

ARTICLE

Socio-environmental conflict in Quintero-Puchuncaví: Feminist narratives beyond organizational boundaries

Conflictividad socioambiental en Quintero-Puchuncaví: narrativas feministas más allá de lo organizacional.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the emergence of feminist narratives in the context of socio-environmental conflict in Quintero-Puchuncaví, an area located in the Valparaíso Region in the central zone of Chile. In this area different socio-environmental conflicts have taken place over five decades, the result of the coexistence of communities and polluting industries. Taking as a guide studies of political ecology, feminism and ecofeminism, this article discusses three aspects of feminism narrative present in the accounts of the affected communities in the zone: (1) The identification of women as an affected group of industrial activity. (2) The

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emergence of daily practices seeking to put life at the center. (3) The recognition of a relation between humans and the more than human. The article has been elaborated with information from interviews of activist and residents, developed between 2021 and 2022. The results show that narratives are interwoven with feminist aspects on socio-environmental disputes in Quintero-Puchuncaví that go further than the conformation of women organizations in the zone in the last decade. The conclusion reflects the dynamism of socio-environmental conflicts and the recognition of topics of recent concern.

Resumen

El artículo discute sobre la emergencia de narrativas feministas en el contexto de conflictividad socioambiental de Quintero-Puchuncaví, territorio ubicado en la región de Valparaíso, zona central de Chile. En esta localidad se presentan conflictos desde hace más de cinco décadas producto de la convivencia de sus comunidades con industrias contaminantes. Tomando como referente estudios de ecología política, feminismos y ecofeminismos, el artículo discute sobre tres aspectos en los que se materializan narrativas feministas dentro de los relatos de los actores comunitarios en el territorio estudiado: (1) la identificación de las mujeres como grupo afectado por las acciones contaminantes; (2) la emergencia de prácticas cotidianas que buscan poner la vida en el centro; y (3) el reconocimiento de una relación afectiva entre humanos y más que humanos. El artículo se funda sobre la información construida a partir de entrevistas con activistas, vecinos y vecinas de la localidad, desarrolladas entre 2021 y 2022. Los resultados muestran la integración de narrativas que entretujan aspectos feministas dentro de la disputa socioambiental en Quintero-Puchuncaví que iría más allá de la conformación de organizaciones de mujeres en la zona. A modo de conclusión se reflexiona en torno del dinamismo de los conflictos socioambientales y el reconocimiento de nuevos asuntos de preocupación de índole transversal.

Palabras Claves:
Narrativas feministas; conflictividad socioambiental; organización; Quintero-Puchuncaví



Introduction

We find ourselves in a context where socio-environmental conflicts are frequent and intense (Environmental Justice Atlas, EJAtlas, 2023; Leff, 2006; Gudynas, 2014), with Latin America being one of the regions with the highest concentration of cases (Olmedo and Gómez, 2020; Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflicts, OLCA, 2023). These conflicts are related to the extractivist development model still present in the territories (Arsel, 2013; Harvey, 2004), which has visible effects and intergenerational consequences.

This model has led to a crisis of a civilizational nature (Rivera-Cusicanqui, 2018; Estermann, 2012) anchored in the hegemonic mode of the society-nature relationship. It reflects a way of thinking and living centered on instrumental rationality, characteristic of Western modernity (Composto, 2012), which has constructed an unsustainable world based on the illusion of an infinite planet (Leff, 2014).

This has caused damage that goes beyond the purely environmental. The damage has intensified due to the ecological and climate crisis, demonstrating that we can no longer sustain the notion that nature constitutes the backdrop (Latour, 2019), something inert upon which we inhabit and can control.

Thus, socio-environmental conflicts are characterized by irreparable effects on nature, social fabric, communities, and their relationships (Ulloa, 2016b). In the face of their persistence, responses emerge that reflect other ways of feeling-thinking and shaping the world (Escobar, 2014; Merlinsky, 2021). These are territorially anchored processes and resistances that demand the defense of modes of existence and lives that are affected (Svampa, 2013), challenging the idea of a single world (Toledo, 2003; Blaser, 2019).

Women have taken center stage in these conflicts (Svampa, 2015; Salazar, 2017) from a critical role regarding the situation of territories and bodies (Herrero, 2015; Ulloa 2016a). This is not only related to the dominant economic model but also to androcentrism and patriarchy (Bolados and Sánchez, 2017; Svampa, 2021; Puleo, 2017), leading to the emergence of feminist approaches to this phenomenon.

