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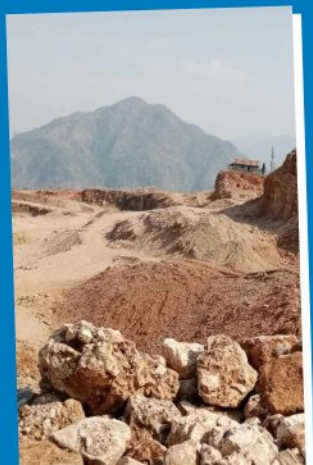
Exploited Lands, Exploited Lives

Struggles for Forests, Life and Gender Justice in the Global South

Global Forest Coalition



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About the Global Forest Coalition (GFC)

We are an international feminist coalition of 134 NGOs and Indigenous Peoples' Organizations from 75 countries, defending social justice and the rights of forest peoples in forest policies. GFC carries out joint advocacy campaigns on the need to respect the rights, roles and needs of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women and youth in forest conservation and the need to address the underlying causes of forest loss.

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Editorial

Six Stories of Community Resilience

By **Valentina Figuera Martínez**, Global Forest Coalition, Brazil

Forest ecosystems in North Sumatra, Indonesia, are closely tied to Indigenous heritage and the local economy. ***EPN***

The world is facing mounting threats, from geopolitical conflicts to climate events and ongoing genocides, while grassroots movements and civil society organizations continue fighting entrenched inequalities. Gender oppressions and colonialism continue to support a violent structure of wealth accumulation that decimates ecosystems and forest communities. There is an overwhelming consensus: time is running out, and systemic transformations are essential to address the root causes of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Forests are crucial for climate regulation, increasing atmospheric vapor, and providing livelihoods for human communities and habitats for terrestrial plant and animal species, but they are under threat everywhere. Meanwhile, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase, and corporations and export-driven economies continue destroying biodiversity through polluting activities, environmental deregulation, and perverse incentives like government subsidies. It is clear that global capitalism—with its unlimited economic growth model and false solutions to climate change—has caused so much environmental damage that some ecosystems are now at the point of no return.

In land ecosystems, 3 to 14% of known species will likely face a very high risk of extinction at a global warming level of 1.5°C, unless urgent actions are taken to halt climate change and biodiversity loss. These twin crises are intensified by the influence of transnational corporations, corporate philanthropies, and export-oriented countries over international policy processes. Permanent agriculture, wildfires, and logging are responsible for 87% of tree cover loss since the turn of the century. Corporations and elites are driving the destruction of forests, traditional knowledge, livelihoods, and forest communities, yet they continue dominating international fora and decision-making spaces that claim to seek environmental sustainability. They decide our future and leave the peoples who have historically protected natural commons in a condition of massive dispossession and cruel inequality.

> *In these words there are spirits rooted*
> *in the forms of fish scales, snakes, fruits, animals,*
> *in fibers narrating the stories of peoples and communities*
> *that venerate the land, the river ...*
> *We have never been separated from the earth, from the king vultures, from the aromas,*
> *not even from the sacred words and the past and present that come together every day.*
>
> **Tudruá Dorrico, Ecossistema dos Deuses**

The words of environmental activist and Indigenous leader Berta Cáceres still prevail not as essentialist rhetoric, but as an unequivocal fact: "We must shake our conscience free from the rapacious capitalism, racism and patriarchy that will only assure our own self-destruction." The rising voices of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women in all their diversity, gender diverse people, Afro-descendant Peoples, and youth fighting against social inequalities, extractivism, and environmental destruction will continue to echo as long as our rights, territories, livelihoods, traditional knowledge,

cosmovisions, and bodies remain under siege. Our words, rooted in ancestral spirits, evidence-based research, and Southern epistemologies, are leaving a legacy of resistance, resilience, political culture, and transformation to protect the world's remaining forest ecosystems and natural life.

This issue of *Forest Cover*, with articles by Global Forest Coalition's member groups in six countries, seeks to politicize the environmental conversation with on-the-ground findings, in a moment of political turmoil where immediate decisions must be made to create territories free of extractivism, fossil fuel exploration, and agribusiness. Here, we highlight the voices of those most affected by industrial monoculture tree plantations, the expansion of agribusiness, and extractive industries. In the places described in the articles from Brazil, Bolivia, China, Georgia, Indonesia, Nepal, and Paraguay, forests are considered sources of commodities to be decimated, plundered, and controlled, similar to women's bodies under a hierarchical dualism, following notions of the old classic model of colonial extractivism.

The articles here expose a collapsing predatory model by examining industrial monoculture tree plantations and other false solutions to climate change, human rights violations, the expansion of agricultural commodities, and extractivism, highlighting the gender-differentiated impacts of these issues. The objective of the research is to expose the impact of extractive industries and corporate interests on forests, biodiversity, and communities, focusing on how Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women in all their diversity, and youth resist the current threats and pressures through community resilience.

Our Approach to Assessing Gender-Differentiated Impacts

The cases presented here help us understand how extractivism, industrial monoculture tree plantations, and agribusiness (including unsustainable livestock production) affect rightsholders, their livelihoods, and traditional knowledge, and become a barrier to achieving transformative change to save the planet. The articles were developed using methodological criteria to document the gender-differentiated impacts on forests and communities, based on the assertion that the policies that define society's organization, production, and consumption, and the deforestation, forest degradation and climate change effects caused by the current economic model, are accelerating the decline of all forms of life and are a consequence of colonial legacies in the Global South.

This gender methodology aims to foster Global South epistemologies, challenging Eurocentric knowledge systems and emphasizing the recovery and valorization of knowledge of women in all their diversity, gender diverse people, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities, in facing the direct causes of deforestation, climate change, and human rights violations.

It was developed following gender impact assessment tools and gender analysis guidelines to support integrating gender and intersectionality approaches according to local, regional, and national contexts. Our members

Chinese and Indonesian women leaders at the forefront of defending local communities and forests meet in North Sumatra, Indonesia. ***EPN***

In Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, much of the native Cerrado forest has been converted to eucalyptus plantations in the past decade by Suzano. ***Orin Lanegelle/GJEP***

used this tool as a basis to create their own gender methodological criteria, map data collection, measure achievements and challenges, and support their commitment to decolonizing knowledges.

Six Cases from Critical Forest Landscapes in the Global South

The first article, by **Global Justice Ecology Project (GJEP)**, exposes the effects of eucalyptus plantations on water, health, food sovereignty, and traditional knowledge systems in a Quilombola community of Volta Miúda, Caravelas, in Bahia, Brazil. Companies like Suzano are responsible for massive ecological devastation in the area, and continue spraying glyphosate and threatening biodiversity.

Additionally, new and irreversible threats from the use of genetically engineered (also called genetically modified or GM) eucalyptus trees are alarming the community and experts. In a historic and devastating decision, Brazil became the first country in the world to approve GM trees for commercial planting after it granted Suzano approval to commercially plant GM eucalyptus trees.

Suzano is planning to expand its industrial plantations in the Brazilian Amazon and the Cerrado, one of the most biodiverse ecosystems on Earth and a critical carbon sink. If the expansion of GM trees continues, it will affect not only the ecological and social balance of Brazilian biomes but also open the door to the spread of this dangerous threat to other countries in the region. In this devastating context, the first article is a global call to demand climate solutions, reject corporate greenwashing, and embrace agroecology, food sovereignty, traditional knowledge, and community-driven forest protection.

The second case, shared by **Environmental Paper Network (EPN) China**, illuminates the pressing issue of pulpwood plantations and their similarities in China and Indonesia. Chinese investments and rising domestic demand for paper have driven rapid pulp expansion in Indonesia, destroying vast areas of rainforest. Much of the social and environmental impacts caused by this rapid expansion were produced by manufacturing companies Asia Pulp and Paper (APP) and Asia Pacific Resources International Limited (APRIL), which have strong ties to China. The exchanges between women campaigners and activists from China and Indonesia documented in the article deepened understanding of how Chinese investment and consumption are harming Indonesian forests, and strengthened local efforts to fight these threats with community-led solutions.

In Paraguay, the case presented by **Centro de Estudios Heñói** shows how the district of Bahía Negra, located in

the extreme northern stretch of the Paraguayan Chaco, near the border with Bolivia and Brazil, became the main focus of extractive capitalist expansion. Agribusiness represents a threat to local wildlife, ecoregions, and communities, particularly rural and Indigenous women.

The expansion of industrial livestock farming and mechanized agriculture (soybeans, corn, sorghum, cotton, and pastures) has a very high socio-environmental cost. This translates into more deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and displacement of the Chaco's Indigenous peoples, whose rights to ancestral territories are threatened. In this context, the government continues handing over lands subject to agrarian reform to local land grabbers, while a violent cycle of dispossession, impoverishment, social exclusion, gender injustices, and state violence continues.

The Paraguayan case exposes the reality of the local community, the state of Indigenous and rural women's rights, and urges immediate actions to ensure socio-environmental public policies and regulatory frameworks to ensure gender equality, respect for human rights, and traditional knowledge, as well as halting the expansion of these destructive activities in the country.

Similarly, the article by Bolivia's **Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA)** exposes a devastating reality, with soy production experiencing a rapid expansion and causing environmental damage since the 1970s. Growing international demand for agrocommodities is motivating the Bolivian government to develop perverse incentives, including a national policy to support unsustainable soy production in the departments of La Paz and Beni, amounting to US$43 million to be implemented between 2025 and 2030.

Furthermore, in 2024 alone, forest fires in Bolivia destroyed 12.6 million hectares of land, 60% of which were forests, smashing records for its worst-ever fire season and scorching an area twice the size of Greece. This unprecedented reality not only left massive ecological devastation and biodiversity loss in an already complicated extractivist context but also put more pressure on Indigenous and rural women who suffer disproportionate consequences.

Legally recognized lands for Indigenous Peoples and local communities in Bolivia are facing an increasing threat: significant areas of territories are being illegally "rented" to third parties, despite their legal status as collective and inalienable property of Indigenous communities. The advance of the agricultural frontier is forcing local communities to sign "agreements" to convert these legally recognized lands to agroindustrial production, which is causing deforestation, gender inequalities, and human rights violations.

From Indigenous and rural women resisting the expansion of agrocommodities in South America to connected struggles against extractive industries in Eastern Europe and South Asia, the cases presented in this issue of Forest Cover expose similar realities in different contexts. The cases expose the need to address structural problems in the current export-driven economic

A cattle ranch in the Paraguayan Chaco. ***Elisa Marecos and Sandino Flecha/Heñói***

"The objective of the research is to expose the impact of extractive industries and corporate interests on forests, biodiversity, and communities, focusing on how Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women in all their diversity, and youth resist the current threats and pressures through community resilience."

Valentina Figuera Martínez, Global Forest Coalition

The house of an indigenous Chepang family which is due to be removed for mine expansion in Makawanpur, Nepal. ***NAFAN***

system that is incentivising Global South countries to degrade and destroy ecosystems.

