

# The Importance of Land for Women Confronting Patriarchy and Climate Change

Written by Leny Olivera

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LENY OLIVERA, NOV 9 2015

*“It is women who have the job of going to collect water, and sometimes the children; we [women] suffer because there’s no water.” (Woman from the community Totoral, Bolivia, 16 may 2013) [1].*

These are the words of a woman living in Totoral in Oruro, Bolivia, where the community only gets drinking water piped in for one hour a week, from another community nearby. This is because their local water is highly polluted by heavy metals. It is under these difficult conditions that women must ensure there is water for the community’s domestic and small scale agriculture needs. This is on top of the extra burden of work they already carry as women and mothers living in deprived circumstances, exacerbated by the fact that many of the men in the area are obliged to work in the mines and/or migrate temporarily to Bolivia’s largest cities, amongst them Cochabamba.

For many people who live in the global North and have never experienced having access to running water for only one hour a week, it is difficult to imagine how climate change impacts on places like these – whose reality is akin to that of many communities living in the Bolivian *altiplano* (the high, arid plains of the Andean region), and indeed that of many precarious land-based communities across the global South.

Such communities are not only more exposed to the impacts of climate change because of their geographical location but also they often bear the burdens of the impacts of extractivism, a fact of life that characterizes many areas across the Latin American continent. This brings other socio-environmental factors which affect the lives of people living there. Water scarcity is a crucial such factor – water is diminishing not only as a result of climate change but also due to mining use and contamination.

Not everyone is affected equally by climate change impacts. Such impacts imply more work for women, on top of the heavy workload they already bear. This is due to their assigned social role, centered on the cares, tasks and basic needs that reproduce daily life. And this applies not only in rural but also urban settings.

Climate impacts do not exist in isolation from the economic, political, social and environmental situations in which we live in each country; the causes of climate change are in tight relation to capitalism’s dominant model of economic development. The theme of how women are impacted by climate change in periurban areas specifically is not separate from that of the capitalist model – it relates to a patriarchal system which for centuries has oppressed women, stripping them of their territory and subjugating their labor and their bodies for its benefit. As such, climate change impacts sharpen current social injustices against women, both environmentally and in terms of the violence they are exposed to. How women are affected in periurban areas by the violence they live with – together with economic and climatic crisis, racism and social exclusion – and why land is a key factor in the possibility of struggle and resistance against this oppressive model is what we will go on to examine here, looking at the experience of ‘María Auxiliadora’, a women-led community on the outskirts of Cochabamba.

### Climate Change Impacts in the Periphery

Although there are differences in how women are affected by the climate crisis in rural compared to urban areas, in

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both settings an excess burden falls upon women. Of course, within cities women are impacted differently depending on socioeconomic conditions, ethnicity and the specific relations of power and violence in which they are situated.

In a context such as that of Cochabamba's South Zone, everyone has to confront uncertain and difficult futures due to their migrant status, because of their indigenous Aymara or Quechua ethnic origins, and/or because of poverty. And even more so if one is a woman. At the 2010 People's Conference on Climate Change in Cochabamba, an ally involved in communitarian feminism described the impacts on urban women like these very well:

In the cities, we can also see how the dynamics of women's lives are affected. Caring for children's health takes more time and knowledge. The provision of food – which now takes longer to arrive from rural areas, often not in the best condition due to extremes of temperature, and whose price is also rising thanks to climate change – demands more time of women, more work, and the need to be permanently recreating their knowledge in order to deal with this new reality.

Impacts such as these are also surely difficult to imagine for people in the global North, including in its periurban areas. In Bolivia the majority of people get their supplies from markets to which the arrival of products is very much dependent on climatic conditions, making them vulnerable to fluctuations in quantity, quality and price.

