



**ASSESSMENT OF THE SOCIAL AND  
ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON  
WOMEN ARTISANAL MINERS IN THE  
ZAAMAR SOUM OF TUV PROVINCE IN  
MONGOLIA**

**NORMAN B. KEEVIL  
INSTITUTE OF  
MINING  
ENGINEERING –  
UNIVERSITY OF  
BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(UBC)**

**IN PARTNERSHIP  
WITH**

**GERMAN-  
MONGOLIAN  
INSTITUTE FOR  
RESOURCES AND**

# **Assessment of the Social and Economic Impacts of COVID 19 on Women Artisanal Miners in the Zaamar Soum of Tuv Province in Mongolia**

## **Final Project Report**

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Report written by:

Angarag Otgonbayar, André Xavier, Bolormaa Purevjav, Aligermaa Bayarsaykhan – Norman B. Keevil Institute of Mining Engineering – The University of British Columbia (UBC)

With contribution from:

Munkhzaya Batjargal and Battsengel Baatar – German-Mongolian Institute for Technologies and Resources (GMIT)

Project team:

- |                                |                                   |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| ▪ Andre Xavier (UBC)           | Principal Investigator            |
| ▪ Bolormaa Purevjav (UBC)      | Project Coordination              |
| ▪ Angarag Otgonbayar (UBC)     | Research and policy analyst       |
| ▪ Munkhzaya Barjargal (GMIT)   | In-county researcher coordination |
| ▪ Aligermaa Bayarsaykhan (UBC) | Researcher                        |
| ▪ Alexandra Carlier (UBC)      | Gender advisor                    |
| ▪ Lena Patsa (UBC)             | IT / online education advisor     |
| ▪ Julian Dierkes (UBC)         | Project advisor                   |
| ▪ Battsengel Baatar (GMIT)     | Project advisor                   |
| ▪ Bern Klein (UBC)             | Project Advisor                   |

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## **Executive Summary**

The Norman B. Keevil Institute of Mining Engineering at the University of British Columbia and the German-Mongolian Institute for Resources and Technology (GMIT), in partnership with the Enhmuh Ergeh Holboo (EMEH) ASM NGO, have carried out an assessment of the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on artisanal miners who are members of the EMEH ASM NGO. This project was funded through the Extractives Global Programmatic Support (EGPS) administered by the World Bank. Most specifically, this assessment focused on understanding the implications of the pandemic on women miners.

The EMEH ASM NGO was established in June 2008 as an advocacy group and interlocutor with other stakeholders to protect the rights and interests of artisanal and small-scale miners in Zaamar sum of Tuv Province, Mongolia. Currently, the EMEH has 129 members, out of which 89 are women miners.

This final report discusses the findings of an anonymous online survey distributed to EMEH ASM NGO members, and also incorporates the results of 20 interviews carried out with selected EMEH members, a focus group session and three webinars run for, variously, GMIT students, the ASM National Federation and local ASM NGOs, and multiple stakeholders.

The surveys were filled out between February 22 to March 18, 2021, and all 69 valid surveys representing a 75.8% completion rate, were completed by women miners. The survey consisted of 31 questions designed to help us gain an understanding of the demographics, nature of work, and the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the women miners in the study region. The study reveals that women artisanal miners in the Zaamar soum of Tuv province have, and are experiencing, severe social and economic difficulties as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The majority of ASM women have been miners for over five years, confirming that mining does not represent a transient occupation and that the women rely significantly on mining income to support their families. ASM is the main activity for 90% of the participants and contributes to at least 50% of the family income. Out of the 69 participants, 38 women have two or more people under their care.

The loss of income due to the pandemic is impacting the women's independence and ability to provide for their families. Gender-based violence has increased and is being experienced by these women. Significantly, 3 out of 4 participants have reported an increase in domestic and gender-based violence.

Consequently, they rank physical protection as their highest priority, alongside the need for financial help and food assistance. Not surprising, and yet disconcerting, is the fact that 50 women (73.53%) indicated that their mental health has been negatively impacted. It is not farfetched to suppose that this strenuous situation is also considerably affecting the miners' families since many women have dependents, with the majority being underaged. The suspension of ASM licenses has also had significant consequences on the artisanal miners' ability to maintain formalization. Without legal contracts, the miners are put in a difficult position as most of them rely on income from their ASM activities. Still, they need to go out into the field and work, and by doing this, they are exposed to penalties and can be charged for criminal conduct and burdened with additional fees.

