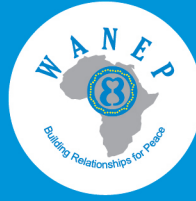


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Thematic REPORT



WEST AFRICA NETWORK FOR PEACEBUILDING
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FOR PEACE

COVER PHOTOS CREDITS: GOOGLE IMAGES



**WOMEN
AND THE SHADOW ECONOMY
OF ILLEGAL MINING
IN WEST AFRICA**



Introduction

Illegal mining, often referred to as artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) without legal authorisation, has proliferated across West Africa over the past decades. The phenomenon is partly driven by high demand for minerals such as gold, diamonds, and coltan, as well as unemployment among populations.¹ Although illegal mining contributes significantly to the local and national economies of countries in the region, it is frequently characterised by unregulated practices that have profound environmental, social, and economic consequences.² Among the groups most affected by illegal mining in West Africa are women, whose experiences are shaped by a confluence of factors, including gender roles, economic dependency, and social vulnerabilities.

While much of the discourse surrounding illegal mining has preponderantly focused on environmental degradation, loss of state revenue, and security concerns, attention to its gendered impacts remains relatively minimal.³ The impacts of illegal mining on women are multidimensional and deeply entrenched in existing inequalities. This encompasses a spectrum of adverse impacts, including exposure to hazardous working

conditions, displacement, heightened vulnerability to sexual exploitation, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods.

Women in West African mining communities often engage directly in mining activities or in ancillary roles such as processing, trading, and providing domestic support. Nonetheless, illegal mining environments pose unique challenges to their health, safety, and socioeconomic status. The environmental degradation caused by illegal mining, including water pollution, deforestation, and land degradation, disproportionately impacts women who are primarily responsible for household water collection, food production, and family health.⁴ Additionally, illegal mining zones are frequently fraught with increased gender-based violence, exploitation, and limited access to formal economic opportunities for women.⁵

Moreover, in terms of socio-economics, illegal mining offers women a critical source of income in contexts of limited formal employment in most West African states. However, the labour conditions are largely replete with a lack of legal protection and social security, with consequences for the security of women involved in the sector.

¹ Aning, K., Albrecht, P. and Blaabjerg N. A. (2021). West Africa Security Perspectives: Kwesi Aning Explains. DIIS Report, No. 2021: 03.

² Ibid.

³ WANEP (2019). Illegal Mining in Burkina Faso: A Contributory Factor to Current Peace and Security Crisis? WARN Policy Brief. June 2019.

⁴ Hilson, G., and Garforth, C. (2013). 'Everyone now is concentrating on the mining': Drivers and Implications of Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM) in Ghana. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 1(2), 339-349.

⁵ Amponsah-Tawiah, K., and Dartey-Baah, K. (2011). Corporate social responsibility in the mining industry: the case of Newmont Ghana. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 18(5), 270-280.

West Africa Early Warning & EARLY RESPONSE Network (WARN)

The West Africa Early Warning Network (WARN) is an integral part of the West Africa Preventive Peacebuilding Program co-ordinated by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). Through its WARN Program, WANEP is setting the stage for a civil society-based early warning and response network in Africa with emphasis on human security.

WARN covers the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region.

Since 2002, WANEP entered into an agreement with ECOWAS through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in the framework of capacity building in Conflict Prevention. One of the goals of

this agreement is to interface WARN with the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems to optimize early warning conflict prevention in West Africa. In view of this development, WANEP has been operating a liaison office located at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria since April 2003.

In recognition of the role and achievements of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its substantive session of 2006 granted WANEP Special Consultative Status to the UN. WANEP is therefore mandated to designate official representatives to the United Nations in New York, Geneva and Vienna to further its advocacy and outreach strategies for peace and human security.

The gendered division of labour within mining communities, for instance, reveals that women are mostly exposed to the most hazardous and lowest-paid tasks, reinforcing systemic gender inequalities.⁶ Furthermore, the influx of predominantly male migrant miners often results in disruptions in social cohesion and increases in transactional sexual relations, exposing women to health risks such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.⁷

This report examines the intersection of illegal mining and gender dynamics in West Africa, focusing on how the sector's informal and unregulated character exacerbates the vulnerabilities of women. It interrogates the structural and socio-economic factors that compel women to engage in illegal mining and explores the impacts of such engagement on their well-being. It further highlights policy recommendations aimed at mitigating these challenges while harnessing the sector's potential to enhance women's socio-economic well-being in the region.

