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Feminist alternatives to predatory extractivism: Contributions and experiences from Latin America

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Feminist alternatives to current development models dependent on the predatory relationship between societies and the environment are already in the making. They assume that it is important to build another economy and another way of doing politics in order to subvert the system in which we currently live. Change the world and change women's lives in the same movement: the struggle for women's autonomy and emancipation is attached to the struggle against patriarchal capitalism and racism, as well as against old and new forms of colonization, all of which organize predatory extractivism¹.

Capitalism depends on the control over women's bodies, sexualities and territories to establish and perpetuate itself. There is a deep connection between the various oppressive forces that affect women's lives: patriarchy, (neo) colonialism and racism work together with capitalism to guarantee the accumulation of capital. In this process, the exploitation and commodification of women's paid and unpaid work, women's bodies and women's territories are necessary conditions. Since the goal of capitalist economy is to accumulate capital and to concentrate it in the hands of a few privileged subjects, the

whole socio-economic structure will be organized to guarantee that process. This happens at the expense of nature and of most people's lives.

In the context of capital accumulation, the work of social reproduction, of sustaining life and of care are delegated to the invisible economic spheres. These spheres are, in their turn, feminized and placed in the private, in the domestic. Capitalism depends on maintaining women's

¹ In this work, the term predatory extractivism refers to the large-scale processes of appropriation of nature, mainly by transnational companies, through the extraction of raw materials - such as oil, minerals, water, fish, industrial agriculture, amongst others - as well as the infra-structure mobilized to make this extraction possible.



work as unvalued – both socially and economically – and invisible, as if it was not part of its productive process. However, since the 1970s, feminist movements and feminist economists have been affirming that without the reproductive, invisible work of women, capitalism would not be able to sustain itself. In this sense, in the process of building our struggles and resistances, we identify a very important structural and unsolvable conflict of capitalism: the conflict between the logics of accumulation of capital, on one hand, and the logics of the sustainability of life, on the other. In other words, there is a conflict between Capital and Life.

From our perspective, predatory extractivism is in the broader framework of this unsolvable conflict, what becomes visible when we look at the impacts caused by the extractive industries' transnational companies on the territories in which they operate. For instance, the privatization and pollution of land, water and other natural goods to assure predatory production processes occur at the expense of the subsistence activities that are integrated to nature's cycles while at the same ensuring people's fulfilment of their needs. In such context, what we see is the disruption of social reproduction. It is no longer possible to sustain life, because the changes wrought by the transnational companies organize the social and economic structure to guarantee their profits. Another common feature is the increase of militarization and multiple forms of violence to guarantee control of the territory and of the people who live there.

In such contexts, women are disproportionately affected. Due to the sexual division of labour, women are, historically, responsible for guaranteeing social reproduction. Their amount of care work grows due to sickness induced by the companies' pollution. The loss of livelihoods increases the dependency on and the reach of capitalist market relations, which implies deepening the division between production and reproduction. The loss of access to land reduces women's autonomy and limits their capacity to ensure their communities' food sovereignty. These few examples belong to a much longer list of impacts that illustrate what we frame as the incompatibility of a life that is worth living and the productive process centred on capital accumulation as practiced by extractivist companies.

Capitalist market actors and their fake alternatives

Our experiences teach us that capitalism is not an abstract and immaterial entity. It is advanced and promoted by concrete actors, such as international organizations as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) – which are always trying to figure out ways to impose capitalist market relations and policies to our peoples; transnational companies (TNCs), which invade our territories and privatize our natural goods without our consent and despite our opposition; and some governments, which tend to rely on the notion that nature is an inexhaustible source of opportunities to achieve a certain type of 'development'. All these actors impose themselves on women's lives and territories, while at the same time denying our condition as political subjects and as subjects of rights.

In the context of predatory extractivism, these actors can sometimes propose measures to mask the problems they created. They present them as 'alternatives'; instead, they are just business as usual. Some examples of fake alternatives are those related to the Green Economy and to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Green Economy initiatives are based on turning nature conservation into a source of profit. They contribute to the commodification of nature and facilitate the control of financial corporations over nature (SOF, 2018). The REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) and TEEB (The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity) initiatives, which are already happening all over Latin America, in Africa and Asia, are two examples of these processes. REDD initiatives ignore the role of indigenous, peasant and other groups' knowledge systems in the protection of nature and in developing a sustainable relationship with it, while frequently promoting the criminalization of some traditional farming practices. REDD may also aggravate land conflicts and complicate land titling processes as its contracts may last up to 99 years. Thus, causing divides between communities by leadership co-optation through fake promises of employment and income generation opportunities.





