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## Necessity or choice: women's migration to artisanal mining regions in eastern DRC

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### ABSTRACT

Women have long remained invisible in representations of artisanal mining in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Based on original field data, this paper seeks to fill that gap. It shows how women come to mining sites with the hope of finding a degree of security, economic possibilities and the start of a new life. Contrary to what dominant discourses on the “resource curse” and sexual violence towards women have suggested, women may find a degree of protection in mining areas. We take the analysis beyond the “push” and “pull” factors with which migration is usually explained, to understand women’s motivation to move into mining areas as complex and changing. The study situates women’s movement to the mines within their life trajectories which are shaped by violence and various forms of insecurity. The notion of social navigation is brought in to understand how they cope with gender discrimination, challenges and risks in the mining economy. The paper shows how push and pull factors merge over time and how some women succeed in creating new sources of revenue and manage to mitigate the situation of vulnerability in which they find themselves.

### RÉSUMÉ

Les femmes sont restées longtemps invisibles dans les représentations de l’exploitation minière artisanale dans l’Est de la République démocratique du Congo. Fondé sur des données originales de terrain, cet article vise à combler cette lacune. Il montre comment les femmes arrivent sur les sites miniers avec l’espoir d’y trouver un degré de sécurité, des opportunités économiques et le début d’une nouvelle vie. Contrairement à ce que les discours dominants sur la « malédiction des ressources naturelles » et la violence sexuelle à l’égard des femmes ont laissé entendre, les femmes peuvent trouver un certain degré de protection dans les zones minières. Nous poussons l’analyse au-delà des facteurs attractifs et répulsifs par lesquels la migration est habituellement expliquée pour comprendre les motivations des femmes à s’installer dans les zones minières comme quelque chose de complexe et changeant. L’étude situe le déplacement des femmes vers les mines dans leurs trajectoires de vie, qui sont déterminées par la violence et diverses formes d’insécurité. La notion de navigation sociale est introduite pour comprendre comment les femmes font face à la discrimination, aux difficultés et aux risques dans l’économie minière. L’article montre comment les facteurs attractifs et répulsifs fusionnent au fil du

### KEYWORDS

migration; mobility; social navigation; women; artisanal mining; violent conflict; eastern DRC

### MOTS-CLÉS

Migration; mobilité; navigation sociale; femmes; exploitation minière artisanale; conflit violent; Est de la RDC

temps, et comment certaines femmes réussissent à créer de nouvelles sources de revenu et parviennent à atténuer la situation de vulnérabilité dans laquelle elles se trouvent.

## Introduction

Mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as in other countries, has long been treated as a male affair. Moreover, the dominant discourse on conflict minerals has pitched mining sites as highly unsafe for women who could easily become victims of sexual violence and abuse (Cruz and Hintjens 2015; Kelly 2014; Rustad, Østby, and Nordås 2016; Kotsadam, Østby, and Rustad 2017). This, however, overlooks the fact that artisanal mining sites are key to the lives and livelihoods of many women and underestimates the degree to which they may have come to these sites as a matter of choice. Whether they fled from violence or were attracted by the opportunities of booming mine towns, a considerable number of women have found a new home in these sites, developing a range of strategies to build a life.

Though women make up a substantial portion of the population attracted to mining sites in the DRC, their motives, experiences and interests have rarely been studied. For both men and women, motivations to migrate into mining zones are linked to security as well as economic concerns. In the context of insecurity, men and women may turn to mining areas with hopes of finding physical and economic security. Women do face many challenges in mining sites, including limited access to mining pits (Keita 2001) and sexual harassment. Yet the picture has become one-sided as sexual violence to women has received much more attention than have other aspects of their lives (Douma and Hilhorst 2012).

This article aims to fill the gap in the literature on women's migration to mining areas, asking why they move to mining areas and how they seek to make a life there. Based on an analysis of empirical research in multiple artisanal mining sites in eastern DRC, the study provides an analysis of the underlying, mixed motivations for migration to and settlement in mining sites, as well as the opportunities and limitations that these migrant women encounter. The analysis draws, on the one hand, on migration literature, which is strong in the analysis of push-and-pull factors and helps show how economic calculus informs mobility decisions. On the other hand, it builds on the literature on conflict-induced migration, highlighting the role of violence and insecurity. A combined perspective seems most useful to understand the situation of women who have come to mining sites. Rather than seeing women as being motivated by either necessity or economic opportunity, the study allows for the co-existence of multiple motives. The analysis contextualises women's movement to the mines within their life trajectories, which are shaped by violence and various forms of hardship. It shows how both strategic calculus and the navigation of multiple insecurities are part of their decisions. We introduce the concept of social navigation to understand women's decision-making under the conditions of uncertainty encountered in conflict-affected Eastern Congo.

The article is structured as follows. After a brief methodological discussion, the next sections provide an introduction to migration in relation to artisanal mining and to mining reforms in the DRC. The section after develops the theoretical framework on migration decisions in relation to artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). This is followed by several sections that draw directly on women's narratives: starting with two life stories of women in mining, a detailed analysis of women's different motives to come to the mining towns is presented, followed by an analysis of how they have experienced life there since.

## Methodology

This paper is based on focus group discussions, interviews (individual and semi-structured) and observations gathered during multiple field research periods in 2013 and 2014 in mining towns in eastern DRC: two in South Kivu (Kamituga and Nyabibwe) and two in Tanganyika (Kisengo and Manono). These sites were selected either because of the considerable presence of women working in the mines (Kamituga and Manono) or for being a pilot site in the implementation of a mining reform initiative (Nyabibwe and Kisengo).

