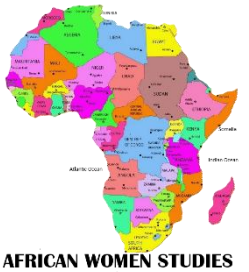
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Women's Economic Empowerment through Small-Scale Mining in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The mining industry in Zimbabwe has traditionally been male dominated, with women largely excluded from meaningful economic participation. While recent government initiatives, such as sponsoring women in small-scale mining syndicates, have marked some progress, significant gaps persist in achieving gender parity and promoting women's economic independence in Zimbabwe's mineral extraction sector. These disparities continue to limit women's full participation and empowerment.

This study explores the empowerment of women through small-scale mining, identifying both challenges and opportunities. Guided by the Women Empowerment Framework, the study investigates equitable access to essential resources, equal voice in decision-making forums, awareness of rights, and provision of basic services.

To gather insights, key informant interviews were conducted with thirty female small-scale miners from all ten provinces of Zimbabwe. The findings reveal notable progress in accessing funding, credit, and partial financial control. However, persistent barriers remain, especially regarding access to information, training, and leadership roles. Most participants reported violations of their rights, limited access to basic services, and a lack of agency in production activities. This contribution highlights the need for specialized strategies to mitigate these challenges and promote sustainable empowerment for women in the small-scale mining sector in Zimbabwe. Stakeholders must prioritise women's financial autonomy and participation. To advance these goals:

i. *The Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development should formulate and implement inclusive policies and programs that strengthen women's economic empowerment.*
ii. *The Ministry of Mines and Mining Development must review and revise existing regulations to tackle the specific hurdles women miners face.*
iii. *The Zimbabwe School of Mines should provide training programs tailored to the needs of women miners.*
iv. *Civil society organizations, such as the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe, should advocate for policy reform and deliver capacity-building initiatives to confront discriminatory social and cultural norms.*

Key words: *Gender Equality, Economic Empowerment, Small-Scale Mining, Women, Zimbabwe.*

1.0 Introduction

The mining and minerals industry in Southern Africa has long exhibited a stark gender imbalance, with women facing formidable barriers to entry and meaningful participation (Moyo, 2011; Ndlovu, Ndhlovu, and Mpofu, 2019; Ranchod, 2001). Ranchod (2001) notes the sector's persistent male dominance, evident in the slow integration and participation of women. Although women comprise between one-third to half of the mining labour force, they are often marginalized, earning lower wages and lacking equitable access to career advancement, resources and recognition by donors and governments (USAID, 2020). Moyo

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(2011) highlights the paradox of Southern Africa's significant contribution to the global mineral market, juxtaposed with the exclusion and marginalization of women from the region's mineral wealth.

In Zimbabwe, this gender disparity is particularly acute. Mining policies have historically sidelined women's needs and concerns, relegating their roles to insignificance (Binha, 2021; Chatiza, Muchadenyka, Makaza, Nyaunga, Murungu, and Matsika 2015; Jenkins, 2014). Despite Zimbabwe's position as a leading mining country in the region, the sector remains 'gender blind', with women occupying a mere 15% of mining jobs as of 2017 (Ndlovu et al., 2019, p. 139). The unequal distribution of mining benefits along gender lines, as noted by Jenkins (2014) is alarming, given the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Heads of States's 2001 declaration promoting gender equity, poverty reduction among women, and inclusive economic development (Ranchod, 2001). The continued marginalization of women in mining, with its vast economic development potential, poses a significant threat to gender equity and effective mainstreaming (Binha, 2021).

Notwithstanding the historical exclusion of women from mining, recent years have seen a growing recognition of the need to prioritize gender parity and women's socio-economic development in mining across developing African countries, including Zimbabwe (Shaba, 2024). Over the last 20 years, Zimbabwe has made notable progress in empowering women to participate in the mining industry. The Zimbabwean government, in collaboration with the Ministry of Women Affairs, has implemented a sponsorship program that provides women with capital and equipment to support their mining ventures (The Herald, 2020). This initiative has enabled women to establish small-scale mining startups and cooperatives, offering women pathways into the previously male-dominated industry (The Herald, 2020).

As women's participation in mining activities gained momentum, it attracted both local and international investors, who offered crucial support in acquiring and operating mining sites (African Development Fund, 2016). This surge in female participation has accelerated progress in gender inclusivity and expanded economic opportunities in the mineral extraction sector, creating a positive ripple effect that continues to advance gender inclusivity and economic opportunities in mining (African Development Fund, ibid). Additionally, targeted support has enabled women to access funding, training, and resources, empowering them to assume some leadership roles and make meaningful contributions to the industry's growth (Chatiza, 2021).

However, despite these advancements, substantial barriers continue to impede women's full participation and empowerment in Zimbabwe's mining sector (Ndlovu et al., 2019; Dzvimbo, Ncube, & Monga, 2019; Tiernan & O'Connor, 2020). Existing policies and initiatives aimed at promoting women's participation in the mining sector often fall short due to inadequate design, poor implementation, or insufficient alignment with the unique challenges women face in this context (Dzvimbo et al., 2019).

