

Feminist Solidarity in the Resistance to Extractivism and Construction of Alternatives:

Charmaine Pereira speaks with Marianna Fernandes and Nzira de Deus.

Charmaine Pereira spoke to two of the feminists organising a path-breaking transnational project of feminist mobilisation and solidarity building across three former Portuguese colonies—Mozambique, Angola and Brazil. The discussion focused on what was involved in bringing together women from these three countries for a week-long workshop in Maputo to share experiences and strengthen feminist solidarity in struggles against extractivism. All participants were actively engaged in such struggles and women's efforts to construct alternatives to extractivism were integral to the overall process. The workshop organisers were feminists from *Fórum Mulher*¹, World March of Women, *MovFemme*², *Ondjango Feminista*³, and WLSA⁴, based in Mozambique, Angola and Switzerland, and the workshop was organised with support from Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). The edited conversation below took place via Skype on 28 August 2019 in Maputo, Geneva and Abuja. Marianna Fernandes, a Brazilian based in Switzerland, is an active member of the World March of Women, a feminist anti-capitalist movement. Nzira de Deus is the Mozambican National Co-ordinator of the World March of Women and works at *Fórum Mulher*, a member organisation of the World March of Women. Further information about the workshop content is available in Fernandes and Manusse (2020).

Charmaine Pereira: Can you tell me how the idea of this solidarity meeting and consciousness raising event was born?

Marianna Fernandes: It was in the context of the Feminist Reflection and Action meetings.⁵ People from Brazil, Mozambique and Angola worked together in one group and we started discussing how useful it would be if we could put grassroots women from these three countries, which have such historical ties, together in a workshop to discuss their struggles. And not only their struggles but what

alternatives are being built, because there *are* alternatives to the current models of exploitation of nature and of people. So, we talked about it—that it could be something interesting to do and emphasising from the beginning that our goal was to put grassroots women in dialogue together.

Nzira de Deus: We are in a region where most of the countries speak English and we speak Portuguese, so it is not easy to strengthen our struggle and to connect with other countries that are English-speaking. We saw this as an opportunity, especially for rural women, to share their analyses and experiences of what is happening on a day-to-day basis and hear about the challenges that women from other countries are suffering. Brazil, especially, is so far away that we think that the problems are only in our countries, or in our region, but this was an opportunity to see that the problems are also in other continents. The idea was to bring together this diversity, not just in terms of language but also region and continent, and reflect, build alternatives and strengthen solidarity among us as women, as people, and have some hope to change our countries.

CP: Can you tell me how you went about choosing the rural women? Where were they coming from?

ND: Marianna chose from Brazil, I chose from Mozambique, and Cecilia and Sizaltina chose from Angola. In Mozambique, we started by looking at the regions that are affected by extractivism and at women at the forefront of the struggles, and at women who were already working with us in these debates and reflections on the situation in the country, or region, or community.⁶ We started to map these women. The women were also part of other movements like Via Campesina, and they were connected with us, Via Campesina and the World March of Women. They share the same ideology and vision of the world we all want. So, we picked these women and invited them to join us and share what is going on and how they are facing the challenges in their environment.

MF: It was similar for us. It was very important that the women participating in the workshop were actually at the frontlines of the resistance to transnational corporations and extractivist enterprises. And we wanted the women to be representative of Brazil's diversity. Of course, we had a limited number of people we could bring but we tried to have some regional diversity and also bring women that are engaged in the frontlines of resistance. These are places where there are concrete struggles happening: places where these women are actually facing

challenges such as massive agribusiness enterprises, or having their livelihoods threatened by the possibility of the construction of huge hydroelectricity power dams, or women who are struggling against discrimination and the emergence and strengthening of racist public policies being implemented by the current right-wing government in Brazil. It was really important that these women were representative of the context that Brazil is living right now.

CP: And how many women did you have from each of the countries?

ND: From Mozambique, I think there were about 12, because we had a lack of funds to bring more. We had five from Brazil and two from Angola.

MF: I think there were more from Mozambique. There was one day that we went for a visit to a co-operative of peasant workers. There were the women in the workshop but also women that we met on our way and in the activities that we did outside. So, I would say that between 30 and 40 women were somehow touched by this experience.

ND: And from Mozambique, they were not just from Maputo but mainly from outside, in the communities that are affected by extractivism. So, Cabo Delgado, Tete, Manica—they are not from Maputo. We had to bring them to Maputo.

