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# **Unearthing Women's Anti-Mining Activism in the Andes: Pachamama and the 'Mad Old Women'**

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## **Abstract**

Women play an important role in social activism challenging the expansion of extractive industries across Latin America. In arguing that this involvement has been largely unrecognised, this paper explores Andean Peruvian and Ecuadorian women's accounts of their activism and the particular gendered narratives that the women deploy in explaining and legitimising this activism. These discussions contribute to understanding the patterning of grassroots activism and making visible the gendered micro-politics of resistance and struggle around natural resource use, as well as to understanding the gendered and strategic ways in which women contest dominant discourses of development.

**Keywords – Mining, Activism, Women, Extractive Industries, Latin America, Andes**

## **Introduction**

This paper provides a critical analysis of Andean Peruvian and Ecuadorian women's accounts of activism and the gendered narratives they deploy in contesting mining development in their communities, aiming to make visible women's experiences of involvement in anti-mining activism. As well as expanding understandings of anti-mining activism, the paper contributes rich empirical detail to scholarship conceptualising everyday experiences of activism and activists across the global North and South and making audible the voices and perspectives of marginalised development actors (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, Maxey, 1999, Baillie Smith and Jenkins, 2011).

The most recent mining 'boom' to hit Latin America has been gathering momentum since the mid-1990s, with both an intensification and geographical expansion of extractive activities (Bebbington, 2009). Transnational mining corporations from across the world have been at the forefront of this

expansion, involving the concessioning of vast tracts of land across the region. Mining, including for copper, silver, gold, zinc and lead, has become the principal economic activity in many Latin American economies, providing a significant proportion of Foreign Direct Investment and export income; for the purposes of this paper, my discussion focuses on Peru and Ecuador. In Peru, in 2012, the mining sector accounted for 62% of exports and 75% of all investment (EITI, 2014), with the country being the world's biggest producer of silver and second biggest producer of zinc and copper, as well as an important producer of tin, gold, lead and molybdenum (Arellano-Yanguas, 2011). In Ecuador, over 2.8 million hectares of land were concessioned to foreign mining companies by 2007 (Ecuadorian Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights et al., 2010) and, in 2014, although active large scale extraction has not yet begun, the Ecuadorian government continues to push hard to facilitate the start of mining exploitation, with the first major contract signed in March 2012 (El Telegrafo, 2012), and several others under negotiation, amid widespread protest.

However, even prior to active extraction beginning, mining companies in Ecuador have been associated with human rights abuses (Ecuadorian Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights et al., 2010) and, as Bebbington (2012a) observes, "...the rise of extractive industry visits tremendous change and dislocation on territories and countries within which it occurs [...] [and is associated with] unprecedented transformations of landscape, labour and social relations" (Bebbington, 2012a: 5). This mining 'boom' has thus been accompanied by a corresponding increase in protest and contestation of extractive activities, as local communities challenge the legitimacy, legality and morality of these significant 'development' interventions and confront their myriad impacts on communities, livelihoods and cultures. This paper argues for the importance of recognising women's involvement in this activism, and understanding more about how this is constituted and negotiated in particular places, especially given the increasing tendency towards the criminalisation and violent repression of protestors (Arellano-Yanguas, 2012, Ecuadorian Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights et al., 2010, Rondón, 2009).

The paper begins by outlining the two contexts that frame this research, going on to consider the broader literature around anti-mining activism, and the gendered impacts of mining, as well as research around women and mining more generally, arguing that women's anti-mining resistance has so far been invisible in these literatures. The main part of the paper then critically analyses women's accounts of their anti-mining activism and explores the gendered narratives that the

women deploy in making sense of this activism, in order to make visible and better understand the gendered dynamics of resistance, and the intersections of gender and nature in relation to social conflicts.

This paper draws on a small research project carried out in 2012, involving in-depth, relatively unstructured, interviews with 26 women anti-mining activists in Peru (6 activists) and Ecuador (20 activists),<sup>1</sup> working in partnership with the Latin American Mining Monitoring Programme (LAMMP), a London-based advocacy and campaigning NGO.<sup>2</sup> Interviews began with asking about women's experiences of protesting against mining, followed by a series of prompts. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour.<sup>3</sup> The research adopted a feminist approach, and aimed to foreground the women's own accounts of their experiences as grassroots activists, including how and why they became involved and the challenges they faced. In each location, the research was facilitated by working with grassroots women's activist organisations. The women involved were predominantly rural women from communities that will be directly affected by the proposed mining projects, as well as a few women from nearby urban areas. They were all Spanish speakers and did not identify as indigenous women, but rather as *campesinas* (peasants). The interviewees were aged between 20 and 70, with the majority being over 40 years old and the oldest being 70.<sup>4</sup> The predominance of older women was particularly notable, and generally reflected the age range of women involved with the organisations who participated in the research.<sup>5</sup> The women interviewed did not necessarily explicitly identify themselves as 'activists' but all participated actively in organisations directly concerned with resisting mining developments. Bobel's (2007) discussion of the activist/activism distinction is important here in terms of recognising that many people involved in activism and social protest do not adopt the label of 'activist', for many reasons. As Askins (2013) observes, "what constitutes 'activism' and 'activist' is multiple and emergent and operates through diverse sites and processes: activism/activists of various kinds are everywhere." (Askins, 2013: 528).

