

Gender and natural resource extraction in Latin America: Feminist engagements with geopolitical positionality

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Abstract

This article resituates the debate on approaches to gender in contexts of natural resource extraction in Latin America and, subsequently, outlines an intersectional, feminist proposal focused on geopolitical positionality, which points to the complex and global power relations that (re)position individuals and collectivities residing in spaces that have geopolitical value in a gendered way. This article draws on both empirical and theoretical research in/on extractive contexts, focusing on women, masculinities, and sexual markets. By paying special attention to the diversity of women's experiences and productive activities in extractive contexts, this article visibilizes their agency, as well as generates a more accurate account of how extractivist regimes operate and reconfigure gender relations on a local level. This expands existing approaches, allowing a situated, feminist critique, which helps to refine the study of gender and gendered power relations in their intersection with processes of natural resource extraction. *Keywords:* Gender, feminism, natural resource, extractivism, geopolitical positionality, Latin America.

Resumen: Género y extracción de recursos naturales en Latinoamérica: Involucramientos feministas con posicionalidad geopolítica

Este artículo reubica el debate sobre los abordajes al género en contextos de extracción de recursos naturales en Latinoamérica y, posteriormente, esboza una propuesta feminista interseccional enfocada en la posicionalidad geopolítica, que apunta a relaciones de poder complejas y globales que (re)posicionan de forma genérica a individuos y colectividades residentes en espacios de valor geopolítico. Este artículo se basa en investigación empírica y teórica en contextos extractivos, centrada en mujeres, masculinidades y mercados sexuales. Prestando especial atención a la diversidad de las experiencias y actividades productivas de las mujeres en contextos extractivos, este artículo visibiliza su agencia, así como genera un relato más acertado de cómo los regímenes extractivistas operan y reconfiguran las relaciones de género a nivel local. Esto amplía abordajes existentes, permitiendo una crítica feminista situada, que ayuda a refinar el estudio de género y las relaciones genéricas de poder en su intersección con los procesos de extracción de recursos naturales. *Palabras clave:* Género, feminismo, recursos naturales, extractivismo, posicionalidad geopolítica, Latinoamérica.

Introduction

Extractive activities generate intricate and often contradictory social and economic after effects that result in conflicts over diverging cosmologies, territorial rights, land use, environmental contamination or degradation, extractive licenses, militarization, securitization, violence, and changes in population. The objective of this article is to resituate the debate on approaches to gender in contexts of natural resource extraction in Latin America and, subsequently, to outline an intersectional, feminist proposal focused on *geopolitical positionality*, which points to the complex, global power relations that (re)position individuals and collectivities residing in spaces of geopolitical value in a gendered way. We draw on both empirical and theoretical research in/on extractive contexts, focusing on the study of women, masculinities, and sexual markets. We seek to rethink existing approaches, outlining a situated, feminist critique, which might help to refine the study of gender and gendered power relations in their intersection with processes of natural resource extraction.

Firstly, we focus on feminist approaches to the study of women's experiences and practices in resource extraction sites. We discuss the advantages and disadvantages when using certain tropes regarding the relationship between women and nature; and we propose the deconstruction of some of the uses that are strategic, but simultaneously counterproductive in terms of what feminism is trying to dismantle. Second, we discuss approaches to women's struggles against neoextractivism in Latin America, and highlight the role that feminist critiques of development played in proposing another model of life based on reciprocal relationships and new meanings of territory. We pay particular attention to the contributions of community feminism and the tensions arising from disputes between Western and Indigenous ontologies. Third, we discuss the contributions, difficulties, and shortcomings of studies on women, masculinities, and sexual markets at extractive sites. We analyze how the problems involving women in extractive sites have been addressed, and point out the academic neglect of women's participation in extractive activities and its implications. We discuss the prevailing representations of men and masculinities in extractive environments, and how some have contributed to reproducing common and hegemonic meanings of those men. We emphasize the importance of recognizing the prevalence of a diversity of sexual-economic practices (beyond what is commonly understood as sex work or prostitution) in extractive environments. By acknowledging that both the characteristics of men's demands and consumption patterns, as well as women's possibilities for labour and socioeconomic mobility, are in fact structured by locally-present gender roles and forms of gender discrimination, we obtain a more accurate depiction of their sexual-affective practices in extractive contexts. Lastly, we point to the pressing need to develop analytical and empirical perspectives attentive to the *geopolitical positionality* of individuals or communities, in order to understand how extractivist regimes operate and reconfigure gender relations.

Feminist engagements with natural resource extraction

A number of women theorists point out that Social Sciences have neglected the analytical category of gender in environmental research and, particularly, in issues of natural resource extraction, and how, even when incorporated in some cases, it is based on essentialized conceptions of relations between men and women. This also encourages the representation of gender inequalities as inevitable or even innate, always placing women in a subordinate position with respect to men. It was feminist political ecologists who emphasized gender differences in how nature is experienced, what the interests behind nature and its stewardship are, and how the environment is inhabited (Agarwa, 1992; Plumwood 1993). Feminists showed that these differences are not rooted per se in biology, but in gender constructions, which vary culturally and contextually, and their social interpretation (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter & Wangari 1996). Ecofeminists, such as Shiva (1989) and Merchant (1980), generated a great resonance and adherence by highlighting the close (and special) connection of women with nature, due to their supposed intrinsic biological attributes. Both women environmental lobbyists and feminist academics have helped to disseminate this notion, constructing the fable that they have a special relationship with the environment, which has often been associated, for example, with other feminist fables about women's "natural" connection to care. These perceptions of women's natural, cultural, or ideological closeness to nature have been used to give political appeal to women's struggles for environmental justice.

