

This paper written by Monica Gagnon, is part of a series of background papers on artisanal diamond mining and basic development issues. It complements our regular series of Policy Briefs. Others in the series will deal with topics such as the environment, health, microfinance and community development.

Artisanal Diamond Mining and Gender: *An Overview*

Introduction

Artisanal mining in general, and specifically artisanal diamond mining, accounts for a significant contribution to developing economies with mineral endowments. As such, it is important to analyze artisanal diamond mining in terms of poverty reduction. In this paper DDII examines artisanal diamond mining in relation to the third Millennium Development Goal: the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

In this paper, “‘Gender’ refers to the behaviours, attitudes, values and beliefs that a particular socio-cultural group considers appropriate for males and females.”¹ These behaviors, attitudes, values and beliefs, as well as the roles of women in artisanal mining communities, vary greatly from mineral-to-mineral, mine-to-mine, and culture-to-culture. Much of the existing gender research on artisanal mining communities generalizes these variables, and few studies of gender issues are specific to diamond mining.

The Role of Women in Artisanal and Small-Scale Diamond Mining

Artisanal and small-scale diamond mining can be a risky investment of time and energy due to its economically unstable and lottery-like nature. While the likelihood of finding a valuable stone is low, the potential rewards can be significant, and women and men often turn to diamond mining hoping to find something of value. Many of these hopefuls are simply looking to make fast money, but others have few alternatives. More men than women are found mining diamonds, perhaps because of the economic uncertainty of the undertaking. Women with children need to have the stability that will allow them to feed their children daily, clothe them

and send them to school. Still, women and girls, both married and unmarried, with varied backgrounds and motivations, find themselves in male-dominated diamond mining communities because they have been abandoned or widowed, or as a result of human trafficking or indebtedness. Despite the often negative driving forces, these women fulfill many important roles.

Estelle Levin, Principal Consultant for Resource Consulting Services Limited, observes that in Kono District of Sierra Leone women involved directly in diamond mining are not found in productive positions, except for the rare case of a female mine owner, financier or license holder. More vulnerable women (war widows or older women) are involved in “overkicking”; that is, panning the tailings of gravel that has already been washed at least once. Shawn Blore, an independent researcher who has observed diamond mining communities in Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) says that women there do have access to new gravel but it is difficult to tell what gravel is going to be productive, so this may not in fact be an advantage. Still, he says that women are not shunted to lesser-quality sites. According to Blore, women account for fewer than 50% of diamond miners in the DRC. Often, their involvement is in moving earth. Blore estimates that out of 50 bags of earth that a woman might carry from a pit to the river, she will be permitted to sift through just one. Both men and women participate in these lower status roles, but there are few women in higher status positions. In cases where there is improved technology and mechanization, women are always excluded.

Karen Hayes, Program Director for Pact Congo, reported that in the Kasai Province of the DRC women are heavily involved in diamond sorting, in addition to washing and transporting gravel. There, women are considered to be dexterous, patient

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and honest, and are thought to have better hand-eye coordination than men. These characteristics result in a high recovery rate. However, women are paid significantly less than men and are only allowed to keep a portion of the lower value stones or gravel. In the event that a woman does make more money she must be cautious of theft and accusations of witchcraft. Hayes has not seen female diggers, diamond traders, or regulators, but she says that this does not mean they do not exist.

Writing about Sierra Leone, Estelle Levin says,

“In the legal trade women do license-holding, supporting, and dealing, though the latter is very rare. They also act as gang leaders or water-women. Two of the three [female] miners we interviewed were licensed and self-supported. The other female miner was a land-owner. We interviewed one woman as a digger, but in fact she was an unlicensed miner who supported a gang of three diamond diggers using the gold she panned from their diamond tailings. Another two women worked as gang leaders for legal operations. One woman was a water-woman for a legal gang, one dug individually (and so illegally) and two were overkickers (illegal).”²

In addition to direct work in diamond mining, women and girls hold other positions. Again, Levin: “Women also conduct supportive activities, such as growing, providing or cooking the food for the mining gang or bringing in the daily bread. Their labour makes it possible for the men to mine in the face of unreliable mining income.” Women’s roles in diamond mining communities are so essential as to ensure productivity despite the economic instability of the mining itself.

