

RE-EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S ARTISANAL MINING IN OKPELLA EDO STATE NIGERIA,
1960–1980

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Abstract

Several studies have examined events that occurred on the eve of Nigeria's independence and those that have taken place since its independence in 1960. These studies cover a wide range of issues, including the strategies adopted during the decolonization process, post-independence crises, the civil war, post-war reconstruction, and the Indigenization Decree. Historians, political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists have also interrogated the impact of key developments such as the oil boom of the 1970s, development planning in the 1970s, the political changes that ushered in the Second Republic in 1979, and the economic challenges of the 1980s. However, none of these studies has examined the re-emergence of women's artisanal mining in Okpella, Edo State, Nigeria, from 1960—when Nigeria attained independence—to 1980, when the chieftaincy declaration law recognized the authority of traditional rulers over Okpella and its environs. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of Nigeria's post-independence economy in general and Okpella's local economy in particular. This study investigates the re-emergence of Okpella women in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) between 1960 and 1980, following their marginalization in formal mining at independence. Utilizing oral interviews, archival records, and field observations, it traces how the collapse of large mining firms—triggered by oil discovery in 1956, the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), and indigenization policies—created opportunities for women to dominate the local extraction of limestone, granite, and gravel. The analysis highlights persistent challenges, including restricted access to finance, licenses, land, and technology; low bargaining power; health risks arising from dust inhalation, pit collapses, and environmental pollution; and cultural and legal discrimination that confined women to informal and vulnerable operations. Environmental consequences—such as deforestation, water contamination by potentially toxic elements (PTEs), and soil degradation—underscore the unsustainable nature of unregulated ASM. The study concludes that the resilience of Okpella women in navigating post-independence economic challenges exemplifies female agency in Nigeria's informal sector and offers critical lessons for gender-inclusive mining policies, environmental regulation, and sustainable livelihood strategies.

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Introduction

The monumental roles of women in the economies of various societies all over the world cannot be underestimated. Their strategic positions in the running of both former and informer sectors of the economy remain important lubricants that help in its growth and development. All over the world, women are known to be important players of the mining sector despite the difficulties which accompany the mining profession and its dominance by their male counterparts. In the 19th century United States, gold was discovered at Sutter's Creek in California in January 1848 prompting an avalanche of migrants to the area and the migration was further accelerated through the encouragement of President James, K. Polk who in December 1848 encouraged migrants to move in mass to the area as this led to the movement of about 40,000 migrants including women in search of livelihood. (Bryceson:2018)

In South Africa, women were prohibited from mining throughout the 20th century but the exception to this rule was asbestos mines, which had women cobblers and sorters between 1893 and 1980.(Asanda-Jonas Benya: 2023)

Throughout the 20th century, women's activism reflected their central role in the development of Bolivia's mining sector, of which women once made up approximately 35 percent of the workforce. However, Bolivian women faced discriminatory regulations and common cultural beliefs that kept them out of underground mines. (Ramona Vijayarasa: 2026) In Nigeria, the colonial government sustained the mining and production of coal in throughout the 20th century in the Enugu Province when land with huge deposits of coal were transferred to the British Crown. (Ihediwa Nkejika: 2014) The revenue generated from it formed parts of the important strategy of transforming the pre-colonial economy into an economy that suited the British economic motive of exploitation. (Ayodele Samuel Abolorunde: 2019) Through this, the British then began the systematic penetration of the colonial territory to accelerate the extraction of Nigeria's resources to benefit the metropolitan economy. (Ayodele Samuel Abolorunde: 2021) It is important to state that foreign business interests were palpable in other sectors of the economy and this continued unabated in the distributive trade and the production of agricultural products in Nigeria. (Chris B.N. Ogbogbo and Ayodele Samuel Aborisade: 2018)

Many studies have therefore interrogated the roles of women in various societies all over the world while the study of the post-colonial economy in Nigeria, especially the mining sector which Okpella women made monumental contributions had not been undertaken by scholars. Ross Harvey interrogates how South Africa's possession of monumental mineral deposits has not translated into economic benefits and empowerment of the majority of the citizenry since the country's return to democratic rule in 1994 as acute unemployment rate of 40 percent of the entire population continues to widen inequality among the citizens. (Ross Harvey: 2015) Study has also been carried on the importance of green economy to the reduction of economic and gender inequalities among nations and individuals all over the world respectively. (Agnes Babugura: 2017) Study has been carried out on how import control under regionalism was one of the strategies used by the colonial government on the eve of independence in the devolution of economic powers to the regions through constitutional framework. (Abolorunde, Ayodele Samuel: 2019)

