
Southern African women organising against the violence of extractivism

For many resource-rich nations in the global South, large-scale natural resource exploitation and extraction, and accompanying mega infrastructure projects, is the pathway governments take in order to receive foreign investment and access to financial aid. The Africa Mining Vision (1), adopted by African ministers responsible for mineral resources exploitation throughout the continent, along with its accompanying policy framework, Minerals and Africa's Development (2011) (2) both provide the most "comprehensive strategy for African industrialisation in the 21st century."

However, beneath the veneer of this popular development paradigm, the lives and livelihoods of rural and peasant communities as well as the environment are under threat from the devastating impacts of mining and other extractives industries. Women and girls, in particular, carry the costs of these impacts. From women in the Tete Province, Mozambique, whose communities are burdened with water scarcity and pollution to Zimbabwe's Marange community, where militarised and often sexualised violence haunts women's daily lives.

"Women in search of water" – Tete, Mozambique

Tete Province lies to the very north of Mozambique, and is bordered by Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In the pre-colonial era, Tete town, the present capital of the Province, was a major trading place in Southern Africa. Currently, it is the centre of the Mozambican mining industry, with coal mining being predominant. To date, coal mining concessions and licenses covering 60 per cent of the Tete Province (3) have been awarded by the Mozambican government.

One mining site, Kassoca, is operated and owned by Jindal, a company that is part of Indian multinational conglomerate Jindal Steel and Power Limited. This site tells the story of a highly militarised community struggling for water. The government has done little to research the effects of mining on the community, according to local environmental justice NGO Justiça Ambiental (JA)'s project coordinator. Starting operations in 2013, the Kassoca mine has resulted in the relocation of over 500 families. To date, 289 families are still awaiting relocation.

The daily life of these 289 families is not easy. "Here, there is no water," says a local activist, while pointing to a dam. Although the mine claims that the water from the dam is unfit for consumption, women are forced to use that water because they have no other option. They must, however, do so in secret as the mine will "deal with us if they catch us." The community, along with Justiça Ambiental, faces heavy threats and intimidation for speaking out against the mining company. Nonetheless, they have made efforts contesting the violations of their right to water and against the pollution coming from the mines in the Mozambican courts.

In another part of Tete sits the Moatzi Coal Mine. Operational since 2011, this mine was formerly owned by Rio Tinto and now belongs to Brazilian company Vale. The affected community, which largely relies on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods and survival, was relocated to the area of Mualadzi and is finding it difficult to grow food in the resource-depleted area.

One local activist, Dona Maria (not her real name), is working alongside Justiça Ambiental to raise awareness on the plight of her community. Similar to the Kassoca mine, the lack of access to clean water is a serious issue for people in Mualadzi: “The old people (Rio Tinto) dug up 10 boreholes, but only 6 are working.” There are many women gathered around the water, as well as a range of animals. “See?” says one woman, “We use the water with the animals.”

The community has developed small income-generating projects, choosing four families to sell basic items in a small market, with the aim to increase the projects so that other families can benefit.

Dona Maria shares that there has been an unusual number of spontaneous abortions and stillbirths since they moved to Mualadzi. “We are trying to investigate, we want to be sure.” Many of the young women who collect water are of school-going age. The road between the community’s secondary school and the residential area is long and unsafe, “Some girls have been attacked and raped. So they are afraid.” The community has a graveyard area allocated, but Dona Maria says, “Our sick travel back to our land and die there. They do not want to be buried here.”

A few kilometres away there are houses being built by mining company Vale, which are intended for placing more families that will be relocated. These are nothing but “painted empty shells.” None of the homes have piped running water, and the tap installed for families to use is often cut off by the builders of the housing settlement, in retaliation for not being paid by the mining company. In a province with average temperatures of over 40°C, women’s daily lives are made that much more arduous without access to clean water.

Supported by Justiça Ambiental, these communities have lodged formal requests to the mining company Vale, and the Mozambican government, in order to address the issues they are facing. This, however, did not result in any action. A peaceful protest was thus held and the road and railway were blockaded. The community faced a violent backlash from the Mozambican government, resulting in six protestors being hospitalised and many others jailed. There is an increasing militarization of these communities, with police check points controlling people’s movement in and out.

Communities continue to seek ways in which to raise awareness and mobilize. In 2016, they sent a delegation to the Permanent People’s Tribunal (4), a platform and instrument that gives recognition, visibility and voice to people suffering violations of their fundamental rights.

“When the diamonds were discovered”— Chiadzwa, Zimbabwe

“They displaced us from our lands and stripped away our freedom of movement,” describes Zimbabwean activist, Gladys Mavhusa. “When our land became a restricted area [because of the diamond mining], it meant that there was a boom gate to enter our town. This is where public transport would stop and the ‘officials’ there would perform strip searches. Women would be searched in our mouths, our ears, everywhere including private parts. Sometimes these officers did not change their gloves, using the same one on many women to the point that some of us began to develop infections. Women started having problems with their reproductive systems, fibroids and other growths. For us to go and seek medical treatment, we could not because we were no longer farming and thus, we had no money.”

