

Fight for human rights in the extractive industry



By Pinkleen Oinokwesiga
Artwork by Najuma

Nowadays, more nations are shifting towards natural resource extraction as a means of spurring growth and reducing poverty. Unfortunately, these benefits usually come at a great cost, causing environmental and social harm. To rectify this, the *Count Me In!* consortium has come up with initiatives in the Global South that will strengthen women's capacity to defend, organise and advocate for themselves and their lands.

Since the year 2000, the extraction of natural resources has more than tripled, leading to an increase in the development of extraction projects. This has resulted in the loss of land and livelihoods and created climate emergencies and crises that affect gender and class. However, a group of women and girls have been proposing and leading feminist solutions against this, centring on social justice, human rights, and care for all people and the planet.

They have applied their ancestral knowledge of land regeneration, thereby strengthening their communities to saying no and resisting such projects. These women land defenders act as guardians of the environment, yet they are still vulnerable to specific gender-based risks. Sadly, it is estimated that one in ten is killed annually, with the highest number (212) occurring in 2019.

Luckily, a consortium came up and proposed critical initiatives around GBV, economic justice, and sustainable resourcing for women's rights in policy-making spaces. They use popular education materials to speak against injustice, take action against violence and inequality, as well as build movements for transformative change by using their collective voice to raise issues on the global stage.

The *Count Me In!* consortium (*CM!*) is a network of feminist funders, educators, and movement builders working to achieve human rights and equality for women, girls, and trans people worldwide. It constitutes organisations like the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), CREA, Just Associates (JASS), Mama Cash, Urgent Action Fund-Africa and Urgent Action for Women Human Rights Defenders, Red Umbrella Fund (RUF), and WO=MEN, the Dutch gender platform, as their lobbying partner.

Countries such as the Philippines, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Indonesia, Honduras, and Mexico have especially benefited from the work being done by the consortium and its constituent partners. I had a chance to discuss with Ronald Wesso and Connie Nawaigo, who work with the *Count Me In!* extractives working group, about their popular education tool that was developed to enable land defenders to investigate the individuals funding extractives projects and how with it, women land defenders can protect themselves from violence and GBV.

Wesso is a popular educator and freelance researcher in Johannesburg, South Africa, who has written widely on matters of labour, land, community, and feminist movements. Meanwhile, Nawaigo is a human rights lawyer and women's advocate in Zimbabwe and Uganda. She works to lobby for and evaluate human rights, democracy, and governance through different organisations like Human Rights Network-Uganda, Urgent Action Fund-Africa and Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights.

According to her, the consortium works with female human rights defenders on land defence. It is an integral part of their work since the group works with structurally marginalised and excluded groups. In addition to evictions, loss of land, destruction of eco and biosystems, highly securitised zones, rape, intimidation, and assassinations, they also face gender-based violence.

Governments and advocates of the status quo sometimes monetise patriarchal stereotypes to target women activists—such as land defenders. They are often labelled enemies of progress and other derogatory terms, which are used to attack and weaken their resistance against extractives. This is their everyday life. Nonetheless, there is support by the consortium for those in desperate need, such as grants for relocation, which are available through Mama



Ronald Wesso

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This applies to those who feel they are no longer safe in their current location. They also ensure their anonymity, to protect them, so that the extractives do not direct their resources to silence dissenting voices. Despite the challenges, these brave women continue making gains in the fight for their rights to land and homes. One equivalent is collective protection within the movement, where every member knows how to look out for their safety and of others, since they are all integral to the movement.

It is imperative to point out that the consortium avails support to ongoing resistances and does not, in any way, bring resistance where none exists. That way, it strengthens women's capacity to defend, organise and advocate for themselves and their land by creating awareness of the risks and how they can be mitigated. They have put in place different strategies, like popular education by JASS, which works with communities and movements, and focuses on three issues—identifying the problem, discovering what you want, and what you want to do.

Wesso explains that there is always a need to describe what happens behind the scenes and understand how the projects are financed and abled through laws and policies. Interestingly, research carried out in Honduras, Zimbabwe, and Indonesia discovered that the law was actually in favour of extractive projects, fronting those interests over the local community's.