Effort has also been made to establish the nexus between the possession of natural resources and the challenges it brings in the quest to accelerate developments of countries like Italy, Turkey and Morocco (Vanessa Ushie :2013) Study which reveals poor conditions of mining workers in South Africa throughout the twentieth century has been undertaken as little social value was attached to black lives, mining operations were not designed for safety and health, from the outset and for most of the twentieth century. (May Hermanus, Sizwe Phakathi, Nancy Coulson and Paul Stewart: 2019) This paper therefore focuses on Re-emergence of Women's Artisanal Mining in Okpella Edo State Nigeria from 1960 when colonialism ended in Nigeria and the year of the country's independence to 1980 when a Chieftaincy Declaration Law was enacted by the then Bendel State government recognizing the traditional leaders in Okpella when Alhaji Yesufu Dirisu was recognized as the traditional ruler with the title: Okuokpellaghe which literarily mean symbol of unity. Although was enthroned in 1971, was officially recognized under the declaration law of 1980.

The law empowered him in collaboration with the government to rejuvenate mining activities in Okpella. The study notes that discussions on Nigeria's post-colonial history had been centered around civil war, post-war reconstruction, indigenization decree, local government reforms and political development which ushered in Second Republic in 1979. Scholars have therefore paid adequate attention to various economic reforms of the post-independence Nigeria, political decisions which drove these economic reforms as well as reactions of Nigerians to these reforms and the political activities which ushered in the Second Republic. Study on how mining operations of the Chinese on African continent and Latin American countries of Peru and Ecuador where local communities protested against unbearable exploitation and excruciating pains brought by their displacement which was necessitated by Chinese mining activities since the beginning of the 21st had been carried out (Tim Wegenast, Georg Strüver, Juliane Giesen and Mario Krauser: 2017) However, there has not been a comprehensive interrogation of how women were involved in mining activities in Okpella and how this led to their contributions to the post-independence economy of Nigeria in general and Okpella in particular during the period, 1960-1980.

This exclusion makes this study important to us because one of the strategies through which the post-colonial economy was sustained through the economic contribution of Okpella women to the post-colonial economy of Nigeria. The exclusion of the contributions of Okpella women to the post-colonial Nigerian economy in general and Okpella in particular reduces our comprehensive understanding of the workings of the economy, a gap this study intends to fill in the body of Nigeria's post-independence historiography. Specifically, the study brings out the importance and monumental contributions of regional economic activities to the overall effectiveness of the post-independence Nigerian economy from the prism of women's role in the mining sector. The study also brings to the fore, adaptative capacity of Nigerians, especially women to the dynamics of challenges and opportunities inherent in government policies.

The study helps to reveal the involvement and displacement of Okpella women in mining industry in the post-independence era Lastly, the study necessitates the re-thinking of scholars on the contributions of women and Okpella region to the overall post-independence economy of Nigeria. The conventional wisdom on women studies around the globe as well as colonial economy centred around women's pivotal role in the mining sector in Africa, (Lynda Lawson :2018) prison system in colonial northern Nigeria, (Mohammed Bashir Salau: 2015) Women

mobilization for war efforts during the Second World War in Australia, (Heather Goodall, Helen Randerson and Devleena Ghosh:2019) and quest for equality and women's right in mining industry globally.(Ege Tekinbas and Kalowatie Deonandan:2021) However, Asanda-Jonas Benya challenged the conventional wisdom by arguing that women in South Africa, were prohibited from mining throughout the 20th century but the exception to this rule was asbestos mines, which had women cobblers and sorters between 1893 and 1980.(Asanda-Jonas Benya:2023) Ramona Vijeyarasa corroborated this evidence when she argues that Bolivian women faced discriminatory regulations and common cultural beliefs that kept them out of underground mines. (Ramona Vijeyarasa:2026) Similarly, Ege Tekinbas and Kalowatie Deonandan point out how women were usually burdened by the costs and impacts of the mining industry; and how they experienced minimal benefits from the biased regulatory frameworks, lack of sector-specific gender equality policies, social norms, and economic inequalities. (Ege Tekinbas and Kalowatie Deonandan: 2021)

Extant studies have not paid adequate attention to how post-independence decision of the old Bendel State as a sub-national transformed the economic role of women in Okpella and how this transformation contributed to the workings of the Nigerian economy in general and Okpella in particular. The main thesis is to demonstrate that the overall workings of the post-independence Nigerian economy during the period under study was connected to the economic inputs of the Okpella women in the mining sector. This study became imperative because the inputs from Okpella to the Nigerian economy was unique due to the adjustment of Okpella women to changing realities brought by the dynamics of post-independence economic circumstance.

