
Resistance by Women Defenders of Territory to Extractivism in Latin America

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In Latin America, women have always been part of the historical struggles in defense of territories and the environment. Through mobilization protests and in their daily practices, they have resisted extractivism and all forms of violence against women. **As well as being at the forefront of such struggles, literally "using their own bodies" to stop the destruction of their territories, they have also proposed critical views on the patriarchal and racist nature of extractivism.** By way of the feminist assertion that "the personal is political" **they have questioned sexist practices within social movements, transgressed stereotypes and gender roles, and created autonomous spaces based on solidarity and collective caring.** In the following article we will share some reflections on their struggles, offering a brief overview of the current context of the extractivist model in the region and its specific impacts on women's lives.

Extractivism is an economic and political model based on the commodification and unrestrained exploitation of nature. In Latin America it has become more prolific since the 1990s. This model produces irreversible damage, polluting the air, soil and water sources and causing high losses of biodiversity. Furthermore, it contravenes the human and collective rights of the affected communities, destroying traditional ways of life and economies, and making such communities dependent on external markets.

Extractivism, in its various forms, is characterized by plundering and usurpation. It is based on the structural racism that manifests itself in the dispossession of ancestral territories, the denial of cultural practices and ways of caring for nature of indigenous peoples, afro-descendants and mixed race native islanders (*Raizales*).

How does extractivism operate in Latin America?

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the usurping and violent nature of the extractivist model is evident both in the negative impacts it produces and in the different strategies used by companies to take over entire territories, in collusion with the governments where such activities are carried out, and often with the collusion of their own governments of the countries of origin where such companies are based.

The complicity between companies, governments and in many cases, illegal armed groups and other shadowy forces, can be observed in the different levels and stages of socio-environmental conflicts: a) legislation and policies favorable to the entry of investments and companies in the targeted countries; b) the violation of the right to prior, unrestricted and informed consultation and in general to the participation of civil society, which allows projects to be set up despite local opposition; c) the defense of the companies' installations through the **militarization** of

the territories and coordination with armed groups and organized crime; and d) the interventions of judges and prosecutors who deny that companies have any responsibility, thus allowing impunity to prevail.

At present, Latin America continues to be the most dangerous region for those trying to defend their territory: **60% of all murders of people defending the earth and the environment in the world have been recorded in this region.** The countries with the highest figures of such homicides are Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, Peru and Nicaragua, according to the most recent report published by the international NGO Global Witness. (2)

Criminalization is one of the main strategies used by companies and governments to stop the resistance to extractive megaprojects. This occurs through the stigmatization of dissent, defamation through the media or declarations made by public officials, the repression of social protest and the use of litigation or criminal prosecution of defenders. This underlines the double standards of justice systems: while companies enjoy legal security and armed protection to take control of whole territories, those who fight to defend such territories are persecuted and subjected to severe sentences.

How are women in particular affected?

Extractivism is based on and exacerbates the patriarchal culture, which has a particular affect on women's way of life. As some feminist theorists and land defenders have argued, there are cultural, historical and symbolic parallels between exploitation and control over women's bodies and of nature. In the contexts of mining and oil exploitation and hydroelectric installations, for example, a 'masculinization' of territories takes place (3) in which community spaces and daily life are restructured around the desires and values of a hegemonic masculinity.

The defenders of land and women's rights have denounced that the practices of dispossession and contamination of the territories take place alongside the resurgence of patriarchal violence against women and girls and the exacerbation of gender inequalities. The above occurs in all areas of their lives and is expressed in: a) increased workloads in terms of the care work undertaken by women; b) loss of economic autonomy and food sovereignty; c) the increase in psychological, physical, economic, patrimonial and sexual violence within family and community contexts; d) the impacts on physical, emotional and reproductive health due to contact with contaminated air, soil and water; e) discrimination based on gender and violation of the right to citizen participation in prior, unrestricted and informed consultation processes (4); f) the increased sexual exploitation of women's and girl's bodies and; g) loss of cultural identity and the weakening of the community and ancestral roles of women.

Violence against women defenders of territory

The specific vulnerability and the multiple attacks suffered by women defenders of territory adds to the violence experienced historically by women, within the framework of a society shaped by injustices of gender, race and class. **In contrast to their male counterparts, women defenders are exposed to a greater range of violence, particularly sexual abuse.** In addition to facing attacks by corporate and state agents, such defenders suffer multiple violence on a daily basis within the context of their families and communities, and on many occasions, within their own organizations and mixed social movements.

Although the statistics for murdered women are lower than those of their male comrades, it is

important to highlight that the cases of murders or "territorial femicides" as some feminist defenders in Guatemala refer to it, (6) are highlighted and investigated differently. **The absence of recognition of the work of women defenders and the partiality of the judicial authorities who apply misogynistic and racist prejudices, result in such cases being classified as "crimes of passion," thus ignoring the context of the resistance led by such women, or even contriving such cases as suicides,** which as a rule simply reinforces impunity. (7)

Consequently, such violence does not end with the elimination of the physical existence of the women defenders: the way in which investigations are conducted -or rather the lack of such investigations- re-victimizes the women, transforming them into the guilty party, and preventing justice and reparation for such women and their families.