### Overview of research sites

#### South Kivu:

*Kamituga*: gold mining site, 180 km from the city of Bukavu, with a relatively high number of women involved in grinding and crushing gold ore.

*Kalimbi*: cassiterite mining site in Nyabibwe, located 97 km from Bukavu. Selected in 2010 as a pilot area for traceability initiatives organised by iTSCI (ITRI Tin Supply Chain Initiative) and the Federal Office for Geosciences and Natural Resources (BGR), Germany.

#### Tanganyika<sup>1</sup>:

*Manono*: located 480 km from Kalemie and 636 km from Lubumbashi, with 265,000 inhabitants including many women who work along the mineralised sand embankments containing a mix of cassiterite and coltan.

*Kisengo*: coltan mining site in Nyunzu territory (180 km from Kalemie), discovered in 2007 and which, since 2011, is within the iTSCI requirements for traceable processes. The Mining Mineral Resources (MMR) – an Indian mining enterprise – has exclusive rights to exploit the minerals found at Kisengo (Matthysen and Zaragoza Montejano 2013).

Research participants in all of the sites were selected with the help of a local organisation focusing on women's issues in mining. Women representing all socio-economic categories of female miners were included. Women were approached either directly at the workplace or later in the day at their house, if an appointment had been made beforehand.

Focus group discussions were conducted at the start of the fieldwork and included 6–15 women, depending on their availability. There was one focus group per mining site, and two in the case of Kamituga. Kamituga was the first site we visited and relatively more of the focus groups and individual interviews were done there, to provide us with a better insight on the women's working conditions and motives and to prepare for the remaining field trips. The semi-structured interviews focused on the choices and motivations of women to live and work in the mining towns and were conducted using an interview guide. In addition, numerous formal interviews with others such as administrative agents and men in the community were done to strengthen the general understanding, but these are not cited directly in this text. Direct observation of women's lives in the mining

communities helped us to understand the challenges and opportunities they faced. The research relied on a (male) assistant for translation – in places where respondents were more comfortable speaking their mother tongue – and also for security reasons. For some women, life histories were constructed on the basis of repeated interviews. Two of these are taken up in this text.

## Artisanal mining and migration in the DRC

Throughout history, the discovery of minerals has been associated with significant demographic growth in areas that were formerly rural and scarcely populated (Bryceson and Mwaipopo 2010). In different parts of Africa, ASM has attracted considerable numbers of people, contributing to significant spatial and social transformations (Hayes and Wagner 2008). Previous research on mining areas worldwide (Geenen 2011b; Cuvelier 2014; Nyame and Grant 2007; Grätz 2014) offers different explanations as to why people migrate to these areas, emphasising different push (people come not out of choice but out of necessity) or pull (people hope to get rich quickly) factors. One important driver is the difficulty of sustaining a livelihood on the basis of smallholder agriculture (as noted by Banchirigah and Hilson 2010; Maclin et al. 2017). However, as research from Sierra Leone (Maconachie and Binns 2007) and Zimbabwe (Mkodzongi and Spiegel 2019) has shown, mining does not necessarily replace farming but may co-exist with it and provide a complementary source of income. Migration patterns in mining areas also need to be understood in historical context (Cuvelier 2014; Büscher, Cuvelier, and Mushobekwa 2014) and take into account the complex nature of ASM, which may be either seasonal or permanent depending on the setting. Migration may be fuelled by sudden hardship and desperation, referred to as “shock-push,” or involve rush displacement, as news about opportunities for fortune-seeking spreads (Hinton 2011; Kelly 2014).

Existing research has demonstrated that women form a significant portion of the population coming to mining areas. Evidence suggests that women do not just come as dependents but are economically active in artisanal mining, occupied either directly or indirectly in the mining activities (Hinton, Veiga, and Beinhoff 2003; Heemskerk 2000, 2003; Werthmann 2009; Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre 2006; Geenen 2013; Buss et al. 2017). However, women’s economic roles in mining have, until recently, received only limited attention. Some studies have identified women primarily as sisters, daughters or wives of miners, highlighting that these women did not come to mining sites of their own choice (Veiga 1997). Other studies have depicted women as rushing to “become rich quickly” by engaging in secondary activities such as sex work (Hilson 2005). As more is becoming known about the position of women in mining, it becomes clear that they still face many forms of discrimination and exploitation (Perks et al. 2018).

In eastern DRC, mobility flows have resulted in a process of “mining urbanisation” and the emergence of “mining boomtowns” in rural settings. The original inhabitants were joined by newcomers ranging from internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing from violence in other parts of eastern DRC, to those seeking economic opportunity (Büscher, Cuvelier, and Mushobekwa 2014; Bryceson and Jönsson 2010) and/or the returning of young miners as mentioned in the case of Sierra Leone (Maconachie 2012). For a long period of time, the Congolese population has faced critical situations. The economic and social order has been strongly affected by forced displacement, loss of

property and the (forced) abandonment of the prime source of living: agriculture. In the context of two consecutive wars (1996–1997 and 1998–2003) and a permanent situation of insecurity and waves of violence, artisanal mining became the principal means helping local people to survive.

