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If another world is possible, who is doing the imagining? Building an Ecofeminist Development Alternative in a Time of Deep Systemic Crisis

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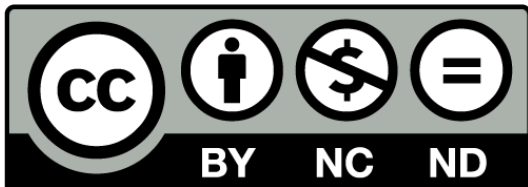
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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the ecological and climate crisis, as a critical dimension of the manifold threats facing the planet and most of its peoples today. We locate the crises in an economic system founded on production for profit which places nature in service of the minority of the world's people. This economic system meets patriarchy which subjects women to extreme exploitation of their labour and their bodies. In the article, we critique mainstream solutions to the climate crisis, many of them technological in nature, which are false, distract us from the real problems, and are serving to perpetuate further injustice and inequality between peoples. The article considers some key struggles against fossil fuels and large-scale energy projects in Africa, and outlines what women are defending and proposing in their resistances. The article points out that women are protecting the environments and ecosystems upon which their lives and that of their families and communities depend. They are defending the rights of future generations to have air to breathe, water to drink, and safe food to eat. And they are resisting the imposition of projects that are contributing to planetary destruction. We argue that the majority of women in Africa, who carry the burden of the climate and ecological crisis and who have paradoxically contributed the least to the problem, are practicing and proposing, in their resistance, a development alternative which all humanity must respect and echo if we and the planet are to survive. The article concludes by describing and promoting an Africa-wide charter building process in which working class and peasant women will define a Just Development Agenda for nature and humanity.

IF ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE, WHO IS DOING THE IMAGINING?

BUILDING AN ECOFEMINIST DEVELOPMENT ALTERNATIVE IN A TIME OF DEEP SYSTEMIC CRISIS

By: Margaret Mapondera, Trusha Reddy and
Samantha Hargreaves

The year 2019 will mark 25 years since the start of international talks, through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP), to address the climate crisis. Year on year, carbon emissions causing climate change have escalated, taking us ever closer to climate catastrophe and corresponding ecological and social collapse. As we entered 2019 it was reported that the previous year, 2018, was the fourth hottest year in recorded history, characterised by numerous natural disasters in the form of forest fires, droughts, and tsunamis, all linked to the changing climate. In the second half of 2019, scientists projected that average temperature increases in this year will outstrip any previously recorded.¹

Governments, entrusted with the future of humans and all other life on the planet, have collectively failed in their shared global governance role. This is because, in our analysis, the climate talks are dominated by powerful corporate interests – with dirty oil, mining, and seed leading the pack - and their powerful allies

in the traditionally powerful G7 joined by big polluters from the emerging global South. There is a well-established record of these governments manipulating negotiations through threats and proposals for bilateral aid, and withdrawing from commonly negotiated platforms, such as the United States from the weak Paris 21 COP agreement. Given all of this, the current configuration of the climate negotiations will never yield a just and fair outcome for the majority of the world's people and the planet.²

If we are to really develop and build solutions, we need an overhaul in thinking and doing. This article explores the core nature of the problem as WoMin understands it, including an examination of extractivism and its consequences for people and ecosystems. We use extractivism to refer to a development logic which sees economies of poor countries as subject to the large-scale extraction, with no value add, of usually non-renewable natural resources under highly unequal and exploitative conditions. We use this logic to expose and interrogate the mainstream or 'false' solutions proposed by global North governments, intergovernmental bodies like the UNFCCC and International Finance Institutions (IFIs).

We also consider approaches to solving the climate crisis which are more akin to our vision of a different world: the just transition, climate justice, and ecofeminism. Building on these, we propose the building of an African ecofeminist development alternative through a bottom-up Africa-wide charter building process and discuss some of the challenges and key political questions that need to be addressed as we build.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

THE WORLD IN CRISIS

"The world is in deep social, economic and ecological crisis."

