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Indigenous women’s anti-mining activism: a gendered analysis of the El Estor struggle in Guatemala

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ABSTRACT
Focusing on the struggle against the Fenix mine in El Estor Guatemala, this article argues that women are disproportionately affected by resource development; and that women’s activism against mining is also gendered, in the sense that they are often distinct from men’s strategies and are rooted in women’s experiences as women, and as indigenous women within a particular socioeconomic and historical context. We draw on original data gathered from interviews with indigenous women activists in the El Estor communities in Guatemala.

Introduction
Resistance to large-scale development projects, such as hydro-dam construction, palm oil production, and mineral extraction, has become a distinct feature of the 21st century Latin American political landscape. One of the countries where this scenario occurs is Guatemala, where there have been thousands of protests since 2005 over such forms of development. One of the industries targeted is metallic mining.
While both men and women are extensively involved in the anti-mining movement, the role of the latter group remains largely on the margins of scholarly research. This is so despite the fact that mobilisation by women has attracted global attention, and led to calls for changes in how the global mining industry operates. For example, a group of indigenous Guatemalan women are pursuing a globally precedent-setting lawsuit in Canadian courts against Canada’s HudBay Minerals over human rights abuses (including rape and murder) at the company’s former property, the Fenix nickel project, formally known as the Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel (CGN) (Nobel Women’s Initiative 2013).

We have two main objectives in this article, which draws on research we carried out in August of 2015. First, we aimed to demonstrate that the effects of resource development disproportionately harm women. Second, we set out to show how women’s resistance strategies are also ‘gendered’, in the sense that they are often distinct from men’s strategies and are rooted in women’s experiences as women, and as indigenous women within a particular socioeconomic and historical context. In exploring these two themes, we aim to make women more visible in the debates both in terms of mining’s impact and the resistance to them.

In Guatemala, mobilisation by women against mining is occurring at all the mining sites in Guatemala (BTS 2013). However, our article focuses on a single example of women’s activism around the Fenix nickel project in the eastern part of the country, in the municipality of El Estor. By focusing on one site, a more detailed and context-specific picture emerges and this allows us to grasp the complexity of issues relating to gender and mining. In demonstrating its claims, the analysis will draw heavily on the voices of the women activists from the region who were interviewed by the authors.

In the next section, we give a brief account of our research aims and methods. Afterwards, we provide background information on the mining area of the study. After that, we give a two-part analysis on the various ways in which mining affects women, and women’s responses to this. We then go on to address the potential ways policymakers might respond to these issues, before our conclusion.

**Our research: its aims and methods**

In order to understand the specific nature of women’s activism at the El Estor struggle, we employed a qualitative research method using key-informant interviews with female activists at the site. In-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews are an appropriate choice for this research as they make for the collection of rich and detailed data; they also allow subjects to provide detailed, nuanced, and in-depth responses to questions posed to them. In this instance, women were able to go into detail, for example, of the various types of strategies they employed in the resistance efforts (Archer and Berdahl 2011). The responses of the women form the substance of this article.

A total of five of the female activists at El Estor were interviewed, with each interview lasting between 90 and 120 minutes in length. Among the topics covered were: the effects of the mine’s presence on the women, their families, and the community; the role of women in the resistance to mining; the strategies that women used to resist; the role of
female leadership in the movement; and the sources of women’s inspiration for their activism.

Each participant granted oral informed consent prior to the start of interviews, and all interviewees requested the use of their real names, as they desired to have their stories and struggles known.

**Background**

The locus of this struggle is the municipality of El Estor, located on the northern shores of Lake Izabal, Guatemala’s largest lake. The municipality is home to a predominantly indigenous Q’eqchi Mayan population, a group whose history is one of oppression, exclusion, and dispossession (Lovell 1988; McFarlane 1989). Contributing to these historical injustices are the foreign-owned mining enterprises, supported by the Guatemalan state and military apparatus, which sought access to the region’s natural resources, including metals, and hence to lands occupied by the indigenous people.

