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Industrial Mining and Social Investment in Santurbán: Reflections from a Gender Decolonial Approach¹

By Raquel Méndez Villamizar² and Andrea Mejía Jerez³

Abstract

The Canadian extractive company, Greystar (currently known as Eco Oro), provides diverse training and consultancy programs for entrepreneur women, as part of their social responsibility policy. This article reflects on the human talent training experience offered by Greystar in the mining towns of Vetás and California, in Santander, Colombia, from a gender decolonial perspective, and a *global* understanding of social practices. We followed an interpretive qualitative approach for analyzing data collected from public-dissemination brochures regarding the outreach projects offered by the extractive company, and from semi-structured interviews carried out with the studied population. This article shows how these programs emphasize sexist stereotypes, promote a gender-specific division of labor, ignore the capacities and interests of the local women, and do not generate a positive impact on their socio-economic conditions.

Keywords: Mining industry, Foreign investment, Gender stereotypes, Gender roles, Colombia

Neoliberalism and Extractivism in Latin-America

Since the 1970s, the logic of the free market and Milton Friedman's *Theory of the Consumption Function* have been applied around the world, giving corporations and investors carte blanche to work on any foreign territories. In Colombia, such ideologies were introduced in the second half of the 1970s, reconfiguring both the mindset and the economic model that have predominated to date. The accelerated production of goods, technology, experiences, and information has promoted cumulative ambition, increased the expectations of quality of life, and

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created new necessities. These phenomena can be evidenced by the rise in the demand for minerals and energy, which is a result of a growth in population and consumption patterns.

Companies with American, Canadian, European, and more recently, Chinese capital, started to negotiate mining concessions with almost all the governments of the region. They preferred areas with the most accessible mineral deposits, and the most flexible and favorable regulations for foreign investment. The extreme increase in the prices of precious metals on the international market has been a determinant incentive for direct foreign investment (Ruíz, 2013, p. 3)⁴.

Neoliberalism has colonized people's mindset, it has globalized it, and has lowered the expectations of political intervention, and even of personal relationships. The growing interest in granting prominence to mining within the global market has led Latin American countries to implement important legislative changes. In Colombia, the State limits its action to the grant and oversight of concession contracts, and to the promotion of foreign private investment in mineral exploration and exploitation. In other words, it is the investors who determine the size and scope of extractive projects. This is why Decree 2655 of 1998 was modified by the Law 685 of 2001, which recognized the subsoil as State property (Fierro, 2012). Furthermore, since the Political Constitution of 1991, the discussion regarding the ownership of the subsoil was recorded in Article 332, which states that "the State is the owner of the subsoil and the non-renewable natural resources, without detriment to the rights acquired and improved by modifications to the pre-existing laws".

Although extractivism is an activity originated from capitalism, traced back to the times of the Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, and Dutch conquests, it is worth highlighting that during the last three decades, raw materials have experienced an upturn in exports, with prices generating great profit in Latin America, particularly in Colombia (Sánchez, 2016, págs. 11,15). The extractivist model prevails as an economic activity by which the current world market is supported. In countries like Colombia, Peru, and Mexico, which maintain a close relationship with American politics, extracting companies impose themselves on the regions, taking over the environment and its communities. On the other hand, in countries with a more progressive or left-leaning politics such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina, and Brazil, the extractivist model called by Eduardo Gudynas (2011) as "Neoextractivism", grants the State greater prominence. This is because it is the State who boosts the mining growth, in the interest of the country's social development. Likewise, the State seeks to legitimate their actions by means of social investment, which is as welfare-oriented as the one provided by the transnational companies.

Despite having structural peculiarities, these two extractivist modalities share a developmentalist discourse⁵ and patterns of expansion and accumulation at a large scale, which

⁴ Translated from original: "*Empresas con capital norteamericano, canadiense, europeo y más recientemente chino, se lanzaron a negociar concesiones mineras con casi todos los gobiernos de la región. Privilegiaron las zonas donde se encuentran los yacimientos más accesibles y las regulaciones más laxas y favorables a la inversión foránea. El alza extraordinaria en los precios de los metales preciosos en el mercado internacional, ha sido un aliciente determinante para la inversión extranjera directa.*"

⁵ According to the Brundtland report, sustainable development is defined as development which satisfies the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future ones to satisfy their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Nonetheless, with the purpose of gaining social acceptance and obtaining the economic profit offered by extractivist projects, different governments and transnational companies have based their arguments on the premise of sustainable development. In Latin America, this

have detrimental effects on the environment, and on the communities' social and gender relations. This kind of market applies new production and marketing technologies and new organizational schemes. However, it can be argued that although some countries lean towards "right-wing" ideologies, while others prefer "progressive" ideas, both approaches respond to the needs of the world Industry. Consequently, as stated by Humberto Ruiz (2013, pág. 5), "changing hands from a transnational company to the State, does not imply a relief for nature; the benefit has been derisory, and the damage caused to the territories will be irreversible".

