INTRODUCTION

The Covid19 pandemic that was first reported in Wuhan China\(^1\) has spread globally in different waves, although in some countries it is receding, but not without causing stress on the global economy. To date many lives have been claimed by the pandemic and many infections recorded. Globally countries are still battling with the pandemic and putting in place measures best suited to deal with each country’s context. Zimbabwe has not been spared, with the Government imposing lockdown measures, curfews and shutting down some sectors of the economy to curb spread of the virus. The mining sector has been exempted from the lockdown and in all cases with strong recommendation that the miners should adhere to the WHO guidelines\(^2\) and scale down the number of people involved in their operations. While the miners reduced their capacity, they still have fixed mining fees and rates they must pay despite reduced production levels.

In this edition of the report, we focus on the Mthandazo Women Miners Association (MWMA). MWMA has existed since 2002, although it only registered as a Trust in 2018. The women are implementing a responsible gold sourcing project. The main objective of the Association is to secure the economic independence of artisanal and small-scale women miners in Matabeleland South Province. MWMA has

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been operating a gold processing plant since 2014 which it set up with funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The MWMA Executive has successfully managed the mill which was established in 2014 with support from UNDP. The Gold processing center is still functioning up to date. However, the mining operations just like in any other sector, have been affected by the COVID-19 and members of the MWMA and the gold processing center operations have not been spared.

In this report we look at how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the mining operation of the MWMA as they work on incorporating the responsible sourcing guidelines in their mining operations. With financial support from European Programme for Responsible Mining (EPRM), the MWMA has been working on upgrading their company policies and gold operations to adhere to the responsible sourcing guideline on gold mining developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) The situational report gives insights on how the artisanal and small-scale women miners were affected by COVID-19 from March 2020 up to February 2021.

In compiling this Sit Rep, we gathered information from members of the MWMA, media reports, and public statements by Government officials and corporates. In all this, we adhered to our Safeguarding Policies and Principles of doing no harm to our communities and stakeholders. We have always encouraged them to socially and physically distance- to stay safe by staying at home whenever necessary and not put themselves at risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19. At times, we had the community monitors collecting information using their own social media contacts and networks at community level, which were triangulated by ZELA through some site visits. Safety precautions were taken to protect the miners and the ZELA staff involved in the collection of the data.

**IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE WOMAN IN MWMA**

**Movement restrictions**
The first lockdown that was announced in Zimbabwe in March 2020 resulted in movement restrictions. Most of the women had to let their miners go back to their homes in adherence to the lockdown, leaving many with skeletal staff that provided security and managed the equipment the miners had. For security reasons many miners employ mine workers who work from out of town. The return of the workers proved to be a challenge with the movement restriction while some who were able to retain workers faced a different type of challenge. Thubelihle a youth miner who is a member of the MWMA shared her experience after the Government ordered for a total shutdown. She indicated that with the movement restrictions, she could not travel to the mine to go and deliver supplies such as food to the miners. When she finally managed to go, her claim had been deserted and the workers were now working for another miner in the area. She went on to add,
I am on a three-year lease and with this Covid-19 this means I have lost one full year of productivity that I cannot regain”.

Sister Balbina a Roman Catholic sister who mines in Esigodini and is a member of the MWMA had her own experience to share. With the lockdown all the workers were sent home leaving them vulnerable to illegal miners. The illegal miners raided their claims using gold detectors to extract the gold.

“I had to direct them to areas that I knew had no deposits to dissuade them from exploring further”, she shared.

The Gold Processing Centre had to let half of their workers go and were left with skeletal staff and security personal. Out of the ten staff that normally work on the centre, only four were left while six went home. Downgrading the workforce meant workers’ shifts were longer than usual at most mine sites.

In some areas, miners stated that they were not really affected as they continued with production. At one mine site run by MWMA members in Gwanda, there was a slight decrease in the number of artisanal mine workers from about 500 to 400. Miners work there on a tributary arrangement. Miners are aware of the regulations and what needs to be done like wearing masks, sanitization and social distancing among others. However compliance is an issue and regulations are not being followed. At the time of writing, no Covid19 cases had been reported on site.

