HANDOUT:

Power, conflict, and violence

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Conflict, violence, and the threat of violence are used to prevent change, quell dissent, and maintain power and control. Both power and violence are always changing and take direct and indirect, visible, and invisible forms in both public and private arenas. In anticipating and responding to conflict, violence, and fear, it's helpful to understand the different forms these can take: [1]

Structural: The ways that social, economic, political, and cultural institutions systematically marginalise and exclude certain people (based on characteristics including gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability), rendering them impoverished and invisible. This discrimination is tolerated by society. Those who suffer from poor health, economic insecurity, lack of shelter, stigmatisation, or crime are often blamed. [2]

Political: Threats, attacks, and intimidation from both state and non-state actors when dominant actors believe their control and power are exposed or challenged, including:

Lawsuits (for example, defamation) and legal restrictions on funding/operations. Repression, assassination, and the presence of police, military, and weapons to deter or suppress protest.

Complicity in violent attacks by non-state actors such as private security, militias, and organised crime and paramilitaries.

Surveillance and infiltration (such as posing as new members of a group to steal information)

Use of digital and other media to marginalise, stigmatise, and blame dissenters and discredit their agendas.

Death threats or threats of assault against family members and activists. Raiding offices, destroying equipment, or seizing property.

Cultural: The use of popular culture, stories, and humour that normalise gendered, racist, or economic violence or degrade certain cultures or communities.[3]

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[1] Some of these definitions draw on Rosemary McGee with Jesús Alfonso Flórez López, 2016, "Power, Violence, Citizenship and Agency: A Columbian Case Study" Working Paper 474, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, and others were developed and adapted for "Building Power in Crisis: Opportunities for Supporting Women on the Frontlines of Extractivism," 2023, Sage Fund.

[2] Galtung, J. (1969) 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', Journal of Peace Research 6.3: 167–91, cited in McGee and Flórez López (2016)

[3] Pearce, J. (2007) Violence, Power and Participation: Building Citizenship in Contexts of Chronic Violence, IDS Working Paper 274, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, cited in McGee and Flórez López (2016)

Symbolic: Highly visible attacks on communities, their leaders, cultural icons, and expressions of beliefs, language, dress, and customs in ways intended to threaten and destroy their core identity and existence.[4]

Ecological: The destruction and degradation of nature and the environment through mining, logging, and other extractive industries; through overuse, as in the case with industrial farming, or pollution produced by car emissions, pesticides, or industrial waste in water.

Identity-based: Perpetrated on the basis of a person's gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc.

Consider, for example, gender-based violence, directed at a person, group, or movement based on their perceived biological sex, sexual expression, or conformity with norms of gender identity. Here, violence is used to control behaviour, freedom of movement, and expression. It prevents people from stepping out of traditionally prescribed gender roles and can include physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse, threats, coercion, and economic or educational deprivation, harassment, and control on freedom of movement, whether occurring in intimate, private, and public arenas.

Femicides – the murder of women and girls because they are female – used as a political agenda is an example of gendered political violence, along with the sexualised and gendered attacks on women human rights defenders.

Violence of all kinds is used to police and dominate ethnic and racial groups, working class and poor communities, immigrants, and other marginalised communities.

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[4] Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992) An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology, Chicago: Chicago University Press, cited in McGee and Flórez López (2016).