Gendered social media communication around mining: patriarchy, diamonds, and seeking feminist solidarity online

Juliet Gudhlanga and Samuel J. Spiegel

ABSTRACT
Although it is increasingly well-known that mining generates a vast array of gendered impacts, less studied is how women in mining zones have turned to online social media to articulate concerns and mobilise for collective action. This article explores how gendered social media communication has conveyed injustices experienced by women in Zimbabwe’s diamond-mining areas and produced spaces of feminist solidarity in navigating structural violence, offering mutual support, and sharing daily developments and strategic initiatives. While Zimbabwe’s diamond-mining controversies have transformed over the years, communication online has continued to occur under the gaze of online state surveillance, and online spaces are never risk-free spaces. Seeking equitable development and inserting into politically sensitive topics, sensibilities of ‘online’ community-building have been different across a range of contexts and for different people. We explore communication online, bringing together discussions of gender-focused critiques of mining megaprojects, state violence, and feminist research in online spaces.

KEYWORDS
Gender; extractive industries; social media; structural violence; Africa

CONTACT
Samuel J. Spiegel sam.spiegel@ed.ac.uk

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Aunque cada vez es más conocido que la minería provoca una amplia gama de impactos de género, se sabe menos sobre cómo las mujeres de las zonas mineras recurren a los medios sociales en línea para difundir sus preocupaciones y movilizarse para la acción colectiva. Este artículo examina cómo la comunicación basada en el género presente en los medios sociales da cuenta de las injusticias experimentadas por las mujeres en las zonas mineras de diamantes de Zimbabwe, al mismo tiempo que produce espacios de solidaridad feminista que permiten sortear la violencia estructural, ofreciendo apoyo mutuo y compartiendo acontecimientos diarios e iniciativas estrategicas. Si bien las controversias sobre la minería de diamantes en Zimbabwe se han ido transformando a lo largo de los años, la comunicación en línea sigue produciéndose bajo la mirada de la vigilancia estatal virtual. Ello significa que los espacios en línea nunca están libres de riesgos. Buscando un desarrollo equitativo e insertándose en temas políticamente delicados, las sensibilidades resultantes de la construcción de comunidades “en línea” han sido diferentes en distintos contextos y para diferentes personas. Por esta razón, realizamos un análisis de la comunicación en línea, reuniendo para ello diversos diálogos sobre las críticas de género a los megaproyectos mineros, la violencia estatal y la investigación feminista en los espacios en línea.

Introduction

Capitalist expansion in resource-rich regions across the world continues to produce profound gender-specific impacts that are not always fully recognised as such. Despite growing acknowledgement by global policymakers that conflict commodities and sexual violence are linked (Buss 2018), reports from NGOs and government agencies have tended not to provide substantial detail on gender-specific experiences and perceptions in regards to mining (Sinclair 2021). Responding to the need for a critical feminist lens in exploring experiences in mining areas (Lahiri-Dutt 2015), past writings in this journal have drawn attention to extractive industries ‘as sites of supernormal profits and supernormal patriarchy’ (Bradshaw et al. 2017), examining pervasive yet sometimes-subtle influences of extractive capital in social milieus shaped heavily by patriarchal power structures. Scholars addressing anti-mining resistance have also argued that not only are women disproportionately affected by extractive development, but that activist strategies adopted by women are often different from strategies adopted by men and deeply rooted in gendered experiences as women (Deonandan et al. 2017). Indeed, attention has been drawn to the need for deeper understandings of the changing nature of women’s resilience and how this intersects with vulnerabilities amid changing circumstances of extractivist violence (Jenkins and Rondón 2015). The WoMin Collective (2017) provided a powerful example of consent1 claimed through struggle and contestation of titanium mining in South Africa. To further contribute to understandings of women’s strategies with respect to extractive struggles, we focus on responses to mining in Zimbabwe, where the discovery of new diamond deposits in the 2000s attracted considerable global interest and prompted a myriad of new challenges that have been highly gendered, with violence against women and girls intimately bound with diverse injustices.
Scholarly writing on diamond mining in Zimbabwe has addressed contentious issues such as the forceful displacement of artisanal mining to clear the way for large-scale mining (Spiegel 2015), unjust relocation processes and situations (Hwami et al. 2018; Madebwe et al. 2011; Muchadenyika 2015), and the roles and influences of state military operations (Muchadenyika 2015; Saunders and Nyamunda 2016; Nyota and Sibanda 2012; Saunders 2014), as well as poor health and commercial sex work (Andreadis et al. 2012; Busza et al. 2014). Nonetheless, in Zimbabwe and globally, in-depth analyses of the gendered impacts of diamond-mining developments have remained sparse, with the roles, concerns, strategies, and communication modalities of women in response to the impacts of mining particularly under-studied (Horowitz 2017; Jenkins 2014). In this article, we reflect on how social media communication has been embraced by women in conveying, and mobilising around, injustices in contexts of unfolding structural violence within diamond-mining impacted communities in Eastern Zimbabwe. We discuss struggles in Marange, Zimbabwe’s most lucrative diamond-mining zone, where past work has expressed the concern that women are portrayed too often as passive victims (Moyo 2011; Muchadenyika 2015). We expand on some of the ways in which the oppression of women is entrenched in patriarchal systems, where concerns of women and their roles as active participants in development have routinely gone unheeded (Muchadenyika 2015; Nyamunda and Mukwambo 2012; Saunders and Nyamunda 2016).