COVID-19 prevention measures adopted

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is expensive for many in Zimbabwe. This has forced many mine workers to resort on using homemade or makeshift masks that might not provide optimum protection from Covid-19. As part of the new and improved SHE culture many mine owners (members of the MWMA) have integrated Covid-19 safety as a part of their daily SHE briefings before the beginning of every shift.

At the gold processing centre, temperatures check at the entrance have been set up including various water points. In Zimbabwe, the PCR tests costs US$60 which is out of reach for many. As a result, the only “test” the miners currently rely on is the temperature checks upon entry. Although no COVID-19 death has been recorded by the women, they are still worried about contracting Covid-19 since there are no sufficient early detection mechanisms in place. Some miners have integrated the WHO guidelines with traditional herbs such as Zumbani (Lippi a javanica (Burm.f.) in a bid to protect themselves from COVID-19.

Mine workers accommodation

In 2020, the Minister of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services gave an announcement on the Government directive for mining companies to ensure mine workers remain within the precincts of their accommodation for the duration of the lockdown. This directive came with cost implications for Mthandazo women miners who had to procure more material to ensure the staff are catered for and are not overcrowded while ensuring that they maintain social distancing in their staff quarters.
Gold mining productivity
The women shared experiences of low gold productivity since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. The major reason for low production according to the women are curfews that resulted in artisanal and scale miners working shorter hours as compared to utilising the entire 24 hours. Curfews would normally run from 6am to 3pm, meaning that everyone was supposed to be indoors. In addition, the closure of borders such as the South African border affected procurement of equipment resulting in the shortage of mining equipment. In instances where these were available locally, they would be overpriced or of sub-standard quality compared to the imported one.

At the gold processing centre a decrease in the amount of gold processed per month was recorded. Before the pandemic, the centre used to produce on average 160 tonnes of ore per month. With the pandemic the amount of ore processed decreased to 90-100 tonnes per month. The centre manager at MWMA stated that the decrease in production at the milling site was because of the movement restrictions (for miners to bring their ores to the milling centre), reduced working hours, reduced personnel (workers at the milling centre) and the reduced load (ores) from miners. He added that the miners did not have sufficient equipment to use, while closure of border with South Africa affected trade and supply of equipment.

Gold selling
Although Fidelity Printers and Refiners (FPR) as the sole buyer of gold in Zimbabwe, made a policy pronouncement on the gold buying framework in June 2020 to pay small-scale miners 100% USD for their gold deliveries, FPR failed to pay miners timeously. Delays in paying for gold was attributed to COVID-19 induced closure of borders and grounding of flights that resulted in the shortage of foreign currency in Zimbabwe. In some cases, payments took as long as two weeks to be processed. This frustrated the miners, forcing some to sell their gold to the parallel market where the payment process was prompt and the prices better that the official rate. As of 2021 the payment method form FPR has improved.

Child labour in the mining sector
While no cases of extreme child labour in the mining sector have been recorded by the Mthandazo women, the women miners noted an increase in the number of children working in neighbouring artisanal and small-scale mines. The involvement of children in the mining sector has been recorded in many areas around the country. The increase is argued to being driven by the closure of schools and deteriorating economy due to COVID-19. Children are now venturing into mining alone or with their parents and argue they are contributing to the household income or school fees when schools finally open.

“Both boys and girls who are supposed to be at school have been observed working at neighbouring mines. The children do this to make money to help fend for their families and keep them out of trouble, given the amount of time they have on their hands with the closure of schools”, remarked one woman from the MWMA.

More so the children are mining without any Personal Protective Equipment leaving them vulnerable to any accidents that may occur, she added.

