

Making sense of women's economic activity within DRC's artisanal gold mining sector

Key messages:

- A high rate of dependency is a critical cause of extreme poverty in women miners.
- The need for both spouses to work is a significant development in gender relations in artisanal mining in the gold sector. This is partly because each is working for relatively low pay, and both incomes are necessary to meet subsistence needs in the family.
- Women view their own contribution to the household income as relatively unimportant, compared to men's.
- Some policy actors and development agencies assume women should be protected from working in gold mining, but the women interviewed in this study wanted to continue, while combining this with other means to supplement their low incomes.

Background:

The selected sites for fieldwork, Kamituga and Luwhindja in South Kivu, have been centres of gold mining since colonial times. With slightly different histories, they were nonetheless in the same mining concession, holding the same license. In 1997, Société Minière et Industrielle du Kivu (SOMINKI), which was composed of 13 exploitation permits (for the Twangiza, Kamituga, Lugushwa and Namoya: see map), was liquidated (Geenen and Claessens, 2013). Around this time, most men working in SOMINKI found themselves unemployed and, in order to survive, started working with women in artisanal gold mining and processing. People in mining areas began to settle permanently in Kamituga and Luwhindja, living close to the mine. From the time Banro arrived to take over the licenses, the situation did not improve; people continue to mine artisanally. The debate about conflict minerals in the Democratic

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Credit: Twangeuse in Kamituga, Bashwira 2018.

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Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been widely documented by the international community, governments, national and international NGOs and academics (Seay, 2012; Matthysen et al., 2013; Radley and Vogel, 2015; Cuvelier et al., 2014 (a); Cuvelier et al. 2014 (b); Diemel and Hilhorst, 2018). Among the key mining reforms currently implemented in the DRC, the most recent has been to eliminate financing of armed groups through mineral extraction and sale, and improve mining governance while increasing state revenues from the mineral sector. Unfortunately, even where this occurs, there is often a loss of livelihood for small-scale artisanal miners and their dependents: more specifically for women, who can be marginalised or even excluded from the mining economy (Geenen, 2014; Geenen and Radley, 2014; Kelly et al., 2014; Cuvelier et al., 2014 (b), Bashwira, 2017).

Researchers have noted that women in mining are mostly involved in low-paid and labour-intensive tasks, such as washing, grinding, crushing and transporting stones (Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre, 2006; Hinton et al., 2003; Buss et al., 2017; Bashwira, forthcoming). Indeed, the emerging evidence regarding the position of women in gold mining indicates that most occupy very unprofitable positions at the bottom of the supply chain, especially in the processing phase of production. Policy-makers have asserted that women must be given alternative livelihoods outside the mines, to improve their quality of life. Poverty means many women remain in the sector, despite poor conditions and physical/economic abuse from more powerful actors in the supply chain.

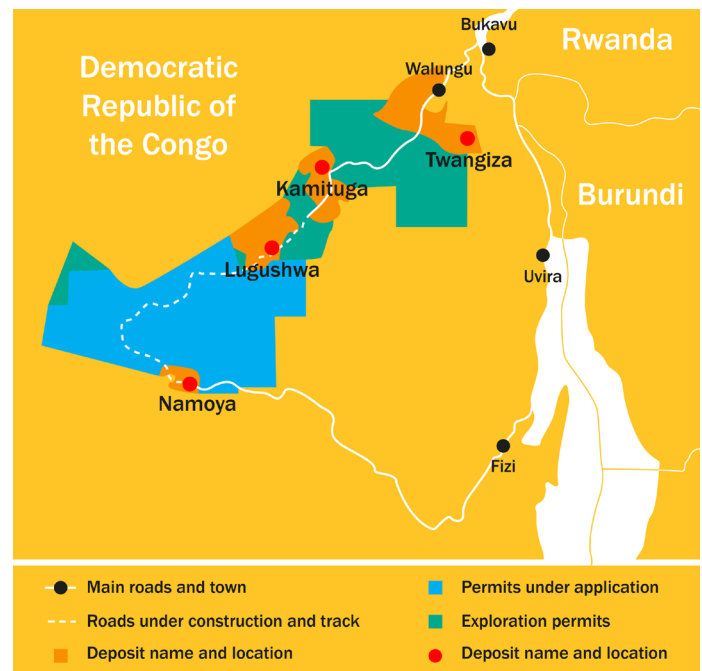
Previous work from the author of this briefing (Bashwira and Hilhorst, forthcoming) and colleagues have mentioned the dilemma encountered by state agents when dealing and negotiating with women. We are trying to assess the presence of women but also to further analyse how female and male miners view themselves. Clearly, not all women involved in the gold mining sector are in the same situation. This briefing seeks to make sense of women's economic activities within the artisanal gold mining sector.

