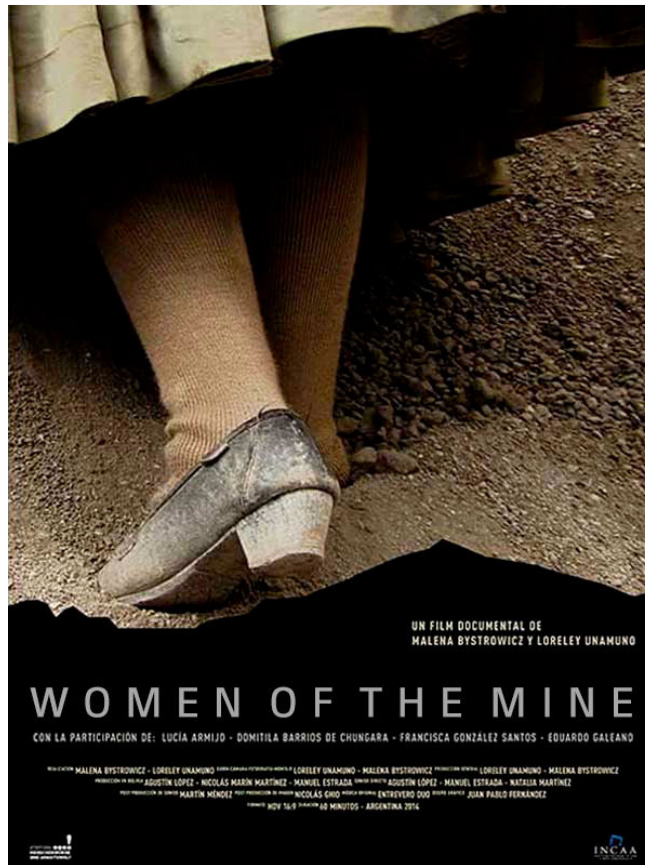




WOMEN OF THE MINE (MUJERES DE LA MINA)



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Women of the Mine tells the story of three women who live and work at the mines of Cerro Rico in Potosi, Bolivia. The world's largest silver deposit, the Cerro Rico de Potosí mine has been a source of enormous wealth, labor exploitation and misery since Spanish Colonialism. Known as "the mountain that eats men," Cerro Rico has taken the lives of countless miners, leaving women widowed and struggling to raise their children in poverty. However, local beliefs that women bring bad luck, prevent women from working inside the mines. Instead, they work hammering rock on the side of the mountain in search of bits of mineral.

Bolivia, Potosi and Mining

Bolivia is a land-locked South American nation that shares borders with Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile and Peru. Roughly a third of the country's territory lies in the Andes mountain range and was part of the Incan Empire prior to Spanish colonization. Today Bolivia has a total population of approximately 10 million people and one of the largest multi-ethnic indigenous populations in Latin America. In addition to Spanish, which is spoken by the majority, Bolivia's main languages are Quechua, Aymara and Guarani. Thirty-three other indigenous languages are also spoken throughout the country. In 2006, Evo Morales, a democratic socialist and cocalero activist, became Bolivia's first Indigenous president. Under his administration, the constitution was rewritten with the aim of allotting more power to the indigenous majority. The new constitution changed the country's name from the Republic of Bolivia to the Plurinational State of Bolivia, and granted official status to all 36 indigenous languages.

Bolivia is divided into nine departments: Pando, Beni, La Paz, Potosi, Sucre, Cochabamba, Chuquisaca, Santa Cruz and Tarija. The greater part of the department of Potosi, where Cerro Rico is located, is situated in the Andean Altiplano (high plains). At the foot of the Cerro Potosí lies the department's capital, the city of Potosí. With an elevation of 4,090 meters (13,420 feet), it is one of the highest cities in the world. During the colonial period, Cerro Rico was a major source of silver for Spain, making Potosí one of the most important and largest cities in the Americas. Spanish exploitation of Cerro Rico depended principally on Quechua laborers. The Spanish Viceroy used a form of tributary labor, known as the mita system, to exploit the labor of indigenous men aged eighteen to fifty from communities in the region. Indigenous women's labor was also exploited at the mines for tasks such as clothes-washing, making coal and candles, prostitution, handling llamas, gathering excrement for fuel and transporting metals, food, fuel and other goods.

