Strategic Sisterhood: The Missing Political Solidarity Tool And Power Resource In Degendering Artisanal Small-Scale Gold Mining In Western Kenya

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Abstract
This paper explores women gold miners' gendered work experiences with each other in Western Kenya. The objective is to contextualize the extent to which engaging 'strategic sisterhood' can help Women Gold-mine shaft Owners (WGOs) play a vanguard role in degendering Artisanal Small-scale Gold Mining (ASGM) in the region. The paper is framed within the poststructural/postcolonial feminist/trade unionist/political proposition that, for gender equality to be achieved in the entire mining sector, women miners situated in privileged positions across the sector need to adopt more proactive strategies in mitigating gendering and its imperatives. For the paper, a critical analysis of such strategies—and by extension, of the potent of 'strategic sisterhood' to promote gender equality in the sector—should be centered on three WGOs' resources i.e their knowledge of gendered mining as common oppression to all women, psycho-social bonding with other women as 'sisters' and, awareness of their positional power to promote equal mining opportunities for all women. Key finding reveals the absence of sisterly camaraderie in the region's ASGM activities. This is evident in WGOs' continued preference for women in less lucrative mining roles despite their willingness to engage in lucrative mining roles; unwillingness to pay women equal wages for similar surface roles as those done by men and, disregard for safety measures in mine spaces predominated by women. For policy development, the finding highlights the critical need to nurture sisterly camaraderie among women miners as an alternative way to degender the ASGM sector .
Keywords: Gendering, degendering, ASGM, WGOs, positional power, sisterly camaraderie
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I. Introduction

Between September and November 2019, I did a study within the farming and mining communities of Nyatike Sub-county, Western Kenya as part of my Master thesis to determine how farm-mine labour shift influences sustainable food security within households headed by women miners.[1] Few months before I started my fieldwork for the study, Carleton University, Canada held a series of policy dialogues and workshops on women's gold mining livelihoods in the region.[2] The policy sessions were based on a study carried out between 2015 and 2018 in Osiri-Matanda (the largest and most vibrant ASGM site in Nyatike Sub-county) by a consortium of researchers to assess the influence of ASGM on the region's livelihoods. Some of the pertinent findings of the Consortium which were also reiterated by participants of the Carleton-led policy dialogues and workshops included: the emergence of ASGM as an alternative economic activity to many families in the region following the stagnation of agriculture as the primary income generator, an influx of women into artisanal gold mining sites in search of work either as miners or auxiliary service providers and, an increase in the number of women in mine leadership positions such as shaft ownership, proprietorship and supervision.[3]

During my fieldwork, most of the women I interviewed in Osiri-Matanda and other ASGM sites expressed similar views as those that were reported by participants of the Carleton-led policy sessions and the discussion paper. However, a significant number of them noted that the proliferation of women in mine-shaft leadership positions did not necessarily improve their employment outcomes and household livelihoods because of lack of 'sisterly camaraderie' for WGOs to help ordinary women miners. For them, many women employed in shafts either owned, appropriated or supervised by women continued to be affected in three ways that manifest ASGM in the region as a highly gendered work: women employed in surfaces roles receive low wages compared to their male counterparts; they are not preferred to work in lucrative mining roles such as pulleying, drilling and underground digging despite their willingness to and; most mine spaces predominated by women

are not given sufficient attention in terms of occupational safety measures.[1,4]

Though my study and the Carleton-led policy workshops and dialogues did not interrogate the exact ways through which 'sisterly camaraderie' would improve the mining employment outcomes of Ordinary Women Miners (OWMs) in the region, they both highlighted the long-standing contestation on the relationship between women leadership, women empowerment, and livelihoods.[5,6] An analysis of this contestation is necessary in understanding the way gender and power relations shape the employment and livelihood outcomes of women in the entire Artisanal Small-scale Mining (ASM) sector, including the potent of 'strategic sisterhood' in offering alternative pathways to degendering labour relations in the sector. Accordingly, in April 2023, I began a follow-up study in the region, focusing on the thematic areas of gendered ASM, degendering and the role of women in opposing gendered mining. My interviews explored women miner's gendered work experiences with each other to determine WGOs' missed opportunities in promoting equal mining, including their misplaced priorities, conformity to social norms and willingness (or lack thereof) to leverage their power in mitigating underlying and emerging mining contradictions. My specific objectives were to understand; for OWMs, what it is like to face gendered mining inequalities despite having a 'sister' in a privileged position within the Gold-mine who can facilitate change and; for WGOs, the knowledge of their power to facilitate change and the unconditional, sisterly connection with OWMs to leverage this power.

