



Exploring cultural norms limiting women's participation in artisanal and small-scale gold mining activities in Mwakitolyo, Shinyanga region

Thubutu Africa Initiatives

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Front cover image: Artisanal and small-scale mining site in Mwakitolyo (Shinyanga region), an area used by local miners for gold extraction activities (Thubutu Africa Initiatives, 2025).

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"Voices from Tanzania" presents evidence-based case studies by selected civil society organizations from Tanzania which aim to draw attention to pertinent issues of access to justice and human rights in extractive resource governance in Tanzania. Through these case studies, we seek to shed a light on experiences of communities affected by natural resource extraction in order to amplify their voices in the broader debates on resource governance in Tanzania.

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About the author

Thubutu Africa Initiatives (TAI) is a Tanzanian non-profit, established in 2014, dedicated to creating lasting social and economic change in African communities. TAI has been working with communities, local governments, religious leaders and other local actors in northern and eastern Tanzania in the areas of health, education, economic strengthening, rights awareness and environmental conservation, in order to see thriving African societies acting with more confidence and less dependency. Contact: info@thubutuafrika.org

About the editor

International Peace Information Service (IPIS) is an independent research institute providing tailored information, analysis, capacity enhancement and policy advice to support those actors who want to realize a vision of durable peace, sustainable development and the fulfilment of human rights.

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List of abbreviations

ASGM	Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Miners
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IPIS	International Peace Information Service
LGAs	Local Government Authorities
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SHIDEPHA+	Service, Health, And Development for People Living With HIV/AIDS
TAI	Thubutu Africa Initiatives
TAWOMA	Tanzania Women Miners Association
TZS	Tanzania Shillings
UN	United Nations
VEO	Village Executive Officer
VICOBA	Village Community Bank
WCDO	Ward Community Development Officer

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Executive summary

Women's participation in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) in Tanzania, and particularly in Mwakitolyo village in Shinyanga District, remains significantly constrained by deep-rooted cultural norms and societal beliefs. These persistent barriers highlight the need for more focused research to understand their causes and impacts, and to guide targeted interventions aimed at enhancing women's inclusion in the sector.

This study, conducted in Mwakitolyo village, examined these barriers through the following research questions:

1. What are the key cultural norms and societal beliefs in Mwakitolyo that limit women's participation in gold mining activities?
2. What are the economic and social consequences of limiting women's participation in gold mining in Mwakitolyo?
3. What strategies or interventions can help overcome the barriers restricting women's involvement in gold mining in Mwakitolyo?

A qualitative research design was adopted, including key informant interviews, in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation. A total of 50 unique respondents participated in this study, including women miners, women in support businesses, male miners, and local stakeholders such as local government leaders and civil society representatives.

The study reveals that major barriers to women's participation in ASGM in Mwakitolyo are rooted in cultural myths surrounding menstruation and pregnancy, traditional gender stereotypes, and Sukuma cultural norms that emphasize women's roles as primary caregivers. These beliefs and expectations limit women's ability to take part in more profitable

and physically demanding mining roles, which are often reserved for men. In addition, structural economic challenges such as limited access to mining equipment, capital, and credit further restrict women's capacity to engage meaningfully in income-generating mining activities in Mwakitolyo.

The marginalization of women in mining exacerbates existing economic and gender inequalities, limits their economic empowerment, and increases their vulnerability to poverty. Furthermore, women's limited representation in decision-making processes perpetuates their exclusion and inhibits inclusive development within the local mining economy.

Despite these challenges, the study identified promising strategies to support women's greater involvement in ASGM. These include: (1) the implementation of community sensitization and awareness programs to address prevailing beliefs and stereotypes, and (2) the provision of training in technical skills, entrepreneurship, and business management to equip women for more productive and independent participation in mining.

To further increase women's participation, the study recommends coordinated efforts focused on education and awareness-raising, capacity building, support for women's networks, and expanded access to financial services and mining equipment.

In conclusion, addressing socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers to women's participation in mining is essential not only for promoting gender equality but also for supporting the sustainable development of Mwakitolyo's mining sector and the broader community. Fostering a more inclusive environment where women can actively participate in all aspects of gold mining will enhance economic outcomes for women and their households and contribute to more equitable and resilient local development.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

Since the early modern period, women have played a significant role in mining worldwide. However, with the industrialization and mechanization of mining in the late eighteenth century, they were gradually excluded. The emergence of the male breadwinner model and protective labor laws led to the banning of women from working in underground mines (Romano and Papastefanaki, 2020).

The presence of women in mines was not only perceived as unnatural but was also feared by many, fueled by myths and stories suggesting that their presence caused accidents (Castilhos and Castro, 2006; Perks and Schulz, 2020). These justifications, rooted in superstition, tradition, and prejudice, ultimately normalized women's exclusion from mining. Traditional gender stereotypes have not only barred women from working in underground mines but have also contributed to the invisibility of their contributions to the mining sector, rendering their work less recognized and valued. As a result, women generally tend to be more vulnerable to the risks of the mining sector, while profiting less from the sector's benefits compared to men (Eftimie, Heller, and Strongman, 2009).

