

## YCU - RI **POLICY Brief**

# Exploring social inequalities and challenges faced by women in a rare earth elements mining area: A Study of Kachin State, Myanmar

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### **Key Findings:**

- Women often migrate due to economic necessity, limited local job opportunities, and the pursuit of better livelihoods.
  - Family financial stability, obligations, and demographic factors like age, education, and marital status influence women's decisions.
  - Their challenges are systemic gender-based discrimination in recruitment, hiring, and career advancement, including unequal pay and limited job opportunities that increase their vulnerability to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse.
  - Barriers like limited access to justice, social stigma, and fear of retaliation often prevent women from reporting violence and seeking help.
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## **Executive Summary**

Social inequalities of women in the extractive sectors relate to the systemic and pervasive ways in which they are subject to discrimination and disadvantage in many aspects of their lives, including their access to resources, opportunities, and power. This paper focuses on Myanmar's Rare Earth Elements (REE) mining area in the borderland of Kachin State. It seeks to understand women's concerns regarding their roles in the REE mining area, to analyze women's issues, and explore the challenges of social inequality that women experience. The study utilizes a systematic literature review and semi-structured interviews. It shows that women in REE mining sites migrate due to economic necessity and limited local job opportunities, with their decisions influenced by family background and demographic factors. They face systemic gender discrimination, unequal pay, limited job opportunities, exclusion from decision-making, and various forms of violence, exacerbated by the male-dominated industry.

## **Introduction**

The global extractive industries have long been characterized by women facing systemic discrimination that results in significant social inequalities

affecting their access to resources, opportunities, and the ability to control their lives. In Myanmar's numerous mining industries, research on gender discrimination is limited compared to other sectors but reveals pronounced discrimination against women (Castilhos et al., 2006; Quirino, 2011; Gutiérrez & Sánchez, 2017). Research highlights the lack of women's perspectives in mining impact analyses, despite their role as crucial community members affected by mining (Jenkins, 2014). The Rare Earth Elements (REE) mining sector, predominantly concentrated in Kachin State, is a significant area where these issues are evident.

This study addresses the gap in understanding women's experiences in REE mining areas by conducting a systematic review to explore common issues such as sexual and physical abuse, food insecurity driving women into sex work, poor health, low respect, discrimination, and security concerns. There is no policy in place regulating the percentage of women in the mining workforce and the absence of women in executive positions further increases the power imbalance between male and female miners (Nhawu et al., 2016). Consequently, women's roles are often undervalued and marginalized within the industry. The study seeks to understand women's concerns about

their roles and addresses what roles women fill in REE mining and what social inequality challenges they experience.

## **Methodology**

This research employed a qualitative approach, combining a systematic review with semi-structured interviews with mining experts. The systematic review aimed to identify empirical evidence to address the research questions, exploring common issues faced by women in mining areas, such as physical and sexual violence, food insecurity, health problems, discrimination, and security concerns.

Due to political instability and escalating conflict in Myanmar, access to women respondents in REE mining areas was limited, resulting in interviews with only two mining experts. Through semi-structured interviews with experts, the conditions of the mining area and why women are not working in those areas have been explored.

## **Rare earth element mining in Myanmar**

Since the 1980s, China has dominated global rare earth production, accounting for 80-90% of supply (Tracy, 2020). However, concerns about the negative impacts of such

mining and declining reserves has led to many heavy rare earth mines being closed, from 2016 onward (China Water Risk, 2016). To maintain international supply, China's state-owned processors sought new raw material sources, turning to Myanmar, which has rich resources comparable to those in Jiangxi (Global Witness, 2022).

Between 2016 and 2019, around 15,000 people from Ganzhou moved to Myanmar to mine rare earth minerals (Merriman & Backeberg, 2019). Most of Myanmar's heavy rare earth resources are located in Kachin Special Region 1, including Chipwi, Panwa, and Kanpiti townships, a semi-autonomous, mountainous area on the northeastern border with China (Network Media Group, 2023). This region is controlled by the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K), integrated into the Border Guard Force under Myanmar military command (BNI Multimedia Group, 2009). In the Chipwi and Panwa regions, over 2,700 mineral pools exist within 300 mining blocks owned by Chinese businesses (Global Witness, 2022). The mining activity is intensive, with exports to China reaching nearly 24,000 tons, valued at over 600 million USD in 2022 (ISP Myanmar, 2023). The presence of BGF and militia groups, along with frequent armed conflicts, has displaced around 100,000 people, reflecting power abuses over

valuable resources (Global Inequalities and the 'Just Transition,' 2022).

As China's demand for resources led to significant migration from regions like Ganzhou to REE-rich areas such as Kachin State, the gender dynamics in mining have likely shifted. By investigating, first, the roles of women in REE mining and, second, the social inequalities and challenges they encounter, this study seeks to highlight their contributions and identify the barriers they face.