The article by Georgia's **Local Environmental Initiative**, describes the turmoil in Chiatura in the central-western area of the country due to unchecked manganese mining, which has devastated land and water, undermined community health, and entrenched gender inequality, leading to unrest.

Despite this reality, the people of Chiatura are increasingly standing up for their rights, and their example shows how a movement that began as discontent among miners has grown into street protests, hunger strikes, and desperate acts, including sewing mouths shut. The article also demonstrates how the people of Chiatura are calling attention to the destructive legacy of manganese mining, which has enriched companies but left residents impoverished, their health compromised, their rights violated, and their homes in ruins.

In Georgia, as in many other countries we read about here, women bear the heaviest burden of environmental decline and social upheaval. Women are mostly unemployed, overburdened with unpaid domestic and care work, and excluded from the labour force because of this unequal reality. Nevertheless, the article exposes an urgent demand: Inclusive, gender-sensitive, and community-driven decision-making to confront corporate interests and the cracks in the earth — and in society.

Governments and corporations frequently promote so-called "responsible mining," dams, and large-scale infrastructure as development "solutions." Yet, as the case presented by the **National Forum for Advocacy Nepal (NAFAN)** on mining companies shows, for communities on the ground, these projects bring dispossession, environmental collapse, and deepened inequality.

In Nepal, the Chepang people, an Indigenous group living in the rugged Mahabharat range, are facing the destruction of their lands by mining companies that advance without Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). In particular, it explores the Huaxin Cement Narayani plant on the Dhading–Chitwan border—a Chinese-Nepali joint venture. The consequences have been

"Forests are not 'green financial products' with a monetary value granted by an invisible hand. Forests are not tradable assets to offset environmental damage, nor raw material suppliers to feed the ideology of 'progress' and unending capitalist accumulation."

Valentina Figuera Martínez, Global Forest Coalition

Deforestation in the municipality of Ascensión de Guarayos, Bolivia, as the agro-industrial fronteer advances. ***Mario Vargas/CIPCA***

devastating: human rights violations, gendered burdens, and severe ecological damage. But alongside these harms is a story of community resistance, led in many cases by Chepang women.

The Chepang have not remained silent. They have organized protests, blocked roads, and taken legal action to defend their ancestral lands. In 2024, community leaders halted trucks hauling stone from the Manahari riverbed. And despite police intimidation, the Chepang have won some victories. For example, in Chitwan, protests pushed authorities to suspend operations at the Supar/Starline quarry. In Dhading, residents continue legal battles to hold Shree Kumari Mata accountable. Across the region, women leaders are raising their voices and demanding recognition of land rights, protection of cultural heritage, and genuine participation in decision-making.

Forest Policy in Focus

Ahead of the 30th UN Climate Conference and the Peoples Summit in Belém, Brazil, the Global Forest Coalition stands firm with grassroots movements' urgent demands: a halt to extractive activities including big agribusiness and industrial monoculture tree plantations, accountability from corporations and governments, gender and environmental justice, recognition of rights, material reparations and dismantling the infinite economic growth model as essential to climate and biodiversity goals.

Forests are not "green financial products" with a monetary value granted by an invisible hand. Forests are not tradable assets to offset environmental damage, nor raw material suppliers to feed the ideology of "progress" and unending capitalist accumulation. The pressing problem of deforestation is not a "market failure" that can be corrected with mechanisms like the Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), another false solution to the problem of forest loss and climate chaos.

Forests are complex living ecosystems with intrinsic ecological, cultural, and spiritual value, and they have been protected and co-managed for millennia by Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women in all their diversity, and youth, in accordance with customary laws and traditional cultural practices. In this spirit, we present *Forest Cover 69*, which we hope contributes to understanding of the existing real solutions to climate change, biodiversity loss, and deforestation. ■

Brazil

Big Tech is Driving an Environmental and Socioeconomic Disaster Under the Guise of Climate Responsibility

By **Heather Lee**, Global Justice Ecology Project and Campaign to STOP GE Trees, Canada

Young sisters in a Landless Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*) encampment in Galdino dos Santos in Espirito Santo, Brazil. ***Orin Langelle/GJEP***

Monoculture tree plantations for carbon offsets are taking over swathes of native forests, destroying ecosystems, displacing communities, and violating human rights, particularly those of Afro-descendant women. This article about Brazil exposes how big tech giants are driving the expansion of these plantations, and calls for such false solutions to the climate crisis to be opposed at COP30 in Belém.

As artificial intelligence (AI), data centers, and digital infrastructures demand massively increasing amounts of energy, big tech giants and corporations are turning to carbon offset markets to maintain a façade of climate responsibility. This includes companies like Microsoft and Apple offsetting their greenhouse gas emissions through purchasing carbon credits from eucalyptus plantations in Brazil.

These industrial tree plantations are expanding rapidly at the hands of corporations like Suzano, the world's largest pulp and paper producer. Presented as climate solutions, tree plantations commodify nature while also destroying ecosystems, displacing communities, and giving rise to human rights violations.

Meanwhile, calculations of the carbon stored in plantations are questionable. They fail to account for the vast amounts of carbon released from clear-cutting native forests, which are far more carbon-rich and biodiverse, to make room for the plantations. The result is trees planted in perfect rows and columns, optimal for mechanical harvesting and herbicide spraying, with a complete lack of biodiversity—yet the companies purchasing the credits are able to falsely promote themselves as "green" and "carbon neutral."

Tree plantations are ultimately false solutions to climate change, as they do nothing to stop forest loss, and can even cause natural forests to be razed. They also reinforce a patriarchal and corporate-dominated economic system that oppresses women in all their diversity, Indigenous Peoples, and rural communities.

Eucalyptus plantations with trees planted in rows to allow for machine access. "The huge plantations do not harbor wildlife, and the only biodiversity you find in them is ants and termites," explained Anne Petermann, Executive Director of the Campaign to STOP GE Trees.

The Gendered and Colonial Impacts of Industrial Tree Plantations

The phenomenon of monoculture tree plantations may be relatively new, but it is a legacy of colonial land grabs rooted in the patriarchal control of resources, and they continue to drive dispossession. In Brazil, the issue is highly political, with the Landless Workers' Movement (MST, in Portuguese) reclaiming plantation land for settlements of landless peasants. But the massive plantations of companies like Suzano continue to threaten the livelihoods, cultural practices, and health of Quilombola and other forest-dependent communities, including Indigenous Peoples who rely on intact forests and agroecological practices for food sovereignty, cultural identity, and survival.

In 2023, the Campaign to STOP GE Trees, coordinated by the Global Justice Ecology Project (GJEP), led a delegation to Brazil to collaborate with

communities and gather testimonies about the effects of eucalyptus plantations on water, health, food systems, and cultural survival.

Celio Leocadio, a leader of a Quilombo community of Volta Miúda, Caravelas, Bahia, stated that the planting of eucalyptus in Espírito Santo and Bahia had grave environmental and socioeconomic impacts. "They removed the native plant cover and all the nutrients from the soil. People here used to do agroforestry, use cover crops, and let the land rest—but now, with eucalyptus, there is no rest for the soil," he said. "This model of plantations without any kind of environmental requirements by our national and global governments makes it extremely difficult for us as a society, especially for our forest-dependent and Indigenous Peoples."

Several communities from the Landless Workers Movement we met with were also undertaking important agroecological work, such as training people in the region to grow food organically. The agroecological and agroforestry work of Quilombola communities is significantly impacted by water shortages, the destruction of medicinal plant ecosystems critical to traditional knowledge systems, and the undermining of local food sources. Communities are also exposed to agrochemicals from tree plantations, including glyphosate, which has been linked to various health issues, including increased cancer risk. Women, as caretakers of water, health, and family sustenance, suffer the brunt of these impacts.

Women in the Quilombola town of Angelin II, a matriarchal community surrounded by eucalyptus and sugarcane plantations, testified to us about the impacts of Suzano's agrochemicals on their environment. They said that they could no longer sell their produce as organic, and many of their livestock were sickened or died due to herbicides sprayed by drones. They also stated that Suzano used surveillance drones to monitor their activities, invading their privacy and homes.

The New, Irreversible Threats from GM Trees

Brazil's rural communities now face an even greater threat: genetically engineered (also called genetically modified or GM) eucalyptus trees. In a historic and devastating decision, Brazil became the first country in the world to approve GM trees for commercial planting after it granted Suzano approval to commercially plant GM eucalyptus trees. They are engineered to resist toxic herbicides like glyphosate, kill insects (including pollinators), and grow rapidly. Alarmingly, some of the GM trees combine all three of these traits.

Moisés Savian of Brazil's Ministry of Agrarian Development has identified

A harvesting machine operating in a eucalyptus plantation. **Anne Petermann/GJEP**

"The huge plantations do not harbor wildlife, and the only biodiversity you find in them is ants and termites."
Anne Petermann, Executive Director of the Campaign to STOP GE Trees

"They removed the native plant cover and all the nutrients from the soil. People here used to do agroforestry, use cover crops, and let the land rest —but now, with eucalyptus, there is no rest for the soil"

Celio Leocádio, a leader of a Quilombo community of Volta Miúda

Quilombola activist Célio Pinheiro Leocádio holds a eucalyptus seedling near a recently harvested and replanted eucalyptus plantation. **Orin Langelle/GJEP**

corporate interests as the driving force behind the push for GM eucalyptus, saying: "It makes no sense in my view to have a transgenic [eucalyptus] associated with glyphosate. It is much more linked to market interests of the corporations that want to sell herbicides."

These GM trees will increase agrochemical use, threaten biodiversity, and harm fragile water systems. The problem is only growing; Suzano plans to expand its plantations in the Amazon and the Cerrado, two of the most biodiverse ecosystems on Earth and critical carbon sinks. The pulp and paper producer has named the Amazon region one of the "weedy" regions needing their GM herbicide-resistant trees, which raises serious ecological and social concerns.

During a GJEP press conference at CBD COP 16, Elvis Huni Kui of the Federation of the Huni Kai People of the state of Acre, Brazil, said GM trees "could absolutely destroy the balance of the ecosystem of the Amazon… this is the knife to the throat of our rainforests...the very survival of the Amazon is at stake."

Suzano is also building the world's largest pulp and paper mill in a small town in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul. The project threatens grave damage to natural habitats, biodiversity, water, and air, and a devastatingly precipitous population influx. The 10,000 workers, most of whom reside in nearby male-dominated worker camps, also increase the threat of violence towards the local population, especially women.

Regional and Global Repercussions

The approval of GM trees in Brazil endangers the country's forests and people, but also paves the way for widespread commercialization and large-scale release of GM trees across Latin America. Large-scale eucalyptus plantations are already established in Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. GM traits from Brazil could spread to naturalized eucalyptus species throughout the region, threatening cross-border biodiversity and the territorial integrity of Indigenous and local communities.

As Gustavo Ulcué Campo of Colombia's Nasa community and the National Commission of Indigenous Territories (CNTI) explained: "GMO trees threaten Indigenous Peoples' way of life, ancestral knowledge, and food systems. Defending territories means defending life!"

