

# Down to earth

Governance dynamics and social change  
in artisanal and small-scale mining in DRC



## Barriers and opportunities

Women's livelihoods and diverse responses to  
transformations in artisanal mining in eastern DRC

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Wageningen University and Research  
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## ***Down to earth***

### ***Governance dynamics and social change in artisanal and small-scale mining in DRC***

*An in-depth understanding of how international mining reform initiatives for transparency affect governance, local institutions, livelihoods and the roles of women in artisanal mining in DRC.*

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## Background

Over the last decades, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has experienced significant changes in the legal and regulatory regimes in its mining sector. Several reform initiatives have been introduced in Congolese artisanal mining. Since the beginning of the 2000s, in an attempt to break the supposed links between mining and violent conflict in the DRC, the Congolese government and the international community have set out to organise the mining sector through reforms and formalisation [1]. This study aimed to investigate how these reforms affect the position of women in artisanal mining – a group that has long been overlooked.

A growing body of literature on artisanal mining describes the roles of women involved either directly and indirectly in mineral exploitation. This previous work provides a general overview of women's work in African, Latin American and Asian small-scale artisanal mining [2-4]. In Africa, it is estimated as many as 50% of women are one way or the other involved in artisanal mining: either in alluvial exploitation or in the processing of mineral and other activities along the supply chain of mineral [2], and the sector contributes to the livelihoods of a vast number of households. In the DRC, the World Bank has reported that the sector supports 16–20% of the population and provides direct employment to 0.8–2 million people, 20% of whom are women [5].

However, most existing research views women living in mining areas only as victims of discrimination, exploitation and sexual harassment. Past work also portrays mining communities as homogeneous, with all people facing the same problems [6-8]. Little specific attention has been paid to women as actors in the artisanal mining regime, and gender issues have rarely been examined, despite the fact that women carry most of the economic burden and responsibility for their families.

The aim of this study was to take a different approach to the issue of women in artisanal mining. While acknowledging the difficult conditions in which women are working and living in the mining areas, as well as the exploitative and horrific acts of violence perpetrated against women (which have been exacerbated by the presence of armed groups), the study explicitly took the diversity among women into account. Clearly, all women are not the same.

Tracing the process of artisanal mining formalisation, this study aimed to examine processes at the interface of women's position, artisanal mining governance and local culture. It explored the relationship between global mining initiatives and local organisations to gain a deeper understanding of how women's positions have been shaped, negotiated and maintained, as well as how this relates to the political economy of the mining industry in the context of post-conflict reconstruction.

## Research design

This study focused on *women and mining* in contrast to only *women in mining*. It is generally understood that 'women in mining' implies women working within the mineral supply chain, whereas 'women and mining' implies women living or working in mining centres without necessarily being directly involved in the mining activities. I prioritised the analysis of women's direct and indirect involvement in mining activities with the mining community as the main study setting.

Instead of viewing women at the mining sites as victims, the study took an actor-oriented perspective. This starts from the idea that all women at the mining sites have agency and are

creating room for manoeuvre to overcome the difficult situations they face in the world of mining. However, there are large disparities in the room for manoeuvre accessible to different women; some women have very few options, whereas others can diversify and expand their opportunities.

Taking this approach, I sought to answer the main research question: *How do differentially positioned women navigate and negotiate the transformations of artisanal mining in the context of mining reforms in eastern DRC?*

Focusing on specific issues developed in the different chapters of the thesis, this main question can be broken up into the following sub-questions:

1. How has the reforms process and the discourse around it affected women's access to mining activities?
2. Why are women deciding to move and settle in artisanal mining areas? What challenges do they face after arriving in the mining areas, and how do they cope with life there?
3. What kind of activities are women involved in at the mining sites, and what different combinations of livelihood strategies differentiate these women?
4. How has the formalisation process influenced the position of women and power structures at the local level?

These questions address three interrelated themes: (1) access to resources (Sub-question 1), (2) women's diversity (Sub-questions 2 and 3); and (3) power relations (Sub-question 4).

In seeking to answer these questions, this study considered the mining centre to be an arena where there is interplay among multiple realities, which are socially constructed and negotiated. The research also captures the complexity of the relationship between local rural areas and the global market.

