

Women in Artisanal and Small Scale mining in Central and East Africa: Empowerment Challenges and Possibilities

This project will provide an in-depth study of women’s economic roles and livelihood practices in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) of tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold; four minerals that are in high demand and subject to an increasing range of international and national regulation. The volume of mining activity globally and on the African continent is increasing while mining-related regulations are undergoing significant change as a result of buoyant prices, government and donor interest, and consumer demand for ‘conflict-free’ minerals and electronics. Women are present in high numbers in ASM zones, yet little is known about their livelihood practices and the impacts of increased mining activity and heightened regulation. This study focuses on three countries at the heart of mineral production in central and east Africa, which are at different stages of implementing sweeping reforms targeting ASM and gender equality: Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Uganda.

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The proposed three-year research project (Sept 2014-August 2017) is funded via the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) Program supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Department for International Development, UK (DfID), and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, USA.

1. Background

Millions of African women and men rely on artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) for their livelihoods. With commodity prices buoyant, particularly for gold and the 3Ts (tin, tantalum, and tungsten), mining activity has escalated across the continent, and national governments are increasingly recognizing ASM as an untapped source of export earnings and tax revenues. This, combined with international consumer demand for ethically-sourced, 'conflict-free' minerals in electronics and other goods, has generated a series of measures to regularize ASM to enhance its economic potential while tackling links between mining, criminality and conflict.

Relevance and Impact:

Estimates suggest Africa holds 30% of the world's mineral reserves, most of which is unexploited. Artisanal and small-scale mining, with its low levels of technology, has become a significant informal economy and labour market in its own right on the continent and globally, with 13-30 million people directly engaged in ASM, and 80-170 million dependent upon it. Women participate in high numbers in artisanal mines, from 40-50% in the sector as a whole, to as high as 90% in individual, usually gold mining zones, performing various roles from panning and processing, to trading goods and services. Women also support multiple dependents through mining-related livelihoods.

This study is directed at an extremely important economic sector in which women's contribution is significant though largely overlooked by policy makers and researchers alike. The timing of this study is crucial. ASM is experiencing unprecedented structural change as governments, international institutions and donors grapple with measures to increase state regulation of mining to address the twin aims of increasing economic gain and curtailing criminality and conflict.

The range of policy initiatives is vast. Regional frameworks, such as the African Mining Vision, seek to strengthen African states and their regulatory capacity. Other initiatives, including the OECD's Due Diligence Guidelines, Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), and the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, focus on links between mining, armed conflict and criminality. The latter are largely driven by consumer demand for 'conflict-free minerals' not linked to armed violence in-region, including violence against women. Canada and several European Governments have also drafted legislation requiring manufacturers of electronics, automotive components and other goods to conduct due diligence on their supply chains and disclose products' 'conflict minerals' status. Furthermore, the 12 Member States of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) have committed to implement legal and institutional measures to combat illegal mineral exploitation through the formalization of the ASM sector and via implementation of 'conflict-free' mineral certification.

This heightened regulatory activity underscores two critical research gaps: little is known about (i) the socio-economic, including gender dimensions, of ASM and its potential to support or hinder women's economic empowerment; and (ii) the gendered impact of regulatory initiatives. Both gaps have been repeatedly cited as leading to ill-informed policy interventions that tend to characterize ASM as illegal, criminal or economically insignificant, thereby risking further marginalization of those most vulnerable.

Benefit of the Study for the Rwandan Population

This research aims to provide data on artisanal and small-scale mining and women in Rwanda which will provide helpful information to policy-makers responsible for mining regulations as well as women's empowerment. The introduction of regulatory changes in Rwanda has promising implications for enhancing the economic returns on mining, thus benefitting whole populations, as well as improving the working conditions of women and men in mining-related sectors. Crafting those policy changes to address Rwanda-specific needs and demands, rather than internationally-driven agendas, is crucial to ensuring that the affected populations benefit from the policy changes. Finally, this project is aimed at enhancing local capacities in the area of mining law and practice, with specific focus on including gender considerations into the sector. In this regard, WIAMO researchers will enhance their research experience which they may use to conduct further research which will have relevance to policy-makers in Rwanda. Furthermore, women and men in the artisanal and small-scale mining sites will have greater awareness of mining regulations and policies concerning gender in Rwanda.

2. Aim and Objectives

The problem:

While women's economic roles are essential to ASM, there is little reliable data on women's economic activities and the conditions that structure them. Policies aimed at legalization and regularization are thus unfolding without sufficient analysis of how women, and the barriers they face in ASM, will be impacted. This study focuses on ASM as an economically important sector in Africa and globally that has potential to increase women's economic empowerment. Results of this research will have implications for both women and mining in other global contexts and analyses of women's economic empowerment in other informal sectors.

This consortium of universities, civil society organizations and researchers in Africa and Canada will conduct a comparative study of women's livelihood strategies in ASM of four minerals (gold and the 3Ts) in three countries at the heart of mineral production in central and east Africa and which are at different stages of implementing sweeping reforms targeting ASM and gender equality: Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Uganda.

The research objectives:

The research objectives are:

- 1. To advance knowledge of women's economic activities in the ASM sector** to better understand the range of livelihoods reliant upon this sector and the power relations that condition women's livelihood strategies;
- 2. To deepen understanding of the barriers to, and solutions for enhancing women's economic empowerment in the burgeoning ASM sector.**

3. To contribute to policy making in the areas of regulating ASM, cleaning supply chains, and enhancing women's equality, to facilitate evidence-based decision-making, and improve the conditions for women's ASM livelihoods.

The research questions:

- What are the economic roles and livelihoods pursued by women in ASM zones, across different country and mining contexts, and what are the circumstances that condition women's survival as compared to accumulation activities?
- resources needed to improve their livelihoods in ASM zones, and how are these being impacted by regularization through licensing, registration, and increased state involvement?
- To what extent, and in what ways, are gender considerations included in the design and monitoring of policies aimed at regularization?

Objectives and Outputs:

The project contributes to knowledge and data accumulation with implications for women's empowerment and gender equality in the informal mining sector by increasing:

- overall awareness of the conditions and importance of women's ASM participation and economic empowerment;
- capacity to remove barriers and create opportunities for economic empowerment; and
- research capacities and partnership.

This project is expected to produce the following outputs:

- Evidenced-based research on: women's participation in ASM 3Ts and gold sectors; circumstances that create barriers and opportunities to economic empowerment; and, impact of heightened regularization and legalization.
- Field research and methodological notes that will be disseminated widely to various interested parties including policy makers in Rwanda, regionally and internationally, as well as interested researchers, scholars and advocates.
- Policy briefs on the implications of the research findings that will be disseminated widely to policy makers working on issues relating to gender mainstreaming, mining, and economic growth in Rwanda, regionally and internationally, as well as interested researchers, scholars and advocates.
- National and locally-based researchers' opportunities for training, promotion, publication and collaboration enhanced.
- Advocacy and leadership opportunities for select women in ASM communities identified, and skills enhancement.