Violating Rights and Ignoring Indigenous Knowledge

Genetically engineering trees is a dangerous, untested, and irreversible technology. GM trees represent a continuation of colonial thinking—imposing corporate, techno-fixes over Indigenous knowledge and ecological balance. There are also fundamental challenges regarding risk assessments for GM trees due to how risks are framed within different ecological viewpoints.

Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network sees GM trees as a violation of how we view all life forms and the knowledge of Indigenous Peoples: "This is part of a colonial mentality of a predatory knowledge of property of life. When we talk about our rights, we talk about the forests as well."

Genetic engineering can also result in unintended and unpredictable changes in trees' DNA, traits, and behaviour, which may not be noticed in initial tests and could cause serious long-term harm. Geneticist Dr. Ricarda Steinbrecher, an independent scientist with EcoNexus and the Federation of German Scientists, warned in 2023 that "the risks of GM trees are extremely high in terms of the impact on biodiversity, the people living around it, and the global ecosystem and climate."

GM trees could also be included in false solutions like REDD+ and carbon offset markets, further threatening communities by increasing interest in this risky technology. The company Living Carbon is creating trees that resist decay to "store carbon," potentially forever, while others manipulate lignin (the tough, woody material that makes trees rigid and slows their decay) for biofuel use, altering the very core of what trees are and transforming their relation to the ecosystem.

"Who has the foolishness [and] ugliness to take the seed from this relative and alter it in whatever manner they do and whatever way those laboratories allow them?" asked Ponca Nation Ambassador on the Environment Casey Camp-Horinek, speaking in 2024. "It hurts how these humans are coming up with these false solutions to what they have created—what they call climate change."

> *"This is part of a colonial mentality of a predatory knowledge of property of life. When we talk about our rights, we talk about the forests as well."*
>
> **Tom Goldtooth,**
> **Indigenous Environmental Network**

Brazil Must Be Held Accountable – The Time to Act is Now

Brazil's approval of GM trees violates the UN Convention on Biological Diversity's 2008 de facto moratorium on GM trees. No independent, long-term studies exist that prove the safety of GM trees, and geneticists point out that such studies are likely impossible. As Brazil prepares to host COP30 in November 2025, we must not let GM trees become an acceptable climate "solution."

Climate justice must center the rights and demands of women in all their diversity, Indigenous Peoples, and frontline communities. Climate solutions must reject corporate greenwashing and embrace agroecology, food sovereignty, traditional knowledge, and community-driven forest protection. ■

Angelim II is a Quilombola community in Espirito Santo, Brazil that is completely surrounded by eucalyptus and sugarcane plantations. ***Orin Langelle/GJEP***

China & Indonesia

From Sumatra to Yunnan: How Cross-Border Exchanges Are Strengthening Women to Lead for Forest Justice

By **Wen Bo** and **Kim Porter**, Environmental Paper Network (EPN), China and USA

Participants learn how forest concessions have affected Indigenous communities, particularly women, in North Sumatra, Indonesia. ***EPN***

When women from China and Indonesia first met in Sumatra nearly 20 years ago, they discovered their struggles to protect forests were deeply interconnected. What began as an exchange of stories and strategies has grown into a powerful women-led network, uniting grassroots leaders across borders to confront destructive industries, influence investors, and build solidarity for forest justice.

In 2006, Zhang Huiying, then a program officer at Wuhu Ecology Center in Eastern China, traveled to Sumatra, Indonesia, on a fact-finding mission to investigate the social and environmental impacts of a pulpwood plantation. "The devastation I saw was shocking," she later reflected. "But the determination of local women to protect their forests showed me our struggles were connected. We needed to act together."

That mission, organized by the Environmental Paper Network (EPN) and made possible through the leadership of Indonesian partners, marked the first meeting between grassroots women leaders from China and Indonesia. It was the start of an enduring collaboration in which women from the two countries have shared strategies, supported each other's campaigns, and confronted some of the world's most powerful pulp and paper companies.

The Roots of Connection

The 2006 Sumatra trip was motivated by urgent threats. Chinese investments and rising domestic demand for paper were driving rapid pulp expansion in Indonesia, destroying vast areas of rainforest. Much of this was led by manufacturing companies Asia Pulp and Paper (APP) and Asia Pacific Resources International Limited (APRIL), which have strong ties to China.

> *"It was no longer an abstract supply-chain issue. It was about real women, real families, and our responsibility to each other."*
>
> **Ding Jie, director of the Wuhu Qingye Community Development Center, Anhui province**

On the ground, Chinese delegates, including Zhang and fellow activist Ding Jie, met Indigenous women whose livelihoods depended on forest resources like incense trees. They learned that corporations' conversion of diverse forests to monoculture eucalyptus plantations for pulpwood had depleted biodiversity, reduced water availability, and forced women to travel further and further to collect clean water.

These personal encounters helped shift the focus of the Chinese activists' own work. "It was no longer an abstract supply-chain issue," said Ding Jie, now a prominent environmentalist and director of the Wuhu Qingye Community Development Center in Anhui province. "It was about real women, real families, and our responsibility to each other."

Building a Women-Led Network

Following the Sumatra exchange, EPN began supporting structured opportunities for women campaigners from China and Indonesia to learn from one another. In 2014, Chinese activists returned to Sumatra, while Indonesian women leaders traveled to China for a symposium and learning trip. These exchanges deepened understanding of how Chinese investment and consumption were harming Indonesian forests, and gave Indonesian partners insight into how Chinese NGOs could help raise awareness at home.

Each visit paired community observations with strategy sessions. Women documented illegal logging, pesticide damage on incense trees, and land grabs affecting ethnic minority communities. They also discussed tactics—from media advocacy to investor engagement—to hold companies accountable.

Ding Jie applied these lessons to her own work. She now leads sustainable development projects in rural communities in South China, tackling climate change with practical, locally driven solutions. Reflecting on her journey, she said, "Leadership means having a forward-looking vision, guiding diverse teams toward growth, and embracing inclusivity to advance public welfare and ecological development."

Linking Struggles Across Regions

The shared challenges Zhang and Ding observed ran deep. In China's Yunnan Province, for example, pulpwood plantations, hydroelectric projects, and mining had displaced Indigenous Miao, Zhuang, Wa, Yi, and Dai communities, eroded biodiversity, and destroyed watersheds. Women there faced similar dynamics to those seen in Indonesia: powerful companies, inadequate environmental impact assessments, and disregard for community rights.

The exchanges helped participants recognize patterns in corporate behavior and identify opportunities for joint advocacy. In one instance, Chinese activists who had met incense tree harvesters in Sumatra shared their stories in outreach to Chinese financiers, highlighting the gendered impacts of pulp plantations.

Strategy and Solidarity in Yunnan

In 2017, EPN hosted a strategy-building gathering in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, bringing together 40 activists from 14 countries. Indonesian and Chinese women leaders shared updates on their campaigns and forged alliances with participants across East Asia, laying the groundwork for ongoing collaboration, knowledge exchange, and coordinated action on regional forest and environmental issues.

The meeting also planted seeds for local organizing. A women-led Dai cultural preservation society emerged from the gathering, working to protect the local language, traditional practices, and the community's deep connection with nature. "So much of our culture and traditions have been intertwined with rainforests, peafowl, and elephants," said Yu Yinghan, who worked as a Dai

North Sumatra's "incense tree" (*Styrax benzoin*) produces a resin with traditional and modern uses. Beyond its economic value to local communities, it also holds cultural and spiritual significance. ***EPN***

Indonesian and Chinese women leaders meet with community members in North Sumatra to discuss protecting customary forests and upholding Indigenous rights. ***EPN***

language news anchor and later founded her own NGO after being inspired by environmental activists she met at the gathering. "I came to understand that defending our culture also means defending our forests."

Learning in the Field

In 2019, three Chinese women NGO leaders—Mao Jing of Snow Alliance in Qinghai, Liu Rongrong of Wuhu Ecology Center, and Hanna Ye of CDP China—traveled to Sumatra to visit the Nagasaribu Onan Harbangan Indigenous community, which has been affected by the operations of the company Toba Pulp Lestari. Local organizations Lembaga Pemberdayaan Ekonomi Dan Sosial Masyarakat (LPSEM) Riau and Kelompok Studi dan Pengembangan Prakarsa Masyarakat (KSPPM), hosted the delegation, guided by Indonesian conservation leader Woro Supartinah. She showed how eucalyptus plantations had disrupted traditional incense production and increased household labor burdens on women. The visit allowed women leaders to exchange experiences, witness the impacts of pulp expansion on communities, and strengthen cross-border solidarity in environmental advocacy.

The trip was a two-way exchange: Chinese participants saw firsthand the harm done to communities and local resistance efforts, while Indonesian hosts gained new insights into how their struggles could be communicated to investors and decision-makers in China.

Reflecting on her visit, Hanna Ye said: "As villagers shared how Toba Pulp Lestari affected their lives, from leaves that no longer signaled harvest, to seasonal rains as short as half an hour causing landslides. We saw the stark contrast between these realities and the environmental terms the developed world loves: COP, REDD, net zero, traceability, certification schemes. The gap between policy and reality was laid bare. These communities and the forests they protect are the true foundation of any environmental progress."

New Challenges, Evolving Responses

In recent years, threats to Indonesia's tropical forests have expanded beyond pulp plantations to include nickel mining

and pulp mill proposals from companies like Djarum Group, with supply-chain links to APP and APRIL, often with Chinese financing.

In 2023, Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) China, an all-women team, and Rainforest Foundation Norway organized a study tour to Oslo for Chinese investors. The trip exposed participants to Nordic environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices to apply these standards to Chinese overseas investments, including in Indonesia. This initiative reflects the evolution of EPN's exchanges: starting with grassroots community visits, growing into cross-border collaboration that engages policymakers and investors, and consistently placing women leaders at the heart of environmental advocacy.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

The women-led exchanges between China and Indonesia have demonstrated the power of grassroots diplomacy. They have bridged cultural and political differences, elevated local struggles to international platforms, and nurtured leadership that is strategic and deeply rooted in community realities.

Reflecting on the impact, Mao Jing of Snow Alliance said, "These cross-border exchanges help enrich our understanding of deforestation issues that we did not hear much about in the past. We can do a lot in China to help protect Indonesia's rainforests. We now feel these forests are much closer to us."

From the first meeting in Sumatra to strategy sessions in Yunnan and investor dialogues in Oslo, these exchanges have been grounded in trust, respect, and shared purpose. They have also faced barriers: funding constraints, political sensitivities, and the challenges of ensuring women's voices are heard in often male-dominated spaces.

Yet, as Zhang Huiying reflected, "Every time we connect, we plant seeds of change, rooted in hope and growing into solutions. The roots are spreading—across forests, across countries, across generations. We hope to continue building this shared strength as we meet, learn, and rise together." ■

Indonesian environmentalist Woro Supartinah leads Chinese women campaigners and EPN to investigate rainforest destruction in Riau, Indonesia. ***EPN***

"Every time we connect, we plant seeds of change, rooted in hope and growing into solutions. The roots are spreading—across forests, across countries, across generations."