It is a contribution to the study of Nigeria's post-independence history and moves discussion in new directions. The study is divided into five sections, the first deals with introduction, the second addresses Collapse of Large Mining Industries the third discusses The Re-emergence of Women in the Local Mining Industry in Okpella 1970-1980, the fourth interrogates Challenges faced by Okpella Women in Small and Medium Scale Enterprise and Post- Independence Realities, the fifth discusses, the conclusion.

Collapse of Large Mining Industries

The collapse of large mining industries can be said to have both remote cause and immediate cause. The remote cause lies in the fact that the discovery of oil in 1956 hurt the mineral extraction industry as government and industry operators both began to focus on this new resource which was believed to be more profitable in the international market due to the oil-boom. (Dauda G, Dieter B. & Moronkola O :2020). While one of the immediate causes has been identified as the effect of the Nigeria civil war in the late 1960s which led to the exodus from the country by many expatriates mining companies. The cumulative effects of these developments greatly affected the mining industry to the extent that the sector only accounted for 0.3% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). (Ediawe, J.R) This has stifled the country's developmental strides. Succinctly put, the concept of development is transcendental, and its appropriate applicability can be assessed if the variables of economic growth align with the empowerment of the people. (Ayodele Samuel Aborisade:2018)

Another factor that was responsible for the collapse of the initial mining companies in Okpella was the introduction of different economic National Development Plans which were introduced immediately after the war years. These plans which had the aim of industrializing the country as well as the objective of indigenizing the industries prompted the remaining few expatriates who had not left even after the aftermath of the war, to finally abandon the industries for the indigenization programme. The indigenization programme compelled foreign investors to collaborate with Nigerian investors through the coordination of Nigerian Enterprise Promotion Board. (Ayodele Samuel Abolorunde:2020) On the long run, change of ownership, and lack of expertise hastened up the collapse of some of these companies. Just as Ogundele etal, points out "a critical appraisal of the industrial challenges in the period, the limitation was not so much on finance but dearth of human capital including techno-managerial capacities and skills required for initiating, implementing and managing industrial projects" (Ogundele O. Chete L.N, Adeoti J.O, Adeyinka F.M:2015)

Following the decline of the position of women in the mining sector around 1960, Okpella women gradually began to diversify into other sectors of the economy by exploring areas which would yield higher profit and quicker returns. (Interview with Mrs Gloria Addeh:2023) The working lives of Okpella women during this period exhibited an enormous diversity, this is as a result of the fact that while, quite a large number of women combined both independent work for themselves and work for others to make a living, at different ends of the economic spectrum, the women contributions seems as though they were entirely working for others. (Whitehead A: 1994)

The decline that women faced in the mining industry in 1960 prompted some women to go into catering business for commercial events as well tailoring to supplement her income. (Interview with Mrs Gloria Addeh:2023) The case Some women also retained a very substantial responsibility for a wide variety of domestic task including essential processing of raw commodities to render them edible. (Whitehead A: 1994) It is also reported that the loss of the social security system provided by the more collective forms of responsibility in the pre-commodity kinship system, means that many poor women were increasingly to be found working for their wealthy neighbours in return for food rather than for wages. (Whitehead A: 1994) Before the discovery of the

mineral deposit, Okpella was totally isolated from the rest of Etsako and beyond as far as the old mid-western region was concerned. (Interview with Mrs Gloria Addeh:2023) The first road construction in Okpella was in the late 1960s when a road was constructed to link Okpella from Jattu–Auchi because of the cement factory. Previously, people travelling to the north have to pass through Auchi -Igarra, Ibillo-Okene before they could get to the north. Among all the mineral deposits in the land of Okpella, limestone was the most important economic sustenance of the people as thousands of the people were engaged in the industry. (Interview with Mrs Gloria Addeh:2023)