CP: How long was the event altogether?

MF: Five days, plus the day that they arrived and the day that they left.

CP: Were there any challenges in deciding who should come?

MF: The challenge when selecting the participants from Brazil was the limited space. We wanted to bring more, certainly, but we also wanted to be careful that the women who would attend would be able to participate fully and we did not want them to feel out of place. Four out of the five had never left the country before. Some of them had never even left their villages. You can imagine that this was not an easy task for us, the organisers, because it meant that we needed to give much more assistance than just the workshop time. For example, three of them had to get passports; they did not have passports. So, there were many logistical and bureaucratic difficulties that demanded a lot of organisation from us. One of them lived in a rural neighbourhood where, in order to get her passport, she needed to travel over I don't know how many hours of road, but she couldn't travel alone, so we had to have someone pick her up. There were many challenges in this sense. We also tried to observe diversity in terms of age, ethnic background and type of struggle in which the women are engaged.

ND: For us, we tried to mix them but also to have women from different regions. Mozambique is a large country. The women who were coming from outside had to take a bus to leave their community. We do not have good roads and it is very difficult to travel by road. From the community to the village and from the village or the province level to take a plane and come in to Maputo—it was a very stressful experience, especially for the women of Cabo Delgado. This is a province that was, and still is, suffering armed conflicts and the government does not know which groups are attacking the communities. So, for the women to have this mobility was also not so easy. Our army has been asking people, “Where are you going, who are you?” And people are also afraid to move because they do not know who is who. It is a very critical context that we have here. We have already moved into a conflict context; people are being killed and most of them are women.

CP: Is that primarily in Cabo Delgado?

ND: Yes.

CP: Although all three countries have Portuguese as their official language, were the participants all Portuguese-speaking?

MF: The Brazilians were all Portuguese-speaking, their first language is Portuguese. But I think that there was a little bit of difficulty with the accent. Brazilian and Mozambican Portuguese have different accents and I know that this posed a challenge for some women. But I think that, overall, it went well because we tried to use methodologies that were very participatory: the women worked in groups and would discuss amongst themselves, and then present to the other women. We tried to reduce the communication problem that could emerge. But I know sometimes the Mozambican Portuguese was hard for the Brazilians to follow and maybe vice versa. But it did not stop the workshop from happening (laughs)!

ND: For Mozambique, Portuguese is not the only language that we speak. In rural areas and communities, we have local languages. The women that attended the meeting speak Portuguese. Not at top level, because they were not so literate, but they were able to talk and I believe that it was enough. In other circumstances, if they had been able to express themselves in local languages, I believe they could have been even more outspoken. But I think they were very comfortable and they tried to participate actively. And it was not difficult to understand the Portuguese from Brazil since we have contact with the Brazilian community through television; we see a lot of soap operas. We are very familiar with Brazilian Portuguese, which

is very nice to hear. For us, it is soft, it's like music...

MF: That's nice (laughs). I will share that.

ND: It was funny because we understood that the women from Brazil saw us differently, like, "You speak Portuguese, but in a different way". It was interesting.

MF: It was certainly interesting to see the contrast between the situations. For Mozambique, since they have Brazilian soap operas and maybe they receive a lot of information about Brazil, the language might not have been a big challenge. But for the Brazilians, it was a challenge. Unfortunately this says a lot about how, although these are countries – *people* more than countries – that share a lot in terms of their history, their current struggles and their creativity, still, in Brazil, we hardly hear about Mozambique or Angola. So, I think that this is also a victory of our initiative: we started building bridges. Of course, there are other bridges, but we started one through feminist solidarity. I think that is very powerful.

ND: Yes, definitely.

CP: And the five days that you had together, how did you organise that time?

(Both laugh)

MF: Everyone got very tired afterwards. Our workshop theme was "Feminist Solidarity in the Resistance Against Extractivism and the Construction of Alternatives". So, we tried to break down the theme into crucial issues. The first thing that we saw was the need to discuss sexual division of labour and the organisation of systemic oppressions, like capitalism, racism and neo-colonialism, and how these are connected with patriarchy. This was already like one-and-a-half days. After that, we also wanted to discuss how the body and the territory are connected. This is not necessarily because of an innate association between Woman and Nature, but because of the sexual division of labour and the way women interact with nature through their multiple forms of labour, be it productive, reproductive, visible or invisibilised. So we wanted to have this discussion about how our body is our first territory, and how the system that exploits nature is the same system that exploits women's bodies, sexualities and labour force. These were key issues that we wanted to discuss and we tried to dedicate one session to each of these issues. And of course, to alternative-building.