Zhang Huiying, former program officer at Wuhu Ecology Center

Paraguay

Paraguay's Chaco Under Attack: The Case of Bahía Negra

By **Alhelí González** and **Sara Montiel**, Centro de Estudios Heñói, Paraguay

Clearling land for cattle ranching in the Paraguayan Chaco. ***Elisa Marecos and Sandino Flecha***

The Bahía Negra district, located in the northernmost part of the Paraguayan Chaco, is home to three biomes that contain much of Paraguay's biodiversity: the Pantanal, the Cerrado, and the dry Chaco. This article highlights the socio-environmental conflicts caused by the expansion of industrial livestock farming and agriculture, a leading cause of deforestation and land concentration in Paraguay, with a special emphasis on the gender impacts and resistance of women and young people from Indigenous and rural communities.

The district of Bahía Negra, located in the extreme northern stretch of the Paraguayan Chaco, near the border with Bolivia and Brazil, is a vast expanse of over 3.6 million hectares with a population of under 3,000 people. The most thinly populated region in Paraguay, it includes three important eco-regions: the Pantanal, the Cerrado, and the dry Chaco.

The Pantanal, an ecosystem shared by Paraguay, Brazil, and Bolivia, is the world's largest wetland. Home to one of the largest concentrations of biodiversity in Latin America, it is known for its great diversity of birds, abundant population of Yacaré caiman, and endangered mammals like the jaguar and marsh deer.

This rich biodiversity, however, is under threat. The Chaco region has become the main focus of extractive capitalist expansion in Paraguay, representing a threat to the wildlife, ecoregions, and local populations residing in the territory, particularly rural and Indigenous women.

The Chaco is home to diverse flora and fauna. It is bisected by the Paraguay River, with dry forest zones, wetlands, savannahs, and riverine forests that connect different ecosystems. Historically, the river has been a nexus of human communities, serving as a source of food and income from fishing, as well as a transportation route for native populations that are isolated and lack road infrastructure.

The Chaco region has become the main focus of extractive capitalist expansion in Paraguay, representing a threat to the wildlife, ecoregions, and local populations residing in the territory, particularly rural and Indigenous women.

The Yshir and Ayoreo Indigenous Peoples, just like the great branch of the Tupí-Guaraní communities in this region, have traditionally practiced hunting and gathering for subsistence. Their relationship with the land is therefore essentially the opposite of that of Western culture, for they see it not as a source of resources, but rather a source of life, just like the river. The Yshir culture coexists with Western practices in the city of Bahia Negra, albeit with contradictions.

In Yshir communities, men engage in hunting and fishing or are employed on cattle ranches in semi-feudal conditions, while women perform care work and gathering and make handicrafts to sell using plant fibers. Patriarchal gender relations and the sexual division of labour are firmly rooted in community culture, with men assuming more leadership roles. While questioning the subordinate status and gender oppression of Indigenous women must start from their own local perspectives, we must also problematize these cultural relationships without turning them into a tool of power to discredit Indigenous societies. Subordination, based mainly on colonialist notions that consider traditional cultures as "savage," has strong implications for the lives of

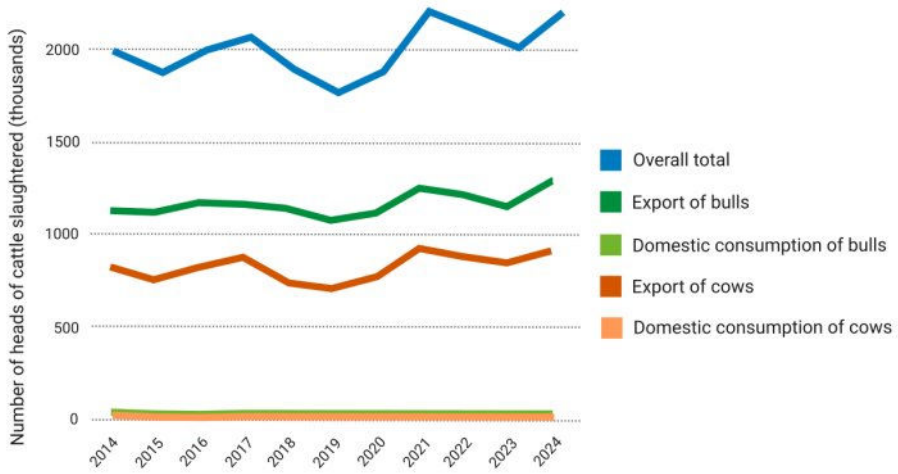


Figure 1. The evolution of livestock farming in Paraguay, 2008–2022. Created based on data from Paraguay's 2022 National Agricultural Census (Censo Agropecuario Nacional).

women and girls and reinforces cultural essentialism. On the other hand, gender injustices at the community level, rooted in traditional discourse, hinder women's political participation and involvement in community decision-making. In this regard, it is important to highlight the strategies Indigenous women use to challenge traditions, construct their own visions of what it means to be a woman without reproducing hegemonic notions, and open up more equitable spaces for community participation.

Many complexities exist in Bahía Negra, given that it is the center of various extractive processes, such as cattle ranching, mining, and agribusiness infrastructure, and officials are attempting to turn the district into a business logistics hub and a strategic center linked to the Interoceanic Highway that would connect the Atlantic and Pacific and Oceans.

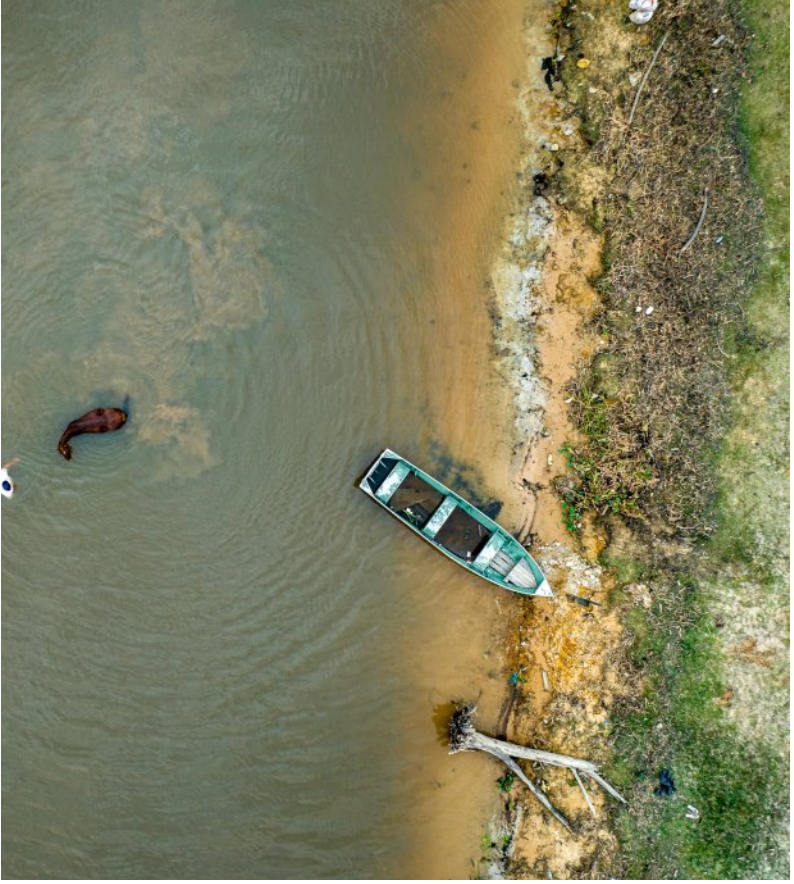
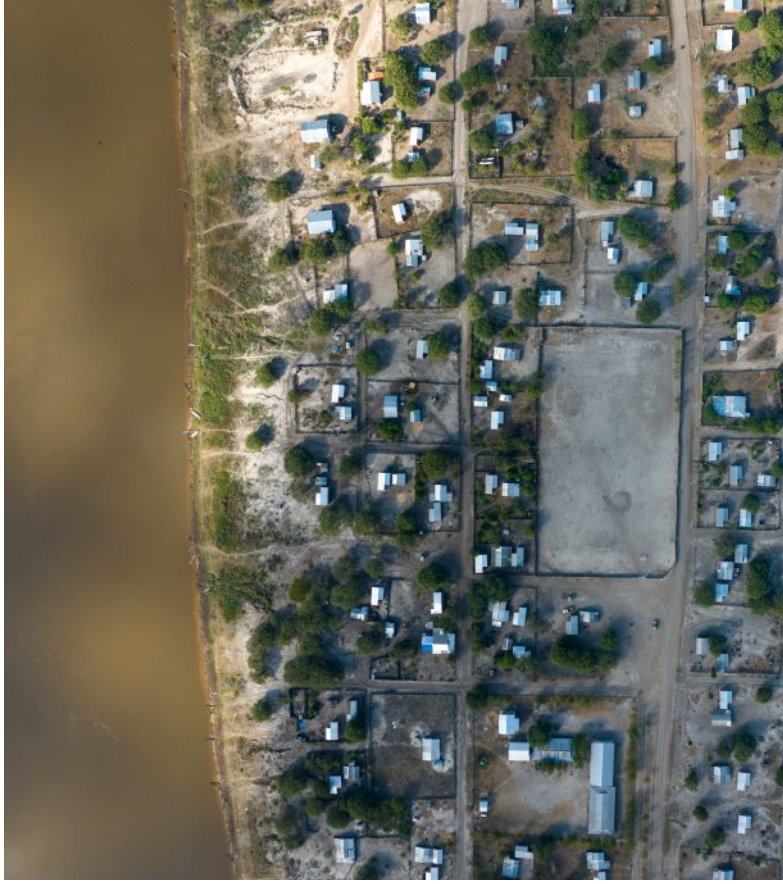
For the population of Bahía Negra living along the Paraguay River, one of the main waterways in the region, daily life centers around the water and the now scarce forestland. The river represents life for native communities like the Yshir Ybytoso, which have lived on this land since the formation of the Paraguayan nation-state. Near the Yshir are the Ayoreo community, the only Indigenous community in voluntary isolation in this region. Their lives and culture are under threat due to the steady advance of the agricultural frontier for agribusiness.

The Extractivist Offensive

Since the agricultural commodities "boom" of the early 2000s, the Chaco has undergone deep social and territorial transformations. Paraguay's economy, which is primarily export-based, relies heavily on cattle ranching, and this sector accounts for a large share of national production.

Paraguay is the world's tenth-largest beef exporter, having sent 470,000 tons to markets abroad in 2024. According to data from the Mesa Paraguaya de Carne Sostenible (MPCS), 2.12 million head of cattle are slaughtered each year, representing about $1.35 billion, making this sector one of the biggest sources of foreign exchange.