However, most of the mining companies were unable to maintain regular expenditure due to insufficient funds to import spare parts to run the machines used on the mines, as well as the inability to compete favourably with the international market. During the first drive for industrial development in Nigeria which dates back to 1962 with the introduction of the first ‘National Development Plan’ which was to begin from 1962. Chete et-al, note that under the first plan the country embraced Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) with the objective of mobilizing national economic resources and deploying them on a cost/benefit basis among contending projects as a systematic attempt to industrial development. (Ogundele O. Chete L.N, Adeoti J.O, Adeyinka F.M:2015) In pursuance of the objectives above, about four years after independence, the Edo Cement factory was established with the name ‘Bendel Cement’. The cement factory in 1964 opened new avenue for the women who had previously opted out of the mining industry to venture back into the industry.(Interview with Mrs Ogiathon Muhammed: 2023) The establishment of Okpella cement factory, led to the demand for limestone for cement production as well as gravel and granite for building construction and as a result of this demand, the women once again became the main labour force in the industry, When the factory was established in Okpella in 1964, the factory then started its production capacity of ten thousand (10,000) bags of cement per day. In deed the intense mining activities that started in 1964 led to an upsurge of mining and quarry activities in Okpella Most of the women were employed in the cement factory as cleaners, massagers and laborers, some of them were self-employed in the mining industry locally. (Interview with Mrs. Mamuna Jimoh: 2023) The profit made from mining prompted the women to begin to abandon farming for mining once again since they could earn more money unlike farming. Although, farming had been the ancestral occupation of the people of Okpella, the mining evolution of 1960s drastically reduced farming activities to the barest minimum. In fact by 1962-1963 the Okpella communities were relying on imported foods from neighbouring towns up to 1965 and the later years. (Interview with B.I. Agboegba:2023)

By 1966, the economic activities of the women began to drift considerably towards mining as the women began to abandon farming for mining which they perceived to be the most readily available lucrative business, this was how farming was gradually reduced and abandoned there by reduced the quantity and quality of food in the market which made Okpella up till now depend on farm produce from the north. (Okhakhu P.A: 2016) In the year 1967 when the Nigerian Civil War began, economic activities in the country came to a halt as the smooth running of most economic activities in Nigeria could no longer thrive. The resultant effect of the war touched every sectors of the economy and the mining sector in Okpella was not exempted. (Ediawe, J.R: 2011) Most of the women as entrepreneurs in the mining industry attained the status between 1970 when there was an industrial recession in Okpella, this period was when the industries in Okpella were out of production, the different production factories were beginning to fold up. The period from 1970, also witnessed a dramatic shift in policy from private to public sector led industrialization. (Chete L.N, Adeoti J.O, Adeyinka F.M, and Ogundele O: 2015) Examples of these companies were the Crushed Rock Industries, Monior construction Company, Germs Quarry Industry, Freedom Group, Blue Stone Nigeria Limited, Idonigie Nigeria limited, Salorog Nigeria Limited, Lime Chemicals Limited, Fazel Nigeria Limited, West African Fertilizer Limited, Iyayi Group among others. This industrial recession placed woman as the sole producer of granite and lime stone component in Okpella, all nooks and crannies in Okpella was busy and booming of mining activities where the women champion the ventures. (K. M. Buchanan and J. C. Pugh, 2016.)

The collapse of the big mining companies in the early 1970s led to massive unemployment of mine workers without any means of livelihood. Many of them went into illegal mining activities to survive. One of such illegal miners who was caught and arrested was one Adeyemi K. who came to Auchi and later Okpella on 29th January 1970. He was initially declared wanted and was eventually arrested and charged under section 3 (2) chapter 134 for illegal mining. Fortunately for him, he was granted bail under section 12 of chapter 12 by the Magistrate Grade 1 court sitting in Auchi. (National Archives of Nigeria Ibadan: N.A.I K.D. 115/A/68 Illegal Mining in the Kukuruku Division) The economic hardship of this period created a ready market for products of illegal mining activities, this led to the emergence of women as middlemen and mineral smugglers. (Ediawe, J.R: 2011)

The Re-emergence of Women in the Local Mining Industry in Okpella 1970- 1980.

In the year 1970, the intense mining activities of the women was in high gear. At this time there was a gap between the manufacturers and the buyers as a result of shortage of supply in the market, this situation paved the way for the women to come back to their normal business once again. When they took over the market, they

began to expose and expand the market to different locations in the country, relating with different kinds of people, and different ideas from those people aided as a kind of training to boost their professionalism on the job. They engaged in the locally mining of stones in the ground, as well as extraction of readily available limestone at surface areas. This was done through a process of digging the limestone from the ground and filtering it to separate the limestone from the sand. Also, the women processed large rocks into tiny bits called gravel. This gravel had specific areas they were found, in some areas, they could be found in the shallow surface of the ground while in some areas, they could be found 5-12 feet down the ground to the stone base. The process of mining was so risky that careless and delicate situation could be dangerous in the mining process as some miners could be trapped if necessary caution was not taken. (Interview with Mrs. Omoti Igiegba:2023)

