



Undermining Extractive Mining: Cases of Women's Activism in Latin America

By Rita Herschkovich and Sophie Schellens



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About Rita Herschkovich

Rita Herschkovich is a recent graduate with a strong interest in women's peace activism. She pursued her bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts and Sciences with a major in Human Interaction, at Leiden University College The Hague. Her bachelor dissertation focused on the effects of militarization on gender identity in young Israeli women serving in the army. Rita then went on to do a master in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. She is currently volunteering at the Women Peacemakers Program for the WPP 2015 May 24 Pack "*Women, Peace & Security: Business as Usual?*". In this position, she looks forward to using her skills in anthropology to represent and disseminate women's voices as a step toward a gender-sensitive approach to peacebuilding.

About Sophie Schellens

Sophie Schellens MA MSc has been involved in women's rights and peace work since an internship at the Dutch Embassy in Jordan, where powerful stories of women peace activists inspired her to get actively involved in women's peace activism. Within subsequent research she focused on women's activism and the Middle East, with her thesis analysing women's organizations in Syria. Her ambition to make a difference was strengthened through work experiences at GPPAC and AVAAZ. In 2013 she began as the Program Officer of WPP, where communications are a large part of her daily activities. Sophie holds a Bachelor in European Studies and two Master Degrees in International Politics and International Conflict and Development, both obtained in Belgium.

In her contribution to the 2014 May 24 Pack, Cynthia Cockburn identifies a missing component in the mainstream peace movement's conception of what causes militarization and war. Along with economic interest (capitalism) and the political system (ethno-nationalism), she argues that the power system of patriarchy is the third, often overlooked, cause of war. As Cockburn puts it: "Economic and political power is intertwined with, shapes, and is shaped by sex-gender power, patriarchy, the worldwide system of male dominance."¹ Applying a feminist lens to the extractive mining industry, many women activists have analyzed how the three causes of violence and armed conflict (ethno-nationalism, capitalism and patriarchy) converge within the extractive mining industry. They have come to the conclusion that the patriarchal system the extractive mining industry represents does not work for them, and that they have most to lose when a mining corporation enters their land and community. As a result a growing number of women are at the forefront of nonviolent activism against extractive mining activities.

The three causes of armed conflict interconnect within the extractive mining industry, with women specifically bearing the brunt. First, part of capitalist philosophy is to make as much profit as possible, which is rooted in a self-perpetuating system of inequalities and forced expansion for new markets. Within the extractive mining industry, this is exemplified by the occurrence of gross human rights violations, such as land grabbing; forced labor; the absence of, or limited labor rights; and forced displacement. A connection with colonialism can be made: Capitalism allows for Northern-based powers to exploit countries' natural resources under the guise that their mining techniques are superior and more efficient. In reality, they are damaging the natural and socio-cultural environment for their own profit-driven interests. Looking at it from a gender lens, Heather Gies² argues that the connection between capitalism and colonialism within the extractive mining industry builds upon the inequality and commodification within society, specifically exploiting women.

Secondly, in many cases, indigenous populations are bearing the brunt of the extractive mining industry. Extractive mining activities disregard their property rights, with them being marginalized and robbed of their livelihoods and traditions strongly tied to the land.

¹ Cynthia Cockburn, '*Feminist Antimilitarism: Patriarchy, Masculinities and Gender Awareness in Antiwar Organizing*' WPP May 24 Pack 2014, p. 33

² See: <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/analysis/Facing-Violence-Resistance-Is-Survival-for-Indigenous-Women-20150307-0018.html>

Artisanal miners, women and men alike, are often caught in an absurd legal trap that forbids them to continue their traditional small-scale mining, thus forcing them to seek work under the large mining companies that are taking over their lands. Where some men can take up jobs within large-mining projects as an alternative, women are often left deprived from their livelihoods. This ethno-nationalist component hits women specifically hard, with them relying on their lands, their homes and on the local water sources to sustain their families and their entire communities.

