Towards Building Feminist Economies of Life

Donna Andrews

Living in Crisis

This anthropocene[1] era with its accompanying avarice has significantly contributed to the destruction of the ecological integrity of our planet. Mainstream neoliberal economics valorises economic growth and fosters the super exploitation of minerals, metals and nature by transnational corporations. Its associated policies severely undermine social and economic protection, with dire ramifications in many countries.

Proponents of mining-for-development constantly evoke and legitimise Hardin's tragedy of the commons – namely, that communal ownership of the commons leads to environmental degradation – despite evidence to the contrary and the obvious finite limits of nature. The gains, argued by advocates of new forms of extractivism, privatisation and enclosures, remain elusive. The enclave logic of extractivism is prone to volatility and capital flight and is heavily reliant on external finance (Acosta, 2013). Therefore, states often give transnational corporations (TNCs) exclusive rights and control over non-renewables in order to lure and retain foreign direct investment (FDI). This control distorts the allocation of resources, fosters corruption and state collusion, heightens violence and militarisation, criminalises anti-mining activism, and dislocates communities (Thematic Social Forum on Mining and Extractivist Economy, 2018).

This extractivism occurs in the midst of multiple converging crises. *Deep economic inequalities* are evident from rampant hunger and food inflation, the ever-growing wealth gap, and the feminisation of migrancy, labour and poverty. *Social oppression* can be seen in the disproportional violence against women, blatant misogynist aggression and sexism, gross human rights violations, rampant xenophobia and racism, horrendous homophobia and vicious attacks against queer bodies. *Ecological destruction* is visible in rising carbon emissions, shrinking biodiversity and outright ecological degradation, the destruction of water bodies and the attack on ocean life.

Our Feminist Challenges

As feminists, the challenges we confront are multipronged since the neoliberal extractivist model exercises control through various sectors, institutions and policies. Confronting extractivism requires feminist alternatives on all fronts – trade, finance, budgeting, law, agriculture and technology at international, regional, national, local and household levels. Thus we try to contain the expansion of the social reproductive burden foisted on women and the new enclosures of our commons. We build alliances and solidarity as we strive to put forward feminist alternatives in these sectors. Yet, faced with so many areas, we tend to specialise, identifying strategic entry points but risking inferences to hierarchies of demands, struggles and issues. The tactics we employ, often with insufficient cognisance of our positionality, seek to marshal the "masses", reinforcing masculine forms of organising and resistance, and making us susceptible to the binaries and divisions that we resist.

One of the starkest impacts of patriarchy in the extractive industry has been the pervasiveness of violence, gender-based violence and sexual favours women have to exchange for work and pay (WoMin, 2013; Benya, 2015). Our task is to expose this and demand protection and policies that strongly assert non-tolerance of sexism and misogyny. Another impact is the extensive abuse, evictions, subordination and violence enacted against women working on farms and through the piecemeal nature of their work (Andrews, 2018). Our demands are for equal pay and the rejection of labour brokers. On the continent, the lack of security of tenure which women have on the land as small-scale and subsistence farmers is critical, as is, for instance, the lack of secure access with regard to fishing quotas, forest harvesting or waste materials. Feminists illuminate these challenges and demand security of tenure, equal access and greater support for women.

Feminist are hard at work to aid the defence against attacks on forests and lands, seeds, water bodies and oceans. Their biodiversity and ecosystems give women living in these communities their autonomy, livelihoods, source of food and medicine, identity and belonging. The defence occurs on numerous fronts and our challenge is that we often do not place equal value on its various aspects. Energy is disproportionately directed at major events and conferences, often donor driven. Some reforms are essential even though they in no way

address structural issues. For example, women in mine-affected areas demand better corporate social responsibility, compensation, access to finance records and disclosure of revenue, an end to tax shifting, environmental legislation that improves their health, equal distribution of water and electricity, decent housing and infrastructure. Women affected by the environmental pollution, loss of land and food production, and high levels of HIV infections in coal mining areas, demand a stop to all coal mining and effective social labour plans and accountability (MAC: Mines and Communities, 2016; Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance, 2019; Hallowes and Munnik, 2016, 2017).

