

A step into the male dominated mining sector: Women's participation in mining: the case of Kwekwe District, Zimbabwe.

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Abstract: Zimbabwe's determination to empower its citizens is loud and clear and the policy is rooted in distributive justice. This has resulted in people-oriented policies being implemented in various sectors including the mining industry. The consequence has been a significant penetration and control of the small scale mining sector by Africans. However, the affirmative action has somehow missed a target. It has tended to empower men alone than women resulting in serious economic and social gender inequality in the society. The paper analyses the contribution of gender neutral mining cooperatives to the empowerment of women in the society. As both women and men possess inherent skills and weaknesses gender inclusive syndicates will ensure optimum utilisation of their individual skills. The resultant exploitation of gendered skills will place women and men on an equal footing in production and development. Thus development will cease being a male-driven process but a game of all people in the society. The paper argues that gender-neutral mining cooperatives will promote social and economic visibility of women in the society and ultimately enhance gender equality in resource ownership and utilisation. It further posits that unless strong women-oriented action is taken and the media plays an active role in the promotion of such policies, the realisation of economic freedom by women will remain a pipedream.

Keywords: Empowerment, gender, equity, participation, non-sexist policies, media awareness, mining, cooperatives.

I. Introduction

Study area and research methodology

Kwekwe district is in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe and its administrative centre is Kwekwe town. It lies between Kadoma (in the north) and Gweru (in the south). The area is generally dry and hot. In spite of its small size Kwekwe town is home to big industries such as Ziscosteel, Zimasco, Sabel Chemical, Lancashire Steel, Steelmakers and Bimco. For years these industries have provided employment to several thousands of people. However most of these industries either are operating below capacity or have closed shop. The district is located in the mineral-rich belt known as the Great Dyke (Maposa, Hlongwana and Muguti 2011). This partly explains why the district has been invaded by gold panners from all walks of life. Places such as Totororo, Sherwood Block, Bamhara, Gaika Park, Globe and Phoenix, Mbizo 20, Empress, just to mention a few have witnessed unprecedented gold panning activities in recent times. The activities are partly a consequence of the economic meltdown which hit the entire country between 2000 and 2009 and the subsequent deindustrialisation in the area. The study employed predominantly qualitative research techniques, namely observation, questionnaires, interviews, and textual analysis. Document interrogation involved a study of written and published documents such as newspapers, books, and journal articles. Most of the newspapers were obtained from the Midlands Observer in Kwekwe. Participant observation was undertaken in areas such as Amaveni, Gaika, Mbizo, Sherwood Block and other sites. This research technique shaped the study in two ways. First, fieldwork was conducted in situ, that is in the existential context of the gold panners. Secondly the interaction with the women yielded first hand information on their level of ownership of mineral claims, achievements and challenges which have militated against their meaningful participation in the mining sector. The information was interpreted and analysed qualitatively and laid the foundation for the views which are expressed in this paper.

The mining sector has over time been a male domain and the trend continues today. During the colonial era women worked alongside men in alluvial gold mining. Gold mining was an important economic activity. This is supported by the fact that the origins and the expansion of some pre-colonial states for instance the Great Zimbabwe State was a result a long distance trade which depended among other things on mining. It was possible for the women to take part in mining because gold and other minerals then were collected from the surface and shallow pits (Mudenge 1982). In addition to the collection of alluvial gold, women played a critical part in religious functions which were conducted to promote mining businesses. For example during mineral searching rituals, female spirit mediums led the way to ensure successful exploration, prospecting and mineral

mining (Banda 2012). The importance of women in mining then was graphically depicted by the shape of the smelting furnace. The furnace had breast like features which signified procreation and fertility of women.. This implied that smelting was an important process which produced valuable items for domestic use and long distance trade (Banda 2012).

However, the advent of colonial rule spelt doom for further participation in mining by women. As most areas were fenced and became private properties women could no longer access the mineral rich areas. Furthermore, deep level underground mining which replaced surface mining created difficult conditions for women to take part. Women were further alienated from the mining sector by legislations which were enacted to bar them from the mining areas. To make matters worse the myth that to be intimate with a woman prior going to work would cause accidents lend weight to the mine owners' resolve to exclude women from mining premises (Banda 2012). However, as time went on, colonial mine owners permitted married women to join their husbands at the mining sites. This was a ploy to ensure maximum exploitation of the African because the presence of women at the work place would prevent male workers from visiting rural areas frequently (Banda 2012). The separation of women and men had proved to be counter-productive because time and again men left the mining sites for rural areas to see their families. This however did not result in women being employed or allowed to collect alluvial gold which was found in abundance in mining communities. Their presence was essentially a source of motivation for men to stay focused and continue working for the white men. Thus, as far as mining business was concerned women had no place in it.

