



Gender Games and the Modelling of Inequalities in Artisanal Mining in Batouri (East Cameroon)

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the gender games that structure daily interactions in artisanal gold and diamond mining in Batouri, East Cameroon. The objective is to understand how the gender division of labour is produced, reproduced and, on certain occasions, transformed through strategic interactions among actors. The methodology combines a quantitative approach (questionnaires administered to 200 artisanal miners) and a qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews with six categories of actors, participant observation over 2,000 cumulative hours, focus groups). The results show that the gender division of labour is highly hierarchical: men occupy the most remunerative positions (digging, amalgamation, wholesale trade), while women are confined to manual crushing and washing, with incomes five times lower. These inequalities persist because they constitute stable Nash equilibria: no actor has an interest in unilaterally changing their strategy. However, certain «choice opportunities» crises, police raids, arrival of new actors create windows of opportunity where power relations can be reconfigured. The article mobilises a theoretical framework articulating Goffmanian interactionism, Crenshaw's intersectionality and Nash's game theory, enriched by the contributions of Foucault, Bourdieu, Kergoat, Scott, Connell, Butler, de Certeau, Simmel, Weber and Tilly. It proposes five figures of mining femininity tolerated, transgressive, accommodating, resilient and subaltern which account for the diversity of women's strategies in the face of domination.

KEYWORDS: gender games, artisanal mining, gender division of labour, Nash equilibrium, face, intersectionality, Batouri.

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INTRODUCTION

In Batouri, East Cameroon, artisanal gold and diamond mining mobilises thousands of workers under conditions marked by a rigid and asymmetric gender division of labour. Men occupy the most remunerative positions (digging, amalgamation, wholesale trade), while women are massively confined to manual crushing and washing, with significantly lower incomes: a male digger earns an average of 17,000 FCFA per week compared to 7,500 FCFA for a female crusher. This configuration is not merely a reflection of natural differences or individual productivity; it is the product of complex strategic interactions in which each actor adjusts their behaviour according to the anticipations they form about the actions of others.

To account for this complexity, our research mobilises a theoretical framework articulating three complementary approaches. Goffmanian interactionism (Goffman, 1973, 1974) provides the concepts of face, frame of experience and backstage to analyse daily micro-interactions and the strategies of self-presentation through which actors negotiate their position. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality (1989, 1991) illuminates the articulation of different forms of domination gender, ethnic origin, migratory status, age which combine to produce specific situations of vulnerability or privilege. Finally, non-cooperative game theory, formalised by John Nash (1950), makes it possible to model situations of strategic interdependence and to understand why certain unequal configurations persist, constituting stable equilibria that no one has an interest in modifying unilaterally. These

Gender Games and the Modelling of Inequalities in Artisanal Mining in Batouri (East Cameroon)

three pillars are supplemented analytically by the contributions of Michel Foucault on micro-powers and the production of subjectivities, Pierre Bourdieu on symbolic violence, Danièle Kergoat on the gender division of labour as a fundamental social relation, James Scott on discreet resistances, Raewyn Connell on masculinities, Judith Butler on the performativity of gender, Michel de Certeau on everyday tactics, Georg Simmel on the forms of conflictual socialisation, Max Weber on the construction of ideal-types, and Charles Tilly on repertoires of collective action.

Methodologically, the research adopts a mixed approach, combining quantitative and qualitative inquiry. It was conducted between 2023 and 2025 in Batouri and its surroundings. A total of eight mining sites spread across three villages (Kambélé I, II, III, Trypano, Mbounou) were investigated. Questionnaires were administered face-to-face to 200 artisanal miners (100 men, 100 women). Data were entered using Sphinx Plus software and then analysed with SPSS (descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests, ANOVA). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six categories of actors: administrative authorities (3), traditional chiefs (2), male artisans (10) and female artisans (10), buyers (3), foreign investors (2), and women's associations (2). Four focus groups were organised (24 participants). Direct and participant observation was carried out continuously throughout the research (over 2,000 cumulative hours). Qualitative data were processed through thematic content analysis using NVivo software.