Aerial view of Bahía Negra (left) and the Paraguay River (right), in the El Pantanal eco region in the Paraguayan Chaco. ***Elisa Marecos and Sandino Flecha***

A fisherman bathing his horse in the Paraguay River (left) and arial view of the district capital of Bahía Negra (right). ***Elisa Marecos and Sandino Flecha***

Como puede apreciarse en el gráfico que antecede, la producción industrial de carne tiene como principal destino la exportación, lo que explica el aumento sostenido de los precios de la carne de res en el mercado interno y su sustitución por otras proteínas como aquellas obtenidas de la carne de aves o porcina, sectores que han experimentado un aumento sin precedentes en la última década, pero cuyo estudio queda fuera de esta nota.

The country's livestock sector includes 291,497 farms and over 13 million head of cattle, which accounts for its considerable influence in the development of agricultural policies, including the institutional framework around agribusiness.

Cattle ranching is one of the main causes of deforestation and the concentration of land ownership in Paraguay. In the district of Bahía Negra alone, there are more than 100 large farms with a herd of around 1.8 million, mostly owned by Brazilian businesspeople.

According to data from the National Agricultural Census, Paraguay has 617 farms larger than 10,000 hectares each (more than about 25,000 acres). Of these, 536 account for over 3.5 million head of cattle. In contrast, 25,300 farms are less than one hectare each in size, with 58,410 head of cattle distributed among 10,026 farms engaged in small-scale livestock production. Overall, livestock farming accounts for around 19 million hectares nationally (CAN, 2022).

> *Indigenous women are exposed to violence against their bodies, specifically in the case of indigenous girls and adolescents who are victims of sexual exploitation.*

The expansion of livestock farming and mechanized agriculture to produce soybeans, corn, sorghum, cotton, and animal feed has very high socio-environmental costs. It causes deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and displacement of Indigenous Peoples in the Chaco whose rights to ancestral territories are threatened, which often goes hand in hand with impoverishment, social exclusion, and state violence.

In particular, Indigenous women are exposed to violence against their bodies, specifically in the case of girls and adolescents who are victims of sexual exploitation. A recent study on the situation of Indigenous children in Paraguay points out that extreme poverty and lack of adequate infrastructure hinders the full exercise of other rights such as access to education and health. This leads to Indigenous children and adolescents being forced by economic conditions to leave their communities and migrate to cities, where they are exposed to extremely precarious conditions that reproduce the cycle of poverty and marginalisation of the Indigenous population.

Access to land is the main social conflict arising from the agrarian capitalist model, and indigenous and

peasant women suffer disproportionate impacts, as their rights to communal or individual land tenure is not widely recognised in the country. Nor are there robust public policies aimed at guaranteeing gender equality in land tenure, despite the fact that Paraguay is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which establishes equal participation and benefits for women in the rural context and in agrarian reform.

Public institutions have played a leading role in legitimising the agro-export model. Of particular note is the position of the National Institute for Rural and Land Development (INDERT), which, using legal devices, maintains a tacit policy of handing over land subject to agrarian reform to large local and foreign capital linked to agribusiness. These fraudulently obtained titles exacerbate land conflicts between large landowners and rural, peasant and Indigenous communities who are resisting in order to preserve their territories and ancestral cultural practices.

New markets for Paraguayan meat have exacerbated socio-environmental problems in these territories. Practices such as 'controlled burning', which are used to prepare the soil for changes in productive activity, have caused huge forest fires that in 2024 destroyed approximately 230,000 hectares in the western region of the country. Some 150,000 hectares of burned earth were located in the Cerro Chovoreca National Park area. According to data from the National Forestry Institute (INFONA), in early 2025, INFONA extended the total suspension period for the authorisation of burning permits to prevent forest fires. These types of practices mainly affect native forests and areas of high ecological value. A visit to the district and territories confirmed that nature reserves and parks are surrounded by livestock farming in the Chaco, while large areas of forest have been appropriated by foreign landowners.

Rural Women Resisting the Advance of Agribusiness

The extractivist model destroys life in the territories and fragments community social ties without offering alternatives that allow rural, peasant, and Indigenous people to get involved in the productive sphere. On the contrary, this model expels communities from the land and fails to generate employment for those who live in the region. The lack of job opportunities forces the population—mainly young people—to resort to buying and selling foodstuffs, flee to other cities to work in coal factories or as labourers on farms, or emigrate to Brazil to work in São Paulo's large textile factories.

The assault by agrarian capital is not just carried out against the land, but also against the bodies of rural women and girls. Human trafficking, sexual exploitation, servitude, and unwanted pregnancies are just some of the ways in which this assault is manifested. Despite the situation of extreme

Yshir youth are transported to work at cattle ranches. ***Elisa Marecos and Sandino Flecha***

"We are all survivors."

Indigenous woman leader Yshir Ybytoso

Establishing urban building plots in the Bahía Negra district. ***Elisa Marecos and Sandino Flecha***

vulnerability in which thousands of rural women and girls find themselves, they continue to lead the resistance to agribusiness, organizing life in the territories.

Women's rights and the rights of rural, peasant, and Indigenous women in particular are in decline despite the existence of regulations like the 2018 Policy on Gender Equality and Interculturalism in the Public Agrarian Sector. This legislation establishes the state's duty to guarantee linguistic and heritage support, social protection, access to basic social services and quality education in accordance with local culture. The reality in the communities reflects the hollowing out of public policy, which is also seen in the underfunding of the main institutions responsible for safeguarding the rights of Paraguay's native communities, such as the Paraguayan Institute for Indigenous Affairs.

During interviews in the community, informants stated that large-scale livestock farming requires a small workforce and that the jobs it generates are low-paying and precarious, including no social security contributions. Meanwhile, the work is organized based on a semi-feudal relationship between the landowner and the workers' families, who must live on the estates.

While young men seek employment on the estates as foremen, rural and Indigenous women often make ends meet by making handicrafts for sale. Agribusiness forces women in Indigenous communities to watch their daughters and sons leave in search of opportunities and, according to their accounts, they sometimes fail to return because they die in the extreme conditions of labour exploitation in the fields or in Brazilian textile factories.

Although 75% of the population in the Bahía Negra district is Indigenous, there are no public policies that address the lack of employment, access to production, and decent living conditions in these communities, or that protect and promote the continuity of their ancestral cultural practices. State policies serve only to support agribusiness, while Indigenous Peoples exist solely as cheap labour available for exploitation, even to the point of their disappearance. Meanwhile, amid this dire situation, the National Indigenous Institute (INDI) has remained silent.

Local informants stated that they are disregarded and there is no work. Women in the communities of Yshir Ybytoso, Karcha Bahlut, Puerto Diana, and Puerto Esperanza have turned to selling handicrafts as a survival strategy, although they are frequently unable to reach markets due to the lack of road infrastructure, which isolates Indigenous residents from the rest of the country.

The Indigenous woman leader Yshir Ybytoso declared "we are all survivors"—survivors of the agribusiness model that continues to expand and raze everything in its path, survivors of drugs that have reached the communities and destroyed the lives of youth, who lack spaces in which to grow and develop with dignity. The people of Bahia Negea are also survivors of apathy by the state, which in practice is causing the genocide of Paraguay's Indigenous Peoples. ■

Bolivia

The Socioeconomic and Environmental Impacts of Soy Expansion in Bolivia's Lowlands for Indigenous Communities

By **Mario Vargas** and **Cecilia Peñaranda**, Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA), Bolivia

The advancing agricultural frontier is imprisoning the community of Bella Selva in the San Andrés municipality, whose lands are communally owned. ***Mario Vargas***

In Bolivia, soybeans have become the main agricultural export product. This article presents critical reflections on the expansion of soy cultivation in the Bolivian lowlands, which is being promoted by the government and has led to worsening wildfires and loss of territory for Indigenous groups. It also describes Indigenous women's leadership in defending forests against the expansion of the agricultural frontier.

Bolivia is one of the world's megadiverse countries, with three broad regions: the highland *altiplano*, the dry Chaco, and tropical Amazonia. Some 39% of the population self-identifies as Indigenous, and 23% of the country comprises Native Indigenous Peasant Territories (in Spanish, *Territorios Indígenas Originarios Campesinos*, or TIOC). These areas are legally recognized communal properties by which the federal government grants land rights to Indigenous and peasant communities. However, despite progress on rights, Indigenous Peoples face displacement and aggression from mining activities, timber extraction, cattle ranching, and the advance of the agricultural frontier for agribusiness.

Public policies, new export markets, and access to new technologies, particularly since the 1980s, have transformed agricultural production in Bolivia. The amount of land dedicated to cultivation increased fivefold between 1983 and 2023, reaching 4.57 million hectares.

The growth in agricultural production has been concentrated in the eastern plains and the Amazon basin, particularly in the eastern lowland Department of Santa Cruz, which in 2023, accounted for over 70% of crops, primarily wheat, sorghum, maize, and soybeans. For soybeans alone, this department is responsible for 97% of national production, followed by neighboring Tarija and Beni.

Policy Support for the Expansion of Soybean Cultivation

Soybeans first began to be grown in Bolivia in the 1970s. Because of rising international demand and public policies favoring the industry, a soybean boom occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, with the first genetically modified seeds introduced in the early 2000s.

A watershed moment was the beginning of the World Bank's Eastern Lowlands Project in 1990, which sparked an era of new subsidies for soybean cultivation expansion. This project was the first to promote mass-scale cultivation of soybeans in Bolivia, and it laid the foundation for more expansion by establishing the institutional and financial infrastructure that to this day sustains agribusiness here: specialized credit systems, consolidation of business networks that coordinate production, processing, and exportation, as well as mechanisms for subsidies and tax exemption for soybean production and export abroad.

By 2020, Bolivia had become a leading exporter of soybeans alongside Brazil, with 85% destined for export, mainly to China and the United States, illustrating the strong regional impacts of global markets. Estimates suggest global demand for soybeans could double by 2050, driven by markets for soybean cake or flour, a subproduct used for animal feed.

Bolivian public policy promotes an extractivist model of production through which the state provides steady support for agribusiness. A clear example of this support is Supreme Decree 5381 of 2025, through which the Bolivian Government created a national program to strengthen soybean production in the Departments of La Paz and Beni as new

poles of agroindustrial development. The program has an investment of US $43 million for 2025–2030, intending to reach 200 million tons of soybeans planted over 61,000 hectares.

Soya is one of the most heavily state-supported crops in Bolivia, promoted for its use in animal feed and biodiesel. A biodiesel plant with a capacity to produce 1,500 barrels per day was built in the city of Santa Cruz in 2024, billed as an "environmentally friendly" way to ensure energy security. The Department of Beni is also pursuing the expansion of the agricultural frontier as part of its latest Land Use Plan.

Loss of Forests, Biodiversity, and Livelihoods

The soybean boom is not the only thing transforming the landscape of Bolivia's eastern lowlands. In 2024, Bolivia saw a record number of wildfires, with some 12.6 million hectares burned, an area the size of Greece. Of that amount, 60% was forest land, and the remaining 40% was non-forested and pastureland. The most affected areas by far were Santa Cruz (68% of the national total) and Beni (28%).