These findings were confirmed and expanded upon through the 20 interviews conducted with female members of EMEH ASM NGO. These interviews allowed us to capture a deeper understanding of the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on women miners. The one-on-one interviews took place during the first two weeks of April and were comprised of 12 semi-structured open-ended questions.

One of the common responses when asked why they got involved in the ASM sector was related to lack of other job opportunities (answered by 60% of interviewees). Other respondents (25%) mentioned the low likelihood of being hired if they are citizens of Zaamar soum and the rest indicated profession and age as the main barriers to landing alternative jobs.

All participants conveyed that they have been highly impacted by COVID-19. A sharp decline in the miners' income was reported as one of the key challenges faced by this community. As a result of the regulations and restrictions imposed nationally during the pandemic, roads were closed, limiting any movement inside and outside the town. This led to a sharp decrease in the volume of work available for artisanal and small-scale miners, and consequently resulted in the loss of income.

The implementation of a tripartite cooperation agreement between artisanal miners and large scale mining companies, with facilitation from the local government, was a recurring recommendation presented by the miners to address their current work situation. Access to land was also a common suggestion regarding the type of assistance the miners required during COVID-19 from local and national governments, while increase of employability and financial and food support were the next most common answers. Overall, the interview responses supported the results of the survey and provided additional insight into the challenges faced by the ASM community and the kind of supports they need at this time.

A focus group session involving members of the EMEH ASM NGO took place in April as the final portion of data collection. The objectives of the discussion were to identify potential solutions to the challenges faced by the community, and the roles that different stakeholders could play in their implementation.

Three main solutions were discussed during the focus group sessions: tripartite agreement (local government-mining company-ASM NGO), permission for miners to conduct environmental rehabilitation of legacy mine sites, and a prioritization of the residents of Zaamar soum for the artisanal and small-scale land agreements. Members of EMEH ASM NGO noted a lack of support from their local government as well as the failure of mining companies to rehabilitate the land at the end of their operations.

The summary of the findings was presented to various audiences and stakeholders through webinars organized in May, which are described below.

In order to widely share the results of the study online, three webinars were organized with different groups. The first webinar was held on April 17, 2021 with future professionals and engineers from GMIT. It provided the opportunity for the undergraduate and graduate students to learn about the context in which the ASM sector functions, and raised awareness and deepened their knowledge on the technical aspects of ASM through a presentation delivered by Professor Klein from UBC. Professor Klein's presentation focused on ASM processing, mercury-free technologies and the environmental implications of the activity. The research team also presented

the project results and spoke about how COVID-19 has impacted women miners in the Zaamar soum. A total of 40 students and faculty members from GMIT attended the webinar.

The second webinar was organized in partnership with the ASM National Federation (ASMNF) and took place on April 28, 2021. The ASMNF invited its ASM partner organizations from 15 aimags where ASGM occurs, with a total membership of more than 1,600 miners. The intention of the webinar was not only to present the results of the study, but to also create a dialogue to better understand whether or not the findings in Zaamar soum reflect the experiences of other aimags. As a result of the webinar, it became clear that similar challenges are faced across other regions as well. The webinar was attended by a total of 16 people, representing ASMNF and local ASM NGOs in Bayankhongor, Uvs, Dornogovi, Selenge, Tuv and Khovd aimags. Overall, the key issues raised were with respect to land access, support for alternative employment, and educational opportunities for the children of artisanal miners. In fact, the children's future was a recurring theme mentioned in the survey, interviews and focus groups.

The last event, as part of online activities was a multistakeholder webinar that was held on May 11, 2021. The objective of this multistakeholder webinar was to share the results of the project with the intention of raising awareness of the issues faced by artisanal miners and to foster dialogue between different institutions. The event was very well attended with 45 participants representing 23 organizations ranging from the academia, Government, NGOs, and the international community. They included representatives from the German and the Canadian embassies, the Asian Development Bank, UNDP, the governor of Zaamar soum, members of parliament and representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, Mineral Resources, the Petroleum Authority, and the Gender National Committee.