TEEB initiatives create a market for preservation by promoting the idea that nature provides services that have a price, which is calculated by comparing the costs of preserving with the costs of exploiting a given environment. Like REDD initiatives, TEEB consists of fake solutions to problems created by capitalist market institutions and relations. Considering that most areas under the reach of these two initiatives are in the Global South and under the sustainable management of indigenous, tribal as well as traditional peoples and communities, REDD and TEEB are also perceived as strategies to interfere in our countries' sovereignty by stimulating the expansion of capital's frontier to these territories and by creating new instances of capital accumulation. This ultimately forces the peoples of the Global South into problems that were not created by them, while simultaneously allowing transnational companies and countries from the Global North to continue their harmful practices.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) tends to follow an equally problematic logic of proposing fake solutions to the problems. CSR measures are very common in the Global South, where most of the TNC-led resource extraction happen. They are usually promoted as a contribution of TNCs to boost local development in the communities where they explore natural resources and people. They are often presented as proof that TNCs can also be beneficial to the locales where they operate. Nevertheless, once again it consists of business as usual but this time benevolently made up. CSR reveals itself to be a corporate strategy to divide and pacify communities with promises - hardly ever accomplished - that can vary from building schools and hospitals to providing training aimed at inserting local people in the labour market. Corporations of the extractive industries play with the absence of public services and manipulate people's needs and dreams with promises that are never fulfilled while they continue to degrade the environment and destroy livelihoods on behalf of their profits.

Green economy and CSR initiatives are emblematic of the failure to truly address alternatives to predatory extractivism inside the political and economic paradigm advanced by the neoliberal order.,. They contribute to

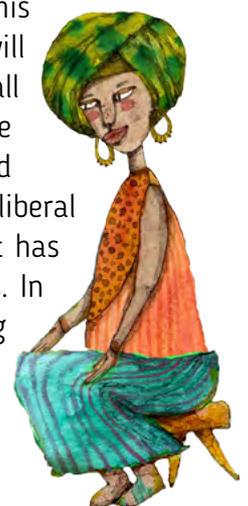
aggravate the conflict between Capital and Life. From our territories, we affirm that Green Economy and CSR are not alternatives!

Women's self-organization and collective struggles

Our movement's conception of alternatives comes hand-in-hand with the absolute need to promote feminist subversion of the economy and of mainstream politics. We need concepts and practices of the economic and the political, that are centred in the possibility of sustaining lives worth living. For this reason, we reaffirm that it is important to change the world and change women's lives in the same permanent movement.

One key element of our understanding of alternatives is the self-organization of women. This means the union of women in women-only groups or in spaces created specifically for women in mixed movements (that is, movements of both women and men, such as trade unions and cooperatives). The principle and practice of self-organization is fundamental, because it is where women meet to discuss problems, debate, participate in training activities and identify similarities and differences in our lived experiences. It is a space of exchange, where our diversity is brought together to establish political plans for change. For us, self-organization is the collective construction of women as political subjects, both in rural and urban areas (SOF, 2018).

Our movement's conception and practice of alternatives is based on the permanent and collective nature of our struggles. For this reason, we claim that women will be on the march until we are all free! Additionally, we do not see the feminist struggle as detached from the struggle against the neoliberal order and conservative revival that has spread globally in the recent years. In Latin America, we are undergoing circumstances of undemocratic instabilities and setbacks from coups, new structural adjustments and the destruction of social





policy. We believe that the only way to respond to these challenges is through alliances, coalitions and networks with other progressive social movements to build spaces of political articulation to collectively construct the political, economic and social project of the world we want.

Feminist subversion of the economy

The concrete experiences of alternative building that we advance in our territories are inscribed in the broader framework of our political principles. As mentioned above, our notion and practice of alternatives has self-organization of women and collective processes as political pillars. To that, we must add feminist economy. Our practice of alternatives is based on the notion that the dominant conception of the economy considers only a small part of the activities necessary to produce life and keep society going. Usually, they are related to the market and involve wage labour, buying and selling of products, and the logic of profit. In practice, this means that a series of non-monetized, as well as non-profit oriented activities, work and relations are excluded from the mainstream conception of the economy, even though the economy depends on them to function. It is not by chance that women are responsible for executing most such activities, whether in the domestic sphere or community spaces (SOF, 2018).

In this sense, we need to go beyond the mainstream concept of the economy to do things differently and challenge the capitalist rationale, based on profit maximization. This involves considering and practicing principles such as solidarity, equality and reciprocity in collective and democratic processes. Such processes should re-establish economic circulation and the social function of markets and money, always aimed at placing the economy at the service of guaranteeing a life with dignity for all, as opposed to the accumulation of capital for a few.



Agroecology and Solidarity Economy: Concrete feminist alternatives to predatory extractivism

As opposed to the predatory way TNCs organize production and reproduction in the context of resource extraction, implementing new economic and political practices require different labour organization. This implies acknowledging that production, reproduction and labour are much more entangled than capitalism make us believe. In this sense, the processes of production, reproduction and labour should be organized to consider 'the multiple interdependencies and interrelationships between the ecological, the economic, the social and the human', prioritising the living conditions of people as fundamental objective (Bengoa, 2017 p. 71).

Our alternatives are organized considering these interdependencies. They place traditional, ancestral knowledge and practices that empower us as central, while also promoting the collective construction of knowledge through dialogue and exchanges. Far from being ready and self-evident, building alternatives is a process... in the making!