> *Frequent wildfires are not just an environmental threat; they also spark social injustices that hit women hardest. As guardians of traditional knowledge and caretakers of the land, women suffer the direct consequences of environmental degradation.*

Wildfires in Bolivia happen on four different types of land, which we can differentiate according to their legal status. The first group is individual properties or communities settled illegally in areas unauthorized for occupation or agricultural use. The second is illegal settlements and parcels within the Native Indigenous Peasant Territories (henceforth TIOC). There are also newly denominated intercultural communities, which include migrants from different parts of the country who have settled on state-owned land, with or without authorization to do so. The fourth group consists of legally established medium and large properties owned by agricultural and cattle ranching businesses.

Frequent wildfires are not just an environmental threat; they also spark social injustices that hit women hardest. As guardians of traditional knowledge and caretakers of the land, women suffer the direct consequences of environmental degradation. Several women-led productive initiatives to promote the sustainable use of forest products have been affected by fires, and some have lost everything, both the source of their primary inputs and their infrastructure, limiting their ability to

Omar Quevedo farm in the Nueva Betania community, San Andrés Municipality, with a diversified agroforestry production system. ***Mario Vargas***

In the municipality of San Andrés, Beni department, oilseed production is fully mechanized, from planting to harvesting. ***Mario Vargas***

generate income and achieve financial autonomy.

After wildfires, it is often difficult to rebuild homes and restore family dynamics in the communities. Men typically leave to find temporary work in urban centers or on cattle ranches to earn money to rebuild their homes and replant their citrus, cacao, and cassava crops, among other important food and income-generating crops. Meanwhile, women play crucial roles in the rebuilding processes at home: they clean up the aftermath of the fires, prepare the soil for replanting their crops, and take care of their children, the elderly, and the sick. They may also engage in the public sphere. In terms of the gender division of labor, women bear the brunt of caregiving tasks, while men generally do not assume active roles in domestic care work.

Pressures on Indigenous and Peasant Communities

Illegal settlements and land ownership are a perennial problem within Native Indigenous Peasant Territories (*Territorios Indígena Originario Campesinos - TIOCs*). It is increasingly common to see significant areas of land under the control of "third parties," despite the status of these territories as collective and inalienable property of Indigenous Peoples. The advance of the agricultural frontier generates instances of illegal land use agreements with leaders and communities in TIOCs, which involve deforestation and the implementation of agro-industrial crops by "third parties," who pay to "rent" the land averaging US$220 per hectare per year.

The system of deforestation to develop agricultural land destroys the entire forest, prevents the creation of natural buffers with forest between each plot, and promotes intensive land use with no replenishment of nutrients and organic matter to the soil. This means that in the medium and long term, the land becomes depleted and degraded. The territory becomes a kind of vicious cycle of deforestation to clear new agricultural land. Ultimately, this is an unsustainable agricultural model that undermines food production.

For Indigenous communities, forests are of great importance from a cultural, spiritual, economic, and environmental perspective. They are sources of sustenance and livelihood, providing food, medicinal plants, and materials for housing and daily activities in the community. According to the worldviews of the Indigenous Peoples who have lived in these territories since ancient times, the forest is sacred, the home of ancestral spirits, and a place for traditional rituals and ceremonies.

Because of the extractive agribusiness model so readily adopted in Bolivia's eastern lowlands, forests are increasingly destroyed and degraded and Indigenous groups suffer violations of their constitutional rights.

Three broad trends are reconfiguring the lives and territories of Indigenous and peasant communities in Bolivia. First, climate change has altered water resources, affecting the biological dynamics of the forest, with a reduction or total loss of forest products that are important for humans and wildlife. Second, lack of water is affecting fishing and the cultivation of traditional crops for food security and sovereignty. Third, there is a lack of efficient and gender-sensitive public policies for the communities, many of which are located in Indigenous territories where there are no integral services provided by the state, which instead facilitates illegal activities such as mining. Finally, pressure from the agricultural frontier is forcing Indigenous and peasant communities to enter into an illegal system of land use agreements with "third parties."

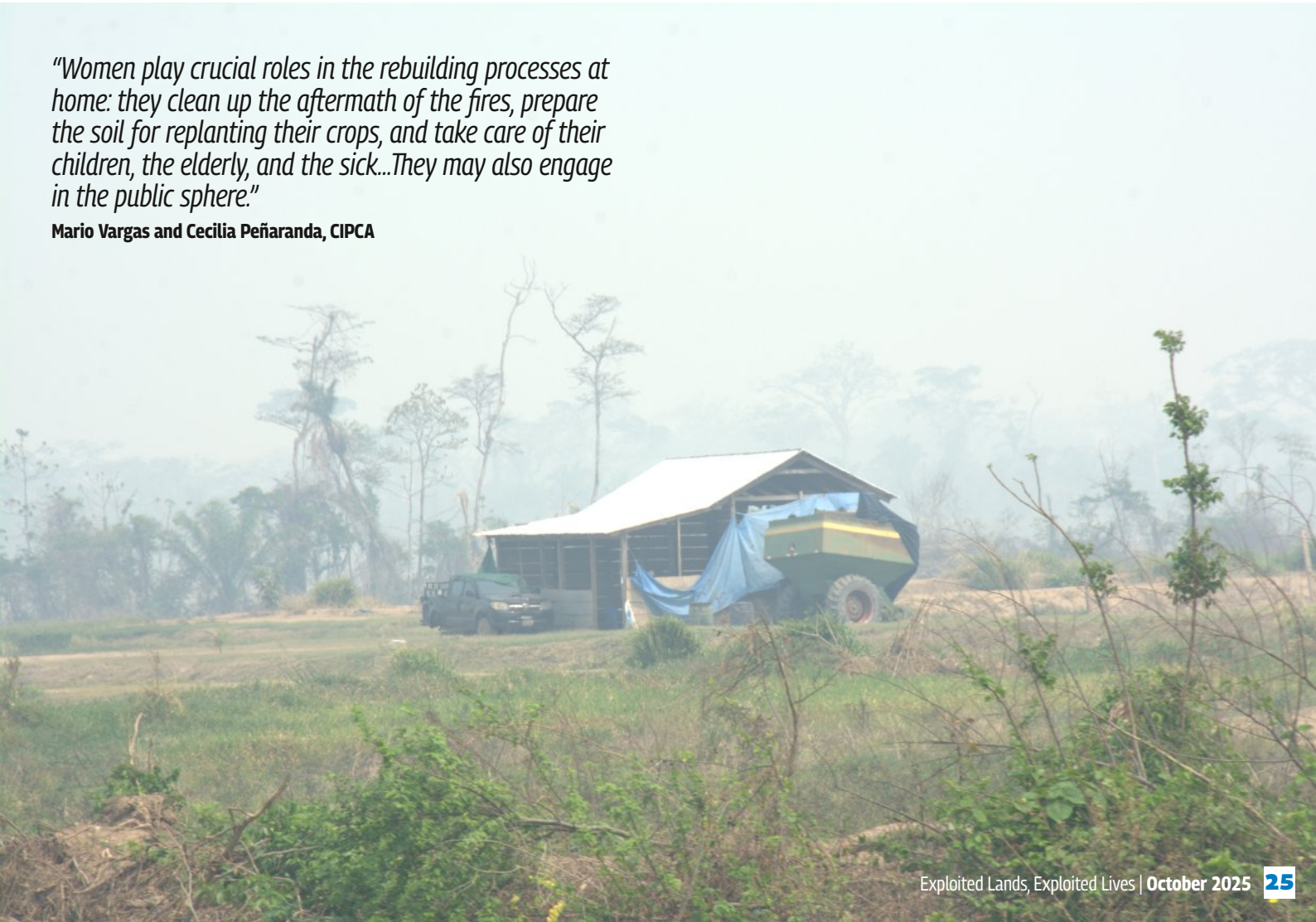
These factors increase dependence on agribusiness income, whether through the "rental" or sale of Indigenous Peoples' land or their employment as laborers in agribusiness activities. Indigenous and peasant communities are less likely to grow their own food and engage in traditional hunting and gathering practices in the forest, which can affect family farming, leading communities to depend mainly on purchasing food in urban centers, increasing the cost of living. This form of income generation disrupts their way of life, accelerates the loss of ancestral wisdom, encourages a detachment from their worldview of the forest, and promotes the expansion of the agricultural monocultures for export.

Indigenous women play central roles in defending forests, and they are also closely tied to environmental protection and conservation of non-forest non-timber forest products, promoting traditional medicine, and providing household income. For example, the Chiquitana Indigenous Women's Organization (Omioch-C) and the association of women entrepreneurs of the Municipality of Concepción helped create a public policy on the conservation, gathering, processing, and sale of non-timber forest products. They presented the Law on Non-Timber Forest Products to the city. The Omioch-C also developed a brand called Chapie, allowing them to sell products like almonds, coffee, honey, yucca in local, regional, and national markets.

The establishment of new areas for agro-industrial crops is accompanied by the intensive use of agricultural machinery and the services and infrastructure it requires. ***Mario Vargas***

"Women play crucial roles in the rebuilding processes at home: they clean up the aftermath of the fires, prepare the soil for replanting their crops, and take care of their children, the elderly, and the sick...They may also engage in the public sphere."

Mario Vargas and Cecilia Peñaranda, CIPCA



In the Villa Fátima community, municipality of Ascensión de Guarayos, small farmers previously grew diversified crops but are now shifting to planting industrial varieties of corn for sale. ***Mario Vargas***

Women Leaders Take on Environmental Degradation

The advance of the agricultural frontier for soybean production has led to deep environmental and socioeconomic transformations in Bolivia's lowlands, with profound impacts on peasant and Indigenous communities. Increased deforestation, soil degradation, and wildfires are the result of a production model that enjoys strong state support and international financing.

These impacts are perpetuating social inequalities and gender injustices, threatening food security and sovereignty, and also undermining cultural reproduction for Indigenous People and local communities. The reproduction of life is threatened for communities facing precarious situations, such as environmental degradation and reliance on renting communal land to third parties for income.

The territorial pressure generated by extractive industries like agribusiness, mining, and logging has incentivised mechanisms for land grabbing and trafficking. The TIOCs are exposed to these ills and become even more vulnerable over time, whether due to encroachment on their lands or the effects of climate change. Abandoned by the state, communities are faced with loss of food sovereignty, gender injustices and the rising cost of living, which puts their very existence at risk.

In addition to their leadership in the realm of production and environmental protection, Indigenous women in Santa Cruz are investing their time in training, obtaining certifications as community advocates against domestic violence, which helps establish them as key actors in promoting equity at home. Indigenous women are also fighting for the recognition of their rights and territories to guarantee their livelihoods, halt the expansion of agribusiness, and combat wildfires.

In all these processes, women have long been present, but too often invisible. Women's leadership and resistance deserves greater recognition because of their key contributions to agroecology and forging real solutions to pressing twenty-first-century problems like food insecurity, the climate crisis, and destructive capitalist and consumerist practices.