The interviewees were from two locations where women have been prominently involved in opposing the activities of transnational mining companies – the community of Huancabamba in the Province of Piura, Northern Peru, and several communities in and around Cuenca, in Southern Ecuador, principally Molleturo and Victoria del Portete. These sites were chosen due to LAMMP's existing contacts and ability to facilitate fieldwork in these communities.<sup>6</sup> Unlike other prominent examples of resistance to mining in the Andes (such as the cases of Yanacocha and La Oroya in Peru),

in both of these instances full scale mining exploitation has not yet begun and the communities are continuing to resist the opening of the mines.<sup>7</sup> In Peru, the project in question is Rio Blanco, a copper mining project now owned by the Chinese Zijin Mining Group Limited, though previously owned by a British Company, Monterrigo Metals (see Bebbington et al., 2007 for a detailed discussion of the historical context of this project). In September 2007, 92% of the local population voted against the Rio Blanco mining project, in an un-official and non-binding popular referendum (Bebbington et al., 2010, Hufstader, 2007). Following this referendum, the project has been further delayed, though not abandoned (Bebbington et al., 2010), and there are recent signs of some resumption of activities, with expectations that full-scale production will begin in 2015 (Low, 2012, Cooperación, 2013). In Ecuador, several potential mines will affect the area studied, the principal ones being the Rio Blanco gold and silver mine (at the time owned by International Minerals Corporation, now owned by Junefield Mineral Resources),<sup>8</sup> and a gold-silver-copper mine, owned by IAMGold at the time of the fieldwork and known as Quimsacocha, but now jointly owned by IAMGold and INV Metals and called Loma Larga.<sup>9</sup> Both of these developments have faced on-going delays and social conflict since the early 2000s, and many of these contested concessions include environmentally sensitive areas (Moore, undated).

Whilst I recognise that the Peruvian and Ecuadorian contexts are very different in terms of histories of extraction, as well as histories around social protest and mobilization, drawing together women's narratives from these two different contexts enables the paper to draw out some common discourses through which the two groups of women explain their activism. The emphasis of the paper is on making audible women's own accounts of their activism rather than on the specificities of mining conflicts in each location. Throughout the paper I have noted where analysis is particular to one or other country context.

### **Activism, Women and Mining**

A significant literature explores processes of contestation around mining in the Andes, particularly theorising social conflict around territory and rights to natural resources (Bebbington et al., 2008, Bebbington, 2012b), and processes of negotiation between the state, mining companies, regional government, NGOs and communities (Muradian et al., 2003, Moore and Velasquez, 2012). In the Andean context, Tony Bebbington's extensive work has been particularly important in shedding light on the complex scenarios of negotiation and contestation surrounding proposed and existing mining

projects across the Andes (Bebbington et al., 2008, Bebbington, 2012b, Bebbington et al., 2010). However, whilst this literature provides significant analytical insight into macro level and institutional processes of resource governance and contestation, it pays relatively little direct attention to the nature of activism or to the activists themselves who are embedded within these macro processes. This reflects Chatterton and Pickerill's (2010) assertion, in relation to literature on activism more generally, that a counterpoint is needed to macro-level theorising of activism, focusing on the everyday practices of activism and activists. Thus it is important to understand the sorts of activities in which activists engage, how these change over time, and the ways in which activists themselves explain their engagements, contributing empirical detail to a more nuanced understanding of activism.

The gendering of activism is particularly important to consider in this regard. There is increasing recognition of the multiple intersections between gender and mining (Macdonald and Rowland, 2002, Oxfam Australia, 2009), however literature examining social conflict in relation to mining in the Andes makes no specific mention of activists as gendered actors (see, for example, Taylor, 2011, Kuecker, 2007, Muradian et al., 2003, Moore and Velasquez, 2012), making women invisible in this struggle, and meaning little is known of Andean women's roles in relation to anti-mining activism. This situation is also reflected in Leach's (2007) observation that "Gender-blind perspectives on community and the poor as actors in relation to ecological and global political-economic processes seem to be more prominent than ever" (Leach, 2007: 82). Challenging this gender-blind approach is of particular relevance considering that mining has been shown not to be gender neutral, but to impact disproportionately upon women, particular poor and rural women. These impacts include threats to women's livelihoods (Robinson, 2009, Oxfam Australia, 2009); the impact of environmental degradation – especially in relation to water quality and quantity (Oxfam Australia, 2009, Earthworks and Oxfam America, 2004); increasing violence, particularly sexual violence, as well as increased prostitution, in communities affected by mining (Mines Minerals and People, 2003, Mahy, 2011); health issues related to pollution and to women's direct involvement in mining activities (Simatauw, 2009, Hinton et al., 2003); changing community power structures and economic relations (Simatauw, 2009, Perks, 2011); and human rights violations (Mines Minerals and People, 2003, Human Rights Watch, 2011). This literature deals principally with the Australasian and Asian contexts, and is dominated by an NGO and practitioner focus. With a couple of notable exceptions (Cuadros Falla, 2010, Rondón, 2009, Li, 2009, Ward and Strongman, 2011), there is little literature on the gendered impacts of mining in the context of the Andes, or in Latin America more

