

Structural violence: Learning from women and girl environmental defenders

In their efforts to defend their land, territories and natural resources, women and girl environmental defenders¹ (WGEDs) around the world are experiencing diverse forms of structural violence. The violence they experience ranges from the physical to the spiritual. From dislocation and dispossession, to harassment and defamation. From sexual and domestic violence to kidnapping and murder. In 2021, the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA)² consulted with WGEDs around the globe about their understanding and experiences of structural violence. We asked WGEDs what structural violence is, how they face it and how donors can best support them. Here's what we learned from listening to their voices.³



“ We believe that structural violence is rooted in patriarchy, where marginalisation, subordination, and discrimination against women and girls are inherently embedded in the very institutions of the society. This is perpetuated by a system that creates inequality in many forms, such as economic, political, cultural, racial and gender inequality.

In communities where energy and development projects are being implemented, women are neither informed nor consulted despite the impending damage to their environment and dislocation from their communities and livelihoods. Worse, the companies do not pay for any damage they cause to the community. And it is women who bear the brunt of it. As a result, poverty and economic marginalisation of women gets worse, and so does the violence against women. ”

— **Local Asian Organisation**

¹When using the term women and girl environmental defenders (WGEDs), GAGGA includes women, girls, intersex, trans and non-binary people.

²Launched in 2016, GAGGA is a consortium led by Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (FCAM) in collaboration with Mama Cash and Both ENDS. GAGGA rallies the collective power of gender, climate and environmental justice movements around the world.

³Where needed, quotes have been lightly edited for readability.

1. WGEDs have a robust, comprehensive analysis about structural violence.

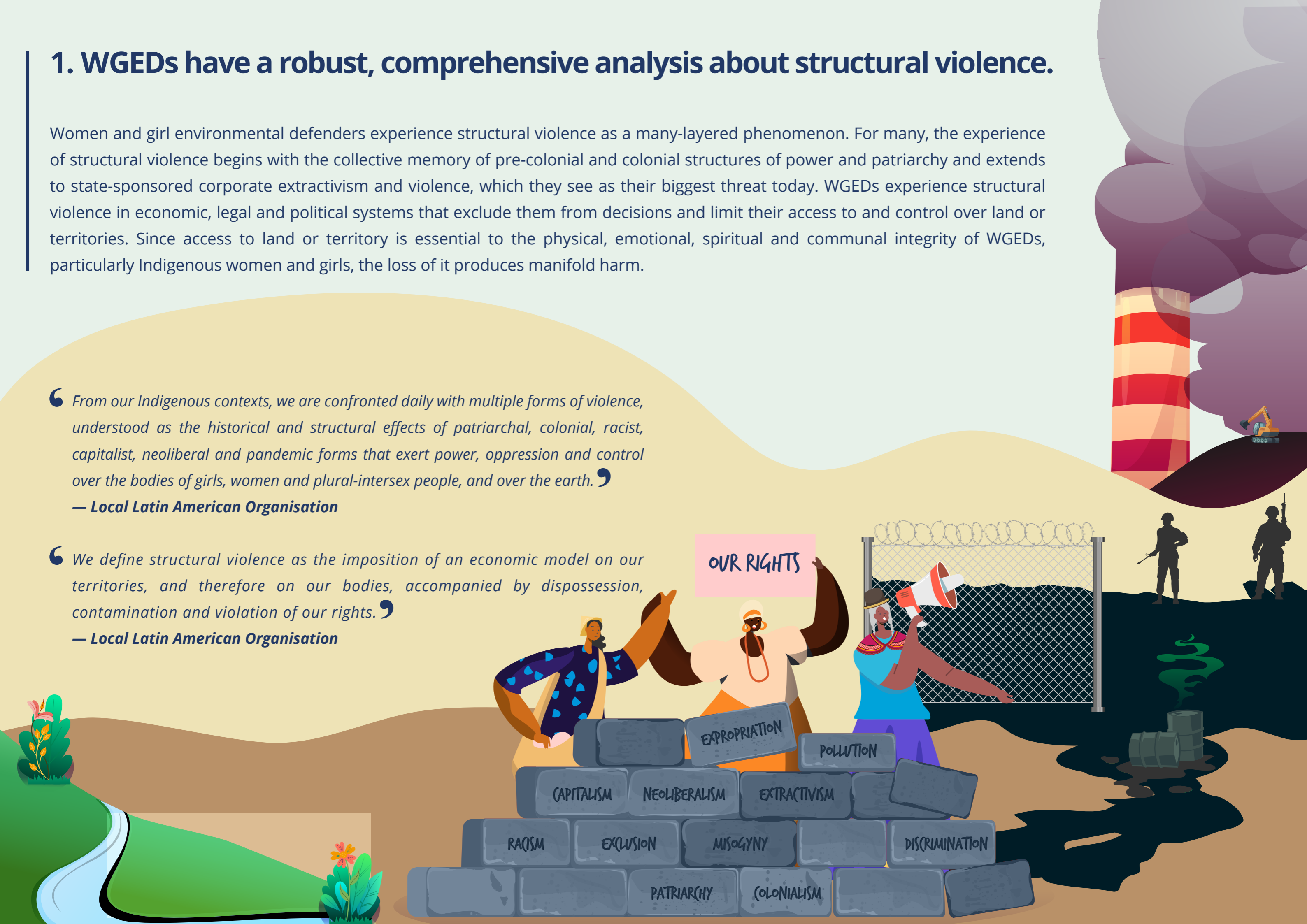
Women and girl environmental defenders experience structural violence as a many-layered phenomenon. For many, the experience of structural violence begins with the collective memory of pre-colonial and colonial structures of power and patriarchy and extends to state-sponsored corporate extractivism and violence, which they see as their biggest threat today. WGEDs experience structural violence in economic, legal and political systems that exclude them from decisions and limit their access to and control over land or territories. Since access to land or territory is essential to the physical, emotional, spiritual and communal integrity of WGEDs, particularly Indigenous women and girls, the loss of it produces manifold harm.