II. Defying Gender Imbalances: Women venture into mining

The Influence of Post-Independence Policies

The attainment of independence in 1980 kindled the desire to introduce people oriented policies. The hallmark of the economic policies was to even out unfair advantages which the white community had enjoyed over the black majority. This resulted in the introduction by Zimbabwean government of non-sexist policies to empower black people. Laws, for example, to permit small scale miners to own mineral claims were enacted. The ministries of Mines, Women Affairs, and other government departments have played their role in promoting women awareness and participation in the mining sector. While the decision was motivated by the desire to empower the disadvantaged blacks, it was also a result of the realisation that small scale mining business would complement commercial mining in the exploitation of minerals in the country. The introduction of the indigenisation policies and the subsequent liberal economic and political environment resulted in Zimbabwean women joining the mining industry with some becoming mine owners (Maramba 1998). The women are of varied backgrounds: rural women who were able to raise capital from farming; retired or retrenched women those from politics (Maseko 2013) and the unemployed who are taking part in illegal gold mining as a survival imperative. The contribution of illegal mining in sustaining the lives of both women and men is evidenced by a hive of panning activities in mineral - rich places such as Shamva, Mazowe, Shurugwi, Kwekwe and of late Chiyadzwa in Marange. Newly-coined vocabulary in the small scale mining sector notably makorokoza (panner), gweja (male panner) and gwejerina (female panners) testifies that women have made significant inroads into the small scale mining sector (Sibanda and Nyota 2011). However, in addition to government's effort to encourage women to participate in mining, economic pressures have also compelled men and women to take part in illegal mining as a survival imperative.

Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP)

The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) which was officially introduced in 1991 by the Zimbabwean Government to resuscitate the economy turned out to be a boomerang. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank prescriptions notably the retrenchment of workers, devaluation of the national currency, removal of price controls and subsidies on basic commodities, trade liberalisation to mention just a few devastated the Zimbabwean society to the core. In line with this background, companies in Kwekwe town demonstrated their compliance with the IMF dictated conditions by retrenching more women than men (Mutize 2013). Companies targeted women because the majority of them were in the low income bracket and therefore it was easy to pay their terminal benefits. Also the belief that men were the sole breadwinners increased employers' determination to retrench women (Mutize 2013). In addition to retrenchment, women had to contend with the high cost of living following the devaluation of the Zimbabwean dollar and the removal of price controls and subsidies on basic commodities. Frustration resulted in women committing suicide and indulging in prostitution. Some women took part in economic activities such as cross-border business and illegal mining (Chihwehwe 2013). Participation in mining therefore was made easier by the abundance of alluvial gold and the presence of old gold mines in the vicinity such as Gaika Park, Empress Mine, Globe and Phoenix and other places. Here men and women foraged the surroundings for residual gold.

The land reform programme

The land reform programme was a landmark event whose effects have been felt in many sectors of the economy. Among others, it resulted in mining activities being carried out in the former white-owned commercial farms. Before the advent of the land reform programme loitering in commercial farming areas was tantamount to trespassing and was a punishable offence. However the land reform programme opened access to the gold-rich soils in the former commercial farms. Some individuals were fortunate in that they were given plots in gold-rich areas thus prompting serious gold panning activities in the resettlement areas. This has brought in a new dimension ; that the new farmers are participating in gold mining at the expense of farming (Jambaya 2013). However, the criticism is unfair because the majority of them are mining gold from their individual plots. Moreover they have not abandoned farming. During the rainy season farming is a fulltime business which preoccupies every new farmer in the resettlement areas (Jambaya 2013). Therefore, gold mining is a seasonal economic activity which plays second fiddle to agriculture. Another contributory factor to gold mining is because of climatic challenges. Kwekwe district is found in farming region three which under normal circumstances receives rainfall which cannot sufficiently support crop life. This partly explains why the majority of the former commercial farmers focused more on wildlife management than crop farming. Crop growing was practised with the aid of irrigation thanks to the presence of perennial rivers in the district such as Sebakwe, Kwekwe, Munyati Mbembezani just to mention a few.

Furthermore the land reform programme has led to the unemployment of the former commercial farm workers, the majority of these being women. The new farmers are unable to employ the former farm workers. The new farmers have been facing serious operational challenges such as farming inexperience, financial institutions' unwillingness to lend them money and an unfavourable economic climate because of the sanctions imposed by the Western world on Zimbabwe. On the whole, the agrarian reform has indirectly contributed to the participation of women and men in small scale mining activities.