During the 1900s, three businessmen known as the Tin Barons, Simón Patiño, Carlos Aramayo and Mortiz Hochschild, controlled two-thirds of Bolivia's tin. Patiño, "The Tin King", owned the majority of the mines, including Catavi and Siglo XX. So great was his fortune from mining, that at the time of his death in 1947 he was one of the wealthiest men in the world. Yet, while the Patiño and the Tin Barons reaped enormous wealth, mining families lived in poverty.

In 1952, under pressure from organized miners, the Estenssoro administration nationalized the mines, taking control of Bolivian mining away from the Tin Barons. As a result, the Tin Barons role in national politics also declined. That same year, the multi-mineral corporation COMIBOL (The Corporación Minera de Bolivia) was created by government decree, granting workers the right to a say in the company's activities. The Siglo XX and Catavi mines together formed the largest mining complex of the state agency COMIBOL. With many of its workers active in the Union Federation of Bolivian Mine Workers (FSTMB), the Catavi-Siglo XX mine complex was the site of ongoing labor strife. Although women were also affected by the labor practices and policies at the mines, they were not permitted to participate in the union.

Political Oppression, Women's Activism and Domitila Barrios de Chúnigara

In 1961, a group of seventy women, the wives of imprisoned miners who had been demanding higher wages, organized the Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX. After failed individual attempts to free their husbands, the women came together for a ten-day hunger strike, resulting in the miners' eventual release. In June 1963, the women of the Housewives Committee of Siglo XX played a strategic role in supporting miners' efforts to secure better working conditions and pay. In a decisive move to have their demands heard, the miners took a group of seventeen men (six foreigners and eleven Bolivians) hostage. The women offered to stand guard over the hostages while the miners negotiated with the federal government. The Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX guided mining women's activism for the next several decades and, following this 1963 event, Housewives Committees appeared in other mining centers throughout Bolivia.

That same year, Domitila Barrios de Chúnigara, who later became internationally-known as a Bolivian union leader and social activist, joined the Housewives' Committee of Siglo XX. She organized the Committee of the Unemployed, to represent women working at the rock pile at Siglo XX. In many ways, Domitila's life tells the story of Bolivia's history of exploitation, repression, patriarchalism and political activism. She was born into a Potosí mining family in 1937, when the mines were still controlled by the Tin Barons. Upon her mother's death, she was left to care for her five younger siblings at just ten years of age. Later in life, Domitila divorced and, like many women at Cerro Rico, she struggled to raise her seven children alone in conditions of extreme poverty. Domitila was a participant in and witness to several pivotal events in Bolivia's history of political repression and social activism. She is perhaps best known for her role in the 1977 hunger strike that helped end the military dictatorship of Hugo Banzer. Her 1978 autobiography "Let Me Speak" chronicles her everyday struggles as a mother, worker, union leader and political activist.

In *Mujeres de la Mina*, Domitila recounts the San Juan Massacre, which took place at Siglo XX on June 24, 1967. By order of the dictator General René Barriento Ortuño, Bolivian soldiers had surrounded the mining camps on the day of the local Festival of San Juan, opening fire on children, women and men who were returning home after a night of celebrating. In collusion with the military, the mining company had cut off the electricity

at dawn to prevent radio stations, the principal form of communication in the camps, from alerting the miners and their families. After several hours of killing, the soldiers declared the entire province a “military zone.” The massacre was the culmination of General Barrientos attempt to repress political activity and organizing in the mining centers. His government had already cut wages, emptied the general stores and prohibited union activity. The day of June 24th, the miners had planned a national meeting of miners to take place at Siglo XX in order to discuss their demands for an increase in wages and support of Che Guevara’s guerilla movement. The night of the massacre, the military captured and later tortured many union leaders, including Domitila Chúngrara, who was pregnant at the time and as a result lost her baby. A few months later, the military junta captured and killed Che Guevara.

