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GENDER AND MINING IN KENYA: THE CASE OF MUKIBIRA MINES IN VIHIGA DISTRICT

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This essay examines the role of women in mining in Kenya compared to that of men. It utilizes the Mukibira mines in Vihiga district to demonstrate how women have been at the center of mining activities. As well, it reports on the various complex activities that were discovered around these mines during our field research. It interrogates these activities vis-a-vis women and evaluates their impact on their life and society around them. It also looks at the benefits or advantages that women have acquired from these mines and it discusses the dangers and problems that women face in the mines, especially the dangers to which they are exposed. The activities of women in mining have not been thoroughly researched and documented in Kenya. Their contribution is often blanketed together with that of men and therefore not known. Even where statistics are available, the focus is often on direct role and not support roles that women play in the production process, services in homes of miners, in supply of commodities and other auxiliary services like marketing to the mining industry in Kenya. The essay illuminates many of these gray areas that have been ignored. It also compares the role of women and men in mining activities in Kenya. It is hoped that other similar studies will follow in other mining areas like Macalder in South Nyanza, West Pokot in Northern Kenya, Kerio Valley in the Rift Valley, Kariandus near Nakuru, and Kibongwa near Kisumu among other mining sites. It is our contention that Mukibira mines represents a case study of a very rich and representative population that demonstrates the role of women in a dynamic activity such as mining. It examines gold panning and other small-scale mining activities at Mukibira. It is estimated that gold panning produces about five tons of gold in a year from rivers in Kenya and Mukibira is one of the leading sites. Mukibira has an estimated 2,000 (two thousand) panners and majority of them are women and children. There are about 500 pit diggers mostly men. About 10,000 people depend on the proceeds of these mines either directly or indirectly to subsist. In our view, this is a very significant segment of Kenya's economic sector; and hence constitutes our rationale of the study.

I

In 1992, the Government of Kenya produced a national policy framework on gender and development, which was a "realization of the immense contribution that women make to development process" (Republic of Kenya, 1992: iii). It pointed to the need to recognize women's roles as producers in addition to their well- acknowledged reproductive and maintenance roles. The framework was "based on the understanding that gender differences are socially constructed" (ibid). In 1994, the Government of Kenya, in collaboration with the Netherlands Embassy in Nairobi, produced the first country gender profile, which interrogated how women and men related within a societal context. This was a realization of the need to incorporate gender awareness into

development efforts, which had been recognized during the First UN Conference on Women in 1975. The profile's main objective was to provide "better grounds to improve the quality of development process and help motivate both genders to work together towards successful development in Kenya. to assist in programme planning by acting as a tool for advocacy to all those involved in development activities: local authorities and experts, project staff and consultants" (Kenya Country Gender Profile, 1994: XI). It was noted in the profile that "Sex stereotype is the most entrenched obstacle to elimination of discrimination against women and most effective propaganda instrument in this patriarchal society. It is largely responsible for the devaluation of women in society" (ibid: 16). It recognized that traditional female-male roles are deeply ingrained and in fact glorified in all Kenyan societies, languages, in education, mass media, advertising, in the arts and other public spaces. It was noted that the society's perception of women is for most part negative with the 'best' women perceived as dependent, fertile mothers with their capabilities going virtually unnoticed. It conceded that "Such sex stereotypes and social prejudices are inappropriate in present Kenyan society where female roles are no longer severely differentiated. Male-headed families are no longer the norm, as about 40 per cent of households in Kenya are headed by women" (Kenya Country Gender Profile, 1994: 17). Thus, the role of women is increasing and the recognition and documentation of their contribution to all sectors of Kenya's society, long overdue.

It should be realized however that gender is an organizing principle in society as well as a source of differentiation and inequality. All societies have a gender system that includes a division of labor, power inequalities between men and women, cultural concepts of masculine and feminine and other gendered socio-economic constructions. Writing on gender in Kenya, Asenath Sigot says, "Gender issues refer to the asymmetrical relationship between men and women in the spheres of production and reproduction inside and outside the household" (Sigot, 1995:2). It is a holistic process of interaction in the production circles at macro and micro level, that is, at the family level, national arena and beyond. Utilizing a gender paradigm, she argues that women's role in animal husbandry and agriculture, as well as fuelwood collection and other range of tasks, "makes them the daily managers of natural resources" (Sigot, 1995:1). In these contexts, women's work is therefore, vital for ensuring the basic community welfare and livelihoods. Women, she says, are also knowledgeable about management of resources, and that it is high time that this important potential should be harnessed to the benefit of Kenya.

However what is disturbing, Sigot argues, is that women "seem invisible in these roles, since they are ignored in statistical accounting and in policies of government and non-governmental institutions" (ibid.: 1-2). It is with such peripheralizing of women actions and achievements that this paper is concerned, hence her analysis and ideas are very important in foregrounding our discussion. Like other writings on gender in Kenya she does not however address the role of women in the mining sector, even as she talks about management of natural resources. There are also other works on gender-related discourses on Kenya but which do not address the mining sector. They tend to focus on agriculture, soil, gender antagonisms, land tenure and policy, income-generating, women groups, forestry, law, reproduction, among others, in the whole country (Ongile, 1999; Mackenzie, 1994; Riria-Ouko, 1985; Ahlberg, 1991; Gordon, 1995). Others address similar or related aspects in our

area of study, which is Western Kenya (Feldman, 1984; Groenenboom and Drift, 1991; Ipara, 1991; Jungheim, 1989). Still others have researched on case studies on gender in different parts of Kenya (Silberschmidt, 1999; Gwako, 1995; Dolan, 1995; Hakansson, 1994; Moore, 1986). In many analyses that are gender-based, women and men are seen as playing different roles in society and therefore seen as having different needs (Ongile, 1999; Silberschmidt, 1999; Republic of Kenya, 1992). However despite all these, mining has not attracted significant scholarly attention.