In this paper, I present the pertinent finding(s) of my follow-up study through a poststructural inflected postcolonial feminist conceptualization of gender and gendering as; social realities, social structures and structuring structures in the society, whose de-campaign strategies must involve privileged women miners because they have the ability and the legitimate claim, of socio-economic and political power resources to intervene in their own lives and that of others. For WGOs, I posit that their power and legitimacy to play a vanguard role in degendering the ASGM sector are often undercut by lacking sisterly camaraderie. This position informs my analysis of 'strategic sisterhood' as a missing political solidarity tool and power resource for degendering the ASGM sector.

The paper proceeds as follows: the second part provides literature review of the ASM sector globally, focusing on the themes of gendered mining, degendering, and the direct role of women in anti-mining inequality actions. The third part highlights the methods used in the study. The fourth part presents findings of the study and discusses them under the thematic areas of [strategic] sisterhood as a political solidarity tool for women in emancipatory struggles, the notion of solidarity and power resources in political action and the strategic role of WGOs in degendering the ASGM sector. Discussions under these themes are premised on the political standpoint that, even though structural powers such as patriarchy offer a hegemonic hindrance to women's employment outcomes particularly in the informal sector, they can still be stalled when privileged women in the sector develop strategies to improve the collective position of women.[7] The last part concludes.

II. Literature Review
Gender and gendering in the ASM Sector

The concept of gender is broadly defined as the social construction of roles, identities and relationships based on the sex of an individual, with the female sex constantly occurring as the most subordinated.[8'9] For postcolonial feminists however, gender is defined as 'a structuring social relation, intersecting with other social inequalities, but that can also be read off from the configurations that different societies take.'[10] Based on this definition; societal roles, identities, classes and relationships which are traditionally viewed as outcomes of unequal gender relations can also be interpreted as sources of inequality, in which case gender-based domination becomes self-sustaining. Gendering thus comprises ways through which gender manifests hierarchically in the society to create inequalities, including how those inequalities intersect with other inequalities to magnify positions of precarity for women.[10] It can also be defined as a lens through which social inequalities and power relations are interpreted first, as social realities and second, as frameworks that shape some of the 'improvement schemes' put in place to address them.[11] In other words, gendering is an unequal societal structure and structuring social structure.[10,12]

The theme of gendering and how it has manifested in ASGM throughout the history of the sector features prominently in literature as an ontological outcome of patriarchy that leverages male miners' authority to consolidate and wield unequal mining practices such as the restriction of women to less lucrative surface roles and low wages among others.[13'14] According to Eagly and Karau,[15] leveraging of patriarchal relations against women in mining is often influenced by wider societal norms that shape the 'consensual expectations about what men or women ought to do or ideally would do (pg. 574).' For example, the belief that men are physically stronger and thus a good fit for labour-intensive and lucrative underground mining roles is flouted by men to deny women (socially identified as weak beings) an equal opportunity to engage in those roles. Similarly, the characterization of gold mining sites as labour intensive has historically informed the conflation of cultural land rights with mining rights in many mining communities. In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania where cultural land rights still favour men, many women continue to be denied the right to own ASGM sites that

occur sporadically on cultural lands.[16]

Gendering also shapes the way mining narratives and meanings are (re)produced and ascribed to women. For example, myths and beliefs that menstruating women scare gold ores away, or that the gold ore is a woman who gets jealous in the presence of other women; are propagated by men in some mining communities to discourage the entry and participation of women mining.[4] According to Lahiri

Dutt and Macintyre,[17] such macho superstitions socially construct women as inadequate miners whose natural body processes are incompatible with mining activity and their presence in the mines threatens the benefits of mining to the entire community (pg.163). This tendency of othering women as naturally unfit for mining draws from Hegelian dialectics[18] and opens an ideological gender proposition that views the entire ASM sector as a labour space where, women's negative social attributes intersect with real mining challenges to reduce their employment outcomes and livelihoods.[19]

Though scholars like Buss and Rutherford[20] posit that mining norms based on the construction of women as physically unfit for underground digging, create possibilities for more women to partake in surface roles that are perceived as less labour-intensive; this assumption, however, does not elicit the same level of belief that women are, for example, lazy or not daring enough in mining (pg. 24). Consequently, surface roles such as sorting that are dominated by women do not generate the same level of attention in terms of wages and occupational safety because of a mismatch between social narratives that place women in those jobs and the welfare programs that should keep them there.