When the lockdown was imposed on South Africans, he used his experience, research, and discussions, and together with the team from the *CM!* extractives working group formulated a toolkit. It has fifty-three exercises with different aspects of resistance against extractives and their related problems, how to deal with violence against women, and complicated tribunal laws.

He confidently explains that it is very user-friendly, as long as the community has the patience and commitment to see change and does not need any special qualification. He further states that it is open-ended, allowing for innovation and modification, and dissects several issues. He assures that it can be used by land defenders and their allies, without the need for an academic or lawyer.

To illustrate, he gives the example of an investment chain exercise. A group of defenders are taken through a series of activities, putting them in a position of developing strategies that will confront investors in an extractive project. This is done through a strategy that concentrates on 'pressure points,' areas in the extractive and political industry which support the former, that people can focus their resistance on to achieve the change they want.

The toolkit provides tools that people take, step by step, until they achieve their objective. It is usable across communities and has revolutionised and proved successful in the resistance struggle in

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communities where such activities are prevalent, with reports from South East Asia, Indonesia, Honduras, Latin America, Malawi, and Zimbabwe supporting this. To Nawaigo, the toolkit has demonstrated its usefulness as people acquire knowledge on how they can advocate and resist better. She emphasises that anyone can use it as it helps one understand the individuals funding these projects.

With its help, individuals have been helped to actively resist in an organised manner against financiers of such projects in their communities.

However, there are several challenges and obstacles to the great work being done by *CMI!* in regards to its usage, Ronald Wesso points out. It is a written toolkit for communities where information is usually disseminated orally. Therefore, it requires someone to read and share it verbally, which at times is difficult because it incorporates several exercises. But as earlier explained, it takes patience to achieve the desired results, and different communities have shown this.

He admits that it is unfortunate communities have to deal with a toolkit written in a foreign language. This requires translation into the local languages, which can be problematic when trying to find the right people who can immerse themselves in it. Popular educators like Wesso and Nawaigo have been employed by the consortium, through their different partners, since by nature it requires one or two individuals to disseminate the contents to the local communities. It helps that it is a written manual for oral processes, so communities are easily trained.

Land defence continues to take centre stage globally. Activists for climate change are now being brought on board through the toolkit with the view that it (land defence) is the solution to the climate crises. To do things better, people on the ground like Nawaigo assert the need to listen to communities during policy formation. She emphasises that consultation with key stakeholders is vital in ensuring people's innate rights are protected such as the right to say no and what it means.

Wesso seconds, in regards to GBV in extractive communities, as this would create a free and peaceful society. Nawaigo conclusively urges that communities should be heard, development should be looked at differently and most importantly, alternative economic systems that do not need continuous extraction until communities are impoverished should be put into consideration. Perhaps, more sustainable practices would garner less resistance from locals.



Connie Nawaigo

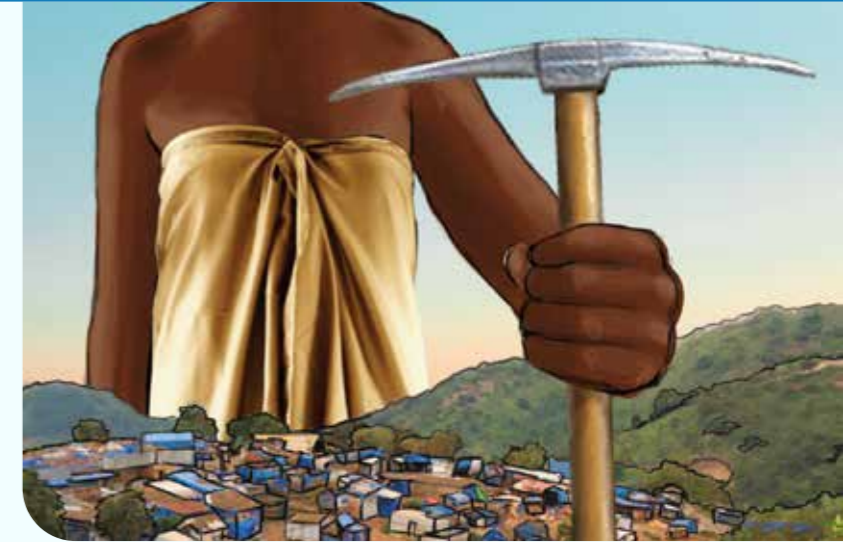
Indisputably, the extractive industry is a billion-dollar industry, capable of propelling a country from a developing one to among the wealthiest in the world. Unfortunately, most developing countries that are rich in these resources are marred by weak governance structures which promote corruption and conflict. In the end, they have become a source of conflict rather than an opportunity. Worse still, it is the women and children who always seem to bear the brunt.

