

On Australia's doorstep: gold, rape, and injustice

Substantial involvement of health professionals is needed to stop further entrenchment of harm and suffering

Many Australians, like others in Western countries that are home to the world's largest mining companies, benefit economically from extractive industries. We want mine operations to be socially and environmentally responsible, and we expect our governments to fairly regulate corporate activity to prevent or mitigate harm.

But some communities in Papua New Guinea bear the brunt of poorly regulated extractives projects, carried out with insufficient attention to their social impacts. When things go wrong, harms can be compounded by justice and health care systems ill equipped to respond effectively. Australian health professionals have expertise in many of the problems facing those living near PNG mines, and could have much to offer, working in partnership with local communities.

In March this year, women living near a remote PNG goldmine described to me how they had been brutally gang-raped by personnel associated with the mine. The Porgera mine — majority-owned and wholly operated by a subsidiary of Barrick Gold, a Canadian company with significant operations in Australia — generates great wealth. However, many women in the surrounding community are illiterate and poor, living in squalid conditions just a few feet from a mine that releases tailings waste into the environment. Traditional landowners have lost farming land to the mine's operations, and many scavenge the mine's waste to find gold scraps to sell for a few dollars.

These women are some of the many who have reported assaults to our team of human rights lawyers from Harvard and New York University Law Schools, as part of a 7-year project to document alleged assaults and to support victims seeking justice.¹ Some of the women said they had been raped by five or more men at a time. Many said they were badly beaten; some were forced to chew condoms used during the assaults. Many women were afraid to report their cases to police, for fear of retribution or inaction. In addition, a number of the women whose assaults had become public knowledge were stigmatised, beaten by family members or divorced by their husbands.

The harm to these women has been amplified by gross failures in justice, and poor access to psychosocial support. For many years, the company and the government did not act on reports by non-government organisations (NGOs) exposing abuse, public since at least 2006. Amid mounting pressure, the company announced investigative and preventive measures in 2010, and the assaults appear to have significantly reduced since. Barrick also announced important efforts to address pervasive sexual violence in the



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region, including a local counselling service, although few women know about or access it.^{2,3} The company also created a remedy program for victims, although it has been highly problematic thus far, for reasons including its lack of clarity around compensation offers, and offers of items such as chickens (deemed insulting by the victims of severe sexual violence). Consultations excluded meaningful input from some key stakeholders (a local NGO, long-time international observers, and the victims themselves), and the program does not address allegations of security guard violence against local men. Further, the requirement that to receive compensation, women must waive their right to sue Barrick, is problematic.⁴ The company has never disclosed how many employees it has terminated, and local police say that very few have been criminally prosecuted.

The sexual violence takes place in a complex web of other serious social, health and environmental concerns, almost all underaddressed. Significant concerns in villages around the mine include alcohol misuse, sexually transmitted diseases, a lack of potable water and crowded living conditions. Residents often express fear that they and their land are being poisoned by the mine's operations. Yet few independent scientific studies have been conducted, and the mine's actual environmental impacts are largely unknown by residents. Locals' concerns stem largely from the tailings and waste dumps, close to their homes. The community now perceives the impact of the mine to be so negative that they express a near-universal desire to be resettled far away.⁵

In Porgera many local residents (including children) also handle mercury to extract gold from rock collected from the mine site. They have few other economic opportunities and little education about mitigating their risk of harm from mercury exposure.

Australian experts are well versed in many of these issues, and partnerships with groups in Porgera could be invaluable. Multidisciplinary assessments and culturally appropriate programs are needed to address and prevent further entrenchment of harm.

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