Furthermore, based on the dual conceptualization of gendering as unequal societal structure and structuring social structure, the restriction of women within poorly remunerated and less protected surface roles shows that gendered mining inequalities are social realities affecting women in the mining sites, but also forms the foundation for subordination of women at the community level. In other words, othering of women miners based on gendered prerogatives often operates hierarchically to shape their precarity inside the mines but can also be a lens through which to understand power relations outside them. In Western Kenya for example, those who own mining machinery such as compressors are dominant, including over men who mostly engage in ore sorting. Similarly, women who have broken the glass ceiling by acquiring gold-mine shafts and machinery also dominate OWMs, including male sorters. In gold mines like Osiri-Matanda and Rongo-Kopuodho, very aggressive and successful women miners are sometimes referred to as *nati,* a masculine Swahili word which loosely translates to 'tomboy.' The use of the word 'tomboy' semantically offers male miners with a gendered alternative of expressing the femininity of aggressive and successful women miners without losing their socially constructed identity as unfit for lucrative, physical labour. Besides, it confirms that discomfort with women's physical aggression and success outside the home still exists and that gender essentialism 'continue to impact perceptions about traits linked to men and women.'[21]

For some scholars (see [22,23]) the empowerment of women especially in highly gendered workplaces sometimes creates a form of gendering driven by women who have successfully found comfort in a man's dominion (pg.12). This comfort constitutes the irony of sisterhood, otherwise known as the Mean Girl Syndrome (MGS). MGS is defined as the tendency of women to undercut each other's opportunities either as a competitive strategy for personal growth or a way of obtaining acceptance and approval from male colleagues. Accordingly, whenever women mine leaders act in ways that sustain gendered mining meanings, beliefs, and norms about male miners as superior, or deliberately refuse to support the welfare of OWMs; they partake in mine-gendering. As alluded to by some respondents during my thesis research, many women attribute their socio-economic precarities in mining to the lack of a helper or god-father in the mine. Post-structurally, the existence of a woman who, ordinarily, can act to improve the position of other women but does nothing either because of her lackluster attitude towards the welfare of other women or conformity to existing patriarchal norms, partake in gendering.[24] In other words, privileged but mean women are essentially 'victims themselves who have been socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo' (ibid. pg. 127).

Degendering of gendered ASM and the role of women

Based on the post-colonial feminist proposition on gender and gendering discussed above, de gendering entails strategic interventions that seek to mitigate power differentials, social structures, identities, norms and beliefs that individually and collectively (re)produce gendered inequalities.[25,26] In ASGM just like other informal sectors, the central objective of degendering is to dissociate labour from its association with patriarchy. This entails the implementation of specific strategies such as the de conflation of mining rights with cultural land rights, promoting equal remuneration for similar work or work of equal value and, mitigating the social construction of women as naturally unfit for mining labour among others.[1,27] Moreover, in the context of the Mean Girl Syndrome in ASGM, degendering also includes a structural analysis of the contribution of mean women miners to male authority in the sector. Such an analysis entails an acknowledgement of gendered mining as common oppression to all women and the development of strategies to mitigate it. In other words,

even though broken glass ceilings in ASM should excite feminists as a positive outcome of a decades-long struggle to emancipate women in the sector, the potential risk of some women miners colluding with male miners to frustrate other women miners should not be assumed within an overall analysis of gendered mining and its improvement schemes.

Globally, many attempts continue to be made to de-gender the ASM sector. Majority of these attempts are linked to institutionalized fixes such as the promulgation of gender-neutral mining laws e.g. the Mining ACT of Kenya 2016 among others.[28] However, in recent years, other forms of interventions have been linked to eco-feminist and political ecology, involving Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and women's direct opposition against unequal mining following the failed promise of institutionalized fixes.[29] Studies on the direct involvement of women in opposition politics of mining show that women not only organize in response to gendered mining, but also to challenge patriarchal dynamics within policy frameworks.[29] In some cases, women have also challenged their absence during consultations with investors, including the consideration that mining labour in its current gendered and neoliberal form, does not compensate for its negative impacts on miners' livelihoods and the environment. Instead, it widens the socio-economic gap between men and women and further between labour, capital and nature. In this regard, women involved in anti-mining inequality actions do not simply seek to improve their welfare in the sector, but rather, perceive their involvement as an act of care for life and a direct pathway to socio-ecological transformation.[30,31.]

