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**Article**

## How mining companies promote gender equality through sustainable development?

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## MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How mining companies promote gender equality through sustainable development?

Nattavud Pimpa\*

**Abstract:** Gender equality has been promoted among social responsibility by mining companies. A key challenge for the management of sustainable development programs for gender equality is the need to develop sophisticated approaches that work at both local and international levels. In this paper, the researcher investigates the impact of CSR programs on gender equality (through labour, environment, training, and economic activities) and life experiences of female workers, members of the community, and their family in a mining community in the Southern Laos. The results show that CSR programs focusing on promoting equal opportunities at workplace, professional development, and other economic opportunities can influence the likelihood of sustainable development by mining companies.

**Subjects:** International Management; Sustainable Development; Business and Society

**Keywords:** CSR; mining; gender equality; sustainability

### 1. Introduction

The relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and development in the mining industry has been examined and conceptualised by various authors. Currently, issues concerning the promotion of gender equality are important because of the masculine norms of the industry.



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Nattavud Pimpa is Associate Professor in international business at the College of Management, Mahidol University (CMMU). His research interests span business and society, international mining and gender equality, and diversity management in business. At present, he leads the Global Future Skills Research Cluster at CMMU.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The development from mining industry always comes with environmental, social and economic impacts that change women's lives. Gender equality is one of the impacts that require attention among stakeholders in the industry.

In the past, mining companies were paying attention to certain aspects of gender-related corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, which they considered peripheral to the business. In this project, we argue the gender equality within this sector can be achieved if mining corporation integrate various aspects of policies, profession, and strategies to empower women in the industry.

We suggest that gender-neutral approaches for CSR will not support gender equality outcomes. In fact, mining companies need to invest in women and girls in their skills development, health, and access to assets and jobs, if they expect multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency and sustained economic growth and equal social status.

The structure of mining jobs potentially discriminates against female participation (Kemp, Owen, Gotzmann, & Bond, 2011). Women still struggle to achieve work-related parity, with responsibility for family and social roles.

The expected traditional roles for women such as family carers or providing support remain an issue that impedes the advancement of women at various levels. For instance, at the operational level, women's jobs tend to be concentrated in administrative positions and provision of clerical or domestic services with a similar division in mine sites (Hamann, 2004; Kemp et al., 2011). In many circumstances, women participate in the mining industry on a seasonal basis or at times of particular economic difficulty (Pimpa, Moore, Gregory, & Tenni, 2015).

The fairness of the recruitment, promotion, and empowerment of women in the industry has long been questioned. This issue was addressed by Laplonge (2018) who stated that the creation of "ideal women" in the mining industry is a part of the masculine norms. When women join the mining industry, they agree to participate in the traditional masculine, and neo-liberal practices of mining (Laplonge, 2018). They may have to adapt the traditional roles of women as approved by the men in the industry. Their social roles, as well as professional status, will need practical movement for and by women to sustain themselves (Laplonge, 2016) and their families in the masculine environment (Laplonge, 2018). This point is firmly supported by Ey (2018) and Spence (2014) that masculine hegemony embeds in the ideology and culture of all aspects in the mining industry globally.

## 2. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and gender equality

A full gamut of research on CSR by mining industry confirms a strong relationship among direct investment by mining companies and the development of economic, social, and political situation of the host communities. The common developmental themes include CSR and taxation and resource governance (i.e. Prno & Slocombe, 2012), CSR and community development (i.e. Kemp et al., 2011; Grant, 2003), and CSR and economic situation (i.e. Pimpa et al., 2015).

When it comes to its definition, Carroll (1999) clearly defined that:

*"corporate social responsibility involves the conduct of a business so that it is economically profitable, law abiding, ethical and socially supportive. To be socially responsible then means that profitability and obedience to the law are foremost conditions when discussing the firm's ethics and the extent to which it supports the society in which it exists with contributions of money, time and talent"*

It is clear that business should proactively engage with various essential issues among various stakeholders. Due to the nature of mining industry, the mining industry has been criticised as a strong masculinised industry, which preferences hyper-masculinity and rejects femininity (Laplonge, 2018). Gender equality, therefore, for men and women has become a critical issue for mining MNCs worldwide.