The expansion of soybean cultivation in Bolivia's lowlands has deepened an extractivist model that prioritizes agribusiness over the rights and well-being of Indigenous and peasant communities. Its impacts—deforestation, wildfires, and loss of biodiversity—threaten local livelihoods and cultural continuity. Yet Indigenous women have shown remarkable leadership in defending forests and promoting sustainable, community-based production. Recognizing and supporting these initiatives is essential for a more just and sustainable future for Bolivia's lowlands. ■

Georgia

Cracks in the Earth: The Human and Environmental Cost of Manganese Mining in Western Georgia

By **Nino Beridze**, Local Environmental Initiative, Georgia

Mine next to residential area in Chiatura, Georgia. ***Local Environmental Initiative***

This article examines the environmental and socioeconomic harm caused by decades of unregulated manganese extraction in Chiatura, Georgia. It describes the environmental damage, highlights how women and youth are especially vulnerable, and outlines the need for urgent reforms.

The mining town of Chiatura in central-western Georgia has been in turmoil for years. Unchecked mining has devastated land and water, undermined health, and entrenched gender inequality, leading to unrest.

The people of the area are increasingly standing up for their rights. What began as discontent among miners has grown into a movement involving street protests, hunger strikes, and desperate acts, including sewing mouths shut. Residents are calling attention to the destructive legacy of manganese mining, which has enriched companies but left residents impoverished, their health compromised, their rights violated, and their homes in ruins.

Manganese mining in Chiatura began in 1846 in the Kura and Rioni River basins. For over 150 years, environmental protection has been neglected, and mining waste has reshaped the landscape. A study by the Chiatura Residents' Union describes "radical changes" in the topography, with soil and vegetation destroyed, sinkholes and funnel-shaped deformations, and large-scale landslides causing erosion and desertification.

Villages like Darkveti, Mgvimevi, Khalifauri, Rgani, and Tabagrebi have lost hundreds of hectares of forest and dozens of hectares of soil to open-pit mining. Even 30 kilometres from the mines, air pollution remains hazardous. Abandoned and active mines dot the countryside, with a maze of around 200 kilometers of tunnels underground. Winds and rain spread heavy metal dust across the region, contaminating water, soils, and crops, and endangering humans and animals.

> *The manganese content in water is many times higher than the safe limit, with the Chiatura Residents' Union reporting levels of 600 milligrams per litre, more than 50,000 times the "normal" level.*

According to reports, none of the manganese plants have operational wastewater treatment. Rivers like the Kvirila turn black with manganese leachate. In some stretches of the river, the manganese content in water is many times higher than the safe limit, with the Chiatura Residents' Union reporting levels of 600 milligrams per litre, more than 50,000 times the "normal" level. Concentrations of other heavy metals, such as lead, nickel, cobalt, and zinc, are also far above permissible levels. In 2009, at the entrance of Chiatura, the recorded concentration of manganese ions in the Kvirila River was 3.9 milligrams per litre —over 40 times the permissible levels.

According to the 2020 study, soil samples from several investigations show arsenic and lead at several times the legal limits, and manganese well above the maximum allowable concentration in places like Ithvi. Cadmium, arsenic, cobalt, copper, zinc, manganese, iron, nickel, aluminium, and radioactive isotopes of potassium and lead were found in soil samples, with concentration levels several tens of times over legal limits. Hazardous metals in these high concentration levels in the water and soil contaminate

agricultural products and pose health risks for humans, animals, and the environment.

In the village of Ithvi, the concentration of manganese in the soil is 140,000 mg/kg—93 times higher than the maximum allowable concentration. Elevated levels of other heavy metals, such as cadmium, copper, zinc, and nickel, were also recorded. The copper content in the soil is 1,070 mg/kg, seven times higher than normal, while manganese levels are 180 times higher than acceptable standards. These toxins are absorbed by crops, making local food potentially unsafe for consumption.

Despite the visible destruction, no comprehensive statistics exist on the full scale of environmental damage. Loose legal norms and weak enforcement mean mining companies often operate unchecked.

The Cost of What Lies Beneath

No areas of Chiatura are protected from the reach of mining companies. Extraction appears to be occurring everywhere: in pastures, along roads, beside homes, and even under villages. Houses that once stood on solid ground now teeter on the brink of collapse as tunnels erode the earth beneath them. In Ithvi, years of mining led to an 800-meter-long landslide that destroyed or rendered 20 homes uninhabitable and put dozens of families at risk. The state commission investigating the disaster blamed historic mining, deflecting responsibility from the current operator.

In Chiatura, mining zones and residential areas are indistinguishable. Schools and daycare centres lie within extraction zones, and children often walk to school through quarries. Ambulances struggle to reach homes due to destroyed roads. In Mgvimevi, abandoned mining hills are a short walk from residents' doors, and the ever-present dust and stench are reminders of the ongoing crisis.

Rgani, once home to chestnut forests protected under Georgian law, has lost its pastures and trees to mining. "Near my house, there was a whole field covered with chestnuts... I have never been a complaining person, but I am very angry... In summer, you can't open a window or hang clothes outside. Everything is covered in dust, people get sick," said one female resident, who asked to remain anonymous due to fear of reprisals.

Experts from Tbilisi State University say fertile land has become barren, water sources have disappeared, and the natural balance is shattered. Anthropogenic impacts have replaced forest ecosystems with degraded shrubland, especially in karst and plateau areas where water is scarce. Overgrazing—driven by economic desperation—has further slowed vegetation recovery.

Manganese pollution stems mainly from mining and industrial processes. According to the World Health Organisation, chronic exposure to manganese and other heavy metals harms haematological, kidney, and liver function, with the central nervous system especially vulnerable. Women are particularly at risk. Elevated manganese in blood is linked to increased infertility, complications during pregnancy and childbirth, and chronic fetal hypoxia. These gendered health impacts often go unrecognised and untreated.

A landslide that destroyed houses in Ithvi village. ***Local Environmental Initiative***

"I have never been a complaining person, but I am very angry... In summer, you can't open a window or hang clothes outside. Everything is covered in dust, people get sick."

Resident of Rgani

Protest in Rgani village, sign reads "Some houses that used to stand on the meadow now stand on the edge of a cliff several meters deep". ***Local Environmental Initiative***

Not a Woman's Problem?

Mining appears to be a male domain, as most workers are men, but women are often the driving force behind community protests. Why is this the case? In Chiatura, women bear the brunt of environmental decline and social upheaval. Women are mostly unemployed, overburdened with unpaid domestic and care work, and excluded from the labour force because of this unequal reality. According to the International Labour Organization, most Georgian women remain outside the workforce because of their care responsibilities. Furthermore, surveys of the Georgian populace show that gender inequality is more pronounced in rural and mono-industrial regions like Chiatura than in cities.

Traditional gender norms, though not enshrined in law, mean that men typically inherit property, while women are rarely registered as owners, and the gender pay gap in Georgia stands at 33% on average. In mining regions, women lack land and assets, making them more vulnerable to displacement and poverty.

Although there are legal provisions for gender equality in Georgia, recent policy reversals, such as the removal of quotas for women MPs, signal backsliding. The government increasingly dismisses gender equality and condemns certain sectors of the population as influenced by foreign imposition and meddling by overseas NGOs, claiming they pose a threat to "traditional" values. This further marginalizes women's rights.

This is nothing but a false premise. After all, gender justice is not an antithesis to traditional knowledge. Ensuring women's rights is a fundamental human right—not a matter of charity or the concern of NGOs alone. Gender justice fosters peace and societal harmony by eliminating the root causes of conflict, inequalities and discrimination. Research shows that involving women in economic and social life boosts productivity and prosperity. In fact, "investing in women and girls"—expanding their economic rights and opportunities—is a key driver of broad-based development and economic growth.

One example of gender inequality rooted in tradition, rather than law, concerns women's property rights. Although Georgian law does not assign property rights based on gender, an implicit norm grants men priority. Parents usually leave property to male heirs. Consequently, women register property far less frequently than men in almost every region of Georgia, particularly outside the capital. This pattern is evident in mining regions: most women do not own strategic assets—they live in their father's or husband's house and are not regarded as the owners. Thus, the dire situation in mining regions exacerbates existing gender inequalities.

An Imbalance of Power

Manganese extraction in western Georgia is dominated by a handful of companies, with the largest actor by far being Georgian Manganese, a subsidiary of British steel company Stemcor, with an unofficial turnover of millions, but the company has refused to publish its financial documents. Yet Chiatura remains among the poorest areas of Georgia, with 23% of residents classified as socially vulnerable and reliant on state benefits.

Mining operations are mostly subcontracted, making accountability opaque and allowing companies to skirt regulations. Worker and community protests are frequently ignored. This legal murkiness enables the industry to put corporate interests above public, social, and environmental concerns.

Licenses allow Georgian Manganese to mine until 2047, even as easily accessible reserves dwindle. Rather than invest in new technologies or diversify, companies are pushing into new territories, such as the mountain village of Shkmeri. Residents there only learned of plans to mine after licenses were quietly sold and their plots seized by the prosecutor's office. The site includes a protected cultural heritage monument, St. George's Church, but objections from the National Agency for the Protection of Cultural Heritage were ignored. Locals had hoped to build a future on agriculture and tourism.

Mining companies often simulate public support through staged consultations or informal deals with select families, while denying any responsibility for past damage. Local authorities claim there are no alternatives to mining, citing Chiatura's monocultural economy and poor soils as barriers to agriculture.

Digging Out of the Crisis

Chiatura's history is interwoven with manganese mining. The extractive industry, shaped by Soviet-era practices, has disrupted ecosystems, destroyed property, and buried the region's future. It is a stark example of how unchecked resource extraction can devastate communities, especially when gender and environmental concerns are ignored.

Local advocates insist the true costs of mining—environmental, health, and social—must be fully studied and accounted for. New permits should require rigorous social, economic, and environmental assessments, with genuine input from affected communities, especially women and youth.

Mining companies must be compelled to remediate past damage, restore soils and forests, and contribute to community well-being, including through investing in alternative livelihood opportunities—such as hazelnut cultivation or eco-tourism. Otherwise, Chiatura faces further depopulation, deepening poverty, and irreversible ecological loss. Only by ensuring real representation and participation of women and young people in governance—and by fully implementing Georgia's Association Agreement with the European Union, which mandates comprehensive, participatory decision-making—can the balance between extractive industries and local communities be restored.

Inclusive, gender-sensitive, and community-driven decision-making is essential. Without it, the gap between corporate interests and local well-being will continue to widen, and the cracks in the earth—and in society—will only deepen. ■

Mining equipment works along a residential road in the Chiatura region. ***Local Environmental Initiative***

Nepal

Displacement and Resistance: The Chepang People Confront Nepal's Extractive Industries

By **Bhola Bhattarai**, **Shova Neupane**, **Kiran Kumar Baram** and **Sumitra Rai**, National Forum for Advocacy Nepal (NAFAN)

Truck transporting stone and gravel from a quarry along the Manahari river, Nepal. ***NAFAN***

The Chepang people of Nepal are facing widespread displacement and environmental devastation from the rapid expansion of open-pit limestone and stone mining in their ancestral territories. Based on field visits and testimonies, this article documents how extractive industries have destroyed forests, water sources, and cultural heritage while placing the heaviest burdens on women. It highlights the Chepang resistance and calls for urgent action by the government, companies, and international actors to uphold Indigenous rights, and pursue community-led alternatives to extractivism.