However, the idea of women's inherent closeness to nature is only sustained because of the strategic interests it serves. When examined closely, the notion that women per se or naturally are "sacred custodians of the earth" (Low and Tremayne 2001) does not hold up in a cross-cultural comparison. In no way do women's reproductive roles bring them necessarily closer to nature, nor is there a relevant reason why men should be sidelined from that relationship. There is an inherent assumption that precolonial, organic, and sacralized visions of nature go hand-in-hand with harmonious environmental practices and egalitarian gender relations, which we believe should be challenged. The fact that certain ecological processes are socialized in local thinking, and that certain natural resources are culturally valued does not translate into a "total respect" for nature (Persoon 1989). Notions of respect for nature depend on specific cultural relationships with the environment. Then, without ignoring that these notions about an innate and essential "woman-nature" bond can be strategic, and discursively powerful for the defense of the environment, they also validate orders of domination and difference between sexes, which feminism has fundamentally challenged. However, this criticism does not resolve the issue, because it suggests, first, an insurmountable and hierarchical distinction between the human and the natural, and the man and the woman and, second, it reinforces the Western nature-culture dichotomy, and the questionable corroboration of a single (liberal) feminism (Plumwood 1993).

It is necessary to “understand and interpret local experience in the context of global processes of environmental and economic change” (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter & Wangari 1996: 345), where gender constitutes a critical variable that shapes access to, and control of resources, interacting with class, race, and ethnicity, among other factors. And within this framework, we seek to emphasize the way in which myths about women are constructed and function to situate women “closer to the land,” while triggering diverse identity elements. In other words, these may be discursive strategies to capture resources through policies that address gender injustice and disadvantage, and by forging alliances with diverse actors in a plethora of relevant political institutions. Cornwall (2008: 145) has argued that the feminist attachment to certain ideas about women and what is needed to improve their lives must be analyzed in terms of the affective power of deeply held beliefs about women. The central quality of myths is that they are grounded in emotions, which gives them the power to galvanize people into action, including in public-policy environments.

Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead (2008: 7) conclude that feminists are under pressure to “simplify, invent slogans, and create narratives with the ‘power to mobilize’ that depend on gender myths and give rise to feminist fables”. Working to influence economists and public officials may require evidence and analysis in the form of “stylized facts” and “juicy quotes”), short and powerful messages, preferably accompanied by easily accessible statistical data. The politics of influence requires not only simplification and memorable slogans, but also strategic decisions and language. These pragmatic presentation strategies used by feminist practitioners are driven by the conviction that it is better to make concessions than to see no action at all.

The institutional and organizational forms of international policymaking in relation to natural resource extraction and the environment, such as bureaucracies with their own agendas and the need for cooperation and partnerships in global forums, create pressures for simplification, sloganeering, and a consensus of the lowest-common-denominator (Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead 2008). While it is true that feminists within these organizations must “play by the rules” and make decisions, including those that concern which forms of language and presentation will be best addressed, prioritized, and resourced, we as academics need to unveil these strategic moves aimed at achieving success in particular policy environments and return to a careful analysis of the lived complexity of exactly how extractive activities and gender are intertwined. Within a feminist framework, we believe that it is necessary to contribute to the development of better and more refined conceptual tools of analysis, which at the same time are more nuanced and progressive in their capacity to incorporate critical perspectives, based on the lived realities and the epistemologies of those affected by extractive projects. What defines critical perspectives on resource extraction is a primary focus on power relations, both locally and globally. Thus, there is a pressing need to stress analytical and em-

pirical perspectives attentive to local-global geopolitics that recover how different social actors negotiate or contest the economic, social, ecological, and moral orders in which extractive capitalist development is embedded. We believe that the ways in which extractivist regimes operate, and how they reconfigure gender relations, can only be successfully studied if we include people's socioeconomic, labour, environmental and intimate trajectories, and their forms of agency.

Territorial turn in feminism: Women's resistances to neoextractivism

There is a growing body of literature that addresses the social, political, ecological, and developmental implications of the twentyfirst-century extractive boom in Latin America (Bebbington & Bury 2013; Burchardt & Dietz 2014; Göbel & Ulloa 2014; Gudynas 2009, 2015; Lang & Mokrani 2013; Svampa 2012; Valladares de la Cruz 2014; Veltmeyer & Petras 2014). In addressing the sociopolitical context of Latin America, these studies coined the term neoextractivism to refer to an economic model based on resource extraction, which, unlike classical extractivism, uses surplus income from extractive activities to combat poverty and improve the material well-being of the population (Gudynas 2009; Svampa 2012; Acosta 2013; Burchardt et. al. 2016). Neoextractivism, however, remains closely linked to a capital-dominated economy and a growth model oriented towards the export of raw materials.

The key features of neoextractivism are the rejection of neoliberal policies and the partial nationalization of certain extractive industries (oil, gas, mining), stronger political control over resource appropriation and profits, and the expansion of sociopolitical programs. While leftist and left-liberal governments in Latin America have followed post-neoliberal forms of extractivism (Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Mexico), others (e.g. Colombia) have followed classic extractivism, characterized by the continuance of neoliberal policy patterns such as multinationalization, deregulation, and privatization. Progressive neoextractivism is based on a nationalist and anti-imperialist discourse, emphasizing that extractive activities are of the people and for the people (Brand, Dietz & Lang 2016). The exploitation of nature in this model is justified as a project that seeks to promote national development, sovereignty, and social redistribution.