Mining-related mobility in the DRC today is characterised by a mix of causes. The current situation differs from colonial times, when people were forced by colonial authorities to migrate to the mines (Vlassenroot 2013), and from the 1980s when late President Mobutu implemented policies of economic liberalisation and structural adjustment (Mazalto 2008). Political and economic instability and bad governance under President Mobutu meant that people had to “fend for themselves” (MacGaffey 1986, 31). This has pushed thousands of people into the informal economy, and many of these people turned to artisanal mining activities in search of a better life (Hinton 2011). The long period of war and insecurity uprooted many people, especially in the rural areas affected by ongoing violence. Many people, including women, looked for safe places in and around mining sites. Maclin et al. (2017), in an attempt to understand the motivation of men and women to move to mining areas, have already noted the presence of a mixture of pull and push factors together with both traditional economic factors and security issues. With this situation as a backdrop, we will try to understand the pattern of women’s migration and women’s motivations to stay in the mining centres. Comprehensive accounts of women’s motives for and experiences with moving to a mining town are still rare. This paper makes a contribution to filling in the picture by using ethnographic methods to understand how women’s move to a mining area came about and how they navigate the difficult circumstances they encounter.

### **Mining reform initiatives in eastern DRC**

The DRC has been described as a clear example of the “resource curse,” which links the existence of mineral resources to protracted conflicts (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Dranginis 2016; Jackson 2002). A wide range of reform initiatives have been launched to fight the negative side of mineral exploitation, including traceability and certification schemes, present in three of our sites (Kisengo, Manono and Kalimbi).

In response to the global concern over conflict minerals, the artisanal mining sector in the DRC has been subject to a number of reform initiatives at international, regional and national levels. The mining reform process includes three different dimensions aimed at reshaping the connection between long-term conflicts and mining exploitation: (1) a national legal framework with the mining code and its regulations (2002–2003); (2) the embargo and sanctions of conflict minerals; and (3) international and regional initiatives and global campaigns. These included, at the international level, the Dodd–Frank Act which requires all companies listed on the US stock exchange to apply due diligence in the trade of tin, tantalum, tungsten or gold coming from the DRC or neighbouring countries (Matthysen and Zaragoza Montejano 2013). Other significant initiatives are the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) due diligence guidelines for engaging with conflict-affected and high-risk states to help companies ensure that they are not financing armed groups (OECD 2011), and the European Commission’s pronouncement on conflict minerals (Cuvelier, Vlassenroot, and Olin 2014), and, at the regional level, the certification mechanism developed for the Great

Lakes region (by the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region). Through the reform initiatives, the mining sector in the DRC is meant to change from an informal and unregulated sector to a more regulated one. On its side, the Congolese government adopted a new mining code (2002) to formalise artisanal mining and to increase tax revenues (Pöyhönen, Bjurling, and Cuvelier 2010). We expect these changes to have an impact on the attractiveness of artisanal mining as a livelihood option and, hence, migration into mining areas. The research for this paper included locations where the iTSCi for traceability of tin, tantalum, and tungsten (3T), was implemented, since 2010.

## Analysing migration: economic calculus and navigating insecurity

The lives of men and women in eastern DRC have been shaped by sustained and at times severe threats to their economic as well as physical security. Decisions to migrate need to be understood in relation to these combined challenges. To understand why women come to mining sites in conflict-affected eastern DRC, our analysis is located at the crossroads of migration studies and conflict studies and explores economic and non-economic factors in migration patterns. The general literature on migration explains migration decisions at the micro level as being made through either choice or necessity (Mafukidze 2006), privileging either economic incentives or political violence (Aysa-Lastra 2011). This section develops an understanding of women's migration to mining centres in the DRC combining these two types of motivation.

The literature on economic migration affords relevant insights on the role of different push and pull factors. A long-standing explanation for economic migration is that it is motivated by the *comparative advantage* gained from the host place versus the home place. Todaro (1980) added that the decision to migrate depends on the "expected" gain. Rural-to-urban migration has been explained in this way. Stark and Taylor (1989), in the case of international migration, showed how individuals compare their situation to the deprivation of their friends, their relatives or the households in their home village. Hence, the decision to migrate is not motivated by the absolute gains in income but rather by the improvement of the individual's relative position, compared with a specific reference group.

It is now commonly accepted that migration does not derive from purely economic motivations. The expectation component of migration includes not only opportunity structures and demographic and socioeconomic variables, but also social and cultural norms, risk-taking behaviour and adaptability (as shown for southern Africa by Mafukidze 2006). In addition, social relationships and networks are important to the decision of moving. This means that the choice of a specific migration destination depends on whether there are relatives, friends or members of one's identity group in the new place, who may reduce the costs and risks of moving by providing information, facilities and encouragement, hence acting as pull factors. In contrast, social relations may equally be a "push" factor. For instance, conflict among family members may be one of the motivations for moving to another place (Haug 2008).

Also in the case of forced displacement or "conflict migration" – which occurs when a situation of insecurity motivates people to relocate (Chiswick 1999) – the decision to move depends on various factors. Acute insecurity due to violence may be a powerful push factor, but people partly choose their new destination based on the comparative



perception of the safety level. In addition to security, people consider other factors such as income opportunities and quality of life, information and migration costs (Haug 2008). This has also been found for eastern DRC, where migration – especially to the mining centres – is clearly related to patterns of violence and insecurity, but economic factors also play a role. As Maclin et al. have argued (2017, 117) “conflict mitigates, but does not neutralise, the role of traditional factors in migration decisions.”

The economic aspects of migration in eastern DRC are reflected in the literature on push and pull factors (Jönsson and Bryceson 2009; Hilson and Banchirigah 2009; Hinton 2011; Cuvelier, Vlassenroot, and Olin 2014; Cuvelier 2014; Grätz 2014; Hilson 2016; Maclin et al. 2017; Mkodzongi and Spiegel 2019). One of the main pull factors presented in the literature is the promise of becoming “rich quickly” in the mineral sector, as an alternative to agriculture (Geenen 2011a). For South Kivu, Maclin et al. (2017, 119) have noted that economic push factors related to land access, food needs and the need to find money or employment are the most cited motivations to migrate to a mining area. Economic pull factors – “to get rich quickly” – were the least cited (120).

