

COVID-19, Artisanal & Small Scale Mining and Gender Inequality **Blog by Pjotr Elshout, May 2020**

The overall mortality rate of COVID-19 might be higher for men, yet in the long run women are disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Especially gender-inequality in the Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) sector might increase because of the COVID-19 crisis. Women struggle to combine their role as caretaker with sustaining their families. Aside from struggling to balance being a caretaker and breadwinner, women are disproportionately affected by increasing domestic violence and healthcare related issues due to COVID-19 measures.

The Lancet draws parallels between COVID-19 and Ebola: when Ebola spread in Zimbabwe, local healthcare focused on combatting the disease which resulted in neglecting other health issues. Women suffered from a surge in maternal mortality rate, in a country that already has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world¹ ². Besides potential implications on maternal mortality, there are concerns about the increase of domestic violence that affects women disproportionately compared to men due to the forced lock-downs to control COVID-19³.

Not only women's health is affected by the pandemic, but their economic status as well. The Gender Innovation Lab of the World Bank warns for growing economic gender inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa. Women often have less access to social protection and have less liquidity to support their small-scale businesses. The closing of schools and a reduction in access to health services 'can interrupt the trajectories of adolescent girls at a critical life juncture'⁴.

The COVID-19 pandemic is aggravating the vulnerability of women in ASM communities. Often women are not allowed in mine-shafts by men and depend on the ore the men bring to the surface. Women crush the ore, hoping to find valuable metals or minerals. When the men do not descend into the shafts due to the lockdown caused by COVID-19, there is no ore to crush for the women. Men often look for work elsewhere, yet women are expected to stay close to their homes. They are, traditionally, expected to take care of their children, which is a challenge without having the means to sustain them. As a female miner explained:

"The husband can decide to leave home for the entire day, leaving the woman with kids to take care of everything... The children, you need to educate them, feed them, [and for this] you just depend on gold. When it [the gold] is not there, you have to suffer".⁵

¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30526-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30526-2/fulltext)

² https://academic.oup.com/heapol/article/32/suppl_3/iii32/4621472

³ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30823-0/fulltext?dgcid=raven_jbs_etoc_email#.XpWBVeD75r0.twitter](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30823-0/fulltext?dgcid=raven_jbs_etoc_email#.XpWBVeD75r0.twitter)

⁴ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33612/Supporting-Women-Throughout-the-Coronavirus-Covid-19-Emergency-Response-and-Economic-Recovery.pdf?sequence=5>

⁵ <https://delvedatabase.org/about/news-and-events/impacts-of-covid-19-on-artisanal-and-small-scale-mining-insights-from-the-ground>

Especially single mothers who are active in the ASM-industry are socio-economically disadvantaged compared to men (and to a lesser extend married women). They have to take care of their children while still trying to earn money which is nearly impossible when the mines are closed⁶.

Civil Society Call to Action

The recent [Civil Society Call to Action](#), signed by over 70 civil society organizations, recommends immediate and concerted action from governments, financing institutions, international organizations, private sector actors and others to reduce the negative impact that COVID-19 has on small-scale miners. The Call to Action urges for an humanitarian and emergency response to deliver dignified aid through cash, food and health supplies, directly to artisanal mining communities. It also calls for investments in local healthcare to prevent COVID-19 from spreading.

At governance level, it suggests to consider ASM activities and supply chains as essential services that require economic recovery actions because of the large number of people depending on mining to make a living. In the longer run, the Call to Action asks for a focus on the development of responsible supply chains that are more resilient to crises⁷.

The Call to Action focusses especially on female miners by urging to directly support local women's groups and associations, to invest in local civil society and to engage with international NGOs.

To counter the negative impact of COVID-19 on small scale mining immediate action needs to be taken. Yet the long-term solution lies in strengthening the social and physical wellbeing of those working in the ASM sector. This requires a special focus on the rights of women, who are disproportionately struggling with the consequences of the current COVID-19 crisis.

⁶ <https://delvedatabase.org/about/news-and-events/impacts-of-covid-19-on-artisanal-and-small-scale-mining-insights-from-the-ground>

⁷ <https://www.oecdwatch.org/2020/05/12/emergency-action-needed-for-vulnerable-artisanal-and-small-scale-mining-communities-and-supply-chains/>