### **Women in REE mining area**

In the rare earth mining sector in Kachin State, gender inequality, geopolitical challenges, and socioeconomic dynamics intersect. The substantial rise in female labor force participation, especially after the coup in 2021, highlights how the region's power structures and financial opportunities are changing.

Chinese managers lead the rare earth industry, with Burmese labor leaders who speak Chinese overseeing operations (Kachin News Group, 2024). At one site, 15 of the 40 workers are Chinese, performing technical roles, while Myanmar nationals, mostly aged 18–30, handle hazardous chemicals. Women work as cooks and water level monitors (Global Witness, 2022; Kachin News, 2024), general workers, and sex workers, often serving Chinese

clients due to limited employment options (Myanmar Resource Watch, 2023). In REE mining, Chinese companies typically employ Chinese workers for technical tasks, Myanmar men for (often dangerous) manual labor, and Myanmar women in the lowest tier, often facing demands for sexual favors due to gender discrimination.

An emerging research agenda emphasizes recognizing women as essential actors in mining-affected communities (Jenkins, 2014). Historically, women in the mining industry have faced sexual harassment, exclusion, and were often relegated to domestic roles like carrying water and providing food (Buss et al., 2019; Pimpa et al., 2016; Norberg & Falthlom, 2018). In REE mining areas, women's involvement has been largely overlooked, with myths suggesting their presence caused accidents (Perks & Schulz, 2020). Since the 2021 coup, the number of women in mining has increased due to economic hardship and limited job opportunities, with many young women from across Myanmar, including recent graduates, entering the sector, most being in their 20s and 30s (Myanmar Resource Watch, 2023). At these sites, women are typically employed as general or sex workers. Chinese workers view Myanmar women as objects of desire,

and job applications often involve questions about their willingness to work as sex workers (Myanmar Resource Watch, 2023).

This research points out that women exist in the complex concerns of marginalization and injustice that are present in the rare earth mining industry, where boundaries have disappeared not only geographically but also in terms of gender roles and exploitation.

### **Challenges of social inequality in REE mining**

The analysis employs borderland theory, emphasizing how complex interactions between residents, outside actors, and marginalized groups, particularly women, are influenced by geographical and sociopolitical barriers in Kachin State's REE mining areas. Borderland theory posits overlapping scales of territorialization. This is seen in Kachin when BGF groups and military groups came to the area, there was de-territorialization in terms of displacement and reterritorialization, the establishment of new connections to a territory as a result of mining activity. Women exist in the borderlands of mining sites, constructing their roles while dealing with continual marginalization and social inequality.

Women's involvement in REE mining in Myanmar has increased due to limited job opportunities following the military coup but remains restricted, with many working as cooks, water level monitors, and sex workers. The higher wages for sex work attract women to this role, especially given Myanmar's economic difficulties.

Female employees in the mining sector, including sex workers, are often sexually exploited by their Chinese employers, with no accountability for mistreatment (Myanmar Resource Watch, 2023) and many suffer from reproductive ill-health. Reports of abuse, violence, and reproductive health issues, highlight the pervasive gender inequality and systematic mistreatment faced by women, especially those involved in sex work.

Chinese employers at rare earth mining sites gave female sex workers contraceptives and other medications, often unknown, and many of these women later developed reproductive diseases, and some died (Myanmar Resource Watch, 2023). This situation reflects severe structural inequalities and vulnerabilities experienced by marginalized women in society.

### **Conclusions**

This research has examined the obstacles women face at REE mining sites, and finds that women often

migrate due to economic necessity, limited local job opportunities, and the pursuit of better livelihoods. Their decisions are influenced by family financial stability, obligations, and demographic factors like age, education, and marital status. They face systemic gender-based discrimination in recruitment, hiring, and career advancement, including unequal pay and limited job opportunities. The male-dominated industry, remote locations, and inadequate security increase their vulnerability to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Barriers like limited access to justice, social stigma, and fear of retaliation often prevent women from reporting violence and seeking help.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to address the challenges faced by women and girls at REE mining sites:

- **Protection:** Enforce strict measures to protect women and girls from discrimination, harassment, and violence in mining sites.
- **Prevention:** Develop and implement comprehensive policies and programs to prevent gender-based discrimination and violence in the mining sector.

- **Participation:** Promote the meaningful participation of women and girls in decision-making processes at all levels of the mining industry.
- **Relief and Recovery:** Establish support mechanisms and services to provide relief and recovery for women victims of violence, including access to healthcare, legal assistance, and psychosocial support.

## Implications

- NGOs and legal aid organizations in Myanmar and Kachin State should investigate women's experiences in mining, with academic assistance, and support them.
- They need to offer free legal assistance to women who have experienced violence or discrimination in the mining sector, ensuring they have access to justice, and to create support networks that offer safe spaces for women to share their experiences, access counseling, and receive assistance in rebuilding their lives after facing abuse.

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