1. Research Methods

We looked at women miners working in the gold sector in South Kivu, in the Mwenga territory (*territoire*) in Luwindja and Kamituga chieftaincies (*chefferies*), or villages. The two mining villages selected are located 84km and 180km from Bukavu city, respectively. In all the selected sites, artisanal mining took place alongside an industrial Banro concession (see Figure 1).

The research used mixed methods. The first phase employed a qualitative approach, combining ethnographic observation, face-to-face interviews and focus groups (mixed and with women only). Questions to both men and women related to the positions of women in the mining sector. The answers were recorded (after obtaining permission) and transcribed for analysis. A second phase of field research involved a quantitative survey of over 206 women miners in Kamituga, where it was found there were more women working in gold, and in more categories of work, than in Luwindja.

Figure 1: Artisanal mining sites



Source: Kitco.com /leadgen/companies/banro_corp

Using a semi-structured questionnaire, the survey generated data on households and demographic characteristics, household income and expenditure, assets and institutions, as well as sources and uses of income and credit (debt or borrowing). Survey data was then collected using *KoBoCollect* software in the field sites. The data was collated and analysed using *SPSS 25* to produce tables and conduct descriptive analysis.

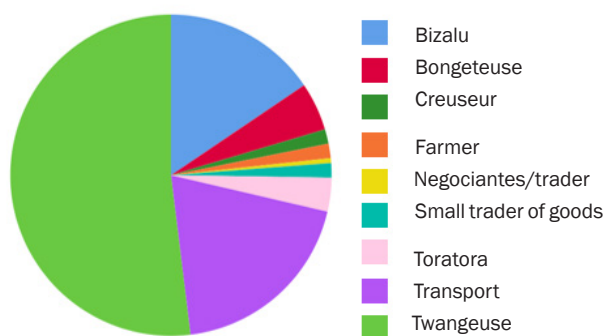
2. The mine sites: Luwindja and Kamituga

After extracting stones, *creuseurs* (usually men or boys) bring them to the entrance of the pit. Here, women (or sometimes, as in Luwindja, young boys not necessarily related to the women) carry these stones to be processed. The stones are then pounded by women, especially if there is no crushing machine at the mining site, as in Kamituga. Women's work is mainly limited to carrying and breaking stones into smaller sizes so they can be fed into the crushing machine, or *concasueur*, which men operate. Women's work is recognised as hard physical labour, even by men in the mines and there are no measures for health and safety. Despite this recognition, many *creuseurs* in this study said the mine remains a dangerous place for women to work. Women overwhelmingly adhered to cultural bans in mining sites and were content with processing minerals.

In the two mines studied, women's dependence on mining activities for their income depended on the locality of the mine site itself. Typically, mines in heavily forested areas, with no nearby fields, as in Kamituga, reinforce women's dependence on income earned from their work in mining. Where there are farms nearby, mining activities can supplement other activities, including farming.

