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## [Women in the anti-mining struggle in El Salvador: "We are that swarm of bees"](#)

In March 2017 the people of El Salvador won a huge victory. The Metal Mining Ban ruled absolute prohibition on mining exploration, exploitation and processing—whether open-pit or underground—as well as the use of toxic substances like cyanide and mercury. The legislation is retroactive, and thus completely cancels permits that might be in process. The potential harm to rivers and water sources has been one of the reasons social movements are battling the extractive industry.

Passage of the law comes after over ten years of struggle by grassroots organizations and community leaders, who especially opposed the El Dorado mine located in the central state of Cabañas, and operated by the Pacific Rim company—now Australian-Canadian OceanaGold. Opposition to the El Dorado mine was brutally repressed, leaving a tragic toll of deaths and injuries.

Even though their active participation in the resistance is almost always rendered invisible, the women behind the anti-mining struggle in El Salvador have not only kept up the fight, but have also taken on a leadership role.

On this occasion, we spoke with Rhina Navarrete, general coordinator of the Friends of San Isidro Cabañas Association (ASIC, by its Spanish acronym).

### **Why did people resist the El Dorado project so strongly and for so long?**

One of the main reasons was the defense of our water, since most people understood that the municipality would be left without this vital liquid. There were also other incidents, such as the death of livestock in areas of exploration. Also some wells dried up.

### **How did you organize the resistance? What was the strategy?**

There were several stages. First, we collected all possible information on the mining project, in order to understand firsthand the impacts that it would have on the region and the country. Later came fieldwork aimed to inform communities about the negative effects of metal mining. We held information forums with specialists on mining (Dr. Robert Moran and Dina Larios), and with people who had experience with the harm mining causes, as in the case of Honduras (Dr. Almendares). We designed written, audiovisual and radio material in popular language so that the entire population could easily understand it. We also forged strategic alliances with other organizations at the national level.

### **How did the company react?**

The company did not stand idly by. They also launched a whole promotional campaign in the communities, seeking to convince people that cyanide was not deadly; but most people did not believe them. They also employed a strategy that is used worldwide: buying authorities, local governments and community leaders; and doing social projects, etc. Occasionally they would show

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up at forums we held in order to challenge the presenters, but they did not count on these people being expert scientists on the subject.

### **What was women's role in this struggle? How did it differ from men's participation?**

First of all, most participants in the various information spaces were women. As people became more informed and aware of the magnitude of the problem, women led the struggle. (There were about 10 women leaders) They participated in a strategy to make public denunciations and organize demonstrations.

### **Why do you think women take on such a leadership role in these struggles?**

In the first place, because we represent a greater percentage of the local population. Second, we are the ones who suffer the onslaughts of disasters and any kind of conflict, as well as economic, health, and other problems. A woman knows how necessary water and food are in her home, whether she is a single mother or not. I am not saying that a man does not know, but rather that a woman is the direct provider of goods for survival; she is the caretaker of the family, house and gardens; and she raises the domestic animals.

A woman is more sensitive to the problems that afflict humanity, and she is an excellent caregiver and administrator of all resources (of for example, Mother Nature, the Sea Goddess, etc.) A woman is very determined in her convictions, and it is not so easy to buy her will when she knows that life is at stake.

### **In order for women to participate actively in the resistance, did they also have to fight within their own communities or homes?**

The women earned their own space. Only in special cases was their participation overshadowed by a male element. Having said that, I believe that their greatest struggle was indeed inside their homes, since they had to leave their families in order to join the fight.

### **Do you think the fight is won, or should we remain vigilant?**

A law banning metal mining in El Salvador does not guarantee anything, since it is a secondary law that can be vetoed or modified at any time. As long as El Salvador adheres to free trade agreements, we will remain exposed to any threat—not just from the mining industry. Also, legislatures change every three years; so no one can guarantee whether the next legislature will change things or not. For the time being we can be a little more calm about this issue, but the future of Salvadorans remains uncertain. This is especially true now with the Public-Private Partnership Law, which aims to increase private investment, especially foreign direct investment. The president made public his position to comply with this Law.

### **What message would you share with other women and communities that are fighting mining companies seeking to take over their territories?**

That we are the majority. We are that swarm of bees or ants, and we have the ability to change the course of history if we remain united. I insist, women are the majority. It is our right and also our responsibility to defend life and land. I think humanity must recognize that the enemy is the same throughout the world, and it is called CAPITALISM. We must reclaim our role as caretakers of creation, or evolution (depending on each person's ideological perspective). It is a struggle between

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the conservation and destruction of human beings. We know that wealth is private, but its consequences affect everybody. We people pay the price. They sell back to us what they steal from us, and throughout history, those who get killed are always the same. We cannot eat gold. It is not an indispensable good for humanity. Water is a finite resource. Most of all, we women have an immense capacity to love—and love with our hearts—and to strengthen love for our neighbors, life, family, humanity, nature and creation or evolution. The key to victory is LOVE.