Feminist struggles against mining worldwide have offered insights into how capitalist production perpetuates class, racialised, and gendered restructuring of social relations, and violent, embodied effects, manifesting – among other effects – in the frequent disproportionate exposure of women to severe impacts from extraction but also, simultaneously, treatment of women in stereotyped narratives that obscure heterogeneous identities, inequalities, and relationships (Horowitz 2017; Lahiri-Dutt 2012). The emergence of online spaces as new areas of protest, involving diversely positioned actors, has brought growing attention to changing possibilities of digital activism but also to how the ‘making of digital subjects’ (Elwood and Leszczynski 2018) is inflected by class disparities and other social differences. In Zimbabwe, as women impacted by diamond mining have used social media for mobilisation, advocacy, reporting, and strengthening community voices on diamond-sector governance and resistance, we draw attention to the diversity and nuances of these approaches. Spaces of online feminist activism can be avenues for encountering social connections, as well as social differences and power imbalances (Morrow et al. 2015; Ott 2018; Portwood-Stacer and Berridge 2014). Our research was aimed at examining how social media has provided not only ‘data’ through telling stories of Chiadzwa women from a participatory viewpoint, but also to forge a sense of community in a virtual space; we also explore some of the limitations of online activism in this milieu.

The research interest driving this work centred on asking how women in Marange (Chiadzwa) have been affected by the transitions and operation of diamond extraction and how social media has been used to adapt, share experiences, and build solidarity. Observing and recording transitions in community activism attributable at least in part to increased use of social media in a period between 2017 and 2021, the article
embraces a narrative analysis of the personal experiences of women impacted by diamond mining in Eastern Zimbabwe, including efforts to lobby and advocate with and for women in repressive circumstances. The section below sets the scene for this exploration, briefly outlining the macro-economic structural issues of the Zimbabwean diamond industry that serve to rob Zimbabwe of needed revenue and underlie the oppressions it brings. It also introduces the growing use of social media in Zimbabwe as a tool for social expression, and describes the research context and process adopted for this study. The third section analyses what emerged from unravelling how social media served as a form of expression and facilitated gendered social media reporting around diamonds in Chiadzwa. The fourth section discusses the interlinked online and offline diamond-related activism that emerged, exploring the social impact and government responses, and the final section draws out some final thoughts that can be generalised from this study.

**Setting the scene: background and research approach**

Recent literature has called for more attention to primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession in feminist extractive sector-focused research (Sinclair 2021). Zimbabwe is a powerful case study for why this argument is indeed fundamental. On 21 February 2017, the former president of Zimbabwe announced that US$15 billion had been plundered from the country, pointing to gaps in data particularly from within Zimbabwean diamond-extraction companies. Public debate around Zimbabwe’s mining sector has since increasingly placed the issue of Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) at the centre of controversies. In Zimbabwe, the top five companies in terms of failure to repatriate finances derived from Zimbabwe’s resources are all in the mining sector, four of them diamond-mining companies. Within the diamond sector, considered the most susceptible to such practices (RBZ Report 2018), four diamond-mining companies were recorded as having externalised US$111,425,531 through non-repatriation of export proceeds. Capital flight in diamond mining in Zimbabwe also increased due to use of bond notes which created panic and precariousness. This figure (US$15 billion) is widely believed to be considerably undervalued as it ignores criminal activities such as smuggling, corruption, and components of IFFs that occur daily within the diamond industry.

While narratives that centre on economic plunder and illicit flows often do not attend to the gendered power dynamics at play, they substantiate claims of how kleptocracy and off-budget financing of partisan state security apparatus from Marange diamonds play a key role in political suppression and limiting democratic space in Zimbabwe (Gukurume 2017; Maringira and Masiya 2016; Mzaca 2012), including infiltrating traditionally civilian domains within and beyond extractive zones. From information about soldiers’ plunder, soldiers’ violence, and water pollution levels to issues of women’s sexual assaults in the diamond-mining areas, information has been highly securitised; data circulation in Chiadzwa have been intercepted by overbearing state securocrats (military, Central Intelligence Organisation, police, and political executives) establishing a hold over the 60,000 hectares of diamond fields following the brutal clampdown since 2008 by the
Zimbabwean national army to capture the diamond fields from over 30,000 artisanal miners operating in the area. Various researchers (Duri 2018; Le Billon and Spiegel 2021; Mangongera 2014; Nyamunda and Mukwambo 2012; Towriss 2013) have explored how the plunder of Marange diamonds was achieved through state brutality, environmental destruction, and economic exclusion of the host community of Marange and ordinary Zimbabweans, with civil society organisations (CSOs) (Maguwu 2011) reporting on how artisanal diamond miners and ordinary villagers were tortured and murdered during this period dubbed operation Hakudzokwi (‘You will not come back’).

Yet, the myriad gendered impacts and gendered struggles around diamond mining in Zimbabwe remain under-studied, the social, health, cultural, and economic nuances of which remain enmeshed in power relations that cross multiple scales. As described by Muchadenyika (2015), entire communities were moved to accommodate mining activities in this region, with the task of cultivating new livelihoods, alongside child-care duties, adding further burdens on women, compounded by the absence of schools and health facilities. Mining effluent from diamond mining has severely polluted water sources, disturbing fishing, and adversely impairing water quality for drinking and washing. In addition to environmental degradation and disruption of the social fabric of communities, migrant miners, leaving behind their families, have engaged girls and women in commercial and transactional sex, often leading to physical and emotional violence. Some children were forced to drop out of school and look for jobs elsewhere. Women have been responding to the negative impacts of mining in various ways, including resistance to unjust mining practices, in some cases with support from civil society (such as Action Aid International Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Association (ZELA)), to engage government stakeholders around their concerns.