In addition, according to Acosta (2009, p. 75), regarding psychosocial matters, there have been multiple gender-related denunciations from communities where extractivist companies are present: sexual violence from Company operators against adult and minor women, spontaneous abortions, unwanted pregnancies, discrimination and racism, forced displacement, detrimental cultural impact and disruption of social cohesion. Thus, the role played by transnational companies, in historically impoverished territories by state abandonment and internal war, has given way to paternalism and to the patriarchal gender dynamics which strengthens unequal power relationships, and as a result, accelerating gender-related conflict in communities.

However, under the promise of speeding up the social development of communities, large-scale extractivism continues to gain acceptance, partly because the demand on new technologies as well as the international integration has led countries with abundant natural resources, such as gold, petroleum, emeralds or coltan, to assume new roles with the purpose of favouring the world economy.

Among the objectives proposed at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, those related to environmental, political, economic and gender-related challenges have particular relevance. The desire of ending extreme poverty and hunger, preventing deadly illnesses, expanding the coverage of primary education and reducing gender inequalities, encourages governments to support economic projects that could favor such goals. Regarding gender-related concerns, it is important to mention that the UN goals consider the integration of a gender perspective as crucial to achieving sustainability. Even though in the last years advancements have been made in favour of gender equality, women and girls around the world, especially in places where poverty levels are more visible, continue suffering discrimination and violence. The abovementioned UN's sustainable development goal states that:

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but the necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world (...) If women and girls are provided with equal access to education, health care and decent employment, sustainable economies will be boosted (...) The eradication of harmful practices targeted at women is crucial to ending gender-based discrimination prevalent in many countries around the world. (UN, 2015).

The creation of projects for women, as part of the so-called *social responsibility policies* (políticas de responsabilidad social) implemented by extractivist companies, are used by governments as a pretext to defend their support to extractivist projects. Generally, corporate discourses emphasise creating employment opportunities for women through offers in the same companies or in complementary service posts derived from the extractive business, training in productive activities alternative to mining, as well as facilitating the access to health and other

developmentalist discourse has granted more relevance to the economic profit, leaving aside other factors such as equity and environmental care, violating the rights of communities, and causing harm to ecosystems.

basic services - particularly water and sewer systems or gas networks. All of the aforementioned constitutes promises the contribution to the sustainable development of communities as the ultimate goal of transnational companies (even though eventually this remains an illusion). In this manner, countries with outstanding natural resources and serious social inequalities such as Colombia, persist in making extractivism their main economic activity.

The insistence on extractivism as the main activity of Colombia's national economy has persisted for many government periods. For instance, during the administration of Alvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010), Law 685 of 2001 modified the mining legislation and determined that subsoil is property of the state. As a result, individuals and private companies requested permission for 20.000 mine exploitation and exploration concessions covering 22 million hectares. These requests granted 9 thousand mining concessions, without respecting moorlands, National Parks, indigenous reservations, or afro-descendant collective territories (Ronderos, 2011). Afterwards, under the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), the two National Development Plans consolidated extractivism as the pillar of development needed for transforming Colombia into a mining and oil producing country (Sánchez, 2016, p. 16).

Mining has led the economic, social, and cultural dynamics of towns located in the Moorland of Santurbán, such as Vetas and California, for the last four centuries. Since 1994, artisanal mining has been gradually replaced by a new type of mining extraction that pledged to promote economic growth and development; however, the hegemony of foreign capital has been unevenly imposed on the territories. As a consequence, large-scale mining has not only threatened biodiversity, but also the communities' social and gender relations (Méndez, 2018, p. 53).

To illustrate this situation, is worth mentioning the *Gender Gaps Diagnostic in Santander* (Diagnóstico de Brechas de Género en Santander), which was carried out by the administrative district government⁶. This study raised concerns about how rural territories, where macroprojects exist, get involved in the world economy, which in turn highlights concerns of the situation of women in such contexts, especially, due to the difficult access to resources, which defines the conditions for enabling or limiting autonomy, equality and freedom.

According to Nussbaum (2003, p. 55), human beings need material support, without which their higher faculties cannot be developed. Access to education, rights to property, work and autonomy of income administration are essential for women, given that they constitute the foundation of their empowerment and grant them freedom to decide on their circumstances.

Although transnational companies promise to deliver the necessary guarantees for empowering women and reducing the gaps of gender inequality among mining communities, results from previous experiences (such as the case of Greystar Resources Ltd., which will be presented hereafter) have not provided evidence of those contributions, and conversely, the disruption of social cohesion and the deepening of social inequalities have heavily affected women rights in those communities.

Greystar and Development in Santurbán

Neoliberalism in Colombia brings with its investment interests from extractive transnational companies and the government's readiness to embrace them as partners in social development projects. In 1994, Greystar purchased lands in the surroundings of the Moorland of

⁶ This document was the diagnostic foundation for the creation of the Women and Gender Equality Public Policy in Santander, and the first Decennial Plan of Equality of Opportunities in Santander 2010-2019.