With the introduction of 'The Second National Development Plan in 1970', the government attempted to address the limitations of (ISI) Import Substitution Industrialization strategy, and placed emphasis on 'the upgrading of local production of intermediate and capital goods for sale to other industries' (Chete L.N, Adeoti J.O, Adeyinka F.M, and Ogundele O: 2015) This was the first systematic effort to create an industrial structure linked to mining, quarrying, agriculture, and transport which extended till 1971. The 1972 Act on Indigenization of Enterprises operating in Nigeria resulted in an indigenization policy which was subsequently amended, and replaced by the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Act. (Chete L.N, Adeoti J.O, Adeyinka F.M, and Ogundele O: 2015) The objectives of the policy were to transfer ownership and control to Nigerians in respect of those enterprises previously owned and controlled by foreigners, foster widespread ownership of enterprises among Nigerian Citizens, create opportunities for Nigerian businessmen, encourage foreign businessmen and investors to move from the unsophisticated spheres of the economy to the industries where large capital investments were needed. (Chete L.N, Adeoti J.O, Adeyinka F.M, and Ogundele O: 2015)

According to Mrs. Mamuna Jimoh, ex-miner at Iddo Okpella said, that there was a massive economic boom in the local mining industry that a head pan of the gravel was sold at the rate of ₦1 naira in 1973, and 200 head pans made up a tipper load and she was realizing 2-4 loads per day, and in 1974 a head pan had been increased to ₦ 2 naira. The mining industry in Okpella from its inception was a reserve for the male folk but with the introduction of the women into the industry, it was later regarded as a mixed occupation involving both men and women. (interview with Mrs. Manuna Jimoh2023)

The arrival of companies with modern machineries initially threatened the local mining activities of the women (often referred to as artisanal or small-scale mining). As these companies introduced modern mining and quarrying into the sector, women could not compete favourably with these industries simply because clients preferred to patronize those companies with modern technology rather than patronize the women's products. Due to the establishment of these new modern 'crushed rock companies' which produce granite and limestone in larger quantities and at a faster rate, the production, sales and supply of the market for the women stagnated for a very long time. (Interview with Mrs. Sarah Omokhafa:2023) By the year 1975, this was no longer the case as this time, there was a kind of innovation of how to produce the granite to meet the demand in the market. The discovery of making fire on the rock or stone was adopted since they could not afford to buy and use explosive device to blast the rock or stone. (Interview with Mrs. Omoti Igiegba: 2023)

They made fire on the rock or stone for several hours or a whole day, after much fire heat, in most cases the stone crack and then will be broken into boulders by men before the women will further break down the boulders into granite. (Interview with Mrs. Ide Oduwa: 2023) the stone or rock can be blasted if they have the capacity to do so. In the same vein, the women also broke down limestones after they have been blasted by explosive or local firing method before they will be milled by milling machines into different grades such as over-sized, animal feed, direct milling, dust, coarse, Texcote and Sugar grade for different purposes respectively. The limestone was used for cement, fertilizer, paint, poultry feeds etc. Any local stone breaking activities in Okpella is called "AYEGHESI". (Interview with Mrs. Manuna Jimoh: 2023)

In the year 1976, it became obvious that women involvement in the mining industry had come to stay this is because even when there was modern quarry all over, the women still managed to sustain their living through the industry because those who bought in small quantities still patronized them since their products were considerably cheaper. (Interview with Mrs. Omoti Igiegba:2023)



Okpella Women in a milling site crushing and bagging semi-processed limestone

The women played an important role in the economy of Okpella, their contribution to the economy had a great impact in the development of the society. Their active role in the production of granite and gravel had tremendous effect on the supply of building materials which led to the development of building construction within Okpella in particular and Nigeria in general. The introduction of local mining industries in Okpella propelled the women to the level of innovative advancement that transformed the industry into an elaborate business environment, and this development elevated them to the level of recognition in the society in the sense that people were depending on them for a maximum satisfaction which made them more relevant. (Isa S. Afegbua Esq, “*Okpella Origins, Communities and Neighbors*”, Okpella:2003)

The transformation and evolution of mining industry in Okpella could be credited to the women because they sacrificed a lot since they abandoned farming and trading which was their initial primary occupation to focus on mining to the extent that even when all the industries including the old cement factory broke down, the women activities were functioning to make Okpella still relevant in the mining sector. (Interview with Mrs. Ide Oduwa:2023)