Considering these issues, this study innovatively investigates women's economic empowerment through the mining industry in Zimbabwe. Building on current gender equity and mainstreaming initiatives, it aims to uncover the limitations that hinder women's full participation and develop actionable strategies for transformation.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

i. Explore the pathways and experiences of women's economic empowerment through small-scale mining activities in Zimbabwe.

ii. Identify and analyse the challenges affecting women in small-scale mining and their implications on economic empowerment.

iii. Propose recommendations for addressing these challenges and promoting sustainable gender equality and economic empowerment in the mineral extraction sector.

2.0 The Women's Empowerment Framework (WEF)

The Women's Empowerment Framework (WEF), conceptualized by Longwe (1995), serves as the theoretical guide for this study, providing a structured lens through which to examine the empowerment of small-scale female miners in Zimbabwe. The Framework posits that women's empowerment occurs in five interconnected phases: the welfare stage, access level, conscientization phase, participation, and control stages (Longwe, 1995).

Welfare, the foundational stage, focuses on meeting women's basic needs and improving their overall well-being. In the context of this study, it involves examining the provision of basic services and benefits to women engaged in the mineral extraction sector. This initial stage is critical in establishing the groundwork for subsequent empowerment phases (Kabeer, 1999). By assessing the availability of essential services such as healthcare, education, and social support, this study aims to understand the extent to which small-scale female miners' basic needs are being met.

The subsequent levels: access, conscientization, participation, and control, involve increasing women's resource mobilization and opportunities, raising awareness of their rights and abilities, promoting their contribution to decision-making, and fostering their independence and self-sufficiency, respectively (Longwe, 1995).

i. **Access** examines women's ability to obtain resources, information, and opportunities necessary for advancement (Malhotra, Schulte, & Gajwani, 2002).

ii. **Conscientization** refers to the development of awareness among women regarding their rights, roles, and potential, enabling a shift from passive acceptance to active agency (Rowlands, 1997).

iii. **Participation** emphasizes women's involvement in decision-making processes within their communities and cooperatives.

iv. **Control** highlights the ultimate goal of empowerment: fostering autonomy and self-sufficiency in shaping one's own life and surroundings (Kabeer, 1999).

Together, these levels provide a comprehensive grasp of the intricate factors influencing women's self-sufficiency in mining cooperatives in Zimbabwe, offering a nuanced framework for analysis in this study.

Despite its usefulness, the WEF has attracted critique for its perceived linearity and its tendency to present women as a homogenous group (Leder, 2017). Additionally, Pittman (2011) argues that the model's explicit political undertones may oversimplify the complex socio-economic dynamics surrounding women's inequality and poverty. Nevertheless, as Pittman (2011) argues, the WEF remains a crucial tool for organisations seeking to develop sustainable strategies that promote women's empowerment and gender equity.

By applying the WEF, this study aims to attain knowledge of the complex factors influencing women's empowerment in the small to medium-scale mining sector of Zimbabwe, ultimately informing strategies for promoting gender equality and empowerment. The WEF's principles directly inform the design of the key informant interviews, which seek to extract data on women's experiences related to economic empowerment in the mining sector.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and case study approaches to explore the experiences of female small-scale miners in Zimbabwe. The qualitative approach provided rich, contextualized insights into the women's perspectives, highlighting both benefits and drawbacks through key informant interviews (Baskarada, 2014). The case study approach enabled a detailed examination of specific cases, offering nuanced understanding of the women's lives and experiences within their socio-economic and cultural contexts. By integrating these approaches, this study achieved what Baskarada (ibid) describes as a comprehensive understanding of the complex issues faced by study participants, uncovering nuanced patterns and themes that might have been overlooked through a single-method approach.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

This study used a sequential mixed sampling approach, combining purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. Purposeful sampling enabled the selection of participants with unique and relevant experiences in small-scale mining, ensuring the richness of the data collected (Robinson, 2014). Snowball sampling helped access hard-to-reach populations through personal referrals and social networks (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019). Initially, purposeful sampling selected women from small-scale mining cooperatives in

Zimbabwe, targeting those with industry experience. Snowball sampling then expanded the sample to thirty participants across ten provinces, ensuring both geographical representation and diverse lived experiences.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with thirty female key informants from small-scale mining associations via video conferencing, which helped overcome logistical and geographical constraints while reducing costs. The interview instrument was developed using Longwe's (1995) Women's Empowerment Framework, focusing on five levels of indicators: welfare, access, conscientization, participation, and control. The interview questions were designed around these concepts. Each 30-minute interview, on average, was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviews took place over a one-month period (7 July – 5 August 2024).

