



RESOURCE GOVERNANCE & POLICY EXECUTION SERIES

Beyond Boardroom Gains

Critical Blindspots in the Empowerment of Women in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Tanzania and Sub-Saharan Africa.



Executive Summary

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) remains a critical source of livelihoods across Sub-Saharan Africa, yet efforts to mainstream gender in the sector have largely delivered superficial gains. Well-connected women benefit from associations, formalisation programmes, and donor initiatives; the majority of grassroots female miners continue to face structural barriers, limited agency, and new forms of marginalisation.

This Insight Brief examines the disconnect between policy rhetoric and on-the-ground realities in Tanzania and comparable contexts (Ghana, DRC). It identifies five critical blindspots: elite capture within women's associations, gender-neutral formalisation, persistent data gaps, neglected intersectionality, and weak site-level accountability. Together, these dynamics risk perpetuating inequality under the banner of gender inclusion.

The brief calls for a shift from top-down, output-driven programming to transformative, execution-focused strategies that centre the hardest-working women in the sector. Closing the policy-to-practice gap is the condition for ASM to contribute meaningfully to inclusive resource governance and sustainable livelihoods.

Executive Summary

- Empowerment initiatives disproportionately reach educated, urban, or well-connected women rather than grassroots miners.
- Formalisation without tailored support reinforces exclusion rather than ending it.
- Sparse, non-disaggregated data masks implementation failure.
- Intersectional barriers — class, literacy, location, custom — remain largely unaddressed.
- Genuine progress requires grassroots representation, accountability mechanisms, and holistic site-level interventions.

Introduction

Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) employs an estimated 44.67 million people globally. Women comprise approximately 30% of the workforce in Africa, rising to 40–50% in some countries and regions (World Bank, 2023; Weldegiorgis et al., 2018). In Tanzania, women account for around 27% of the ASM labour force, concentrated in processing, panning, sorting, and ancillary services rather than pit ownership or extraction (Weldegiorgis et al., 2018). Gender mainstreaming in ASM has gained prominence through international frameworks such as UN Sustainable Development Goal 5, national policies, and donor initiatives — yet empowerment rhetoric often remains confined to boardrooms, associations, and policy documents.

This brief examines that paradox. While well-connected women benefit from formalisation, training, and networks, grassroots female miners experience limited agency and, in many cases, new forms of marginalisation. Drawing on reports from the Intergovernmental Forum on Mining (IGF), the World Bank, and field studies, it identifies under-examined blindspots in Tanzania and comparative African contexts (Ghana, DRC). The analysis proceeds in five parts: (1) the landscape of women's participation; (2) current initiatives; (3) blindspots and marginalisation dynamics; (4) case insights; and (5) recommendations and conclusion.

The Landscape of Women's Participation in ASM

Women's roles in African ASM are diverse yet structurally subordinate. They dominate low-value, labour-intensive tasks — crushing, sluicing, washing, mercury amalgamation, and vending — while men control higher-value activities such as digging and marketing (Weldegiorgis et al., 2018). Cultural taboos (for example, the belief that women are “bad omens” in pits) and customary norms further restrict access to licences, land, finance, and geological data. In Tanzania, traditional beliefs deny women control over earnings even when they hold concessions (Weldegiorgis et al., 2018). Across the region, women carry a “double burden”: mining labour alongside disproportionate domestic responsibility, limiting full-time engagement and skill acquisition (World Bank, 2023).

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Data invisibility compounds the problem. Sex-disaggregated statistics remain sparse, producing gender-blind policies that underestimate women's contributions and fail to tailor interventions (World Bank, 2023). Health and safety risks are also gendered: mercury exposure disproportionately affects women — much of it through home-based processing — and their reproductive health, while gender-based violence (GBV) is prevalent in remote, masculinised sites (World Bank, 2023; Weldegiorgis et al., 2018).

Current Empowerment Initiatives and Apparent Successes

Existing initiatives include women miners' associations, formalisation programmes, skills training, and microfinance. In Tanzania, the Tanzania Women Miners Association (TAWOMA, established 1997) provides advocacy, technical support, and marketing linkages, enabling some members to secure licences and equipment (Weldegiorgis et al., 2018). Similar groups exist across the continent, such as the Association of Zambian Women in Mining. Donor projects — by UN Women, the World Bank, and NGOs — focus on capacity building, value addition, and ethical supply chains, including Moyo Gemstones for Tanzanian women gem miners.

Formalisation efforts have increased women's licensing in targeted sites, with some gains in income and visibility (World Bank, 2023). At the associational level these appear successful: women leaders participate in policy dialogues, and quotas or gender provisions now feature in mining codes, including Tanzania's land and mining policies.

Blindspots and New Forms of Marginalisation

Despite these gains, empowerment remains elusive at the grassroots. Five under-identified blindspots explain the disconnect between boardroom rhetoric and field realities.

