

Researching livelihoods and
services affected by conflict

Negotiating freedom?

Interpreting women's debt bondage
in South Kivu artisanal gold mines

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Cover photo: A women carries water up the hill to a nearby processing site. South Kivu Province, DRC. Robert Carrubba, 2017

About us



The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) is a global research programme exploring basic services, and social protection in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Funded by UK Aid from the UK Government (DFID), with complementary funding from Irish Aid and the European Commission (EC), SLRC was established in 2011 with the aim of strengthening the evidence base and informing policy and practice around livelihoods and services in conflict.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include: Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), Focus1000, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Wageningen University (WUR), Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research (NISER), Narrate, Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka (SSA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Women and Rural Development Network (WORUDET), Claremont Graduate University (CGU), Institute of Development Policy (IOB, University of Antwerp) and the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS, Erasmus University of Rotterdam).

SLRC's research can be separated into two phases. Our first phase of research (2011 - 2017) was based on three research questions, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity under conflict

Guided by our original research questions on state legitimacy, state capacity, and livelihoods, the second phase of SLRC research (2017-2019) delves into questions that still remain, organised into three themes of research. In addition to these themes, SLRC II also has a programme component exploring power and everyday politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For more information on our work, visit: www.securelivelihoods.org/what-we-do

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Acronyms and glossary



DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo	biporo	Filterage system to filter out gold with inner leaves of the banana plant
ILO	International Labour Organisation	bongeteuses	People (mostly women) who hammer stones into smaller pieces
IMF	International Monetary Fund	creuseurs	Those who dig in the mine pit, generally men
IPIS	International Peace Information Service	filon	A vein (of gold)
MGL	Minière des Grands Lacs	kalinzi	Gifts given, for example to a king
NGO	Non-governmental organisation	kangumbu	Forced labour (in the mines)
		kasomba	Kiswahili for transporteuses
		loutra	A basin used to carry stones for pounding; also a place set up to crush stones
		mishale	A tiny measure of gold; a unit of measurement
		mushamuka	Noble man
		muzungu	White; white person (pl. wazungu)
		mwami	King
		toratora	Women who collect stones left behind by diggers around pits or rivers
		transporteuses	Those who carry bags and other loads in the mine
		twangeuses	Women who pound and grind stones from pits, to a powder

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Executive summary



This working paper situates women's work in artisanal gold mining in South Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in the wider context of debates on debt slavery and gendered forms of labour bondage. The study asks: *What are the sources and mechanisms of debt bondage for women working in gold mining in eastern DRC?* The findings are based on detailed field interviews and on focus group discussions, conducted with dozens of women miners, some men miners, NGO staff and other experts in the field. These discussions and interviews took place in two locations in South Kivu - Kamituga and Luhwindja.

Findings

Debt bondage of women in gold mining should not be confused with trafficking of women, for sex work or other forms of work, which has often been the primary focus of international anti-slavery campaigning efforts. However, it was found that debt bondage is not a temporary expedient for most women, and has become deeply embedded in the institutional set-up of artisanal mining in South Kivu. Women's debt slavery in artisanal gold mines in South Kivu has become tightly enmeshed with local social relations of partnership, business, custom and with marriage and family ties. To a large extent, women miners' debt bondage has become normalised. This makes it almost invisible to outsiders. The findings suggest that debt bondage can result in forced marriage and can be transmitted inter-generationally. Indebtedness is often taken for granted as the 'normal' state of affairs for women miners. This applies in peace-time as much as during violent conflicts and clashes. For women, debt bondage reinforces their marginalisation in the

household, as well as low self-esteem, especially as economic actors. This is despite women's overwhelming contribution to household livelihoods and survival strategies in South Kivu mining households.

Recommendations

To tackle debt bondage and other forms of unfree economic and social relations in the mining sector, this study makes the following recommendations for researchers, practitioners, policy-makers and donors:

- **Researchers** should appreciate the need for local knowledge concerning women, debt and unfree labour practices and forced marriages in artisanal gold mining areas in Eastern DRC. Otherwise these problems may not appear in research findings at all.
- **NGOs** in the sector should help to create spaces for peer-to-peer discussion among women in artisanal mining, of debt, forced labour and forced marriage, to enable them to challenge the normalization of debt bondage in the sector.
- **Donors** should support further studies by local researchers on the relative contributions of men and women working in artisanal mining to household income and consumption, especially in relation to basic household needs.
- **Women artisanal gold miners** should be ensured access to small, low-interest loans on preferential terms through local credit unions or local banks.
- **Those engaged in mining sector reform** in DRC should consider adopting a more gender-aware approach to debt, forced labour and sustainable livelihoods in artisanal mining environments.

1 Introduction

Focusing primarily on women's own perceptions, this study asks: *What are the sources and mechanisms of debt bondage for women working in gold mining in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)?* The study sheds light and understand the meaning of debt in the life of women miners and the degree to which debt bondage practices are normalised in artisanal gold production. Employing a mainly qualitative approach, ethnographic observations in the field are integrated with the views of informants gathered in focus group discussions, face-to-face semi-structured interviews and informal discussions. Responses to a survey conducted in 2018 also inform this study and will form the basis of further research.

If debt is discussed at all in relation to the DRC, it is either in relation to the national debt of the country or to micro-credit schemes targeted mainly at poor women (Engel et al., 2014; IMF, 2015). This working paper takes a different approach, looking at debt in terms of debt bondage as a form of unfree labour, taking women in artisanal gold mining as an example. Gold was selected rather than other minerals such as coltan or cassiterite because almost 80% of artisanal miners in the South Kivu region mine gold, while gold mining more broadly accounts for an astonishing 87% of the region's total workforce (Weyns et al., 2016: 4–5).¹

The work and home lives of many women in the gold-mining sector in South Kivu are characterised by debt bondage and slavery-like conditions. Trapped at lower levels of the gold supply chain, women carry out the most labour-intensive, back-breaking and poorly-paid jobs in the artisanal gold mining sector. In this way, many seem condemned to life-long poverty and debt, remaining dependent on others, generally men, for most of their working lives.

We take Congolese women involved in gold mining not as hapless victims but as workers who make daily sacrifices and who risk their well-being in order to improve their families' situations. Their poor pay and working conditions lead to indebtedness that mitigates against their freedom of choice in labour, which is what leads us to conclude that these women often suffer from a form of 'debt bondage'.

The research shows that such unfavourable social conditions have come to be considered normal, but this

¹ For the interactive map on which this study is based, see: <https://bit.ly/2H5Po0q> (in French)

does not mean that debt bondage should be taken for granted by researchers. Indeed, we try to unpack this normalisation in order to imagine how women miners might start to be able to negotiate more freedoms for themselves in the artisanal mining systems in which they work, both in relation to those who 'own the stones', the mine owners, and to those who control the deposits.

Through extensive verbal testimony from interviews with women in Luhwindja and Kamituga mines, the study illustrates the complex nexus of debt and 'unfree' forms of gendered labour practices. We show how these have become normalised to the extent that, for the women themselves, there may not appear to be an obvious set of alternatives to the cycle of forced labour in the mines, forced marriage, poverty-driven debt, and a reinforcing set of 'unfreedoms'. We consider some of the obstacles to removing the 'gendered debt trap' as an impediment to women's well-being and freedom.

The next section of this report reviews relevant academic and practitioner debates around 'slavery-like conditions'. Section 3 describes the research site and the way interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in 2017, as well as reflecting on the broader situation of the women interviewed. Section 4 discusses the jobs performed by women and some reflections on the social meanings of debt for women – and for men – in the two selected mining communities. Section 5 returns to the wider global context in which women in gold mining in DRC are embedded, before drawing some general conclusions.