There is still no literature so far on mining in Kenya, leave alone a study of the relationship of gender and mining. The only available literature on mining is on Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa and other countries (Parpart, 1983; Conradie, et al, 1996; Milne and Marongwe, 1993). The first work by Parpart is an assessment of the place of women in the mines in Zambia in the colonial period. Although it purports to utilize gender paradigms, the economic analyses especially class, seem to predominate. She says, "women spent most of their day ensuring the daily reproduction of labor. As with their husbands, capital-labor relations defined much of their lives. Thus on the surface, the African women in copper mining areas seemed truly working class wives..while willing to engage in class struggle against capital, these women also struggled against their male 'protectors'" (Parpart, 1983:1). Overall, however, the place of the woman as the exploited class rings out throughout her discourse, affirming the gender inequalities of sexes in African societies.

It is the work of Conradie, et al, which is perhaps the best and most extensive research known to us on the role of women in mining in any African country. Although impressive in its massive data and impressive analyses, this work is weakened by the traditional approach of mixing the role of women and their accomplishments with that of children, viz., "this report will focus on the least known aspect of Zimbabwe's mines: the lives of children and women" (Conradie, 1996:1). Whereas the role of the women and children is delineated, the lack of desegregation of accomplishments of women as opposed to those of men and children makes the study inconclusive as a gender analyses. Thus there is an academic lacuna, involving the interrogation of mining and gender, which the current study seeks to help in filling.

In the predominantly small-scale mining activities that are labor intensive, women feature prominently by providing most of the labor throughout the cycle. This vital role has been taken for granted, and little or no attempt has been made to evaluate the input. The social, rather than "natural," basis of women's contribution to household productivity still holds sway, and they are considered in the traditional society mainly as breeders and nurturers, and not as economic agents in their own right. There is therefore need to recognize women's role in development in such areas as mining compared to that of men. This falls in the realm of affirmative action, an area that has recently received some attention in Kenya in the recent past. In calling for affirmative action in all sectors in Kenya, Gituto and Kabira have pointed out that there is "need to gender segregate, document, and make known the extent of suffering and exclusion meted on women on the basis of their sex. Affirmative action picks the agenda from there to make for programmatic vision on how such suffering and exclusion can be eradicated" (Gituto and Kabira, 1998:19). They argue that the first challenge to effective affirmative action proposals is to document thoroughly the magnitude of

existing injustices and thereby provide justification for their support. This is very relevant for the hardworking women of Mukibira mines who suffer a lot of discrimination and exclusion, domestically and nationally despite their significant contribution to the national and local economies. Their contribution has not been documented or recognized beyond the district.

The basis of gender analysis in mining areas in Kenya is the fact that in traditional society, women only have access to, but do not control land. This does not make it possible for women to have full control over the mining activities effectively. The traditional social system deprives women control of mining pits and only allows them access through men. Thus, their overall status in the production process is low. A standard result of this arrangement is the alienation of women from traditional land rights since they are forced into low productivity activities. In mining areas, this superficially increases their labor-intensive commitment and unilaterally diminishes their control over a product in which they invest over half of the labor required. In the Mukibira example, women pan and prepare the gold only to surrender the account to the male head of household who determines how the money is spent. This “circle of dependency” on men as custodians of family income appears to be so entrenched in traditional society. Two researches among the Abaluyia where our present study was carried out reinforce this fact.

Beatrice Kimokoti in researching on gender equity in distribution of resources among the Tachoni of Western Kenya has concluded that men own the land and it is them who determine the level of participation of women in any productive venture. The men also have veto power on family income. She says “The community has been constructed in such a way that it does not see anything wrong with this set up. The men are still looked at as the sole breadwinners and the women accept that they are inferior to men.. generally women are still discriminated against” (Kimokoti, 1997:174). Helen Mwanzi on writing about the Abanyole who dominate in the lower parts of the Mukibira mines has come up with similar findings with Kimokoti on male dominance in economic activities of Western Kenya societies. She says, “The analysis came out with the paradox that the Munyore housewife has to live with; everything is the man’s including her, yet she is the manager for she is married top manage his property but she has no direct control” (Mwanzi, 1997: 182). These two researches in the study area illustrate how the Abaluyia traditional system has been coercive and unfair to the woman and undermined her achievements.

Therefore, against a background of male domination, a gender perspective in mining in Kenya is rather Herculean given that in all existing written information on sectoral development, men have always been seen to dominate. The gender approach in this paper is not focussed on “women’s issues” as such; rather it helps improve understanding of the roles and interactions of men and women and the constraints they face and, using this perspective, helps promote sustainable and equitable patterns of development emanating from mining. In this paper, gender is used as a socio-economic variable to interrogate production and marketing dynamics of men and women, analyze their roles, the responsibilities, constraints and opportunities of those involved in mining at Mukibira. In this study, reciprocity rather than conflict is emphasized, even if needs may differ.