Across the world, Indigenous Peoples stand on the frontlines of the climate and biodiversity crises. Governments and corporations frequently promote mining, dams, and large-scale infrastructure as "green solutions" to development or climate change. Yet for communities on the ground, these projects often bring dispossession, environmental collapse, and deepened inequality.

This contradiction is starkly visible in Nepal, where the Chepang people, an Indigenous group living in the rugged Mahabharat range, are facing the destruction of their lands by mining companies. Despite their ecological knowledge and cultural heritage, the Chepang are among Nepal's most marginalized peoples, struggling with landlessness, food insecurity, and poverty. Now, the rapid expansion of limestone, rock, and stone mining threatens not just their livelihoods, but their survival as a people.

Although Nepal has ratified ILO Convention 169 and endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), mining projects routinely advance without free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) from affected communities. The consequences have been devastating: human rights violations, gendered burdens, and severe ecological damage. But alongside these harms is a story of community resistance, led in many cases by Chepang women.

In July 2025, representatives of the National Forum for Advocacy Nepal (NAFAN) and Nepal Chepang Association travelled to four districts of Nepal—Gorkha, Dhading, Chitwan, and Makawanpur, home to the majority of the Chepang population, to assess the situation. We visited the Ginggu Mine in Ward 4 of Raksirang Rural Municipality in Makwanpur, the Supar Limestone Mine at Kalika-9 in Chitwan; the Shree Kumari Mata Rock and Stone Industry in Dhading, and the Dhanwari Limestone Mine at Ichhhakamana-2 in Chitwan.

We interviewed Chepang community leaders and human rights activists and held focus groups in Makawanpur, Chitawan, and Dhading districts. What we found was a situation and a population requiring urgent attention.

Human Rights, Environmental, and Gendered Impacts of Mining Expansion in Chepang Territories

For generations, the Chepang sustained themselves through slash-and-burn farming (khoriya), foraging, and small-scale agriculture, complemented by forest-based food systems managed by women. Today, their lands across Makwanpur, Chitwan, Dhading, and Gorkha are being transformed into extraction hubs.

Nepal's National Human Rights Commission identified 42 mining industries already operating in Chepang territories and another 86 licensed. While these projects benefit business owners and state revenues, they leave

local communities with only costs: dust-covered farms, dried-up springs, and homes at risk of collapse from blasting.

Over 1,200 Chepang households have already been displaced, with entire villages forced off ancestral land, often without proper compensation. At the Ginggu limestone quarry in Raksirang, Makwanpur, tied to Riddhi Siddhi Cement, dozens of households were displaced, while others live in fear of falling rock. Despite an 11-point agreement with authorities, promises of rehabilitation have gone unfulfilled. Chepang leaders say only half of households with land ownership certificates received compensation, and many did not qualify because they lacked certificates.

There are reports of further unscrupulous activities by mining companies, including forging the signatures of Chepang communities to fraudulently gain mining rights on Chepang land.

Further east, in Kalika-9, Chitwan, residents resisted a quarry known locally as the Supar mine, reportedly operated by Starline Industries Pvt Ltd. As early as 2018, villagers demanded its closure, warning it threatened drinking water, irrigation, and the historic Upardang Gadi fort and nearby Ichchhakamana Temple. Community leaders say blasting destabilised Nagopahad hill and endangered a school above the site. Protests against the Supar mine eventually forced suspension of operations, though it remains unclear if the closure is permanent.

On the Dhading-Chitwan border, the Huaxin Cement Narayani plant—a Chinese-Nepali joint venture—represents extraction on an even larger scale. Locals call it "Hwasin," and the project drew controversy soon after launching in 2019. That year, the Public Accounts Committee questioned its land lease, and floods severely damaged its construction site. Yet operations continued, with residents reporting day-and-night factory activity, dust settling on fields and homes, sick livestock, and collapsing water sources. Farmers displaced by the project sold ancestral lands cheaply and now struggle on marginal plots.

In Thakre, Dhading, interviewees reported that the Shree Kumari Mata Rock and Stone Industry acquired land under disputed circumstances. Villagers insist this happened without their consent. One local resident told us that the company has been digging on public land outside its approved boundary, causing problems for his agricultural land and food security, as well as placing his home directly at risk of landslides. He has filed a legal case, he said, and is also in the process of appealing to the Supreme Court.

In Ichchhakamana-2, Chitwan, a site known locally as the Dhanwari mine, reports from community members described how families had been pressured to sell land at low prices, often through middlemen. Road construction alone brought dust, noise, and water shortages, community members told us. Testimonies suggest that entire Chepang and Rai settlements could be uprooted if operations resume. No public record names the mine

Mining site in Gingu, Nepal. ***NAFAN***

"The dust makes it hard to breathe, and the water left is not safe to drink or farm with. This has created serious health and social problems."

Chepang woman impacted by limestone quarrying

Meeting with Chepang community members to discuss the imapcts of extractive industries in Raksirang. ***NAFAN***

formally, highlighting a wider problem: many smaller quarries operate under local names rarely visible in national registries, leaving communities without transparency or accountability.

Subsistence farming, central to Chepang survival, is steadily being undermined. Blasting and quarrying dry up springs, destabilise hillsides, and bury irrigation pipes. We found evidence of water contamination and damage to agricultural lands in all five sites we visited. At the Ginggu limestone quarry in Raksirang, Makwanpur, for example, locals reported the loss of forests and grazing land, and water sources that no longer flow. They also reported health issues and the death of one community member from falling rocks due to the mining operations.

Residents near the Supar mine in Chitwan also complained of threats to drinking water and irrigation, while around the Huaxin plant, communities reported collapsing water sources, sick livestock, and dust settling on fields, undermining both crops and fodder.

Road construction to access the Dhanwari site in Chitwan has already caused water shortages for nearby households, according to local community members. The drying of water sources has also reduced agricultural output. In the monsoon, the risk of entire villages being swept away remains high.

The gendered consequences are particularly severe. Women, who bear primary responsibility for food production, water collection, and forest management, now walk further for every pot of water. With water scarce and fields unproductive, their workloads intensify even as household food security collapses. Pregnant women face heightened health risks from malnutrition and contaminated water. Girls are often withdrawn from school to help with household chores, especially water collection, while the noise of blasting interrupts classrooms when they do attend.

Women's cultural roles are also threatened: as keepers of seeds, medicinal plants, and forest knowledge, displacement and loss of forest access disrupt the intergenerational transmission of ecological knowledge. Patriarchal land laws further exclude women from compensation, since most land certificates are held by men, compounding their vulnerability.

Quarries across Chepang territories destroy forests, destabilise hillsides, and pollute rivers, increasing flood and landslide risks throughout the Mahabharat range. Community testimonies describe collapsing slopes around homes and fields, while secondary sources confirm the lack of effective mitigation or monitoring despite company claims of environmental assessments.

Mining projects also endanger cultural heritage. In Kalika-9, residents warned that the Supar mine threatened the historic Upardang Gadi fort and the nearby Ichchhakamana Temple. Such damage resonates deeply, as sacred sites are interwoven with Chepang identity and spirituality.

Together, these mines paint a consistent picture: approvals granted without FPIC, environmental and cultural heritage sites at risk, and Chepang communities left with only the debris of development.

Community Resistance: Defending Land and Life

Against these odds, the Chepang have not remained silent. They have organized protests, staged road blockades, and taken legal action to defend their lands. According to interviews with local leaders, in 2024, community leaders halted trucks hauling stone from the Manahari riverbed. They said that police cracked down, arresting several leaders—a stark reminder of the dangers faced by Indigenous defenders in Nepal.

Women that we spoke to in the community said that entire Chepang settlements faced displacement. Protests eventually forced the suspension of operations, though it remains unclear whether the shutdown is permanent.

Testimonies collected during field visits reveal the resilience of those resisting. One 65-year-old woman explained how her family lost farmland and water sources, forcing them to relocate: "The dust makes it hard to breathe, and the water left is not safe to drink or farm with. This has created serious health and social problems."

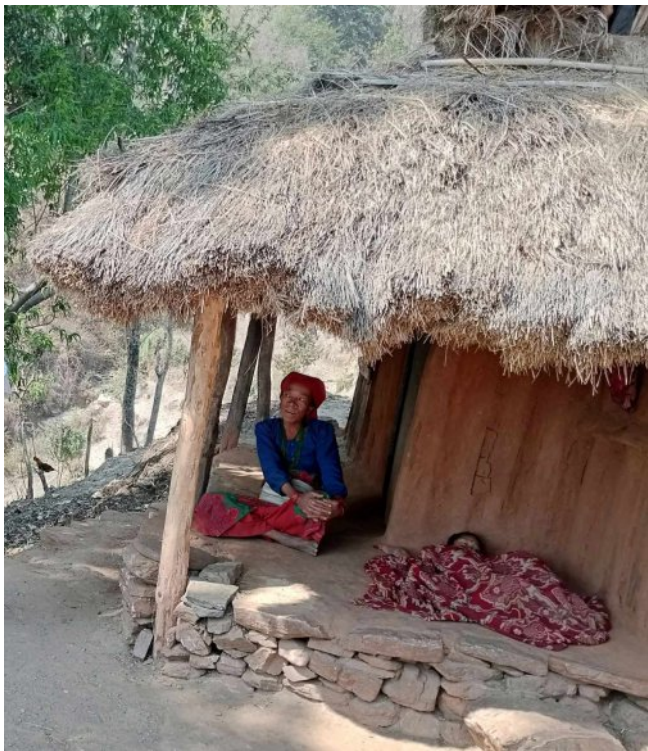
Despite intimidation, the Chepang have won partial victories. In Chitwan, protests pushed authorities to suspend operations at the Supar/Starline quarry. In Dhading, residents continue legal battles to hold Shree Kumari Mata accountable. And across the region, women leaders are raising their voices, demanding recognition of land rights, protection of cultural heritage, and genuine participation in decision-making.

At its seventh central national assembly, held in January 2024, the Nepal Chepang Association urged stronger collaboration among community-based organizations (CBOs), NGOs, and INGOs active in Chepang regions. The assembly emphasised that any institution planning to operate in Chepang settlements must first receive approval from the Association. This "one-door" mechanism is intended to guarantee participatory and accountable engagement in future initiatives, while also providing oversight of external actors working with Chepang communities.

The gathering further highlighted the need to move forward with the Bagmati provincial government's earlier declaration to establish Chepang Protected Areas in Chitwan, Makwanpur, and Dhading districts.

These struggles connect the Chepang to Indigenous resistance movements worldwide, from Amazonian women defending forests from oil extraction to communities in Africa opposing destructive mining. Their demands are clear: a halt to projects without FPIC, accountability from corporations and governments, and recognition of Indigenous stewardship as essential to climate and biodiversity goals. ■

No Entry sign at entrace to mine site (left), Chepang woman in her home (right). ***NAFAN***

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