Briefing

Natural resource management; Gender

Key insights and recommendations from IIED research for stakeholders across critical mineral value chains

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Key points

Corporate and government decision makers can address gender-based violence (GBV) in the critical minerals sector through an applied understanding of structural inequalities and harmful gender norms.

Better data on GBV risks and impacts can support and inform the business case for action in the sector.

Investors and end users can drive action across value chains by making clear the legal, financial, reputational, operational and community risks of GBV.

Policymakers can set clear expectations and drive accountability for addressing GBV as a human rights violation.

Understanding gender-based violence in critical mineral mining

With the global boom in critical mineral and metal mining, there is an urgent need to increase investment in tackling the sector's complex social and human rights impacts — including the risk of gender-based violence (GBV). The context and realities of the mining sector often exacerbate the systemic inequalities and harmful gender practices that are known to underpin GBV; and the legal, financial, reputational and operational risks posed by GBV should incentivise policymakers and companies to act across the supply chain. This briefing proposes a collaborative, multistakeholder response that is underpinned by a deep understanding of structural inequalities to transform gender relations and design programmes and policies to tackle and prevent GBV within mining workplaces and communities.

The mining sector plays a leading role in supplying critical minerals and metals for the global energy transition. But the pressure to fast-track exploration, develop new mines and assure security of supply risks compromising commitment to international laws, standards and good practice to address the sector's complex and significant impact on social and human rights. Commodity price volatility also endangers operating budgets at a time when environmental, social and governance standards are under scrutiny. Yet, respect for human rights is an enforceable legal requirement, a moral imperative, and a prerequisite for stable and resilient supply chains.

GBV is the "most pervasive yet least recognised human rights violation in the world," according to the United Nations (UN).[1] The mining sector's complex relationship with GBV is poorly understood and addressed; yet the failure to tackle GBV risks and impacts in the workforce and communities threaten both the social licence to operate and the diversity and safety of workplace environments. The investment that is necessary for the sector's viability and growth is compromised by a poor human rights record.[2]

Although complex social and human rights issues such as GBV may appear an insurmountable challenge, informed, pragmatic and context-specific responses can make a difference. Increased knowledge and understanding of how sector-specific gendered dynamics perpetuate the structural inequalities and harmful gender norms that underpin GBV in mining are necessary to drive action and inform the policies and standards that shape and incentivise action.

GBV risks and impacts at work[3]

Women make up 15% of the global mining workforce, where pervasive gender inequality heightens the risk and reality of GBV and long-standing masculine dominance manifests overtly and covertly in behaviours, systems and policies.

Systemic cultural challenges and structural practices in the **large-scale mining sector** heighten the risk of GBV. Rio Tinto's report into its workplace culture exposes the full spectrum of GBV harms present in a global mining company — from 'everyday sexism' to sexual harassment, assault and rape. It also outlines how an organisational culture that disrespects, devalues and objectifies women creates an environment in which more serious forms of GBV are allowed to perpetuate.[4]

The physical environment of mining is often remote and may offer limited social infrastructure. Underground mining, which can access untapped mineral resources and has a reduced environmental footprint, poses heightened risks from working in dark, isolated spaces where women are "outnumbered and frequently subordinated".[5] Differences in physical strength can affect gender dynamics, with men potentially becoming resentful if they feel that women are given 'lighter work' and some women even feeling compelled to exchange sex for support with challenging workloads. Protective clothing and mine facilities are rarely responsive to the unique safety concerns of women.[6]

Common working practices include shift work, fly in/fly out and a reliance on transient, often migrant, contractor workforces. Across these practices, long hours, remote locations, isolated working, long periods away from home and family, complex power dynamics, and fewer opportunities for response and intervention increase the risk of GBV. Women often occupy more menial and lower-ranking roles, further exposing them to the abuses of power.

