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The Influence of Local Regulatory Frameworks on the Viability of Artisanal Mining as a Sustainable Poverty Alleviation Strategy for Women and Youth in Bhuka Community, Ward 10, Masvingo Rural District Council

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ABSTRACT

Artisanal mining has become a prominent livelihood source for many marginalised groups in Zimbabwe, yet its effectiveness as a sustainable poverty alleviation strategy continues to be shaped by prevailing regulatory environments. This qualitative study investigates the influence of local regulatory frameworks on the viability of artisanal mining as a sustainable poverty reduction mechanism for women and youth in Bhuka community, Ward 10 of Masvingo Rural District Council. Drawing on the opportunities-and-pitfalls discourse in artisanal mining literature, the research specifically examines how policy implementation at the local level either enables or constrains long-term livelihood security for these demographic groups. The study adopted an interpretive qualitative case study design. Data were generated through 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions involving a total of 21 additional participants (distinct from the interview sample) comprising women and youth artisanal miners, local council officials, traditional leaders, and representatives from artisanal miners' associations. Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich participants across different peri-urban settlements. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis approach, with credibility enhanced through member-checking, peer debriefing, and researcher reflexivity. Findings reveal that although local regulatory frameworks aim to promote formalisation, participants consistently reported that they are largely ineffective due to complex licensing procedures, high fees, perceived corruption, selective enforcement, and limited stakeholder consultation. These constraints were described as disproportionately affecting women and youth, pushing most miners to remain in the informal sector and undermining the sustainability of poverty alleviation outcomes. The study concludes that without comprehensive reform, artisanal mining is likely to continue offering only short-term survival rather than sustainable livelihoods. It recommends the development of inclusive, simplified, and gender-responsive regulatory frameworks to unlock the full potential of artisanal mining in rural and peri-urban communities.

Keywords: Artisanal mining, regulatory frameworks, sustainable livelihoods, poverty alleviation.

INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), also known as makorokoza, has gained importance as a livelihood strategy for marginalised groups in response to prolonged economic challenges, high unemployment, and limited formal sector opportunities. Zimbabwe has experienced severe economic contraction, hyperinflation, and the breakdown of formal employment since the early 2000s, leading a high proportion of the population especially in rural and peri-urban areas to explore alternative livelihoods (Bryceson & Geenen, 2016; Chipangura, 2019). The sector is estimated to support more than one million people directly and constitutes a significant component of national gold production, providing an important safety net in rural and peri-urban communities (Pact, 2016; World Bank, 2019). In Bhuka community in Ward 10 of Masvingo Rural District Council, ASM activities have progressively engaged women and youth seeking income in the absence of other viable options.

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The policy environment for Zimbabwe's mining sector has evolved from greater decentralisation in the 1990s to recentralisation in the 2000s and 2010s under formalisation agendas (Spiegel, 2015; Hilson & Maconachie, 2017). These shifts have produced an intricate governance structure involving overlapping legislation, including the Mines and Minerals Act (Chapter 21:05), the Environmental Management Act, and various statutory instruments. Although ASM has significant impacts on gold production and the rural economy, its long-term sustainability remains uncertain due to informality, environmental degradation, and limited institutional support (Geenen, 2012; Mawowa, 2013). While ASM can serve as a poverty alleviation tool, prevailing regulatory frameworks often undermine its long-term viability.

Women and youth, who constitute a growing percentage of ASM participants, face additional gender- and generation-specific constraints. These include restricted access to mining claims, gender discrimination in decision-making and access to more lucrative positions, and heightened risk of gender-based violence (GBV) (Mafongoya, Maroveke & Muzenda, 2021; Lahiri-Dutt, 2018). The Zimbabwean ASM literature engages the opportunities-and-pitfalls discourse, recognising short-term income-generating benefits alongside the risk of unsustainability in the absence of enabling formalisation policies (Pact, 2016; Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2020; Hilson, 2016). However, there remains a significant gap in context-specific, interpretive qualitative research examining the impact of local regulatory implementation in peri-urban/rural interface areas on the livelihoods of women and youth. This study addresses that gap through an intensive case study of Bhuka community. It contributes nuanced, evidence-based insights to the literature on ASM governance and sustainable livelihoods, with implications for the design of inclusive, simplified, and gender-sensitive regulatory frameworks in Zimbabwe.

