
India: Women's response to devastating mining

Mining has devastating impacts on the environment and on people, but it has also specific serious effects on women (see WRM Bulletins N° 71 and 79). Besides causing deforestation and contaminating the earth, rivers and air with toxic waste, mining destroys the private and cultural spaces of women, robbing them of their socialization infrastructure and social role, and all that for the sake of profit of just a handful of huge corporations.

In the case of India, when mining projects displace villages, women are left more unprotected, with even less possibilities of claiming at least for rehabilitation or compensation, since they have no rights over lands or natural resources. With forests being cut down to accommodate mines and related infrastructure --more often than not failing to comply with the laws and international agreements related to human rights including ancestral and cultural rights of indigenous peoples-- women become alienated from their traditional economic roles and lose their right to cultivate their traditional crops or gather forest produce for domestic consumption and medicinal purposes. Plunged into a strange cash economy, they may end up pushed into marginalized forms of labour as maids and servants or into prostitution. Women also have to face previously non-existent social evils like wife-battering, alcoholism, indebtedness, physical and sexual harassment, which become commonplace among mining and mining-impacted communities.

Mining, by its very nature, has no room for women to be employed, so they lose their independence as they depend solely on the wages of the male members. In the cases where they are employed --in the small private sector mines-- they are the first to be retrenched, have no work safety measures, are susceptible to serious health hazards which affect their health and ability to bear healthy children. The conditions of work, in the event that they are employed in mining activities, expose the women to sexual exploitation.

Human rights abuses on women miners or women affected by mining have shockingly increased with the entry of big capital and private corporations (see WRM Bulletins N° 40 and 52), with no attention paid by the government on this situation. On the contrary, protests and resistance from the victims have faced violent response from the State.

However, against this background of women's exploitation and alienation from their environment, many small struggles to protect and campaign for the rights of women as communities, workers, protectors and nurturers of natural resources and ecology, are trying to come together and raise a collective voice and action.

Thus, a national alliance has been formed called "mines, minerals & PEOPLE" (mm&P). A major focus of the alliance is the National Network of Women and Mining in India, which seeks to address the problems of women miners and women in communities affected by mining. This Network is also a member of the International Network of Women and Mining and its coordinating office for the Asia-Pacific region.

The objectives of the network are:

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- * Understanding the status of women in mining and affected by mining
 - * Work for the rights of women mine-workers and women displaced/affected by mining
 - * Work towards a collective struggle in order to advocate for a gender sensitive mining policy for the country
 - * Link up with women's struggles and campaigns nationally and internationally, and particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, to gain strength and solidarity for their struggles
 - * Fight for new legal rights for women to gain control over land and other natural resources which have traditionally been male-oriented domains
 - * Campaign for the protection of human rights of women displaced by, or working or living in mining areas
 - * Fight against employment of girl-child labourers in mines
 - * Understand the health problems and hazards of women in mining areas and address these problems
 - * Organize the Third International Women and Mining Conference in India (which will be held in October of this year 2004, hosted by mm&P)

The Network assumes the "Pact for Life" "because the earth is our mother and the rivers are our mother's milk. The earth is our life and death. Therefore we demand water for all, protected wells, rivers free from contamination and waste, an earth free from degradation."

Article based on information from: "Women and Mining. A resource Kit", April 2003, published by Delhi Forum, E-mail: delforum@vsnl.com ; "The International Network, Women and Mining - An Appeal for Support", 25 February, 2004, Mines & Communities Website, <http://www.minesandcommunities.org/Mineral/women6.htm>