This pattern of exclusion and invisibility is also evident in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM), a low-tech, labor-intensive form of mineral extraction and processing that serves as a vital livelihood strategy for millions globally, especially in rural communities. According to the 2023 DELVE report, women represent approximately 30% of the global ASGM workforce. However, this figure is likely an underestimation, as women are often not formally counted in mining statistics, rendering them invisible to policymakers and development practitioners (World Bank, 2023).

In the ASGM sector, women typically take up roles such as panning, crushing, and grinding ore, transporting materials, and supporting service work such as cooking or selling food at mining sites. They may also be involved in the informal trading of minerals, managing small mining claims, or working as part of family-run operations (World Bank,

2023; Hinton, Veiga & Beinhoff, 2003). Despite their essential contributions, women's work is often undervalued because it overlaps with domestic responsibilities, is largely informal, and hence, not recognized as productive labor in many cultural contexts.

1.2. Problem statement

Tanzania's extractive sector, encompassing mining, oil, and gas, is recognized as a significant driver of economic growth and development in the country, as well as a key avenue for improving the welfare of its population. However, the benefits from this sector have not been equitably distributed among all segments of society, with women being notably disadvantaged (HakiRasilimali, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

Despite efforts to promote gender equality in various domains of society, women's participation and representation in the extractive sector continue to be constrained. According to UN Women (2016), this limitation is observed both globally and in specific contexts such as Tanzania, where legal and socio-cultural norms further entrench inequality.

Employment in Tanzania's extractive sector is overwhelmingly dominated by men, with a gender disparity nearing 80% (TEITI, 2021). The artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) sub-sector in Tanzania is estimated to employ up to 1.5 million people an estimate based on various sources with approximately 27% being women (World Bank, 2023; IPIS, 2019a). ASGM operations are spread across regions such as Shinyanga, Geita, Mara, and Mbeya, and are regulated under the Mining Act (Revised Edition 2019). Women in ASGM face multiple barriers, including limited access to capital, marginalization from decision-making, poor working conditions, and gender-based violence, as documented in national and international studies (HakiRasilimali, 2021; IPIS, 2019a).

Systemic barriers for women are rooted in legal, cultural, and socio-economic structures (HakiRasilimali, 2021). Especially the combination of discriminatory legal provisions and socio-cultural

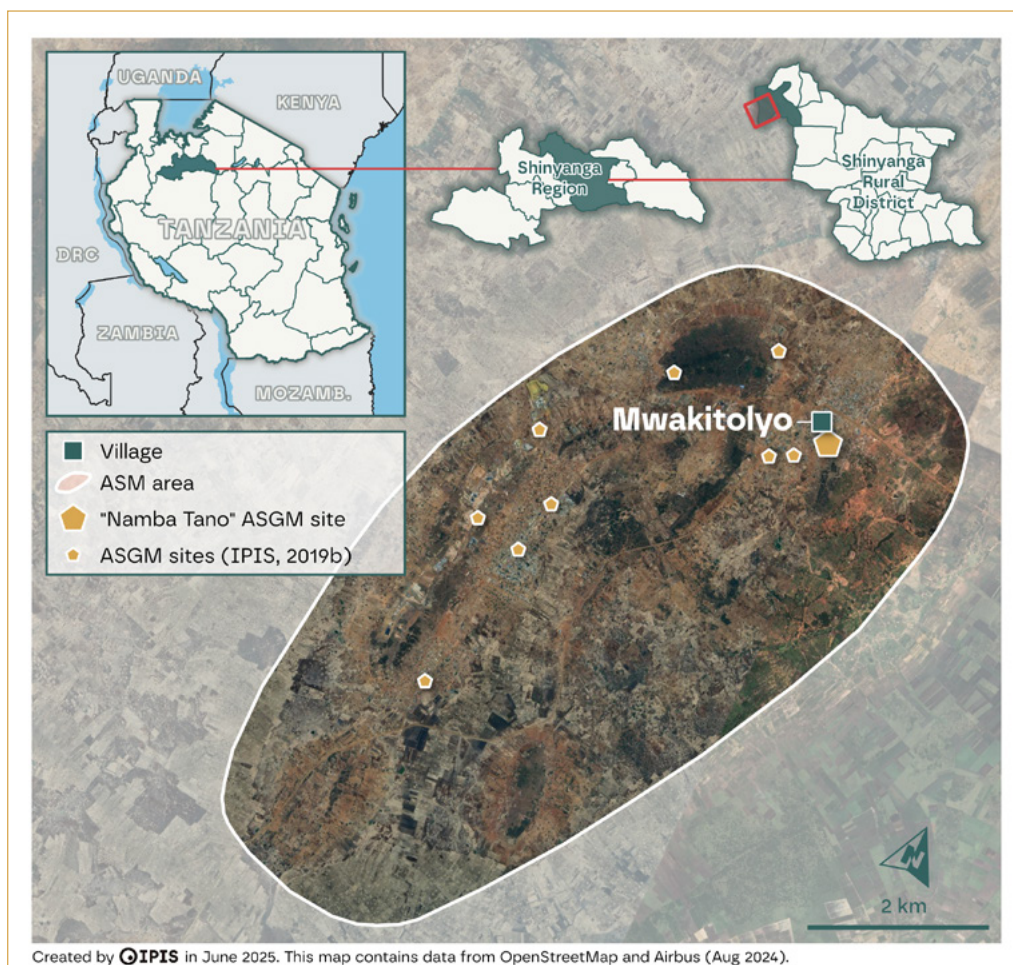
practices limit women's ability to meaningfully participate in mining activities.