I. THE CONCEPT OF GENDER GAMES: DEFINITION, FOUNDATIONS AND OPERATIONALISATION

The analysis of gender relations in artisanal mining requires a conceptual tool capable of capturing both the strategic dimension of interactions, the performativity of identities and the materiality of power relations. The concept of gender games meets this requirement. It designates the set of strategic interactions, conscious or not, through which actors and actresses adjust their behaviours, discourses and postures according to the anticipations they form about the actions of others, in a context where gender norms assign differentiated and hierarchical positions.

I.1. Theoretical foundations of the concept of gender games

The concept of gender games draws on three major theoretical traditions. The first is Erving Goffman's interactionist sociology, which analyses social life as a stage where each actor plays a role and seeks to control the impression they produce. Goffman (1973) shows that daily interactions are governed by «*confirmation rites*» and «*repair rites*» that maintain social order and preserve the face of participants. Face is that positive social value that a person effectively claims through the line of action that others assume they have adopted during a particular contact. In the mining context, men construct their face around physical strength, courage and the capacity to provide for their families; women must navigate between the need to prove their competence and the obligation not to threaten masculine face.

The second tradition is non-cooperative game theory, formalised by John Nash (1950). This approach analyses situations of strategic interdependence where each actor chooses a strategy according to what they anticipate of others' choices. A Nash equilibrium is a situation in which no actor has an interest in unilaterally modifying their strategy, given the strategies of the others. In the context of ASM, this approach makes it possible to understand why certain unequal configurations persist: they are stable even if they are disadvantageous to some, because no actor has an interest in changing them alone.

The third tradition is intersectionality, theorised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991). Crenshaw shows that different forms of domination gender, race, class, etc. do not simply add up but interact to produce qualitatively new situations, irreducible to the sum of their parts. Applied to ASM, intersectionality makes it possible to understand that the position of a migrant, illiterate woman is not reducible to that of an educated, indigenous woman: it is the articulation of gender, origin, migratory status and level of education that produces a specific situation of vulnerability.

I.2. The three dimensions of gender games

The operationalisation of the concept of gender games on the Batouri mining sites rests on the fine observation of three interdependent dimensions. The first dimension is the performative dimension. Actors play their gender role the strong and courageous man who descends into the pits, the discreet and patient woman who washes the ore and these performances are evaluated, validated or contested by others. Judith Butler (1990) has shown that gender is not an essence but a «*performance*» produced by the stylised repetition of acts, gestures and discourses. In Batouri, this repetition is daily: every gesture, every word, every posture confirms or threatens the gendered order. Transgressions a woman who digs, a man who washes create «*frame breaks*» that oblige others to readjust their expectations.

The second dimension is the strategic dimension. Each actor calculates their choices according to the probable reactions of others, in a context where resources are scarce and positions unequal. Game theory formalises these calculations: a male pit owner knows that by excluding women from lucrative activities, he maximises his short-term gains. A woman knows that by claiming a role in extraction, she risks reprisals and the loss of her income. These calculations are not necessarily conscious; they are incorporated in the form of habitus, as Bourdieu (1998) shows. Actors act «*as if*» they were calculating, but their strategies are the product of internalised dispositions that make them perceive certain options as natural and others as impossible.

The third dimension is the reflexive dimension. Actors adjust their strategies according to the feedback they receive, and these adjustments contribute to stabilising or transforming the gendered order. A woman who has experienced a «*choice*»

Gender Games and the Modelling of Inequalities in Artisanal Mining in Batouri (East Cameroon)

opportunity" a police raid that drives the men away, for example may durably modify her perception of her own competences. This is what Foucault (1976) calls the production of subjectivities by power dispositifs: power does not merely repress; it produces subjectivities, knowledges, norms.

II. DAILY INTERACTIONS AND FACE MANAGEMENT ON THE MINING SITES

The Batouri mining sites are stages where daily performances of gender are played out. Each actor must constantly manage the impression they produce, preserve their face and, where necessary, repair the incidents that threaten the interactional order.