The research team was able to disseminate the findings to a broader audience and bring this case to the attention of the decision makers, the international community and civil society. The main topics of discussion were around the legal framework of artisanal mining, tripartite agreements between artisanal miners, mining companies and local government, and land access. One of the members of parliament, a Head of the Mining Lobby Group, who attended the webinar invited the research group to present their findings to parliament and to participate in the discussion on the amendment to the Minerals Law (that includes regulations on artisanal and small-scale mining), which is scheduled for review during the autumn session of parliament.

In addition to the online activities, an interview with the UBC project lead on the project's findings was published in the May issue of The Mongolian Mining Journal (MMJ), the leading bilingual magazine on mining and economic topics in Mongolia. Issues of the MMJ reach over 1500 readers per month and are available both in print and online through Dow Jones' Factiva channel. An online copy of the interview will be posted on the magazine's webpage in mid-June, reaching additional audiences. A second article highlighting the project results and featuring an interview with the EMEH ASM NGO Chair will be published in the IKON News in June. An executive summary and the final report will be shared broadly with the government and agencies that are involved directly or indirectly with issues related to the mining sector in Mongolia.

It is evident from the research conducted in this study that there is a discrepancy between the information available on the ASM sector and a lack of recently completed studies in regions where ASM activities occur. The feedback received during the multistakeholder webinar called for additional studies on the ground, which was also mentioned during the webinar with ASM NGOs. Although a single case study in Zaamar soum provided us with a clear understanding of

the challenges faced by the ASM community during COVID-19, a broader assessment of other aimags would yield tangible results that would inform the ongoing process of revising ASM regulations.

Based on the findings, it is believed that the implementation of tripartite agreements between the miners, government and mining companies that are currently on hold due to the ongoing amendments to the regulations on artisanal and small-scale mining is an opportunity to organize the sector. For miners, such agreements provide the opportunity to work as legalized entities and to collaborate with large-scale mining companies working in a formal and responsible manner and contributing with the local economy.

Through the implementation of this project, the webinars and meetings with stakeholders, it is evident that lack of information and misperceptions about what ASM is, how the sector is organized and who are the artisanal miners. Despite positive progress achieved through the implementation of previous projects, the old view of "ninja" illegal miners still exists. All stakeholders have a role to play in to change this perception. However, the media has an essential role in educating and raising awareness at the society at large, not only in Ulaanbaatar but also at the soum and aimag levels.

There seems to be currently greater importance for such awareness-raising activities since in the following months, members of the Mongolian parliament will be making proposals to amend the Minerals Law, which is an opportunity to address many of the challenges existing in the ASM sector.

# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Socio-economic overview of Mongolia**

By the end of 2020, the population of Mongolia had reached 3.4 million, an increase of 62,000 (1.8%) compared to the previous year. A total of 1215 cases of COVID-19 were registered in Mongolia between March and December 2020. Statistics reveal that by the end of that year, the state's budgeted revenues had decreased by 13.6%, industrial production by 6.7%, the extractive industry by 8.4%, manufacturing by 6.1%, exports by 0.6% and imports by 13.6%.

According to the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, by the end of 2020, there were 30,000 job searchers registered nationwide. During this same year, Mongolia's GDP growth had also slowed to 5.3%. The 2021 state budget was approved with a deficit of 12%. In February 2021, the Minister of Finance, B. Javkhlan, reported that Mongolia had lost 68,000 jobs due to COVID-19. Without the approval of further economic measures, there is a risk of losing more than 130,000 jobs by the third quarter. According to a survey released by the Mongolian National Chamber of Commerce and Industry in February 2021, 65% of businesses have no working capital. To date, the total amount of money lent by banks within the financial system has declined by 10% and sits at its lowest level in over a decade. With respect to the situation caused by COVID-19, since March 2020, the government has implemented the 10 trillion plan to protect the health of citizens and recover the national economy. Through this plan, the government has provided loans to businesses at a 3% interest rate.