Agroecology and Solidarity Economy are two important ways we put into practice the process of constructing alternatives. Agroecology is the political choice of applying ecological principles to design and manage sustainable agroecosystems. By understanding that nature is cyclical and has limits, we seek agriculture practices that are integrated with nature's cycles, while ensuring people's access to healthy food.

In Vale do Ribeira, in the Southeast region of Brazil, for instance, we have been participating in the process of collective construction of knowledge with *quilombola*² women to produce agroecological food. The region is highly marked by the strong presence of agribusiness, which is in constant tension with the traditional rural communities, such as indigenous, *quilombolas* and *caiçaras*, and their ways of living. In such context, the practice of popular education in association with ancestral knowledge to transform agricultural practices

² According to the Brazilian Anthropology Association, the term *quilombola* refers to 'every rural black community that groups descendants of slaves, living in a subsistence culture and where cultural manifestations have strong ties with the past'.



is not simply a change in the way food is produced but a political change that has consequences in the way women relate with their families, with their autonomy and with their territories. It is also an important step into valorising women's knowledges and practices. (SOF, 2018)

Solidarity Economy consists of organising economic relations in a counter-hegemonic way. One of its pillars is self-management, which implies the collective ownership of the production means; collective awareness of the importance of people's work to decide how best to execute it; collective definition of functioning standards and agreements; and the transparent and democratic participation of all people involved in the decisions. The range of solidarity economy initiatives varies. They may be related to production, like family farmers cooperatives; to services, such as community kitchens; to financing, for example credit cooperatives and solidarity currencies; and to trade in the form of solidarity economy fairs (SOF, 2018). Nevertheless, such initiatives are not immune to reproducing injustices. Solidarity economy does not automatically end gender, race and class inequalities. This requires the collective commitment of all people engaged in the initiatives with overcoming such injustices, amongst them the sexual division of labour and other limitations to women's autonomy. In this regard, it is important to commit with values of feminist management, including a division of labour that recognizes equally all functions and promotes task rotation instead of specialization in certain functions.

In Vale do Ribeira region, the women farmers and quilombolas from Barra do Turvo, together with the World March of Women and with *Sempreviva Organização Feminista* (SOF), created solidarity markets to promote direct sales for their products. The sales are harmonized to production for self-consumption, since the goal is not to prioritize commercialization of one's production to the point where the women sell everything they produce and must buy non-agroecological food to eat. In the commercialization process, women producers organize the dynamics of sales and control economic resources, which consist of important steps towards the construction of their autonomy. Similar

experiences of women creating alternative economic circuits based in values such as solidarity exist in other territories. Between 2009 and 2013, there were at least 972 production groups composed by women all over Brazil (Butto, Dantas, Hora, Nobre, & Faria, 2014).

Current challenges

Feminist alternatives to predatory extractivism are already underway in Brazil and other Latin American countries. They require another way of doing politics, by promoting women's self-organization as well as collective and democratic processes. They imply organizing production, reproduction and work differently from the ways promoted by mainstream economics, where the only socially guaranteed process is that of profit accumulation.

Nevertheless, feminist groups willing to do things differently still face many difficulties. Concerning women's economic autonomy, the challenges are related to production, sales and organisation of women. In this sense, it is essential to 'strengthen the sales strategies that articulate self-consumption, donations, exchanges, markets and consumer groups with the expansion of access to institutional market policies so that women have greater possibilities of controlling their own work' (SOF, 2016).

Another set of challenges relates to the current neoliberal and conservative revival that Latin American countries are facing. In this context, the concrete construction of alternatives is threatened by the criminalization of social movements as well as discrimination, promotion of hate speech and systematic removal of the rights of indigenous and traditional peoples and communities, including land rights. This process coincides with a new wave of capitalist frontier expansion in several territories, with an institutional, political and economic scenario that facilitates the access of TNCs to natural resources. ◉





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About the Author

Marianna Fernandes is Brazilian and activist of the World March of Women – an international feminist movement, which seeks to change the world and the life of women. As researcher she is working on issues related to the impact – especially on women’s lives – caused by predatory economic models of development and extractive industries, as well as on feminist economy and the construction of feminist alternatives. She is currently finalising her master thesis in Anthropology and Sociology of Development at the Institut De Hautes Études Internationales et du Développement, in Geneva, Switzerland. To contact her, please write to mariannafsb@gmail.com

The Feminist Dialogue Series

The Idea of the Feminist Dialogue Series was born during an International Workshop on Political Feminism in Africa organized by the Mozambican Feminist Platform Forum Mulher and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in October 2016 in Maputo. The gathering brought together over 50 feminist activists and scholars from all over the continent. Inspired by the stimulating discussions and interventions at the workshop, this series is intended as a platform to share important feminist reflections. In this way the series wants to contribute to the development and spreading of African feminist knowledge to transform political and economic conditions on the continent towards social and gender justice.

The Feminist Dialogue Series proudly counts on the artistic contribution of Ruth Bañón (art header) and the design of Sebastião Montalvão (Lateral Comunicações).

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