The Role of Women in the Diamond Mining Communities

In Kono Levin found that of the 62 miners and diggers she surveyed, roughly 75% were married, allowing, in these cases, for at least two heads of household to provide

income. Diamond mining is rarely the sole income for a family. Men might use income they gain from diamond mining to invest in their wives’ small businesses, for example. Married and unmarried women often have more than one livelihood and can be involved in many income-generating and non-income-generating activities.

“Women mine workers do not earn as much as their male counterparts and are often forced to take on the worst aspects of the work”

The most common complementary livelihood is agriculture. Gardens are a way to sustain families, and whatever income a woman (or her husband) gains from mining can take them beyond the subsistence level. In addition to cooking, caring for the household, and mining, women and girls work the gardens. Blore observed no male miners involved in agricultural activities in the DRC, but in Angola he found that men might sell crops the women grow. Levin writes that increased local agriculture can improve the health of the community. Half of her interviewees (both women and men) said that they would rather farm than mine even though miners tend to be more socially respected than farmers. However, the capital to start new agricultural ventures is lacking. “In order to be sufficiently profitable [interviewees] said farming needs to be conducted on a large scale, but it is far harder in Kono to access the capital to do farming (e.g. land, seeds, tools, machinery) than to access capital for mining (e.g. land and tools).” As a result, farming usually provides sustenance, while mining provides the hope of a better life. However, in reality, diamond mining still commonly results only in subsistence living.

As for other livelihoods, women may own small shops or restaurants, which miners rely on for their meals. They are also involved in trading consumable goods such as alcohol, soap, cigarettes and sugar. They may also produce the alcohol, a significant consumable in ASM

communities. Still, as with agriculture, it can be difficult to gain the capital to start a small business and stay out of debt.

Young girls do not dig; rather, they help their mother with her work or are involved in support services for miners such as carrying tools, food or water, cooking, or selling goods. Whatever income they earn helps to support their family or whoever provides for them. The fact that these girls are working means they are not in school. Both boys and girls abandon schooling to work in diamond mining communities.

Young girls often engage in sexual activity with miners and are sometimes encouraged by their mothers to do so for income. Child and adult sex workers often do not or can not protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and they do not or can not use birth control. As a result, ASM communities are the less than ideal home of many small children. Sex workers in these communities are subject to gender-based violence, they are poorly paid, they have little bargaining power and no social organization. And they lack alternative livelihoods.

According to Jennifer Hinton, a consultant on community development and small-scale mining, if married women generate income beyond the subsistence level, they give it to their husbands. These men might not be able to afford to mine if their wives did not work. Levin agrees:

“...participants in the Peiyima focus group admitted that, generally speaking, the men in their community are only able to pursue mining as a livelihood because their wives’ daily labour brings in the goods which maintain the family’s welfare: without their wives’ support, incidental or small as it might be, they would not be able to mine. This pattern – with the woman providing for the daily needs while the man brings home occasional windfalls – and the great uncertainty of returns from mining lead me to assert that in diamond communities the women’s labour is at least as important as the men’s, *if not more so*... Without women doing the work they do, the men could not mine.”³

Prominent Gender-Related Issues

The issues facing women in artisanal diamond mining communities vary based on cultural, religious and historical attitudes, and they are often more pronounced in post-conflict environments where social instability, violence and the other negative characteristics of artisanal mining are worse.