In the **artisanal and small-scale mining sector**, women are often overlooked, marginalised and relatively 'invisible' in policy, research and programming, leaving them highly vulnerable and exposed to risk. One study in 12 African countries identified that women and girls are exposed to rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, physical violence, spousal abandonment at the end of their assignment, unwanted pregnancies and abortions, dangerous chemicals (often in mineral processing roles) and economic violence, including failure to promote women and inequitable sharing of resources and income.[7]

Structural inequalities and harmful gender stereotypes combine to limit women's access to resources, capital, education, higher-paying roles, equality in professional and domestic roles, and fair renumeration. Their precarious position in the sector means they have less bargaining power, face exploitation and can be forced to provide sexual favours in exchange for access to work or payment, with many feeling they have little alternative. Few women have access to support services and sociocultural blocks — such as shame, fear of rejection, and financial vulnerability — prevent many from seeking help.

GBV risks and impacts in the community[8]

Women in communities around mining locations experience greater negative social, environmental and economic impacts from mining, increasing their vulnerability and marginalisation in societies that are often already strained and gender unequal. Significant gender

Box 1. Understanding GBV

The term 'gender-based violence' is often misunderstood and jargon creates a barrier to understanding, engaging with and acting on GBV. All those affected by or seeking to address GBV need to first understand what it is.

Violence is any behaviour that is used with the intention of causing another person harm, whether physically, sexually, emotionally, psychologically, financially or economically. This includes controlling another person through behaviours that initiate fear and restricting access to, or making threats around, money or property — whether in the home, at work or in communities. Different forms of harm can interact, and having a poor understanding of the issue can lead to narrow programmes or policies that are inadequate in their response.

Violence is more likely to be perpetrated against people who are vulnerable, and higher levels of vulnerability increase the likelihood of experiencing harm. Vulnerability may be due to personal or relational factors, but it is often a function of societal context and structural inequalities. GBV is most often perpetrated by men against women, whose vulnerability stems in large part from entrenched power dynamics, systemic gender inequality, discrimination and harmful gender norms (collective beliefs about what is typical or appropriate).

The GBV pyramid of harm (see Figure 1) illustrates how cultural norms, systems and discriminations underpin structural inequalities that lead to increasing levels of harm. Global social norms that are known to contribute to gender inequality and perpetuate GBV include: women must be submissive; men must exercise coercive control; men have the right to discipline inappropriate behaviour; women cannot deny their male partners sex; girls are valued as wives and not as individuals; and heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation.[21]

These widespread, but often overlooked or masked, patterns of behaviour, values, conditions, relationships and practices are entrenched and reflected in institutional processes and structures across health, education, justice and employment sectors, creating and perpetuating disadvantage and marginalisation, and increasing vulnerability.

However, not all women are victims, and not all victims are women. As such, GBV programmes or policies must reflect dynamic and intersectional factors that impact a person's vulnerability across genders.

inequality around the benefits of mining prolongs injustice and further subordinates the rights and power of women. Complex livelihood pressures, increased poverty and female-headed households are common systemic vulnerabilities in mining communities. Increased vulnerability heightens the probability of GBV; but GBV itself increases vulnerability, perpetuating a vicious cycle of gendered harm and injustice.

The social and cultural impacts of mining are complex and insidious. A large male workforce can drive increases in 'macho' behaviour and associated violence and simultaneously disrupt the social cohesion and structures on which women often rely. Heavy reliance on contractor, often migrant, workforces with different cultural and management norms can increase the risks. Sex work is common in mining communities, and sex workers are highly vulnerable to nonconsensual behaviour and actions where appropriate protections are not in place. Health impacts are often greater on women, who may be pregnant, breastfeeding or menstruating, and who predominate care roles.

As mining brings higher incomes — usually for men — and cash-based economies, women may also experience negative impacts on their roles and identities in the community. These include an increased reliance on male breadwinners, a loss of status in their traditional and reproductive roles, entrenched male privilege, and a loss of decision making and social power through restricted access to land and resources. Mining is also subject to frequent cyclical shocks and closures, which can create significant job insecurity for men — a primary driver of GBV. These factors increase women's vulnerability to physical, sexual and economic violence, often with consequential impacts on children.