Differentiated violence also leads to differentiated impacts on the lives of women defenders. These include negative impacts on their physical, emotional and spiritual health, ranging from sleep disorders, weight loss, permanent feelings of fear, depression, to more serious diseases such as cancer. Being criminalized and stigmatized also has a precarious impact on their economic well-being, and in many cases they become isolated in their own communities and families. At a collective level, these aggressions weaken their organizations, spreads fear among their female comrades and sometimes results in the dismantling or stagnation of their struggles.

Proposals from Latin American women for the defense of territory and the elimination of violence against women

Within the framework of their work as custodians and defenders of the environment and nature, women have developed various actions that have allowed the positioning of their particular demands and perspectives, and on many occasions **they have temporarily halted or paralyzed extractive interventions that threaten their territories.** In turn, **they have generated significant transformations at the personal and collective level,** constructing new practices aimed at forms of comprehensive protection and security.

Some of their repertoires of social action include: a) the creation of spaces for the articulation and exchange of defense experiences at the national and regional levels and the construction of regional networks to contribute to the visibility, accompaniment and strengthening of local hubs of resistance; b) protests and de facto actions to prevent the advance of extractive activities, and to recover lands: road blockings, marches, permanent camps to block the installations of companies; c) actions of enforcement to activate protection mechanisms within the national and international framework and advocacy activities directed at local and national authorities, and international human rights organizations; d) documentation and reporting of aggressions and criminalization of female defenders and the formation of communicative strategies to draw attention to their struggles; e) promotion of popular and autonomous consultations so that communities can express their determination regarding the decisions and activities that affect their environment, and the necessity to carry out prior consultations according to international standards; f) daily resistance practices related to food sovereignty - preservation of native seeds and their traditional uses, agroecological practices - and the popular, feminist and solidarity economy and g) practices and reflection around self-care and mutual care, including personal and collective healing.

One of the main contributions of the struggles of women and feminists for the defense of land and common goods has been to insist on the connection between bodies and territories. **Guatemalan community feminists have proposed the category body-land territory to highlight that the struggle for the defense of the land against extractivism must be simultaneous and**

inseparable from the struggle for women in such territories to live a life free from violence and the exploitation of their bodies.

From their experiences as land defenders, women have forged positions of transformation based on the care of life in all its multiple manifestations, and with ever-increasing efforts they have integrated care of the earth, of themselves and of the collective as elements indispensable in their activism. This comprehensive vision of care is reflected in the way in which some women's and indigenous organizations perceive protection: **the protection of female human rights and environmental defenders is necessarily interwoven with the protection of territory.** In this sense, the organizations propose measures of protection and practices that reflect indigenous, afro-descendant and mixed race native islanders (*Raizales*) spirituality. In this context, **healing becomes ever more relevant:** from the dialogue of knowledge between peoples, contexts and generations, and the recovery of the memory of the ancestors, **women defenders not only heal the impacts of the attacks they have suffered because of their environmental activism, but also the deep wounds of structural violence against women.**

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- (1) This article is based on our publication "[Extractivism in Latin America. Impacts on women's lives and strategies for the defense of territory.](#)"
- (2) GLOBAL WITNESS, 2018. [At what cost? Irresponsible business and the murder of land and environmental defenders in 2017.](#)
- (3) See: CABNAL, Lorena. [Without being consulted: the commodification of our body-land territory](#), in: Women Defending the Territory. Experiences of participation in Latin America. Urgent Action Fund of Latin America and the Caribbean, 2015; and GARCÍA TORRES, Miriam. [Feminism reactivates the struggle against 'extractivism' in Latin America](#). Published in La Marea on 17 February 2014, by the Latin American Network of Women Defenders of Social and Environmental Rights (Only Spanish).
- (4) For a broad perspective on the barriers to effective participation of women in environmental issues and experiences of women in different countries with respect to popular, community and autonomous consultations, see our collective publication together with women defenders from Argentina, Guatemala, Bolivia and Ecuador: [Women defending the territory: experiences of participation in Latin America](#), 2015.
- (5) For a comprehensive overview on the criminalization and attacks against women defenders of territories, see our [Regional Report on Patterns of criminalization and limitations on the effective participation of women who defend environmental rights, territory and nature in the Americas](#).
- (6) This has been a category promoted by women territorial defenders, including Red de Sanadoras del Feminismo Comunitario de Guatemala (Network of Healers of Community Feminism of Guatemala).
- (7) For a comprehensive overview on impunity, see our [Regional Report on Impunity for Violence against Women Defenders of Territory, Common Goods, and Nature in Latin America](#), 2018.
- (8) The Urgent Action Fund for Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is a regional feminist fund that contributes to the sustainability and strengthening of activists and their movements, with agile and strategic support with respect to situations of risk and opportunity. We support the resistance, struggles and demands of women human rights defenders and territories in the transformation of systems of injustice and inequality, making integral feminist protection and care the main point of focus. [For more information please consult our website.](#)