ND: We tried to create a dynamic that involved presentations but not PowerPoints, just talk, combined with group work. We ate together many times.

MF: Yeah! This was the most amazing part!

ND: We had moments of celebration, and we had the opportunity to walk around, not just stay in one room. Work inside, work outside. We tried to combine different spaces and do different things. We had a party too, which was very nice.

MF: Many of the sessions happened under the mango tree of the FES office. We had a lot of dancing, of course. When it comes to Brazil, Angola and Mozambique, there is dancing, clapping and music for everything. I really think that a strong point of this workshop was the methodology.

ND: Other strong points that stand out were going to the field, visiting a community where women had the opportunity to explain what was going on in that association or community. Interacting with other participants and eating the food prepared by the women in that community was also very interesting. We had these interactive moments that were very powerful. We talked, we agreed, and sometimes we agreed to disagree. Sometimes we had a common understanding on some points, and other times we would say, "OK, we don't understand". But it was very relaxing and very spontaneous. I think it was very strong in that way.

CP: Were there some issues on which you disagreed?

ND: On the understanding of some concepts. I remember when we were talking about agroecology.

MF: Yeah!

ND: We had a debate on "what is what", how we understand things, and we came to a certain perspective, especially on this point, about what is, in fact, agroecology.

CP: The debate on "what is what", was that about how you come to an understanding of anything?

MF: I think it was interesting because sometimes we had different names to refer to the same thing, or sometimes we used the same names to talk about different things. What was interesting was that it was not a conceptual discussion, it was a discussion of our practices based on our daily experiences, on things that we live every day. So, I remember, for instance, in the discussion about agroecology, that some of us were saying, "Agroecology is something new", and then others recalled, "No, agroecology is just rescuing ancestral knowledge that was taken from us and which we are now claiming". In this sense, there was a healthy disagreement. In the end, we were basically talking about the same thing.

CP: So, embedded in the process of talking about practices and experiences, you were also discussing concepts?

ND: Yes, that's what we wanted to say: we were discussing how we understood the concepts, the practice versus the theory, and how we felt about this. For us in the movement in Mozambique, working with women who are not so literate, it was very important for them to be able to name something, to say, for example, "OK, I can simplify things. The short name for all of this is agroecology. So if I am preserving the natural environment, and I am engaged, I understand the importance of women's participation, decision making, and I put all this information in one package, all of what I'm doing, the name for this is agroecology". Because sometimes we see a lot of words being used to explain one thing. When we finished giving an explanation, we would use a word that is theoretical. So, to talk about the patriarchal system, we would say, "We don't want the men beating women, we don't want violence, we don't want to be exploited." To end the discussion, we explained that the name for these practices is patriarchy. It was very interesting to have this discussion. Brazil has a long history of talking and reflecting about this and Brazilian feminists are very articulate in how they explain things. For us it was very important to talk about the concepts.

MF: To reinforce what Nzira has just said, among the Brazilians, there was someone who could read but could not write. We needed to be sure that this would not stop her from fully participating. Sometimes we are very colonised in our imagination of what knowledge is, right?

CP: Yes.

MF: So, we also tried to get out of this by understanding that just because someone cannot write, it does not mean that she has no knowledge. On the contrary. For example, as soon as we stepped out of the room and started moving in the field, this woman would name a lot of the plant species that she saw. I can read and I had no idea what I was looking at. She was able to name them and give their uses. We were valuing our diverse knowledges, putting them together, without saying that one is more important than the other.

CP: That is a really critical point, I think, and as you said, the methodology you used was central to that. I want to know how, through this five-day event, you were able to surface two other concepts: gender and power. How did they come out in the course of your interactions?

MF: We did not use the word "gender" much. I don't recall us using the word "gender". I don't know if you remember this, Nzira.

ND: No, I don't remember.

