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Women Cooperatives in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Zimbabwe: A Livelihood Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In Sub-Saharan Africa, natural resources endowment has remained a key source of livelihoods in rural areas. This study argues that in rural Zimbabwe, artisanal gold mining has become a major economic and livelihood activity with great potential for improving women's socio-economic condition. However, this sector is predominantly male, making it difficult for women to penetrate it. Women who enter this masculine economic terrain are bound to encounter challenges. In Manicaland Province, to deal with such challenges, they constitute artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) cooperatives. Focusing on Manicaland Province and applying feminist perspectives, the study examines why women enter this male-dominated sector; the nature of women's cooperatives, and ultimately the extent to which cooperatives bolster participation in gold mining as well as socio-economic benefits derived through such cooperatives. This study makes a significant contribution to literature by examining how women cooperatives in ASM shape their livelihoods in rural Zimbabwe. In this qualitative study, the researcher conveniently and purposively sampled 20 particpants, that is, women working in gold panning, law enforcement agents, and traditional leaders. The study traces the various factors propelling women into artisanal mining and concludes that women's entry and continued participation in the artisanal mining sector reflects their ongoing gendered struggles for inclusion. Notwithstanding all the study participants agree that women are utilising the cooperative system to mitigate the challenges, sexual harassment included, that threaten to eliminate them from the male-dominated mining sector. It also found that under the cooperative system, participants are realising reasonable economic gains. The study recommends that the government of Zimbabwe should formally recognise Artisanal and Small-Scale gold mining as a source of livelihoods, not only for men, but women as well.

Keywords *Women Cooperatives, Gold Mining, Rural Livelihoods, Zimbabwe*

1. Introduction

In Sub-Saharan Africa, natural resources endowment has remained a key source of livelihoods in rural areas. ASM has shaped the livelihoods of rural communities since the colonial era (Mandirahwe, 2021). In Zimbabwe, the proliferation of ASM post-independence has been ignited by a combination of economic meltdown and climate change, which is currently experienced in Sub-Saharan Africa. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has further disrupted the livelihood options for communities, and

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ASM has remained an avenue for sustaining the livelihoods of rural communities. This has been further supported by Siaw etal, (2026). provided empirical evidence on ASM as a livelihood source in face of climate change. In Zimbabwe, the current El Niño conditions have diminished hope for rural communities who had pinned their hopes on agriculture, as crop failure is being experienced in the rural parts of Zimbabwe. This explains the unprecedented rise in ASM in Sub-Saharan Africa and Zimbabwe in particular. However, it has remained masculine, making it difficult for women to penetrate. According to Koomson-Yalley and Kyei (2022), existing socio-cultural norms limit women's entrepreneurial drive and capacities in this sector. Women who enter this masculine economic terrain are bound to encounter challenges ranging from masculine violence to shortage of capital. While there is a growing body of scholarship on barriers faced by women in ASM, there is scanty literature on the drivers of women cooperatives in ASM and the extent of these cooperatives in sustaining their livelihoods. This study will draw insights from women's cooperatives in ASM in the Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe. This study was informed by the following research questions: What are the drivers of women's cooperatives in the ASM sector in Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe? In what ways does women cooperatives in ASM enhance their livelihoods, and what are the challenges faced by women's cooperatives in the ASM sector?

2. Literature Review

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), natural ASM has remained a key source of livelihood in rural areas. Ofosu and Sarpong (2022) argue that despite its informality, the sector is known for sustaining livelihoods through employment opportunities. In the context of climate change, which makes rain-fed agriculture elusive, ASM has become a source for livelihood diversification. The study by Bansah et al. (2023) has revealed how smallholder farmers are transitioning to ASM from agriculture as a response mechanism to climate change through focusing on Guinea. The same has been further revealed by scholars such as Siaw (2026) through using empirical evidence from Ghana. Women have participated in the ASM sector as it offers economic gains compared to smallholder farming, which has proved to be highly sensitive to climate change in developing countries such as Ghana and Zimbabwe. However, extant scholarship has indicated the barriers faced by women in a male-dominated sector, which makes it difficult for women to penetrate this sector. Hilson etal, (2018) note that in Manica, ASM is dominated by males and women have entry barriers due to existing social and cultural norms which are skewed against women. In areas where they are accepted, women are not allowed to perform other tasks as performed by men. Their findings revealed that women were engaged in activities such as gold panning, transporting ore-bearing materials to washing sites, and vending. In this regard, women cooperatives in ASM have the potential to break gender stereotypes, thus harnessing ASM a livelihood pathway.