Moreover, some women have also framed traditionally assigned gender roles and motherhood as part of their activism.[32,33] In Guatemala for example, women from the mountains of Xalapán stood up against mining by linking their daily struggles to defend land with the defense of their bodies as the first "territory" that mining threatened. They developed the concept of 'Territorio Cuerpo-Tierra' to highlight the consubstantiality of mining labour, womanhood and nature.[34,35] This consubstantiality draws on an essentialist notion of femininity that conceives social, economic, political and ecological mining inequalities as threats to women's wellness and closer proximity to nature.[36,37] Such essentialist claims, when used in mining opposition politics, are often symbolic and strategic rather than a reinforcement of existing social constructs that view women as physically unfit for mining.[38,39] For example, Venus et. al[29] found out that women involved in anti-mining movements globally, more often perceive mining inequalities as intersecting with unpaid care work to worsen the socio-economic precarity of female miners. Women reviewed by the authors in their work (Peruvian Shipibo leader Juana Payaba Cachique, Eunice Mampa from South Africa and Estela Reyes from Guatemala among others) all had a direct role in mobilizing their communities to block mining companies from promoting unequal mining practices. Similarly, despite the invisibility of women in mining advocacies in East Africa, studies have shown the willingness of women to partake in degendering activities in some areas. During my thesis fieldwork, some women representatives of informal mining unions recognized the need for more women to be involved in decision making.[1]

Essentially, as patriarchy continues to structure mining globally, women ought to question the invisible hands of the patriarchy at all levels of mining labour.[29] An overriding poststructural thesis is that elite women situated in the ASM sector play an indispensable role in reducing underlying and emerging mining contradictions because of the legitimacy that their position (as leaders) and mining lived experiences grant them to intervene for themselves and other women.[40,41] As I discuss in the next section, for WGOs, this legitimacy draws from a combination of their positional power as shaft owners, the knowledge of gendered mining practices as common oppression to all women miners and, the sisterly connection with other women miners to bring change. In other words, beyond existing legal safeguards to women's direct involvement in anti-mining actions such as the freedom of association and protection of the right to organize,[42,43] the success of women-led ASM degendering rest squarely on their solidarity and mutuality of interest and support against patriarchal mining. I hold the opinion that solidarity that draws from kinship bonds between women (as sisters) when facing real, common oppression, post structurally, is stronger than individual profit tendencies. This in turn can be the motivation for WGOs to trade-off some temporal privileges and lead a degendering agenda.

III. Methods

Data used in this paper were collected as a follow-up study to my 2019 thesis finding.[1] The data represents interviews conducted between June and August 2023 from a total of 50 women working in five gold-mine shafts owned by women in four artisanal gold mining sites in Nyatike Sub-county, Western Kenya. The sites included Osiri-Matanda, Mikei-Kakula, Macalder Copper and Nyatuoro Kowuonda.

The women were organized into 8 focus groups, each comprising 5-7 members and interviewed following a Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) method. Additionally, 5 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were done for women gold shaft owners across the four sites. The FGDs and KIIs were guided by two research questions (respectively):What are OMWs experiences on the role of WGOs in influencing women's mobility to lucrative mining roles, equal pay for similar work as those done by men and non-discriminatory safety measures? And how do WGOs themselves perceive their role on these issues? The choice of FGDs and KIIs

followed from their compatibility with the ethics and politics of feminism and the flexibility that they offer in studying women. Emerging data were transcribed axially and interpreted following literature reviewed on gendered ASM, degendering and the role of women in opposition politics of mining.

IV. Results And Discussion

The women interviewed responded on their experiences regarding the role of WGOs in promoting equal mining practices in three areas: hiring willing women in lucrative roles such as pulleying and drilling that are traditionally dominated by men, promoting equal wages for women and men doing similar jobs and implementing standard safety measures. Most OWMs interviewed reported a general unwillingness of WGOs to impact on the three areas positively. In terms of hiring willing women in lucrative roles, the majority of women responded in what can be paraphrased as 'WGOs' meanness to hire women in lucrative mining roles.' Some of them also noted that the continued deployment of more men in lucrative roles like drilling is a norm that is difficult to change in all informal mines in the region because those jobs are labour-intensive and time-consuming; and women are considered as physically weak and spend most of their time doing family chores. Most WGOs reiterated this observation, however, some added that though the decision to engage willing women in such roles rests squarely on them as shaft owners, in principle, the presence of women within the spaces where they are done discomforts male miners. This is because most men in the region still believe that the gold ore is female in nature, thus is scared away in the presence of other women out of jealousy. One stated:

'…about hiring women as drillers or diggers; there are many things that can be said, but I don't even think they have the energy and time needed to drill or dig. Even if they do, a lot of diggers would not want to mix with them in the underground spaces where they want to tell their own stories while working…some even think women scare the gold away. They say that the gold is also a woman who is jealous just like the first wife.'