Prevailing Dynamics

Illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) has become a defining feature of West Africa's extractive landscape. While it provides livelihoods for hundreds of thousands across the region, the phenomenon is increasingly linked to broader threats to security, environmental degradation, and human rights violations. In recent years, the scale, organisation, and impact of illegal mining on security and governance have intensified, with countries such as Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone grappling with its far-reaching consequences. This includes the growing influx of irregular and labour migrants within the region, as well as from China and the Middle East countries.⁸ For instance, the presence of labour migrants in the Upper West region of Ghana has exacerbated chieftaincy and inter-communal violence related to natural resources, such as land, water, and food.⁹

Other security concerns include reports of violent clashes, mine collapse, kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery. According to WANEP's National Early Warning System (NEWS), between January 2024 and June 2025, at least 129 mine collapses were recorded across 11 West African countries, resulting in 286 deaths. In Nigeria, the scale of insecurity linked to illegal mining is significant. According to the SBM Intelligence Report, at least 33 violent incidents related to illegal mining were recorded between January 2019 and April 2025, resulting in over 218 deaths, particularly in Zamfara, Niger, and parts of North Central Nigeria. In January 2025, violent clashes between illegal miners and security forces at AngloGold Ashanti Mines in Obuasi, Ashanti Region in Ghana, left seven illegal miners dead and several others injured.¹¹

A more worrying trend is the link between illegal mining and transnational organised crime. In parts of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, armed groups have established control over mining zones, using proceeds from gold and other resources to fund insurgencies. This has transformed mining into a geopolitical risk, with mineral wealth becoming a catalyst for conflict rather than for development. Gold smuggling is also on the rise. Between 2019 and 2012, Ghana reportedly lost over US\$1.1 billion in unrecorded gold exports¹². In Mali, security forces already strained by the fight against jihadist insurgencies maintain only a limited presence in artisanal mining areas, leaving many of these zones effectively ungoverned.¹³ The lack of traceability and regional coordination allows illicit flows to persist undetected and untaxed. This underscores the high-risk, unregulated conditions under which these miners operate.

The persistence of illegal mining also reflects systemic governance failures. Regulatory agencies across the region often lack the necessary capacity or political will to enforce laws effectively. Where mining laws exist, enforcement is weak, and fines are minimal. In several cases, Where mining laws exist, enforcement is weak, and fines are minimal.

⁶ Danso, M., Frimpong, S., and Asuming-Brempong, S. (2012). The Contribution of Small-scale Mining to Livelihoods in Ghana. *Resources Policy*, 37(2), 141-147.

⁷ Sachs, J. D., and Warner, A. M. (1997). Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth. NBER Working Paper No. 5398.

⁸ The Regional Migration Context. https://www.mixedmigrationhub.org/africa-and-middle-east/west-and-central-africa?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed 2/07/2025).

⁹ Orkoh, E., Blaauw, P.F. Migration Motives and Employment Outcomes of Ghanaian Migrants: The Role of Skills, Work Experience and Gender. *Glob Soc Welf* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40609-025-00378-6>.

¹⁰ Mining States and Violence: The Untold Stories Behind Nigeria's Crisis - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZGocAo7rzo> (Accessed May 30, 2025)

¹¹ WANEP Ghana NEWS Bulletin January 2025. www.wanep.org (Accessed 21/06/2025).

¹² Unaccounted gold export: Ghana lost \$1.1b in 2 years - <https://www.gnbcc.net/News/Item/5982> (June 11, 2025)

¹³ Karimou Imane., "Local perspectives should shape multilateral responses to transnational organized crime," UNU-CPR (blog), 2024-11-16, 2024, <https://unu.edu/cpr/blog-post/local-perspectives-should-shape-multilateral-responses-transnational-organized-crime> - Accessed June 13, 2025

In several cases, politicians and local authorities have been complicit, offering protection to illegal operators in exchange for political support or financial benefit.¹⁴ Efforts to curb illegal mining, such as Ghana's "*Operation Vanguard*" or Nigeria's deployment of mining marshals, have yielded mixed results. In Ghana, despite high-profile crackdowns, illegal activities continue to flourish, often returning stronger after brief lulls. In Senegal, although the government suspended mining activities along the Falemé River to prevent further ecological damage, over 800 illegal mine sites along both the Senegal and Mali sides of the river remain active, up from 600 in 2021.¹⁵