The described scenario is manifested in the territory of Quintero-Puchuncaví, located in the Valparaíso Region, Chile, where the population coexists with highly polluting com-



panies (Liberona and Ramírez, 2019). It has become a space of environmental inequality and injustice (Bolados and Sánchez, 2017). This territory is impacted by pollution in various areas (Bergamini et al., 2018; Ginocchio, 2000), causing profound effects on its communities across multiple dimensions.

The article discusses the integration of feminist narratives as a field intertwined in the dispute of Quintero-Puchuncaví over the last decades. These narratives are constructed based on coordinates from their own stories about how they feel-think of conflict. The narratives emerge from interviews with 27 activists, residents of the area, representing partial approaches (Haraway, 1991), connections, regarding what happens in this controversy at a given moment.

The importance of the above responds to an understanding of socio-environmental conflicts as broad disputes, where feminisms have positioned themselves as a field of knowledge and action with a plural character that is not limited to the formation of organizations that have taken these perspectives as a banner of struggle.

Socio-Environmental Conflicts

There are various approaches to socio-environmental conflicts, most of which reveal their social nature (Walter, 2009), related to their causes, consequences, and the diversity and complexity of the dimensions involved (Stepanova and Bruckmeier, 2013).

In broad terms, we can understand them as processes in which an environmental problem or disagreements about access, use, and transformation of natural resources, as well as the generation of waste (Paz and Risdell, 2014; Martínez-Alier, 2009), lead to the reaction of groups, individuals, and local communities (Walter, 2009). They consider these situations they face or could face as harmful and/or unjust (Napedensky and Azocar, 2017).

From a political ecology perspective, the main actors involved in socio-environmental conflicts are the people and communities directly affected by the damage to their material conditions of existence and the sustainability of life, not only at a material level but also symbolically (Martínez-Alier et al., 2016; Herrero, 2015).

This is evident in the Global South, and to a greater extent, in certain impoverished and particularly vulnerable spaces (Rubilar et al., 2022; Paz and Risdell, 2014). Socio-environmental conflicts have a localized expression, particularly affecting territories and bodies (Svampa, 2021; Herrero, 2015) that have been continuously exploited and colonized (Rivera-Cusicanqui, 2018).

The described phenomenon is not new; in fact, many of these conflicts have a long history (Gudynas, 2014; Alimonda, 2011) and have been studied from other conceptual approaches. However, the scenario of the climate crisis and the effects of globalization have exacerbated and multiplied the visibility of these conflicts, reflecting the disturbing times we are in (Haraway, 2019).

According to Merlinsky (2021), these conflicts are linked to the environment as their catalyst, but they involve complex aspects and broad conflictuality, historical or conjunctural processes, inequalities, and power relations (Alimonda, 2011; Trentini and Sorroche, 2016; Merlinsky, 2013). They are controversies (Latour, 2008) that go beyond opposing interests, as they involve values and beliefs, knowledge, sensibilities, modes of existence, and rationalities related to ways of relating to nature (Escobar, 2014), the human, and the more than human (Leff, 2014), and even ontologies (Blaser, 2019).

Feminisms and Ecofeminisms

The research adopts a qualitative approach based on the narratives of the affected actors. Feminist narratives are constructed, drawing from the coordinates present in their own stories regarding how they feel-think about the conflict in Quintero-Puchuncaví today.

Twenty-seven activists and residents of the Quintero-Puchuncaví area were interviewed, part of a broader ongoing research project aiming to understand the development of community dynamics around the conflict in the Quintero-Puchuncaví area.

The interviews did not aim to investigate aspects related to feminisms but were encounters seeking to build perspectives on how the conflict is felt and thought of in Quintero-Puchuncaví, with feminist narratives emerging as a significant aspect in addressing the current conflict.

The interviewees are individuals over 30 years old, including 17 men and 10 women. Each attended the interview on a personal basis and were not representing the organizations they are part of, although most are involved in some local organization or initiative.

The intentional sample includes key informants identified based on the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas), the Map of Socio-Environmental Conflicts of the National Institute of Human Rights of Chile (INDH), and data published by the Latin American Observatory of Conflicts (OLCA). This sample was constrained based on availability to participate and expanded through the snowball sampling technique.

