

Women on the



Frontlines of

the Extraction of

Transition Minerals

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A Vision for a Just Future in Bikita, Zimbabwe



This report was developed following a three-day workshop held on the 9th, 10th and 11th of September in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe. The workshop involved the participation of eleven Indigenous women from the Vatombe community of the Hanyanya Mountain, a rural area in the Bikita District of Zimbabwe. Additionally, during the discussions, two women from the community of Marange in the Mutare District of Zimbabwe also participated in the debate and shared their experiences. The women from Marange have been directly affected by diamond mining, while those from Hanyanya are anticipating significant impacts due to the expansion of a lithium mine in Hanyanya.

The workshop included a variety of discussions, organised in a format that combined roundtable sessions and interactive activities. These activities provided space to reflect on the uses and significance of ecosystems and lands, discuss the gendered impacts of mining activities based on their life experiences, and encourage reflections on how these impacts have affected and, as the mining activities intend to expand to their territories, increasingly pose threats to their communities. The space enabled all participants to share their testimonies and fostered bonds of collaboration, sisterhood, and mutual learning. Furthermore, during the discussions, the women participants were able to identify and describe a sustainable and fair future they envision for their lives, families and communities.

The workshop debate took place mostly in Shona. Some of the ideas and messages conveyed by participants have been translated into this report and included as quotes in English.

This report was developed by the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Shine Collab.

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Introduction

As the global push for low-carbon societies accelerates, there is an urgent need to prevent widespread and significant human rights harms as the demand for critical transition minerals—such as lithium, cobalt, and nickel used in developing low-carbon technologies—has skyrocketed,¹ presenting both opportunities and profound challenges for resource-rich regions. Achieving this transition requires not only urgency but also a commitment to respecting and protecting the rights of affected communities and advancing gender equality.

Global restructuring has made Africa a key site of competition, with North America, Western Europe and Asia seeking to secure economic power, supply chains, food and energy security, and expand strategic industries, relying on Africa and the Global South for raw materials, mining products, low-cost labour, and consumer markets.² Yet, the intensified extraction of these minerals often perpetuates a historical legacy of exploitation and environmental degradation in those regions, entrenching patterns of inequality and human rights violations. Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in Africa—one of the lowest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change—³ where the rush for lithium epitomises the contradictions of the current dominant energy transition. This model, while focused on reducing carbon emissions globally, risks hindering the livelihoods and human rights of people and communities on the frontlines of extraction, particularly women in all their diversity, who disproportionately bear the adverse impacts of mining.

The energy transition should follow a different path than its fossil-fuel-based predecessor. This transition offers a critical moment to reimagine and reshape our approach to resource extraction. It is important that it not only prioritises environmental goals but also social justice and human rights, including the advancement of gender

¹ Monia Snoussi-Mimouni, and Sandra Avérous, “High Demand for Energy-Related Critical Minerals Creates Supply Chain Pressures.” *WTO Data Blog*, January 10, 2024. https://www.wto.org/english/blogs_e/data_blog_e/blog_dta_10jan24_e.htm.

² Youba Sokona et al., “Just Transition: A Climate and Energy and Development Vision for Africa,” 2023. https://justtransitionafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Just-Transition-Africa-report-ENG_single-pages.pdf; Denise Fairchild, and Al Weinrub, *Energy Democracy: Advancing Equity in Clean Energy Solutions*. (Island Press, 2017).

³ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Edited by H.-O. Pörtner, D. C. Roberts, et al. Geneva: IPCC, 2022. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-9/>.

equality.⁴ States have an opportunity to promote laws and policies that support a just transition—one that not only prevents harm but also demands accountability from both State and non-state actors for human rights abuses across their supply chains. This includes implementing legislation that requires mandatory human rights due diligence, prioritising the protection and empowerment of affected communities.

To ensure a truly just transition, it must support gender equality and address the unique burdens women face in mining-affected regions. Women often play pivotal roles in resisting extractivism, protecting their lands, territories, and resources, and advocating for practices that respect human rights in the face of the extractive sector. However, they often face gendered human rights abuses, particularly those experiencing multiple forms of marginalisation. Indigenous and rural women, in particular, face greater risks to their health, livelihoods, and security as a result of mining activities,⁵ while having limited access to the potential benefits of the transition to low-carbon societies. To achieve meaningful change, a gender-transformative approach to the energy transition is essential, one that fully acknowledges and rectifies these injustices by ensuring that women are actively engaged in decision-making processes at all levels. This includes incorporating their voices in policy development, resource management, and the design of low-carbon technologies, ensuring that their experiences and expertise shape equitable and sustainable outcomes.

This report examines the complex interplay between critical transition mineral extraction and women's rights, using the case of Bikita, Zimbabwe, as an example. There, in the community of Hanyanya mountain, which is located in the surrounding areas of Bikita, women are both grappling with actual and potential harmful impacts of the expansion of lithium mining in their territories and leading efforts to

⁴ United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, Extractive sector, just transition and human rights*, UN Doc. A/78/155 (New York: United Nations, 2023). <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/202/46/pdf/n2320246.pdf?OpenElement>

⁵ Elizabeth Moses, "Gender and Extractives: The Importance of Gender Transformative Policy Reforms" (Natural Resource Governance Institute and World Resources Institute, November 2021). https://resourcegovernance.org/sites/default/files/documents/primer_gender_and_extractives.pdf; "Strengthening Gender Equality in the Raw Materials Sector," Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development n.d. <https://rue.bmz.de/rue-en/topics/gender-86778>; "Strengthening Gender Justice in the Extractive Sector," Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, n.d., <https://rue.bmz.de/rue-en/topics/gender-104366>

promote more sustainable, equitable futures. Their experiences reflect broader regional and global trends, revealing the need for greater corporate accountability in extractive industries and a new model to advance the transition to low-carbon societies. Business enterprises bear a significant responsibility to respect human rights and avoid exacerbating existing inequalities, particularly in communities where women are already socially and economically marginalised. At the same time, the example of the community of Hanyanya also calls for a deeper discussion on who ought to bear the costs associated with the energy transition.

In response to these challenges, there is a need to follow frameworks that seek to ensure human rights and gender equality are central to the energy transition, such as the Climate Change Gender Action Plan adopted by Zimbabwe which emphasises the inclusion of women in climate-related decision-making. Moving beyond a singular focus on environmental targets, a just transition must pursue systemic reforms that advance sustainable consumption, equitable access to clean energy, and the dignity of all individuals.⁶ For women in mining-affected communities, these reforms must include policies that mitigate the harms of extraction, protect their rights, and promote their active participation in decision-making processes. The experiences of the women of Hanyanya underscore that a just energy transition must be both inclusive and transformative, working to dismantle systemic inequalities while building a future where people and the planet thrive together.

⁶ Denise Fairchild, and Al Weinrub, *Energy Democracy: Advancing Equity in Clean Energy Solutions*. (Island Press, 2017).



Critical Transition Minerals in the African Region: A History of Extraction and Exploitation of People and Ecosystems

A. THE DOMINANT ENERGY TRANSITION MODEL AND ITS ADVERSE IMPACTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE AFRICAN REGION

Although Africa has only contributed a minor share of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions—less than 4% of global totals—, it is poised to face some of the most severe impacts of the climate emergency.⁷ The crisis is already intensifying water shortages, worsening health outcomes, and heightening food insecurity across the continent.⁸ In the face of those challenges, decarbonising economies and securing clean and sustainable sources of energy is imperative.

Africa's energy and infrastructure systems still bear the heavy imprint of its colonial history, when colonial powers extracted its natural resources to fuel their own industrialisation.⁹ This legacy has resulted in lasting inequalities and systems that are difficult to change that persist today, leaving vast disparities in access to energy and infrastructure within African countries and across regions. Transitioning to provide access to modern energy is not only imperative but also presents a potential opportunity. In that sense, the best path forward is to adopt and implement changes that advance climate goals while also promoting equality, justice, and social inclusion.¹⁰ The energy transition implies an immense potential

⁷ "Africa Energy Outlook 2022," International Energy Agency (International Energy Agency, 2022). <https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/220b2862-33a6-47bd-81e9-00e586f4d384/AfricaEnergyOutlook2022.pdf>.

⁸ Youba Sokona et al., "Just Transition: A Climate and Energy and Development Vision for Africa," 2023. https://justtransitionafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Just-Transition-Africa-report-ENG_single-pages.pdf; Denise Fairchild, and Al Weinrub, *Energy Democracy: Advancing Equity in Clean Energy Solutions*. (Island Press, 2017).

