

WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES OF EXTRACTIVISM

HOW FUNDERS CAN SUPPORT WOMEN
ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS

By Katrina Anderson and Mary Jane Real





Source: Wambui Gichobi | Survival Media Agency

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Introduction


This document is a synthesis of independent research conducted by the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA), Global Greengrants Fund, and the Strengthening Accountability in the Global Economy Fund (SAGE Fund). This cross-movement collaboration between three intermediary funds was supported by the Ford Foundation through the “Resilient Women and Natural Resources Initiative.” The purpose of this initiative is to expose how natural resource extraction both fuels and reinforces structural violence, with particular attention to the impacts on women and girls. Through learning, convenings and grantmaking, the partners seek to amplify the strategies and collective response of women on the frontlines of extractive struggles.

From 2021-2022, the initiative partners researched gaps and opportunities for strengthening support to women environmental defenders and their communities. Women impacted by extractivism experience the violence as structural, embedded in systems with a long history of patriarchal and racialized violence. Yet, civil society and philanthropic approaches favor tactical and short-term strategies that often fail to address root causes. This document is a tool to build a shared understanding of the systemic crisis, including the critical needs of women in frontline communities and gaps in support. This analysis lays the groundwork for a collective response.

Solutions to a crisis of this complexity are never straightforward. This moment requires layered strategies that provide urgent support to women defenders as well as long-term support to tackle the drivers of extractive power. This document provides opportunities for civil society and funders across a range of fields to find their entry points, captured in Opportunities and Ways Forward. This is a starting point for conversation, and an invitation to join the effort.



Summary of Research



GAGGA conducted a study in mid-2021 to find out how women and girl environmental defender (WGED) collectives, organizations and groups worldwide define structural violence; what kinds of structural violence they are facing in their contexts; and what their strategies are to prevent and respond to it. The study mapped 182 groups led by WGEDs, including 44 in Asia, 40 in Africa, 5 in Georgia and 93 in Latin America, and conducted a survey and interviews with regional and local WGEDs in GAGGA's network. Their views are captured in a synthesis document, [Structural Violence: Learning from Women and Girl Environmental Defenders](#), that also includes recommendations to funders.

Global Greengrants undertook an exploration of funder perspectives and grantmaking to better understand how funders are supporting women's environmental defense and addressing the violence women defenders face, as well as obstacles funders face in supporting this work. Research for this project included an analysis of grants awarded in 2014 and 2017 (most recent available data at the time of the analysis) by hundreds of foundations at the nexus of the environment, women, and gender-based violence, as well as interviews with 40 individuals across 30 philanthropic institutions. A report assessing the current priorities of foundation and corporate environmental funders, women's funds, and other grantmakers to funding at the nexus of women and the environment and gender-based violence will be published in 2023.



Source: Initiative for Coastal Development

SAGE conducted a cross-movement analysis of the needs and opportunities for supporting women and their communities involved in extractive struggles. SAGE engaged a team of eight consultants to interview women leaders and their allies in Africa, Asia Pacific, and Latin America. They collected nearly 100 interviews with women community leaders and defenders, social movement leaders, scholars, researchers, and civil society groups working from the local to global level and situated within diverse social movements. SAGE's report, [Building Power in Crisis: Women's Responses to Extractivism](#), centers the experiences of women in frontline communities and offers multiple entry points for funders, civil society, and social movements working across fields, including feminism, human rights, Indigenous Peoples, environment and climate.



Definitions

EXTRACTIVISM

A dominant economic model that relies on the removal of natural resources and raw materials on a massive industrial scale for export.¹ Crucially, the term extractivism pertains not only to the activity or the process itself, but also to the conditions under which these resources are extracted (such as the absence of consultation or consent of local populations) and the interests they serve (such as elite, corporate, and criminal interests rather than the public good).² To learn more about the characteristics of extractivism and its drivers, see the SAGE Fund report, [Building Power in Crisis](#).