Zooming in on migration of women, studies to date have highlighted the role of both economic and security-related motivations. Research on South Katanga in the DRC (Pact 2007) has shown that the number of women involved in artisanal mining activities has increased due to the conflict episodes of violence as a consequence of two changes: on the one hand, the situation of socio-economic and political decline; and on the other hand, intensified physical insecurity. In combination these factors have made poverty a prime driving factor, notably in Katanga (Hayes and Perks 2012). The dynamics of violent conflict meant also that people ran the risk of being recruited into forced labour, the abandonment of agriculture, children dropping out of school, and the disruption of social ties (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2003), making mining a more lucrative and, in some cases, safer activity. As Maclin et al. (2017) found, for female migrants coming to artisanal mining sites, next to economic factors, their choice of site was also related to the presence of an armed group seen to offer some degree of security.

Büscher, Cuvelier, and Mushobekwa (2014) have demonstrated how the situation of armed conflict reinforces the sense of instability that accompanies the growth of a mining town. In a study in two territories in South Kivu (Kalehe and Walungu) in the DRC, Kelly (2014) observed elements of both distress-push and rush-type motivations to move to the mining areas, as well as a third hybrid distress-rush model, which involves both desperation and fortune seeking (Hilson, Hilson, and Maconachie 2017). In this system – which has elements of both desperation and “fortune-seeking” systems – exploitation of minerals becomes increasingly entrenched as a primary source of income, and in turn shapes social, economic and political structures. As insecurity in DRC extended for years and then decades, people became increasingly pushed into, and then reliant upon, mining systems. As mining became more profitable and expanded precipitously, parties associated both with the conflict and with state and traditional power structures found ways to entrench themselves into ASM systems (Kelly, King-Close, and Perks 2014, 101).

To better understand the way multiple motives interact in women’s decisions to migrate, we draw on the concept of “social navigation.” Vigh (2009, 419) defined social navigation as “how people act in difficult or uncertain circumstances and in describing how they disentangle themselves from confining structures, plot their escape and move



towards better positions.”<sup>2</sup> The concept conceptualises the intersection of agency, social forces and change, and “offers an image of a simultaneous movement – of social formations and of practices of agents within the social formations” (Radu 2010, 415). Social navigation is a perspective that we find particularly useful to study how people keep afloat in unstable conditions while being motivated by their imaginations of possible futures. In this paper, the concept helps us move beyond push and pull factors to focus on how people act tactically and strategically in circumstances that are not under their control. The concept can help us to understand how women manoeuvre between choice and necessity within a horizon involving multiple uncertainties. It considers that people react in response to shocks or difficult situations while also being attentive to how they adjust and shape their current situation to achieve a better position. This means that, although the conflict period may be “dangerous and unstable,” people may find a way to improve their position by building on opportunities that they identify even in difficult situations. In sum, we employ the concept of social navigation to move beyond reductionist understandings of why women come to mining sites in the DRC and as a way to understand how they cope with uncertainty and adverse conditions while seeking to give shape to their lives.

The following sections highlight the diverse and dynamic nature of women’s motives, uncovering some of the complexity of women’s motivations to migrate and how they navigate the difficult circumstances they encounter as they seek to build a life in some of the DRC’s artisanal mining areas.

## Life stories of women in mining sites

During fieldwork, four important factors stood out in women’s explanations as to why they came to the mining sites: seeking security, family ties and responsibilities, economic opportunities, and the search for a better life. We begin our analysis of the different factors at play in women’s mobility choices, by drawing on the life histories of two women living and working at the mining sites.<sup>3</sup> In the analysis, these narratives are complemented by additional stories recounted by the women participating in the study.

### Case 1: Becoming a *twangeuse*<sup>4</sup> after abduction and escape

The first author met Diana in Kamituga where she worked as a *twangeuse*, a woman who crushed and pounded the mineral. Diana is a 25-year-old woman who was born in Mwenga territory in the centre of Mwenga, where she lived with her family until she was 10 years old. She was the first born of five children – three boys and two girls. Her parents were involved in agriculture, and her mother ran a small business out of their home. In the search of a better field for farming, her father decided to move to Mulangozi (slightly closer to Itombwe Forest, nearly 50 km from Kamituga).

When the “Hutu” war broke out in 1995,<sup>5</sup> the family had to flee their village and find a safe place to stay. Like many families, theirs was split up: Diana, her mother and her three younger brothers fled into Itombwe Forest with the rest of the village. Diana’s father and one of her brothers went somewhere else – they were not heard from again. Hutu soldiers, when in need of food or house items, were attacking villages, usually early in the morning when people were still asleep, ravaging everything and burning the houses,

abducting women and girls and requiring men to transport all the items. People were forced to flee into the forest without any spare clothes, and with no food or money; they left everything behind. These soldiers occupied villages for weeks or months before moving on, and if this group did not attack, the Mai-Mai<sup>6</sup> militias did.

To find something to eat, Diana and her family had to leave the forest and approach the villages, where they could try to get some rural products to eat. One day, along with several other young people, Diana approached a village to pick some cassava from a field. They were caught by a Mai-Mai militia. Some were able to escape, including Diana's brothers and mother. Diana, however, was abducted. While in captivity, Diana had three children. After eight years she and other "girls like her" were able to escape the military camp. After going through Itombwe forest, Diana found herself near the village of Kitutu (45 km from Kamituga).