Addressing other contexts internationally, research on anti-mining gender struggles is increasingly considering the role of digital platforms in knitting relationships between local and translocal spaces, pointing to a hybrid interconnection between online and offline realms of mobilisation (Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig 2017; Sjöstedt Landén and Fotaki 2018). Past studies in Zimbabwe have meanwhile alluded to how ‘smart’ storytelling through social media can provide useful checks and balances to bolster available reporting in the mining sector (Gukurume 2017; Munier 2016). Social media use in Zimbabwe has indeed been emerging as a way to navigate power and build solidarity amongst the marginalised (Karekwaivanane 2019; Mare 2016). This includes providing an intersectional forum for voices of women whose perspectives have too often been invisible or oversimplified in NGO, government reporting, and mainstream news media. Social media use and reporting is increasingly growing in diamond-mining affected communities and yet the extent to which social media communication around diamonds has impacted on community development and feminist solidarity remains under-documented. The research here seeks to advance a feminist approach embracing qualitative data triangulated from both primary and secondary sources to analyse critically social media interactions around diamond mining.

Cyber ethnography, also referred to as ‘netnography’ (Chiweshe 2017; Kozinets 2010; Mare 2016), was utilised through observing online participation of women’s groups in
Chiadzwa on various social media platforms. The first author utilised networks established during her participation in a CSO’s community data journalism training for extractive communities, organised by ZELA, facilitated to capacitate mining communities in Zimbabwe with social media use skills particularly to vocalise opinions to influence decisions by government and mining companies on management of mineral wealth. This training was held in February 2018 for individuals residing in mining extractive regions of Zimbabwe to strengthen community members on digital community data journalism, including helping participants to create these social media accounts, create groups, and share stories. A new WhatsApp group was established, with community members also assisted with opening Twitter and Facebook accounts. Blogging was also explained, including instruction on how to conduct social media campaigns for advocacy, community development, and solidarity building in mining-impacted communities that make it difficult for government and mining companies to ignore community concerns. Attended by more than 20 women, the training programme laid a strong foundation for research engagement by providing space for listening to participants sharing and reflecting on their experiences. The network established also provided an opportunity to analyse the social media footprints of government ministries, departments and agencies, mining companies, parliament, and local and international CSOs, allowing for improved data reporting, useful in determining ways of engaging these diamond-mining stakeholders and print media through social media. Insights from the first author’s participation in the social media training programme and networks that emerged were combined with an overall understanding of the structural violence underpinning the inequalities in Zimbabwe’s extractive sector based on over 15 years of research by the second author, particularly with respect to the political ecology of artisanal mining in Zimbabwe as well as crackdowns in the diamond-mining sector. This was bolstered by secondary source analysis on emerging trends around feminist solidarity and diamond mining reporting in Zimbabwe.

Social media as a social expression and solidarity building for women in Chiadzwa

Solidarity-driven social media use by women in Chiadzwa

Narratives around use of online spaces in Zimbabwe have focused mainly on social media use as an urbanite movement and political space for male patriarchs (Chiweshe 2017; Gukurume 2017; Mzaca 2012), generally asserting that digital technologies and social networking are largely beyond the reach of impoverished or marginalised communities. While the digital divide is an ongoing concern globally, we observed increased internet use in rural areas of Zimbabwe with mobile phones gaining popularity, as has also been documented elsewhere (POTRAZ Report 2017). Mobile network providers have been promoting internet use by offering affordable data discount packages, e.g. with Econet weekly WhatsApp, Twitter, or Facebook bundles costing equivalent to one US dollar in local currency. In a survey conducted during the first author’s data journalism
training, all the participants stated that they had had knowledge or experience with WhatsApp, although just over half (55 per cent) had used Facebook and less than 5 per cent had used Twitter or blogging. Participants welcomed training in social media as conducive to addressing their quest for meaningful and sustainable inclusion of women in natural resource governance. During the full research period, WhatsApp remained the most dominant source, complemented by Facebook, Twitter, and blogging, depending on the purpose of the communication; this contrasted with observations by others that Facebook is the most preferred platform in Zimbabwe (Chiweshe 2017; Gukurume 2017; Mzaca 2012). Importantly, solidarity was strongly observed amongst the women participating in the training, as participants shared available resources through collectively raising capital with initiatives such as ‘mukando’, a fundraising mechanism allowing women access to capital for business start-ups which has enabled them to buy smart technologies (notwithstanding barriers related to connectivity and reliable electricity – in an economic crisis context where power outages have become commonplace). In Chiadzwa, solidarity was also illustrated by how women share resources to gain internet access to stay abreast with contemporary matters. An example in this regard was shown by one Zimbabwe Consolidated Diamond Company (ZCDC) worker who allowed other women to flock to her house during her off days to access downloads and share mail updates. Following March 2020, COVID-19-imposed restrictions on mobility led to greater reliance on social media as villagers embraced use of online meetings under the mandated lockdown. Civil society programmes were channelled online, leading to more-inclusive participation of women, with some programmes providing support through data reimbursements for participants. One woman explained how the use of social media meetings accommodated many women like her, as her husband did not permit her to leave the confines of their home to go to Harare or Mutare to attend workshops. Thus, social media use within communities was seen to promote greater inclusivity by mitigating individual alienation and challenging patriarchy which fosters domestication of women by relegating them to the confines of the homestead.