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed inductive Thematic Analysis to examine interview data, guided by the Women's Empowerment Framework theory. The analysis involved a three-step process:

i. **Data Coding:** Assigning codes to meaningful segments of interview data;

ii. **Theme Identification:** Grouping coded data into emerging thematic categories; and

iii. **Theme Refinement:** Reviewing and validating themes for coherence and relevance.

Data interpretation was informed by existing literature, which corroborated the findings and strengthened the study's conclusions, thereby enhancing their generalizability (Schryen, Wagner, & Benlian, 2015).

3.5 Ensuring Validity and Credibility

Validity and credibility are vital in qualitative research, as they ensure the integrity, trustworthiness and reliability of the study findings (Nkwake, 2015).

i. **Validity** was established through rich, contextualized descriptions that illuminated participant experiences.

ii. **Credibility** was ensured via in-depth key informant interviews, member checking, and peer debriefing, providing a robust and triangulated account of the data.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent, safeguarding their rights and privacy throughout the research process. Participant identities were kept anonymous, and all personal data were managed with strict confidentiality, guaranteeing integrity of the study process. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the National Research Council (Ethics Approval Number, ZNRC/2024/5678), affirming the study's compliance with research standards.

4.0 Study Findings

This section presents the findings from key informant interviews conducted with selected female small-scale miners across diverse mining communities in Zimbabwe. The interviews were designed to elicit views about women's economic empowerment through the mining industry, identifying both opportunities and challenges, with the aim of generating actionable recommendations.

4.1 Participants' Demographics

Figure 1 below presents the demographic profiles of the study's participants. It shows that the majority of the participants were over 40 years old, single, holders of diplomas, and had worked in the informal sector for 10 years or less.

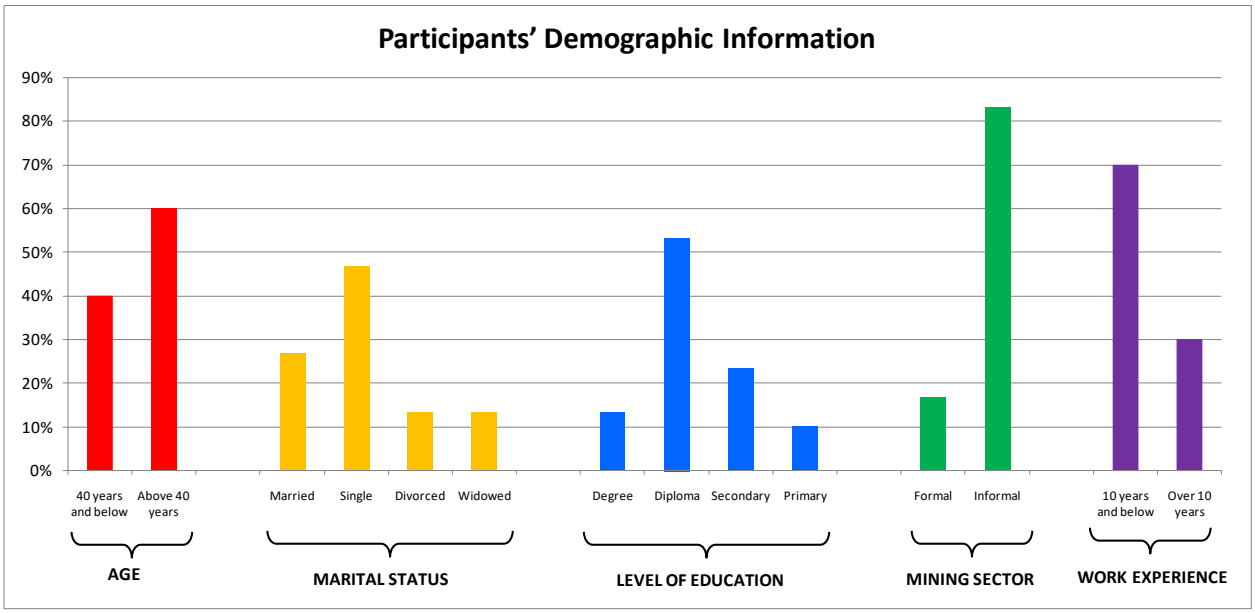


Figure 1: Participants' Demographics

To maintain anonymity, participants are assigned unique alphanumeric codes (KI 1-30). Table 1 presents specific traits of each coded participant, offering insights into their backgrounds and facilitating a deeper understanding of the study's findings.