However, the neoextractivist strategies of progressive governments produced considerable intrasocial conflicts, particularly in countries with new constitutions and strong Indigenous movements, such as Bolivia and Ecuador, where such constitutions have stipulated not only broad political and social rights and the rights of nature, but also have recognized cultural differences and the rights of territorial self-definition and autonomy. Resistance to the national neoextractivist project by Indigenous peoples and a broad movement of women, (some identifying with feminism, others not) in defense of life and nature, constitutes a huge dilemma for progressive governments. Some gov-

ernments have subsequently resorted to hierarchical, authoritarian, and militaristic means to repress emerging conflicts (Brand, Dietz & Lang 2016).

In this context, feminist critiques of extractivism¹ are part of emancipatory traditions of thought that account for life's diversity and potentiality from a holistic perspective, and are associated with fundamental critiques of the dominant development discourse. Beyond women's individual and collective struggles to transform an unequal and unjust political, social, and economic system, feminist critiques of Latin American development have played a crucial role in proposing another model of life, based on reciprocal relationships, on the resignification of territory, not only spatially, but also in relation to women's body, represented in the powerful notion of "body-territory" (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo 2017; Cruz Hernández & Bayón Jiménez 2020; Leinius 2020). In continuity with autonomous and decolonial feminisms, community feminism (*feminismo comunitario*) emphasizes its organic character, grounded in the recognition of Indigenous community organization and politics, the importance of territory and territorialization, the revaluation of resistance, and its situatedness in women's ancestral knowledge.

Bolivian community feminism, for example, can be seen as a radical proposal for a process of global change, and as such, a call for people to "thought-action" (*pensamiento acción*). It prioritizes a commitment to the construction of a "community of communities" (*comunidad de comunidades*) and a life that guarantees *buen vivir*, grounded in a conception of territory produced by the political relations of native peoples (Paredes 2010). *Buen vivir*, a concept deficiently translated into Spanish from different Indigenous languages,² denotes a flourishing of the natural environment and spirituality that cannot be separated from territory (Prada Alcoreza 2013). This implies a continuous and affectionate relationship between people and the land, a notion that is incompatible with Western understanding of development based on the extraction of natural resources, the latter requiring a certain alienation from the natural environment and other living species. Feminists from the Global South have criticized development policies as a continuation of colonialism, highlighting the systematic devaluation of Indigenous world views and traditional institutions in countries considered "underdeveloped" (Aguinaga et al. 2012).

In this sense, Latin American community feminisms struggle against the colonial patriarchy – as well as the ancestral, original patriarchy –, and neoliberal capitalism, which with its extractivist dynamics, not only advances on territories, but also on bodies (Cabnal 2010). Hence, territorial knowledge is revalued, as well as women as epistemic subjects who produce, interact, and share their knowledges with and from Abya Yala women movements, whether or not they self-identify as feminists. Indigenous, peasant, afro, and popular territorial feminisms are configured from a position of life in, and defense of their territories (Ulloa 2016). These feminisms coordinate a struggle for decolonization, dismantling patriarchy, overcoming capitalism, and building a new relationship with nature. Having experienced the destruction of their habitat by

development megaprojects, feminists have collectively called for another model for their societies.

Andean, popular, and community feminisms deplore that extractive development is not only economically-driven and functionalizes nature, it is also deeply racist, patriarchal, and classist, and will be impossible to dismantle without confronting these dimensions of power (Aguinaga et al. 2012; Falquet 2017). Indigenous women who speak out and organize resistance, however, are increasingly perceived as potential obstacles to resource extraction projects, and also as threats to capitalism itself, since resources such as oil, for instance, are perceived as symbiotic with capitalism (Wilson 2014). In its most extreme expression, violence against the body-territory as the primary experience and impact of capitalist exploitation is manifested in the murders of women land defenders. However, antiextractivist feminist movements in Latin America have powerfully fought back despite persecution, criminalization, and threats against women who have resisted the advance of extractivist mining, oil, agroindustry, or forestry projects (Echart & Villareal 2019). In the following three sections, we discuss research that underscores experiences arising from constructions of femininity and masculinity, and the practices and opportunities that these constructs enable or constrain in extractive environments.

Women at extractive sites

The establishment of extractive activities in a region generally leads to significant changes in gender relations. A growing body of literature stresses that large-scale and capitalized extractive projects bring rapid social change that negatively affects women, more so than men (Quintanilla Zapata 2004; Nolzco & Figueroa 2015). Some authors have noted that women tend to be hired for lower status jobs, or become less economically active because of changing production systems, new productive relationships, and spatial extractive organization (Ward & Strongman 2011). In general, the impact on women falls into three broad categories: health and wellbeing, available jobs and traditional roles, and gender-based economic inequalities in terms of the benefits produced by extractive activities. Extractive projects often weaken local livelihoods and degrade the environment, making women in particular unproductive for securing food for the family (Nieves Rico 1998; SPIA 2007). As a result of the alienation from agriculture and forest land, and the pollution caused by the companies' extraction and processing activities, some women begin to earn their living through a variety of activities in the informal sector, while others lose their economic independence and become dependent on men who often manage to obtain well-paid jobs in the extractive industries (Amancio 2015; Himley 2011).