II

Mukibira gold mines are found in the Edzava (etsaba) Riverbed and surrounding valleys and areas. Enzava River is a tributary of River Yala which is 110 miles long, and one of the largest rivers in Western Kenya, the other being River Nzoia which is 160 miles long. River Yala pours its waters into Lake Victoria. The most mined areas lie in parts of Sabatia and Emuhaya divisions of Vihiga district. Vihiga district was created in 1990 from the larger Kakamega district. Much of the geological information on Vihiga is therefore contained in the colonial economic and geological maps of Kakamega district (Amutabi and Simala, 1997; Onyango-Abuje and Wandibba, 1979; King, 1970). Mukibira mines are found in Western Kenya that is an area occupied by the Abaluyia (Were, 1967; Osogo, 1966 and Were and Wilson, 1973). Mainly the Maragoli and Banyore clans of the Abaluyia ethnic group inhabit and own ancestral land in the mine areas. The earliest immigrant laborers in the area were the other Abaluyia clans of Idakho and Kisa who inhabit the neighboring areas. Today the area is a microcosm of various ethnic groups from Kenya. Since 1915 it has come to include other races, mainly Asians and Europeans.

Mining in this area was a pre-colonial activity. The Maragoli and Banyore women mined clay in the various river basins for the traditional crafts of pot making (Wandibba, 1984; 1994; 1998) and other allied products. The pot-making crafts are the ones that often revealed the mineral bearing rocks and areas. When pots were burnt as the last stage of pot making, they revealed the texture of the underlying minerals from their colour. Iron and gold bearing rocks were therefore followed after being discovered by women (Wandibba, 1998). Gold mining between these River Yala tributaries probably dates to the period when the Abaluyia first arrived in this area and continued to engage in their pot-making activities which have been linked to the iron-age (Were, 1967). Men and women carried out both reef and alluvial (artisanal) mining. Many of the sites of pre-colonial gold workings and gold panning have been discovered and mapped by archaeologists (Wandiba, 1984; 1994; 1998).

The most striking feature about gold panning is how little it has changed over hundreds of years. Most of the technology remains the same; small gold producers still feel buyers are cheating them, and panning is done predominantly by women. It is estimated that about 2,000 people are involved in gold panning, of which 80 % are women. Women have been involved in gold panning in Mukibira for hundreds of years. It is therefore the women who provide much of the panning expertise as the skills have been passed on from mothers to their daughters. Men and boys are very active in digging and building supports over riffs. They haul the gold-bearing ores to the surface for women to pan.

The early traditional artisans are the ones that led the Europeans to these sites. European buyers received the unrefined gold from these pits very well in Nairobi. This alerted them and elicited some interest. The earliest European to set up residential camp at Mukibira came in 1915, and was called Leon Hobley, nicknamed 'Mapili' by locals. Prior to that Europeans operated from Kisumu and Kakamega and bought the gold from local miners. It was Mapili's party that first drew national and international attention to the gold deposits of Mukibira. He expanded the amount that that could be extracted in a day. He took samples from the larger troughs and took them for tests and they were

discovered to be of very high quality than the traditional ones. Mapili commenced a small scale, low capital, and mining operation on high-grade ores of the area in 1920 (Amutabi, 1992).

Like the gold rush in neighboring Rosterman which lasted from 1930 to 1950 (Amutabi, 1995), the ores soon became few and far apart. This made them very uneconomical to mine at commercial levels. By 1950s there were very few Europeans still operating in the area. They soon left. The mines thus reverted to the traditional miners who have continued to extract small deposits using traditional methods. Gold panning therefore remains the main mining technique here although there is occasional pit mining going on. The surviving evidence that Mukibira was once a thriving mining settlement are the concrete platform and slab remains, the large turbine-like metals and the plastered areas of what used to be miners huts and camps. There are also vandalized structures of what were managers' houses. The mining area has shrunk and the community reduced from its peak in the 1940s and 1950s when there were an estimated twenty thousand people in this valley. At its peak, it economically supported over hundred thousand people whose relatives eked out a living in this valley and surrounding support activities. Lunyerere town which was the center of the mining activities has since declined in stature and been replaced by Mbale and Chavakali as the economic centers. The majority of the Asian businessmen even vacated Lunyerere (Amutabi, 1992).

The Abaluyia were initially reluctant to work or be employed on these mines because they lived well from agriculture. However, colonial agricultural policies and the increased taxation by the same government forced some of them into mining. Some companies also recruited workers from neighboring communities to supplement this labor need. The current mining activities are carried out mainly by the local and indigenous people with very few from outside the area (Amutabi, 1992). However the majority of the middlemen and women are from the major towns and include Europeans and Asians. Some local individuals and groups have taken up the marketing of the commodity to escape the middlemen who have exploited them for along time. This is particularly true of the women groups all of which we found are registered with the District Social Development Office at Vihiga District headquarters at Mbale.