Table 1: *Individual Participant Traits Coded KI 1 to KI 30*

Code	Age	Education Level	Marital Status	Sector	Experience (Years)
KI 1	38	Diploma	Single	Informal	7
KI 2	29	Secondary	Married	Informal	6
KI 3	33	Secondary	Married	Informal	8
KI 4	42	Degree	Single	Formal	13
KI 5	51	Diploma	Divorced	Informal	15
KI 6	47	Diploma	Married	Informal	9
KI 7	26	Secondary	Single	Informal	6
KI 8	44	Primary	Married	Informal	8
KI 9	34	Secondary	Single	Informal	12
KI 10	56	Primary	Married	Informal	9
KI 11	55	Diploma	Single	Informal	13
KI 12	47	Secondary	Single	Informal	10
KI 13	37	Degree	Divorced	Formal	10
KI 14	42	Diploma	Single	Informal	7
KI 15	28	Diploma	Married	Informal	6
KI 16	46	Diploma	Divorced	Informal	12
KI 17	50	Secondary	Widowed	Informal	15
KI 18	43	Diploma	Single	Informal	11
KI 19	30	Diploma	Single	Formal	9
KI 20	35	Diploma	Married	Formal	8
KI 21	45	Diploma	Single	Informal	10
KI 22	48	Secondary	Widowed	Informal	13
KI 23	31	Diploma	Single	Informal	7
KI 24	43	Diploma	Divorced	Informal	7
KI 25	53	Diploma	Single	Informal	9
KI 26	43	Degree	Single	Formal	6
KI 27	59	Primary	Widowed	Informal	10
KI 28	49	Degree	Married	Informal	12

KI 29	40	Diploma	Single	Informal	8
KI 30	55	Secondary	Widowed	Informal	9

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative findings from the interviews with female miners shed light on their lived experiences, persistent challenges, and ongoing progress towards economic empowerment. These findings are categorized into five broad themes: access to training, information and opportunities; participation in decision making and leadership; awareness of rights and empowerment; provision of basic services and benefits; and control over economic activities and resources. These themes were inductively derived from responses to two specifically designed interview questions as outlined in the interview instrument. The questions effectively elicited the rich responses that formed the basis of these thematic categories. Table 2 provides an overview of the thematic coding process, detailing the specific questions, the emerging themes, and a concise description of each theme, which encapsulates the key perspectives and views expressed by the participants.

Table 2: Thematic Coding Framework

Interview Questions	**Theme**	**Theme Description**
1. Can you describe your experience accessing funding or credit for your mining activities? 2. Have you encountered any barriers in accessing information about industry developments or training in the mining sector?	Access to Resources, Information, and Opportunities	Female miners face challenges in accessing technical training, education, and opportunities, with male-dominated programs and limited dissemination of information. However, some progress has been made in accessing funding and credit facilities.
1. Can you describe your decision-making authority in your mining operation? 2. Have you held any leadership positions in the mining sector? If so, can you describe your experience?	Participation in Decision-Making and Leadership	Women are underrepresented in leadership positions and decision-making processes, with their opinions often overlooked. They face limited opportunities for career advancement and mentorship and perceive gender bias in promotions and appointments.
1. Are you aware of your rights under labour laws and industry regulations? 2. Have you experienced any violations of your rights in the mining sector? If so, how did you address them?	Awareness of Rights and Empowerment	Most female miners are unaware of their corporate rights and labour laws, with limited support for those experiencing sexual harassment or gender-based discrimination. This disempowerment perpetuates a culture of silence and tolerance for abuse.
1. Do you have the provision for essential public health services, childcare, and transportation in your mining community? 2. Are you provided with the necessary protective equipment and safety training for your work?	Provision of Basic Services and Benefits	Female miners face restrictions to basic services and benefits, including transportation, health and childcare facilities, and suitable accommodation. They have minimal access to personal protective equipment (PPE) that fits their needs, exposing them to occupational risks.
1. What level of control do you have over your economic activities, such as setting prices and managing income, within the mining context? 2.To what extent do you have control over mining resources such as land, equipment, and technology, necessary for your mining operations?	Control over Economic Activities and Resources	While female miners have some control over financial activities and resources, they lack autonomy over work decisions. They face challenges related to illegal mining activities, theft, and violence, which affect their business operations and control over resources.

4.3 Access to Training, Information, and Opportunities

The study found that only thirteen out of thirty participants (43%) had reasonable access to essential training, information, and opportunities. The participants revealed that, despite the fact that female entrepreneurs in the mineral extraction business have various levels of education, lack of access to technical

training and education on mining-related issues is universal. Training programs are often male-dominated, and women feel uncomfortable or excluded. KI 3 had this to say: "*Accessing training and education is still a challenge. We need more programs that focus on skills development for women in mining because most of us are still searching for knowledge.*" Others noted that available training is generally tailored for women in the formal sector, who access training through their employers. For example, according to KI 24.

> "*Education programs are meant for women working for mining companies, and as for entrepreneurs we have to make our own arrangements*."

Even among those with some access to training and opportunities, concerns around information-sharing were common. Participants expressed frustration at the inconsistent dissemination of critical updates. For example, one participant claimed, "*I do receive some information about industry developments and opportunities, but I think more can be done to disseminate information to women in the sector*." (KI 18). Another participant remarked, "*In most cases, we are not informed about important matters until it's too late to act on that information. I believe that our partners and co-workers need to be considerate about that issue*." (KI 5).