Economic meltdown

Economic decay which has become a salient feature of the Zimbabwean economy in the current era is a consequence of the Western-imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe and the chaotic land reform programme. The West argued that the land reform programme violated the inviolability of private property hence they reacted by imposing sanctions on Zimbabwe. What is clear is that it was a demonstration of solidarity with fellow whites who lost their farms to the black majority. The sanction clause among other things ordered a freeze on foreign direct investment from the United States of America, bilateral assistance from America and most European countries and issued a directive to all US companies to have no business dealings with companies associated with Zimbabwe (ZANU / PF Manifesto, 2008). While the sanctions were touted as smart, in practical terms the target was the entire Zimbabwean economy. Kwekwe, whose existence depended on the aforementioned industries and farming was not spared by the devastating the sanctions. The Zimbabwe Iron and Steel Company (Zisco) which was already ailing due to inept management finally grounded to a halt. The employees of ZISCO have been hit hardest as the declining of this life supporting industry has rendered them virtually destitute (Nkala 2013). The downstream industries in Kwekwe which relied on ZISCO have almost all closed shop, leaving Kwekwe and in particular Redcliff as near ghost towns. Notable industries such as Sable Chemicals and Zimasco are facing serious operational challenges. In addition to retrenching workers the companies have drastically downsized their operations that workers now work for two weeks a month (Mutize 2013). The unprecedented deindustrialisation has forced many women to take part in gold mining. At Amaveni, Rudolf, Mbizo 20, Tiger Rief and many other places, women are working alongside men. They are involved in hand milling of the mined ore, quarry stone crushing, and in the processing of gold. In spite of the fact that they have taken the mining sector by storm, the majority do not own mineral claims.

III. Constraints faced by women in the mining sector

Lack of capital

A lack of funding has remained a major challenge for small scale mining enterprises partly because financial institutions' confidence in the sector is low. Lack of funding has been worsened by their subordinate position in the society. Structural poverty which affects the majority of women is partly a result of men's gate keeping tendencies against them. As a result of their inferior status, participation in the mining sector has not been fruitful because they lack capital. While financial institutions have been encouraged to extend loans to all people regardless of sex, women remain victims of mistrust. Most of the financial institutions will not grant loans to a woman unless the husband has supported the application (Maramba 1998). This effectively rules out those who are not married in accessing loans. This partly explains why the majority of women in Kwekwe work for men instead of owning their own mineral claims. The failure by several women syndicates to succeed in the mining business is due to a degree on the non availability of capital. An informant at the Ministry of mines (Gweru) who declined to reveal his identity, attributed to women's failure to surrender monthly returns to the

Ministry of Mines to the lack of capital. However another informant at the Gweru offices argued that the failure to submit the returns was a ploy to avert the payment of tax. While the payment of tax is a normal business practice it has found little purchase among the small scale miners. Their argument is that the payment of the tax robs them of their hard earned money. Reacting to government position on the payment of tax, Takavarasha (2013) argued that, “---when the government increased the mining levies for small scale miners in 2012, production went down again---.” While both views are valuable, the former is more plausible as it was the same explanation for the failure of women syndicates in Chiredzi (Bongozo 2013). What emerges from the forgoing discussion is that participation in business requires capital. In addition to the initial capital which is required before a mineral claim is granted to an individual a mine owner needs substantial capital to see his business running.

Limited knowledge in the mining sector

The mining sector remains an unfamiliar territory for the majority of women. Women's dearth of experience is a result of their long history of exclusion from the sector and criminals are capitalising on their inexperience. A considerable number of women, who have shown interest in the mining industry, cannot easily distinguish between a gold bearing rock from an ordinary rock. This has resulted in many women syndicates losing gold to male conmen. The male labourers who are aware of the women's limited knowledge in the mining sector mislead women into believing that the rocks they are mining from underground are not rich in gold. However the so called waste rock is clandestinely traded during the night (Svova 2013). Svova who has since resigned from a mining syndicate to concentrate on her formal job expressed her disappointment at the loss of the precious mineral to the unscrupulous male labourers. This partly explains the failure by many women to make meaningful inroads into the mining sector. Furthermore, the rule of the thumb in the sector is that you should rarely trust people as every partner in the mining business is a potential criminal. Some women have fallen prey to conmen who are capitalising on their limited knowledge in the sector. Lack of knowledge has resulted in women losing rich ore and gold claims to male criminals. For example a woman who lost ownership of a claim had this to say, ‘I used to work on a farm. In 1993, I started working on mine. After gaining experience and saving money, I decided to get my own mine. I used to sell my gold through Mr. C.A prominent lawyer and business man. Unfortunately, Mr. C. took over my mine without my knowledge. It is difficult to get it back as I cannot afford legal advice, and because the man who stole my claim is a lawyer’ (Maramba 1998.19). Little did she suspect that her business partnership with the lawyer would result in her losing the claim; instead she thought that her life and business were safe with the lawyer.