widely, despite the current rapid expansion of mining activities. Nevertheless, as will be examined below, Andean women's engagement in contesting new mining developments is particularly informed by their understandings of the gendered impacts of mining.

A growing literature explores other intersections between gender and mining, including examining the role of women as miners (see, for example, Lahiri-Dutt, 2012, Hinton et al., 2003, Macintyre, 2006); exploring the construction of masculinities within the mining sector (Carrington et al., 2010); and examining women's activism in support of striking miners (Spence and Stephenson, 2009), and in relation to workers' pay and conditions (often as miners' wives) (Lahiri-Dutt, 2012).<sup>10</sup> It is important to emphasise the North-South resonances here, with case studies spanning Canada, Australia, Japan and the UK, as well as global South countries including India, Indonesia and Ghana, and this is reflected in the transnational nature of practitioner networks (Macdonald and Rowland, 2002, Mines and Communities, 2008). However, despite this gendered lens now being cast upon mining activities, beyond Gier and Mercier (2006) briefly highlighting women's anti-mining activism as an important topic for future research, women's involvement in resisting mining has received very little academic attention (though see Seedhouse, 2011, Rondón, 2009, Velasquez, 2012).

This tendency for women activists to remain relatively invisible has been particularly highlighted within the sphere of feminist political ecology (see, for example, Campbell, 1996), and is also evident in accounts of grassroots movements that are not specifically mobilising around women's issues, as highlighted by Kapur (1993) in relation to the Narmada Dam movement and by Laurie (2011) in her discussions of the gendering of activism against water privatisation in Bolivia. This paper therefore also furthers these literatures around gendered access to resources, gendered knowledge about the environment, and women's roles in decision making, responding to Zanotti's (2013) call for "a finer-grained analysis of female participation in the politics of resistance" (Zanotti, 2013: 347). This is not to suggest that women have been dominant actors in the anti-mining movement but rather to emphasise the need to recognise their particular contribution in order to understand the complex gendered dynamics of anti-mining resistance and, more broadly, to understand the multiple subjectivities embedded within everyday activist practices.

## **Women's Accounts of Their Involvement in Anti-Mining Resistance**

In both Huancabamba (Peru) and the communities around Cuenca (Ecuador), women have played a sustained role in resisting the arrival of mining companies. Amongst the women I talked to, this involvement spanned up to ten years in Ecuador, and around seven years in Peru.<sup>11</sup> In both cases women had participated alongside men in resisting the arrival of extractive industries but had more recently formed women-specific groups in order to coordinate their activities and increase their visibility, as well as to combat the sexism and marginalisation they faced within the broader anti-mining movement (Velasquez, 2012). Many of the women reported that their involvement had begun through participating in popular protests organised when communities first became aware of the concessioning of their land and exploratory activities by mining companies:

***Gabriela (Peru):** we've been involved in this for many years, (...) we have been fighting ever since the gringos arrived to do exploratory studies in our community. At that time we didn't know what was good and what was bad, but later we realised that they weren't doing things that were good for us, and so we became more alert and realised that if the mine arrived our lands would be damaged and we wouldn't have anything to eat.*

As a result of this initial participation, the women subsequently became involved in a broad range of activist activities including coordinating petitions, disseminating information on the negative impacts of mining, taking part in protests, being interviewed on the radio and attending community meetings. The intensity of this activity ebbs and flows with the contours of the conflict itself, and also depending on the women's other commitments to family and subsistence activities. Through this sustained involvement, the women in each location began to coordinate small but formally constituted organisations of women engaged in anti-mining resistance and also began to establish some contacts with national level NGOs (e.g. Cooperación in Peru and the Coordinadora por la Defensa del Agua y de la Vida in Ecuador), as well as with LAMMP at an international level. In Ecuador, the women's grassroots organisation is now well established and widely known, whereas in Huancabamba, Peru, the women's organisation is much more nascent and has not yet formulated its collective approach or strategy, and involves fewer women. Nevertheless, in both cases, the existence of a formal organisation provides women activists with a much needed source of solidarity and legitimacy, in the face of a sense of increasing isolation and division within their communities;



many of those initially involved in opposing the mine have lost interest or have become convinced of the mine's potential to bring prosperity, often through the mine's concerted attempts to garner support by offering gifts and donations to community members.

