Women and Mining: A Case of Golden Crumbs

By Wadzanai Chimhepo

Wadzanai Chimhepo is a Zimbabwean development economist. In addition to serving as a research consultant, she is also a feminist researcher. She has extensive experience in local economic development that promotes sustainable livelihoods. Wadzanai also has a passion for women's participation in economic development issues. She is a member of the Economic Society of South Africa (ESSA) and the Inclusive Growth Research Community for the Research Project on Income Distribution and Inclusive Growth in South Africa. She holds a Masters in Peace and Governance (AU) and a BSc Economics (AU).

Women in Penhalonga – a Zimbabwean gold mining community around 18 km north of the city of Mutare – are being forced to survive on the golden crumbs that fall from the table, while the men feast on the golden cake. Indeed, research I conducted in gold mining communities in eastern Zimbabwe revealed that culture and patriarchy are colluding to keep women from claiming their rightful seats at the gold mining table and from securing their own slice of the cake. In particular, like many other communities in southern Africa, people in Penhalonga believe that a woman's presence at a gold mining site will make the gold ‘disappear’. Based on this belief, women are not welcome at any site where gold is being mined, even when they have legal rights to the mine.

Focusing on one community in eastern Zimbabwe, this article will explore the implications and consequences of this belief on women’s access to, and control of, this precious mineral – and examine the ways in which mining shapes women’s relationships in their communities.

As I walked up the winding roads of Penhalonga, my heart was bubbling with excitement – finally a chance to spend a day in a gold mine had availed itself. At the time, I was a graduate student conducting studies on women’s participation in mining and spending a day underground was a necessary part of my research project, which sought to explore how gender influences women’s access to, and control of, natural resources. During the course of the study, which focused specifically on gold mining in Penhalonga, it became very apparent that culture plays a large role in determining women’s levels of involvement in this industry. It also became very clear that an enormous tension exists between women’s legal rights and the impediments imposed by culture on their ability to access and control mineral resources.

In preparing for my journey to the mines, I would picture myself going down the tunnel to dig out a bucket of ore, which I would process myself and see how productive I could be in a mine. This eagerness kept me going even as Mother Nature created serious challenges for the mission. Being the rainy season, the roads, which were mostly footpaths, were muddy and slippery, which made it very difficult to manoeuvre my way up into the gold-rich mountains.

After a long and arduous journey on bare feet (I had to remove my sandals because they had no grip) in light rain that made walking uphill on the already slippery paths an almost impossible task, I finally arrived at the edge of the 10 hectare claim that I had intended to observe. However, before I could set foot on the claim, more than a dozen men started shouting and telling me not to move a step closer to the mine – and that I had to go back. At first I thought that they were just teasing me, especially as two men were approaching from the mine and were obviously coming to welcome me – since what else would they be coming all the way over to me to say?
However, much to my chagrin, the two men had actually come to tell me that I should turn around and leave as I was not allowed to go any closer to the entrance to the mine shaft. This was unimaginable for me. To think that I had trudged this far in the rain, risking slipping and breaking a limb just to be told that I had to go back – because this was a no-go area for women. This was not something I could accept so I pushed my luck and tried to negotiate with them to be allowed in. But my efforts in were in vain, as the men made it clear in no uncertain terms that they would not allow me onto the claim because my presence in the mine would make the gold disappear.

In the local Shona language spoken, they said, “Mukatosvika padhuze sembo rinokava, tinoziv sei pamwe mutori kumwedzi.” (If you go any closer, the gold will disappear, especially if you are menstruating, which we cannot tell.)

You can imagine how I felt at that point; I had just been told that the essence of my womanhood was a curse. As I turned to leave the mine, I felt angry at such harsh and demeaning words and for being physically barred from the claim. I had experienced – first hand – how a particular set of cultural beliefs barred women’s direct access to mining.

The curse of the monthly scarlet flow!

In another incident during this study, the influence of these cultural beliefs was again very apparent. I went to a house in a township to interview Mai Tariro, a woman whose husband is a small-scale gold miner. Baba Tariro is also in the business of buying and purifying gold; a scenario that made his wife an ideal participant in this research. As we were talking, I asked Mai to show me the gold purification process and the tools that her husband uses for this job. Even to this day I still vividly remember the bewildered expression on Mai’s face. When I asked why she looked so surprised, she said it was not possible for women to touch the tools or to get too close to the gold mill – even though the tools were right under her roof! I felt let down, like I had lost a battle. And the reason she gave for this bizarre rule was the same taboo – the curse of the menstrual cycle!