Santurbán, located in the departments of Santander and Norte de Santander⁷. In 2011, Greystar started efforts to obtain the environmental license to exploit the aforementioned territory. Such interest arose a conflict among the mining company and the local people, who coexist with the high woodlands in the Andean and Moorland areas (Méndez, 2018, p. 67).

Current transnational companies have corporate social responsibility policies in order to promote integral human development. The institute *Icontec* provides guidance in this respect through the Colombian Technical Guide for Social Responsibility, GTC 180, which is defined as:

The voluntary and explicit commitment made by corporations or organizations in relation to the expectations and actions generated as a result of any agreement with the interested parties regarding integral human development. Corporate social responsibility allows organizations to ensure economic growth, social development and environmental balance thanks to the enforcement of legal provisions (Icontec, 2009)⁸.

Carrying out a large-scale extractive project has significant effects on the social, cultural, economic, and even political aspects of a community. The greatest conflict-generating causes are related to the environmental impact, problems in the territories, which are also linked to a lack of socialization of the projects and lack inquiry within the communities, an increase in gender inequalities and a mix of the abovementioned causes along with the struggle to gain more profit. In municipalities such as Vetás and California, for instance, some of the conflicts which arise include: irreversible damage to the moorland's ecosystem; social displacement from mining territories where artisanal mining used to be done; unemployment; marginalization of women's jobs; the disruption of family relationships; drastic changes in gender roles; drug addiction; alcoholism; prostitution, etc.

Thus, there exists an imperative need for implementing programs and projects showing corporate social responsibility, designed in cooperation with the communities inhabiting the affected territories. The idea of commitment between the private company and the communities is an inherent part of extractive projects launched in countries where the State's intervention is only visible at policy level, and almost non-existent in the reality of the populations who interact directly with the exploited territory.

Greystar's social promise for Santurbán includes projects of 7000 up to 275.000 USD. Their proposals include financial support to sport and recreation by sponsoring sporting events, theater and dancing lessons, as well as funds for road maintenance, the donation of surgical

⁷ The area of the Moorland of Santurbán covers the administrative districts (departments) of Santander and Norte de Santander (North Santander). For the population in Santander, this moorland provides the water filling the sub-basins of Cachirí, Suratá and Cáchira Rivers, which in turn flow into the river network of the Magdalena Medio; while in Norte de Santander, the river network of Catatumbo is shared with Venezuela. In Santander, the moorland area is located on the Soto Norte province, comprised of the towns of California, Vetás, Suratá, Charta and Tona, among which, the first two have a prominent role in the region due to their gold richness. This territory, rich in minerals such as gold and silver, is one of the most important hydric reserves in the country. In santander, the moorland area covers approximately 80.000 hectares shared among the mining towns of Vetás and California, whose population live on artisanal mining and the agricultural production of subsistence crops as an additional activity.

⁸ Translated from original: "Compromiso voluntario y explícito que las organizaciones asumen frente a las expectativas y acciones concertadas que se generan con las partes interesadas en materia de desarrollo humano integral; esta permite a las organizaciones asegurar el crecimiento económico, el desarrollo social y el equilibrio ambiental, partiendo del cumplimiento de las disposiciones legales".

instruments and the promotion of entrepreneurship through loans for the creation of family-owned businesses and micro-enterprises. Considering the low financing and technical capability of the municipal entities of Vetás and California, it is necessary to highlight how difficult it is to carry out an articulated work between state institutions and the extractive company to achieve processes with medium and long-term social impact. Consequently, the transnational acts as the provider of resources of immediate necessity.

The relationship established between the State, the private company, and the population is determined by an enclave economy that, according to Zapata (1997), consists of “raw material production centers characterized by the geographical separation from the administrative, political and social centers of a country”. This type of economy emerges specifically when States, on behalf of “development”, offers the natural resources of the most remote regions to foreign companies that have the technological and financial potential for extracting the resources and putting them on the world market.

Open-air mining by transnationals and direct exportation of minerals reveal the logics of an enclave economy where the idea of the Nation-State as a regulator is vanished from the territories, particularly as a result of the laws enacted in the 1990's and the granting of mining concessions (Falero, 2015)⁹.

Given the effects of this type of productive activities on the populations, and the need of obtaining support from them, extractive companies use “friendly” strategies launched through corporate social responsibility programs, as quick fixes to those problems. Falero (2015) identifies six common actions performed by extractive companies in similar contexts of Latin America:

- 1) Promoting and disseminating a general discourse around development, justified on the imperative of economic diversification.
- 2) Establishing political bonds with different parties, even to the extent of assigning well-known government officials to business management positions.
- 3) Minimizing the detrimental effects on the environment through their official discourse.
- 4) Releasing public statements about the possible withdrawal of the mining projects, in the middle of negotiations on the projects' conditions and in cases when communities have expressed rejection.
- 5) Intervening in the social network of the territory, generating a serious division among those who support and reject their intervention.
- 6) Creating indirect pressures and expectations regarding the workforce needed.

