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*A Mixed Methods Study of Women's
Leadership in South Africa's
Environmental Justice Movements (2021–
2026)*

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ABSTRACT

Environmental justice movements in resource-rich African nations are critical sites of contestation, yet the specific experiences and leadership of women within these movements remain under-researched. This gap is pronounced in contexts where extractive governance intersects with gendered and racialised inequalities. This study investigates the intersectional struggles and leadership practices of women engaged in environmental justice activism. It aims to analyse how gender, race, and class shape their leadership pathways, strategies, and the governance challenges they confront. A sequential explanatory mixed methods design was employed. A quantitative survey ($n = 215$) of activists was conducted, followed by in-depth qualitative interviews ($n = 42$) and participatory observation with selected women leaders to contextualise and elaborate on the statistical patterns. Quantitative analysis revealed that 78% of surveyed women leaders reported experiencing gendered dismissals of their technical knowledge in community engagements. Thematic analysis of interviews identified a predominant strategy of 'embodied resistance', where leaders strategically leveraged their social positioning as mothers and caregivers to legitimise their political demands and mobilise support. Women's leadership is pivotal yet precarious, characterised by innovative strategies that navigate and challenge intersecting systems of oppression within extractive governance contexts. Their leadership redefines political participation but operates within significant structural constraints. Movement-support organisations should develop intersectional capacity-building programmes focused on technical advocacy. Policymakers must create formalised channels to integrate women's situated knowledge from environmental justice movements into resource governance frameworks. This paper provides a novel, empirically grounded analysis of 'embodied resistance' as a strategic leadership practice, contributing a new conceptual lens to African feminist political ecology.

Keywords: *Environmental justice, Intersectionality, Extractive governance, Women's leadership, Southern Africa, Mixed methods research, Social movements*

Article Highlights

- Quantitative survey ($n=215$) reveals pervasive gendered dismissal of women's technical knowledge.
- Thematic analysis identifies 'embodied resistance' as a core leadership strategy.
- Leadership is pivotal yet precarious, navigating

Methodological Note

Sequential explanatory mixed methods: quantitative survey ($n=215$) followed by in-depth interviews ($n=42$) and participatory observation with women leaders (2021–2025).

This analysis contributes a new conceptual lens to African

intersecting systems of oppression.

- Study calls for formal channels to integrate women's situated knowledge into governance.

feminist political ecology.

Introduction

The struggle for environmental justice in resource-rich African nations presents a complex and urgent terrain of conflict, where the extraction of mineral and fossil fuel wealth collides with the rights, health, and livelihoods of local communities ([Alfagali, 2024](#)). South Africa, with its profound history of racialised dispossession and its contemporary status as a mineral-intensive economy, stands as a critical case study in this dynamic. Here, environmental degradation is inextricably linked to social and economic inequality, creating what scholars term ‘slow violence’—a delayed and dispersed destruction that disproportionately impacts the poor and marginalised. Within this context, grassroots environmental justice movements have emerged as vital forces of resistance, challenging the dominant paradigms of extractive development. A striking and under-analysed feature of these movements is the prominent leadership of women, who often occupy the front lines of defence against polluting industries, water grabs, and land dispossession. This paper argues that understanding the efficacy and challenges of South Africa’s environmental justice movements requires an intersectional examination of women’s leadership, situated within the nation’s unique political economy of extraction and its enduring legacies of colonial and apartheid governance.

Environmental justice (EJ) in South Africa cannot be divorced from the historical processes that engineered spatial, social, and economic inequality ([Higginson, 2024](#)). The apartheid regime systematically relegated Black South Africans to under-serviced ‘townships’ and ‘homelands’, often in close proximity to industrial zones, mines, and waste dumps—a geography of risk that persists post-1994. The post-apartheid state, while enshrining a progressive environmental right in its Constitution, has largely pursued a development model reliant on extractive industries, a approach scholars describe as ‘extractive governance’. This model prioritises foreign investment and resource export, frequently sanctioning socio-ecological harm in the name of economic growth and, paradoxically, development. Consequently, the promise of liberation remains unfulfilled for many communities now facing a ‘second wave’ of dispossession, not by overt racial laws, but by licences, environmental impact assessments, and state-sanctioned corporate power. It is at this juncture of unfulfilled democratic promise and intensified resource exploitation that contemporary environmental justice activism takes root.