“From our Indigenous contexts, we are confronted daily with multiple forms of violence, understood as the historical and structural effects of patriarchal, colonial, racist, capitalist, neoliberal and pandemic forms that exert power, oppression and control over the bodies of girls, women and plural-intersex people, and over the earth.”

— Local Latin American Organisation

“We define structural violence as the imposition of an economic model on our territories, and therefore on our bodies, accompanied by dispossession, contamination and violation of our rights.”

— Local Latin American Organisation



2. In the face of severe challenges and risks, WGEDs have developed innovative strategies to prevent and respond to structural violence.

In their crucial efforts to defend land, territories and natural resources, WGEDs face significant risk to their lives and well-being. Their organisations are operating under extremely difficult conditions. To combat and cope with structural violence and advance environmental goals, WGEDs use a variety of innovative strategies.

■ Organising, alliance and movement-building, including uniting local struggles with broader movements for women's rights, human rights, climate and environmental justice

“There is a lot of fragmentation. People are working in silos. So it becomes easy for you to be targeted and silenced. One strategy we are working on with partners is to strengthen the environmental justice movement in Africa. We bring women human rights defenders who are working on environmental justice together, because together their voice becomes stronger.”

— **Regional African Organisation**

“Territorial alliances are very important to us. We go to these territories and meet Indigenous authorities who support our cooperation. These alliances are led and conducted by women and people with diverse bodies/genders, e.g. transgender Indigenous people. It is very important for us to work with diverse bodies and genders.”

— **Local Latin American Organisation**



■ Practices of community care, psycho-social and spiritual support, and healing

“Community embodied accompaniment (*acuerpamientos*) is a tool that we use to support our colleagues and the community. Through physical presence, with ceremonial elements and the performance of rituals, we bring energy and intentions to support women at risk, and those with pain and psychological illnesses.”

