



Review Article

Women, mining and development: An emerging research agenda



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ABSTRACT

This critical review argues that the experiences and perspectives of women in relation to the extractive industries have often been absent from analysis of the impacts of mining in the global South. This paper therefore explores the ways in which women in developing countries are affected by the expansion of extractive industries, bringing together a dispersed literature, scattered across disciplines and relating to geographically diverse locations, in order to provide a comprehensive overview of key debates in relation to women and mining, and generate momentum for a new research agenda in this area. The review concentrates on four key intersecting areas – women as mineworkers; the gendered impacts of mining, and specifically the disproportionately negative impacts on women; women's changing roles and identities in communities affected by mining; and finally gendered inequalities in relation to the benefits of mining.

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1. Introduction

Natural resource extraction of all kinds plays an increasingly prominent role in the economic development strategies of many countries across the global south. In relation to mining, this involves the extraction of a wide range of resources, from gold and silver to clay and salt. A diverse and extensive body of literature addresses the myriad issues and debates arising from these socially and environmentally destructive processes of extraction. Such issues include analysis of processes of negotiating resource governance and territorial rights (Bebbington et al., 2008; Hilson and Maconachie, 2008; Bebbington, 2012; Haalboom, 2012);

understanding the nature and extent of mining conflicts in diverse contexts (Haarstad and Fløysand, 2007; Kuecker, 2007; Gordon and Webber, 2008; Arellano-Yanguas, 2012); understanding and uncovering the complex social, environmental and economic impacts of mining on local communities (Bech et al., 1997; Earthworks and Oxfam America, 2004; Kitula, 2006; ActionAid, 2008; Bebbington and Williams, 2008; Carrington et al., 2010; Earthworks and Mining Watch Canada, 2012); and interrogating processes of environmental impact assessments, free and informed prior consent, and community consultations (Whiteman and Mamen, 2002; Whitmore, 2006; Macintyre, 2007; Li, 2009a), to name but a few areas of recent scholarly interest. However, it is notable that women and their experiences and perspectives tend to be absent from these accounts. Where women are mentioned, it is often a brief comment in relation to other substantive topics, with relatively little research specifically focusing on the impacts

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of mining on women, and their experiences in relation to mining and the mining industry. This critical review therefore aims to draw together a dispersed literature, scattered across disciplines and relating to geographically diverse locations, in order to provide a comprehensive overview of key debates in relation to women and mining. Given the vast range of topics and contexts that this encompasses, this paper aims for breadth rather than in-depth analysis, in order to signpost key areas for further research, and generate momentum for a new research agenda in this area.

I argue that the situation of women in relation to mining activities is currently under-recognised and under-theorised but is a key issue in terms of thinking through and critiquing the role of the mining sector in relation to development and to poor communities in the global South. In this paper, I therefore emphasise that women should be recognised as important actors in communities affected by mining, and examine this in relation to four key, intersecting areas – women as mineworkers (both in relation to artisanal and small scale mining (ASM) and larger scale industrial mining); the gendered impacts of mining, and specifically the disproportionately negative impacts on women; women's changing roles and identities in communities affected by mining; and finally gendered inequalities in relation to the benefits of mining. The paper is underpinned by a feminist approach to making visible, understanding and addressing the issues and inequalities faced by women, particularly poor women, across the global South. Due to the already substantial scope of this topic, I have restricted the focus of this paper to the global South. However, I recognise that many of the issues covered are by no means experienced only in the global South but resonate across the extractives sector, including in contexts across the global North. I therefore make links to literature relating to the global North where appropriate. Throughout the paper, I draw on academic literature from across the social sciences and beyond, bringing this into dialogue with practitioner/policy-based literature, which has arguably been particularly important in recognising women's positioning in relation to mining activities.

The paper draws out the gendered dynamics of a range of contexts across the ASM and large scale mining sectors, whilst recognising that there are great variations both within and between these sectors. Similarly, the category 'women' is very diverse, and women in different social and economic positions will experience and engage with the mining sector in different ways. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address these differences in detail but I do recognise that the impacts of mining on women are mediated by class, ethnicity, age, disability, and levels of literacy (amongst other factors), and are differently experienced by rural and urban women. I aim to draw out some of these differences where possible throughout the paper.