In Shona culture, there is a taboo that prohibits women from having contact with men while they are menstruating, generally because they are considered to be possessed by unclean spirits during their periods. As in the Maroon culture of Jamaica, the taboo forbids women from having sex, travelling or cooking for men. As such, women cannot work with men for a number of days each month (Hinton, Veiga and Beinhoff, 2003, page 15).

This makes women less attractive employees in the mining sector as this perceived ‘uncleanliness’ is also thought to affect the mineral yield. The fact that no one can tell when a woman is menstruating, except the woman herself, means that people in the community prefer women to stay away from the mines at all times – and even refrain from touching any of the miners’ tools.

Shangwa (2011) asserts that in some Zimbabwean communities, girls and women suffer humiliation and isolation during their periods. Menstruation is not considered a natural biological process, but rather as a curse. Some communities even believe that a menstruating woman cannot cook or even add salt to the food as this is believed to cause people eating it to experience back pain. The other reason that makes women stay away from normal day-to-day activities, such as travelling, is that soiling their clothes with menstrual blood is considered an embarrassment and women are discouraged from risking it (Shangwa 2011, page 3).

Such cultural beliefs are not unique to this community. Menstrual taboos also play an important role in determining women’s developmental participation in society in many other cultures. In some communities, women are even exiled to a menstrual hut for a portion of the month and needless to say this reduces a women’s productivity. However, in a study carried out in N’tulo and Manica in Mozambique, while women are believed to attract bad spirits and are therefore banned from working in the mines, they are permitted to sell food and beer to the miners (Hinton, Veiga and Beinhoff, 2003, page 15).

Legally empowered, but culturally disabled

An interview with the only two female claim holders in that community, Mai Rumbi and Mai Ta, revealed that they are forced to depend on men to gain physical access to their gold claims. So even
owning a claim does not give women permission to actually go to the mines. And even though they can legally own mines, they are culturally barred from physically managing the day-to-day activities at their mines. Instead, they have to employ, and rely on, male supervisors to do that – meaning that mining is not a viable option for women.

As Mai Rumbi said, “It is very difficult to make a profit from mining. Things happen in your absence and all you get at the end of the day are reports that there is not much gold in the mine. When, in actual fact they would have sold the gold or the ore and shared the money among themselves.”

I also discovered that the cultural beliefs around women’s menstruation had implications that went beyond limiting women’s physical access to the mines. My study revealed that women are also prejudiced when trying to acquire gold claims. The women I interviewed lamented the fact that their applications for claims are not given serious consideration when compared to applications from men. Mr Molai, a council employee who I interviewed during the study, corroborated this assertion and acknowledged that women faced challenges with service providers in the gold mining industry. He cited the example of the mine pegger who gives priority to claims belonging to men while women remain on the waiting list. This prejudice may explain why in a community of around 7,000 people, only two women own gold claims – alongside hundreds of claims owned by men (Tripmondo, 2012).

As I continued with my study, I also learned that apart from taking advantage of the women owners’ physical absence from their mining sites, male employees also harbour perceptions that their female bosses do not know anything about mining – attitudes born out of cultural perceptions of women as being inferior to men. Mai Ta and Mai Rumbi both revealed that their male employees do not accept instructions from them since the prevailing culture of male domination makes it unacceptable for men to take orders from female bosses. Furthermore, men in the area generally believe that it is inferior to work for a woman so they often quit female-owned claims to go and work on male-owned claims so that female-owned claims are often understaffed, which reduces their turnover and profits. “I have to constantly recruit miners to work in the mine because these boys are always running away,” said Mai Ta. “On recruitment they sound sincere [because of desperation] but once they are in the mountains they leave and join neighbouring claims owned by men. All you get are reports that so and so has left.”

**Picking up the cake crumbs**

Due to these attitudes and practices, women in these communities have resorted to indirect gold mining activities. These are undertakings that are not directly linked to gold production but provide some access to gold revenue. For instance, women in Penhalonga dominate the periphery industries, such as selling food, clothes and other goods, entertaining the miners, selling sex, and working as porn stars (Chimhepo, 2012, page 56).

