



# Women in Artisanal Mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Artisanal and small-scale mining is the most important segment of the mining sector in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Conservative estimates are that 2 million people are actively involved in mining and are responsible for producing 90% of the minerals exported from the country. With their dependents, this means 15-20% of the population is directly dependent on this dangerous, illegal activity. It is not possible to estimate how many people depend on the cascade of economic activity that the miners generate but it is clear that this is the backbone of the trading economy in the DRC today. Twenty percent of the artisanal mining community, or 400,000 miners, sorters, transporters and suppliers, are women. Twice that many are children.

Women working in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in the DRC face a huge array of issues, challenges and threats. ASM, as it is practiced in the country today, is unregulated, hazardous, controlled by illegal traders and security forces, and increasingly marginalized with the advent of new investment in formal mining. The men, women and children who carry out this work are indebted, exploited and manipulated for political and financial purposes.

Whilst everyone in the sector faces challenges, the security, health, and social risks posed to women are particularly acute and include:

- Sexual violence and abuse in the mines, particularly in remote areas where mines are still controlled by military forces. Eastern DRC has the worst rate of rape and sexual abuse in the world, much of which is perpetrated by security forces and militia
- Family break-up, polygamy, and abandonment due to the highly migratory nature of ASM
- Health risks due to lack of sanitation in camps, malnutrition, and physical trauma from the difficulty of the manual labour. Women in mining camps suffer a high rate of miscarriages due to injury and stress
- Exposure to, and involvement in, disruptive and damaging behaviour due to the high levels of alcohol and drug abuse in camps
- The risk of HIV/AIDS and other STDs due to prostitution and the risk profile of ASM activities (large concentrations of migratory young men, family separation for prolonged periods, high levels of military presence, lack of awareness, no condom use)
- Gender discrimination whereby women do not receive equal pay or opportunities, and are often required to surrender high value products

Women are frequently obliged to bring their children with them to the mines, and live with them in mining camps. The DRC has ratified the UN Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, and it is illegal for children under 18 to work in mines; however, 800,000 to 1 million of them do. This exposes them to hazards and health risks, and frequently prevents them from going to school, thereby limiting their future options and the hope for transition to a better life.



Above: Women and their children at work in mines and living in mining camps in Provinces Oriental, South Kivu and Katanga, DRC.

Below: Artisanal mining women at work (left to right ): copper in Katanga, gold in Orientale, gravel in Katanga, copper in Katanga



Women carry out a range of activities in ASM in the DRC. Some are involved in actual mining, the majority in washing and sorting material, some in transportation of raw and processed material, and many run small businesses to supply the mine and camps. A recent survey in Kolwezi, Katanga, indicated that 30% of women actually dig, 60% process the material, and 10% provide transport and supply services. Whilst income varies according to the location of the mine and market, the mineral involved, and the task carried out, the average income for women in and around the mines ranges from \$2-\$4 per day.

**Women play roles and hold positions of significant influence in ASM.** The issues of exploitation and risk tend to be the most prominent and recognised features of women working in ASM; however, many women overcome gender barriers and are key control points in the ASM chain.

- Mining camps may be run by women - even in cases where they are not actually permitted into the mines on the basis of superstition that the presence of women will cause the ore to disappear. Camps run by women are frequently well-organised, clean and economically vibrant.
- Women frequently act as traders and, on the basis of good financial management and influence, can be powerful actors in the supply chain.
- Women are better at many tasks than men due to greater patience and dexterity – for example, women are better diamond sorters than men and are considered to be more honest.



Right: women in leading management and trading roles in ASM in the DRC (clockwise from top left): a camp chief in Katanga; a gold trader in South Kivu; a mineral buyer, or negotiant, in Katanga.



Above: women miners learning to read and write, and establishing a thriving market garden in Katanga, through the WORTH program.

Pact helps women miners to make decisions about their future and to find resources to strengthen their position in the mines or in a new life. Many women wish to leave artisanal mining and find alternative livelihoods; however, they face significant barriers to exit including debt, the difficulty of leaving a daily income for a longer-term income source, and social stigma.

Pact assists women miners through the WORTH program, an international initiative, which provides literacy skills, financial management training, and start-up support for small businesses. Through WORTH, groups of women come together to create savings funds, based on a small weekly contribution, which can serve as loan capital and can assist in accessing micro-credit.

All the partners listed below are working with civil society and business organisations, the DRC government, and donors to find ways to regulate and strengthen the ASM sector in order that all actors, including women, can make a decent and legal living, efficiently extracting and safely processing minerals.

The DRC government's agency, the *Service for Assistance and Encadrement of Artisanal and Small-scale Mining*, SAESSCAM, has identified one of its key objectives as the promotion of women as mining operators in the DRC.

Developed in Partnership with  
**USAID, IFC, SAESSCAM, Anvil Mining, Katanga Mining, Nikanor, and Tenke Fungurume Mining**

**Karen Hayes, MBA**  
 Director, Extractive Industries Program  
 Pact Congo  
 2871 Avenue Kamanyola  
 Lubumbashi  
 Democratic Republic of Congo  
 +243 81 016 5313  
 congominig@yahoo.co.uk