Exploitation of women by men

In addition to open criminal activities women have suffered from subtle exploitation in the hands of men. Following the implementation of the land reform programme and the current measures which have been put in place to promote economic indigenisation, some whites who have farms in gold rich areas are promoting good neighbourliness by allowing women and men to mine gold from their farms under certain conditions (Svova 2013). At face value the white farmers are complementing government policy to eradicate poverty by availing acres of space to the poor men and women. Almost all black claim owners have this practice in place. Instead of having fulltime workers they allow women and men to mine gold from their claims on condition that they surrender the ore and gold obtained at the site to the claim owner for marketing. The understanding on paper is that the women and men will share the proceeds with the claim owners on the basis of an agreed formula. However, the labourers get pittance from their toil. The claim owners argue that the transport and milling costs are so high that little remains for sharing (Svova 2013). The labourers however, are of the feeling that they being cheated by the claim owners because the facts and figures regarding the marketing of gold are hardly presented for public scrutiny.

The non availability of basic tools and materials which miners need has exposed the miners to further exploitation. Among other requirements they need explosives, water pumps, compressors, food and torches (Ncube 2013). This has led to the rise of sponsors that is individuals who provide essential items to the miners for payment later. The agreement is that the sponsor will get the sum of money which every member of the syndicate is entitled to. By this arrangement the sponsor is an additional member to the existing syndicate. However, Ncube (2013) is of the view that the sponsor gets the lion's share of the proceeds because he inflates the value of the consumables he supplies to the syndicate. The result is that the miners have become objects of exploitation in the hands of the sponsors and claim owners.

IV. The way forward in the empowerment of women and benefits

Gender equitable utilisation of resources

Economic empowerment policies per se will not benefit the nation unless both males and females are viewed equally as needy citizens in the empowerment drive. Most of the empowerment measures which have been implemented so far, have tended to empower men alone than women thereby entrenching patriarchy and perpetuating women's exclusion from the centre. Although underdevelopment and poverty have been attributed to colonialism, cultural bias remains men's weapon of exclusion against women's participation in the economic sector. Regrettably, the sidelined women constitute more than half of the population and shoulder greater family responsibility. The adoption of gender neutral syndicates will open access for both men and women to the country's natural resources. The development of the sector in this way will be a key condition in promoting equitable gender resource utilisation. Empowering the nation in this manner is more advantageous and reliable to the country as it helps to counter the big companies who have devised means to siphon wealth out of the country. Furthermore joint gender participation in the economy will offer employment across gender divide and in the final analysis it will reduce the prevalence of poverty in the society.

Demystifying women incompetence in the mining sector

While the adoption of gender neutral cooperatives will help to empower women, in the long run it will help to eliminate gender stereotypes against women participation in the mining sector. The argument that mining is a dangerous activity has long been used to exclude women from having a stake in the mining sector. Research has shown that women can work alongside men in women friendly small scale mining environment. Moreover both sexes need each other's skills for small scale mining business to tick. Where open cast is the mode of operation women can work alongside men. After the mineral rock has been blasted by dynamite the collection of the debris for milling and processing becomes a simple task for women to carry out (Matanga 2013). At Rudolf for example, women are eke a living out of selling quarry stones which they collect from the open cast several metres deep from the earth's surface. Therefore, not all mining environments are inhospitable to women.

Furthermore, research has shown that women-men smart partnerships in mining produce more gains than when the two sexes operate in homogeneous syndicates. Women syndicates among other explanations have collapsed because of the absence of the male element in the syndicates (Svova, 2013). On the other hand women are more comfortable with hand milling and processing of gold than men. Therefore, the two sexes can complement each other in small scale mining. At Rudolf, Amaveni, Mbizo²⁰ to mention just a few places, women and men have forged successful partnerships. Men blast the mineral rock and ferry the rubble to the earth's surface where it is hand milled and processed by women. The majority of the men are happy with the involvement of women in the processing of gold because they are believed to be more reliable than men (Dube 2013). Furthermore the involvement of women in small mining business has indirectly rehabilitated the landscape. The waste rocks which are unearthed during man's never ending pursuit for gold are not wasted; they are crushed by women for the production of quarry stones. The result is that the waste rock is removed from the surface thereby mitigating environmental degradation (Maseko 2013). Women at Rudolf remarked that their business (quarry stone crushing) was more reliable than gold searching which is fraught with risk and uncertainty. In agreement with the women's view Naison Bokwe (2013) aptly remarked that, "before gold you get quarry stone."