⁹ Youba Sokona et al., "Just Transition: A Climate and Energy and Development Vision for Africa," 2023. https://justtransitionafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Just-Transition-Africa-report-ENG_single-pages.pdf

¹⁰ International Renewable Energy Agency, "Towards a Prosperous and Sustainable Africa: Maximising the Socio-economic Gains of Africa's Energy Transition," February 1, 2022. <https://www.irena.org/Publications/2022/Feb/Towards-a-prosperous-and-sustainable-Africa>.

for economic transformation in Africa.¹¹ It has the potential to enable the continent to leapfrog traditional fossil-fuel-based models and allow it to capitalise on its abundant clean energy resources. Specifically, it implies an opportunity to guarantee electricity for the 600 million Africans who currently lack such access.¹²

Notwithstanding the imperative of the transition to low carbon economies, in many parts of the world, it is taking place following the same practices of dispossession and exploitation, reproducing injustices and deepening socio-economic exclusion.¹³ Too often climate and energy solutions that promise progress favour wealthier nations or global elites at the expense of local communities. This is already evident in cases where African land and resources are destined for large-scale renewable energy projects designed to reduce emissions globally, yet with minimal benefits to local populations. In some instances, such projects may actually worsen Africa's vulnerability to climate change impacts rather than enhance its resilience. The rapid rollout of large wind farms, solar plants, and mining for critical minerals—undertaken in the name of the climate emergency—has at times led to significant social and environmental harms.¹⁴ In many cases, land acquisitions for these projects disrupt livelihoods and displace communities, echoing the impacts of fossil fuel extraction.

The dominant energy transition model, one that works to maintain the status quo in the Global North and only implies a switch from coal-based to low-carbon-based energy sources, risks a new wave of extractivism in Africa. Decarbonising energy systems does not imply the automatic delivery of equitable and just outcomes. To ensure a move toward energy justice, decarbonising energy systems is not

¹¹ Youba Sokona et.al, "Just Transition: A Climate and Energy and Development Vision for Africa," 2023. https://justtransitionafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Just-Transition-Africa-report-ENG_single-pages.pdf.

¹² Ibid. https://justtransitionafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Just-Transition-Africa-report-ENG_single-pages.pdf.

¹³ Hamza Hamouchene, "The Energy Transition in North Africa: Neocolonialism Again?," Transnational Institute, November 13, 2023. <https://longreads.tni.org/the-energy-transition-in-north-africa-neocolonialism-again>.

¹⁴ Ibid. <https://longreads.tni.org/the-energy-transition-in-north-africa-neocolonialism-again> Youba Sokona et.al, "Just Transition: A Climate and Energy and Development Vision for Africa," 2023. https://justtransitionafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Just-Transition-Africa-report-ENG_single-pages.pdf.

enough; it is necessary to transform them.¹⁵ This implies a shift in the energy paradigm and a re-evaluation of the relationship that energy has with social and gender justice, the environment and the economic model.¹⁶ The energy transition must be implemented in such a way that both addresses the climate emergency and prioritises compliance with human rights standards, especially concerning social justice and gender equality.

For an energy transition to be just, equitable, and sustainable, regulatory frameworks and public policies must ensure environmental protection and respect for human rights. Without this, the transition risks delivering few tangible benefits for Africa.

B. THE ROLE OF AFRICAN COUNTRIES IN THE GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAINS OF CRITICAL TRANSITION MINERALS

African countries have become key players in the global market for critical minerals essential to the transition towards sustainable and renewable sources of energy. Africa houses large volumes of critical energy transition minerals, including cobalt, platinum-group metals (PGMs), and manganese.¹⁷ On its part, Zimbabwe has one of the main global lithium reserves in the world and the largest in Africa, with 10.8 million tons of lithium ore reserves.¹⁸ Moreover, countries in the region have also become leading producers, such as South Africa of PGMs, chromium and manganese and the Democratic Republic of the Congo of cobalt.¹⁹

Mineral extraction represents a major income source in African countries, with mining revenues accounting for about 8% of government income and mineral exports constituting over 30% of

¹⁵ Denise Fairchild, and Al Weinrub, *Energy Democracy: Advancing Equity in Clean Energy Solutions*. (Island Press, 2017).

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¹⁶ *Ibid*

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¹⁷ "Africa Energy Outlook 2022," International Energy Agency (International Energy Agency, 2022), 2022 <https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/220b2862-33a6-47bd-81e9-00e586f4d384/AfricaEnergyOutlook2022.pdf>.

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¹⁸ Faustine Ngila, "Zimbabwe Has Banned the Export of Raw Lithium." Quartz, December 21, 2022. <https://qz.com/why-zimbabwe-has-banned-the-export-of-raw-lithium-1849918099/>.

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¹⁹ "Africa Energy Outlook 2022" International Energy Agency. (International Energy Agency, 2022). <https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/220b2862-33a6-47bd-81e9-00e586f4d384/AfricaEnergyOutlook2022.pdf>.

total exports in 23 African countries.²⁰ With demand for transition minerals rising due to the global shift towards renewable energy, the economic impact of mining for Africa is expected to grow and could be an important contributor to job creation, social development, and infrastructure expansion. However, the environmental and social impacts of mining have proven to be considerable, especially for local communities.

Despite its role as a holder, producer and provider of transition minerals, Africa has thus far been prevented from steering the path for the energy transition. It is questionable how, despite being resource-rich and having the biggest renewable energy potential,²¹ African countries often play a subcontracting role in the policies of the Global North, highlighting the complexities behind the energy transition.

Africa must ensure that its participation in the global energy transition benefits people, safeguards ecosystems, and promotes gender equality. The energy transition should support not only climate goals but also the broader human rights, gender equality, and social equity objectives that are fundamental to sustainable development. For Africa, a truly sustainable energy future will require breaking from historical cycles of extraction and inequity and building a pathway that places the rights and well-being of its people at the forefront.

C. THE RUSH FOR LITHIUM IN ZIMBABWE: A PARADIGMATIC CASE REFLECTING GLOBAL DYNAMICS IN THE TRANSITION TO LOW CARBON TECHNOLOGIES

Africa is one of the new frontiers in the race to gather the resources necessary for the transition to new energy sources. Among these, lithium —sometimes referred to as ‘white gold’— has become one of the highly sought-after commodities due to its critical role in the transition to renewable energy and electric mobility.

Zimbabwe is at the forefront of the scramble for lithium in Africa, hosting major lithium investments from mining giants Sinomine

²⁰ *Ibid.* <https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/220b2862-33a6-47bd-81e9-00e586f4d384/AfricaEnergyOutlook2022.pdf>.

²¹ FaYouba Sokona et al, “Just Transition: A Climate and Energy and Development Vision for Africa,” 2023. https://justtransitionafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Just-Transition-Africa-report-ENG_single-pages.pdf.

and Huayou Cobalt. As Africa's top producer of lithium, Zimbabwe is expected to meet 20% of the world's lithium demand in 2024, attracting mega Chinese investments totalling \$1.4 billion in 2022–2023.²² Zimbabwe Investment Development Agency (ZIDA) continues to grant even more licences to lithium mining,²³ despite reports of displacement, toxic water spills, labour abuses, intimidation, and other harms associated with lithium mining in the country.²⁴ In the fourth quarter of 2023, ZIDA stated that it received a proposal with a projected investment value of US\$6.940 billion, for minerals (gold, nickel, and lithium) trading and mining development, which is being reviewed.²⁵

The Bikita mine, located 308 km south of Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, is the country's largest lithium mine, with 10.8 million tons of lithium ore reserves.²⁶ Although the mine has been operated since the 1950s by the company Bikita Minerals, it was recently acquired in 2022 by the Chinese mining giant, Sinomine Resource Group Co. Since then, operations have expanded due to a significant influx of funding that matches the rise in demand for lithium worldwide. In particular, after acquiring Bikita Minerals, Sinomine injected 300 million USD to upgrade and expand the mine infrastructure.²⁷ The company increased the plants' processing capacity from 700 tonnes to 4 million tonnes per year.²⁸

²² *The Tarnished Horizon: Unveiling the Dark Side of Lithium Mining in Bikita*, Centre for Natural Resource and Governance, n.d. <https://cnrgzim.org/news/the-tarnished-horizon-unveiling-the-dark-side-of-lithium-mining-in-bikita/>.

²³ Wallace Ruzvidzo. "ZIDA licenses US\$1.2bn investments in Q3." *The Herald*, October 23, 2024.. <https://www.herald.co.zw/zida-licenses-us12bn-investments-in-q3/>

²⁴ Toshua Matanzima. "Lithium Mining in Zimbabwe: A Story of Loss for One Community." *Down to Earth*, September 19, 2024. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/africa/lithium-mining-in-zimbabwe-a-story-of-loss-for-one-community>. "Locals slam Zimbabwe for turning a blind eye to Chinese miner's Violation," *Zimbabwe Situation*, April 2, 2024. <https://www.zimbabwesituation.com/news/locals-slam-zimbabwe-for-turning-a-blind-eye-to-chinese-miners-violations/>.