The prevalence of illegal mining is rooted in its function as a livelihood strategy for many. In contexts marked by limited formal employment, ASM has become one of the few accessible income sources for many, including women in rural communities. In Burkina Faso, for example, the activities of illegal miners are mostly confined to rural poor communities where the presence of security is fragile. Currently, there are over 200 officially recognised gold artisanal mining sites and more than 800 illegal mining sites in the country in 2017¹⁶. Given that 43.7 per cent of Burkinabè live on less than \$1.90, coupled with a high rural population of 70 per cent¹⁷, illegal mining serves as a viable livelihood support for most of the rural poor communities. In Burkina Faso's two poorest regions - the north and the east, where a high level of insecurity persists - the state's inability to provide basic public services has led to illegal mining becoming an essential source of local economic support.

In Ghana, artisanal miners known locally as *galamsey* operators can earn significantly more than those engaged in subsistence agriculture. Research on Ghana's ASM sector suggests that artisanal miners earned over GHS 100/day, while typical smallholder



Galamsay site in Ghana
Source: globalinitiative.net

GHS 848/month).¹⁸ In 2024, Mali's gold production plunged 23% to around 57 metric tons, of which about 6 tonnes came from artisanal miners.¹⁹ This explains why rural workers shift into illegal mining.

The environmental cost of illegal mining has been a cause for concern in mining communities. For instance, across Ghana's mining belts, forest cover has declined sharply due to land clearance, with over 2.5 million hectares lost over the past decade.²⁰ Rivers and water bodies have been particularly affected; mercury and cyanide used in ore processing contaminate water supplies, leading to rising cases of kidney failure, skin diseases, and birth defects.²¹ In some communities in Ghana, water turbidity levels reached over 14,000 Nephelometric Turbidity Units (NTU) in 2024, far exceeding the World Health Organisation's limits.²² Moreover, the use of heavy-duty machinery and chemicals has made modern-day illegal mining far more destructive than its traditional form. Foreign actors, notably from China, have introduced mechanised technologies that enable deeper excavation and more efficient processing, accelerating environmental degradation. These actors often operate under the guise of joint ventures or partnerships, but lack proper authorisation and accountability mechanisms.²³

¹⁴ Corrupt chiefs, politicians, others fuelling *galamsey* in Ghana – Report. https://www.myjoyonline.com/corrupt-chiefs-politicians-others-fuelling-galamsey-in-ghana-report/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed 21/06/2025).

¹⁵ Senegal Halts Mining Along Falemé River to Combat Environmental Degradation <https://investingnews.com/senegal-halts-faleme-river-mining/> (August 28, 2024): Accessed July 8, 2025.

¹⁶ Burkina Faso: the problem of gold smuggling (20 June 2018) - By Évariste Somda, Head of PCA, Burkina Faso Customs <https://mag.wcoomd.org/magazine/wco-news-86/burkina-faso-the-problem-of-gold-smuggling/> (Accessed July 15, 2025)

¹⁷ USAID. Climate Risks Profile. Climate Risks in Food for Peace Geographies – Burkina Faso. August 2017. https://www.climatelinks.org/sites/default/files/asset/document/20170807_USAID%20ATLAS_FFP_Bur (Accessed on 3/3/2025).

¹⁸ Living Income Report Rural Ghana (2018) https://www.living-income.com/fileadmin/living_income/Publications/Studies/Living_Income_Report_Ghana_Cocoa_Final_version_210918_AR.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed on 8/08/2025).

¹⁹ Mali Halts Small-Scale Gold Mining Until End of September 2025 (<https://www.ecofinagency.com/news-industry/0506-47159-mali-halts-small-scale-gold-mining-until-end-of-september-2025#:~:text=Government%20suspends%20small%20scale%20mining,supply%20chains%20and%20state%20oversight.>) (Accessed on 8/08/2025).

²⁰ Ghana's Gold Gamble: How illegal mining threatens our future and global relations (6, September 2024)- <https://www.myjoyonline.com/ghanas-gold-gamble-how-illegal-mining-threatens-our-future-and-global-relations/> - (Accessed June 10, 2025)

²¹ US\$2.3bn lost annually to illegal mining - <https://thebftonline.com/2024/09/25/us2-3bn-lost-annually-to-illegal-mining/> (September 25, 2024) Accessed: June 30, 2025

²² Ghana Water Limited Reports Reduced Water Turbidity, Increased Production in Central Region - (October 2, 2024) - <https://gna.org.gh/2024/10/ghana-water-limited-reports-reduced-water-turbidity-increased-production-in-central-region/> (Accessed June 23, 2025).