We are witnessing deepening inequality and poverty, the large-scale destruction of ecosystems upon which all life depends, and looming climate catastrophe. The very survival of people on earth and the planet itself is under threat.

At the very moment when bold and transformative solutions are needed, we witness the rise of right-wing popular forces – exemplified in heads of state such as Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump in the United States, Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, and Poland's Andrzej Duda, whose reactionary agenda is only fuelling the crisis. Their climate denialism, renewed fossil fuels energy drive, push to exploit new frontiers of nature (such as the oceans, the atmosphere through geoengineering feats, and the forests, earth's lungs) for profit, and their violent repression of social dissent are all markers of deepening crisis for the majority of the world's poor now and into the immediate future.³

Africa and other parts of the global south are subject to another round of deepening colonisation as corporations and their host governments in the global north and parts of the global South chase the untapped and highly profitable frontiers of Africa's mineral and natural wealth. This gives impetus to what WoMin calls an extractivist development model, just another link in the

chain of perpetual colonisation and exploitation of Africa and its peoples.

This new era of natural resource colonisation is presented as the opportunity for "Africa Rising" by multilateral and intergovernmental bodies, including Africa's 'own' – the African Union and its Agenda 2063 and the African Mining Vision (African Union 2009), adopted by the Heads of African States at the February 2009 AU summit; the World Bank and its Strategy for African Mining (World Bank 1992); as well as the Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), to name a few. It is unfortunate but Africa's Rising through a 'transformed, accountable and transparent extractives sector' is also the development mantra that has been uncritically adopted by significant swathes of African civil society.

Extractivism is deeply patriarchal and racist, relying on the cheap paid labour of Black and brown working-class men who work under extremely exploitative and dangerous conditions to guarantee profits for large multinational corporations and their vast supply chains. The unpaid care work of women is also incorporated into the accumulation of profits to corporations and the rich as they labour to reproduce workers and their families through subsistence food production, the provisioning of water and fuel, and their care work. Extractivism's externalised costs – pollution, forced dislocation, water grabs and violence – cause significant ill-health for workers and affected communities and it is women's labour which replaces for absent health and care services. WoMin argues that all of this work of care represents an invisible and no-cost subsidy to the profits of corporations.

Communities impacted or to be affected by large-scale development projects are denied voice in decision-making. The corporates mislead through false promises about local development and jobs, whilst traditional and local leaders are corrupted to swindle communities out of their land and birth right. Women, who may be the primary users of land, are not regarded as 'owners' and denied their right to participate in decisions about development for which they pay the highest price.

"WoMin argues that mining and extractivist economy is violent "