²⁵ "The Tarnished Horizon: Unveiling the Dark Side of Lithium Mining in Bikita," Centre for Natural Resource and Governance, n.d. <https://cnrgzim.org/news/the-tarnished-horizon-unveiling-the-dark-side-of-lithium-mining-in-bikita/>.

²⁶ Faustine Ngila, "Zimbabwe Has Banned the Export of Raw Lithium." *Quartz*, December 21, 2022. <https://qz.com/why-zimbabwe-has-banned-the-export-of-raw-lithium-1849918099>.

²⁷ WBikita Minerals. "Corporate Social Investment." Accessed December 5, 2024. <https://bikitaminerals.com/corporate-social-investment-copy/>.

²⁸ Mining Zimbabwe. *Bikita Minerals Halts Key Contractors as Lithium Market Pressures Force Shutdown*. October 1, 2024. [Bikita Minerals Halts Key Contractors as Lithium Market Pressures Force Shutdown - Mining Zimbabwe](https://www.miningzimbabwe.com/news/bikita-minerals-halts-key-contractors-as-lithium-market-pressures-force-shutdown).

As international demand rises, Zimbabwe can capitalise on its rich lithium deposits, potentially shifting its economy from reliance on traditional exports to emerging industries. Additionally, for rural Bikita, it can be a path to access to energy for many Zimbabweans that remain off the grid. However, at the same time, the rush for lithium in Africa risks fuelling corruption and a range of other human rights abuses.²⁹ Successfully navigating these challenges will require transparent policies, community engagement, and sustainable practices to ensure fair and equitable outcomes.

D. WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY IN ZIMBABWE: RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR A JUST ENERGY TRANSITION

In Zimbabwe, where access to electricity has yet to reach around half of the population³⁰ and two-thirds of the rural population,³¹ the transformative power of the energy transition could be significant. Given that women are more prone to energy poverty and its adverse effects,³² guaranteeing reliable access to energy can also be an effective measure to advance the rights of women. Indeed, in a country where 25.8 per cent of the population is multidimensionally poor and an additional 26.3 per cent is classified as vulnerable to multidimensional poverty,³³ and with a relatively high gender inequality index of 0.572,³⁴ the expansion of mining activities could play a significant role in lifting many Zimbabweans out of poverty and advancing the rights of women by creating jobs, increasing incomes, and stimulating local economies.

²⁹ "An Unjust Transition? The New Rush for Lithium in Africa," Global Witness, November 14, 2023. [https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/natural-resource-governance/unjust-transition-lithium-africa/#:~:text=Global%20Witness%20investigated%20three%20emerging,and%20governance%20\(ESG\)%20issues.](https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/natural-resource-governance/unjust-transition-lithium-africa/#:~:text=Global%20Witness%20investigated%20three%20emerging,and%20governance%20(ESG)%20issues.)

³⁰ World Bank Open Data, n.d. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.ZS?locations=ZW>.

³¹ World Bank Open Data, n.d. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.RU.ZS?locations=ZW>.

³² "Energy and Gender Equality," United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), n.d. <https://www.undp.org/energy/our-work-areas/energy-and-gender-equality>.

³³ UNDP, "2023 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)," Human Development Reports, July 11, 2023. <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-global-multidimensional-poverty-index-mpi#/indicies/MPI>.

³⁴ UNDP, "Gender Inequality Index (GII)," Human Development Reports, n.d. <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>.

The current landscape of lithium mining in Zimbabwe, particularly in Bikita, has and will continue to have a profound impact on the socio-economic conditions of local women. While mining activities hold promise for economic growth, they often take place at the expense of women's rights and livelihoods. The absence of adequate legal protections and policies specifically designed to safeguard women's rights limits their ability to advocate for fair resource distribution and social justice. This underscores the urgent need for inclusive environmental governance, legal recognition and protection for women's rights—including land rights—that both recognises and responds to the unique needs and contributions of women in mining regions.

Indeed, the implications of mining in Bikita are not merely economic; it intersects with social dynamics, particularly concerning the rights and roles of women in the region. Resource conflicts, land rights, and the drive for lithium mining can exacerbate gender inequalities if local voices, particularly those of women, remain marginalised.



Photo by Mike Tena



The Women of Hanyanya: Testimonies of Collective Resistance, Organising, and Envisioning of a Green Future

A. ZOOMING IN ON THE PEOPLE, LAND, RESOURCES, AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE COMMUNITY

Bikita is a district in Zimbabwe's Masvingo Province, located south of the capital, Harare. In rural Bikita, near the Hanyanya mountain, lives a community deeply connected to their ancestral lands that maintains a way of life rooted in traditional subsistence farming. Despite the lack of recognition by the State of any specific group as indigenous in the country, the Hanyanya community identifies as an Indigenous People. This community, residing primarily in the Bikita district of Zimbabwe, represent a rich cultural tapestry characterised by unique traditions, social structures, and a deep connection to their ancestral lands. Historically, the Hanyanya community has maintained its identity through a blend of oral traditions, agricultural practices, and communal living. The social organisation of the Hanyanya people is traditionally patrilineal, with inheritance and lineage traced through the male lineage, which provides men with a significant role within family and community structures. This patrilineal framework influences power dynamics and gender roles, shaping the experiences and rights of Hanyanya women in various spheres of life.

However, through the engagements with the women, youths and traditional leaders during the implementation of this FPAR, it is evident that women play crucial roles in both economic and social domains. Women are largely responsible for subsistence farming, gathering, and the management of household resources, which places them at the centre of community sustenance. However, despite their essential contributions, women face challenges related to access to decision-making processes and leadership positions. The intersection of traditional practices and contemporary governance structures often leads to disparities in women's rights, highlighting a need for critical engagement and advocacy to ensure equitable representation and participation in local governance.

Cultural narratives and beliefs surrounding gender roles often dictate the expectations placed on women, influencing their autonomy and opportunities. While some of the Hanyanya traditional practices build women's power by providing them with responsibilities and status within their communities, others perpetuate inequality, restricting women's access to resources, land ownership, and control of community-owned resources such as forests. Work towards the protection of women's human rights requires a nuanced approach that respects cultural heritage while advocating for necessary reforms.

The intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status among Hanyanya women further complicates the landscape of women's rights and empowerment. Climate change has exacerbated these challenges, as women, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, face heightened vulnerabilities in their livelihoods and rights. Indigenous knowledge systems play a pivotal role in equipping women with the tools to adapt to changing environmental conditions and assert their rights within the community, particularly given the expansion of lithium extraction. By acknowledging and integrating these knowledge systems into the conceptualisation of just energy transition initiatives, partners and allies can enhance women's resilience and promote sustainable practices that honour the cultural heritage of the Hanyanya people while advancing gender, energy and climate justice.

As previously stated, the women of Hanyanya have historically engaged in agricultural practices which they shared as a community, and would have gatherings to support each other in land preparation, weeding and harvesting which they stated, are quite labour intensive. Women have continued to play a pivotal role in food production and household management. This labour-intensive work has traditionally afforded women a degree of respect and authority within their families and communities, yet societal norms continue to relegate them to subordinate positions in broader decision-making processes

Colonial interventions in the late 19th century in Zimbabwe significantly disrupted Hanyanya's cultural practices and social structures. The imposition of foreign governance systems marginalised indigenous authority and reshaped gender roles in ways that often favoured men. The introduction of colonial law undermined traditional practices that had previously empowered women, leading to a decline in their status and influence in both domestic and public spheres. Consequently, the historical context

of colonialism is essential for understanding the contemporary challenges that Hanyanya women face, particularly in terms of their rights and representation.

Post-independence, the Hanyanya community has experienced a resurgence of interest in traditional practices, including those related to women's roles. This revival has been met with mixed responses; while some women have found new avenues for empowerment through re-engagement with their cultural heritage, others have encountered resistance from entrenched patriarchal systems that seek to preserve male dominance. The intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status further complicates these dynamics, as women from different backgrounds navigate varying degrees of privilege and oppression within the same cultural framework.

Bordering the lands surrounding Hanyanya Mountain is the Bikita mine, Zimbabwe's largest lithium mine, operated by Bikita Minerals and currently owned by the Sinomine Resource Group Co. In recent years, operations have expanded due to a significant influx of funding after the acquisition by the Chinese mining giant, which has also coincided with the global rising demand for lithium. In that context, Bikita Minerals is also exploring the potential for additional lithium reserves in the surrounding lands for further extraction.

Neighbouring those mines, the Vatombe community of Hanyanya Mountain lives in a state of energy poverty, facing significant barriers to accessing basic energy services. Despite the abundant lithium resources that can be found in their land—resources that power technologies and infrastructures globally—this community remains without reliable electricity or sustainable energy sources. This lack of energy access affects their quality of life and limits their opportunities for social and economic development.