In terms of promoting equal wages for women and men doing similar roles, OWMs began by highlighting that men are paid better than women especially in surface roles. For example, male sorters are paid an average of Ksh. 400 per bag while female sorters are paid an average of Kshs. 250 per bag. Ironically, the majority of OWMs and WGOs noted that changing this pay gap is challenging for all shaft owners because most surface workers are hired directly by diggers and drillers after ore-sharing has been done. Presumably, shaft owners can only determine wages in roles where they are directly involved in hiring. Nonetheless, some OWMs noted that leveling the pay gap between surface workers is still possible for (willing) shaft owners; for example, by reaching minimum wage agreement with diggers and drillers as part of a requirement to be hired. One OWM noted:

'If shaft owners want to ensure that sorters or crushers working in their shafts are all paid well, they can simply put up a payment condition that every digger must agree to before being hired…but I know they cannot do that because they don't want to.'

Lasty, in terms of implementing standard occupational safety measures in underground and surface mine spaces, most OWMs reported that mine surface spaces are often eschewed by most shaft owners. They added that shaft owners tend to give more attention to the safety of underground walls because they perceive them as prone to fatal accidents. This practice leaves the responsibility of surface safety to women because they are concentrated in those spaces. Majority of WGOs interviewed confirmed this statement, further noting that even men working on mine surfaces are expected to provide their own protective gears. However, for one WGO in Osiri Matanda, non-standard safety measures in the mines are often driven by shaft owners' need to retain male diggers by ensuring safe underground spaces. She noted:

'…accidents happen everywhere in the mine. The mine is a dangerous place from all corners, but to be honest, I concentrate on wall reinforcements because no digger will want to work in my shaft if I don't do this…and I need to keep them for digging. Women cannot dig like men.'

A critical interpretation of these responses reveals pertinent three issues: one, unwillingness of most WGOs to leverage their power in promoting women's role mobility because of their discretion to conform to superstitions that socially construct women as naturally unfit for lucrative roles. Two, perceptions by most women miners that shaft owners do not have the power to promote wage equality for surface roles even within their shafts. Lastly, the deployment of discriminatory safety measures by WGOs both as a norm and a competitive strategy to entice male miners. More importantly however, considering the social, financial, and political influence that shaft owners have within their shafts, these findings highlight WGOs' missed opportunity and misplaced priority in mitigating gender inequalities, including a general lackluster attitude towards the welfare of ordinary women miners. By choosing to comply to norms and practices that devalue OWMs through a socially constructed unfitness identity, inability to develop strategies that can circumvent equal wage challenges for women doing surface roles and,using safety measures as an enticement for male labour—WGOs contribute to the (re)production of patriarchal relations within their shafts and the entire ASM sector.

As has been alluded in the analysis of the irony between female leadership and empowerment, women miners' deliberate actions that undercut the mining outcomes and general welfare of other women miners as a strategy for competition and personal growth constitute the Mean Girl Syndrome (MGS).[22,23] MGS also contributes to the othering of ordinary women miners and their spaces of work as the 'alternative other' because of the dialectical comparison of status and capital it triggers amongst women. Though Rutherford and Chemane[20] posit that othering of women by excluding them from underground mining activities offers opportunities for more women to partake in surface roles; the OWMs interviewed did not acknowledge their concentration in mine surfaces as offering superior or equal employment outcomes as those of men in underground spaces. Moreover, the unwillingness of WGOs 'to help a sister' as was mentioned by most OWMs show that women engaged in surface roles do not view their concentration in those spaces as providing a strong organizational force to demand improved employment terms. Instead, they perceive WGOs as the most credible change makers if and whenever they are willing to implement pro-women decisions such as payment conditions (for sorters) with diggers and drillers to mitigate unequal remunerative practices for surface miners.

By OWMs relinquishing the 'power to' change to WGOs despite the latter's meanness to them, they acknowledge power differentials that exist in the mine and between women miners, including how this power can be leveraged by shaft owners to improve their position. Furthermore, the emphasis put on the 'willingness' of WGOs in leveraging their power for change, borrows from the Ally model—a framework for intervention in social work which proposes that, for potential social change makers to succeed, they need to transform their abstract interests for change into compassion and empathy for the victims by ideologically questioning class differences that exist between them and the victims and using their newly found homogeneity with the victims to initiate change. Accordingly, women's responses about WGOs 'powerlessness' to improve women's wages and safety, whether real or perceived, are erroneously dismissive of the positional power of women mine leaders to lead the degendering agenda in ASM in two ways: One, they allow men to continue wielding their patriarchal power in capturing most mining benefits including in women-owned shafts.[44] Two, they reinforce the notion that women, even those in leadership, are rarely able to change things, and those who can still do not think of themselves as credible change makers. Bell Hooks[24] portends that whenever women are unable to question workplace contradictions by conforming to social norms, they end up perpetuating the male supremacist ideology that women are natural enemies of themselves and therefore, cannot achieve socio-economic and political empowerment by bonding amongst themselves (pg.127).