Whilst women's activism is sometimes constructed as being in support of, or secondary to, men's activism, and thus involving less prominent or visible contributions, this was not the primary experience of my interviewees, whose accounts were characterised by sustained engagement as activists in their own right, for which many of them recounted suffering violence, threats and intimidation.<sup>12</sup> At its most extreme, this involved two of the women activists being kidnapped and tortured following their participation in a peaceful protest:

***Eva (Peru):** ...we took part in a peaceful march, thousands of campesinos participated, whole families were marching with their children, their wives. It was a peaceful march that was organised by the government but nevertheless it was a march where every sort of right was violated, they violated the right to protest and we were attacked, threatened, and as a result of this march around 29 of us were detained, we were submitted to torture, violence, we were stripped naked, denied our liberty and kept incommunicado and without food for three days and on the third day they let us go. Even today we still have charges against us, accusations of terrorism, damage to private property and violence against the state.*

Many women reported being involved in protests where violence was used against them, and several women had been arrested and imprisoned:

***Marlena (Ecuador):** Several comrades have been arrested during the marches. They dragged us, hit us, kicked us, pushed us to the ground. What the police did to us! They took us by the legs and pulled us, they grabbed our arms and kicked us, they threw bombs that exploded with teargas and they threw stones...(..) We have struggled against them and they have treated us badly, we have been kicked by the police, left half dead with teargas.*

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**Constancia (Ecuador):** *When we had a protest here, 500 police came, and they dragged me away and took me prisoner. They were throwing stones and the people. I was detained for two days, without food, being shouted at.*

Thus, despite their lack of visibility in accounts of anti-mining resistance in the Andes, the women's accounts position them as active participants rather than being on the periphery, or playing solely supporting roles such as provisioning of food for male protestors (though many women reported being involved in these activities too). The rest of this paper therefore explores women's own narratives explaining this engagement, arguing that women make a highly symbolic contribution to anti-mining resistance through positioning themselves as embodying rural livelihoods, continuity and the environment in opposition to the modernity and rationality of the mining sector.

### **Gendered Narratives of Mining Resistance**

As reflected in other discussions of Latin American women's involvement in activism (see, for example, Laurie, 2011, Navarro, 2001), the women activists draw heavily on quite essentialised notions of femininity in framing their involvement in anti-mining resistance. However, rather than simply reinscribing traditional gendered roles, these narratives can be understood as performing a more symbolic and strategic role. As well as serving to legitimise women's involvement in very public acts of resistance, as Laurie (2011) recognises, I argue that such narratives are important in the unique symbolic contribution they allow women to make to contesting mining developments. Below, I discuss three key inter-connected narratives used by the women in making sense of and explaining their activism – women and water; Pachamama and discourses around women and the environment; and women safeguarding livelihoods for future generations.

#### *Women and water*

The perceived impact of mining activities on water quality and quantity featured prominently in the women's narratives. The women emphasised that the proposed mining sites were high in the mountains at water sources on which their communities, and indeed the whole country, rely. Implicit in this is also a cultural understanding of these places as sacred sites in Andean cosmology (Gelles, 2010). Women often drew on anecdotal evidence from elsewhere in Latin America, gained

through activist networks, regarding the contamination of water by mining activities – in particular, the potential for cyanide, mercury and base metals to enter the water supply, as well as reports of streams drying up and water scarcity in areas where large scale mining activity had commenced. Some women also reported that even the exploratory stage of mining activity near their communities had already impacted negatively on the water supply:

**Marta (Ecuador):** *The company IMC is there already, in the mountains, high up, and down below there are communities, and already the water is half-contaminated, there is little water.*

**Interviewer:** *How do you know that it is contaminated?*

**Marta:** *Because it is dirty, when before it wasn't like this. Before there was plenty of water, but now there is not. The water has started drying up. And this is because the mine is up there in the mountains, they are exploring.*

Bennett et al (2005) highlight how rural water usage and management in Latin America is gendered, and this is reflected in the ways that, in explaining their involvement in anti-mining resistance, the women emphasised that gendered patterns of water usage in their communities meant they would be most directly affected by the expected deterioration in water quality and quantity. They highlighted this both in terms of their roles as primary agriculturalists in their households, responsible for growing crops and tending animals, as well as being responsible for daily provisioning of food and water for their families:

**Miranda (Ecuador):** *Of course, it is women [who are most affected] because we are the ones who stay at home to cultivate our land, everything. For example, the men go out to work, they don't stay at home. The woman has to see to the cooking, washing, bathing the children, everything. She has to clean the house, everything needs water. This is why we have organised ourselves...*

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**Interviewer:** *And why is it that women are involved in this struggle?*

**Luisa (Peru):** *Many women get involved in this struggle for the good of their children, for the good of their land. Because if the mine arrives, it will affect us all. Firstly, it affects the water, secondly the land, and thirdly we will get sick, death will come, and it will all be over.*