Despite the real disadvantages faced by women in these economies, however, in order to contribute to a feminist epistemology of resource extraction, we seek to question the representation of women as mere victims of extractive ac-

tivities. Much of the literature on the gendered impacts of natural resource extraction that equates patriarchy and capitalist resource extraction-based accumulation is reminiscent of biological determinism and essentialism. It is also often moralistic in tone, lacks specificities of social and material contexts, and overlooks a historical understanding of women and work (Lahiri-Dutt 2012). Such interpretative frameworks risk depoliticizing environmental, community, and gender relations in and around extractive industries. Academic studies that emphasize the negative impacts of extractive activities on women often focus on highly capitalized extractive operations, leaving aside informal, traditional, and small-scale mining practices. Yet, globally, large numbers of people, including women, earn their living from mineral extraction with low levels of capital and technology (Mansilla 2004; Factor & Mastrangelo 2006; López Canelas 2019). For these small-scale miners, mineral extraction provides a significant flow of seasonal and supplementary cash income, which alleviates rural poverty and helps them to cope with high prices of basic goods.

Traditional and small-scale mining is often associated with scenes of chaos and looting that create fear and insecurity among economists and public officials (Lahiri-Dutt 2006). Likewise, there are normative discourses and certain cultural narratives, for example, that “the presence of a woman at a gold extraction site will make the gold ‘disappear’” (Chimhepo 2014: 40), that prevent women from claiming their legitimate participation in extractive activities and earning related income. Informal mining, however, contributes to the livelihoods of large numbers of women and men. The presence of women working in this type of mining activity reaffirms current global trends with regard to women’s work, and shows that not all mining is essentially corporate and exploitative, or disconnected from the broader sociopolitical and economic forces that are changing rural economies in poorer countries.

By opposing all extractive activities, environmental lobbyists sometimes increase women’s invisibility in the world of labour. At times, there is an outright refusal to recognize the potential benefits of extractive activities for women, or the fact that the capitalist production system benefits from their reproductive labour. This ignores the gendered economic and political processes that have structured the sexual divisions of these spaces: men in charge of the extraction and processing of natural resources, and women exclusively in charge of care jobs. While it is true that around the world, extraction is based on traditional principles and patterns of land ownership, thus almost all registered mining leases, tax rights, and common-law lands are held by men (Lahiri-Dutt 2012), it is urgent to inquire into the processes that shape these relationships, rather than hold individual subjects responsible and blame them for their engagement in extractive activities. Even in matrilineal societies such as the Maroons in Suriname, women engaged in traditional mining have less access to political power, money, financial assets, and contacts with the outside world than men (Heemskerk 2003). Many traditional social systems around the world deprive women of control over mine shafts and only allow them access through

men, putting them at a significant disadvantage with respect to the benefits of extractive revenues.

Approaches to natural resource extraction and gender tend to homogenize negative effects on women's lives, and produce problematic generalizations, not only because they consider men's domination unquestionable and natural, but because they ignore the women's agency in the different roles they occupy, and their practices of resistance from those positionalities. However, and in tune with the strengthening of community and/or territorial feminisms that we presented earlier, there is a growing, recent academic literature on women's actions in the face of extractive industries and development policies, emphasizing how they contribute to the local knowledge of these resistance movements, and how their interactions with other social movements also benefit from women land defenders' strategies (Coba 2019; Echart & Villareal 2019; Leinius 2020; Tapias Torrado 2019).

Along these lines, a feminist critique of extractivism would be towards challenging the predominance of current discourses of total victimization and domination, recognizing women as key actors within the industry, traditional mining, or other natural resource extractive activities, in protests and at home, where they sustain and politicize communities. Calling attention to empirical studies on the subject, we ask ourselves, what extractive activities mean for women and the communities involved, and in what ways macroprocesses and social practices reproduce or challenge the gender inequalities and other forms of domination in extractive contexts, and what can be theorized from that.

Men, masculinities, and resource extraction

Both academics and environmental activists have contributed to perceptions of extractive activities as an exclusively and essentially male domain. In particular, the male miner has historically and socially been constructed as the prototypical male representative of the working class (Evans 2005; Murphy, 1997). For example, miners who worked in shafts during the early industrial era undertook dangerous, dirty, and risky jobs and were perceived at that time as strange and frightening, and therefore repulsive, but at the same time attractive, because they were masculine and sensual (Lahiri-Dutt 2013). In the context of traditional gold mining in Latin America, miners were also associated with moral deviance related to excessive consumption, prostitution, and alcohol-related violence (CHS 2002; Mújica 2014). However, few studies have made in-depth, ethnographic explorations of the "masculinized universe" (Svampa & Viale 2014: 121) of resource extraction that would contribute to complexify theory building on the topic. Paris (2016), for example, analyzes how newcomers to the oil camp in the San Jorge Gulf Basin (Argentina) are exposed to sexual jokes and games. Following Baeza, he states that these practices "blur the boundaries of what it means to be a man or a woman in the hegemonic order" (Baeza 2010: 7). Palermo (2015) similarly observes that in oil-extraction sites

“there is an atmosphere of constant feminization which is perceived as a threat”. These practices are meant to be humiliating, which according to the author can be understood as endeavors to “exorcize” femininity. The workers in the Palermo study (2016: 114) about an oil-extraction site in the Argentinian city of Comodoro Rivadavia perceive their work as hard, physical work that forces them to “be a man” and possess a “factory discipline.” The plentiful sexualized jokes and homoerotic practices can be seen as related to the “deeply androcentric representation of [the workers’] labour” (Palermo 2016: 112); working there requires “being a man,” and the sexualized games are a way to “prove it”.