Mineral development in the region began in the 1950s when Hanna Mining, an American owned company partnered with Canadian mining giant INCO (McFarlane 1989), through the latter’s newly established local subsidiary Exmibal, and began developing the nickel industry. Exmibal was Guatemala’s first mining operation. The industry’s beginnings coincided with the start of Guatemala’s brutal civil war, between the military government and the leftist guerrillas of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). One of Latin America’s bloodiest wars, it lasted almost four decades (1960–1996), and cost the lives of over 200,000 people, mostly indigenous Mayans. (For a good source of information on this historical context see CEH [1999, 17].)

The arrival of INCO, as McFarlane (1989) reveals, further aggravated the historic marginalisation and dispossession of the country’s indigenous populations. To begin, the military government granted generous concessions to INCO through new mining legislation which was drafted with help not only from the company, but also the Canadian government (McFarlane 1989). The law repealed an extant ban on open pit mining, granted INCO a 40-year lease, and earned it a commitment from the military to guarantee stability in the region (McFarlane 1989). Translated, stability meant displacing the Q’eqchi to whose lands mining development demanded access.

Unfortunately for the local Q’eqchi, they lacked formal land titles, despite their presence in the region for generations, and this served as the basis for their dispossession. Under the leadership of Colonel Carolos Arana, dubbed the ‘Butcher of Zacapa’ (and later elected President of Guatemala), the military unleashed a ‘reign of terror’ to displace the Q’eqchi, killing thousands of them in the process (McFarlane 1989). One of the most horrific incidents was the 1978 Panzós massacre, in which women and children were among those killed. The horrors unleashed that day haunt survivors still, as María Maquín, a 51-year-old married mother of five, and present-day anti-mining activist, told us in her testimony below.

Although Exmibal, now Fenix, has changed hands on several occasions, there has been no change in the status of indigenous land claims. The Q’eqchi persist in their struggles for
land rights, while the mining company and its proponents continue to resort to violence against them.

In the current resistance to large-scale mining, women are continuing to play a critical role and are continuing to pay a high price, as the aforementioned rape case demonstrates. They are often directly targeted with violence by state or company security forces, or by mining proponents in their communities. Despite the centrality of women in these struggles, and despite the many adversities they confront as a result, academic studies on these themes remain largely gender-blind. This analysis seeks to make a contribution toward addressing this gap, and to a lesser extent, also addresses the question of what policymakers might do in response to the issues.

The following sections delve into the motivations for women’s anti-mining activism; it notes, in particular, that mining’s harmful effects are gendered, and that women bear a disproportionate share of the burdens stemming from these harms.

**Analysing the adverse effects of mining on women**

**Environmental effects**

Striking in women’s testimonies is the importance they gave to the impact of mining on the natural environment. Water security – in terms of safety and availability – was of major concern. The women asserted that the effluent from the mine’s refinery pollutes Lake Izabal, a major source of the area’s water supply, and this has health implications for residents. Specific illnesses were mentioned to be plaguing community members, such as hair loss, rashes, and gastrointestinal problems, and were occurring more frequently for children. One participant, Violeta Tuil Pérez, a 27-year-old married mother with two children, even spoke of increasing birth deformities occurring in the region and the challenges these bring to local families, particularly the mothers. Other women linked the amount of water and electricity consumed by mining operations as having a deleterious impact on the availability of the former and the price of the latter.

Environmental effects were also noted in terms of declining land productivity. The women charge that the airborne emissions from the mine, which they believe affect precipitation, in turn affect land production capacity, and thus food availability. In an interview, Fidelia, a 54-year-old mother of seven who is strongly opposed to the mine, explains:

> I realise that the problems that they [the mine] leaves in our communities such as shortages of water and a shortage of food is linked to the land which is no longer producing like it did before. Why? Because they are taking all the riches out of our land, they are destroying it, and it no longer produces healthy crops. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

Women’s anxieties over the environmental changes stem from their unique knowledge, based on gender roles, of the local ecological context. As agricultural producers responsible for providing food for the household, they are attuned to the changes in land productivity and crop growth. As mothers, they are also keenly aware of the status of their family’s health. Alterations in either realm, such as declining food production or the worsening
health of their children, add to women’s already onerous responsibilities. Ana María, a 39-year-old mother of five, explained how she and other women are affected by environmental transformations attributed to mining:

Well, it [referring to mining] affects me a lot more as I woman I’ve realised. [The mine is] having an enormous impact, especially with the shortage of water … [It] has impacted our crops … they are not growing like before … [The mine is] taking away our water … taking away our crops which is our food, so what does that mean for us? (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