The participation of women in ASM is critical from a livelihood perspective. According to Lahiri-Dutt (2015), women's participation in the ASM serves to portray feminisation of mining, thus defying the conventional idea of conceptualising ASM as a masculine industry. Driven by a high level of unemployment and current geopolitical crises, which have increased the demand of gold globally, Arthur-Holmes et al. (2023b) argue that ASM has continued to employ women. Women occupy a distinct role in the ASM space worldwide and can go unnoticed by scholars. This has been further necessitated by the informal nature of ASM in Zimbabwe, where it has remained subterranean since the dawn of independence. Scholars like Ofosu etal (2024) indicated that women provided 50% of the total workforce in ASM; however, financial reward is not as equal as compared to their men counterparts. This can be attributed to the nature of work; women are not interested in underground mining. Women and children only engage in less dangerous activities indirectly or directly. The former includes vending, and the later include activities such as gold panning, transportation, and separation of gold.

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Naika and Pawar (2026) argue that women-led livelihoods are important in enhancing income diversification and income stability. In this regard, creating a livelihood entails addressing economic uncertainties, social change, and environmental problems. This conceptualisation of livelihood is apt for this study, as women's cooperatives in ASM are seen as a response to the above shocks, especially in post-colonial Zimbabwe, where climate change and economic meltdown have disrupted the livelihoods of rural communities. A livelihood is therefore said to be sustainable when it can sustain endogenous and exogenous shocks. The former includes economic uncertainties such as inflation, and the latter includes climate change-induced disasters such as drought and floods. Whether women cooperatives in ASM enhance the livelihood of rural communities endowed with minerals remains a grey area for scholars not only in Zimbabwe but on the globe. ASM in this study is defined as the traditional extraction and processing of minerals using limited technology. This sector is informal in SSA, including Zimbabwe, and it is often illegal. It is often associated with disasters, especially ASM who rely on disused pits. This study therefore grappled with the question on why women formed cooperatives in ASM spaces and how does it shape their livelihood.

Extant literature on women workers in ASM revolves around the perceived invisible nature of women using different case studies (Lahiri-Dutt and Macintyre, 2006). These scholars have not interrogated women's cooperatives in ASM from a livelihood perspective, given the potential of cooperatives to transform the livelihoods of rural communities. Additionally, scholarship on women in the ASM has exclusively focused on women in ASM as individuals, thus missing the uniqueness of women's cooperatives in challenging masculinities in ASM spaces. Therefore, existing scholarship has employed an individual approach (Hinton et al., 2018). The experiences of women in ASM also vary and sometimes have significant barriers. Women are also dismissed as not real miners (Buss etal, 2017). Henceforth, by forming cooperatives, women's visibility in ASM is enhanced, which enables them to harness ASM as a livelihood pathway.

The study conducted by Jokka and Mahanta (2026) indicated that the role of cooperatives has been acknowledged to have played an important role in society, particularly in improving the livelihoods of societies. Of interest to note here is the fact that cooperatives are characterised by voluntarism and they offer a platform for the communities to have control over productive activities from which livelihoods are derived from. The principles which apply to the modus operandi of cooperatives arguably provide a platform for the empowerment of women as they are characterised by autonomy in decision-making. These internationally recognised principles include voluntary and open membership, democratic member control and member economic participation (Ortmann and King, 2006). These principles arguably have the potential to empower women in ASM. However, challenges are uncommon on cooperatives in mining, as discovered by Alves et al. (2017) on mining cooperatives in Brazil. Accordingly, problems inherent in cooperatives in mining include inadequacy of government support, lack of management skills and shortage of working capital. Therefore, while women cooperatives in ASM is essential in improving livelihoods, challenges are inevitable; thus, the need to reflect on seven international guiding principles

