

Empowering Women Artisanal Miners for Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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The artisanal mining sector employs nearly 8 million Africans across the continent and supports more than 45 million indirectly. Artisanal mining is a poverty-driven activity that frequently exists outside the law, which feeds conflict and disenfranchises miners, especially women. Women, who make up 40 to 50 percent of the artisanal mining workforce in Africa, undertake a variety of mining activities including digging, rock crushing, grinding, panning, washing, and sieving, all with rudimentary tools and methods. Because of the peripheral nature of the roles played by women in the artisanal mining sector, they seldom participate in the core operational decision-making of the mines, which limits their income opportunities.

Because of their limited participation in the sector, most women artisanal miners have insufficient technical knowledge of the mining market, lack adequate funding for business expansion, are not prioritized in employment and training opportunities, and are not involved in consultations preceding project implementation and decision-making along the mining value chain.¹ The marginalization of women artisanal miners 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.² Further, initiatives on conflict minerals—such as the Kimberly Process, OECD Due Diligence Guidance, and the Dodd-Frank Act’s Section 1502, among others—that focus on ensuring the mining value chain is conflict-free and curbing the human rights abuses associated with the exploitation and trade of conflict minerals frequently neglect to foreground women miners and involve their voices in the peacebuilding process.

Failure to address these challenges and allow women to fully take advantage of the opportunities available to them in artisanal mining risks perpetuating inequalities and deepening grievances linked to natural resource rights, access, and control, which can be powerful catalysts for war and violence.³ 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 rights and access to land and minerals to miners, which can reduce restrictions on the participation of women artisanal miners.

Policy Options and Recommendations

1. For African Governments

- a. **Formalizing artisanal mining operations:** African governments should consider formalization policies and strategies that focus on community-based natural resource management programs for artisanal

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miners. 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.⁴ In a formalized artisanal mining environment, women artisanal miners in associations and cooperatives become eligible for grants, and can gain access to finance and credit. This can empower them to invest in and adopt environmentally sound mining practices and techniques, and encourage them to use personal protective clothing and equipment.⁵

Governments could also create dedicated artisanal mining departments in relevant ministries, such as those related to land or natural resources, the environment, local government, and gender, and in offices at both the district and community levels to monitor implementation and improvement of the legal framework.

b. Supporting women artisanal miners with training and technical expertise: Community-based natural resource management programs can be developed and intensified through the inclusion of an interdisciplinary model of training for artisanal miners 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. In Malawi, for instance, the government has put in place mechanisms to train women artisanal miners in geology, mineral extraction, and lapidary work as part of its formalization strategy and as a way of contributing to economic development.⁶ This has been possible with significant assistance from the private sector in the provision of technical expertise in technology, marketing, and financing opportunities. Similarly, in Tanzania, training and capacity building are provided to women artisanal miners on how to cut minerals into jewelry as a way of enhancing value-chain gains and accessing better markets.

c. Engendering policies and development plans involving women artisanal miners: Legislation, policies, and mining sector reforms under a formalized artisanal mining sector can be more gender-sensitive, recognize women's vulnerabilities in the sector, and provide them with opportunities for sustainable transformation of the sector towards socioeconomic development. In Malawi, the government has developed a policy that addresses artisanal mining with a gender-sensitive focus to ensure formalization of the artisanal mining sector. Thus, women artisanal miners could be welcomed and encouraged to work with district and local governments in developing a needs assessment of the mining sector that will feed into the overall mining sector policy and legislation, to ensure all miners benefit from the gains of the sector.

2. For Private Sector Organizations and Large-Scale Mining Companies

a. Capacity-building: As part of their corporate social responsibility programs, large-scale mining companies and private sector institutions with an interest in artisanal mining could put in place efforts to enhance the skills of women artisanal miners. This could include skills training with a focus on safe and labor-saving technologies, the technical requirements of the sector, as well as best practices in mining to encourage the engagement of women miners and to enable them to compete effectively in the sector.

b. Economic Empowerment: Ensuring effective inclusion of women in artisanal mining also means providing the necessary conditions and empowerment structures to ensure their physical, economic, and social security. Most importantly this could include the provision of sustainable livelihood options for

women by creating both forward and backward linkages between the mining sector and other productive sectors through beneficiation and value-added activities.

For instance, backward linkages can be promoted through the development of local clusters or industries that produce and supply services and specialized equipment such as hand tools used in artisanal mining. Forward linkages, meanwhile, would ensure the dependence of other sectors on the output and supplies of the mining sector. Together, these linkages would provide the opportunity to develop clusters of manufacturing activities around the extractive sector, create more productive jobs and competitive industries, and diversify the economy while providing other livelihoods for women.

3. For International Organizations, Policymakers, and Donors

a. Regulatory initiatives: Regulatory and conflict minerals initiatives such as the Kimberly Process, the Dodd-Frank Act's Section 1502, the OECD Due Diligence Guidance, and others could be strengthened with programs that enhance the capacity of women artisanal miners to contribute to the promotion of conflict-free mineral sourcing, enhancing their participation in peacebuilding. These initiatives and international donors can also impress on African governments the urgency of formalizing all artisanal mining activities. They could also support African governments in addressing the dimensions of legal and policy development, social and public engagement, and institutional strengthening needed to formalize the artisanal mining sector.

For an in-depth analysis of the role of women artisanal miners in development and peacebuilding, see the accompanying Africa Program Research Paper No. 13 by Maame Esi Eshun.

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