When we analyse the relationship between CSR and the promotion of gender equality, we found two layers of relationship. First, CSR is imbued with ethical exceptionalism by mining industry. The second aspect is CSR activities for women can be perceived as an instrument for strategic management by companies (Spence, 2014).

It is, however, criticised by scholars such as Hirsch and Lounsbury (1997) and Dashwood (2012) that they tend not to be able to account for the change in organisational behaviour, character, and practices. CSR activities by mining companies should provide development assistance to the host countries and community.

The lack of gender analysis of its impacts on community and members is crucial when such issues form part of the core impacts of company operations (Kate, 2009). In fact, women should be seen as a member of different groups of stakeholders in the mining community. As Derry (1996, p. 107) suggests that a “feminist firm” that took the gender equality agenda seriously would ponder various gender issues in the workplace in a variety of ways, and would also consider women as consumers—in design, advertising and marketing for example—taking into account women’s lives in the home and at work (Kate, 2009).

A number of gender issues are inter-connected and cannot be addressed in isolation. Instead, a wider-lens, multi-stakeholder approach is necessary for CSR activities. While mining companies cannot be the sole driver of change, it is important that they take a proactive approach and look at gender issues from the sustainable development perspective.

### **3. Sustainable development for women: employment in mining**

Mining presents challenges, opportunities and risks to sustainable development for women. Although some mining companies have policies on empowering women, equal employment opportunity, and recognising the equality that exists between men and women in the workforce, the impacts of their policies have long been questionable. The relationship between policy on gender equality by mining companies and their practices seems to be contradictory (Lahiri-Dutt, 2012).

Mining presents challenges, opportunities and risks to sustainable development for women. Although some mining companies have policies on empowering women, equal employment opportunity, and recognising the equality that exists between men and women in the workforce, the impacts of their policies have long been questionable. The relationship between policy on gender equality by mining companies and their practices seems to be contradictory.

However, the situation regarding the gender pay gap and pay equity actions has changed. As reported by Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) (2018) mining companies now offer relatively high rates of discretionary pay of up to 39% above base salary for both male and female managers. The industry continues to perform well in driving down gender pay gaps. Mining firms reduced the overall gender pay gap in base salaries by 2.1 percentage points between 2015–16 and 2016–17 (WGEA, 2018).

Some mining multinational corporations (MNCs) have become responsive to gender issues and made commitments towards gender equity through projects in departments devoted to implementing social responsibility (Hamann, 2004). The mining industry can be a considerable engine for development; however, addressing framework conditions that place women in a disadvantaged position compared to men is necessary to exploit the full potential benefits of mining for both sexes.

Women in the mining sector are often denied basic working rights, including minimum wages and labour representation (Mercier and Gier, 2007). Market distortions arise as economic resources do not reach those who could make the most use of them (Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), 2008). Women often do not have the same access to and control over capital and resources as men or equal rights of inheritance, ownership, freedom and power over decision-making including their own reproductive health. Traditions, customs and social norms often hold the key to understanding the roots of gender inequalities (Jutting, Morrisson, Dayton-Johnson, & Dreschler, 2008).

Pattenden and Brereton (2015) confirmed that despite the workforce engaged in metalliferous mining having doubled over the decade to 2014, the proportion of females remained more or less constant at about 15%. More women entered the workplace but the ratio remained at a stubborn



5.5 men to 1 woman (Women in Mining (WIM), 2013) . Hence, mining's contribution to gender equality is an alarming issue.

Given the lack of comprehension on the impacts of business actions (including CSR) by mining companies, the purpose of this study is not to replicate existing institutional theories (e.g. Dashwood, 2012; Ruef & Scott, 1998) but to understand how integrating two concepts (sustainable development and gender equality) can improve and influence the approach to CSR by mining companies, in particular for staff and their families.

#### **4. Research questions**

How can CSR activities by mining companies be related to the development of gender equality in the Lao PDR context?