**Calling for accountability and combating structural and gender-based violence**

Scholars in other settings have discussed the diversity not only of opportunities and challenges for women in the mining sector, but of the varied gendered attitudes and impacts on gendered relations (Laplonge 2017; Sinclair 2021), including in artisanal and small-scale mining (Buss et al. 2021; Lahiri-Dutt 2018). There is also growing literature on how women suffer disproportionately from mining activities (Roche et al. 2019), with Zimbabwean scholars highlighting prostitution and rape alongside militarised diamond fields as well as gendered water injustices, among other immediate consequences (Hove et al. 2014; Muchadenyika 2015). While some social media posts by participants in Chiadzwa welcomed what they saw as possible income-generation opportunities from mining, the vast majority took an anti-mining approach, concerned about socioeconomic and political entanglements as well as health and environmental impacts. Some social
media discussions gestured to post-extractivism, recognising that diamond mining had fuelled widespread water pollution, adverse social impacts, and violations of economic and cultural rights. Women in Chiadzwa took up social media spaces to build strong online alliances to demand accountability to curb corporate looting in Zimbabwe’s diamond extractive sector and advocate for gender-inclusive laws. One series of discussions focused on Zimbabwe’s shift towards a ‘open for business mantra’ and transitional stabilisation programme which led to increased diamond extraction facilitated by ZCDC, circumventing parliamentary oversight. Concerns about uncertainties on whether ZCDC operations would resuscitate the Chiadzwa and Chimanimani diamond communities from the throes of poverty were widely expressed, with tax justice and beneficial ownership of resources amongst key concerns, along with demand for accountability as guaranteed in Section 315 of the Constitution. Challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic further increased demand for diamond revenue to finance pandemic response; meanwhile, social media reporting showed increased diamond production alongside increased social instabilities in host communities.

Social media reporting particularly reflected growing unease linked to gender injustices in Chiadzwa typified by commodity overpricing; participants spoke of how, as women, they are tasked with the burden of feeding the family in an economy with a cash liquidity crisis, with considerable disparity between the ability to fulfil basic needs and their actual fulfilment. This had led some to rely on commercial sex work for survival. A Chiadzwa youth activist wrote (translated from Shona into English by the first author): ‘The mining zone creates an influx of men who can offer rural girls food and clothing in exchange for sexual favours.’ Various articulations took cognisance of how sex work was a livelihood strategy due to economic problems. One elderly woman community monitor lamented:

Some parents are sending their daughters to the nearby market instead of going to school. Parents can’t afford everything so the gals will get into love affairs with the miners to cater for their needs and end up engaging in sexual activities, hence there is the spreading of the HIV/AIDS and STIs [sexually transmitted infections]. They are also facing all sorts of abuse …

Stories told of the proliferation of prostitution, consistent with other reports (Busza et al. 2014) of how diamonds in Chiadzwa increased commercial sex work. Even women offering commercial sex services complained of violence in the industry, with hegemonic masculinities and patriarchy informing commodification of women. Women noted how they were now being priced according to age and specific looks, placing pressure on women to abuse lightening creams in order to keep up with the market. One woman who identified as a commercial sex worker called for a unified approach to dealing with sexual reproductive issues when she sarcastically pointed out: ‘These health issues affect us all, after all it is your husbands that keep us in business.’

In a political context shaped by years of national election violence and economic crises created out of structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s followed by high military spending (Moyo 2011; Saunders and Nyamunda 2016), diamond mining in Chiadzwa is typified by gender-based violence stemming from underlying social inequalities and a
prevailing societal framework that imposes invisible barriers. While the negative effects of structural violence (Galtung 1969) affect everyone in Chiadzwa, the stories illuminate how cultural, political, and economic barriers provide a societal structure rendering more severe impacts on women. Structural violence manifested in the stories in intersectional ways, from struggles with waterborne diseases from un-reclaimed pits, poverty, loss of food sovereignty with associated farmer/miner conflicts, to loss of livelihoods with reports of villagers’ cattle falling into mining pits, and health outcomes such as HIV-related concerns and cervical cancer – all with serious implications on life expectancy and infant mortality. Sentiments were summarised by one of the WhatsApp group members:

As long as diamond mining is not transforming the lives of Marange citizens and Zimbabwe at large for the better, mining should stop!

Another lamented:

We are crawling on our tummies as if in a forest full of beasts. As women, all we have are aspirations and hopes for success. I celebrated when we did barter trade in the past; now monetarisation of the economy has brought problems and brought more poverty due to commodity overpricing. Now we burn in poverty whilst in a land of abundance. We are struggling in the land of plenty!

Another person in the group voiced the struggles in relation to ZCDC:

It is painful always getting fake promises from ZCDC – they promised funding for livelihoods but to date nothing.

Our analysis indicated that social media provided space for women to discuss these concerns as well as taboo issues related to sexuality and health in a manner sometimes seen as apart from the dominant male gaze in a patriarchal environment. An incident discussed extensively by the groups was a that of a man believed to be HIV-positive having sex with his oldest daughter, then 13 years old; when the issue came to light he apparently paid off the police to avoid arrest, and concern surfaced in social media that he may now be ‘on the 2nd daughter’. Social media tools were also used to campaign against violence towards commercial sex workers, justified by societal cultural norms and the secrecy instantiated by the silencing of victims. As adaptation to violent state operations in Chiadzwa since 2006 (Hove et al. 2014), social media was used by women in Chiadzwa to develop name-to-shame strategies and spreading of circular warning messages exposing abusive uniformed personnel or vicious clients amongst sex workers. This has helped in reducing and protecting women against sexual abuse by state apparatus (see also Maringira and Nyamunda 2017), at times recognising that soldiers are social beings who strive to assimilate within the community, hence fear naming, shaming, and even being shunned by society. Thus, some women found solace in social media as a possible response to direct violence.

People have found refuge in the anonymity of cyberspace to discuss issues that may be difficult to discuss openly in public. A quintessential example of social media revealing
structural inequalities was the constant reports of sexual harassment and even rape at the hands of elite actors. Following the resigning of the Zimbabwean Vice President Kembo Mohadi (in 2021), anonymously leaked evidence of sexual scandals reflected on the power of social media in fostering women’s solidarity against sexual harassment despite the absence of a Sexual Harassment Act in Zimbabwe. Women in Chiadzwa also discussed the issue on social platforms, arguing that power informs ‘consent’, women in the WhatsApp group displaying empathy by sharing examples of how married women in Chiadzwa can also use social media to name and shame state officials who rape women while they are in detention as they could not file charges directly due to fear that their husbands would divorce them. There were indeed many stories of domestic abuse as well as other gender-based violence. One woman recently pleaded: ‘During this lockdown our women are suffering in silence, so we need to rise in oneness and say “No to domestic violence, let’s name and shame the abuser. Break the silence.”’

