

# Power and resistance against patriarchal *extractivism* in Latin America: practicing the feminist perspective

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DOI: 10.13128/sdt-13111

**Abstract.** *The aim of the paper is to provide a theoretical insight into the feminist concept of *cuerpo-territorio* and the strict interrelation between the two terms – body and territory –, both object of predatory capitalist exploitation and protagonists of resistance against patriarchal extractivism in Latin America. The research intends to shed light on how capitalism, through the exploitation of territories and natural resources, is able to exploit also the reproductive role of women, strengthening their subordinated position and their confinement within the patriarchal society in the name of the profit. In this scenario, the study adopts a gender-sensitive perspective to reveal to what extent men and women are differently affected by extractivism and, as a matter of fact, it supports the evidence that this dominant model of accumulation cannot be considered gender-neutral, as impacts on women are definitely more severe than on the male counterpart. Consequently, through some cases in Colombia, greater attention has been put on women's status, roles and capacities of challenging the system, in order to highlight the gendered implications of capitalist extractivism and to stress the capabilities of women in creating an alternative conception of development, aware of women's needs and pointing at a more fair and inclusive society.*

**Keywords:** territory, commons, body, feminism, policies.

## 1. At the origin of a concept: “*mi cuerpo es mi territorio*”<sup>1</sup>

As analysed by Simone de Beauvoir, throughout history women have been bound to Nature, reproduction, immanence, i.e. to the body. “Humanity is male”, she wrote “and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself [...]. And she is nothing other than what man decides [...]. He is the Subject [...]. She is the Other” (BEAUVOIR 1949). Starting with the concept of woman as “the other”, her body is conceived as the representation of an inferior human being, according to the dominant male discourse. Constrained into the body of reproduction, woman is her body, dehumanized and denied of her subjectivity, as defined by social and economic constructions of femininity, which treat women as object of desire, as mother, as caregiver.

Historically, the association of woman and corporality has driven the conceptualization of women as the irrational part of human, subjugated to reason and inferior to male supremacy (POSADA KUBISSA 2015). As a consequence, due to their affiliation with the body and the social construction of femininity, women have been relegated to a position of inferiority and a place of no relevance, made of irrationality and emotions, in contrast to the male nature associated with mind and rationality. Placed in hierarchized dichotomies, the body, conceived as the feminine, has become synonymous of the domestic private sphere and women have been excluded from public processes, dominated by men.

According to Bourdieu, the naturalization and legitimization of male dominance patterns seem to be based on the social construction of the body as “a sexually defined reality” where “the biological difference between the *sexes*, i.e. between the male and female bodies [...] can thus appear as the natural justification of the socially constructed difference between the *genders*” (BOURDIEU 2001).

On the basis of the fundamental studies of Joan Scott (1986; 2010) and then thanks to the works of Colombara (1995), Lamas (2000) and many others, the concept of gender can be extended beyond genetics, defining it clearly as the product of cultural ideas, representations, practices, and social interactions aimed at establishing the ‘masculine’ and the ‘feminine’. In a patriarchal culture, women and the body become thus object of power relations and expression of men’s dominance. Foucault’s identification of the body and sexuality as cultural constructs and direct locus of social control, rather than natural entities, establishes the subordination of the body to mechanisms of power (FOUCAULT 1976).

Based on this assumption, poststructuralist feminist and political theorists have produced an analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> CRUZ HERNÁNDEZ 2016.

male dominance and female oppression to criticize the patriarchal social structure that secures men's power over women and the female body. Similarly, drawing from Foucault's work, Bordo (2004) ascertains that the body is a practical direct locus of social control, expressed under the form of direct and material domination, that in some occasions reaches even women's physical elimination, as in the case of witch hunting analysed by Silvia Federici (2004). As a result, the repression of the body is translated into the repression of the feminine and the demolition of women's agency and subjectivity.