With respect to the reflection arising from our research, Greystar's use of a developmentalist discourse disrupts the daily lives of Santurbán's population by means of short-range investment. The company's initiatives include: improvements to public areas and health services, the promotion of culture, recreation, and sports, as well as informal training for productive labor alternative to mining. The company, thus, consolidates itself as the organization

⁹ Translated from original: “[l]as dinámicas de minería a cielo abierto a partir de empresas transnacionales y las exportaciones directas de mineral presentan lógicas de enclave económico notorio donde se diluye en el territorio implicado la idea de regulación de los Estado-Nación particularmente a partir de la introducción de leyes promulgadas en la década del noventa y el otorgamiento de concesiones.”

which provides benefits and, despite not representing the State, the transnational partially replaces it. This is attested by an inhabitant of the area:

As the Colombian government is not present, in Santurbán, it is the company who paints the school, the one who is present if people need anything (...) the company performs the functions of the State¹⁰.

However, the dependency relationship that has been established ignores the characteristics of the context, the cultural history, and the gender and social relations which have served as foundations for the community dynamics. In this sense, the efforts for offering economic alternatives have been unsuccessful. “Given the local-global links, the territorial dynamics of the material and symbolic appropriation of “resources” - whose economic valorization is prioritized over values and cultural or life relationships - generate socio-environmental impacts” (Ulloa & Coronado, 2016, p. 25)¹¹. Hence, the extractive company’s actions involve the exploitation of nature with consequences for the life and identity of the communities. Particularly, they create and reinforce gender inequalities, and forge paternalism through the idea that due to the company’s presence, people have everything, but if it were absent, they would have nothing.

Assistance cannot be sustainable in the long-term as a model of development (...) In his book *The White Man’s Burden*, William Easterly states that help is not only an industry, but also a neo-colonial arm of the North’s powers, which works to keep the Great South on a cycle of dependency and desperation, while it simultaneously gives them a sense of moral self-reassurance for helping the poor of the world, and taking them out of the “darkness” (Fontan, 2013, pp. 39-40)¹².

Extractive projects such as Greystar’s have an approximate length of 25 years, a period during which communities are attracted towards the materialization of development. Nonetheless, everything that is left is eventually the frustration produced by the imposed transformation of the lifestyles, and the unfulfilled expectations regarding the sustainability of the economic growth. “Extractivism, nowadays, (...) is thought of as the fastest option for the development of the region’s countries, including Colombia” (Ulloa & Coronado, 2016, p. 158). These discourses “make especial emphasis on the reduction of inequality and extreme poverty, but they do not contemplate neither the costs nor the socio-environmental risks that extraction produces for the local population, as well as for the future generations” (Gobel & Ulloa, 2014, p. 15)¹³. For instance, the

¹⁰ Key participant 1. Bucaramanga, Santander. February 7, 2018. Translated from original: “*Como el Estado colombiano no hace presencia, en Santurbán la empresa es la que pinta la escuela, la empresa [es la que está] si necesitan algo (...) la empresa hace las funciones del Estado.*”

¹¹ Translated from original: “*Dadas las conexiones locales-globales, las dinámicas territoriales de apropiación de facto y la simbólica de los ‘recursos’ –cuya valorización económica prima por encima de valores y relaciones culturales o de vida- generan impactos socio-ambientales.*”

¹² Translated from original: “*La ayuda no puede ser sustentable a largo plazo como modelo de desarrollo (...) En su libro *The White Man’s Burden (La carga del hombre blanco)*, William Easterly establece que la ayuda no es sólo una industria, sino que también es un brazo neo-colonial de los poderes del Norte que trabajan para mantener al gran Sur en un ciclo de dependencia y desesperación, mientras que, simultáneamente, les garantiza a ellos mismos un sentido de auto reafirmación moral por ayudar a los pobres del mundo y sacarlos de la “oscuridad.”*”

¹³ Translated from original: “*hacen especial hincapié en la reducción de las desigualdades y de la pobreza extrema, pero no contemplan los costos ni los riesgos socioambientales que la extracción produce tanto para la población local, como para las futuras generaciones.*”

arrival of outsiders to the mining territories, who bring with them behaviours and customs different from the communities' dynamics, gives rise to social and cultural clashes, as well as social issues (divorce, unwanted pregnancies, family and community breakdowns, and drug addictions).

The issue of drugs, and everything that this kind of projects may bring because of all the foreigners who enter... because of all the cultures, apart from ours, that enter. That brings consequences and it has brought consequences. We have seen how this issue happened six or seven years ago, when there were more paisas¹⁴, Peruvians, Chileans, Canadians than people from California (our town). Because they brought many foreign people to do the jobs and they were practically absorbing the town; and it was then when problems of public order, alcoholism, drug addiction arose. Even though our town has never had these problems, we did see how this affected us, and how it is dragging us to the limit; then, who are the ones that end up being affected? our families, our children¹⁵.