“I am a woman traditional leader. I am Headman Mutsimba, and as you can see, my title was never intended to be held by a woman but by a man.

In our language, we do not use such titles. Our traditional titles are not gendered that whether you are a man or woman, a person in my position is called ‘Ishe’ implying leader of many villages, but the official language was changed to ‘Headman’ which is quite problematic.”

Participant of the workshop held in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe.

B. THE DIFFERENTIATED IMPACTS OF LITHIUM MINING ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

The international human rights framework,³⁵ through obligations incumbent upon States, provides standards for recognising both the injustices and rights violations experienced by women. It also outlines the necessary actions needed to prevent potential violations and guarantee the rights of the women human rights defenders of Hanyanya Mountain, located in the Masvingo province in Zimbabwe. This framework is thus essential in analysing how the lithium industry impacts Indigenous women in the region.

Climate change has emerged as a significant factor impacting Hanyanya women's livelihoods and rights. As agricultural practices become increasingly threatened by environmental shifts, largely as a result of increased lithium extraction, women often bear the brunt of these changes due to their primary roles in food production. The erosion of traditional knowledge systems that have guided sustainable practices poses additional challenges, highlighting the need for the integration of indigenous knowledge into climate adaptation strategies, and just energy transition debates. The resilience of Hanyanya women in the face of these challenges underscores their importance in local governance and decision-making, as well as their potential to lead initiatives that promote both environmental sustainability, just energy transitions and gender equity.

Cultural narratives play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of gender roles within Hanyanya society. Traditional stories, rituals, and customs often reflect the values and beliefs that underpin gender dynamics, serving both to reinforce and challenge existing power structures. While engaging with the Hanyanya community, it becomes imperative to consider these narratives in efforts to advocate for gender-just energy transition in the context of lithium extraction and promote women's rights and energy access. By recognising the historical context and the evolving nature of cultural

³⁵ *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*, December 16, 1966, *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI)*, UN Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 UNTS 3, entered into force January 3, 1976; *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, December 18, 1979, *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 34/180*, UN Doc. A/34/46, entered into force September 3, 1981. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*, December 16, 1966, *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI)*, UN Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 UNTS 171, entered into force March 23, 1976.

practices, the women of Hanyanya can be supported to reclaim their agency and navigate the complexities of their socio-cultural landscape.

Advancing women's rights and gender equality is essential to ensure a truly just transition to low-carbon societies.³⁶ The human rights and environmental impacts of mining activities often imply disproportionate and distinct burdens on women, highlighting the need for measures that address intersecting inequalities. Women—particularly Indigenous and rural women—are more vulnerable to various human rights abuses along the mining value chain and are less likely to benefit from the energy transition.³⁷ Thus, making women's experiences in the extractive sector visible is crucial so that policies and programs can address these gaps through a gender-responsive and transformative approach.

The women of Hanyanya exemplify themselves as human rights defenders for their community as they advocate for the preservation of their autonomy and heritage. These women resist mining activities, not out of an inherent opposition to development, but to safeguard their right to land—a fundamental resource essential for food, clean water and their community's future. Their commitment begins and ends with their intrinsic connection to their ancestral land, which is central to their livelihoods, sustenance and identity. As defenders of their land, they actively uphold principles aligned with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders,³⁸ which recognises the rights to, individually and in association with others, promote and strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.

³⁶ *United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises Extractive sector, just transition and human rights, A/78/155*

³⁷ Elizabeth Moses, "Gender and Extractives: The Importance of Gender Transformative Policy Reforms" (Natural Resource Governance Institute and World Resources Institute, November 2021). https://resourcegovernance.org/sites/default/files/documents/primer_gender_and_extractives.pdf; "Strengthening Gender Equality in the Raw Materials Sector," Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development n.d. "Strengthening Gender Equality in the Raw Materials Sector," Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, n.d. <https://rue.bmz.de/rue-en/topics/gender-86778>; "Strengthening Gender Justice in the Extractive Sector," Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, n.d., <https://rue.bmz.de/rue-en/topics/gender-104366>.

³⁸ *United Nations General Assembly, Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, A/RES/53/144 (8 March 1999).*

Furthermore, with the looming threat of mining expansion reaching their lands, the women remain vigilant. They have come together to assert their rights and collectively prepare to resist any potential encroachment that could disrupt their lives and ecosystems.³⁹ Their efforts reflect broader struggles for a fair and sustainable future, emphasising sustainable practices over extractive industries. By challenging the narrative that prioritises exploitation over inclusion, they demand recognition and respect for their voices in decision-making processes. Their stance embodies the essence of human rights defenders, where they strive to protect their community's dignity, rights and resources against the backdrop of the potential expansion of the Bikita mines.

This section explores the impact of the lithium industry on women's rights in rural Bikita through the testimonies of eleven Indigenous women and human rights defenders living in the area. The insights presented here reflect the perspectives, accounts, and experiences of Vatombe women living in the lands surrounding Hanyanya mountain, adjacent to the mining operations carried out by Bikita Minerals. Although mining activities have not taken place on their lands, the women's experiences are shaped by the impacts that have already reached them and those observed in neighbouring communities. Furthermore, with the increasing global demand for lithium, the community remains vigilant as exploration activities are expected to expand and approach even closer to their lands.

Their testimonies provide insight into the impacts of lithium mining on women and their rights in Bikita, Zimbabwe. It must be noted that these testimonies may not necessarily include all of the actual and potential impacts or rights violations, but the ones perceived and expressed by the women of Hanyanya.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

“If our land is taken, we don’t know from where we
are going to get food.”

Participant of the workshop held in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe.

B.I. THE RIGHT TO LAND

The right to land is guaranteed by Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereinafter, “ICESCR”)⁴⁰ and Article 14 of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (hereinafter, “African Charter”).⁴¹ Furthermore, the right to land and natural resources derives from Article 14, para. 2 (g), read alongside Article 13 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (hereinafter, “CEDAW”).⁴² Importantly, Article 26 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (hereinafter, “UNDRIP”) also recognises that Indigenous Peoples have their right to “the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired”.⁴³

This right is closely linked to several other internationally recognised human rights. In rural areas, secure land access is essential to the right to adequate food and housing. The land is fundamental for food production, making it key for the fulfilment of the right to food.⁴⁴ Similarly, the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing often depends largely on having secure access to land.⁴⁵ Furthermore, access to natural resources like water is intertwined with land, as enclosing communal land can deprive people of access to essential water sources for personal and domestic needs.⁴⁶ For women, secure access to land is particularly empowering, enabling greater

⁴⁰ ICESCR, December 16, 1966, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI), UN Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 UNTS 3, entered into force January 3, 1976

⁴¹ African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (African Charter), June 27, 1981, Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 ILM 58 (1982), entered into force October 21, 1986.

⁴² CEDAW, December 18, 1979, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 34/180, UN Doc. A/34/46, entered into force September 3, 1981.

⁴³ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), A/RES/61/295, adopted on 13 September 2007.

⁴⁴ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), General comment No. 26 on Land and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/26. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/ec12gc26-general-comment-no-26-2022-land-and>

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/ec-12gc26-general-comment-no-26-2022-land-and>

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/ec-12gc26-general-comment-no-26-2022-land-and>

participation in decision-making processes and strengthening their influence over collective rights and shared resources.⁴⁷

The women of Hanyanya shared that their land holds significant meaning since they see their land as a profound source of power, happiness, and freedom. They shared that this bond is deeply woven into their identities and everyday lives, nurturing a strong sense of ownership and belonging. To them, the land embodies strength and is fundamental to their existence, offering fertile grounds that sustain their food supply, allow them to grow medicinal herbs, and provide them with clean water. They explained that they see the land as vital to their lives, feeling that losing it would equate to losing a part of themselves.

During the discussions, the women expressed that their connection to the land goes beyond mere sustenance; it is about preserving their legacy and heritage. They feel an innate duty to protect their land and ecosystems, not only for themselves but also for future generations. They view the mining operations as a threat to this bond, seeing the potential expansion of mining activities as a threat to their permanence on the land and a disruption of their connection, increasing the risk of displacement. However, while they have expressed concerns about forced displacement, they have also shown their determination to resist mining operations on their land.

The women of Hanyanya explained that the exploration activities undertaken by Bikita Minerals are already leaving open pits in their territories. They perceive these pits as a very tangible example of how mining can have an impact on the everyday lives of the members of the community and their enjoyment of their lands. They explained that these pits are hazardous for the community, because of the risk of falling, not only for themselves but also for animals. Ultimately, due to the potential for further expansion of mining activities, the women conveyed their fear that their right to reside on their land, grow food and medicinal herbs, and access clean water is at risk, which they perceive as a threat to their self-sufficiency and ability to shape their future. They emphasised during the discussions the need for recognition—not only to remain on their land but to protect it from practices that could endanger their sustenance and heritage.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/ec-12gc26-general-comment-no-26-2022-land-and>

The potential expansion of the lithium extractive activities into their territories compounded with the fact that they are not able to participate in related decision-making processes poses an imminent risk to the exercise of their rights to land and natural resources.



