

THE INVISIBLE WORKFORCE: WOMEN IN MALI'S ARTISANAL MINING COMMUNITIES

Every day, thousands of women in Mali's artisanal mining communities contribute to an industry that sustains local economies. Yet, despite their labor, they remain largely invisible excluded from land ownership, financial services, and decision-making roles. These inequalities, deeply rooted in tradition and economic structures, prevent women from fully benefiting from an industry that depends on their work.

In a context where issues related to rights, equality, and empowerment are becoming increasingly critical, closing these gaps has become an urgent priority. Through field research and in line with Canada's gender equality requirements the Femmes et Enfants des Communautés Minières Artisanales (FEMA) project has documented the challenges women face in mining communities and the ways they are organizing for change. The FEMA Gender Study, "the Gender Equality and Inclusive Gender-Based Analysis (GBA+) in Artisanal Mining Communities" was completed with data from the project between 2022 and 2023. This article highlights key findings from the FEMA Gender Study, showing how advancing gender equality and women's economic empowerment in Mali's artisanal mining communities is driving positive change, resilience, and inclusive local development.



Women from the village of Sekohamata, Sitakily commune, on a mining site

A Sector Built on Inequality

Despite national laws supporting gender equality, artisanal mining remains governed by traditional systems that overwhelmingly favor men, limiting women's access to land, financial resources, and economic opportunities.

- **Land Ownership:** In Kéniéba, only 2% of women own mining land, compared to 44% of men. Land allocation is controlled by customary leaders (Dougoutiguis and Tombolomas), who rarely prioritize women's claims, leaving them dependent on male relatives for access.
- **Financial Barriers:** Women struggle to access capital, with only 2% of women having formal credit access. In contrast, informal lending exposes them to high-interest rates and financial dependence on traders and middlemen.
- **Gender Income Gap:** Women earn significantly less than men across mining-related activities. In gold trading, men earn seven times more than women, reinforcing financial disparities.

These inequalities are not just statistics—they shape women's daily realities, limiting their ability to invest, expand businesses, or secure long-term financial stability for themselves and their families. Women's exclusion from economic resources is further exacerbated by their underrepresentation in governance. Despite playing key roles in the local economy, 72% of women do not participate in joint decision-making, and only 10.6% hold leadership positions, falling short of the 30% national target.

Traditional governance structures—which control access to land, mining permits, and economic opportunities—remain male-dominated, leaving women without a voice in decisions that affect their livelihoods. Women's lack of representation in decision-making reinforces their economic marginalization, as they remain excluded from policies and programs that could improve their access to resources.

Women Fighting Back: Breaking Barriers and Driving Change

Despite these systemic barriers, women in mining communities are actively organizing for change. Through grassroots movements, savings groups, and cooperatives, they are challenging exclusion and creating new economic opportunities.

1. GAINING ACCESS TO LAND AND FINANCE

For decades, land allocation and financial control have been governed by informal rules that favor men. However, women's collective advocacy is slowly shifting the landscape:

- In Dialafara, women-led negotiations with village leaders resulted in a 57% increase in women's land ownership, proving that change is possible when communities engage.
- Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) are empowering women financially, providing an alternative to predatory lending. These savings groups allow women to pool resources, invest in small businesses, and finally regain financial autonomy with participants in this study reporting a 20% increase in savings and improved access to investment capital.

These efforts are still in their early stages, but they demonstrate that women's economic empowerment is not just a goal—it's happening now.



Woman from the village of Segreya, Dabia commune, on a mining site

2.EXPANDING LIVELIHOODS BEYOND MINING

Mining provides an income, but for many women, it is a cycle of economic instability. With limited access to resources and market power, they are often trapped in low-paying, dangerous roles.

To counter this, many women are turning to alternative income sources where they can have greater control:

- Agriculture, agro-processing, and trade are becoming viable pathways for economic independence. Women engaged in market gardening reported higher and more stable incomes compared to those in artisanal mining.

The FEMA Gender study (GBA+) shows that women engaged in market gardening earn 48,611 FCFA per month, surpassing men's earnings in the same sector (43,417 FCFA per month), unlike most industries where women earn three to seven times less. The report also highlights that market gardening and agro-processing offer the potential for improved financial stability for women than artisanal mining, reinforcing FEMA's strategy to promote economic diversification as a pathway to sustainable empowerment.

- 15 women's cooperatives have been established with support from FEMA, helping women build collective bargaining power and expand business opportunities.

