

WoMin – The Journey from Research Initiative to an African Ecofeminist Alliance

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Introduction—the political background to and rationale for WoMin’s existence

Oil was identified about five years ago in Nwoya district [Uganda]. They have started to install infrastructure and the [extraction site] is under tight security. Since people discovered the oil, there has been land grabbing... so now people are buying up the land—government officials, prominent businesspeople—in the name of investment. If these powerful figures discover that the people don’t have land titles, we will just wake up and find ourselves with nothing. For women, the situation is tough. It is the women who are displaced. The men will take the compensation money and find their own way to cope: concubines, drinking, drugs. But now the women with children have to find a place to live, like squatters. To survive, many are forced to become casual labourers on big plantations owned by these top government officials, and they are paid peanuts.¹

Ever since Tendele [coal mining company] started to mine here in Somkhele [northern KwaZulu Natal, South Africa] in 2006, my grandmother started to cough and when she went to the doctor, it was said that she has a layer of coal on her chest. She was asked if she lives next to a mine, and she said Yes. The doctor then gave her a letter to take to the mine for the mine to pay for her medication... but the mine always said they will get back to her and they never did till we lost her... she passed away in 2016.

(Ngobeni, 2018)

These are snippets of stories addressing the experience of millions of women across Africa who carry the externalised costs of a development paradigm founded on the large-scale exploitation of natural resources. This extractivist model has been privileged as the development pathway out of poverty for many countries in Africa.

These projects prioritise corporate profit over the well-being and livelihoods of local citizens. And they result in the externalisation of significant environmental and social costs to the nation, to local communities and to women who routinely suffer a disproportionate burden of harm because of a patriarchal division of labour and their unequal power to make decisions in their families and communities.

The typical costs are forced displacement from land, the destruction of land and natural resource-based livelihoods, ecological damage and climate change in the long-term, the grabbing and pollution of key resources such as forests and water bodies, increased care work linked to ill-health of family members, and increased interpersonal violence, specifically violence against women. Governments, corporations, development banks and financiers seduce communities with promises of jobs and basic services, but these rarely come to pass and almost never benefit women in communities. The benefits are typically channelled to leading members of ruling parties, powerful actors in the state, and local elites such as traditional leaders, councillors and businesspeople. In the words of a local woman activist organised under SOFLECO (*Solidarité des Femmes sur le Fleuve Congo*– Women defending the Congo River), which is contesting the construction of the Inga 3 hydropower dam in the Democratic Republic of the Congo:

.... With Inga 1 and Inga 2 we didn't get any benefit. We can't feel any benefit from it. Nothing at all. Nor do we have any rights. They don't respect our rights, mainly SNEL [national electricity company]. They replaced the government. SNEL and the government have become siblings, maybe an older brother and a younger brother. The dam is now for their benefit. They are the ones who know the entry and the exit of the money. It's as though the village didn't have any power, as though the village didn't have any dam.

However, the village has a big dam which sends power to foreign lands.²

Whilst extractives, energy and large-scale infrastructure development projects are posited by governments, financiers and development banks as the road to development, women and their communities across the region are contesting this development logic. These frontline communities are saying “NO!” and defending their development sovereignty. Their resistance is often met with violence and conflict as corporations and governments collude to force community compliance with large-scale extractives and infrastructure projects. The violence perpetrated upon women by the military, police or private security firms of extractives corporations often takes a highly sexualised form. This gendered violence combines

with other forms of violent repression to instil fear and quell the resistance of dissenting communities. WoMin reads this violence as one expression of a deeply oppressive extractivist economy which exploits people, land and nature for material gain. See the [Rise against Repression online platform](#) which contains cases and testimonies of land and environmental defenders across the continent contesting large-scale natural resource extraction.

In the diamond fields of Marange, Zimbabwe activist Gladys Mavhusa describes how the mining activities disrupted her and her community's way of life, and put women in danger:

They displaced us from our lands and stripped away our freedom of movement. When our land became a restricted area, it meant that there was a boom gate to enter our town. This is where public transport would stop and the “officials” there would perform strip searches. Women would be searched in our mouths, our ears, everywhere, including private parts. Sometimes these officers did not change their gloves, using the same one on many women to the point that some of us began to develop infections.

(WoMin, 2017)

In these stories and experiences of the egregious impacts of extractives lie the genesis of WoMin. The group was launched in October 2013 as a regional alliance to support women's organising and movement building to resist destructive extractivism and propose the needed development alternatives from an African Ecofeminist perspective.