In our survey, 53% of all respondents were *twangeuses*, crushing mineralised stones. This was the principal activity of most women interviewees. Another significant category represented in our sample are *transporteuses* (18%), who carry water, stones and tailings for (re)processing. The *bizalu* (15%) are responsible for reprocessing ore residues to extract small amounts of left over gold. Less well represented are *bongeteuses* (5.2%), who break up larger stones into smaller pieces, to allow for crushing by the grinding machine. Meanwhile, *toratora* (3.6%) women collect the small stones left by diggers on extraction sites. This left the *creuseurs* (pit owner), *négociants* (traders), small traders and women farmers. All the women in these positions, except for *creuseurs* and *négociants*, typically work at the bottom of the gold supply chain.

Figure 2: Pie chart percent of Act. Princip.



Source: Authors own using SPSS 25

The characteristics of our sample also show that close to two-thirds of women surveyed were aged between 26 and 45 (64.7%). Almost one fifth were between 15 and 25 (18%). The average level of education reached was primary school (55.4%). Again, almost one-fifth (17.6%) had never been to school. In terms of marital status, 63% were married or in long-term partnerships. It was found that 29% of the survey sample were sole worker in their household. A further 55% of our interviewees were in households in which two people were active out the total household. Households with more than seven people stood at 32.5%, implying a high dependency ratio and vulnerability to debt and low incomes per person.

Depending on low production and high production seasons of the mining, our interviewees (91.7%) indicated that their income was less than \$100 a month¹; with the greatest proportion (55.3%) having less than \$50, against 71.3% with an income between \$50 and \$200 with a proportion of 39.3% in the range between \$50-100.

3. Analysing women's contributions to the mining economy

Both quantitative and qualitative data helped to establish the contribution of women's mining activities to the household.

1 This is very little compared to the amount found as revenue for men in South Kivu gold mining (see Mukotanyi 2012).
 2 This is quite different from what Mukotanyi (2012) found for the money male miners received from their activities.

We used a scale from 1 to 5, where interviewees chose between the following options: 1 = none, 2 = less than half, 3 = half, 4 = more than half, 5 = all. The contribution of women's mining activities was measured in three different ways, as illustrated in Charts 1, 2 and 3 below.

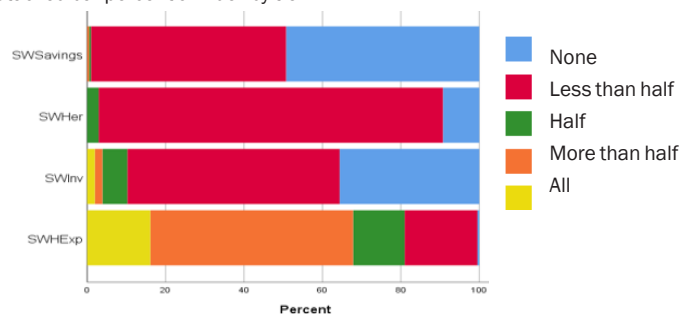
3.1 Evaluating the use of revenues of women's miners

Four items were analysed:

- 1 What is the share of women's income from mining in household savings (SWSavings)?
- 2 What is the share of women's income from mining allocated to her personal needs (SWHer)?
- 3 What is the share of women's income from mining in large investments (e.g. home purchase, mining-related or other commercial investments) (SWHInv)?
- 4 What is the share of women's income from mining assigned to household expenditure (SWHExp)?

Chart 1: Percentage shares according to contribution of women's mining income

Stacked bar percent of index by tran1



Source: Authors own using SPSS 25

From these estimations, in Chart 1, it can be understood that the money women earn from mining is almost never used for saving purposes.² Women also rarely use the money they earn from mining for their own expenses or major household investments. Instead, almost all their mining income is used for daily consumption, as shown in 'SWHExp' above. This finding tallies with the qualitative responses in our survey, which showed women at the lower levels of the gold mining supply chain working for consumption – or subsistence – only. Their incomes were so low that they were not able to save or undertake any investment in future activities. Major investments and savings were therefore mostly left to men (see items SWSavings and SWHInv).