III

There is no doubt that gold panning although difficult and dangerous is of significant benefit to the people in this area especially women. In Mukibira, it is the last resort for women, unemployed youth and desperate individuals. Many deaths and permanent injuries have been reported. Mukibira is located in a rich agricultural area but pressure on land and its diminished fertility has pushed many people into gold panning. This has been worsened by the high cost of agricultural in-puts and sporadic, unpredictable rains and frequent droughts in Western Kenya in the recent past. Thus it has become difficult for the local farmers to survive from earnings from agriculture and other subsistence activities. It is important to note that besides gold panning, women often do gardening activities especially vegetable growing to supplement their income. They also engage in hawking food and other supplies to miners and buyers at a fee. In addition some school children also engaged in gold panning to raise money to buy books, school uniform and even school levies. Young girls often engage in gold panning in the evening after school, weekends and school holidays.

Close examination of the age of the female engaged in gold panning reveals a significant participation of young girls in this activity. In our study of the representative sample of the over 2,000 women at Mukibira, it was discovered that 30% of all panners were under the age of 16. Many families still prefer to take boys to school at the expense of girls. Girls are last to be enrolled and first to be withdrawn from school. Mothers who are engaged in gold panning often use the young girls as nannies. The interviews revealed not very surprising reasons why women took up gold panning. Many took it up because their parents or elder siblings were already engaged in the activity. Other women took it up as a result of economic necessity and survival. Yet others have only known mining and no other economic enterprise throughout their lives. Fifteen year-old Evelyn says, "I started working in the mines when my father died and our mother could not take care of all of us. I was the eldest and had to step in to help in bringing in some income". Evelyn lived in the family ancestral home about four kilometers from the mine from where she reported to the mines every morning. She was barely an adult when responsibility beckoned on her. The rough life on the mines and hard labor made her look much older than her real age.

Many women had been forced onto the mines by different circumstances. Leah Muhonja started panning because, "I couldn't find any other employment and my husband was ill. I had to learn from fellow women who paid me to work for them until I knew how to do it on my own". Here follows various excerpts of the responses in the questionnaires:

Naomi, Age: 45: I used to sell food to the panners and then one day I decided to try panning instead of sitting about as the buyers ate my food. I got used to it and became a panner because it made more money. I do both panning and food selling nowadays.

Deborah, Age: 30: When I left school I had high hopes of getting a big job in the city. After three years in Nairobi and no job, I came back here and started helping my parents.

Jacqueline, Age: 15: My parents decided to discontinue paying school fees for us girls but continued paying for our brothers. They ordered us girls to leave school and help in the mines. I went back to school at the pressure of my teachers because I was always on top of my class in which my brother is. But nobody could pay my fees of Kshs 300 (about US \$ 4) per year. When I complain they tell me that I will get married and do not need education.

Phoebe, Age: 43: My husband was not giving me enough money for family needs. This persisted even when sales were good. I decided to join him and now I make more money than he does. I also do the selling.

Mable, Age: 55: Mining is the only job my husband and I knew having grown up on these mines. I have never worked anywhere else and so is my husband.

Dorcas, Age: 62: I was retrenched from the civil service in 1990 where I worked as a clerk. I ploughed my retirement dues into hiring labor to dig up pits and pan. I realized the people I

employed were not honest when not closely monitored. I joined them and now I turn out more. When I leave to market it (locals because of some traditional beliefs rarely refer to gold by name, preferring to call it a thing) in Nairobi, they do not turn out as much as when I am around.

Elizabeth, Age: 40: The drought, poor harvests, our small farm after it was shared between my husband and his brothers, increased cost of farm inputs made me loose interest in farming. As a small-scale farmer, I waited for so long to get money compared to those who were here. That is why I decided to join the women here.

Gloria, Age: 35: I first came here through our Jilinde Women Group who had bought rights to a pit and we were supposed to work on it in turns to supplement our group income. I was the secretary and was supposed to lead by example. That was my first experience in this dirty water. This dirty water has money. Our savings account has been growing ever since.

Sophia, Age: 26: Where I was born there are no mines. When my husband was sacked from his salaried job in Nairobi, we had no alternative but to look for ways of making a living back in the village. It was easy for us to first work for people to get enough experience. He has since left to try his luck in Nairobi again but I opted to remain.

A thorough examination of the life history excerpts above reveals a lot of information that is of great significance to our understanding of the gender relations and the place of women and men in these mines. First women appear to bring the family interest above other parochial interests. They see their fate together with those of their families, husband, children, and even parents. Thus, their concern is not just for mere individual survival but much wider, that is, for the sake of the entire family. As mothers, women are very sympathetic and instinctive to children whenever family fortunes dwindle and would do everything to ensure safety and survival of the family.

Second, women are often on the periphery of the inheritance circles and appear resigned to this position. They are very disempowered by the traditional structures which are male-dominated and which favor men in allocation of resources. Where women are custodians of the family income, there was overwhelming evidence that showed women as better managers. Thus, one can conclude that society has not let the women to exercise their full potential. On education, the male child is favored against the female child in school attendance. This will ensure a perpetuation of the male in the society and education has often serves as a channel of upward social and economic mobility. The female children, the future women of tomorrow, have no chance of catching up with their male counterparts as the odds seem to be set against them and their fate at vulnerable position at the bottom of the production hierarchy is already determined and sealed. Land which is a key factor in the empowering process as a source of gold belongs to men. Thus men have a head start even if they are uneducated.

