

Feminism and the Economic System



Porgeran women meet with Catherine Coumans of MiningWatch Canada to discuss the impacts of Barrick Gold's Porgera Joint Venture mine on their lives.

Fear. Violence. Rape. Broken promises. These are the dividends from an economic system that values private profit for a few over public good for the many.

In 2006, Canadian mining giant Barrick Gold acquired the Porgera mine, an open pit gold and silver mining operation in Papua New Guinea. Like other mining companies, Barrick hired private security and contracted public police forces to guard the mine site. Like at other mine sites, these security forces have abused their power, gang-raping local women and shooting villagers they consider trespassers, resulting in maiming and death. In the

face of a much-delayed grievance mechanism internationally criticized as unjust and inadequate, over a hundred courageous women survivors of sexual abuse have organized to demand restitution.¹

The relentless pursuit of profit can create insecurity and fear, and it is often women who have to pay the price – through economic insecurity, conflict and dangerous work conditions. And in too many countries, the rampant and superficial pace of

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¹ Information from Mining Watch Canada's website (<https://miningwatch.ca>)

Whose Rights? A Feminist Approach to International Investment Agreements



Chanting “Water is more precious than gold”, Salvadorans protest against metal mining in their water-poor country.

All people suffer when the “right” to private profit trumps good public health and education policy, access to medicine and clean water, environmental and labour protections.

A feminist approach is about analysing power and privilege – how it’s distributed and for whose benefit.

Canadians know about multilateral trade agreements, such as NAFTA, and CETA with the European Union, which, beyond trade, also provide considerable protections for investors – i.e. corporations. Canada has also signed over 50 Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreements (FIPAs), most of them with developing countries.

Developing countries are extremely vulnerable to Canadian corporate and diplomatic power. International investment agreements reinforce these existing power inequalities, with severe human rights impacts on marginalized people, including women.

While doing nothing to protect the human rights of these affected by foreign investments, investment agreements do provide strong protection to investors. For instance, countries are not allowed to favour domestic businesses over foreign business, even if it would benefit the local economy. Under such agreements, foreign corporations have successfully sued countries for introducing improved public health policies or strengthened environmental regulations when those changes have affected their profits.

Even when a country doesn’t lose, it still doesn’t win. El Salvador denied mining permits to Canadian Australian mining company Oceana Gold in the face of concerns over water scarcity and contamination. The company sued the government for US\$250 million, equal to approximately three years of El Salvador’s combined budget for health, education and public safety.

After seven years of litigation, the company lost its case and was ordered to pay El Salvador US\$8 million in costs. But El Salvador, an impoverished country with insufficient water resources, is still on the hook for over US\$5 million in legal fees. And as Marcos Orellana of the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) pointed out, the case “had a chilling effect on the development and implementation of public policy necessary to protect the environment and the human right to water.”

All people suffer when the “right” to private profit trumps good public health and education policy, access to medicine and clean water, environmental and labour protections. Those with fewer resources – marginalized groups, often Indigenous peoples – feel the brunt. And women, who are largely responsible for raising children, family health care and obtaining and using water, bear a disproportionate burden of the cost.

Much of the injustice and poverty in the world is maintained by structural inequalities within and among nations. This is why Inter Pares collaborates in national and global networks that work to change structures of international law and finance that empower the already powerful, while weakening local economic autonomy and democratic process. ☹

See www.interpares.ca for an interview on this issue with Penelope Simons, one of the legal experts who advises us and the Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability (CNCA).

economic growth masks a very high rate of gendered inequality. A lack of economic power often correlates to little political power. A feminist analysis must question an economic system where growth and profit are sought above all else, and where this system oppresses rather than liberates. A “feminist economic model is based on sustainability, equality and social, economic and cultural rights for all, in both the formal and informal economy.”²

Through financial support, accompaniment and political advocacy, Inter Pares supports organizations that are working to change these hierarchical and unjust power dynamics. One example is the Deccan Development Society (DDS), Inter Pares’ counterpart in India, which has facilitated rural women’s organizing through “sanghams.” These groups work to collectively build and share knowledge about agro-ecology, a type of farming that is biodiverse, resilient, self-reliant and economically transformational. Through sharing techniques and seeds, women resist corporate control over farming inputs, including seeds that are genetically-engineered. These women are able to earn a livelihood; they are able to send their children to school; they are able to build a life that is economically secure.

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Inter Pares’ counterpart MiningWatch Canada monitors Canadian mining interests around the world, including the Porgera Mine in Papua New Guinea. MiningWatch Canada lends its support, expertise and solidarity to those who have experienced harm, particularly affected women and their families.

Beyond documenting and supporting individual cases, MiningWatch Canada also works to advocate systemic solutions. Together with them and others, Inter Pares

co-founded the Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability (CNCA) whose mandate is to propose and advocate for laws and policy reforms that ensure Canadian extractive companies are held to strong human rights and environmental standards. CNCA was instrumental in the 2018 creation of the government’s Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise, an office that will be

tasked to investigate “allegations of human rights abuses linked to Canadian corporate activity abroad.”

Feminism is about a transformational change in power dynamics. So it’s essential to examine how wealth is generated and for whose benefit, as well as its relationship to the wider patriarchal social and political context. It is only in this way will we fully unleash feminism’s potential to build a more just and equal world. ☹

² W7 Final Recommendations (<http://w7canada.ca>)

INTER PARES

221 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6P1 Canada

Tel: 613-563-4801 • Toll free: 1-866-563-4801 • Fax: 613-594-4704 • info@interpares.ca • www.interpares.ca

With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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