

# Upholding Human Rights: Bridging the gender - environment divide

## EXPLOITATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Globally, unsustainable economic development and the run on natural resources put communities dependent on these resources under immense pressure. It is widely acknowledged that large-scale dams, mines and land conversion projects frequently force people off their lands and cause huge environmental damage. What is still insufficiently recognised, however, is that women suffer disproportionately from the negative impacts of these large-scale development projects.

Women are expected to feed and take care of their families. Resettlement to less productive land thus forces women to work larger tracks of marginal land to grow the same amount of food, and causes women and girls to walk further for fetching water and fuel. Compensation for lost land is often negotiated only with the male head of the household. And on industrial mining sites sexual intimidation and harassment of women and girls is rampant.

Meanwhile, in decision-making bodies that govern the use and control of natural resources - water boards, unions, and land use fora - women are often not at the table and power is vested in the hands of the men. This further limits women's ability to effectively defend and promote their rights and interests.

**Lindiwe Matshiane** lives in the community area Togologo in Middelburg, Mpumalanga, South Africa, only a few meters away from the Coal Shanduka mine, which started operations in 2003:



"When we saw the mining company coming into our area many of us thought of job creation and changing life opportunities. Little did we know that the truth is otherwise. The mines affect our water, our land and the air we breathe. The rivers are toxic and the land has become infertile. Our houses are cracking, and dust from the mine blasting blows directly into our community. Many people in my area are suffering from illnesses such as tuberculosis, asthma and bronchitis, leading to an increase in women's unpaid care work. We also have a high number of women getting miscarriages because of the blast. Our women are not consulted at all, or are unable to attend meetings where decisions are made due to their heavy role as caretakers. Women also face sexual intimidation and assaults in and around the mine.

We are tired of this mining that puts profit first before people. The mine downplays the environment, human rights and human dignity to live in a healthy and clean environment. Our government officials are not doing anything to defend our rights, they are failing to hold this mining company accountable. We were never consulted or informed, but now we have been receiving information on our rights and we have a women's group meeting regularly. We will use this information and pass it on to other members of the community. We will fight for the future of our children and our well-being."

## POTENTIAL OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

In a four-year project (2014-2018), Both ENDS, ActionAid and their partners, set out to explore how the Human Rights system could be used to support women whose rights are threatened or infringed upon, notably the Human Rights to Water, to Food and to a Healthy Environment. While these rights are increasingly recognized by the United Nations and its members, so far experiences both in the effective implementation of these rights by governments as well as in the claiming of these rights by citizens, are limited.



Stone mine near Bhagaguda village, Panna, India

## INDIA, SOUTH-AFRICA AND KENYA

The project focuses on three emerging economies that are rich in natural resources like minerals, oil or gas: India, South Africa and Kenya. While these countries have strong legal frameworks related to environment and human rights, enforcement is weak or lacking, and local communities frequently are unaware about their rights.

The project enables specific case-building work to take place to generate evidence on how large-scale development projects impact the human rights of women. Communities confronted by these projects gain awareness of their rights, and women in particular are empowered to prepare strategies to advocate against interventions, and to claim their rights. At the same time, women leaders are supported to increase their political participation in relevant local and national decision-making processes.

In South -Africa, the project focuses on Mpumalanga, the centre of coal, gold and platinum mining in the country. This province has a long history of coal mining and is known for the massive impacts on people's health and access to land and water.

In Kenya the project addresses the impacts from oil exploration and salt mining in the Kitui, Baringo, Taita Taveta en Kifili Counties. In India, the project looks into iron ore, coal, uranium and diamond mining, as well as forestry conversion projects and the impacts on the indigenous Adivasi communities in 5 Indian States (Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu).

As those who speak up and demand justice run real risk of violence and repression through intimidation or worse specific attention is paid to ensure that female human right defenders are sufficiently protected.

## INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

The context specific work in India, Kenya and South-Africa is the basis for all project partners to increase awareness and knowledge of the gendered impacts of large-scale development projects among international donors, policy makers and the UN constituency. We want to encourage them to recognize the intricate links between gender, human rights and environment and better integrate these correlations in

their policies and interventions. By showing women's efforts to claim their rights in the three countries, we aim to contribute important insights in how to improve the implementation of internationally recognized human rights to the benefit of local communities, and women in particular.

## PROJECT PARTNERS

ActionAid Netherlands, ActionAid Kenya, ActionAid South Africa, Both ENDS Netherlands (Project Coordinator), Centre for International Environmental Law (CIEL) based in Washington DC and Geneva, and India-based organisations Dhaatri (Adivasi Resource Centre for Women and Children) and Keystone Foundation. The project is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. See also <http://www.bothends.org/en/Themes/Projects/project/51/Human-Rights-and-Gender>

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