Bidari and Khanal (2026) argues that the cooperative model is not new. This scholar argues that the application of cooperative model in agriculture dates back to the Rochdale Pioneers in England in 1844 A.D. There is a bourgeoning literature on agriculture cooperative and livelihoods. Sandesh & Khanal, (2026) sees cooperatives in agriculture as a vehicle to improve access to financial services, increase farm productivity and strengthen livelihoods. This was revealed by Attwood and Baviskor (1980) argue that cooperatives in developing countries sought to bridge the gap between rural and urban areas. Chitisike (1988) noted that in developing economies, where agriculture is the livelihood source, communities across Africa find the need to increase agriculture through cooperatives. Focusing on ASM, there is scant literature except for Munir (2022), who interrogated how cooperatives improve female miners'

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outcomes in Rwanda. In Zimbabwe, rural cooperatives can be traced back to 1980, and the idea was to enhance economic empowerment. While scholars have focused on agricultural cooperatives, there is scanty literature on women's cooperatives in the ASM. This study contributes to the literature on cooperatives by revealing how women cooperatives in ASM shape their livelihoods in Zimbabwe.

There seems to be a belief that improved cooperation supports improved incomes and that collective decision-making translates to lower cases of Gender Based Violence (GBV). Rwanda's successful accompanied by GBV strategies serve as a lesson for African countries to improve well-being. The potential of cooperatives in reducing GBV is based on overarching evidence that disadvantaged women are vulnerable to abuse globally and financial resources can help to expand women's choices to improve their conditions (Britton, 2020). However, there is still a gap in the literature on the link between cooperatives and gender based violence. In some cases, national laws put in place to protect women at mining sites in Africa have been used to exclude them, while gender based violence has been attributed to higher incomes, thus threatening their husbands' masculinity (Hinton, 2016).

Focusing on Zimbabwe, the legal framework within the extractive industries has historically sidelined women's needs and concerns (Binha, 2021). The country is a leading producer of mineral resources on the continent, yet women in the sector account for 15% of mining jobs (Ndlovu et al 2019), thus posing a significant threat to effective gender equality. Mukenge and Moyce (2024) noted the strides made by the government of Zimbabwe in women's empowerment in the mining industry. This has resulted in sponsorship programs that provide women with resources such as mining equipment to support mining initiatives. This resulted in creating pathways for women to establish cooperatives, offering economic avenues into a previously male-dominated industry. The Zimbabwean Constitution (2013) section 17 and 53(2), outlines gender equality and this is further supported by policy frameworks such as the National Gender Policy which articulates the framework for gender equality across all sectors including ASM. Against this background, this study seeks to understand ways in which women in cooperatives contribute to their livelihoods.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

In understanding the interplay between women cooperatives in ASM and Livelihoods outcome, the study was premised on the feminist political ecology (FPE). This theory was apt for this study as it combines gendered environment politics with socialized labor roles, inequalities and women forms of knowledge and environmental relations. Proponents of theory indicated that gender is a crucial element in shaping the control over natural resources as gold. To this extent, women participation in ASM is an attempt to break perceived gender roles in ASM wherein male control and access mining of resources such as gold and women being confined in the reproductive and indirect roles which include vending.