This potential impact of water pollution on the health of their families was a common concern of the women activists, with many exemplifying their concerns by citing examples from places such as Cajamarca where active extraction is already taking place. For some women, this included using first hand accounts of the impacts of mining, gleaned from visits to affected communities:

**Sofia (Ecuador):** *I travelled to Peru, two trips to Peru to see the mines, and I saw all of this and I have spoken to the people who are suffering the consequences there with illnesses, with droughts, with so many problems.*

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**Berta (Ecuador):** *We have also visited other communities. A community quite similar to Molleturo, located near to a water source, and they said that most days they don't have water, they don't have electricity, they don't have basic services. Or when they do have water it is yellow and muddy.*

Such practices reflect broader patterns of activism in the Andes and, in particular, the transnational circulation of activists and activist ideas, and the use of iconic exemplars within practices of resistance (Laurie et al., 2003). These practices provided important sources of information for women who had not themselves had the opportunity to travel, and they drew on video documentaries and testimonies from activists who had visited from elsewhere, as well as accounts from women they knew who had participated in visits. The women also highlighted the geographical spread of the impact of contaminated water supplies, which they anticipated would affect more distant urban areas as well as their own communities, as well as emphasising the fact that urban areas rely on rural areas to grow crops and produce milk for the cities. They thus framed their struggle not only in terms of the personal detriment that the mine might bring, but as a struggle for

the common good, and part of a broader discussion about the nature and direction of 'development' in their countries.

### *Pachamama/Mother Earth*

Narratives emphasising women's connections with water were also reinforced by the ways in which women talked about their broader connection with the earth. In Ecuador, the women expressed this through using the motif of Pachamama/Mother Earth to situate and legitimise their activism. Pachamama is the Andean indigenous female deity of the Earth, and a key element of the indigenous cosmovisión, strongly linked to sacred ideas attached to both land and water sources (Gelles, 2010). The notion of Pachamama has become particularly prominent in relation to Ecuador's indigenous movement and the recognition in the 2008 Constitution of the rights of nature (Radcliffe, 2012). Pachamama is usually translated as Mother Earth, and the women used the emblem of Pachamama/Mother Earth<sup>13</sup> to represent what they perceived as their natural affinity with the land, as women and mothers:

**Clara (Ecuador):** *It is women [who are involved] because just like Mother Earth, she gives life, so we are givers of life. We are mothers, sisters, grandmothers, nieces... and also because we are the ones who directly cultivate the land, with livestock and everything. So we say to ourselves, what will become of us without water? We need the water for our plants, for the animals, how will it be afterwards? This is why we are fighting. And also because we see that... without water we cannot live. Water is life and without water there is death, this is why.*

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**Lorena (Ecuador):** *...because as women we are like Mother Earth. Mother Earth gives life to us all. She is crying out for us to help her, for us to defend her.*

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**Sandra (Ecuador):** *As women, like Pachamama, like mothers, women, sisters of Pachamama, we find ourselves in the position of having to defend our environment to the bitter end, our Pachamama, who gives us wellbeing, sustenance, through her we live and cultivate the land, and we should never abandon her.*

Despite the women's lack of explicit indigenous identity, as rural peasant women Pachamama was a strong symbol for them in shaping their world view and explaining their involvement in activism, reflecting Gelle's (2010) assertion that even monolingual Spanish speakers in the Andes may often "follow indigenous cultural orientations" (Gelles, 2010: 120). Recognising these women's symbolic use of Pachamama is not to suggest that this position is unique to rural women activists nor to imply that men do not also draw on the symbol of Pachamama to frame and sustain their activism. Rather, it recognises the sense of an intimate connection to the land as an important part of the women's rationale for their involvement. In explaining their activism, the women identify *themselves* with Pachamama, reflecting broader (and by no means unproblematic) ecofeminist maternalist tropes of women as Earthmothers and guardians of nature (MacGregor, 2006, Rocheleau et al., 1996).

In Peru, the women activists expressed a similar perception of an intimate connection with the land, in terms of their holistic understanding of the world and the importance of maintaining a traditional rural way of life in harmony with the land:

***Luisa (Peru):** ...we give our life to defend our water... because we live from our water and our land, we sow, we harvest and we survive. This is our work, we do not have a profession, we cannot say I live from my profession. No, we live off our land. We work the land, we sow, we produce, and from this we live.*

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***Pati (Peru):** In accordance with what we were seeing, we realised that this was important for us, because in the countryside we live from agriculture, from farming, and if certain mining projects were to be permitted, the water would become contaminated, our animals would get sick, as would we, so this is what motivates us to participate, to make this effort.*

Whilst the discourse is very similar, the lack of the Pachamama motif in Peruvian women's accounts may reflect broader patterns around the relative invisibility of indigeneity in highland Peru, and the much less strongly developed political indigenous movement. Similarly, it may also indicate the much less well articulated collective narrative of the more recently formed women's organisation in Huancabamba, as opposed to the perhaps more self-conscious and deliberate positioning of the

longer-standing Ecuadorian group, more attuned to positioning themselves in relation to powerful transnational discourses and practices around indigenous knowledge (Laurie et al., 2003).