Photo by Mike Tena

“Water is a women’s issue.”

Participant of the workshop held in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe.

B.II. THE RIGHT TO WATER

The right to water is integral to the right to an adequate standard of living and is also closely linked to the right to health. It can, thus, be found in Article 11 and also relates to Article 12 of the ICESCR,⁴⁸ Article 16 of the African Charter⁴⁹ and Article 14 of the CEDAW.⁵⁰ Articles 25 and 32 of the UNDRIP also establish that Indigenous Peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their spiritual relationship with their traditional waters and to be consulted through their recognised authorities before the approval of any project that may affect their water resources.⁵¹

Access to water is essential for the fulfilment of other human rights, such as the rights to life and food among many others.⁵² This right includes maintaining access to existing water sources and being protected from interferences that affect the fulfilment of this right, such as contamination.⁵³ In that sense, water should therefore be valued foremost as a social and cultural resource, rather than primarily as an economic asset.⁵⁴ Thus, priority in the allocation of water must be given to the right to water for personal and domestic uses.

During the discussions, the women of Hanyanya Mountain shared that water is a central concern tied closely to their daily lives and well-being. They view water access as a women's issue, as women are often the primary caretakers responsible for fetching, managing,

⁴⁸ ICESCR, December 16, 1966, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI), UN Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 UNTS 3, entered into force January 3, 1976.

⁴⁹ African Charter, June 27, 1981, Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 ILM 58 (1982), entered into force October 21, 1986.

⁵⁰ CEDAW, December 18, 1979, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 34/180, UN Doc. A/34/46, entered into force September 3, 1981.

⁵¹ UUNDRIP, A/RES/61/295, 13 September 2007.

⁵² CESCR, General Comment No. 15 on the Right to Water (arts. 11 and 12) of the ICESCR, UN Doc E/C.12/2002/11 January 20, 2003. https://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/water/docs/ces-cr_gc_15.pdf

⁵³ CESCR, General Comment No. 15 on the Right to Water (arts. 11 and 12) of the ICESCR, UN Doc E/C.12/2002/11 January 20, 2003. https://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/water/docs/ces-cr_gc_15.pdf

⁵⁴ CESCR, General Comment No. 15 on the Right to Water (Arts. 11 and 12 of the ICESCR), UN Doc. E/C.12/2002/11 (January 20, 2003). https://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/water/docs/ces-cr_gc_15.pdf

and using water for the household. They highlighted how mining activities threaten water supplies, exacerbating challenges to their roles and directly impacting their access to this essential resource. This puts an immense burden on women, who must wake up early to collect water, often walking long distances to find clean water sources. When clean water is unavailable, they are forced to seek alternative sources and even sometimes use dirty water for bathing, which poses health risks to themselves and their families.

The women of Hanyanya also expressed that water access is particularly essential for women's health, especially during menstruation. In that sense, they explained that without sufficient clean water, managing menstrual hygiene becomes a significant challenge, compromising the health of women and girls and adding to the burdens they already face in securing this fundamental resource.

The women of Hanyanya also shared that the potential impact of water scarcity could expose them to violence and affect social dynamics within their households. They explained that travelling long distances to fetch water places them at a greater risk of assault, with reports of harassment and even rape linked to the influx of mine workers from outside the community moving into Hanyanya. Beyond the threats from outsiders, the time-consuming task of water collection disrupts household dynamics, often resulting in domestic conflict and, in some cases, domestic violence due to the time women spend away from home to fetch water.

The impact of mining activities on their enjoyment of the right to water is already visible to the women of Hanyanya. Although extraction has not yet taken place in their lands, they explained that mining activities in Bikita have had effects on their enjoyment of the right to water. Despite still having access, due to their community being upstream, they shared that water quality has worsened. They consider that the expansion of activities could have even worse effects, not only affecting quality but also access to water.

Consequently, the women of Hanyanya see the looming expansion of mining as a serious threat to their rights and well-being, especially related to water access, which would also endanger the health, safety, and stability of the entire community.

“The mines do not hire women.”

“The kind of work that women can access is as cooks and cleaners, work that looks like an extension of house chores.”

Participants of the workshop held in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe.

B.III. LABOUR RIGHTS

Labour rights are enshrined under Articles 6, 7 and 8 of the ICESCR,⁵⁵ which recognise the right to work, the right to enjoy fair and satisfactory working conditions, as well as the right to form unions. At the African level, Article 15 of the African Charter⁵⁶ recognises the right to work under equitable and satisfactory conditions and to receive equal pay for equal work. Furthermore, the CEDAW obliges States to eliminate discrimination against women in employment, ensuring women have the same rights as men on an equal basis.⁵⁷ Article 17 of the UNDRIP also recognises that Indigenous Peoples have the right not to be subjected to any discriminatory conditions of labour.⁵⁸

Rural women, in particular, face limited paid employment opportunities and, often, rely on house-based work activities and subsistence farming.⁵⁹ This is also exacerbated by unequal access to income diversification opportunities that result in rural women frequently experiencing greater poverty than rural men. Thus, it is incumbent upon States to take proactive steps to ensure employment rights for rural women.⁶⁰

The women of Hanyanya conveyed that the presence of mining activities has not translated into meaningful employment opportunities, especially within Bikita Minerals itself. They explained that rather than bringing opportunities for women mining activities have driven up local prices, increasing the cost of living. They shared a feeling of exclusion, as the company mostly hires men

⁵⁵ ICESCR, December 16, 1966, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI), UN Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 UNTS 3, entered into force January 3, 1976.

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⁵⁶ African Charter, June 27, 1981, Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 ILM 58 (1982), entered into force October 21, 1986.

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⁵⁷ CEDAW, December 18, 1979, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 34/180, UN Doc. A/34/46, entered into force September 3, 1981.

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⁵⁸ UNDRIP, A/RES/61/295, 13 September 2007.

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⁵⁹ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General recommendation No. 34 on the Rights of Rural Women, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/34 (March 4, 2016) https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/34&Lang=en

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⁶⁰ *Ibid.* https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/34&Lang=en

from the community and only for manual labour within the mines. They explained that women are relegated to informal roles as food vendors or occasionally as cooks and cleaners. Women sense a profound inequality in the allocation of job roles. They shared that the company rarely considers them for roles outside these traditionally domestic responsibilities. Administrative, stable and higher-paying office positions are offered to individuals from outside the community or foreigners related to the mining company rather than local residents, further limiting the economic empowerment of the women and the surrounding community.

Moreover, the women also shared that, in the past, community members were permitted to collect and sell residual materials from the mines in Bikita. In recent years, after the purchase of Bikita Minerals by Sinomine, the company has begun selling the residue to members of the community. Regardless of the informality of the previous situation, this change has cemented a perception that mining will not bring better opportunities in the future.

Moreover, the women expressed concern over widespread corruption within the mining sector across Zimbabwe. This relates not only to how mining companies obtained their mining licences but also to securing a job within mines in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, they claimed that securing a position within the mining companies in Zimbabwe often requires personal connections or bribes, making job opportunities inaccessible without the necessary networks or resources. This adds yet another barrier to meaningful employment and economic stability for not only women but also the community at large.

Consequently, the women of Hanyanya do not see mining as a pathway to fulfilling their right to work. Rather, they see the industry as perpetuating discriminatory practices that violate their human rights, specifically their labour rights, and continue to marginalise local women and their communities as they remain excluded from stable, formal employment and the economic stability it could offer.

“The mining company leaves behind open pits that become breeding grounds for mosquitoes.”

Participant of the workshop held in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe.

B.IV. THE RIGHT TO HEALTH

The right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is provided for in Article 12 of the ICESCR.⁶¹ Health is a fundamental human right interconnected with the fulfilment of other rights, such as the rights to food, water, housing and life.⁶² This right also encompasses access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation.⁶³ Among the obligations incumbent upon States in relation to the right to health, the duty to protect requires them to prevent third parties from undermining the fulfilment of this right.⁶⁴ Furthermore, articles 21, 23, and 24 of the UNDRIP enshrine Indigenous Peoples' right to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including, among others, in the areas of health, as well as their rights to their traditional medicine and to have equal access to all social and health services.⁶⁵

The women of Hanyanya conveyed that mining activities present serious risks to their health and well-being. The exploration activities undertaken by Bikita Minerals have left open pits in their and nearby territories. These pits are particularly hazardous, especially for children and domestic animals, who are at risk of falling in with potentially fatal consequences. Furthermore, given that Hanyanya is a very wet area, they see these open pits quickly fill with stagnant water, creating a breeding ground for mosquitoes, thus increasing incidences of mosquito and water-borne diseases in the community. That is particularly harmful to women who spend long hours outside tending to household tasks, leaving them vulnerable to mosquito bites. The open pits are of great concern for the women of Hanyanya and are a very tangible example of how mining already affects their everyday lives.

