***Extractives and Gender on the African Continent: the need to make mining beneficial for women***

*Nomonde Nyembe[[1]](#footnote-1), Business and Human Rights Attorney at Centre for Applied Legal Studies, South Africa*

The extractive industry on the African continent is sexist. It is sexist in nature, design, implementation and effect. According to the United National Development Programme “women lag far behind men in the extractive industry in terms of employment, income, compensation, consultation and participation in decision-making processes”. While this is no different from other industries operating in Africa and indeed across the world, it is a matter that the World Economic Forum on Africa (WEF Africa) should address.

WEF Africa is set to take place between 3 and 5 June in Cape Town, South Africa under the theme “Then and Now: Reimagining Africa’s Future”. Among the issues that will be discussed at WEF Africa is the development of natural resources to deliver genuine shared value for Africans. And a high-level session at the Forum with Graça Machel and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (Executive Director of UN Women and one of the chairs of the Forum) will address “Closing the Economic Equality Gap” between women and men. I commend WEF Africa for recognising that extraction on the African continent (for the most part by transnational organisations) does not, in and of itself lead to benefit sharing for African citizens, and that gender inequality is an issue that will not resolve itself but needs targeted action. Natural resource extraction is not even neutral in its effect as it sometimes leads to human rights violations and environmental degradation. These effects are felt most harshly by the most marginalised members of African society – women.

Extraction of natural resources is seen as a man’s job. This is due to socially ascribed notions of gender, which align strength with men and assume none for women. Because of this extraction by its nature, and mining in particular, reward and affirm hegemonic masculinity. This is done in a way that excludes not only women but men who do not fall in the hegemonic male box. The extractive industry is also sexist in design. In South Africa, the Mining Charter provides that women should comprise 10% of mine employees. I commend the fact that there is a target but not the target itself: in a country where women comprise over 52% of the population 10% of the workforce is not fair. It is clear therefore that the design of the extractive industry itself, in legislation and policy, is sexist. This is also evident from the oft-criticised single-sex hostel dwelling set-up of mines.

Despite the low target set for the participation of women in the South African extractive industry, non-implementation remains. A few extractive companies have failed to meet the low target of 10%, while others have attained it but have failed to actually transform the extractive industry. Allegations of sexual and gender-based violence underground and within mine terrain remain. Just 3 months ago, a woman miner was raped in the mine change room in Rustenburg. This is not the first report of rape on mine terrain. It demonstrates that while mines have, to some degree, embraced the target of 10%, they have not changed their occupational health and safety policies to ensure that women mine workers are actually protected from occupational harms, which include sexual and gender-based violence.

Sexual and gender-based violence also occurs in conflicts that arise due to natural resource extraction. In these conflicts, women are often used as tools by which to oppress, terrorise, destroy or silence communities. The raping and sexual violation of women in these conflicts serves, among other things, to affirm women’s subservient role in society, affirm the abusers’ power and exert control over communities, regions or even whole countries.

Participants taking part in the WEF Africa should be mindful of the sexist nature of extraction on the continent. If they truly intend to ensure value sharing and gender equality, the participants should discuss and seek steps to make the extractive industry beneficial not only to mine-affected communities, but to mine-affected women. I call particularly on Executive Director of UN Women Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka to speak and aim to address the gender-discriminatory nature of the extractive industry on the continent.

1. Nomonde writes in her personal capacity [↑](#footnote-ref-1)