

“Our Bodies Are Not Terra Nullius” by Erin Marie Komsmo (from Komsmo & Pacheco, 2016)

Exploiting Indigenous Peoples: Prostitution, Poverty, Climate Change, and Human Rights

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ABSTRACT

This article describes connections between resource extraction, prostitution, poverty, and climate change. Although resource extraction and prostitution have been viewed as separate phenomena, this article suggests that they are related harms that result in multiple violations of indigenous peoples’ human rights.

Keywords: resource extraction, prostitution, poverty, indigenous peoples, climate change, human rights, women’s rights, sexual exploitation.

Resource Extraction and Climate Change are Connected to Prostitution

Extraction of raw materials on indigenous peoples’ lands is linked to prostitution, poverty, and climate change.¹ The centrality of resource extraction to these oppressive harms is clarified by Seiya

¹Prostitution is the sale of a sex act or the exchange of a sex act for food, shelter, drugs, cash, or something of value. Trafficking is pimping or third-party control over another person. Women are adult human females. Regarding the differences between sex and gender, see Dahlen, 2020; Hilton et al., 2021; Stevenson, 2010; Sullivan, 2020. In this article, we use the term ‘women in prostitution’ to include any adult in prostitution, simply because most people in prostitution are women.

Morita's diagram in Figure 1.² *In the short term*, resource extraction leads to a sudden increase in prostitution, as shown by the arrow on the left side of the diagram. *In the long term*, resource extraction causes climate change, as indicated by the right arrow. Climate change then leads to crises in peoples' ability to survive extreme events such as drought, floods, or agricultural collapse. These climate changes result in poverty which then channels women into the sex trade. The arrow on the bottom of Figure 1 illustrates this process.

Historically, extraction industries have exploited young, poor men who are paid well to perform jobs that no one else wants. The jobs are unpleasant, difficult to perform, and dangerous. The resource extraction phase temporarily results in a boom economy with cash-rich but lonely working-class men. To pacify the workers and

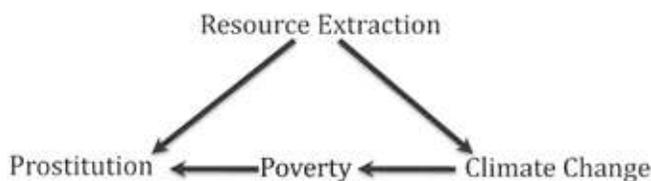


Figure 1. Links between resource extraction, prostitution, poverty, and climate change

enrich the sex trade capitalists, women and girls who are under the control of pimps are delivered to workers in these boom/sacrifice zones such as the Bakken oil fields in USA and Canada, gold mines in South Africa, coltan mining regions in Colombia, and logging regions in Brazil.³ This movement of trafficked women increases prostitution both in the boomtown and in neighboring communities. "Sex crimes, the sex trade, and anti-woman violence, have become major and predictable by-products of oil, gas and mining extraction operations."⁴ Following is an example of this process.

The Bakken oil fields of Montana/North Dakota/Saskatchewan/Manitoba are in lands where the Dakota Access Pipeline causes physical, psychological, and cultural damage to the community and harm to the land and the water by way of ecocide.⁵ In 2008, large numbers of pipeline workers moved into the Bakken region's barracks-style housing named man camps. Sexual assaults, domestic violence, and sex trafficking tripled in communities adjacent to the oilfield sacrifice zones,⁶ with especially high rates of sexual violence toward Native women.⁷ Violence against women and violence against the land are connected, explained Sii-

²Seiya Morita's most recent book is *Marxism, Feminism, Sex Work* (Tokyo: Keio University Press 2021).

³Anderson, 2019; Bnamericas, 2016; Hiar, 2012; Stuckler et al., 2013.

⁴Adamson, 2017.

⁵The Dakota Access Pipeline is controlled by Energy Transfer Partners, with minority interests held by oil corporations Phillips 66 and by affiliates of Enbridge and Marathon Petroleum. This pipeline construction is resisted by the Standing Rock Sioux and many others.