Machete gangs and criminals
The pandemic hit when many women miners in the artisanal and small-scale sector were still recovering from the trauma caused by the machete wielding gangs and criminals. At one of the mining sites in
Gwanda, the attacks left one man dead, many injured and valuable assets stolen from some members of the MWMA. The women said that because of the machete gangs their safety in the sector was compromised and some indicated that they suffered psychological trauma as it took them a while to visit their mines as a result of the sad memories. The machete gangs continue to wreak havoc in different artisanal and small scale mining areas in Gwanda.

**Basic commodities pricing**
Some women shared their experiences as bread winners or live-in single income families. The price increase in basic goods and the demand in quantity and frequency given the school closure coupled with salaries to pay mine workers and low mining productivity left a lot of women under pressure to provide for their families and pay salaries to the mine workers on time.

**Unpaid care work**
With children out of school, the intensified care needs of older persons and ill family members, and overwhelmed health services, demands for care work in a COVID-19 world have intensified exponentially. The unpaid care economy is a critical backbone of the COVID-19 response. Before COVID-19 became a universal pandemic, women were doing three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men. As formal and informal supply of childcare declines, the demand for unpaid childcare provision is falling more heavily on women, not only because of the existing structure of the workforce, but also because of social norms. The women of MWMA are no different and have shared experience of the strain they feel as they must balance the increased work at home coupled with managing the mine sites.

**Identification of risk and risk management**
Before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the women were recovering from machete gangs attacks that resulted in loss of property, death and injury of their workers. During the lockdown period, theft, and criminality in the artisanal and small-scale mining sector in Gwanda increased along the gold value chain, thereby affecting the women. The women have experienced gold ore and equipment theft. With the increase in unemployment, many young people, including criminals are turning to the ASM sector for quick money. MWMA identified theft, criminality and violence as some of the major risks in their operations. These risks were identified during responsible sourcing training workshops and due diligence audits. With financial support from EPRM and technical backstopping from ZELA, MWMA managed to develop a Responsible Sourcing Guide and conducted an Audit and Assessment of its gold supply chain and actors. The idea
was to comprehensively identify, mitigate and reduce the risks associated with its operations including abuse of women, criminality, theft and violence. The women’s group also managed to set up security measures including fencing and construction of a strong room at their gold processing centre to reduce the theft of ore. In addition, the names, mining claims and source of ore for all its members and suppliers of gold ore are being recorded and filed to enhance traceability of gold.

**Improving workers’ health rights**

In responsible sourcing observing and protecting the labour and health rights of the workers is key. As a result of the pandemic, Mthandazo women have had to adjust and adopt the new ways of protecting the workers from the pandemic. In addition, they have integrated WHO Covid-19 safety protocol into their Safety, Health and Environment (SHE) culture, through the provision of clean water, face mask and hand sanitizers for the workers. Extra staff living quarters where constructed to decongest the living quarters and promote social distancing. Temperature checks and hand sanitization is mandatory when entering their premises.

**Gold buying framework policy changes**

The new proposed gold buying framework, came with changes in 2020 that allowed Fidelity Printers and Refiners (FPR) the sole buyers of gold, to pay for the gold delivered by the women at 100% United States Dollars (USD) as compared to the previous arrangement that paid part RTGS and partly US$. Due to Covid-19 foreign currency shortage was recorded that resulted in delayed payments to the miners at Fidelity Printers. With the costs that come with mining, delays in payment also disrupted their gold mining activities. The women were pushed to go to the parallel market that paid on time and at a higher price as compared to what FPR was offering.

**Recommendations**

- There is need for the Ministry of Mines and Mining Development to set aside mining claims quota for women.
- More engagement with FPR on adoption of the responsible sourcing guidelines is needed.
- The gold processing centre needs to diversify to generate more income that can sustain the centre.
- Women in mining are encouraged to diversify and not rely only on mining as a source of livelihood. They can possibly venture into agriculture or any livelihood sector.
- Women in mining should be encouraged to form saving groups that they can fall back on in times of crisis.
- The government should urgently formalize the ASM sector to enable them to get the much needed support that can be of much relief especially during difficult times such as the Covid-19 era.

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