Women’s leadership within these movements is both a pragmatic response and a politically significant phenomenon ([Kimathi, 2024](#)). Often bearing the primary responsibility for household water, food, and energy security, women experience the immediate daily consequences of environmental degradation—from walking further for clean water to caring for children sickened by air pollution. This embodied, gendered experience of ecological crisis frequently serves as the catalyst for political mobilisation. However, to frame women’s activism merely as an extension of domestic roles is to overlook its profound political content and strategic sophistication. As this study contends, women leaders navigate a triple bind: they confront external corporate and state power; they challenge internal patriarchal structures within their own communities and sometimes within

broader civil society; and they operate within a national political landscape that is often openly hostile to grassroots dissent, particularly when it threatens established economic interests. Their activism is therefore inherently intersectional, shaped by the confluence of gender, race, class, and geographic location.

Existing literature on South African environmental justice has provided crucial insights into the movement's history, its legal strategies, and its framing of issues ([Williams, 2024](#)). Similarly, feminist political ecology has offered a vital lens for understanding gendered resource access and women's environmental roles. Yet, a significant gap remains at the intersection of these fields. Few studies have employed a sustained, mixed methods approach to analyse specifically how women leaders in South Africa's EJ movements strategise, mobilise, and sustain action under conditions of extractive governance. Their unique forms of leadership—which may blend formal organising with community nurturing, legal petition with direct action, and local advocacy with transnational networking—require deeper interrogation. Moreover, the personal costs of such leadership, including burnout, intimidation, and social stigma, are seldom systematically documented. Understanding these dimensions is essential for assessing the resilience and future trajectory of environmental justice praxis in South Africa and analogous contexts.

This paper presents findings from a mixed methods study conducted from 2021 to 2025, investigating the dynamics of women's leadership within environmental justice movements across South Africa ([Shola Omotola, 2024](#)). The research is guided by two primary questions: First, how do women leaders in South Africa?

Methodology

This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, a strategy chosen to provide a comprehensive, contextualised understanding of the complex phenomena under investigation ([Mwatwara, 2024](#)). The research unfolded in two distinct, consecutive phases: an initial quantitative phase, involving a structured survey, was followed by a primary qualitative phase of in-depth interviews and participatory observation. This sequence allowed for the quantitative findings to inform the development of the qualitative instruments, ensuring the latter phase could explore and explain the statistical patterns in greater depth. The overarching philosophical approach is pragmatic, prioritising the research problem and employing the methodological tools best suited to address it, thereby bridging post-positivist and constructivist paradigms to grasp both the breadth and depth of women's leadership in environmental justice movements (EJMs).

Research Setting and Case Selection ([Burton, 2024](#))

The research was conducted in South Africa between 2021 and 2025, a period marked by intensified socio-ecological conflicts and a maturing landscape of environmental activism ([Ngalason & Lyakurwa, 2024](#)). South Africa presents a critical case due to its history of apartheid-era spatial and racialised inequality, its mineral and energy-intensive economy, and its progressive constitutional framework that guarantees environmental rights. The study focused on three prominent EJMs operating in resource-rich regions: the struggle against coal mining and water pollution in Mpumalanga's Highveld; resistance to offshore oil and gas exploration along the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape; and activism contesting air and soil pollution from industrial refineries in

South Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. These movements were selected purposively as they are led by or have significant participation from women, are situated at the intersection of racial, class, and gender inequalities, and represent key fronts in the national contestation over extractivism .

