

POLICY BRIEF



Photo: Tommy Trenchard

Empowering women in artisanal and small-scale mining in Central and East Africa

Research from Central and East Africa shows that, despite facing engrained gender barriers, women are important participants in the economic activity surrounding artisanal and small-scale mining, and some are forging new economic pathways.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) supports hundreds of millions of people globally, and has grown substantially in recent years, from an estimated 10 million miners in 1999 to some 20-30 million a decade later. Along with the growing recognition of the socio-economic importance of artisanal and small-scale mining is the realization that gender is key to the success of efforts to strengthen mining as a sustainable economic sector. The African Mining Vision, for example, specifically calls for the integration of gender equality in “mining policies, laws, regulations, standards and codes”. Yet, a substantive understanding of gender norms and the roles of women and men in the sector has been lacking to date.

KEY RESULTS

The power structures and livelihood options in ASM zones are highly gendered, creating significant barriers to women. But evidence shows important benefits for women:

- Women’s mining income is directly supporting households.
- Their earnings may increase women’s social status.
- Successful women miners are diversifying into other economic activities.
- Some women are breaking ASM gender barriers to open new pathways for others.

Available research has largely overlooked or minimized the roles of women in mining and in economic activities linked to mining such as food production and small-scale trading. Very little is known, for example, about the varied roles women play in the mining process or the ways in which gender norms, attitudes, and institutions shape the kinds of activities women are “allowed” to do, with implications for their economic potential. Such an understanding is urgently needed as this growing sector is also increasingly the subject of new regulations aimed at harnessing artisanal mining to national development goals. Interventions that are not analyzed in terms of their impacts on women will not only fail to redress gender inequality, but perhaps even exacerbate women’s vulnerabilities in the ASM sector.

This brief outlines emerging insights from a three-country study undertaken by researchers from Carleton University, Partnership Africa Canada, and Uganda’s Development Research and Policy Analysis Center. The findings will be of use to national mining, land, and gender ministries, national civil society organisations, regional and international inter-governmental organisations, donor states, and agencies working to improve the development outcomes of resource extraction.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research team applied a mixed-method approach to explore gender dynamics in six study sites in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda. This included participant observation, focus group interviews, a survey, and life histories conducted in mining zones. In examining mine-related livelihoods, ancillary services (e.g., food, repairs, tools, sex work) that support mine sites and adjacent residential areas were included. In total, 878 women and men were surveyed; multiple focus groups were held at each site; and life histories of four to five women and men in each site have been conducted to date. The breadth of this data across the three countries presents, for the first time, a detailed picture of how gender norms in ASM activities, related economies, and governing structures, and its impacts on the roles and livelihood strategies of women.

The research focused on the social organization of mining, including governance relationships, in exploring the gender dynamics. Close attention was paid to relationships with authorities, which affect women and men’s forms of agency and shape their livelihood strategies. These relations include those with power over mine sites, such as government officials, license holders, bosses, and subcontractors. Interviews also focused on the discourses, terms, and

metaphors that structure how mining activities, and the roles of women and men in those activities, are understood. The statistics and data presented in this brief are an average across the three countries. Analysis per country and mine site offers data variations according to the specific context. Find sources below for additional information about this project.

KEY FINDINGS

Early findings reveal how women are disadvantaged in mining zones, and even excluded in various ways, by a number of overlapping and mutually reinforcing barriers. At the same time, evidence illustrates the importance of ASM livelihoods for women, with some deriving significant benefits.

Barriers observed:

Gender norms and taboos discriminate against women at ASM sites.

Across study sites, a range of norms and taboos limit women’s participation in various aspects of ASM. These range from their presumed weakness, to issues of immodesty, to taboos against women entering shafts or pits. In a tin mine in Uganda’s Western region, for example, men claimed that women “do not have the energy to dig down there” and “are weak.” Others asserted that menstruating women are “unclean” and could lead to the disappearance of tin. In the community surrounding a Rwandan wolframite mine, both men and women depicted female miners as drug addicts, pregnant out of wedlock, disobedient to parents or husbands, or widows unable to “control themselves.”

Women are concentrated in the least remunerated livelihoods at ASM sites.



Working, owning, or controlling the mine pit are the most lucrative ASM jobs and mostly occupied by men. Other mining activities — stone crushing, washing, panning — are more accessible to women, but less remunerative. Surveys revealed that women are concentrated in the lowest-paid aspects of ASM activity. Across mine sites in the three countries, women were largely excluded from the few salaried positions available, and from the highest paying positions, including ore extraction: only 15 percent of women identified as diggers, compared with 62 percent of men surveyed. The main occupations for women are

Surveys revealed that women are concentrated in the lowest-paid aspects of ASM activity. Across mine sites, women were largely excluded from the few salaried positions available, and from the highest paying positions, including ore extraction: only 15 percent of women identified as diggers, compared with 62 percent of men surveyed.

in transportation (over 43 percent of women compared with over 15 percent of men); processing activities such as panning and washing ore (37 percent of women compared with 33 percent of men); and support services such as vending food, drink, and other goods, or selling sexual and domestic services (29 percent of women compared with over 10 percent of the men). These gender differences in occupations make for a significant income gap between men and women.