Bizalu in Kamituga, Bashwira 2018.

2 Literature review: The nexus of debt and unfree labour

The origin of slavery and other forms of unfree labour lie deep in the social structures that expose some groups in society to exploitative relations involving economic and extra-economic coercion (violence). Unfree labour practices are one of the manifestations of relations of coercion. In mining, vulnerability to extra-economic exploitation is especially pervasive among women. This study tries to shed light on unfree labour practices outside the framework of the ‘moral panic’ that has led a multitude of external actors to enter eastern DRC scene with a view to ‘freeing the slaves’. In the case of gendered debt bondage, emancipation is not a simple process of ‘being freed’ from the outside but must involve deeper changes in the social and economic structures, and especially in class and gender relations, from within (see Recommendations section). A growing body of both academic literature and NGO reporting focused on the economic exploitation of Congolese men and women is being added to literature that focuses more on the sexual dimensions of slavery and violence (Free the Slaves, 2011; Kelly et al., 2014a; Kelly et al., 2014b).

2.1 Defining debt bondage and unfree labour

In 2016 the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery reported that debt bondage ‘remains one of the most prevalent forms of modern slavery in all regions of the world’.² Much debate continues around whether debt bondage is a form of slavery (for two recent reviews of such debates, see Strauss, 2012 and Skrivankova, 2010), and the meanings of forced³ and unfree labour more generally.

Debt bondage, as a slavery-like labour practice, was defined by the ILO Convention (ILO 1956 cited in Plant, 2014: 6) as involving:

the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of these services are not respectively limited and defined.

² On 15 September 2016, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Urmila Bhoola presented a report on slavery in the modern world, in particular debt bondage, to the 33rd Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC), being held in Geneva, September 13-30, 2016.

³ Forced labour is defined in the International Labour Organization’s Forced Labor Convention (1930: 29) as ‘work or service which is extracted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily’.

Debt bondage and unfree labour can be distinguished from classical chattel slavery, where the owner had full legal rights over the slave who could be bought and sold as if he or she was property. But when debt bondage extends to several generations of one family, for instance, it becomes evident that it is akin to slavery in the classical sense of working under duress without pay.

Unlike old-fashioned slavery where one person owns another 'legally' as property, contemporary slavery involves 'the total control of one person by another for the purpose of economic exploitation' and may or may not involve crossing borders and migration (Bales, 2016: 6). As explained by Strauss: 'Forced labour differs from slavery by virtue of the fact that in the case of the latter a worker, not just her labour, becomes the (real or de facto) property of the employer and can be bought, sold or traded' (Strauss, 2012: 140).

As the ILO suggests: 'It may be useful to consider a range of possible situations with, at one end, slavery and slavery-like practices and, at the other end, situations of freely chosen employment' (ILO, 2009 cited in Plant, 2014). If unfreedom implies 'the various forms of compulsion' that require one to work (Strauss, 2012: 140), then the freedom we are referring to here is the choice of where to work, irrespective of working conditions. In other words, unfree labour is akin to slavery when debt restricts people's freedom of movement. In such a situation, by limiting women's ability to make their own decisions about where they live, what work they do, and whom to marry, debt can be said to have become a means of bondage and imposing conditions of 'unfreedom', whether the resulting social and economic conditions are perceived as unfree locally or not.

2.2 Women, debt and coercion in eastern DRC

In DRC, there is little evidence of chattel slavery but rather evidence of unfree labour, with debt the coercive instrument tying the worker, especially women, to the mines.

Some recent studies that focus on 'slavery', however, are almost entirely devoted to cross-border trafficking, and barely consider forced labour regimes (see chapters in Rodriguez, 2011 and Kotiswaran, 2017). According

to Haider's review of the wider field (2017: 2), studies in eastern DRC have tended to confuse modern slavery and unfree labour with trafficking. She identifies six types of slavery – forced labour, debt bondage, peonage, sex slavery, forced marriage, and the enslavement of children – noting 'There can be overlap in the experiences of slavery. Women, for example, may be subject to sex slavery and debt bondage, concurrently.'

Indeed, many studies have highlighted the sexual exploitation by armed groups of communities living in and around the artisanal mining sites, extending a broader socio-economic definition of slavery to include the significant use of sexual violence as an instrument alongside debt to find sufficient labour to ensure the operation of the artisanal mining economy, and to consolidate mining-related social relations based on implicit or explicit use of coercion.

The use of forced labour by armed groups has resulted in further normalisation of coercive labour practices, so that as with slavery during the era of King Leopold II of Belgium, there are:

few dividing lines between different forms of violence in a system where threats of physical force, actual violence, including sexual violence, served multiple purposes, including that of gaining material, symbolic and economic control over fractured families and communities. (Hintjens and Cruz, 2014: 220)

As in the past, women can be coerced, sexually violated and forced to work for almost no money, in part due to debt relations, combined with the legacies of armed groups being involved in artisanal mining activities.

Whereas in the past, women were often arbitrarily excluded from mining, with excuses about cultural taboos, today mine-owners and miners recruit women, and women are allowed in most places to dig, sift, crush rock and do a range of other mining jobs (Bashwira and Hilhorst, forthcoming) both in DRC and in other countries where artisanal mining is pervasive, such as Ghana and Tanzania (Hinton et al., 2003; Eftimie et al., 2012; Geenen, 2012; Hayes and Perks, 2012; Lahiri-Dutt and MacIntyre, 2006; Yakovleva, 2007; Werthman, 2009; Bashwira, 2017).

Box 1: Mining, insecurity and agricultural decline in South Kivu

Agricultural activities having experienced a sharp decline as rural areas in South Kivu became insecure during recent wars and violence. More and more rural people moved to mining areas:

A sense of relative security and the hope to find economic opportunities in the informal mineral trade intensified the migration from rural areas to Kamituga, which saw its population more than double over the course of the war. (Buraye et al., 2017: 358)

Mining and not agriculture became the main source of cash, while an artisanal mines provided relatively secure environments compared to dispersed farms, falling under the protection of one armed group or another. Yet terror, insecurity and violent raids were all part of the experience in many mining areas like Kamituga, which were nonetheless growing rapidly. As agricultural production declined, food insecurity in towns increased. More and more international attention meanwhile shifted to protecting workers in mines, so that fewer poor people felt that working in agriculture was given priority (see for example Radley and Vogel, 2014). However, mining was anything but safe for women, as noted by Buraye et al. (2017: 358), who documented examples of torture and killings of women for resisting forced labour for armed groups. The likelihood of trauma among interviewees, in this kind of context, should not be underestimated.

All this reinforces ordinary people's rising vulnerability to hunger and extra-economic coercion in the form of debt bondage and forced labour.

But in the largely unregulated artisanal mining sector,⁴ those on lower pay, doing the dirtiest and hardest jobs, are often women. Few women are able to escape the tendency for women's work to be concentrated fairly uniformly at the lowest ends of the supply chain (Bashwira, 2017).

As Hayes and Perks (2012: 534) remark:

Despite similar working hours and levels of effort, women are often paid only a fraction of what men receive. Moreover, women tend to work at the lower ends of the production chain, performing tasks such as washing, sorting, or transporting; because they have only limited presence in the higher levels of production and trade, they are often excluded from the decisions that determine the level of payment for various services and the organization of the mining teams. Being excluded [in this way]... profoundly undermines women's well-being and economic standing, and is particularly damaging in light of their increasing role as principal breadwinners.