These obstacles relegate women to the fringes of decision-making processes, limiting their access to opportunities for advancement within the extractive sector (The Citizen, 2022), and subjecting them to discrimination and harassment in the mining areas (HakiRasilimali, 2021). Unless more attention is brought to the perspectives and experiences of women in the mining sector, the specific challenges and opportunities they face will remain largely invisible and therefore unaddressed. This highlights the relevance of the current study, which seeks to shed light on the socio-cultural norms affecting women's

participation in mining, thereby contributing to efforts to build a more inclusive extractive sector in Tanzania.

1.3. Description of the study area

This study was conducted in the Mwakitoloyo gold mining community, located in Mwakitoloyo Ward, within the Shinyanga District Council of Shinyanga Region, in north-western Tanzania (Figure 1). Mwakitoloyo is known for its rich gold deposits and is considered one of the key artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) hubs in the Lake Victoria zone. According to the IPIS web map (IPIS, 2019b), more than 17,000 miners operate in this area.



◀ Figure 1: Location of the artisanal and small-scale gold mining areas of Mwakitoloyo ward, Shinyanga region, Tanzania.

Artisanal mining in Mwakitoloyo is mainly carried out in shallow to moderately deep pits and trenches. Most mining activities are done manually or with basic mechanized tools such as hammers, pickaxes, sluice boxes, crushers, and water pumps. Mining areas are typically situated outside the residential

parts of the ward, and as a result, many miners live in temporary camps set up near the pits. These camps are characterized by limited infrastructure and few permanent structures, inadequate access to clean water and sanitation, and informal stalls that serve as makeshift restaurants and supply shops.

The ASGM sector is vital to the local economy. It provides employment and income-generation opportunities to a large portion of the population, especially in the absence of viable agricultural activities. Mwakitolyo falls within a semi-arid region, where rainfall is low and unreliable. Due to this, agriculture is not a dependable livelihood, and mining has become a more economically attractive alternative (HakiRasilimali, 2021).

According to the 2022 Population and Housing Census, Mwakitolyo ward has a total population of approximately 38,909, including 21,000 men and 17,909 women (United Republic of Tanzania, 2022). The area of the ward is approximately 202.8 square kilometers, resulting in an average population density of 191.8 people per square kilometer. The population includes a mix of miners, traders, machine operators, food vendors, transporters, and service providers who rely heavily on mining-related activities for their livelihoods. The Sukuma ethnic group is the predominant tribe in Mwakitolyo and across the wider Shinyanga region. As the largest ethnic group in Tanzania, the Sukuma people have a rich cultural heritage that strongly influences social norms, gender roles, and economic life in the area.

To earn an income, women in Mwakitolyo primarily engage in small-scale trading (such as food vending). Their participation in artisanal and small-scale gold mining remains limited (see Chapter 3). Despite the economic potential that gold mining offers, the community still faces major challenges, including poor infrastructure, poverty, and socio-economic inequalities. One of the most critical issues in the mining landscape of Mwakitolyo is the pronounced gender disparity. Although no official gender-disaggregated data exists for this specific area, field observations, and interviews indicate that women are significantly underrepresented in mining activities. Their exclusion is often reinforced by traditional norms and cultural beliefs that restrict women's mobility, limit their access to resources, and discourage their involvement in what is traditionally considered male-dominated work. This study, therefore, seeks to explore these cultural norms and their influence on women's participation in artisanal mining activities in Mwakitolyo, contributing valuable insights to broader efforts aimed at promoting gender equity in Tanzania's mining sector.

1.4. Study objectives

This study aims to explore the cultural norms and societal beliefs that limit women's participation in gold mining activities in Mwakitolyo.

The research aims to address the following key questions:

1. What are the key cultural norms and societal beliefs that limit women's participation in gold mining activities at Mwakitolyo, and how do these restrict women's participation in mining in Mwakitolyo?
2. What are the economic and social consequences of limiting women's participation in gold mining in Mwakitolyo?
3. What strategies or interventions can help overcome structural barriers restricting women's participation in gold mining?