Using this Feminist Political Ecology and intersectionality framework, this paper draws on the analytical approaches outlined by Yaffa Truelove (2019),). Rocheleau etal (2014) explained that using gender not only as a lens but as a driving variable in understanding natural resources access and control. They further argue that gender is the variable that interacts with class, race, culture and ethnicity to determine the process of ecological change. Kerr (2014) proposes for a feminist approach that combines social vulnerability with feminist political ecology because vulnerability to environmental politics revolves on both physical and social factors. She further sees women vulnerability to the environmental politics as a product of extant disadvantages in social, economic, political and legal opportunities. These feminist scholars provide a solid understanding Women cooperatives particularly on intersectionality of social, political and economic drives in shaping women cooperatives in male dominated ASM economic sector. An intersectional approach was apt for this study as women's vulnerability to extractive politics is based on their experiences in economic, legal and cultural constructs unique from those of men. The theorical

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framework is also applicable to the mining communities in Zimbabwe where feminization of poverty is a key feature of the communities endowed with mineral resources such as gold. yin

3. Materials and Methods

Qualitatively, the study used an exploratory multiple-case study design. According to Yin (2014), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Three women cooperatives were purposively selected in Premier Estate, Tsvingwe and Penhalonga Area in Mutasa District. These areas were selected because the district is currently experiencing a gold rush in these selected areas (Mandirahwe, 2024), hence allowing the researcher to understand the research questions. The researcher chose an exploratory multiple-case study design to gain a deep understanding of the research question, which is subjective and, therefore, best served through a qualitative design. To this extent, an exploratory multiple-case study method was used to explore the phenomenon. The method was employed because it is reliant on the nature of the research problems, and insights embedded in women cooperatives in ASMs in Zimbabwe concerning their struggle to achieve self-reliance in a masculine economy. In-depth interviews were the main data collection instrument to be used to solicit information. In-depth interviews with key informants were conducted with ten (10) key informants (KIs) selected through purposive sampling. The researcher made use of this sampling technique because it provided an opportunity to decide whether the sample represent the total population in line with the information supplied.

This included one representative from Mutasa Rural District Council, Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), Environmental Management Agency (EMA), Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG), Empower Bank, the Ministry of Mines, Fidelity Printers, Ward Councillors, the District Administrators' (DA) Office and finally the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises and Cooperative Development (SMECD). The researcher used convenience sampling to select six (6) representatives from three cooperatives in Tsvingwe, Penhalong and Odzi areas in Mutasa District. He purposively included four (4) women who are not affiliated to ASM cooperatives as a control group to understand if women cooperatives increased household incomes. Besides interviews, the study employed three focus group discussions consisting of ten (10) participants to understand how ASM is sustaining women's livelihoods. These were conducted in Penhalonga, Tsvingwe and Odzi areas. The researcher further used observation guides to observe if there are livelihood changes as result of women joining cooperatives. The study also made use of secondary data, that is Mutasa District master plan report, (2024), the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG, 2026) and legal frameworks. The researcher first sought approval from the District Development Committee (DDC) officer in the Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe. He was approved by the DDC office to conduct the study. The researcher pledged to safeguard the rights of participants during the study. Participation in this study was obtained through written consent, and participants were allowed to decline from the interview at any given moment.

Results

This study aimed to understand women's cooperatives in ASM from a livelihood perspective. Key themes that emerged in this study revolve around drivers of women cooperatives in ASM, contribution of ASM to women's livelihoods (income, standard of living and accessibility of basic needs such as food, shelter and education) and challenges faced by women cooperatives in sustaining their livelihoods.

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4. Drivers of Women Cooperatives in Masculine ASM sector

Climate change has proved to be one of the key drivers behind women's participation in the ASM in Zimbabwe. Since the turn of the new millennium, Zimbabwe has been experiencing extreme weather events such as drought and floods. Within the context of climate change, small-scale farming proved to be vulnerable to climate change, and small-holder farming remains volatile in sustaining livelihoods. This pushed women to off-farm activities such as ASM. This was further confirmed by Siaw etal (2026), who revealed how climate change pushes small-holder farmers into ASM.

