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# Living Next to the Mine

**Women's struggles in mining affected communities**



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# The Impact of Mining on Women

Despite the contribution the mining and extractives industry makes to the South African economy, mining operations have very negative effects on the surrounding communities. Contrary to promises of contributing to socioeconomic development, mining companies provide poor labour conditions; evade tax; are complicit in corruption; pollute the environment and natural resources; and regularly flout health and safety regulations. Furthermore, opportunities for women in mines are either limited or more vulnerable, while women in mining communities bear the brunt of the negative impact of mining operations.

Women in these communities carry multiple oppressions – as women, as rural people and as poor people. These all compound one another, leaving women with little power and few resources to influence decision-making or to resist unfair development activities which undermine their interests. Ultimately, their position as poor rural women compromises their ability to adapt to or resist the negative socio-economic and environmental impacts of mining.

Women are the primary producers and processors of food, and thus access to and preservation of land is crucial for subsistence and survival. When prospectors identify land for extractive operations, in most cases the communities will be pushed off the land with little or no compensation. The men in the communities will generally end up working on the mine, and women will bear a greater brunt of domestic labour and child care. Moreover, poor women carry a greater burden in the home because of gender inequalities within the family structure and society as a whole. For instance, when men become ill or are forced to retire because of poor health, women are expected to take care of them.

Women also suffer terrible health problems as a result of pollution created by mining operations. The cases of leukaemia, terminal illnesses, miscarriages and deformity in children are also on the rise among women in mining communities. There are also numerous indirect negative effects of mining, such as transactional sex and women having to resort to sex work due to poverty and inequality. There are also increased infection rates of HIV since women are less able to negotiate safe sex.





# Food Security

Women are often tasked with the duty of providing food for their families. Most families in Mpumalanga are agro-based and survive by farming on the land. Women are always at the center of agro-based activities and sell the excess and use the money to buy other household necessities. With the land taken away for mining operations, most women explained that their households were riddled with hunger and poverty as they no longer farm and cannot afford to buy enough nutritious foods to feed the family. “We used to have plenty of food. I had so much land to farm and plenty of water and grazing land for the animals. Now look, I live next to a mine dump that has polluted our water, the few animals we have are sick, my farming land is gone and now even this little patch that I try to grow some vegetables on is dying because of the toxic dust and now I have given up because I can’t even afford the seed anymore. We are unhealthy as a household not only because of these toxins but because of poor nutrition,” laments a woman living in the community.

In other cases, the forests and or natural resources were fenced off by the mining companies who now own the land and do not allow the local people access. In addition, most women indicated that they used to own livestock which had since died due to lack of grazing land and pollution of water.

In October 2012, the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy released a pilot study on the impact of coal mining on agriculture. Forty-six percent of South Africa’s total potential arable soils are found in Mpumalanga, and the study found that “at the current rate of coal mining ... approximately 12% of South Africa’s total high potential arable land will be transformed.” A further 14% of that arable land was subject to coal prospecting applications. The study assessed the impacts of this transformation, ranging from the loss of maize production and resulting price increases to the loss of employment, soil degradation, water and air pollution and health impacts. It concluded that “the effects of coal mining on agriculture are immense and some effects are irreversible.



## Sex Workers

The high levels of poverty and social insecurity have led to more women getting into sex work as a source of sustenance, given that women head most families and carry the burden of family support. In addition, some of the children are forced into sex work early to contribute to family income and this signifies an extreme consequence of the poverty and desperation which characterises life in mining communities. Teenage pregnancy, with its related concerns such as illegal abortions has threatened education for most teenage girls who are forced to drop out of school.

## Migrant Workers

In Mpumalanga, the spread of HIV is linked to the challenge of migrant labour. Some migrant workers live in large, single-sex hostel facilities which make it difficult for them to accommodate their families. This has increased risky sexual behaviour that increases the probability of transmission of HIV infection. Thus the migrant labourers are often agents for transmission of the virus, both in the receiving and the sending communities. The mining zone creates an influx of men who can offer rural women and school girl's food and clothing in exchange for sexual favours. The pressures of poverty and the lack of sexual health education forces women to view transactional sex as their only option. In such desperate environments, girls normally do not refuse sex, even at a young age, because they think it is the way to secure funds or small payment or to potentially find a husband.