Thirdly, the extractive mining industry is legitimized, reinforced and sustained by patriarchal values, as it is characterized by strong elements of hierarchy, domination and the use of (gendered) violence. Business and political actors benefitting from the exploitive extractive mining industry often rely on institutionalized violence as a means to serve their interests. This is reflected in the highly militarized operations of extractive mining, exemplifying militarized masculinities and the use of dominant power. Mining corporations are often government-backed and hold close ties with armed forces, private security companies and paramilitary groups that defend their interests by means of gendered violence against local populations as well as human rights defenders.³

In her contribution to the 2014 May 24 Pack, Sumshot Khular describes the interaction between mining companies, the government, increased militarization and the effects on the local communities in South Asia. *“Many indigenous territories across South Asia continue to be heavily militarized, and their prime lands, the source of their livelihood and survival, are conscripted for military infrastructures.”*

In regards to how this specifically affects women, she mentions *“Indigenous women, by virtue of their gender and ethnicity, face particular impacts and increased vulnerability from the consequent loss of traditional livelihoods, displacement, conflict and poverty. Violence against indigenous women is as intricately related to their collective and individual rights to their land, resources and territories as their wellbeing, cultures and identities are. The aggressive development models associated with intensive militarization have been ravaging not only our lands and resources but also our people, especially women and girls.”*

Looking at violence against women in regards to extractive mining, Heather Gies notes *“Capitalism, colonialism - both patriarchal systems - don't see worth in women's bodies and the work they do, and instead commodify them. This positions violence against women as a justified and structural part of the state that upholds these systems”*.⁴

All around the world, women are standing up to challenge extractive mining, and simultaneously challenge the capitalist and patriarchal system that drives these mining activities. So how does women's activism in Latin America against extractive mining take shape on the ground?

WPP spoke to women involved in anti-mining movements in Rancho Grande (Nicaragua) and Verapaz (Guatemala), and reviewed sources on La Toma (Colombia) about the role of women within these movements.⁵ In Rancho Grande, the Ministry of Promotion, Industry and Trade (MIFIC), granted a gold exploration and mining permit to a Canadian company in 2003. Communities within this region began nonviolent actions such as blockading access roads to mining sites as well as large marches to express their resistance against the government-backed extractive industry.

³ See: e.g. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/22/the-global-extraction-industry-has-become-hallmarked-by-plundering-violence-and-political-corruption>

⁴ See: <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/analysis/Facing-Violence-Resistance-Is-Survival-for-Indigenous-Women-20150307-0018.html>

⁵ See e.g. <http://afrocolombian.org/category/espanol/>, <http://www.elespectador.com/opinion/marcha-de-los-turbantes-columna-530872>, movie *“The War We Are Living”* (DVD series Women, War, Peace)

The village of LaToma, located in the municipality of Suarez-Cauca, Colombia, has seen the rise of an afro-Colombian women-lead anti-mining movement that started after the mining and energy boom in the early 2000s.⁶ ‘Marcha de los Turbantes’ (March of the Turbans), is a women-lead initiative that arranged a march to Bogotá from La Toma on November 18th, 2014. Finally, Verapaz in Guatemala is home to various dispersed indigenous communities that have come under threat of extractive mining as well as hydroelectric and oil drilling activities. The ‘Pastoral Social’ movement has emerged in protection of these communities and their land.

Women at the forefront: connections with the land and nature

Looking at the motivations of women’s involvement in anti-mining movements, one thing stands out; the connection of the women with the local nature and environment. This connection goes beyond the role the land and the environment play in the livelihoods of the women. In all three cases - Guatemala, Colombia and Nicaragua - women characterize Mother Earth/Nature as a female entity. For them, it is a woman who cares and nurtures and protects her ‘children’, her communities. For women, this female identity of Mother Earth/Nature provides strong guidance in their daily lives and therefore the women feel a strong affinity and loyalty to their lands. It has provided them with their livelihoods and the daily rituals - which are passed down from generation to generation - that reinforce their cultural identity.

Women regard the extractive mining industries’ invasion of their lands and communities as a direct attack on Mother Nature, and the connected feminine values and identity. As such, they also view it as a personal attack on themselves. They see extractive mining as gender-based violence; a patriarchal industry invading and attacking the feminine nature. This experience drives women to be actively involved and at the forefront of anti-mining movements in many indigenous communities throughout Latin America. Their activism is not only about protecting their lands and livelihoods, it is also about defending their gender identity.

Marcha de los Turbantes’ statement elaborates on this: *“We were taught that the land is not sold, they understood that we guarantee the resurgent stay in the territory. Four centuries have passed and their memory is our memory, our practices are handed down from our grandmothers’ and grandfathers’ practices; our daughters and our children today continue reaffirming our identity as free people. Many of us had to raise our sons and daughters alone. The territory has been our partner and has been with us in times of joy and sorrow. Our grandmothers taught us that “the territory is life and life is priceless”-“the territory is dignity and this is priceless.”*⁷ The land, or territory, is even referred to as a ‘partner’ further emphasizing the irreplaceable role the land plays in everyday life.

