

“COVID-19 has Crippled Our Struggle.”

An Interview with Pinky Langa, environmental justice and feminist activist, on the experiences of women organising against extractivism in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic

Sithandiwe Yeni



Keywords: women against extractivism, organising, coal mining, resistance, solidarity

The spread of COVID-19 has interrupted fieldwork for activists and academics alike. Meanwhile, local voices in mineral frontiers across the globe attest to the mining industry's quest to capitalize on the pandemic, often in conjunction with local governments. In this context when mineral frontiers continue to expand and people's freedom of movement is restricted, community activists are facing

extraordinary organizational challenges in their work.

This *From the Field* contribution to the first issue of *Commodity Frontiers* is dedicated to women defending human rights against extractivism. We shine a spotlight on *Pinky Langa* (31), a gender activist and feminist from Emalahleni (“the place of coal”) previously known as Witbank in South Africa.

Correspondence:

Sithandiwe Yeni, sthayeni@gmail.com

Cite this article:

Yeni, S. 2020. “COVID-19 is Crippling Our Struggle: An Interview with Pinky Langa.” *Commodity Frontiers* 1: 43-47. doi: 10.18174/CF.2020a17963.

Commodity Frontiers is an open-access journal edited by the CFI Editorial Board, Mindi Schneider, senior editor. Read it online at [Commodity Frontiers](https://commodityfrontiers.com), or our website, commodityfrontiers.com.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).



Her activism began in 2013, when she realised how mining companies were grabbing land from the residents and polluting air and water in Emalahleni, a process with which she was all too familiar. Pinky's family was evicted from the land by a global mining company, Anglo American, in 1990 and had to seek alternative land to live. Anglo American arrived – unannounced – to extract coal. They paid no compensation and provided no alternative land to families who lost their land and homes.

It was learning about this awful experience of eviction from her grandmother that influenced Pinky's activism. She came across an organization called Southern Africa Green Revolutionary Council (SAGRC), fighting for environmental justice through community education and awareness raising based in Emalahleni. As a volunteer at SAGRC, she built and deepened her knowledge of the rights of people living in mining towns and the relevant laws to protect them, in order to help residents confront and engage with mining companies from an informed position. After a year as a volunteer, Pinky and other activists convened all the members of the community who had been evicted because of mining and they began to fight for their land and compensation for their losses. This is an on-going battle that remains unresolved, and Pinky continues to fight.

Sithandiwe Yeni (SY) spoke to Pinky Langa (PL) about her activism and her reflections on organising during the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE INTERVIEW

Gender and Activism

SY: Please tell us about your role as a gender activist and feminist in the structures that you are part of and what are some of the struggles you are fighting?

PL: I am the organizer and I focus on the impact of mining on women in our areas. We are affected differently. My role is to make sure women have their own safer spaces, and are free to debrief and engage on issues that only affect them with no men in sight. **We need such spaces, where women set the agenda and think through the solutions to the problems they face.**

This can be hard in the presence of men as there is power imbalance as men often want to dominate the conversations.

Let me give you examples of some of the issues we seek to address that affect only women.

1. Women do unpaid care work, if children go swimming in polluted water due to coal mining and become sick, it is the women that must take care of them. This is hardly men's responsibility.
2. If their husbands or boyfriends work in the mine, women do all the social reproduction work, they ensure that the men are well fed and clean and in good conditions to go to work.
3. When the mines are blasting, the dust makes the homes dirty, and that's more work to clean especially curtains and linen which is not easy to wash but has to be washed regularly. It takes a lot from us.
4. Many women engage in sex work in the mine and experience both physical and sexual harassment.
5. It is a huge challenge for women to get employment in the mines, in some cases mine bosses demand sex from women in exchange for jobs.
6. There is a gender wage gap where often men and women do the same job, but women are paid less. This is in addition to the fact that we are always doing unpaid care work, and we are constantly worrying about kids at home.

7. Mining has contaminated our soil and water, as a result we are unable to produce crops. Small-scale farming is largely practised by women, but due to poor soil the produce have also been bad and for some it became useless to continue. This is a loss of livelihoods.

It is quite stressful and we know that it is us women who need to stand together and fight for change.

My activism is not only limited to the struggles related to mining in our area, I do more than that. I belong to a group of young people in Witbank. It doesn't have a name. We are just young people who are concerned with injustices we experience. Our main focus is to make sure that young people get jobs, and victims of gender based violence get support. We ensure those who've been abused go through counselling, we do that by finding sponsors for them to attend hospitals.

I also belong to a women-led group, also it has no name. We focus on elderly women and those living with disabilities, and albinism. Two years ago a young girl was kidnapped and found dead with missing body parts, she was living with albinism. They are not catered for. The state does not understand and can't even give them proper medication for their skin. We have been doing awareness in the community, especially around the stigma. We educate people in our community, that these are humans too.

SY: *What are some of the demands that your community has made and to whom?*

PL: Employment opportunities in mining is a major demand. There are so many mines in the area yet we are jobless, the rate of unemployment is very high. Women and young people in general want skills development and opportunities to farm. We want the mining companies to build clinics, with medication and there must be a doctor in every clinic. Our schools are built of asbestos, with no toilets yet in the social labour plans mining companies make promises to build schools and proper toilets.

Communities around here do not have running water and electricity, but the mines do. We demand accountability from them. We know that mining companies pay royalties to municipalities which should be used for development but we do not see any development. They are failing to fix roads even though they promised to in the social labour plans. When the mine is gone, we will be left with a liability. Anglo American won't be here in 30 years' time, and we are not getting services yet they are making money. We want the money to be spent here to improve our quality of life. The only thing Anglo American has done was build a water purification plant, so we can now drink clean water.

