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Women and Children Bear the Brunt of Mine Closures and Gender Injustice

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The mental trauma that women and children experience when mining companies shut down is a challenge that is seldomly recognised nor addressed. This affects mining communities severely and the law does not protect these communities from the repercussions of mine closures.

Mine closures leave women and children vulnerable, as abandoned shafts become hotspots for illegal activities. The negative environmental impact of unrehabilitated mine dumps (tailings) leads to increased illnesses among children. Women as primary caregivers are burdened with the additional stress of caring for sick children. Furthermore, mine closures often result in the loss of basic services such as water, electricity, security, and healthcare facilities.

In many households, women are the primary breadwinners. They often don't have a source of income and face dire circumstances that affects their wellbeing. Abandoned mining communities attract artisanal miners who take advantage of the socio-economic vulnerabilities of women and often rent rooms and later emit various forms of abuse to these women. The absence of support from the government and the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) exacerbates the abuse faced by women in these communities.

The challenges that women face interconnects in many ways. Unemployment is a significant issue, exacerbated by companies that refuse to hire women, leaving them vulnerable and desperate. In some communities surrounded by mines, women are either employed in minimal numbers or forced to endure exploitation, such as being coerced into sexual favours for employment. Those left unemployed often turn to sex work to support their families, only to face rape which they cannot report to the police and exposed to further health issues such as STIs, HIV and AIDS. The stress of these conditions leads to substance abuse and suicidal thoughts. Women's rights are often violated and they do not receive the same opportunities or treatment as men. Even securing promotions is a struggle.

Reflecting on a personal experience, Lettie Nkele Komane, the coordinator for Women Affected by Mining United in Action (WAMUA) Rabokala branch in Brits, North West, said on the 09 August last year, her cousin's daughter was brutally beaten by her ex-boyfriend. The trauma she endured was severe. After visiting the clinic and being transferred to the hospital, they went to the police station to open a case of assault. Despite being assured that the case was opened, they did not receive any follow-up for two days. Upon returning to the police station, they discovered that the initial officer had not registered the case. This repeated failure by the police to act highlights the lack of safety and justice for women. "We, as women demand that justice must be served," said Komane.

Our call as women in mining communities must be acknowledged and addressed. On this Women's Day, we call for immediate action to protect and empower women, ensure justice and changes to the MPRDA to create equitable employment and development opportunities for women. We stand united in our demand for gender justice and the recognition of the unique challenges that women face. It is time for our voices to be heard and for tangible changes to be made.

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