From the field trips conducted by the researcher in Penhalonga, Premier Estate and Tsvingwe, ASM activities have encroached on the land previously used for agricultural production due to its vulnerability to climate change. This has become a major factor in driving women into ASM. This has been noted by Madzivhandila and Niyimbanira (2020), who note that the contribution of climate change in collapsing rural businesses culminates in unemployment in most rural economic sectors. Evidence of climate change in Zimbabwe, particularly Mutasa district, is unequivocal, as noted. In Mutasa District, small-scale farmers are experiencing increased incidents of droughts characterised by heat waves and erratic rainfall. This has compromised efforts towards growing maize crops and rearing livestock for income generation. Field trips revealed a rapid transition from agrarian to mining communities

One key Agriculture and Extension Officer (AGRITEX) interviewed confirmed that:

ASM is masculine in nature, and it is characterised by violence and corruption. Women enter in this rural economy as a survival mechanism in the face of climate change, which has disrupted rain-fed agriculture.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was characterised by the collapse of formal business, further shaped the increase in the participation of women in ASM as cooperatives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, formal business and unemployment increased drastically. Small and Medium enterprises provided an economic avenue for employment; however, they collapsed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This livelihood economy never recovered and ASM remained one of the viable pathways for rural women in Mutasa district in Zimbabwe. All interviewees agreed that ASM offers an alternative livelihood source against livelihood shocks such as economic meltdown. Salient to note is that ASM is indispensable for building resilience against livelihood shocks in the rural economy. This study has revealed that women cooperatives in ASM have provided women with a livelihood mechanism in the face of the economic meltdown. The confluence of climate change and economic meltdown has worsened the plight of women whose livelihoods are based on smallholder farming. One Agriculture and Extension Officer interviewee noted that:

In 2021 the country experienced El Niño-induced drought, and this has been experienced in Mutasa District, which is known to be food secure. Erratic rainfall received in the district has diminished the hopes of women who depend on subsistence agriculture as a major livelihood source.

Women cooperatives have entered ASM space in response to socio-economic challenges. The same was identified by scholars working on gender and masculinities in ASM spaces (Arthur-Holmes et al., 2023a). From the focus group discussion conducted with women cooperatives in ASM, it was indicated that ASM is characterised by violent masculinities which at times lead to displacement of women from their gold claims. Through collective actions, this study indicated that women's strategies such as protest and demonstration made positive impacts in responding to violent masculinities. Unlike women who occupy ASM as individuals, they reported facing sexual harassment from their male counterparts. This study revealed that gender based violence is more pronounced against women who are not affiliated to cooperatives in ASM space. These women are subjected to sexual harassment ranging from subjected to

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sexual harassment ranging from unwelcome physical, verbal, and non-verbal contact by male perpetrators. Findings from this study revealed that men have and are still using sexual harassment as a masculinist weapon to derail women from the sector that they perceive as "their" sector

5. The role of cooperatives in sustaining rural livelihoods

5.1 Income diversification

Women cooperatives in ASM have contributed to income diversification. From the focus group discussion carried out by the researcher, hit was pointed out that women extract more than 20 grams of gold after processing, where a gram is sold at Usd$150. Some women have even indicated that they have exceeded the average 20 grams depending on the type of ore. However, this is seasonal and depends on the presence of gold-bearing rocks, which cannot be easily detected. The researcher noted notable income variation from women cooperatives and individual women in the ASM. Field trips conducted by the researcher revealed livelihood improvement as evidenced through building new modern houses in areas such as Tsvingwe and Penhalonga low-density areas. Findings from this study revealed that income diversification has reduced domestic violence against women. Through participating in the cooperatives, income security among women has improved, outpacing women employed in the public service. Geopolitical wars such as Russia and Ukraine have opened economic avenues, particularly in the extractive industries, leading the rising demand of gold. This was confirmed by scholars such as Kowalewski and Skopiec (2024) who associated the rise in gold price with rising income and private demand in China and India.

One woman aged 40 interviewed indicated that

I have been in vending for the past 10 year and I was could not save; rather surviving on hand to mouth, ASM business has provided me with income for my day-to-day living expenses and I have managed to build my own house in Penhalonga residential area which I could never done through vending.