Research objectives

- To examine the key features and implementation of local regulatory frameworks governing artisanal mining in Bhuka community, Ward 10 of Masvingo Rural District Council.
- To analyse how these local regulatory frameworks enable or constrain the participation and livelihood outcomes of women and youth engaged in artisanal mining.
- To assess the implications of the prevailing regulatory environment for the viability of artisanal mining as a sustainable poverty alleviation strategy for women and youth, and to propose relevant policy reforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of literature exists on artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in Zimbabwe, frequently identifying ASM as a livelihood option while highlighting persistent governance and sustainability challenges. Research emphasises opportunities for poverty reduction alongside challenges related to informality, environmental degradation, and unequal outcomes, particularly for women and youth (Pact, 2016; Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2020; Banchirigah, 2006). The evidence base is robust regarding national-level formalisation problems, yet relatively limited in terms of in-depth, localised qualitative evidence on local regulatory implementation in specific peri-urban/rural interface communities. This study contributes to the opportunities-and-pitfalls conversation by providing contextually specific evidence from Bhuka community and original empirical insights into gender and youth dimensions at the local level.

Theoretical framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) serves as the primary theoretical framework for this study. SLA provides a comprehensive lens for understanding livelihood creation and change as the process of accessing different types of capital within vulnerability contexts (Scoones, 1998; Ellis, 2000). In this study, local regulatory frameworks are examined as key transforming structures and processes that can facilitate or impede access to livelihood assets relevant to the mining sector for women and youth. Institutional theory complements the SLA by helping to explain how formal rules and informal practices shape power relations and livelihood outcomes in the ASM sector (North, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

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The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA)

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), developed by Chambers and Conway (1992) and popularised by Scoones (1998), is a people-centred framework for understanding poor households' capacity to develop resilient livelihoods. It focuses on five key capital assets human, social, natural, physical, and financial and how vulnerability contexts (trends, shocks, and seasonality) and transforming structures and processes (including policies, institutions, and regulations) affect them (DFID, 2000; Scoones, 1998; Ellis, 2000). SLA is particularly pertinent when examining the impact of regulatory structures as transforming structures that mediate miners' access to natural resources (claims) and financial capital in Zimbabwe's ASM sector (Pact, 2016; Mkodzongi, 2019). The approach emphasises not only short-term income but also asset building, risk mitigation, and the securing of long-term livelihoods. Previous ASM studies in Zimbabwe have used SLA to illustrate how informality negatively impacts asset building, while poorly designed formalisation can increase the vulnerabilities of marginalised groups (Zvarivadza, 2018; Hilson & McQuilken, 2014). This study employs SLA to assess the role of local regulation in promoting or hindering sustainable livelihood outcomes for women and youth.

Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM) as a livelihood and poverty reduction approach

Small-scale and artisanal mining has emerged as an important livelihood option in Zimbabwe, supporting the employment of more than one million people during periods of economic hardship, unemployment, and agricultural challenges (Pact, 2016; Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2020; World Bank, 2019). The sector provides a crucial safety net and poverty alleviation tool, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas with limited formal opportunities. Many households combine ASM with smallholder farming, using proceeds to finance agricultural inputs, education, and household assets (Mkodzongi, 2019; Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2019; Bryceson & Geenen, 2016).

However, literature indicates that while ASM provides short-term income, its contribution to sustainable poverty reduction is limited without supportive structures. Miners often work under conditions of limited formal recognition, low productivity, health risks, and economic insecurity (Pact, 2016; Hlungwani et al., 2021; Siwale & Siwale, 2017). Research reveals that ASM helps people survive but frequently fails to enable long-term asset building and livelihood diversification due to insecure tenure and external shocks. For women and youth, participation offers an avenue for income generation but is generally associated with lower-paying labour roles and greater risks (Mafongoya et al., 2021; Hinton et al., 2003). This study responds to calls for context-specific analysis of local governance institutions and their capacity to support ASM's poverty alleviation potential in Bhuka.

Regulatory frameworks and problems with formalisation

The laws governing ASM in Zimbabwe are primarily the Mines and Minerals Act (Chapter 21:05), the Environmental Management Act, and related statutory instruments. Although some formalisation efforts involved decentralisation in the 1990s, policy has evolved towards recentralisation, resulting in elaborate licensing processes, high fees, and potential conflicts between national and local government (Spiegel, 2015; Hlungwani et al., 2021; Hilson, 2016). Costs (in some instances exceeding US$3,000 for full compliance), bureaucratic delays, corruption, and selective compliance have been cited as significant impediments to formalisation (Pact, 2016; Spiegel, 2015; Geenen, 2012).