Men have also been associated with the giant machinery linked to extractive industries. In most large-scale extraction efforts, technology plays an important role, increasing productivity, enhancing safety, and improving working conditions. Feminist geographer Lahiri-Dutt (2012) argues that capitalization of the production process is never gender-neutral, and she draws on historical and contemporary evidence to conclude that technological change works against women’s interests in the extractive industries. Thus, while extractive cultures are associated with exaggerated and violent masculinity, women in extractive contexts are portrayed as unproductive and isolated, unable to challenge domestic oppression, and staying home to care for their husbands and children (Nash 1979). Feminist scholars have extensively challenged such depictions of women (e.g. Carr 2001), yet the focus on the miner’s wife has hidden women mine workers. López Canelas’ (2019) work on female mine guardians is one of few examples. She raises concerns over the miner’s wife becoming the only authentic figure in mining settlements, leading to omissions or possible (mis)representations of women miners (Lahiri-Dutt & Macintyre 2006). By highlighting the domesticity of the miner’s wife, on the one hand, and the depravity of the male miner, on the other, extractive culture is characterized as a generalized dualism that obscures the productive roles that women play within the extractive industries, in their homes, and in the communities, as we have pointed out in the previous section.

Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the constructions of masculinities in extractive activities, and denaturalize the usual connection between them, as this link ignores the complexities of gender within the existing spectrum of extractive economies. The exclusive emphasis on men in analytical terms produces two issues: on the one hand, women are eliminated from the extractive scene as relevant actors, and their agency in this important economic activity is made invisible; and, on the other, extractivist masculinity is approached from one conception only: as superior, unique, and natural, when in reality it also troubles men’s daily lives, affecting both work and intimacy. As a result, women who are able to access masculinized gold-mining sites often choose to work in the markets that emerge around that economy, such as selling food, clothing, and other goods, or providing leisure, entertainment, and satisfaction for workers.

As a consequence, we believe it is necessary to develop feminist understandings that will help deconstruct masculinities, and study its diverse configurations, as well as its tensions, while attending to the enormous evidence of women's agency in productive extractive activities and in the home, as well as their resistance to the serious oppression generated by the extractive industries. We believe it is crucial to challenge approaches that frame women at extractive sites as mere victims, but develop a perspective that repositions them as legitimate social, economic, and political actors in this important economic space. A more fine-tuned analysis can help us understand the ways in which masculinities are produced by local gender and cultural orders, but also and, above all, by the extractive economic order in which they are situated.

Sex markets and natural resource extraction

We believe it is urgent to undertake a critical study of sexual markets at extractive sites and challenge some mainstream interpretations of the subject. The prostitution that takes place at natural resource extraction sites is commonly referred to or understood as a (negative) consequence of extractivism, together with other social, environmental, and territorial problems (Svampa & Viale 2014), or even as a social pathology (Acosta & Cajas Guijarro 2016). Further, with the more recent development of public policies and government programs aimed at combating the trafficking of people for sexual exploitation (Piscitelli 2012a; Varela 2015; Kempadoo 2016), sex markets at natural resource extraction sites have been viewed as conducive to trafficking, arguably due to the high presence and concentration of men. This recalls what was discussed above regarding the predominant perception of the masculinization of these spaces and, above all, the attributed and perceived dangerousness of these spaces, with respect to the demand for commercial sex and its illegal ways of procurement.

In this context, commercial sex is conceived only in its coercive and violent modality, despite the fact that it includes a diversity of sexual-economic exchanges that vary in the degree of consent of those who participate in them. An idea prevails: that those who practice prostitution in these environments – mainly women – are co-opted by organized criminal networks, and increasingly so when they are young or migrants, with a low educational and socioeconomic status. While it is true that these coercive conditioning factors exist and limit the mobility, labour, and subjective trajectories (Barrantes 2016; Goldstein 2019), there are also those who participate voluntarily in the sexual market, although the subject of consent requires a discussion that goes beyond our purposes here (Doezema 2002; Fraisse 2011; Lowenkron 2015).

Likewise, with respect to femininities and masculinities, we seek to problematize totalizing generalizations regarding sexual markets in extractive sites, with the aim of deconstructing hegemonic meanings about prostitution and sexual consumption in these contexts. As Mahy argues (2011), the way in which the sex trade is perceived or understood at sites of natural resource ex-

ploitation depends on the feminist positioning of prostitution, another topic that also requires a thorough debate (Daich 2012; Lamas2014; Piscitelli, 2012b), and how resource extraction itself is valued. However, the tendency always appears to be to victimize those who participate therein, invisibilising their capacity for agency and evaluation of possibilities for socioeconomic mobility.