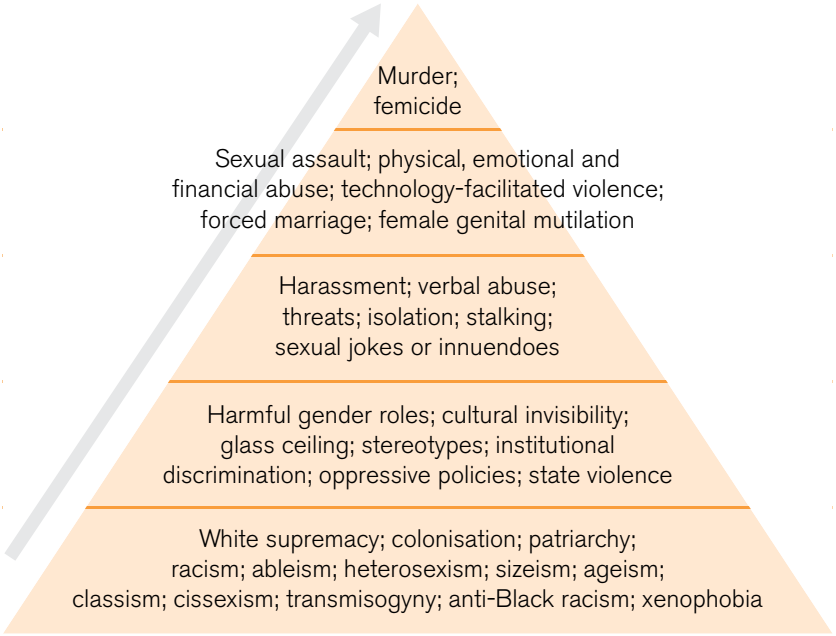
Forms of harm vary across settings. Sociocultural norms, such as the 'bride price' practice in Southern Africa, can increase women's risk of commodification and disempowerment. Harmful gender norms and inequalities can also have more impact when they intersect with racially motivated violence — for example, on Indigenous women facing territorial dispossession due to mining.[9]

The legal and economic imperative for tackling GBV

The UN Secretary-General's Expert Panel on Critical Energy Transition Minerals placed human rights at the centre of all mineral value chains,[10] while the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and European Union's (EU) Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence set out clear expectations on businesses to implement international law and standards, identify and assess human rights impacts and establish appropriate prevention, mitigation and remediation measures.

Figure 1. The GBV pyramid of harm

Sexual violence exists in a pyramid. Structural inequalities and harmful norms contribute to a culture of violence and increasing likelihood and severity of harms.



Source: Adapted from Ashley Fairbanks (@ziibiing) and Toronto Metropolitan University's Office of Sexual Violence Support and Education, www.torontomu.ca/sexual-violence

The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 190 requires a zero-tolerance approach to GBV in workplaces. Class actions underway in Australia against Rio Tinto and BHP Group are seeking to establish corporate liability for sending women into workplaces where there is a known risk of GBV.[11] And 'sex for work' and sexual exploitation can be manifestations of modern slavery, which is heavily legislated against in mining operations and supply chains in Australia, the United Kingdom and the EU.

Legal and moral imperatives aside, GBV is also an economic issue that impacts value and material risk to investment in the sector. The cost of violence against women and girls amounts to around 2% of global gross domestic product;[12] Peru alone estimates that GBV contributes to US$6.7 billion in lost productivity and other costs a year.[13] An institutional investor study of workplace misconduct concluded that "culture-based" financial risks of sexual harassment threaten a company's operations, reputation, social licence to operate and human capital and can therefore negatively impact financial outcomes and investment.[14]

A reliable supply of transition minerals is a geopolitical risk. Social unrest and harm in local communities risk disrupting operations, which can cost up to US$20 million a week in delays and stoppages.[15] Conversely, more diverse operating environments are known to lead to better safety outcomes, while greater gender diversity in supply chains can improve reliability and keep costs down.[16]

Despite these imperatives, recent research into 43 critical mineral exploration and production companies found them lagging in public commitments to human rights and embedding them in operational policies, procedures and management.[17] Only five companies had committed to assessing and addressing the gendered impacts of operations on communities, and none had recognised ILO 190 in the workplace or committed to ensure women's safety and security — including against GBV — either at work or in surrounding communities.

