



WOMEN AND ARTISANAL AND SMALL-SCALE MINING IN AFRICA: A LOOK AT BURKINA FASO, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO AND SOUTH AFRICA

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This is summary of a research report prepared for WoMin in Mining Regional Alliance.¹ Artisanal and Small-scale mining (ASM) in Africa is not only an increasingly important economic livelihood activity but also one that provides crucial insights to transformations occurring in the political and economic landscape of the continent in response to conditions of economic, ecological and social reproduction crises. The state's turn to formalisation has been a key instrument used to regulate the sector. However, the challenges arising out of this effort to formalise artisanal mining speaks to how economic strategies and legal frameworks continue to centre large-scale mines, while marginalising the interests and needs of smallholder producers. Women are at the coalface of such policy bias.

Historically, explicit colonial regulations sought to criminalise activities regarded as undermining the interests of emerging large-scale mining corporations. More recently and since the liberalisation of the mining sector on the continent in particular, ASM has been the focus of renewed policy interventions. The question of gender relations and the policy measures required to support women in ASM has been also gaining some traction. But this has been done without a coherent and clear approach to address the ecological challenges raised by ASM whilst also ensuring women's livelihoods and wellbeing are protected. This is especially challenging when related to the issue of Gender Based Violence given the criminalised and militarised nature of mining.

To deliberate on the issues raised by women in ASM, this paper undertook an overview ASM in three countries: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burkina Faso and South Africa. DRC and South Africa, provide important insights into how the mining industry evolved in a manner that externally oriented African economies and undermined ASM and devalued women's work while entrenching existing forms of exclusions from mining itself. Historically, Burkina Faso was relegated as a labour pool reserve in the colonial period. More recently, it is experiencing a gold mining boom which is displacing agrarian based livelihoods as the primary economic activity reproducing similar patterns under the conditions of neoliberal globalisation.

South Africa needs to decriminalise artisanal mining and state interventions that explicitly seek to serve the interests of ASM miners while balancing this with environmental, health and safety concerns. A Draft ASM policy has been gazetted in May this year, opening up possibilities for engagement by the public, including the National Association of Artisanal Miners of South Africa (NAAM) who have been formally consulted by the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy. The context of high unemployment which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic



remains of huge concern. NAAM has emphasised how ASM has offered an alternative livelihood while also asserting the mineral rights of Africans to control, manage and exploit their mineral resources instead of 'foreign' or 'white owned' multinational corporations. Women are active members of NAAM and are visible in leadership roles, although still a minority.

Decriminalisation remains a demand for which there is consensus in regulating ASM. However, even in contexts where regulations are instituted, criminalisation persists largely due to inappropriate regulations, cost of licensing and bureaucratic red tape. Regulations have to be designed to fit the challenges arising out of the forms of ASM, and specific needs of miners especially women and youth. Regulations that are supportive of ASM can also be oriented to providing services, facilities where processing can be done, formation of cooperatives and associations to also enable access to financing and technical training and the development of appropriate technology. Women are especially best placed to benefit from state led initiatives since programs can be developed to support women as a group to avoid the risks of exposure to unsafe and risky methods of mining, while providing them with training in sustainable ASM techniques and methods, as part of broader support for livelihood alternatives.

GBVF is a complex issue, especially in the violent context of extractivism. While encouraging women to exit from mining is not a solution, it is clear that decriminalisation can ensure it is more likely cases of GBVF can be reported, access to psychosocial care and medical services are also essential. Approaches that seek to prevent GBVF are also needed in ASM sites. In some cases, ASM occurs in areas that are connected to or lead to the formation of informal settlements that do not receive access to social services, such as to water, electricity and sanitation. These services can be provided alongside improved housing conditions, as well as the creation of community spaces where women can also organise autonomously, and regulate welfare in ASM communities. In cases such as DRC and Burkina Faso where policies exist to regulate ASM, it is possible to consider addressing women's exclusion from ASM, and ensuring gender segmentation of labour is also addressed by ensuring women are supported to supervise, manage and be issued licenses to mine with the support from local authorities. Women working in ASM should also have their rights as working women to be protected.