- **Religious and cultural attitudes excluding women from participation.** “Women’s ability to adopt certain roles in the industry is determined less by their physical make-up and actual capabilities than by patriarchal prohibitions and sexist beliefs about these capabilities.”⁴
- **Double burden.** Women participate in the hands-on work of mining, in addition to preparing meals and caring for the family. Most of them carry the double burden of working long hours at the mines and raising a family.
- **Gender-based violence.** There is a “culture of violence” in mining communities. Widespread exploitation and the prevalence of drugs and alcohol breed social instability and conflict. Sex workers are often mistreated and many married women report being beaten by their inebriated husbands.
- **Abandonment.** Male migratory workers often set up a second family in a new mining community, theoretically sending money back to previous family, but often abandoning them.
- **The Nomadic Nature of ASM** damages the traditional extended family structure and it promotes the spread of disease, especially sexually transmitted diseases carried by migrant miners and sex workers.
- **Reproductive health risks.** Because there is very little, if any, reproductive health care in mining communities, there is a high maternal mortality rate.
- **General health risks.** “...Wounds to the feet and legs from the shovel and pick, wire cuts to the hands from the shaker, cold and fever, vomiting, body aches and pains especially in the back, sides and bones, torn muscles, itchy skin, malaria, fatigue and exhaustion, dysentery, ear pain from diving, and headaches from dehydration. Of these, malaria, dysentery, fatigue, feeling cold and body pains were chronic conditions for some of the diggers and miners interviewed. They were also prone to leaches and snake bites...”⁵ These are exacerbated by violence, malnutrition, and lack of access to health care and health education.
- **Poor sanitation,** lack of appropriate toilet facilities and clean drinking water contribute to the health risk.
- **Lack of appropriate childcare.** Women are often accompanied by their children in unsafe mining areas. There are many unsupervised children due to the prominence of prostitution and child maternity.
- **Lack of capital** prevents women from purchasing mining tools or engaging in alternative livelihoods. This can leave women with few choices but sex work or debt.
- **Debt.** Women (and men) may borrow money to pay for tools, food and taxes. from a “supporter” who then has the right to buy their diamonds. Supporters often charge an extremely high rate of interest that is difficult to repay.
- **Lack of access to land.** Where land is scarce it must be paid for, and women may not have the capital to do so. In other cases the land may need to be cleared for agriculture, and women may not be able to pay.
- **Environmental degradation** from mining depletes land and natural resources in addition to creating increasingly unsafe living conditions.
- **Gender-based income and labor discrimination.** Women mine workers do not earn as much as their male counterparts and are often forced to take on the worst aspects of the work.
- **Lack of literacy skills, education and information.** Girls are kept from schooling in order to help the family. Women are uneducated and unaware of their rights, which results in lower self-confidence and less motivation to voice their needs.
- **Lack of organization and lack of participation in decision-making.** In the DRC, Hayes has observed no women’s diamond mining organizations or associations. But women do have more control and autonomy when they group together. Women are entrepreneurial, and with the support of a group they could share labor and pool capital, in addition to collectively voicing their needs.
- **Poor governance** results in two things. First, institutional neglect of women by government agencies responsible for the ASM sector, and secondly, a lack of gender-specific legislation and gender mainstreaming in ASM interventions. The failure to address women neglects their needs and their potential.

Women’s roles in artisanal diamond mining communities are thus vital to the survival of these communities. This phenomenon might be unique to diamond mining due to its economically risky nature, and it provides all the more reason to address gender issues in artisanal diamond mining communities.

Conclusions

There is much we do not know about women and artisanal diamond mining. Levin points to “...the lack of information on the positive and negative impacts of mining activities on women in Kono, on how they are included and excluded, on

how they are vulnerable and resilient, and on their potential as significant economic and political actors in Kono society”.⁶

More detailed information and statistics are needed before specific policy conclusions can be reached, but a few general conclusions are obvious. The stability of

women ensures the stability, now and in the future, of artisanal diamond mining communities. Women's labor can help to ensure the education of their children. But women must have access to sustainable and beneficial livelihoods in order for their children to have a stable upbringing. Women's labor and financial contributions may be responsible for the survival of artisanal diamond mining communities because women often undertake multiple livelihoods in addition to raising their children. If women did not devote themselves to these productive economic endeavors, many men would not be able to engage in the economically risky venture of artisanal diamond mining.

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Further Reading

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<http://www.asmasiapacific.org/>.

Communities and Small-Scale Mining.

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Endnotes

- 1 Judith Butler, as quoted in Jennifer J. Hinton, *Communities and Small-Scale Mining: An Integrated Review for Development Planning*, second draft, Community and Small-Scale Mining Initiative, 2005.
- 2 Estelle Levin, "From Poverty and War to Prosperity and Peace? Sustainable Livelihoods and Innovation in Governance of Artisanal Diamond Mining in Kono District, Sierra Leone", Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 2005, 93.
- 3 *Ibid*, 127.
- 4 *Ibid*, 91.
- 5 *Ibid*, 88.
- 6 *Ibid*, 132.

About DDI International

DDI is an international, nonprofit, charitable organization that aims to gather all interested parties into a process that will address, in a comprehensive way, the political, social and economic challenges facing the artisanal diamond mining sector, in order to optimize the beneficial development impact of artisanal mining to miners and their communities within the countries in which the diamonds are mined.

A major objective is to draw development organizations and more developmentally sound investment into artisanal diamond mining areas, to find ways to make development programming more effective, and to help bring the informational diamond mining sector into the formal economy.

More information on DDI International can be found at www.ddiglobal.org, and we can be reached at enquiries@ddiglobal.org

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