²³ Gold, Guns, and China: Ghana's fight to end *galamsey*. https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/gold-guns-and-china-ghanas-fight-to-end-galamsey/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed on 8/08/2025).



Women and Illegal Mining: Structural Inequalities and Security Risks

While men dominate the extraction process, women and girls, driven by household-level economic pressures, often take on secondary but equally hazardous roles, such as carrying loads, washing ore, or preparing mercury solutions, to supplement family incomes from illegal mining. These roles are frequently overlooked in policy discussions, making women's vulnerabilities less visible. These unregulated environments are marked by structural changes, such as increased cash flows and the influx of migrant workers, that heighten the risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).²⁴ In many mining communities, women are exposed to layered forms of social disruptions, including increased school dropout rates, coercive labour, exploitation, economic exclusion and transactional sexual relationships. The Sahel Security Observatory report of 2024 documented a surge in GBV within illegal mining enclaves in Eastern Burkina Faso and Central Mali, where terrorist groups impose restrictive gender norms while taxing gold production.²⁵ In these fragile zones, women are often coerced into "protective" arrangements, ranging from forced marriages to transactional sex, in exchange for access to water, mine pits, or basic security.

Beyond the Sahel, similar patterns have emerged in the region. In Senegal's Kédougou region, the gold rush has also been accompanied by a rise in human trafficking.²⁶ Reports indicate that hundreds

of Nigerian women have been trafficked into Senegal and forced into prostitution around mining sites.²⁷ Women and girls are often brought into the country outside formal entry points and forced into sex work to repay immense transport debts, and sometimes held incommunicado by their managers or proprietors. Methods used to control the women and girls include threatening to tell their families back home about the nature of their employment, or threatening to put a curse on them or their families.²⁸ In such environments, where economic opportunity is scarce and state security is limited, these forms of exploitation become normalised, reflecting broader structural inequalities and the harsh realities faced by women in unregulated mining economies.

In Nigeria's North-West, bandits reportedly use kidnapped women and girls in mining camps as labourers, sex slaves, informants, and gold smugglers, often exploiting them as proxies to exchange illegally mined gold for arms and ammunition across borders.²⁹ In Liberia's Sapo National Park, illegal mining has also been linked to increased cases of SGBV, child labour and drug abuse, with reports of school-aged children abandoning education to participate in mining activities.³⁰ WANEP NEWS reported similar trends during a raid on an illegal mining site in Ghana's Subri Forest Reserve in April 2025, where several trafficked women from Nigeria, Mali, Niger and Guinea were rescued.³¹ These developments reflect a broader regional context in which mining communities have become fertile grounds for organised crime and human trafficking, with women commodified to serve both the economic and sexual needs of male-dominated operations.

The education indicators in mining zones offer further insight into the intergenerational impact of these exploitative economies. In the Kayes region of Mali, illicit gold mining drives child labour, with families enrolling children in mining work out of economic necessity.³²

²⁴ Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Mining Sector in Africa: Evidence and reflections from the DRC, South Africa, Tanzania & Uganda - <https://internationalwim.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SGBV-in-the-Mining-Sector-in-Africa.pdf> (Accessed on June 16, 2025)

²⁵ Sahel Security Observatory. (2024). Quarterly Security Trends Report – Q2 2024: Gendered Impacts of Armed Group Presence in Resource-Rich Zones. Bamako: Sahel Security Observatory.

²⁶ Senegal's gold mining boom leads to surge in sex trafficking - <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/focus/20250604-senegal-s-gold-mining-boom-leads-to-surge-in-sex-trafficking> (Accessed June 18, 2025)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Op. cit. Corrupt chiefs, politicians, others fuelling gamamsey in Ghana – Report.