The study has revealed that women have invested in human capital development as well as accessing basic needs such as food. One single woman interviewed noted:

When my husband left me, he was the bread winner and I had savings for the family upkeep. My four children stayed with me at our rural home due to lack for school fees needed at Tsvingwe Primary School. From our mining cooperatives, my monthly income has increased to $usd300. My children are at school and I am now affording buying food for my children,

Located within the context of rural unemployment, ASM has provided a space for women's employment. These findings resonated with the research conducted by Arthur-Holmes et al., (2023b), who noted that ASM activities have continued to serve as a source for employment for most women, notably women. This is viable in rural areas where feminization of poverty is uncommon in Mutasa District of Zimbabwe. This study argued that formalisation of ASM will go a long way not only in reducing poverty among women but towards the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goal 1 (No Poverty) and Africa Agenda 2063 (Leaving Noone Behind). The African Mining Vision (2009) has also pinned hopes on ASM in improving the rural economy. The African Union (2011) has indicated the potential of harnessing ASM to stimulate entrepreneurship as well as its potential to promote local and integrated national development.

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5.2 Challenges Faced by Women Cooperatives in ASM

5.2.1 Financial Constraints

Findings from this study have complex challenges faced by women in ASM as they are operating in an informal space. ASM is capital intensive as it involves several stages from gold extraction to gold processing using chemicals such as mercury. Accessing loans from financial institutions such as the Zimbabwe Microfinance Bank has remained a challenge for rural women who do not have collateral security. However, some women cooperatives have relied on individuals who can provide them with an informal loan where interest rates are high as compared to prevailing bank interest rates. In case of failing to pay loans, loss of property such as cars has been reported. From the in-depth interviews collected by the researcher, it was revealed that the initial capital required for women cooperatives to engage in ASM ranges from $5000- $7000. Since ASM is an ideal livelihood option, women cooperatives are required to raise the initial capital outlay. According to Makaza and Chimuzinga (2020), financial institutions have expressed unwillingness to lend to ASM risky projects. The table below shows the amount of cost incurred in ASM business. This is beyond the reach of any ordinary citizen in Zimbabwe, hence a barrier for women to fully participate in ASM business. Findings from this study resonate well with the study conducted by Mohammed and Lee (2015), who identified lack of capital as a drawback for the prosperity of cooperatives.

Table 1. Mining Regulations for 2020

Item	Cost (usd$)
Application for an Exclusive Prospective Order (non-refundable)	10 000
Special mining lease	25 000
Special prospecting licence	3,750
Ordinary prospecting licence	1000
Renewal fee for a mining special grant	5000
Annual fee per five hectares	1125
Annual fees for mining special grant	50 per Hectare
Permit to transport ore (valid for three months	100

Source: The Mining (General) Amendment Regulations, 2020 in Statutory Instrument 95 of 202

The Gold Development Fund which was established in 2016 is one of the initiatives implemented by the Fidelity Printers and Refiners to support ASM in Zimbabwe. Makaza and Chimuzinga (2020) notes that the 20 million was disbursed was availed to fund women in mining and only 11% was taken by women. The study revealed that women are not either unaware of the facility or expressed frustration in application process, hence remain a barrier for rural women to access it. The study revealed that this facility is viable for corporates and excludes women cooperatives in ASM.

5.2.2 Political Patronage

The study has also revealed that women cooperatives have been subject to politics of patronage. It was revealed that for cooperatives to be viable, they have to be aligned to the ruling part was way of enhancing visibility as well as cushioning it from physical violence. ASM in Zimbabwe has been politicised, hence a fertile ground for the politics of patronage and electoral violence. This has compromised the key principles for cooperatives particularly on independence and autonomy. The study has revealed that women cooperatives in ASM are forced to be aligned to the ruling party for its survival. As noted in the literature sometimes cooperatives are used for political gains (Munir, 2022). These findings resonate with the study conducted by Kwakyewah (2016) who notes that in Senegal, the majority of women cooperatives have been used to augment their political power and profits upon entering a vote-exchanging arrangement with leaders of women cooperatives seeking funding. This is true with regards to women cooperatives in ASM in Mutasa District where cooperatives have been used

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to drive political interest of the ruling part. This norm is intense especially in electoral times. This challenge for women cooperatives in ASM has remained perennial given the informal nature of ASM.