In describing this relationship with the environment in the Rancho Grande community, Teresa Perez González, member of the local women’s network in Matagalpa and researcher on the extractives model for development in Rancho Grande from the perspective of the anti-mining movement, said the following: *“the landscape is not just the mountains and trees, it is part of their identity, it is part of their tranquility of life”*. It is clear that a common thread between these struggles in Latin America against the extractive industry is the understanding of the environment as an integral and irreplaceable part of life and identity.

Militarism and the use of violence

All three cases are heavily affected by militarized violence and coercion, both as a means of evicting communities from their land and as a direct response to nonviolent activism. In Verapaz, road blockades and marches are often halted by the police, with armed forces intimidating the participants. These actions disappointed the nonviolent movement.

⁶ See: http://www.pbicolombia.org/fileadmin/user_files/projects/colombia/files/colomPBla/111203_mining_in_colombia_web.pdf

⁷ See: <http://afrocolombian.org/category/espanol/>

The movement felt that taking up the defense of their land and rights should be supported by the government, as government is supposed to represent the interests of its citizens. Conchita Reyes, General Director of Social Pastoral Outreach Team: *“We say in Guatemala that behind the political system is the power of the army. The concept of security in Guatemala is that you can combat insecurities through control by the combined forces of the police and the army, which is what the government/political system is using. This concept is very removed from the women’s concept of peace in these communities.”*

Women’s definition of security, Conchita explained, includes access to land, housing, food and safer spaces for women. She specifically mentioned the distance between the indigenous people’s homes and their water sources; a trip that exposes young girls and women to sexual and physical violence.

Conchita added: *“Historically, in Verapaz, since the time of the internal armed conflict, women have been the ones suffering the most violence, and I think that women are really tired of so much violence.”* One example she offered of this occurrence is the beating of pregnant women who were involved in a peaceful blockade against hydroelectric projects in Verapaz: *“This takes on a double meaning, the fact of being attacked for being women and also a disregard for life and motherhood.”*

In the case of Nicaragua, similar military intimidation and other government responses to the anti-mining movement have resulted in a strong feeling of betrayal and disillusionment among affected communities. Here too, they see themselves as merely protecting their lands and protect their country from harmful developments; a cause they feel certain the government should support.

The statement released by Marcha de los Turbantes highlights the immediate threats the affected communities and defenders of these communities are faced with: *“Today our lives are in danger. The possibilities existing for people of African descent are minimal. Many men and women are threatened with death.[...]. Meanwhile for us we are forced to endure harassment, fearing for the lives of our children, and our children fearing their own lives.”*⁸

The stronghold of patriarchy

In contrast to the movements in La Toma and Verapaz, in the case of Rancho Grande women have not been in the forefront of the anti-mining movement. According to Teresa, reflecting on the movement in Rancho Grande, this is due to the duplication of society’s patriarchal structure within the anti-mining movement. Though the movement in Rancho Grande consists of people from different political parties, the core framework is structured by the Catholic Church. Patriarchal systems from the church are replicated in the movement, leading to, amongst others, male-dominated leadership. This is also illustrated by the established commissions within the movement. Women attend these commissions, but they don’t vocally participate very often. Teresa explained: *“they are used to being silent [...] I think their resistance is not so obvious, but it is very important.”*

Women are also discouraged from getting involved in the more physical aspect of the conflict, such as demonstrating. They are mainly relied on to provide the men with food and logistical support for such activities. This example shows how patriarchal duplication within anti-mining movements affects women on different levels of operation and mobilizing.

Though Guatemala has similar patriarchal structures in society as Nicaragua, patriarchy within the movements is less prominent. The struggle is identified as one that concerns both men and women equally. As such, patriarchy is viewed as manifesting itself through violence against women by the armed forces and the industry itself.

⁸ See: <http://afrocolombian.org/category/espanol/>

Women leading by example

Women have been connecting the dots between patriarchy, capitalism and corrupt political systems and have come to the conclusion that extractive mining means women are even losing out more. With their activism, they are not only directly addressing the social injustices affecting their communities; they are challenging patriarchal values as a whole. The nonviolent activism of women in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Colombia is only a tip of the iceberg of women's mobilizing against extractive mining. There are many more examples of women's activist leadership in Latin America, as well as South Asia, Africa and Canada. Women are sowing the seeds for a global resistance movement all over world, in order to harvest cultures of peace that bring forward human rights, gender equality, prosperity for all and environmental preservation.

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