The early (her)story of WoMin

When WoMin started building in 2012, there was a dearth of analysis, thinking and concrete work on women, gender and extractives, specifically mining, oil and gas extraction, across the continent. Important work on women, land and food—research, organising efforts and campaigns—had been ongoing for many years, but from the start it was determined that this would not be a primary area of focus for WoMin. Our first step was to review the available literature, mainly on the continent but also beyond, and write six papers addressing key themes and issues related to women, gender and extractives, namely, the impacts of extractivist projects on women's lives, livelihoods and communities. The foci included land and food sovereignty, artisanal mining, women's bodies, and women miners. The

research drew on a wide body of literature spanning, *inter alia*, HIV and AIDS, migration, the land and agrarian question, violence against women, and women's health. The papers were a critical entrée to the extractives terrain and have since been synthesised (see WoMin, 2020a).

In parallel with this first research effort, WoMin undertook a regional scoping of organisations and initiatives related in some way to the question of women, gender and extractives. This process would not have been possible without the support of the International Alliance on Natural Resources in Africa (IANRA), which was our host for the first few years and had a wide base of members across the continent. Friends and allies in ActionAid International, the Greengrants Global Fund, and some early funders of WoMin played a critical linking role at this time. From this process we were able to identify a preliminary layer of potential friends and allies for the WoMin Alliance, many of whom were invited to the first ever continental meeting on women, mining and extractives. This meeting took place in October 2013 in Johannesburg and drew together more than 60 activists from across the continent, as well as Brazil, Canada and the Philippines. This convening offered an important space for sharing, deepening analysis, and mapping out a programme of work together. WoMin and the first collection of research papers were launched at this regional convening (WoMin, 2013).

In the two years to follow, WoMin supported alliance members to conduct feminist participatory research in eight countries. The research was successfully concluded in seven countries—Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe—and the reports were published as a collection.³ This research was critical for a number of reasons. It (a) drew the attention of organisations to the neglected question of mining and its impacts on women; (b) encouraged new organisations to explore a neglected area of work; (c) placed organisations in a new relationship with women in communities, now asked to play a leading role in participatory enquiry; and (d) helped to deepen knowledge on women, mining and extractives at a continental scale. The research was not without its complications, given that WoMin as a regional organisation could only provide support to prioritised countries from a distance due to significant capacity constraints. At this time, WoMin had one full-time staffer and three part-time consultants in the team. As a result, the quality of the research process and outputs varied greatly, as many organisations were challenged

by a radically different positionality relative to women in communities, and a research process that required commitment to, and some experience in, feminist and participatory analysis and practice. Despite these constraints, the process offered a route to galvanising interest and deepening knowledge on the part of participating organisations and community partners.

The research was later consolidated into a series of short pamphlets and a synthesis paper setting out the key findings of the research—“that the impacts of extractive industries on land, water and food systems, the communal wealth from which women sustain livelihoods for families and communities, are so damaging that in the long term, the cost of mineral and oil-based development tend to outweigh benefits” (WoMin, 2015). This finding challenged the analysis and promises for Africa’s regeneration through mining, as outlined in the preeminent “strategy for Africa’s industrialisation in the 21st Century”, the African Mining Vision and accompanying policy documents.

In the very early period of building—2013 to 2014—we also undertook learning exchanges and supported regional participation in the two World Social Forums in Tunisia. WoMin convened two more regional platforms: a sub-regional women and coal exchange, “Women Stand their Ground Against Big Coal” (in Johannesburg and several field sites in South Africa, in January 2015) and a regional meeting in October 2015 on climate, energy and food, held in Port Harcourt, in the Niger Delta. WoMin’s work on energy and climate, “Women Building Power” (WBP), was birthed from these two important regional convenings. In both these spaces, we established very firmly our politics of centring affected women’s voices and leadership, with the NGOs playing a secondary and supportive role.

WoMin was hosted by IANRA from 2013 until January 2016, when WoMin started to operate as a fully independent organisation. WoMin’s independence was decided by its oversight group of twelve women activists from eight countries, nominated at the October 2013 launch meeting. In January 2015, this group, which gave strategic guidance to WoMin in the absence of a governing body, determined that WoMin should be built as a women-led, women’s rights alliance firmly oriented towards women’s organising and movement building regionally. WoMin registered itself as a Trust in July 2015 and, by January 2016, had an office, a set of basic organisational and finance policies, and the rest of the architecture required to function as an organisation.

From 2014, WoMin started to consider how best to support feminist movement building through political formation. In August of that year, we cooperated with the southern African Rural Women's Assembly (RWA) and the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa (OSISA) to convene a regional dialogue and exchange between key feminist political education and leadership formation efforts in the region. The space drew together WoMin, the RWA, Fórum Mulher⁴, JASS (Just Associates) and Akina Mama wa Afrika⁵. Out of this grew a March 2016 WoMin feminist movement building school which was undertaken in partnership with JASS. The school would not have been possible without their collaboration, generosity, and openness to supporting the formation of a new feminist organisation. The collaboration was important in provoking WoMin in respect of its feminist orientation, its understanding of the sources of women's oppression, and its thinking about movement building in the context of extractivist capitalism.