Based on ethnographic work with sex workers in the mining areas of Sangatta and Bengalon (Indonesia), operated by the Kaltim Prima Coal company, Mahy suggests that the background of these women and their insertion into the sex market should not be understood through the dichotomy of forced labour/voluntary work, but that “sex workers in mining areas must be recognized as women who are pursuing a livelihood opportunity within their broader socio-economic context [...and] are not necessarily victims or heroines” (Mahy 2011 53). Furthermore, since these are migratory experiences, Mahy shows what motivations guide their decision of seeking out the mining destination, and also what other work opportunities are available to them. In comparison, engagements in the sex market seem more promising, especially as there is a possibility of the development of long-term, sexual-affective, and economic relationships with the miners.

Similarly, in areas of gold extraction (*garimpos*) in the Brazilian Amazon (Serra Pelada and Região do Vale do Tapajós), Tedesco (2014) studied women’s backgrounds and ways of life in these spaces, as well as the characteristics and meanings of carrying out domestic work (cleaning and cooking) and sexual work (as *mulheres de boate*), and how relations with men (*garimpeiros*) happen through inter- and transactions. Thus, her ethnography “leads to a discussion regarding the rules and reciprocities in the relationship between men and women [where] honor and shame are generated in specific contexts and from the subjects’ experience” (Tedesco 2014: 272). Even in a “*garimpo* culture,” with strictly demarcated gender relations, women negotiate their own interests in managing these masculine orders, strategically arranging their stay in these spaces.

The contributions of these studies undertaken in extractive sites allow us to emphasize the dimension of sexual or intimate economies (Constable 2009; Hofmann & Moreno 2016; Piscitelli 2016), and the specificities that this dimension takes on at extractive sites (Cabrapan Duarte 2020). We believe that there is a need to explore the diverse forms of sexual-affective and economic relationships that arise from commercial sex and how the actors involved therein signify it, without necessarily circumscribing or limiting themselves to it. This is an aspect that sheds light on studies of commercial sex in general, by highlighting certain nuances, particularly to those situated in contexts of natural resource extraction. Such a perspective enables us to demonstrate that in addition to presenting the “dark side” (Obeng-Odoom 2014) of these sites, a product of their immorality, dangerousness, and marginality – which are simultaneously reinforced by the media and environmental activists – there is room to signify the experiences of both women and men in a less pessimistic way.

However, we should also note that these sites may not necessarily deconstruct the traditional and sexist distribution of roles and tasks in both the productive and reproductive spheres, and may continue reproducing gendered power relationships. For example, sex workers at resource extraction sites have historically been both tolerated and persecuted by the state, companies, armed groups, and other powerful actors that control extraction (Cabrapan Duarte 2018; Laite 2009; Molano 1990; Serje 2005). Often, tolerance has to do with the fact that the extractive companies and the state claim that there is a lack of wives to keep the men “civilized,” established, and productive, and so women at such sites – being heteronormative spaces – provide sexual services that keep workers from leaving, and thus sustain the companies’ productivity demands.

Therefore, women’s affective work contributes to the reproduction of extractive workers’ labour force by satiating sexual desire, without creating the social and financial obligations of family life. However, rather than generating recognition, or greater income and better living conditions (Cohen 2014), sex workers are stigmatized and persecuted as a threat to production and made responsible for the moral degradation of the male workforce. As Cohen (2014) analyzes in the context of traditional gold mining in Colombia, the perceived deviancy of women’s sexuality provided the justification for repressive measures i.e. either removal from the extraction site or denial of access to the mines. She observes that in some mining territories that are under the control of guerrilla and paramilitary groups, women miners depend on their chastity or on being the sexual property of one man as a requirement for permission to enter the mining site; otherwise, they risk losing access to the mines or even being killed on charges of sexual promiscuity.

Thus, it is highly worthwhile to critically acknowledge that sex markets at extractive sites produce disruptive spaces and practices, while recreating other or traditional forms of inequality. And given our call for more in-depth and long-term studies, rather than saying that “extractivism generates prostitution/trafficking,” we propose exploring and attending to the situational factors and elements that organize and structure the varied relationships between men and women at extractive sites, and determining which masculinities and femininities reproduce or challenge the gender relations in those contexts. It is essential to problematize, empirically and theoretically, how gender and sexual-affective relations between men and women occur in direct relation with extractive economies, and everything that unfolds because of their presence. This helps us to reconstruct and better understand the macro-scenarios that produce the global economies, as well as the frameworks of meaning that arise from the actors’ own experience.

Women's security in extractive capitalism

A major focus of feminist intersectional research has been the articulation of experiences of violence in relation to how gender, class, ethnicity/race, religion, sexuality, and nationality situate women unevenly. We propose an expansion of the intersectional analytical framework by highlighting the relevance of *geopolitical* or *geostrategic positionality*, referring to the complex relations of power that position individuals and collectivities in spaces of shifting and often contradictory geopolitical value. Geopolitics can be defined as practices and strategies that recognize the economic and power-engendering value of particular geographic locations, and aim to exploit the territorial advantages for the benefit of particular (often external) population groups. We are drawing from two distinct bodies of literature here and try to combine them for a productive analysis of extractive contexts: one works with *geopolitics* as a central analytical concept, and has grown out of feminist perspectives on political geography,³ and the other one is concerned with *gender in conflict zones*⁴. By drawing on literature on conflict zones, we recognize that resource extraction turns regions into conflict zones, which present characteristics akin to low intensity warfare (von Borstel Nilsson 2013; Roy 1999).