The rapid change from rural subsistence societies to money-based societies creates social problems, especially for women and youth. The displacement of people from rural communities where people have been able to fend for themselves for basic food has had a serious impact on issues such as food security, as mining operations drastically change the economy of communities and denies the community access to agrarian land used for subsistence farming.





Communities are now characterised by high cash dependency with no informal activities relating to extra income earning projects such as cottage industries, backyard vegetable gardens and other subsistence activities. In view of this, the levels of poverty are dependent on the employment status of the community members.

Unemployed women are more vulnerable to the transmission of HIV for several reasons. The HIV prevalence rate among pregnant women is 36% and 23% among the rest of the population in Mpumalanga. The leading cause of death in the municipality are pulmonary diseases such as influenza and pneumonia followed by Tuberculosis.

As wives, women are often dependent on their husbands for financial support and consequently find it difficult to enforce the use of condoms or to refuse sex. Unmarried women are forced by their poor social circumstances into relationships in order to get financial support for their families. There are situations where women have offered their children to men in order to get continuous financial support for the family.

## Increase in Teenage Pregnancies

This was cited as another challenge that communities and particularly mothers were faced with. Young girls in the area who have finished school end up pregnant because they cannot advance further academically due to lack of resources and opportunities. These young girls and women end up being sexually exploited mainly by men working in the mines who have resources to entice them. It was revealed that young girls looking for money go into relationships with mine workers or 'sugar daddies' and end up pregnant. The increase in pregnancies and relationships with older men with resources accounts for the high numbers of school dropouts amongst girls in the areas. However, some young women get pregnant with young men due to lack of recreation/ work activities to keep them occupied and focused. Sugar daddies and boyfriends often abscond, and abandon the women and their children. The poverty then continues in the homes because there are more mouths to feed but no father to provide for the families.





## Stories from Women Affected by Mining

The following stories detail these very violations and hardships faced by women as a result of mining operations in their communities. The stories, from Carolina, Ermelo and Emalahleni, not only highlight their lived experiences of the mining and extractives industry, but also the lack of response and recourse offered by local and national governments.





Elizabeth Ngwenya



# Abandoned coalmine swallowed my son

The majority of the world's coal is obtained through underground mines. The processing and mining of resources, particularly coal, causes widespread damage to environment. During the initial mining process, columns and pillars are installed to support the ground above. When a mining operation is shut down, both permanent and temporary installation is removed, and the mine is left to collapse.

The Imbabala Mine in Ermelo, Mpumalanga, was shut down without proper rehabilitation. It was left abandoned without being fenced off and without any warning signs. The surrounding community now uses the abandoned mine to generate income and energy for cooking and heating. The people accessing the abandoned mine are unaware of the dangers, and with their ongoing digging and mining, the ground and rocks regularly collapse causing serious injuries and death.

Elizabeth Mthethwa (64) and her family live in a two-room shack. Every morning she wakes up at 5am to prepare fire on a brazier coal stove to cook and to warm water for her daughter who is still attending school. Mthethwa lost her son, Dlozi, after he was crushed by a rock fall in the abandoned mine. "Imbabala Mine swallowed my son while he was searching for coal to sell in order to put food on the table."

Now that Dlozi has died, her other son continues to collect and sell coal to help the family financially. Mthethwa is still struggling pay off the mortuary and funeral home, since her pension is only just enough to survive.

"I constantly live in fear for my son knowing that he might not come back home one day, that the mine will swallow him just like his brother," she says with tears streaming down her cheeks.