Articulating fears and gendered aspirations for development

Many of the participants in the research also admitted to political fears as cyber use in Zimbabwe has resulted in beatings and arrest of those politically vocal online. For example, in 2020 a journalist, Hopewell Chin’ono, was arrested for speaking against corruption in the diamond sector under the lockdown in a post trending beyond the Zimbabwean borders under the hashtag #demloot. Unlike WhatsApp, Facebook is public and open to all; as such, some online users have resorted to use of pseudonyms, not just in discussing political issues but also sensitive issues such as sexual health. A woman confessed to adopting a male identity on Facebook so as to participate on male-dominated platforms in high-level decision-informing arenas. Use of fake identities has been a typical feature; indeed, perhaps most famously, as illustration of this, the March 2013 faceless Facebook icon Baba Jukwa sparked controversy by voicing sensitive political concerns during the lead-up to the 2013 election. Bruce Mutsvairo and Lys-Ann Sirks (2015), through an online ethnography, assessed Zimbabwean blogger Baba Jukwa’s Facebook webpage as a prominent platform for the anti-Robert Mugabe establishment; the site was withdrawn from the Web in August 2014.

While fear of state repression for online remarks was palpable, so too were fears of resource capture and marginalisation, exacerbated by reports of headmen selling communal lands to foreign ‘gwejas’ (a commonly used word that refers to artisanal miners), while denying women alternative livelihoods, land tenure, and choice to land use. Chiadzwa is hot and arid, and unlike other parts of Manicaland, food security and food sovereignty have been compromised by mining activities. Women showed how the baobab trees they relied upon as a source of nutrition and for making mats to trade in Mozambique and South Africa as a source of income had been cleared to make way for resource extraction. Women expressed the need to improve food security through horticulture and climate-adaptive farming. The posts also highlighted the division of labour within the society as sustaining structural violence in which the justification of gender as ‘natural’ placed a huge demand on women to provide the necessities of
domestic life. Importantly, as stressed by Lian Sinclair (2021), gendered consequences of mining are not limited to relations between men and women, as these comprise the construction of a wide range of diverse masculinities and femininities. Often on social media platforms women in Chiadzwa discussed how viewing gender roles as ‘natural’ has disadvantaged them in devising strategies of engaging men in challenging dominant gender relations. These discussions resonate with Patience Mutopo’s (2010) reflections, in a past issue of this journal, on how women in Zimbabwe regularly grapple with ‘the challenge of conquering gender stereotypes’ by re-imagining and re-framing livelihood/coping strategies, at times in farming and at times in domestic and cross-border trade activities. At various points in our research in the 2016–2021 period, some women voiced that they were resorting more frequently to ad hoc trade activities, given adverse agricultural conditions. This is consistent with recent reports elsewhere in Zimbabwe of farmers turning to artisanal mining to generate income for survival (see Kachena and Spiegel 2019; Mkodzongi and Spiegel 2019).

Indeed, while social media reporting reflected opposition to diamond mining by elite-controlled companies and military networks, it also revealed women’s aspirations towards artisanal diamond mining, with some women using social media platforms to engage policymakers in promoting a Minerals Act that provides for artisanal diamond mining. Women argued for beneficial ownership of diamond resources through community ownership and involvement in diamond resource management, contending that more equitable female participation in resource management has the potential to not only fight poverty but contribute to national development by improving the general status of women. Using social media, women noted that their participation in the mineral value chain is also in alignment with Section 13 of the 2013 Constitution which stipulates that local communities benefit from local resources. Women also lobbied for social security nets through regulations or legal frameworks pre-, during, and post-extraction. Most women in Chiadzwa participated in diamond mining during the free-for-all era. Others continued as part of syndicates in illegal diamond panning and smugglings, albeit exposed to greater risks. Women miners, ‘gwejelines’, expressed how diamond extraction in Chiadzwa is not labour intensive as deposits are near the surface, requiring only simple tools and not involving toxic chemicals such as mercury in small-scale gold mining. ‘Give a woman anything and she will multiply!’ was one slogan shared to motivate and encourage the inclusion of women. The sharing of aspirations provided collective agency – including, at times, directed at policy-level change (lobbying for decriminalising artisanal diamond mining) or for greater awareness of the value of using diamonds as a coping mechanism in times of economic hardship. Throughout the past 15 years, artisanal diamond mining has consistently been criminalised by the state, despite state actors’ mining-sector ‘empowerment’ rhetoric, and those found in possession of diamonds illegally have faced jail time (see Spiegel 2020).

During informal discussions undertaken at the training programme, WhatsApp participation was noted to include development-oriented groups where women share business ideas, aspirations, and vital necessities. One woman from Zimbabwe’s diamond worker allied trade union recorded a voice note which was later widely broadcasted as a
A podcast from community monitors of the Southern African extractive community, globalising her message (https://communitymonitors.net/2018/09/8386). The Manicaland Women’s Forum is a local platform on WhatsApp in which women became active participants in developments surrounding natural resource management. Throughout the discussions, community members shared the need for a comprehensive diamond policy which ‘does not cushion investors – particularly foreign direct investors – at the expense of the local communities’. ‘The investor I want’ is one phrase that went viral on WhatsApp as women reflected on their desire to be consulted about mining operations within their community.