*A commitment to protecting future generations*

The women's determination to protect the land and their traditional ways of life was a recurring theme in the interviews, primarily framed in terms of safeguarding livelihoods for future generations. Women represented the land as a symbolic link between the past, present and future, a direct connection to their ancestors and future descendants, and thus a vital resource to be protected for future generations.

**Lorena (Ecuador):** *I have to defend this because I have to leave the environment as my parents and grandparents left it to me. So I cannot forget this, this example that they have left me, this beautiful thing.*

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**Luz (Ecuador):** *Our land is not unclaimed, our lands have been bought. Our grandparents bought these lands. We are their grandchildren, we are the great-grandchildren of those old people who used to be here.*

Thus the land is more than a source of livelihood, it embodies an entire way of life passed down through generations, and an associated set of cultural and spiritual practices and beliefs. Again, drawing on very essentialised notions of femininity, the women suggested that, as mothers, women's concern for the wellbeing of future generations was greater, and presented this as a key factor in explaining their activism. This theme was central for all women interviewed, even those without children, but was particularly poignantly expressed by older women, again emphasising the idea of the defence of a common good:

**Luisa (Peru):** *...and then there's my children, future generations. I will die perhaps tomorrow or the next day, but my children, my grandchildren, they will be here to suffer, this is why I carry on protesting, I carry on in this fight for the good of my children and the next generations.*

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*Luz (Ecuador): I have to think of my grandchildren, of my future generations. Because now the natural world is finished, nature is being destroyed. And everything will be contaminated. Because taking all of the riches from our soil will leave it contaminated, they are going to leave it exhausted. So, thinking of this, I think – not because I will get anything in return, nothing, never – but I think of those poor creatures, those who are yet to come, where will they go? If now we are already suffering, and we are not yet contaminated by the mine, we are already suffering some consequences. What will it be like in the future?*

In Luz's quote above, we also see an illustration of the importance of place; this narrative is not simply about a tradition of working the land, but a connection to a *particular* piece of land that has links to their ancestors. The women question 'where would we go?', 'what would we do?' Thus their narratives emphasise the continuity and cultural heritage they associate with this particular place, and the threat that the proposed mining development poses to this, beyond simply a threat to their future livelihoods and those of their descendants.

### **Strategic Narratives and Challenging 'Development'**

These narratives, around women and water, Pachamama and future generations, are all woven together by the women's perceptions of a natural connection to the land, as mothers and as women. In a development policy context, such essentialising 'earth mother myths' (Leach, 2007) rose to prominence in ecofeminist and Women, Environment and Development (WED) theorising and development interventions in the 1980s (Leach, 2007), but have now been roundly critiqued in the academic literature, and have largely disappeared from donor and NGO discourses and strategies (Leach, 2007). However, whilst ecofeminist ideas of "women's inherent closeness to nature" may be dismissed as universalising "fables" constructed to fit a particular (Northern) policy context (Leach, 2007: 68), the narratives above suggest a genuine belief in women's innate connection to the natural world in this particular cultural context, that they deploy strategically, and we should not disregard this simply because of its essentialising tendencies. In this light, Sturgeon (1997) recognises that such essentialising narratives may be strategically useful. This draws on Spivak's (1990) notion of strategic essentialism which Noble et al. (1999) expand to encompass "the everyday practices of marginalised groups" arguing that such a popular essentialism "is crucial [...] to



the ways communities mobilise their sense of identity in specific circumstances” (Noble et al., 1999: 31). Similarly, Krauss suggests that apparently conservative discourses around motherhood become “the levers which set in motion a political process, shaping the language and oppositional meanings that emerge, and providing resources for social change” (Krauss, 1993: 249). In specifically using the notion of Pachamama, the Ecuadorian women are able to present a more cohesive identity and narrative around their activism. Whether this is deliberate or not, I would argue that this is strategic in relation to positioning themselves within their own community and legitimising their activism, as well as in relation to articulating their activism as part of a broader contemporary set of political ideas, practices and forms of resistance, rooted, at least partly, in a reclamation of ideas of indigeneity:

...this newfound term of indigeneity is not about blood or a tightly-bound culture, but about peoples’ relationship to nature—it is an identity that is defined in relation to practices and politics of environmental defense, against an economic development model of extractive industries, and against the Correa administration who promotes mining activity. (Velasquez, 2012: 312)

As well as positioning their own identities and communities in symbolic and strategic ways, the women draw strongly on motifs of time, natural rhythms, continuity and tradition, to conjure images of a pure and unpolluted past with abundant water supplies and crops, and unspoilt natural landscapes, that they and their ancestors had enjoyed. They contrast this with a bleak and polluted vision of the future with little possibility of sustainable rural livelihoods:

***Marlena (Ecuador):*** *Imagine, the water, so much water that we used to have, pure streams, they are drying up already, because they have drilled so much up in the mountains, so now we don’t have as many lovely streams as we used to. The water and the fish are dying, and we don’t have them any more.*

Albeit presenting a very idealised image of the past, such narratives serve to provide an emotive and powerful rendition of rural ways of life and the intrinsic value of the natural environment,<sup>14</sup> implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, drawing a contrast with the hyper modernity and rationality of the mining sector. To argue that this narrative is ‘strategic’ is not to suggest that it is artificial or insincere, but rather to recognise the symbolic role that it plays, and the unique contribution that

women make in this way to the broader struggle (see also Rubin, 1998 for another example of the ambiguities and contradictions of such strategic, but not insincere, narratives). This is also evident in the ways in which the Ecuadorian women recount that the pro-mining contingent within their communities uses the term 'Pachamama' as an insult to denigrate the women's activism and campaigning, framing them as 'mad old women' to whom no attention should be paid:

**Patricia (Ecuador):** *They say 'those old women, blah,blah, those Pachamamas won't leave us alone'*

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**Paula (Ecuador):** *They call us 'daughters of Pachamama' as if it were an insult.*

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**Clara (Ecuador):** *...and then, they also say that we are mad women. They say we don't know anything.*

The women thus cast the pro-mining contingent as being anti-nature and as rejecting the cultural heritage associated with Pachamama, and also imply that they themselves are perceived to be transgressing traditional gender roles. Such insults also echo broader histories of women activists being labelled as 'mad women' (Seager, 1996, Taylor, 2001) and thus as people whose views may be discounted:

...women activists are stepping outside the bounds of sanctioned female behavior, and the techniques which men invoke to put women back in their place are often entirely based on sexist "policing" – there can hardly be a woman environmental activist in the world, for example, who has not been called a "hysterical housewife" (Seager, 1996: 278-279)

The women construct sharply dichotomised gendered images, allowing them to create spaces through which to challenge dominant notions of 'development'. Whilst feminist critiques of

modernisation theory criticised the way in which mainstream conceptions of 'development' cast women as passive bearers of tradition and obstacles to progress (Mohanty et al., 1991), the women activists are in effect actively embracing this role, reclaiming the right to be an obstacle to 'progress' and re-asserting the importance of cultural heritage. This is not to represent the women activists as solely traditional or as culture-bound actors – indeed their activism includes actively engaging with new technologies such as Facebook – but rather to recognise the ways in which the women draw on powerful gendered constructions of women as bearers of culture, and in this way consciously represent themselves as a forceful challenge to development orthodoxies, rooted firmly in their use of motifs around continuity, heritage and rural livelihoods and, in particular, a critical engagement with what might constitute 'progress':

***Luisa (Peru):** well, at the moment we are very worried about the motives of the transnationals, the mining companies from other countries who come, deceiving the people, that mining means progress, that mining is development. (...) Because if the mine is allowed to open, everything will be finished. I know that the mine is development, but in our communities it is not, because they are agricultural communities, we produce plenty of milk, plenty of cheese, plenty of potatoes, plenty of corn...*

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***Florita (Ecuador):** We ask them [the mining companies] if when they are hungry they eat gold, or when they are thirsty they drink gold, and they say to us no, water, and we tell them that that is what we are defending.*

However, at the same time as emphasising their reliance on rural livelihoods, the women activists show a clear awareness of the powerful contemporary economic realities against which they are battling, and the commercial interests that are at stake:

***Nuria (Ecuador):** This is an imposition of the interests of international markets, what sense does it make to us to let them destroy everything? We know that this is only so that the corporations can carry on increasing their profits and nothing else. And the communities are left worse off than ever, because it's not only that they*

*take [the gold], but they leave the land destroyed, rights violated, serious problems with contamination, serious illnesses that are caused by this. So one starts to think about all of this and say 'no'. It makes no sense, there is no reason or justification, so why would we allow it to happen? (...) No way is it going to be for our development or wellbeing, simply a matter of profits for the companies.*

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**Eva (Peru):** *Our governments very much protect the economic interests and are not interested in the human aspect. Whilst there is more development and more progress they do not care if they have to violate people's rights. (...) The economic factor justifies all sorts of harm to fundamental rights. You can go to a community, despoil its lands, burn the houses, all in the interests of economic growth, the mine does not care. We say that in our country we have completely lost the human aspect, we associate economic growth with progress. Economic growth for one sector of the population comes at the cost of suffering, despoiling, violating the rights of the common people, the community, the peasants.*

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**Cristina (Peru):** *Because the money will dry up, and we will have to keep on working. If the mine comes here, they will take what they want and then leave, and what will happen to us?*