In April 2011, the Department of Mineral Resources issued a stop order, due to the mine's violation of environmental law. Without authority, the Imbabala Mine converted their opencast mine to an underground mine. It is also alleged that the mine was non-compliant to water management standards, which led to local catchments being polluted. Local farmers complained about the increased number of crop failures and livestock deaths due to lead poisoning and waterborne diseases. To no avail, the communities have voiced their dissatisfaction and called for urgent rehabilitation of Imbabala Mine.



# The mining company has ravaged the earth and left the land bleeding

Evidence has shown that bad mining practices can ignite underground coal fires, which can go on burning for decades. These fires release smoke, which contains carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, methane, nitrous oxide, sulphur dioxide and other toxic greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Goldview Mine dubiously acquired a mining license to operate in a wetland area and divert water from the Holbankspruit River. The mine has also dumped rocks in the river; constructed offices within the 10-year flood line; built canals; and transformed three hectares of indigenous vegetation. What was once a green lush wetland, is now perpetually in flames, and the ground is forever sinking, but no one is being held accountable.

Although the mine has been shut down, it has left a devastating impact on the environment. No vegetables can grow and no animals can survive. The mining company has ravaged the earth and left the land bleeding. Gases smell pungent in the air and flames are visible in the ground. The Universal Declaration states that Mother Nature and all beings of which she is composed, have inherent rights, including the right to regenerate and to continue its vital cycle and processes. It also states that the right of each being is limited by the rights of other beings. Any conflict between their rights must be resolved in a way that maintains the integrity, balance and health of the Earth.

Mining companies take everything from the communities and leave nothing for the future generations.







Mavuso Mkhathshwa





## Living in the dark

Mavuso Mkhathshwa (84) lives close to the Imbabala Coal Mine. She struggles to make ends meet and survives on a small pension. It's a cold day and she sits inside her two-room shack with her two grandchildren and her 25 year old daughter, Nompilo.

Nompilo suffers from nagging headaches and lies in bed in the other room. Today, she is unable to collect the coal for cooking and warming the place up. Usually, Nompilo's daily routine is to fill up a 25 litre bucket with coal that she collects from the abandoned Imbabala Mine. Like many other informal settlements in Mpumalanga, there is no access to electricity, water and decent sanitation, making it a breeding ground for preventable diseases.

When the mine was operational it employed a number of community members, but now it is simply a white elephant. Many community members, like Nompilo, continue to etch out some livelihood from the mine. They dig through the upper soil surface and painstakingly search for coal that can be used in the household and sold for some money. After filling up the bucket, Nompilo and others stagger up the mountain, back home carrying the heavy load on their heads.

Carrying these heavy loads of water, wood, coal and their children over long distances can lead to chronic physiological problems. The heavy strain put on the spine results in young women becoming more susceptible to miscarriages and bearing dangerous pregnancies due to poor pelvic development. Women who may have recently given birth and older women are more likely to develop a condition known as prolapsed uterus (fallen womb). Women throughout the community bitterly complain about chronic back and neck pain. Mkhwatshwa's right hip has been sore for days now, and this makes her less able to help Nompilo prepare fire and cook for the family before night fall.



## Our water is contaminated

Silobela Township was among the very few townships in Carolina where residents enjoyed access to clean running water that was piped to their homes. The introduction of mining in the area changed the landscape and realities of communities dramatically, fundamentally infringing their constitutional rights. Between 2010 and 2011 residents began observing a strange occurrence - the tapped water was changing to an unusual brown colour, and people regularly complained about stomach problems. When people went to the clinic for medical checkups, they were advised to stop drinking the water. Zodwa Mabaso, a concerned resident, says that their water is contaminated and that “we don’t have money to buy water because we are unemployed.”

Community members are now forced to walk long distances to collect water from schools in the area that have not been affected by contamination. This sometimes leads to the disruption of classes since there are crowds of people waiting to collect water. Collecting containers of water is a backbreaking and time consuming task, which is often carried out by women and young girls. “We are tired for most of the day. Water is the heaviest thing that women must carry,” exclaims Mabaso.