²⁹ Armed groups and illicit economies in Nigeria – Insights from Kaduna, Kastina and Zamfara mining communities (Issue 47/November 2024) - <https://enact-africa.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/pages/1737550943577-research-paper-47.pdf> (Accessed June 13, 2025)

³⁰ WANEP NEWS. www.wanep.org (Accessed 21/06/2025)

³¹ Abrewa ne nkran raid: The slum dwellers had their own power supply system for gamamsey – Forestry Commission (April 20, 2025) <https://starrfm.com.gh/abrewa-ni-nkran-raid-forestry-commission-military-clamp-down-on-illegal-mining-hub-in-subri-forest-reserve/>; <https://3news.com/news/abrewa-ne-nkran-raid-a-young-lady-told-me-she-had-to-sleep-with-7-10-men-a-day-forestry-commission-manager/> (Accessed June 17, 2025)

³² Karimou Imane., "Local perspectives should shape multilateral responses to transnational organized crime," UNU-CPR (blog), 2024-11-16, 2024, <https://unu.edu/cpr/blog-post/local-perspectives-should-shape-multilateral-responses-transnational-organized-crime> - Accessed June 13, 2025

Authorities of the National Directorate for the Advancement of Women and Child Protection in Mali highlighted the most severe cases involving the trafficking of migrant children from neighbouring Burkina Faso.³³ In February 2025, an assessment conducted by the Plateau State Government in Nigeria documented widespread school dropouts in Bassa, Riyom, Jos North, Jos South, Mangu, and Barkin Ladi Local Government Areas (LGAs), where illegal mining activities are prevalent.³⁴

A similar pattern was reported in the coastal town of Brenu Akyinim in the Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abrem Municipality of Ghana, where families encourage children to enter mining as a means to alleviate their financial burden.³⁵ In Jos South LGA, additional concerns were raised on rising cases of sexual exploitation, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy among young people in mining sites.³⁶ Likewise, in Ghana's Talensi District, the discovery of gold and the expansion of illegal mining have been linked to a surge in teenage pregnancies.³⁷ These trends reinforce a cycle of abuse, leaving women and girls vulnerable in a shadow economy with no protections, such as social welfare services, access to law enforcement, legal recourse or labour rights.

Women face health and other critical social challenges in illegal mining communities. For instance, exposure to mercury results in diverse health concerns, including tremors, headaches, and insomnia, while long-term exposure has been linked to renal failure, cognitive impairment, and maternal health complications, with indirect effects on the health of children born in mining communities.³⁸ Illegal miners are also disproportionately exposed to silicosis, tuberculosis, and lung cancer due to prolonged inhalation of dust in poorly ventilated shafts – risks that cut across gender.³⁹ In terms of personal protective measures in mining communities, women and girls seem to be more vulnerable or prone to injuries than their male counterparts. Many pregnant women are at serious risk due to the lack of availability of clean drinking water and the consumption of mercury-polluted water.⁴⁰ This has led to complicated pregnancies

and life-threatening diseases for many women and their babies. Most of the health facilities in these rural mining communities are under-equipped. In the event of any disease outbreak resulting from the activities of small-scale and illegal mining, the readiness of these healthcare systems to provide adequate health services is lacking. Other social vulnerabilities compound the health risk. In many unregulated mining facilities, women are pushed into transactional sex to secure access to working space, cover astronomical debts for travel, lodging and documentation. Moreover, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and forced marriages with mine controllers are frequently reported but remain under-prosecuted.⁴¹

Women involved in artisanal and small-scale gold mining also face discrimination and receive few benefits from the highly lucrative sector, despite their major roles. In Senegal's Tambacounda and Kédougou regions, as well as Kayes in Mali, women form nearly half of the workforce, yet earn substantially less than their male counterparts.⁴²

Strengthening Gender Responsiveness in ASM Governance through the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda

The institutional response to illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in West Africa remains heavily influenced by the mining sector's deeply entrenched masculine culture. The mining laws enforcement teams are predominantly male and tend to apply hardened enforcement methods that are insensitive to gendered dynamics. This has been critiqued for failing to account for women's compounded vulnerabilities in mining sites.⁴³ This non-gender-sensitive approach has reinforced the marginalisation of women in the mining sector governance and undermined efforts to create inclusive, sustainable, and peaceful mining communities.