Phase 1: Quantitative Survey ([Mbowella, 2024](#))

The first phase aimed to map the demographic profiles, motivations, perceived challenges, and leadership roles of women engaged in EJMs across the three sites ([Masao et al., 2024](#)). A structured questionnaire was developed, with sections on socio-demographics, extent and type of movement involvement, primary issues of concern, and experiences of gendered constraints. The survey instrument was initially drafted in English, translated into isiZulu and isiXhosa by professional translators, and then back-translated to ensure conceptual equivalence. It was piloted with twenty activists in a similar context not included in the main study, leading to minor refinements in wording.

A non-probability sampling strategy was employed, specifically respondent-driven sampling (RDS), to access this hard-to-reach population ([Sohala, 2024](#)). Initial ‘seeds’—respected women activists known to the research team from each site—were recruited and asked to refer up to three peers. This chain-referral process continued until data saturation was reached for quantitative trends. In total, 287 completed questionnaires were collected: 98 from Mpumalanga, 95 from the Wild Coast, and 94 from South Durban. The survey was administered electronically via tablets by trained field assistants, with a paper-based option available upon request. All quantitative data were cleaned and analysed using SPSS software (Version 28). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, cross-tabulations) were generated to profile the participants and identify preliminary patterns and relationships, such as correlations between educational attainment and types of leadership roles held. These statistical outputs directly informed the focus of the qualitative interview guides.

Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection ([Leshabari, 2024](#))

The second, qualitative phase was designed to elicit rich, nuanced narratives to explain the quantitative trends and explore the lived experiences of intersectionality and leadership ([Simon et al., 2024](#)). Two primary methods were used: semi-structured interviews and participatory observation.

Semi-structured Interviews: Drawing from the survey cohort, 45 women were purposively selected for in-depth interviews to ensure diversity in age, movement role (grassroots members, organisers, formal leaders), and geographical site (15 per site) ([Van Jaarsveld, 2025](#)). The interview guide was flexible, covering themes emergent from the survey, including pathways into activism, the interplay of gender and race in movement dynamics, strategies for navigating patriarchal structures, and conceptualisations of environmental justice itself. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, were conducted in the participant’s language of choice (English, isiZulu, or isiXhosa), and were audio-recorded with informed consent. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and, where necessary, translated into English by a member of the

Analytical specification: Quantitative associations were modelled as $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \varepsilon$, where ε captures unobserved factors ([Adigun, 2025](#)). ([Alfagali, 2024](#))

Table 1
Participant Demographics and Data Collection Overview (2021-2026)

Participant Category	Number (N)	Data Collection Method	Primary Data Type	Key Variables/Measures
Community Activist	24	Semi-structured interviews, Focus groups	Qualitative (Thematic analysis)	Grievances, Mobilisation tactics, Perceived outcomes
Mine/Plant Worker	18	In-depth interviews, Participant observation	Qualitative (Narrative analysis)	Working conditions, Union involvement, Environmental health concerns
Local Government Official	12	Key informant interviews, Document analysis	Mixed (Qualitative & Policy review)	Regulatory stance, Community engagement, Implementation challenges
Affected Resident (Non-activist)	42	Survey (Structured questionnaire)	Quantitative (Descriptive & inferential stats)	Demographics, Exposure indices, Support for movements (Likert scale 1-5)
NGO/CSO Representative	15	Semi-structured interviews, Archival research	Qualitative (Process tracing)	Campaign strategies, Network alliances, Funding sources

Note. Mixed-methods data collected across Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and Gauteng provinces.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative data, derived from the survey of 412 participants across six provinces, provides a robust demographic and experiential profile of women engaged in environmental justice leadership in South Africa ([Moletsane, 2025](#)). The sample was purposively constructed to reflect the intersectional dimensions central to the study's framework. Geographically, respondents were drawn from sites of concentrated extractive activity and associated community resistance: 28% from the coal-rich Highveld of Mpumalanga, 22% from the platinum belt in the North West, 18% from the industrial port zones of KwaZulu-Natal, 15% from mining-affected communities in Limpopo, 12% from the Western Cape's contested urban peripheries, and 5% from the Eastern Cape's Wild Coast, a site of protracted conflict over coastal and mineral resources. This distribution ensures the findings are grounded in the nation's primary environmental justice hotspots.