Those people that do have some money to spare simply cannot afford to buy enough for cooking and cleaning. Mabaso says that many women in the community have discreetly told her that they have developed rashes around their genital area which they believe is attributable to the contaminated water. Most women are anxious to get treatment and disclose their condition to their husbands for fear that their husbands will accuse them of being unfaithful.

Mabaso herself lost her husband during the fight against the mine. She sighs sadly at the fact that she could not afford to give him a dignified burial. Mabaso worries constantly about her family’s security. “Because we don’t own the land and we don’t own this home, I am concerned that we will be relocated again and what will happen to my husband’s grave?”

After school children are often obliged to collect more water for the household and have little time to focus on school work. The high degree of disease, domestic chores and the lack of separate school latrines for girls and boys in the area, has led to a sharp decline in school attendance. This further entrenches the cycle of unemployment and poverty, and youth are left with few opportunities for a better future.





Zodwa Mabaso







## A bitter irony

The importance of power and energy in our daily lives is an obvious fact. We need energy for preparing food, keeping warm and for lighting the rooms so kids can do their homework at night. Women are mostly responsible for domestic duties and chores. This is particularly evident in Mpumalanga where women spend a considerable amount of their time collecting firewood and coal used for cooking, heating, and lighting in the household.

Most women in Emalahleni, Carolina and Ermelo still cook and heat their homes using rudimentary techniques which include open fires and stoves that burn wood and coal, because a large proportion of these areas do not have electricity. It is a bitter irony that electricity is reserved strictly for those who can afford to pay for it, yet the people that live near and work on the mines that actually produce the electricity, cannot access it. While Emalahleni, Carolina and Ermelo are located near coal mines, middle and upper class cohorts who tend to live some distance away from the mines suffer none of the impacts of water contamination, air pollution and earth tremors but enjoy uncapped electricity usage.

Most women in Emalahleni, Carolina and Ermelo are forced to dig for duff coal in adverse weather conditions and in abandoned coal mines putting their lives and their children's lives at serious risk. In rainy conditions the ground is slippery and holes fill up with water making it a treacherous terrain to navigate. There are no warning signs and the area is contaminated with heaps of toxic dust. The abandoned mine is a tinderbox, and with no clinics nearby. Children regularly fall sick or are involved in accidents.