Gender mainstreaming is a conscious approach to integrating gender into mining governance and security policies. This involves incorporating a

³³ Karimou Imane., "Local perspectives should shape multilateral responses to transnational organized crime," UNU-CPR (blog), 2024-11-16, 2024, <https://unu.edu/cpr/blog-post/local-perspectives-should-shape-multilateral-responses-transnational-organized-crime> - Accessed June 13, 2025

³⁴ Tackling illegal mining in Plateau - <https://nannews.ng/2025/03/10/tackling-illegal-mining-in-plateau/> (Accessed June 3, 2025)

³⁵ Galamsey gold rush: Brenu Akyinim students trade classrooms for risky beach mining - https://www.modernghana.com/news/1408862/galamsey-gold-rush-brenu-akyinim-students-trade.html#google_vignette (Accessed, June 16, 2025)

³⁶ Tackling illegal mining in Plateau - <https://nannews.ng/2025/03/10/tackling-illegal-mining-in-plateau/> (Accessed June 3, 2025)

³⁷ Gold Discovery in Talensi: A blessing or a curse - <https://citinewsroom.com/2023/12/gold-discovery-in-talensi-a-blessing-or-a-curse> (Accessed May 29, 2025)

³⁸ Illegal Mining: The Dangers of Making a Living Underground, source : <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/articles/c9w5dpwj82po> (Accessed 21/06/2025).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² ISS, Gold doesn't shine for women in the mines of Senegal and Mali, Artisanal mining should make women gold miners rich: why are they discriminated against and exploited?

⁴³ How Peace Hubs Can Improve Women's Security in Mining Communities. https://impacttransform.org/en/peace-hubs-womens-security/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed 21/06/2025).

gender-equality perspective into policy development and evaluation. However, existing analyses of mining sector governance and security strategies at regional and national levels depict inadequate consideration of gender, particularly in terms of women's participation and protection in the sector.⁴⁴ For instance, Ghana's Operation Vanguard and similar enforcement operations in Sierra Leone and Liberia have been heavily militarised and male-dominated, with little attention paid to how such tactics expose women artisanal miners to heightened risks of violence, harassment, and loss of livelihood. In Mali, policy frameworks regulating artisanal mining make scant reference to women's participation in decision-making bodies or to measures safeguarding their occupational safety. As a result, women remain underrepresented in governance processes and inadequately protected within security enforcement approaches, reinforcing gender disparities in the sector.

Furthermore, state responses to ASM have been predominantly kinetic, focusing on forceful crackdowns, bans, and evictions rather than addressing the underlying socio-economic drivers of informality. These approaches often do not provide alternatives to the loss of livelihood for those who rely on small-scale mining for their survival. In practice, such actions often exacerbate economic hardship and further entrench gender inequality. For instance, in Burkina Faso, a decision was taken by the authorities to close artisanal gold mining sites due to the growing insecurity posed by terrorist groups operating across the country.⁴⁵ The Government of Burkina Faso has repeatedly closed artisanal gold mines to prevent terrorists from using them for financing; however, the bans have been counterproductive, especially in areas where the terrorist groups operate, which have also imposed similar measures with no consideration for the protection of women.⁴⁶

Mali's current strategy against illegal mining focuses mainly on repression and awareness campaigns. The authorities have dismantled 61 illegal mining sites and seized various equipment, including 286 excavators and 63 vehicles.⁴⁷ However, experiences from other countries show that repression alone

is insufficient. In Ghana, the ban on artisanal mining has significantly altered the interaction between miners and government representatives. Although these measures have not fully eradicated illegal mining, stakeholders have called for greater cooperation and inclusivity. In Guinea, the government has worked to integrate miners into formal legal structures by fostering a genuine climate of cooperation and trust. The country has adopted new legislation and regulations that focus on providing oversight and assistance to mining groups in communities, but the legislation does not specifically address women in the informal mining sector.⁴⁸

Like several other West African countries, Nigeria continues to grapple with the devastating consequences of illegal and small-scale mining. In 2022, under the leadership of former President Muhammadu Buhari, the Government established the "*Mining Marshal*" unit, a new armed force within the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), to strengthen the fight against illegal mining nationwide. Predominantly male in composition, the unit was deployed to the 1,975 illegal mining sites identified across the country.⁴⁹ However, its male-dominated structure reflects a broader gender gap in Nigeria's mining governance and security sector, where women are underrepresented in enforcement roles and their perspectives are often excluded from decision-making. This lack of gender diversity risks perpetuating enforcement approaches that overlook the specific needs, vulnerabilities, and economic realities of women in mining communities.⁵⁰

In light of these gaps, there is an urgent need to integrate the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda into mining sector governance. The WPS framework, anchored in four interconnected pillars — Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Relief and Recovery — offers a strategic entry point for embedding gender-responsive and conflict-sensitive approaches into mining regulation, peacebuilding, and environmental security.