She also conveyed her fears about the implications of these environmental changes for the future well-being of her children:

I cry when I think about what will happen in these next ten years. How will it be? If right now we are seeing that our rivers are drying up what does that mean for our lives? Our crops are destroyed. I have my ten cuerdas [of land] from which I feed my children, but what's happening now? The corn will not grow. What will happen to us? How will I be able to maintain my children? They [the mine] has left us nothing but poverty. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

Reinforcing the gendered nature of mining effects, the women note the differences in responses between themselves and men when it comes to responding to environmental changes; the men focus less on the future and more on the present. Violeta, a 27-year-old mother of two, expanded on this:

Women take the time to think: what will happen tomorrow? Or what will I do tomorrow? Men do not think this way. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

Another research participant, Angélica, a 47-year-old mother of five whose husband was allegedly murdered by the head of the mine security forces, is now an acknowledged resistance leader. She elaborated:

We, as women, think more about the future. This is why I have said many times, men do not value what women are and do. That is why I say in women’s assemblies, women’s encounters: ’If we don’t take care of things ourselves, who will?. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 6 August 2015)

Angélica’s reference to women’s obligations to the future coincides with June Nash’s claims regarding indigenous women’s ‘connectedness to issues of survival of past tradition and future generations in their lives’ (2001, 25). The women suggested that men’s emphasis on the present is related to their concern about securing employment and earning an income. Violeta explained:

Recently I had the opportunity to speak to a [male] friend from my church. He is young … [and has] started working at the CGN mine. And I asked him: ‘Are you aware of the consequences that mining brings?’ And he said ‘Si! But, if I’m going to die tomorrow, I would prefer to work’. And then I said to him: ‘You … work where there are fumes. Don’t you think about your health? The contamination will do you harm!’ And he simply responded: ‘Yes, but I have money and there is no other work’. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

This difference in concerns illustrates the gender role expectations. In the Guatemalan context, women are expected to be caregivers and culture bearers, and men the breadwinners (Smith 1995). These different roles coincide with differences in concerns related to
time, with men focused on the short-term problems of gaining adequate income to fulfil their role as breadwinners, and women being concerned with more long-term problems that would threaten the health of their community.

Economic effects

Interviewees pointed out that mine employment for women is limited, restricted to ancillary low-paying jobs such as cooks and cleaners, an observation consistent with developments in other mining contexts (Lahiri-Dutt 2011). This employment structure not only reinforces that mining is a hyper-masculine industry, but it also mirrors the relationships and power differentials between women and men in the larger society, and deepens women’s economic dependence on men. Precise data, however, on women’s employment, or any types of employment at the mine, however, are non-existent in the Guatemalan context, a challenge faced by research conducted at other mine sites (for example, ASIES 2010; Deonandan and Ortiz 2016; Zarsky and Stanley 2011). Nevertheless, the demographics of the region (high rates of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy, especially among the indigenous, and particularly indigenous women) suggest that women, more so indigenous women, are least well-positioned to take advantage of mine employment (see SEGEPLAN 2011). This problem is compounded by the fact that, as the Guatemalan government itself claimed, the level of employment anticipated by the Fenix project did not materialise (SEGEPLAN 2010).

The wage economy that comes with mining also brings a slew of disruptions that have gender implications. The gender division of mine employment introduces disruptions to family life for local women. This is linked by two related factors. Firstly, that mining job opportunities are mostly restricted to local men, and secondly, the income men earn negatively affect their behaviours.

Mine employment for men also means that they have access to cash and this in turn results in disequilibrium within the home as men feel emboldened to act on spending decisions without consulting their wives. The latter fear speaking out as they could become victims of abuse or abandonment. As Violeta confirmed,

[A] lot of women are abandoned here … [T]his is happening because of men’s employment at the mine and although they earn very little … as soon as they have the power of money they leave their wives because they become interested in other women. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

Men engaging in sex with prostitutes is another dimension of their employment at the mine, and one that also has gendered effects. By spending their income on prostitutes, men neglect the needs of their wives and families. At the same time, women working as prostitutes is a reflection of the lack of employment options for them. Hence, both the wives and the prostitutes are dependent on the men and the choices that the men make.

