

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women and other oppressed peoples have been, and continue to be, at the forefront of struggles worldwide to challenge inequality and economic and political systems based on natural resource extraction, labour exploitation and multiple forms of discrimination. The rising power and extended reach of corporations in the current era of globalization and extreme inequality is an urgent challenge confronting women and oppressed peoples today.

‘Corporate power’ refers to the excessive control and appropriation of natural resources, labour, information and finance by an alliance of powerful corporations, and global elites, in collusion with government. The immense size and extensive scope of corporate power in comparison to nation states is difficult to comprehend. Research shows that 63% of the top 175 global economic entities are transnational corporations, not countries. The revenues of the three largest corporations, Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobil and Wal-Mart were higher than the gross domestic product of 110 countries - 55 % of nation states.<sup>1</sup> In 1965, CEOs in the United States earned 20 times more than their employees; in 2014, CEOs of the 350 largest corporations earned, on average, 303 times more than their employees.<sup>2</sup> This reflects the growing divide between the owners of capital and workers evident across the world.

Corporate actors are part of a business sector, which include small and medium enterprises, cooperatives, and larger national and transnational corporations. The concentration of power within the hands of a few large national and transnational corporations distorts economic, political and social structures in the interests of a few; and entrenches the extraction and exploitation of labour and natural resources. Rooted in a history of colonialism and imperialism, corporate power depends on, and reinforces, longstanding and interlocking systems of domination based on gender, class, race, caste, and ethnicity. Women and oppressed groups in both the global North and South feel the brunt of corporate power through deplorable working conditions, the appropriation of their land and natural resources, a lack of access to quality public services, and the invisibility of their unpaid and low paid informal work.

In early 2016, AWID and the Solidarity Center convened a Cross Movement Dialogue facilitated by Just Associates (JASS) in São Paulo, Brazil, which brought together women trade unionists, women workers, feminists, Indigenous and Black women, lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer, Intersex (LBTQI) activists, and women human rights defenders to discuss, debate and share understandings of corporate power, and what it means to their struggles and their lives. The reflections, insights and theoretical frameworks explored during the dialogue shape and inform this report. In discussions participants sought to understand how corporate power functions, its impacts on women and oppressed peoples, and the ways in which social movements are challenging and confronting corporations and governments acting in their interest.

Drawing on an analysis of power, exclusion and inclusion the report outlines the ways in which large national and transnational corporations exert formal, shadow and invisible power.<sup>3</sup> Governments, influenced by large corporations, set the rules through national and international legislation that privileges these corporate interests over and above agreed international human rights and labour law. The 1980s mark the consolidation of neoliberal economic policies that led to changes in the laws allowing for trade and financial liberalization, the deregulation of labour, and the privatization of natural resources and basic services. This gives corporations the **formal power** to degrade working conditions, pay low wages, avoid tax, and sue sovereign states for violations of trade agreements. Corporate lobbying of governments is a way to exert **hidden power** as it gives corporations a seat at the table in decision-making processes where they can set the agenda.

Similarly, corporate social responsibility is used to obscure and mask the negative practices corporations adopt to gain power and revenue such as corporate lobbying, union-busting, aggressive tax avoidance, environmental pollution and violence against workers and communities. Corporations are gaining more influence and visibility in setting international development priorities for example by directly funding UN initiatives and civil society programs.

Corporations are also exercising their **invisible power** to mould and shape social norms and people's beliefs. Global media ownership, for instance, is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few transnational corporations.<sup>4</sup> It is used to disseminate and reaffirm the key principles of market fundamentalism and has become a powerful tool in determining whether or not political leaders are elected and remain in power. The media drives over-consumption and lulls people into a false sense of wellbeing especially in the global North.

The multiple ways in which corporate power is practiced and exercised depicts a system of extraction and exploitation of natural resources and labour with its roots in the ideologies of white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy.<sup>5</sup> The impacts on women's and oppressed people's lives is pervasive and devastating. Women from racially and ethnically marginalized groups and migrant women worldwide, including those living in the global North, have limited access to education and skills training, are responsible for an unequal share of domestic and unpaid work, and are more likely to be in low paid and informal employment without social security benefits.<sup>6</sup> The privatization of public services such as health and education make them inaccessible to the most marginalized women. Women are overrepresented amongst the lowest tier of public sector workers such as teachers, nurses and healthcare workers who are likely to lose their jobs or earn lower wages on more precarious contracts as a result of privatization.

The privatization of land and natural resources displaces women farmers and indigenous communities and violates their right to land, food, water and a livelihood. The extraction of natural resources through agribusiness, hydropower, and mining leads to ecological damage and contributes to climate change that will disproportionately affect women in the global South. Finally, the militarization and criminalization of social movements and the working class by corporate power is expressed through systemic violence against women and oppressed groups.

Confronted with escalating corporate power, women and other oppressed groups are continuing to resist through their movements. There are 70 million women organized in trade unions today, and many millions more in cooperatives and other worker rights associations.<sup>7</sup> There is a call to scale up struggles of resistance, build bridges between different social movements, and foster and grow people's power to build new forms of production, consumption and distribution of the world's social and economic resources.

The five stories of struggle captured in this report were shared during the Cross Movement Dialogue and illustrate that women and oppressed groups around the world have the **power to** challenge the dominance of corporations. Each struggle, whether focused on labour rights in Cambodia, access to medication and public healthcare in South Africa, or the preservation of natural resources against large corporate mining and energy projects in Nigeria, Brazil and Mexico, uses cross movement collaboration in some way to defy corporate power. The recommendations and reflections emerging in the last moments of the Cross Movement Dialogue speak to how women trade unionists, LBTQI activists, feminists, indigenous women and women human rights defenders can sustain their victories by consolidating the **power within** their movements, nurturing collective **power with** other social movements, and exerting **power over** corporations and governments acting in their interest.

<sup>1</sup> White, D.S. The Top 175 Global Economic Entities. 2012 <http://dstevenwhite.com/2012/08/11/the-top-175-global-economic-entities-2011/> Cited in Pingeot, L. Corporate influence in the Post-2015 process. Global Policy Watch, MISEREOR and Brot für die Welt. 2014 (accessed 23 January 2016)

<sup>2</sup> Mishel, L. and A. Davis. Top CEOs Make 300 Times More than Typical Workers Pay Growth Surpasses Stock Gains and Wage Growth of Top 0.1 Percent. Economic Policy Institute. USA, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> VeneKlasen, L. and Miller, V.A. New Weave of People, Power and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation. World Neighbors. USA, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Arsenaault, A. and M. Castells. The Structure and Dynamics of Global Multi-Media Business Networks. International Journal of Communication. 2, 707-748. 2008

<sup>5</sup> Hooks, B. Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black. South End Press. USA, 1999

<sup>6</sup> UN Women. Progress of the World's Women: Transforming Economies Realizing Rights, USA, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Global Unions. Global Unions Statement to the 60th Session of the UNCSW. United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. 18 March 2016 <http://www.world-psi.org/uncsw/news/global-unions-statement-60th-session-uncsw> (accessed 11 April 2016)