Under such conditions, women in the artisanal mines are dependent on more powerful actors, most of them men, for work and for continued access to the mining site (Bashwira and Hilhorst, forthcoming). Women miners need credit to purchase tailings or to buy basic tools. And everything a person needs in the mining areas has to be paid for in cash or through credit, since very little food is grown around these areas. In this way, debt becomes a structural component of the livelihood strategies of poor women in the artisanal gold mining sector.

Women's exploitation is reinforced by a system of gendered hierarchies in the production process (Heemskerk, 2003; Lahiri-Dutt and MacIntyre, 2006; Hinton et al., 2006; Yakovleva, 2007; Hayes and Perks, 2012). The prevailing gender hierarchy means that taboo and myth are 'finely manipulated to support both discrimination against and violation of women in artisanal communities' (Hayes and Perks, 2012: 535).

In one study conducted for the World Bank in South Kivu in 2013, a woman working in mining in Nyabibwe explained how the production system produces structural indebtedness for women, which in turn makes them

⁴ Legally, all those who work in the artisanal gold mines in South Kivu (and in DRC generally) are supposed to carry an ID card. This card should specify the person's role in the supply chain, and is required as part of the policy of formalising the status of mine workers as a means of regulating the sector (Bashizi and Geenen, 2015). However, such reforms have as yet not been implemented in South Kivu's artisanal gold mining sector, which mostly remains unregulated and where most workers are unlicensed.

vulnerable to slavery-like labour practices. As she explains (Kelly et al., 2014b: 15):

[Even when] things were good and we were mining a lot, we got nothing, it's always the big men who own the mine who profit. If you have your own minerals and can't explain where they came from they will take it from you ... Not everyone gets the benefit of being in the mine, the miners [including most women] don't get benefit, the ones that profit are the ones [who own] the holes.

Studies suggests forced labour and debt bondage are the most predominant forms of modern slavery in eastern DRC (Free the Slaves, 2013; USAID, 2014). Not all of these studies, however, fully discuss the longer-term nature of the problem. Rotherberg and Radley (2014), for example, found forced labour in mining sites, although their findings suggested it was largely a temporary phenomenon, limited to a number of days. They did not seem to be able to discover all the contours of structural social gendered relations as well as the 'normalisation' of some of them that may imply debt slavery, combined with women's sexual slavery.

By tying women to their creditors, mostly men but also a few women, debt becomes socially accepted, so that 'a worker might be hired under conditions that are unfree (her mobility is curtailed) but which she considers normal' (Strauss, 2012: 140). As Hidrón and Koepke (2014: 22-23) note:

There are fundamental issues that make forced labor hard to detect and make its risks very hard to

manage: extreme forms of exploitation are usually clandestine ... Many victims are not aware of the severity of their situation ... Victimization occurs within the family or with people close to the family, which is why what may seem harmless is in truth a form of extreme exploitation ... victims may be traumatized, which is why they need protection and should be encouraged to grant interviews and be shown the benefits of support ... It usually affects the vulnerable groups with limited capacity to speak out ... It also affects indigenous populations...where cultural and language barriers make it a lot harder to detect and address forced labor.

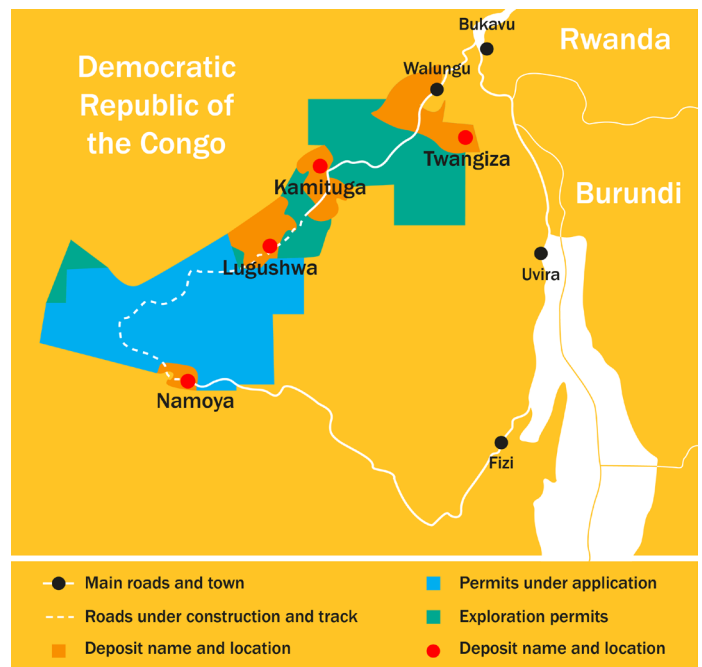
Detection of what can be termed 'intimate exploitation' can be difficult, almost by definition, in an artisanal and informal context. One notable feature of women's debt bondage in eastern DRC is that it is so deeply embedded in economic and social structures, in local norms and in cultural practices, that it can hardly be seen by outsiders or insiders. It requires patience and familiarity with both local society and international norms to even detect it. Whether among local NGOs and activists, by scholars or policy-makers and practitioners, there is a general sense of indifference to this question, while the local women too tend towards a certain fatalism in relation to the question of forced labour and debt bondage. There are some local NGOs, along with international organisations like Free the Slaves, that actively campaign against debt bondage and other forms of unfree labour and enslavement. Yet on the whole, the forced marriages and inherited debt passed onto children are viewed as unexceptional. For women working in artisanal gold mining in South Kivu, these are daily realities of life.

3 Research design

3.1 Research sites

Two sites in South Kivu were selected for the fieldwork: Twangiza and Kamituga. The sites, which were visited first between August and October 2017 and later between June and August 2018, were selected initially because of the Banro concessions in these areas. Banro was one of the first corporations to launch activities in eastern Congo after the area formally passed from rebel to central government control in 2003. It acquired its research and exploitation permits in a context of political instability and war (Geenen, 2018). It lost its mining concession in 1997 after President Mobutu’s removal (Geenen, 2014a), but regained the titles in 2002 after a legal struggle. In 2007 it acquired an additional 14 exploration permits covering large areas around their concessions, including Twangiza and Kamituga (Buraye et al., 2017: 357).

Figure 1: Site of fieldwork



Source: www.kitco.com/leadgen/companies/banro_corp

In 2008, once exploration activities started around Twangiza, a group of artisanal miner households and farmers, who lived within the mining perimeter fence, were forcefully displaced. A couple of years later these same miners and farmers and their families were forcefully displaced again, leading to further disputes and requests for compensation from 2010 onwards in Twangiza mine (Geenen and Verweijen, 2017).

The two mining sites have similar histories, with both part of the former *Minière des Grands Lacs* (MGL) company’s

Box 2: Differences between Kamituga and Twangiza

The process of acquiring and securing a plot of land where you can start to mine differs between Kamituga and in Twangiza.

Kamituga is a historical mining town of about 100,000 inhabitants, situated in Mwenga territory, Wamuzimu chiefdom, in a region traditionally inhabited by the Balega people. Sominki's main gold mine was in Kamituga, and the company recruited workers from all over South Kivu and beyond, which resulted in an ethnic mix in the mining camp. The traditional Balega livelihoods were hunting and slash-and-burn in the forest and the region was not densely populated. This had consequences for the system of land distribution, and for customary governance in general. The system is mirrored in artisanal mining. If you want to start a mining project in this area, it suffices to have the necessary financial capital, recruit workers, provide them with tools and equipment, and start to dig. At a later stage, you go and see the chief and pay the customary taxes and contributions.

