

IN DEPTH

## Extractivism's intrinsic violence: the domination of women and the domination of nature

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Over the past years women across the world brought attention to men's violence against women with increased vigour and anger. In capital cities across the world, women held marches, slutwalks,<sup>1</sup> flashmobs and hashtag campaigns. In Lebanon women hung wedding dresses from nooses, in Beijing women walked the streets in wedding dresses splattered with red paint, in Brazil women scattered hundreds of items of underwear across a beach, and in Argentina women stripped and lay in a heap in front of a banner saying "Femicide is Genocide". These demonstrations screamed out that women want an end to violence and rape and an end to men's impunity for such violence in private and public spaces.

Relatively more absent in mainstream media is the violence experienced by women in remote rural areas. A long way from capital cities, extractive industries such as mining, agricultural plantations and mega dam projects wreak the violence of impoverishment on women's lives. Women and their communities encounter land, forest and water grabbing at times at gunpoint, disruptions in ways of living, and the destruction of ways of sustaining life.

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When women and their communities exercise their right to say no<sup>2</sup> to the natural resource grabbing by extractive industries, when they protest removals, or the failure of companies to fulfil promises of relocation and development they face the might of the army and the police. They also face the might of private security, which defend company wealth by policing the movement of community members, searching bodies and homes, and sexually violating women. Often women are reluctant to speak of the sexual violence they encounter, fearing not only reprisals from security forces but also the patriarchal victim blaming from their own families and communities that often accompanies sexualised violence.

**Guns, power and politics**

In recent research with partners, WoMin brings ecofeminist understandings to the exploration of the political economy of extractivism in three countries –Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Sierra Leone.<sup>3</sup> The research reveals how corporations and the political elite manipulate and undermine law and policy and use violence to gain control over mineral wealth. It makes clear that the violence unleashed upon poor women and their communities and upon the earth’s resources is intrinsic to the current economic system.

This predatory system of capitalism places profit and the wealth of an elite ahead of the security of the majority of the earth’s people, the ecosystems upon which all life depends, and the sustainability of the planet. It is women, in particular, who bear the cost of this violent and destructive economic system.

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Women’s specific experiences result from their reproductive roles –the expectation that women should perform household duties, bear and rear children, care for the sick, and from deeply rooted sexist ideas about the services, including sex, that men believe they can extract from women. The work of reproduction also includes putting food on the table, mobilising energy, and ensuring that the family and the community have access to safe water resources. Women are designated responsibility for all of these.

In all three contexts, mining under colonial rule led to the displacement and dispossession of people, turning men into cheap labourers, and abusing women’s reproductive labour in order to keep men at work and guarantee the next generation of workers in the mines and factories. The research by WoMin and its partners highlights how colonial land grabs, dispossession and exploitation continue in the neoliberal and neocolonial present, as national elites aid, abet and enable multinational corporations to continue natural resource grabbing.

Laws in all three countries privilege multinational companies and fail to protect the rights of communities whose lives are destroyed to make way for mining. In addition, in all three contexts the state and company security unleashed violence on communities in order to establish and maintain control over minerals.

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## **national elites ”**

### **A case study: Marange<sup>4</sup>**

The Marange diamond mining area of Zimbabwe has been a battlefield with military and company security waging war on artisanal miners and the local community for the past 14 years in order to secure control over the diamond wealth<sup>5</sup>

Diamonds were discovered in Marange in 2005. Between November 2006 and October 2008, police killed, tortured, beat, harassed, and set dogs on artisanal miners in raids intended to drive them from the fields. Police assaulted and arrested local community members and subjected women to sexualized violence.

A woman from Marange recounted<sup>6</sup> how a truck of soldiers stopped her and another woman as they were coming from the fields. The women were forced to strip, armed with sticks, and then instructed to fight one another. The soldiers indicated that the loser would be raped by the soldiers in the truck.

## **“ The state and company security unleashed violence on communities in order to establish and maintain control over minerals ”**

On October 27th, 2008 the Army, Air Force and Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) launched Operation *Hakudzokwi*<sup>7</sup> in Marange. Soldiers fired live ammunition and teargas from the ground and from helicopters at artisanal miners and villagers. More than 200 artisanal miners and diamond dealers were gunned down. Thousands more were tortured, and hundreds of women were raped.

In 2009 armed forces forcibly removed 1,300 families from Marange to clear land for diamond mining. There was no consultation and families were forced onto trucks at gunpoint, their homes destroyed by bulldozers. They were moved to Arda Transau, a

government farm about 60 km north of Marange, where they experience considerable hardship and continued violence.