Consequently, from the year 1977-80, the re-organization of the industry brought about the success of the women as entrepreneurs which promoted the socio- economic well-being of the people in Okpella. Though, most of the mining sites were owned by the men, the capability and the productivity of the industry was totally influenced by the contributions of women that engaged in mining industry. Different kinds of assistance were being offered by the women in the mines, and soon enough most of the women in this industry gradually used the proceeds to empower themselves. There were visible instances of women assisting with their various family economic affairs by sending their children to schools within and outside Okpella up to University level. (Interview with Mrs. Ide Oduwa:2023) Some others were building houses and establishing other businesses, while most of them began having their mining/ milling sites where they employed more labour. These new capacity of women elevated them to the level of wealth creation status, as well as agents for reducing unemployment. It is important to note that the continued chain of job creation and opportunities transformed Okpella to a town of more industrious individuals. The neighboring people were also employed in these industries; so it generated a kind of ‘partial economic development’. (E. O Erhagbe: 2005)

The manual production carried out by the women and the relatively low price fixed by the women made the demand high in the market. Because of this, they were not able to mine or produce the quantities of which larger industries were producing, there was need to employ more hands to hasten up the job and speed up production process. This need created greater opportunities for more labourers to go into the business. The women’s commitment to this profession contributed to the part of nation’s building which transformed the economic activities of the women in particular and Okpella at large. ((E. O Erhagbe: 2005)

Culturally, Okpella women ‘were believed not have any important role in Okpella’s society’ particularly when compared to the men who were privileged to occupy positions of their choice. The kind of occupation women were initially allowed to engaged in often times prevented some of the women from pursuing their dreams to the extent that those who believed so much in working for themselves eventually get discouraged. (Interview with Mrs. Omoti Igiegba:2023) However, for those women that picked interest in mining and overcame the challenges inherent in the business, they were able to make good use of the opportunity because mining was an

‘all-time’ business in Okpella. The term ‘all-time’ business originated from the fact that even at night determined miners could still continue working using any available means of generating light. In most cases, the major reason which could prevent a mine worker from coming to the mine was usually health related issues or religious obligation. It should be noted that those who believed in the culture of the land always attend the *Olimi festival* which was once in a year. (Borgatti J.M: 1976). Some of people of Okpella had so much regard for the *Olimi festival* to the extent that the cultural festival and their mining activities don’t intercept each other. (Interview with Mrs. Omoti Igiegba: 2023)



Okpella Women in a milling site crushing and bagging semi-processed limestone



Picture Showing the Okpella a section of a local Milling Centre in Okpella.



Picture showing samples of limestone deposit in Okpella

Challenges faced by Okpella Women in Small and Medium Scale Enterprise and Post- Independence Realities

The challenges faced by women in the small and medium scale enterprise were numerous and in different categories. Some of the challenges will be classified into financial and legal challenges, family challenge and health challenge.

In the financial aspect, women faced different economic challenges as a result of the lack of access and control over the use of resource land, and other productive resources such as licenses, finance, and geological data. (Weldegiorgis F, Lawson L, Verbrugge H: 2018) The inability to access finance contributed to women's inability to invest in mining equipment and technology necessary for a successful business. At policy level, the existing discrimination against women relegated them at a lower order in policy decisions affecting them. The de jure and de facto inequity in access to and control over land and property rights constrained women from accessing various other determinants of mining business success, such as finance. (Weldegiorgis F, Lawson L, Verbrugge H: 2018) Furthermore, most women were kept away from pit areas "for their safety" and this invariably means that they were kept in the dark about the extent of actual minerals mined. The lack of women's participation in the critical stages of mining gave men the leverage to exercise control over financial matters consequently, the inability to have access to any financial flow, implied that women ended up gaining little from their work. Notwithstanding, there were cases where women participated in pit areas and do the actual work, yet they still lose control over any financial or other business-related matters to men (Weldegiorgis F, Lawson L, Verbrugge H: 2018)

Access to funds, financial power to own a quarry or mining site was a big problem in the mining industry on the one hand, on the other hand, the ability to obtain legal right to own a deposit site was extremely difficult. For instance, every solid minerals in Okpella was being licensed to companies or individuals, licensing was a big challenge to the women because, majority of them lack the awareness, influence and financial enablement to acquire these rights. This was another fundamental challenge to the women who could not obtain the required mining rights as they could not compete favourably with those who had the advantage. The women also faced the challenge of low bargaining power. This challenge was so critical to the extent that the prices at which they sell their products were being influenced by the buyers who usually used different bargaining mechanisms to regulate the prices to suit their business to the detriment of the women. (Interview with Mrs. Omoti Igiegba:2023)