Extractive activities come along with an array of complex and contradictory social and economic consequences that often result in conflicts related to diverging cosmologies, territorial rights, land use, environmental contamination or degradation, extractive licenses, militarization, securitization, violence, and rapid population changes among others. Indigenous territories and the natural resources they hold continue to be the focus of extractive industries and other large-scale infrastructural projects (Erazo 2013; Sawyer 2004), resulting in an increasing militarization of Indigenous regions by state and nonstate armed actors, often in covert support of extractive industries, both “legal” and illegal (Sierra, Hernández & Sieder 2013). Alleged “nonstate” repression carried out by private actors is in fact intrinsic to new state forms and political economies linked to intensified exploitation of oil, gas, mineral, forest, wind, and water resources (Sieder 2017).

In these conflicts over territories and natural resources, Indigenous women are often targeted in particularly insidious, gendered ways, especially if they are at the forefront of resistance (Belausteguigoitia Rius & Saldaña-Portillo 2015; De Marinis 2017; Mora 2017; McLeod 2017). Feminist scholar Segato (2013) suggested a connection between illegal economies, an increasing amount of which are involved in extractive activities in contemporary Latin America, and extreme forms of gender violence, such as feminicides. Feminist research on gender and resource extraction should therefore focus on examining how global, unequal power relations shape the intricate configuration of legal and illegal economies in extractive contexts in the Global South, and what specific impacts emerge from this regarding gender violence, gender equality, and gender justice in such locations.

Large-scale resource extraction projects are the core of the modern promise of prosperity, and states have put laws into place to protect them and facilitate their growth. Whilst states deploy police and military to quell mobilizations and social unrest against mining corporations in some areas; in others, state forces persecute small-scale, autonomous miners who operate in areas in which extractive activities are prohibited. Resistance against extractive megaprojects is often followed by extreme levels of violence, as the cases of Indigenous activists Berta Cáceres (Honduras)⁵ and Máxima Acuña (Peru)⁶ demonstrate. Bueno-Hansen and M. Falcón (2017: 72) call such staged and coordinated attacks against Indigenous and peasant activists, the “murky terrain of insecurity and threats by the neoliberal state-corporate nexus,” which requires feminists to map cartographies of struggle across the globe and build transnational alliances across multiple differences and asymmetric power relations.

Feminists do need to be concerned with mapping the complex societal relationships that are produced by extractive capitalism in different locations. Extractive capitalist endeavors connect people and processes across regions and international borders, we therefore suggest that the intricate relations of conflict that surround extractive endeavors, and the dimensions of power that traverse international borders must be captured with a transnational feminist framework that takes the *geopolitical situatedness* of the respective context into account. A transnational feminist, geopolitical perspective seems relevant and appropriate for contexts of resource extraction, also because it “departs from the assumption that neither nations, nor local communities, can be seen as independent entities” (Stepputat & Nyberg Sørensen 1999: 85).

Activist and critics often (rightly) foreground physical forms of violence, such as sexual assaults, attacks, and destruction of property or animals by corporate or state actors (Hernández Castillo 2015; Belausteguigoitia Rius & Saldaña-Portillo 2015), however, it is important to highlight that some of the most harmful forms of violence related to extractivism may involve no direct or physical violence. In fact, much of the violence that accompanies extractive endeavors is embedded in clerical, administrative, juridical practices that then produce processes of dispossession which are experienced as violence by affected communities (Thrift 2000). Ong’s (2006, 2007) work on economic zones, illuminated what she called “zoning technologies”, the division of the world into zones that are differently treated and governed. By this she meant a sovereign power’s strategic deviation from liberal governance, in ways calculated to create new economic possibilities, new kinds of spaces and technologies for governing populations, guided by the maximization of the economic value, located in or extractable from particular places. People working inside zones marked for the “neoliberal exception” (Ong 2006) are governed solely in relation to their potential for growth and productivity, subjected to overt forms of capitalist work discipline and repressive laws, frequently abused, stripped of rights, and denied benefits and the most basic social protections.

A focus on geopolitics⁷ and the *geopolitical positionality* of individuals or communities and their struggles shifts our attention to territorial forms of power, and how they are intertwined with gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class, thereby diversifying feminist analysis and expanding relevant previous work centering on the body, affect and discourse. The analytical lens of geopolitics holds that geographic locations stand in a particular relation to the production of power; whilst some regions can be turned into “sacrifice zones” (Lerner 2010), i.e., neglected, exploited, contaminated, and eroded; other sites are identified as sites worthy of protection and nourishment by private and state actors concerned with ensuring security in those zones – many of which located in the Global North.

Gender relations as well as configurations of sexual markets in extractive sites would be better analyzed in direct relation to the dynamics present in those zones that possess a particular *geostrategic value* and an attractiveness for different actors, bearing potential for wealth and economic empowerment, but also for conflict, corruption, militarization, and violence. Women’s security in extractive zones rests on the interdependency of their own disadvantage and marginalization, and the material needs of the multiple population groups present at extractive sites, some of whom forming part of the complex organized crime dynamics surrounding illegal extractive activities. Feminists from wealthy countries in the Global North often press for legal and political rights for women, and there have been relevant successes of women’s rights and human rights approaches, such as the inclusion of gender-based violence into international conventions, and subsequently the persecution of crimes such as domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment to some degree. However, for the majority of the world’s women who live in poverty, economic survival and better incomes are paramount.

