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View of the forest from the community of San Pedro  
(CLAUDIA LÓPEZ)

MARXA CHÁVEZ AND CLAUDIA LÓPEZ

## Women Rebel in Tariquía

In southern Bolivia, the fight for the dignity and against oil interests begins with women.

"Step by Step for Dignity, Tariquía on its Feet, Never on its Knees" was the name of the march that brought together a group of community members led by the Committee for the Defense of Tariquía on April 24, 2017 in southern Bolivia. That day, a women-led rebel nucleus began a four-day march towards the city of Tarija. The march marked the beginning of a series of actions that brought the campesino communities resisting the entry of oil companies into their territory into the public eye.

Women were at the center of the action, and grew stronger as they broke away from their silence, fear, and isolation. At that moment, no one knew what path

their struggle would take. More than a year has since passed, and today the voices of the women of Tariquía reverberate throughout Bolivia and Latin America.

### The Dispute over the Tariquía Reserve

The National Flora and Fauna Reserve of Tariquía is located in southeast Bolivia along the border with Argentina. Created by presidential decree in 1989, it is one of the only areas in the country where the Andean Yungas ecosystem is protected. Tariquía's forests protect the most important water sources in the region, and the reserve contains a protected area that is home to at least 13 endangered species.

There are 10 campesino communities living inside the reserve, and another 13 in the surrounding areas. These communities help care for and protect the reserve, especially its forests, which have been exploited through illegal logging.

Although some illegal oil exploration took place in Tariquía in the 1990s, it wasn't until 2007—during the first years of Evo Morales' government—that the state company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB) declared the San Telmo and Astillero blocs within the reserve as areas of interest. State policies, based in a profoundly extractivist regime, established a series of legal measures that loosened the regulations safeguarding protected areas.

According to the Centro de Documentación e Información Bolivia (Center for Documentation and Information Bolivia, CEDIB) in Cochabamba, three decrees approved in 2015 opened up the possibility for oil exploration and exploitation in protected areas and also modified the terms for seeking and acquiring out prior consent. In March 2018, both houses of congress approved contracts for exploration and exploitation of oil in Tariquía to Petrobras, in partnership with the federal YPFB as well as YPFB's Chaco branch.

### Women: The Core of Conservation

In Tariquía, political organization occurs primarily through participation in an agrarian union local. Six of ten communities in Tariquía arrived at a consensus that they would work to stop the state-capital offensive represented by Petrobras and YPFB, working with their local agrarian union. However, larger union organizations, including the Departmental Peasant Federation “Tupaj Katari” (FDUTC) and the United Union Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB), receive mandates from the national government of Evo Morales to facilitate the entry of oil companies. Both have attempted to exert pressure on the Tariquía agrarian union local to open the door to drilling.

Capital, patriarchy, and colonialism impose logics whereby masculine and hegemonic economic development represented by such companies disrupts the social reproduction of life, the means of existence, and communally organized work. This disruption expropriates the reproductive labor of women, their traditional knowledge, and their ability to farm self-sufficiently. Seen more generally, the capitalist occupation of their territory threatens forms of self-governance.



**Lourdes Sutara, leader of the community of Acherales, handweaving a rug (CLAUDIA LÓPEZ)**

Since 2013, these communities, led by women, have woven and sustained a struggle to prevent the entry of oil companies into the reserve. Their struggle opposes projects that separates communities from the material goods that make their lives possible—primarily agro-ecological production, fishing, and beekeeping—as well as against the destruction and possible disappearance of a valuable ecological area.

Faced with multiple barriers to making their voices heard, the women of Tariquía created the Defense Committee, an autonomous associative space with the capacity to dispute larger state-instructed unions' efforts to promote the entry of oil companies and to challenge the official line by expressing their communities' desire to defend the land and their means of existence.

The communities of Tariquía frame their struggle as advocating for the “defense of life,” referring to both human and non-human entities that live in Tariquía. Women connect the struggle to defend life with the

defense of their territories. They struggle alongside nature and animals, from the river where they fish to the bees that produce honey around them. The inhabitants of the reserve live in interdependence with one another, and together face the threat of collective dispossession.

In this struggle, women work as part of their families: their children share the activities of social reproduction and their elders give them strength. Women fight for the future of their children and ongoing generations. This is the key element that powers their struggle.

Women have challenged multiple mechanisms of patriarchal mediation throughout their defense, which have been enacted by larger regional and national organizations and state-instructed unionism. These structures attempt to impose and reproduce logics that asphyxiate and permanently block women's actions and strategies. In this war, there is an expansive dynamic we call *oppressive enclosure*, a power structure founded on violence against women's bodies. The meaning of oppressive enclosure goes beyond its material elements and also contains the symbolic, as Silvia Federici has outlined. Enclosure has multiple embodiments—economic, political, and cultural—and its aim is to contain or quash efforts to defend life, rupturing and fragmenting them.

Women's broad participation in this movement allows us to understand how time passes in periods of community struggle. The actions, forms of organization, and political work the women of the Defense Committee carry out allow us to reflect on how spaces of social reproduction generate strategies for struggle. These strategies are often made invisible, but are important to understand. Working in common is in itself a defense contributing to the un-enclosure or reopening of their territory to the social wealth that the state and capital disputes.

The struggle of the women of Tariquía has transcended classic conceptions of violence against women that defines them as victims. They have broken what Verónica Gago has called the *corset* of gender violence, and re-appropriated not only territory but also organizational forms, staying critical in a complex and difficult context under which most union organizing has been co-opted by the state. Since the outset of the conflict, women have disputed the authority of the FDUTC and have managed to place women leaders within the agrarian union local. Today, the Defense Committee has merged with the agrarian union local, but is led by a woman.

The women's organizing has challenged the

disciplinary tactics exercised against women leaders and their bodies, from verbal abuse to humiliation. The central areas of struggle problematize the false divisions between the public and the private spheres. The threat of dispossession is projected in daily life, such as when women must endure division within their families, a form of private and public violence. "The struggle is inside and outside," said a woman comrade interviewed in Tariquía.

In Latin America, violence has grown as a method of imposing economic and social capitalism, making existence itself precarious. Against this violence, social struggles come together to defend and recreate forms of existence. The women's rebellion in the Southern Cone is a light forward, because of its creativity, which exposes multiple dimensions of violence. The struggle of the women of Tariquía also presents a path forward, inviting us to consider the possibility of building alliances for struggle which challenge not only the economic violence of extractivism but also institutional, state, and racialized violence that seeks to condemn them to invisibility. Thus far, the women of Tariquía have prevented the arrival of oil companies to their territory. Their march forward, and their ongoing organization, implores us to continue to pay attention to their resistance against oil companies that wish to enter the reserve to begin exploration. **n**

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Translated by Dawn Paley.

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