These questions were asked purposely to formulate evidence-based recommendations regarding the participation of women in mining activities in Mwakitolyo and lessons to learn for women in mining in Tanzania.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to comprehensively analyze gender disparities in the ASGM community of Mwakitolyo. A mixed methods approach was used to allow for an in-depth understanding of socio-economic dynamics while supporting findings with statistical evidence. All primary information was collected from 6–15 January 2025 in Mwakitolyo ward. Overall, the research employed three key qualitative data collection methods:

- **Semi-structured in-depth interviews**

A total of 35 individuals were interviewed in two rounds of semi-structured in-depth interviews. The first set included:

- 10 women miners (6 women who own mining sites and 4 women employed at mining sites)
- 10 women not directly involved in mining, but engaged in supporting businesses such as food vending and selling mining equipment
- 10 male miners (4 mine owners and 6 workers involved in tasks like trench digging and operating mining equipment)

A second set of interviews was conducted with 5 key stakeholders, including:

- 3 community and local government leaders (Village Chairperson, Village Executive Officer [VEO], and Ward Community Development Officer [WCDO])
- 1 representative from a local civil society organization (SHIDEPHA+, involved in gender equality programming)
- 1 chairperson of the Tanzania Women Miners Association (TAWOMA)

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**

Three FGD groups were conducted with a total of 15 participants whereby each group comprised 5 participants and grouped as follows:

- One group of male miners with a total of 5 participants

- One group of female miners with a total of 5 participants
- One mixed-gender group comprising both male and female miners with a total of 5 participants

The FGD participants were entirely distinct from the individuals interviewed during the in-depth interviews. No participant took part in both data collection methods. Therefore, the study engaged a total of 50 unique respondents. The FGDs were designed to provide additional insights and to further explore emerging themes identified in the interviews. They allowed for collective reflection and deeper discussion of community perceptions regarding gender norms and participation in mining.

- **Observation**

The research team visited three active ASGM sites within the “Namba Tano” area of Mwakitolyo (Figure 2). “Namba Tano” is the name commonly used by local residents to refer to the main artisanal gold mining area within Mwakitolyo. While not an official administrative or mapped designation, the term is widely recognized by community members and miners alike. “Namba Tano” serves as the central hub of artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) activities in the ward, with a high concentration of active mining pits, rudimentary equipment, and informal campsites established near the mining sites. The name carries significant local meaning and is used in daily conversations to describe both the physical space and the economic lifeline it represents for many households in Mwakitolyo.

Particular attention was paid to the roles and participation of women at each site, including their involvement in ownership, physical labor, and support roles.



▲ Figure 2: General view of mining operations at Namba Tano, including women in support roles (Photo by TAI, 2025).

3. Findings and analysis

This study was conducted purposely to explore the cultural norms and societal beliefs that limit women's participation in gold mining activities in the Mwakitolyo community of Shinyanga District. This part of the report summarizes the survey findings and their analysis. In line with this study's key questions, this section has been divided into five major parts, analyzing (1) the context of women in ASGM gold mining in Mwakitolyo, (2) the social and cultural norms limiting women participation in gold mining activities in Mwakitolyo, (3) additional factors limiting women participation in gold mining activities in Mwakitolyo, (4) effects of restricting women's participation in mining activities in Mwakitolyo, and (5) the strategies and interventions to overcome cultural barriers restricting women's involvement in gold mining.

3.1. Context of women's participation in Mwakitolyo

Interviews with women miners revealed that a majority of women who work in mining in Mwakitolyo are actively engaged in a variety of mining-related activities across different stages of the gold extraction process. These roles range from support services to more physically demanding tasks at the mining sites. Roles taken up by women are:

- **Supporting businesses**

Many women work in peripheral, mining-related businesses that support daily operations at the sites. These include selling food and beverages (such as rice, beans, and porridge), tools like shovels and hammers, and other essential supplies such as headlamps, protective gloves, water containers, batteries, and other tools available or needed in the mining area. These businesses not only

generate income but also create a form of indirect participation in the mining economy.

- **Digging in shallow trenches**

Some women participate directly in mining by digging in shallow trenches, typically those less than 30 meters deep. These trenches are often easier to access and require less technical equipment. Women dig to extract gold-bearing rocks, which are then transported for crushing and further processing. This activity allows them to earn an income without depending on male miners, especially when the shallow pits are self-dug or accessed through informal agreements with pit owners.

- **Transporting stones to the crushing point**

Another key task done by women is transporting stones from deep trenches, often dug by men, to the crushing point. Women typically carry the stones in metal basins or plastic buckets on their heads, walking long distances from the trenches to the processing areas. These loads can weigh between 20–30 kilograms, and the task is repeated several times a day. In rare cases, wheelbarrows or hand-pulled carts may be used, but such tools are often shared or unavailable.

- **Crushing and grinding**

Once the stones reach the crushing areas, women use hand tools such as sledgehammers, chisels, and metal pestles to break large rocks into smaller pieces. This manual crushing is labor-intensive and time-consuming. The main goal of this step is to reduce the rock into smaller particles, which can then be washed and panned to extract gold. The women often work in small groups, taking turns to rest as they crush.