MF: But that does not mean that gender discussions were not there, of course they were. We used a lot of other categories, such as “sexual division of labour” and “patriarchy”. And we talked about “woman” a lot. I think that when the discussion about “power” came about, it ended up being a discussion about gender as well. For instance, I recall very clearly the discussion about power; it was when we discussed violence, domestic violence, or the types of violence a woman has faced. Many of the women knew that the reason men were inflicting violence on them was *because* they were women. This came out in many of the testimonies, because a lot of women shared very delicate stories with us there. I think that the discussions about gender and power were both grounded in concrete experiences at the level of each woman but at one point we realised these are shared experiences. Everyone in this room, at one point or another, had faced violence somehow.

ND: I think that another moment for discussing power was when we talked about the power of the international corporations and also countries that have tried to control all the natural resources of other countries. We talked about the capitalist system and how it works and why it happens like this. So, we talked about power related to the corporations and to domination, the move to dominate the Global South and why and how we have to resist. And why this is happening. And also, a bit about justice.

CP: When you did get to talk about resistance, how did you do that?

MF: The women were talking about their communities. We would talk about, let's suppose that a corporation was doing X, and they would say, “In my community, it happened in this way ...” and someone else would say, “Oh no, in my community, what we see is [...]”. The discussion was based on the context, so what was their struggle? If it was against agribusiness, if it was against mining, if it was against hydroelectric dams – what is the diagnostic of the reality that they live? And then, what women are doing there to face the problem. In the case of Brazil, they are practising agroecology in one territory. In another, the women organise in women-only groups where they try to influence local politics. They are joining national movements of women. These were the moments when we shared what we are doing to resist. And there is no ready-made formula to resist, it depends on the context. But one thing that became clear is the power that we have when we share, when we learn what other women in other territories are doing, their

situation may be a little bit different but overall there are many similarities in the way that extractivist industries and companies operate. When we learn that others are resisting in other territories, this has a very powerful effect.

ND: When we talk about resistance, we emphasise that it's not wrong to understand the importance of preserving our natural resources, our environment and our land or of defending our territories; it is important for us and for future generations. And we are not buying the discourse that says, "This [the status quo] is development, it's our future". So, resistance is also understood as the possibility to question, to raise our voices and make demands. This is what we as Mozambicans do. When you're not contesting what the government and companies are saying, if you keep silent, that means you're accepting what they are saying, or assuming that what government and companies are bringing are the best for us. Resistance is also understood for us as the possibility to choose and decide, particularly decide what we want and what is best for us. It is also understanding that this can come with consequences because the system wants to move in one direction, but we believe that our direction and way of doing things are the best ones. Another form of resistance that we talk about is defending our seeds; we don't accept the use of GMOs. We say that our native seeds are the best; we know how to preserve our seeds, we don't want to use GM seeds. Another aspect is building solidarity: when we come together and support each other. We do it a lot when we see companies that are coming to privatise common goods like water, we contest, and we say "No". We use our bodies to say "No", because this is a common good and we need to use this water for everybody, no one can come and privatise it. We have groups that mobilise themselves to go to stop privatisation efforts, saying "we're not going to move ourselves from this place until you stop". This has happened in Mozambique in certain communities. These are some examples that we can count and as Marianna says, they are based on our lives and our experiences and what happens in our contexts. When we take some actions, or even when we do not take action, we're conscious that this action that we are or are not taking is to stop a proposal that we disapprove of.

CP: Are women very engaged in the struggle against GMOs in Mozambique?

ND: Yes, yes, women are very engaged in this struggle. Government had already started to take on some of the GMOs, testing and giving GM seeds to farmers. We've been contesting this and the rural women gave a declaration to the president,

saying something along the lines of, “We do not want GMOs, why are you forcing us? Our demands are here, please follow the demands because we are the people, we are the farmers, you have to respect what we want”. So, from that step which the women took, the president retreated. Now, what government has said is that they want to appoint one person to sit at the table and talk. They understand that women have the capacity to analyse the phenomena, the context and the steps that government and companies are taking and say, “No, this is not what we want”. The women have knowledge already; they also know what is happening in other countries and communities. So, they are engaged in the process and they have a clear position on what they do and don’t want.

CP: There are anti-extractivist groups and movements out there in different countries. What would you say is distinctive about a feminist approach to extractivism?