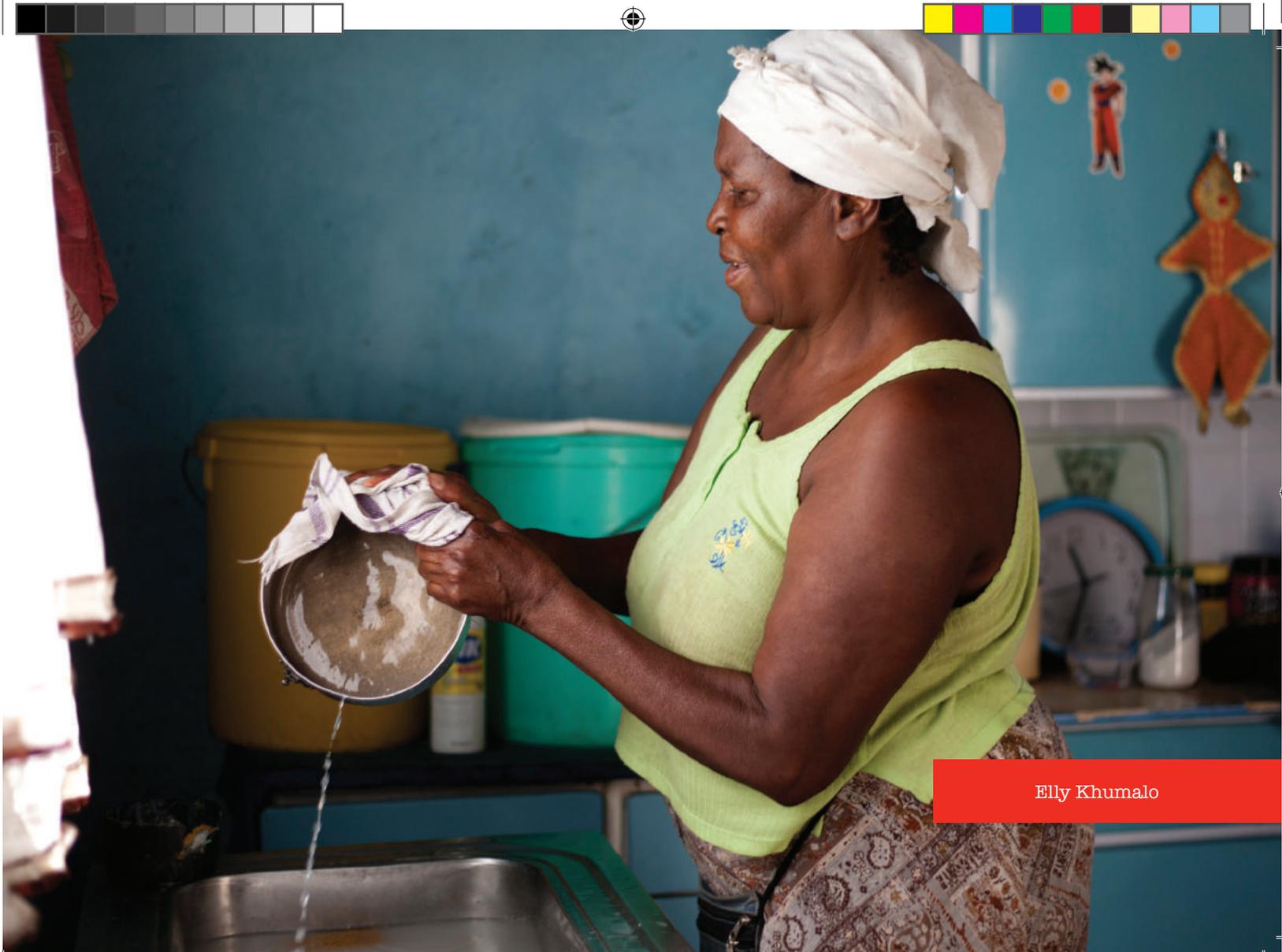
Duff is wet coal waste that is put in the sun to dry and then used to make household fires, producing high levels of air pollution. This can cause serious lung infections such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), a condition in which small soot particles penetrate deep into the lungs. Risk of exposure to the infection is highest among women and children. Women who use duff coal are twice as likely to suffer from COPD as women who use cleaner fuel alternatives.



Smoke emanating from an “Imbawula”, a makeshift coal stove, contains methane, carbon monoxide and oxides of sulphur and nitrogen which can be very hazardous. Animal dung and crop remains, which may be added to the fuel of stoves, can make the concoction of smoke more lethal. This is largely due to the chemicals present in pesticides and fertilizers. Without proper air ventilation this smoke can prove to be fatal.

These methods of energy production are shown to be inefficient and unsafe often leading to the emission of particles causing serious air pollution in households. Pro-longed exposure and inhalation of polluted air within households can inflame the airways and lungs, impairing immune system responses and reducing the oxygen-carrying capacity of the blood. This can cause dangerous respiratory conditions such as pneumonia, asthma and ultimately leads to premature deaths. The brunt of which is sustained by women and children who are left most exposed to the pollutants.

Collecting coal and wood takes up a considerable amount of time and energy. This time spent by women could be put to more productive activities and afford children more time to concentrate on school. Women and children face the additional risk of violence and intimidation when collecting coal and wood in unsafe spaces. The burden of providing energy often proves to be more costly for those who are marginalized in society.



Elly Khumalo



## The right to water is a fundamental human right

Elly Khumalo is unemployed. She suffers from numerous health conditions after surviving a stroke. She battles with chronic arthritis and eye problems. Her family ekes out a living from their small scale livestock business. The viability of smallholder livestock farming in South Africa is hinged on having access to sufficient grazing land and water for the cattle. Since Mimosa Mines began operations in the area, Khumalo complains about how life's hardships have grown worse.