Blindspot 1: Elite Capture within Women's Associations

Associations like TAWOMA are vital but often dominated by educated, urban, or well-connected women who prioritise individual interests over collective ones. As Cornwall (2003, cited in Weldegiorgis et al., 2018) notes, women-led meetings can exclude poorer miners when "elite and wealthy women who may have little interest in the collective gender cause may dominate." Leaders are sometimes perceived as representing personal rather than majority interests, sidelining the diggers and processors who lack networks or literacy (Weldegiorgis et al., 2018). This mirrors a broader development pitfall: formal structures rewarding the already-capable.

Blindspot 2: Gender-Neutral Formalisation Reinforcing Exclusion

Formalisation, prioritised in Tanzania and across much of Africa, assumes equal starting points. In practice, arduous licensing processes, high costs, and collateral requirements favour those with capital, education, or male patronage. Women without these assets remain informal and vulnerable, while connected women capture licences and benefits (World Bank, 2023; Weldegiorgis et al., 2018). In Tanzania, even licensed women may not control their earnings due to customary norms (Weldegiorgis et al., 2018). The result is a two-tier system: elite women in formal cooperatives, grassroots women in exploitative informal arrangements.

Blindspot 3: Data and Visibility Gaps Masking Implementation Failures

Policies rely on outdated or non-sex-disaggregated data, rendering women's site-level realities invisible. Interventions target "women miners" generically without tracking outcomes for the poorest rural or migrant women (World Bank, 2023). Donor and NGO focus on measurable outputs — association membership, training attendance — overlooks qualitative agency: whether women gain decision-making power or escape debt traps.

Blindspot 4: Neglect of Intersectionality and Structural Power Relations

Empowerment discourse rarely addresses class, education, ethnicity, or rural–urban divides. In Tanzania, pastoralist or low-literacy women face compounded barriers absent from urban-centric programmes. Cultural taboos, GBV, and the double burden persist unaddressed in many initiatives (World Bank, 2023). Broader power dynamics — male control of pits, buyers, and markets — remain intact, allowing connected women to subcontract or benefit indirectly from grassroots labour.

Blindspot 5: Rhetorical Gender Mainstreaming without Site-Level Accountability

Mining ministries and donors mainstream gender in policy documents but lack monitoring, enforcement, or grassroots consultation. Training reaches association leaders more than field workers; finance access remains elusive even for organised groups (Weldegiorgis et al., 2018). The product is “boardroom empowerment” while the women actually mining continue hazardous, low-paid work.

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Together, these blindspots generate new marginalisation: well-connected women gain visibility and resources, while the majority subsidise the sector through undervalued labour — perpetuating inequality under an empowerment guise.

Tanzania and Comparative African Examples

In Tanzania, TAWOMA’s successes coexist with persistent gaps. Women in Geita and the Uмба Valley report progress in pit access and gemstone marketing, yet many remain excluded from earnings control and continue to face taboos (Weldegiorgis et al., 2018; Pact-supported initiatives). Formalisation has professionalised some operations but left informal women vulnerable to exploitation.

The pattern repeats elsewhere. Ghana’s *galamsey* (informal mining) shows similar elite capture: women’s groups advance while customary norms and high formalisation barriers sideline poorer miners (Yakovleva, 2022). In the DRC, formalisation projects increased women’s roles in some cooperatives but reinforced male dominance elsewhere, with GBV and health burdens unchanged (World Bank, 2023; Buss et al., 2017). Across contexts, associations empower a minority while structural change lags.

Recommendations for Addressing Blindspots

Moving beyond superficial gains requires action on six fronts:

- **Deepen inclusivity in associations.** Mandate grassroots representation quotas, transparent leadership rotation, and independent audits of how benefits are distributed (Weldegiorgis et al., 2018).
- **Make formalisation gender-sensitive.** Simplify processes, introduce women-specific quotas and collateral alternatives such as group guarantees, and reform customary law on land and earnings control (World Bank, 2023).
- **Fix the data.** Require sex-disaggregated, site-level data collection and independent evaluation of empowerment outcomes, measured by agency — income control, GBV incidence — not attendance.
- **Address intersectionality.** Target programmes by poverty, literacy, and location, and pair mining support with childcare, literacy, and alternative livelihood options.
- **Strengthen accountability.** Embed mandatory gender impact assessments in policy, with civil society oversight and funding tied to measurable field-level change.
- **Work holistically at site level.** Tackle GBV, health risks, and the double burden through multi-stakeholder site improvements — lighting, sanitation, protective equipment — integrated with social protection.

Each of these requires political will, sustained funding, and genuine consultation with the miners themselves.

Conclusion

Women's empowerment in African ASM has produced visible gains at the policy and associational levels but falters in delivering meaningful agency to grassroots miners. The five blindspots identified here — elite capture, gender-blind formalisation, data invisibility, intersectional neglect, and accountability gaps — explain why rhetoric outpaces reality and why new marginalisation emerges. Addressing them demands a shift from top-down, output-driven programming to transformative, context-specific strategies that centre the hardest-working women. Only then can ASM genuinely advance gender equity and sustainable livelihoods.

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