



Women's Role in the Rancho Grande Resistance: Facing Patriarchy In- and Outside

*An Interview with Teresa Perez González
by Rita Hershkovich**



This article is the last of the five articles to be published by the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) during the week leading up to **International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament** on May 24.

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About Teresa Perez González

Teresa Perez González is a feminist, economist, and international cooperation worker for development organizations in Mozambique, Guatemala and Nicaragua. She is currently finishing her Master degree in Gender and Development Perspectives and is researching the anti-mining struggle in Rancho Grande, Nicaragua. Teresa is deeply committed to social justice and women's rights and is a member of the Matagalpa Women Network that uses creative and joyful activism through different forms of art, such as music, theatre, dancing and gaming as social transformation tools against sexism and patriarchy.

Teresa's dissertation title is "Mining and Development in Nicaragua: a feminist view on the Rancho Grande case"

"The feminist economy model argues that sustainability of life must be the goal of development instead of the accumulation of capital, they [the women of the Rancho Grande anti-mining movement] basically have the same argument. They just want to live with their land"

Rancho Grande is a municipality located in the Matagalpa department of Nicaragua. It is a highly agriculturally cultivated region that generates Nicaragua's main export products, namely coffee and cocoa, which provides employment to local communities, contributing to a stable local economy and a sustainable development model for the country. Responding to foreign interests in the mining potential of the land, the Ministry of Promotion, Industry and Trade (MIFIC), granted a gold exploration and mining permit to a Canadian company in 2003.¹ Since then, a strong resistance movement has risen to protect the region from the devastation. Locals educated themselves on the impact of mining projects by visiting other places affected by such activities. They saw the negative consequences and heard about the environmental and social devastation that the industry brought with it, and decided they did not want the same results for Rancho Grande. Rancho Grande is divided into 36 communities; every last one of these communities has publically and unconditionally opposed mining projects in the municipality.²

As part of her master research, Teresa has been speaking to the men and women involved in the community resistance movement as well as the authorities and people in support of the mining in Rancho Grande. Her aim is to understand the complex situation by looking at the economic, political, social and environmental dynamics and systems through a feminist lens. Currently, there is a lack of meaningful representation of the anti-mining movement in the media, which is solely representing the corporate voices on the matter. This is also a complaint she encountered during her conversations with the people of Rancho Grande, when she and the Matagalpa Women's Network joined one of their marches in support of their cause. Teresa hopes that her research on the matter can help make their voices heard within the academic community and beyond.

* This article is a follow-up of the fourth May 24 teaser article "Undermining Extractive Mining: Cases of Women's Activism in Latin America"

¹ See: <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/4931>

² Ibid.

Rita: What is the role of women within this particular conflict in Rancho Grande?

“Curiously, the role of women in the anti-mining struggle in Rancho Grande, is *not* in the forefront as is seen in similar struggles/anti-mining movements in other countries in the region. The movement in Rancho Grande goes by the name of ‘The Yaoska Guardians’ (Yaoska being a main river running through the region that stands to be most affected by the mining). The movement is made up by different commissions, and although women attend assemblies, they don’t vocally participate very often. They are used to being silent and therefore I think their resistance is not that obvious, but it is nevertheless very important.”



Yaoska Guardians organize large protest marches against extractive mining. Credit: Teresa Perez González

“The Yaoska Guardians movement itself is comprised of people from different political parties, but its overall set-up is structured by the Catholic Church. Patriarchal systems within the church are duplicated within the movement, leading to a leadership that is entirely male dominated. This discourages women from getting more directly involved in on-the-ground activism. They are mainly relied on to provide the men with food and logistical support for such activities. It is interesting to see on how patriarchal views and values operate on so many different levels, and how it affects women everywhere, even within anti-mining movements.”

“There are a few important examples I would like to mention in relation to the role of women in the conflict and movement. There was an incident where a local government representative, who supports the mining activities, forced public workers to participate in a march in support of the mining projects. I spoke to one council woman, who was also a teacher, who had gone to the march against her will and on her return suffered a brain hemorrhage that put her in a wheelchair. To this day, she speaks out on the matter of government coercion and continues supporting the struggle against mining in the ways that she can.”

“The mining corporations are trying to gain the support of the locals despite 80-90% of the population being against mining. The company in question sought to attain this social acceptance through signature campaigns. However, people informed me that the ways in which signatures were acquired were essentially corrupt. For example, a visit to the community health center would require a signature, which was then actually used for the purpose of supporting the mining projects without people’s knowledge. As a result, many people refused to go to the community health center. In response, the women are recovering traditional medicinal practices passed on to them by their grandmothers. Again, I think this form of resistance is not so well known, but it is very important because these women are the ones guarding the families and preserving their ways of life.”