⁶¹ ICESCR, December 16, 1966, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI), UN Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 UNTS 3, entered into force January 3, 1976

⁶² CESCR, General comment No. 14: The right to the highest attainable standard of health (Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), UN Doc. E/C.12/2000/4 (August 11, 2000). <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cescr/2000/en/36991>

⁶³ *Ibid.* <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cescr/2000/en/36991>

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cescr/2000/en/36991>

⁶⁵ UNDRIP, A/RES/61/295, 13 September 2007.

Moreover, the women also shared concerns about the potential impact of being barred from accessing clean water, due to restricted access to their water sources or from toxic spills contaminating the water. If mining activities expand to their territories, such disruptions, which are already happening in the territories affected by these activities, would directly affect their lives, particularly during menstruation, when clean water is essential for managing menstrual hygiene. The women consider that the potential expansion of mining operations to Hanyanya would expose the health and safety of the community to increased risks, yet it does not offer any benefits.

Not only do mining operations mean risks to women's health, but also there is inequity in health service access. The women shared that infrastructure improvements do not reach them in rural Bikita. In particular, they explained that the investments done by the mining company are generally devoted to cities like Harare or Masvingo, far away from their lands in Hanyanya. Moreover, the women shared that mining companies maintain ambulances for their employees, excluding even relatives of the workers. This creates a gap in access to health services in the community, where men employed by the mining operations can access healthcare, but women, who are rarely hired by the mining companies, lack the same support. The women recount an incident that highlights this divide: the case of a worker's wife who required urgent medical transport to the capital due to a complication during childbirth. Despite her husband's employment with the mining company, she was denied access to the company ambulance. Such selective access to health services continues to widen the health gap in the community, deepening women's exclusion from essential healthcare.

The women of Hanyanya contend that the current mining operations have not offered any benefits to their right to health; instead, they perceive the continued mining operations and potential expansion as creating serious risks to their well-being and their right to health.

“The mining company agreed with the chiefs to start their operations.”

“Mining companies focus on the chiefs and elders when penetrating a village. Ordinary villagers are rarely consulted.”

Participants of the workshop held in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe.

B.V. RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION AND THE RIGHT TO FREE, PRIOR AND INFORMED CONSENT

The right to participation is enshrined in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (hereinafter, "ICCPR").⁶⁶ Additionally, Indigenous Peoples and communities have the right to free, prior, and informed consent, as outlined in the International Labour Organisation Convention No. 169 (hereinafter, "ILO Convention No. 169")⁶⁷ and the UNDRIP.⁶⁸

In particular, Article 6 of ILO Convention No. 169 requires States to "consult the concerned peoples, using appropriate procedures and primarily through their representative institutions, whenever legislative or administrative measures are likely to affect them directly." These consultations "[...] should be conducted in good faith and in a manner suited to the circumstances, with the objective of reaching an agreement or obtaining consent on the proposed measures."

Consultation must be prior,⁶⁹ effective⁷⁰ and serve as a vehicle for genuine participation⁷¹ to ensure free, prior and informed consent,⁷² especially when the rights at stake are essential to the survival

⁶⁶ ICCPR, December 16, 1966, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI), UN Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 UNTS 171, entered into force March 23, 1976

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⁶⁷ International Labour Organisation, Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, June 27, 1989, International Labour Organisation, entered into force September 5, 1991.

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⁶⁸ UNDRIP, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 61/295, September 13, 2007.

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⁶⁹ International Labour Organisation (ILO), Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, General Observation No. 2010/81, (2010).

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⁷⁰ Human Rights Committee (CCPR), *Apirana Mahuika v. New Zealand*, Communication No. 547/1993, CCPR/C/70/D/547/1993.

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⁷¹ International Labour Organisation, Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, General Observation No. 2010/81, (2010), 10; Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, *Concluding Observations on the Combined Nineteenth to Twenty-First Periodic Reports of Chile*, adopted by the Committee at its eighty-third session, UN Doc. CERD/C/CHL/CO/19-21, September 23, 2013. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g13/470/56/pdf/g1347056.pdf>

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⁷² UNDRIP, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007, Articles 19, 32(2) https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf; CESCR, General Comment no. 21, Right of everyone to take part in cultural life (art 15, para. 1a of the CESCR), E/C.12.GC/21, December 21, 2009. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/cescr/2009/en/83710>

of Indigenous peoples and the foreseen impacts are significant.⁷³ Thus, communities must be informed of the risks associated with development projects,⁷⁴ including the findings of impact assessments.⁷⁵

The women of Hanyanya shared they feel excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making processes concerning the potential mining activities on their lands. Decisions to allow mining operations are often made exclusively by male community leaders, with minimal input from the wider community. This centralised decision-making process marginalises the voices of women, who are particularly affected by these decisions. The women also indicated they perceive the decision-making process as compromised by corruption, alleging that oftentimes village leaders accept bribes from mining companies to influence their decisions. This corruption, compounded by poverty within the community, enables manipulation of public opinion through financial incentives, sidelining the community's genuine needs and concerns.

The women also shared that exercising their right to participate is not only hindered by structural exclusion but also by deliberate tactics that undermine their voices. They shared that men in the community often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and spread false narratives to discredit women, delegitimising their roles and excluding them from community affairs. Such rumours hinder women's ability to assume positions of influence and create an environment where their contributions are valued. Intimidation further deters women from participating in discussions about public issues, leaving them powerless about decisions concerning their own land and future.

This systematic exclusion from consultation and decision-making results in women feeling silenced and powerless as choices

⁷³ ICCPR, *Poma Poma v. Peru*, CCPR/C/95/D/1457/2006, 24 April 2009; Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Case of the Saramaka People v. Suriname*, Judgement of Nov. 28, 2007. https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_172_ing.pdf; United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples*, UN Doc. A/HRC/21/47, July 6, 2012. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-47_en.pdf

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⁷⁴ Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Case of the Kichwa Indigenous Sarayaku v. Ecuador*, Judgement of June 27, 2012. https://corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_245_ing.pdf

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⁷⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples*, UN Doc. A/HRC/12/34, July 15, 2009. <https://www.refworld.org/reference/themreport/unhrc/2009/en/69741>

impacting their lives are made without their input. Their concerns about corruption and gender-based discrimination reinforce their belief that mining activities in their territories will threaten not only their physical and economic well-being but also encroach upon their rights to have a voice and influence the fate of their community's future. The failure of the government to address these structural conditions of exclusion amounts to a violation of their rights to participation and to free, prior and informed consent.



Photo by Mike Tena

“Because of the open pits left by mining companies,
we now have to take the children to school.”

Participant of the workshop held in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe.

B.VI. CARE

Care responsibilities are a critical human rights issue, central to women's rights, as it involves recognising and valuing the essential labour that sustains individuals, families, and communities.⁷⁶ Care work, both paid and unpaid, includes essential domestic tasks—such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry—and personal care, such as tending to children and the elderly.⁷⁷ This work upholds fundamental standards of living, enables social reproduction, and maintains the labour force.⁷⁸

Globally, care work is largely shouldered by families, with the burden falling disproportionately on women and girls due to persistent social norms.⁷⁹ Women perform the majority of unpaid care work, limiting their opportunities for employment, education, and civic participation. This unequal distribution and lack of recognition of care work infringe on women's rights, restricting their access to resources, and social protections, and entrenching their disproportionate vulnerability to poverty.⁸⁰ Moreover, such unequal distribution, intensity and lack of recognition of care work hinders women's enjoyment of human rights on an equal basis with men.⁸¹

The women of Hanyanya believe that the expansion of mining activities would not only disrupt their land and resources but also intensify their already heavy responsibilities as primary caregivers. They conveyed that basic household responsibilities, such as

⁷⁶ Maria S. Floro, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona and Alejandra Lozano Rubello, "A Care-Led Transition to a Sustainable Future," *GI-ESCR*, June 25, 2024. <https://gi-escr.org/en/resources/publications/a-care-led-transition-to-a-sustainable-future>

⁷⁷ Laura Addati et al., "Care work and Care jobs: For the future of decent work," *International Labour Organisation (ILO)*, 2018. https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_633135/lang-en/index.htm

⁷⁸ Maria S. Floro, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona and Alejandra Lozano Rubello, "A Care-Led Transition to a Sustainable Future," *GI-ESCR*, June 25, 2024. <https://gi-escr.org/en/resources/publications/a-care-led-transition-to-a-sustainable-future>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* <https://gi-escr.org/en/resources/publications/a-care-led-transition-to-a-sustainable-future>.