WOMEN AND GIRL ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS (WGEDS)

Refers to women, girls, trans, intersex and non-binary people who face heightened risks when defending land, territory and the environment as a result of their gender, indigeneity, and other intersecting forms of discrimination or marginalization; and who experience particular forms of human rights violations, especially gender-based violence, for engaging in environmental defense.³ To learn more about how WGEDs experience structural violence, see the GAGGA report, [Structural violence: Learning from women and girl environmental defenders](#).

WOMEN IN FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES

Refers to a broad sector of women, trans, intersex and non-binary people directly impacted by extractive activity and/or engaged in extractive struggles. The term is inclusive of women and girl environmental defenders as well as other leaders or community members who may not identify as “defenders” out of choice or necessity.

STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Violence in the context of extractivism is embedded in economic, political, legal, social and cultural systems that enact harm on the marginalized to serve the interests of the powerful.⁴ Structural violence is also gendered, in terms of how it operates as well as who it benefits and harms. To learn more about gendered structural violence and the forms of violence it fuels and/or reinforces, see the SAGE report, [Building Power in Crisis](#).

These definitions were compiled over the course of the GAGGA/Global Greengrants/SAGE Fund research.

- 1 Alberto Acosta, “Extractivism and Neoextractivism: Two Sides of the Same Curse,” in *Beyond Development: Alternative Visions from Latin America*, ed. M Lang and D Mokrani (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute/Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2013), 61–86, https://www.tni.org/files/download/beyonddevelopment_extractivism.pdf
- 2 Zo Randriamaro, “Beyond Extractivism: Feminist Alternatives for a Socially and Gender Just Development in Africa” (Maputo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Mozambique, 2018), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/mosambik/15208-20190325.pdf>
- 3 See UN Human Rights Council, [Resolution 40/11](#) (2019), paras 1, 11, “Recognizing the contribution of environmental human rights defenders to the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development.”
- 4 Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91; Barbara Rylko-Bauer and Paul Farmer, “Structural Violence, Poverty, and Social Suffering,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Poverty* (April 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199914050.013.4>.

Source: Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) – Agua Zarca dam and Berta Caceres case



Gaps and Needs

Across philanthropy and civil society, there is a lack of conceptual clarity about structural violence in the context of extractivism, and little understanding of how or why women are differently impacted.

We are living in a moment with intersecting crises. The different language used in philanthropy and civil society to talk about the problems – mega-development projects, extractivism, environmental destruction or climate change – reflects a lack of conceptual clarity about how these multiple crises intersect and overlap, what is at stake, and what can be done about it. It also hinders the ability of social movements to coordinate on strategy or secure the resources they need to tackle big problems.

More recently, the term “structural violence” is being used to address the root causes of the intersecting crises that jeopardize the well-being of people and planet. But research shows few in philanthropy or civil society understand how extractivism emerges from, and reinforces, structural violence embedded in economic, political, and social systems. Similarly, a gender analysis about how extractivism harms women, trans, and non-binary people is generally lacking in discourse surrounding extractivism.

The starting place for civil society groups and funders often does not reflect the lived experiences of women who are impacted by extractive activities. Those who directly experience violence in frontline communities understand it as structural and multi-dimensional. Because access to land or territory is essential to the physical, emotional, spiritual and communal integrity of women in frontline communities, the loss or destruction of it produces manifold harm.

Source: Joel Likhovi | Survival Media Agency





Few funders understand the ways women environmental defenders face unique risks due to their gender.

- GAGGA’s field consultations revealed that WGEDs have a robust and comprehensive analysis of structural violence.⁵ For many, the experience of structural violence begins with the collective memory of pre-colonial and colonial structures of power and patriarchy and extends to state-sponsored corporate extractivism and violence, which they see as their biggest threat today. WGEDs experience structural violence in economic, legal and political systems that exclude them from decisions and limit their access to and control over land or territories.
- A [landscape analysis by the SAGE Fund](#) found that civil society organizations are more likely to conceptualize the violence of extractivism through the lens of their sector or movement rather than through the holistic lens of women living in frontline communities.⁶ For example, those working in the environmental justice field may more readily identify the political, legal and economic failures that lead to environmental violence, but focus less on other forms of structural violence, such as harms to women’s livelihoods from the loss of access to natural resources. Similarly, those in the human rights field tend to focus on gaps in legal corporate accountability or criminalization of human rights defenders but not

necessarily on the ways Indigenous and rural women are differently impacted by it. Consequently, there are gaps in understanding how extractivism operates to exclude and divide women, particularly women with intersecting forms of marginalization.