The procedure is different in Twangiza. Twangiza is actually the name of a concession, stretching over different Bushi chiefdoms such as Luhwindja, Burhinyi and Ngweshe. The Bushi chiefdoms were hierarchically organised with the mwami or king at the top. He was the holder of all land rights (Dupriez, 1987: 12). Such land rights, in the form of non-alienable inheritable user rights, were allocated by the mwami in exchange for the kalinzi, which came mostly in the form of cattle and banana beer and was handed over in a special ceremony in the presence of witnesses. By giving the kalinzi, the customary land owner became a 'political subject' of the mwami, had to pay his fiscal contributions and work on the king's land (Dupriez, 1987: 15-16). The industrial mines in this area were already abandoned by MGL in the 1970s, but remained part of the concession, according to official state law. Yet in practice, thousands of people have been working in the artisanal mines since that time, and the entire system was controlled by the mwami. This was at least allowed, if not encouraged, by the mining company, which had an interest in maintaining good relationships with the chiefs (Geenen and Claessens, 2013). For the mwami, it was an opportunity to extend his power over land rights to the underground, and to substantially benefit from its yields.

Source: Geenen (2014b: 236)

mining concession, Kamituga from the 1930s and Twangiza from 1957. The two sites differ environmentally, however, Kamituga being forest, Twangiza being amid cleared farmland, and in terms of customary structures and land tenure (see Box 2).

3.2 Methodologies of data collection

Data was collected in two phases. First, mostly qualitative observation was conducted for familiarisation with the environment. In total around 40 individual were interviewed individually and 20 focus group meetings and group discussions were organised. Before contacting individuals for focus groups and face-to-face interviews, observation and focus groups proved two useful methods for identifying the broader gender dynamics involved in the artisanal gold production process. In each location, some key people were already known from previous studies, and the researcher was able to locate other key individuals to interview, which provided important insights into the gender division of labour in artisanal gold mines. Evidence was sought about the general situations

of women at the lower levels of artisanal gold mining in South Kivu in general, prior to interviews and focus group discussions.

In the second phase, the main researcher returned to the same areas to discuss the issues raised with women miners, men miners and other actors during the first round of visits. The idea was to triangulate the results of observation and initial interviews with more in-depth discussion and follow-up questions with women miners themselves.

In all, four group meetings were arranged with mining committee leaders in Kamituga and Luhwindja (see Figure 1 for map). Women's associations working around women's issues and mining were identified and contacted for group discussions and individual interviews. In total, 13 NGOs involved with women and mining issues – national and international – were contacted in Bukavu, the main city in South Kivu. Field research also included interviews with members of 14 women's and miner's associations in Kamituga and in Luhwindja. To strengthen

the quality of data, 18 focus groups were held, of which eight were with men and women miners, and ten with women miners only. The overall goal was to gather a range of varying perspectives on the significance and meanings of debt for women in gold mining, as well as credit, and how women negotiated their gendered social relationships along the entire supply chains of the Congolese artisanal 'goldface'.

The data was generated thanks to the help of local NGOs including ALEFEM (*Association de Luttes contre l'Exploitation des Femmes et des Enfants des Mines* – Association Against the Exploitation of Women and Children in the Mines), APFEM (*Alliance pour la Protection des Femmes et Enfants des Mines de Mobale* – Alliance for the Protection of Women and Children in the Mines of Mobale) and ACOFED (*Action Communautaire des Femmes pour le Développement* – Women's Community Action for Development). All work closely with women miners and are locally based NGOs, created by women miners living in mining communities. There are known for advocacy on the position of women in gold mining in South Kivu. Most have been working with women miners on the issue for more than three years, often in collaboration with other provincial organisations.

3.3 Ethics

As Hidrón and Koepke (2014: 95–96) note, when interviewing women in the artisanal gold mining sector, ethical considerations are paramount. They recommend that interviews are anonymous:

When dealing with exploitation, names are not disclosed ... Vulnerable people or people at risk of being exploited must be interviewed with the utmost respect ... especially when the interviewee is a member of a poor sector, minority group or ethnicity within the society [and] Practitioners must generate a comfortable environment for the interview ... The place should also offer privacy so the interview can cover the more sensitive issues of forced labor.

Furthermore, they recommend that interviews, being voluntary, 'can be interrupted or abandoned by the interviewee at any time' and the interviewer 'must calmly listen to what interviewees have to say; their demeanour must never be defensive' (Hidrón and Koepke, 2014: 96). All of this was borne in mind by the researcher during interviews.

4 Findings: Negotiating her daily bread



This section presents some of the key findings derived from fieldwork data. The findings tend to confirm what some previous studies have shown, contributing further evidence of how gendered hierarchies are linked in artisanal gold mining with debt bondage and forced marriage of women.

Women are involved almost exclusively at lower positions in the artisanal gold mining hierarchies, their indebtedness is rooted in their poverty and the difficulty of meeting even their daily subsistence needs. A few women were involved in trading, in processing and in transporting activities and they could become creditors rather than debtors, or both. Some women managed to become wealthy and influential, but they were few in number, and hardly relevant role models for other women grappling to meet their own needs and those of their families. In terms of expectations and the motivations of women for working in gold mining and processing, very few seemed motivated by amassing a fortune. Their general objective was to ensure their own survival and that of their children and family members. Women involved in gold mining mostly hope to construct 'a better life' and remain involved in mining activities, often to their own cost, as they are caught up in the day-to-day struggle for survival on a day-to-day basis. In this setting, it is not hard to see how women in artisanal gold mining may slip, bit by bit, into debt bondage.

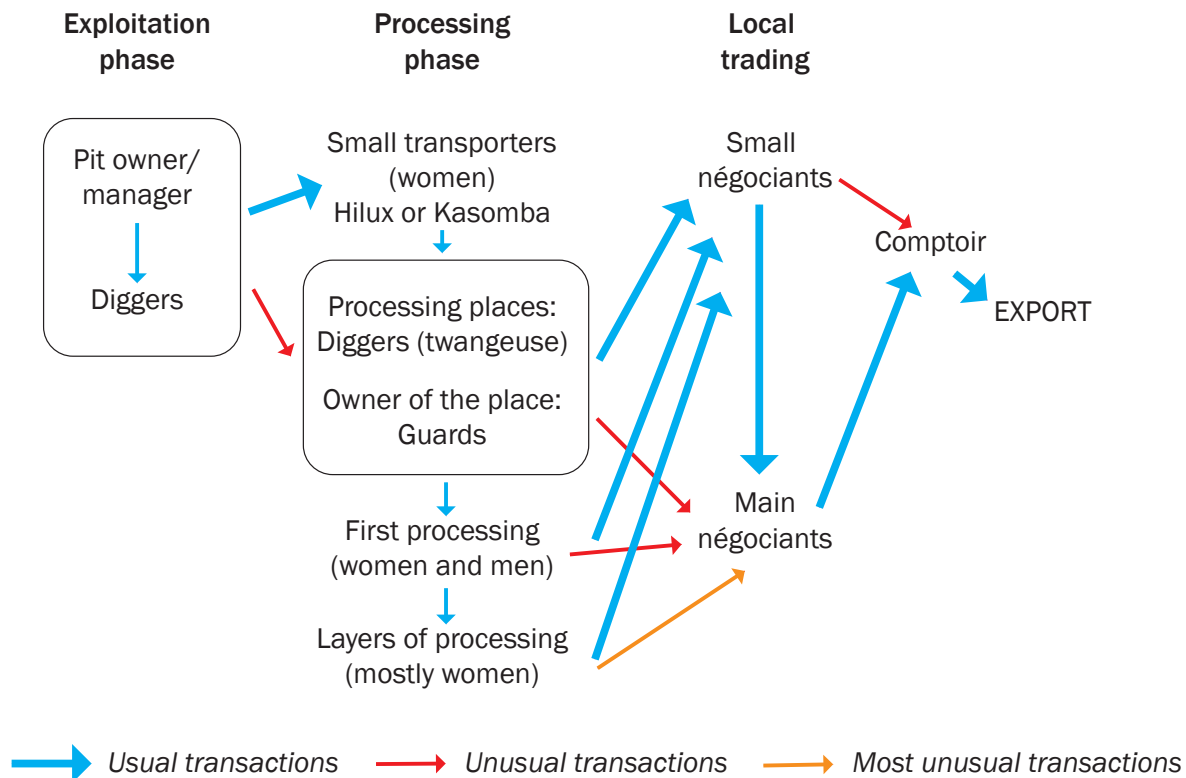
When interviewed by the first author, most women noted women had generally found themselves restricted from moving into artisanal gold mining because of certain cultural norms that made it taboo for a woman to be involved in mining underground.

