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Resources and resourcefulness: Roles, opportunities and risks for women working at artisanal mines in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo



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ABSTRACT

Two dominant narratives have characterized the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): (1) the horrific abuse of women through sexual violence and (2) the use of “conflict minerals” to fuel the fighting. These two advocacy narratives intersect uniquely in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) towns and can lead to flawed understandings of the true dynamics of women’s experiences in these contexts. Mining areas are important centers of economic activity for women, but also pose distinct risks. A simplistic portrayal of women’s victimization in mining towns suppress discussion of their participation in non-conflict political and social processes. Yet, these processes are among the most important to ensure that women secure opportunities for long-term, substantive engagement in mining activities. This paper draws on systematically collected qualitative data from two territories in South Kivu, Walungu and Kalehe, to examine how women negotiate these complex social and economic mining landscapes in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Their accounts compel a re-examination of development efforts to remove women from the mines altogether, and to look more closely at the measures available to help them realize their legal rights to work safely and fairly in these contexts.

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1. Introduction

In the mining town of Nyabibwe in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a respected woman, Mama Constance,¹ who had worked in the mines for years, was asked by a local leader to help address the fact that many young women were flocking to the area seeking economic opportunity. While these women may have hoped to open restaurants and undertake trade, they most often ended up having to engage in transactional sex in order to survive. Mama Constance stated, “That was why the chef de poste² came and said we need to look after [these young women]. Let us pick women and

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¹ Name changed to protect the privacy of the interviewee.

² Head of the locality.

look after them – the beaten [and] raped. I was selling beer up at the mine, they picked me because I was serious and was able to look after them.”

The influx of these young women seeking work was taxing to the under-developed town infrastructure. The young women engaging in the sex trade did not have the money to pay for health services for themselves or their children. The clinic struggled to respond to these health needs and the women, knowing they could not pay their clinic fees, would wait to seek care only when their medical problems became severe.

Mama Constance, with the support of local leaders, established an informal association of sex workers and vulnerable women. Each member contributed a fee of five dollars, which was later used to support members' health care bills or to cover other expenses. Mama Constance described this process:

[A member] will pay some small money to enter the association, it will stay in the mchango (pot of contributions), many of them will have children without a dad so this money helps them get health support, and other support when they are sick or have problems.

Women who became a part of this association described it as one of the most important factors in allowing them to access healthcare, withstand financial shocks and receive peer-support. This intervention was achieved with no outside financial input. A combination of political will, dynamic individual change-makers and social organization helped address some of these young women's most pressing problems. The young women in the association decided to play on their label of “femmes libres” (loose women or prostitute) which can also mean “free women”, so they decided to name their organization “The Association of Free Women.”

Mama Constance's story speaks to the dynamics explored in this paper: namely the intersection of women's vulnerability, agency and employment in artisanal mining towns in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Her story, like that of many of the accounts from women working in mining towns visited as part of the research drawn upon here, challenges assumptions of the two dominant narratives characterizing the conflict in eastern Congo by showing women to be dynamic agents in mining towns. Advocacy narratives describe the country's war-torn east as the “rape capital of the world” where the violence is driven by “conflict minerals” serving to fuel the activities of rebel groups. Yet, the story of Mama Constance emphasizes the fact that women actively seek out work in mining towns and face a more complex landscape of risk than one solely driven by conflict-related violence. As will be discussed, many advocacy groups and media reports emphasize the barbaric conditions in DRC's mining towns, which are depicted as lawless drivers of violence. But a closer examination reveals much more nuanced and complicated realities.

The purpose of the paper is to expand the current characterization of women's victimhood in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) communities in eastern DRC. Information gathered from women currently working in mining towns shows promise for women's self-organization, a policy approach in eastern DRC that goes beyond the current programming which focuses on treating women as victims of war and rape through isolated medical and social services. This research draws on findings from focus groups and interviews in two territories in South Kivu, Kalehe and Walungu. These women discussed their experiences, priorities, most pressing needs, and provided suggestions for improving their situation. This paper will first explore how the “conflict minerals” and the “rape in war” narratives provide an inadequate framework for developing effective solutions to these women's problems. It subsequently explores how these solutions can be improved with additional input from women working in these areas.

The first section of this paper reviews women's participation in ASM in developing contexts. The paper goes on to examine the case DRC specifically and how the discourses about women in mining towns influence the development and policy efforts crafted for women in ASM towns in eastern DRC. This section will explore more closely how the “conflict minerals” and the “rape in war” advocacy have led to partial or inadequate programming responses in their separate spheres, and goes on to discuss the implications in the mining towns where these two themes converge. The results of the research are presented in the second section, which explores the ways in which women see themselves within broader social and political contexts. The paper concludes by reflecting on women's futures in ASM in these areas.

2. Women's roles in mining towns: perils and prospects

In Sub-Saharan Africa, roughly nine million people labor in ASM (Hayes, 2008). Upwards of 40–50% of this group are women (Hinton, Veiga, & Beinhoff, 2003). As is the case in other ASM environments globally, the women in eastern DRC undertake a variety of jobs across the mineral supply chain, most commonly menial tasks such as sorting, gathering, and washing, and providing services to the mining community such as cooking, running small businesses and the sex trade (Hayes, 2008; Hayes & Perks, 2012; Lahiri-Dutt, 2008).

Mining towns are appealing to women and other traditionally-marginalized populations because they offer employment to groups that had previously been excluded from many opportunities (Hilson, 2008a, 2008b; Hilson & Banchirigah, 2009). As Hilson (2009) explains, this phenomenon began to be visible in the 1990s, when “The sector's rapid expansion, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and accounts of it providing employment to vulnerable groups, including women and children suggested that its existence was linked strongly to peoples' hardship” (p. 1).

Work from a number of developing contexts emphasizes the difficult nature of women's roles in ASM. In addition to the generally unsafe and unsanitary working conditions that most workers in ASM communities experience, women are vulnerable to additional forms of exploitation and abuse. In Lahiri-Dutt's (2000, 2009) research on ASM in South Asia, she

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