This is not to suggest that the women are 'anti-development' but underlines a critical engagement with the ideas of so-called 'Big D' Development (Hart, 2001). These powerful and emotive narratives, from both Ecuador and Peru, demand not only that mining development does not proceed in the women's own communities, but rather call for a wholesale re-evaluation of the form that 'development' takes in their countries. In adopting this approach, the women also claim a kind of 'moral high ground', implying that as women they are innately more principled and able to consider the common good, than is the (implicitly male and foreign) mining industry, which they characterise as driven solely by the need for short term capital accumulation. Although by no means unproblematic, such narratives present a forceful challenge to dominant economic development strategies, resonating with broader debates around development as *buen vivir* (Gudynas, 2011, Gudynas and Acosta, 2011), as well as with strategies used by indigenous communities to challenge

economic modernisation in other parts of the world (Kidd and Kenrick, 2011). The women's narratives emphasise the need for a critical engagement with fundamental debates around how we might develop more environmentally and socially sustainable and gender-sensitive development trajectories beyond a widespread reliance on large-scale extractive industries (see also debates around post-extractivism, for example Aguilar, 2012, Gudynas, 2013), and re-assert the importance of enabling rural women's participation as key actors and decision-makers in development planning and interventions.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Although the essentialising narratives of femininity and so-called 'earth mother myths' (Leach, 2007) that underpin women's engagement in mining resistance may sit somewhat uneasily with contemporary (Northern) approaches to women and development, recognising the particular ways in which Andean women frame their involvement in anti-mining activism is important in giving new impetus to understanding the (currently under-theorised) gendered dynamics of grassroots resistance to large scale extraction. Making women visible as active participants in these struggles, and recognising their strategic contribution, is particularly salient in the light of the increasingly violent and confrontational nature of state responses to such resistance (Arellano-Yanguas, 2012, Ecuadorian Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights et al., 2010, Rondón, 2009). This paper makes an important contribution to understanding women's activist subjectivities in such circumstances and making visible their on-going commitment to contesting mining developments, despite the often challenging and isolating conditions in which their activism takes place.

As well as providing a nuanced understanding of the gendered dynamics of anti-mining activism in the context of the Andes, the paper provides significant new empirical material to develop a more complex picture of the gendered lived experiences of grassroots activists and the ways in which activism and struggle are negotiated and embedded in their daily lives and realities (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). The paper emphasises the importance of making space for women's voices in order to explore the way in which women themselves frame and understand their activism. In the particular case of women anti-mining activists, their narratives underline the importance of engaging with the micro-level, on-the-ground realities of activism for Andean women. Exploring these gendered narratives and experiences allows us to begin to open up spaces to explore the often

strategic ways in which women activists engage in and with more macro level processes of territory, governance and social conflict.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The sample was drawn from women members of the grassroots organisations with which LAMMP works, including three women who worked in the organisation in Cuenca. The sample was therefore based upon women who were available to take part in interviews when I was in each location. The data is not intended to be generalizable to all women activists in Ecuador and Peru, but rather to provide a snapshot of the narratives of a range of women in order to begin to critically explore women's participation in the anti-mining movement.

<sup>2</sup> LAMMP's interest in supporting the research stemmed from our shared agenda of supporting women anti-mining activists.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews were conducted in Spanish by the author and were digitally recorded. Data analysis was conducted using Spanish transcripts. Quotations used here have been translated by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all of the women who participated in the research. Verbal informed consent was obtained from research participants due to literacy issues.

<sup>5</sup> One NGO worker explained this in terms of increasing levels of out-migration of younger people, including women, from rural areas.

<sup>6</sup> It is also worth noting that, due to LAMMP's involvement with both groups, there were nascent links *between* the two groups of women.

<sup>7</sup> In Ecuador, at the time of this research, no mining projects had yet received approval to begin full scale extraction, though approval was imminent for several projects, as noted above.

<sup>8</sup> Coincidentally, the fieldsites in Peru and Ecuador both had a 'Rio Blanco' project, but these are not related.

<sup>9</sup> See Velasquez (2012) and Moore and Velasquez (2012) for useful background to the complex politics of these conflicts and of the Ecuadorian situation more broadly.

<sup>10</sup> Although this paper focuses on contemporary accounts of women and the mining sector, literature dealing with historical accounts of women in relation to mining should also be acknowledged (in particular, see Gier and Mercier, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> In both Ecuador and Peru, the sustained and significant involvement of women NGO activists should also be recognised as very important.

<sup>12</sup> However, this is not to frame their experiences of violence and intimidation as somehow legitimating the women's status as 'activists', nor to celebrate particular types of activism as 'more activist', but rather to recognise their continued commitment to activism in a context of ongoing violence and threats of violence.

<sup>13</sup> Women used both 'Pachamama' and 'Madre Tierra' (Mother Earth) interchangeably in their discussions with me.

<sup>14</sup> Velasquez (2012) discusses this same phenomenon, amongst both men and women, in terms of a strategy of evoking "memories of environmental loss" (Velasquez, 2012: 320).