This draws attention to the relevance of ILO Recommendation 204 on the transition from the informal to the formal economy. This policy framework that guides the alliance of the state, employers, trade unions, and more recently the community, is a key policy making instrument. However, ASM is one prickly area that amplifies the challenges of transitioning from the informal to the formal economy. Instead, ASM thrives in conditions of informality, and women who work in ASM (and the informal sector) find the flexible nature of informalised work conducive to balancing work with the burden of care work. However, ILO 204 also prescribes Guiding Principles which include the promotion of gender equality and non-discrimination.

Police reform is also a longstanding and important demand that goes beyond extractives, but has particular implications in mining areas which tend to be located in rural areas where human rights abuses are more likely. Decriminalisation of ASM however, remains an essential precondition to enable these kinds of interventions.

Environmental, health and safety concerns are deeply challenging. Burkina Faso offers an example of a state that has instituted measures to ensure artisanal miners avoid harmful practices. However, the scale of implementation remains limited. The responses of women to the





dominance of corporate mining in Burkino Faso provides an understanding of the environmental and social impact of mining, and the complex position occupied by ASM and women in it in the broader industry.

The capacity of the state remains eroded and in as much as NGOs attempt to fill the gap, this can only illustrate the kind of interventions states should be providing. However, DRC shows the state has been intervening largely to monitor and trace mineral resources. Not only has this managed to further exclude women and cut off their ability to eke a living, it serves the interests of mining and technology giants whose interest is in avoiding public and legal backlash for being involved in child labour. African states agenda should not be distorted in this manner especially since policy failure in this respect is first felt by ASM miners, especially women.

On the other hand, ASM has been shown in the Burkina Faso case to have significantly improved consumption patterns in the local economy. Diversification also occurs by those able to invest in ASM and retain significant surplus value. Women in ASM highlight incomes they receive enables them cover cost of keeping households afloat, covering school fees, and food expenses. In the midst of a wave of liberalisation that has displaced and eroded the capacity of workers and the peasantry to earn a living, ASM has in the first instance offered an alternative.

In Burkina Faso's Bomboré, an open pit mine with estimated annual production of 5.2 million tonnes, has been set up by Orezone, a Canadian mining firm. Women in Bomboré are resisting the project by drawing upon their understanding of how the process of dispossession is revealing its true impact on disrupting their livelihoods and quality of life.

With our farmland disappearing, our villages being relocated to new sites, and compensation offered, we are indeed realizing that the truth was not told to us at the outset. We feel that we have been misled. We now realise that your mining project will make us poorer. Paying for our children's schooling is becoming difficult because of a lack of income, and producing food for ourselves has become another problem... What we are losing, will be gone forever... We were already assaulted by the police because we were panning for gold on your territory.

As grim a situation the above depicts, it also lays a basis for rethinking an approach to structural industrial transformation that does not rely on a privatisation of natural resources, but instead can build on the commons, in a manner that ensures artisanal miners and smallholder farmers can be plugged into downstream linkages. Formalisation itself also needs to be approached differently to centre the needs of ASM miners, especially women, instead of merely constraining their ability to operate through rigid and inappropriate regulations. This is the kind of approach that can place women smallholder producers at the centre of a more holistic and integrated approach from below to intervene in the economy. It also creates a process to renegotiate the social contract with the state, and potentially rebuild its capacity.





NOTES

- 1 Women in Mining (WoMin) is an alliance of organisations that span the African continent, working alongside national and regional movements and women's organisations, communities impacted by mining and mega-infrastructure development projects to expose the impacts of extractivism on African women and advance women-centred and just development alternatives. WoMin works in 11 countries in West, East and Southern Africa to assert a radical and African ecofeminist agenda in the conversation on the climate crisis, climate justice and ways to protect the future of the planet and its people from corporations, their allied governments and elites in the Global North and South.