Rural District Councils have limited functions in implementation, creating a gap between policy intent and practice. These difficulties sustain high levels of informality and expose miners to legal, environmental, and exploitation risks. Scholars note that while formalisation is intended to improve governance, revenue collection, and sustainability, poorly designed processes can recentralise power and marginalise small operators (Spiegel, 2015; Verbrugge, 2015). Calls have therefore been made for simplified, decentralised, and inclusive licensing systems (ZELA reports; planet GOLD initiatives; Mutagwaba et al., 2018). This study builds on this work by investigating ground-level implementation in Bhuka and its impact on women and youth.

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Opportunities and pitfalls for gender and youth

The opportunities-and-pitfalls debate in ASM literature highlights the sector's potential to empower women and generate income alongside significant risks such as environmental degradation, health and safety issues, child labour, and gender-based violence (Pact, 2016; Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2020; Lahiri-Dutt, 2018). Women and young people form an important and increasing share of Zimbabwe's artisanal miners and face distinct challenges. Women are typically involved in processing and support roles and encounter patriarchal norms, low claim ownership, and increased exposure to GBV (Mafongoya et al., 2021; Hinton, 2005). Youth participation is driven by unemployment but exposes them to unsafe conditions and limited skills development (Hlungwani et al., 2021; Chipangura, 2019). While ASM provides easy entry points and cash income, literature emphasises that equal opportunities and sustainable livelihoods are unlikely without gender-responsive policies (Pact, 2016; Buss et al., 2019). These groups are often excluded from formalisation processes due to high costs, limited risk-sharing mechanisms, and insufficient consultation. This study adds localised qualitative evidence from Bhuka on how regulatory frameworks disproportionately affect women and youth and the need for a more inclusive approach to ASM governance.

Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted because the study sought to gain insight into the lived experiences and perceptions of participants regarding local regulation and artisanal mining. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative methodology is a naturalistic and interpretive approach that focuses on understanding social phenomena in their natural contexts and how people interpret them. It is particularly appropriate for context-specific inquiries involving complex issues that require deep understanding rather than statistical generalisability. This approach was suitable given the research intent to capture nuanced perspectives on regulatory implementation, power relations, and livelihood outcomes.

Research paradigm

The study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm. In contrast to positivism, interpretivism holds that knowledge emerges from understanding the lived experiences and meanings of participants and that reality is socially constructed and subjective (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Willis, 2007; Schwandt, 2015). Whereas positivism seeks objective truths and general laws, interpretivism focuses on contextual understanding, researcher reflexivity, and the plurality of realities. This paradigm was chosen because the study aimed to elucidate how women, youth, and local actors experience and navigate regulatory systems in artisanal mining in Bhuka. It aligns with the purpose of examining perceptions, power relations, and implementation gaps rather than testing hypotheses. The flexible, participatory nature of interpretivism is suitable for this context-sensitive inquiry on sustainable livelihoods.

Research design

The study employed an interpretive qualitative case study design. According to Yin (2014), Stake (1995), and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a case study is an in-depth investigation of a bounded system in its natural context using multiple sources of evidence. It enables researchers to examine phenomena deeply while retaining contextual richness. Bhuka community (Ward 10) was selected as a typical peri-urban/rural interface where artisanal mining operates at the interface of local government. The design facilitated detailed analysis of the impact of regulations on women and youth within their specific socio-economic and institutional context. The single-case approach provided depth and thick description, justifiable for theoretical and policy-relevant insights in under-researched local contexts (Yazan, 2015).

Population and sample

The study population comprised all individuals directly involved in or affected by artisanal mining practice within Bhuka community in Ward 10 of Masvingo Rural District Council. This included artisanal miners

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(primarily women and youth), traditional leaders, local government officials, and community members. Twenty-five participants were selected for in-depth interviews using purposive sampling. Three focus group discussions involved a total of 21 additional participants who were distinct from the interview sample. Specifically, FGD 1 comprised eight women artisanal miners; FGD 2 comprised seven mixed youth and male miners; and FGD 3 comprised six participants including women miners and representatives of the artisanal miners' association. The overall sample included one Chief, three Headmen, one Councillor, and villagers in various roles. Diversity in age, gender, roles, and experiences was sought to capture different perspectives. Data saturation guided sample size determination.[1] For qualitative research, smaller samples (typically 15–30) are appropriate when the focus is on depth rather than breadth in information-rich contexts (Hennink et al., 2022; Guest et al., 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Purposive selection of information-rich cases enhanced credibility and relevance to the research questions.