⁸⁰ Benería, Lourdes & Berik, Günseli & Floro, Maria. (2015). *Gender, Development, and Globalization: Economics as if All People Mattered*. 10.4324/9780203107935.

⁸¹ Maria S. Floro, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona and Alejandra Lozano Rubello, "A Care-Led Transition to a Sustainable Future," *GI-ESCR*, June 25, 2024. <https://gi-escr.org/en/resources/publications/a-care-led-transition-to-a-sustainable-future>.

cleaning and laundry, are heavily impacted by mining-related disruptions to water quality and availability. With water sources either polluted or in short supply, routine chores become arduous, requiring more time and effort. In particular, fetching water is seen as a particularly burdensome care responsibility. Women have to rise before dawn and walk long distances in search of clean water. This intensifies their caregiving role, impacting their physical well-being and consuming valuable time that could be used for other activities.

The women also shared that they may face heightened security risks due to the potential influx of mine workers into their community if the expansion of the mine occurs. In neighbouring communities this has created an atmosphere of insecurity, increasing the threat of harassment and violence. They explain that, given they begin their chores early in the morning, they are particularly vulnerable to harassment and assault, when out alone.

Mining activities also affect their daily care routines in other ways, particularly concerning their children. The open pits created by the exploration of lithium in their territories make the landscape hazardous, and women often feel compelled to accompany their children to school to ensure their safety. This added responsibility extends their caregiving role even further, requiring them to wake early not only to do household chores but also to provide extra protection in an increasingly unsafe environment. It intensifies their caregiving duties, adding time and emotional labour to their daily tasks.

Additionally, the women also shared that there are cases when mining operations across Zimbabwe desecrate ancestral graves. In those cases, it falls on the women to handle the reburials. This task—rooted in respect for tradition and the community, carries deep cultural weight—is an additional care responsibility that falls on women due to mining activities. The duty of reburials is shouldered primarily by women, adding to their burden.

The experiences shared by the women of Hanyanya illustrate the significant impact of mining on their caregiving duties, leaving them with an ever-growing workload and deeper concerns about their security and well-being. Their accounts also underscore the importance of recognising care work as a human rights issue, essential to supporting human dignity, well-being, and development.

“The mining companies are an invisible power. They
are not near to us.”

Participant of the workshop held in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe.

C. CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY: THE ROLE OF MINING ENTERPRISES SHAPING THE CONDITIONS IN BIKITA

Corporate accountability continues to be critical in a highly globalised world where business operations oftentimes have profound impacts on human rights.⁸² While States hold the primary duty to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, non-state entities also have a responsibility to respect and comply with human rights. Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (hereinafter, “Guiding Principles”), States bear the primary duty to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights.⁸³ At the same time, business enterprises have a responsibility to respect human rights, which “exists independently of States’ abilities and/or willingness to fulfil their own human rights obligations”.⁸⁴ This dual obligation reflects the understanding that business activities—especially those extending across borders—can create or exacerbate significant human rights concerns, such as environmental harm, or community displacement.

The Guiding Principles framework is grounded on three fundamental pillars. First, States have a duty to protect individuals within their territory or jurisdiction from human rights abuses by third parties, including businesses.⁸⁵ This duty entails proactive measures to prevent, investigate, punish, and address rights violations through effective policies, legislation, regulation, and judicial oversight. Second, businesses themselves hold a responsibility to respect human rights.⁸⁶ This is understood as a global standard of expected

⁸² CESCR, *General comment No. 24 (2017) on State obligations under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the context of business activities*, UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/24, June 23, 2017. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-comment-no-24-2017-state-obligations-context>; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework* (United Nations, 2011)” https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf.

⁸³ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework* (United Nations, 2011)” https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

conduct that exists independently of State actions or national laws. For businesses, this responsibility means they must avoid infringing on human rights and take steps to mitigate any adverse impacts their activities may cause, contribute to, or are directly linked to through their operations, products, or services. Furthermore, in fulfilling this responsibility, businesses should actively support substantive gender equality and ensure they do not intensify or perpetuate existing discrimination against women in any part of their operations.⁸⁷

The women of Hanyanya view the mining companies through a lens of exclusion and power imbalance, whereby these business enterprises exercise control over local resources while disregarding the community's wellbeing. They conveyed a feeling of disempowerment and invisibility in contrast to the influence that public officials and mining companies wield. They explained that, despite their lands hosting mining operations, they have no means of engaging with the companies directly, and the companies remain a distant, impersonal force in their lives. They described the mining companies as an "invisible power", that they associate with their own feelings of isolation, as they are left without a voice or representation in decisions affecting their everyday lives.

In their view, the mining companies claim to contribute to the country's economic development, yet these alleged benefits remain unseen at the local level. Instead, the women of Hanyanya view the mining companies as agents of exploitation, extracting resources without consideration for the community and their rights. They fear that the expanding mining activities will result in forced displacement, fragmenting their families, uprooting their community, and intensifying poverty. Additionally, the women feel that the arrival of mining companies has not brought them significant employment opportunities. This is because employment within the mines is largely restricted to men, while women are relegated to stereotypical roles like cooking and cleaning. Moreover, the women reported that although the mining companies may claim to make donations to healthcare or infrastructure, the community has seen no improvements in their own access to health services or living conditions. Instead, mining

⁸⁷ *United Nations Human Rights Council, Gender Dimensions of the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, Report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, UN Doc. A/HRC/41/43 (United Nations, 2019).* https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/documents/A_HRC_41_43.pdf

activities have driven up local prices, increasing the cost of living and further marginalising women economically. In general, the women in Hanyanya describe the mining operations as a threat to their survival, rather than as an opportunity for growth. The women endure negative impacts without any benefit and perceive mining as a force that has worsened their quality of life.

Over the years, the relationship between Bikita Minerals and the community has grown ever more strained. For instance, community members were previously permitted to collect and sell residue materials. Now, after being purchased by Sinomine, community members are barred from these sites that have become privately militarised. The company has even begun selling the residue that they once regarded as waste to members of the community. This shift has solidified the women's perception that companies prioritise profit over any kind of benefit sharing with the community.

Safety risks are also part of what they see as the company's disregard for the community's well-being. In its exploration activities, Bikita Minerals has left open pits in their territories surrounding the Hanyanya Mountain. These pose severe safety hazards, particularly for children and domestic animals who risk injury or death if they fall in. These pits also fill with stagnant water, creating breeding grounds for mosquitoes and elevating the risk of water-borne diseases. The women expressed that the lack of measures by the companies to mitigate the risks related to their activities reflects the companies' lack of concern for the community's health and safety.

Companies have a responsibility to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for how they address their adverse human rights impacts. This responsibility to respect human rights extends beyond mere compliance with local laws.⁸⁸

To meet this responsibility, companies are expected to conduct human rights due diligence throughout their operations, supply chains and business relationships, identifying and addressing potential risks related to their activities. If a company causes or

⁸⁸ *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework (United Nations, 2011)* https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf.

contributes to adverse human rights impacts, it needs to provide for, or cooperate in, access to remedy for the people affected. Although business enterprises may engage in additional activities that promote human rights or social causes, such initiatives do not offset their responsibility to ensure that they respect human rights nor qualify as a remedy for harm.

Stakeholder engagement is an essential part of human rights due diligence. For stakeholder engagement to be meaningful and enable identification of and action on salient human and environmental risks, it must inform all stages of ongoing due diligence throughout operations, value chains, and project life cycles and be safe, so that human rights defenders and rights-holders can speak out about adverse impacts without suffering retaliation.⁸⁹ The experiences shared by the women of Hanyanya make clear that the companies are not engaging in meaningful stakeholder engagement with the community.

The women also expressed that, in their experience, the issue of corruption was endemic in the relationship between the mining companies and public officials, noting that public officials appear more invested in creating personal alliances with mining companies than in the community's welfare. They expressed that poverty has created a culture where bribes are easily exchanged, allowing mining companies to circumvent community interests and begin extracting resources with little regard for the community's consent or welfare. This perception of corruption has undermined their faith in public institutions, leaving them with few options for remedy or protection.