## **2 Mongolia's Mining Sector**

### **2.1 Large Scale Mining - Overview**

The mining sector alone accounted for 22% of Mongolia's GDP, 94% of the country's exports, 71% of its total industrial output, and 71% of foreign direct investment in 2020. Furthermore, mining accounts for 20% of state budget revenues. As of the first quarter of 2021, mineral products accounted for 90% of the country's total exports, and coal accounted for approximately 30 percent of Mongolia's export revenue. In 2020, due to COVID-19 the mineral resources sector's revenue that contributed to the state budget decreased by MNT 246.6 billion or by 8.4 percent when compared the previous year.

As a result of the rapid spread of the coronavirus around the world, countries have taken a variety of steps to stem the pandemic including imposing curfews and to recover their economies. Mongolia has also gradually implemented certain restrictive measures. It is working hard to keep the volume of mining exports at a constant level and at the same time to increase the amount of gold sold to the Bank of Mongolia. As a result, 28.6 million tons of coal and 1.4 million tons of copper concentrate were exported by the end of 2020, while the Central Bank purchased 23.5 tons of gold in 2020, thus.

As of 2020, the country had issued 1703 valid mining licenses and 908 exploration licenses. To increase transparency in the sector, in 2006, Mongolia joined the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) with 54 other resource-rich countries. Mongolia's key export products include coal and copper concentrate. The top 10 extractive companies are Erdenet Mining Corporation (copper), Erdenes Tavan Tolgoi (coal), Oyu Tolgoi (copper), Petrochina Dachin Tamsag (petroleum), Energy Resources (coal), Tavan Tolgoi (coal), Mongolyn Alt MAK (coal), Erdenes Mongol (state-owned enterprise) and Tsairt Mineral (zinc).

Erdenet Mining Corporation, Erdenes Tavan Tolgoi JSC and Oyu Tolgoi LLC were the top three taxpayers of Mongolia in 2020. Erdenet Mining Corporation is a large-scale copper and molybdenum ore mining and processing company. It produces 37 million tons of ore, processes 32 million tons of ore, produces 580.0 thousand tons of copper concentrate and 5.0 thousand tons of molybdenum concentrate per annum.

Oyu Tolgoi LLC is the largest copper and gold company in Mongolia and is involved in a strategic partnership between the Government of Mongolia (34%) and the Canadian-based Turquoise Hill Resources (66%). The company produced 149,631 tons of copper in 2020.

Erdenes Tavan Tolgoi is a Mongolian state-owned company that holds mining licenses to the Tavantolgoi coal deposit, which is regarded as one of the largest and highest-quality coking coal deposits in the world. The company produced 15.5 million tons of coal in 2020.

In the face of a pandemic and the challenging situation that results from it, the mining sector in Mongolia is doing relatively well, contributing significantly to the state budget and maintaining the country's economic potential. In order to ensure the implementation of measures to support households and businesses during COVID-19, Government Resolution No. 211, which was approved on December 13, 2020 ordered the “Erdenet Mining Corporation” state owned company to disburse 650 billion MNT for the annulment of electricity, heat and steam consumption, water and sewage service fees and ordinary waste service fees for households and economic entities and organizations. It also dispatched Erdenes Tavan Tolgoi JSC to provide MNT 128 billion to subsidise 75 percent of the price of improved coal briquettes.

## **2.2 Artisanal and small-scale mining in Mongolia - Overview**

Artisanal mining occurs in 20 of the 21 aimags (provinces). In 2015, as per the statistics gathered by the Sustainable Artisanal Mining Project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 40,000-60,000 people were estimated to be engaged in artisanal mining in Mongolia. One-third of these people are women. Artisanal and small-scale gold and coal mining is widespread and is centered in the highlands within the leading mining aimags such as Bayankhongor, Tuv, Uvs, Khuvsgul and Ulaanbaatar.

According to the Mineral Resources and Petroleum Authority, more than 70 percent of artisanal miners work in the gold sector, artisanal gold mining indirectly supports the livelihoods of 120,000-180,000 people, and 14 out of the 21 aimags have ASGM operations.

