

Gendered Issues and Mining in Ghana: A Critical Perspective

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Graphical Abstract



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1 Background and Context

Mining has long occupied a central position in Ghana's development trajectory, contributing significantly to employment creation, export earnings, and fiscal revenue. Gold mining has shaped national economic narratives, attracting foreign direct investment and positioning Ghana as one of Africa's leading mineral producers [8]. Yet, alongside these macroeconomic gains, mining has generated environmental degradation, social dislocation and governance challenges. While these issues are increasingly acknowledged in policy debates, the gendered dimensions of mining remain insufficiently interrogated.

Extractive industries are often portrayed as gender-neutral economic activities, governed by technical, financial and geological considerations [4]. However, feminist political economy and resource governance studies consistently demonstrate that mining is embedded within gendered power relations that shape who gains access to resources, who bears environmental and social costs, and whose voices count in decision-making processes [13, 12]. In Ghana, these dynamics are particularly evident in artisanal and small-scale mining contexts, where regulatory gaps intersect with entrenched social norms.

This editorial argues that gender inequality is not peripheral to Ghana's mining challenges but is structurally embedded within the organization and governance of the sector. Addressing gendered injustices is therefore not only a matter of social equity but a prerequisite for sustainable mining governance and inclusive development.

2 Gendered Structure of Ghana's Mining Sector

2.1 Women's Participation and Economic Marginalization

Women's participation in Ghana's mining sector is substantial yet undervalued. Studies indicate that women constitute a significant proportion of the artisanal and small-scale mining labour force, particularly in processing, washing, transportation and trading activities [9, 22]. Despite this, women are rarely recognized as miners in formal policy and regulatory frameworks. Their work is often categorized as auxiliary or informal, reinforcing economic invisibility and exclusion from legal protections.

Structural barriers play a critical role in shaping these outcomes. Access to mineralized land in Ghana is mediated through customary tenure systems that privilege male authority, limiting women's ability to secure land rights or mining licenses [19]. Financial institutions similarly constrain women's participation through collateral requirements that disadvantage those without formal land ownership. These intersecting barriers confine women to low-return activities while men dominate capital-intensive and mechanized operations. The marginalization of women within mining economies reflects broader gender inequalities in access to productive resources. As feminist scholars argue, extractive economies frequently reproduce patriarchal labour hierarchies, where men control productive assets while women's labour is rendered expendable and informal [6, 14]. In Ghana, this pattern undermines both economic efficiency and social justice, as women's productive contributions remain systematically undervalued.

2.2 Gendered Environmental and Livelihood Impacts

Environmental degradation associated with mining is widely documented in Ghana, particularly in relation to water pollution, deforestation, and land degradation driven by both large-scale operations and illegal artisanal mining ("galamsey") [15, 1, 5, 16]. However, the gendered distribution of these impacts remains inadequately addressed. Women in mining-affected communities bear disproportionate environmental burdens due to socially constructed roles in agriculture, household water provision and food security. Contamination of rivers and streams increases the time and labour required for water collection, while land degradation undermines subsistence farming and women's income-generating activities [3]. These impacts intensify women's unpaid labour burdens and heighten vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity.

Despite these realities, environmental impact assessments and rehabilitation plans rarely integrate gender analysis. Mitigation strategies typically treat households as homogeneous units, obscuring intra-household inequalities and masking women's differentiated experiences [18]. This governance gap perpetuates environmental injustice by failing to recognize how environmental harm intersects with gendered livelihood systems.

3 Social Risks, Power Relations and Governance Failures

Beyond economic and environmental dimensions, mining environments in Ghana expose women to heightened social risks. Research across mining communities documents increased incidences of sexual harassment, transactional sex, domestic violence and economic exploitation, particularly in contexts characterized by weak regulation and male-dominated labour influxes [10, 21]. Women's vulnerability to these risks is compounded by exclusion from decision-making institutions governing land, mining rights, and community development. Customary authorities and mining committees are often male dominated, limiting women's ability to influence negotiations, compensation processes or dispute resolution mechanisms [2]. As a result, women's interests are frequently marginalized in community-company agreements and resettlement arrangements. These dynamics illustrate what scholars describe as the "feminization of extractive harm," whereby social and environmental costs are disproportionately borne by women, while economic bene-

fits accrue primarily to men [11]. Such patterns reflect broader governance failures that prioritize production and revenue over social equity and human security.

4 Legal, Policy and Institutional Implications

Ghana's mining governance framework has evolved considerably over the past two decades, incorporating environmental safeguards, revenue management mechanisms and institutional oversight structures. However, gender considerations remain weakly institutionalized. Key policy instruments, including mining legislation and environmental regulations, rarely address women's differentiated access to mining opportunities or their disproportionate exposure to harm. From a gender-and-law perspective, this omission represents a substantive equality gap. Formal equality before the law does not translate into equitable outcomes when structural barriers remain unaddressed [7]. Gender-responsive mining governance therefore requires targeted legal and policy reforms that move beyond neutrality to address underlying inequalities.

Such reforms should include deliberate measures to enhance women's access to mining licenses, financial resources, technical training and safer working conditions. Compensation and resettlement frameworks must explicitly recognize women's land use rights and livelihood losses, rather than assuming male household heads as sole beneficiaries. Institutional actors, including regulatory agencies and traditional authorities, must also be held accountable for gender inclusion in decision-making processes.

5 Towards Gender-Responsive and Sustainable Mining Governance

Sustainability in the mining sector cannot be achieved through technical regulation alone. It requires addressing the social relations that shape extraction, distribution, and environmental management. Gender-responsive governance is the systematic integration of gender analysis into policy design, implementation and monitoring [20]. In practice, this entails embedding gender considerations into environmental assessments, licensing procedures and community engagement strategies. Corporate social responsibility initiatives must similarly shift from symbolic inclusion towards substantive empowerment, supporting women's economic agency and leadership within mining communities. Evidence suggests that inclusive governance arrangements enhance conflict prevention, environmental stewardship and community resilience [17].

For Ghana, integrating gender into mining governance aligns with broader national and international commitments to sustainable development, social justice and human rights. It also enhances the legitimacy and long-term viability of the sector by addressing grievances that undermine social cohesion and trust.

6 Conclusion

Gender inclusion is not an optional adjunct to mining governance but a foundational pillar of sustainable development. The gendered organization of Ghana's mining sector

systematically marginalizes women, exposes them to disproportionate harm and undermines equitable development outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires deliberate legal, policy and institutional reforms that recognize gender as central to resource governance. Research must continue to interrogate the intersections of gender, environment and extractive economies, while policymakers must translate these insights into enforceable and inclusive frameworks. Only by placing gender at the centre of mining governance can Ghana's extractive sector contribute meaningfully to sustainable development, social justice and environmental resilience.

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