⁶Ruddell, et al., 2017; Johnson, 2021.

⁷First Peoples Worldwide, 2019; Corbett, 2021; Johnson, 2021.

am Hamilton, “The femicide is directly linked to the ecocide. No matter what kind of extractive industry is attacking a community, it has the same rippling effect on women.”⁸ Some of the adverse consequences of living near extractive projects include increased rates of sexually transmitted infections and still-births; general deterioration in health; ecological degradation and climate change; threats to food security; and political corruption – all of which severely impact women.⁹

When an extraction project is stopped, for example when coltan mining was halted in DR Congo because of environmental protests, the newly expanding sex trade remained in operation: an enduring legacy of colonization. Belgium’s domination of Congo gradually shifted from state to corporate colonization.¹⁰ The Belgian colonists’ commodification of the nation diminished the people’s social and political power, leaving them poorer, with fewer resources, and often desperate for a means of survival even before the later phase of climate change occurred. This sequence happens wherever resources are commodified. Initially, a boom economy based on resource extraction creates short-term job opportunities and wealth previously unknown. Prostitution is established both to pacify the workers and to generate money for pimps and traffickers. When the boom economy collapses, the men’s demand for continued paid sexual access and women’s poverty merge. The consequence of the triple cage of sexism, corporate colonialism, and poverty is

that the institution of prostitution expands and flourishes even after the extraction industry has ended.¹¹

Pervasive ecological damage, climate change, poverty, and entrenched prostitution become evident in the second phase of harms resulting from resource extraction. For example, in Bangladesh after flooding, and in India after droughts, women had few options to feed their families.¹² Climate heating causes food and water shortages, resulting in poverty and decreased alternatives for survival, all of which are linked to prostitution. This destructive cycle causes great harm to indigenous peoples, threatening their existence.

Accurate Information is a Human Right

In the digital age, access to information is now recognized as a human right. Since awareness of human rights violations usually precedes a demand for protection, accurate information is essential to asserting indigenous peoples’ human rights.¹³ Inaccurate and deliberately

⁸ Brooks, 2021.

⁹ Oluduro and Durojaye, 2013.

¹⁰ RT Films, 2017.

¹¹ See Lakhani, 2020; Mulobelaj, 2016; O’Brien, 2008; Potts, 2013; Pretty Sounding Flute, 2000; Rogelj et al., 2018; Smith, 2015; Swarup et al., 2011; Vidal, 2015.

¹² Simonsson, 2018; Catch News, 2017.

¹³ Kravchenko, 2007.

misleading information about climate science and prostitution harms have confused people.¹⁴ For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (1990) produced an early report on risks. Although the oil company Exxon was aware of severe climate change risks as early as 1968,¹⁵ Exxon and other Big Oil lobbyists created the deceptively named Global Climate Coalition for the purpose of raising doubts about climate heating so that resource extraction could continue without interruption. Advocating legal prostitution, the Open Society Foundation (OSF) supports efforts to integrate prostitution (named “the sex sector”) into countries’ job markets.¹⁶ OSF and the Gates Foundation produce campaigns that function much like Big Oil’s climate science denial crusades. In what Hedges described as a ‘triumph of misogyny’, OSF funding recipient Amnesty International

successfully campaigned for men’s rights to buy sex and pimp women in prostitution.¹⁷

Trafficking, which is an ambivalent word for pimping, is prevalent in all forms of prostitution. Noting the impossibility of separating prostitution from trafficking in the real world, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Aspects of the Victims of Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, observed that prostitution as it is practiced “usually satisfies the legal elements for the definition of trafficking.”¹⁹ The evidence suggests that legal prostitution is associated with expansion of sex trafficking. Economists Cho, Dreher, and Neumayer found that in 150 countries, trafficking increased when prostitution was made legal.²⁰ Research from Europe and the United States has also reported the coexistence of legal prostitution and sex trafficking.²¹