Third, the potential of women is not maximized. A woman must work extra hard to make any impact in her life and to be recognized as an equal partner in the whole mining enterprise. The woman must also work through the man to realize her potential. She is forced to negotiate with at least a male person to ensure that she succeeds. Therefore due to all these obstacles, her potential is

compromised by the negotiation for space before she can begin exploiting the resources. Men are not subjected to such negotiations since they are inheritors of ancestral lands unless in cases where they are laborers. But even in the laboring classes, the male is better placed than a woman is, whether married or single, as the woman must answer to a man either as father or husband.

Lastly, we must state that the role of income generating activities and small membership groups in the empowerment of women is increasingly becoming significant throughout Kenya and Mukibira has not been left behind. The arrival of Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is a blessing to many women. These NGOs have encouraged independence in women through the women self-help groups. Empowerment, education in management of funds, marketing, family planning, healthcare, and rights of women as a people are key concepts that dominate deliberations of NGOs when they meet these women groups. Thus, the testimony of Gloria from Jilinde Women group above is not an isolated occurrence. It may as well be indicative of positive things coming to Mukibira. The affirmative action as advocated for by many national NGOs may soon liberate these women from the oppressive traditional social structures. Already legislation has been enacted in Kenya's parliament to enjoin women in inheritance of land and other property within their families. One must also take cognizance of the generation gaps between the women, the youthful and the elderly, educated and uneducated, and thus not treat them as homogenous and thus positively responsive to every proposal that is made on altering of the status quo. The older women have lived under the oppressive traditional structures for long and have even climbed through the ranks to say, above their daughters' in-laws and so on. They are therefore not very enthusiastic in overthrowing this arrangement.

Many young women below the age 35 were uncomfortable on the mines as the mines were dominated by the older generation that had very little formal education or no education at all. They thus saw mining as only fit for the uneducated and old. The government program of universal free primary education since 1974 had a positive impact, as a higher percentage of the young generation was literate (could read and write). The younger women headed many of the Welfare Clubs and women societies because of their relatively high level of education although we found one chairperson of a group who was completely illiterate (could neither read nor write). It turned out that majority of members in her group were her daughters in-law and close relatives. She had however a very capable secretary who answered most of our questions making the chairman a figurehead of sorts. It was apparent that the age-old traditional practice of educating boys at the expense of girls was still endemic going by the many young girls on the mines compared to boys. Data from local primary schools at Nadanya, Demesi, Viyalo, Emurembe, Ikumu and Kilingili revealed that both girls and boys dropped out. However many girls dropped out very early in lower classes whereas boys dropped out in mainly upper classes. The reasons for girls leaving school varied from parental withdrawal to become nannies, lack of school fees to early marriage or teenage pregnancy. For boys, it was mainly lack of fees, the lure of easy money and free life on the mines, peer influence and lack of discipline.

There were many cases of teenage or child marriages at Mukibira mines. Many girls became pregnant in their early teenage years. Fifteen was the average age of marriage of many women on the mines. There were cases of under age couples. The government officials were addressing the problem of child brides but it was obvious that they were fighting a losing battle as parents and miners colluded to undermine their efforts. Many people were not aware that sex with a girl below the age of eighteen was a crime even if she consents. They did not also know that a girl below 18 years is considered a minor in law and cannot be given in marriage. They were not aware that sex with a girl below sixteen is considered defilement and between 16 and 18, rape. These early marriages among the mining communities are responsible for the many children they have compared to non-mining families. The average number of children of a mining family is seven whereas that of non-mining is five (This was by a random sample of twenty families, ten on the mines and ten outside the mine areas in Vihiga district).

Married men who were engaged in extramarital affairs sought out younger girls for fear of AIDS among grown up women. Even older men who wanted to marry a second wife sought child brides for fear of AIDS and also to subdue them in sharing out proceeds from gold sales. There were also cases of defilement, rape and incest reported on the mines. Some women eloped with successful young miners or traders, dealers and middlemen and abandoned their husbands or had illicit affairs with them. Divorce rate is relatively low among older couples with grown children compared to young couples. This has to do with the Luyia tradition where marriage becomes permanent and unbreakable when the eldest son of a woman in marriage gets circumcised. Even if the woman leaves, when she dies she must be buried where she first had a son circumcised. This however is changing as new marriage arrangements replace traditional marriage systems. There is also a high level of promiscuity among the youth. Many of these relationships end up in unplanned pregnancies and early marriages. Very few of these marriages last long. It was not easy to ascertain the level of unfaithfulness between married couples but many women thought men were mainly unfaithful whereas men thought women were.

According to the interviews we carried out, the average income in a gold panning family would be Kenya shillings 5,000 to 10,000 (about US \$60 to 120) a month provided families are working for themselves and not employees of other miners, chain holders or dealers. If they are employed, the wages paid are much less. Conditions of women who are employed are worse. Their time and energy are used to the maximum at a minimum wage. The income of gold panning family working for itself is high compared to the income of communal farmer or a civil service or any worker on minimum wage. At Mukibira, families that worked together as a unit, especially man and wife or under a patriarch did much better financially. This was even better if they panned or worked on pits in their ancestral land. There are however those who hire spaces in other peoples' lands where they dig pits to collect samples for panning. These are the most disadvantaged because it is a gamble, as some pits do not produce much gold.