Additionally, in relation to gender, women's role in the extractivist industry is a complex, subordinated and multifaceted one in settings such as Santurbán. Women are employed for white-collar and pink-collar jobs, that is, they are required to perform administrative, salubrious or general duties as a result of gender stereotyping justifying their abilities in operative, care and cleaning tasks (Méndez, 2018). This brings forth a general concern among communities since women are being limited and not being allowed to pursue their personal growth in tasks traditionally performed by men, such as in mechanics.

According to Catalina Quiroga (2016), the mining project in Latin America constitutes a competition between two geographical projects: one which involves a governance of territories allowing the occupation of various actors, and another presents a government that assures only one occupant. The first one involves sequential and daily territorial changes marked by continuities with historical meanings; the second involves drastic territorial changes, which are not well understood by the locals, and generate a combination of higher risks and uncertainty under the pretext of promoting modernity.

Although the presence of the extractive company dates back over fifteen years to the beginning of the exploratory stage, their actions in social matters gained prominence after the project "Angosturas" materialized¹⁶. For the communities inhabiting the Moorland of Santurbán, having a large-scale mining project, a foreign employer, and the expectation of a millionaire

¹⁴ Colloquial expression used in Colombia referring to people from Antioquia (Northwest of Colombia).

¹⁵ Key participant 3. California, Santander. February 7, 2018. Translated from original: "*El tema de incluso las drogas, y lo que pueda llegar detrás de un proyecto de estos por todos los foráneos que entran de afuera, por todas las culturas, aparte de la nuestra, que ingresan, eso trae consecuencias, y ha traído consecuencias. Hemos tenido evidencia de cómo fue el tema hace unos 6-7 años atrás, cuando en el municipio había más paisas, peruanos, chilenos, canadiense, que californianos, porque traían muchísima gente de afuera a hacer sus trabajos y prácticamente estaban absorbiendo el pueblo; y allí empieza a desprenderse un tema de desorden, alcoholismo, drogadicción, que aunque el municipio no ha tenido nunca estas connotaciones, si vimos cómo esto nos afectó, y cómo nos llevaba allá ahorcados al límite, entonces ¿quiénes terminan viéndose afectados?, pues nuestras familias, nuestros hijos.*"

¹⁶ On December 13, 2009, Greystar requested an environmental license to the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development for the Angosturas project to perform open-air mining exploitations at the Moorland complex of Santurbán. Estimates drawn that, during the fifteen years of the exploitations, silver productions would amount to 2,3 million ounces (72 tons). Owing to these figures, Angosturas was considered to become one of the most important mining projects for the country's economy (Greystar Resources Ltd, 2009).

investment in the community through the company's social responsibility policy, introduces a collective imaginary reinforcing the belief that: "mining extraction equals development". These representations dramatically disrupt the dynamics and lives of the communities.

Multinational companies, as institutions which are foreign to the territories, must acquire the responsibility of exploring and understanding local realities outside of the globalized and systemic lens through which life in big cities and countries from the North is observed. This implies deconstructing the civilizing *teleos* which justifies a transaction that offers the extraction of non-renewable resources in exchange for leading communities to modernity. Therefore, it is necessary to eradicate every feeling of superiority.

Sustainable development can only be built from the inside, this means, from dialogue between the local and global, so as to avoid the colonization of thought and the civilizing illusion. The consolidation of sustainable economies independent from mining, requires a collective act of rethinking the context where social and gender relationships are built upon the necessities and social dynamics of the territories. This implies inquiring deeper into the social life of populations, valuing the centuries of vocational and productive tradition, and understanding the ingrained social dynamics that define their identity. Such is the case of towns like Vetás and California, where the role of women is essential to community life.

Actually, women have always played an important role because we are the core of every family, without excluding the masculine side, due to their autonomy, authority and so on, but it's always women who take the initiative; the ones who care about others, the ones with a kind heart, the ones who look around, and that really occurs. Who are the ones who actually care about social issues? Women, because we care about what happens to our neighbor. We care about what happens to the town. We worry because politicians do not do what they're expected to do, I mean, that is a fundamental role. And, it has been us women who have fought to defend our rights, interests, property and territory. Women have played a highly important role because we are the ones who cares for the household's wellbeing, for what their children will become, for their community's and their people's peace¹⁷.

Within rural communities, women exercise their leadership through their identity as peasants and as women (Serrano, 2008), given that their setting, institutionally forgotten, stricken by poverty and affected by unequal gender stereotyping through which women are subordinated¹⁸, lead to taking urgent, transformative actions to positively change the communities' conditions.

¹⁷Key participant 3. California, Santander. February 7, 2018. Translated from original: "*Realmente la mujer siempre ha jugado un papel importante porque en la familia, el centro somos nosotras, sin que uno excluya a la parte masculina, por la misma autonomía, autoridad y demás, pero siempre la mujer es la que toma la iniciativa, la que se preocupa, la que tiene ese corazón bondadoso, es la que mira hacia alrededor, y eso sucede, que en una comunidad, ¿quién es la que se preocupa por los temas sociales?, la mujer, porque uno se preocupa por lo que le pase al otro vecino, por lo que le pueda pasar al pueblo, uno se preocupa porque los gobernantes no hacen las cosas, o sea, ese papel ha sido fundamental. Y realmente, las luchas que hemos dado por defender nuestros derechos nuestros intereses, nuestra propiedad, nuestro territorio, hemos sido las mujeres. La mujer ha jugado un papel supremamente importante porque es la que se preocupa por la estabilidad del hogar, por lo que van a hacer los hijos, por la tranquilidad de su comunidad, de su pueblo.*"

¹⁸ In the case of the communities living in the Moorland of Santurbán, it is necessary to point out that colonial mining represents the deep-rooted presence of the Catholic church in Colombia, and along with it, the long-standing customs and traditions of the populations' everyday life.