#### **5. Research methods**

##### **5.1. Location**

The research site for this project was selected as Vilabouly, a small mining town in Savannakhet Province in Southern Lao PDR. Vilabouly lies between the Mukdahan Province of Thailand and Thừa Thiên-Huế Province of Vietnam. This town has been the major gold and copper mining community in Laos for the past decades. We selected seven out of the 46 villages in Vilabouly including Ban Vangyang, Namkeep, Ban Noonsomboon, Padong, Boungkham, Nongkadeang and Ban Huay Suan.

##### **5.2. Data collection**

For the first stage of this project, the research team collected personal experiences from the perspectives of the community members. Our team adopted an exploratory, interpretive approach to investigate the impacts of the mining industry on women in a Lao mining community. In order to capture the experiences and interpretations of relevant actors in the mining industry, semi-structured interviews stand as an appropriate data collection technique. We asked the participants to define key CSR activities from the mining company that affect their lives. Then, we asked them to scope the projects as short and long-term. This process helped the participants to recall their experiences with key CSR activities implemented by the company.

##### **5.3. Participants**

We contacted the local government team to ask for permission to interview members of the mining community. Then, our local university and research partners assisted with the promotion of the project to the members of seven villages (identified as the mining area by the Government). A total of 76 subjects as 48 females and 28 males from seven villages participated in this study. We only invited those who addressed some experiences from CSR activities by the mining company. Participants included workers from the mining company, community leaders and family members of the workers and leaders of the three ethnic groups in Vilabouly. All had lived in the mining community for at least 3 years. The snowball technique was adopted in the selection of research participants.

##### **5.4. Data analysis**

The researchers adopted abstraction (Yin, 1998) to analyse the data. Using abstraction, themes were grouped by similarity of ideas, allowing movement from concrete to more general and theoretically useful themes. These higher-order themes were then further abstracted (using axial coding) to link categories hierarchically so that more general themes included relevant sub-themes (Charmaz, 2008). This resulted in fewer higher-order categories and their relevant sub-categories, for which respective dimensions could be identified and analysed.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Women and employment

While working in the field, we observed that the major occupations in Vilabouly included (1) mining-related work, (2) agricultural sector and (3) small and medium-sized enterprises. Prior to the advent of mining in the community, most people worked on farms and in the forest. Some continued with this form of employment when mining was introduced to the community, while others changed their career from the agricultural sector to mining.

Participants in this study addressed CSR in the form of equal employment policies for men and women. Employment opportunities provide women with opportunities to lead the family, the same way as their male counterparts. From the interviews with various members of the Vilabouly community, we learned that the mining industry created tremendous economic opportunities for women and those who migrated to work and reside in Vilabouly.

*"I come from the North of Laos and now I work in a hotel in Vilabouly. There are a number of visitors from overseas here since the operation was started a while ago. I can save a lot of money and send them to look after my husband and kids at home." (Female community member, 19 years)*

Economic independence from mining is clearly important as an ideology to promote equity. Participants from Ban Vangyang, Padong and Huaysuan are of Blu ethnic background and mentioned that socio-linguistic issues may limit employment in the mining company. Recruitment and selection, promotion and retention can potentially exclude different linguistic backgrounds. This is a prominent issue that most women of various ethnic backgrounds frequently mentioned in the field.

*"The company always look for people who speak central Lao and I don't. It is a bit difficult for me and people from my village to adjust our accent in order to work here (Laugh)." (Female cleaner, 22 years)*

Certain limitations concerned women in this study. Most women were required to actively participate in professional development and skill-building activities by mining MNCs. They sought opportunities to be able to play different roles in the organisation although these were limited.

Most women in this study had worked in the same roles and some were eager to try something new. Skills training and professional development are important mechanisms to promote women in mining MNCs to upgrade their professional status and experiences on a par with their male counterparts.

*"I am an office administrative person and it is not easy for me to think about doing something at different department. My boss has supported me to participate at some training programs but I do not always have free time since I need to look after my kids." (Female staff in administration, 32 years)*

We also found that various family-friendly practices, including paid leave and flexible work arrangements, can have net benefits for women in terms of overall productivity, work performance and growth. Paid parental leave allows both women and men to take care of children for prescribed periods, without suffering adverse income and employment effects. These schemes also influence women to switch their "roles" with men. Most women perceive these CSR activities as "core benefits" for the development of gender equality in the long-run.