- Research into the funding landscape conducted by Global Greengrants revealed that very few funders understand the ways women environmental defenders face unique risks due to their gender.⁷ Where funders do take gender into account, they conceptualize structural violence narrowly as “gender-based violence,” and within this category as physical or sexual violence perpetrated by individuals. This is seen as directed towards cis-gendered women, and perpetrated by intimate partners but not security forces, government actors, or community members. The structural drivers of that violence, including capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and racism, rarely factor into the analysis.

5 GAGGA, “[Structural violence: Learning from women and girl environmental defenders](#),” (October 2021).

6 The SAGE Fund, “Building Power in Crisis: Women’s Responses to Extractivism,” Summary Version (December 2022), p. 8-11, <https://www.sagefundrights.org/women-and-extractivism>.

7 Global Greengrants Fund, Draft report, “Funding at the Nexus of Women, the Environment, and Gender-based Violence” (July 2021).



Conceptual clarity is desperately needed to confront the urgent and overlapping crises of this moment. Funders and civil society can close gaps in their analysis by listening to women in frontline communities link the violence they face from extractivism today to historically rooted experiences of oppression, exclusion, and expropriation. A feminist intersectional analysis can help funders understand the systems of power that give rise to, and reinforce, gendered structural violence in all its forms. Because these systems cut across many social movements and sectors of civil society, this process of gaining clarity can help spur collaboration and identify new entry points. Such cross-movement and cross-sectoral collaboration is more likely to facilitate the complex solutions needed, with the resources and support to scale.



Source: Central de Rondas Campesinas de la Microcuenca Inkas Vivientes

Women on the frontlines play many roles in extractive struggles to unify communities and resist structural violence, yet their efforts remain under-recognized and under-funded.

Women hold transformative power to heal communities impacted or divided by extractives and mobilize communities to imagine a different, more sustainable future. However, they are often perceived as victims of extractivism rather than strategists, defenders, or solution holders. The SAGE Fund research revealed several reasons for this impression. Patriarchal views and practices can obscure the myriad ways women exercise leadership within the community. Although gender roles prioritize women's caretaking responsibilities over participation in public life, women play many active and critical roles in community from food producers to spiritual healers to guardians of conservation practices.

Women's roles are typically less visible forms of leadership than male-led governance structures. Their efforts to sustain community life are often perceived as small-scale, even though these are often the path towards larger scale alternatives. As a consequence, women-led strategies may require more effort to identify and lift up. Trusted allies that have accompanied women on the frontlines for years can play a critical role in identifying these strategies and connecting women's groups to additional forms of support. The size and scale of the problem requires a multi-layered, long-term, and cross-movement response.



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Despite this lack of recognition, and in the face of significant risks to their lives and well-being, women environmental defenders are developing promising strategies to address threats from extractivism. Research from GAGGA and the SAGE Fund exposed many strategies used by women in frontline communities around the world: building cross-movement alliances; practicing holistic community-based care; defending common goods, spaces and land; documenting and sharing information about land, territory and rights; and mobilizing for greater political power. The SAGE report provides extensive analysis of these strategies illustrated with case studies and examples, and GAGGA's report includes testimonies of women defenders from various contexts.

Research by Global Greengrants revealed that little funding is reaching women on the frontlines. This traps women in a cycle of lacking the resources they need to show impact, which they need to do to secure more funding. Consequently, women's approaches are often dismissed as small-scale and localized rather than recognized as strategies that unify and sustain communities impacted by extractives, or that offer transformative solutions to break dependency on extractive resources. Accordingly, there are major gaps in funding at the intersection of gender, structural violence and environmental defense.