Data collection tools

Semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data.[2] Semi-structured interviews, guided by an open-ended interview schedule, focused on regulatory experiences, challenges, and livelihood impacts while allowing exploration of emerging issues. Interviews were held in private, comfortable locations within the community to ensure confidentiality and rapport. The three FGDs (organised as relatively homogeneous groups by gender or role where feasible) supplemented interviews by facilitating interactive discussion and uncovering collective perspectives. Informed consent was obtained for all sessions, which were scheduled at convenient times (most often afternoons or evenings). Interviews and FGDs lasted 45–90 minutes. The researcher-built trust through prolonged engagement and cultural sensitivity. These tools were appropriate for generating rich narrative data consistent with the interpretivist paradigm.

Data analysis

Data analysis employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This method is flexible and suitable for identifying patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts and listening to recordings. Initial codes were generated inductively, after which themes were organised around licensing barriers, corruption, gender constraints, and livelihood sustainability. Themes were refined iteratively against the entire dataset to ensure coherence. NVivo software assisted with data organisation, complemented by manual analysis to enhance reflexivity. Trustworthiness was reinforced through member-checking (sharing summaries with selected participants), peer debriefing, and maintenance of a research journal. Thematic analysis was appropriate for this interpretive study due to its capacity to generate fine-grained, policy-relevant insights grounded in participants' voices.

Ethical considerations

Before data collection, all participants received clear information about the purpose of the study, their right to participate or withdraw at any point without penalty, and the measures taken to protect confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained prior to all interviews and focus group discussions. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained using pseudonyms in all transcripts, field notes, and reporting, and by omitting potentially identifying information.[3] Interviews and FGDs were held in private, comfortable community environments selected by participants. Reflexivity was actively practised through a research journal and

[1]Data saturation was assessed iteratively. No, substantively new codes or themes emerged after the 20th interview and the second focus group discussion. Subsequent data collection confirmed existing patterns without introducing novel insights.

[2]Fieldwork was conducted between March and June 2026 in Bhuka community, Ward 10, Masvingo Rural District Council.

[3]All participant identifiers (for example Participant A) are pseudonyms used to protect anonymity.

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periodic peer debriefing, acknowledging the researcher's prior engagement with the community and positionality as an outsider-insider. This process helped surface and bracket assumptions during data collection and analysis. Member-checking of preliminary findings with selected participants further enhanced ethical rigour and trustworthiness.

Presentation of results

Thematic analysis of 25 in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions yielded four major themes that directly relate to the research objectives. These themes illustrate how participants experienced local regulatory regimes. Participant codes (for example Participant A) are pseudonyms representing a variety of roles, ages, and genders.

Theme one: Costly and complex licensing processes

This theme emerged primarily from questions concerning participants' awareness of and experience with obtaining mining permits or formalising operations, and the impact of these processes on everyday mining (Objective 1).

Most participants viewed licensing as cumbersome and costly. **Participant A** (24-year-old female youth miner) explained: "Getting even a simple prospecting licence requires making multiple visits to the Ministry of Mines, and the necessary papers, which include IDs, proof of residency and environmental reports, are too burdensome for us to complete and we ended up giving up after two months because we didn't have enough money."

Participant B (male headman, 58 years) reported: "The government promises to help, but the fees seem to be still too high, and most of us are not affording them. A full mining licence is too expensive for us; we are mainly on indigenous mining. I wonder where the government thinks we raise the funds when we are struggling to feed our families."

Participant C (female miner, 42 years) added: "Even if you paid, the licence will be valid only for a small plot and will have to be renewed year after year, by which time those with stronger connections would have taken the claims so there is no security." In contrast, **Participant D** (male Councillor) offered a different perspective: "Look, these procedures are not just for the sake of it; they are to prevent people getting hurt and claims being taken back. But I can tell you here in Bhuka and in wards like this, the system is slow." These accounts highlight the complexity of procedures as a factor sustaining informality.

In **FGD 1**, participants collectively expressed frustration: "The process is designed for educated people with money, not for us. When we get the paper, we always must spend more on transport and other overhead expenses than actual mining." Another participant added that even when the paper is finally received, the area allocated is too small and they lack machinery to make meaningful profits.