Cerro Rico Today

Cerro Rico continues to form part of the economic backbone of the city of Potosí. As of 2014, 15% of Potosí’s population was still employed in the mining sector, with approximately 15,000 people working in small mining co-operatives. Tourism is also an important source of revenue. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, the city of Potosí was added to the List of World Heritage in Danger on June 17, 2014, due to “uncontrolled mining operation” and risks of further degradation at Cerro Rico. Riddled with tunnels and sinkholes, the peak of Cerro Rico, according to geologists, is in danger of collapsing. In 2012, Evo Morales’s administration took on a project to save the mountain. The project involved pumping ultra-light cement into Cerro Rico’s peak to stabilize crumbling rock and stop an imminent inward collapse. In December 2014, the summit began to crumble again and the government suspended the stabilization project, which was to be completed by the end of the year. Meanwhile, COMIBOL began a project to fill the growing hole with rock already stripped of minerals.

Despite the vast riches extracted from Potosí, it is one of the poorest departments in Bolivia. Employment opportunities outside of mining are scarce for those with little education and no land. Although miners belong to cooperatives, the system is unequal. Many miners work as day laborers and do not receive the pensions or health benefits that are available to the partners who run the mines. For women, the situation is particularly pernicious. Only recently, in 2001 women gained recognition as partners and shareholders in the cooperatives. Although hundreds of women now belong to mining cooperatives in Bolivia, they are barred from working inside the mines, because of the belief that women’s presence “scares away” the minerals. Nevertheless, women continue to organize and fight for their needs, including the right to work the veins inside the mines. Paradoxically, the ban on women from the mines that results in their greater economic struggle, has protected them, in part, from the early death that silicosis and mining accidents exacts upon men. It is this paradox that has resulted in numbers of poor widows whose lives are spared, only to be driven more deeply into poverty as they struggle to support their children by eking out an existence on the side of the mountain.

Glossary:

- **Spanish Colonialism** – Beginning with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492, the colonial period in the Americas continued into the nineteenth century. Bolivia declared independence from Spain on August 6, 1825.
- **Mita system** – Under the Incan empire, the mita system was a system of mandatory public service that required communities to provide men's labor for public works. During the colonial period, the Spanish exploited this system to supply the labor they needed for silver mining. Abuses were common under the Spanish regimes, and the mita system had a severe impact on local indigenous communities.
- **Department** – Similar to a state in the United States, a department is the primary political subdivision in Bolivia. Bolivia has a total of nine departments. Each department has a governor and is represented by four senators.
- **Cerro Rico** – Located near the city of Potosí, this mountain in the Bolivian Andes was one of the most important sites of silver mining during the Colonial era. Mining at Cerro Rico shifted principally to tin extraction after 1891. Due to the high number of workers' deaths in the mines, Cerro Rico is known as the "mountain that eats men."
- **Catavi** -- Catavi is a Bolivian tin mine located in the department of Potosí, near the city of Llallagua, approximately 150 miles northwest of Cerro Rico. The Catavi Massacre took place here on December 21, 1942, when Bolivian government forces massacred a group of striking miners.
- **Siglo XX** – A Bolivian tin mine located in Llallagua, Potosí. The Siglo XX and the Catavi mines made up the largest mining complex of the state agency COMIBOL. Many Catavi-Siglo XX workers were members of the Union Federation of Bolivian Mine Workers (FSTMB). This mining complex was the site of ongoing labor strife, as well as the 1967 San Juan Massacre.
- **Tio Jorge** -- A deity or devil of the underworld in the Cerro Rico mine of Potosí. Tio Jorge offers protection, as well as ruin and destruction. As such, miners give offerings, such as cigarettes, coca leaves and alcohol to the Tio Jorge figure before entering the mine.
- **COMIBOL** -- The Corporación Minera de Bolivia (COMIBOL) is a multi-mineral corporation that was created under pressure of organized miners by government decree on October 2, 1952. On October 31, 1952, Víctor Paz Estenssoro's administration also nationalized Bolivia's mines. COMIBOL was decentralized into five semi-autonomous mining enterprises in 1985, and has continued to undergo changes.
- **Domitila Barrios de Chungara** – (1937-2012) A member of a Potosí mining family, she was a union leader and social activist who led the 1978 hunger strike that helped end the CIA-backed dictatorship of General Hugo Bánzer.