Angélica spoke of the effects of prostitution on women’s lives in El Estor:

Prostitution and the disintegration of the family unit. These are linked because when men see money or have money, they don’t come home when they get paid. First, they go to the drinking
holes, and if there is a bit of money left over to their poor wives who have to find a way to put food on the table. So, what happens next? The wives get fed up of this abuse, voice themselves and the husband leaves them for another woman … El Estor was not like this before. But now, there is a lot of prostitution, and many of the young girls go to these bars and drinking holes out of necessity to earn money. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 6 August 2015)

It should also be noted that women resorting to prostitution represents a major shift in cultural norms around sexuality. Traditionally in Mayan culture, the rules of sexual conduct are prescribed according to community and ethnicity. That is, cultural expectations are placed on indigenous women to ‘wear the emblems of their community identity, marry local men, and bear and nurture children of the community’ (Smith 1995, 740).

Social effects

As the last section showed, the social impact of mining is closely and iteratively linked to the economic changes that mining brings. The issue of men and money in mining communities brings to the fore another of mining’s detrimental effects: community divisions and the risk that mining will increase inequalities and drive conflict. Inequalities and conflict play out at a number of levels in society, including both community and the household (Moser 1993). In an environment of rampant poverty and a stark absence of alternative options, mining jobs are coveted by many. A job at the mine brings cash into the local economy and income to the household. However, it also brings social tensions and domestic upheavals.

Within the community, divisions emerge between the haves and have-nots as the economic benefits of the mine become unequally dispersed. For those households with a member in mine employment, their better standard of living can cause jealousies among their neighbours who have few alternatives. At the same time, mine workers see anti-mining activists as posing a threat to their fragile livelihood. This tension often leads to violence between the two sides, as Violeta explained:

Yes, there are divisions. … But, there are families that get work with the mine and others that don’t, so these are where the attacks stem from. We are attacking each other. Yes, there are a lot of divisions and not only for this reason. I mean, everyone is just trying to get ahead, we want to overcome the challenges of poverty and that creates jealousy between families. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

These social divisions have gender implications as women are particularly affected by these conflicts. Traditionally, they are seen as the guardians of community cohesion and cultural identity. As Smith (1995, 738) explains, in the Guatemalan context, indigenous women not only bear ‘the burden of maintaining the main markers of Mayan ethnic identity’, but they are also ‘reproducers of the Mayan community, both culturally and biologically’. Hence, as with environmental destruction, community divisions disrupt the roles women normally play, and render it difficult for them to perform their expected functions as identity gatekeepers. In this context there is danger that, over time, community solidarity and group cohesion might become a thing of the past.
Gender effects are also experienced through the loss of longstanding female friendships. Women whose husbands found work at the mine, and who are thus benefitting economically from the operation, have now become staunch mine proponents (where once they may have been its opponents). As a result, conflict has now emerged between women whose husbands have mine employment and those whose husbands do not, and in the process many valued friendships are being sacrificed. Ana María, a 39-year-old mother, related the consequences of these divisions:

I cannot say that our female friends who support mining are calm. This is because they receive economic benefits [due to their husbands’ employment at the mine] or because they are manipulated or offered small projects [as part of the mine’s social programmes] to oppose us who maintain the resistance. And what have they said to us? They have said that we are dumb women, that we don’t know anything, that we are the ones that are influenced by other sources. This affects me a lot because when I see my female friends like this I feel upset and sad that they act this way. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

Fidelia, a 54-year-old mother of seven and activist, tells of her sense of sadness over the loss of community, cohesion, and the commitment to a common goal:

Well, this bothers me a lot when I see former friends (females) that support mining knowing that we are communities in resistance. There are friends [who have left the resistance] and I’m worried for them and I hurt for them … because I realise they are not thinking about the future of their children … they just don’t understand because their husbands earn with the mine or they are scared to speak up. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

The gendered dimensions of women’s activism

Not only are the effects of mining gendered, so too are the strategies of resistance deployed by women. This is a research terrain that remains largely unexplored, with the exception of the works of Jenkins (2014), and Jenkins and Rondón (2015). They drew on the gendered narratives to understand women’s activism, an approach followed here. Below, three gendered strategies are identified as critical to enabling women to maintain their struggle: female solidarity, consciousness building, and bridge leaderships.