Theme two: Corruption and selective enforcement

This theme emerged from discussions of fairness in policy implementation, interactions with police and other authorities, and obstacles to formalisation (Objectives 1 and 2).

Participants frequently raised concerns about bribery and favouritism. **Participant E** (youth male miner, 29 years) stated: "If you don't have someone in the government or police or EMA, they will harass you every day. Sometimes we must go out of our way to try and get a better relationship with the law enforcement personnel so that we can work, or else we may not get anything out of our activities."

Participant F (female miner, 35 years) expressed a related frustration with a gender dimension: "Men with money or political connection get protected areas and protected operations, but me being a woman, I am a bit vulnerable because my husband may be at some place. Rules are there and exist but applied selectively." **Participant G** (traditional leader) offered a counterview: "Not everyone is corrupt; sometimes it's hard to

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enforce because the miners don't want it regulated." This was met with retorts from **Participant H** (youth female miner): "But the raids on small groups like us have been inconsistent and big operators with machines are working freely." These accounts illustrate participants' perceptions of how corruption undermines trust and equitable access.

In **FGD 2**, the discussion was lively: "Corruption is the worst issue here as people are not regularising their tools; when they are big, they are being warned but when they are small, they are being raided." The group consensus was that the rules appear to favour the powerful and punish the poor.

Theme three: Low level of stakeholder involvement and exclusion of youth and women

This theme emerged from questions about involvement in local decision-making, awareness of regulations, and the specific challenges faced by women and youth (Objective 2).

Participants described significant marginalisation in policy processes. **Participant I** (31-year-old female miner and mother) stated: "Nobody ever comes to me to discuss what I need; I can't work underground like a man; I have children and nothing's done about it." **Participant J** (male youth miner, 26 years) agreed: "Youth are the ones that dig daily, but it's the traditional leaders and councillors that make all the decisions; we hear about new rules being imposed on us and yet we are not consulted so that we air our opinions."

Participant K (headman) provided context: "We do have community meetings, but young people and women are not often in attendance because they do not feel comfortable speaking openly." **Participant L** (female association representative) highlighted further barriers: "Patriarchal attitudes mean women are told mining is not our place even when they are present; their voices are not listened to." The theme underscores how limited consultation perpetuates marginalisation.

Participants in **FGD 3** expressed strong views: "We are never really consulted; rules are being announced and then we are expected to follow them." One participant explained that meetings are mostly male-dominated, and women find it harder to speak. They agreed that policies do not fully reflect realities on the ground in Bhuka because youth voices are insufficiently heard.

Theme four: Livelihood sustainability and poverty alleviation effects

This theme draws on questions regarding the overall impact of regulations on income stability, future planning, and poverty reduction outcomes (Objective 3).

Participants expressed divided views on the sustainability of poverty alleviation through ASM. **Participant M** (male miner, 47 years) was relatively optimistic: "Mining provides for food and it supports school fees if we didn't do it, many families would die out of hunger and we are informal so we can't plan for tomorrow." **Participant N** (female youth miner, 22 years) voiced greater concern: "The money is fast-spend and we are always afraid of being arrested or under the threat of having our claims confiscated by the powerful ones. We also wonder how this can help us escape poverty if we have no investment or expansion funds."

Participant O (Councillor) offered a balanced institutional perspective: "Formalisation would make miners safer and get them better prices, but many don't want it because of costs, and when it does happen, there are better schools to which the miners can send their children." **Participant P** (elderly female processor) concluded more pessimistically: "To my thinking, we are still poor, because the system is against us small people." These narratives illustrate ASM functioning primarily as a short-term solution rather than a long-term livelihood strategy under the current regulatory environment.

In **FGD 1**, the discussion was reflective: "Artisanal mining helps us survive but not develop. If we had secure claims, we would be able to invest in better tools or further education. Without the security of the claims, all the profits go to cover health bills we would have faced from dangerous working conditions."