To summarise, mining companies must focus on CSR as non-discriminatory recruitment and fairness in professional development for both men and women. Flexibility in work-life balance policies for women can increase the level of well-being and ability for female workers to sustain their roles and responsibilities in the industry.

## 7. Women and social activities in the community

Male-dominated culture also structures the day-to-day work and job design in large-scale mines. For instance, mining requires routinely long hours of work and part-time or flexible working practices for Lao female workers to integrate and balance both their work and personal or family life are severely limited. Flexible work practices are limited and a full-time working week is the norm. Most female workers in this study agreed that this is a key barrier or obstacle to juggle both caring and earning responsibilities. Although the company has introduced policies that promote work-life balance for men and women, these seem at present to have little effect.

*“If I don’t have to work long hour and look after my family after work, I will be able to engage in other activities in the village.” (Female machine operator, 26 years).*

Women in Vilabouly have different views on traditional male-dominated culture of the mining industry. Most women are comfortable to play the role of leader in the family, with strong support from their husbands and other family members. Women working in the mining industry are looked up to by family and community members and have “switched” roles with their husbands. Some women who work in the mining industry expressed the view that, due to time commitments at work, their spouses now play the role of house husband. They also have an equal say in family financial issues. These changes in “roles” must be agreed among family members. The company has also initiated activities that create a platform for male house husbands to discuss strategies to support their wives. Although not a formal business activity, this raises the profile of the company in the eyes of the community.

*“We have a female head of village who supports women to work or establish business in the community. I think she does it because she’s a woman and she understand us, women, very well.” (Female community member, 36 years)*

With the support of economic empowerment activities from the industry, women can participate more in political roles in the community. Most female participants in this study confirmed that when the company promotes representation of women in various CSR activities, such as micro-finance or training schemes, women become actively engaged in traditional male societal roles. Indeed, we witnessed female village heads, female head of the village funds and women representatives in the village committee.

*“Although we have the local women union, we now have more female workers or shop owners to participate in various community activities.” (Female CSR staff, 33 years)*

Most women in this study described business activities by the mining company as “highly-political” in the sense that business and benefits can influence social and political roles of women in the community. We learned that women in Vilabouly, under the Women Association, actively engage in land entitlement and the planning process for the exit strategy of the company.

By participating in the planning process, under the equality CSR scheme jointly promoted by the Women Association and the mining company, women are able to ensure that proper concern is given to their cultural, social, spiritual and environmental heritage.

Some women suggested that the “relevance” of CSR activities should be discussed among mining stakeholders. Most activities are seen as generic and not relevant to women’s needs. Most women in this study confirmed that employment in the mining industry and its relationship with the economic status of Vilabouly is an important issue. They needed to think beyond the present to be able to plan their future. In this regard, they raised a concern about the future of Vilabouly after the depletion of mining resources.

*“The company must engage us as part of the plan for the closure of its operation. We don’t see the future of women and girls after this industry.” (Female community member, 44 years)*



As the mining footprint grows, land will be lost to operational requirements but it is unlikely that many new jobs will be created to offset this loss of land. Women are worried about losing their incomes and benefits from the industry. More importantly, most of them do not have professional skills that will lead to future employment. It is speculated that mining will be finished within 5–7 years. Thus, men and women in Vilabouly need to be ready to plan for their future directions.

### 8. Women and health

Health is complex; the result of a raft of socio-economic determinants. Women in Vilabouly are impacted by mining in all aspects of life. They are key to reversing disadvantage in their communities. Hiring women has greater welfare impact on families; they spend income in ways which increase child health and wellbeing. Most women in this study agreed that income from mining helped them to better look after the health and well-being of family members.

There was a lack of CSR activities to promote equality among men and women in underground mining operations. We found from the interviews that mining companies have lagged behind in the obvious requirements of separate ablution facilities. Privacy is also limited for women and this is a psychological downside to the entry of women into underground mining operations.