Subsequent schools have built on lessons and provocations made in this early history and evolved in directions which are well aligned with our social ecofeminist political positioning. We have used these schools to deepen analysis of women's pivotal role in social reproduction and how this labour undergirds capital's accumulation process, women's relationships to food, land and natural resources, and how extractivist capitalism disrupts these ways of life and ways of sustaining livelihoods. Other foci include understanding the architecture of the global finance system and how local struggles are implicated within this, understanding the systemic violence of the extractivist economy, and creating space for well-being and collective care through one-on-one counselling and collective support.

The middle-years – WoMin evolves organisationally and politically

Between 2014 and early 2016, WoMin operated on a skeleton staff of two, supported by various external consultants. By the end of 2016, a year of quite rapid growth and transition, we had expanded to a team of seven, with two staff based in Zimbabwe and one staff member working out of her home base, Cameroon.

Since WoMin's inception, we have grappled with many questions related to the building of a feminist organisation. How should decisions be taken? How should staff and resources be managed? And what are the implications for accountability within and without? This commitment to feminist principles

has shaped organisational policies and many internal systems, but we still have a long road to travel. We have stumbled and made errors, like any organisation, but there has been a genuine openness to reflect, learn, explore, and make the needed adjustments. In early 2019, it became clear that we needed to return to important conversations about what feminist organisation is and how we could deepen the advancement of our political vision and commitment internally.

WoMin's work also evolved politically, starting in 2015. Coinciding with our decision to build as a women's rights, women-led alliance, the WoMin oversight group adopted a four-pronged programmatic or thematic strategy. The first arm is the focus on energy and climate justice, launched as "Women Building Power" in 2016. Our second prong is work on women's rights of consent with respect to large-scale extractives and development projects. Our third area of work is focused on extractivism, militarisation, securitisation and violence against women. WoMin's fourth work focus addresses the cross-cutting organisational commitments to advance feminist organising and movement building. The key tools supporting these processes are the feminist schools and feminist participatory action research. Allied to this is the work on ecofeminist post-extractivist development alternatives to dominant extractivism.

In all of WoMin's work historically, a position asserted at the very first convening in October 2013, we advance alternatives to the dominant development model which is profit oriented, destroys ecosystems and exacerbates climate change, exploits cheap and unpaid labour, oppresses women and people of colour, and is deeply violent. The support to feminist organising and movement building is about advancing alternative power and a different way of living and being with each other; it is therefore a central part of the alternative for which we strive. As we organise, so too do we work to build a living example of the world we dream of. The work on consent rights—specifically, the right of communities, and women within communities, to give or withhold consent for large-scale development affecting their land, livelihoods and bodies—is a core part of the development alternative. We imagine a world in which communities, societies and, very importantly, women within them, exercise democratised inclusive decision-making and a right to define and claim "development" on their own terms. Our Women Building Power work creates space to collectively craft women-centred, localised and democratically controlled renewable energy systems.

Our work on alternatives is powerfully held together by our focus on the “Just Transition”, read from an African Ecofeminist perspective. This work is at an early stage, involving collaboration with more than ten other organisations and collectives committed to building a regional charter on development alternatives, as defined by the majority of African women (WoMin *et al.*, 2018).

We have also journeyed far in defining our organisational identity: are we a women’s rights or feminist organisation? WoMin’s positioning has been under debate since October 2013, when the regional convening ruptured into intense debate and open conflict about whether feminism should be a central facet of social and economic change in families, communities, societies and the world. Different streams of thought emerged in the discussions; some felt that there was no need to take on an explicitly “feminist” agenda and felt that holding a progressive, Marxist analysis was enough. Others suggested that a “women’s rights” approach would be adequate. There were also those who felt that feminism was a Western-imposed concept that could not speak to African experiences. Our discussions over many years have led us to nuanced and not fixed positions on our political positioning. In different contexts, women activists and their organisations and movements may not be able to publicly embrace a feminist position. The threats and risks for activists may be too great. We have full respect for this stance. In other situations, an explicit feminist positioning may undermine the possibility for tactical alliance in a project or campaign. For political reasons, therefore, we may not always assert an explicit feminist position.

Our understanding about feminism has also evolved to respond to the ideas and perspectives of the grassroots women we are connected to, through 37 sites of resistance⁶ across 11 countries. These sites of resistance are varied, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where we are supporting communities and allies resisting the Grand Inga Project, to Sendou, Senegal where women activists and their NGO partners are organising against a coal plant. The women at the forefront of these struggles hold the most radical positioning amongst all of our partners and allies. It is women in communities who are confronting the power of corporates and the state; these women meet the greatest risk to their livelihoods and very lives. They are brave, clear and determined to oppose large-scale extractive development which is destroying their families and communities. They are also determined to defend their way of life on the land and its connections with nature—the basis

of their very survival. Their clarity of perspective and position has shaped the emergence and ongoing development of WoMin's ecofeminist orientation.