In artisanal gold mining in Eastern Congo, both women and men have to work to provide for families.

Even though women miners' incomes are very low, and may even be described by some as insignificant, these incomes remain important for meeting daily family necessities. The need for both spouses to work, even for relatively little money, to support the family and meet subsistence needs, is a significant development in the context of artisanal gold mining and gender relations. In artisanal gold mining in Eastern Congo, both women and men have to work to provide for families.

3.2 Evaluating the significance of women's mining activities

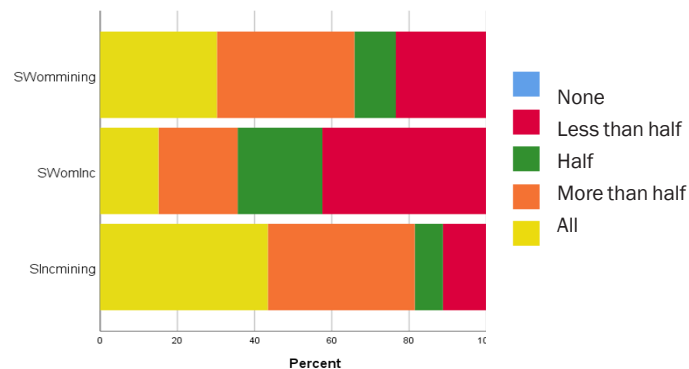
To assess the importance of women's income from mining, three survey questions were used:

- 1 What share of women's income comes from mining (SWommining)?
- 2 What is the share of woman's mining income in total household income (SWomInc)?
- 3 What is the share of women's mining income in the total household income (SIncmining)?

The results are shown in Chart 2.

Chart 2: Women's mining revenue

Stacked bar percent of index by tran1



Source: Authors compilation using SPSS 25

According to Chart 2, more than half the revenue for most women who took part in the research, came from the mining activities. This shows the importance of mining in their lives. The same was noted by our respondents in the qualitative questions asked, confirming gold mining as the main single source of revenue for many of those living in the area.

Mining activities are recognized as the main income-generating activities in Kamituga as well as in Luhwindja. Other activities are considered to exist and flourish thanks to the presence of mining. The contribution of women in the mining economy includes the additional cash they bring to the household and community. By listing different income-generating activities, we found that mining activities are the most important in both communities. Yet, in Kamituga the second main economic activity is trading, whereas in Luhwindja it is farming.

However, while much of the income of these women's families is essentially mine-based, the money these women receive



Credit: Bizalu in Kamituga, Bashwira 2018

from mining contributes very little to the total household income. This was reflected in the family composition of the households found in the sample, where several family members were diggers. Moreover, 63% of our interviewees were married reflecting the general trend for most husbands (partners) to also be involved in mining and receive more money from their activities.

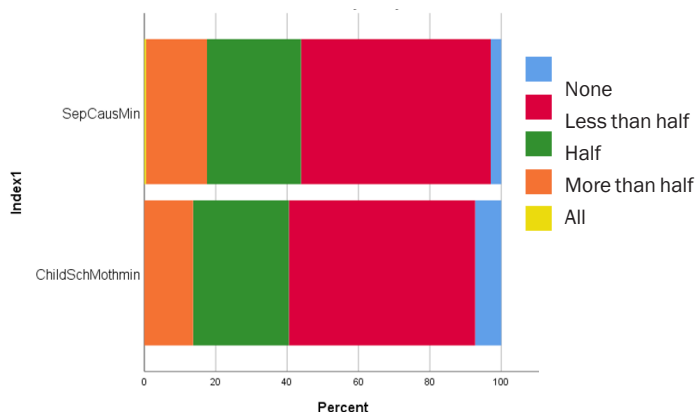
3.3 Women's work in mining and family arrangements

Women miners, especially those occupying the lowest-paid positions in the mineral supply chain, spend a long time in the mine, sometimes all day, just to be able to earn enough money to feed their families. This has a negative impact on family life. The chart below shows what actually happens in these women's mining households regarding their relationships with their families. Two further questions were analyzed in relation to this, summing up the family situation of women working in the artisanal gold mines.