MF: It is a tricky question. A lot of the women who are engaged in struggles against extractivism may be organised in women-only movements and also in movements where the majority are women or where the group is more mixed. Does that make them less feminist? I don’t think so. But I also think that it is important to be attentive to the feminist dimension, to push this agenda. It’s thanks to feminism that women are now able to say that the system that allows extractivist companies to come into a given territory and steal the sources of water and appropriate land and do all of these things is the same system that profits from keeping women’s labour unpaid or underpaid or devalued. I think that feminism is what allows us to claim for societal change and not merely reforms, because we know that some agendas do not contemplate issues related to equality, issues related to feminist agendas. It will only be possible to stop all these things that we are denouncing regarding extractivist enterprises in a world where women are not oppressed. Otherwise, it is not feasible because the problem is systemic. When women are engaged and are claiming feminism, they make this connection clear. And I think that this may be what distinguishes feminist debates and practices against extractivism from others that are not clearly feminist.

ND: I totally agree with Marianna. I think that a feminist approach is deeper. I think it brings different angles of analysis because it’s [about] fighting for a society where we are equal and there is no discrimination. It’s fighting for justice, for freedom, for peace. I think that Marianna was very clear. We have different ways

of fighting this battle, and different spaces in which to do it. There is no single feminism, there are feminisms. But there are principles that we cannot negotiate and we have to focus on those principles rather than on the things that we disagree about. If we are together on the principles of feminism, we can move.

MF: Just to give an example, Charmaine, which I think is interesting. I remember one of the women who is organised in a mixed group that is fighting against massive flower cultivation with pesticides that is actually contaminating water and appropriating land on behalf of bigger private companies. And she is in this mixed group of men and women. The women from her community decided that it was important to self-organise in women-only groups. And she shared with us during the workshop that one of her colleagues in the women-only group was being beaten by her husband, who also happened to be in the struggle against the massive flower cultivation enterprise. The women got together and first they approached her to say, "This cannot continue, this cannot go on". But then after that they approached *him* to say, "Look, this makes no sense that you are fighting against the initiatives of the companies to steal our land and our water, and you beat your wife at home. It's contradictory, you cannot do both". So, the women know that it is not OK to fight against extractivism and still come home and beat your wife. On the contrary, the women and men need to be together on the frontline, be equally entitled to political voice, and be equally respected as leaders and activists, to face challenges.

ND: Yeah, that's it. What the women are still asking me is when we're going to...

MF: To do the next meeting! (Laughs)

ND: We could receive everyone here or go to Angola or to Brazil, to see how the women are fighting, how they are resisting, how they are building alternatives. The workshop experience was so powerful for them and they want more. And we are saying, where are we going to find the resources to do this? Because after the workshop...

MF: That is a challenge as well.

ND: Yeah, it is a challenge. After the workshop they felt that they had this sorority. They have this community, they are not alone and they can scream; when they scream, the others in other continents, other countries, they are listening. There is someone there, they're listening there. So, it is very important to have these moments together. It was a very beautiful experience which I had the opportunity

to engage, I liked it so much because we were three young women that were pushing this process. We had another colleague, but she was so busy and we tried to do our best. I felt so proud of us for making it happen. It shows that we are really connected; we were able to engage on this and we also gained some respect. CP: This conversation and the report of the workshop (Fernandes and Manusse, 2020) complement one another because the report is full of information about the thinking, the analysis and the politics that were being grappled with in a very concrete way during the workshop. Thanks so much to both of you!

Endnotes

- 1 *Fórum Mulher* - the Women's Forum or Network in Mozambique.
- 2 *Movfemme – Movimento das jovens feministas de Moçambique* (Young feminists' movement of Mozambique).
- 3 *Ondjango Feminista* - Feminist Gathering, Angola. Mouzinho and Cutaia (2017) discuss the background to the formation of the *Ondjango Feminista*.
4. Women and Law Southern Africa.
5. The first meeting of the African Feminist Reflection and Action Group was held in Maputo in November 2017; this and subsequent meetings have been convened by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Participants at the first Meeting comprised 27 women—feminist scholars, activists, trade unionists and political party members—from 16 African countries: Botswana, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Swaziland (renamed by the King as Eswatini) and Uganda. Since 2017, the African Feminist Reflection and Action Group has been working on alternatives to current models of economic development and political participation.
6. The feature article by Teresa Cunha and Isabel Casimiro in this issue presents a feminist perspective on extractivism in Mozambique and women's efforts to resist this and identify alternatives.

References

- Fernandes, Marianna and Manusse, Rosete. 2020. "Feminist Solidarity in the Resistance and Construction of Alternatives to Extractivism". Available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mosambik/16791.pdf>
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