¹⁴ Postmodern philosophy has confused people and camouflaged the harms of prostitution by mystifying the sex trade via a ‘politics of abdication and disengagement’ in which for example, incest and rape become ‘epistemological quandaries’ (MacKinnon, 1999). Under postmodernism, racism, sexism, and lethal poverty become representations of reality, rather than reality itself. To postmodernists, facts are unreliable: the oppressive social forces that harm women in prostitution – racism and sexism and poverty – are considered ‘unknowable’ (Shimizu, 2006) even though the peer-reviewed research cited here extensively documents those harms. The assumption that material reality is mentally constructed and that nothing is real means that the actual harms of prostitution cease to exist except in a woman’s mind. Postmodernists assume that women who have been prostituted or trafficked are narrating just one more version of reality. In postmodern reality, pimps’ and pornographers’ lies (prostitution is sexy and fun for everyone; prostitutes get rich and meet nice men) are just as valid as survivors’ lived experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse, and as valid as peer-reviewed research documenting that abuse. This presumed equivalence of validity reflects a postmodern ‘sexual politics of meaninglessness’ that has profoundly impacted women’s lives because it makes men’s violence against women invisible (Jeffreys, 2008). A postmodern philosophical view of the world ultimately brings forth a nihilistic destruction of meaning and a valorization of fragmentation that obscures an evidence-based understanding of the human rights violations of prostitution.

¹⁵ Jennings et al. 2015; Rust, 2019. See also #EXXONKNEW.

¹⁶ Raphael, 2018.

¹⁷ Hedges, 2015.

¹⁸ Moran and Farley, 2019.

¹⁹ United Nations, 2006.

²⁰ Cho, Dreher, & Neumayer, 2013.

²¹ Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2013; Lee & Persson, 2013; Osmanaj, 2014; Heiges, 2009.

Human Rights are Interdependent

Noting the connections between racial and climate justice, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. dryly noted, “It is very nice to drink milk at an unsegregated lunch counter – but not when there’s strontium 90 in it.”²² Applying King’s perspective to this discussion, it is clear that collective actions that confront corporate and Eurocentric ‘climate solutions’ must redefine global coexistence on *indigenous people’s terms*.²³ Climate change must be understood as linked to other social justice struggles or else we will fail to dismantle the interconnected injustices of carbon capitalism, itself based on “an economic order that systematically exacerbates poverty and inequality while exceeding the limits of the planet’s finite ecosystems.”²⁴

Some human rights instruments that might reduce the harms of sexism, colonialism, prostitution, and climate change. These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women, the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) and the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights (Voluntary Principles). The Mandaluyong Declaration of the Global Conference on Indigenous Women and Climate Change is

both a tool for articulating indigenous women’s spiritual and political world view and also a call to activism.²⁵

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is a global policy framework for women’s human rights which recommends taking appropriate measures to: “... address *the root factors* including external factors that encourage trafficking in women and girls for prostitution and other forms of commercialized sex, forced marriages and forced labour...”²⁶ Solutions that address these root factors are programs that help women avoid or escape prostitution via the provision of food, shelter, healthcare (including mental health care and peer support), housing, and job training. Climate refugees need similar programs for survival. Moreover, the provision of survival *needs for all humans* would begin reducing stratospheric economic, race, and sex inequality, including the elimination of prostitution.

A coerced choice between poverty and prostitution should not be women’s only alternative. A forced choice between poverty and pollution should not be the governments’ only option. During the carbon elimination transition and the transition to the abolition of prostitution, redistribution of wealth is critical. Economies can and must be transformed away from

²² Dellinger, 2017.

²³ Whyte, 2014.

²⁴ Gonzales, 2021.

