

WOMEN STAND THEIR GROUND AGAINST BIG COAL

By Samantha Hargreaves and Hibist Kassa

Battles between coal mining companies, the municipalities that host them and affected local residents are now drawing blood with last week's rubber-bullet shootings and arrests of activists (including key women organisers) fighting coal and demanding a decent life in Emahlaheni (formerly Witbank).

This battleground stretches east across the continent's main coal seam, out to Mozambique's Tete Province. There, Mama Life (we use a pseudonym to protect her from reprisal), a local farmer affected by coal digs, displacements and pollution by Vale, the Brazilian mining company, pleads, 'What is the point of development? We bear the cost of development, but do not receive the money made from mining. How do we fight back...?'

Mama Life is right. Coal kills people and devastates local environments. Coal divides communities when corporations form local alliances that are detrimental to the majority. Coal exploits labour, both paid mining jobs and unpaid women's work reproducing labour and community. Coal is notoriously fickle in price, with nearly a 40% price drop since 2011. And Coal contributes most significantly to climate change, and the destruction of our planet.

More than 50 grassroots women activists gathered from around the region in late-January 2015 to stand their ground against Big Coal. Their six-day exchange and strategy meeting involved dozens of organisations in South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana.

Coal is the fastest growing fossil fuel and the single largest contributor (40%) to carbon emissions which cause climate change. Climate change is projected to escalate due to the more than 1200 coal-fired power plants and related infrastructure projects proposed in over 65 countries.

The three largest plants under construction and design are Medupi, Kusile and 'Coal3', all in South Africa, which relies on coal for 94% of energy needs, with the principal consumers being mines and dirty industry. The Energy Intensive Users Group has 35 companies that consume 44% of all electricity, some at a deep discount.

If they and other polluters continue to use these levels of dirty energy, we will stay on track to a 4-degree temperature increase (according to the World Bank), but for Africa's interior that will mean up to 9 degrees. Women will take the brunt of this unprecedented catastrophe, which the charity Christian Aid estimates could kill 185 million Africans this century.

Coal's costs start at the point of extraction and include its transportation, combustion and processing into other products. Who bears these impacts? Local communities, workers and especially peasant and working class women, whose cheap (usually unpaid) labour subsidises the profits of polluting coal corporations.

Coal leads to sickness, displacement from stolen lands and food insecurity. This is a problem not only next to coal mines and power plants, but anywhere water supplies are diverted to industry needs and polluted.

The 'externalisation' of these costs include stresses on public services like healthcare, water, environmental monitoring and rehabilitation, once again mainly hurting poor and working-class black communities, women in particular. Costs are shifted from coal corporations and power utilities, who are thus able to preserve the myth of cheap coal.

This externalisation is starkly evident in Sasolburg, a large industrial town established by the petrochemical giant Sasol in 1954. Last month, the regional coal activists visited a group of women in Zamdela township, within walking distance of Sasol One, where coal is squeezed to make oil.

They explained how sinusitis and asthma are distressing their families. They showed how washing put out to dry in the morning is stained by polluted air before it is even taken off the drying line. Women caregivers nurse the ill but they suffer sicknesses of their own. There are grounds for concern that Sasol has polluted the entire area's water supplies. The firm's Secunda plant is the world's single largest source of greenhouse gas emissions.

Women from Mozambique, in turn, described their dislocations by Vale from productive fields close to markets and services. They now live in an isolated resettlement area, Cateme, which is dry, pitted with stones and has infertile soil. The land cannot be farmed and families are being starved, once again mainly affecting women who are responsible for growing, processing, and cooking most of the food eaten by rural households in sub-Saharan Africa.

Coal encroaches on community lands and livelihoods, but fails to create the promised work. When low-paid, short-term jobs are on offer in the mines and related industries, women are often compelled to offer their bodies, in the words of a young woman activist from Middelburg, Mpumalanga, "as a CV" for work. The Umsobo and Mimosa Coal mines are accused of such sexist practices by young women on the ground. A high rate of unemployment and pervasive sexual harassment ensures impunity thrives.

What the women participants to the regional exchange have also learned in their various struggles against Big Coal, is that the corporations have purchased allies in government and the ruling party, local traditional leaders and sometimes dogmatic trade unions. The women recorded how they have been harassed and threatened, side-lined for local municipal employment, and victimised during police violence against peaceful protests. One of the participants said: "When you speak...you never know what is going to happen to you."

Anti-coal movements in other parts of the world – even the United States – have won the scrapping of planned expansions, closure of existing mines and power plants, environmental rehabilitation, polluter-pays damages, and a shift to alternative

sources of energy. Emissions caps are also used by climate-conscious governments.

Because nothing less than our survival is at stake, this is the time to build alliances with diverse constituencies, including mining unions whose members need healthier jobs developing renewable energy. The regional movement of women fighting Big Coal and demanding an alternative is one critical force now gaining traction. It's a movement already tough enough to take rubber bullets from the Emahlahleni police, and to bounce back up for the next stand against Big Coal.

Hargreaves and Kassa work with [WoMin](#), a regional alliance of women's organisations and movements fighting deadly natural resource extraction, which led the *Women stand their ground against Big Coal* exchange.