The Marange diamond fields were discovered to the east of the capital, Harare, in 2006. Since then, communities like Chiadzwa have suffered grave human rights violations, violence and repression, land grabbing and displacement. Presently, in the Chiadzwa area, the Zimbabwe Consolidated

Diamond Company (ZCDC) holds the mining rights (5), a merger of government and corporate interests supported by military and security forces.

Gladys Mavhusa paints a powerful picture of life before and after the mineral rush arrived in Marange:

“I was born in Chiadzwa. When I was growing up, my life was very good, I lived a relatively free life. I was born in a family that was rich, I married into one, too, because we were farmers. We had cattle, goats, chickens, everything. The problem came when diamonds were discovered. The first thing we were told was that we were no longer free to move around. The land that we had lived on all our lives, the fields that we had cultivated and depended on – they were all taken away. The forests where we used to worship and pray to our gods for rain were taken. Our ancestral graves, the graves of our chiefs – sacred places that we all valued when I was growing up, were taken over by the mines.”

Women in Marange bear the heaviest burden of the impacts of mining activities, including the loss of livelihoods. Before the mining companies overran their lands, women made their living through activities such as farming and basket-weaving. This is no longer possible for the vast majority. Women also experience rape and other forms of sexual violence. (6) It is an onslaught from “all directions... If our husbands see that we have been raped, they blame us and they claim that we asked [for it]. If our children are raped or engage in sex work, the men blame us women again and say, ‘It’s your child.’ This situation has brought so much conflict into our families and our communities. Our husbands cannot understand that it is impossible for us to look after our families and deal with all of these problems at the same time; they say that we are lazy.”

The Chiadzwa Community Development Trust (CCDT) (7) was formed in 2005 in order to promote accountability and transparency in the extraction of diamonds. They began to work with women who wanted to mobilise to stop the violation of their bodies and rights, the grabbing of their lands and livelihoods. First, women began to organise to refuse relocation – they told their local member of parliament that they would not respect relocation, particularly to lands where they could not farm and support their families. At first, they faced early backlash – intimidation and threats from local ‘officials’. Fearing further retaliation, some members of the community chose to relocate – but in the end, they did not get their relocation homes.

CCDT continues to work with the women and families who stayed behind. Many of these women lost their husbands through murder or disappearance. In cases where it is possible, CCDT assists with litigation with the support of allies like the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR). In other situations, CCDT provides much-needed trauma and psychosocial support to widows and their families through organisations like the Counselling Services Unit (CSU).

To strengthen women’s organising and movement building, CCDT holds community trainings to enable women to know their economic, social and cultural rights. Through these awareness-raising activities, CCDT hopes that women will be able to collectively build an analysis and mobilise together.

“...I want a world where...”

The contexts may be different but the struggles are the same—from the fight for clean water to confronting threats of intimidation and repression at the hands of mining companies’ security forces or other powerful actors as well as the struggles to protect lives and livelihoods. The alliance “African Women Unite Against Destructive Resource Extraction” (WoMin) is working with women from these

communities and many others across the region in order to support their movement building and resistance initiatives, while envisioning a world where, as Gladys Mavhusa says, “women and communities are empowered. And I believe that we must build that empowerment together so that every woman can stand up for herself and with others.”

Nicky Le Roux and Maggie Mapondera,
WoMin, <http://www.womin.org.za/>

WoMin is an alliance of organisations that spans the African continent, and works alongside national and regional movements and popular organisations of women, mining impacted communities and peasants, and their solidarity partners, to make visible the impacts of extractivism on peasant and working class women. Together with partners situated from the local to the international, WoMin works to counter the destructive impacts of extractivism such as land grabbing and displacement of communities, pollution and erosion, and violence against women, and, critically, to advance a women-centred and just development alternative.

- (1) Africa Mining Vision, 2009, African Union and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), http://www.africaminingvision.org/amv_resources/AMV/Africa_Mining_Vision_English.pdf
- (2) Africa Mining Vision, Reports and Documents, <http://www.africaminingvision.org/reports.html>
- (3) Justiça Ambiental, World Bank Development Policy Finance in Mozambique, January 2017, <https://issuu.com/justicaambiental/docs/mozambique-dpf-formatted-1.11.17-1>
- (4) Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal, <http://permanentpeopletribunal.org/?lang=en>
- (5) New diamond merger commences work, posts profit, June 2016, <http://nehandaradio.com/2016/06/23/new-diamond-merger-commences-work-posts-profit/>
- (6) Marange rape victims suffer in silence, 2015, <https://www.thestandard.co.zw/2015/03/22/marange-rape-victims-suffer-in-silence/>
- (7) The Chiadzwa Community Development Trust, <http://www.ccmt.org.zw/index.php/manicaland/88-chiadzwa-community-development-trust>