

# Women miners stake a claim in Zimbabwe

Women in Zimbabwe are not about to be left out of the artisanal and small scale mining sector writes **\*Sally Nyakanyanga.**



**T**apiwa Moyo, 40, religiously leaves her home each day when the first cock crows and joins a throng of women who have taken up artisanal mining in her community.

Moyo spends the better part of her day tramping to and fro, carrying sacks on her back packed with river sand that she sifts through in hope of finding flecks of gold. Working with their limbs in muddy water up to the knees, the women see small-scale mining as a path to im-

prove their livelihoods and bolster scanty family incomes.

“As an unemployed single mother, I’m left with no choice but to find means to fend for my five children who are of school-going age. I have no one to cover my back, as such I joined other women in artisanal mining for a living,” says Moyo.

Mining in Zimbabwe has been largely a men’s affair, but women are slowly making inroads in the sector. Despite the

rudimentary methods still used in artisanal mining, women are now wielding picks and shovels alongside men as they scavenge for valuable minerals.

But Dorcas Makaza-Kanyimo, the acting director for Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA), Zimbabwe, says more must be done to pave the way for real gender equality in the sector.

“There is need for reduction of costs of mining claims, provision of suitable loan facilities for women to be able to

access capital to start mining thereby enabling them to purchase the needed mechanized equipment for their mining operations,” Makaza-Kanyimo told IPS.

Women comprise 11-15 percent of the estimated 50,000 small-scalers miners in the country. A 2017 report entitled Women’s Economic Empowerment in SSB – Recommendations for the Mining Sector, reveals that though the mining sector remains a key driver to economic growth and transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa, rarely has it delivered benefits in reducing poverty and improving livelihoods for the majority of the population.

“Women in particular have struggled to avail themselves of the benefits and opportunities of large-scale mining operations and often disproportionately suffer from the negative impacts of the industry,” the study says.

Dorcas Makaza-Kanyimo agrees. “The Ministry of Mines should run programs that promote women in mining in terms of allocating machines, and allow women to access these loans with minimum requirements in terms of collateral as women don’t have the collateral required by banks,” she told IPS.

WLSA Zimbabwe provides education and outreach to ensure women in the extractives industry understand the legal framework.

“We have been supporting these women on how one can get a legal mining claim, as we know most women are mining illegally as artisanal miners and operating in an unregulated environment. This makes women vulnerable as a lot of things happen in that environment – women can experience violence, rape, be elbowed out by men and cheated by gold buyers when they try to sell their gold,” says Makaza-Kanyimo.

Currently, Zimbabwe is still governed by the 1961 Mines and Mineral Act, which was enacted during the colonial era. Calls are now mounting to ensure the new mining statutes are more gender responsive.

The country is going through a reform process called the Mines and Mineral Bill, which is now in parliament and was up for its second reading on March 12. However, groups such as WLSA Zimbabwe say it should explicitly pro-

**“As women miners, we need a friendly environment, particularly revising the costs of owning a mining claim. We are unable to own these mining claims because we don’t have the means – that’s why you find many women in [unregulated] artisanal mining,”**

vide for women to get an equal share of mining claims.

“As women miners, we need a friendly environment, particularly revising the costs of owning a mining claim. We are unable to own these mining claims because we don’t have the means – that’s why you find many women in [unregulated] artisanal mining,” says Moyo. As the world celebrated International Women’s Day under the theme “The Time is Now – Rural and Urban Activists Transforming Women’s Lives,” gender-responsive policies for women in the extractives industry could play an important role in their economic empowerment and development.

In Africa, where most countries are endowed with rich mineral resources, women remain largely impoverished and their participation in the extractives sector is marginal. Though no countries have a fully gender-balanced approach, South Africa has been praised as a progressive example – and one Zimbabwe should examine as it creates its own comprehensive policy.

“Issues of gender are very much included in the South Africa mining charter, although they still have their challenges on implementation of certain aspects in terms of their mining law, but they have made great strides in terms of achieving gender equality,” Makaza-Kanyimo added.

The majority of women engage in

small-scale artisanal mining, and WLSA Zimbabwe notes that South Africa’s law provides for mining syndicates and consortiums so groups can buy mining claims together.

As such, women miners like the Mtandazo Women Miners Association in Gwanda, Matebeleland North have recorded some success stories. Sithembile Ndhlovu, the founder, has since bought three mining claims of her own. These women have also been encouraging each other by forming savings and loan groups in order to raise money to buy mining claims.

“I was seeing them (men) managing to drive their own cars and feeding their families. I was going to work every day, but could see that the money was not sustaining me and my family,” says Ndhlovu.

The Mtandazo Women Miners Association is made up of 32 small-scale miners and its members have received training on the fundamentals of mining from the Zimbabwe School of Mines. Women miners are strongly encouraged to register and regularise their mining operations, which enables them to have access to loans and possibly equipment that opens up new opportunities.

“As a country, it’s imperative that we have a mining policy that is responsive to women’s needs in the sector. We should stand in solidarity with women who are organizing against destructive extractivism. Women have realized that they are mostly impacted in the extractive industry,” Makaza-Kanyimo added.

Tapuwa O’bren Nhachi, research coordinator at the Center for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG), says the Mines and Minerals Bill needs to recognize artisanal mining as an activity which contributes to the economy.

“We need to decriminalize it so women can operate in a free environment without being harassed,” Nhachi told IPS.

Nhachi added his organization has since trained 27 women artisanal miners who are now operating in syndicates and have their own claims.

*\*Sally Nyakanyanga wrote this for the IPS.*