The interview content corpus was analyzed through thematic content analysis, seeking to identify certain recurrences within the interviewees' narratives. Narratives were then constructed and interpreted as an exercise of articulation between what was narrated by the interviewees and the researcher's position (Galaz and Rubilar, 2018).

The interviews were conducted in two fieldwork moments: the first virtually, mainly during the second semester of 2021, and the second in-person between July and August 2022. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was recorded in audio. They were conducted with the informed consent of the interviewees.

About Quintero-Puchuncaví

The case of socio-environmental conflict in Quintero-Puchuncaví is situated in the municipalities of the same name. Here lies the Ventanas Industrial Complex (CIV), an area that houses a multitude of polluting industries, including mining, fossil fuels, chemicals, and energy industries (Carrasco et al., 2020).

The CIV was established in 1958 in Ventanas, one of the localities of Puchuncaví, and by 1964, it had a thermoelectric plant and a smelter. Currently, the area is home to more than 12 companies, forming a high concentration industrial zone (Bolados, 2016). Over the years, these operations have generated severe environmental and health problems for the population, as well as other impacts on their lives associated with the conditions of the environment. This has affected the way and quality of life of the residents, their traditional economies, and their well-being (Ministry of the Environment, MMA, 2017).



Due to industrial activities, the bay was declared a saturated zone for sulfur dioxide and particulate matter in 1993 (Espinoza, 2015). This territory represents a conflict zone that began to take shape five decades ago with the installation of the CIV (MMA, 2017). According to the EJAtlas and the INDH, the conflict dates back to the 1990s when the first claims were recognized by farmer residents regarding the waste and emissions generated by the smelter.

Throughout the years, environmental incidents and the impact on communities have been numerous. These include coal strandings on beaches, intoxications in schools, notably the one at La Greda School in 2011, mass intoxications in August 2018, oil spills in the Quintero bay in 2014 and 2016. In June 2022, there were again intoxications, leading to the commitment to close the Ventanas smelter in 5 years by the Chilean government and the board of the National Copper Corporation.

The socio-environmental vulnerability situation (MMA, 2017) has deepened poverty and unemployment (Milenio Institute Foundations of Data, IMFD, 2022), reinforcing the notion of a poverty trap (Rubilar et al., 2022). There is also a perception of stigmatization by the local communities. The population in the area experiences violations of economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to live in an environment free of pollution, the right to work, and health, among others (INDH, 2018).

It is considered a “sacrifice zone,” one of the most emblematic in Chile. This category was introduced in Chile by the OCEANA NGO and the Terram Foundation, referring to spaces where situations of environmental injustice occur, involving vulnerable populations that become especially affected (Fundación Terram, 2014). These situations extend over time and demonstrate the devaluation of territories, forms of production, and life (Svampa and Viale, 2014).

Organizations and initiatives have formed here, seeking, among other things, to defend the territory, nature, and the living situation of the communities. Over the last decades, two women’s organizations that have developed actions in this regard stand out locally. These are “Women in Sacrifice Zone in Resistance Quintero-Puchuncaví,” MUZOSARE, an organization established in 2015, and “Women for Good Living,” originating in 2019. Previous instances include the formation of an association of widows of workers from the Codelco Ventanas smelter, ASOREFEN, who filed a protection action in 2010, and the activation of the Women’s House. These show references to a new female protagonism in the Quintero-Puchuncaví scenario.

Research on the case covers various aspects, including the existence of gaps in Chile's environmental standards, ecosystemic dimensions of the territory, the impact on communities, specifically in health-related issues and its connection to pollution. Other studies demonstrate the comprehensive vulnerability of the area.

In the context of the article's discussion, it is essential to highlight the recent works of Bolados and Sánchez (2017), providing insights into a feminist political ecology associated with the MUZOSARE case, and Tironi's (2014) works on caregiving practices as a form of activism in everyday life.

Results: Feminist Narratives in Quintero-Puchuncaví

The feminist narratives analyzed in the accounts of activists, residents, and individuals from Quintero-Puchuncaví interviewed in this study reveal three central themes that interweave the emergence of feminist aspects within the ongoing dispute in the study area. While each theme is discussed separately, it becomes evident that all three are interconnected.

Identification of Women as the Affected Group:

There is a widespread acknowledgment regarding the greater impact on women of all ages, from girls and adolescents to older women. This is linked to the roles they play in caregiving and their active participation in defending their territory and bodies due to the socio-environmental conflict in the locality.