II.1. The mining stage and its actors

On the Batouri sites, social life unfolds like a theatre. For men, face is closely linked to the identity of provider and protector. A pit owner, whom we shall call André (52 years old, Gbaya, owner for 15 years), states: *"I am the chief here. I opened this pit, I took risks when no one wanted to come. Now I have teams working for me. I decide everything. If anyone is not happy, they can leave."* This discourse, analysed in the light of Goffman, is a performance intended to maintain a dominant face, to call subordinates to order and to legitimise authority through the narrative of a founding exploit. Men who occupy subordinate positions young diggers, precarious migrants construct their face on other registers: resistance to fatigue, capacity to endure pain, the narrative of past exploits.

For women, face management is more complex. They must both prove their competence to be accepted on the sites and avoid threatening the symbolic order that attributes strength to men. Cécile (44 years old, Kako'o, washer for 20 years) declares: *"I do my work, I crush my stones, I don't bother anyone. If a man speaks loudly to me, I lower my eyes, I say 'yes, sir'. Yet I know I work faster than him. But if I show it, he'll bother me. So I pretend."* This *"pretending"* is an invisible cost of female labour, an additional mental burden imposed by the constraints of gendered interaction.

II.2. Face incidents and repair strategies

Daily interactions are punctuated by incidents that threaten the face of participants. When a woman proposes a better washing technique to a man, she commits an attack on masculine face. The observed repair strategy generally consists of the man ignoring the proposition, while another man takes it up for himself, thus restoring collective masculine competence. Conversely, if a man insinuates that a woman prostitutes herself to obtain favours, the attack on feminine face is repaired by a laugh and a strategic distancing.

The most serious incident concerns the transgression of ritual interdictions, such as the approach of a pit by a menstruating woman. In this case, the repair strategy is collective and formalised: immediate withdrawal of the woman, then purification of the site by an elder, who restores the threatened symbolic order. These repair mechanisms, although codified, reproduce and reinforce the gendered hierarchy by reminding women of their ritual *"impurity"* and their dependence on men for the management of the sacred.

II.3. The backstage and spaces of preparation

The Goffmanian distinction between *"front stage"* and *"backstage"* is particularly fruitful for understanding women's strategies. On the public stage of the mining site, women play the expected role: discreet, respectful, they do not challenge male authority. But in the backstage the camps, the tontine meetings, the informal moments among women they prepare their strategies, devise tactics of circumvention and strengthen their solidarity. Marie (38 years old, Central African migrant, washer) explains: *"On the site, I act like a woman who knows nothing. I ask men: 'sir, what should I do?' They are happy, they explain to me. But in my head, I already know what I'm going to do. In the evening, with the other women, we organise, we prepare."*

These backstages are spaces of discreet resistance. James Scott (1990), in his analysis of the *"arts of weakness,"* shows that the dominated develop discreet practices that allow them to preserve their dignity and improve their lot without exposing themselves to repression. In Batouri, these practices take the form of work slowdowns, small thefts of gold, rumours, mockery. A washer, whom we shall call Thérèse (50 years old, Gbaya, crusher for 25 years), confides: *"When the owner is too mean, we work slowly. We pretend to get tired quickly. We 'lose' a little gold in the sand we throw away, and we come back to get it at night. He sees nothing, but we get justice."* Michel de Certeau (1980), in his analysis of everyday tactics, emphasises that the dominated do not have the power to impose global strategies, but they can deploy opportunistic tactics that exploit the faults in the system.

III. THE STRATEGIC MODELLING OF INEQUALITIES

Why do gender inequalities persist in Batouri despite their apparently disadvantageous character for women? John Nash's non-cooperative game theory offers a formalism to answer this question.

III.1. Principles of game theory and Nash equilibria

Non-cooperative game theory analyses situations of strategic interdependence where each actor chooses a strategy according to what they anticipate of others' choices. A Nash equilibrium is a situation in which no actor has an interest in unilaterally modifying their strategy, given the strategies of the others. This formalisation illuminates what Danièle Kergoat (2012)

Gender Games and the Modelling of Inequalities in Artisanal Mining in Batouri (East Cameroon)

calls the "*gender division of labour*" as a fundamental social relation. Kergoat shows that the division of tasks between the sexes is not a simple technical distribution, but an antagonistic social relation that assigns subordinate tasks to women and valued activities to men.