The Marange area has been declared a restricted zone under the Protected Places and Areas Act (PPAA) and this turns villagers into effective prisoners, with outsiders including family members able to visit the area only if they have police clearance. Villagers are regularly searched for diamonds at 11 checkpoints on the more than 100 kilometre road between Mutare and Marange, and women often experience sexual violence at these checkpoints. Three women told *Human Rights Watch* that a male police constable forced them to strip naked at a checkpoint, and inserted his gloved finger in their private parts, claiming to be looking for hidden diamonds.<sup>8</sup>

## **“ Not a single arrest has been made for these human rights violations of miners and women. ”**

The harassment, murder, assault and sexual abuse perpetrated by security operatives has continued over the years, as highlighted by reports on the torture and killings of artisanal miners in August 2019.<sup>9</sup> Yet, not a single arrest has been made for these human rights violations of miners and women.

### **Linking domination of women to the domination of nature**

Women in all three-country studies conducted by WoMin and allies, experienced sexualised violence including rape at the hands of state and company security forces. However, while there was much documentation on violence on the communities, there was little documentation on women's experiences of such violence.

Ecofeminist understandings that such violence is intrinsic to a violent extractivist model of development, enables the development of transformative organising approaches and alternative visions. This is in contrast to mainstream responses to violence against women, which often individualise the problem and the solution, offering women individual treatment or casting justice in legal terms.

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Challenging mainstream responses, WoMin with other ecofeminists point out that violence against women is linked to systems of class and patriarchal oppression; and that change is needed in structures of oppression while at the same time addressing the immediate effects through counselling, breaking the silence, and enabling women to work through self-blame, fear, and stigma.

For ecofeminists, the domination of women and the domination of nature are linked. Claudia von Werlhof<sup>10</sup> sees the patriarchal urge to dominate and control as embedded within capitalism which places money, economic growth and profit ahead of people and the environment. Nature and women are dominated as a result of this urge and are a means to increasing profits. Both land and women are deemed inferior, are treated as property and as commodities that are expendable and are abused. The environment is destroyed and women's reproductive labour is abused and used as a subsidy to capital. Women are exploited by men in power for the profit, success, and pleasure of these men.<sup>11</sup>

The domination of women therefore stems from the same ideologies that lead to the domination of the environment. Increased profits and growth are touted as progress or development, and take place through processes which entail the domination over and the exploitation of both nature and women.

**“ Ecofeminist understandings contrast to mainstream responses to violence against women, which often individualise the problem**

## and the solution ”

Vandana Shiva<sup>12</sup> points out that capitalist patriarchy abuses both nature and the sustenance economy stretching both to their limits. The earth and its resources, which sustain life, are destroyed; women are displaced from their livelihoods and removed from access to the land, forests, water and seeds on which they and their families and communities depend for survival. The powerful grab resources from the vulnerable, and this intensifies violence. Women's deepening vulnerability as a result of extractivist land grabs and ecological exploitation makes them more vulnerable to violence.

WoMin's ecofeminist analysis highlights that both women and nature carry the externalised costs of an extractivist economic system. The costs to nature include pollution, the destruction of large swathes of land, forest and water bodies, the growing loss of biodiversity, and ultimately, hand in hand with all forms of extractivism, is the growing climate crisis. Because of women's role in social reproduction they are the ones who clean up polluted ecosystems, walk longer and further to meet basic needs of their families, and fall ill as they encounter, in the greatest proximity, the toxicities and poisons of this model of development. This gives rise to the idea that extractivist capitalism is an economy of unpaid costs, for it is nature and people, especially women, which absorb the social, environmental and economic costs, whilst capital carries few or none. The system is structured so that corporations pay little if any of the costs of clean ups, fair compensation for the loss of resources and livelihoods, increases in women's unpaid labour, and the costs of destroyed health in affected communities.

**“ Extractivist capitalism is an economy of unpaid costs, for it is nature and people who absorb the social, environmental and economic costs ”**

In line with ecofeminist thinking, the Yaoska Guardians Movement of Rancho Grande in northern Nicaragua see body and land as territories to defend.<sup>13</sup> The movement rejects

mining because mining impacts the sustainable local economy; mining changes ecosystems and water sources burdening women, who are responsible for ensuring the food and health of their families; mining promotes sexual division of labor and deepens relationships of domination of men over women; mining leads to increased sexual violence and abuse by men who come from outside the area, and feel entitled to invade the territory and the bodies of women.

In defending land from mining, the Guardians Movement is defending a way of life deeply rooted in the land and in the community, in which mutual care still exists. The territory they are defending cannot be filled with relationships of inequality, as these weaken the community and causes divisions. They are defending a good and happy life for all, with free bodies living in harmony with each other and with nature.

### **Building power and alternatives from below**

WoMin draws on ecofeminist understandings that ending violence against women means moving beyond a violent economy shaped by capitalist patriarchy to a nonviolent, sustainable peaceful economy that respects women and the earth. This transition can only be achieved through movements of conscientized people, with clear political analysis and strategy, unified across countries and sectors.