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Overall, the results indicate that although local practices aim to foster order, participants experienced them as imposing excessive restrictions particularly on women and youth thereby reducing long-term livelihood security.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this interpretive qualitative study conducted in Bhuka community, Ward 10 of Masvingo Rural District Council, are discussed thematically in relation to the three research objectives. The analysis is informed by the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), which positions local regulatory frameworks as transforming structures and processes that influence access to natural capital (mining claims) and financial capital, and that shape vulnerability contexts for women and youth (Scoones, 1998; DFID, 2000; Ellis, 2000). Institutional theory further illuminates the interplay of formal rules and informal practices, power dynamics, and selective enforcement (North, 1990). Interpretations remain open-ended and holistic, recognising Zimbabwe's broader economic crisis, high youth unemployment, patriarchal social norms, and the interplay between state institutions and traditional authority. Limitations are acknowledged: the single-case design and purposive sampling of information-rich participants limit statistical generalisability, and self-reported data may be subject to social desirability or recall biases. Nevertheless, the depth of the 25 in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions provide transferable insights for comparable peri-urban/rural interface settings. Themes are examined through a combination of participant accounts and secondary literature, highlighting points of agreement, nuance, or divergence.

Complex and costly licensing procedures

This theme addresses Objective 1 by illuminating key features and the lived reality of local regulation. Licensing was repeatedly characterised by participants as onerous, costly, and impracticable. Participant A (female youth miner, 24 years) described abandoning the process after two months of repeated travel to Masvingo, citing endless paperwork including identity documents, proof of residency, and environmental reports that she lacked the resources to complete. Participant B (male headman, 58) noted that even "improved" government support remained insufficient for affording full mining licences. Participant C (female miner, 42) observed that even when licences were acquired, they covered small areas and could easily be appropriated by better-connected individuals. Participants in FGD 1 collectively described the system as appearing "for educated people with money," noting that transport and ancillary costs often exceeded any mining returns and that harassment by the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) was common.

These participant narratives align closely with Spiegel's (2015) findings on the ASM sector in Zimbabwe, where the recentralisation of licensing from Rural District Councils to national ministries produced slow, expensive, and hard-to-access processes that demobilised local operators and sustained informality. Similarly, Pact (2016) estimated that full compliance could involve more than 13 procedures, over 158 days, and costs exceeding US$3,000 sums inaccessible to most artisanal miners in a setting such as Bhuka. Hilson and Maconachie (2017) note comparable dynamics across sub-Saharan Africa, where formalisation calls can produce exclusionary outcomes when structural limitations facing the poorest operators are overlooked (see also Hilson, 2016; Geenen, 2012). While the policy intent in Bhuka promotion of order and safety is recognised by Councillor Participant D, participants' accounts starkly contrast with this intent. From participants' perspectives, the current design appears to exclude those without resources. Although some procedural safeguards may be necessary, participants' experiences suggest that local institutional constraints and high costs leave most miners in the informal sector. This finding is consistent with the literature on formalisation pitfalls and indicates that, without radical simplification, fee reductions, and decentralised support mechanisms, regulatory frameworks are likely to continue limiting participation.

Corruption and selective enforcement

This theme focuses on Objectives 1 and 2, highlighting participants' accounts of corruption in regulatory processes and inequitable livelihood outcomes, especially for women and youth. Widespread perceptions of

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corruption, favouritism, and inconsistent enforcement were reported. Participant E (youth male miner, 29) stated that without personal relationships with council members, police, or the EMA, daily harassment occurred and "better relationships" had to be cultivated to continue working. Participant F (female miner, 35) described selective application of rules, with men possessing money or political connections accessing protected areas while women remained vulnerable. Participant H (youth female miner) contrasted raids on small groups with the freedom enjoyed by larger operators using machinery. Participants in FGD 2 unanimously described corruption as taking the form of selective raids that damaged the livelihood tools of the poor while larger operators received warning.

These participant accounts resonate with Spiegel's (2015) description of a vicious circle in which informal miners are blamed for problems, yet coercive formalisation efforts can further entrench informality and normalise repressive control. Knutsen et al. (2017) provide broader African evidence that mining can elevate corruption levels when officials exercise discretionary power in licensing and enforcement. In Bhuka, participants perceived selective enforcement as benefiting powerful interests and harming the marginalised, thereby undermining trust and reinforcing power imbalances. While some enforcement inconsistencies may stem from capacity gaps or miner resistance—as noted by traditional leader Participant G participants' accounts suggest that selectivity is not fully explained by capacity arguments alone. Female participants in particular described increased vulnerability to demands for sexual favours or extortion for protection. These findings are consistent with literature indicating that poorly organised formalisation can recentralise power and exclude small operators (Spiegel, 2015; Hilson & Maconachie, 2017; Verbrugge, 2015). From participants' perspectives, corruption and selective enforcement not only negatively affect livelihoods but also produce inequitable outcomes by rewarding connections over compliance and reinforcing gender and generational disparities.