Interestingly, on a more positive note, many women reported improved access to funding and credit facilities. Banks have started accommodating women's financial needs, primarily requiring a business plan and proof of affiliation with a women-in-mining cooperative. This shift has reduced barriers and made financing more accessible. For example, KI 28 highlights; "*Before, it was difficult for women to access funding, but now banks have programs that cater to our needs, making it easier to get loans and credit*."

Nevertheless, some women operating from remote areas still face significant obstacles in accessing funding. Reasons for failure to secure bank loans include long distances leading to poor coordination with financial institutions, information deficit, and lack of movable assets that can be used as collateral, essentially excluding the less privileged. As one participant indicated, "*I have been failing to get a loan from the bank to boost my business because I have no properties to list as surety*" (KI 16).

4.4 Participation in Decision-Making and Leadership

Key informant data revealed that female small-scale miners have minimal participation in decision-making meetings and discussions, with their opinions often overlooked regardless of their level of education. Only four out of thirty participants (13%) reported having occasionally and limitedly engaged in leadership roles or participated in decision-making processes. In KI 11's view, "*As a woman, my opinion is often overlooked in decision-making processes. It is as if they think we don't know what we're doing*."

Beyond the marginalization of their voices, participants also revealed a broader underrepresentation of women in leadership within the mining sector. As a result, many shared frustrations about limited opportunities for career advancement or mentorship. For example, one participant noted, "*In this mining industry it is rare to see women in leadership positions, hence it is fruitless for us to aim for high-ranking positions*." (KI 26).

Further, several participants perceived entrenched gender bias in promotions and appointments and limited support for women's leadership development, regardless of age, education, or experience. Examples of these views included the following responses:

> "*I've seen a few women in leadership positions, but it's still a male-dominated industry. We need more support for women's leadership development*." (KI 4)
>
> "*Career advancement is limited for women in mining. We need more opportunities for growth and development*." (KI 16)

4.5 Awareness of Rights and Empowerment

The data supported that only a minority of women in the mineral extraction sector were aware of their corporate rights. Only seven out of thirty participants (23%) reported knowing their rights and liberties. The

majority admitted having little to no knowledge, some citing that rights are only a concern when disputes arise. Lower levels of education particularly correlated with limited understanding of labour laws. For instance, KI 8 had this to say:

> "*To be honest, I didn't know my rights until I got into a dispute with my partners, we need more education on labour laws and rights*."

Data also revealed a limited support in the small-scale mines for women who experience sexual harassment or gender-based discrimination. In some cases, the participants indicated that they collaborate with arbitrators who are employed to resolve disputes, however, it was also noted that they do not provide sufficient support when it comes to gender-related disputes. As a result, women may not know where to report incidences of abuse or seek help. The participants claimed that this disempowerment of women perpetuated a culture of silence and tolerance for abuse. Examples of such indications include the following:

> "*We don't have much support when it comes to sexual harassment or gender-based discrimination. It's like we're on our own*." (KI 15)
>
> "*I just ignore sexual harassment encounters and move on with my business. I realized that fighting it would cause more problems for me"* (KI 25)

Furthermore, efforts by women to negotiate for better working conditions are stifled. For example, KI 9 reported:

> "*We (women) try negotiating for better working conditions, but it's not always easy. We need more support and resources to empower us*."

4.6 Provision of Basic Services and Benefits

Respondents emphasized severe limitations in access to essential services and benefits for women in the sector, including health and childcare facilities, and suitable accommodation for females in the mineral extraction industry, irrespective of age or marital status. Notably, only three out of thirty participants (10%) had access to organisational or partner-provided support, highlighting a significant gap in support. In some cases the participants indicated the need to travel long distances for medical care or sharing unsafe accommodation with men, exposing to potential abuse, especially those who are not married. KI 10 indicated that:

> "*There are no health facilities nearby that we can use. We have to go to the nearest town, which is far*."

Similarly, KI 3 had this to say:

> "*Childcare* facilities*? Forget it. We have to make arrangements ourselves*."

According to KI 23,

> "*The accommodation that we* find *here near the mines is not appropriate or safe for us women, but we are often forced to stay as we have no choice*."

The lack of immediate healthcare facilities and secure accommodation compromises women's safety and well-being, particularly in emergencies. Again, with no childcare facilities, women often must arrange

childcare themselves, being forced to choose between work and parenting responsibilities, which in turn limits their ability to participate in the industry. Concerning this, KI 9 retorted

> "*Being a female miner is no child's play, I tell you!"*

Further, the participants indicated minimal and inconsistent access to personal protective equipment (PPE) tailored to the needs of women in small-scale mines. Many noted receiving only the bare minimum requirements, often resorting to improvising or even purchasing gear for hazardous tasks. For example, KI 26's opinion was: "*The provision of PPE is average. We get the minimum requirements, but it's not always sufficient*." Other participants expressed concern about the lack of access to PPE that fits their needs and body types, exposing them to various occupational risks. For example, one retorted, *"In most cases, the PPE barely suits us women, it then becomes clear that we are supplied with men's provisions!*" (KI 20).