While many first-wave feminisms have devalued or ignored the body in attempts to enhance women's ability to reason as comparable to men's, others have reclaimed "the body as a site of valuable knowledge production" (CLEARY 2016) and as "a site where power is contested and negotiated" (BROWN, ALLEN GERSHON 2017). The body as a social, cultural and political entity has started being conceived as the point of intersection between the physical, the symbolic and the material (REVERTER BAÑÓN 2001).

The re-evaluation of feminine corporality has been a central focus of sexual difference theorists around the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, especially Luce Irigaray. Based on the poststructuralist concept of *difference*, Irigaray (1997) believes that a woman, conceived as "the other" to the subject-man, has to reconfigure her full subjectivity and social existence. The ascription of femininity to the body is thus reviewed under a new positive light that claims for the re-evaluation of the body as a key place for the reaffirmation of the female subject. With this approach, the feminist thought wants to subvert the traditional social conceptualization of the female and feminized body and defend what was previously disregarded, in a process defined as "*nostalgia de lo femenino*" (POSADA KUBISSA 2015). Women's reproductive role, explicated in care activities, interdependency, and communitarian ties, as well as their assimilation to Nature, territory, immanence, and corporality, become thus objects of re-evaluation. The re-enhancement of the body requires a recovery of its linkages with nature and the communal and identity bonds that are ascribed to women's corporality.

In this framework, the anthropologist Maria Luz Esteban (2013) describes the body not as a mere social construction, but rather as an active agent, capable of generating alternative proposals. This reconceptualization of the body transforms the female body into what can be defined as women's first *territory of resistance*. This understanding of the body as a political category has been developed especially thanks to the contribution of Latin American and Caribbean feminisms, which have advanced the concept of *cuero-territorio*, as not simply a space affected by multiple mechanisms of domination, but also a space of emancipatory struggle and resistance against the abuses perpetrated by the hegemonic system. As a matter of fact, being bodies produced and transformed by social interactions, in capitalist-neoliberal, colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative and racist societies, where relations of domination and exploitation prevail, they (the bodies) "are affected by all relations of exploitation, subordination, repression, racism and discrimination" (EFLAC 2014). Women's movements have therefore not only entered the public space to defend their *first territory* from the exploitation and abuses committed by the capitalist patriarchal system, but have also used the body to occupy public spaces and jeopardized lands in order to defend them against destructive practices led by resource-extraction and exploitation activities (CARVAJAL ECHEVERRY 2018). Relating the body to the territory implies the recognition of a dimension of life that defines people's place, history and desires:

a territory is much more than a plot of land: it is a cultural, symbolic and historical living space. Understanding the body as a territory – as a whole complex and living system, consisting of multiple relationships in which all living beings and natural resources like water, land, mountains are involved – challenges us to think about our individual and collective bodies as part of a community and constituent part of territories (EFLAC 2014).

Especially for indigenous, Afro-descendant and rural communities, the territory represents their ancestral legacy, their present and their future. In this cosmos, the body is a fundamental element, capable of feeling the life of other bodies and recreating and revitalizing life (FAU-AL 2015). Capitalist forces guiding exploitative actions and patriarchal behaviours represent the rupture of this balance, affecting not only women and their bodies, but the community as a whole.

In extractive societies, the exploitation of territories is reflected in the perpetuation of violence on the body. Latin American and Caribbean feminisms have emerged with the concept of *cuero-territorio* exact-

ly to underscore and denounce the common oppression and exploitation that affects women, territories, and their affiliation as both generators of life and subsistence (FEDERICI 2004).

The abuses committed by the capitalist system invite to reconsider the  *cuerpo-territorio* relation advanced by feminist theories and practices, acknowledging the body not only as “*lugar-objeto para la dominación*”, but also as “*espacio-tiempo de resistencias y luchas*” (CASAFINA 2016) in defence of the human rights of women and communities.

## 2. Violence on the body and land

Many Latin-American feminisms consider the  *cuerpo-territorio* relation starting from a decolonizing perspective, which embraces a historical and geopolitical point of view about colonization, as well as an intersectional approach where gender is analysed together with the variable of race. The theory of coloniality, developed by Aníbal Quijano (2000) and affirming that the discriminatory discourse of colonialism has been reflected in the structure of modern postcolonial societies in the form of social discrimination, has been expanded by María Lugones, who stresses that coloniality of power has constructed racial identities, but also expectations on gender, that have led to the creation of the “modern/colonial gender system” fostering intersectionality (LUGONES 2008).