Through their role as leaders, women not only seek to guarantee a prosperous future for the four-hundred families living in the mining municipalities of Santurbán, but also work towards access to their rights as women to defend their territory and diminish the companies' impact on gender relations and social fabric.

In their discourse and demands, the only request which brings to the table a concern inherent of their identity as women, is employment. It is worth highlighting that although the practice of artisanal mining, which has been inherited and is socially accepted for women (searching for gold in the river sands), does not allow them to have any savings or capital accumulation, it has enabled many women to have certain extent of financial autonomy for providing nourishment and basic education to their children. For them, it is culturally unfeasible not being able to earn their own income, in spite of it not being necessarily high.

Decolonial criticism from a gender perspective: Vetas and California

Different social studies on the Moorland of Santurbán, such as Buitrago's (2012) and Méndez' (2018), characterize the division of gender roles in terms of public and private. According to these studies, women perform traditional tasks at home (taking care of animals and orchards, cleaning, and cooking), and as mining labor, they do the "*barequeo*". This activity consists in manually washing the river's sand in search for gold pieces, without the help of any tool or machine. On the other hand, the majority of men work on underground mining.

It is relevant to emphasise that findings from the fieldwork conducted for this research, particularly, from the interviews carried out with the townspeople of Vetas and California, show that women's role in their territories is significantly important at family, community and economic levels. With respect to the family, apart from their caring role, women are in charge of making decisions, also provide for their family and manage the household economy. Even though the majority of women traditionally work as "*barequeras*"¹⁹, some of them also work inside the mine. This activity is disapproved by some because of the handling of dynamite, chemicals and the fact that women have to go into the underground tunnels. Nevertheless, underground mining is also an option for those women who due to their family heritage have become active members of the mining economy. This is affirmed by one of the interviewees:

(...) all women coming from this area have done mining, it has been our legacy
 (...) we used to go to the mine, we would mine: "*mineabamos*", that was the colloquial word we used. We [also] used to go to the river in search for gold, our mothers always passed on that knowledge²⁰.

The need to provide resources for family maintenance blurs the division between public and private roles of daily life. Without denying that gender inequalities persist during their work in rural, service and mining economies, reducing their role in society solely to household work is unacceptable. Their urge to seek the benefit of their families and communities places them as active and widely participative subjects in the realities of their territories. There, they express their

¹⁹ Colloquial expression used in Colombia referring to women who practice the "*barequeo*".

²⁰ Key participant 1. Bucaramanga, february 7, 2018. Translated from original: "*Todas las mujeres que provenimos de esta zona hemos hecho minería, ese ha sido nuestro legado (...) Íbamos a la mina, "mineabamos", que era la palabra coloquial que se usa, [también] íbamos al río a orear, las mamás siempre transfirieron ese conocimiento.*"

thoughts according to the traditional and cultural relationships they have with natural and mineral resources.

Through social participation, women make themselves visible as actors in the dispute scenario with the right to become the writers of their own history. In the case of California, the mobilizing capability of women is proven, even in relation to the working conditions of their husbands. During interviews with leaders in California, for instance, they highlight anecdotes of citizen mobilization during the presence of Greystar in the Moorland to demonstrate their disagreement with the company's social management and its relation with the community; the burning of corporate Greystar t-shirts²¹ is one of the most emblematic and memorable experiences of non-conformity demonstration due to the resistance they had to exert.

According to Judith Butler (1993), gender, body, sex, desire, and the individual are product of a discursive and signification order, which, depending on the context, is interpreted by each person, and acted upon politically in the reproduction of power relations. In contexts of extractive industry, the multifaceted role of women in this economic activity is tangible. Women's closeness to mining extraction is determined by the relevance that such activity has for the family income, and for the culture and identity of the communities. However, their leadership is not highlighted from a gender perspective or any feminist theoretical foundation.

Although women's agency vis-à-vis collective issues is relevant, their demands regarding their situation as women are nonexistent (Méndez, 2018). This justifies the need to analyze the way in which women find solutions to their own problems, starting from the performativity of their position as women and farmers. In order to accomplish this, it is pertinent to consider the theoretical possibilities offered by decolonial feminism.