II.2. The payoff matrix as an archetype of gendered interactions

The matrix below formalises the strategic interactions between women (F) and men (H) in ASM.

Table 1: the matrix of Nash applied to Gender's games in Small Scale Mining

F Strategy \ H Strategy	Exclude women from lucrative roles (H1)	Collaborate / share lucrative roles (H2)
Accept subordinate role (F1)	(2, 8)	(4, 6)
Claim extraction role (F2)	(1, 7)	(6, 5)

Source : Ndongso Bela and ESSOMBA EBELA Solange, qualitative inquiry, March 2026

Each pair of numbers represents the respective gains of the woman and the man, in hypothetical units combining monetary income and social status. The situation (2, 8) corresponds to the dominant patriarchal status quo: the woman accepts a subordinate role, the man excludes her from lucrative roles and captures the essential value. The Nash equilibrium of this game is (F1, H1): the woman has no interest in deviating alone towards F2 (since $2 \rightarrow 1$), and the man has no interest in deviating towards H2 (since $8 \rightarrow 6$). This equilibrium is stable, but inefficient in the Pareto sense: it is very far from the best possible collective outcome (6,5). The actors remain stuck because of power asymmetries and the costs of individual deviation.

III.3. Symbolic violence and the internalisation of domination relations

What the payoff matrix does not show is the process of internalisation that stabilises the equilibrium. Pierre Bourdieu (1998), in *Masculine Domination*, shows that the dominated contribute to their own domination by incorporating the categories of perception of the dominants. In Batouri, women who declare: "*The mines are for men. I sell at the market, it's better for a woman*" (words collected from Jeanne, 40 years old, trader) are not simple passive victims; they are subjects of a symbolic violence that makes them perceive their exclusion as natural. This mechanism is reinforced by what Foucault (1976) calls power-knowledge dispositifs: medical discourses on women's physical weakness, traditional discourses on their ritual impurity, legal discourses on property rights all these discourses produce docile subjectivities. Raewyn Connell (1995), in her work on masculinities, completes this analysis by showing that hegemonic masculinity constructs itself in opposition to femininity and subordinate masculinities. In Batouri, men construct their identity as "real men" by digging deep pits, taking risks, providing for their families' needs. Any transgression of this norm is perceived as a threat to the symbolic order. This is why women who transgress are tolerated but rarely accepted.

III.4. The impasse of collective action and choice opportunities

This formalism makes it possible to explain the failure of women's protest movements on the mining sites. Lucie (42 years old, Gbaya, crusher) analyses the situation lucidly: "*We know we are exploited. But if we complain, we lose our place. And there is always another woman waiting to take our work. So we keep quiet, we put up with it.*" This verbatim illustrates what Charles Tilly (1978) calls a constrained repertoire of collective action: in a context of migrant precariousness and heterogeneous interests (washers, traders, mothers), each woman has an interest in individual defection rather than collective mobilisation.

Yet windows of opportunity can open. "*Choice opportunities*" crises, arrival of new actors, technical innovations, police raids create temporary configurations where power relations can be recomposed. Josiane (36 years old, Kako'o, washer) recounts: "*When the police came, all the men fled into the bush. They were afraid of being arrested. We, the women, stayed. For two weeks, we were the chiefs. The buyers came directly to us. It was the first time I negotiated the price myself.*" Judith Butler (1990) shows that the repetition of gender norms is what constitutes and stabilises them. An interruption of this repetition like a police raid that drives the men away can open a space of subversion where other configurations become possible.

IV. POSITIONS AND STRATEGIES OF ACTORS IN GENDER GAMES

Gender games do not unfold in an empty space; they are crossed by other power relations that combine to produce specific positions. This section analyses the articulation of gender with ethnic origin, migratory status and age.

IV.1. The accumulation of handicaps: gender, origin and migratory status

Intersectionality, theorised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), makes it possible to grasp how gender articulates with other power relations. In Batouri, foreign women accumulate handicaps. Fatima (29 years old, Chadian, washer) testifies: "*I came from Chad with my husband. He died in a landslide. Now I am alone. The women here look down on me, they say I take their work. I wash, I earn just enough not to starve. If I get sick, I have no one to help me.*" This situation is typical of what Crenshaw

Gender Games and the Modelling of Inequalities in Artisanal Mining in Batouri (East Cameroon)

calls "*structural intersectionality*": the position of this woman at the intersection of gender, migratory status and widowhood produces a specific vulnerability.