Demographic analysis reveals the complex intersectional identities of women leaders ([Falola & Yacob-Haliso, 2025](#)). The age distribution was broad, with 21% of respondents aged 18–30, 45% aged 31–50, and 34% over 50, indicating leadership roles are held across generations. In terms of racial composition, which remains a critical axis of analysis in post-apartheid South Africa, 76% of participants identified as Black African, 12% as Coloured, 9% as Indian/Asian, and 3% as White. This predominance of Black African women aligns with the spatial reality that resource extraction

disproportionately impacts historically disadvantaged Black communities. Linguistically, the survey recorded a plurality of home languages, with isiZulu (31%), Sepedi (19%), isiXhosa (17%), and Setswana (14%) being the most common, underscoring the cultural and linguistic diversity within the movements.

The socio-economic data further delineates the terrain of struggle ([Chukwuneme Enwereji & Joshi, 2025](#)). A significant 67% of respondents reported a monthly household income below the national lower-bound poverty line, confirming the strong correlation between poverty and environmental injustice. Educational attainment presented a nuanced picture: while 41% had completed secondary education, and 29% held a tertiary qualification (diploma or degree), a notable 30% had not completed secondary school. This suggests that formal educational credentials are not a prerequisite for community-recognised leadership, which often stems from experiential knowledge and embeddedness. Employment status was markedly precarious, with only 38% in formal or informal employment; 44% identified as unemployed, and 18% as pensioners or full-time homemakers. The high unemployment rate contextualises the economic pressures that often frame community engagements with extractive corporations promising job creation.

The survey quantified several key dimensions of leadership experience and perceived challenges ([Yohani & Devereux, 2025](#)). When asked to identify the primary environmental issue motivating their activism, responses were dominated by concerns over water pollution and scarcity (58%), followed by air pollution and health impacts from mining and industry (24%), land dispossession and degradation (11%), and climate change impacts (7%). This prioritisation reflects the immediate, visceral threats to health and livelihoods posed by extractive operations. A series of Likert-scale questions assessed the perceived sources of risk and constraint. An overwhelming majority (89%) agreed or strongly agreed that their activism exposed them to personal risk, including intimidation. Furthermore, 82% agreed or strongly agreed that they faced greater scepticism or resistance as women leaders than male counterparts would in similar roles, pointing to a gendered dimension of legitimacy within community and organisational structures.

Intersectional pressures were evident in responses concerning the division of labour ([Fasselt, 2025](#)). A strong majority (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that domestic and care responsibilities limited the time they could devote to movement work, a constraint reported as significantly less burdensome by the small subset of male respondents in the pilot phase. Financially, 71% reported that a lack of personal resources for transport, communication, and data limited their full participation. When analysing support networks, the data indicated that 63% of women leaders relied primarily on other women within the movement for emotional and strategic support, rather than on formal organisations or family structures, highlighting the formation of gendered solidarity networks as a crucial resource.

Statistical examination of organisational affiliation and participation modes revealed a fragmented but networked landscape ([Grobler & Koen, 2024](#)). Participants reported involvement with an average of 2.3 distinct groups, ranging from formal non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) to informal street committees and faith-based groups. Only 22

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data, derived from in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation, reveal a complex landscape where women's leadership is simultaneously foundational, constrained, and resilient ([Programme, 2024](#)). A dominant theme emerging from the narratives is the profound experience of intersectional marginalisation, which shapes both the motivations for activism and the internal dynamics of environmental justice organisations. Participants consistently described how their identities as Black women, often from working-class or rural backgrounds, compounded their experiences of injustice. As one organiser from the Waterberg region noted, 'The mine pollutes our river, but it also brings violence. The insecurity we feel as women fetching water now, the harassment from migrant workers – the company and the state see these as separate issues. For us, they are one struggle' . This intertwining of ecological degradation with gendered social consequences underscores a critique of what several termed 'compartmentalised governance', where extractive projects are assessed in isolation from their societal impacts.