Women in frontline communities need urgent support to stop the imminent harm from extractivism and protect

themselves and their communities from further violence. Yet, very few funders, aside from women's funds, are supporting women-led environmental organizations or projects with a gender focus. Funding restrictions prevent many women's groups from accessing funding, particularly for unregistered groups. Project-based funding aimed at achieving specific and measurable outcomes is prioritized over strategies aimed at addressing root causes. This tactical, short-term approach does not align with the strategies women use to sustain their organizing activities over the long timespan required to confront existential threats like extractivism and climate change.

Now is the time for big bets. Women on the frontlines need urgent support to stop the imminent harm from extractivism and protect themselves and their communities from further violence. Research and analysis generated by this initiative has exposed critical needs and gaps in the field. With further investment in cross-movement alliances, and with support for layered and complementary strategies to tackle extractive power, women and their allies are well-positioned to tackle the root causes of this systemic crisis.

They now need an unequivocal commitment of resources to match their efforts.



A photograph of two women standing side-by-side, smiling and raising their right fists in a gesture of solidarity. They are wearing patterned, knee-length dresses. The woman on the left has her hair styled in braids, and the woman on the right has a headband. The background is a plain, light color.

Opportunities and Ways Forward

1 Create learning opportunities to deepen understanding about extractivism and how to support women on the frontlines.

The lack of conceptual clarity about what drives structural violence, how it operates, and who it harms limits a collective capacity to act. The Global Greengrants research reveals a need for funders to initiate learning opportunities about the intersections of the crises surrounding extractivism and to deepen their understanding of structural violence. As GAGGA's research underscores, women community leaders and environmental defenders must be at the center of the conversation. The SAGE landscape analysis provides a working definition of gendered structural violence and a framework for civil society and funders to explore how to address it.

GAGGA, Global Greengrants, and SAGE offer the following analysis to spur conceptual clarity in exploring how to design and resource strategies at the intersections of gender, structural violence, and extractivism.

Source: *Afrocaracolas Saberes Itinerantes*

- We are facing a systemic crisis with the **economic model of extractivism** at its core. Extractivism shares the same drivers or root causes – neoliberalism, patriarchy, racism, colonialism – as climate change, the rise of authoritarianism, and other systemic crises. Maximizing profit is prioritized over the welfare of people and planet, resulting in extensive environmental destruction and pollution, threats to the cultural survival of Indigenous Peoples, and the existential threat of climate collapse from the production and consumption of non-renewable fossil fuels, among many other harms.
- People experience the violence of extractivism differently depending on their social, economic and political power. **Those directly impacted** include communities whose land and territory is appropriated for extractive projects as well as those who rely on access to natural resources for their economic, cultural, and spiritual survival. Frequently, these are Indigenous Peoples, rural people, pastoralists, campesinos, peasants, and others who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression.
- In addition to factors such as race, ethnicity, indigeneity, class, and caste, **women and girls** experience compounded marginalization because of their gender. Patriarchal beliefs, policies and practices exclude women from decision-making spaces at all levels – within families, community governance structures, and global policy forums – and in many contexts, prevent women from securing or exercising their basic rights. When extractivism appropriates land and disrupts community life, women have less access to rights and resources. Often, women experience extractive violence in an embodied way through gender-based violence, separation from family members, or displacement from land and territory that is central to their ways of life.
- Women have many responses to extractivism, depending on their particular constraints. Some engage in extractive industries out of economic necessity, while others adapt to their new realities. Many women on the frontlines resist extractivism and, defying gender roles, lead collective struggles. Often described as **women environmental defenders**, these are women who are targeted with political violence by those outside the community, or face violence from within the community for stepping out of their gender roles. But those who resist also include other **women community activists and leaders** who choose not to identify as defenders out of choice or necessity.

2

Drive resources to women-led groups and strategies tackling extractivism, and fund at the level this crisis requires.

