

# **'WOMEN ANTI-MINING ACTIVISTS' NARRATIVES OF EVERYDAY RESISTANCE IN THE ANDES: STAYING PUT AND CARRYING ON IN PERU AND ECUADOR'**

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Dr Katy Jenkins, Northumbria University

# Anti-Mining Activism in the Andes

- Response to mining boom in Latin America from 1990s onwards
- Large scale, open pit mining
  - ▣ Vast tracts of land
  - ▣ Massive water demand
  - ▣ Use of toxic substances such as arsenic and mercury in mining process
- Widespread and vociferous opposition and protest in both Ecuador and Peru
  - ▣ Demonstrations and mobilisation at a community level
  - ▣ Propaganda campaigns by mining companies
- Increasingly violent repression and criminalisation of protestors
- Significant literature exploring processes of contestation around mining in the Andes (e.g. Bebbington et al 2008; Bebbington 2012; Muradian et al. 2003; Haarstad & Fløysand 2007)
  - ▣ Mostly focused on macro level issues around negotiation of territory and use of natural resources, and governance processes.

# Gender, Mining & Activism

- Gendered processes and experiences of extractivism have not been extensively researched, especially in Latin America
- Though some notable exceptions – Ulloa; Grieco; Macleod
- Women are often invisible in accounts of activism
- This research therefore aims to contribute new theoretical and empirical material, in order to generate a more nuanced perspective on anti-mining activism, foregrounding women's experiences within the movement.

# Case Study

- Two case study locations – Ecuador & Peru
  - ▣ Community of Huancabamba in N. Peru
  - ▣ Communities around Cuenca in S. Ecuador
- Worked with a small NGO based in London & Latin America (Latin American Mining Monitoring Programme) & grassroots organisations
- In-depth interviews with 26 women activists
  - ▣ Predominantly rural women, aged between 24 and 70 years old
  - ▣ Involved in anti-mining activism for up to 10 years
    - Demonstrations, petitions, educational workshops, community meetings, radio interviews... even Facebook!


# Everyday Activism

“Though resistance is characteristically understood to be expressed through the politics of protest, demonstration, public statement or declaration, then, the more mundane gestures of everyday life reveal significant sites of political struggle.” (Amoore 2005: 7)

- Contribute to more nuanced understandings of activisms and activist identities (Chatterton & Pickerill 2010; Maxey 1999; Baillie Smith & Jenkins 2012)
- Make visible the activism of a largely unrecognised group of women
- Foreground the interweaving of gendered practices and everyday activism
- Intersects with Ulloa’s discussions of ‘territorial feminisms’, and the intersections of the body, territory and nature.
  
- Focus on 3 key aspects today:
  - Everyday confrontations
  - Incorporating the extraordinary
  - Staying put and carrying on

## Everyday confrontation & ‘small’ acts of resistance

- Divided communities and isolated clusters of anti-mining activists
- Frequent low-level confrontations *within* the women’s communities
- “prosaic but constant struggle” (Scott 1986: 6) with “rarely any dramatic confrontation, any moment that is particularly newsworthy” (Scott 1986: 8)



**Florita (Ecuador):** They call us liars, they say that we are stupid poor people, that we don't know anything (...) They humiliate us, in particular the women humiliate us most of all, it's sometimes like that in the countryside, (...) We women are humiliated, they do not want us to speak at all, they say that we don't know what we are talking about, that we talk rubbish, that we are ignorant.

**Cristina (Peru):** It's complicated, very difficult for people. Standing up to this has divided us, it has made us fight with each other. Before we worked together nicely in the community, very organised, the people were united, but now there is disunity. It's a terrible thing because now people just want to be paid, everything is about getting paid.