From there, these girls found many people from nearby villages who had also fled the conflict. Some of them were recognised and brought to their family members if they were nearby. In this way, Diana was able to reconnect with her mother and brothers, who were settled in Kamituga for security. The only possibility for her was to work in the mines: "it is the only job that can be done when you don't have money: for land to cultivate, one has to rent it, but there is no money."

According to Diana, life in the mine site has not been easy for her at all. She had two more children after coming to Kamituga. She had these children when she wanted to supplement her income through being in a relationship with a digger: "You have no choice! When you have the rent to pay, children for whom you have to provide food, pay for school and sometimes pay for medication, you cannot allow yourself to come back home with nothing. You have to find a way ... " In the beginning, Diana lived with her mother and brothers, but the cost was too high: too many people to support together with her own children. She then decided to move out to her own place with her children.

Diana's coming to the mining site was opting for what appeared to be a reasonable alternative in a life heavily marked by the violent conflict. It allowed her to reconnect with part of her family and offered some opportunity to earn some income for someone like her, with no assets to fall back on. Her navigation also included engaging in an at least partly instrumental sexual relationship.

## ***Case 2: Climbing up to be a négociant***

The first author met Bona (a 30-year-old woman) in Manono. Bona was born in Nyunzu territory, where mining is also present, where she lived with her parents for 15 years. She was the fourth child in a family of six children. Her parents were involved in agriculture, and her father also ran a small business. When her father died in 1998, the family decided to split up into two groups: Some of her elder siblings decided to stay in Nyunzu, while the other siblings – including Bona – joined their mother in a move to Manono, where her relatives lived. Most of the siblings who joined their mother continued to study and were able to earn their secondary diplomas. Bona's mother's family provided them with some land (from her inheritance) to cultivate, and they used the money they brought with them to buy additional land.

At 18, Bona got pregnant and married the father of her child. They had three children together. Her husband was a businessman who travelled from town to town selling different items. While they were married, her husband did not allow her to work outside the home, so she oversaw agricultural activities carried out by Pygmies on her husband's field around 15 km from Manono centre.

Over their 12 years of marriage, Bona and her husband experienced many problems, and in the end, her husband left her for another woman. Although she had always lived in a mining community (Nyunzu or Manono), she was never close enough previously to understand what it meant to work in the mines. However, "it was the only job that was available for anyone with courage and in need."

She first worked as a digger in open-cast mining – digging, washing and cleaning the mineralised sand (*seketa*) for two years. She started at the Djibende site (in Manono) and could move from one site to another depending on the information she obtained about the production: "the more the production, the more there is work for people like me." It was very difficult for her to cope with such a life, but her objective was to work hard, amass a certain amount of money and then leave the activity.

With that objective, she could, with time, reach 2 kg of cassiterite per day to earn 8000 CDF (Congolese francs, about USD \$10) at a time when the price was high. If there were no emergencies, she could save 5000 CDF and use the remaining 3000 CDF to feed and clothe herself and her children. Thanks to the farm products that she continued to get from her own family, she was able not only to increase her savings but also to stock up on food at home. When she had saved 300,000 CDF, she decided to stop digging and work for herself as a *négociant* (mineral trader).

To be a good *négociant* it was important to have a coach to introduce her to the business. Some people receive help from family members or their husband. Others, like Bona, choose an alternative that often bears more profit. These women enter into a "win-win" relationship with a male *négociant* from a different province who can teach them the business and introduce them to influential people as his wife. In exchange, the woman cares for the man, provides him a place to live in her house and receives him as her husband for the time he is in the community. The male *négociant* does not use her money for his business, because he has his own. He keeps her updated about new ways of working with minerals and how to check the world price of minerals online. Women in this situation are also able to benefit rapidly from the many strategies that *négociants* must have to increase their income, such as the system of *vragage* (mixing the mineral tailings with the mineralised sand to increase the weight of the package).

At the time of the interview, Bona also continued to engage in agricultural work. With the money she earned from mining, she was able to pay the people working in her field and to invest in another small business. At the time of the study, she had two bicycles that are used to transport farm products and one motorcycle that is used for public transport.

Bona had come to the mining area as part of a family choice. She turned to mining activities only when circumstances pressed her, and then was quick to exploit the opportunities she noted. Being able to rely on family assets (notably agricultural land) helped her in this, as did her (sexual) engagement with an experienced, well-connected male trader.

## **Motives of women to migrate to artisanal mining communities**

From these narratives and other accounts encountered during the field research, four themes were identified that enable a clear understanding of women's motives for migrating to mining towns: seeking security, economic poverty/opportunities, family ties and responsibilities, and finding a new/better life.

### ***Seeking security***

As is shown in the first life history, due to the war, people have lost their assets, suffered the looting of their land and experienced forced displacement and abduction. In this context, mining centres became areas of relative stability. This relative security was made possible, in some cases, through the collaboration of local authorities, economic actors and armed groups (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2005; Beneduce et al. 2006; Geenen 2013, 2011b). From the local perspective, mining sites can be seen as a more "secure" place, in contrast with the rural surroundings. The presence of administrative officials and military authorities is in some cases seen to offer a kind of "umbrella" protection against the rebel forces. Mining centres are usually better protected and more secure than are the surrounding areas (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2003; Kelly 2014), and small self-defence groups are created. Echoing the findings of Maclin et al. (2017), this security consideration seems especially relevant to women. In Diana's case (Case 1), Kamituga was perceived as more secure because of access to a major road, meaning that they could move out quickly if things became worse.