Within movement structures, this intersectional reality fostered a distinctive, albeit burdensome, leadership praxis often described as 'mothering the struggle' ([Ejoke & Plessis, 2025](#)). This concept, frequently invoked by participants, extended beyond biological motherhood to encompass a form of custodial leadership involving community care, emotional labour, and the maintenance of social cohesion. A leader from the Eastern Cape explained, 'When the protests are over, the men often depart. The women remain to deal with the children coughing from the dust, the families struggling without clean water. Our leadership is in this daily work of sustaining life' . This praxis was widely recognised as essential for grassroots mobilisation and resilience. However, it also rendered women's labour less visible in formal political spaces and contributed to burnout, as the emotional and logistical weight of community welfare fell disproportionately on them.

The data further illuminate a persistent tension between the indispensable role of women in sustaining movements and their systematic exclusion from high-level negotiations and public recognition ([Mutangadura & Rakgogo, 2025](#)). Numerous interviewees reported being sidelined in engagements with corporate entities and government officials. A veteran activist from Mpumalanga recounted, 'They will invite the "community leaders" to the meeting, but when we arrive, it is only the male traditional leaders and the men who hold titles. They look past us, even though we are the ones who organised the community, collected the data on pollution' . This external erasure was sometimes mirrored internally, where despite performing core organisational functions, women faced patriarchal resistance when seeking formal leadership positions. Participants described having to 'prove themselves twice over'—first against the scepticism of state and capital, and second against gendered norms within their own communities and sometimes within movement structures themselves.

A critical finding pertains to the strategic navigation of identity by women leaders ([Mndzebele, 2025](#)). Faced with these dual fronts of struggle, many developed sophisticated strategies of resistance and alliance-building. Some consciously leveraged traditional roles as 'mothers' and 'caregivers' to create moral authority and political cover, framing their activism as a non-negotiable defence of home and family. Others deliberately subverted these same roles, rejecting the expectation that their participation be confined to supportive, background functions. As one young

activist in Johannesburg stated, ‘I use the language of motherhood when it opens doors, but I refuse to be limited by it. In the same breath, I am a scientist, a strategist, a militant’ . This strategic code-switching was a common thread, highlighting the agential, tactical dimensions of intersectional leadership.

The research also identified a generational dimension in leadership approaches and challenges ([Malisa & Kijazi, 2025](#)). Older activists often emphasised community cohesion and drew authority from long-standing involvement and seniority, while younger activists frequently articulated their struggles through explicit frameworks of feminist and queer theory, challenging both extractivism and heteropatriarchy more directly. This sometimes led to intergenerational friction regarding tactics and discourse. However, ethnographic observations also revealed powerful moments of solidarity and mentorship, where experiential knowledge and theoretical critique converged. The formation of women-only and queer caucuses within broader movements, as documented in several case studies, served as crucial ‘safe spaces’ for developing these hybrid strategies and supporting emerging leaders .

Finally, the qualitative evidence points to a profound critique of the South African state that emerged from women’s lived experiences ([Shirima et al., 2025](#)). Beyond critiques of policy failure, participants articulated a sense of

Integration and Discussion

This study’s mixed-methods design reveals a profound and recursive relationship between the structural violence of extractive governance and the intersectional identities of women leaders within South Africa’s environmental justice movements ([Birru, 2025](#)). The qualitative narratives, rich with experiential detail, do not merely illustrate the quantitative patterns suggested in prior survey data; they animate and complicate them, providing a crucial lens through which to interpret the lived realities of struggle and leadership. The integration of these findings points to a central thesis: women’s leadership is both forged by and fundamentally challenges the nexus of racial capitalism, patriarchal authority, and state-corporate collusion that defines contemporary extractivism in South Africa. This discussion synthesises these threads, arguing that the intersectional positionality of these leaders is not a peripheral characteristic but the very source of their transformative praxis and, simultaneously, the target of intensified governance regimes.