The research generated by this initiative provides multiple entry points for funders seeking to support work at the intersection of gender, natural resources and extractivism:



Source: Organización Indígena Siekopai Del Perú

- Provide flexible, multi-year, long-term support to women defenders and women’s strategies that build towards a sustainable future.** The most urgent need is direct support for women on the frontlines of extractive struggles. The SAGE Fund research from frontline communities and the allies who support them revealed three categories of strategies women use to confront extractivism: foundational, site-specific, and transformational.⁸ These are overlapping and interlinked; for example, women-led community organizing and leadership-building practices help women build the leadership and structures necessary to sustain extractive struggles over many years. Over time, these organizing efforts may lead to community systems for resource management, sustainable livelihoods, and more. These autonomous, often women-led, community systems benefit whole communities by restoring cohesion necessary for long-term struggles against extractivism. They also serve as bold and visionary alternatives to the extractive model. Funders can seize the opportunity to invest in strategies that prevent extractive violence and build towards a sustainable future.
- Support trusted social movement allies.** Where barriers to funding make resourcing frontline groups impossible, funders can support

trusted allied – networks, coalitions, and other partners providing long-term accompaniment to frontline groups – to direct funding to groups leading extractive struggles in specific contexts. For example, networks of women human rights and environmental defenders in every region provide critical information about the defenders at risk and how to support them. Indigenous-led networks provide support to Indigenous Peoples seeking to block extractive projects using territorial defense strategies.⁹ And extensive networks in the human rights and environmental fields offer legal support, corporate accountability strategies, and communications and advocacy support to amplify the efforts of those directly impacted.¹⁰

- Resource cross-movement-building efforts to affect scalable change.** Funders must do more than support strategies designed to address imminent crises. Tackling extractive power requires a shift in orientation to support long-term preventative strategies that transform the conditions giving rise to structural violence. Cross-movement alliances – comprised of feminists, Indigenous Peoples, human rights groups, environmental justice movements, labor movements, and land reform movements – have spent decades building collective power and

8 SAGE, Building Power in Crisis, p. 13.

9 GAGGA, Structural Violence: Learning from WGEDs, p. 4; SAGE, Building Power in Crisis, pp. 25-26.

10 SAGE, Building Power in Crisis, pp. 21-35; GAGGA, Structural Violence: Learning from WGEDs, p. 5.



Source: Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB) – Arpilleras

developing frameworks, agendas and strategies to address root causes of extractivism.¹¹ With a stronger investment of resources, these coalitions can deepen their analysis, expand their base, and build the scale of collective power needed to confront the many faces of extractive power.

- **Support exploratory grantmaking that funds the strategies, groups and opportunities identified by the partners in their respective research.**

Foundations with diverse portfolios can facilitate opportunities for cross-sector and cross-movement funding to address work at these intersections. Funders seeking to learn more about these intersections before committing to a strategy may choose to support intermediary

funds that both fund cross movement work and are best placed to reach frontline communities (see Opportunity #4).¹² Many of these funds take an intersectional approach that integrates a gender analysis. They also have ways of capturing learning from grantmaking that can be shared with the broader philanthropic field to inform other strategies and amplify impact.

11 GAGGA, Structural Violence: Learning from WGEDs, p. 3; SAGE, Building Power in Crisis, pp. 29–32.

12 Global Greengrants, Funding at the Nexus.

3 Integrate a collective care and holistic security approach into grantmaking at the intersections of gender, natural resources and extraction.

Collective care and protection¹³ provides an alternative approach to traditional human rights models aimed at protecting high-risk and visible individuals. Collective protection recognizes that violence is systemic, and the need for women defenders' safety is a constant and continuous struggle demanding a new logic of organization and connection and resources to sustain these initiatives. It builds on and strengthens community-based support networks, in accordance with the culture, capacities, and resources of where defenders work. Holistic care centers self-care and healing, focusing on physical and emotional wellbeing of activists and communities. Funders can foster a holistic care infrastructure by elevating these practices among the philanthropic community and encouraging grantees to integrate them.