- Determined & vociferous refusal of ‘gifts’ aimed at buying off the villagers
- Apparently ‘small’ acts of resistance – Cheru’s “army of termites eating away at the wooden structure of a house inch by inch” (Cheru 2005: 74)

**Esmeralda (Ecuador):** They trick us by giving us so called gifts, but I have learnt not to take those gifts so that my conscience remains clear. By accepting gifts I would be selling my conscience. I can survive without anything from anyone, working the land, growing my corn, my beans, all the products that I have, in order to survive, I don’t need gifts from anyone.

**Luisa (Peru):** For example, I have raised seven children with my husband, working in agriculture, weaving, I have sent them to school, they are still young, I haven’t sold my conscience for 20 or 50 soles. And this is what is worrying now, because most people don’t have any money, they sell themselves for 50 soles and sign up so that the mine will provide for them.



# Making the extraordinary everyday

- Anti-mining activist women have integrated very unusual & challenging circumstances into their daily lives:

**Nuria (Ecuador):** “And here we have cases of women comrades who are elderly, they are grandmothers, being convicted of terrorism!”

- Women narrate examples of struggles with the police, arrest, torture and imprisonment – hardly quotidian for rural Andean women
- Experiences of violence, harassment & death threats have become commonplace

**Eva (Peru):** In 2006 my personal life changed greatly, I began to be followed, threatened, it is a rather difficult life, but I think that they are personal decisions that I feel very happy with, it is something I believe in and I feel good doing it, even though I know that it is very risky because it also involves my family who always have to be cautious and worried, one cannot live a calm life.


- Force of circumstance has meant the women have had to teach themselves how to grapple with complex technical information, and deal with legal challenges and documentation
- Legal wranglings, as well as interactions with officials, police, human rights organisations etc, have all become part of everyday life

**Nuria (Ecuador):** And there have been difficult years, for example in 2009 there was a strong mobilization against the mining project and there were some serious situations, various comrades were charged with terrorism, sabotage. (...) We had to confront everything that year, and for us it was very new: judgements, legal processes... and with serious charges... it was quite a difficult year. But it was difficult because it was like a permanent worry, we didn't know what might happen, but then later we learnt a lot about judgements, about penal issues, all of that. Because it forced us to be there, get our heads around it, study all the proceedings, talk to the lawyers.

- These quite unusual experiences of activism structure the women's realities and everyday lives – their activism is not separate from more commonplace aspects of subsistence and family life

# Staying put and carrying on

- Less self-evidently 'activist' practices and discourses should also be recognised as making an important contribution to long term strategies of resistance.
- Maintaining their rural way of life as a way of demonstrating their resistance to the notions of 'change' and 'progress' being imposed upon them
- The rhythms of their everyday life rooted in a particular place actually constitute part of the women's activism
- Women draw strongly on motifs around working the land and continuing their rural way of life, as another way of demonstrating their ongoing opposition to the mining companies



**Sandra (Ecuador):** I think that people shouldn't sell their land and they shouldn't pay attention to what the authorities say, but rather they should stay there on their scrubland, and fight and say 'this is our property', and you are not going to make us leave, we have lived here with our animals and where are we going to go? And they should stay firm and fight instead of selling up and leaving so that the miners can come and do what they like and contaminate the environment.

**Esmeralda (Ecuador):** I can survive without anything from anyone, working the land, growing my corn, my beans, all the products that I have, in order to survive, I don't need gifts from anyone. But if the mine arrives, there won't be any more crops, there won't be livestock, we will have nothing.

# Concluding thoughts

- A mostly unspectacular but “constant struggle” (Scott 1986: 6)
- Blurring the boundaries around what constitutes ‘activism’
- Emphasising the importance of recognising small acts that are not necessarily explicitly characterised by the individuals themselves as ‘activism’ but which nevertheless make a significant and long term contribution to resistance and struggle (Amoore 2005).

**Gabriela (Peru):** ‘It is a battle that is part of our life, because if the mine arrives we will not be able to survive’

**Berta (Ecuador):** ‘We will carry on being the stone in their shoe, annoying them.’