2. Women as mineworkers

Of the four areas covered by this review, this is the area where there is greatest recognition of women as important actors, though this nevertheless remains rather patchy. Although both historically and more recently, mining and miners have been associated with strongly male traits and identities (Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre, 2006b; Lahiri-Dutt, 2010), the reality of the situation is in fact a lot more complex, with women participating in a wide range of mining and mining-related activities across the global North and South (Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre, 2006b). However, traditional gender stereotypes mean that women's contribution to this sector has been largely invisible – “women's work in the mines has remained obscure and hidden, forgotten and devalued” (Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre, 2006a: 3), and women have faced a range of challenges and discrimination in relation to their involvement in this sector.

When examining women's direct involvement in mining, it is important to distinguish between artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), and the larger scale, industrialised mining industry.¹ It is in relation to ASM that most literature exists about women mineworkers, and thus it is to this aspect that we turn first. ASM refers to the “low-tech, labour intensive mineral extraction and processing found across the developing world” (Hilson and McQuilken, 2014), encompassing varying degrees of formality and legality, characterised by “low levels of environmental, health and safety awareness” (Hilson, 2002: 4), and usually located in remote rural areas (Hilson, 2002). The precise nature and extent of ASM varies across the global South but conservative estimates are that it involves at least 25 million people across 70 countries of the global South (Hruschka and Echavarría, 2011). Although accurate figures are difficult to ascertain, Hilson (2002) suggests that women could represent approximately one third of the ASM sector, and notes that in several countries, women's involvement is as great or even greater than men's – for example, in Guinea where women make up 75% of workers involved in small-scale mining, and in countries such as Mali and Zimbabwe where women's participation is around 50% (Hilson, 2002). However, despite the significant numbers of women involved across the global South, many authors highlight the historical and ongoing invisibility of women in ASM (Hinton et al., 2003; Lahiri-Dutt, 2008; Dhaatri Resource Centre for Women and Children and Samata, 2010; Orozco Zevallos, 2013).

Literature on women workers in the ASM sector responds to this perceived invisibility and tends to take the form of a number of stand-alone case study examples of women's unrecognised involvement in mining in particular country contexts, with discussion of the different roles undertaken by women and the challenges they face. The collection by Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre (2006b) and Lahiri-Dutt (2011a) and the chapter by Hinton et al. (2003) are the most comprehensive collections of evidence in this regard, with examples from other sources being rather scattered across the academic and policy literature. Overall, it is notable that most literature focuses on Asia and the Pacific Rim, and Africa, with relatively little examining the Latin American context.

Although it is important not to overgeneralise across the varied regions of the global South, it is evident that across the developing world women are involved in almost every stage of mineral transportation and processing, but generally participate very little in underground mining, particularly as in many countries women have been considered to bring bad luck if they enter the mine (Van Hoecke, 2006; Hargreaves, undated-b).² Women's work in ASM is overwhelmingly concentrated in the processing of minerals – carrying out arduous and often hazardous manual tasks such as crushing, milling, grinding and sorting rock, and subsequently concentrating gold, a process which uses extremely toxic materials, predominantly mercury (Hinton et al., 2003; Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre, 2006b).³ In Burkina Faso and Mali, for example, 90% of these processing activities are undertaken by women (Hinton et al., 2006). These tasks tend to be those with the lowest economic returns and that require high levels of manual

¹ We should also recognise, as Moody (2007) highlights, that these two sectors do not exist in isolation from each other, and there are often connections and overlaps between the two (Hentschel et al., 2002; Chaloping-March, 2006; Moody, 2007).

² There are, however, a few contemporary accounts that include examples of women working underground, including in small numbers in China (Yao, 2006), Bolivia (Chaparro Ávila, 2005; Van Hoecke, 2006) and in parts of the Philippines (Chaloping-March, 2006), as well as in larger scale mining in South Africa (Benya, 2010). Historically, however, women's participation in underground mining was much more widespread (Mercier and Gier, 2009; Dhaatri Resource Centre for Women and Children and Samata, 2010; Lahiri-Dutt, 2010; Hargreaves, 2014d), prior to the introduction of the International Labour Organization's 1935 legislation making it illegal for women to work underground.

³ See Veiga and Hinton (2002), Hinton et al. (2003) and Hruschka and Echavarría (2011) for detailed accounts of this process and of the hazards involved.

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