- **Washing and panning**

After crushing, the fine rock fragments are collected and washed by hand, using wide pans made of metal or plastic. Women stand for hours, sometimes knee-deep in water, swirling the pans in a circular motion to allow lighter materials to be washed away while retaining heavier gold particles at the bottom. This process, although basic, is one of the most common techniques used by women in Mwakitolyo to recover gold from crushed ore.

Our observations showed that most women are engaged in crushing, panning, and transporting stones, as these roles are more accessible to those without capital or ownership of mining pits. However, a considerable number of women also work in digging and support businesses.



◀ **Figure 3: Women engaged in manual crushing and sorting of rocks at Namba Tano site in Mwakitolyo (Photo by TAI, 2025).**

Payment for women in mining varies depending on the activity and their agreement with pit owners or buyers. For those involved in stone transportation, crushing, or digging, payment is often made per bucket, per day, or as a share of gold recovered. In some cases, especially in panning, women are only paid when gold is successfully extracted and sold, making their income highly unpredictable and insecure. Others who operate support businesses earn daily income from their sales, though this too can fluctuate depending on miner activity and site productivity. Despite the physically demanding nature of the work and financial uncertainty, many women expressed a sense of resilience and pride in being able to earn independently. One woman miner said:

“It is hard work, yes, but it is better than staying idle. Some days I go home with nothing, but when I find something small, I feel proud that I can support my children.”

Six of the women interviewed were owners of ASGM sites. These women hire laborers both male and female to conduct the actual mining work. In many cases, the female pit owners provide basic tools like shovels, pans, and hammers, and may also offer small loans or advance payments to workers. Their financial arrangement with laborers is typically based on profit-sharing agreements, where workers receive a percentage of the gold recovered, after deducting costs. This gives female pit owners a more stable and structured income, although they also bear the financial risk when yields are low.

3.2. Key cultural norms and societal beliefs that limit women's participation in gold mining activities at Mwakitolyo

In our research, we identified three main socio-cultural beliefs that significantly influence women's participation in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) in Mwakitolyo.

3.2.1. Myths related to menstruation and pregnancy

The most widespread belief concerns women who are menstruating or pregnant. The majority of respondents in both individual interviews and focus group discussions reported that such women are

perceived as “bad luck” or “a curse” within mining areas. According to these beliefs, the presence of menstruating or pregnant women at mining sites can “chase away the gold” or bring misfortune to the operation. This belief is held by both men and women. Many women have internalized this myth and, as a result, intentionally avoid visiting or working in the mining sites during their menstrual periods, including some women who own mining pits. The stigma around menstruation and pregnancy has, therefore, become a psychological and social barrier to consistent participation in mining.

During a focus group discussion, a female miner who had worked in Mwakitolyo for over six years shared:

“You know, here at the mining sites, everyone has their own beliefs about how to find minerals. Some believe in God, while others believe in different gods. The majority of those who follow other beliefs have been instructed by their gods to restrict women during menstruation and pregnancy, as they are considered bad luck and may drive away the minerals. Unfortunately, many women have adopted these beliefs and even stayed away from the mines during this period. Even some women who own mines avoid visiting their sites during menstruation for fear of chasing away the gold.”

This quote highlights how these beliefs are deeply embedded in the social fabric and have practical implications for women's work and mobility at mining sites.

3.2.2. Stereotypes about women's physical inability

A second major barrier identified is the widespread stereotype that women are physically incapable of handling the demands of mining. Respondents repeatedly mentioned that mining is “too hard” for women due to the physical strength required for digging deep trenches, lifting heavy rocks, and enduring long working hours. As a result of this stereotype, women are often prohibited or discouraged from entering trenches deeper than

30 meters, under the assumption that they lack the endurance or ability to manage the physical strain and safety risks involved. Furthermore, there is a prevailing belief that exposure to mining conditions may negatively impact women's reproductive health, including risks such as miscarriage, which adds to their exclusion from active mining roles. One male miner from Mwakitolyo stated:

“Listen, you know women. In nature, they are very weak you can't tell them to go into trenches of maybe 150 meters holding the rope for around 30 minutes would be very tiring for her. Also, many men here don't like to see women doing heavy tasks I think they are only supposed to do lighter work, outside the mining sites.”

This statement reflects both patriarchal attitudes and protective rationalizations that contribute to women's exclusion. As a result, women are relegated to lower-paying and less-valued roles like stone crushing, panning, or vending roles that yield less economic return compared to core mining tasks such as digging or processing at depth.

3.2.3. Cultural expectations of women as primary caregivers

The third socio-cultural barrier is rooted in traditional gender roles, particularly within the Sukuma culture, which is dominant in the Shinyanga region. The Sukuma ethnic group is the largest and most dominant tribe in the Shinyanga region, including in Mwakitolyo Ward, where cultural values and social structures are deeply rooted in traditional norms. Within the Sukuma culture, gender roles are clearly defined, with women traditionally expected to serve as caregivers and homemakers. Their primary responsibilities revolve around domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and fetching water.