Prior to social media popularity, single women had been excluded from women-specific community development projects due to cultural segregation of single women. Single mothers, for example, expressed how invitations to women-specific social gatherings are usually selective towards married women, isolating the single and widowed. They also expressed challenges associated with land allocations based on patriarchal lines. We observed how virtual spaces indeed narrowed the divisions amongst working women, single women, and rural versus urban women, also confronting labels such as housewife or prostitute. Successes of single women as breadwinners were shared in the group, inspiring other single women. One woman wrote: ‘I was driven into mining after my husband passed who was the breadwinner and now I can even educate other women as I was also motivated by other women already into mining.’

A disabled woman explained how social media kept her updated on critical societal developments, allowing her to share concerns in social accountability meetings which she was never able to attend in person. Mobility is a challenge in Chiadzwa, travelling on foot in the blazing heat is a struggle; for women living with disability, striking a balance between critical social participation and domestic work was impossible. In solidarity, women brought forward collective care-related concerns such as the condition of Mukwada clinic’s fallen roof, as well as its understaffing and lack of drugs, as women asserted that they are indeed society’s caregivers.

**Resisting relocations and other network-building goals**

Women-specific action groups such as Kumboyedza (meaning ‘We try’) and Tashinga (meaning ‘We are now strong’) reduced societal gaps by facilitating discussions about living under the threat of displacement, as 300 households were earmarked for relocation. These locally driven groups were initiated to maintain ties with families and friends relocated to Arda Transau – 40 km from Mutare – where people forcibly displaced by the diamond-mining activities encountered a variety of serious livelihood constraints and poor agricultural conditions (Mandishewa and Mutenheri 2021). Young and old people in Chiadzwa explained how they have used WhatsApp to stay in touch with displaced friends and family. Use of digital spaces in Chiadzwa to spread awareness and build resistance against forced relocation not only mounted unified resistance but also attracted solidarity from sympathisers beyond the communities of extraction. The fact that relocations provide neither security of tenure nor entitled land ownership (as the land is state
land) was articulated amongst the women’s concerns. One villager noted: ‘Uprooting people from their ancestral land is evil, involves stripping someone’s identity and is about decimating someone’s culture and dignity and as such relocation must be resisted.’

Efforts in 2019 saw some partial victories; 27 families successfully resisted relocation to Arda Transau, advocating for justice for the already dispossessed in that area. This resistance account reinforces an alternative to the dominant narrative of passive subjects of displacement – challenging elite actors’ interests in making displacement seem incontestable. A different story recorded in a Marange blog showed the value of women’s support in obtaining power positions formerly considered male domains. The selection of the first female chair of the Chiadzwa Community Development Trusts (CCDT) was one such advancement of the position of women in society. Social media has also allowed networking with solidarity movements through national indabas (conferences) and trainings from CSOs – such as the Centre for Research and Development (CRD), Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, Southern African Peoples Solidarity Network, and Zimbabwe Environment Lawyers Association – assisting diamond communities to globalise their message. One woman gave feedback on her experience of attending the Southern African Development Community (SADC) people’s conference thanks to networks with the southern African people’s solidarity network. Other community members also shared travel opportunities they had to Switzerland, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Murowa diamonds to share their experience after recognition and network-building on online spaces. Of great interest was how the 2021 mining indaba was successfully held online allowing for regional solidarity.

Overall, our analysis underscored that social media in Zimbabwe was playing a significant – if uneven – role in bringing together a group of people with shared common experiences, at times sharing grievances and goals to compel government actors to listen to their voices and address their plight. Although some state actors often paid these online efforts little regard, eventually, after delays, the ZCDC – much critiqued on online media for failures to uphold corporate social responsibility promises5 – finally agreed to fix the Mukwada clinic; ZCDC also started some sewing projects and training for women, and promised to hire more women as company workers. However, with regard to security issues, arrests, brutality, threats, and intimidation continue. Security has even been tightened; the Zimeye (a media broadcast) blog commented on how the Chiadzwa community is ‘now condemned to perennial fear’ as more uniformed and ununiformed senior security details from Mutare are being deployed to Marange, sometimes viciously attacking artisanal miners.

Although the internet has opened up space for women in Chiadzwa, it remains out of reach for some women bound by class and patriarchy, which manifests itself in economic, cultural, and social deprivation. Some women are illiterate in this region, but not the majority, and some have advanced education, including university degrees; many women in Chiadzwa know the basics for communication or reside with at least one member who is knowledgeable, in this regard, and, due to diamond trading, some households have two smartphones. However, there are religious sects that are influential in the region that promote early marriages and also have forbade women to use social media and
restrict the access of women to development opportunities. In a conversation with one of the women who had a data-compatible phone, she noted that in her church, the internet is seen as defiled and its use forbidden. Nonetheless, social media has been a vocal platform to rally support – including nationally and internationally – against some of the most brazen incidents of gender-based violence in the area, at times directly challenging religious patriarchy. For weeks, a topic of social media was the death of a 14-year-old girl who died giving birth at the shrine of a local religious sect; this was met with particular outrage as the deceased’s husband demanded another wife from the same family according to custom of that sect, targeting the nine-year-old sister. Through social media this was brought into mainstream media and began trending on social media nationally and internationally, with many CSOs demanding an end to such practices.\(^6\)

Despite the fact that COVID-19 has opened up digital spaces, social media is far from a panacea for the women in Chiadzwa. One of the family members of the young girl who died explained how they are living in fear for exposing the death. Moreover, resource governance policies overall remain repressive and women continue to bear the burden of extractive sector injustices. One woman wrote: ‘... Hunger has become a major ailment here despite our rich natural resources. It appears it is the corrupt already-rich who are benefiting from these. As we fight COVID lets again fight extractivism. BE STRONG WOMAN BE STRONG.’ Under the COVID-19-imposed lockdowns, stricter state surveillance on social media\(^7\) has been observed, resulting in growing numbers of arrests and increased allegations of abductions.

