender justice perspective.

Numerous communities and social movements around the world struggle against agribusiness. This model is based on androcentric and patriarchal ways of being and existing that obliterate the plurality of life and knowledge in territories. It destroys the ancient wisdom linked to holistic management and stewardship of the commons - such as land, forests, biodiversity, water, seeds - and their uses and transformations. Women’s knowledge is central to such wisdom, which allows us to understand the genealogy of forest and biodiversity preservation practices.

Historically, Indigenous Peoples and local communities have undertaken the sustainable management of forests and biodiversity around the world. Here, women play a key role. Strengthening women and their communities’ practices in this area is therefore essential. This means recognising peoples’ organising power, with women’s leadership at the forefront. In fact, we must reveal, recognise and reinforce these processes where women play leading roles; this is certainly one way of struggling against agrocommodities’ patriarchal logic.

It is also essential to dismantle the power of corporations that try to control all aspects of people’s lives in the territories where they operate. Equally important is to build peoples’ power in response to the different forms of oppression that are exercised over women, which lead us to rethink the way we relate to each other and the social distribution of work and care. In this sense, we must build alternatives based on the feminist economy, which seeks to break with the system by making its injustices and inequalities visible through fundamental principles such as the recognition of interdependence, eco-dependence and equity. We must also make equity in human and economic relations visible in order to change the relations of power and oppression between families, groups and communities.

“We women are organising ourselves, we are mobilising, we are saying enough is enough to this agribusiness model, because they are destroying all our ways of life, our water, and also the future of the generations to come.”

These principles call on us to defend territories, to care for the reproduction of nature and the commons, without which life on the planet would not be possible. Community forest management and agroecology are concrete political practices that emerge under the leadership of women; they are a path for transformational existence and struggle against the agrocommodities model. Organised women around the world are creating and inviting us to other forms of territorial stewardship, management, and care - for our forests and biodiversity, but also for their rights and ours.
References


References
Footnotes


2. Ibid. p.2

3. An ecoregion, or ecological region, is a relatively large biogeographic area distinguished by the uniqueness of its ecology, climate, geomorphology, soils, hydrology, flora and fauna


7. ETC GroupA.

8. Interview with Karin Nansen of REDES/Friends of the Earth Uruguay, conducted on 17 October 2022.

9. Ibid, p.1

10. Throughout this analysis, we use the concept of body-land-territory, which we learned from our sisters of the Xinca Peoples in Guatemala. In this sense, we speak of women. However, this concept does not focus purely on biology. We understand gender non-conforming persons.

11. Interview with Shamila Artifin of SAM/Friends of the Earth Malaysia, conducted on 3 November 2022; paragraph 8.


13. “Cash crops” are crops grown with the intention of selling them on the market or exporting them for profit.


15. Interview with Karin Nansen, paragraph 2. [Own translation.]

16. Interview with Karin Nansen, paragraph 5. [Own translation.]


21. Interview with Alejandro Porras and Mariana Porras of COECO CEIBA/Friends of the Earth Costa Rica, conducted on 17 October 2022; paragraph 8. [Own translation.]

22. Interview with Rita Uwaka, par.33.


25. Interview with Rita Uwaka.

26. Interview with Lourdes Wills, Afro Q’eqchi’ woman from the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala, conducted on 26 October 2022. [Own translation.]


28. Interview with Shamila Ariffin, paragraph 10.


32. Interview with Rita Uwaka.


34. ActionAid, p.20


36. Ibid, p.37


38. Ibid, p.37


42. Amnesty International (2016), paragraph 8.


44. We delve deeper into women’s work and their territorial strategies for the management, care, and stewardship of their territories in our analysis on community forest management. See www.foei.org/what-we-do/forests-and-biodiversity/community-forest-management

45. For more information about the feminist economy, see the video “What is a Feminist Economy?” by Friends of the Earth International and the World March of Women (2023). www.foei.org/video/what-is-a-feminist-economy-video
## Friends of the Earth Groups around the world

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