Lorena Cabnal, decolonial and communitarian feminist, uses the term “ *cuerpo-tierra*” (body-land) to identify how colonial invasion led to expropriation of lands, resources, and knowledge using as means women’s body. She defines colonial penetration as “a condition for the perpetuation of indigenous women’s multiple disadvantages” (CABNAL 2010) that persist still today. Being colonialism and patriarchy two simultaneous and parallel systems of hierarchical production and subordination, the process of decolonization of the land-territory requires as a fundamental step also a de-patriarchization of the body (VARGAS 2017). An extension of decolonization feminism is represented by communitarian feminism which recognizes, as remarked by Cabnal (2010), that the discriminatory conditions of women are not only related to colonial inheritance, but also to the pre-existing patriarchal structure of society, which thus requires a deeper understanding of the historical process of patriarchy. Latin American communitarian feminist movements stress indeed the historical and cultural path of violence and subjugation against both female bodies and territories where women generate and reproduce life. Considering the concept of “ *territorio cuerpo-tierra*” (CABNAL 2015) communitarian feminists highlight the relationship that connects women’s bodies to the cosmos. Lorena Cabnal (2010) clearly states that if bodies have historically experienced violence emanating from patriarchy, at the same time the territory has been abused by neoliberal economic development models, which threaten the relation of women with life and jeopardize the space where bodies manifest themselves. In this context, recovering the primary territory, i.e. the body, is a political and emancipatory act, that simultaneously requires the defence of the historical territory-land, not only as means for survival, but also as space that dignifies women’s existence.

The parallel path of violence affecting both bodies and lands has, therefore, led to the establishment of strategies for collective actions of mutual liberation for the recovery and defence of the  *cuerpo-territorio*, conceived as a place of resistance (COLECTIVO MIRADAS 2017). In this sense, as Mary Mellor defines,

ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women (MELLOR 1997).

Although many women’s movements in Latin America do not identify themselves oftentimes as currents of feminism or ecofeminism (BIANCHI 2012), their struggles and practices reflect the ecofeminist theories and actually generate a new wave of feminism from the South that offers a new key of interpretation of the development models of the whole world.

### 3. The specificity of the connection between feminism and extractivism: the case of Colombia

Latin American feminisms have indeed developed in a context of consolidation of the model of extractivist society, which presupposes the re-colonization of territories and peoples aimed at the exploitation of resources and the subjugation and elimination of those that Zibechi defines as “*los y las de abajo*” (ZIBECHI 2017). Indeed, as described by Cruz Hernández (2016), the 2013 march of Amazonian women highlighted the connection between threatened lands and the consequences on women’s bodies, showing how the settlement of extractivist companies in communitarian territories led to a process of masculinization and patriarchization of lands. Consequently, the process of commodification and exploitation of natural goods has stimulated the creation of paths of social mobilization and resistance guided by women and focused on the concept of *cuerpo-territorio*. The Latin-American articulation of this notion defines the female body as the outcome of the shaping of multiple forms of oppression and resistance, such as the family and the community, that transform women’s bodies in the first territory of fight. Ecofeminism considers “the body as a living and historical territory, consisting of the struggles, the memories, the knowledge, the desires, and the individual and collective dreams. Similarly, the territory is a social body where relations are based on co-responsibility and not domination” (CRUZ HERNÁNDEZ, 2016).

These new feminisms have thus the political objective of criticizing the extractivist model of development and the connected power relations, while simultaneously integrating the values of reproduction and protection of nature in a gender-based perspective (SOLA 2019).