Of course, these strategies have been evident in other social struggles, and they are not unique to the women in this particular struggle. However, what is important to note here is that, in the context of the El Estor anti-mining struggle, these strategies are influenced by the women’s unique history, their cultural values as indigenous Mayans, their personal life trajectories, and their understanding of their obligations to their family, their community, and to other women. In other words, while the strategies may have echoes in other struggles, the motivations and inspirations behind them are not necessarily the same but are particular to this specific group of women.

Activism and solidarity with the past

One of the striking aspects of the El Estor resistance was the link the women perceived between their current struggles and those of the past, and the inspiration they took from
this sense of solidarity and continuity. This too has echoes of the empowerment vision of feminists such as Rowlands (1995, 1997) – it reveals the women’s sense of the importance of understanding that their experiences are shared (albeit with a sisterhood of the past) and their awareness of the need for collective action, though in this instance, action co-ordinated with or built upon those that came before. Historically, indigenous women’s activism in the region is rooted in longstanding land-rights struggles, and women’s participation in these made them targets of horrendous violence. In their testimonies, women made strong links between their present and the struggles that came before.

María Maquín, a 51-year-old anti-mining activist who, as a child, survived the brutal Panzós massacre, embodied the links between the past and the present that she spoke of:

I have lived through many painful things because of the mining companies and the government. I am a survivor of the civil war and the Panzós massacre. I have overcome these [hardships] and I feel very proud. I have overcome them, but I will never forget. I will carry in my heart everything they have done. I have seen blood run … I have so many scars on my body to remind me of this time – when the soldiers beat me in an attempt to kill me. A time when they pursued me even with helicopters. These are the great challenges that I have been able to overcome. I have fought so much in the defence of our lands, and I will continue fighting today with my people who have also suffered. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August, 2015)

Another activist, Fidelia, 54-years-old, connected the past with the present:

I am a survivor, I lived through the armed conflict. I have a history and this must be shared. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

In her research on Mayan Q’eqchi women in this region, anthropologist Sanford (2000) employs the concept of ‘living memory of terror’ (129), to understand the enduring nature in women’s memory of this type of gender violence. More specifically, she highlights the fear that persists in women’s consciousness decades after the physical violence ends. Within the context of mining development, women’s testimonies suggest that this type of memory has a dual function – it serves as an important reminder of the past as well as a motivation to struggle for the future. This can be seen from Maria’s closing words above.

This persistence and courage also serves as a source of inspiration for younger generations of female activists and reinforces gender solidarity. While the younger generation does not have the same ‘living memory of terror’, they draw inspiration from the struggles of the previous generation and their ancestors. Angéllica, an activist from the community of La Unión explained:

When I was nine years old, these women were struggling for their land, struggling while their grandparents died defending their lands. These same sons and daughters continue [today] working in the defence of their territory. This is something that I appreciate and admire – the length of their struggle. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

Gender solidarity is also strengthened through women relying on each other. Because of their grinding poverty and the lack of any significant outside support for their struggle, the women at the Fenix resistance draw strength from each other. Fidelia expanded on this:
When I see my friends [female] and how much they value my work, and how I value their strength, we encourage each other. And when they get together with me, I feel very happy. I value their fight, and perhaps I cannot express this to each one of them, but I believe that every woman brings a gift. They can do many other things that I cannot do, but I can speak. I can be a voice of all my female friends. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

Activism and consciousness-raising

Another strong theme in the women’s testimonies is that of consciousness-raising, where participants attempted to encourage women’s activism by pointing out that the sufferings they are each enduring are shared by all women in the community. As Fidelia states above, in reference to trying to mobilise her friends whose interest in the resistance was waning, ‘I have tried to raise their consciousness’ (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015). This strategy of trying to get women to realise their shared interests and objectives very much parallels the work of feminists such as Rowlands (1995, 1997), who advocated for women’s empowerment through consciousness-raising rooted in women’s common experiences, and their collective action to challenge internalised oppression (created for example, by local, national, and international systems of patriarchy and hierarchy). In the Latin American context, these discussions had echoes of the gospel of liberation theology and the teachings of Freire (1970), in which critical consciousness was deemed a precondition for liberation. In this context, it is similarly employed but with the additional goal of strengthening the unity among women.