4.7 Control over Economic Activities and Resources

Key informant data revealed that although small-scale female miners have little autonomy in day-to-day work decisions, many have some control over financial activities and resources. A significant twenty-two out of thirty participants (73%) revealed this perspective. These women miners, most of whom are single mothers, indicated that they are household breadwinners, able to meet their families' financial needs. They also demonstrated a sense of security and stability, and the ability to balance career and financial responsibilities. Some of the striking responses include the following:

> *"I have control over my earnings, but I wish I had more control over my work." (KI 22).*
>
> *"I balance work and financial issues fairly well, but it's not always easy. We need more support for women in mining." (KI 7).*

This financial control signals a degree of economic empowerment, enabling them to make decisions that shape their lives and future expectations. However, grave concern emerged regarding illegal artisanal mining activities within small-scale mining operations. Most participants indicated that they were terrified as they were facing the risk of being attacked by the illegal miners and some mentioned that they sometimes sought male security when visiting the mines. In addition, the illegal miners were reported to trade minerals illegally on the ground, undermining ongoing mining activities. Some examples of these views included the following:

> "*The issue of theft of mineral resources and illegal mineral trading is undermining our efforts to make an honest living; we need an immediate solution to this*." (KI 28).
>
> "*When it comes to artisanal miners, we do not have control over the mines. Often, we let them do as they please while we focus on our business on the side*." (KI 18).

Criminal activities such as theft, robbery, and violence were frequently mentioned as disruptive to the smooth flow of business in small-scale mines. These crimes not only threaten livelihoods but disproportionately affect women, resulting in diminished control over business activities, capital loss, and resource depletion. KI 1 indicated: "*Theft around here in the mines is costing us. I wish there could be a permanent solution to this problem so we can operate productively*."

4.8 Frequency of Participants' Views Across the Broad Themes

The frequency distribution of participants' views across the five key themes is visually illustrated in Figure 2, providing a clear and concise overview of the study's core findings. This graphical representation facilitates a better understanding of the relative emphasis and prevalence of each theme, allowing for a deeper exploration of the interview data.

