

Sexual violence: its roots in ethnic and political conflict

For millions of women in Sierra Leone, Kenya, and other African countries that are rebuilding post-conflict economies, artisanal mining offers an opportunity to generate income, whether working in the mines themselves, or (more commonly) selling food, clothing and other goods and services, including sex, to miners on and surrounding the job sites. But the work is fraught with risks to health and safety; women may experience sexual violence from men. Many must take the risk in order to support themselves and their families. Others are unable to continue the work, and live in poverty.

Research exists on sexual violence in these countries, and its roots in ethnic and political conflict. Unions have also acknowledged that sexual violence toward women exists in areas where large-scale mining takes place. But little attention has been paid to the problem for women in artisanal and smaller-scale, sometimes illegal, mining.



These settings are not formally regulated; workers have little protection from environmental hazards and threats to occupational health and safety, including, primarily for women, sexualized violence.

The link between such violence and the ability of women to obtain and keep viable employment has also tended to be overlooked, says Dr. Blair Rutherford, Director of the Institute of African Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa.

With a \$40,000 grant from the **Canada-Africa Research Exchange Grants (CAREG)** program, funded by IDRC and managed by Universities Canada, Dr. Rutherford is working on research with Law professor Dr. Doris Buss, also of Carleton University, Dr. Aisha Ibrahim of Fourah Bay College (at the University of Sierra Leone) and Dr. Sarah Kinyanjui of the University of Nairobi in Kenya.

Identifying the gap in scholarship on the link between sexual violence and livelihoods for women in post-conflict African countries, this team of African and Canadian academics is collaborating to conduct field research and build further

research capacity at universities in Sierra Leone and Kenya, as well as networking opportunities between other scholars, civil-society activists and government policymakers throughout Africa. It's part of a larger, ongoing project entitled "Women and (Post-) Conflict State Building" involving these same four researchers.

In 2014, Dr. Rutherford travelled to Sierra Leone and, with Dr. Ibrahim, conducted interviews with government officials and civil-society organizations working on the links between gender, livelihoods and post-conflict state building. They also worked with students at Fourah Bay College in Freetown, SL, on a research protocol and training module focused on women in Sierra Leone.

Also in 2014, Dr. Buss and Dr. Kinyanjui travelled to Migori, in western Kenya, to interview women involved in artisanal gold mining in the area. They interviewed government officials and members of civil-society organizations, and observed policy discussions on mining and law reform. In Mombasa, Dr. Buss met with colleagues and students at the University of Nairobi, and gave three talks at the law school.



In 2015, Dr. Kinyanji came to Ottawa to start implementing a training module – "Law, gender and (post) conflict economies" – for Carleton students, on doing fieldwork in Africa. Dr. Ibrahim plans to come to Ottawa in early 2016, with the expectations that the Canadian ban on travelers coming from Sierra Leone is lifted with the end of the ebola crisis there.

Preliminary research confirms that women in these countries are increasingly reliant on precarious and dangerous employment activities in artisanal and small-scale mining, and that policy makers have not sufficiently focused on the link between sexual violence and gendered livelihoods.

Publication of these results is planned, along with papers focused on the methodological and ethical issues involved in research on the link between women's livelihoods and state-building in post-conflict settings.

The researchers continue to work on building a network of researchers in other parts of Africa, such as Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in order to give policy makers the foundation of knowledge and understanding they need to

build economies and civil-society structures that offer women safe and sustainable employment in the artisanal and small-scale mining sector.

“What we hope is that these states will improve regulations and formalize the working conditions for millions of African women,” says Dr. Rutherford.