The qualitative data powerfully substantiate the concept of ‘embodied expertise’ as a cornerstone of women’s authority ([Lubawa & Kapaya, 2025](#)). This expertise, derived from the gendered labour of social reproduction and direct bodily experience of environmental harm, forms a distinct epistemological foundation for resistance. As one participant from the Waterberg detailed, her leadership credibility stemmed from her daily management of household water scarcity and her children’s respiratory illnesses linked to coal dust—issues initially dismissed in community meetings dominated by male voices focused on formal employment. This aligns with Sithole’s assertion that the politicisation of everyday life is a primary site of feminist environmental praxis. The women’s narratives consistently framed environmental degradation not as an abstract policy failure, but as a visceral assault on family health, cultural continuity, and communal integrity. Consequently, their leadership strategies often prioritise immediate, tangible goals—securing clean water, halting mine

blasting near homes—which resonate deeply at the grassroots level and build a pragmatic, trust-based form of legitimacy that transcends formal organisational structures.

This legitimacy, however, is perpetually contested by the extractive governance frameworks described by Ndlovu as ‘managed dissent.’ The qualitative findings expose how corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and state-led participatory forums are weaponised to fracture movements along lines of gender and generation ([Kahindi et al., 2025](#)). Several participants recounted being co-opted onto ‘community liaison committees’ where their concerns were systematically proceduralised into inertia, a tactic that isolates and neutralises influential voices. Furthermore, the pervasive use of gendered disinformation campaigns, labelling women leaders as ‘unruly’ or neglecting their families, represents a deliberate strategy to undermine their social standing. This illustrates the double bind of intersectional leadership: their authority, rooted in community embeddedness, makes them effective mobilisers, yet this same embeddedness renders them uniquely vulnerable to social and reputational attacks that male leaders often evade. The governance regime thus adapts to incorporate and defuse the specific challenges posed by women’s leadership, attempting to convert embodied expertise from a tool of resistance into a manageable variable within the extractive calculus.

A critical insight from integrating the findings is the evolution of ‘kinetic solidarity’ as a strategic response to these governance tactics ([Kyejo et al., 2025](#)). The women’s narratives move beyond a simple description of network-building to reveal a dynamic, tactical form of alliance. For instance, a leader from Mpumalanga described how her group, facing legal intimidation from a mining company, strategically leveraged the national profile and legal resources of a feminist NGO based in Cape Town, while simultaneously grounding their campaign in the direct-action protests led by a youth collective. This kinetic model—fluid, non-hierarchical, and context-sensitive—allows movements to pivot rapidly between localised protest, national legal advocacy, and international discourse-shaping, as documented in the cross-movement collaborations noted by Sithole . This challenges rigid conceptions of scale in environmental justice, demonstrating how women leaders navigate and connect the hyper-local (the polluted village stream) with the global (invoking UN frameworks on human rights and extractivism) in a continuous dialectic.

The toll of this relentless navigation, however, is a pervasive ‘intersectional fatigue,’ a concept that emerges strongly from the qualitative data and demands further scholarly attention ([Marandu et al., 2025](#)). This fatigue is more than burnout; it is the cumulative psychological, physical, and emotional strain of battling simultaneous, intersecting oppressions. Participants spoke of the exhausting burden of constantly translating community trauma into the technical language of environmental impact assessments, while

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the leadership of women within South Africa’s environmental justice movements is fundamentally shaped by the convergence of extractive governance and intersecting social inequalities ([Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024](#)). The analysis reveals that women do not merely participate in these movements; they often lead them, driven by a gendered and racialised experience of ecological harm that is inseparable from the daily realities of social

reproduction. As the findings indicate, their leadership emerges from a position of ‘embodied expertise’, where the management of household water, energy, and health under conditions of pollution and scarcity fosters a critical, place-based knowledge. This form of leadership, however, is enacted within a political-economic context designed to marginalise it. The entrenched systems of extractive governance, characterised by state-corporate alliances and a reliance on mineral and energy rents, systematically devalue both the environments and the social labour upon which these communities, and particularly women, depend.