— **Local Latin American Organisation**

“We need to support WGEDs to just take time to breathe. If you’re going against a coal plant, it’s going to be difficult for you to sustain that activism for a whole year. The amount of money and power involved makes it difficult for environmental justice defenders to sustain their activism without getting burned out.”

— **Regional African Organisation**



■ Defence of common goods and communal spaces, including communally-owned land

“We do a lot of work in the defence of common goods. When we do this kind of work, it is the women who propose a legal framework for the protection of their territory, forest or agroecology, etc. Then they do the advocacy from there. What we do generates problems for us, because we face the interests of national and transnational companies. They are interested in taking ownership of common goods, to which we say NO!”

— **Local Latin American Organisation**

“We gave the government a choice. We said that we don’t want coal mines. We said: If you do build them, then they will be ours. Our land, our coal. We don’t want it to be private or government-owned. WE will dig it.”

— **Local Asian Organisation**

■ **Documentation, information and awareness-raising, including providing people with timely and accurate information about their land, territory and rights; and media outreach and campaigning to make state and corporate actions visible**

“ We create transparency. If something happens, we tell people right away. We talk to local media. If a company is coming, we talk to the community right away. We try to join up our issues. We network a lot. We try to do that to keep each other informed. ”

— **Local Asian Organisation**

“ Our work is to give information to women. What does the law say, what are their rights, what should they do so they get their rights? ”

— **Local Asian Organisation**



■ **Advocacy, lobbying and pursuit of political decision-making power**

“ We try to influence the local village level government. We involve our own candidates in the election. We have 50 heads of the village government. It was really hard to get them in the election, but we managed, and we won! ”

— **Local Asian Organisation**

“ We lobby government institutions and agencies that have the mandate to protect the rights of the people, like the Commission on Human Rights, so that they will respond with concrete actions to the human rights situation right now here in our region. We also lobby local government units that can help our organisation with the issues that our communities are facing, especially militarisation. We help strengthen community-based organisations so that they will be able to assert their rights and act on the rights violations that are happening inside their communities. ”

— **Local Asian Organisation**



3. Donors can support WGEDs to effectively and safely conduct their work by responding to their needs for financial and other types of support.

WGEDs need financial support that is:

- **Accesible** to those working at the grassroots level and which **eschews bureaucratic requirements** that may prevent WGEDs from being able to access funds or focus on their work
- **Flexible**, enabling them to **cover costs for basic operations** (e.g. personnel, equipment, rental or acquisition of property, transport) and to use the **diversity of strategies** they have developed to prevent and respond to structural violence, from advocacy and communications to alliance and movement-building
- **Longer-term**, which is necessary for WGEDs to **sustain** the measured pace of collective action, movement-building and alliance-building required for structural change and to defend land, territories and the environment; alongside of **supplementary emergency funds** to respond to risks or threats

WGEDs need other types of support, including:

- **Digital and physical security and protection**, such as safe spaces and transportation; digital security platforms, including infrastructure, tools and training; and relocation for defenders under immediate threat of violence
- **Capacity building** to develop their work and organisations, and their skills and expertise on issues identified by WGEDs themselves
- **Advocacy, communications and legal support**, such as diplomacy and policy influence that strengthen WGEDs in their struggles, increase awareness or address key issues that contribute to structural violence

“ For WGED organisations, standing on the ground is resistance. But it is also suicidal, because they know the militia or the companies will kill them. We ask other actors to amplify support of WGEDs, for example via the media or pro bono legal aid. WGEDs are at the end of that spectrum where they do not have anything to lose anymore. The capacity to do community organising is very thin. ”

— **Regional Asian and Pacific Organisation**

“ We don't have a secure office. There are death threats, attacks, military guards, drug traffickers. International protection and back-up from the international community is important. ”

— **Local Latin American Organisation**



For more information, visit our website: www.gaggaalliance.org

