



IGF

INTERGOVERNMENTAL FORUM
on Mining, Minerals, Metals and
Sustainable Development



Gender Equality in the Race for Critical Minerals

Executive summary

Mining is entering a new strategic era. As demand accelerates for critical minerals that underpin the global energy transition, digitalization, and advanced manufacturing, the sector has become central to climate ambitions, technological innovation, and economic transformation. Critical minerals such as cobalt, copper, lithium, graphite, and nickel are essential inputs for renewable energy infrastructure, electric mobility, energy storage, semiconductors, consumer electronics, data infrastructure, and defence.

Yet, the sector has long been associated with social impacts, environmental harm, and persistent gender inequalities. The rapid expansion and restructuring of mineral value chains bring renewed urgency to the existing challenges, with the risk that, without deliberate policy intervention, current inequalities may widen and be replicated at a greater scale.

Meeting the rising demand will require new and expanded mining, often in remote and vulnerable contexts. A geopolitical race is on as governments and companies vie to secure stable critical mineral supply chains. Demand is surging, with the International Energy Agency projecting that by 2040, the demand for lithium could increase 5-fold, demand for graphite and nickel could double, and demand for cobalt and copper could rise by 50% and 30%, respectively.

However, the critical minerals boom may heighten risks related to gender-specific rights such as women's access to land, livelihoods, food security, and health, as well as unpaid care responsibilities. These pressures can present compounding human rights challenges, particularly for Indigenous and rural women. This report, jointly developed by the Intergovernmental Forum on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development; International Labour Organization; and UN Development Programme, describes these risks and offers



practical, actionable mitigation measures for governments and mining companies.

What does the predicted increase in mining activities related to the increased demand for critical minerals mean for women's rights, particularly the rights of Indigenous and other women in mining-affected communities?

In addition to longstanding impacts associated with mining, the expansion of mining activities to supply critical minerals presents specific and even more pronounced rights risks. Three determining factors are key: (i) the environmental impacts specific to the extraction and processing of critical minerals; (ii) the geographical location of mining projects (often found on or near Indigenous and/or peasant lands), and (iii) the potential for accelerated permitting processes to meet the pace of rising demand. These three factors set the stage for even greater risks to women's rights, potentially reinforcing existing systemic inequalities in the mining sector.

Along with best-practice case studies, the report offers three recommendations that can help governments and industry actors mitigate risks and promote gender equality:

1. Assess and manage gendered social and environmental impacts

- Apply an **intersectional gender analysis** within impact assessment processes (environmental and social impact assessment, human rights impact assessment, and/or standalone gender impact assessment).
- Collect **intersectional, gender-disaggregated data** (with further disaggregation as relevant, e.g., age, indigeneity, ethnicity, disability).
- Translate findings into a costed, time-bound **Gender Action Plan** integrated into environmental and social management plans and monitoring.

2. Require inclusive consultation, promote women's agency, and secure consent

- Foster **broad, meaningful participation**, including women's safe engagement throughout the project life cycle.
- Use **community-led approaches** (e.g., women-led monitoring, local oversight committees).
- Treat **free, prior, and informed consent** as the best-practice standard for rights-respecting engagement, particularly where Indigenous and customary land rights apply.

3. Establish gender-responsive benefit-sharing mechanisms

- Remove barriers to women's **direct and indirect employment** through gender audits, targets/quotas where appropriate, anti-discrimination measures, and actions to close gender pay gaps.
- Ensure **equitable land compensation** and livelihood restoration, including recognition of women's land tenure and use rights.
- Deliver community development programs that strengthen women's economic agency (e.g., savings and credit groups, micro-grants, skills development, supplier inclusion).

Gender equality must be at the centre of mining governance. This is not just a matter of equity; it is essential for sustainability, accountability, and shared prosperity. The criticality of gender equality must remain paramount in the race to secure critical minerals, achieve a just energy transition, meet the needs of the digital economy, and support industrial development.



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March 2026

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Photo: Joerg Boethling/Alamy

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