

MINING COMMUNITIES IN GHANA: REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE OF WORK FOR FEMALE MINERS AND NON-MINERS

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The following narrative describes the experiences of women in small-scale mining and other economic activities at Kejetia, in the Upper East region of Ghana. The ways in which economic activities of women are influenced by social factors—such as the culturally determined position of women in the Ghanaian society—are discussed. The cultural challenges faced by these hardworking women account for their vulnerability in the mines.

Introduction

This narrative is based on my 2010 participation in the University of Michigan's Study Abroad Summer program, sponsored by the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at Kejetia, in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The original study (my doctoral research, from which this narrative was drawn) came from data which was focused on evaluating the effect of mercury on small-scale miners in Ghana, both male and female. Funding for my doctoral research came from the University of Michigan's Office of the Vice President for Research, Department of Anthropology. From the original data set, I interviewed females ranging in age from 16–45 in groups and solo: 4 groups (N = 4 – 7 in each) and 20 individual. What drew my attention to this issue was a desire to understand the nature of women's work as miners and non-minors at mining sites, the type of work they do, personal income generated from mining activities, their social and family interactions, and reasons for working in a mining community without basic amenities such as electricity and running water. In addition to sharing the plight of females in mining communities and lessons learned, I will put the narrative in context commencing with the historical overview of the development of gold mining in Ghana, especially small scale mines owned by Ghanaians.

Small-Scale Mining Activities in the Talensi-Nabdam District of Ghana

Ghana, called the Gold Coast prior to March 1957, has produced and exported gold for centuries. Trade in gold with the Phoenicians and Moors were recorded before European incursions in 1471. Most gold mining in Ghana before the mid-nineteenth century was alluvial: miners recovering the gold from streams. Women and children in coastal towns around Elmina and Axim collected and washed beach sand to obtain gold after heavy rains (Aryee, 2003). Modern gold mining that plumbs the rich ore deposits below the earth's surface began about 1860, when European concessionaires (vendors – subsequently owners) imported heavy machinery and began working on large-scale mines such as Ashanti Goldfields Company (currently AngloGold Ashanti; based in South Africa, the 2nd largest mining company in the world) in Obuasi with mining rights granted by 1896. According to Hilson and Pardie (2006), between 10 and 15 million people worldwide are directly involved in small-scale gold mining with another 100 million people estimated to be associated with this work. In Ghana, gold currently accounts for about 40% of the country's exports and employs more than 200,000 people, with over 300 registered small-scale mining groups (Hilson, 2002).

As mining became more regulated by state, there was a high demand for unskilled labor power. The Northern territories of the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) became the target for labor recruitment. Thus, men from the Upper East region have travelled south to work in the large gold mines, non-Ghanaian owned, for more than forty years (Plange, 1979).

History of Kejetia

Kejetia is a mining community in the Talensi-Nabdam district of the Upper East region of Ghana. Ghana is divided into ten administrative regions. At the north-eastern corner, in the Guinea Savannah zone in the Upper East region. The regional capital is Bolatanga. Talensi-Nabdam district capital is Tongu, population 94,650 in 2010; one of the eight districts of the Upper East region (<http://tongo.ghana.districts.gov.gh>). Mining concession in the district originally covered an area 72km², although there have been encroachments by miners to other non-demarcated sites by illegal miners.

The major occupation of the people had been farming and raising livestock in their home communities. Relative to the livelihood of local inhabitants of Talensi, economic reciprocity among husbands and wives is used to satisfy their material needs (Fortes, 1949). The land belongs to the head of the family and to those of his lineage. Men do the heavy work on the farm, while women are responsible for the household chores and offer services to the men, such as the harvesting and marketing of produce. But the trend in occupation or agricultural duties differential by gender has changed with the emergence of other industries such as mining; this meant increased participation from women as miners and in mining-related activities.

At Kejetia, small-scale gold mining did not start until 1976. According to one of the early settlers, most of the neighboring concessions or mine workers migrated to the town of Obuasi to work at the gold mine. They returned to their local communities with the skills gained while working in large mines to start or work in small gold mines, often owned by Ghanaians. Thus, gold mining became the

“pull” factor for starting these communities. Now, Kejetia’s economy and development is heavily dependent on both gold mining and gold prices which impact the role of women.

Women’s Work: Mining and Non-Mining Occupations

The population of Kejetia is about 3,000; this number could more than double during active mining periods. Half of the population is estimated to be women primarily the ages of 16 - 45. Before the introduction of small-scale mining in the district, the major livelihood of women included farming, livestock rearing, shea-butter picking and processing, and fuel-wood gathering (Banchirigah and Hilson, 2010).