At the UN level, the Working Group on Business and Human Rights recognised that corruption is closely linked to human rights abuses.⁹⁰ Corruption can have profound, enduring impacts on human rights by undermining the availability, quality, and accessibility of goods and services that States are obligated to provide under international human rights law.⁹¹ For business enterprises, involvement in corrupt

⁸⁹ *Business and Human Rights Resource Center, Front Line Defenders, Indigenous Peoples Rights International (IPRI) and ProDESC. Hearing the Human: Ensuring Due Diligence legislation effectively amplifies the voices of those affected by irresponsible business. October 2021. https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/2021_Hearing_the_Human_Briefing_v6.pdf*

⁹⁰ *United Nations Human Rights Council, Working Group on Business and Human Rights, Connecting the business and human rights and the anti-corruption agendas, A/HRC/44/43*

⁹¹ *United Nations Human Rights Council, Working Group on Business and Human Rights, Connecting the business and human rights and the anti-corruption agendas, A/HRC/44/43*

practices, such as bribery, can result in direct or indirect contributions to human rights abuses in pursuit of business goals.⁹²

The extractive sector has proven particularly susceptible to corruption, especially related to obtaining lucrative government concessions, often leading to direct harm to communities and their rights.⁹³ These situations highlight the need for businesses to conduct rigorous human rights due diligence in tandem with anti-corruption measures. When corruption risks are present, whether, through supply chains, partnerships, or operating in regions with high levels of corruption, businesses face not only legal and ethical challenges but also an increased likelihood of human rights violations, underscoring the need for integrated anti-corruption and human rights strategies in business operations.

The perspectives shared by the women of Hanyanya show that mining companies in Bikita are failing in their responsibility to respect human rights and engage in robust human rights due diligence. By fulfilling their responsibility to respect human rights and prioritising meaningful community engagement and benefit sharing, mining companies in Bikita could make positive contributions to local communities. However, the women of Hanyanya clearly expressed that they do not support any mining activities in their land and territories. They considered that instead of promoting extractive industries, efforts should be harnessed in developing their communities' traditional economic activities to enhance their autonomy while preserving their local ecosystems.

⁹² United Nations Human Rights Council, Working Group on Business and Human Rights, *Connecting the business and human rights and the anti-corruption agendas*, UN Doc. [A/HRC/44/43](#), June 18, 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4443-report-connecting-business-and-human-rights-and-anticorruption>

⁹³ United Nations Human Rights Council, Working Group on Business and Human Rights, *Connecting the business and human rights and the anti-corruption agendas*, UN Doc. [A/HRC/44/43](#), June 18, 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc4443-report-connecting-business-and-human-rights-and-anticorruption>.

“There is nothing for us in mining.”

“We remain low-class and other people benefit.”

Participants of the workshop held in rural Bikita, Zimbabwe.

D. IMAGINING ALTERNATIVE FUTURES FOR THE COMMUNITY OF HANYANYA

The women of Hanyanya envision a future rooted in sustainability, autonomy, and the preservation of their land and cultural practices. Their vision prioritises communal well-being, ecological integrity and agricultural development over extractive industries. Rather than seeing their land as a resource for lithium extraction, they view it as the heart of their heritage, livelihood and community reliance.

Central to their vision is a commitment to protecting their land from mining encroachment. Despite lithium's value in global markets, the women of Hanyanya see no benefit in its extraction for their community. Instead, they view the extraction of lithium as a process that enriches outsiders while leaving the local people without any tangible improvements in their quality of life. There is a deep frustration in knowing that even though lithium from their land powers technologies around the world, they remain without essential infrastructure, including electricity. When it comes to accessing products like lithium batteries, they face the same market prices as everyone else, with no special consideration given to their role as custodians of the resource. Even more, they shared that lithium batteries are actually more expensive in their region than in the capital of the country. The irony of this situation is not lost on the women, who see that the lithium from Bikita contributes to global progress while they continue to struggle with energy scarcity. For them, this energy poverty is a stark indicator of the inequalities embedded in mining operations and a reminder of the pressing need for inclusive energy access that considers the rights and welfare of communities like theirs.

Instead of seeing any potential for development, the women are deeply concerned that mining will lead to displacement, poverty, and the loss of their land, which is vital for farming and self-sufficiency. They view their land not as a source of lithium, but as a foundation for sustainable agriculture and community well-being. Their vision for the future is one where economic development is achieved through sustainable agriculture and ecological preservation. They hope to build a future that supports their community's resilience and independence.

Thus, the women aspire to enhance their community's self-sufficiency by further developing their own sustainable agricultural practices.

They seek to incorporate technology that complements rather than replaces their methods. For example, they emphasise the need for clean, potable water to support their families and irrigate their gardens. They aspire to install solar-powered pumps to improve irrigation and increase crop yields. Already using sunlight to dry vegetables, they are eager to adopt solar-powered tools that streamline this process while respecting their existing practices. With these innovations, they aim to process their own herbs, including rosemary, and produce avocado oil while converting the seeds into powder, thus diversifying their agricultural production and promoting economic sustainability within their community.

For the women of Hanyanya, envisioning their community's future means access to improved infrastructure—roads, electricity, and water—as essential public services. They foresee roads connecting Hanyanya to surrounding areas, facilitating better transportation and market access, which would enhance economic opportunities. They recognise that access to quality water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities is vital for fostering a healthier, more resilient community. The women also envision access to energy through solar power as transformative not only for their agricultural practices but also for providing reliable electricity for their homes and community, enhancing their quality of life and supporting a future of dignity and self-reliance.

In articulating this vision, the women of Hanyanya challenge conventional narratives of development that focus on resource extraction. Instead, they advocate for a future where they continue to control their lands and reject extractive industries. For the Vatombe women, the future of Hanyanya lies not in the promise of lithium mining but in the fruits of their lands, cultivated and shared within a community that honours and sustains its own way of life.



Photo by Mike Tena



Conclusions

The experiences of the women of Hanyanya Mountain reveal critical tensions at the intersection of climate action, human rights and gender equality in the context of critical mineral extraction. Their testimonies shed light on how the current dominant model of energy transition, whilst aimed at addressing the climate emergency, risks perpetuating historical patterns of exploitation and gender-based discrimination that have long characterised extractive industries.

The evidence gathered through this research demonstrates that the rush for critical transition minerals like lithium threatens to replicate colonial patterns of resource extraction, where benefits flow primarily to external actors whilst local communities—particularly women—bear disproportionate costs. The mining operations in Bikita have failed to deliver meaningful benefits to local communities and have also created new challenges for women. These challenges encompass serious risks to land rights and food security, compromised access to clean water and limited economic opportunities amidst discriminatory employment practices. Women have also experienced heightened safety concerns, encountered significant barriers to participation and shouldered intensified care responsibilities as a direct result of mining activities in their region.

It has also become evident that mining companies in Zimbabwe consistently fail to fulfil their responsibility to respect human rights. Often operating as ‘invisible powers’ these companies remain unresponsive to community concerns whilst maintaining practices that exploit gender inequalities. This dynamic is further exacerbated by consultation processes that exclude women’s voices, thereby perpetuating power imbalances that prevent their meaningful participation in decisions affecting their lives and communities.

The women of Hanyanya offer a compelling alternative vision for development—one rooted in sustainable agriculture, community autonomy and the preservation of traditional lands and practices. Their perspective challenges us to question whether the intensive extraction of transition minerals truly serves the goal of building a more equitable, sustainable world. Their experiences and insights

demonstrate that technical solutions to climate change cannot come at the expense of human rights and gender equality.

These findings highlight the urgent need to re-imagine energy transition with human rights and gender equality as central, non-negotiable principles. A just transition requires the meaningful participation of affected communities, particularly women, in decision-making processes and the establishment of robust accountability mechanisms for both states and business enterprises. Policies must be grounded in human rights, ensuring public participation, and securing free, prior, and informed consent from impacted communities.⁹⁴ Actively supporting community-driven development alternatives and addressing structural inequalities will help create fairer outcomes, while giving affected communities a voice to correct power imbalances and promote more equitable solutions to energy transitions and challenges.

The energy transition presents a historic opportunity to break from extractive models that have historically marginalised women and Indigenous communities. However, realising this potential requires fundamental changes in how the dominant transition model is being conceived and implemented. The continued exclusion of communities from these processes not only risks violating their human rights but also exacerbates social conflicts, particularly in regions reliant on extractive industries. The experiences documented in this report demonstrate unequivocally that there can be no just energy transition without gender and social justice.

As the global community pursues solutions to the climate emergency, the rights, well-being and vision of women like those in Hanyanya must be at the forefront of policy and practice. Without the meaningful involvement of affected stakeholders—particularly local, Indigenous and rural communities—transition policies risk deepening the very inequalities they should aim to resolve. Only through genuine commitment to community-driven progress and human rights principles can we ensure that the path to a low-carbon future does not perpetuate the injustices we seek to overcome.

⁹⁴ *United Nations Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises Extractive sector, just transition and human rights, A/78/155.*



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WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES OF THE EXTRACTION OF TRANSITION MINERALS

A Vision for a Just Future
in Bikita, Zimbabwe

This report was developed by the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Shine Collab.

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The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR) is an international non-governmental human rights advocacy organisation. Together with partners around the world, GI-ESCR works to end social, economic and gender injustice using a human rights approach.

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