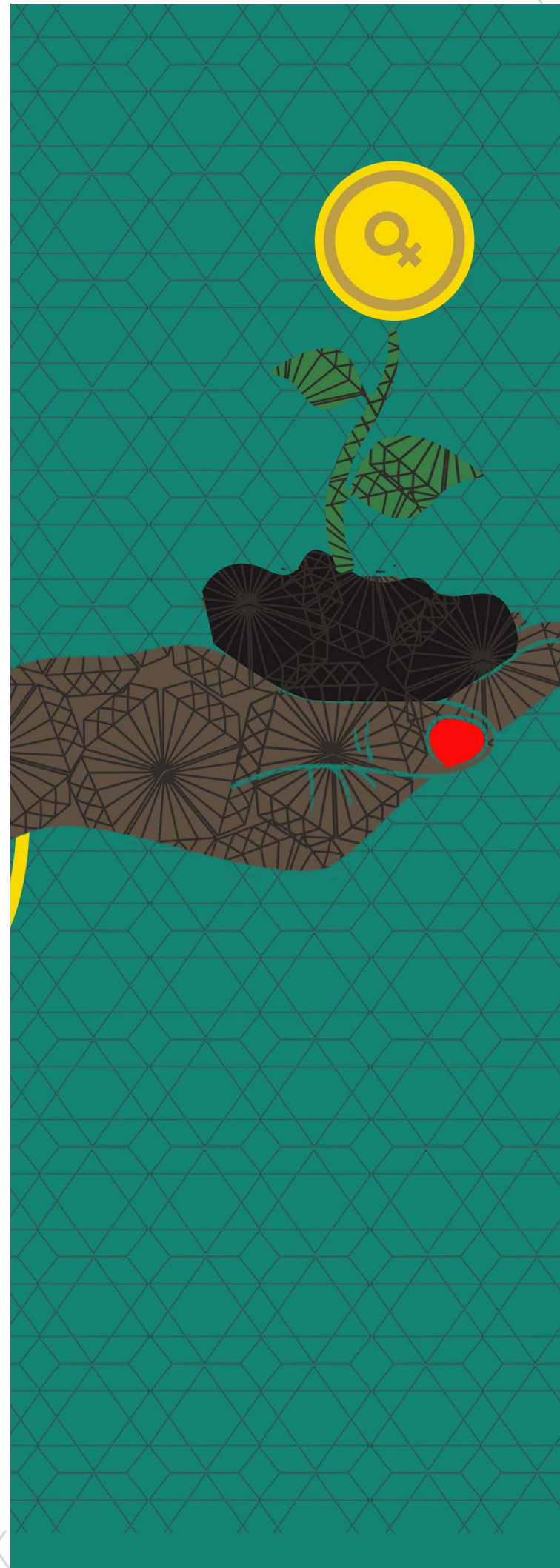
Whole local ecosystems in water bodies, forests and land are destroyed, communities are forcibly removed and their livelihoods destroyed, and the labour of workers and women is violently exploited. Geographic areas subject to extractive activities are militarised (occupied by the state military) and/or securitised (where private security companies 'mimic' the state military) to repress resistance and guarantee the social conditions necessary for extraction to continue unhindered. In this process, communities are subjected to threat and intimidation, as well as physical violence, including assassinations. Activists defending land, rivers, forests and the oceans are among the most at risk in the world today. In 2017 alone, 207 environmental defenders were killed – the deadliest year to date.⁴ For women, this violence is most often sexualised. From the Niger Delta to the oil fields of Uganda to the diamond fields of Marange, Zimbabwe – women from affected communities endure sexualised violence, sexual harassment, threats of rape and rape by the military and private security.

Climate and ecological catastrophe in Africa

WoMin's work centres the looming climate and ecological catastrophe in Africa, its links to extractivist development and its gendered impacts. The most concrete markers of this crisis include:

- The period 2015 to 2019 will be registered as the warmest five-year period on record since the late 19th century. The global average temperature for the first 10 months of 2018 was about 1 degree Celsius above what it was in the late 1800s. In 2019, with the extreme summer heat in Europe, the uncontrolled forest fires across numerous continents, and the unprecedented warming of the arctic, the planet is already lapping up against the maximum projected increase of 1.5 degrees promised at the 2015 Paris COP.⁵
- For millions of people across Africa, Latin America and Asia, climate change translates into more regular and extreme droughts, storms and flooding with the World Food Programme concluding that this now accounts for up to 90 percent of all natural disasters. Climate change is projected to increase the number of hungry people to 20 percent by 2050.⁶
- Those most at risk live in Africa. This impacts heavily on African women living in rural areas who constitute not less than 50% of the agricultural labour force in sub-Saharan Africa.⁷
- It is estimated that if deforestation continues at a rate of roughly 13 million hectares per year, all of the world's forests will be depleted within a century and many ecosystems will be utterly destroyed.⁸