Family challenge revolved around the traditional beliefs which prevented women from utilizing certain economic factors by denying them any control over earnings. Due to the traditionally influenced legal constraints to owning or inheriting land and mineral rights, many women ended up operating unregistered. This increased their vulnerability in the current global efforts to promote formalization, which, in itself, was characterized by arduous requirements many women were unable to fulfill. (Weldegiorgis F, Lawson L, Verbrugge H: 2018) Women miners were faced with different health challenges as they worked in the mines for instance, in cases where semi-mechanized techniques were practiced, bulldozers were used to open up the pits but often without proper stabilization of the steep cuts by way of benches. The scarp faces often collapsed posing danger to the often-untrained miners. (Abutudu Musa : 2020) Cases of pit collapse were very common and in such unforeseen event, miners sustained serious injuries which led to permanent disability and in extreme cases were buried alive where rescue efforts prove abortive. (Abutudu Musa : 2020) Irrespective of the processing method adopted in mining, it has been observed that there were environmental and occupational health challenges and concerns for the miners. For instance, evidence of injury scars and marks were common among the mine workers using hammers to break boulders into granite aggregates. In addition to the scars, the inhaling of the dusts being generated during the milling processes of limestone and feldspar came with their attendant noise, air and vibration pollutions which had negative impact on the health of the miners. (Ediawe, J.R: 2011)

Scholars like Ediawe argue that the issue of wearing of protective gears against health and occupational hazards by the workers which should have served as protection against shocks such as ill health, accidents occasioning body injuries and at times death were treated with utmost levity. (Ediawe, J.R: 2011) But personal studies conducted proved that it was not in all situations that the women voluntarily neglected the use of Personal Protective Equipment's (P.P.E). In some cases, these P.P.E were so expensive that they could not be easily acquired by the women at every given point in time. Due to the rigour involved in the process of mining operations, even those women that had possession of some of these Personal Protective Equipment's, could not make long use of them as they tend to wear off, break, or tear with constant usage.

Furthermore, the surge in the population as a result of increase in labourers at the mines, the housing conditions at sites and in the mining communities were deplorable. Mining communities were 'worse than slums' (Abutudu Musa : 2020) Many miners interviewed confessed that they slept on the corridors of the make-shift houses, the majority of which were constructed with iron sheets.(Mustapha A.I : 2020) The deplorable state of housing around the mines also affected the health of the women adversely. (Interview with Mrs. Mamuna Jimoh: 2023)

Strong cultural norms influenced legal approaches to gender issues resulting in subtle and, open legal discriminations against women. Thus, legal and cultural discriminations, domestic and childcare responsibilities, and lack of education have relegated women to passive participation, making it difficult for women to openly air their concerns and ideas in front of men. This lower status has meant women have little to no power or influence in actively participating in key decision-making processes. As a result, women's views, needs, ideas and potential to contribute to solutions were overlooked. Women's groups which could represent women's interests in most cases get off to a good start, only to struggle due to lack of organizational structure and institutional capacity, competition for power, weak leadership and corruption. (Weldegiorgis F, Lawson L, Verbrugge H: 2018)

Despite the numerous challenges highlighted above, women in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) have demonstrated enormous potential to achieve substantial financial gains and manage successful mining businesses. (Weldegiorgis F, Lawson L, Verbrugge H: 2018)

Some notable post-independence realities include among others the following factors;

First, the expansion of the mining industry led to some challenges in the area of food security and the living standard of the people. This is because the search of natural minerals for extraction has proven to have negative effect on the production of food since vast expanse of land which could have been used for agricultural purposes were often rendered desolate due to mining and exploration activities. (Interview with Mr. Isabemoeh James Roy:2023) Also natural vegetation and economic trees were destroyed which invariably caused deforestation and gradual extinction of wildlife and other micro-organism which were often forced to migrate. With this intense environmental deforestation, it was certainly impossible for Okpella forest to regenerate in time without a myriad of consequences due to vast deforestation to establish mining activities in the land. According to Mrs. Mamuna Jimoh, ex-miner at Iddo- Okpella, mining activities were in every nooks and crannies in Okpella, that the deforestation for extraction were never replaced, and these mined areas which were as deep as 5-12 feet deep were never filled for future use. (Interview with Mrs. Mamuna Jimoh:2023)

The most worrisome condition was the effect mining had on the health of the people. Some scientific studies carried out at different times over the years indicated that mining activities created polluted environment which contained some toxic crystalline silica which has been associated with human lungs cancer and other respiratory disease. The nature of mining processes especially as employed by the artisanal and small-scale miners created a potential negative impact on the environment, both during the mining operations and for years after the mine had closed. (Ediawe, J.R:2011)