At present, female employees must considerably adjust their sense of privacy. The same is probably true of male employees who are too socialised to expect privacy in respect of members of the opposite sex. This would, however, seem to be an aspect easily addressed by female workers in this study.

Women also raised some negative health experiences related to mining operations, mostly the result of stigma and discrimination and their low status in the mining industry.

*“I am always under stress because of the work conditions. I feel that I have to work harder than my male colleagues and I know it is bad for my mental conditions.” (Female business operator, 20 years)*

Most women who participated in this study (94%) agreed that mining companies should prepare a separate health scheme for male and female workers. They insisted that prevention and treatment should be planned and costed on the basis of gender. Female workers require specific health services for gender-specific diseases and conditions (such as breast cancer, cervical cancer), reproduction (pregnancy, menopause, osteoporosis) and socio-economic concerns (eating disorders, violence against women, work-related stress). By not having a gender-specific health policy, the company may experience potential social and health problems among their employees.

Household income was generally managed by women, with girl's education and health taking priority in expenditure and some saving for the future. Their social status overall has increased. Interestingly, environmental degradation was a concern for women's health, as was a social change for a minority including husbands' alcohol consumption (although rarely associated with violence against women).

We also found a relationship among health, economic and educational status. Improving the access of women to good health care and education, as well as economic opportunities can have significant positive outcomes for poverty reduction. Lower fertility rates, better nutrition for all family members and reduced infant, child and maternal mortality were reported among the social gains from women in this study. They also discussed long-term prospects among their family members when health problems were not the main concern.

### 9. Women and skills development

Various training programmes provided by the company are certainly important among men and women in Vilabouly. Apart from opportunities in skill development that come with consistent income from the mining industry, equity in education can be supported by the establishment of the mining industry in the community. We learned from the study participants who engaged in the operations of the company (i.e.

professional development, training, and leadership programmes), that formal knowledge was transferred to them and they felt empowered by engaging in various corporate trainings and learning activities. This point was addressed by one female operator who participated in this study:

*“Opportunities to be part of the leadership training programs help me to be promoted to the next level of management position.” (Female management team member, 36 years)*

Vocational training programmes, as part of education schemes, provided by the mining company through their CSR activity such as weaving, farming, or design are perceived as sustainable community development. Some women in the community expressed that they also needed to participate in different types of educational and skill-building programmes such as foreign language training, accounting, entrepreneurial skills and marketing. Their main concern was the future of their family and children after the closure of the mine. Education and training will help women in the community to sustain their equitable roles alongside men.

It is interesting to observe that female workers in this study defined “training” (ways to develop specific skills) as an ideal strategy to help them cope with changes at work and in the community. They addressed the importance of CSR activities on skills training as a mechanism to prepare the entire community to be ready for future changes in job and employment.

## 10. Discussion

Our findings confirmed that mining MNCs can create equality among men and women in many ways. Women in the mining community and MNCs experience different personal, family, health and professional challenges and opportunities. We learned that representation of women in the international mining industry can increase their opportunities in life. Through direct benefits together with CSR schemes, women in the mining industry can be promoted at the same rate as their male counterparts.

There are three approaches that the mining industry can follow to improve the relationship between sustainable development and gender equality. They include (1) enterprise channel, an instrument where the mining company creates jobs and opportunities for women, (2) distribution channel, a mechanism where the mining industry engages with various other stakeholders and allocates their resources to directly and indirectly empower women to various educational, health and social schemes and (3) government revenue, a mechanism where the mining industry shares its profits and knowledge with national and local government and promotes long-term development in conjunction with governmental instruments.

Gendered policies around flexible working, gender-specific health policies and life-long education for women are fundamental to the development of equality. More importantly, mining companies can play the role of “business as a development agent” (Blowfield, 2007) by deploying capital with the intention of delivering outcomes that contribute to development goals. This is dependent on giving primacy to the benefits of certain community groups such as women, girls and people of low socio-economic backgrounds and being held accountable for developmental outcomes.

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