



Women, Artisanal Mining, and Peacebuilding in Africa: A Call to Action

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Approximately 8 million Africans are engaged in artisanal mining—mining activity characterized by the use of rudimentary tools and labor intensive techniques. These 8 million jobs support nearly 45 million Africans.¹ Yet, very little is known about the role that women play in this sector, and its implications for conflict, peacebuilding and development, especially in mineral-rich countries.

Artisanal mining is considered a poverty-driven activity due to its ability to provide mostly impoverished people with direct employment and create jobs, especially in rural areas where there are few livelihood alternatives.² The informal and unregulated nature of many artisanal mining activities makes it vulnerable to illegal dealings, corruption, and violence and conflict, especially in high-value minerals like diamonds, gold, coltan, tin, and tungsten (often called conflict minerals).³ Africa has the highest proportion of women artisanal miners (WAMs), with women averaging 40 to 50 percent of the artisanal mining workforce, compared to the world average of 30 percent.⁴ WAMs in Africa undertake a variety of mining activities including digging, rock crushing, grinding, panning, washing, and sieving—with very few women represented in the management or technical aspects of mining operations.⁵ This limits their income opportunities. For some women, their involvement in artisanal mining is mostly clustered in support services—water haulers for mine sites, laborers, and suppliers of goods and services around the mining sites, including the sex trade.

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Because of the limited participation of women in the sector, most women have insufficient technical knowledge of the mining market, lack adequate funding for business expansion, are not prioritized in employment and training opportunities in the sector, and are not involved in consultations preceding project implementation and decision-making along the mining value chain.⁶ The treatment meted out to WAMs is mainly a reflection of existing gender inequalities, deeply rooted in traditional and cultural norms. Just as widespread cultural beliefs prevent women from extensively exploring their potential in mining, most statistics do not even count women as artisanal miners at all.⁷

Failure to address these discriminatory practices in artisanal mining, and to allow women to fully explore the opportunities available to them, risks perpetuating inequalities and deepening grievances linked to natural resource rights, access, and control, which can be powerful catalysts for violence.⁸ In addition, the structure of the mining sector and conditions of work can discourage women from taking up leadership roles, reducing efforts towards their empowerment and their contribution towards peacebuilding.⁹ The World Bank and United Nations (UN) recognize that the empowerment of women, often overlooked in mining sector legislation, regulations, and policies, directly impacts the success of peacebuilding initiatives. Thus, ensuring women have better access to and control of natural resources can improve the chances of sustainable peace and recovery in war-torn countries.

Why Should We Care? Women in Artisanal Mining in Africa

Across the African continent, high numbers of women participate in the artisanal mining sector. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), an estimated 2 million people are engaged in artisanal mining, half of them women, while in Uganda and the Central African Republic, 45 percent of the artisanal mining workforce are women.¹⁰ Women, especially in rural areas, are the primary providers of food, energy, and water at the household and community levels. To provide such basic necessities, WAMs are highly dependent on natural resources, especially those obtained through artisanal mining, to support their families. In many artisanal mining communities, WAMs become household heads, responsible for maintaining the family's welfare due to the minimal (or complete lack of) support from their husbands.¹¹

Conflict minerals fuel civil wars and internal strife, which have resulted in displacement, the devastation of farmlands, and reduced livelihood opportunities for many women. Where agriculture used to be the principal source of income, it no longer becomes a viable option.¹² Consequently, women are enticed into artisanal mining as it is a productive economic activity that generates livelihoods for them.

Artisanal miners are faced with poor safety standards and health hazards in their day-to-day work. For WAMs, their exposure to the artisanal mining environment is even more dangerous due to the effects these safety and health hazards (through chemicals and toxic substances) can have on women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Additionally, WAMs may not fully benefit from the sector because of their lack of technical and geological knowledge, their limited access to information on the mineral processing value chains, and the lack of a legal and regulatory framework for the sector.¹³

The fact remains that artisanal mining will “continue for at least as long as poverty makes it necessary,”¹⁴ but it can be “a resilient livelihood choice for people who are vulnerable or looking for economic diversity in their livelihoods.”¹⁵ It is also important to recognize that women may want to remain in the artisanal mining sector, especially in cases where alternative livelihood opportunities are limited. Therefore, the focus should be on how WAMs can be supported to maximize any gains that the sector brings and to mitigate costs, usually the conflicts that can arise from mineral extraction.