These cultural norms limit women's availability for full-day mining work, which typically requires long hours of continuous presence at the site. The societal expectation that a "good woman" belongs at home has a double impact: it limits women's participation and simultaneously stigmatizes those who defy this norm by engaging in mining. A male respondent explained:

“Women are supposed to stay at home and take care of the children. You know, women who engage in mining are mostly 'Wasimbe' ('unmarried women', a term often used to refer to sex workers), and I can't allow my wife to be involved in that. I also don't want her to associate with women who work in mining.”

This quote underscores the social stigma and moral judgment attached to women miners. Some married women choose not to engage in mining for fear of being labeled immoral or facing marital conflict. Our findings reveal that these traditional gender roles not only limit participation but also inflict psychological and social pressure on women, discouraging them from seeking income opportunities in the mining sector.

3.3. Additional factors limiting women's participation in gold mining activities in Mwakitolyo

Access to financial resources and mining equipment is essential for meaningful participation in the artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) sector. However, women in Mwakitolyo face significant economic challenges in acquiring the capital and tools needed to actively engage in mining operations. Most female respondents in this study cited the high costs of essential mining equipment such as excavators, crushers, water pumps, and generators as key barriers. These tools are critical for modern and effective mining operations, but their cost is often prohibitively high for individual women or small women-led groups.

Additionally, limited access to credit and loan facilities further restricts women's ability to invest in mining activities. Respondents highlighted that financial institutions require formal documentation such as a business registration, collateral, or land ownership papers, which most women do not possess. This is partly due to women's limited control over assets like land or property, which are commonly required as loan security. Although some men also face capital-related challenges, men tend to have better access to networks, information, and control over productive assets, such as ownership of mining plots or heavy equipment, giving them an advantage in securing loans or attracting investors

Another key barrier is the lack of technical training and support tailored to women miners. Many women respondents in Mwakitolyo expressed a strong desire to receive training on how to operate machinery such as excavators and crushing machines, which would enable them to upgrade from manual tasks to more profitable roles within the mining value chain. Others noted that training could help them better understand occupational health risks, helping them differentiate between real dangers and cultural myths, for example, those surrounding menstruation and pregnancy. A female miner who has been involved in gold mining in Mwakitolyo for over six years shared:

"We are conducting these mining activities in a very challenging environment. We lack enough capital to hire excavators and other mining equipment. We also don't have enough funds to pay laborers. As you know, when they come out of the trench, you have to make sure they survive by buying food and meeting their basic needs. Acquiring loans from banks is quite difficult. They need many documents that we, as women, often lack. And also, as the mining business is now, we need more improved equipment to have adequate returns on our investments."

The need for improved equipment has become increasingly urgent due to growing competition, the need to dig deeper trenches to access gold-bearing rock, and the desire to improve productivity. Without modern tools, many women find it difficult to keep up with the pace and scale of current operations.

While men also experience some economic constraints, the compounding effect of gender-specific challenges such as lack of asset ownership, limited access to finance, and lower levels of technical support places women at a distinct disadvantage. These economic barriers significantly limit women's potential to expand their role beyond small-scale, labor-intensive, and lower-paying activities in the mining sector.

3.4. Effects of restricting women's participation in mining activities

This study identified several socio-cultural and economic barriers that restrict women's full participation in gold mining in Mwakitolyo. These restrictions, rooted in gender stereotypes, cultural beliefs, and unequal access to resources not only affect individual women but also have far-reaching consequences for the mining sector and the broader Mwakitolyo community.

3.4.1. Economic effects: reduced income, limited economic empowerment, and increased poverty

The most direct economic impact of these barriers is the limited income among women involved in mining in Mwakitolyo. The majority of female respondents reported that they are largely confined to low-paying tasks such as crushing, grinding, washing, or transporting rocks. As these jobs are considered less skilled, they are remunerated significantly less than operating heavy machinery or digging in deep trenches. These higher-paying roles are dominated by men and are rarely accessible to women due to a lack of capital, training, and prevailing gender norms, as described in the sections above. As one female miner shared in an interview:

"Many women here are just not benefiting from the mining activities like men. It's because we are experiencing various difficulties, including doing lower-paying activities such as washing, grinding, and crushing rock, while men operate machines and dive in deep trenches and earn more income. Even those women who own mining sites need to use rudimentary tools for mining, due to capital challenges. They can't earn much money from the mining, not like others who are using machines."

Women also face time constraints due to their domestic roles as primary caregivers, which further limits their ability to engage consistently in mining. Additionally, cultural norms around menstruation and pregnancy force women to stay away from mining sites periodically, further reducing their earning time.