The assassination of a feminist land defender spurred the Count Me In! consortium to embark on research to better understand and reveal the financial drivers and enablers of extractive projects. Based on that, they developed the toolkit to support women land defenders and their communities in their efforts to fight extractive projects. It provides tools and analysis that enable them to map what is impacting their lands and develop stronger strategies in response.

Living at the mercies of a gold mine

In 2017, more than ten thousand miners were evicted from their land, by the same government that was meant to protect them, in favour of mining companies. This led to protests which eventually had them reinstated after they acquired the necessary documents.

By Pinkleen Oinokwesiga
Artwork by Najuma



Mubende, located 110 kilometres west of Kampala, was a typical rural settlement until someone discovered a gold nugget on Kagaba Hill, leading to an influx of prospectors. By 2014, gold rushes had become common in the sub-region. People migrated from other places to become miners, washers, refiners, middlemen, buyers, and even exporters, increasing the number of artisanal miners—small-scale subsistence miners who are not officially employed by a mining company, but work independently using their resources.

Three years later, over ten thousand illegal artisans were evicted. It was alleged that they were encroaching on the legal mining areas the government had given to AUC, a foreign gold miners company meant to advance the sector in the country. They were then required to process and own mineral location licenses to operate. In the aftermath of their ruthless eviction from the gold mines on the third of August 2017, the president claimed he had not given the directive but rather had told the soldiers and other security agencies to be on 'standby.'

The miners were adamant that he had betrayed them, yet he had often made verbal pledges that they were safe and would continue to work without interference. This triggered them to put up a fight to keep their land under their umbrella association, Mubende United Miners Association (MUMA), which brings together 22 associations. The chairman selected chairpersons from each association within the mining area to join hands and achieve their desired goal.

One of the chairpersons took me through the series of events that transpired. They were facilitated by different organisations, like Global Rights Alert and ActionAid Uganda, as they fought to get the rightful documents and licenses that would reinstate them to their former areas and allow them to operate. As more organisations like Human Rights Defenders Network came on board, the women had undergone training and learnt how to speak out for themselves as mine workers, defend each other, and become resilient.

This network has also helped them to interact and grow their circles, and other key strategies, to reinforce resistance against any form of discrimination. It should be noted that women within the Kagaba mining area encounter numerous GBV incidences that include domestic violence, rape, sex work, and verbal violence.

They are also excluded from communal work, and key decision-making processes, and are underpaid due to gender inequality.

But as a chairperson, activist, miner, and leader of all women in her area, who is also part of the Women Human Rights Defender Network Uganda, she seeks to ensure that these women's rights are respected and upheld.

She voices their needs any chance she gets, makes sure medical check-ups are done monthly—especially for sex workers—and ensures the creation of savings groups among them since men tend to be in control of money. She also counsels couples in case of domestic squabbles and makes sure that women are involved in communal work by creating opportunities for them, like communal cooking projects, which they earn from.

Through the joint effort of human rights defenders and women, the issues of GBV are gradually being tackled with the help of the *Count Me In!* consortium and Human Rights Defenders Network and its projects where women speak against the perpetrators and their unfair acts. Extractive companies are still on the increase, which potentially means more displacement and eviction of people, which will affect settlement and work. But it takes patience, passion, and commitment to either, stand and fight for your rights, or another person's. It all starts with you.

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Tribulations of the Salt Miners of Katwe

By Pinkleen Oinokwesiga
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The salt mining sector in Lake Katwe is very lucrative and employs many people, including women. Unfortunately, many of them still live as paupers because of the deeply entrenched patriarchal system which seems keen to subdue them. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that they often encounter incidences of GBV and land grabbing. Fortunately, the situation appears to be gradually improving.

Salt mining remains one of the major sources of livelihood for the people of Kasese residing around Lake Katwe. The infamous lockdown that was imposed by the government at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic aggravated the abuse and dangerous working conditions for the women who worked in those mines. During that period, an unforgettable incident occurred which remains prevalent in the mouths of the residents of the Katwe-Kabatoro town council to date.