The community can no longer access clean water, because it has been contaminated or restricted by the mine. Mimosa Mines have also put up fences throughout the area further encroaching on grazing lands. The limited access to land and water means resources need to be sparingly apportioned between community members, their crops and livestock. "Today we have to share water and land with the animals," explains Khumalo. The Khumalo family was forced to spend large sums of money to travel to Carolina, located 30 kilometers away from their home, to collect clean water. The state grant that the family receives is simply not sufficient to cover expenses to make ends meet. The Khumalos called an urgent meeting with the mine to discuss the water situation. The mine now supplies the family with a meagre provision of water. The supply is used for household chores and is sometimes shared with their livestock. The family has 30 cows and spends up to R300 each month on purchasing water for their livestock. Khumalo wearily asserts, "We depend on selling cows and we are worried that our animals are now starving and no one will want to buy cattle from us."

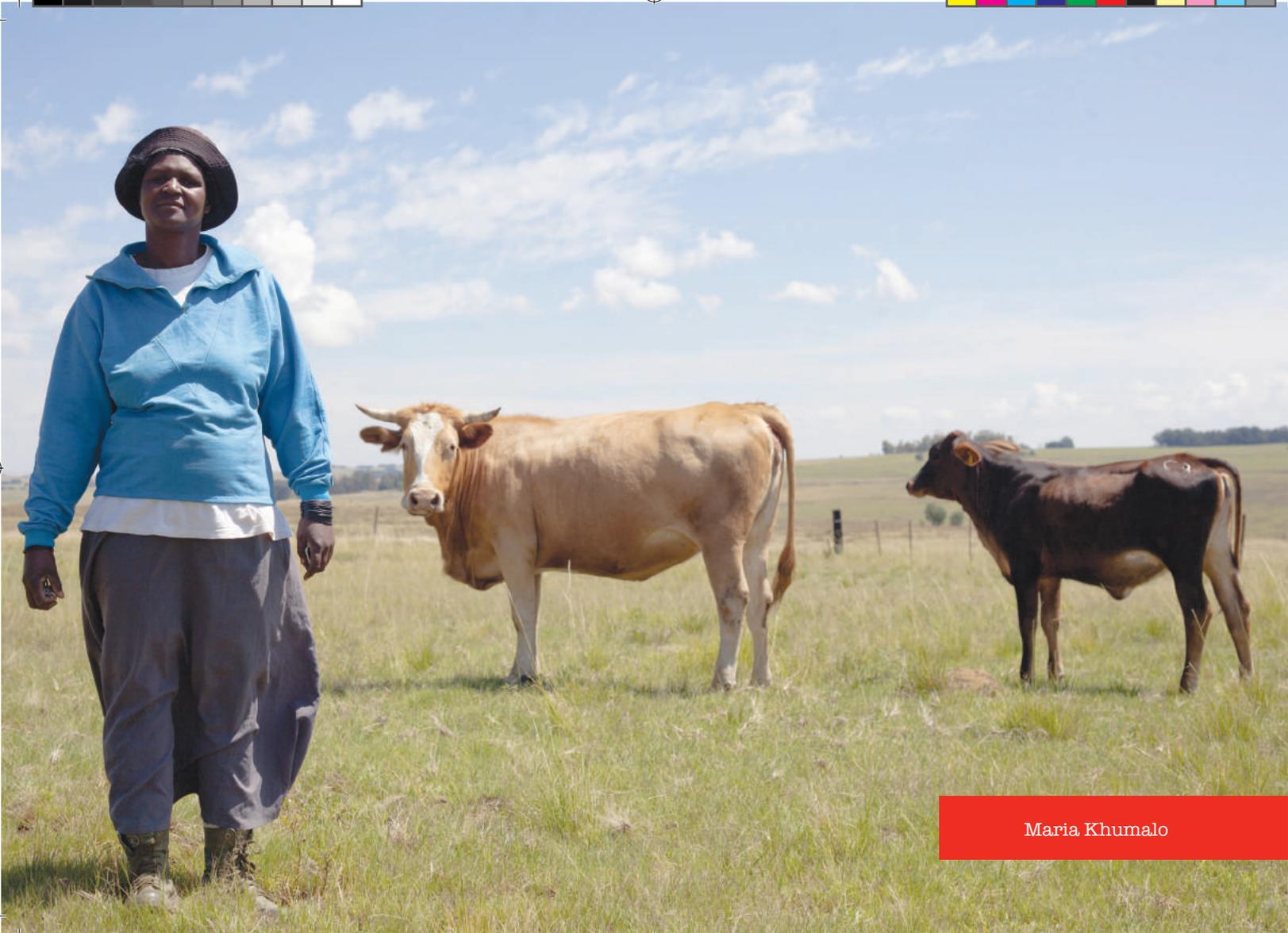
Adding insult to injury and further frustrating the Khumalos, the mine has put up signs across the area warning against trespassing and preventing community members from collecting wood in an open field nearby. Since many community members do not have access to electricity the wood is essential to make fire.