Respondents pointed out that these inequalities reinforce an income gap between men and women. Although there are no official earnings statistics for Mwakitolyo, qualitative interviews suggest that women earn significantly less than men. For example, several women estimated that their daily income from crushing or washing rocks could be as low as TZS 3,000 – 5,000 (circa €1 – 1.5). In contrast, male respondents shared that when they are involved in deep trench mining or operating machines, they can earn between TZS 10,000 – 30,000 (circa €3 – 10) or more per day, indicating a gap of up to 50 – 90%. This disparity results in a cycle of economic dependency, where women are unable to accumulate savings or invest in better tools and services.

These challenges are exacerbated by the limited alternative income-generating opportunities in Mwakitolyo. Although some areas have land suitable for agriculture, Mwakitolyo falls within a semi-arid region where rainfall is low and unreliable. This climatic condition makes agriculture an unreliable livelihood option. In addition, access to fertile land is limited, further reducing agricultural viability for many residents. Some community members have ventured into small-scale trade and entrepreneurial activities, but these offer limited returns. By contrast, the ASGM sector, despite its risks and unpredictability, offers the potential for high, immediate returns when gold is found, which makes it the most attractive and viable livelihood option for many people in the area.

With women kept at the margins of ASGM in Mwakitolyo, their economic empowerment and independence remain limited, which increases the risk of poverty not only for women but for entire families and communities. As an example, many women in Mwakitolyo are found struggling to afford basic needs such as food, healthcare, and school fees for their children.

“When you don't make enough money, you can't plan. You're just surviving day by day. Even when children get sick or need school uniforms, we women are the ones in trouble,” one woman remarked during a focus group discussion.

3.4.2. Social effects: gender inequality, marginalization, and social stigma

Beyond economic impacts, women's marginal participation in mining also leads to broader social consequences. Based on data from our interviews and focus group discussions, one major issue identified is the exclusion of women's voices from key conversations that determine how mining resources are distributed, regulated, or improved. As a result, decision-making spaces within mining operations, associations, and community leadership rarely reflect or prioritize the needs of women. On the contrary, they often reinforce existing gender inequality and contribute to the continued marginalization of women. One female respondent expressed frustration by saying:

“When meetings are called about mining, it's mostly the men who attend. We are either not invited or not taken seriously. Even if you try to say something, they will say ‘This is men's work.’”

Second, there is a strong social stigma attached to women who participate actively in mining. As discussed in section 3.2, women miners are often labelled as "Wasimbe" (a term referring to sex workers), which discourages many married women from engaging in mining altogether. This moral judgment leads to isolation, ridicule, and sometimes even domestic conflict.

“A woman going to mining sites every day is seen as someone who has lost her morals. You can even lose your marriage,” said one female respondent.

As a result, women face a significant dilemma: to remain economically dependent in order to maintain their social acceptance or to seek independence and risk exclusion from their families and communities. This dilemma discourages many women from fully participating in mining, limiting their empowerment and further entrenching existing social and gender patterns.

3.4.3. Broader implications for the community and mining sector

These economic and social exclusions not only hurt women but also limit the overall development of the mining sector. By restricting nearly half of the population from contributing to and benefiting from mining, Mwakitolyo is missing out on the potential innovation, labour, investments, and perspectives that women could bring. Women's participation in the formal mining economy could diversify income streams, increase household resilience, and promote more equitable and inclusive community development.

Furthermore, when women are empowered economically, studies consistently show that they are more likely than men to reinvest in their families and communities, especially in health, education, and food security (World Bank, 2012; UN Women, 2016). Therefore, creating a more inclusive mining sector is not only a matter of gender justice but also a strategic approach to local development and poverty reduction in Mwakitolyo and other rural mining communities.

3.5. Strategies and interventions to overcome barriers restricting women's involvement in gold mining

To promote gender equality and increase women's participation in gold mining at Mwakitolyo, it is essential to implement targeted strategies that challenge restrictive cultural norms and address structural barriers. Below are key interventions suggested by a majority of the respondents in this study.

- **Community sensitization and education**

The majority of women, men, and local government authorities (LGAs) who participated in the in-depth interviews and FGDs suggested that sustained community awareness sessions, targeting both men and women, are needed to debunk myths and stereotypes surrounding women's involvement in mining. Participants proposed organizing group dialogues, theatre performances, and community forums that promote inclusive narratives around women's capabilities. They also emphasized the importance of engaging influential local figures including traditional leaders, respected elders, religious leaders, and successful women miners to serve as champions of change. These individuals were seen as trusted voices who could help shift community attitudes and advocate for women's full participation in the mining sector.

- **Provision of financial support to women miners**

During interviews and FGDs, women miners highlighted the need for accessible capital and financial support, either individually or through women-led associations such as the Tanzania Women Miners Association (TAWOMA).

Respondents suggested that TAWOMA could play a key role by organizing savings and loan schemes for its members, facilitating group loan guarantees, and linking women miners to microfinance institutions that offer tailored financial products. Additionally, TAWOMA could provide training on financial literacy and business development to help women manage and grow their investments.