⁴⁴ Case study on enhancing women's participation in extractive sector governance for women in mining Ghana. Available at https://www.wimghana.org/app/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CASE-STUDY-ENHANCING-WOMENS-PARTICIPATION-IN-EXTRACTIVE-SECTOR-GOVERNANCE_-Web.pdf (Accessed 21/06/2025).

⁴⁵ Mining and extractives/will Burkina Faso's closure of artisanal gold mines work this time? <https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/will-burkina-fasos-closure-of-artisanal-gold-mines-work-this-time> (Accessed 21/06/2025).

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Mali to Heighten Fight Against Illegal Gold Mining - <https://www.ecofinagency.com/mining/2401-46365-mali-to-heighten-fight-against-illegal-gold-mining> (Accessed March 2, 2025) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380206584_Artisanal_gold_mining_in_guinea_and_security_concerns

⁴⁸ FG inaugurates mining marshals to combat illegal mining - https://tribuneonline.ng.com/fg-inaugurates-mining-marshals-to-combat-illegal-mining/#google_vignette (Accessed June 4, 2025)

⁵⁰ Mining and extractives/will Burkina Faso's closure of artisanal gold mines work this time? <https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/will-burkina-fasos-closure-of-artisanal-gold-mines-work-this-time> (Accessed 21/06/2025).

1. **Participation:**

The participation pillar emphasises the meaningful inclusion of women in decision-making at all levels of peace and security sector governance. Studies and sector reviews indicate that women comprise a substantial share of the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) workforce, but remain underrepresented in decision-making bodies, community mining committees, and formal oversight institutions. Where women are supported to organise, lead cooperatives, or participate in governance, there are measurable benefits: reduced harassment, better environmental practices, and stronger links to formal markets and services. Therefore, women's participation must extend beyond tokenistic representation to real influence in regulatory bodies, enforcement agencies, community mining boards, and environmental oversight institutions.⁵¹

2. **Protection:**

The protection pillar calls for safeguarding the rights and physical security of women and girls, particularly in fragile or high-risk environments. In the context of ASM, this means addressing the heightened exposure of women to gender-based violence (GBV), exploitation, and human trafficking in mining communities. Women are often forced to operate in unsafe conditions without legal protection, access to grievance mechanisms, or basic services. A gender-responsive security framework should include targeted measures such as training enforcement personnel on GBV prevention, deploying gender desks in mining zones, and ensuring that protection strategies respond to the distinct needs of women and girls.⁵²

3. **Prevention:**

This pillar focuses on addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting social justice. Conflict in mining-affected communities frequently stems from inequality, exclusion and competition over resources; mismanaged land and mineral governance raises the risk of localised violence. Women, especially those in rural and marginalised communities, face structural barriers to accessing land, licenses, financial services, and alternative livelihoods. A preventive approach requires

integrating gender equality into mining reform processes and livelihood diversification strategies. Promoting women's access to legal mining opportunities, secure land tenure, and skills training not only enhances their resilience but also contributes to broader community stability and cohesion.

4. **Relief and Recovery:**

Post-conflict and post-crisis recovery in mining-affected areas must centre women's needs and leadership to rebuild resilient, equitable communities. Evidence from Sierra Leone shows that women make up to 90% of small-scale gold prospectors, yet are excluded from compensation and recovery planning.⁵³ Burkina Faso's gender-integrated artisanal mining reforms ensure women benefit from safer, alternative income sources.⁵⁴ Furthermore, programs like Women in Mining-Africa (WIM-Africa) demonstrate that women's participation in recovery planning and environmental stewardship not only promotes social cohesion but also strengthens long-term resilience.⁵⁵ Financial empowerment is further supported through WIM-Africa's grants readiness program, which helps women-run mining enterprises access funding and rebuild sustainably. It is also essential that the government's mining sector regulatory institutions at the national and sub-national levels, as well as state and non-state accountability actors, CSOs, NGOs, other community-based institutions, and local community leaders, are well-informed about the challenges women and girls face in mining communities.

The failure to integrate gender considerations into mining sector governance not only perpetuates systemic inequalities but also undermines the effectiveness of security and environmental responses. By adopting the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda as a guiding framework, states and regional bodies can shift from reactive, enforcement-heavy tactics toward proactive, inclusive governance models that recognise and elevate the role of women.