The women gold panners in Mukibira mines are in different categories. First is the category of children mainly teenagers attached to their parents and elder siblings or operating as free lancers for hire by the highest bidder. Children are used to fetch water for cleaning of mounds away from the river, as panning assistants and to carry mounds to the riverbanks where adults pan them in the water. They are also used to run errands and act as scouts to alert miners on the oncoming strangers. Older girls are engaged in panning also. Adult women are also in several categories. There are those who are single and work on their own. There are those who work on family mines in extended family. There are those who work with their spouses, with their husbands controlling finances. There are also those women who control the family finances and only give their husbands pocket money as they keep the rest for family use. It is the women who are independent or who control family finances that are the most successful. Those with understanding and non-alcoholic husbands have been able to meet most of their family obligations. They have built good houses and their children go to school and look healthy. The case of Mable Musimbi demonstrates this.

Mable Musimbi worked on a mine on her husband's ancestral land. The husband, Clement Chogo, had found her to be a good financial manager and had ceded control of money to her. Together, they dug pits and panned sometimes with the help of some of their eight children. They had managed to see two of their children through school and one of them had secured a place in a government university. They had a modest neat home, a semi-permanent main house, a kitchen block and another house for the boys in the same compound. They had bought a grade milk cow from the gold proceeds. The children looked neat, clean and healthy. Mable was a school certificate holder (form four) although she did not pass well in her final exams, same to her husband. The husband initially indulged in smoking and drinking but had stopped. This was a model family that had succeeded under great odds. They had bought two radios and a television set, their house was well furnished with sofa sets, which reflected a standard of living that was way above that of many average salaried employees in the civil service. Mable and Clement looked very strong and too young for their age.

The complete opposite of this family was that of Agnes Labega and Titus Lwigado. Lwigado was a total wreck, destroyed by booze. He looked much older than his real age. We met him only once during our several visits to his home. He was dictatorial and in charge of the family finances and it was obvious that much of the money the family made ended in brews and cigarettes. Agnes managed to survive with the children because of her shares in the Abeene Women group to which she was a member. Also her children all of whom had dropped out of school for lack of school fees supplemented the family income by gold panning and providing labor to other panners on the mines. Their house was dilapidated, the compound bushy and the nine children dirty and malnourished. Agnes also looked weak and sickly. Lwigado was drunk most of the time and worked very little in the mines. Elders and peers had counseled him on several occasions but he appeared very indifferent. Agnes could not leave him because of the children. She had nevertheless got support from the local administration to manage the family finances. She planned to take the children back to school. She had been assaulted several times by the husband but had opted not to report him to the authorities for fear that he would be put behind bars. He only appeared at the

house to take money from her. He had sold much of the family property to finance his drinking including the only family cow three years before our interview.

At Mukibira it was noticeable that women do most of the work. They help in digging pits, panning, washing and selection using mercury. They also do the marketing, as they seem to be preferred by buyers. This is because women are generally regarded as being more honest than men in rural Kenya. As they do most of the work and sell gold, they can decide how income from gold is used. Many would only give their husbands pocket money, which contributes greatly to peace in some homes. Men are less likely to antagonize a relationship in the gold panning areas if they want to continue this economic symbiosis. It was noticeable that unlike in the past when men went to look for illicit brews elsewhere, the illicit brew sellers now search out the men right in the mines and women are able to determine how much their husbands should drink or completely refuse to allow them to drink. This is a very unique pattern in patriarchal Kenyan societies where men have always been decision-makers. Women had also waged a war against illicit brew sellers and were reporting them to the police.

The work of women does not end on the mine. After nightfall, as men relax in one form or the other, women are to be found cooking for the family and minding other family chores like milking the family cow, cleaning up the children and other income generating activities. Very early in the morning before they leave for the mines, it is women who prepare children for school, prepare family breakfast, and milk the family cows, go to buy provisions for breakfast and set up daily order of family business enterprises and check the family garden (Mutoro, 1997a; 1997b). Provisions for breakfast are bought every day from the local shop for lack of refrigeration facilities in all homes. Women will also do all the household chores like cleaning, washing, laundering, and cooking as the men sit by. At the mines, women do most of the work. Once men get the composite mounts out of the pit, the women take over up to the time when gold is produced by mercury. In our estimation, women do 90 percent of the work from the time the pits are opened up to the time the gold is ready for selling. Until recently, men would spend up to 50% of the earnings on their individual needs and leisure. This is changing with family education programs and gender activists through the NGOs who have organized women around groups where they are taught about human rights and home management. Today's woman on the mine is much more informed and aware of her right in marriage compared to a few years ago.

The price of a gram of gold varies from Kenya shillings (Kshs) 500 (about US \$ 8) to 700 (about US \$ 10) at Mukibira and other mines. Kevin Mudome's family made about Kshs 2,500 in a week from the five grams they were able to produce from gold panning. The official price on the stock exchange at the time was Kshs 1, 000 per gram of gold. But the official market involves a lengthy and cumbersome process. Since miners are always in need of quick cash, they often sell the gold to the dealers, mainly middlemen for Kshs 250. These are illegal buyers and usually arrive at the most opportune time when the miners are most vulnerable like in drought and during new school term when fees is required. The various cooperative marketing attempts like other sectors in Kenya have always failed because of corruption and embezzlement of shareholders funds. Individuals are

therefore left to fend for themselves. A few women groups still put their resources together and do the selling in Nairobi where they fetch better prices.

