

Women, mercury and artisanal gold mining : Risk communication and mitigation

J.J. Hinton¹, M.M. Veiga² and C. Beinhoff²

¹ University of British Columbia, 517-6350 Stores Road, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada

² United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), Vienna International Centre, P.O. Box 300, 1400 Vienna, Austria

Abstract

Artisanal miners employ rudimentary techniques for mineral extraction and often operate under hazardous, labour intensive, highly disorganized and illegal conditions. Gold is the main mineral extracted by artisanal miners, and the ecological and human health impacts resulting from mercury (Hg) use in gold extraction warrant special consideration. More than 30% of world's 13 million artisanal miners are women and, as they are often perceived to be less suited for labour intensive mining methods, the majority of women work in the processing aspect of artisanal mining, including amalgamation with Hg. As women are also predominantly responsible for food preparation, they are in an excellent position to respond to health risks associated with consumption of Hg-contaminated foods in impacted areas. In addition to their influence on consumption habits, women in artisanal mining communities may be in a position to effect positive change with respect to the technologies employed. Thus, gender sensitive approaches are necessary to reduce exposure risks to women and their families, promote clean technologies and support the development of stronger, healthier artisanal mining communities. This paper describes the roles of women in artisanal gold mining, highlights their importance in reducing the Hg exposure in these communities, and provides insight into how risks from Hg pollution can effectively be communicated and mitigated.

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