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## Defending the body-earth territory: an alternative for social movements in resistance (1)

The Rancho Grande municipality in northern Nicaragua is facing installation of an open-pit gold mine by Canadian company B2Gold. With over 80% of the population against the mine, the Yaoska Guardians Movement—made up of women and men from the communities—led the protests and denunciations that paralyzed the project. The threat is still present, as the company has seven other concessions in the municipality.

The Nicaraguan government has presented open-pit mining and other mega-projects that exploit nature (so named for their large size), as a strategy to reduce poverty. However, the economic, social and environmental impacts on the population and territories where they are installed are very negative. Women are especially jeopardized, through impacts on their economic activities, health and participation in decision-making; and through gender violence.

The struggle to defend land is inseparable from the struggle to defend women's bodies—the first territory to free in an exploitative system. It is necessary to defend the right to make decisions about territory, bodies and life in a more integrated fashion. Only by uniting these struggles can they resist and create alternatives to transform the capitalist, patriarchal and colonial system. (2)

### **Defending Land/territory for Life**

Territory is not only a physical space: forests, mountains and rivers; it has a deeper meaning. It is where relationships among humans, and with the environment (animals, plants) occur; it is the rocks and minerals that sustain it, and the surrounding air that enables all these forms of life. It is also history, memory and culture, and the roots and spirituality that form the worldview of each people. Territory is where individual and collective identities are constructed. Therefore, to defend territory is to defend the forms of life that inhabit it.

Feminist economics (3) considers that life is based on two principles: interdependence (the need for human relationships) and ecodependence (the relationship with the environment where we live). Interdependence in a territory can be expressed through relationships of solidarity, respect and reciprocity; but also through relationships of inequality and exploitation between men and women because of the patriarchy in which we live, which generates discrimination, oppression and violence.

Ecodependence is the relationship with nature. In the current system, companies exploit and plunder nature for profit. This causes serious effects and impacts on the lives of communities, for which companies and States rarely take responsibility.

How can life continue in a system that attacks it, and places capital accumulation over the lives of people and nature? (4) It continues only thanks to women's caregiving work in homes. (5) It is women's bodies that fight to ensure the sustainability of life, in any circumstance and against all odds. Faced with a threat like the installation of a mining project, defending territory becomes a struggle to

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defend life itself.

But, what life do we want to defend? One where inequality exists and women do not have the same opportunities as men? Where our bodies and sexuality are controlled? One where nature is degraded or plundered to benefit the interests of a small group of people over the majority of the population?

In order to defend a good life where we can be happy, the struggle must mend the injustice of the system itself, in joint defense of land and bodies. Otherwise, territorial defense is only partial and helps uphold inequalities.

### **The First Territory to Defend is Women's Bodies**

Community feminists from Bolivia and Guatemala identify patriarchy as the system of all oppression, exploitation, violence and discrimination in humanity and nature, which historically has been built on women's bodies. (6) That is, the domination of women is the same domination that exploits nature; it is a relationship of inequality also present in the oppressions of particular groups of people: racism, sexism, colonialism...From this perspective, both land and women's bodies are seen as expendable territories to be conquered.

Feminist movements against extractive projects have constructed a new political imaginary and struggle, focused on women's bodies as the first territory to defend. (7) The body has become the first frontier, the place from which—first individually and later collectively—we defend what is most sacred: individual and community life, knowledge, identity and memory. Interwoven with this resistance is the defense of territory-earth, because "we cannot talk about happy and emancipated bodies, while nature is highly oppressed and exploited. The liberation of bodies comes through the liberation of the earth." (8)

### **Community Resistance to Mining in Rancho Grande**

The Yaoksa Guardians Movement emerged in 2003 as an organization of women and men from 38 communities in Rancho Grande, who were concerned about the threat of mining in their territory. They question the alleged "development" that mining promises, as they have seen how mining in other towns in Nicaragua has increased inequality instead of reducing poverty levels.

Defending territory in this municipality is not only a matter of respect for the environment. It is a matter of defending their way of life, which is deeply rooted in the land and in community, in which mutual care still exists, as well as the value of the collective over the individual. Nonetheless, as part of a patriarchal society, great inequality between women and men also exists.