Bell Hooks'[24] position on the irony between women leadership and women empowerment also re-affirms the critique of sisterhood as a myth despite evidence that women's solidarity especially in highly gendered workplaces like can leverages their opposition against gendered labour practices and other social injustices. This means that, though lacking solidarity among OWMs and WGOs as 'sisters' cannot fully explain the (re)production of patriarchy in the ASGM sector, it shows the underlying psychosocial limitation among women miners in mitigating it. As highlighted by discussions on the MGS,[23] this psychosocial limitation brings forth the complexities in nurturing sisterhood as a political solidarity tool and power resource in highly gendered workplaces where men draw on social norms and beliefs to acquire opportunities unfairly and sometimes wield brotherly kinship ties to consolidate their authority. Thus, based on the implications of the study findings within the framework of women's direct contribution to degendering, discussions on the ability of WGOs to lead the agenda to de-gender ASGM needs an analysis of [strategic] sisterhood ethos as an antidote to MGS.

Strategic Sisterhood As A Political Solidarity Tool For Degendering

Sisterhood, the metaphor of kinship for women, is defined as an egalitarian and unconditional bonding between women as kins. The concept has been proposed by some feminists as the source of psychological bonding that women need in building solidarity during liberation struggles against sexist domination.[45,46] Like the Ally model that fosters empathy for social workers and motivates them to act in favour of victims as metaphorical kins, sisterhood leverages group identities among women by combating their personal biases towards each other and making them aware of how their experiences with privilege impact the way they see the world and, in turn, the places they work and the women they work with.[47] For WGOs who are both victims of the first tire othering (by male miners) as unfit for mining and; villains of the second tire othering of OWMs as the 'alternative other,' sisterhood can form the basis through which they ideologically question their role in (re)producing gender inequalities in the sector. This questioning connotes the process of degendering because it envisages the development of class consciousness that views patriarchal mining relations as common oppression to all women. In Marxists terms, class consciousness helps workers to collectively acknowledge the proletariat position they occupy within an alienative production system and the solidarity that they need to 'impose upon them a common fate'[48] (pg.1).

Based on an academy of the history of feminist movements beginning from the gender wars of the 70s, the application of sisterhood as a solidarity tool has over the years enabled women to partake in wider political

campaigns driven by an identity spirit of 'us versus them' and the political-Lutheran slogan 'no one is free until we are all free.' Most of these campaigns, however, have involved women who are not in contact with each other but are bound by mutuality of interests and support for a common course. Accordingly, sisterhood has not been viewed as a forte women should struggle to achieve. Instead, it is a reflexive, unconditional behaviour driven by class knowledge of patriarchy as common oppression to all women.[24] Yet, with all the excitement over an apparent age of a politically conscious and united woman, the application of sisterhood in fostering solidarity among women has faced sharp criticism over the years. For some feminists,[24,49] the idea of common oppression for geographically dispersed women is abstract and does not fully reflect internal class conflicts among women in contact with each other. Scholars like alexander-flood [50] reckon that internal competition increases when women are exposed to similar employment conditions. This competition often makes women develop various survival tactics like the MGS that undermine their relationship with other women and the political vision of sisterhood.

More recently, some feminists have attempted to resolve the misrepresentation of women's consensus regarding their workplace realities. This has led to the imagination of some proactive concepts of sisterhood such as [shared sisterhood][51] and [strategic sisterhood][52] with the aim of preserving the political vision of sisterhood without eschewing an analysis of women's workplace differences and internal class conflicts. Though some feminists still feel that the political vision of sisterhood even with the lens of its proactive versions does not guarantee significant positive gains in fighting patriarchy given the complexity of class differences among women, abandoning the idea of sisterhood altogether weakens feminist movement and its vision of equality.[24] In this regard, the hope that sustains sisterhood both as an ideology and a rights-fulfilling tool for women in highly gendered spaces is that, women, if properly educated on how the politics of patriarchy works and, how it is difficult for men to problematize their own domination, can acknowledge and repudiate internal class differences for a common course.