Insecurity in eastern DRC generally also led to reduced livelihood options. Some women changed their livelihood activities and focused on mining, which was seen as less economically and physically risky than agriculture and forms of business which call for long-distance travel through areas under militia occupation. In this case, women preferred engaging in mining activities over agriculture or business as they had witnessed their colleagues (or experienced themselves) being abducted on their way from/to the field or market place.

As in the case of Diana (Case 1), for many women in the study sites, mining areas were perceived as possible destinations following abduction, in search of the relative security such areas can provide and the presence of administration offices. We also found women coming from surrounding villages who, after having been abducted, found their return home very problematic as they were viewed as the wife of the militias, especially when they came back with children. They saw the mining centre as a place where there was less stigmatisation of women like them, affording greater freedom as "everybody cares about his own businesses."

### ***Poverty and economic opportunities***

In addition to insecurity, poverty was mentioned by many respondents as the main factor that pushed them into the mines. This is illustrated by the case of Bona, who when left by her husband found no other way to survive than getting into mining activities. Several respondents, both women and men, acknowledged that the lack of opportunity led them to work in mineral exploitation, and for women this is especially true. Mining centres –

with their urban economies – offer a wide range of economic opportunities, such as secondary markets, that emerge from the influx of migrants and the demographic concentration. This can offer alternative sources of income to the original inhabitants, as well as attracting new people who wish to invest in these possibilities.

Economic opportunities are not the same for all, as the cases also suggest. Some women settle in a mining area and become well known, or even one of the “big mamas” who run a business, own a pit or engage in trade (Bashwira and Cuvelier, 2019). For women at lower levels of the mineral supply chain, their stay in the mining area may include short-term activities such as prostitution (see the case of Diana (Case 1) and her search for supplementary income). Similar results have been found elsewhere (Bashwira, *forthcoming*). Clearly, women’s motivations for moving to and their experiences when settling in the mining centres reflect women’s diversity. The reasons for moving in (either for survival or to take advantage of opportunities) also determine women’s potential willingness to stay or leave the mining community.

Paradoxically, the mining reform process that is underway in some of the mining sites in DRC seems to be limiting the economic opportunities available to some categories of women. Interviewees mentioned the reform process of mining as a factor slowing the flow of money into an area. In fact, in recent years, in the sites visited, fewer new traders have been coming to the mining areas in search of adventure and opportunities, because of the decline in the circulation of funds. With the traceability process, as income has decreased, mining sites have also become less attractive settings for prostitution. Women engaging in prostitution move to the mining areas seeking rich miners, and there are more opportunities for that when the mining site’s production is high. One woman engaging in prostitution at a mining site said that “the miners no longer give as much money as before; they became stingy ...” Indeed, these women only go to sites where there is a strong flow of money, because it is easier for them to find “clients who spend freely ...”

Other women participating in this study who pursued different avenues of finding economic opportunities did not mention the reform process as having had any influence on their migration to or away from the mining sites. This is somewhat curious, because the expectation was that mining areas should have become more secure thanks to the reforms which should reduce the armed occupation. In areas such as Nyabibwe, which is undergoing reforms to increase traceability, the population expressed interest in the presence of the *Comité de Surveillance et Anti Corruption* (CSAC<sup>7</sup>), which identifies and discusses all kind of incidents related to the implementation of the traceability process and the guidance of the OECD on mineral exploitation and trade in conflict-affected areas. It also helps to manage security issues in the community. Through these committees, people, especially women, felt included in the management of the community and thus in the stability of the area.

### ***Family ties and responsibilities***

Family reunion and kinship ties are sometimes pull factors drawing women to mining towns, to join family members or their husbands. In the second case (of Bona), after the death of her father, she chose to go and live with her mother’s family in Manono. In the interviews conducted during our fieldwork, many respondents acknowledged that

women often come to the mines to follow a parent, husband or son, or even a sister or a brother. The sentiment expressed by one female miner was echoed by many other respondents: "Women are following the presence and the choice of their husbands."

Pull factors attracting women to the mining centres also include the possibility of taking over the family business outside of the mines. This seems to create a form of navigation where women coming from a situation of victimhood are acting tactically, by carefully managing their inheritance by creating networks around them:

Me and my husband separated five years ago, and I came to live in Kalemie with my mother and my two kids. At that time, my father was doing business between Kalemie and Kisengo ... but some time after my arrival home, my father had a heart attack, and there was a significant loss in his investment in the Musebe gold mines. I decided to come to Kisengo to look after his business and see if I can sell it: He had been selling beer, he had two motor pumps that he was renting to diggers and he had houses for which he was getting rent money. After some time here, I noticed that there are a lot of business opportunities and money is flowing. So I took over the family business ... I stay in Kisengo for three months and the following three months I am in Kalemie with my kids. I am here just for business ... (Bea, Kisengo, 2014)

Another pull factor is the possibility of doing business inside the mines:

My husband was killed by a gunshot after a robbery in the mines. He was a pit owner. After the funeral, his friends told me to take over the business. I knew little about that job, but his friends, as well as the women miners' association, helped me a lot. I didn't have a choice, I have to take care of my four children ... (Esta, Nyabibwe, 2014)

These two quotes refer to the opportunities that living and working at the mining site can offer, illustrating how something driven by necessity has become an opportunity. These two women may be considered victims of life circumstance (because of either their separation from or the death of their husband). The mining site is not a better place for a single woman than a village, but it may offer opportunities thanks to the social and economic connections they inherit or create (investments of the late father, friends of the late husband, women miners' association). This was the case with Bona, as for many other women who have decided to live in a win-win relation with a man to help improve the women's business.