### **2.2.1 Legal framework**

Illegal mining has been widespread in Mongolia since the 2000s, resulting in human rights abuses, environmental damage, property damage, fatalities through accidents, and criminal activity. As a result of the joint efforts of artisanal and small-scale mining stakeholders, the Mongolian Minerals Law and Land Law were amended in 2010 (Government Resolution No. 308) and 2014 to curb illegal activities and to establish a legal framework for artisanal and small-scale mining. Subsequently, the regulation on "Mineral extraction of artisanal and small-scale mining" was revised and approved on May 24, 2017 through Government Resolution No. 151.

It is illegal to conduct mining activities outside of these regulations. The updated regulations state that rehabilitation should be carried out in accordance with artisanal mining rehabilitation methodologies, and that artisanal miners who have not rehabilitated or failed to fulfill their mining contract obligations should be terminated. However, despite the legal

framework that has been set out for artisanal and small-scale mining, illegal mining and misuse of the legal environment for artisanal mining continue. There are cases of soum and district governors violating the ASM regulations by using their power to sign contracts without conducting reviews. There have also been situations where the equipment specified in the regulations have been over-operated, and instances of illegal mining also occur. Government Resolution No. 355 on “Procedures for artisanal and small-scale mining” in 2019 and Resolution No. 17 on “Procedures to improve mineral licensing and control, and to stop illegal activities” in 2020 were issued and implemented for the purposes of regulating artisanal and small-scale mining, and to bring a halt to illegal mining.

The artisanal mining contract has not yet been signed because of Article 1.1 of Government Resolution No. 355 that states, “Aimag, capital city, soum and district governors shall not enter into new artisanal mining contracts in areas allocated for artisanal mining, terminate the contract of a person who fails to meet the requirements for an artisanal miner and fails to fulfill his / her contractual obligations.”

According to B. Elbegzaya, Head of the Mining Policy Department of the Ministry of Mining and Heavy Industry, no new artisanal mining contracts have been established since 2019. Although the legal environment and regulations for artisanal mining have been established and the use of mercury has been banned, the sector remains largely informal, and the use of mercury remains hidden. There is a need for continued efforts with respect to formalization, capacity building, raising awareness and the adoption of mercury-free technologies so that the ASM sector can contribute to economic development while avoiding its negative environmental impacts. According to the Artisanal Gold Council, only 16% of the ASGM sector has been formalized.

### **2.2.2 International cooperation project**

From 2005 to 2019, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) implemented the Sustainable Artisanal Mining project in Mongolia. In Mandal soum, Bayankhongor aimag, the construction and operation of small-scale gold ore concentrators using mercury-free ore beneficiation technology has significantly reduced the hidden and illegal use of mercury in artisanal mining. The project introduced mercury-free gold mining technology and a rehabilitation approach to reduce soil pollution and environmental damage.

Many artisanal miners have taken decisive steps to address the issue of the widespread use of mercury. For instance, in 2008, gravity-based gold extraction technology was introduced to the scope of the SDC project. Workshops using this technology are operating in Bayan-Ovoo soum of Bayankhongor aimag, Bornuur soum of Tuv aimag and Mandal soum of Selenge aimag.

In 2019, 2,685 hectares of land were allocated for artisanal mining nationwide, and the average annual income of miners increased by 55 percent in 2015 and 16 percent in 2016, and the number of accidents and deaths caused by illegal mining decreased sharply.

In addition, in 2019, miners rehabilitated 526 hectares of land with their own funds. This is 20 times more than in 2013, and many positive changes have taken place. Some of these include the introduction of mercury-free ore beneficiation technology in Gobi-Altai, Bayankhongor, Selenge, Tuv and Umnugovi aimags. It is important to note that various studies and sources on artisanal and small-scale mining report different estimates on key statistics.

Recent activity with regard to promoting mercury-free practices includes the launch of a five-year project (2018-2023) entitled ‘Contribution Toward the Elimination of Mercury in the Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining Sector: From Miners to Refiners’. This project aims to reduce mercury-pollution in the ASGM sector, to advance formalization, and enhance knowledge management. It is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United Nations Environment (UN Environment), with the Artisanal Gold Council (AGC) as its executing partner, and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) as the local partner through the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB).

**2.2.3 Gold production**

From 2016 to 2020 a total of 80.3 tons of gold were sold to the Mongolbank by companies and individuals. Since the beginning of 2021, 41 companies and 60 individuals sold 1.4 tons and 0.6 tons of gold respectively.