The women of Rancho Grande participate in the social base of Yaoska Guardians and as leaders in decision-making spaces, with the ability to mobilize other women. Diverse community expressions to reject large extractive projects—such as mining, the interoceanic canal, dams, monocultures like sugarcane, etc—are emerging forcefully in Nicaragua. Many of these movements are led by women, who are gaining greater prominence and visibility, and who understand that they are the most affected.

### **Impacts on Women**

Where there is mining it becomes the main economic activity, and non-commercial and collective practices are de-valued—these being mainly carried out by women, who have less presence in the

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formal economy. The alterations mining causes in ecosystems and water sources burden women, who are traditionally responsible for ensuring the food and health of their families.

Meanwhile, mining offers women jobs as maids, cooks, washers and gardeners; whereas men are offered more prestigious and better paid jobs. This promotes sexual division of labor (9) and deepens relationships of domination of men over women.

Furthermore, in most mining locations there are increased reports of sexual violence and abuse by men who come from outside the area, who feel entitled to invade the territory and the bodies of women.

All kinds of violence accompany extractive projects. In Rancho Grande, authorities have tried to impose mining against people's wishes. The army and police protect foreign investment and repress any protest by the people. With total impunity, company personnel and government officials have threatened and physically and verbally abused several women and men of the Yaoska Guardians Movement for their positions against mining. This is state subservience to capital interests (10), and is characteristic of extractive industry activities.

### **An Alternative: Uniting Struggles**

The success of the mining project cancellation in Rancho Grande is due, in part, to the alliance of social—including feminist—organizations. The Movement understands that the territory they are defending cannot be filled with relationships of inequality, because this also weakens the community and causes ruptures in it. The rebellion gets its strength from defending a good and happy life for all, with free bodies living in harmony with each other and with nature.

The Nicaraguan Government proposes development and poverty reduction through extractive industries, capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal and anthropocentric projects (11), which harm our bodies, threaten our freedom, destroy our land and impoverish most of the population in order to benefit foreign companies. This constitutes a direct attack on life. Only by uniting the struggles of social movements defending territory-body with those defending territory-land, can both possibly resist and continue building good alternatives that allow us to enjoy life with justice and equality.

Teresa Pérez González, [teresajetlag@yahoo.es](mailto:teresajetlag@yahoo.es), part of the Nicaraguan feminist movement.

(1) The original article was published by the Venancia Group: *“Mujeres que sostienen la vida: Retos para los feminismos desde la realidad nicaragüense.”* Available at: <http://grupovenancia.org/mujeres-que-sostienen-la-vida-retos-para-los-feminismos-desde-la-realidad-nicaraguense/>

(2) Capitalist, because it is based on private property and individual economic benefit. Patriarchal, because it promotes the superiority of male over female, creating unequal power relationships and men's domination over women. Colonial, because some countries appropriate the lands, wealth and resources of others, through exploitative relationships and with the assumption that not all lives are equal.

(3) Amaia Pérez Orozco (2014). *Subversión feminista de la economía, Ed. Traficantes de sueños-Mapas.*

(4) This is what feminist economics calls the capital-life conflict.

(5) Activities required to meet human needs: food, health, education, housecleaning, affection, and many others. They traditionally and unjustly fall on women, justified in terms of skills, traditions, or in the name of love.

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- (6) *"Tejiendo historia para sanarnos desde nuestro territorio cuerpo-tierra"*. Amismajax (2015).
- (7) Miriam Gator (2014). El feminismo reactiva la lucha contra el extractivismo en AL.  
<http://www.lamarea.com/2014/02/17/ecuador-extractivismo-mujeres>
- (8) Interview with Lorena Cabnal, Amismajax, Guatemala.
- (9) Unjust organization of labor that assigns women the least valued jobs and men the most recognized ones.
- (10) Julieta Paredes, (2008). *"Hilando fino desde el feminismo comunitario"*. Ed. Independent Feminist Socialist Lesbians
- (11) We say anthropocentric when we place human beings at the center, ignoring the other forms of life on which we depend for survival