The Case for Formalizing Artisanal Mining Operations

To ensure artisanal mining becomes a sustainable economic opportunity for both men and women, there is an urgent need to formalize artisanal mining operations. Formalization means bringing the sector under an appropriate policy and legal framework, with enforced legal requirements. A legal framework for artisanal mining will ensure effective and efficient allocation of resource (land and minerals) rights and access to miners, which can reduce restrictions on the participation of WAMs in the sector.

Empirical studies have shown that artisanal mining, if well-regulated and developed, can help women gain a foothold in the mining sector, especially in settings where they are marginalized.¹⁶ In a formalized artisanal mining environment, WAMs in associations and cooperatives become eligible for grants, and can better gain access to finance and credits. This can empower them to invest in and adopt environmentally sound mining practices and techniques, and be encouraged to use personal protective clothing and equipment.¹⁷

The promotion of a legal framework for artisanal mining becomes an important tool for rural and community development and a strategy for governments to increase mineral revenues.¹⁸ This can support the provision of public goods in the mining communities to improve welfare and raise living standards, which will help minimize the sector's negative impacts and association with conflict and abuse, ensuring greater equity and increased security for women and children.

Women Artisanal Miners and Peacebuilding Frameworks

Several initiatives and efforts have been targeted at empowering women in peacebuilding efforts. United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325 (issued in 2000) on women, peace, and security is the lead initiative at the global level spearheading women's roles in peacebuilding. Resolution 1325 includes a gender perspective in peacebuilding by affirming the potential of women to play an active role in conflict resolution and state rebuilding throughout the peace process. To effectively implement Resolution 1325, a gender strategy was developed in 2014 by the UN. This included the establishment of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (known as UN Women) with the mandate of "rearticulating the objectives of continued gender mainstreaming within peacekeeping operations."¹⁹ The African Union Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security has also embraced Resolution 1325, invoking it in action plans and strategies. In 2015, the Peace and Security Department of the African Union Commission launched the 5-year Gender, Peace and Security Programme (2015-2020) to develop effective strategies to increase women's participation in the promotion of peace and security and enhance the protection of women in conflict and post-conflict situations in Africa.

Despite the efforts, these frameworks have not led to the consideration and incorporation of the role and empowerment of WAMs in peacebuilding efforts in the global, regional, and national peacebuilding policies and regulatory frameworks. Regulatory initiatives on conflict minerals—such as the Kimberly Process, OECD Due Diligence Guidance, and Section 1502 of the Dodd-Frank Act, among others—with a focus on ensuring the mining value chain is conflict-free, and curbing the illegal resource exploitation, trade, and human rights abuses associated with conflict minerals, have provided only limited guidance on the role WAMs can play to ensure conflict-free mineral sourcing to promote peace.

Critics may argue that peacebuilding interventions target all women, which does include WAMs. But specifically targeting WAMs in peacebuilding initiatives is critical not only because they are usually the main victims of conflicts arising from natural resources, but also because their unique insights, needs, and

experiences derived from their day-to-day connection to mining grounds can strengthen the legitimacy of peace and recovery processes.²⁰

Factors Hindering Women Artisanal Miners in Peacebuilding

Patriarchal Societies: In some societies, prevailing cultural norms which sometimes consider women as subordinate to men, coupled with ideologies that mining is a man's job, obstruct women's effective participation in the sector.²¹ In International Alert's 2007 consultation workshop held with WAMs from Eastern Africa, women cited culture and tradition, deeply entrenched in national, political, and leadership issues, as important causes of marginalization and isolation. As a result, the customary line of reasoning on the part of men in many artisanal mining communities is that WAMs are ineligible to contribute to the elimination of the negative consequences associated with artisanal mining activities (often conflicts and environmental damage). This is often used to justify the exclusion of women from consultative and leadership opportunities in natural resource governance and peace-making processes.²²

Lack of or Limited Education and Training: Limited education and technical knowledge, compounded by illiteracy, impedes the ability of women to engage fully in artisanal mining which has major implications for their contribution to peacebuilding.²³ That is for WAMs, the lack of technical skills and training in advocacy, mediation, and negotiation in peacebuilding becomes a challenge that limits their participation in economic development and peace discussions. In addition, illiteracy can prevent WAMs from fully benefiting from capacity-building workshops and training sessions, which undermines their participation in all spheres of communication and decision-making.²⁴

Lack of Political Will: In some countries, the political will to involve women in peacebuilding is lacking. This lack of political will is driven by several factors. For example, in the DRC a 2004 USAID study conducted indicated that in most artisanal mining communities, the core networks consisted of political and military elite (with some occupying key positions in government). The question, then, of who to consider in decision-making is highly sensitive to military and political issues.²⁵ In addition, the control of mining communities by the military as well as the revenues accrued in exploiting mineral resources, deters people from mobilizing for change and inclusion in peace processes, let alone including WAMs who are also actively engaged in the sector.²⁶