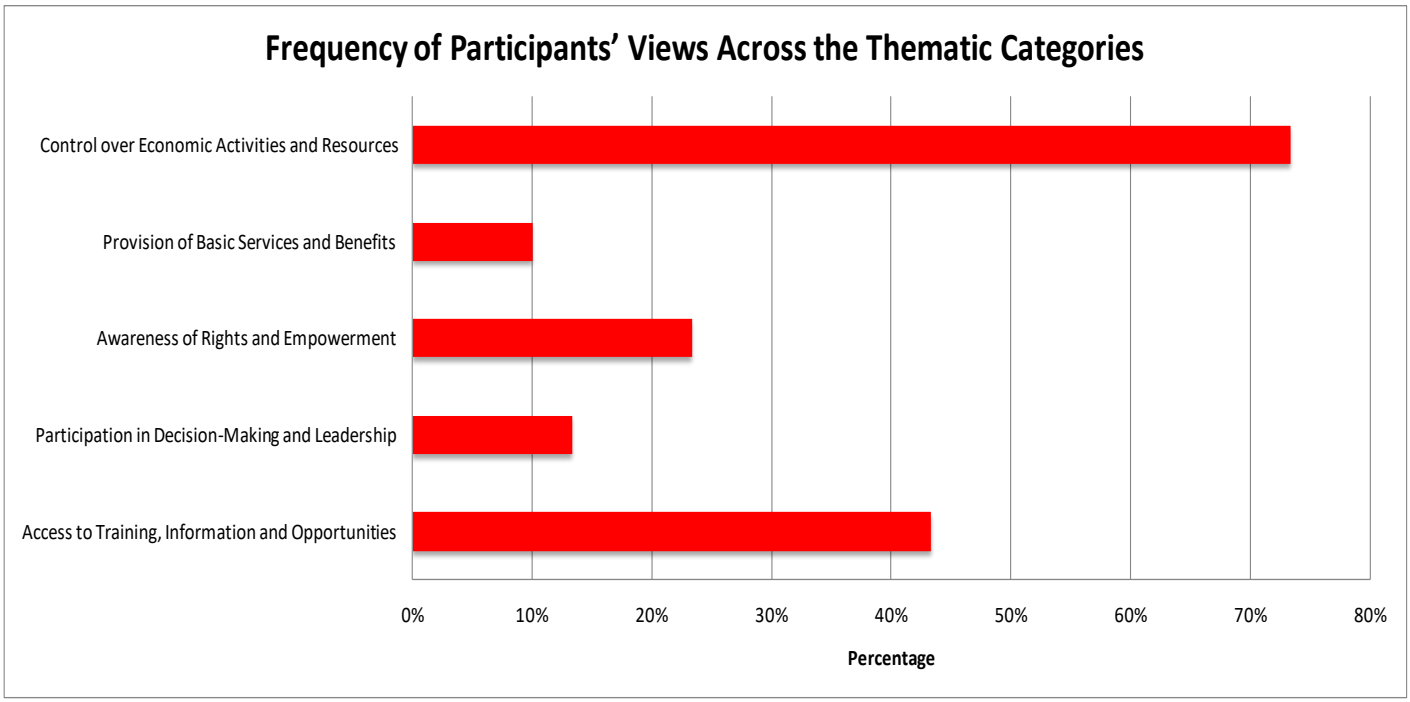


***Figure 2**: Frequency of Participants' Views Across the Thematic Categories*

5.0 Discussions

The findings revealed a complex narrative of women's participation in Zimbabwe's mineral extraction industry, marked by both empowering strides and structural limitations for their economic advancement. A notable catalyst for economic progress is an increased access to funding and credit facilities which enables women to invest in their business ventures, scale operations, and foster job creation.

This finding is consistent with the Women's Empowerment Framework, which emphasizes the importance of access to resources in promoting women's economic empowerment. In line with this, Mukendi and Manda (2022) highlight the substantial contribution of access to financial capital and loans to improving the livelihoods of women miners, enabling them to invest in business activities and projects. Similarly, Hilson, Hilson, Siwale, and Maconachie (2018) observe that women-led mining initiatives across the Southern African region, including Zimbabwe, have significantly improved their financial status, resulting in higher earnings than other income-generating businesses. These scholars advocate for government recognition and support of this positive development, noting its potential to foster sustained economic independence for women.

At the same time, disparities persist, particularly for female miners in small towns, where geographic isolation and information barriers limit access to financial services. Applying the intersectionality lens of the Women Empowerment Framework, the study examined how women's experiences intersect with other social identities, such as location, and how these intersections affect their access to resources. Ndlovu et al. (2019) concur that female miners in remote areas of the country still face substantial barriers to accessing finance, including limited financial capital and mining equipment. This uneven access to capital underscores a critical issue of financial exclusion and economic inequality, hindering women's empowerment and entrepreneurship in already vulnerable communities. Addressing these geographical gaps is crucial to ensuring inclusive financial opportunities, enabling women to overcome structural barriers and fully participate in the economic benefits of the mining sector.

The study further revealed that restricted access to training and education in mining activities posed a significant obstacle to women's economic empowerment. Only 43% of respondents reported having access to such opportunities. Furthermore, a mere 23% of the participants demonstrated an understanding of their rights and labour laws, underscoring a concerning lack of legal awareness among women in the small-scale mining sector. This limited access to education, training, and legal knowledge ultimately hinders their economic empowerment. Using the Women Empowerment Framework's dimension of

agency, it can be argued that the dearth of skills and familiarity with labour laws among women in mining perpetuates the gender inequality in the mining industry.

Ncube-Phiri, Mucherera, and Ncube (2015) advocate for legal familiarization, constitutional reforms, and targeted skills training for women miners to formalize mining activities and align them with Zimbabwe's legal frameworks. Similarly, Mukendi and Manda (2022) shed light on the negative impact of the limited entrepreneurial expertise of businesswomen in mining, arguing that it limits the extent of access to finance to transform their experiences and enhance economic empowerment. Ndlovu et al. (2019) further reinforce these concerns and argue that weak management skills, poor business knowledge, and inadequate awareness of the regulatory frameworks governing mining operations, significantly hamper the efforts of women miners to achieve economic empowerment. To address this, targeted up-skilling training programs can help bridge the knowledge gap and enhance economic empowerment among women miners (Ndlovu et al., 2019).

Illegal mining activities, especially in gold and lithium extraction and trading, pose a significant threat to the safety, productivity, and economic returns, and well-being of women miners. While 73% of the respondents reported having control over financial resources, a significant challenge to their economic empowerment persists due to the prevalence of illegal mining activities. According to Matingo (2023), the mere presence of criminal elements in mining zones creates a climate of fear, subjecting women to risks such as theft, assault, and gender-based violence, and hindering their ability to reach their full potential in the industry. The problem of criminal activities is not new or unique to women-owned mines in Zimbabwe. It reflects a broader developmental challenge across Zimbabwe's mining landscape (Jongwe and Mhlanga, 2023; Matingo, 2023; Ncube-Phiri, et al., 2015). Matingo (2023) argue that, while unauthorized mining operations in Zimbabwe pose a danger to the environment and the economy, the government's efforts to curb this problem have been largely ineffective as these activities continue.

Compounding these issues is the widespread lack of access to basic needs and benefits, including health and childcare facilities and suitable accommodation and transportation, which exacerbates the challenges experienced by women in small-scale mining. Notably, only 10% of the respondents reported having access to these essential services, highlighting a significant gap. These unmet needs compromise women's well-being and productivity, intensify their vulnerability and marginalization, and perpetuate gender disparities. This outcome aligns with prior research, including Chatiza et al. (2015), who highlights the disproportionate burden of inadequate health facilities on women miners, particularly in terms of health risks and caregiving responsibilities. Furthermore, prolonged exposure to hazardous chemicals in the mines presents significant reproductive health risks to women of childbearing age, including miscarriages, stillbirths, birth defects, and chronic injuries (Chatiza et al., 2015). Similarly, Hentschel and Priester (2003, p. 28) note that *"sanitation and public health care in or near small-scale mining communities tend to be extremely deficient"* due to the provisional nature of these structures. They emphasize the importance of practical urban planning and the provision of decent public health facilities and living conditions to mitigate the challenges faced by women miners and enhance their operational efficiency.