Government support and supervision

While a handful of the miners have posited success in small scale mining the majority of them are pointing to the lack of tools as the cause of their failure in the mining business and are calling upon the government to assist them. Close to 80% of the miners are operating below 50% of their capacity due to a lack of capitalisation. However, players in the sector have indicated that with proper support they can increase their production capacity to over four tonnes per year (Mushaweve 2013). For example, women at Rudolf argue that their business would improve if they manage to acquire a crusher. Their product (quarry stone) would then compete with the Bimco quarry stone which is currently highly regarded in the area (Maseko 2013). While the miners are calling upon the government and the corporate world to assist them, the assistance can be extended to a registered group. In support of this view President Mugabe cited by (Matenga and Nyashanu 2013) had this to say, "We want them to pan and sell their minerals to Fidelity Printers and not sell clandestinely to unscrupulous buyers from outside the country. We want them organised and they will be supported by government." The formation of cooperatives would therefore enable the government and the corporate world to offer help. Apart from the provision of basic tools, the government can further provide technical support in the form of training workshops on workmanship, administration, mining economics and accounting and many other aspects of business. However, the handicap is that most of the small scale miners operate individually in the bush and therefore it is difficult to extend support to such individuals.

Furthermore, group mining activities would minimise landscape degradation. Registered syndicates among other things have a responsibility to protect the environment. Organised groups who operate under licensed conditions cannot afford to disregard environmental protection laws. This partly explains why the unregulated illegal gold miners have caused wanton destruction of terrestrial and aquatic environment in Kwekwe district. The general damaging impact includes soil compaction and accelerated deforestation along river banks. Furthermore, the pits which are left open have claimed the lives of animals and people. Aquatic life has also not been spared as a result of dangerous chemicals such as sulphuric acid, borax and cyanide. The illegal gold miners use these chemicals to remove impurities from alluvial gold. In response to the destructive activities of the illegal gold panners, Nelson Mangezi cited in (Maposa, Hlongwana and Muguti 2010) remarked that "Kwekwe has experienced massive environmental degradation due to illegal mining activities ----." This law of the jungle like conduct will become easy to arrest once regulated mining business is put in place.

Media awareness and Image Building

The media in Zimbabwe and specifically community newspapers in the midlands province also have a role to play in the mining sector. The media can foster positive images of against the stereotypes already present in society. Terms such as 'gweja' or 'gwejerina' mentioned above tend to discriminate all miners whether illegal or legal and women miners are not spared. McQuail (1994:1) describes the mass media as "a major source of definitions and images of social reality" thus through the use of non-discriminatory terms, the media can project a positive image of women miners.

Mining is a sector that is yet to accept women favourably and by building an awareness of the contribution women can make to the development of the sector, women can finally be recognized as equal players in the mining sector. The media can further provide a platform where women miners can be educated about the legal procedures involved in legally registering their claims, safety and health measures to be put in place and environment friendly mining methods stipulated within environmental laws.

V. Conclusion and recommendations

The study assessed the extent to which women have gained control of the small scale mining sector. The paper has established that women have made significant inroads into the sector though much ground is yet to be covered. Available evidence indicates that through policies of empowerment and indigenisation, women have been able to own mineral claims and others are running successful mining syndicates. Furthermore several other women are taking part in illegal mineral mining. This has improved the livelihoods of many women who have taken part in the mining sector. However, their entry into the sector has not been smooth sailing owing to a plethora of constraints. These range from the lack of technical knowhow in mining, the inability to work in dangerous mining environment, the failure to access loans, to men's indifference to accepting women as equal partners in the mining business. The result is that the majority of women play peripheral functions in the mining industry. In light of these findings the paper recommends that the government should consider the formation of gender inclusive cooperatives as a priority. Such initiatives will go beyond the empowerment of women but the entire society as both men and women will complement each other in supporting the family. Furthermore, it will bring sanity in the sector as the government will be in a position to monitor all activities ranging from environmental management, production to the marketing of minerals.

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