**“ Moving beyond a violent economy to a peaceful economy can only be achieved through movements of conscientized people, unified across countries and sectors ”**

It is from this understanding that WoMin and its allies support women's organizing and movement-building and works with women in communities impacted by violent repression to address trauma, organize, explore the roots of violence and advance ecofeminist alternatives to development. Our interventions include some of the following:



Firstly, we have been supporting women who experienced extreme violence and torture perpetrated by the military and police, to work through trauma and define what justice means to them, in context, and taking into account the risks women and their communities confront. This work, piloted in partnership with the *Counselling Services Unit* in Zimbabwe, entailed developing a collective model of trauma support which enables women to organize, support one another, rebuild livelihoods, build consciousness, and break down the victim-blaming narrative.<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, WoMin and its partners have been working, alongside women, to undertake research which illustrates the connection between patriarchal extractivist capitalism and violence, including violence against women. This work includes research on the political economy of extractives in Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe; the documentation of women's experiences in Zimbabwe, and an African webinar on extractives to build a common analysis.<sup>15</sup>

**“ WoMin works with women in communities impacted by violent repression to address trauma, organize and advance ecofeminist alternatives to development ”**

Thirdly, we support women and their communities in sites across the continent, to deepen their resistance to destructive extractivism under the banner of the Right to Say NO. As women and their communities say NO to mega projects, assert their collective rights to the commons, and their control over the territory of their bodies, they are also defending and asserting their YES to 'development' as the good life, defined on their own terms.

Finally, the work above is located in a wider alliance effort to collectively imagine Pan African alternatives to the dominant extractivist capitalist model. Led by women from below, and supported through a wide alliance of organisations,<sup>16</sup> this work on building an alternative vision of the Just Transition<sup>17</sup> is ongoing and involves creative

engagement of women in dialogues, learning exchanges, research and documentation on women's coping strategies and living alternatives and will culminate in an expression of women's dreams and hopes for a different community, society and Africa. The final expression of these dreams may emerge as a charter, a tapestry or a series of stories.

1. The SlutWalk movement began in 2011 and wants to challenge rape culture and myths about the nature of sexual violence –including who is likely to commit it and who is likely to be a victim.
2. Right to Say NO is a call by communities for development sovereignty so that they can shape their development without external intervention.
3. WoMin and its partners –Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG) in Zimbabwe, Justiça Ambiental (JA) in Mozambique, and Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) in Sierra Leone– undertook research published in 2020 under the title “Guns, Power and Politics Extractives and Violence Against Women”.
4. Guns, Power and Politics Extractives and Violence Against Women in Zimbabwe Research Report”, WoMin CNRG and WoMin Alliance, 2020.
5. Human Rights Watch (2009) “Diamonds in the Rough Human Rights Abuses in the Marange Diamond Fields of Zimbabwe”, reports on the brutality and human rights abuses wreaked on artisanal miners and villagers.
6. Recounted to WoMin and Counselling Services Unit (Zimbabwe), who are working in partnership with women in communities affected by mining.
7. Shona word meaning “you do not come back”.
8. Ibid.
9. CNRG, “Extreme Human Rights violations continue in Marange”, August 2019.
10. Von Werlhof, Claudia (2007) “No critique of capitalism without a critique of patriarchy! Why the Left is no alternative”, Capitalism Nature Socialism, 18(1), 13-27.

11. WoMin has long made this argument in inter alia the following publications:  
“Collection 1: Synthesis of the available literature addressing key themes and questions related to women, gender and extractives”, “Women Building Power Towards Climate, Energy And Justice”, “Covid-19 – Crisis upon crisis in Africa: an ecofeminist perspective”, and “Addressing crisis and building counter power through new African ecofeminist movement”.
12. Mies, Maria and Shiva, Vandana (1993). *Ecofeminism*. London: Zed Books.
13. World Rainforest Movement, “Defending the body-earth territory: An alternative for social movements in resistance 1”, Bulletin 226, September/October 2016, Uruguay.
14. This experience is being written up for launch in 2021.
15. A conceptual paper on violence against women in extractive sectors from a social, ecological and political economy vantage point is underway.
16. WoMin, the southern African Rural Women’s Assembly, the World March of Women, Friends of the Earth Africa, local women’s organisations, and academics.
17. A Just Transition, for WoMin and other social movements, involves rethinking our relationship with nature, building peoples and women’s power from below, and the radical transformation to an economic system of support and care that sustains livelihoods.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Shamim Meer is a researcher, writer, writing coach and educator working with activists in communities and trade unions. She has written on feminist struggles, women’s land rights, violence against women among other issues. She co-founded feminist publications *SPEAK Magazine* and *Agenda* –a journal about women and gender. She is currently working with WoMin on a conceptual paper on violence against women in extractive sectors from a social, ecological and political economy perspective.

Photography: Waiting for rain in Burkina Faso, by John Isaac/Un Photo