- The World Health Organisation (WHO) projects that climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress between 2030 and 2050.⁹ It is areas with weak health infrastructure – mostly in the global south – that will be least able to prepare, respond and cope with this future-reality.⁹
- The planet is in the midst of a sixth wave of mass extinction of plant and animal life in the past half-billion years. Species extinction ‘normally’ occurs at a rate of between 1 to 5 per year. The Centre for Biological Diversity, drawing on scientific studies, estimates that literally dozens of species are going extinct every day. This species extinction is driven by pollution, invasive species, and increasingly by climate change.¹⁰ By 2050, Africa is expected to lose 50% of its birds and mammals.¹¹
- A World Bank research report *Groundswell – Preparing for Internal Climate Migration* concludes that crop failure, water scarcity and rises in sea levels, linked to climate change, will transform more than 143 million people into “climate migrants” with Sub-Saharan Africa being one of the most impacted. Migration puts women particularly at risk of exploitation, abuse and sexualised violence.¹²



WHAT ARE THE MAINSTREAM RESPONSES TO THESE CRISES?

In the midst of the greatest systemic crisis, governments from around the world gathered at the UNFCCC COP in Poland during December 2018 for the 24th annual session of failed climate talks. And they are now on the brink of the next round of negotiations, COP 25, which has just shifted from Santiago, Chile to Madrid, Spain. The 1997 agreement (the Kyoto Protocol), which held the seeds of a just climate deal, with mandatory commitments to carbon emission cuts and a firm acknowledgement of differentiated country responsibility for climate change, has been eroded year-on-year, culminating in the 2016 Paris COP 21 agreement. This agreement set voluntary emission reduction targets and national plans bringing in targets well beyond what is needed to keep climate change below the 1.5 degrees mark. The US has consistently undermined progress, and with President Trump and his climate denialism and big coal America-first philosophy, can only create further damage. In November 2019, the US initiated a formal one-year withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, fulfilling Trump's commitment during his 2016 election campaigning. In this obstruction, he is joined by other high carbon emitting countries, including Saudi Arabia, Russia and Kuwait.

The Paris agreement saw the consolidation of a commitment to market-based solutions to the climate crisis. These solutions, which fail to address the root causes of the climate crisis, are about maintaining the system and status quo.

These 'quick fix green' solutions are promoted by big corporations and supported by many governments around the world, and are presented as viable and necessary solutions to the planetary crisis. In fact, many of these solutions allow the same polluting corporations to continue polluting and/or support their entrée into new marketized sectors for profit making. These so-called solutions include carbon trading, which allow rich and historically polluting countries to buy credits from non-polluting countries therefore shifting the burden to change from the polluters to non-polluting countries and populations. While the climate science instructs very clearly that remaining fossil fuels need to stay under the ground to keep global temperatures within liveable limits, the industry pushes for unproven technologies to 'clean' coal. Other examples of what WoMin and others in the climate justice movement call 'false solutions' are biofuels (the conversion of food crops into liquid fuel), geoengineering (the manipulation of the planet's atmosphere to 'suck out' carbon dioxide or deflect sunlight such as artificial trees, steel filings in the ocean etc.), nuclear power and mega dams. These efforts not only distract us from real solutions, they also delay urgent action.¹³

Climate and environmental justice organisations have long held a critique of the climate negotiations and the market solutions being proposed instead of the needed structural changes which include: stopping fossil fuels extraction and dirty energy generation; radically reshaping production so that goods and services are produced for use value and according to the needs of people and not for the profit motives of corporations; and building circular economies which enable the very necessary recycling and reuse of materials used in production. Many movements have drawn on and defended **climate justice** as the way to address the crises because it demands that the unjust capitalist system be dismantled to take care of the planet and provide redress for historical violations. Climate justice also starts to propose ways in which the climate debt can be paid, including advancing notions of a basic income grant which deals with future joblessness. But the concept has generally failed to respond to the interests of workers, who stand to lose their jobs and livelihoods in the fossil fuels, industrial agriculture and other carbon emitting sectors, and does not deeply address the relationship between patriarchy and climate injustice.