²⁵ Whyte, 2014

²⁶ Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995.

predatory colonial expansion in which everyone and every part of nature are commodified. The transformation is doable, as Sachs noted:

The world income [in 2019] is \$90 trillion, more than \$11,000 per person. Yet around a billion people still live in conditions of abject poverty. With a transfer of just 1% of the income of the rich countries to the poor countries, roughly \$500 billion per year, we could end extreme poverty.²⁷

Awareness of the links between resource extraction, poverty, and prostitution may facilitate the application of human rights laws and conventions to reduce those harms. The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (Principle 10) formulated procedural rights to participate in decision-making about environmental justice. These procedural rights should include indigenous women's determination regarding what constitutes justice for them, for example the right to housing, food, and the right to escape prostitution, the right to land, the right to language and culture, and the right to choose whether to remain or migrate, with a place in which to settle if migration is chosen. Their procedural determinations are unlikely to be enforced unless there is a shift in understanding about the current philosophical and empirical separation between humans and the rest of the natural world. A misguided dualism is at the cold heart of corporate/state actions that harm the planet; dualism is how non-human beings and also human beings are commodified.

Indigenous Women's Human Rights and Land Defense

Increasingly, climate scholars are applying a feminist perspective to intersecting injustices. Climate crises, economic recessions, rural-to-urban migration, and pandemics—all compound existing patriarchal, classed, and racialized violence.²⁸ Both in and out of prostitution, indigenous women are at the bottom of a brutal race and class hierarchy. The business of sexual exploitation (prostitution, pornography, trafficking) and the business of resource extraction (natural gas fracking, logging, fishing, mining) are connected at the deepest level.

Making the connections between how the earth and women are treated, anthropologist Peggy Sanday compared 156 rape-free and rape-prone cultures. In communities where women were free of rape, the land was free of exploitation and destruction. And where there was environmental degradation, there also were high levels of sexual violence.²⁹ Sanday's findings may be indicative of the "intangible cultural heritage" that reflects a community's values, identity, cultural knowledge, attachments, and relationship to the earth.³⁰

Rape is not just a metaphor: the rape of the earth and the rape of women and children are

²⁷ Sachs, 2019.

²⁸ Sultana, 2021.

²⁹ Sanday, 1981.

³⁰ Aktürk & Lerski, 2021.

driven by the dynamics of colonial power. Like the predation of a rapist, the colonial exploitation of energy in Indian country is not simply about theft, it is about “making tribal nations into things to be taken altogether.”³¹ Native women in Minnesota prostitution saw the connection between prostitution and colonization; they explained that the devaluation of women in prostitution was the same as the colonizing devaluation of Native peoples.³²

Indigenous women human rights defenders who confront extractive industries are challenging corporate power and also patriarchal power. They are targeted both as defenders of rights, land and natural resources, and also as women who resist sex role expectation. Women suffer the hardships of all human rights defenders, but they also face sexual violence. They are sometimes marginalized within their own communities.³³

Indigenous peoples’ analyses have integrated spiritual, cultural, political, and economic awareness regarding the connections between the earth and the women. “They treat Mother Earth like they treat women,” said Lisa Brunner, White Earth Ojibwe Program Specialist for the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center,

They think they can own us, buy us, sell us, trade us, rent us, poison us, rape us, destroy us, use us as entertainment and kill us. I’m

happy to see that we are talking about the level of violence that is occurring against Mother Earth because it equates to us. What happens to her happens to us.³⁴

Mi’kmaq grandmothers in 2021 resisted the construction of a pipeline that would transport liquefied gas across Canada to ports that would move it to Europe. They protested both the environmental harms of the pipeline and the ‘man-camps’ linked to increased violence against women. Because of the pipeline, the grandmothers said, people would be “crying for their water, and their lands and their mothers and their sisters and their daughters.”³⁵ Ongoing resistance to these multiple human rights violations is essential. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples noted the connection between sexual violence and sovereignty, explaining that “[i]ndigenous communities are at their strongest when women and girls have full and free access to social, cultural, spiritual and political institutions.”³⁶

³¹ Deer, & Kronk Warner, 2019.

³² Farley et al., 2011.

³³ Barcia, 2017.

³⁴ Graef, 2014.

³⁵ Moore, 2021.

³⁶ Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on Her Mission to the United States of America, 12 (2017), cited by Deer and Kronk Warner, 2019.

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