### ***Finding a new or better life***

Participants in this study remarked that mining centres such as Manono or Nyabibwe generally have more infrastructural development than do the surrounding villages, and this better infrastructure and the related improvements in quality of life might attract people to these areas. Thus, having had to abandon their original residences due to the war, people come to settle in the mining centres to have access to more facilities, such as good schools or universities for their children, or a large hospital.

The decision to move to mining areas can also come from the desire to seek more freedom. It can mean the possibility for a woman to make her own life choices. Women may also flee their own households because of family conflict. One woman recounted her experience with this:

I am from Kavumu (30 km from Bukavu city). I am the daughter of a high-ranking soldier, and I moved here because he was too harsh with me. Two years ago, I was dating a guy, and we

were really in love ... I got pregnant, and he was ready to marry me ... but he was Burundian, and my father didn't like it and flatly refused to hear about him again. As an army officer my father has some power, and he made my friend leave the town. I tried many times to make him understand, but he didn't want to. I got mad at him, and first I went to Bukavu city, where I worked in a night club for a while. I met some friends who told me about Kamituga ... (Lisette, Kamituga, 2014)

In addition to illustrating the desire to find a new and better life, this account also shows how women may seek to construct a life away from family ties that they find to be oppressive. Mining towns, again, are a place to turn to in such situations.

The findings in this section contribute to challenging the common idea that women's motivations to move to mining communities centre only on coercion or poverty. Findings also suggest that artisanal mining sites are not necessarily experienced as insecure by women or that insecurity would be their prime concern. Motives that trigger women to work in the mining areas are complex and interlinked.

Along with the various reasons leading women to migrate to the mining centres, there are also different challenges. The following section seeks to understand the challenges that women face when living or working in the mining centres.

### Trapped in poverty: women navigating the hardships of mining

Women in our study came to the mining sites with the hope of escaping hardship and finding a better life. Where some are able to identify and construct opportunities, others find hardship continues and feel trapped in the mining site, without prospects to move ahead or to go back to their previous lives. The challenges most reported by women during the interviews were cultural beliefs limiting women's access to mining, sexual harassment and loss of respect, in addition to suffering from diseases and lacking time to take care of their children. Some women felt stuck in a poverty trap, related to low salaries, bad working conditions and stigmatisation. Where women's motivations to migrate to the mining areas were varied, the women were uniform in their view that the biggest limitation experienced once in the mining sites was the work conditions they face along the supply chain of the minerals.

At most of the mining sites, women are denied access to the place where the minerals are extracted (pit) because of cultural taboos and beliefs. It is said that women will bring bad luck to the *creuseurs* (diggers). In many mining sites, women's participation is limited to the point of purchase (*point d'achat*), where they can buy and sell various goods. Some women have challenged these taboos and the prohibition to enter the mines. At some mining sites (mostly in North Katanga), because of the harsh economic situation, more women are working in the pit, helping to transport the minerals from the place of excavation to the pit entrance, but this is unusual, and only acceptable for the sake of helping them (see also Bashwira and Hilhorst, [forthcoming](#)).

Most women are situated at a low position in the mineral supply chain and engage in low-paid work that is very physically demanding. Unable to move out of poverty, they find themselves increasingly dependent on more powerful people in the mines (see also Bashwira and Cuvelier, [forthcoming](#)). Many female miners interviewed for this study recognised the occurrence of *transactional sex*<sup>8</sup> at the mining sites, saying there is no alternative if they and their families are to survive. Women make strategic use of (longer



term) relationships with sexual partners, capitalising on their contact with *creuseurs* or other key actors in the supply chain. Depending on their position, these men gave them access to the mines and additional benefits, got them listed for crushing or transport of minerals, gave them extra mineral tailings to process, and shared business or administrative information. We also found a case of women forced to remain in the mining community for lack of money to pay their travel back to their family with all their children, after having been rejected by their husbands. This experience (of being stuck in the mines) is mostly related to the experience of women who came with their husbands or came to join them. Many of these women have experienced rejection and separation and want to return to their home towns, but are unable to do so.

### Progressing at the mining site: women starting a business

Where some women become trapped in poverty, others manage to build a better life in the mining centres and some become economically very successful (see the case of Bona). These women successfully navigate the gendered conditions in the mining economy. We encountered several women who were able to develop profitable businesses. During the war, some women engaged in some kind of business first out of necessity, and then remained better off after the war because of the benefits they acquired. As one participant's experience demonstrates, this is sometimes the result of individual opportunity:

I first started my business in 1998. At that time, there were no money flows, but [Rwandan] soldiers from the RCD [*Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* or *Rally for Congolese Democracy*]<sup>9</sup> were present in the centre of Manono, and they were willing to pay good money for beer and cigarettes, which were hard to find. I began by selling drinks for a friend, who bought them himself in another city. In return, we would share the profits. After a while, I was able to buy my own rack full of beer. He showed me where I could supply myself and how to negotiate. When people began to return from the host region, I already had a well-established business. Although the price of beer is lower now because of the opening of road access, new people have come to the mines, and the cash flow has remained fairly stable. With time and competition, I diversify my activities and spread my investments around. Now I also have a hotel and a restaurant business ... (Espe, Manono, 2014)

However, the continued benefit experienced by some women after the conflict may also relate to a group initiative, in which social networks play an especially important role:

After fleeing the conflict in 2004 of Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo [AFDL],<sup>10</sup> we returned to our home place. There was nothing left of our previous life. Everything had been looted or destroyed; houses were burnt. In the host place, some of us had already started small businesses [using the money they had brought with them] just for survival. During that terrible period when we were back home, 19 of us decided to put our money together and to start a savings group. As we were all businesswomen, we could afford it. The presence of mining activities helps us a lot because of the regular flows of people coming over. We made a first deposit of 100 USD each and then had to pay 10 USD per week. Then we started a rotating credit. This helps us to reinvest in our businesses and for some of us to start new activities. (Consolata, Nyabibwe, 2014)

The above account of a savings group is a good example of how people, after some time in the mining area, created some social networks. Although groups like this tend to

involve those who are already economically better off, to a lesser extent these groups are also accessible to women with lower economic standing (see also Bashwira, [forthcoming](#)).