Yuderkys Espinosa (2012) defines decolonial feminism as:

A movement in full growth and maturation which proclaims itself as revisionist of the theory and political proposal of feminism, from what it considers its western, white and bourgeois bias. Decolonial feminism is understood as the compilation of the work by thinkers, intellectuals, feminist activists, lesbian feminists, afro descendants, indigenous, underprivileged racially-mixed women, peasant women, as well as some white scholars committed to the task of historical recovery of a name that is their own, of an anti-racist feminist theory and practice in *Abya Yala*²².

Although women from the mining extractive contexts do not put forward gender vindications, they are indeed protagonists of struggles conceived as their own when facing a worrying reality: the uncertainty about the future, caused by the arrival of industrialized mining, which eventually transgresses their culture and economic stability in the medium and long term.

Positive social transformations on both socio-economic and gender levels are still not visible in the objectives of social intervention proposed by large-scale extractive companies, such as Greystar. Although some of these social projects consist in promoting education for work and entrepreneurship among women, through the creation of businesses alternative to artisanal mining

²¹ The t-shirts represent the assistentialism in the practice of the company's social responsibility as perceived by the community. T-shirts in Colombia are used as proselytist items having a void influence in long-term transformation. They have a mere advertising impact.

²² *Abya Yala* refers to the Americas. Such name was given by the indigenous settlers of Colombia and Panama before the arrival of Christopher Columbus and the Europeans.

extraction, there is no evidence of a gender perspective in the principles which guide the social action of the company. This is described by Raquel Méndez (2018) in her research:

[...] the training offer, a key process for generating changes in the access to job opportunities, maintains those sexist perspectives that separate men and women in their training interests [...] Companies have financed basic training courses for women in a variety of areas, which are generally related to feminine tasks: breeding chickens, hairdressing, dressmaking, cooking and processing of dairy and meat products, etc. [...] The information gathered reveals feelings of dissatisfaction among women, who have responded positively to the courses, but when finishing them, have perceived that they have not been useful for improving their income. This is due to the fact that the courses offered do not belong to comprehensive entrepreneurship programs, covering not only basic but also specialized training, and that women lack seed capital for starting their business.

With the gradual replacement of artisanal with industrial mining, and the implementation of training and entrepreneurship programs for women, the interference in the community dynamics is seen as permeated by strong models of inequality brought from the outside. The influence of heteropatriarchal ways of thinking, which divide the roles of men and women, is reflected, for example, in the assignment of passive roles for employed women in the company, and in the training for stigmatized jobs such as: crafting, poultry farming, reforestation, agricultural work, among others.

Offering women educational programs focused on these areas, while training men in technical tasks of the extractive industry, rather than being a plan for deconstructing gender inequalities, leads to their reaffirmation and perpetuation. To illustrate the aforementioned, it is pertinent to refer to the experiences of some women who worked for Greystar, who were excluded from training courses in activities such as mechanics. This was done because their superiors, who were male engineers, did not consider them capable of receiving technical training in an activity traditionally assigned to men. Not only does this activity require physical effort, but also mental dexterity and occupational hazard²³. The stigmatization of women as the weak gender is seen in the limitations imposed on women for performing tasks involving risks or the use of technologies. Regarding this, Astrid Ulloa and Sergio Coronado state that:

Diverse ways of extractivism have triggered multiple conflicts due to deterritorialization and uprooting processes, breaches in the relationships that human beings have with the environment, epistemic, ethnic and gender violence, among others. [This has] fractured the communities, who have been affected in their living spaces and the ways they inhabit, live and work the land (Ulloa & Coronado, 2016, p. 24)²⁴.

²³ Key Participant 4. California, Santander. August 22, 2017.

²⁴ Translated from original: "*Diversas formas de extractivismo han desencadenado múltiples conflictos por procesos de desterritorialización y desarraigo, rupturas en las relaciones del ser humano con el entorno, y violencia epistémica, étnica y de género, entre otros. [Esto ha] fracturado a las comunidades, afectadas de este modo en sus espacios de vida y en las formas como habitan, viven y producen el territorio.*"

In addition, the training and entrepreneurship activities led by Greystar in Santurbán are strongly criticized by the local women. The capitalization of a passive role through training programs in stereotyped activities, promotes the reproduction of inequalities which do not correspond to the reality of communities where they have played a crucial role. Historically and culturally, women in Santurbán have not only been housekeepers, but also workers; although the majority of them have responsibilities as mothers, wives and daughters, they have also been economic providers and social leaders. Nonetheless, their presence in the mining contexts is overlooked due to the existence of traditional stereotypes, which do not portray them as capable of performing activities different from those historically assigned to them, such as taking care of their families and doing housework.

Due to this, many women accustomed themselves to create their own opportunities through entrepreneurship. One of the interviewed women said that before the arrival of the foreign companies in the territory, women entrepreneurship was already a reality. Without external support, a group of peasant women participated in the towns' economy through the Municipal Association of Peasant Women from California²⁵, an organization founded in 1990 in charge of providing the community with products of household consumption.