Astrid Ulloa (2016) defines these experiences of struggle as “*feminismos territoriales*”. Starting from the impact that extractivist practices cause on communities, the author criticizes the processes of capitalist development and analyses the initiatives of social movements led by women centred on the defence of life, the body, territories and nature. Women’s struggles are expression of the indissoluble connection between the *territorio tierra* (territory-land) and the *territorio cuerpo* (territory-body), that requires alternative models of development and different gender relations from those imposed by the capitalist-extractivist dynamics.

Similarly, Svampa (2015) refers to ecofeminism as a further development of popular feminism, based on the recognition of the relations of dominance of men over women and of human beings over nature, and centred on the parallelism between exploitation of women and exploitation of nature resulting from their reproductive role, which is invisibilized by the capitalist hegemony. In particular, the author introduces the “*feminismo del Sur*” or “*feminismo de la supervivencia*”, which establishes strong bonds between gender and environment, women and environmentalism, feminism and ecology, based on the notion of interdependence that relates the subject to the community and the natural world. Ecofeminism, in this sense, is aimed at releasing the culture of reproductive work for an environmentally and socially sustainable society. One of the most interesting examples in recent years in Latin America is represented by Colombia, that is indeed experiencing a new wave of feminism, where women lead the struggle against capitalist hegemony that foments the deterioration of their *cuerpo-territorio*. The mass mobilization has gained momentum during the negotiation process that led to the signature of the 2016 Peace Accords (PAARLBERG-KVAM 2019).

A significant example has been the process of resistance initiated by women in Doima-Piedras, in the Department of Tolima. To defend their territories in the face of the mining project “La Colosa”, executed by Anglo Gold Ashanti enterprise, women created a peaceful movement and organized themselves to block the entrance of mining operators to the territory. They carried out the first popular consultation process in Colombia, obtaining a successful 99,2% of votes in opposition to the mining threat (ROA AVENDAÑO 2014). Resistance actions, like this one, have multiplied all over the country during the last few years. One of the most remarkable is the one carried out by the non-governmental organization “Fundación Comunidades Unidas de Colombia” (COUNCO), based in Puerto Boyacá, on the shore of the Magdalena river. COUNCO implements projects and promotes alternatives based on rural communities’ needs and environmental protection. In 2017, some of the participants organized an unprecedented mobilization against Campo Velásquez, one of the most ancient oil field in the region and the only case in Colombia where the multinational enterprise owns both the soil and the subsoil. They organized a 15-day strike and many marches, during which they denounced the impact of the industry

and obtained the attention of the enterprise which organized an open-door negotiation session. Although women defenders' negotiation skills were still weak, they clarified that such processes require community's participation in projects aimed at autonomy, energy self-sufficiency, food sovereignty, and social justice (GRAJALES MARÍN 2017).

#### 4. The vicious cycle of capitalism and patriarchy

In the process of exploitation and masculinization of society advanced by capitalist practices, women are trapped as victims. They are confined in the domestic sphere devaluating their reproductive work. In this vicious cycle, extractivism represents a powerful tool for capitalism. This process of resource extraction and "accumulation by dispossession" (HARVEY 2003) is indeed a constitutive endemic part of and a permanent precondition for capitalist relations, that through globalization and violence are being imposed on a global scale (FEDERICI 2019).

In order to work, capitalism essentially depends on the *exploitation of nature*, as well as the *exploitation of women* (GIACOMINI 2014). Taken over by governments and enterprises, territories are privatized and destroyed to satisfy the economic interests of the international neoliberal market. As a result, local communities lose their communal control over the means of subsistence and their local economies and communal social relations are disintegrated. Especially women, as responsible for self-sufficiency and social reproduction in their families and communities, are affected by the enclosure of the commons and the degradation of the environment caused by extractivism. By destroying the ecosystem and separating women from the means of subsistence, enclosures thus represent a violent attack on the reproductive role of women, threatening their survival and human rights. Being responsible for housework, food production and preparation, child and elder care, and emotional work, women have thus been relegated to the domestic sphere and outside the sphere of economic relations. The exploitation and the invisibilization of their unwaged labour have devalued women's role and have naturalized the exploitation of the 'feminine'. This process has been the basis for a sexual division of labour and a new family organization based on male domination. Moreover, the masculinization of space and the re-articulation of gender power relations have reinforced the binary model and the stereotypes of masculine hegemony (GARTOR 2014). In this context, extractivism plays a crucial role: by increasing violence and excluding women from the public sphere of decision-making, extractivism relegates them to the private sphere. The accumulation of unwaged labour has been accompanied by state's appropriation of women's bodies for the control over their reproductive capacity. Federici (2004) traces back the origin of this process in the witch hunt of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a matter of fact, this event has played a fundamental role in the creation of the capitalist society, as women have been confined to the domestic sphere, entrusted with the unpaid reproduction of proletariat, and legitimately subordinated to men.

