
Women defend mountain lagoons and promote “Living Well”

Conga: Lagoons versus mines

“I had never been to the lagoons before the marches began and we had to go and defend them. The Elders said that (the Celendín lakes) were sacred, no one was allowed to set foot there, they were the sites for sacred ceremonies and traditional healers came here to collect medicines. The Elders called this place Conga,” said a young rondera (peasant patroller) from Cajamarca when she saw the lagoons.

Popular resistance to the Conga Mine mega-project in the Andean region of Cajamarca, Peru has been going on for more than three years. The project is owned by Minera Yanacocha, a Peruvian company, in partnership with the Buenaventura mining company, the U.S. Newmont Mining corporation and the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC). Yanacocha has been operating in Cajamarca for over 20 years and has been accused of several environmental crimes, such as a mercury spill in the province of Choropampa in 2011. The Conga mine is an extension of the Yanacocha mining project, spread over large areas of the provinces of Bambamarca, Celendín and Cajamarca, a zone of river basins with highland bogs, marshes, wetlands, lagoons and the headwaters of the most important rivers of the region. This area is formally protected by the General Environmental Law and the Water Resources Law because it is regarded as a fragile ecosystem.

In 2012, affected local people organized a huge march for water and for life that flowed like a river through several of the country’s regions and culminated in Lima, the capital, demanding social and environmental justice. New faces and new voices backed proposals for change, based on the agricultural and livestock potential of the region and in defence of biodiversity, water, land and community organization. Months later a serious conflict occurred in which five peasants were murdered and dozens were injured as a result of police repression. Since then, the present government’s policy of criminalizing and persecuting community leaders, both women and men, has not let up; neither has violence by the company against local people who refuse to give up their lands, as shown by the emblematic case of Máxima Acuña and her family.

In late 2012, self-organized peasant *rondas* or patrols to protect their lands and keep order in the community were started to guard the lagoons, camping on one of the mountains that overlook them. The participants became known as “the guardians of the lagoons,” a movement that is a source of hope.

Women guardians of water and of life

Most of the communities affected by the mining company organized themselves to defend the lagoons and water, the symbol of life, against extractive mining. Adults, young people, men and women formed groups that took turns to go into the highlands: the men kept watch and patrolled, the women kept watch, cooked and looked after the *ronderos* (patrollers). When they went back to their homes, communities or cities, the women carried on their watch-keeping duties. One of the

organizations that brings together and organizes the work of the women guardians is the “*Central de Rondas Femeninas de Bambamarca*” (Central Committee of Women’s Patrols of Bambamarca), created more than 30 years ago after the powerful peasant mobilization that secured land reform in Peru.

“At the height of the resistance, we would get up at three o’clock in the morning, we would go around the houses to call people out to the march; later we would fetch donated food from market stalls and shops that supported us. Once the marches were under way we set up communal soup kitchens, no one went without food. Some of us would walk in the front line, singing our marching songs and facing down the repression. We did not mind the weariness, the blows, the frequent railing of our husbands or the incomprehension of our family. We were fighting for water, which is life; for our children, and our children’s children,” said the *ronderas*.

My territory as body, my body as territory

One of the innovative things about this movement is a different way to conceptualize territory which can be attributed to the active presence of women in the resistance. One of the reflections that emerged from dialogues among women at feminist meetings or political education activities in peasant communities was that: “Violence is done to the Earth, our mother, in the same way that violence is done to women. They want to exploit her like they exploit our labour, they do not see or recognise her, they make her invisible in the same way that our contributions and our words are made invisible. It is the same pattern of power that oppresses us, because in the Eurocentric capitalist worldview both women and nature can be appropriated, exploited and controlled.” Thus territory is conceived as comparable to women’s bodies.

By mapping mining-related problems, we found that wherever mining projects are located the cases of violence against women, ranging from human trafficking to labour exploitation, are more numerous and reinforce each other. “The route travelled by minerals, as well as oil, is also the route of trafficking in women,” it was concluded. State violence, like the criminalization of women leaders, also occurs. The spread of social programmes to assist poor families, together with the absence of men who are working in the mines, generate a great burden of work on women and limit their political and social participation.

Indigenous women and urban migrants are recovering a spiritual dimension and a holistic and interconnected approach to their territories. Nature takes on a new meaning: we are reconciled with her and we are consciously part of her. Nature is not passive or oppressive, but rather sovereign and free, like the peoples and bodies that live in her: bodies like women’s bodies, with memory and identity, interdependent and profoundly autonomous, belonging to a common body which is the territory. This is the picture drawn by women who share the multi-hued vision of Living Well. As a whole, all this energizes a historic challenge to the prevailing power structures, inspiring many women to rise up, organize, create alternative knowledge, different ethics and transformative practices. The defence of territory as body and the defence of the body as territory open up a huge fissure in the capitalist system’s new phase of expanding intensive extraction, and in patriarchy and colonialism which are two facets of subjugating power.

Alternatives: Women promoting Living Well

The organization of women’s patrols in Bambamarca had been declining before the resistance movement, which brought women from different villages and communities together once again. Now there are more women’s organizations, and more women are taking part in mixed organizations.

Arrangements were made to meet women from other regions of the country, such as Cusco, Loreto, Piura, Pasco, Valle de Tambo and the community of San José de Cañaris. In all these territories the economic model based on unlimited extraction of common goods (such as water and minerals) is causing serious environmental harm, social conflicts, greater poverty and violence against women. In November 2014, as part of the social preparation for the People's Summit on Climate Change held in Lima, more than 120 diverse women from these territories – peasants, indigenous women, wage earners, students, artists, teachers, activists – came together to discuss their problems, strengthen ties and share experiences of building alternatives. These alternatives already exist, they do not need to be invented from scratch.

Among these alternative projects, several road maps were proposed. Instead of extractivism and its colonial, patriarchal and capitalist pillars, the women proposed an alternative way of life based on equity, identity, and social and environmental justice, called “*Buen Vivir*” or Living Well. In contrast to land grabs, pollution, deprivation, food insecurity, the neglect of agriculture and dependence on oil and minerals, they proposed the solidarity economy, energy and food sovereignty, and diversification of production with prior consultation and popular participation in economic planning, support for agroecology and the unconditional defence of common goods and the rights of Mother Earth. Instead of loss of identity and of the basic principles for harmonious living like respect, collective work, complementarity and reciprocity, they called for the recovery and practice of ancestral wisdom and respect for collective and individual human rights. In opposition to violence done to women's bodies, they proposed life with dignity and non-violence, treating the body as sovereign territory, as well as recognition for women's historic caring work in homes and ecosystems, and fair distribution of this work between men and women, the state and society.

Finally, they concluded that the strands that make up Living Well as an alternative proposal are derived from all the liberating experiences of the past and of the present. It is therefore important to recover and keep alive our memories of struggle and to reinforce collective experiences of democratic coexistence in every organization and movement. Solidarity between peoples and sisterhood between women are the only possible way forward.

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