I remember that in our economy, the shopkeepers [and] the traditional miners managed a very important economy, because traditional miners did not go shopping in the city, they did not have the need to go out of town, and if they did, it was only once a month and just for supplies or things that the capital city had to offer. Other than that, everything (the profit) was for the local economy: for the butcher, the shopkeeper, the milkman. Then, that economy was sufficient and self-sufficient, since we all lived from others, and we all lived peacefully (...) That community association lasted for a lifetime, it had been on for many years. They (the leading women) died, and the organization was over when Eco Oro gave them (the remaining women) the feeding camp. They gave up their role as business women, as workers, everything; and they dedicated themselves to follow up what was happening with the camp. From there, they failed, and their president even faced serious legal issues that almost sent her to prison. Well, it was as it had been the moment for the organization to collapse²⁶.

This experience unveils a lack of concrete and structured processes of inclusion for women into formal and widely participatory activities within the extractive economy not only based on stereotyped jobs. One of the reasons why communities question the companies' legitimacy is the transgression of community dynamics in which women have a more significant role, rather than a

²⁵ Translated from its name in Spanish: *Asociación Municipal de Mujeres Campesinas de California* (AMUSIC).

²⁶ Key participant 1. Bucaramanga february 7, 2018. Translated from original: *“Yo recuerdo que la economía nuestra, los tenderos, los mineros tradicionales movían una economía muy importante, porque es que el minero tradicional no salía a la ciudad a hacer sus compras, no tenía la necesidad de salir, y si lo hacían era una vez al mes, ya para un tema más de insumos, de cosas que la capital les ofrecía, de resto todo se quedaba en la economía del pueblo, para el de la carne, para el de la tienda, para el de la leche, entonces esa economía era suficiente y autosuficiente porque todos vivíamos de todos y todos vivíamos tranquilos (...) Esa asociación comunitaria existía de toda una vida, ellas llevaban muchísimos años constituidas. Ellas murieron y esa organización se acabó cuando la compañía Eco Oro les dio el campamento de alimentación. Porque ellas botaron el rol que venían haciendo como empresarias, como trabajadoras, todo, y se dedicaron fue a hacerle seguimiento al campamento, y ahí fue el fracaso porque terminó fue hasta la presidenta en problemas gravísimos, de jurídico y casi de cárcel, mejor dicho, eso fue como si ese fuera un escenario prestado para que esa organización se acabara.”*

merely domestic one. In consequence, local women are currently seeking approval for an ecotourism project which would eventually generate sustainable financial resources. Such a project would give them independence from industrial mining, while providing them with an external recognition of their sense of belonging, their history and customs without disrupting the environmental setting and the preservation of the ecological riches.

Generally, the priorities of foreign extractive companies are dictated by capital cities of the North, creating extreme disconnections between what they consider priority policies, and the values that the companies' missions are supposed to defend (Fontan, 2013). Furthermore, neocolonial ideas associated with an enclave economy converge in the belief that the companies' responsibility is to bring development to the local population.

At first, the communities' acceptance of Greystar's proposals was a reality, due to the illusion of being hired, having greater fluidity of money throughout the territory, and a possibility of improving their quality of life. However, various inconsistencies between their discourse and practice, occurring during their presence in the territories, incubated rejection towards the company. This rejection is more noticeable nowadays, and although the communities continue seeing large-scale mining as the promise of development, many locals also have a critical standpoint towards this issue, especially when their lives have been directly affected by the company's decisions.

The acceleration of the postmodern world, in which success seems to be a synonym of wealth, it is a common trend that mining extraction companies relate the development of communities to the accumulation of goods and the imposition of a globalized mindset. Foreign companies working in communities such as Santurbán's must be aware that populations have their own social dynamics, and therefore, they deserve their commitment to work responsibly so as to guarantee the communities' wellbeing. This needs to be done from a gender perspective, in order to avoid the reproduction of traditional stereotypes and the subsequent perpetuation of inequality.

Conclusions

Regarding the idea of a neo-colonial and globalized development, the presence of industrial mining companies in Santurbán such as Greystar, implies the creation of numerous opportunities to rescue the communities from the state of inequality in which they live. The social aid underlying these extractive entities' social investments seeks capitalization of the self, not only as a strategy to improve people's quality of life, but also to legitimate their presence in the territories. In relation to globalized notions of poverty, inequality, and gender relations, the social projects carried out permeate the dynamics of daily socialization while triggering determining crises for the future of the communities' cultures, traditions, and values.

Training projects for human talent offering job opportunities as an alternative to mining in the towns of Vetas and California, are some of the most questioned initiatives by the community. Firstly, since these do not provide the sustainability of the economic activities they propose. And secondly, because the imposed ways of interaction and socialization fail to recognize the local realities. With their proposals and social programs, the extractive companies neglect the pace of socialization of the communities. The transnational's developmentalist discourse imbued with globalization makes them fall into neo-colonialism.

The critique of the social responsibility policy posed herein proposes to preserve the local initiatives and the women's leadership stories, which represents a significant achievement for the deconstruction of gender inequalities. As Vásquez (2014, p. 194) highlights, any proposal

imposing pre-established ideas about a reality that should be transformed, has the responsibility to critique itself, while considering that sociabilities are relational and plural.

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