This recognition is reflected in the responsibility for care and protection, especially for children, which predominantly falls on middle-aged women. Moreover, risks are heightened in the household, where care practices intertwine with pollution, as expressed in the statement: "you take the clothes home, and that means contamination for the second, which is the woman who has to wash the clothes" (E5).

Role of Women in the Fight for Territory Defense

The fundamental role of women in the fight for territory defense is acknowledged. This involves valuing the identification of an active and political role that has managed to position the situation of the territory-body on different scales: local (micro), interactive with other territories (meso), and aiming at broader levels such as national or international (macro). A notable example is the denunciation led by MUZOSARE in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2019.

Additionally, collaboration and the generation of studies in partnership with other institutions are emphasized, showcasing the socio-environmental impact of the locality in aspects such as the presence of metals in molluscs, vegetables, and samples in children. Instances of open conversation, like the Open Councils organized by Women for Good Living, are mentioned, contributing to the visibility of the issue in the locality.

Leadership and Collective Action of Women

Leadership associated with women's organizations in the locality is recognized, such as "Women in Sacrifice Zone in Resistance Quintero-Puchuncaví" (MUZOSARE) and "Women for Good Living Quintero and Puchuncaví." These organizations, self-described as feminist, have emerged in the last two decades and have gained significant prominence in the dispute.

Other female leaderships in instances such as the Adriana Cousiño Health Advisory Council, the Batuque Achelpañ organization, NGO Cárcava, the Geopark Puchuncaví project, and Acción Ecosocial Quintero are also mentioned. Collective action is evident in events like the Open Council and Festivals for Life, facilitating the establishment of networks between organizations and addressing more cross-cutting issues, such as care and gender-related matters in connection with socio-environmental conflict.

In summary, feminist narratives emerge as a fundamental part of the discussion on socio-environmental conflict in Quintero-Puchuncaví. Women are recognized as key actors in defending the territory, life, and the construction of new forms of relationship, challenging the notion that they are merely victims and highlighting their active role in transforming the local reality.

Finally, it is noteworthy that, for the interviewees, discussing the socio-environmental conflict situation in Quintero-Puchuncaví today brings women to the forefront of the narrative. This directly engages activists, neighbors, and residents in a dialogue with organized and unorganized women in the territory, recognizing their diverse roles as fundamental and indispensable. Their role goes beyond being mere victims; they are seen as active agents in caring for nature, bodies, and in the construction of new forms of relationships (Puleo, 2017).



The emergence of everyday practices that seek to prioritize life

Firstly, it is possible to identify the construction of a narrative that aims to center life, contrasting it with what the development of industries in the area puts at risk or devalues. “How much is life worth, the environmental damage they have done to produce and have those profits? ... that is the question I ask myself, and I still don’t have an answer” (E17). This brings up a discussion about valuation, not only of nature but also in identifying spaces within that nature and society that are deemed less valuable than others. “It’s a very, very strong issue because life is at stake (...) I mean the issue is: I am not worth more than you, nor you more than me” (E12).

These narratives also reference not only the industries in the industrial park but also other conflicts in recent years due to the construction of real estate developments or the expansion of the F30 highway. They express a desire to protect certain spaces: “leave the beach alone; it is the last altar we have left” (E6). “If you really want to recover, you must start by protecting what has ecological value, which plays a role in our lives” (E1). Likewise, the value of wetlands and geosites is recognized.

Secondly, the theme of care is observed as a topic of interest and special concern, emphasizing its importance for the maintenance of life. This focus includes the care of plants and animals, children, and those who fall ill. Concerning the care of children and adolescents, it is a seemingly flexible topic, but most people today recognize dedicating special attention to it: “It is the community itself that has to see how to face it, take care, condition their homes, take care of their children” (E18).

This is related to the fact that pollution events in the area have brought care practices to the forefront, especially after the events of 2011 when students from La Greda School, Alonso de Quintero School, and República de Francia School were affected. The intoxications in 2018 and the events of 2022 are also mentioned, with accounts like “the children were dropping like flies in the hospital” (E5).

In addition to children, older adults, and people with illnesses caused or exacerbated by pollution, appear in the stories. This not only reflects the impact but also the condition of dependence we have as a species, highlighting interdependence as part of our conditions, with women often playing an invisibilized role.