Foreign men, although dominated by the indigenous, benefit from a "masculine privilege." Ibrahim (35 years old, Nigerian, digger) declares: "*I came from Nigeria five years ago. I work as a digger, I earn a good living. The people here accept me, I've made friends. I can't buy a pit, it's reserved for the indigenous. But I can work, I can earn money.*" As Kergoat (2012) has shown, gender is a social relation that traverses all other social relations, but it does not determine them unilaterally.

IV.2. Age and life cycle as differentiating factors

Age is another major axis of differentiation. Young women are the most vulnerable to violence; adult women can access more autonomous positions if they have accumulated experience; elderly women acquire a certain respect but remain economically precarious. Albertine (58 years old, Gbaya, former crusher turned vendor) declares: "*I am 58. I can no longer wash, my back hurts too much. Now I sell food on the site. I earn little, but it's enough to live on. The young people respect me, they call me 'mama'. Sometimes I am asked to sing for the rituals. But money, it's difficult.*" This testimony illustrates the paradoxical position of ageing women: symbolic recognition, but economic poverty.

IV.3. The double game of elites and the production of subjectivities

Intersectionality also illuminates the ambivalent positioning of politico-administrative elites. By day, these actors embody the regulating State; by night, they become actors in the underground economy, using their position to acquire permits, associate with foreign investors, and organise parallel buying networks. A Chadian migrant, whom we shall call Hamadou (32 years old, former worker on a semi-mechanised site), testifies: "*The Arabs don't work alone. They are with government people, ministers, generals. The gold leaves in big planes, no one controls it. We are nothing. We can die, they will find other young people.*" This double game, analysed in the light of Foucault (1976), shows that power is not a monolithic structure but a set of diffuse relations that traverse the entire social body. The collusion between foreign capital and local elites produces a system of predation where migrant workers, without papers or recourse, are caught in a cycle of dependence and violence.

V. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS WITH EXISTING LITERATURE

The results of our survey confirm and enrich previous work on gender in ASM. The gender division of labour we observed in Batouri corresponds to classic descriptions in the literature. Hilson (2018) emphasises that women are massively confined to transformation activities, while men occupy extraction positions. Our results go further by precisely quantifying the income gap (a ratio of 1 to 5 between women and men) and identifying the five structural mechanisms that produce it.

The concept of gender games we propose extends the work of Arthur-Holmes (2021) on women's "*remuneration negotiations*" in Ghana and of Buss et al. (2019) on women's "*tactics*" for accessing pits in the DRC. Our contribution is to articulate these strategic analyses with non-cooperative game theory, which makes it possible to formalise why these tactics often remain ineffective at the collective level. The Nash equilibrium we identified (F1, H1) illuminates what Mensah (2024) calls "*battling on multiple frontiers*": women struggle simultaneously against customary patriarchy, capitalist exploitation and formalisation policies that ignore them.

The paradox of ritual exclusion we documented women excluded from pits by day but included at night in crucial rituals confirms Lahiri-Dutt's (2011) analyses of the ambivalence of symbolic constructions in mining spaces. Our survey shows that this ambivalence is not a cultural residue but a utilitarian dispositif that serves the interests of masculine domination.

The figures of mining femininity we propose tolerated, transgressive, accommodating, resilient and subaltern draw on Connell's (1995) work on masculinities and Weber's (1922) method of ideal-types. They offer a more nuanced analytical grid than the classic dichotomy between "*victims*" and "*agents*." They align with the analyses of Rutherford and Buss (2024), who insist on the need to go beyond the binary image of the woman as "*victim*" or "*empowered*" to grasp the complexity of female trajectories.

Finally, our analysis of the double game of elites confirms the work of Geenen (2015) on the mediation of access to resources by local power relations, and of Ottou (2024) on the recomposition of power relations in East Cameroon under the effect of the arrival of Asian companies.