Legal and political rights alone cannot guarantee women’s protection in conflict-ridden extractive zones, as their security depends on wider socio-economic change, and changes in cultural institutions, practices, and attitudes. American feminist, writer and organizer in the human rights movement, Bunch (1995: 14) notes the importance of social and economic rights, as well as their connection to civil and political rights: “Much of the abuse of women is a part of the larger socioeconomic and cultural web that entraps women, making them vulnerable to abuses that cannot be delineated as exclusively political or solely caused by states.” To achieve security and *buen vivir* for women across the globe, transnational feminist strategies must recognize that legal, political, economic, social, and cultural rights cannot be separated out, but must be indivisible (McLaren 2017). However, beyond the recognition that social and economic rights are inseparable from legal and political rights, a comprehensive framework ensuring the security and flourishing of women in extractive zones must include attention to context, material circumstances, oppression, and structural inequality.

Conclusion

While we believe that gender is an important element for the analysis of extractive activities, we should also recognize that women's experiences and interests are not uniform or the same in terms of their relationship with natural-resources. By calling on researchers to include gender issues in analyses of resource extraction, we recognize and address gender inequalities and the distribution of power both among women and within the various regions of Latin America. Through situated research, we must elucidate gender, ethnic, age, and class differences, among others, that organize the divergent – even opposing – and disruptive motivations, interests, and movements vis-à-vis extractive activities.

Given this complexity, we believe that if gender and sexual practices at extractive sites are understood solely as (always negative) effects of the commercialization of natural resources, there is no space left to study the ways in which subjectivities are produced and arise that do not fit into the point of view of oppression, but rather vindicate resistances and strategies that we need to (re)discover. In this sense, we contend that natural resource extraction cannot be considered a unitary or unified project that produces positive or negative outcomes, but a composite of processes that generates patterns of exclusion, pockets of wealth, and sites of violence. Global extractive capitalism creates sites of conflict and violence in specific geostrategic locations and in the communities present in extractive sites. Across the globe, these sites present highly gendered and often racialised characteristics.

Conflicts over natural resources and extractive processes are deeply rooted in the divergent worldviews found in contemporary Latin America, and at the same time constitute an important part of the livelihood of many communities, which must be recovered and critically analyzed. Thus, we consider it essential to achieve critical theoretical analysis, starting from divergent social actors' views, including both the perspectives of economic self-determination or Indigenous ecologies that may reject the commodification of nature as a resource, as well as the practices of those who benefit socioeconomically, directly or indirectly, from resource extraction. We reposition women as agents in and from their territories. Agency can be expressed, not only in territorial defense, but also in finding ways to sustain life, which is often not recognized. Even when including other ontologies, it is a continuous challenge to shake up the essentialized conceptions of women and men in these extractive and Indigenous environments, which even these other worldviews can (re)produce.

We intended here to point to the need for a reconfiguration of approaches to understanding resource extraction in ways that capture the complexity, ambivalence, and contradictions of its effects on different groups and individuals, given that they are situated in divergent material positions and legal and cultural contexts. Only when we explore how consent to extractive capitalism is achieved around the world, can we produce accurate understandings of how

processes of resource extraction have become integrated into local realities and everyday practices. We have proposed an expansion of the intersectional analytical framework by highlighting the relevance of geopolitical or geostrategic positionality, referring to the complex relations of power that position individuals and collectivities in spaces of shifting and often contradictory geopolitical value.

Resource extraction generates and restructures social relations between local and migrant communities, corporate actors, state officials, and their broader constituencies. In addition, extractive economies create new gendered domains of power, and new struggles for authority, at the micro and macro levels. A focus on processes of resource extraction shows that neither nations, nor local communities, can be seen as independent entities; instead, actors are entangled in global, unequal power relations that shape the intricate configuration of legal (and illegal) economies in extractive contexts in the Global South, and from which specific impacts emerge regarding gender violence, gender equality, and gender justice in such locations. Feminist research on gender and resource extraction should therefore be concerned with mapping cartographies of struggle across the globe, and thereby visibilize potential for shared causes and transnational alliances across multiple differences and asymmetric power relations.

* * *

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Notes

- 1 There is an extensive body of literature on extractivism in Latin America, see ERLACS (106) Special Collection *Mega-Projects, Contentious Action, and Policy Change in Latin America* (<https://www.erlacs.org/collections/special/mega-projects/>). Following Gudynas (2013), we understand extractivism as intimately connected to citizen mobilizations. Extractivism differs from other extractive activities in three elements: volume, intensity, and destiny of the natural resources extracted. Subsequently, extractivism relates to large-scale natural resource extraction for exportation, rather than for local use.
- 2 A detailed discussion of the different Indigenous meanings is found in Cuestas-Caza (2017).
- 3 See, for instance, Staeheli, Kofman, and Peake (2005).
- 4 See, for instance, Giles and Hyndman (2004).
- 5 After years of death threats, Berta Cáceres, Indigenous leader of a grassroots campaign against the building of a dam at the Gualcarque river was assassinated in her home by armed intruders with alleged links to United States-trained special forces units of the Honduran military.
- 6 Máxima Acuña is a weaver and subsistence farmer who resists the expansion of the Conga Mine in the northern highlands of Peru. Her family, livestock, agriculture, and house are constantly under attack by private security and the police. In 2011, for instance, the security forces and police burned down their house and destroyed all their belongings in an attempt to dispossess them of their land. The security forces came back for several days to destroy anything they had left.
- 7 For critical feminist perspectives on geopolitics, see, for instance, Gilmartin and Kofman (2005) or Sharp (2005).

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