The study's findings emphasize the need to address social and cultural norms that perpetuate gender-based discrimination, limiting women's opportunities and influence in small-scale mining. Guided by the Women's Empowerment Framework's principle of gender equality, the analysis highlights the need to confront discriminatory practices and promote women's agency in decision-making processes. Alarmingly, only 13% of female respondents reported having decision-making authority or access to leadership roles. The majority remained excluded from key business decisions, underrepresented in leadership, and facing limited career advancement opportunities. This, again, perpetuates the gender gap, hindering women's ability to influence industry policies and decisions. Evidence-based research reveals that entrenched cultural and patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes subordinate women, limiting their decision-making power, mobility, and access to resources (Binha, 2021; Ndlovu et al., 2019; Tiernan & O'Connor, 2020). Despite women's meaningful roles in the mining sector in Zimbabwe (Dzvimbo et al., 2019; Shaba, 2024), negative perceptions and stereotypes persist, undermining their contributions to the industry. Overcoming these challenges is crucial for breaking down gender barriers and advancing women's empowerment within the industry.

The study also brings to light the support systems for victims of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, further emphasizing the need for enhanced awareness and education campaigns. According to

Chatiza et al. (2015), the power imbalance between men and women in small-scale mines results from socioeconomic disparities and patriarchal tendencies, perpetuating sexual harassment against women, and tilting the power dynamic in favour of men. However, women's resilience and tolerance in navigating patriarchy and masculinity are evident in their growing presence in the industry (Dzvimbo et al., 2019). To address these challenges, Chatiza et al. (2015) advocate for the development of policies and laws that promote women's visibility, protect them from abuse, and improve their working conditions, ultimately leading to effective economic empowerment. As Hentschel and Priester (2003) emphasize, a gender-sensitive approach towards empowering women to fully participate in the mining industry is necessary as it may substantially reduce poverty.

6.0 Conclusions

This study highlights the intricate dynamics of women's economic empowerment within Zimbabwe's mineral extraction sector. Despite progress and steps to advance gender equality, including increased access to credit and a growing presence of women in mining, significant barriers continue to impede their full participation and empowerment. A comprehensive strategy is required to overcome these challenges to women's economic empowerment, including increased access to training and education, promotion of decision-making participation, awareness of rights and labour laws, and access to basic services and benefits. Ultimately, addressing these challenges is crucial to breaking down the longstanding gender barriers, empowering women in the industry, and driving economic transformation.

7.0 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to inform needed action by specific stakeholders and policy or program initiatives:

i. **Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development**-Should formulate and implement policies that strengthen women's economic empowerment in mining, specifically targeting access to education, training, decision-making, and leadership roles.

ii. **Ministry of Mines and Mining Development**-Should re-evaluate and update current mining policies and regulations to reflect and respond to the unique challenges encountered by women miners, including equitable access to mining resources and land.

iii. **Zimbabwe School of Mines**-Should design and deliver training programs tailored to women miners, focusing on technical mining skills, entrepreneurship, and business management.

iv. **Civil Society Organizations (e.g., Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe)**-Should advocate for policy reforms and implement capacity-building initiatives that support women's empowerment in mining. These organizations should also engage communities to dismantle the discriminatory social and cultural norms limiting women's participation.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Study Title: "Women's Economic Empowerment through Small-Scale Mining in Zimbabwe"

Introduction

Thank you for taking part in this research. Your insights and experiences are crucial in helping us understand the complexities and potential solutions surrounding women's roles in Zimbabwe's small-scale mining sector. Please share your thoughts and stories freely, without reservation.

Section 1: Access

1. Can you describe your experience accessing funding or credit for your mining activities?
2. Have you encountered any barriers in accessing information about industry developments or training in the mining sector?

Section 2: Participation

1. Can you describe your decision-making authority in your mining operation?
2. Have you held any leadership positions in the mining sector? If so, can you describe your experience?

Section 3: Conscientization

1. Are you aware of your rights under labour laws and industry regulations?
2. Have you experienced any violations of your rights in the mining sector? If so, how did you address them?

Section 4: Welfare

1. Do you have the provision for essential public health services, childcare, and transportation in your mining community?
2. Are you provided with the necessary protective equipment and safety training for your work?

Section 5: Control

1. What level of control do you have over your economic activities, such as setting prices and managing income, within the mining context?
2. To what extent do you have control over mining resources such as land, equipment, and technology, necessary for your mining operations?

We appreciate your willingness to engage.