Insufficient consultation and gender/youth exclusion

This theme addresses Objective 2 by providing evidence of how regulatory processes, from participants' accounts, limit meaningful participation by women and youth and reduce their livelihood agency. Several participants described feeling excluded from policymaking. Participant I (female miner and mother, 31) stated that no one from government had sat with women to discuss their needs. Participant J (male youth miner, 26) noted that youth perform the daily digging, yet decisions are made by traditional leaders and councillors, with new rules communicated via rumours. Participant L (female association representative) described patriarchal attitudes that frame mining as "not our place" and marginalise women's voices even when they are present. Participants in FGD 3 shared experiences of male-dominated spaces in which women's childcare and processing roles were not acknowledged, resulting in policies misaligned with ground realities.

These findings align with research by Mafongoya, Maroveke and Muzenda (2021), who documented high levels of gender-based violence among women in Zimbabwean ASM, attributing prevalence to patriarchal norms, economic dependence, and limited institutional protection. ZELA reports (for example Makaza, 2020) similarly identify barriers including verbal abuse, exclusion from associations and local decision-making platforms, high licensing costs that prevent claim ownership, and cultural expectations that confine women to lower-value processing work. Youth exclusion means that everyday lived understandings are seldom solicited. Participant K (headman) acknowledged that community meetings occur, but low attendance by women and youth may reflect fear or cultural norms that themselves constitute exclusion. These finding nuances more positive portrayals of inclusive traditional leadership and is consistent with critical institutional analyses of local governance that reveal patriarchal and generational power dynamics (Lahiri-Dutt, 2018; Buss et al., 2019). Limited consultation, from participants' perspectives, is not merely a process failure but a form of marginalisation, as women and youth are excluded from shaping policies that affect their safety, roles, and access to resources.

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Effect on livelihood sustainability and poverty reduction

This integrative theme addresses Objective 3 by examining the impact of regulatory aspects on ASM as a viable poverty alleviation tool. Participants painted a complex picture of short-term relief alongside long-term precarity. Participant M (male miner, 47) acknowledged that mining "puts food on the table and pays school fees" yet noted that informality made planning "for tomorrow" difficult. Participant N (female youth miner, 22) described irregular income and fear of arrest or claim confiscation that prevented investment or expansion. Participant P (elderly female processor) concluded that the situation represented survival rather than development. Participants in FGD 1 agreed that many long-term miners remain in the same small houses without savings, as profits are eroded by stress, health hazards, and insecure tenure.

These lived experiences align with the SLA principle that sustainable livelihoods depend on more than income; they require asset building, risk reduction, and long-term security (Scoones, 1998; DFID, 2000; Ellis, 2000). In Bhuka, participants described regulatory obstacles as preventing the conversion of natural capital (claims) into financial or physical capital, leaving miners in a vulnerability trap. The findings support Pact (2016) and Mkodzongi and Spiegel (2020) in portraying ASM as a useful safety net during economic crises that does not usually produce sustainable poverty alleviation without supportive formalisation. Zvarivadza (2018) similarly argues that recognition and formalisation are essential if ASM is to function as a livelihood rather than a coping mechanism. While some institutional voices (such as Participant O) identified potential benefits of formalisation including better prices, safety, and education participants indicated that these remained distant in practice. Women and youth appeared disproportionately affected, with low-value roles generating limited income and insecurity increasing exposure to health risks and GBV. Although individual agency failures and market volatility cannot be ruled out as contributing factors, the patterning across interviews and focus group data strongly points to structural regulatory constraints as experienced by participants. From this perspective, regulatory regimes appear to convert ASM from a potential pathway out of poverty into a short-term survival mechanism that generates vulnerability.

In summary, the findings indicate that local regulations in Bhuka community, despite their apparent focus on maintaining order and formalisation, are experienced by participants as ineffective and constraining. Women and youth described being pushed out of income security by complex licensing, perceived corruption, exclusionary processes, and selective enforcement. These results align with and extend existing scholarly work on ASM governance in Zimbabwe (for example Spiegel, 2015; Hilson & Maconachie, 2017) and sub-Saharan Africa (for example Geenen, 2012). The evidence suggests that if current frameworks are not simplified, made affordable and decentralised, rendered gender- and youth-responsive, and accompanied by meaningful stakeholder consultation, artisanal mining is likely to continue providing only short-term relief rather than sustainable poverty alleviation. Such reforms would better reflect SLA principles by facilitating asset development and risk reduction for marginalised groups. The study thus provides context-specific evidence supporting calls for transformative and inclusive ASM governance in peri-urban and rural interface areas in Zimbabwe.