Studies by Awumbilla and Tsikata (2010) showed that 44.8% of females in mining communities are actually involved in mining. Most women working in the mines were born and raised in the Upper East Region and migrated to southern Ghana (especially Kumasi) to work in mining and non-mining occupations. The rest of the women (31%) are either traders or service providers to miners or food processors (17.2%). Only 3.5 per cent of the women are farmers. They live at Kejetia for a greater part of the year; at the beginning of the rainy season, the delays prohibit them from mining, so they often go back home for a few days to help their parents plant crops. They occasionally make trips to Bolgatanga in northern Ghana to purchase major food stuffs such as vegetables. Currently, women in Kejetia engage in several types of economic activities for their survival, including: small-scale mining, domestic services, bathroom operators, *pito* brewing, food vendors and petty trading, and processing shea nuts into butter.

Women as Miners

All the females interviewed for this narrative have been involved in mining, the most common work being *shanking*. More than half of the women work as *shankers* who strain grounded rock to separate the rough particles from the finely grounded powder, using a sieve or scarf. The fine powder is then mixed with water to form a paste. Water is run over the

paste to wash away the earth. Mercury is then added to the residue to form a gold-mercury amalgam. A few of the women are involved in the amalgamation process known as *burning*. The amalgam is heated using small burners to vaporize the mercury, leaving behind the small grains of gold, which is then either refined or sold in its raw state. Not many women are involved in this process as it is normally performed by the owner, sponsor, or buyer of the gold, all of whom are usually men. Where particles of gold can be visibly seen in rock pieces, the rock is pounded in large metal mortars by men to retrieve as much of the gold as possible. Another task women perform is transporting rocks to milling machines to be ground into powder.

Women are excluded from certain mining activities such as the digging of mining pits. Groups of workers are called *gangs*. Each gang is given accommodations in the same household by the leader, owner of the pit, or business (*ghetto*) owner. One man explained:

"Women are excluded from entering the shaft because it is a taboo for a woman menstruating to enter mine shafts. A menstruating woman drives away good spirits, which are guiding spirits for the mines."

Some women reported that working in the mines was peaceful, as it temporarily took them away from the pressures of their families and local governments. One of the women interviewed explained:

"We are defrauded by relatives in Kumasi who contract us (hire us out) as domestic servants but receive (keep) our wages (on our behalf) and refuse to give the money back to us. Besides, we are constantly harassed by city authorities for non-payment of sales tax even when we do not make enough sales. We cannot afford suitable accommodation, often living on the streets or in slum

locations and thus are prone to sexual harassment and rape."

When asked how much money women earn from mining activities, one interviewee stated that 30 – 50 GH¢ (Ghana Cedis) per month is the average (\$20.05 – \$33.41 U.S. dollars; rate as of 6/1/2011). However, the amount can double when business is booming. She explained that she is able to save part of this income for herself and the remainder for her parents through *susu*, which is a form of informal savings organized by groups of people who contribute small amounts in savings over a period and collect the money back in bulk.

Women as Domestic Workers

There are various types of domestic service jobs in mining communities. *Chop-bars*, which are local restaurants where dishes are prepared and sold, are usually female-owned and usually stay open until midnight. Women also work as *kaya yie* or *kaya yoo*, (head porters or couriers) carrying heavy loads of goods or food stuffs on their heads for buyers street vendors.

Younger women can earn money by fetching water for other people in the mining community for a fee during times when the main stream dries up. The cost of a bowl of water (about 30 liters) ranged between 40 and 60 pesewas (.27 – .40 U.S. cents; rate as of 6/1/2011) depending on the season. During the dry season, women can travel distances of over 5 kilometers (approximately 3 miles) one way to collect water upstream when the water downstream dries up. In any of these positions, women are subjected to low wages and/or tips, irregular sale of goods, and lower profits.

Women as Bathroom Operators

Most homes do not have private indoor or outdoor bathrooms in this region. Women own and operate public bathrooms where workers can shower when returning from mining pits. "No flush" toilets are available in the form of large, outdoor rooms for multiple users with trenches along the inner wall for squatting. There is an open underground storage structure where water collects when it rains. Miners fetch water from these structures for bathing,

and the operators use the water to wash down the trenches. It costs twenty pesewas (.13 U.S. cents; rate as of 6/1/2011) to use the bathroom and more if one purchases toilet paper.

Women as Pito Brewers

One of the major female-owned income-generating businesses in Kejetia brewing *pito*: beer made from millet. Women are involved from the milling process through brewing to selling of the end-product. The owners of the business (mostly women) employ other women to assist in *pito* production. One woman can brew 4-7 barrels (210 liter/barrel) per week. *Pito* serves as wholesale stock for other women to sell.