It was interesting that the women (and also the men) who took part in focus group discussions were not very positive regarding the impact of mining reforms, which they saw as having imposed a whole range of new restrictions that mainly served to marginalise those who were already the most vulnerable.

4.1 Differentiating roles in artisanal gold mines

Figure 2 identifies all actors present at the different stages of gold mineral exploitation in the South Kivu. In the DRC context, women are rarely diggers, because they are not usually allowed to go underground like their male counterparts for cultural reasons. However, the evidence from observation and other researchers confirms that women are positioned mainly at the processing phase rather than the later stages of the gold supply chain.

Figure 2: Gold mining supply chain from below



Source: Bashwira (2017)

Gold is highly complex in terms of production and supply chains. There are more intermediaries – and therefore should also be more complex governance arrangements – than for other types of mineral extraction. Informal processes sit alongside processes in the supply chain that are formally and legally regulated. However, DRC mining law says very little about which specific intermediary actors should be in the production process or in the supply chain of gold. This is also true for most other minerals.

Five distinct categories of re-processors were identified, all at the lower rungs of the production process, the most poorly paid tasks. A great many of these are women. There were some variations between the two study sites in terms of which categories of re-processors were found: in Luwhindja, for example, there was just one category of women working in the supply chain, whereas in Kamituga, women were found working in several different phases of processing.

*Bongeteuses*⁵ break stones from the mine into smaller pieces using a two-kilogram hammer to facilitate crushing by a machine. *Twangeuses*⁶ pound and grind the stones removed from the pits to be processed in order to reduce them to a powder that can easily be cleaned and separated from the gold. The stone-grinding pestle, which weighs about three kilograms, is made of wood and metal, as is the mortar. Where a machine does the crushing of small stones, *twangeuses* are not employed.

Women often come early in the morning with either basins or sacks for the mineralised stones coming from the pits to the *loutra*.⁷ They wait in the processing place where the diggers arrive from the extraction pit sites. Some of them are chosen for work; others move on to another *loutra* or another type of site. Because the work is physically demanding, women prefer to work in groups of two or three in a single pool and share the money. Working in this way, they finish faster and get less tired, and they are able to look for other work to supplement their income. These jobs mostly go to women, although

⁵ This group's name comes from *bongeter*, a term that originates from the local Lingala language and means the way to hit someone during a boxing fight because of the hammer use to crush the stones.

⁶ The name *twangeuse* derives from the local Swahili word *twanga*, which means 'to pound'.

⁷ *Loutra* are places set up by the pit's owner, traders (*négociants*) or an independent person for the processing of gold minerals. The step consists of receiving stones from the pit; the stones are then sent for pounding, crushing, grinding, sifting and washing.

some men also engage in this type of work. The pay is low, calculated according to the quantity of stones that are pounded or crushed, generating an average payment at the time of fieldwork of around \$2.5–\$3.5 per *loutra* of stones crushed.⁸

Another category of re-processors are the *bizalu*,⁹ all of whom are women. They buy mineral tailings from the owner of the processing place (see Bashwira 2017). Once the *loutra* is full of waste to drain the water, the owner of the *loutra* may either reprocess them himself or resell left-over tailings to the *bizalu*. The *bizalu* will still have to clean the tailings before finding any gold. Men who are doing similar jobs have another name, working mostly in opencast mining in a task known as *debordage*. In that case the procedure is different (Box 3). The male miners are organised into teams of four to six people, depending on the amount of mineralised sand to be cleaned. Their average production per day is estimated at 3–10 *mishale*¹⁰ (Geenen and Kamundala, 2009). Some women (sometimes relatives of male members of the team) buy the waste sand left in the basin from washing. They get these tailings for \$2–3. In their turn, they process the tailings and get 1–2 *mishale*. Another category of women workers, known as *toratora* mums, is located around the separator and they sort the waste left by the diggers.

To describe the process of the *bizalu*, women individually buy tailings at a fixed price, that can vary between \$60 and \$80 (but was \$120 some three years ago during earlier fieldwork). For the most part, when buying tailings, women spread their risks over several *loutras*, since returns can vary from \$30 up to \$200. In some ways, the *bizalu* are exploited by this system, since the price is fixed but returns vary, and they carry the resulting risks entirely. However, since they are able to afford to buy *loutra*, they are also generally better-off and more able to get credit than *bongeteuses* and *twangeuses*. The main creditors of the *bizalu* women are traders, pit owners or *loutra* owners, who may also be the wife of the pit owner (as observed in some sites). Some *bizalu* reported that their husbands provided the money to set themselves up to start buying tailings.

Transporteurs/transporteuses or *kasomba* in Swahili (meaning gathering), carry mineralised sand and stones or even water (in the case of Luhwindja) for processing. They are also called Hilux in reference to the 4x4 cars which can transport heavy goods even in steep places. The bags of mineral are hauled either from the pit to the place of processing (*loutra*) or for reprocessing in baskets or bags on women's backs or heads. In Luwhindja, where the processing place is far from the water pumps, women carry a 20-litre container from the deep well shaft to the processing place on their backs, as no mechanical water pumps are available. The payment depends on the distance walked with the package or weight. This may be a 5–8 kilometre walk, sometimes uphill. Women transporting water or rocks generally earn very low wages. They reported earning between \$0.30 and \$1.5 per trip, depending on the distance involved.

The *toratora*¹¹ are women who generally work for themselves by collecting the remains of stones left behind by diggers around pits or rivers. They further pound the stones collected, before processing them. Their daily income is relatively more difficult to determine than that of other categories of workers. Previous research showed that they may get up to \$3 a day, or nothing at all, depending on their luck (Geenen and Kamundala, 2009).

While there is little precise statistical data on the number of women in each category and in mining activities in general, Hayes and Perks (2012) have estimated that women make up 40–50% of the workforce in artisanal gold mining, a higher share in comparison to other minerals. Even though local gender norms reinforce many forms of discrimination and exclusion, women choose to work in the mines rather than engage in farming, for example. Yet the secondary position of women in Congolese society undoubtedly marginalises them in relation to men in the mining environment. From the description of the different roles described of women at the bottom of the supply gold mineral chain, it emerges that women are a far from homogeneous group. Some women, such as *bizalu* and *toratora*, seem relatively independent in their daily work activities, whereas others depend completely on other actors to give them work.