All this goes against people's constitutional human right to water, resources and an adequate standard of living for the health and wellbeing of the individual and family. Furthermore, the right to 'adequate water' is specifically provided for in the International Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Draft Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women. CEDAW recognises the right of women in rural areas to enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to sanitation and water supply

Access to water implies that water should be both economically and physically accessible. Physical accessibility means that water should be available within a distance accessible to everyone including vulnerable individuals such as children, elderly persons and persons with disabilities. Women in Carolina, Ermelo and Emalahleni however are made to walk long distances to search for water. Often they wait for hours sometimes days for the municipality truck to bring water. And further spend hours standing in long queues to collect their ration.





Maria Khumalo



# Dispossessed

Maria Khumalo (39) fondly remembers how happy she was living with her family on a farm. The family had a ten-room house and large field on which they planted crops and raised livestock. All that remains of her home are memories. Her present day reality is starkly different.

A few years ago the Khumalos were given a five-room RDP house and promised financial compensation for the relocation. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) is a socio-economic policy framework developed and implemented by government to address the crippling levels of poverty and inequalities prevalent across the country. To date, after moving away from the lands that their forefathers lived, toiled and died on, the family has still not received the promised compensation.

Most families enjoy access to electricity in the RDP houses but the Khumalos are an exception. Maria is convinced that the reason for this is related to her gender, "I'm the only woman and my concerns are not taken seriously."

Mine operations in the area have undermined Maria's livelihood by appropriating vast quantities of land formerly used for crop and livestock farming. "My parents left me with a 100 cattle but now I'm only left with two." She now makes a paltry earning selling chicken and uses the money to buy coal and food. Community members are no longer allowed to hunt or collect wood on what is now considered mine property. Their new home is covered in cracks and it's full of dust caused by the mine blasts and passing trucks. "At night we can't sleep, my nose is always blocked and I am always coughing," says Maria.

Worse yet, Maria angrily explains, "We are no longer allowed to visit the graves of our ancestors." The Khumalos have met with the mine to raise their concerns but this proved to be futile and nothing has changed. The mine continues business as usual being left unaccountable, to the community.



Margaret Zodwa Zulu has lived in Clewer for the past 24 years. Blasts from the nearby Mlalazi Mine have left her home scattered with cracks on both the walls and windows. During mine blasts local residents have, on occasion, fled their homes for safety because of the very real fear that their homes would collapse on them.

Zodwa no longer hangs her laundry outside because of persistent dust, coming from the mine, leaves her washing dirty and in need of another wash. Boreholes have been rendered useless in supplying safe drinking water. Underground water sources are now polluted, acidic and causes severe diarrhea.

The community has rallied together to find some resolution to these issues and have shared their concerns with the local municipality but again, nothing has come of this.



