



Unregulated artisanal mining under the spotlight: Implications on women and children’s rights in Bokomu District, Gbarpolu County

Executive Summary

Communities in and around mining areas have been the major human resources base available to work in the Gbarpolu mines. In these communities live women and children under the age of 16, the latter are supposed to be in school and not involved in the labor market. That artisanal mining in the area is mostly unregulated and creates a spillover of problems related to child safety, education and wellbeing. This policy brief highlights major challenges around artisanal mining in relation to education; child labor as well as sexual and gender-based violence and offers policy alternatives and recommendations for policy makers and other actors to consider as remedial action.



Galleys resulting from artisanal mining in Bellekpalamu, Bokomo District, Gbarpolu

Background

ActionAid Liberia (AAL) is implementing a three- year project funded by the European Union titled, “Enhanced protection from sexual and gender-based violence for women, girls, and sexual minorities in Liberia” (EPS). The EPS project is currently being implemented in eight

(8) communities and three (3) counties (Margibi, Gbarpolu, and Montserrado).¹ The interventions aim to contribute to increase in awareness and elimination of SGBV as well as access to information and rights for marginalized groups. **Gbarpolu** is a county in the northern portion of Liberia.² Majority of people in Gbarpolu practice subsistence farming which is practiced at household level as artisanal mining that provides supplementary income. The lure of the mines for other businesses like petty trade increases the

¹ EU funded Project; ‘Enhanced Protection from sexual and gender-based violence for women, girls, and sexual minorities in Liberia implemented by AAL, 2017 - 2020

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gbarpolu_County

number of people moving to these areas including women and children.

Introduction

Throughout Africa artisanal and small-scale mining, whether legal or illegal, has been associated with social problems such as conflict, environmental damage, health risks and child labor.³

Although there are no exact numbers of how many people participate in such mining activities, it is evident that it is widespread. In Liberia, artisanal mining is rampant and provides an avenue for people to derive income. Though official figures are not readily available, it is believed that both local communities and foreigners are involved in this sector.⁴ For women, this provides potential markets for their wares that range from clothes, food items and other petty goods. Bellekpallamu is not spared as women and children temporarily migrate to these mining areas in search of livelihoods. One such district that has a high number of these artisanal miners is Bokomo District in Gbarpolu County. In an environment that offers little in terms viable economic activities, due to a combination of factors that range from poor road infrastructure and unavailability of markets and essential services, the mines around become the single most common destination.

Bokomo District lies on the North East of Bapolu, the administrative capital for Gbarpolu County. The road to Bokomo is made up of jagged and rugged terrain that cuts across numerous rolling hills and meandering rivers and streams. The district has an approximate population of slightly over 10 000 people according to 2008 LISGIS data.⁵ The district generally lacks social amenities and government social services such as health;

education hardly reach to the communities in Bokomo. This has resulted in migrations, low literacy levels and high vulnerability to health risks especially in Bellekpalamu, a mining town in the district. ActionAid Liberia has been working in this district for some years – supporting and fostering women’s rights interventions and girls rights programmes.

Problem Analysis

Despite the huge amount of investment spanning over 10 years ActionAid and other agencies have made in the district, the above-mentioned factors still make the district a hotspot of increased violence against women and girls, high prevalence of child teenage pregnancies, school drop outs. The mining activities in and around the district further compounds the situation. Bokomo does not have a fully functional police station and communities rely on community leaders and traditional structures for adjudication of cases. Communities in Bellekpalamu practice artisanal mining and this artisanal mining is unregulated by authorities. In interviews with the community leaders conducted by ActionAid Liberia during a monitoring visit in the area, they pointed out that mining activities were largely unregulated and increase the risk of exposure to violence for women and girls.⁶ They also pointed out that women in the town go to these mines to sell their goods and cases of rape and sexual assault are high. The artisanal miners carry out their operations inside the forests where no laws or rules are in place to govern their conduct and these women and girls sometimes go for days to conduct business. While it can be argued that artisanal mining brings the much needed respite to communities in the area through increased income, indications from interviews conducted by a team of ActionAid staff on a monitoring visit in August 2019 shows that households have become more poorer as time that should be spend

³ <http://theconversation.com/why-it-doesnt-make-sense-that-all-informal-mining-is-deemed-illegal-57237>

⁴ <http://theconversation.com/why-it-doesnt-make-sense-that-all-informal-mining-is-deemed-illegal-57237>

⁵ LISGIS Report, 2008

⁶ ActionAid Liberia monitoring report from a meeting with leaders in Bellekpalamu, August 2019

in farms is now spent in the bush mining. This has in turn fueled increased cases of violence against women in the homes as women struggle to fend for children alone because of food insecurity. Children are now more exposed to violations, with local community leaders in Bellakpallamu pointing out that most of the parents spent longer periods away in the bush where mining activities take place, hence neglecting their duties of providing parental care and protection. Without necessary and deliberate policy moves to regulate artisanal mining, the investments on combatting sexual and gender-based violence that have been made by organizations like ActionAid and

Community Healthcare Initiatives (CHI) with support from the European Union will be reversed. Bellakpallamu is one of the many communities in Liberia where unregulated mining activities have resulted in social ills that continue to threaten the significant strides that have been made in addressing violence against women and girls as well as child labor practices. Children as well as women, because of their vulnerability, need utmost protection. It is therefore crucial that in mining activities the best interests of the child are upheld, and children are put first.⁷

Conclusions

The role of government is necessary to strengthen investments made by CSOs in combatting SGBV, VAW and child labor. While Bellakpallamu case shows the challenges that NGOs and other CSOs face in complementing government efforts to protect women and children and uphold their rights, there have been some significant achievements made by ActionAid Liberia and CHI in reducing incidents of rape which had become normalized in the community. For more than a year since ActionAid and CHI started working in Bellakpallamu, no incident of rape has been reported within the town but the ‘bush’ where artisanal mining is taking place remains a setback.

Recommendations

In light of the continued increase in violence against women and girls as well as child labor, it is important to ensure that the government through the responsible ministry develops a policy blue print that regulates artisanal mining to ensure the safety of women and children. Without a policy regulation and its full implementation, there is a high likelihood that violence against women and girls as well as child labor will persist in these environments. Liberia has many other communities where artisanal mining is taking place and more women and children continue to be exposed to rights violations. In Bellakpallamu, the right to education has been affected for most children who end up in the ‘bush’ either as labor or selling or being exploited sexually. It is also necessary for government to set up an inter-agency task force with CSOs to regularly monitor these places where artisanal mining is taking place to ensure that they comply labor statutes and standards and that the rights of women and girls who go there are guaranteed. Policing in these communities and mining areas needs to be improved with well trained and capacitated personnel to protect Survivors and apprehend offenders/perpetrators. In line with decentralization, it is critical that services such as health, education and protection are brought to the people in places like Bokomu District in Gbarpolu County.

⁷Effects of mining on children located @ <https://www.sahrc.org.za/index.php/sahrc-media/opinion-pieces/item/364-effects-of-mining-on-children>