“Another tactic of the mining company to gain support from the community consists of offering credits to local businesses, many of which are run by women, particularly food places. They establish economic ties within the community, whilst vilifying and criminalizing the anti-mining movement.”

“The men of the Rancho Grande resistance movement tend to claim that the women and men suffer the same impact of the mining; it is the same struggle in their eyes. They see the value of having women present, but not as a means to change the overall social (patriarchal) structure. Some men have discussions about the importance of women’s inclusion in the struggle, especially because some of them occupy powerful positions, and some discuss machismo and sexism, but I am unsure how deep these discussions go. The men are generally aware of the gender inequality that exists within the country, but it is not easy to change something that is so historically and culturally engrained.”

Rita: What are the biggest challenges women face?

“Sexism denies women’s leadership in the movement because they are expected to take care of the family and the house, while men are doing the resistance work. I also recognize patriarchy within the corporate context. The mining company offers local women some jobs, yet these jobs tend to fit classic gender stereotypes, such as cleaning, cooking, domestic labor jobs. It is interesting to note that the head of the mining company in Rancho Grande is a woman, the public relations person is a woman, the Mayoresse in Rancho Grande is a woman. These women face harsh criticism by the movement - merely for being women. Extractivism and patriarchy reinforce one another in many ways, and I can see that clearly in the case of Rancho Grande.”

“Sometimes women also face gender-specific challenges stemming from their resistance actions. For example, the Ministry of Education sent out a notice that the mining company was going to visit the schools in order to have some ‘green mining’ talks with the students. In response, many parents involved in the resistance movement refused to send their children to school. As a result, close to 1.600 children missed school and failed the year. This was seen as controversial, because of a child’s right to education. However, many local people felt that ‘the right to life’ was ultimately more important. Some schools were blockaded and when authorities were called in, there were incidents of violence against the women who were guarding the doors. This form of resistance also generated more domestic work for the women within the movement, because they had to become full time mothers with their children at home instead of at school.”



One of the peaceful protest marches in Rancho Grande. *Credit: Teresa Perez González*

Rita: Are there any common recurring experiences and/or sentiments you've noticed from speaking to these women?

“These women’s biggest concerns regarding the impact of the mining projects are related to the care for their children. Their children need access to food and safe water. Safe water is of great concern to them, because mining activities tend to contaminate the bodies of water that are nearby. I was fascinated to discover that these women also associate the mining company’s invasion of their lands with colonization. Similar to colonization, they said “some unknown power from outside is trying to take our livelihoods away”. They look upon the mining company as taking away the wealth of the land, and leaving behind devastation. A feminist economic model argues that sustainability of life must be the goal of development, instead of the accumulation of capital, and these women basically have the same argument. They just want to live peacefully with their land.”

“What is very important to them is their landscape. Landscape is not just the mountains and trees, it is part of their identity, it is part of their tranquility of life. One woman I spoke to told me that the explosions from the large-scale mining activities remind her of the times of war she had experienced, and she began to tell me about a traumatic memory of a young man who had died right in front of her. I think that women have the ability to connect experiences like that, more so than men. Because they have this ability to empathize, their resistance is probably not as confrontational as the men’s. On the other hand, they do worry about *long-term* consequences.”

Rita: What (non-violent) strategies do they employ to achieve their goals?

“Road blockades, marches, talking to alternative media to make their voices heard...”



Presence of the army at one of the peaceful protest marches in Rancho Grande. Credit: Teresa Perez

Often in response to the blockades and marches the government sends in the police as well as the armed forces to intimidate the participants. When they encountered this governmental response, the protesters were very disillusioned with the government, who, they felt, should have been on their side, protecting the land as well as the interests of its citizens. What is important to understand is that Rancho Grande played a vital role during the Revolution in Nicaragua. The resistance there was very structured and many important leaders of the Sandinista opposition were murdered there. When they finally came into power, people hoped they would fulfill what they had publically

promised: ‘the people are the president’. The people of Rancho Grande feel abandoned by the government, and this grievance fuels their struggle.”

Rita: Do you personally think the movement will be successful in the end in stopping the mining activities?

“I change my mind about this every single day. I want to believe it is possible, but then I start reading and find all these policies that support mining in this country and I realize the power of these companies, which has a reach worldwide. On the other hand, I think the point of Rancho Grande is that their voices are beginning to be heard internationally and I am also finding more information about anti-mining movements than I did at the beginning of my research.”



“Some people believe that if the movement stays together, they can successfully stop the project altogether. This is a very exciting and inspiring prospect.” *Credit: Teresa Perez González*

“A woman told me that initially the government did not expect to encounter so much resistance from the Rancho Grande community. The movement was able to paralyze the mining activities. The company received permission last year in October, but they have not started mining yet. Some people believe that if the movement stays together, they can successfully stop the project altogether. This is a very exciting and inspiring prospect.”



International Women's Day for Peace & Disarmament