Fidelia explained why she felt raising consciousness is important:

There are friends [who have left the resistance] … I hurt for them because … I realise that they are not thinking about the future of their children. I have tried to raise their consciousness but they just don’t understand because their husbands earn with the mine or they are scared to speak up. I always remind them … : ‘Friends, one day this mining company will leave our country, our community. Right now you support them. And when the day comes …, will you go chasing after them? No, you will stay here and then what will you do? Not only will you suffer [referring to the loss of employment and income] but we will all continue to suffer for the shortage of crops, of water, and loss of friendships, things that are necessary for life and that you are not thinking about right now’. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

Similarly, María spoke of why she stresses the importance of consciousness:

I gave my message [about the Panzós massacre] to provoke their consciousness to the fact that the war from those years has not ended but simply that the strategies [by multi-national companies] are different. The contamination of our lands, of our rivers, is killing us slowly. Perhaps they are not using arms as frequently as they did during the armed conflict, but with all this contamination this is how they are killing us, it’s a different strategy. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

These testimonies are informative as they reveal the gendered foundations on which female activists base their consciousness-raising. The referencing of livelihood, land, water, community, and attachment to place, all of which are the cornerstones of Mayan indigenous culture, have very gendered components as discussed earlier (Lovell 1988).
Inspiring and building indigenous women’s consciousness around these issues is, in many senses, an attempt for women to preserve their gendered cultural identity. Gender is utilised as a ‘cultural resource’ that resistance members use ‘to construct their image in a certain light, frame an issue in a particular way, or claim legitimacy as actors in a given arena’ (Einwhoner et al. 2000, 680). There are also many temporal motifs in women’s testimonies, particularly in drawing on the past as motivation and referencing the future with a sense of obligation.

**Activism and ‘bridge leadership’**

This consciousness-raising among female activists has been facilitated, in large part, by strong female leadership in this struggle. While there are individuals in the movement, such as Angélica Choc, who conform to a traditional leadership profile, there are others who fall into the category of ‘bridge leadership’ and who serve a critical role in movement cohesion and motivation. Bridge leadership is defined as distinct from official leadership, and is instead a role played by a rank and file member(s) of the movement who works to convince others to involve themselves in the struggle, and who liaises with other movements to build networks of solidarity with other movements (Robnett 1997). Angélica Choc is an acknowledged leader both within and outside the El Estor resistance. She has an international profile, and is frequently invited abroad to speak on behalf of the resistance. However, there are others within the movement, less known outside the group, but who work to build movement strength and cohesion. In so doing, they serve an equally – or perhaps even more – critical role, within the community itself.

As Bahati Kuumba notes, focusing on recognised leadership often leads to an obscuring of bridge leaders, ‘a large portion of whom are women, and are the actual foot soldiers [and] can be the glue that attracts and holds participation in the movement’ (2001, 80). In the case of El Estor, one individual who epitomises the concept of ‘bridge leader’ is María, who often speaks to local communities, and draws the memory of her activist grandmother, who was murdered at Panzós, to keep the movement inspired:

> I am a survivor of Panzós massacre and the 29th of last month we had a commemoration for my grandmother. So, many communities participated in this commemoration ceremony …. My grandparents always used to say in those years [referring to the arrival of INCO in the 1960s]: ‘Why are the companies coming here? We have to get them out of here, away from our lands and people’. And … for opposing the mine, they were massacred. But the struggle continues. And now it is their children and great grandchildren that have to continue fighting and defending our lands. And we will never forget this idea, the wisdom our grandparents and ancestors left us …. And I will never forget it and will continue to walk where they walked … defending our territory and our children’s futures. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

Where Sanford (2000, 129) refers to the ‘living memory of terror’, we suggest this can be countered with what we refer to here as the living memory of courage of ancestors. María’s comments also convey her awareness of her role:

> I have realised the capacity and the strength that I have as a woman and how I can centre myself with my people, with my communities. I am a very humble woman without any schooling, but I
have that wisdom, that intelligence to be able to share, to be able to give strength to the rest of my female friends so that these companies do not defeat us. Because we have rights here in Guatemala. (Interview, El Estor, Guatemala, 7 August 2015)

**Concluding remarks**

Mining is an industry undergoing explosive growth globally, as the world’s hunger for minerals continues to skyrocket. This phenomenon, however, is leaving a trail of destruction in its wake, as vulnerable populations, specifically the poor and marginalised in whose territories these valued resources are contained, find their livelihoods disappearing, their cultures endangered, and their safety threatened. This presents issues for sustainable development as well as women’s rights. Women, in particular, as the above testimonies show, bear the brunt of these harms. The preceding discussion also reveals that, despite their vulnerabilities, women are not passive in the face of these threats. They are rising and resisting, despite the often horrendous consequences this might unleash for them, and the evidence indicates that unless major policy reforms are implemented within the industry, these tensions and conflicts will persist.