Many feminist scholars have noted – and challenged – the culture of patriarchy that positions women on the economic periphery. This is certainly the case in Penhalonga, where women have been relegated to low income activities that are culturally permissible, since their direct participation in gold mining is hindered by beliefs embedded in their society as well as by patriarchal nuances that shape the perceptions of the people in the community and how they conduct their lives (Rathgeber, 1990).

Gender based exclusion is rooted in the cultural norms and beliefs that frame the rules governing how women and men interface in social, economic and political spheres (Hinton, Veiga and Beinhoff, 2003; Kandiyoti, 1998). In Penhalonga, patriarchy is the order of the day. And it is clear that cultural factors prohibiting women’s participation in gold mining perpetuate unequal power relations between the genders.

Other cultural aspects, such as female domesticity and notions of what is and is not appropriate behaviour, have contributed to the marginalisation of women in this sector. Most women seem to have accepted this status quo and appear content with their husbands’ providing for them (Kandiyoti 1998, page 137). For example, during an interview with a woman whose husband is a miner, she intimated that she is satisfied with staying at home and taking care of their house and their children. And she was adamant that there was absolutely no need for her to engage in any income generating activity, especially gold mining. She asserted that women have their place – at home with the children – while the men go out to work and provide for the families. Other interviews revealed that even those women whose families were surviving on less than the average income would not consider working in the mines to earn additional money, as they believe that they belong in the home.

“According to the ethos and values of the community, it is extreme and immoral for a female to be seen among the men in the river.”
Many of the women also pointed out that they were prohibited from mining, even from alluvial mining in the river, for traditional and cultural reasons, including the belief that the gold would disappear and the notion that women should not work with or among men. As one elderly woman told me, “according to the ethos and values of the community, it is extreme and immoral for a female to be seen among the men in the river.” Furthermore, as I observed, men engaged in alluvial mining make it difficult for women to join them. These men were working without clothes, which would make women very uncomfortable.

Finally, kinship also plays a major role in ensuring that women are left scrabbling for crumbs. Kandiyoti (1998) asserts that kinship contributes to determining how women participate in their community. In Penhalonga, kinship only counts male relations, which strips women of their rights to participate as equal and rightful citizens. Women are traditionally thought of as not having any rights to own property and resources – forcing them to rely on men. This results in women’s bargaining power being eroded and so they succumb to their subordinate roles. Indeed, most Penhalonga women are not aware that they can apply directly for mining licences, believing that they have to be represented by men.

“Women are traditionally thought of as not having any rights to own property and resources – forcing them to rely on men.”
Conclusion

Reflecting on my experiences in Penhalonga, I am convinced that there is an urgent need to deal with the gender based exclusion that is rooted in patriarchal culture. Gender based exclusion of women can only be eliminated by firstly demystifying key cultural pillars that uphold current gender roles.

In Penhalonga, the gold mining industry is governed by myths and taboos that act as barriers to the participation of women. However, it is time for women to be allowed into the core of the gold mining industry and not to remain confined to the periphery. In line with Boserup’s, (1971) assertion that women need to be treated as economic agents not simply as recipients of development, gender equity is a necessary step to ensuring equality and therefore, more resources have to be allocated to women to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages that prevent women and men from operating on level playing field (Rathgeber, 1990; Snyder 1995).

To ensure women’s full participation in the gold mining industry in Penhalonga, fundamental shifts have to be made to enable a more equitable relationship between women and men in an attempt to neutralize the gender roles that are hindering women’s progression. This shift must go beyond mere policies on paper to allow for existing planning processes, methodology and action to be revisited so as to transform power relations between women and men (Hausler 1997). Gender mainstreaming and sensitivity in relation to day-to-day issues at the local level are also critical, as is genuinely involving and consulting women.

Finally, to fully remove the cultural barriers that women face in their attempt to access and control resources, there is a need to educate both women and men about gender issues and about how they impact on access to resources. Imparting knowledge will enlighten women and encourage them to challenge the status quo and reverse the cultural imbalances that exist between them and men. This includes exposing and neutralising cultural beliefs that characterize women as being possessed by bad spirits that remove the gold from the mines. If these changes are made, then women will finally be able to sit around the table and claiming their fair share of the golden cake.
References


Electronic Resources
Gender http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/y5608e/y5608e01.htm (Accessed by 15 April 2013)

Endnotes

1. A claim is a piece of land over which the land holder has asserted a right of possession and the right to develop and extract a discovered, valuable, mineral deposit.

2. Names have been changed to protect respondent identity.