How to tackle GBV for a just energy transition

Programmes and policies to tackle GBV fall into two broad, interrelated categories: GBV responses and GBV prevention. The former address the needs of victims, survivors, perpetrators and bystanders by improving systems and care processes, while the latter tackles deep-seated, structural inequalities and harmful norms in the long term.

To properly assess, manage and mitigate GBV risks and impacts, mining companies need to work with local partners to implement response and prevention programmes that are informed by context and local impact assessments. Their dual responsibility for workforce and community impacts requires programmes to be implemented 'inside and outside the fence' and across functions, including risk, safety, human resources, social performance and operations.

Effective GBV prevention requires long-term commitment and investment, for which leadership is key. Mining company executives have a crucial role to play in understanding GBV and what is needed to drive positive change — and in championing that change across the workforce and in local communities.

Improved local-level collection of evidence and data on GBV and its causes is necessary to incentivise action and inform effective policy and programme design. Data should be gender disaggregated, provide insights on gendered roles, structures and the power dynamics, privilege and exclusion that underpin GBV, and offer leading indicators for change.

Investors, regulators and end users also have a role to play in setting the standards and frameworks for tackling GBV and upholding human rights in critical mineral mining. Recent legislative developments in the United Kingdom[18] and South Africa[19] affirm the role companies can play in tackling GBV.

The global predominance of GBV means that international organisations and collaborative bodies can drive shared leadership, learning and action. The industry membership body ICMM, for example, have agreed a commitment to remove inequalities in the industry, eliminate harmful behaviours in the workplace and contribute to a beneficial shift in society.[20] Provided it is followed, this kind of commitment offers a good practice example for the wider sector to build upon.

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Notes

[1] UNICEF (no date) Gender based violence in emergencies. / [2] Metals for Humanity (2024) Fuelling the green transition: The mining investment gap. FT Longitude report (PDF). / [3] This section employs the framework developed by Jenkins, K (2014) Women, mining and development: an emerging research agenda, *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 1(2), pp.329–339. / [4] Elizabeth Broderick & Co (2022) Report into workplace culture at Rio Tinto. / [5] Solidarity Centre (2021) What happens underground stays underground: a study of experiences of gender-based violence and sexual harassment of women workers in the South African mining industry. / [6] See note 5. / [7] AWIMA (2024) Elimination de le violence a l'egard des femmer et des filles dans le secteur minier en Afrique. / [8] See note 3. / [9] Owen, J, Kemp, DM, Lechner, AM, Harris, J, Zhang, R and Lèbre, É (2023) Energy transition minerals and their intersection with land-connected peoples, *Nature Sustainability*, 6, pp.203–211. / [10] UN (2024) Resourcing the energy transition: Principles to guide critical energy transition minerals towards equity and justice. UN Secretary-General's Panel on Critical Energy Transition Minerals. / [11] Scott, J (2024) BHP, Rio accused of allowing sexual harassment on mine sites, Bloomberg UK, 11 December. / [12] UNICEF and Criterion Institute (2020) The material risks of gender-based violence in emergency settings: is GBV impacting your investment? / [13] Business Fights Poverty (2019) How business can tackle gender-based violence in the world of work: a toolkit for action. / [14] Fidelity International (2023) Workplace misconduct: the underestimated systemic implications for investors. / [15] Franks, D, David, R, Bebbington, AJ, Ali, SA, Kemp, D and Scurrah, M (2014) Conflict translates environmental and social risk into business costs, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(21), pp.7,576–7,581. / [16] IFC (2023) The business case for gender and mining in IFC (no date) *Gender and Infrastructure Toolkit*. / [17] Sellwood, S, Hirschel-Burns, T and Hodgkins, C (2023) Recharging community consent: mining companies, battery minerals, and the battle to break from the past. Oxfam. / [18] Equality and Human Right Commission UK (2024) Sexual harassment and harassment at work: technical guidance / [19] Mine Health and Safety Act South Africa (2024) Guidance note for the management of GBVF, safety and security challenges for women in the South African mining industry. / [20] ICMM (2023) Diversity, equity and inclusion: position statement, 27 June. / [21] Oxfam International (2018) Ten harmful beliefs that perpetuate violence against women and girls, 28 November.