The research took place from 2013 to 2014, partly in the province of South Kivu (Nyabibwe and Kamituga) and partly in North Katanga (Kisengo and Manono). Two mining sites were chosen in each area, either because they were pilot sites for implementation of the reform initiatives (Nyabibwe and Kisengo) or because of large numbers of women working as miners (Kamituga and Manono).

After arriving at the mining sites, I contacted key respondents to gain an understanding of their points of view on women's position in the mining centre. The informants contacted included representatives of the local administration; individuals in charge of the mining offices (the Mining Division, SAESSCAM – *Service d'Assistance et d'Encadrement du Small Scale Mining*); those in charge of the Division of Women, Family and Children; local NGOs; the main doctor at the local hospital; and priests (or pastors).

With each informant, a topic list was used to guide the flow of the open interview. Starting with the above categories of key informants, I used snowball sampling to gain referrals to a representative of the women's miners association (if there was one at that site) or to a women's leader in the community. I met with these leaders several times and also observed their way of working. I was then able to explore women's involvement in the mineral exploitation. With the help of a research assistant, I used a survey questionnaire and conducted individual interviews with women and men, depending on their willingness to and interest in speaking with us. The main tools used in the data collection were qualitative: focus group discussions with women, individual interviews with state officials and both men and women living and working in the artisanal mining centre, and life histories of five women.

This research was part of the ‘Down to earth: Governance dynamics and social change in artisanal and small-scale mining in the DRC’ research programme.<sup>1</sup> This programme aims to understand the negotiated outcomes of the implementation of conflict mineral policy on three important aspects of the eastern Congolese artisanal mining sector: gender, livelihoods and governance.<sup>2</sup> This project addressed the first aspect in particular and aimed to contribute to the debate on mining reforms from a gender perspective.

## General findings

The main findings can be categorised under the themes of access to resources, diversity, and power relations and change in the labour regime.

### Access to resources

At the interface between international and local arenas, this study identified three types of discourse that determine women’s access to mineral exploitation. These were a conflict-related discourse on sexual violence, a gender mainstreaming discourse and a local discourse based on culture and social taboos. International attention was directed towards conflict minerals, sexual violence and forced labour in the DRC from 1996 to 2003, during the time of the Congolese wars, and this attention has continued in subsequent years. The discourse on gender mainstreaming emerged later in the DRC, around 2012. The local gender ideology is grounded in customary practices [9].

#### *Findings*

- The dominance of the conflict mineral discourse has implications for women’s position and involvement in artisanal mining activities. First, a side effect of protective legislation is the exclusion of pregnant women. In some parts of the country, officials misunderstood which categories of women to exclude and called for a complete exclusion of all women. Second, there has been a lack of recognition of women’s roles in artisanal mining.
- The strengthening of the formalisation of artisanal mining (i.e. the requirement to hold an ID card to access a step in the value chain) has very severe consequences for poor women. It leads some of these women, because of a lack of money, to obtain ID cards that do not reflect their actual activities (e.g. shashulere in Nyabibwe, who hold cards identifying them as diggers although they are actually small traders) [10].
- In the course of implementing reform initiatives to improve the living conditions in the mining community, the gender mainstreaming discourse, which promotes women’s integration in the mining industry, has been developed. This discourse coexists with the conflict-related discourse, which focuses on finding activities outside the mines for women – alternative livelihoods [10]. At the local level, the cultural gender ideology, which translates the protection of women into their exclusion from mining activities, still has a strong influence. All of these ideologies coexist, and this creates confusion regarding how to implement the reforms.
- State officials are tasked with implementing the law and applying international guidelines in accordance with local culture. The fact that they are aware of the different – and sometimes contradicting – discourses creates a barrier to women’s inclusion in the mineral sector. However, this also gives women room for manoeuvre; some women are very successful in negotiating access to the mines with these officials. These are often – but not always – women who are related to the officials or part of their social networks.