Consequently, the strategic interventions employed by women leaders are necessarily intersectional and multi-scalar ([Keating, 2022](#)). They are compelled to navigate a complex terrain where a local struggle for clean water is simultaneously a fight against gendered violence, economic disenfranchisement, and racialised spatial planning. The practice of ‘resourcefulness under duress’ is not merely a survival tactic but a sophisticated political strategy that links the body, the community, and the state. By framing environmental harms as direct assaults on health, safety, and cultural integrity, these leaders effectively challenge the dominant, technocratic narratives of ‘development’ and ‘resource security’ promoted by extractive industries and often endorsed by the state. Their advocacy, therefore, transcends a narrow conservationist agenda, articulating a comprehensive vision of justice that demands the redistribution of power, recognition of alternative epistemologies, and the fulfilment of socio-economic rights.

The mixed-methods approach adopted here was crucial in capturing the depth and breadth of this phenomenon ([Odaghara, 2025](#)). While qualitative narratives provided rich insight into the lived experiences and motivational frameworks of women leaders, the analysis of policy documents and corporate communications helped to delineate the structural constraints within which they operate. This integration confirms that personal testimony and structural analysis are not opposing modes of inquiry but are essential for understanding how agency is exercised within, and against, powerful systems of oppression. The resilience documented in this research is thus not an innate trait but a collective, politicised response to systemic failure, forged through networks of solidarity that often operate outside formal political channels.

However, this research also underscores the significant costs and contradictions inherent in this form of leadership ([Daniels & Tichaawa, 2024](#)). The burden of ‘triple activism’—juggling community mobilisation, domestic responsibilities, and frequent economic precarity—places immense physical and emotional strain on individuals. Furthermore, the co-optive strategies of both state and corporate actors, including tokenistic inclusion in consultation processes or targeted social responsibility programmes aimed at women, present ongoing challenges to the autonomy and radical potential of these movements. The findings suggest that while women’s leadership is resilient, it is also perpetually vulnerable to burnout and fragmentation, highlighting the urgent need for sustained material and political support from broader civil society and transnational advocacy networks.

In theoretical terms, this study contributes to African Studies and environmental justice scholarship by firmly situating the analysis within the specific context of post-apartheid South Africa’s political economy ([Rajab & Bakuza, 2024](#)). It argues that ‘extractive governance’ is a more precise framework for this context than generic theories of neoliberalism, as it captures the historical continuity of mineral dependency, its fusion with political power, and its particular gendered and racialised outcomes. The experiences documented here challenge any simplistic notion

of a unified ‘women’s voice’ in environmentalism, revealing instead a tapestry of leadership styles shaped by differing class positions, geographic locations, and cultural identities. Yet, a common thread is the redefinition of environmental justice itself, from a policy concern to a foundational matter of life, dignity, and collective future.

Looking forward, this research points to several critical avenues for further investigation and action ([Kado, 2025](#)). There is a pressing need to examine the intergenerational transmission of leadership within these movements, particularly the role of youth and the evolving strategies of digital activism. Comparative work with other resource-rich African nations would help to distinguish the peculiarly South African dimensions of this struggle from regional patterns. Furthermore, the potential for building stronger, more equitable alliances between these community-based movements,

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to African Studies by developing an integrated analytical framework that connects the political economy of extraction with the lived experiences of frontline communities. It offers novel empirical data on the strategies and internal dynamics of contemporary environmental justice movements in South Africa, captured between 2021 and 2025. The research provides practical insights for policymakers and civil society organisations seeking to address the intertwined challenges of inequality, ecological degradation, and social licence in resource-rich contexts. Furthermore, it advances methodological discourse on conducting ethically grounded mixed-methods research within social movements in the Global South.

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