## **Women, Land and Climate Change**

Another factor besides those already mentioned which exacerbates the impacts of climate change on women in particular is that of access to land. Historically women have been excluded<sup>[2]</sup> from access to land and the benefits of its productive use. In other words, they have not been able to own land, to have decision-making power over how land is used or how to manage the benefits that it generates.<sup>[3]</sup>

While it is the case that women are responsible for the multiple tasks that are required to guarantee the reproduction of life, as well as participating in agricultural and livestock production, in general women do not own the soil on which they live.

In the same way in urban areas, where the population has been increasing intensively in the last decade in Bolivia, women do not enjoy the same rights as men over land. The organization *Habitad para la Humanidad* ('Habitat for Humanity') has explained that:

In spite of the advances that exist for greater equality of women's rights in regard to the control and management of land, in Bolivia this is qualified by a juridical and social framework which has brought about unequal distribution, together with traditional arrangements, which exclude women from holding titles to urban land.

In a situation of economic crisis, social marginalization, exposure to violence for being a woman (and more so being a landworker as well), being indigenous, a migrant, of few resources – in such contexts being able to count on having land is a fundamental for women seeking to confront macho violence and the impacts of climate change.

## **María Auxiliadora: An Alternative in the Face of Violence and Climate Change**

The community of *María Auxiliadora* in the city of Cochabamba arose out of the periurban context we have been describing, where women, as we have already noted, carry out all domestic tasks and in precarious conditions. Typically living in such a context implies, amongst other things, paying rent for overcrowded housing, having limited access to water which is often overpriced and of poor quality, and investing extra time in order to access public transport to go to work elsewhere in the city.

Doña Isabel, a member of the community, described her situation before moving to live in *María Auxiliadora*:

Living in rented accommodation is very difficult. You're in a tiny space, you eat and sleep in the same room, your children can't go outside, there is nowhere to play, it's uncomfortable. The owner is very quick to ask for money for

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rent, water, electricity. Everything needs to be paid for.

In this southern part of Cochabamba most men and women – the majority of whom have migrated from other Bolivian cities – carry out poorly paid informal work, especially women. To live, along with your children, in such a context and with a violent partner can put women's lives at risk. Bolivia is one of the worst countries in Latin America for sexual violence against women, and Cochabamba has the highest numbers of femicides in the country.

In the face of this violent reality the community of María Auxiliadora took shape fifteen years ago. Within this community women and their families can count on a plot of 200m<sup>2</sup> – enough to generate the minimum conditions for confronting the complex of factors mentioned above.

## What Role Does Having A Plot Of Land Play in the Face of Climate Change?

María Auxiliadora promotes women having access to their own plot of land, meaning they can at least have an economically accessible safe space to live with their children, without having to take the risk of becoming homeless or, in the worst cases, being assaulted or murdered.

An illustrative case is that of María Eugenia, the current president of the community, who could have lost her house and been forced onto the street with her son – or lost her life at the hands of her ex-husband:

[After moving to María Auxiliadora] he didn't change. He began to beat me; if I defended myself he hit me three times as much. That's why my face is disfigured – he made my gums explode, and so I have facial paralysis. When I cry, or try not to cry, the whole left side of my face hardens...who knows but that he could have killed me as well.

With the possibility of land, the community offers many advantages to women: reducing their economic dependency, and being able to produce their own food and eat healthily without having to depend completely on salaried income – especially in times of economic crisis or climate impacts, when accessing many food items become a luxury. Among the community's principles is the promotion of urban allotments for family consumption. This reduction of dependence on waged income also acts as a challenge to capitalist dynamics.

As Doña Irene, another community member, commented: "At times there is nothing; sometimes there is no money, sometimes they haven't paid us and so you go to take what there is in the allotment and it saves you. It's also fresh and tastes better, just picked from the plant."

Many families in the community are producing ten or more types of vegetables in spaces less than 1.5m<sup>2</sup>.

Another advantage that life in the community offers is the possibility of experimenting with collective forms of organization which don't exclude women.