5.2.3 Violence Against Women cooperatives in ASM

The informal nature of ASM in Zimbabwe has created a fertile ground for violence against women. Findings from this study revealed that women cooperatives in ASM are subjected to all forms of violence which ranges from rape, sexual assault and physical abuse. Women interviewed have expressed fear due sporadic and spontaneous violence which characterise ASM in Zimbabwe. Prosecution of violence perpetrators has remained elusive as the sectors is controlled by the politically powerful elite individuals. The machete-wielding gangs noted in the literature has penetrated all facets of ASM. Findings from this study have revealed that women cooperatives in ASM have not spared from this grassroots movement. This study revealed that Mashurugwi are killing local civilians and this has either implicitly or explicitly affected the modus operandi of women cooperatives in ASM. The study has revealed that the rape of women and looting of their ores. Women cooperatives in ASM have continued to bear the brunt of violence and this has been shaped by stereotypes that women are the weaker vessels.

6. Discussion

Findings from this section reveal that women cooperatives in ASM have been formed not only in response to violent masculinities in ASM but as a livelihood pathway where small-scale agriculture is no longer viable in supporting livelihoods in rural communities. The establishment of cooperatives in ASM provides economic avenues for women to navigate the male-dominated ASM sector, thus providing collective bargaining forms. This resonates well with a study conducted by Li etal (2026), who argued that cooperatives are established to strengthen the bargaining powers of their members, helping them to access comparative markets. Again, women who occupied ASM space as cooperatives have successfully challenged violent masculinities through collective actions such as demonstrations and protests. This resulted in positive impacts, unlike individual women who still grappled with some forms of gender based violence such as sexual harassment. From a livelihood perspective, ASM provides an opportunity for income diversification and economic stability in the face of economic uncertainties ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through engaging in cooperatives, income security has been enhanced, and this has an implication on reducing domestic violence. Rural communities in Zimbabwe, particularly Mutasa District, have proved to be vulnerable to climate change; hence, this explains the transition of small-scale farming to the ASM sector. The significant contribution of women cooperatives in livelihoods lies in income diversification and economic stability. Milliterised masculinities and political interference further limit the viability of women cooperatives in ASM, as they need to align with the ruling party for easy allocation of gold claims. Where cooperatives exist, women expressed constant fear for their lives and were even displaced from the gold claims. This is worse for individual women in ASM who have limited security and emotional support in the ASM sector

7. Conclusion

The motive behind this paper was to discuss the women cooperatives in ASM from a livelihood perspective in Zimbabwe. This study was motivated by increase in women cooperatives in ASM as a livelihood option in communities endowed with natural resources such as gold. ASM in Zimbabwe remained an integral part of rural economies in Zimbabwe. By engaging in cooperatives, Women seeks to increase not only the bargaining power but visibility as the sector is highly masculinised. Women cooperatives in ASM this offers collection security and voice in an informal space dominated which is highly masculinised. Findings from this study revealed that ASM has remained a viable livelihood for

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rural communities and has the potential to improve rural economy. In face of economic meltdown and climate change induced disasters, ASM has remained the only hope for rural communities whose livelihoods were earmarked on rain-fed agriculture. Women cooperatives have engaged in a masculinised ASM sector as livelihood option. While ASM has contributed immensely to the women livelihoods, ASM has remained masculinised and unregulated. Women cooperatives have benefitted through employment, income diversification and have invested in human capital development. If formalised, ASM has the potential to contribute towards Sustainable Development Goal 1 (Poverty Reduction) and Sustainable Development Gaol 5 (Gender Equality). Findings from this study also indicated that women face complex of challenges in ASM and subjected to all forms of violence. This study recommends to formalise ASM and remove bottlenecks in securing mining licenses. Additionally, rural women should be sensitised by the government of Zimbabwe on financial facilities available for them.

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