VI. THE FIVE IDEAL-TYPICAL FIGURES OF MINING FEMININITY

Based on prolonged observation of the Batouri mining sites and interviews conducted with women, we propose five figures of mining femininity, inspired by Weber's typology of ideal-types and Connell's work on masculinities.

VI.1. The tolerated femininity

This figure designates the woman who openly transgresses gender norms by investing in traditionally masculine positions, but whose presence is tolerated rather than accepted by men. Men tolerate her presence either because of her position in the mining hierarchy, or for reasons of image and "*political correctness*." Martine (48 years old, Gbaya, pit owner) testifies: "*I'm not just here to wash gravel. I learned to dig, to speak loudly, and now I manage a team. At first, the men laughed. Now they*

Gender Games and the Modelling of Inequalities in Artisanal Mining in Batouri (East Cameroon)

accept me because I pay well. But I know they don't like me." The tolerated woman suffers a double constraint: proving her competence while avoiding threatening masculine face.

VI.2. The transgressive femininity

This figure embodies the woman who, unlike the previous one, does not seek to be tolerated but to actively subvert the established order. She openly claims equal access to resources and organises collectively. Véronique (42 years old, Kako'o, association leader) explains: *"We organised a demonstration in front of the Chinese site. We said: 'If you don't give us access to the pits, we'll block everything.' The men said we were crazy. But we held on. We obtained that they let us wash on part of the site."* Transgressive femininity creates "frame breaks" (Goffman) that can destabilise the gendered order.

VI.3. The accommodating femininity

This figure designates the woman who has found a pragmatic compromise with the dominant order. She does not openly contest norms, but interprets them creatively to preserve her margin of manoeuvre. Rose (36 years old, Gbaya, washer) confides: *"When I have my period, I can't approach the pit, it's tradition. But no one said I couldn't wash the sand that's already been brought up. So those days, I stay at the camp, I wash what the men bring me."* This strategy of "creative adaptation" offers the best cost-benefit ratio in an environment where open contestation is costly.

VI.4. The resilient femininity

This figure embodies the woman who, without seeking to transgress norms, develops survival strategies and discreet resistance in the interstices of the system. She is often elderly, widowed or head of family. Madeleine (58 years old, Gbaya, picker) recounts: *"I come here every day, even when it rains. I look for what the men leave behind. Sometimes I find a little, sometimes nothing. I am alone, my children have left. If I don't come, I don't eat."* The resilient woman is often invisible, but her perseverance constitutes a form of ordinary resistance.

VI.5. The subaltern femininity

This figure designates the woman who has internalised the dominant gender norms to the point of no longer perceiving them as contestable. She accepts her subordinate position and does not develop autonomous strategies. Thérèse (45 years old, Kako'o, trader) declares: *"The mines are for men. I sell at the market; it's better for a woman. I don't go there, it's too dangerous."* This discourse shows how much the interdiction is internalised to the point of appearing as natural evidence.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of gender games in artisanal mining in Batouri reveals a complex system of strategic interactions combining identity performances, rational calculations and intersectional power relations. Goffmanian interactionist sociology makes it possible to grasp how actors play their gender role, manage their face and use the backstage to prepare their strategies. Nash's game theory formalises why certain unequal configurations persist, constituting stable equilibria that no one has an interest in modifying unilaterally. Crenshaw's intersectionality illuminates how gender articulates with other relations of domination to produce specific positions of vulnerability or privilege.

The results of our survey confirm that the gender division of labour is highly hierarchical: men occupy the most remunerative activities, women are confined to subordinate tasks with five times lower incomes. Five structural mechanisms produce and reproduce these inequalities: nature of activities, control of commercial outlets, differentiated access to capital, family burden and level of education. The five figures of mining femininity tolerated, transgressive, accommodating, resilient and subaltern account for the diversity of women's strategies in the face of domination.

Choice opportunities crises, police raids, arrival of new actors create windows of opportunity where power relations can be recomposed, but these transformations remain temporary for lack of a durable modification of the payoff matrix. Ultimately, the transformation of gender games in Batouri requires simultaneous action on identity performances, on payoff matrices and on intersectional structures. Only under this condition can gender games cease to be games of dupes to become genuine games of social transformation.

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