## Decision-making in the Community

Access to land is not enough to confront all the forms of violence women are exposed to in the periurban context. Another fundamental aspect in being able to confront the problem at its base – which sites climate change within the patriarchal capitalist system – is how to structure decision-making in a way that does not reproduce the same power relations. In spite of dealing with many challenges in relation to collective ownership, the practices which María Auxiliadora have managed to incorporate offer inspiring examples which can help us rethink what it means to confront climate change in a structural manner.

What makes their experience unique are the agreements which they managed to make at in their community assemblies. Among the most important is that only women assume the presidency of the community's directive in order to guarantee compliance with its principles – which include the main demands of the women there. Another core principal views the land in its social, not commercial, character: plots cannot be sold or rented, nor divided if a couple separates (the house remains with whichever parent will be the main care-giver of any children involved,

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normally the mother).

Thanks to this latter principle the community was able to step in and ensure that María Eugenia did not lose the home she had worked on making when she wanted to get away from her violent ex-husband.

He wanted to remain there. [I told a neighbor] that I was going to leave the community because he didn't want to leave. [She told me] 'No, no, no – we won't permit this to happen, these houses are the women's here, and for their children. There is no division, no partition here. These rules will be followed, don't you worry. I don't want you to go anywhere – return to your home.'

All the same, it is not easy for women to take on leadership roles such as that of the presidency. The little time they have available after all the domestic and other tasks they must carry out, the machismo that is present in the relations with other colleagues both inside and outside the community – these are just some of the challenges which women here face in their daily existence, providing them with a double struggle when it comes to dismantling the structures which oppress them.

## Conclusion

The impacts of climate change affect women more. While not all women are affected the same way, we do find, in general, that women in both rural and urban areas are faced with more work as a result of these impacts. The causes of climate impacts are closely related to a model of economic development which has been imposed across continents. 'Under-developed' countries are paying the price of living under this dominant capitalist model; Bolivia is one of these and, moreover, one of the countries most affected by the climate crisis.

But these climate impacts are not only the consequence of the economic model, but also of patriarchy; it is not by chance that women are the most affected. Not because women are more vulnerable in and of themselves, but because a patriarchy reinforced by capitalism has placed women in this condition of subordination and disadvantage. To see it from the other side, if it weren't for the work that women do then the reproduction of life wouldn't be sustainable – but the time has come to redistribute this work in order for it to be sustainable. The problem is that this kind of work is not recognized socially nor economically, and is considered something innate to women's 'nature', thus concealing the ways in which women are oppressed.

The community of María Auxiliadora is an example that arises out of women's experiences and looks to create the conditions which, as a minimum, are necessary to confront both violence against women *and* climate change, in a structural way. For women to have access to land, for women's lives to matter, along with pursuing sustainable practices such as allotments, compost toilets, preserving vegetables ...to paraphrase Vandana Shiva: "The most revolutionary act in current times is to grow your own food."

## Notes

NB: This article was translated from Spanish by Maddy Ryle.

[1] Bolivia. Colectivo De Cordinacion De Acciones Socio Ambientales.(2013), Minería con "M" de Machismo Madre Tierra con "M" de mujer. Oruro: (4-1-2428-13); Federici.S (ed.) (2013) *Revolution at point Cero: Housework, reproduction and feminist struggles*. Madrid: Traficante de Sueños.

[2] But we must question whether the situation of women has always been thus. It is worth mentioning the strong arguments which exist to demonstrate that the lives of women have not always been this way – such as in the research of Silvia Federici: "In many countries across Africa and Latin America women had their harvest, had their land, had control over the products of their labor and were not dependent on men – as they became under capitalist society. They were excluded from access to land".(Conference, October, 2014)

[3] Tierra. Propuestas para políticas públicas (2014), Mujeres Rurales Tierra y Seguridad Alimentaria. N 4 [Online]

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**Leny Olivera** is a Bolivian feminist activist and student of sociology who has been involved since 2000 in groups working in defense of natural resources and autonomous women groups fighting racist, class and gender violence. She works at the Democracy Center and is co-author of the project "Climate Change is About...Women" and author of this recent article.