The Study highlights that women's cooperatives play a crucial role in improving economic resilience in artisanal mining communities. The study recommends identifying and structuring women's mining groups into cooperatives to enhance their access to financial resources, training, and market opportunities. This structuring aims to provide women with the necessary tools to increase their bargaining power, secure better working conditions, and engage in alternative income-generating activities such as market gardening and agro-processing. Additionally, these cooperatives enable women to acquire better equipment, negotiate fairer market conditions, and strengthen their economic independence by diversifying their income sources, these women are reducing their economic dependence on a system that excludes them.

3.CLAIMING A SEAT AT THE DECISION-MAKING TABLE

Women's exclusion from economic resources is closely tied to their lack of representation in governance structures. Even in communities where women play a key role in economic life, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions and making-decision sphere.

The FEMA Gender Study (GBA+) confirms that women's exclusion from economic resources is closely tied to their underrepresentation in governance. Despite playing key economic roles, 72% of women do not participate in joint decision-making, and only 10.6% hold leadership positions, falling short of the 30% national quota. In mining governance, traditional leaders control land and resource allocation, often excluding women from ownership and decision-making, reinforcing economic marginalization.

However, momentum is building:

- Local women's advocacy groups are growing, amplifying their voices in decision-making forums.
- With FEMA Project support, leadership training initiatives are equipping women with skills to participate in cooperative management, financial planning, and community governance.

While progress is slow, these steps mark the beginning of a shift where women are not just workers—but decision-makers in the future of their communities.

Looking Ahead: Women's Economic Rights as a Catalyst for Change

The theme "Rights, Equality, and Empowerment" must not remain a slogan. It is a powerful call to deeply transform the systems that perpetuate inequality.

- When women own land, they gain the security to invest and build long-term wealth. However, limited ownership rights continue to hinder their financial stability
- When women access finance, they create businesses that sustain families and strengthen local economies.
- Women in AVEC programs report a 35% higher chance of securing long-term loans
- When women lead, communities become more inclusive, stable, and prosperous.

What Needs to Happen Next?

- Expand financial inclusion programs like VSLA to ensure more women can access capital.
- Increase community engagement to continue shifting cultural attitudes around land ownership.
- Strengthen economic alternatives that offer women stable, independent livelihoods outside of mining.

Economic empowerment is not just about giving women resources—it's about removing the systemic barriers that have kept them at the margins for too long.



Women from the village of Sekohamata, Sitakily commune, on a mining site

4. CONCLUSION: A MORE INCLUSIVE MINING ECONOMY IS POSSIBLE

Women in Mali's mining communities specifically those in Kéniéba are no longer waiting for change. They are organizing, building networks, and creating economic opportunities where none existed before. The FEMA project is working alongside them, supporting their efforts to gain land rights, access finance, and claim leadership roles.

As Canada continues to promote gender equality through its international development policies, understanding these local challenges is crucial. Many Canadian companies, NGOs, and government programs invest in responsible mining and economic development in Africa. Ensuring that women are included in these initiatives can lead to more sustainable and equitable growth. Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy emphasizes the need for economic empowerment of women worldwide. Projects like FEMA align with this vision by tackling systemic barriers and creating tangible opportunities for women in mining communities. With continued collaboration between Canadian organizations, local governments, and the private sector, we can help drive meaningful change for women in Kéniéba and beyond.

As Canadians, supporting ethical and gender-inclusive development isn't just an act of solidarity—it's an investment in a more just and sustainable future for all. The road ahead remains long, but, one thing is clear: when women have the tools to succeed, they transform their communities.

The FEMA Project

The Femmes et Enfants des Communautés Minières Artisanales (FEMA) project in Mali is implemented by Cowater International from 2022 to 2027. It is funded by the Government of Canada (48 billion FCFA or CAD 9.9 million) and B2GOLD (225 million FCFA or CAD 464,800).

FEMA aims to achieve the following results in mining communities in the Kéniéba district:

- Improve economic opportunities for women and adolescent girls;
- Reduce the presence of children on mining sites and promote gender equality;
- Strengthen local governance of the artisanal mining sector (ASM), while reducing its negative impacts on mining communities, including on the environment and gender equality.

The project is being implemented in 20 villages across four communes in the Kéniéba district: Dabia, Dialafara, Kéniéba, and Sitakily, in the Kayes region. In addition to working with national and local authorities — including the Ministry of Geology and Mines, decentralized technical services, and municipalities — the project relies on the contributions of Canadian NGOs Impact and Right to Play.

Explore our research on the political economy of mining governance in Kéniéba <https://projetfema.com/>.