The second idea responding to the climate crisis and proposing parts of the solution needed is that of the **just transition**. Much of the thinking and proposals related to a just transition have emerged from organized trade unions, and address job losses which will occur in high carbon emitting sectors such as energy, agriculture and transport as a result of climate mitigation efforts and the transition from dirty to clean energy like solar, wind and thermal.¹⁴ The language of the just transition has been grasped and redefined in recent years by social movements of indigenous

peoples, peasants, fishers and forest dwellers, as well as the climate and environmental justice movements. Evolving ideas about the just transition address work but also the more expansive concept of livelihoods in an attempt to bridge labour and communities, and the payment of climate debt to support worker transitions and climate mitigation for affected communities. While there have been some early efforts on the part of feminist collectives to engage in the just transition debates, there have, to date, been none addressing an African feminist perspective and little concerted effort to build ideas from below.

Feminist perspectives on patriarchy, capitalism and the exploitation of women's bodies and women's labour generally fail to address how these systems are also organized around the large-scale exploitation of nature. This has resulted in ecosystem damage and climate change, the ultimate threat to the survival of humanity. An ecofeminist perspective is thus critical to imagining and advancing a genuine and deep development alternative for women, all people and the planet. The formal and visible African women's movement is not yet at the forefront of efforts to drive an ecofeminist agenda – a situation that needs to change.

"The leadership for this change is already coming from the deeply ecofeminist analysis and activism of African women who bear the brunt of extractivist patriarchy in communities across the region."

It is from their grassroots struggles, perspectives and demands that WomIn draws its inspirations and ideas about African ecofeminism.

WOMEN'S WAYS LEAD US TO THE SOLUTIONS THE PLANET AND THE PEOPLE NEED

Peasant and working-class women in Africa bear the brunt of climate-destroying 'development' projects which grab, pollute and destroy their natural resources, undermine cultural and historical ties to territories, exploit their labour (paid and unpaid), and violate their bodies and health. And women form the core of struggles to defend the land, lives, livelihoods and future of their families and communities. Their struggle is one that defends a way of life and an existence that cannot be replaced. This is their development alternative. Yet, women have limited voice and authority in decision-making about development at all levels of society. We note the ways in which African peasant and working-class women care for, replenish and reproduce nature and humans.

In WoMin's work, we witness the numerous ways in which women offer a living example of the principles and practices which must shape a sustainable future for humanity and the planet. This includes the following:

- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women contesting the Grand Inga Hydro Dam, which will exceed the Three Gorges Dam in China when concluded, are defending one of the largest remaining rainforests in the world (an act that is aligned with the defence of the planet) as well as the livelihoods and continued existence of their communities and the next generation of Congolese. Theirs is a struggle and a defence much greater than themselves.¹⁵

- In Nigeria, women have been engaged in a long resistance against the ravages of the oil industry – its polluting effects, its destruction of water bodies and local livelihoods, but also a resistance against the war, social instability and violence which has characterized the oil industry in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Women's movement has historically been a movement for peace.¹⁶

- In almost all of the contexts in which WoMin works in solidarity with partners and women's movements, women are defending land and forms of production which contribute to the cooling of the planet. Women and other farmers are defending their indigenous seeds and their agroecological practices which are healthy for people and good for the planet. Theirs is a planetary defence.

- Finally, women centre the defence of care in their families and communities. They struggle for the rights of future generations. And they resist dispossessions to safeguard the well-being of their families and communities.

Now, more than ever, as the world hurtles towards a systemic catastrophe, voices from grassroots communities, especially women, who are too often excluded from decision-making and most affected by the current model, must be heard.

BUILDING A JUST DEVELOPMENT VISION AND MOVEMENT FOR AFRICAN WOMEN



In July 2018, a group of feminists, claiming an ecofeminist perspective, and climate justice activists convened in Mogale, Johannesburg to discuss the global crises confronting us today and the deep social and economic changes needed to achieve a just and sustainable future. This forum adopted an African Ecofeminist Declaration on the Just Transition to inform the climate and labour movements. But, most importantly, it birthed a process of building an African ecofeminist charter for a just transition or a just development charter (a language women may feel more comfortable with) as a tool to deepen a grassroots-led women's movement in the region.