Women environmental defenders have developed practices of community care such as the community embodied accompaniment (*acuerpamientos*), psycho-social and spiritual support



Collective protection recognizes that violence is systemic...demanding a new logic of organization and connection.

and healing.¹⁴ They need supplemental emergency funds to respond to time-sensitive risks that arise when extractive activity threatens their land or territory, or when leaders are targeted for their activism. But they also need support to prevent threats before they materialize, including resources to strengthen their digital and physical security.¹⁵ The former includes digital platforms to amplify their demands, trainings around appropriate and safe use of technology, and technology infrastructure to secure internet connections, hardware, digital accessibility, translation, technical capacity, and digital security infrastructure. Funders can help by asking grantees directly about their security needs and including budget lines in grant applications to ensure these needs are adequately addressed. They can also adjust their ways of communicating with their partners to minimize security risks, such as communicating via secure platforms, and recognizing collective rather than individual leadership models that help to disperse risks.

13 GAGGA, Structural Violence: Learning from WGEDs, p. 4; SAGE, Building Power in Crisis, at 19-20.

14 GAGGA, Structural Violence: Learning from WGEDs, p. 4

15 GAGGA, Structural Violence: Learning from WGEDs, p. 6.



Source: *Martin Westlake*

4 Learn from and collaborate with intermediary funders on eliminating barriers to funding.

Intermediary funds—including human rights, environmental, and women’s funds—provide long-term, flexible support to grassroots activists that help them meet critical needs of activists and movements.¹⁶ Collaborations with intermediary funds can help mobilize resources to local communities by streamlining bureaucratic grantmaking processes

that make funding difficult to access. Many of these funds have long-standing relationships with groups supporting women defenders, women-led groups engaged in extractive struggles, and diverse social movements with women in leadership roles.

Intermediary funds that have accompanied communities on the frontlines of extractive struggles for decades can provide guidance to other funders around diminishing funding barriers.¹⁷ They provide a model for grantmaking that is:

16 Global Greengrants, *Funding at the Nexus*.

17 GAGGA, *Structural Violence: Learning from WGEDs*, p. 6; Global Greengrants, *Funding at the Nexus*.

- unrestricted, and covers the cost of operations for women's groups;
- flexible, allowing women to pursue diverse strategies;
- participatory, guided by people directly impacted and their allies in regions;
- integrated with collective care and holistic security; and
- long-term, in order to sustain the measured pace of organizing for collective action, movement-building, and alliance-building.

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Funders have a heightened responsibility to address the drivers of extractivism, such as hyper-consumption and corporate impunity, rather than expecting women and frontline communities to shoulder this burden on their own.



Source: Justiça nos Trilhos (JnT) – Piquiá de Baixo, Brazil



5 Recognizing that systemic problems require systemic solutions, demonstrate leadership by tackling structural drivers of extractivism within philanthropic institutions.

While still providing critical resources for women and their communities resisting the devastating consequences of extractivism and implementing visions of a more sustainable future, funders can play an active role in directly challenging the structural drivers of extractivism in their own countries and through their own investments and institutions.

Many philanthropic institutions – including those with large grantmaking portfolios on human rights and the environment – have acquired wealth by investing in extractive activity. These funders have a heightened responsibility to address the drivers of extractivism, such as hyper-consumption and corporate impunity, rather than expecting women and frontline communities to shoulder this burden on their own. The asymmetrical power structures that drive extractivism must be addressed by holding in check the interests of actors such as corporate elites that reap profits from extractive activity at the expense of people residing in or near those sites. Philanthropic institutions, for example, can review their investment portfolios, and commit to divesting their shares in companies involved in extractive activities.



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To explore the findings in more depth, please see [Building Power in Crisis by the SAGE Fund](#), [Structural Violence: Learning from Women and Girl Environmental Defenders by GAGGA](#), and [Funding at the Nexus of Women, the Environment, and Gender-based Violence](#) (forthcoming).

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