Another reflection of everyday practices that prioritize life is food production initiatives, such as community gardens within the locality. These can be seen as a form of resistance to what

is happening in the territory and the impacts on their traditional ways of life. This reflects an interaction with nature where it is not just seen as a resource, but there is an eco-dependent relationship with nature, questioning the hegemonic model of food production and consumption. These initiatives are not part of food movements but rather practices that occur in the daily lives that reflect alternative forms of activism. “The gardens are a way of recovering agriculture from before, but in an ecological way” (E1); as well as connections with other agents, “we depend on the sea” (E26).

Therefore, these are narratives that debate one of the key ideas of feminist and ecofeminist perspectives related to ethics of care and relationships of interdependence and eco-dependence, in everyday aspects and practices to address the crisis in Quintero-Puchuncaví that involve prioritizing life.

The affective assessment of the relationship between humans and non-humans

Connected to the previous discussion, it is important to mention the recognition of other modes of valuation within the narratives of the residents of Quintero-Puchuncaví. The stories emphasize the value of relationships, both among generations and between nature-culture, as well as among different species (Haraway, 2003):

“Our children, our grandchildren will remain, and someday when a grandchild comes, we don’t want them to live on the moon. We want them to know water, to know a horse, to know a tree. That’s what we want. That’s why we are fighting for an environmental issue” (E13).

Within these narratives, there is an emphasis on eco-dependence as an indispensable requirement, contrasting with the current situation in the territory where nature has been reduced to a condition of resources. “They will always want to extract more from nature than they should” (E12). The background or setting for activities where life unfolds is described as a disconnection between the State and the community, with the environment in a brutal state, illustrating the ongoing disaster. “There is a huge contrast between what happens here, the tremendous richness, and the presence of companies” (E10). “It’s everything – nature, depredation, defense intertwined with survival. It’s a complex dance, very complex” (O1).

An example of this constant alteration of nature is found in the stories of the interviewees. It’s not just the sea, soil, and air that are affected by pollution, but also, due to the hegemonic de-



velopment model, the very nature and the relationship with it are jeopardized. The defense put forth by the Quintero-Puchuncaví community in recent years regarding the Quirilluca cliffs is a powerful expression of this. This space holds special value for communities due to its beauty, its recognition as a site supporting the life of species characteristic of the area, mainly birds, and its emotional and experiential value. “It’s life, the joy of going to a place and interacting with the non-human...” (E6).

These are not isolated aspects but rather reflect alternative ways of understanding the relationship between the human and the more-than-human, assigning it value. “The ultimate intention is to live in harmony with nature; we are part of it, not owners” (E3). It involves an active role as well, as stated: “What helps is not only human measures but also the forest” (E1).

Key figures within the interviews include Naranjillo, Tayú del Norte, Belloto del Norte, Chungungo, Tenca, and the seagull. These entities become integral components of the discourses, positioning themselves as agents and new subjects of interest, mobilizing new forms of action by the communities in the area. “Here we have Bellotos del Norte, we have Tayú del Norte, which is a dinosaur tree. Despite the threats they face, they not only survive but live” (E3).

Conclusions

In the context of the discussion, it is argued that beyond the formation of women’s organizations in the study area, there has been an integration of narratives around feminist and ecofeminist perspectives in the accounts of affected individuals interviewed in Quintero-Puchuncaví in recent decades. This reflects a breadth in the thematic contents that are part of socio-environmental disputes and their dynamism (Gudynas, 2014). Additionally, it highlights the non-exclusivity of these conceptualizations, as they are not thematically pure. There may be more than one issue of concern for the same person or community (Gudynas, 2014).

It is important to note that there is not enough information to identify a causal relationship between the formation of women’s organizations in the area over the years, which have self-identified as feminist and ecofeminist, and the emergence of narratives intertwining feminist and ecofeminist themes in the region. However, both aspects are related in expressing a positioning of feminist and gender narratives as a present aspect in the dispute.

Regarding the above, in the future, the presented results can be expanded, both in the territory of Quintero-Puchuncaví itself and in other areas or body-territories where there are socio-environmental conflicts and women’s organizations have been formed in recent decades. This

expansion aims to recognize whether this integration of feminist and ecofeminist narratives emerges as a response to the question of how individuals perceive and think about the situation of conflict. It may shed light on certain distinctions and commonalities in different areas or territories.

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