1 [www.wur.nl/en/Expertise-Services/Chair-groups/Social-Sciences/Humanitarian-Aid-and-Reconstruction/Research-1/Down-to-earth-Governance-dynamics-and-social-change-in-artisanal-and-small-scale-mining-in-DRC.htm](http://www.wur.nl/en/Expertise-Services/Chair-groups/Social-Sciences/Humanitarian-Aid-and-Reconstruction/Research-1/Down-to-earth-Governance-dynamics-and-social-change-in-artisanal-and-small-scale-mining-in-DRC.htm)

2 This research has been funded by the WOTRO Science for Global Development programme of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research.

## Diversity

### *Findings*

- Women have complex motives for migrating and for settling in mining centres. Although poverty is an important factor, strong family ties, personal expectations and changes in traditional gender roles should also be considered. Push and pull factors in migration decisions are interrelated in this context. For many women, the reform initiatives are not an important factor in the decision to migrate or to settle in mining centres. However, reform initiatives do become a factor in differentiation because of their negative consequences for those seeking economic opportunities in mining areas.
- Women have different socioeconomic roles in the mining centres: They are involved in multiple activities related to mining exploitation either directly (digging, washing, transporting, owning pits, trading) or indirectly (agriculture, restoration, business, prostitution).
- Some women at the mining sites have a very marginal existence (heavy and exploitative jobs, heavy and uneven work schedules, low income, little time for family, etc.), whereas others are more comfortable and have more options and strategic opportunities. Different women may use the same strategies for different means. For example, women who are relatively comfortable use transactional sex as a strategic option to improve their networks, whereas marginalised women use it as a survival strategy to gain access to mining activities or to supplement their incomes.
- Women in mining centres are most clearly differentiated by how they combine livelihoods depending on their social and economic assets, access to institutional structures, and choice of the coping strategies. Factors such as previous position, family ties, level of vulnerability in relation to the conflict, role of 'husbands' and belonging to a social network are important in determining which women will be very poor and which women will be better off.

### **Power relations and change in the labour regime**

Past work has paid attention only to powerful men in mining, assuming that women are powerless and vulnerable. However, my research findings indicate that some women may exercise agency in the pursuit of self-identified goals. However, the reform process can also increase forms of marginalisation in the mining labour regime.

### *Findings*

- Several local 'big women' are very influential [11]. The reform initiatives have allowed the creation of new forms of power by widening the gap between formal and customary (informal) institutions and thus inducing differentiation between these institutions. Some women develop strategies to take advantage of these changes by relying more on the formal institutions and creating strong networks with officials, putting those who remain more traditional at a disadvantage.
- The formalisation of artisanal mining has created sub-categories of actors and new forms of power relations, discriminating against those who were already marginalised by the mining structure. The phenomenon of the 'sous-couvert' is one example. These people are a sub-category of agents in the mineral value chain who have no identification or recognition by the formal institution. They work for those holding ID cards through verbal agreements, and they share the profit earned through mineral exploitation. This situation increases the vulnerability of powerless people who are unable to afford to meet the requirement of formalisation.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Women in artisanal mining centres are agents who make decisions based on either strategic opportunity or survival. However, they still face significant discrimination in social and political spheres. People respond to this discrimination in diverse ways, and the possibilities for creating room for manoeuvre to overcome this situation differs because women at mining sites are not a homogeneous group with identical needs or motives.

All women must adapt to their own particular challenges. The best recommendations that can be made are therefore necessarily context-specific. However, several general recommendations for women in mining governance can be made:

- Programmes for women in mining should avoid treating women as a single group. Instead, differences in women's livelihood options or motivations to move or settle in mining centres should be considered to understand their specific needs.
- Policies should reduce barriers to women's involvement in mineral exploitation. Local NGOs should engage in awareness-raising to reduce social and cultural taboos. They should also strengthen programmes for women's mining-related social networks. This can facilitate connections that can then improve women's employability and integration into mineral exploitation.
- Policies should improve the understanding of the law and reform initiatives at the local level both for men and women so that people can improve their own situations by fighting for their rights.
- Policies should take into account the existence of sub-categories of agents (such as the shashulere in Nyabibwe, who work with an ID different from their actual position, or the sous-couvert, who are not recognised). These people should be included in the official framework, thereby reducing the strength of the power dynamics created by the reform initiatives.

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