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Women

# Addressing crisis and building counter power through new African ecofeminist movement

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - iV535 - August 2019 -

Publication date: Friday 30 August 2019

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**Africa is reeling through multiple crises – economic, ecological and social. The continent is carrying the most substantial impacts of the growing climate crisis. Women in peasant and working-class communities carry the double burden of oppression. Firstly, they are located in the periphery of the world, which is subject to ongoing neo-colonial capitalist exploitation. And secondly, they are burdened by patriarchy, which serves the interests of capital and all men.**

However, women are at the epicentre of resistance to dispossessions of their land, water, forests and way of life. It is in defence of these that women are proposing the development alternatives that are needed to stave off the worst of the coming catastrophe and adapt to a world radically transformed by a changed climate.

## **Mining, accumulation and the social and ecological crisis**

Mining and the extractives economy in Africa (and elsewhere in the developing world) are a clear example of imperialist exploitation of the periphery for the benefit of the centre – the triad of North America, Europe and Japan. Capital in the BRICS block has, in the past two decades, begun to play a similar role in the extractives economy in Africa. But BRICS countries are located differently in the global order and some of the “benefits” of accumulation are therefore distributed back to the centre.

The scale of looting is well captured in the results of the *High Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa*. This panel, chaired by Thabo Mbeki, reported in February 2015 (following 3 years of research and analysis) that Africa was losing more than \$50 billion every year to illicit financial flows (IFFS). This is money which is earned, transferred or utilised through illegal means. It originates from (a) corporate tax evasion, trade misinvoicing and unlawful transfer pricing, (b) criminal activities, and (c) corruption of government officials. The corruption is estimated by Open Society Initiative of West Africa (OSIWA) at only 3% of total outflows.

The case of Nigeria is powerful. The oil and gas sector is responsible for 92.9 per cent of IFFS from Nigeria. Over \$217.7 billion is said to have flowed out of the country between 1970 and 2008. The extractives sector dominates wealth outflows to the centre – in the Nigerian case mainly to the US, Spain, France and Germany.

We can look at African states whose economies turn substantially around the extractives sector (South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia, Botswana, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo for example). They have attempted neo-extractivist reforms which seek to retain a greater proportion of the profits nationally. But these have been thwarted by powerful Western governments and the G7 Lobby Group.

They manipulate, threaten and undermine higher royalty taxes, windfall taxes, demands for local benefit, indigenisation/ black economic empowerment quotas and so on.

Accumulation by transnational mining corporations is made possible, and not surprisingly so, by a number of factors:

• Weak law and policy safeguarding land, water and other natural resource rights for traditional, indigenous and

customary communities;

â€¢ Inadequate or zero provisions for Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)

â€¢ Criminalisation of activities in dissenting communities;

â€¢ A compromised, corrupted national elite; and

â€¢ A global financial architecture constructed to support these illicit financial flows.

Militarisation and securitisation of extractive sites and war are well known strategies employed by the centre to guarantee exclusive access to these scarce natural resources. And as scarcity increases – in the context of a growing ecological crisis, climate change, and an ever-increasing world population – controls that are increasingly violent will become more commonplace.

Crises arise from mining and other extractives activities in three main ways:

Firstly, through the **exploitation of cheap labour** in territories subject to the logic of extractivism. There is a high level of automation occurring in the mining sector in some parts of the developed world. But mining is driven by cheap labour throughout the global South. Workers are paid low wages, work in extremely dangerous conditions and have a high risk of falling ill after years or decades of exposure to dust and chemicals. Migrancy undermines how labour is organised for subsistence food production in rural sending areas. And ill health amongst mineworkers drains the family coffers and makes new demands on the unpaid labour of women and girl children.

Secondly, through **dispossession of the peasantry and the working classes** of land, water, forests, fisheries and minerals, with zero or minimal compensation. This dispossession always entails violence, lies, corruption and co-optation of local elites like traditional leaders. Dispossession also occurs through the polluting effects of mining activities, such as a polluted water body or river. This dispossesses communities of their ability to use this water for household consumption or food production. This is a central contributor to the crisis of social reproduction.

Capitalists expropriate “so many of the fruits” of women’s labours that the reproduction of labour power at household level is undertaken with increasing difficulty and challenge. Silvia Federici the Italian-American scholar and activist, talks about world regions marked for “near-zero-reproduction” because they are believed to be redundant or inappropriate to the requirements of capital.

Thirdly, through the **externalised social and ecological costs** of an extractivist mode of production. These costs are borne:

â€¢ at the site of extraction, through the pollution of water, air and soil

â€¢ along the transportation chain, through pollution and the high carbon emissions of pipelines, the trucking industry, and the freight sector

â€¢ through processing and beneficiation which consume large quantities of energy and water

Ecosocialists speak of capitalism as an “economy of unpaid costs”. Nature is treated as a free or cheap input or “sink” for costs of production and unpaid labour as the absorber of costs and the rehabilitation of damaged nature.

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## Social reproduction

US sociologists Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner describe social reproduction as: “Processes involved in maintaining and reproducing people, specifically the labouring population, and their labour power, on a daily and generational basis. It involves the provision of food, clothing, shelter, basic safety and health care, along with the development and transmission of knowledge, social values and cultural practices necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation.”

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## African women at the frontline

Across Africa, women and their communities are engaged in brave defence of their lands and their way of living.

They are protecting ecosystems and the commons, the very basis of life for the majority of the world’s people now, and the interests of future generations. In Senegal, women fishers are defending their lands, their air and their fishing rights against the encroachments of a polluting coal power station. In the Mui Basin of Kenya, women are saying NO to the mining of coal. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women activists organised under SOFLECO (women defending the Congo River) and their communities are resisting stage 3 of the Grand Inga hydropower dam. This will result in large scale dispossession of lands and forests, and the destruction of their livelihoods which are bound up with the great Congo River. and proposes development alternatives from below. Their analysis, their clear political positioning, and their radical demands stand contrary to the dominantly middle class, largely urban African women’s movement.

WoMin and its allies are crafting, in alliance and in solidarity, a concept and practice of Ecofeminism which is rooted in the African context. Ecofeminist theory has been a source of understanding for WoMin’s work, but, most importantly, it is women activists on the ground who have been the lodestar guiding WoMin’s thinking and political strategies. We have co-created ideas through feminist political education schools, through feminist participatory action research, through learning and solidarity exchanges, and through regional platforms with key allies that converge struggles from across the continent.

WoMin holds the analysis that as women, the reproductive workers, lead blockades of large-scale destructive development projects, they are defending a living alternative and proposing a different future. The resistance is based on their own concept and practice of development, centred upon protection of the commons of land, water, forest, and air; on a way of producing which is in harmony with nature upon which life rests; on a collective solidarity and sharing between peoples; and on a genuine deep custodianship of the earth for other species and future generations. And so, the alternatives, which capitalist patriarchy asserts do not exist, are alive and well in many communities around the world, to be built on further and supported.

[Amandla](#)

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