The main component of *pito* is millet, which is milled, mixed with water, and boiled over a fire in large pots. The drink is either sold immediately (this is referred to as the female drink) or left overnight to ferment (male drink) to increase the alcoholic content. The drink is consumed all-year round but especially in the dry season when temperatures are extremely high.

Water is also an important component for *pito* brewing. The main source of water for *pito* and all other food preparation is from the main stream at the outskirts of the community. A source of worry is that the stream is highly contaminated from mining. The ultimate impact on the health status of those who drink it has not been officially measured, but during the interviews it was realized that there was a high rate of infant mortality in the community, which can be the result of water contamination. However, no research has been conducted to prove or disprove this assertion.

Women as Food Vendors and Petty Traders

At busy times, a lot of people buy locally cooked food. Food is sold under sheds from morning till late evening. Most food vendors are women, who also employ other young women. A large number of women also engage in petty trading. Their wares include herbal medicine (locally dried leaves and plant roots), food, and clothing. A few men also sell goods, but they work out of actual shops instead of

tables on the street like the female vendors. *Insu* (filtered water sold in small plastic bags for drinking) is brought in big trucks from Bolgatanga, which shop owners buy and sell. Items sold by men tend to cost more than women's, so therefore men are likely to make more profit.

Women as Shea-Butter Producers

Shea butter is used on a daily basis in this region for skin care and food preparation. It is extremely time consuming to make, and is rarely sold for money unless there is a downturn in the gold business. Shea butter is used to make stews and sauces and to fry food, so almost all of the butter is consumed by the household with no economic gain. To make the butter, shea seeds are collected from wild trees, which grow in the area, are sun-dried and crush opened to remove the nut. This process is usually done collectively by a group of women, who sit together and chat while crushing and sorting the nuts. Since there is no shea nut milling machine at Kejetia, women carry the nuts to near-by communities for milling and processing. This takes them away from the community for a week or two.

Kejetia's Mining Community: A Challenge for Women & Children

Life in this mining community is very challenging for women and children. During my visit over the summer of 2010, Kejetia had no basic facilities such as medical clinics, toilets (both private and public), potable water, or electricity. Educational infrastructures were compromised because of these factors. The people are discouraged from building permanent compound houses and permanent sanitation facilities—such as pit latrines—because of the migrant nature of the residents. Thus, a form of open defecation referred to as “free range” is commonplace. Houses are constructed with mud, roofed with thatch or plastic sheets and corrugated metal. Some houses have single rooms and others are a compound with two to seven rooms. Most houses do not have separate kitchens. Cooking is usually done out in the open on locally constructed mud-stoves, using firewood as fuel.

According to the residents of Kejetia, a Danish Development Agency (DANIDA) is the only non-governmental or governmental organization which has donated equipment—a generator—to the community to be used for mining activities. Although this generator could also be used to provide a section of the community with electricity, most people cannot afford it. However, houses close to the generator get enough power to light one or two bulbs when it is in use.

Kejetia has one main unpaved road leading into the community, which divides into two main branches. One branch stretches to one end of the community while the other ends in the market area, where there are two wooden constructed sheds under which women sell goods such as local herbs, and men sell locally-made clothes. The streets of Kejetia are littered with plastic refuse from *insu* and other kinds of trash. An interview with one man revealed that they have not been able to organize themselves for clean up campaigns because mining takes up most of their time. However, he also indicated their willingness to organize for community work.

The only three-classroom block school for the children is run by a private proprietor under poor environmental conditions, such as a damaged roof which leaves the school unprotected during rainy and Hamatan (sand and wind) seasons. There are approximately 70 children, with ages ranging from three to eleven-years-old, with differing academic and physical needs. The single teacher and assistant are responsible for providing meals for the children. Even under these conditions, the children are cheerful and eager to get an education (and meal) as they walk to school, often defying bad weather conditions such as torrid rains. A newly-constructed school by the Talensi-Nabdam District Assembly (local government administration) had not begun enrollment. One male stakeholder who was interviewed stated that the *“inability to start the school could be due to the general lack of getting teachers posted into deprived communities.”* Many trained teachers do not want to go to such communities without basic amenities for fear of their health and well-being. Housing provided by the government

would be sparse; oftentimes they would have to relocate their families to such communities. Older school-going children usually live with family members in cities such as Bolgatanga or Kumasi where they are likely to attend school if enrolled, visiting their working parents in Kejetia when they are on vacation.

Women's Economic Dependence: Lack of Security

More than half the women in the community are engaged in the mining activities. Payment for their services was unregulated and unformulated. As compensation for their labor, they receive ground rocks from secondary extraction with very little gold left in them. Even this compensation for their labor depends on how much the male mine owners are willing to offer. The women seem powerless to contest payments or wages. According to one of woman interviewed, “men only give what they are ready to offer.” She went on to explain that men can choose to refuse a woman any form of compensation for their services. After all, “they enter the pit [in her view, men do the most difficult tasks], which is the most risky part of the process and they own the business.” This feeling of powerlessness accounted for their inability to negotiate their wages. Moreover, she explained that women only found themselves in the small-scale gold mining initiated by men.