⁵¹ Case study on enhancing women's participation in extractive sector governance for women in mining Ghana. Available at: https://www.wimghana.org/app/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CASE-STUDY-ENHANCING-WOMENS-PARTICIPATION-IN-EXTRACTIVE-SECTOR-GOVERNANCE_-_Web.pdf (Accessed 21/06/2025).

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Empowering women in natural resource management critical for lasting peace in war-torn countries, says UN report. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2013/11/empowering-women-in-natural-resource-management?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed 21/06/2025).

⁵⁴ Challenges and Opportunities for Women at Artisanal Gold Mining Sites in Burkina Faso. https://www.planetgold.org/challenges-and-opportunities-women-artisanal-gold-mining-sites-burkina-faso?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed 21/06/2025).

⁵⁵ Women in Mining – Africa. https://www.wimafrika.org/programs?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed 21/06/2025).

A gender-responsive approach to ASM governance would ensure that mining policies and practices protect the rights and dignity of all, promote sustainable livelihoods, and foster inclusive peace. This requires a deliberate effort to move beyond narrow security paradigms toward integrated strategies that prioritise equity, participation, and long-term resilience in mining-affected communities. Ultimately, integrating the WPS pillars into mining governance is not merely a matter of justice; it is a strategic imperative for building peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable societies in West Africa.

Recommendations

Governments and Development Partners

- Governments and the relevant ministries in West Africa, including those responsible for Mines, Energy, Health and the Environment, may consider reviewing mining laws and codes to align them with security strategies as well as ensure gender inclusivity in implementation and enforcement, especially in the artisanal mining sector.
- The Ministries of Mines and Energy, security agencies, and other response institutions should intensify their collaboration to strengthen enforcement capacity and improve information sharing at the regional, national, and community levels, addressing the issues of illegal mining and its associated human security threats.
- The Governments and development partners should strengthen cooperation to provide sustainable economic alternatives to mining, especially for women and young people in communities, including agroforestry, aquaculture and eco-tourism. This should also lead to a review of strengthening agricultural policies to attract increased private sector investment and inclusive citizen participation.
- The Governments may consider developing comprehensive policies to support and subsidise local small-scale enterprises, thereby sustaining the economic livelihoods of the population as a mechanism to mitigate their vulnerability to criminal networks and extremist recruitment.

Mining Companies

- Mining companies should be encouraged to enhance and intensify collaboration and cooperation with community leaders, including traditional authorities, religious leaders, landowners, youth and women's groups, farmer associations, and other relevant stakeholders, through corporate social responsibility, to foster social cohesion in mining areas.

Civil Society, Traditional Authorities and the Media

- Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), including women's groups and the media, should strengthen their engagement with local authorities and landowners to promote and sustain public education and awareness about illegal mining and its environmental threats.

Women-focused organisations should utilise the agency of WPS Agenda to promote the

- domestication of reforms in the mining sector and foster community-government partnerships for development, as well as advocate for a comprehensive security plan that addresses environmental issues, violent extremism, and youth unemployment in target mining communities.

Conclusion

The informal and unregulated nature of illegal mining in West Africa has created a shadow economy in which women are disproportionately exploited, yet largely invisible in policy and discourse. While illegal mining provides essential income for women in contexts of economic marginalisation, this participation often occurs at the cost of their safety, health, and livelihoods. The confluence of environmental degradation, hazardous working conditions, and entrenched gender inequalities places women at the core of these harmful effects within the sector, with limited recourse to legal protections or social support systems.

This analysis highlights the need to move beyond generalised narratives of illegal mining to engage critically with its gendered dimensions. Women's roles in the sector, whether in extraction, processing, or support services, should be acknowledged not only in terms of their economic contributions but also in light of the systemic vulnerabilities they face. Moreover, efforts to formalise and regulate the ASM sector must be accompanied by deliberate, gender-sensitive interventions that address these inequities, including improved access to legal rights, safer working conditions, and alternative livelihoods.

Addressing the exploitation of women in the shadow economy of illegal mining demands a comprehensive and inclusive policy approach that recognises women not as peripheral actors but as central stakeholders in the pursuit of sustainable, equitable development across West Africa.

The report interprets data in countries of the region where illegal mining is a threat to human security. Therefore, for the sake of analysis, it considers only the absolute value of incidence instead of the values compared to population size of the affected countries.

Thematic REPORT

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