'Strategic sisterhood' that I adopt as a political solidarity tool and Power Resource in this paper, entails solidarity actions initiated by seemingly moderate women who are willing to use their own economic, political and social influence to push for pro-women opportunities out of the realization that scarce resources, if left to the manipulation of market forces and social structures, will be acquired mostly by men. For the proponents of strategic sisterhood,[52] though every woman is expected to show her commitment to the welfare and solidarity of women, post-structurally, women leaders bear the biggest responsibility in nurturing positive sisterhood ethos because of their positional power as well as the legitimacy that lived gender experience offers them in changing their own lives and that of other women.[42] In other words, 'strategic sisterhood' operates beyond women's gut-familiarity with each other by triggering all women to ask themselves the question 'what did I do to shift the culture around certain women's issues as real social issues?[52] (pg. 62). As I discuss in the next section, for WGOs, answers to this question entails two Foucauldian steps. First, an archeology of sisterly powers that draws from personal retrospection to understand how conformity to existing mining norms and general ineptitude towards women issues undermine the conviction to promote degendering. Second, the genealogy of these convictions into strategic acts of compassion towards OWMs.[53]

The notion of solidarity and power resource in political action
In the last decades, a consensus has emerged among trade unionists that organized labour is not solely at the discretion of global capital and other dominant social forces like patriarchy but can act strategically to improve its position.[7] Based on this consensus, a new body of research called Labour Revitalisation Studies (LRS) emerged in the early 2000s seeking to map the kinds of Power Resources (PR) at the disposal of organized labour in making strategic choices. Since then, PR heuristics such as associational power,[54] structural power,[55] and societal power[56] among others have been developed to revitalize workers' solidarity and strategies for political action against labour and environmental injustices. The PR conceptual framework acknowledges that trade union/Gramcian resistance tactics, either of position or maneuver, rely fundamentally on numbers and strategies.[57] On one hand, political solidarity ensures that workers with mutual interests come together to mobilize resources for action against social injustices out of the belief that what affects one of them affects all of them. On the other hand, solidarity is a form of strategic power. PR can thus be defined as both a solidarity tool and a strategy for organized workers' resistance against socio-economic and ecological injustices.[7]

However, the conceptualization of PRs as political tools for organized resistance does not necessarily mean that they can only be applied within formal labour contexts where workers are already organized. Instead, it means that workers' organization and solidarity are precedents of political power and action. A fundamental notion of power is that it exists in nearly all forms of non-egalitarian relationships either in organized (tapped) or unorganized (untapped) forms. In other words, PRs can still be applied even within informal labour contexts like ASGM where workers are actively seeking emancipation, if those workers are able to foster mutuality of interest and support. This contextual generalizability of PRs derives from Marx Weber's definition of power as 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his or her own will

despite resistance.'[58] For women in highly gendered work like ASGM, mutuality of interest and support against gendered mining inequalities draw from their kinship ties with each other (as sisters) and, their knowledge of gendering as common oppression to all women. The solidarity of women arising from these two factors leads to an archeology of sisterly powers underpinned by positive sisterhood ethos and the genealogy of these powers into strategic actions against patriarchal mining imperatives.

PRs, nonetheless, does not necessarily imply the desire of organizers to overthrow existing social structures or even establish new ones, but rather the power to assert their own interests within existing ones. This Weberian notion of 'power to' is founded on the political premise that, even though structural powers like capitalism and patriarchy that (re)produce inequalities have remained hegemonic because of their embeddedness in society, their subordinative imperatives can still be stalled when workers act strategically and in solidarity. An archeology of sisterly powers in ASGM requires that privileged women acknowledge both real and perceived internal class differences that exist between them and OWMs and, develop strategies to repudiate them. This process helps women miners to tap the 'untapped' or organize the 'unorganized' powers for action through solidarity building and the creation of negative rhetoric against gendering. Ontologically, political solidarity for women in highly unequal labour manifests as an intersection of women's mutuality of interest and support to fight gendering and the political conviction to act. Solidarity for women seeking emancipation also leverages their power against brotherhood as an extra-patriarchal tool for men's domination.

Degendering the ASGM sector: the strategic role of women gold-mine shaft owners

In ASGM where women's labour is either not yet organized or undercut by patriarchy and brotherhood, fostering solidarity to fight gendered mining requires class consciousness that draws from women's knowledge of patriarchal mining as common oppression to all women. Achieving this class consciousness requires WGOs to act as 'big sisters' in galvanizing OWMs around specific pro-women mining activities. However, WGOs need, first, to strengthen the bond between themselves and OWMs through random acts of camaraderie and second, to promote negative rhetoric against male miners' dominance in mining. The role of WGOs as 'big sisters' in this context relies massively on their economic power to fund pro-women activities within their shafts without depleting core operational capital, and political power to vouch for the welfare of women miners in other shafts. These two power sources should be applied strategically, rather than as a reinforcement of the class differences that exist between WGOs and OWMs. Post-structurally, political solidarity that draws from an unconditional bonding of the oppressed supersedes individual profit tendencies of some members of the oppressed class that may undermine mutuality of interest in solidarity building. This means that, WGOs, if well informed of their positional power as shaft owners to bring change particularly within their shafts, can temporarily forgo some of their profits and privileges to embark on seeking mining equality as the ultimate prerogative that enables all women to realize their full mining potential.