Without men, it would be impossible for women to get into the mining business. Thus, the vulnerability of women is revealed in their inability to come together to negotiate with men since culturally women do not argue with men who are the main decision-makers.

Gender Disparity and Economic Justice: Perspectives on Rights to Access Resources

In an interview with a group of male miners, I found that men are more likely to know and exercise their civil rights to access resources from government and other agencies than women. For example; when questioned, the men mentioned electricity supply as their most pressing need to improve their quality of life. During the interview, the men had a clear plan of protest to secure electricity. Vocal in

their pronouncement, their planned action was to threaten to refuse to vote for the next general democratic election in Ghana (December 2012) unless the government provided them with electricity. They need electricity not only for their homes but for their businesses; the lack of which negatively affects their economic lives and the mining community. The shafts often fill up with water during major rains, and needs to be pumped out before miners can re-enter the pit. This process requires the use of electricity.

By contrast, in a focus-group discussion with women, they mentioned a poly (medical) clinic as their most urgent need to improve their quality of life. Their rationale for such a clinic was that the clinic would provide services to sick children and accident cases from the mines (mostly involving men who enter the pits); the lack of which negatively affects the social and economic development of families and the community. Like the male miners, they too expected the government to provide the polyclinic. However, they did not have an action plan to ensure support for such a clinic in the community. In fact, these women specifically reported that they had not even considered any action if the government failed to provide them with a polyclinic.

Conclusion

Despite the significant role women play at the mines for the production of gold, they have received minimal attention from researchers, development programs, and the government of Ghana. There are discrepancies in the actual number of women involved in mining and related occupational activities, in the significance and nature of work they do, and in diversity among the group. For example, the differential impact of working long hours by female miners has not been fully investigated. For women who come from the same district where the mines are located, it was found in this preliminary study that they were not as negatively affected by working long hours. Being geographically close to their families also offered them the opportunity to participate in social activities such as funerals; a significant event in Ghanaian culture. Not participating in funerals and paying respect for

the dead in Ghanaian society can result in excusion, shunning, etc. One woman, whose family lived far away from where she mined, put the importance of taking part in her family social life after she returned home by saying: "For the last two weeks, I've been attending funerals in my hometown. I couldn't do that when I was in Kumasi."

The impact women have had on these mining communities such as contributing to "community stability, cohesiveness, morale and general well being, and acting as primary agents in facilitating positive change" (Hinton, et al., 2003, p 171) need comprehensive investigation relative to the income and benefits they receive from these profitable mining companies. Often women occupy marginal roles in small-scale mining; activities associated with transporting and processing materials, unlike digging and maintaining pits, do not qualify them as "miners" (Hinton et al., 2003, p 164). Thus they are not sought after to contribute to decisions regarding pay, length of work day, safety, etc., as compared to concession owners, mine operators, dealers and mineral buyers and equipment owners (Yekovleva, 2007). Both their roles and activities need to be investigated—quantitatively and qualitatively—compared to males and within group diversity for those in residing in these communities with small scale mines.

Lessons Learned

I believe that more studies should be carried out on female miners to tell their stories of survival and desire for economic justice. Due to limited time during this preliminary study, many inquiries were not made for a detailed study. However, I have learned several lessons that I hope will be meaningful for future researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and other stakeholders advocating for the rights and improved quality of life through social development programs and initiatives for females in mining communities in Northern Ghana.

Most importantly, I have learned that there is a need to mainstream women's sustainable employment opportunities and activities in mining areas—improving their economic status

and that of their families—in more lucrative businesses. Clearly these women had a preference to work in mining communities as compared to other areas where they felt more exploited (economically, socially, and physically). Thus, stakeholders should pay greater attention to the extraordinary contribution of women in the mining sector while improving facilities such as schools for their children, housing accommodations, sanitary conditions, and drinking water. Finally, what I learned most is that these women seemed to be suffering from low self-esteem, accepting not only what men offered as owners of the mines but believing that, from their social position, they had no voice to ask for fair pay and better working conditions. These women are not only hard workers, but they do have a voice and are the glue holding many of their families and communities together. Much more can be learned from these women; thus, I am encouraging others to seek additional knowledge from them, including the beliefs and traditions of their diverse community, perceptions towards governmental policies on mining, relationships that are emerging from this economic endeavor, and sustainable empowerment interventions that will improve the quality of life for those residing in this “needy” community of miners, especially females.

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