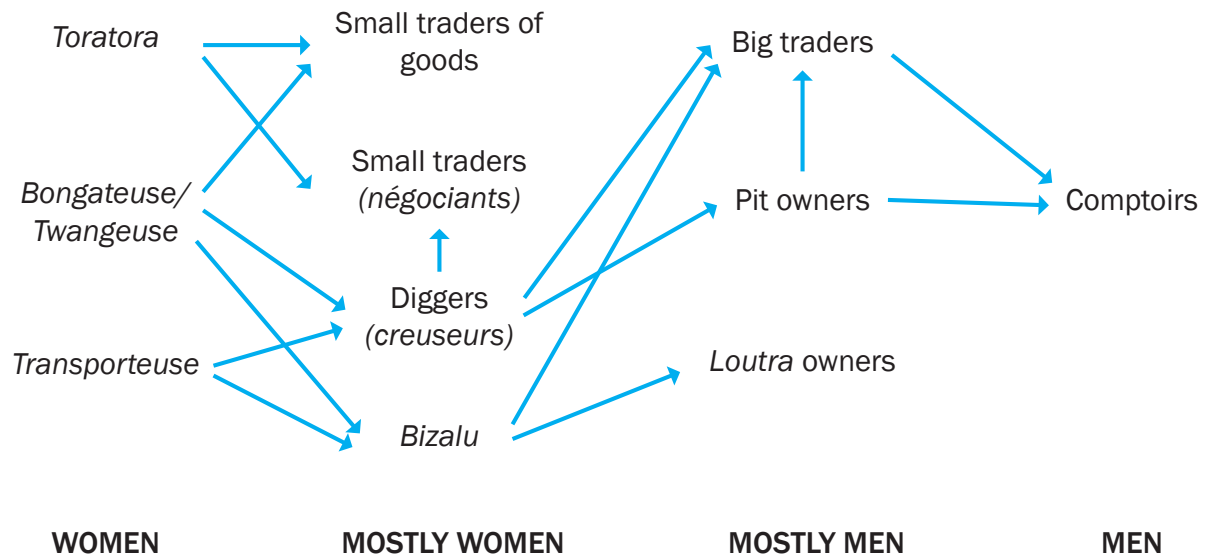
8 In addition to meaning the place described above, *loutra* is also used to refer to half of a 20-liter container used as a unit to measure the quantity of stones to be crushed.

9 The name *bizalu* is also used to refer to the mineral tailings that are obtained after the first processing. According to men and women interviewed, the term does not have any precise local meaning, but is part of the jargon of artisanal diggers.

10 Equivalent to 1/10 of the *renge* (a *renge* = 1.26 or 1.41 gram). 1 muchale = \$5 (plural is *michale*).

11 Derives from the local Lega tribal language, spoken by the Barega who live around Kamituga. 'Tola tola' in Kilega means 'to pick something up from the floor'.

Figure 3: Relations of indebtedness



Direction of arrow indicates debt (x takes loans from y)

Source: Bashwira, 2017

In fact, research is starting to point to the high degree of differentiation among women in the supply chain for most minerals (Bashwira, 2017; Busse, 2016).

4.2 Relations of debt

Women at the bottom of the supply chain of gold face a number of challenges. First, they are often victims of abuse of trust, as are many women and men working in the informal sector generally. The women's contractual agreement with the owners of mineral stones are verbal, and this often means that commitments are not respected. Sometimes the owner of the stones makes excuses for not paying, or for paying her less, including claim, for example, that '*nili kuwa na bamba imbwa mu saki*' ('I was carrying a dog in the bag'). This expression conveys that the stones were unproductive on that day, or in that week, 'like small dogs in the bag', the implication being that the owner lost time unnecessarily by bringing them at all. Another expression is '*Nili lungula*', or 'I got burned', which signifies that the digger got nothing out of the stones he mined.

Generally, the problem is that *twangeuses* do not benefit from profits, and may not even be paid. Sometimes it is assumed by both men and women miners that *twangeuses* should share losses and risks, but not the profits. Risks tend to be passed on to those least able to afford them, rather than being shared equally between owners of the stones and the women who pound them.

At other times, *twangeuses* are paid, but only in kind, by being given a portion of stones or mineralised sand so that they can reprocess it later and, if they are lucky, earn some money from selling the gold they find. They may also be asked to work on credit until the owner of the minerals gets enough money to pay them. This is the opposite of debt bondage: a form of credit bondage, as it were. This means that most of the time women are either paid only part of what they are owed, or that their payments are delayed or paid in risky ways, for example through minerals of unknown quality. Due to their marginalisation and very weak bargaining position, these women are the ones most often exposed to pressures to engage in transactional sex with the manager of the crushing machine, the owners of the stones or *loutra* owners, in order to gain and secure access to such work.

Figure 3 shows a simplified picture of relations of lending within the artisanal gold mining production process. On the whole, men lend to men and women. Sometimes women lend to women, and even men, since some pit owners and some traders are women. *Bizalu* (who are generally women) also lend to *transporteuse* or *twangeuses*. Taking the case of *twangeuse* and *bongateuse*, to prevent tricks from the owners of the stones and mine owners, women may try to secure mineralised stones they think may contain gold as a reward for the risks they take in this profession. In other words, at the end of their work, the women process the minerals taken and keep the profit after selling the gold.

In the late 1990s, *twangeuse* and *bongeteuses* were wearing thick panties for work, commonly referred to as *wazekwa*,¹² containing several pockets that make it easy for them to hide stolen stones. Once the diggers became aware of this practice some women began to hide mineral stones in their intimate parts. This practice meant the diggers and mine owners decided to routinely search for stolen ore on women working in the mine. In this way, the practice of keeping stones exposes the women to another risk – the danger of gender-based violence. Whenever women are suspected, even without any evidence, of having stolen mineral stones, the diggers and mine owners can respond violently. They may beat the woman suspected in public and insult her in front of others. They may body-search her intrusively for the minerals. On the one hand, according to social norms among stone and mine owners, these women 'deserve' this, due to the practice of hiding minerals. From the perspective of women who do this, hiding minerals can be understood as a form of resistance to their impossibly risky working conditions, where they may or may not be paid as promised.

Given the risks of appropriating mineral stones, most women turn to credit as a means to improve their socio-economic status. How much they borrow and what they use it for will vary from one woman to another. When for some (such as the *bizalu* and the *toratora*) the borrowing can be quite high, since it is used for economic investment, for others (the *kasomba* and *twangeuses*), small amounts are taken to meet subsistence needs. Some women in the mines use transactional sex for debt repayment, while others may use other means. The following section will address the social meaning of debt and the ways women navigate the process of repayment.

4.3 Negotiating debt: social meaning in the gold mining community

Debt is not always a sign of poverty. Indeed, for most societies it has been an economically stimulating factor. Grätz (2004) mentioned the importance of trust and friendship in the informal gold trading network in Benin. But for women in artisanal gold mining, debt can become a problem, and debt bondage can result. Some of those caught in situations of debt bondage have created strategies to navigate the marginalisation they confront in

the mining sector. We begin this section with an analysis of the perceptions and cases of debts in the mining sector and how some women manage to navigate these despite their heavy burden.

In the mining areas visited, debt is common and socially embedded in everyday life, especially for diggers, who are seen by the rest of the community as being able to access cash more easily and quickly and are presumed to be credible as debtors. During an interview, a state official in Luhwindja described the types of mine workers who acquire large debts compared to those in the community who cannot afford to do so: 'It is often the people whose money may fluctuate easily who go into debt [for large sums], like *muzungu* workers [Banro] and artisanal diggers' (*Chef de Poste*, Luhwindja, August 2017). In other words, it seems relatively easy for artisanal diggers to obtain credit on a daily basis from their activities, since although they cannot be sure of getting to a vein (*filon*) of the mineral that day, the assumption is that eventually they will make money this way. The diggers take on multiple debts, since others believe they may get rich in future and have a good chance of being paid back.