Margaret Zodwa Zulu





## Lost identity

Emma Mokoena lost her identity document in a fire. She tried to have it replaced several times but had no luck on account of the many inefficiencies riddling the Home Affairs Department. Over the years, she grew wary and simply abandoned any hope of getting a replacement. She was unable to access any government grants and when her daughter was born, as consequence of Emma not having an identity document, her daughter was not issued with a birth certificate. The Mokena case study shows that poverty patterns tend to be intergenerational. While Emma's daughters are eligible to apply for a state grant, technically because they are not recognized as citizens of the country, they are barred from doing so.

The Mokoena's situation is dire. For the past 20 years, Emma lived with her family in a dilapidated caravan, located 40 meters away from Liquid Deep Mine. During the rainy season the caravan would be flooded with water and in the winters cold air would leak in. In early 2016, members of MACUA (Mining Affected Communities United in Action) and WAMUA (Women Affected by Mining United in Action) collected material and built the family a shack.

Emma earns a small income by selling coal which she harvests from the mine. Her daughters try to find odd jobs to help her buy food. Through the intervention of ActionAid South Africa, Southern Green Revolutionary Council and NUMSA (National Union of Metal Workers South Africa), Emma has now been certified as a South African citizen and qualifies to apply for a state grant. She has submitted an application for an RDP house and is optimistic that her official citizenship will allow her family to prosper.



Emma Mokoena



# Growing up next to the mine

Asikhulume Day Care Center, owned by Patricia Phogole, is situated in MNS informal settlement. The settlement is located next to Liquid Deep Mine. The day care caters for children who come from poor households, mostly headed by single mothers. The children in the center are exposed to toxic metals from the mine. Lengthy exposure to these metals has been shown to cause irreversible brain damage. In addition, the children are exposed to dust caused by trucks, transporting materials in and out of the mine. Consequently they regularly suffer from chronic coughs, wheezing, asthma and shortness of breath.

The area has no water, electricity and sanitation. There are no clinics nearby and the health of these children is severely compromised. Patricia explains that most parents “cannot afford to pay medical costs for their children.” Travelling the long distances to town with a taxi to acquire pediatric health services is simply not a possibility for most families.

Noticing the importance of child care in the community, a number of daycare centers have mushroomed and this has lowered the quality of services provided. Patricia remarks, “It hurts me a lot when I see kids who used to belong in my day care center and are taken to another one where they are losing weight through neglect.” With limited resources and after failing to get sponsorship from the mine to upgrade her facilities, Patricia continues to strive to provide quality services, ensuring that the children in her care are clean and have access to health services when needed.



Patricia Phogole





## Longing for a brighter future

Phindi\* (28) became a sex worker at the age of 17, soon after dropping out of high school. She is a single parent and mother of two children, and has been a commercial sex worker for eight years. She explains that most of her clients are men working at the surrounding mines in Mpumalanga. Many of these men are migrant workers from other provinces of South Africa and from neighbouring countries. Since their families, wives and partners are back home, they seek out sexual pleasure from sex workers like Phindi.

She does not have a pimp and works for herself, making about R4000 a week. Phindi explains that she never enjoys sex with her clients because she is not doing it out of love and is only ever able to see clients when she is high. The drugs help her feel in control more powerful during sex, while also helping to numb any negative emotions. Phindi has been addicted to drugs since she started commercial sex work. She is plagued with worry about her health status because many men do not want to use condoms and when people are high they think less about protection and more about pleasure.

She regrets ever taking drugs and starting sex work because she feels like she has wasted her youth and neglected her children. Phindi desperately wants to leave the industry because she believes her work is hurting the people she loves, particularly her children. However, with high rates of unemployment in Mpumalanga; without any formal education and no work experience in the mining sector, she has no other way of earning the same income needed to support herself and her family.

Often, her kids do not want to go to school because other children tease them about their mother's drug addiction. Phindi hates seeing her children suffer and wants them to have a better life, one that doesn't follow the same path she has been on since her teens.

“This year, I made a resolution— I want to find a job to look after my children so that they can have a brighter future and so I can also quit drugs.”

\*not her real name





Photo by Ilan Godfrey





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