Why is the Right to Say NO a women’s rights question?

What is the Right to Say NO?

The Right to Say NO (R2SayNO) is a call by communities for the right to a good and decent life; to health and well-being; to control over seeds and respect for collective land rights; to live in a caring, interdependent relationship with nature; to be free from all forms of violence; and to enjoy public and social services. It is a NO to a destructive economic system which harms people, land and nature so that powerful companies can profit.

The R2SayNO stands for decision-making by communities. Saying NO supports the right of communities to make decisions about their own future. At the same time, saying NO challenges the power of companies and governments who take away a community’s land and resources.

The R2SayNO is driven from below by movements and communities who come together to insist on their right to make decisions and control their development. Their struggles may not immediately be informed by the idea of a legislated right. Theirs is a struggle based on the just notion that they have a right to exist.

For more details on what the R2SayNO is, see Information Sheet 1.
The YES of the NO

The **R2SayNO** challenges a system of development that harms people and the environment. When communities say NO to mega extractives and infrastructure projects, they are saying YES to development that supports life. They are saying YES to decision-making about development made by community members, and not by governments, corporations or corrupted local leaders. And they are saying YES to them being able to control their lives now and into the future, including the right of future generations to have control over their own lives.

The YES to decision-making and control by the community includes all community members – women and men. Saying that women can and should be decision-makers challenges family and community traditions and customs which say that men must make decisions for women. The customs and traditions of most families and communities say that men are the heads of families, and men must be the community leaders.

See **Information Sheet 5** for more on the YES of the NO.

Inequalities between men and women within families and communities

The societies we all live in are patriarchal and thus give men greater power over land and property, but also over women in their families and sometimes in their communities. Land is usually held by men, as fathers, husbands, and brothers, and it is through them that women gain access to land. Although women are often the primary users of land, they are not seen as the ‘owners’ of land. With land ownership, male heads of households are seen as full members of the community and have the right to participate in community decision-making. Thus, when community decisions are made, it is men who represent their own interests, which may be different to those held by women.

This system of patriarchy gives women and men different work responsibilities in the family. Women are generally responsible for growing the food that the family eats every day, for fetching water and firewood, and for caring for the young and the sick. Women and girls typically work longer and harder hours than men and boys of the same family. Women and girls are not born to do this work, but society teaches them that this is their role in life. The same is true of men and boys.
The Right to Say NO challenges power inequalities

The Right to Say NO (R2SayNO) is borne through resistance and so it is very centrally about POWER and a challenge to those who hold and use power destructively. Saying NO challenges systems of power and claims the right of communities to define their own interests and their own futures.

The YES to decision-making and control by communities also centrally demands that women have a right to make decisions, just as much as men do, and even more so. This is because women do most of the work taking care of the family and ensuring it can renew its members every day. The work to reproduce the family involves working the land, fetching water and firewood, and caring for the young and the sick. It is important to emphasise that women are not born to do this work, but that society instructs them to perform these roles.

Because of women’s care responsibilities in the family, they carry different development interests to men. They want to see development that protects the environment people rely on for survival and development that supports, rather than destroys, land-based livelihoods and work. Because they birth and care for children, they hold great concern for their future – their right to have a decent life. Women are therefore more likely to ensure that decisions about development taken now safeguard the interests of future generations. Women carry these interests because of the roles they carry and not because they are born to care.

Women therefore have valuable experiences and ideas to offer in community decision-making spaces.

In valuing women’s perspectives and bringing them into decision-making processes about development, women gain greater power. The work they do every day to ensure the well-being of the family is made visible and given more value. It shifts perceptions that women are under the control and protection of men, as a daughter, sister, wife, or mother. Instead, their participation signals that they are full human beings, with ideas of their own which should be valued within families, communities and countries.

Women’s participation is only JUST, given they carry the costs of bad development

Women carry most externalised costs of mega extractives and infrastructure projects. When the land is taken, women lose the means to put food on the table. When the water is channelled away from the community or becomes polluted, women must walk further to find clean water sources. The same is true of wood for household energy when forests are destroyed.

If compensation is paid, it goes to the recognised head of the household, typically a man. Women in communities often report that men run away to cities and take new wives or girlfriends once compensation has been paid. This leaves the women and their children abandoned without the means to live.

“Saying that women can and should be decision-makers challenges family and community traditions and customs which say that men must make decisions for women.”
Women and girls carry the main costs of the consequences of bad development because of the roles they have been given under this system of male power we call patriarchy. It is therefore only just that women are centrally involved in decision-making about developments affecting them most directly.

**Women are at the forefront of resistance**

Because of the oppressions that women confront, they often play a leading role in resistance to big extractives projects. They know and understand the impacts of the losses that lie ahead, upon their families now and the generations to come.

Women’s ideas about and lived practice of ‘development’ – which puts sustainability, dignity and the well-being of people and the planet in the centre – stands in conflict with the ideas about development that corporations and governments hold.

In their resistance, women are defending living and hoped for development alternatives. This is the key idea underpinning the YES that women and their communities are struggling for.

This is one of 6 information sheets on the Right to Say No:

**Information Sheet 1:**
What is the Right to Say NO?

**Information Sheet 2:**
The Destructive Economic System Communities are Saying NO to

**Information Sheet 3:**
Laws and instruments communities may draw on to support their Right to Say NO

**Information Sheet 4:**
Why is the Right to Say NO a women’s rights question?

**Information Sheet 5:**
Communities say YES to the right to community decision making and the right to development that supports life

**Information Sheet 6:**
Dealing with risk when claiming the Right to Say NO

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