**Online and offline diamond-mining activism in a dynamic terrain of extractive violence**

Scholars have noted that social media has become an important nexus for shaping social realities, with people acquiring political agency online even in societies that have been highly marginalised (Gukurume 2017). More than ten years ago, Shirky (2009) argued that social media may have the potential to provoke and sustain political uprisings by amplifying particular news and supporting political demands on human rights, accountability, and good governance. Hwami et al. (2018) noted, however, how resistance by rural communities can find itself submerged by more spectacular urban and media-attractive news, such that rural resource-based kleptocracy and rural struggles in Zimbabwe go unnoticed. Challenging such dynamics, on 23 April 2018 Zimbabwe witnessed an active protest whereby the people of Marange, including many women, defying heavy military presence, marched from Chipindirwe to Zengeni to demand government accountability in the face of IFFs and massive enrichment of a select few. In a demonstration held a few months earlier, on 7 February 2018, the community blocked roads to the mining concession; however, demands were not met, with organisers attributing the lack of success to minimal media coverage. This became a lesson for future planning in which WhatsApp was extensively used as a mobilising tool. This time, the #Marange-Demo story received huge coverage, reported in several state and private media (Newsday 2018b, 2018a; The Herald, 2018a, 2018b).
Initially sympathisers of the ruling party, ZANU-PF, used cyberspace to dismiss the protests, calling the Chiadzwa people ingrates. The ZCDC referred to the march as a politically motivated sponsored demonstration. The Herald reported this account and on their Facebook page community members responded to the article with 132 likes, 17 shares, and 107 comments contesting the term ‘sponsored demo’ and questioning its accuracy. The ZCDC, acquiescing to media pressure, called for an urgent security stakeholder meeting with community members and civil society groups operating in Chiadzwa. In these meetings, community members expressed that Chiadzwa ‘is not a zoo, stop treating us like animals, we are aliens in our own land’. They also expressed grievances on the lack of corporate social responsibility by the mining company, the pollution which robs them of food sovereignty, and the use of violence and torture as punishment of artisanal miners. Social media reporting by women shone light on smuggling and other clandestine deals in the diamond extractive sector. On the day of the march, thousands of people were bitten by dogs and live ammunition was fired at the unarmed protesters. Photographs and videos were taken and posted on various platforms and the use of violence decried. Complementarity between cyberspace and physical space thus amalgamated the struggle. Sympathisers and supporters across the country raised an outcry against the mistreatment of peaceful protestors. One female participant posted under #MarangeDemo, ‘they can beat you but they have heard us’, with social media exposing further atrocities. The video that went viral on social media showing armed military officials firing on peaceful protestors became compelling evidence during the Motlanthe Commission of Inquiry on 1 August 2018 post-election violence.

When the government cut off internet use to block communication by its critics, the blackout led to further civil unrest as the repressive state security agents wreaked havoc. In Chiadzwa, diamond-mining workers reported looting of precious gems by armed men in military uniforms. As violence escalated, community members devised new and unconventional mechanisms of exposing ongoing atrocities. The Chiadzwa community resorted to what they termed ‘Vhura Pavharwa NeVakuru’ or ‘Vhura Pavharwa Nemu-vengi’, translated to mean ‘open where the enemy or dictator has closed’. A post was sent to the official Twitter and Facebook pages of heads of state on updates to the Davos conference attended by high-ranking elites, noting what was occurring in Zimbabwe. Acie Lumumba, a Zimbabwean socialite, responded by decrying that ‘Zimbabweans are using black market internet’ to get their messages out. The head of state had to cut short his trip, returning to Zimbabwe, and apologised to the citizens, arguing that the uniformed personnel were rogue civilians who had stolen uniforms from the state. This was but one example of the nexus between offline and online Chiadzwa activism towards shaping public opinion and yielding practical response, highlighting the synergism of modalities often discussed by scholars as essential in extractivist and other social justice struggles. This episode can also be seen as a case of women activists interrupting a quintessential male-dominated spectacle of political power at the international level to refocus attention to local concerns.
Concluding remarks

Building on the contributions of Kalowatie Deonandan et al. (2017) and others who have argued for greater attention to women’s voices and experiences in extractive zones, this article examined specific issues of interest to women, the agency of women in the face of illicit financial activities in diamond mining and how solidarity was built to mobilise for action, even in the face of severe repression. In keeping with calls to move beyond a focus on the victimisation of women in mining to integrate an analysis of the gendered effects of participation and resistance in this sector (Sinclair 2021), here we point to social media as a source of agency, yet one that is inflected by intersectional differences. Online participation around policy issues and repressive structures fuelling injustices were discussed extensively by women in Chiadza, along with strategies to improve livelihoods and address structural violence emanating from poor, unsustainable, and insensitive gender development policies. Scholarly interest in women’s agency in the extractive sector has been growing, with many authors drawing attention both to the fact that some women turn to artisanal mining to escape oppressive gender rules and norms, while other women exercise agency to resist mining development (Bashwira and Cuvelier 2019). This study of the agency of women in Chiadza, in the highly militarised and unstable sociopolitical environment of diamond mining in Zimbabwe, adds further insight to the nuances and diversity characterising this trend.