LIMITATIONS

This interpretivist qualitative case study provides rich contextual insights into the impact of local regulatory systems on women and youth involved in artisanal mining in Bhuka community, Ward 10 of Masvingo Rural District Council. However, several limitations must be noted. The single-case design and purposive sampling of information-rich participants enhanced depth and theoretical transferability but limit statistical generalisability to other settings. Self-reported information from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions may be subject to social-desirability and recall biases; these were mitigated through sustained engagement, rapport-building, and member-checking. The researcher's positionality as a male academic engaging with gender and generational issues may have influenced interactions and responses; this was addressed through continued reflexivity via a research journal and peer debriefing. Nevertheless, the quality and depth of the 25 in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions permit credible transferable

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lessons for similar peri-urban/rural interface contexts in Zimbabwe and other resource-dependent settings in sub-Saharan Africa. Future multi-site or longitudinal studies could further test and extend these patterns.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study investigated the effect of local regulatory systems on the sustainability of artisanal mining as a means of poverty alleviation for women and youth in Ward 10 of Bhuka community in Masvingo Rural District Council, Zimbabwe. Findings from 25 in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions indicate that although regulations aim to foster order, formalisation, and environmental protection, participants experienced them as presenting multiple challenges that restrict long-term livelihood security. Complex and costly licensing, together with perceived corruption and selective enforcement, were described as driving miners especially women and youth further into informality. Limited consultation and embedded patriarchal norms in decision-making processes were further reported as marginalising these groups and affecting their access to resources and safety. Consequently, artisanal mining was largely experienced as a short-term coping strategy to sustain basic needs rather than a pathway for sustainable poverty alleviation.

Anchored in the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, the study identifies existing regulatory frameworks as constraining transforming structures. Participants' accounts indicate that these frameworks restrict access to natural capital (secure claims) and financial capital while increasing vulnerability through legal insecurity, health risks, and gender-based violence.

The findings are consistent with and build upon previous research on the ASM sector in Zimbabwe, which has found that formalisation initiatives often marginalise rather than reduce marginalisation (Mafongoya, Maroveke & Muzenda, 2021; Spiegel, 2015; Geenen, 2012; Hilson & Maconachie, 2017). The study offers original, context-specific insights into the peri-urban/rural interface setting of Bhuka, where national-level policy changes interact with local power dynamics, traditional authority, and gendered social relations to shape lived experiences.

While the single-case design and purposive sampling limit statistical generalisability, the rich in-depth data offer credible and transferable understanding. The research highlights the need for deliberate and inclusive reform if artisanal mining is not to remain a precarious coping strategy amid Zimbabwe's continued economic challenges. Policy implications are clear: regulatory frameworks must be reconceptualised as enabling measures that allow women and youth to build assets without undue barriers and to enjoy greater equality of opportunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Simplify and decentralise licensing arrangements:** The Ministry of Mines and Mining Development should streamline artisanal mining licences by reducing the number of steps, fees, and paperwork. Accessibility and formalisation rates could be enhanced through one-stop centres at district level, mobile registration teams, and fee waivers or subsidies targeted at women and youth.
- **Improve transparency and reduce perceived corruption in enforcement:** Implement digital tracking systems for licence applications and enforcement actions and facilitate independent monitoring involving civil society (for example ZELA) and community monitors. Clear guidelines and training should be provided to EMA, police, and council personnel to reduce discretionary powers and the unequal enforcement reported by participants.
- **Institutionalise inclusive stakeholder consultation:** Require and regularise multi-stakeholder consultation at ward and district levels, specifically including women miners, youth representatives, traditional leaders, and miners' associations in the design, review, and monitoring of local regulations. Reserved seats or quotas for youth and women in these structures would help address the exclusion described by participants.

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- **Establish gender- and youth-sensitive support programmes:** Government and development partners should implement targeted programmes providing group-based claim licensing, microfinance or equipment support, and childcare support for women miners. These interventions should be designed to address patriarchal barriers and enable women and youth to move from low-value peripheral roles to higher-value activities.
- **Link formalisation incentives with social and environmental safeguards:** Pair formalisation processes with access to formal markets, occupational health and safety training, and gender-based violence prevention programmes. Implementation may be supported through partnerships with planet GOLD initiatives and local NGOs.

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