- **Ángel Víctor Paz Estenssoro** -- (1907-2001) President of Bolivia during three terms: 1952-1956, 1960-1964 and 1985-1989. Estenssoro co-founded the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) party. In 1952, his administration nationalized the tin mines and created COMIBOL, which it later decentralized in 1985. In 1964, a CIA-backed military coup, lead by René Barrientos and Alfredo Ovando, overthrew Estenssoro and the MNR government.
- **General Hugo Bánzer Suárez** -- (1926-2002) The Bolivian dictator (1971-1978) who led the 1971 coup d'état. Bánzer later served as a constitutional president (1997-2001).
- **General René Barrientos Ortuño** – (1919-1969) Barrientos was a military officer who served as Bolivia's president (1964-1969) following a CIA-backed coup. His regime violently suppressed opposition groups, including Potosí's Siglo XX miners. He also ordered the capture and execution of Che Guevara in 1967.
- **Massacre de San Juan** – (June 24, 1967) Ordered by General Barrientos, this military-led massacre took place in the Siglo XX mining camps in Potosí during the Festival of San Juan. Approximately 400 people were killed, while others were captured or disappeared.
- **Eduardo Galeano** – (1940-2015) Uruguayan journalist and author who wrote about the 1978 hunger strike in *Memories of Fire*. Among his many influential works is the *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, which outlines the history of Latin American from European colonization to contemporary times, analyzing the effect of European and later United States economic exploitation and political domination.
- **Housewives Committee** -- Established in 1961, this organization was made up of the wives of Siglo XX miners who were demanding higher wages.
- **Evo Morales** -- (October 26, 1959-) President of Bolivian since 2006, Evo Morales is a Bolivian politician and cocalero activist who is considered Bolivia's first Indigenous president. A democratic socialist, his administration has focused on poverty reduction, issues facing indigenous communities and combatting the deleterious effects of neoliberal economic policies. His administration re-nationalized several of Bolivia's collective mines.
- **cocalero** – Cocaleros are coca leaf growers in Bolivia and Peru. For more than 8,000 years Indigenous people in the Andes have cultivated and used the coca plant for religious and medicinal purposes. Among it's many medicinal uses, this mild stimulant is commonly chewed by workers to help combat fatigue. In response to US-funded attempts to eradicate coca farming in Bolivia, the cocalero movement has become an important political force in the country.

Timeline:

- 1545: Spanish “discovery” of Potosí’s Cerro Rico. Potosí was known to Incan and pre-Incan populations and was already inhabited.
- August 6, 1825: Bolivia declares independence from Spain.
- May 7, 1937: Domitila Barrios de Chúnigara is born in Pulacayo, Bolivia.
- 1952: President Víctor Paz Estenssoro’s administration establishes COMIBOL and nationalizes Bolivia’s mines.
- 1961: Housewives Committee is established by the wives of miners at Siglo XX.
- 1963: Domitila Barrios de Chúnigara joins the Housewives’ Committee
- 1964: General René Barrientos comes into power in the aftermath of a CIA-backed coup that overthrows the government of Estenssoro. Barrientos declares COMIBOL bankrupt and calls for a reduction in salary for all workers.
- May 1965: Housewives’ Committee protests against salary reductions.
- June 24, 1967: San Juan Massacre at Siglo XX mine in Potosí.
- October 9, 1967: Under General Barrientos’s orders, military junta assassinates Che Guevara.
- April 27, 1969: Barrientos dies in a helicopter crash.
- August 22, 1971: Banzer Dictatorship begins.
- 1977-1978: Hunger strike begins on December 28, 1977 by four women and fourteen children demanding amnesty for all political prisoners, reinstatement of fired workers, recommencement of union activity and the removal of troops from mining centers. A second group of 11 women join the strike on December 31st, then a third group the following day. By January 7th there are 200 protestors, by January 9th 500 and by Jan 12th 1,000. On January 10th the state declares a state of emergency. On January 17th the government frees the majority of the political prisoners and meets three of the protestors’ four demands.
- July 21, 1978: The Banzer Dictatorship ends.
- 1978-1982: Bolivia experiences a period of political instability, with nine different presidents in little over four years.
- 1987: Potosí is declared World Heritage Site
- January 22, 2006: Presidency of Evo Morales begins.
- March 13, 2012: Domitila Barrios de Chúnigara dies of lung cancer in Cochabamba, Bolivia.
- June 2014: Potosí is declared World Heritage Site in Danger, due to sinkholes from uncontrolled mining.

