

Case Study: Large scale concessions in Liberia violate women's land and resource rights and fail to deliver promised benefits

Sonnie Bontor, a 58-year old farmer in Gbapa, in North-Central Liberia, used to make 8,000 Liberian dollars a day selling produce from her farm. One day, she witnessed a survey team on her lands, then saw people working on her property. ArcelorMittal had received a concession from the government to set up a mining operation on her customary lands, but she was not part of the decision-making process, and had not even been informed about the concession. When the company built a dam, her farm was destroyed, leaving her with no means of making a living or feeding her family. The chemicals ArcelorMittal used in its operations polluted the community's air and poisoned its water. The company's promises of relocation benefits failed to materialize.

This pattern is seen across the country. Community and rural women, who rely on their customary lands for their survival, cultures, and livelihoods, are often cut off from the decision-making processes that affect them. Large scale concessions for palm oil, mining, and logging can be granted on their land without their consent—and sometimes without their knowledge. When companies do hold consultations with communities, they speak almost exclusively with the community's men.

These violations occur in spite of the fact that Liberia elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—the first female head of state in Africa—in 2006, and adopted a gender policy in 2009 recognizing the country's gender disparities. Liberia is also a party to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), yet RRI's [Power and Potential report](#) found that the country's women still lack vital legal protections, particularly with regards to the customary land and resources that nearly all rural women rely on to feed their families. This leaves them vulnerable to land-grabbing and dispossession.

Concessions now cover 40 percent of the country, with US\$16 billion in foreign direct investment over the past 12 years. These concessions typically come with promises of economic development: employment, infrastructure, and medical care to less fortunate communities. Yet a [report](#) from Green Advocates, the Natural Resources Women Platform, and the Alliance for Rural Democracy examined all 15 counties in the country and found that large-scale land transactions have failed to lift rural women out of poverty.

Instead, these concessions deprived them of the forests, lands, and rivers that form the basis for their sustenance, livelihoods, and sacred sites. Vital water sources for drinking, fishing, and washing have also been dammed, polluted, or taken over by private companies. Food security in concession areas is a growing concern.

“Presently there is a company operating in the area I live and there is no land for farming. No work for me and my husband, we are suffering, our back yards are cleared, and no space for the planting of pepper, and we don't even know how to live,” said Ma Anna Tue, Sinoe, discussing Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL)'s operations in Sinoe County.

At one point, GVL called the Emergency Response Unit, which arrested community members. Anna Tue protested the treatment of her son; in response, she was beaten, stripped to her underwear, and arrested.

In some cases, communities were forcibly displaced from their customary lands. Resettlement packages and compensation were often promised but rarely provided, particularly in the mining and logging sectors. Where compensation was provided, it was typically channeled through women's husbands, sons, brothers, or fathers.

Few received sufficient jobs or compensation to make up for the loss of their lands and traditional livelihood activities. Women who did receive jobs with the companies engaged in back-breaking labor with few benefits. Logging and plantation concessions in particular involved long working hours, substandard working conditions, and little or no employee benefits. Clinics, hospitals, and schools promised by the companies were typically not provided. In some cases, roads and schools were actually destroyed by concessionaires.

Where women protested the loss of their lands, the government treated them as criminals; the women contended with imprisonment on trumped up charges as well as harassment and violence.

While men face similar problems related to large-scale land acquisitions, these are exacerbated for women, who are primarily responsible for their families' food security but have fewer tenure rights than men under customary systems. Liberian women primarily gain access to land through marriage; a widow can access land in her husband's community, but a divorced woman cannot. Daughters may inherit land, but are likely to receive less than sons.

Where there are no concessions, women still face challenges, including limited decision-making power, but they typically have access to the lands and forests they need for their livelihoods. Most rely heavily on the land for sustenance, income, medicines, and cultural activities; over 90 percent were involved in farming of some kind.

Legislation that would provide a comprehensive set of land rights for communities was introduced in Parliament in 2014. The Land Rights Act would set a precedent in West Africa by recognizing community land rights without requiring a formal title. But little time remains before legislators will be too focused on the election to pass the bill, and even this vital legislation lacks gender-sensitive provisions, including measures to increase women's voice and participation. Nevertheless, securing communities' rights to their lands would go a long way toward fulfilling the promise of Sirleaf's presidency for the country's rural women.