- What is the proportion of women separated from their husbands due to working in the mine (SepcausMin)?
- What proportion of children whose mothers are working in the mine are not in school (ChildSchMothmin)?

Chart 3: Women miner's work and family arrangements

Stacked bar percent of index1 by family situation relation to mining



Source: Authors compilation using SPSS 25

The interviewees usually denied that mining was causing couples to separate in the mining sites or that it was associated with sexual infidelity. Some couples had faced problems when both had worked in gold mining, but for others, this had not posed difficulties in their relationships. In one-to-one interviews and during focus group discussions, matters were less clear-cut. Here, some women accepted that, while supporting their families from their meagre mining revenues, they would occasionally have to make decisions that contradicted the dominant social ethic (e.g. transactional sex). Other forms of exploitation were also noted, especially within lower positions in the gold mining supply chain. Some suggested that, in cases where transactional sex arose, marriages could break down. But it was suggested that transactional sex in the mines was becoming less frequent than in the past. If discovered, transactional sex was even sanctioned by the committee of diggers. What this suggests is that very poor women working in gold mining may view transactional sex as a way to support their families needs.

Schooling was viewed as a vital issue for women in gold mining. Women hoped their children would break out of the cycle of poverty by studying, enabling them to attain jobs with higher incomes, stating that their child's education was a priority, with this reflected in the aforementioned actions taken. This was repeatedly mentioned by interviewees during focus groups and individual interviews.

4. What are the alternatives for women?

The previous section underlines the importance of women's revenue from mining activities. This helps us understand their position on alternative livelihoods. Although there have been some tentative attempts to come up with alternative economic activities, these efforts have not been met with much success (Bashwira et al., 2014). Even in cases where support and funding have been provided, most women in gold mining activities are reluctant (or unable) to completely replace

gold mining with other activities (e.g. agriculture or trade). Most women prefer to combine two or more activities, including gold mining and other work outside the mine, such as sewing, computers, and mechanical or building work. Also, despite training and supervision in these other areas, women become very dependent on gold mining for their livelihoods, sometimes in the long-term. This was reflected in focus group responses.

'For example, Madam Kika...is always [a] bizalu transporter and [she does]...that all day; and in the evening she weaves baskets and other craft objects [following]...the training...by Women for Women and HeartLand' (Woman miner, Female Focus group, Kamituga, July 2018).

A few women in this study said they were aware of the exhaustible nature of gold as a finite mineral and consciously made other choices, knowing that gold mining would not always provide the majority of their income.

'If I did not find anything in the bizalu, I know that I would have at least 2000 fc (francs Congolais) in the other trades and find something to feed my children... at night. Mining [would] then come in second position. Apart from mining, other activities like farming or business can only be done if we have the means' (Woman miner, female focus group, Kamituga, September 2017).

Recommendations

Although women miners in DRC are perceived as vulnerable and as contributing less to household revenue, our research makes four recommendations to help boost the position of women in the mining economy:

- 1 All actors in the gold mining industry, including men and administrative agents, civil society organisations and policy-makers, should recognise the value, worth and permanent presence of women in the sector. This should improve women's self-esteem and status in the community.
- 2 Policy should be based on identifying the most important socio-economic indicators for women's protection. Reforms will significantly impact rural mining poverty, generating alternative livelihoods for women by considering specific needs and encouraging women to diversify rather than quit mining.
- 3 NGOs and local organisations need to complement economic approaches that address constraints rooted in social/customary gendered norms. In future, local organisations working with women in the sector could consider the need to develop/test new theories of change and planning frameworks.
- 4 Policy-makers have more to learn about women's economic contribution to mining. One way to help would be to improve reporting systems in the sector, such as creating a more gender-oriented database for future research and policies.

Author: Marie-Rose Bashwira.

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