Lack of or Limited Access to Resources, Especially Land: Women have been particularly affected by the difficulties in accessing land and insecurities of land rights. This is especially prevalent in societies where women can obtain and use land only if they have the consent of their husbands. This is often because women are seen as part of the wealth of the community, and in many cases considered their husbands' possessions.²⁷ In South Sudan, for instance, although the constitution ensures women's rights and entitlement to land ownership, women are still denied access in practice. In cases where women do exercise control over land, it is over use rather than ownership.²⁸ Insecure land rights can therefore undermine the incentive for women to invest productively in land use and contribute to peace talks especially where conflicts are tied to natural resources.²⁹

Engaging Women Artisanal Miners in Peacebuilding

Conflicts have created shifts in gender roles and responsibilities for WAMs in the economic sphere relative to the pre-war period, giving them a stronger voice at the household and community levels.³⁰ At the community level, WAMs who are household heads, community leaders, and community organizers have unique leverage to capitalize on their roles as wives and mothers to foster trust and build new social norms.³¹ Their relevance to everyday life and their ties and connections to the mining ground also means they are better placed to bring in much more practical ideas and solutions to steer affairs and drive change

in their communities. This can be done through the formation of alliances that mobilize women at the household and community levels to advance the peacebuilding agenda.

Research has indicated this women-to-women support strategy is non-existent in most cases, but has seen success in certain cases, such as Burundi. The outcome is the creation of synergies where women work together to enhance their efforts in decision-making and their contributions to peacebuilding.³² Support from fellow women will also help pull in women who have not been engaged in peace efforts, while creating platforms for women to engage in peace talks.

Local women's groups and organizations have strong local ties, can be effective in the management of natural resources, and can be important sources of information for decision-making.³³ Women's networks, especially in mining, have proven effective at advocating for improved working conditions for women, and connecting them to knowledge-sharing.³⁴ Through such collective actions, women's associations can reach out to government and private sector organizations to seek institutional support and to project the voices of WAMs. Women's coalition groups in Africa, such as the Mano River Women's Peace Network in West Africa and SADC Women in Mining Trust in Southern Africa, have an established presence and experienced with mediation and addressing the needs of women miners in post-conflict countries. Through the efforts and support of such groups, training programs in communication and lobbying skills, mediation and negotiation, and skills development and advocacy will ensure WAMs become familiar with conflict mediation and resolution, building their capacity to contribute to peacebuilding.

Policy Options and Recommendations

For African Governments

1. *Formalizing ASM operations:* African governments could consider formalization policies and strategies that focus on community-based natural resource management programs for artisanal miners. These can be developed and intensified through the inclusion of an interdisciplinary model of training for artisanal miners, especially WAMs, based on capacity-building and training in environmentally sustainable mining practices and technology, geology, mineral extraction, and marketing. This can be supported by establishing effective partnerships with large scale mining companies, the private sector, research institutions, and universities. Governments could also create dedicated artisanal mining departments in the various ministries related to land or natural resources, environment, local government, and gender at both the district and community levels to monitor implementation and improvement of the legal framework.
2. *Engendering Policies and Development Plans with the involvement of WAMs:* Legislation, policies, and mining sector reforms under a formalized artisanal mining sector could be gender-sensitive and take into account the needs and interests of women, recognize their vulnerabilities in the sector, and provide them with opportunities for sustainable transformation of the sector towards socioeconomic development.

For Peacebuilding Organizations, Policymakers, and Donors

1. *Integrating the role of WAMs into the peacebuilding agenda:* Women play a central role in artisanal mining, which means integrating WAMs into the peacebuilding agenda is critically important. Peacebuilding initiatives could consider conducting frequent deliberations through discussions with WAMs about the peace and security situation in fragile and post-conflict African countries. The involvement of WAMs in peacebuilding could also be enhanced by inviting them to participate in peacebuilding discussions through their various country or special representatives.

2. *Support in research methodologies*: More research needs to be undertaken into ways women, especially WAMs, have promoted peace in their post-conflict countries. In particular, women's groups and civil society organizations could be supported in this regard, with resources, including investments in their research on best practices and lessons learned in various conflict situations to increase knowledge about different approaches to conflict resolution.

For a set of policy options and recommendations related to women artisanal miners and peacebuilding in Africa, see the accompanying Africa Program Policy Brief No. 7 by Maame Esi Eshun.

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