Like the findings of the follow-up study have shown, OWMs are not able to initiate and sustain opposition politics against gendering in the ASGM sector because surface roles that they dominate do not generate sufficient economic and organizational power needed in fostering solidarity. Moreover, they do not perceive themselves as credible change makers both within the mines and at the community level. Women miners' solidarity thus draws from strategic sisterhood that is fostered by WGOs. And while strategic sisterhood borders on associational power as outlined by Wright [55] and Silver,[56] it differs from it in one aspect. OWMs' safeguards to direct opposition against inequalities e.g. the freedom of association and the right to organize that leverages associational power, are not guaranteed in informal mining employment because of desperation for employment among women. Besides, mainstream surveillance of informal sectors regarding compliance to national and global labour laws is limited.

Strategic sisterhood manifested by WGOs through deliberate engagement of OWMs in lucrative mining roles, equal payment and the provision of better safety measures in surface roles, constitute a bottom-up approach to political action against gendered inequalities in ASGM. The rationale for this approach is that privileged women situated within the sector, despite their erroneous self-assessment as illegitimate change makers, realize that they are legitimate change makers given their lived mining experiences, socio-economic and political power resources and, the potent of 'strategic sisterhood' in uniting women miners. Besides, the direct participation of women in mining opposition politics provides an alternative fix to bureaucratic labour advocacies that sometimes reduce incentives to organize.[59]

However, it is also imperative to note that positive 'strategic sisterhood' ethos that is limited to a single or few women-owned shafts may not completely destroy unequal mining structures given the embeddedness of patriarchy in the ASM sector and the challenges of managing political solidarity among women. Instead, it precedes strategic actions involving more WGOs, shafts, mining sites, institutionalized actors like CSOs and wider political projects on gender equality. Traditionally, CSOs act as 'bridge-builders' to wider opposition politics against labour and ecological injustices.[60] The 'big sister' role that is played by WGOs in fostering 'strategic sisterhood' ethos metaphorically mirrors the bridge-building role that CSOs play in

advocacy.

Like LRS scholars have posited, any political action that requires mobilization of numbers and strategies, needs from its inception, an individual or group of individuals who feel an altruistic need for political solidarity before that solidarity is transformed into strategic actions for change. The conceptualization of 'strategic sisterhood' as a solidarity tool in this paper, including its prospects in improving women's mining wages, role mobility and occupational safety affirms that, sisterhood if applied strategically can become the power resource for women in ASGM. In other words, 'strategic sisterhood' transforms the bourgeois position of WGOs from being a threat to OWMs, into a force that offers them the much-needed direct political power to oppose gendered mining. 'Strategic sisterhood' is thus a practical tool that can connect women miners and collectively improve their position at work. It is also an ideological framework that offers pathways in solving the long-standing impasse among feminists regarding the political claims of diversity among women and the political need for them to unite against sexist domination (Lyshaug, 2006) [61].

V. Conclusion

This paper began by discussing gendered mining and degendering through a poststructural inflected postcolonial feminist approach. It further highlighted existing literature on direct women actions and ideologies against mining inequalities. Alluding to qualitative evidence showing WGOs' conformity to social mining norms, missed opportunities and misplaced priorities in degendering mining wages, spaces and safety in four artisanal gold mines in Nyatike Sub- County; it proceeded to call for women miners to unite through positive 'strategic sisterhood' ethos in providing an alternative fix to gendering in Kenya. The two steps presented for this fix include: first, an archeology of sisterly powers driven by kinship bonds among women as sisters and the political awareness of male gendered mining as common oppression to all women. Second, the genealogy of sisterly powers to more routine actions of change. The 'big sister' role of WGOs in initiating and sustaining these steps rests on their positional power that leverages social, economic and political influence in promoting pro-women practice within their shafts and beyond. Leveraging this positional power has further been argued to entail an ideological questioning of how conformity to unequal mining norms, misplaced priorities and missed opportunities particularly by privileged women miners endanger the wellbeing of other ordinary women. In conclusion, in the entire ASM sector and specifically in ASGM, strategic sisterhood can transform abstract kinship foundations among women into more strategic power resources for resistance against gendered mining norms and practices. The paper has also affirmed the view of some feminist scholars that sisterhood, despite its abstract definition, is still a viable solidarity tool for women seeking emancipation if applied strategically.

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