The result has been a normalization of violence against women, that the current process of globalization and accumulation still perpetuates through the imposition of a patriarchal and male-dominated system. The brutalization of women is indeed functional to the new enclosures (Federici, 2019). The Brazilian anthropologist Rita Laura Segato (2014) refers to the "pedagogy of cruelty" to describe capitalism's inherent violence against the female body as a form of control over territories and communities. To assault women's bodies means injuring the social body of society, consequently, the domestic and communitarian space is attacked, and the territory is desacralized. Violence, as structural element of capitalist predatory politics, is further exacerbated by the process of militarization of territories that often accompanies extractivism and that adds up to an existing culture of *machismo*, strengthened as a consequence to the frustration and precarization of life.

#### 5. Hierarchies of power and war against women

The capitalist system guides the masculinization of society, simultaneously fostering the feminization of poverty. This implies a disproportionate impact on women, and finally a reinforcement of the patriarchal system, to which they are subordinated: "globalization in all its capitalist forms [...] is in essence a

war against women, a war that is particularly devastating for women in the Third World” (FEDERICI 2012).

In this modern war against women, the degradation and destruction of the environment exercised through extractivism represents an attack against the *cuerpo-territorio* of women, i.e. the space of life preservation and reproduction.

Undermining the access to and reducing the availability of natural resources is a direct attack against the reproductive role of women for preserving life. Moreover, in the capitalist system, women’s reproductive role and body are considered a resource to exploit, as well as nature is. The value they produce, fundamental to the functioning of the economic system, remains invisible and devalued. Finally, exploiting lands and depriving women of the access to their ancestral territories represents a threat against the space where women’s bodies manifest themselves and their existence.

By abusing the territory through extractive practices, capitalism contributes to the imposition of patriarchy and the related degradation of women’s *cuerpo-territorio*. Similarly, the patriarchal system, conceived as “the system of all oppressions, all exploitations, all forms of violence and discriminations that affect humanity [...] and nature, [and] as a system historically built on the sexed body of women” (CABNAL 2010), systematically incorporates multiple forms of oppression and gender-based violence that enslave bodies and confine women to the house and the unwaged invisible work, favouring the conditions for the perpetuation of capitalist control and dominance. This vicious cycle where capitalism promotes patriarchy, and vice versa, constitutes an inescapable trap for women, that suffer from discrimination, inequalities, and abuses.

## 6. Achievements and social changes

Despite women’s historical participation in struggles for the protection of territories and human rights, only recently their participation in resistance processes has been widely recognized, allowing the deconstruction of a portrait of women as passive actors or victims of the process. Indeed, the renewed interpretation of the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* as space of resistance and resilience against capitalist patriarchal and extractivist forces depicts women as active protagonists of social change.

Through the multiple and differentiated resistance strategies implemented, women have substantially contributed to the achievement of important changes at multiple levels. Firstly, in many occasions, women’s struggles have resulted in the imposition of a ban to the entrance of multinational corporations in their territory or have determined the definitive or temporary interruption of exploitation processes (FAU-AL 2016).

Secondly, through the creation of autonomous spaces and the promotion of awareness-raising activities, women and feminist movements have stimulated solidarity and collective reflection about the brutal consequences of exploitative practices on lands and bodies, consequently strengthening communitarian resistance against capitalist forces and favouring the implementation of more democratic processes (CARVAJAL ECHEVERRY 2015). Within these spaces of resistance, women share experiences and feelings about the impact of patriarchal extractivism on their bodies and fundamental rights, fostering a renewed awareness about their inextricable bond to the territory and enhancing the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* as a space of resistance.