Internationally, there is growing interest in the potential role of social media in countering mining projects, and the creation of an ‘imagined community’ in these realms (Großmann 2018). Here, social media engagements vividly illustrated how women are not mere passive victims of large-scale mining and violent capitalist development; rather, cyber use in the specific case of highly militarised Chiadza, using tools such as Facebook, Twitter, blogging, and WhatsApp, connected women across generations and showed how community monitors could share their daily stories and experiences, raising concerns that may not be picked up by mainstream media. Studying social media use provides a window to stories amidst the heavy military presence and surveillance in Marange, offering certain – if even limited – ways of understanding women’s interactions in the Chiadza diamond-mining area. In addition to challenging the notion of women as passive victims of mining operations, the analysis we present here contests the perception that online spaces are currently just spaces for non-progressive political outcries in Zimbabwe. Some scholars have cautioned that social media in Zimbabwe has often been reduced to an apolitical space with comments on fashion and gossip, in which social media use is alienated from real-life engagement – with a tendency to divert from serious engagement with sociopolitical struggles (Chiweshe 2017). Our observations from Chiadza resonate with those who note that social media technologies can indeed become a discursive space for ordinary community voices to articulate serious socioeconomic, cultural, and political problems, challenging endemic corruption and the structural violence of prevailing forms of governance (Gukurume 2017; Mare 2014). That said, although social media tools were employed by women in Chiadza to address gender injustices emanating explicitly from existing social structures and capitalism,
participation dynamics of online engagement must be seen as uneven and contingent. While it may be said that social media has opened space to discuss issues related to diamond mining thereby strengthening solidarity in a society where diamond extraction has far-reaching impacts, it must be stressed that not all women have access to online technologies – class differences continue to be pervasive markers, with poorer women heavily isolated from virtual technology access.

In keeping with the theory of structural violence articulated by Johan Galtung (1969) over 50 years ago, the participants in this project expanded collective understandings of the relationship between the overt personal violence around Marange’s diamond mines that they experienced as women and the structural violence of the wider political landscape in which this was occurring. It was clear that social media is far from immune from the apparatus of state repression. Nonetheless, for some women activists, COVID-19 has created the impetus for increased digital discussions to confront marginalisation and inequality due to patriarchy and suppressive laws. As research on social media use has tended to focus on its use by male youths in urban concentrations or is laden with an assumption of uniformity with regard to how society uses social media to react to bad governance, further analyses are urgently needed of the online activism of rural women in extractive zones and beyond. Ultimately, it must be stressed that online platforms are only tools; their use must be combined with other strategies, as shown here, or any power they have to help effect social justice will fail to be realised.

Notes

1. WoMin is an African gender and extractives alliance based in Johannesburg, South Africa, working with more than 50 allies in 13 countries in East, West, and Southern Africa, whose mission is to support women’s movements to challenge destructive extractivism and to propose development alternatives. The case of Xolobeni cited by The WoMin Collective (2017) is a powerful example of a community claiming consent through customary law, and refusing a mining project proposal based on their sovereign right to determine their own development pathway. This position was won through powerful local organising, led most by women, over more than a decade, combined with legal and political sovereignty arguments, and reinforced by supporting alternate local livelihoods, e.g. through tourism, to successfully oppose mining.

2. The terms artisanal and small-scale mining here refer to extraction of minerals involving low levels of technology, labour-intensive activities, often non-mechanised equipment and rudimentary tools, and minimal barriers to entry; women make up a significantly higher proportion of the labour force in artisanal and small-scale mining compared with larger-scale mining (Buss et al. 2021; Hilson et al. 2018).

3. While in some countries literacy is seen as a major class-related barrier to equitable digital engagement, Zimbabwe has, relatively speaking, a remarkably high literacy rate due to years of prioritisation on public education, notwithstanding significant imbalances in digital literacy (Mutsvairo 2018). Yet, class inequalities manifest in a variety of other ways – including, for example, the opportunities limited by a spiralling economic crisis which limits access to electricity, airtime, and the purchase of smartphones and computers, etc., along with the hegemonic influences of political elites who have sought to shape public (online and offline) spaces of discourse and participation (Marima 2021).
4. The term post-extractivism refers to a transition orientation that moves beyond a dominant Western economic model entrenched by colonialism and characterised by the over-exploitation and exportation of increasingly scarce and non-renewable natural resources. It posits instead a vision that resonates with the concept of ubuntu in Southern Africa, which as argued by Samantha Hargreaves (2016), puts at the centre interests of working-class and peasant women and maintains a more harmonious relation with nature, restoring natural resources and human relations.

5. A WhatsApp group extensively discussed critical sentiments towards the so-called Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) claims of ZCDC, referring to corporate claims as outdated and misleading. For example, as one activist reflected: ‘They never built the computer lab [they promised] for Gandauta secondary school … That block was built by us parents yet the company takes credit … all they did was just supply roofing material, furniture and paint, just like when they put gravel and claim that they have constructed roads yet the roads here in Chiadzwa have been destroyed by the mining vehicles and the truth is they are now unfit for ordinary cars to navigate.’

6. The religious oppression documented here resonated with the report by Lilian Cheelo Siwila (2017), who noted that throughout history religion played important roles in defiling women’s bodies, which she tied to the production of negative perceptions of women also perceived in mining areas in the Zambian copperbelt during the period she was studying.

7. Although not focused on gendered dimensions, a useful discussion on rising surveillance of online communications by state authorities in Zimbabwe was recently published by Allen Munoriyarwa (2021), who drew attention to pressures that manifest at times in ‘retreating from digital spaces’.

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Notes on contributors

Juliet Gudhlanga (MSc Gender and Policy Studies) is an early career researcher and socioeconomic justice activist passionate about advancing the rights of women and girls in communities east of Zimbabwe impacted by unsustainable and exclusionary extractivism. She is the founding director for Women Network for Environmental and Climate Action (WONECA). Postal address: 14 Swinburne Fairbridge-park, Mutare, Zimbabwe. Email: jghdlanga@gmail.com

Sam Spiegel is a Senior Lecturer in International Development at the University of Edinburgh, in the Centre of African Studies within the School of Social and Political Science, with more than 15 years of research experience in Eastern Zimbabwe, with particular focus on resource extraction, displacement, livelihoods, creative methodologies, storytelling, and social change. Email: sam.spiegel@ed.ac.uk

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