In 1970's, the initial collapse of most of the mining and quarrying industries in Okpella made the people to experience an environmental relief which lasted for a short time and was again distorted by the small scale mining industries of the women, who instead of locating their small quarries and mining industries in industrial areas such as around cement factory axis, chose to locate the center of their production at the heart of Okpella starting from Afokpella to Iddo and Okugbe to Awuyeni. (Interview with Mr. Isabemoeh James Roy:2023) Although on the issue of the location for the establishment of milling centres, the women cannot be completely blamed as they were caught in a situation whereby they were forced to make use of the only available lands which had been allocated to them.

In the same vein, clean water which was another very important natural resources to all living things especially man could not be easily assessed. The source of clean water in Okpella had been greatly affected by the mining activities which put the health of the people in great danger, the major sources of water in Okpella were, rivulets, streams, rivers and underground wells. Unfortunately, the aquatic ecosystem was increasingly being polluted by PTEs (Potentially Toxic Elements) through activities such as artisanal mining, industrial wastewater discharges, fossil fuel combustion, sewage wastewater and atmospheric deposition of toxic metals. (Obaje S.O, Ogunyele A.C, Adeola A.O, Akingboye A.S. 2019) In fact studies carried out by Ogunyele et al, of the geo-petroleum engineering and earth science department indicates that a large marble quarry is located close to the Uza River and wastewater from the quarry is also discharged into the river. These industrial activities, use of Hg (Mercury) in gold extraction, tailings and gangue produced during artisanal gold mining, wastewater from marble quarrying as well as heavy vehicular emissions, produce and release significant amounts of PTEs into the area causing various forms of pollution. (Obaje S.O, Ogunyele A.C, Adeola A.O, Akingboye A.S. 2019)

Naturally, the presence of limestone in Okpella had negative impact on some of the underground well water. This impact can be felt from the different taste the water in these wells have when compared to well water in other communities.

With the introduction of the mining and quarrying industries, most of the sources of drinking water have been affected. For instance, the first gold mining activity that took place in Okpella in 1940s around Uza River led to the contamination of the water. (Okhakhu, P. A : 2016) Likewise, the pollution of soils, sediments, plants and water by Potentially Toxic Elements (PTEs) such as arsenic (As),cobalt (Co), chromium (Cr), copper (Cu), mercury (Hg),nickel (Ni), lead (Pb), zinc (Zn) and others was a critical environmental problem in Okpella. (Ogunyele, A. C., Obaje, S. O., and Akingboye, A. S : 2018) Obaje S.O et al, rightly point out that these pollutants often had negative health effects such as damage of the kidney, lungs, brain and other internal organs, blindness, and even death to humans and livestock as they were exposed to Potentially Toxic Elements (PTE's) through

different pathways including direct ingestion of contaminated soils, plants and water as well as inhalation of dust. (Obaje S.O, Ogunyele A.C, Adeola A.O, Akingboye A.S. 2019)



A cross section of a river which has been affected by mining exploration. Source: Photo taken by one of the researchers during field work.



Statue erected at the center of Okpella to portray the economic importance of mining to the community. Source: Photo taken by Researcher during field work

Conclusion

The period from 1960 to 1980 marked a remarkable resurgence of Okpella women as resilient entrepreneurs in artisanal and small-scale mining, as they transformed economic adversity into opportunity amid the collapse of large-scale industries. Driven by oil discovery, civil war disruptions, indigenization policies, and emerging structural economic challenges, women shifted from marginalization in formal mining to dominating the local extraction of limestone, granite, and gravel through manual labor, innovative fire-cracking techniques, and milling operations. This transition not only sustained livelihoods—elevating many women to the status of wealth creators, employers, and community developers—but also contributed to localized economic growth, job creation, and infrastructure development, despite the decline in agricultural engagement and the resulting increase in food dependency.

However, persistent barriers—including limited access to finance, licenses, land, and technology; low bargaining power; health hazards arising from dust inhalation, pit collapses, and environmental pollution; and cultural and legal discrimination—underscore the gendered inequalities of the post-independence period. Environmental degradation, water contamination, and deforestation further compounded these vulnerabilities, highlighting the unsustainable nature of unregulated extraction. Ultimately, the tenacity of Okpella women in

artisanal mining illuminates broader themes of female agency within Nigeria's informal economy and underscores the need for targeted interventions in policy, training, and environmental safeguards to harness their potential for equitable and sustainable development.

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