IV

The research team spoke to so many women gold panners in Mukibira and unraveled several problems. Some of the miners are licensed and recognized by the government and have safety measures in place but majority are illegal. The illegal miners are very wary and are often suspicious of strangers. Police from Kilingili, Mbale and Magada Police Stations permanently accost them. Since the police pounce in civilian clothes, it is often hard to determine friendly people from security personnel. In many of the mining pits and panning areas along the river from Nadanya and Viyalo through Mulugele and Mulwanda, one noticed this tension. After our research team's three weeks of frequent visits and when our mission became clear we were now openly welcome. But still many respondents sought anonymity rather than being identified for fear of reprisals from the mining mafia and some government functionaries like the area chiefs and assistant chiefs. The illegal miners paid protection money to the government bureaucrats and police.

Apart from police harassment, the miners often fall prey to con men and tricksters who masquerade as police or government officers. Armed raids also occur to snatch gold. One common thing that is easily noticeable in this river valley is the weighing scale carried around by women miners. Before the miners bought their own weighing scales con men would arrive with fake and contraband scales that would under-weigh or cheat on the weight of the gold in their favor. Because of lack of currency machines, tricksters often bring fake currency in exchange for gold to these poor miners. Others have cheated them out of their money by pretending to sell them mercury, which is very much in demand in the processing of gold. At least the miners now know that there is no such thing as red mercury but they have often bought poor quality or contaminated mercury from conmen. Since it is illegal business, they cannot report to police. Many of the miners are seen as "illicit" beings and if they report to the police, they only complicate their cases as they are often seen to have gone to report their own selves.

There is a lot of illicit trade going on at Mukibira. Many of the activities are carried out in a language only familiar to the miners. They transacted many businesses in our presence. We only realized what had transpired when they volunteered to tell us about it. They have developed elaborate code names for many things. Many kinds of people are involved in the illegal gold trade including foreigners from Uganda, Tanzania and elsewhere. Others are civil servants, local business people from Kakamega, Kisumu, Mbale, Chavakali, Mago, Mudete, Bendera, Serem, Luanda, Kilingili, Magada, Majengo, Esibuye and Kima. There are also jewelers and jewelry makers especially Asians and Europeans from big towns or their agents. Women are the most common agents from the cities, as miners least fear them. Women are also seen as honest by the miners. Buyers equally prefer to deal with women miners than men. Therefore, by and large, women carry out the buying and selling of gold at Mukibira.

Mukibira has recorded fatal accidents for many years. Many people have died in the mines especially those digging pits and riffs. The worst accident occurred in 1987 when eleven gold diggers were buried alive by a mudslide at a pit at Mukibira. Although their bodies were retrieved, the accident increased government surveillance. The miners reported that whenever an accident results to death in the mines, government presence is usually increased until after temporary safety is ensured. There were many minor cases of gold panners who were killed before 1987 and after. Lack of oxygen, drowning and gas poisoning were major cause of deaths in the pits. Some had been disabled, usually suffering broken limbs or injured spinal columns. By and large, a majority of those killed and injured were men. Only one woman, Margaret Adisa Luboga was reported to have died in the mines in 1998 during the raging el nino rains when she slipped into the raging waters as she panned along the banks of Edzava River. Many of the injuries suffered by miners were collaborated by the Kilingili government health center and Mbale District hospital. Their records confirmed that many of the injuries treated at their institutions were from accidents, both minor and major. It is not however easy to get accurate statistics on gold panning accidents due to the hidden nature of most of gold panning activities at Mukibira mines. One of the area chiefs whose jurisdiction covers the mining area David Onyino Ngati reported to us that only reports of deaths ever reached them but miner injuries went unreported.

Prostitution was one of the problems on the mines. Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and AIDS were a real threat. Some miners were reported to have succumbed to the killer disease. It was difficult to get statistics from the government hospitals, administrators and the miners. But many women were bold enough to name a few of their colleagues who had succumbed to AIDS. Their evidence was crude. Presence of tuberculosis, meningitis, thinning and loss of weight, coughing, wounds, among other signs they have heard in the media are the ones they paraded to confirm their stories. Confirmed cases were where a man and usually his wife or girlfriend passed away in succession. The local hospitals revealed that there were cases of AIDS and many STDs reported from the mining families but refused to release details which they said are only released by the Accounting officer (Permanent Secretary) in Nairobi. Hospitals could not disclose the identity or names of the victims.

At least 70% of women in our sample reported having been infected by a venereal or sexually transmitted disease in their marriage history. In the past ten years, in the period 1990 to 1999, only 40% reported infection. The reason for this was that many of the women were already out of the active sex bracket and hence their husbands also. Second, was the increasing awareness of safe sex and use of the condom promoted by family planning groups. Third, the spread of AIDS pandemic was reducing interest in casual sex especially after 1996. Reduced earnings as a result of inflation and economic recession, which occurred from 1992 in Kenya, may have impacted on these mines. It meant that men had little to spend on illicit sex. Some men who did not stay with their wives and families around the mines and who came from far away were the most vulnerable and many conceded to this fact. Many prostitutes took advantage of the miners at Kilingili, Chavakali, Mbale and other neighboring towns where a majority especially the young miners went for entertainment and to socialize in the evenings and weekends. Drunkenness was also another problem afflicting

men on the mines. Many men said that this was the only way of releasing tension and a way of relaxation after a long excruciating day's strenuous work. The lure of alcohol and its hawking within the mine led some to drink as they worked. Drunkenness led men into cheap and unprotected sex, and depletion of hard earned family incomes.