To overcome current barriers to access capital, such as lack of collateral and formal documentation, participants proposed community-based solutions, including the formation of Village Community Banks (VICOBAs), rotating savings groups, and cooperatives where women can pool resources and access credit collectively. These mechanisms were viewed as more accessible and trustworthy than commercial banks, especially for women with limited assets or formal education. Other suggestions included engaging development partners and NGOs to support seed funding or guarantee schemes that reduce the risk for lenders while empowering women to enter or scale up their mining operations. Strengthening these structures would allow women to profit more from mining opportunities, increase their incomes, and reduce the economic vulnerability of their households.

Conclusions

This study has shed light on the significant barriers that hinder women's participation in gold mining in Mwakitolyo, which are primarily rooted in socio-cultural, economic, and institutional challenges. Deep-rooted traditional beliefs in Mwakitolyo perpetuate myths, stigma, and gender stereotypes that restrict opportunities for women to engage in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM). Cultural norms, particularly in the Sukuma community, place women in traditional caregiving roles that limit their availability for full-day income-generating activities such as mining. These gendered expectations, combined with negative perceptions surrounding menstruation and the labelling of female miners as immoral (e.g., "Wasimbe", referring to sex workers), further discourage women's involvement in the sector.

Women who do participate in Mwakitolyo's ASGM sector are often relegated to low-paying, labour-intensive tasks such as washing/panning, crushing, and transporting ore, roles that do not provide the same financial returns as those dominated by men, such as operating heavy machinery or working in deep trenches. Economic barriers, such as the high costs of mining equipment and limited access to capital and credit for women, exacerbate this situation. Many women lack the financial resources needed to invest in improved mining tools and methods, which hampers their ability to increase productivity or income. Moreover, women's lack of ownership or control over critical assets like land and property further restricts their access to financial services.

In our study, we found that the daily earning gap between men and women in ASGM in Mwakitolyo can reach up to 90%. This disparity contributes to cycles of poverty and economic dependency, with long-term consequences for women's empowerment and household well-being. The absence of women in leadership and decision-making structures within mining operations, associations, and community governance reinforces their marginalization and sustains gender inequalities.

Despite these challenges, the study also found that local efforts by organizations such as the Tanzania Women Miners Association (TAWOMA) can play a significant role in supporting women miners through financial assistance, technical training, and advocacy. However, these efforts remain limited in scale and reach. Much more needs to be done to dismantle the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that continue to prevent women from fully and meaningfully participating in mining.

In conclusion, addressing these barriers is crucial not only for promoting gender equity but also for enhancing the development of the mining sector and the broader community in Mwakitolyo. Creating a more inclusive environment where women can actively participate in all facets of gold mining will lead to improved economic outcomes for women, greater household resilience, and more sustainable and equitable local development.

Recommendations

To promote gender equality and enhance women's participation in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) activities in Mwakitolyo, the following targeted recommendations are proposed, directly drawn from the study's findings:

1. Awareness and community engagement

- Local government authorities (including Village Councils and Ward Development Committees) should organize regular community sensitization forums to challenge negative gender norms and promote the benefits of women's economic participation in mining.
- Religious and traditional leaders should be actively engaged in awareness campaigns to help transform cultural attitudes that restrict women's roles in mining, especially those linked to myths around menstruation and morality.

2. Capacity building and skills development

- The Tanzania Women Miners Association (TAWOMA) and local civil society organizations (e.g., SHIDEPHA+) should design and deliver tailored training programs on mining techniques, safety standards, environmental management, and entrepreneurship for current and aspiring women miners.
- Vocational training institutions should partner with CSOs and mining stakeholders to offer technical and business training for women, including practical internships at ASGM sites.

3. Strengthening women's networks and representation

- TAWOMA, in collaboration with CSOs, should work to strengthen women miners' groups at the village and ward levels to improve peer support, collective advocacy, and resource sharing.
- Local government authorities and mining site committees should facilitate regular dialogue platforms between women miners and local mining authorities to ensure women's concerns are heard

and integrated into local mining plans and decisions.

4. Access to financial services and equipment

- Local microfinance institutions and cooperative societies should be encouraged to develop loan products tailored for women in ASGM, including flexible repayment terms and financial literacy training.
- Mining equipment suppliers should be engaged to establish rental or lease-to-own schemes for women who cannot afford to buy mining tools outright.

By assigning specific responsibilities to relevant actors and grounding these actions in the local context, the above recommendations aim to create a more inclusive and equitable mining sector in Mwakitolyo. Implementing these targeted and practical steps will help key stakeholders empower women, reduce poverty, and promote sustainable local development in mining communities.

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VOICES FROM TANZANIA

The “Voices from Tanzania” is a publication series supported by IPIS dedicated to case studies by Tanzanian civil society actors which aim to draw attention to pertinent issues of human rights, corporate accountability and resource governance in Tanzania.

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