
The impacts of mining on women

While mining has negative impacts on all those who live in the mining communities in general and those who are affected by the mining operations, there are distinct impacts and added burdens on women.

The differentiated impacts can be begun to be understood in concrete situations, such as that faced by a Dayak woman affected by a mine owned by the company PT-IMK in Indonesia.

"Mrs Satar had a field as large as 10 to 15 hectares on the community's traditional land. Upon this land, she could harvest enough produce for one year, in fact sometimes more. With the introduction of the mining into her community, she lost all but one hectare of her land to the mining company. Consequently, she had to buy approximately 3 sacks of rice per month at a cost of Rp39,000 per sack (price at January 1998). In addition, the mining company's operations polluted the river, which could no longer be used to meet household needs, and no longer produced fish. Previously, Satar had cooked fresh fish each day for her family. Now, as a result of the pollution, she has to buy salted fish. If there is enough money, she purchases 2 kilos of salted fish a month at Rp15,000 per kilo. To obtain bathing and drinking water, Satar must walk a long way to a water source that is not affected by the company's tailings. Satar's livelihood is further threatened by the loss of her two water buffalos, found dead at the edge of the contaminated river."

It is also necessary to understand that companies usually enter into negotiations only with men, excluding women also from the royalties or compensation payments. They even have little or no control over and access to any of the benefits of mining developments, especially money and employment. Thus, women are deprived of their traditional means of occupation and become more dependent on men, who are more likely to be able to access and control these benefits.

Large-scale mining entails the replacement of subsistence economies which have nurtured generations of communities and Indigenous Peoples with a cash-based economy. The new market-based economy implies a significant erosion or destruction of traditional values and customs which have been crucial in sustaining community, tribal, clan and family solidarity and unity. In such process, women become marginalised since their traditional roles as food gatherers, water providers, care-givers and nurturers are very much affected. Economic visibility depends on working in the public sphere and unpaid work in the home or community is categorised as "unproductive, unoccupied and economically inactive".

Whereas both men and women had previously been in charge of farming activities, now men have to go out for a wage, thereby increasing women's workload and responsibilities, leading to more stress and tensions. Additionally, the environmental destruction caused by large-scale mining has also decreased the productivity of the fields and poisoned wildfoods, marine life, animals. Many women are pushed to enter into the informal economy to find additional sources of income.

Whilst large-scale mining has limited scope for women's employment, the small-scale sector absorbs women as contract or bonded labour under highly exploitative conditions. In India, for example,

women's wages are always less than that of men, safety standards are non-existent, paid holidays are not allowed even during pregnancy or childbirth, work equipment is not provided, and there are no toilets or facilities available. Unemployed women living in mining communities eke out their livelihood by scavenging on the tailings and waste dumps, often illegally, and suffer from the constant harassment of company guards, local Mafia and the police. They are exposed to the physical and sexual exploitation of the mine-owners, contractors and miners and are at the mercy of local traders when selling their ores. In addition, women work with toxic, hazardous substances and suffer from several occupational illnesses including respiratory and reproductive problems, silicosis, tuberculosis, leukemia, and arthritis.

Alcohol abuse, drug addiction, prostitution, gambling, incest, and infidelity are increasing in many mining communities. These have worsened cases of family violence against women, active and often brutal discrimination in the workplace that is often sanctioned or ignored by judicial and political institutions. Even men-led workers' organisations usually do not raise cases of human rights violations against women. The orientation of discussions between these organisations and mining companies is directed towards economic issues, such as wage increases, subsidies and so on.

In sum mining --be it small or large-scale-- is resulting in a large number of specific impacts on women, who are losing out in almost all aspects related to the development of this activity. The wealth generated by mining further pushes women into poverty, dispossession and social exclusion.

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