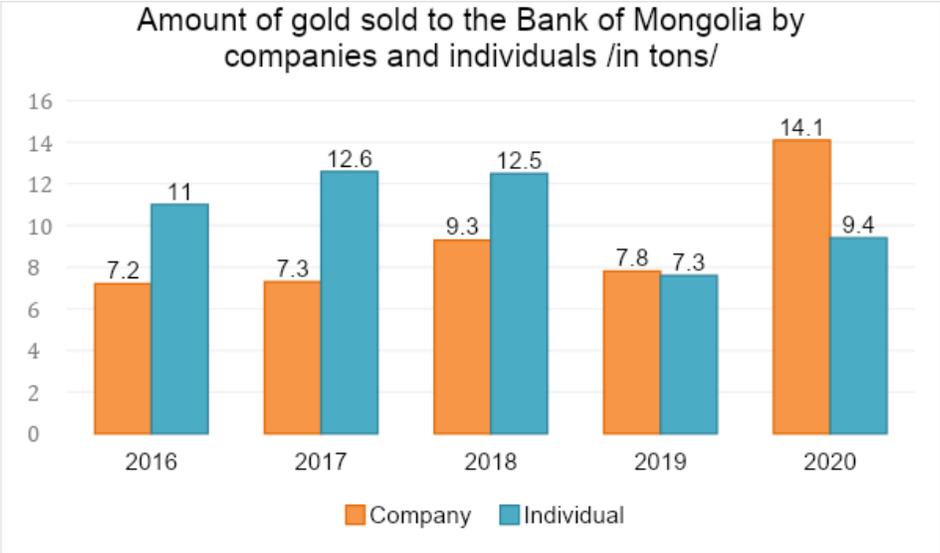


Figure x: Breakdown of the amount of gold sold to the Bank of Mongolia in 2016-2020

Source: Mongolbank (2021)

Although The Ministry of Mining and Heavy Industry, the Mineral Resources and Petroleum Authority, the Bank of Mongolia, and the Sampling Inspection Agency of the Standardization and Metrology Agency have improved coordination, there are discrepancies in the amount of gold mined and sampled, the Bank of Mongolia's gold purchase data and reports. The fact that there is still no unified database on gold reserves, mining, procurement, and exports makes it difficult to make informed decisions with respect to gold sector development planning, investment promotion, and improving the legal environment based on gold resource movement, mining, sales, and export information.

At present, there is a limited amount of basic research and information through which to systematically assess and measure the process of ASGM formalization and its results at the country level. For the artisanal miners, the most important issue of formalization is access to land and ASM mining licences.

#### **2.2.4 Minerals Law Amendment**

The Mongolian Parliament has formed a special committee tasked with reviewing and making proposals to amend the Minerals Law. On November 9, 2020, by Order No. A-279 issued by the Ministry of Mines, a special working group was established to revise Government Resolution No. 151 of 2017, "Regulation on Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining." The timing seems favourable to bringing fact-based ASM issues for consideration by policymakers during the process of the amendment of the Minerals Law.

#### **2.2.5 Artisanal Small-Scale Mining National Federation**

The ASM National Federation of Mongolia (ASM NF) was established in 2013 as an umbrella organization to protect the rights of members of ASM organizations and to promote the cooperation between the Government and ASM miners. The main scope of activities of the Federation is to protect the common interests of its members, strengthen the capacity of its member organizations, influence government organizations through the development of mineral and mining policies and concepts from the point of view of civil society, to increase and diversify members' sources of income, to support entrepreneurship, and to implement projects and programs. It also works to mediate between foreign and domestic sources. Today, there are 15 soums and aimags with artisanal mining in Mongolia. Of these, 13 aimags have established their own artisanal mining associations and are members of the umbrella organization. As of today, 9,200 artisanal miners are organized within 87 NGOs and 490 partnerships.

#### **2.2.6 Women's participation in the mining industry**

The Ministry of Mining and Heavy Industry conducted an impact assessment in the minerals sector in 2017 with the aim of promoting gender equality and implementing gender legislation. Based on this assessment, the "Policy on Gender in Geology, Mining, Petroleum and Heavy Industry (2019-2026)" and its implementation action plan were developed and approved. Mongolia has a Law on Gender Equality, the purpose of which is to define and regulate the relationships with respect to the implementation of the legal basis for ensuring gender equality in political, legal, economic, social, cultural and family relations.