Formal-sector Banro workers are seen as especially credit-worthy since their income is ensured by the company. If these employees experience an emergency during the month that requires them to take loans, they can apply for credit that is paid back from their next salary. One of our respondents during a focus group pointed out that: 'Even prostitutes agree to give them their services on credit because they pay much better'. In the community, many people agree to lend money to these workers using the 10/15 system (borrowing \$10 and repaying \$15 at the end of the month), a system that artisanal *creuseurs* and ordinary villagers cannot afford (male miner, focus group discussion, Luhwindja, August 2017). Moreover, taking on debt can be perceived as symbolic of one's social status, since:

If he can find out who to borrow from, it is [seen that] he is able to repay [the debt] and so [he is] a mushamuka¹³ [noble man] and therefore everyone can trust him for any other social contribution. (School Director, Luhwindja, August 2017)

¹² Style of Congolese musicians at that period for wearing extra 'padding'.

¹³ This word is used as an honorary title in the customary authority structures of certain ethnic groups in eastern DRC. The word is also used as a sign of respect that is earned by different responsibilities and/or action on how a person does within the community. The insistence on the word makes the word shift from respectability to wisdom, and show the capacity of a person to resolve problems in the community.

It is interesting that the school director used 'he' and not 'she' here. Yet social status remains very important for all, women and men alike. One's recognised social position in the village resonates with meaning, and is transmitted even into the mining camp of the diggers and women gold processors.

Getting into debt also means entering into a relation of partnership with the person who lends the money, especially in the mining sector:

Going into debt, that's the engine of our work! We take debts even before starting the exploitation: to buy bags [containers], food, lighting, fuel for the exploitation ... There is no work without sponsors or supporters [mining traders or goods traders who can invest in the mining before it becomes profitable]. It is a partnership we agree on with the lender that we will divide the production by two. (President of the diggers committee, Kamituga, October 2017)

Such debts may indeed be good for the socioeconomic conditions of those who borrow money in this way. Yet most of the people interviewed for this study acknowledge that women's debts in the artisanal gold mining sector differ from these 'debts of status', which are mainly men's debts. They differ both in terms of size and the purpose of debt. Women working in mining are usually in debt for different reasons than men. When answering a question about why women get into debt, one interviewee noted:

Whether in their mining activities or for their family expenses...women easily borrow money from traders, sponsors, neighbors and/or friends because they know that when they will pound, transport, or do toratora, they will repay it back. They can also borrow money for the child's medical care, for example, tuition fees, food, etc. (Male miner, Kamituga mixed focus group discussion, October 2017)

An important difference between men and women in terms of debt was the different priority given to the fulfilment of family needs. Most of our interviewees mentioned that men are less concerned about these things, unless the family situation was already very serious. Then it might come to be valued by the men. However, for everyday family needs, women are seen as being more in charge:

Most times, their borrowing amounts are not exorbitant [from \$1 to \$100] and can be repaid after a short period of time ... Perhaps bizalu can go

beyond this [up to \$1000], but not really the other categories of women miners. Besides, people cannot give them this kind of amount knowing the kind work they are performing. (Woman miner, Kamituga mixed focus group discussion, October 2017)

The *bizalus* are seen as big businesswomen who can invest a lot more money in their activities than other women, following the cycles of mining exploration and production. They are sometimes compared to pit owners, although their capital is less and they do not have any administrative requirements. That is why they are also recognised as more credible.

See, for example, when I borrow \$1,000 to buy the bizalu, it may happen that the sands were not productive and I get just \$800 from the sale. I cannot pay the lender all his money back, just give him all the \$800 ... If I work it's first for my kids! I cannot see them sleeping hungry or not going to school when I have that money. Maybe I will give to the lender a \$400 advance and spend \$400 on my kids. The rest of the money we can agree on how to repay later. (Women miner in Kamituga, October 2017)

The problem of debt starts when the borrower's income is so low that they cannot repay on time, and they have to take on a second or third loan to repay the first one. In this situation, a cycle of debt develops and becomes complex and difficult to exit. The needs of their family will always come first before the repayment of the debt, for women, as the above quote suggests ('If I work, it's first for my kids'). Of course a few women can also find themselves as creditors, and sometimes the person who owes her money becomes exploitative:

Sometimes at the end of the contract the pit owner can tell you that he does not have the money yet to pay for your service and you have to wait for the mineral processing and selling. It sometimes takes 2-3 days before he pays you, if he will really pay back. (Women miners, Female focus group Luwhindja, September 2017)

Indeed, women at the bottom of the mining hierarchy have to negotiate their presence in this male environment when their negotiating power is very low because of the lack of alternatives, and with a very competitive work situation. By claiming her due too loudly, the woman may be refused work the next day by the digger and his friends. For *twangeuse* and *bongeteuses* in Kamituga, the case is even worse as they are sometimes beaten by the

diggers if they try to claim for their due. However, forms of forced labor in the mines visited remain a less discussed topic. Although one of our interviewees acknowledged that forced labour exists in the mines, her comment shows how people tend to perceive debt bondage as normal, and as embedded into the socioeconomic life of the community:

Forced labor really exists in mining activity (I am not speaking of what armed groups make people do). Here in our career we call this the kangumbu...as he has nothing to pay you until he reach the filon or vein in the mine. This is done without any written contract, just a verbal agreement between the two parties. Often what happens: the PDG, once on the filon, tries to flee with the money or try to demonstrate that there was no agreement between him and the person who worked for him. (Woman pit owner, Kamituga, October 2017)

As mentioned earlier, the generally male pit owners usually do well at the expense of diggers and processors, many of whom are women and may work for months without pay. However, many pit owners have good connections with the armed forces and with the state administration. If any digger or anyone else comes to complain to these authorities about the forced labour practices of a specific pit owner, she can find herself sued by the administration or even tracked down by the military. Sometimes a woman brings a complaint to the cooperative or directly to the justice system – for example because she has not been paid. This is rarely a poorer woman, but usually someone well-placed in the mine. Traders or sponsors are able to assert their rights much more easily than those whose bargaining powers are weak, and who may pay dearly for complaining. The system of justice is both costly and corrupt.

Usually the only way for most people, including poor women in the mines, to repay is to continue working until the debt is paid off. Often interviewees mentioned that working for the lender without pay, until the debt is cleared, is seen as quite socially acceptable as an option. This is debt bondage, almost by definition, and is usually of a temporary nature. It was also mentioned that the problem of indebtedness had caused many men to leave their families and flee the village (usually going to another mine), rather than being put in prison for non-repayment. Women do not seem to be able to run away and leave their homes and children behind them in this way. So they stay and endure the cost of debt in the form of working without pay.

Here again, the perception of male interviewees about the indebtedness of women is sometimes misogynistic. According to some, if a woman goes into debt, she hopes that their 'friend' or 'husband' will repay it on their behalf; in other words, the men claim that women in debt shirk their responsibilities and try to pass them on to men. If a husband does not want to repay the debt, the woman will have to look for another way to clear her debt. Others in the community will tend to have a poor opinion of a man who does not intervene to help repay the debt of his wife (unless it is not an isolated case and she has the habit of taking debts without repaying). However, the real picture is more complicated, since many of the indebted women are living in a short-term 'marital' relationship with the digger, but are not officially considered married. To survive, the women may trade in goods in parallel to work in mining; they may also do sex work.