It must be noted that the source of mining conflicts and gender harms are not just a result of tensions between the company and the communities. These conflicts are often layered on larger, more complex socioeconomic, cultural, and political realities of the context in which the mining struggle is occurring. These in turn will affect the outcomes of policy prescriptions for promoting gender rights as well as their outcomes. In the Guatemalan context, which has been the focus of this analysis, there are a myriad of influences that cannot be ignored. These include the country’s history of violence against indigenous peoples (on whose lands mining is primarily occurring), the ongoing dispossession of the poor, the disappointing outcomes of the many indigenous land rights struggles, the great socioeconomic divide between the indigenous and non-indigenous populations, and the rampant racism that stains society, as well as the wide-ranging impunity that prevails surrounding the horrific levels of violence against women in the country.

In such an environment, securing gender rights in extractive development involves an array of policy transformations. They involve actors at the international level (such as international financial institutions which have the capacity to withhold financial aid to government and funding to mining companies), national governments (to implement policy changes dealing with land rights for example), and civil society (to keep governments accountable and to demand from them the necessary policy changes).

Despite the well-documented environmental and social harms wrought by large-scale extractive development and the widespread global mobilisation against it (see for example, Bebbington *et al.* 2008; Jenkins 2014; Jenkins and Rondón 2015; Kuecker 2008; OCMAL n.d.), regulations to address the industry’s threats to date have fallen short by far. The resource sector has become a leading presence at the various Earth Summits, which historically emerged to address the threats such industries posed to the environment. In essence, the target of development critics has become the architect of development policy. Current trends indicate that their role in this capacity is becoming more entrenched and
more powerful, with the emerging emphasis in development practices such as public–private partnerships.

In addition, a proliferation of voluntary regulations has allowed the sector to promote itself as the solution to global challenges such as poverty and environmental degradation. It has embraced voluntary global norms, promulgated by the UN, as the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UN 2008) and the Ten Principles of the Global Compact’s (UN n.d.) framework for business. But measures promoted by national governments, both in home and host states, and by international institutions such as the UN, the World Bank, and the IMF, are voluntary in nature, favour industry players, lack enforcement mechanisms, and seem more designed as public relations exercises.

Giving support to women’s movements and to women’s grassroots activism in the societies affected most directly by mining is a key strategy that needs to accompany other important work with mining companies, governments, and international funders. Analysing this complex network as it relates to protecting gender rights in the extractive sector is not within the scope of this paper, but it is evident that a co-ordinated multi-level approach is necessary to address this growing development challenge.

Notes

1. Aside from Fenix, the other mine sites in resistance are Cerro Blanco, Escobal, Marlin, and El Tambor.
2. The company was then called the International Nickel Company and underwent a name change to INCO in 1976.
3. As mining and other development entered the region and land values rose, large landlords, given land title by the government, pushed peasants off the land. One peasant protest in the town of Panzós (near El Estor) was met with military gunfire and hundreds were killed, including women and children.
4. INCO sold the mine to Canadian Skye Resources, at which time the mine became known as the Fenix project and operated under its new owner’s Guatemalan subsidiary, Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel (CGN). In 2008, Skye sold it to Hudbay Minerals (another Canadian owner), which in 2011 sold it to Russia’s Solway group.
5. Of the five municipalities in the Department of Izabal, El Estor is the poorest and the least populated. Its population is largely indigenous (91 per cent), and poverty and extreme poverty rates within this group are 82 per cent and 38.7 per cent respectively. Meanwhile, the department as a whole has a poverty rate of 51.71 per cent and an extreme poverty rate of 18.8 per cent. These rates represent an increase from 2002 data, and in general El Estor ranks at the bottom, or near to it, on all the socioeconomic indices of the region (SEGEPLAN 2011).

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