The declaration is a statement written by the representatives of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), mainly NGOs and academia and some social movement representatives that attended the gathering. It provides a working frame and a clear set of political demands, which can guide efforts in our organisations, networks and alliances, campaigns and universities.

However, it does not and cannot speak directly to the interests and perspectives of most of Africa's women.

To support organising from below and to build a genuine grassroots-driven perspective on just development alternatives, the group agreed to build a charter process with women in communities, people's organisations and movements. In answering the question 'what is the world you want?' or 'what do women in your community want from development?' women would construct the content of the charter. It was agreed that the methods would need to be creative, enabling voice and perspective through story-telling, testimony, theatre, poetry, drawing and movement. The different dimensions of conversation and proposal would be documented through photo, video, writing, voice recordings and so on. The methodology is in the process of development and we welcome collaboration in building out an approach. Women would need to lead the process of writing the charter and seeking endorsement from their peers across the continent.

This process involves key chapters of the African women's movements – WoMin, the Rural Women's Assembly, and the World March of Women - and Friends of the Earth Africa which plays an important role advancing an environmental justice politics at the continental level, as well as some of the most critical groups at the national level.

The process is not without its complications and challenges which we will need to work through as we build. Firstly, it will be important to engage the organised labour movement at the regional level. And at the local and national level, we will need to deepen efforts to connect and build with organised and unorganised labour. This will not be easy, but we will have to find a way of walking with workers in imagining and building out this just development agenda. Secondly, we will need to carefully navigate the question of keeping fossil fuels underground.

"For African economies organised around natural resource extraction – whether minerals, metals or fossil fuels – we must be thinking carefully about the transition as a just economic transition."

And finally, we will need to bridge the divide between the movements opposing mining altogether, and those who believe there will be need for extraction in support of the just transition. This will require creative thinking about different scales and forms of extraction, set against a wider agenda of challenging excessive consumption by the few and too little consumption by the many, and thinking about the very necessary recycling and reuse of materials.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Tinkering at the margins of change by reinventing extractivist capitalism as 'green' is not delivering, and will never give us, the kind of change we require. An uncritical approach to the alternatives, including a technologically and politically agnostic view on renewable energy, which is corporate led and profit oriented, is also unlikely to work for the majority of people on the planet, or for nature. WoMin believes that the seeds of change lie within the spaces where nature and people meet and create harmony. Indeed, it is built from the ground up, where women are resisting exploitation of their lands, water, and forests, and seeking to preserve and honour what nature gives to us. And yet we cannot be naive that this kind of approach will not bump up against very strong forces which seek to preserve the status quo. It is in the movements, and especially those led by affected women in Africa, and their clarity, conviction, and determination that an alternative world is possible that hope for all people and the planet lies.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

Women from across the region have shared anecdotal stories and testimonies in WoMin's feminist schools and convenings since 2013. The same has also been reported through WoMin's developing work on the relationship between extractivism, militarisation, securitisation and violence against women in Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In addition, the WoMin film 'Women Hold Up the Sky' about women's struggles against large-scale development projects in Uganda, the DRC and South Africa contains testimony about the gang rape of a woman during a forced removal in the oil fields of Uganda. WoMin's conclusions are that few women who have endured violence of a sexualised form perpetrated by the military or private security have spoken openly within their families and communities. This informs WoMin's decision to 'enter' affected communities through a collective model of trauma support so that women can speak, deal (as they can) with what has happened, and determine what justice means to them. Ideally, these stories need to be told, and corporates and the state must be forced to account, but this is a choice women must make in light of the many threats to them, their families and communities.

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WoMin

WoMin, launched in October 2013, is an African women and extractives alliance, which works alongside movements, popular organisations and NGOs to evidence the impacts of extractives on women, build women's movements to challenge destructive extractivism, and propose development alternatives that respond to the needs of the majority of African women. Margaret Mapondera is WoMin's Media and Communications lead. Trusha Reddy is WoMin's Regional Energy and Climate Justice Coordinator and Campaigns Advisor. Samantha Hargreaves is the WoMin Director and Head of Programmes