Books:

Barrios de Chungara, Domitila with Moema Viezzer. 1978. Let Me Speak!: Testimony of Domitila, A Woman of the Bolivian Mines. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Farthing, Linda C. and Benjamin H. Khol. 2014. Evo's Bolivia: Continuity and Change. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

-This account of Evo Morales's first six years in office analyzes the successes, challenges and contradictions of Morales's administration and political party, the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS).

Galeano, Eduardo. 1982-1986. Memory of Fire Trilogy: Genesis, Faces and Masks, and Century of the Wind.

Galeano, Eduardo. 1997 Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of Pillage of a Continent. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Online Resources:

<https://nacla.org/blog/2012/3/15/remembering-domitila-making-bolivian-history>

A tribute article about Domitila Barrios de Chúngrara following her death in 2012.

<https://nacla.org/column/7334>

Rebel Currents blog. This blog explores the challenges facing recent left-leaning South American governments and movements, and the sometimes fraught and contradictory relations between them. It looks at major conflict arenas in countries such as Bolivia, where popular organizations are now confronting the government they brought to power, as well as local stories of communities in resistance throughout the region.

<http://victormontoyaescritor.blogspot.com/> Blogspot by Bolivian writer Victor Montoya. Montoya grew up in the mining town of SigloXX-Llallagua in Potosí. As a result of his political activities, he was imprisoned and tortured in Bolivia's Chonchocorro-Viacha prison in 1976. Through the support of an Amnesty International campaign, he was liberated and became an exile in Sweden in 1977. This blogspot includes articles and videos about mining, political activism, military violence and oppression in Bolivia. Primarily in Spanish with some English translation.

http://www.margencero.com/articulos/new03/masacre_minera_english.html -- An article about the San Juan Massacre, written by Víctor Montoya.

<http://www.marxist.com/san-juan-massacre-bolivia250607.htm>

A statement about the San Juan Massacre written by the Mineworkers Trade Union Federation of Bolivia (FSTMB) on June 25, 2007, forty years after the massacre took place.

<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/5/8/struggling-to-savethemountainthateatsmen.html>

A news article about the sinkhole in Cerro Rico de Potosí. This article also discusses inequality in cooperatives, and resurgence of mining in the mid-2000s.

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/jun/24/bolivia-cerro-rico-mine-mountain-collapse-miners>

Newspaper article that discusses dangerous working conditions, widows of miners and children who work in the mines (the Guardian).

Chávez, Franz. 2011. BOLIVIA: Women Fight Superstition, Machismo in Mining Cooperatives. Inter Press Service News Agency, June 23, 2011.

<http://www.ipsnews.net/2011/06/bolivia-women-fight-superstition-machismo-in-mining-cooperatives/>

Raney, Catherine A., "From Housewife to Household Weapon: Women from the Bolivian Mines Organize Against Economic Exploitation and Political Oppression" (2013). *CMC Senior Theses*. Papers 591.

http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1680&context=cmc_theses

Senior Thesis about women and mining in Bolivia, based on original interviews, bibliographic and archival research.

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