A Chinese company developed an interest in acquiring the community salt pans when the government offered surface rights to the Chinese. This did not go down well with the residents of the area. A few elites took the initiative to read, dissect, and fully comprehend the contract that had been signed and after, search for and craft out possible solutions. As a minority group that earns from mining and fishing, they were concerned since their sole source of income was being taken away from them, and their freedom would be, too, over time.

The lake employs over six thousand people in the Katwe-Kabatoro town council—single mothers, widows, and orphans—who own the salt pans. Therefore, having foreigners in possession of this land would be disadvantageous to them and their community, besides the subsequent environmental degradation that would result from letting them operate the pans.

‘The locals were not considered or consulted, which made the situation unpredictable since our security was not guaranteed. The project seemed like it was meant for personal gain rather than communal benefit,’ someone retorted.

The residents, therefore, decided to resist this injustice and fight for their land. Surprisingly, some leaders in the area did not like the fact that this group of elites had chosen to stand against their ‘progress’ and were ‘hindering development.’

They branded them enemies of progress and had them arrested—thirteen men and one woman. However, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Their brave act brought on board partners, supporters, and organisations who shared their vision of protecting and defending human rights.

Twerwaneho Listeners Club, based in Fort Portal, and the Women Human Rights Defenders Network also came on board and supported the team in creating awareness by making the necessary noise. Eventually, it paid off, because the company left the site.

Through some of those organisations, people have learnt where, how and to whom they can run in similar situations. Some people, especially young mothers, received skills training and protective gear to use when mining.

In a world where toxic patriarchy is deeply entrenched, women and girls have consistently found themselves in the brunt of its harsh consequences. The unequal balance of power has manifested at home in the form of domestic violence, and at work where they get little to no pay and no space to speak on the issues affecting them.

This has seen them cower whenever issues that affect them are raised, as they are afraid it may lead to their expulsion. Additionally, their lack of involvement in leadership spaces has seen a lack of articulation of women’s issues.

They face numerous risks and challenges while working in the salt mines, like lack of enough protective gear which affects their bodies, especially the skin, causing dryness and irritation. There is also no market for their goods, and an inability to budget for their hard-earned money since the financial aspect has been reserved for men, denying them financial autonomy.

There have been cases of abandonment by their spouses who go on to remarry, after acquiring the money, leaving them with the overwhelming burden of fending for their families.

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since they claim that their women have low libido due to the dehydration caused by the salt. Those that try to fight for their basic rights are often abused, humiliated, intimidated, stereotyped, and, in some cases, arrested. A founder of Women with a Vision and the Katwe Salt Pan Owners and Workers Association felt there was a need to fight for their rights and be the voice of the victimised salt pan owners and workers.

She is passionate and, with the full support of her husband, has created a safe space for women to air out their issues during their weekly meetings. She established herself by standing up against all the stereotypes towards women by promoting inclusiveness through the associations.

She recruits more women into this space, creates awareness and sensitises women about their rights, ensures peace through couples counselling, encourages a saving culture amongst them, and promotes backyard farming.

These women sometimes give back to the community by cleaning the salt pits that get clogged with polythene or bottles. Since women are more vulnerable to specific gender-based risks, she has encountered challenges as she tries to give solutions and be the voice for women in different families facing GBV.

From being nicknamed Mandela and bush lawyer, to being slapped, and getting constant threats to her and her family. ‘He said, “I want to cut you into pieces and if that is not achieved, I will go to a witch doctor and bewitch you,” she was once told.

After a series of workshops and training in the community, many women have learnt to speak out against violence and fight for their rights. They work in groups with the motive of being the voice for all by leaving no woman behind and empowering each other to stand against intimidation.

They aim to involve the police, partner with organisations, and watch each other’s backs despite the hostile environment. There is a fire that is always ignited and instilled in them as these challenges arise, but with support from their families, persistence, and passion, they can strike a balance between work and family.

This supports and fuels the continuity of human rights defenders. At the same time, land defenders voluntarily perform their duties in partnership with the police, lease out their land, and ensure that people in the community have the necessary and right documents for land ownership. In turn, this increases how they protect their land and territories (as a community) from extractive projects that might be detrimental to them. ▽