Third, women’s struggles have contributed to increasing women’s awareness about their civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights. As a matter of fact, through mobilization, communication strategies, meetings, and trainings at the community level, an increasing number of women have become aware of their being rights-holders (ERPEL JARA, 2018). This has strengthened women’s self-esteem and belief in their own capabilities (BÓRQUEZ 2011), leading to a higher female participation and representation in the public space. Women challenge their exclusion from public affairs and decision-making processes, as imposed by the patriarchal system, and raise their voice to claim inclusion and recognition of their needs. Indeed, the actions of rebellion and resistance combine the defence of territories with the protection of women’s bodies to advance not only a short-term struggle but also a long-term political goal for the building of new societies based on emancipation rather than oppression (CABNAL 2015). By reclaiming their territory, women are not only reclaiming their space on Earth and their strict

bound to the lands they live in (BÓRQUEZ 2011), they are advancing claims for the recognition of their position and role in society and within families (FAU-AL 2016a). As reported by Gator (2014), the Amazon women that in October 2013 walked for more than 200 km against the XI Ronda Petrolera in Ecuador, affirmed “*Defendemos el derecho de las mujeres a defender la vida, nuestros territorios, y a hablar con nuestra propia voz*”.<sup>2</sup> Women’s leading role in the struggles of resistance throughout the Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) region have definitely increased women’s power and promoted their visibility both in the private and the public sphere (FAU-AL 2016a), affecting multiple aspects of their life. As a result of these crucial social developments, women’s *cuerpo-territorio* as space of resistance has generated significant transformations within the personal and the collective sphere. The participation and the leading role of women within the society have challenged the dominant patriarchal structure and the gender stereotypes affecting the perception of women as subordinated beings, substantially transforming power and gender relations and redefining roles within communities and families.

## 7. The power of the counter-power

In this new phase of aggressive capitalist neoliberalism, women’s contribution to the struggles for territorial claims in the Global South has gained unprecedented visibility. Being primary victims of this model of accumulation, indigenous, Afro-descendant and *campesino* women have indeed given rise to widespread actions of resistance against the predatory spoliation of lands and rights, as they are aware of the impact that extractivism causes on bodies and territories. This fourth wave of feminism in the LAC region has thus reshaped the dominant capitalist, colonial, and racist narrative and has re-conceptualized the idea of *cuero-territorio* as not only space dominated by the capitalist logic, but as a space of resistance against extractivism, where women are no more victims, but rather agents of social change (GAGO, GUTIÉRREZ AGUILAR 2018). The feminist process of socio-environmental struggle encompasses both traditional and innovative mobilization strategies, such as marches, campaigns, popular consultations, public denunciations, and art performances, which aim not only at resisting capitalist forces, but also at creating alternative paths of resilience and reproduction of life in the territory. In this framework, women’s perspective has indeed significantly contributed to the definition of new political and economic paradigms able to enhance human rights and gender equality. Alternatives to the dominant capitalist model emerge from the direct experiences of women, who propose political and economic practices based on the fundamental interrelation between the body and the territory. Women build new models of production and reproduction based on anti-capitalist, anti-hegemonic, anti-racist, and anti-colonial relations. They promote horizontal, participatory, and cooperative spaces, whose purpose is the protection of the community and the environment, the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the fulfilment of self-determination. Their proposals are basically grounded in the enhancement and collectivization of women’s reproductive role for the defence of the commons and the promotion of an inclusive and sustainable development. Nowadays, thanks to their feminist, communitarian, and local perspective, Latin American women represent a strong counter-power able to tackle the existing hegemonic structures of power, protect the environment, enhance women’s self-determination, and definitely promote human rights and gender equality.

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<sup>2</sup> Own translation: “we defend the right of women to defend life, our territories and to talk with our own voice”.

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