## Conclusions

Several authors have described the difficulties that women encounter when living and working in mining centres. Among the suggested solutions are possibilities for alternative livelihoods, allowing women to exit mining sites. We discussed (and criticised) this policy orientation elsewhere (Bashwira et al. 2014), stressing the need to understand the motivations that drive women to migrate to mining sites in the first place and the stakes they develop that keep them there. This article contributes to that goal by presenting qualitative evidence collected through focus group discussions, individual interviews and observations from multiple mining sites in eastern DRC. The study aimed to make sense of the logic of the presence of women in artisanal mining communities. We found that women expressed motives for migration in relation to insecurity, poverty or economic opportunity, and the ambition of starting a new life.

Our findings show how the different reasons mentioned by women for living and working in the mining areas interact and intertwine. Push and pull factors, although initially distinct, merge over time to create hybrid motives: It is not simply out of necessity or by choice. Rather, it is about navigating multiple constraints and seeking opportunities for improvement. Although some women were forced by circumstances of war, family constraints or a lack of alternative opportunities to live in the mining areas, these women have also found ways, through their social world, to turn their circumstances into opportunities. It is important to take into account the diversity of women's motives leading them to choose to migrate to or settle in the mining areas. It is certainly insufficient and not fair to say that these women are all gold-diggers (coming to mine zones to "get rich quick from linking themselves to rich men"), although the urban mining environment, with its flows of money, also attracts its share of these – both male and female. For many women, migration to the mining areas is about making the best of a life impacted by violence, poverty and gender inequality and a narrow economic basis from which to start. However, in the mining activities, women still face marginalisation and many challenges, including exclusionary cultural beliefs, disease and the risk of falling into the poverty trap.

As this paper shows, women miners are not a homogeneous group: women differ both in their motives and in their economic situation. Yet participants in the study unanimously considered mining to be their main source of income, and many saw mining as a unique opportunity in the absence of alternative possibilities. This study reveals both the challenges and the opportunities that some women seize and create in the mining areas. Drawing on the concept of social navigation, we have shown how women go from situations of necessity to those of choice and opportunity, creating new sources of revenue and improving their initial situation of vulnerability.

## Notes

1. At the time of fieldwork, this mine was part of the Katanga province. After the splitting up of the existing 11 provinces into 26, the area that was known as Northern Katanga became Tanganyika province.

2. Taking the case of militia members in Guinea Bissau, Vigh showed how these people tried to move their boat across troubled waters that have been compared to uncertainty of life. While doing their best to keep afloat and to reach a self-chosen point of destination, they take into account both their current position and possibilities as well as the ones they imagine to have in the future; young men described by Vigh have to navigate the highly unstable and unpredictable socio-political landscape in Guinea-Bissau.
3. Diana and Bona are pseudonyms.
4. *Twangeuse* is the name used for women who are crushing and grinding mineral ores in Kamituga sites. It comes from an adaptation into French of Swahili language, *twanga*, which means to pound, with the French suffix “euse” to mean someone who pounds. These women are using an iron mortar and pestle to reduce the mineral into powder. In semi-industrial mining they use a hammer or even the mortar but just to reduce the stones by crushing before they are put in a crusher machine.
5. The Rwandan war of 1992 led to an influx of refugees into the DRC. Among these people there were many former Rwandese Hutu soldiers who recreated their armed forces in the DRC in the name of self-protection. Having no source of funding, they relied on looting surrounded villages over lucrative mining interests (Carayannis 2009).
6. The term “Mai-Mai” (Mayi-Mayi) refers to a range of local and community-based militias active in DRC. They were basically formed to defend their local territory against other armed groups, to resist the invasion of Rwandan forces and Rwanda-affiliated Congolese rebel groups, but some used their position to exploit the war for their own advantage by looting and banditry.
7. CSAC was installed by the non-governmental organisation Observatoire Gouvernance et Paix under the initiative of a Pact project in Nyabibwe. The CSAC in Nyabibwe is the equivalent of the Comité Local de Suivre (CLS) at other mining sites.
8. According to Formson and Hilhorst (2016), transactional sex can be defined in simple terms as “sex provided in exchange for something, [it is] culturally determined and constructed.” The term transactional sex is used by various scholars to refer to engagement in sex in exchange for cash, goods, services, commodities or privileges in order to meet the needs and wants of the parties involved. The authors further explain that the real difference between transactional sex and prostitution is maintained in many local vocabularies and hence the distinction is socially relevant in many contexts.
9. The RCD is a political party and a former rebel group that operated in the eastern region of the DRC. It was said to be supported by the Government of Rwanda and was a major armed faction in the Second Congo War (1998–2003).
10. The AFDL was a coalition of selected Congolese groups with some neighbouring countries such as Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi that brought late Laurent Desire Kabila to power in the First Congo War (which ended in 1996). The alliance fell apart when Kabila did not agree to obey the dictates of his backers (especially Rwanda and Burundi), creating other armed factions such as the RCD, and marked the beginning of the Second Congolese War in 1998.

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