Negotiating a "Necessary Evil"

Radical feminist political economists have long pointed out that the extractivist model of development externalises social and ecological costs onto women. The bodies of colonised women, particularly those in rural areas, mining townships and mine-affected slums, disproportionately carry the socio-economic and ecological burden of injustice of this extractivist neoliberal model. Women's struggle for survival has brought into sharp focus how state, family and market mechanisms are deployed by patriarchal capitalism to entrench the subsidisation of social reproductive unpaid labour. This free and invisible work is the bedrock of society, and with the constant withering away of social protection and social services, the heavy lifting women do is manifold. The extractivist model is highly subsidised through women's unpaid social reproduction work and cheap labour which is often invisibilised and absorbed by the periphery.

Yet the social and ecological costs of extractivism are seen by many as a necessary evil—the price for development, redress, modernity, advancement and progress. Redistributive arguments and demands premised on socio-economic justice call for making "mining wealth serve the people". This call does not recognise the enormous accompanying ecological, social and health hazards carried mostly by women in mine-affected communities (Andrews, 2017). Nor does it recognise that women ought then to be the primary beneficiaries in the process of extraction. Women who suggest an end to coal mining, fracking or the building of mega dams face a battery of challenges by non-governmental agencies and organisations who insinuate that they, along with the community, solidarity organisations, activists and protagonists, are being unreasonable and

are standing in the way of improving living conditions, employment and the plight of the poor. Women opposing extractivist activities are often confronted by state machinery and corporations, and met with violence.

Often too, women who resist attacks on their lands, forests and water bodies, and oppose prospecting by mining companies are seen as "fierce" and their struggle, symbolic. When they move their resistance beyond protests into policy spaces, demanding the Right to Consent and Right to Say No (The WoMin Collective, 2017), progressive policy activists frame their arguments unfairly, as if these were simplistic "back to nature" discourses. Rather than enabling genuine engagement, those "in the know" misinterpret these women.

Many groups face the perils of negotiating mining-for-development. Progressives agree that without serious regulation and protectionism, the promises of FDI, jobs and "sustainable development" are elusive. While radical feminist political economists illuminate the disastrous impact on women, unionists and many socio-economic justice groups support industrialisation. For them, these are core sectors of employment which could improve wages and living conditions, and they are defending the neoliberal onslaught on jobs and wages.

We must ask ourselves: can extractivism or neo-extractivism ever occur without acts of violence and alienation? Can it render decent wages and work that is not harmful to health and potentially deadly? Can profits be derived without ecological destruction, alienation and exploitation of waged labour or unpaid social reproduction?

Protecting our Only Home

The extent and the severity of the ecological crisis and the imminent dangers that it presents compel one to reassess whether striving for a just and equitable world is compatible with endorsing the necessary evils of extractivism. More so, the current nexus of crises begs one to ask: who benefits from the glut of consumer goods and bears the cost of over production and consumption? Vandana Shiva (2013: 3) situates the "war against the earth" by putting forward that it "has its roots in an economy which fails to respect ecological and ethical limits—limits to inequality, to injustice, to greed and to economic concentration".

This perspective obliges one to seek alternative relationships with the earth in the face of such ecological and social destruction. How we re-conceive of our relationships with each other is a fundamental aspect of this. Relations of

exploitation and alienation cannot be altered without simultaneously changing our relationship to nature and each other. This understanding has to be grounded in the acceptance that nature is finite and is the only home we have—a war against earth is a war against ourselves. Women who are inextricably linked and care daily for our home teach us that this task is continual and cannot be outsourced or commodified—it is critical to our and future generations. This task rests on a diverse and rich knowledge system that is freely shared from generation to generation. Women's defence against the war on earth demonstrates an alternative paradigm which prioritises the care and protection of the source, and an appreciation for the lessons from the ecosystem and a deep listening to its wisdom.