The next iteration of deep change—WoMin matures and grapples with a world in crisis

The questions or challenges we were tasked to navigate in 2019 and beyond have become quite explicit. The first of these has been our transition to a stronger campaigning orientation. Our work to date has focused on giving support to organising and movement building, forming networks, engaging in research and learning, building clear political positions, and forging alliances. Our task in 2019 onwards has been to maximise our campaign-building efforts which link active struggles in dozens of sites across more than ten countries. Campaigns are key to maximising our role and positioning as a regional alliance.

In early 2019, WoMin was engaged in building two campaigns. The first was *Right to Say NO*, a multi-organisational campaign asserting the right of communities, and specifically women within them, to claim their development sovereignty and give or withhold consent for large-scale projects. The second was a focused *energy campaign* which would target regional and international institutions and be forged hand-in-hand with friends and allies. The African Development Bank (AfDB) emerged as a possible target of this campaign, given its involvement in financing and co-financing extractivist projects across the continent, such as the Sendou Coal Plant in Senegal. We started investing quite heavily in strengthening an African network of CSOs and movements targeting the AfDB. Extensive campaigns scoping research was undertaken which, combined with work and perspectives from women organised under “Women Building Power”, would inform decisions about the focus, set of demands and form of this energy campaign. In addition, the *charter-building process addressing a just development agenda* for African women has been a wide organising effort which will eventually translate into a campaign.

Since the first half of 2019, WoMin has undergone several shifts in its strategy and approach. Firstly, the evaluation of WoMin's first five-year strategy was implemented during 2019 and informed the development of a new five-year organisational strategy (WoMin, 2020b). The new strategy largely built on the approaches and work established during the first cycle, with the formalisation

of a fourth programme area addressing existing work on the “Alternatives to Development”.

Just as we had started to implement the first operational plan under the new strategy, COVID-19 struck. By early March, we had withdrawn from all regional processes and halted staff travel. We embarked on the development of a Pan-African ecofeminist political economy analysis of the pandemic, which informed the development of a new COVID-19 strategy that would shape our approach in existing programmes, enable transformations in our ways of working and guide us in the building of new efforts.

Three major shifts in WoMin’s analysis, approach and work are evident over the last nine months. Firstly, we have begun a new project called “Organising in a Time of Crisis”. This aims to build resources and support for allies and partners that will enable new ways of working, organising, and acting in and through the perpetual crises related to climate, environment, conflict and war, migration, pandemics and failed economies. Secondly, given the significant transition into online working that COVID-19 has prompted, WoMin has invested in the technology, tools and skills we need to facilitate meetings, exchanges, training and public events online.

Thirdly, in the early period of the pandemic, WoMin identified the question of debt crisis as a critical question to take up with other groups. Debt impedes the ability of governments to mobilise financial resources to respond to the pandemic; the debt crisis is directly linked to resource extraction which siphons African wealth out of countries through illicit and licit financial flows, and which fuels new rounds of resource grabbing as countries hock their resources to settle debt and secure new loans. The call for debt cancellation must be argued for on the basis of the growing climate crisis and historically differentiated responsibility for carbon emissions causing climate change. WoMin has built a new partnership with the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt and to date, we have cooperated to build a political statement which has more than 300 signatories and established a loose Pan-African network. WoMin has also advanced the development of a month of action to Cancel the Debt, which will run from 20 February to 20 March 2021.

These new efforts and shifts in ways of working have been triggered by the COVID-19 crisis but will be sustained as WoMin, its allies and partners, and the women we stand with, navigate a world and an Africa in crisis.

Endnotes

1. Names were changed to protect the security of persons who gave this interview. Activists Alice and Sarah tell their story at the National Association for Progressive Environmentalists, Kwataninza Farmers Groups and WoMin: Uganda Feminist School, July 2018.
2. WoMin interview, Democratic Republic of Congo, December 2017.
3. See <https://womin.africa/archive/country-studies/>
4. Fórum Mulher is a women's rights network in Mozambique. They work to promote women's autonomy and solidarity, and advocate for women's economic, social, reproductive, and political rights through coalitions at the local, regional, and national levels.
5. Akina Mama wa Afrika (Kiswahili for "African women") is a feminist Pan-African development organisation based in Kampala, Uganda. The central pillars of the organisation's work are feminist leadership development, research and documentation, policy influencing and movement building.
6. A site of resistance could be a single community or many communities, all unified in their response to a large-scale mining, extractives or infrastructure project. WoMin is closely connected to, and supports, movements and organisations in 11 countries: Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

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