One aspect, which has been of great concern to the authorities and other development activists in this area, concerns the environment. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reports go back to the 1970s, and 1980s (Republic of Kenya, 1985; 1987) Many of them have pointed out the same problems only differing in detail and breadth. It is true that most gold panners have caused a lot of environmental degradation especially in deforestation, destruction of topsoil, catchment basin and increased erosion. The waters of Edzava are permanently brown because of these mining activities yet many people use the river downstream for domestic and livestock use. It can be successfully pointed out that River Edzava in its current level of degradation is not different from other rivers within the vicinity like Muluchele, Mulwanda, Mulukose and Mulusimu. Yet they do not have mining activities along their banks. Therefore reasons must come from such aspects as population explosion, human encroachment on water catchment areas for farming, grazing, charcoal burning and wood fuel, lumbering, increased domestic and industrial water use and drainage by human agents rather than mining. Kenya's environment and land policy which do not protect catchment ranges along river valleys, streams and groves from farming and other forms of exploitation are also to blame (Amutabi, 1995; Amutabi and Simala, 1997). Poor land sub-division and parceling policies have also led to families settling in water catchment areas where they carry out some farming activities (Mutoro, 1997a). In fact at Mukibira, one will notice concerted efforts at environmental conservation. There are attempts made to rejuvenate the soil by filling up the pits after use, and there is growing of trees.

However, the greatest danger caused by the gold panning and open pit miners at Mukibira is the use of mercury. They use mercury to recover fine gold but many users we interviewed were oblivious to the harmful effects of mercury. There was evidence that mercury poisoning had led to the poisoning of the food chain (Republic of Kenya, 1987; Ministry of Water, 1996; Amutabi and Simala, 1997). Water samples from ponds near the panning sites revealed heavy percentage of mercury in dangerous levels. Mercury was higher than that found in urban sewerage as a result of soap and other mercury containing products. The mercury was disposed off poorly and could end in the food chain through fish, or milk from cattle, or through the vegetables grown along the river or even inhaled directly. There were new attempts, which had just started by environmental advocacy NGOs on the sites which, advocated for safe use of mercury (Amutabi and Simala, 1997). If they succeed, perhaps the greatest environmental threat in these mines will be over.

V

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing, the role of women in mining at Mukibira indicates that their role is more significant than has been portrayed in the past. The women perform 90% of the production and other related tasks at Mukibira and the same might just be the case in the other mines in Kenya. Despite this great sacrifice, some women continue to suffer under oppressive men and a society indifferent to the female cause. The girl child continues to be isolated from empowering process of education. Many young girls are removed from school to provide informal labor in these mines. This is an area that requires urgent attention by the many NGOs engaged in girl-child education in Kenya and the government officials in Vihiga. Since primary education is free and compulsory the chiefs and their assistants should ensure that girls attend school and even annul child marriages. And prosecute perpetrators.

Women are at great risk in mining because they deal directly with mercury. Very few of them had the relevant protective gear. They therefore require education and help to understand the dangers involved. Many women also overworked compared to men. The few women we monitored slept only for five hours on average compared to men (their husbands) who slept for six hours on average.

The government should license all the miners instead of the current selective process that favors bribe givers. The bureaucratic red tapes and exorbitant fees charged to small-scale miners is unreasonable and should be reduced. Mining fee payment and other levees, which seem to favor established miners can be spread out to help these poor miners or allow them to operate in cooperative systems like the women groups have done. This will stop the police and other government operatives from harassing these women who are earning honest and decent livelihoods where many would have resorted to bad practices. The marketing of the gold should also be streamlined with the help of the District Cooperative and Development officers to make the women groups market their gold competitively.

Social workers should spend more time on the mines to investigate the level of rot in these mining areas where there are illegal drugs, illicit sex, child abuse, defilement and child marriages. There are also spousal abuses that go unreported because of fear of reprisals. Just as workshops are conducted for women, men also need to be educated on the essence of being responsible husbands. The traditional council of elders under the chief elder (ligutu) which is used to resolve family conflicts in the mines are male dominated and biased against women. There is need for more women to be appointed as elders and get involved in these councils.

Schools, roads, telephone, electricity and other facilities around Mukibira should also be improved as mining contributes a very significant proportion to Kenya's foreign exchange earnings. The nearest health facility at Kilingili is fifteen kilometers away and the only hospital at Mbale is twenty kilometers away. This can be a factor in the high mortality rate among children and low life expectancy among miners at Mukibira. Children have succumbed to treatable diseases like malaria and diarrhea for lack of medical attention. The family planning programs should also be encouraged here as miners, having no leisure activities often turn to sex as a form of entertainment. They thus have very large families, which they cannot effectively manage with their meager resources. The

AIDS pandemic and its toll on the mining community can only be forestalled by more honest and open discussion and sharing of information. The ministry of health staff should release statistical data to researchers and not direct every inquiry however minor to Nairobi.

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