Acts of resisting and rejecting the dominant way of living and the exploitation of women, people and nature transpire in many ways—the protection of our home requires both small and large acts. It must be recognised that women ensure the health of the society (Andrews *et al.*, 2018) and that this work must be shared equally.

Possibilities for Economies of Life

Key to resisting the extractivist system (Fakier and Cock, 2018) is to create economies that are life affirming. Deploying a new language and values for how we wish to live is essential (Princen, 2005; Gibson-Graham, 2006). These include alternatives that embody the logic of sufficiency rather than efficiency (Princen 2005, 2010; Alexander, 2010; Mellor, 2019). Adopting key principles such as intermittency, protecting the source, and sufficiency espouse alternatives and new imaginaries for being and living in the world. Approaches which place value on transforming self, community and the world at large, offer rich and affirming meaning-making processes. These assist concretely in developing alternatives that are materially specific but also collectively powerful (Gibson-Graham, 2006). This also requires us to closely examine the mechanisms of the economy, in particular its social and political dimensions, and to identify the alternative economies that run parallel to it (Federici, 2012). We need to ensure that these alternatives are not subsumed into the dominant commodified market form and reject the mantra of "there is no alternative".

Feminists offer localisation and solidarity economies at local and regional levels that are mutually reinforcing and equitable to enable self-provisioning. These alternatives are proposed to ensure national self-sufficiency (Dar es Salaam Declaration, 1989) and sovereignty. The subsistence economy has put forward that we produce only what we need, that we utilise our resources mindfully and ensure we work sparingly and within the finite limits so as to engender regenerative practices (Mies and Shiva, 2014). This economy seeks to "subordinate" the role that the market plays, and specifically the "atomized, self-centred individuality of the market economy" (Mies and Shiva, 2014: 319). Importantly, this alternative economy proposes that new relationships are built upon "respect, co-operation and reciprocity" and based upon the "recognition that humans are part of nature" (*ibid.*). These new relationships ought to be established between women and men, and must be premised on non-exploitative and non-oppressive relations.

Many ecofeminists have suggested that "control over nature" as the dominant perspective be replaced by a relationship which is "in harmony with nature" (Merchant, 2003). Anna Tsing (2015: vii), however, reminds us that "[t]he time has come for new ways of telling stories beyond civilisational first principles. Without Man and Nature ..." and then asks us "[w]hat do you do when your world starts to fall apart?" This question confronts us as feminists. We are challenged to deploy the "art of noticing" to see what emerges from the ruins. In doing so, we are able to recognise the power of the "salvaged" as well as "gift economies". Tsing (2015: 133) argues that we are multispecies beings, deeply interconnected and entangled, yet disconnected and alienated, hence "allow[ing] the making of capitalist assets".

Our feminist struggles guide us to defend and protect our commons, bodies and ideas, and to resist the evaluatory processes inherent in mainstream economics and positivist social science views of success. The latter include demands that we concretely show the alternatives—how they can be modelled and operationalised as well as their scalability. These types of questions are red herrings and bludgeon us into paralysis. We reject a one-size-fits-all approach and the machismo of the blueprint. Our work strives to continually bring to the fore the social construction of ideas and assumptions through historical material processes. It is to unearth the hidden and taken-for-granted work, the suppression and exploitation taking

place. This work simultaneously acknowledges the subversive roles and ever more complex identities women inhabit. It recognises how women negotiate power and perform certain roles. We do this work to make visible the machinery of alternatives and possibilities that women enact every day, despite the patriarchal capitalist system.

Endnote

1. The idea that the earth is embarking upon a new geological era in which human beings are, for the first time, having a significant impact on the planet's geology and ecosystem.

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