SY: *What are some of the strategies you use to confront these challenges?*

PL: We use a range of strategies for different issues. On the problem of contaminated soil, we have been working with organisations like Rural Women's Assembly to learn of ways to clean the soil using organic soil material. On fighting against sexual harassment we went to a mine owned by the state president and picketed demanding that women are hired, our slogan was "My vagina is not my CV". Four women were later hired because of this action. On issues pertaining to holding the mining accountable, we engage in protest actions and make sure the media is there to cover it. Sometimes it's difficult for us to access the social labour plans, and so we work with NGOs who are our allies and they help us to obtain these plans and scrutinize them.

But none of this is smooth and easy. Mining companies like to divide and rule. They target certain individuals, bribe them and turn them into their informers. So when we organise protest actions or plan to go to the mine to confront the management, the informers tell them behind our back. I think we will always have such people, especially if they get bribes from the mine. This delays the progress, however **we will not be tamed.**

SY: *Who would you say are your allies, apart from other activists in other communities fighting similar struggles?*

PL: I would say NGOs give us support in different ways, for example the Legal Resources Centre are our allies. We have always relied on them for legal support, if we have cases we can always check with them. Oxfam South Africa has been supporting us financially and very useful to give knowledge training on issues like social labour plans. Other NGOs such as Action Aid, Norwegian people's AID have also supported us by connecting us to resource people we need.

SY: *What are some of your challenges as a woman activist in your struggles?*

PL: There are so many: number one, in most of these organisations and forums we are with men. They always want to be in the front. Once women want to rise and make things happen, they see you as a threat. They cause conflict around you, call you names. It has been one of the challenges for me. In addition, fighting and leading the struggle while unemployed is a challenge, when opportunities come you can't prioritize yourself. You put others before you and this can be problematic.

During this time of COVID-19, I felt the heat more, being a woman, unemployed and leading others. When others look at you they see someone who can help, even when you are struggling and feeling helpless. Some days you wake up and want to give up, but you remember that justice has not happened, you can't stop. That keeps me moving.

Organizing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

SY: *What were you up to when the COVID-19 lockdown was implemented in March?*

PL: I was busy. In February, when the minister of finance made the budget speech, we were still organising the unemployed people in our area. We were organising people to go with us to make inputs when the minister made his speech in parliament. We were in Cape Town, we had a caravan coming from various places across the country. We were in parliament, we were discussing basic income grant, climate change, illicit financial flows, mining affected communities and gender based violence. We were looking forward to getting more people in our communities to participate in budget speeches in our various provinces and municipalities and boom COVID-19 hit us.

We were angry and revolting. We stopped everything. We didn't have resources such as airtime to shift to online communication. Remember we are unemployed and most of the people in the struggle do not have data, smartphones and laptops, we could not host zoom meetings. In the provinces, nothing moved. Nationally, we have through the help of some NGOs who offered to provide us airtime managed to join a few meetings online but not much.

SY: *How has the pandemic and the lockdown affected your work as a woman activist?*

PL: It has dealt with us drastically. **Gender Based violence cases have increased, we could not go to support women in court which we normally do.** We had healing sessions over the phone with some, but we needed more of these in person. **It has created a gap and a void in my life, I am longing for a moment to be in the same room with women to cry.**

It has affected me psychologically, I'm stuck at home and it is not going well. The conversations are different at home. I get strength from being in groups with other activists. I am going through my own stuff and I have nowhere to offload

SY: *Were there new challenges related to mining in your community that came about due to the lockdown? How were you and your community affected?*

PL: No nothing new, we still have the same old problems. However, **we are scared because we already breath polluted air, so when we hear COVID-19 attacks the lungs we already anticipate what will happen to the most of us.**

People are already sick from mining related infections, many people here have lung issues and Tuberculosis. So it is quite scary because covid19 is more harmful to people with existing illnesses.

SY: *Looking at the impact on mining in your community both before and during COVID-19 pandemic, what do you think are the alternatives?*

PL: Mining needs to stop and allow the earth to rehabilitate. We have taken from the soil, that's enough. Let's rehabilitate, plant trees because climate change is real, we should not deplete the coal. There are other ways of generating electricity, not coal. There are so many ways to create other forms of jobs such as recycling and generating energy through solar power. These have not been explored. What will happen after coal is depleted? Let's find other ways. I would say renewable energy is the way to go.

The crazy thing is that in countries where minerals go, there is no

unemployment like here. We are the ones suffering. We need to push for alternative agriculture as well, one that does not depend on fertilizers and chemicals because that is bad for the soil and environment in general. There are alternatives, it's just that they are not favoured by those in power because all they care about are profits.

Organising Beyond COVID-19

SY: *What do you think organising and activism is going to look like going forward?*

PL: It is going to be difficult, we have lost each other while others have moved forward especially those with resources. We will find each other, but it will be hard. I think COVID-19 will be here for a while, it is still going to be hard. The lockdown regulation prohibits gatherings of more than 50 people, now imagine what that means for our community meetings and protest actions? We can't be 50 or less, we can't call the masses and protest at the union building where the state president is.

COVID-19 has crippled our struggle, this is killing us. I am hoping things will work out, but it will not be the same.



Sithandiwe Yeni is a PhD Candidate at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, South Africa. Her research is on land access, property rights, livelihoods and notions of belonging amongst former labour tenants on land reform farms.



Pinky Langa is a gender activist and feminist from Emalahleni, South Africa. She is a volunteer with the Southern Africa Green Revolutionary Council (SAGRC) and works with other local organizations.