Women's "double burden" limits their full engagement in ASM.

The work possibilities for women were strongly shaped by family and community pressures concerning their gendered "duties." For instance, 33 percent of women recorded family obligations as a major factor influencing their work hours, compared with just 14 percent of men. These domestic duties are one reason why women work fewer hours at mining than do men. This in turn limits their earnings and their ability to network and build livelihood connections. The expectation that women's first duty is to the family and husband also tends to discourage married women from working in the sector. Nearly 35 percent of women working in ASM were divorced/separated, widowed, or never married, compared with only 23 percent of men. Poverty appears to be a chief motivation for these women.

Demonstrated benefits:

Mining income helps women support their households.



Despite working fewer hours and earning less than men, nearly 70 percent of women surveyed across the mine sites said that at least half of their household income comes from ASM activities, compared with 88.6 percent of men. Women report using their income for essentials such as food

and school fees, and among some of those better off, for household improvements. The extent of economic necessity as a driving factor came through in personal interviews. In Uganda, for example, some women in tin mining said they had started work because they were no longer supported by either a father or husband. In the Ituri gold mine in DRC, married women working in the mines or related services often support their households during the "lean period" when their miner husbands have not yet reached the gold belt.

Earnings from ASM may increase women's social status.

Despite the stigma they face, some women noted that their ASM earnings had a transformative effect on their social status, both at home and in their communities. This included women in a wolframite mining site in Rwanda who were proud of their work and felt they were viewed as "big people", with comparable status to teachers and nurses. In another site in Rwanda, married women miners noted that their husbands now had to consult them in decision-making, while unmarried women said their earnings were changing perceptions that they were "immoral" or "prostitutes".

Successful women miners have diversified into other economic activities.

While women earn less overall than men at ASM sites, there were noteworthy successes: women who managed to accumulate capital to invest in diversifying their sources of income. In a gold mine in Uganda's Central region, one woman used food vending profits to buy farm land. Within seven years she had enough money from mining and agriculture to start buying raw ore for processing. She then diversified into selling vegetables and building rental structures at a neighbouring mine site. Another woman moved from panning to buying ore to renting out tools, eventually becoming an owner and shareholder in several shafts. In addition to using her wealth to educate her children, she employs others and plans to expand both her mining and farming investments.

Some women are breaking gender barriers to open new pathways for others.

While most women work in transportation, processing, and services, a few have defied norms to hold jobs typically reserved for men. At the gold mine in Uganda, some women were excavating mine shafts, owning or renting processing machines, and a few were gaining stature as "big persons" in the mining zone. At the Ugandan tin mine, a few excavation teams were composed entirely of women, in defiance of norms that preclude women from digging. Some of these women see themselves as trail blazers, paving the way for others to occupy lucrative jobs traditionally held by men.

POLICY INSIGHTS

Preliminary findings challenge the prevailing view of artisanal and small-scale mining as a male preserve and shed light on the processes and structures that reinforce this understanding, to the exclusion of women. As they consider how to empower women in the mining sector, early findings suggest that decision-makers and practitioners should:

Recognize and support the beneficial role of women in ASM zones.

Evidence shows the extent to which women's ASM-related earnings are supporting families, enhancing the status of women, creating new economic opportunities, and opening doors previously closed to women. These current benefits — for women, their families and communities, and the wider economy — need to be factored into any plans and policies for reforming artisanal and small-scale mining. A heavy-handed approach to formalizing the sector could have the unintended consequence of harming women and those who depend on their livelihoods.

Challenge gendered norms and practices within mining zones.

These findings highlight how discrimination against women is deeply embedded in the norms, structures, and practices that shape livelihoods in the ASM sector. Ending this discrimination will entail careful review and reform of these norms and structures. Currently, positions of authority over mining operations are held almost exclusively by men, and the gendered division of labour and authority makes it difficult for women to access more lucrative positions. Without addressing this power imbalance, gender inequalities will likely persist.

Tackle the double burden on women.

In designing interventions to enhance women's status and livelihoods in ASM, policymakers must also confront the extent to which the barriers facing women in mining zones are interwoven with, and reinforced by, barriers they face in society more broadly. These include, among others, the unequal burden of domestic responsibilities and women's underrepresentation in authority structures.

This brief presents findings and policy lessons identified in a working paper prepared through the GrOW initiative. See: Buss, Doris, Blair Rutherford, Jennifer Hinton, Jennifer Stewart, Joanne Lebert, Gisèle Eva Côté, Abby Sebina-Zziwa, Richard Kibombo, and Fredrick Kisekka Ntale. 2017. "Gender and Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Central and East Africa: Barriers and Benefits". Brief produced by: Doris Blair, Blair Rutherford, Mary O'Neill, Alejandra Vargas, and Martha Melesse.

Opinions stated in this brief and the paper it draws from, are those of authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GrOW program partners



IDRC | CRDI

International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international



The Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program is a multi-funder partnership between the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, the Hewlett Foundation, and the International Development Research Centre.

Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW)
International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON
Canada K1G 3H9
Phone: +1 613 2366163
Fax: +1 613 657 7749
Email: grow@idrc.ca
www.idrc.ca/grow