Case study - The fate of women artisanal miners in Katanga in the Democratic Republic of Congo

By Patience Luyeye

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) produces 60% of the world's cobalt and more than one million tonnes of copper per year. Cobalt (also called "blood cobalt") is essential to the manufacturing of electronic devices. Both copper and cobalt are mined in Katanga in the eastern DRC. Mining is an industry on which the majority of the population in the region is dependent. However, with this comes widespread human rights abuses, and it particularly affects the lives of women and children.

What are the different roles that women and children find themselves in at the mines?

There are several kinds of roles that women and children have at the cobalt mines. There are the women who are the wives of diggers and scouts, some of whom are accompanied by their children; there are women entrepreneurs who negotiate and buy minerals for resale to mostly Chinese, Lebanese and Indians investors; and there are women who do artisanal mining – they are commonly called "purifiers", because they spend whole days treating and washing kilos of raw materials in water, which they sell to mining companies who buy them at a very low price. Then we have the children who go down into the mines.

What sort of hazards do the women and children who do artisanal mining face?

They spend hours in the small rivers of the quarries washing the raw materials to sort the ore, a very trying job. They extract ore in an artisanal way. The processing of ore requires protection, because it exposes people to toxins which are harmful to your health. They are obviously exposed to various diseases and health problems, such as birth defects, tuberculosis and a dry cough, because they work without protective equipment.

For lack of means to meet their needs, most of the population of Katanga devote themselves to informal mining. But what is sad is that the children also take part in this mining activity after leaving school. Going down into the mines is a very dangerous job, since the ground can collapse at any time and they risk being trapped. The situation of women and children working in artisanal mines is becoming very worrying. In 2015, UNICEF had to organise conferences and workshops on the issue. Young people engage in prostitution in exchange for access to sites or to negotiate for a few minerals. The women are subjected to rape by the men present in the quarries of the mines, and there is marital sexual violence. Women are marginalised, suffering; it pushes many women to prostitute themselves.

What is the role of international mining companies in this?

Often, when investors are in quarries, it is after the scouts are gone. They wait for the scouts or diggers to discover the site, then they appropriate the quarry and chase the diggers away. The buyers take possession of the entire quarry. The diggers or the scouts are called this because all these foreign companies set up their extraction companies thanks to the scouts who detect the exact place where minerals can be found. After this, military escorts arrive to drive them away from the site and foreign companies set up their equipment for the extraction. Access to the sites therefore becomes controlled and prohibited to people who are not from the company. But despite this, there are still women and a large number of children who work at the mines.

Lately the copper content has fallen by more than 30%, which is why most of the quarries prized by international investors do not allow Congolese nationals to access mining sites – it got complicated. We ask ourselves: who ultimately benefits from these minerals?

What are some solutions to the problems described?

Following an accident in Katanga in 2019, Gécamines, the state-controlled mining company, together with the government set up a structure which will have to regulate the exploitation of cobalt by taking into account three conditions: the prohibition of child labour; the prohibition of work for pregnant or underage women; and the requirement to prepare the site on which the artisanal miners will work and to take care of their safety by giving them protective equipment.

But more needs to be done.

There are organisations defending women's rights in general, but it would be wise for them to be able to defend women who work in mines more specifically. More action is also necessary when it comes to the issue of children working in mining quarries.

National and international organisations or associations need to raise awareness of the issue, especially of the gender-based violence that occurs. Women working at the mines need to be told that rape is against the law, and that they can become sick when they are exposed to toxins when processing the minerals in the river for long days without any

adequate protection.

Advocacy is needed when it comes to the government. It has a lot of responsibility to take decisions and to uphold and enforce the laws with international mining companies. International mining companies also need to respect the laws of the country, especially as regards the rights of women and children (there are Congolese laws on child labour). The manufacturers of telephones and other electrical and electronic devices also have a share of responsibilities, because the raw materials for the manufacture of their products come from these mines.

We need to encourage women working in artisanal mines to come together in an association to help with the negotiation for their rights. Their power will be more important if they are in large numbers.

We will also have to think about the post-mining period: today the copper content is declining, and there will be a day when these mining sites will close. What will become of all these people who depend on this activity?

For more on the conditions for mining cobalt in the DRC, watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KO3s24gSgHM

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