In some families, parents, especially single mothers, may decide to have their children contribute to the repayment of debts. Either boys will be engaged as apprentices with the creditors or the girl may be forced into marriage with the creditor or someone in his or her family. The term 'forced marriage' was, however, rejected by most interviewees in this study. They mentioned that such cases were exceptional and considered them very extreme. On the other hand, some also mentioned that with current NGO lobbying and advocacy, they no longer dare to speak about forced marriage. This makes it unclear how widespread such practices are, and how often they result from debts. As one interviewee mentioned:

There are cases of forced marriages, but we do not talk about it in the community anymore; you force your daughter to get married so that the creditor will not have you arrested or take your house and other property. And people find it normal, because after all it is her contribution for the good of the family. (Woman pit owner, Kamituga, October 2017)

What is interesting here is the phrase 'people find it normal'. Others interviewees rather than forced marriage preferred to speak of 'early marriage', as the daughter is approached by her family who make her understand the need for this act: 'She is not forced into it, she understands'. Although this is illegal when the girl in question is under 18, the practice seems to be widely tolerated in the mining areas, as well as in many places outside the mining world.

Thus, the debt undeniably has an important place in the life of the women miners, though most interviewees blame the socio-economic situation:

A long time ago, we (diggers) were considered noble miners. You could see only young diggers who could walk around with money and using it for unnecessary items ... But nowadays diggers are poor and have to go into debt to reinvest in their activities. (Focus group discussion with digger's comity, Luhwindja, October 2017)

Although this man was thinking of male miners, his observations apply even more to women in the gold mines, many of whom find themselves with debts they can only hope to repay through various forms of extra-economic obligation.

For the indebted, forced marriages could take place, and in South Kivu this is a socially accepted and also a common means to reduce or end a debt obligation. Such marriages with creditors are viewed by women respondents as voluntary rather than coerced, however. They were viewed as relatively ordinary, rather than as exceptional or distasteful or as a sign of a form of debt bondage.

5 Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to analyse some experiences of women miners who find themselves in situations of debt bondage, facing slavery-like conditions, in the artisanal gold mining sector in South Kivu. The focus was on how relations of exploitation relation emerged in the first place, out of poverty and economic insecurity, and which strategies women could use to mitigate their situation of indebtedness.

Women's debt bondage needs to be understood in relation to the effects of global capitalism and the highly profitable mining supply chains originating in regions like Katanga and South Kivu. As Bales points out, opposition to unfree labour is not going to produce results without deeper changes to the structural violence that reduces some groups of people, including rural women with few livelihood alternatives, to the victims of other, more powerful actors. Independence-era President Patrice Lumumba's (1961: 45) promise of 'an end to the humiliating slavery which was imposed upon us by force' is still unfulfilled. Almost 60 years later, poor rural women in DRC continue to be exposed to unfree labour conditions through debt bondage.

Escaping systemic violence can prove very difficult for the poor, and especially for poor women entrapped in coercive economic and social structures. In Mbembe's words (2006: 49), 'the subaltern' (a marginalised group) needs to:

face up to its own dependence on...its entanglement with that originary violence whose energy and form it not only iterates, but repeats since its very protocols are deeply implicated in the exact terms it aims to repudiate.

The appearance is of pseudo-familial relationships in the mines based on marriage, but such family ties may have elements of coercion that make women part-wife, part-unfree-labourer and part-debtor. What can women do to mitigate or escape such forms of economic, social and sometimes physical violence? Since there is evidence that debt bondage can be inherited, this question raises issues of inter-generational justice. Debt in itself need not be a problem in the supply chain. However, when it cannot be repaid in time, it does lead to unfree labour and to conditions that resemble contemporary slavery.

How locals, women in particular, working in artisanal mines, extract, process, transport and refine gold is intimately tied to global market conditions, to international speculation and to trade. Mining reforms

shape local policies and dynamics. It is also important for international capital investment to consider the position of women, without excluding them from working in the mines or earning an income from the mineral wealth of eastern DRC. Many mining centres are poor and deprived, even by Congolese standards, but few development organisations work in mining areas. In part this may be because until recently, many of these areas were controlled by armed groups. To the extent that attention is finally being paid to the issue of women in the mines, this is to be welcomed. The DRC remains highly strategic for most mineral industries, and some of the largest mining corporations in the world operate and trade there.

As Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002: 258) reminds us of the DRC in general, the country's:

enormous natural wealth...made it a prime candidate for imperial ambitions and the envy of adventurers, mercenaries and looters of all kinds ...[these were]... foot soldiers in a long chain of command behind which sit the dominant interests of the contemporary world.

Agreeing with this perspective, Trefon notes that so far, in spite of reforms put in place in the mining sector since the 2002 Mining Code, followed by other reforms, per capita income has fallen in real terms for decades (2011: 41). People have started to look out for themselves by setting up local savings and credit associations and engaging in small business: 'For the time being...Congo's vast mineral potential has not produced dividends for ordinary Congolese' (2011: 43). For the elites, however, mining remains a bonanza. For the state, and for the poor, indebtedness builds up over time, until it becomes a choke-hold on their ability to choose their residence, work or even marriage partners. In large part, the debt of women in mining appears to be structural, since for the most part it is produced by discriminatory policies.

The extremity of women's vulnerability and exposure to exploitation under existing discriminatory labour regimes, and the lack of any measures of regulation or control of abuses by the authorities, worsens their burden. In fact, the vulnerability of women debtors to exploitation in the mines is itself the outcome of their structural lack of access to resources, protection of their basic rights, including to labour protection (O'Connell, 2012). For many Congolese miners, as artisanal mining has become the only source of income available in rural areas, debt has become essential for women to be able to continue to work every day and earn income for the household.

5.1 Recommendations for researchers, policy-makers and donors

At the international, regional and local levels, there is as yet no shared discourse around the position of women in the artisanal mining economy. It is hoped that this study can start to inform policy-makers about how they can contribute to reducing women's marginalisation in artisanal gold mining by improving their conditions of access to credit and capital.

At national level we identify a need for policy-makers to appreciate the complex role of intermediaries and subcategories of actors as identified in this study, many of the lowest-paid being almost exclusively women. Establishing a legal framework in the mining sector is no easy task, when the gendered nature of debt and credit is considered. To tackle debt bondage and other forms of unfree economic and social relations in the mining sector, particularly as they affect women, this study makes the following recommendations:

- Researchers should appreciate the need for local knowledge concerning women, debt and unfree labour practices and forced marriages in artisanal gold mining areas in eastern DRC. Otherwise these problems may not appear in research findings at all.
- NGOs in the sector should help to create spaces for peer-to-peer discussion among women in artisanal mining, of debt, forced labour and forced marriage, to enable them to challenge the normalisation of debt bondage in the sector.
- Donors should support further studies by local researchers on the relative contributions of men and women working in artisanal mining to household income and consumption, especially in relation to basic household needs.
- Women artisanal gold miners should be ensured access to small, low-interest loans on preferential terms through local credit unions or local banks.
- Those engaged in mining sector reform in DRC should consider adopting a more gender-aware approach to debt, forced labour and sustainable livelihoods in artisanal mining environments.

Internationally, of course, a climate in which basic human rights have priority over narrow business interests will help to ensure that women workers in the artisanal gold mining sector are the focus of specific attention in reform measures. This will help ensure they are better protected from economic and social exploitation in future.

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Cover photo: A women carries water up the hill to a nearby processing site. South Kivu Province, DRC. Robert Carrubba, 2017

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