Currently, 15% of employees in the mining sector are women, and some companies employ up to 25% women. In the Mongolian ASM sector, one third of the workers are women. According to the "Women in Mineral Sector Mongolia" NGO, there is a need to raise awareness regarding human rights and gender among mineral sector actors, increase women's participation and representation in decision-making, increase the career choices of girls studying engineering, and reduce the negative impacts on women and children in mining-affected areas.

According to a study by the National Statistics Office and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation's Sustainable Artisanal Mining Project, the number of women involved in artisanal mining fell from 3,915 in 2012 to 2,301 in 2016. This is thought to have been due to the harsh working conditions of artisanal and small-scale miners who work during cold winters and hot summers, and also because some artisanal miners have expanded to include not only gold mining but also vegetable growing and subsistence farming. Unemployed people of all ages are struggling to make ends meet through artisanal mining. Most of them are under the age of 45, with 63 percent being men and 37 percent being women. There is a lack of current information and a decided need to acquire up-to-date data and monitor of the sector.

### 3 Effects of COVID-19 in the Mongolia Context

In 2020, the World Bank estimated that COVID-19 could push 71 million people into extreme poverty<sup>1</sup>. Recent projections are even gloomier, with an estimate that between 119 and 124 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty<sup>2</sup>.

At the global level, there is evidence that the impact of COVID-19 on women has been significant and that the already-existing inequalities have been exacerbated as a consequence of the pandemic.

With children out of school, it has put an additional burden on women by constraining their ability to work in jobs that cannot be carried out remotely. Consequently, women are spending three times more hours in unpaid care and domestic work than before the pandemic<sup>3</sup>.

With respect to the context within Mongolia, a recent household survey supported by the World Bank and implemented by the National Statistics Office of Mongolia (NSO) has described that “85% of the poor population reported experiencing some sort of shock”. Self-employed and agricultural households have been significantly affected, with nearly three-quarters of households reporting difficulties in securing finances for living expenses as a result of the rising prices of food and income loss<sup>4</sup>. A recent survey of informal economy workers in Mongolia has revealed that curfews imposed by the government have led to a 97% decrease in income for informal workers, with 60% of the respondents stating that their total household income is from the informal economy. 62% of the respondents have loans and 56% of them couldn’t make their loan payments on time<sup>5</sup>. The economic situation is slightly better for apartment-dwelling households, but the average household income has decreased by 40% compared to pre-curfew levels<sup>6</sup>.

#### 3.1 Domestic violence

As the pandemic continues, economic and social stress and domestic violence are on the rise<sup>7</sup>. There has always been violence against women, but COVID-19 has had the effect of worsening gender-based violence. Along with severe economic impacts, the pandemic has had a significant impact on domestic violence in Mongolia. Police records for the capital city of Ulaanbaatar indicate a 63% increase in reported cases of domestic violence, with 3,100 during the first quarter of 2020 compared to 1,900 reported during the first quarter of 2019. Most of these cases included physical violence (77%), about 90% were committed in a household setting, and women constituted 93% of the victims<sup>8</sup>.

Mongolia has been successful in limiting the spread of the pandemic through early border closures, instituting several hard lockdowns in Ulaanbaatar's capital city, and limiting travel between provinces. Due to these measures, infection rates were almost negligible for several months but have been increasing recently as a result of several super spreader events, and the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects>

<sup>2</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-looking-back-2020-and-outlook-2021>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects>

<sup>5</sup> Impact of COVID-19 - Curfew on Informal Employment. SICA. 2021

<sup>6</sup> Research on Household Impact of The Winter 2020 COVID-19 Curfew. SICA. 2020

<sup>7</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/11/1078812>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.adb.org/news/adb-help-address-and-prevent-domestic-violence-mongolia-amid-covid-19>

government is considering implementing stricter measures down the road. Travel restrictions and measures have had widespread economic and social consequences, and without bailout programs in place, the citizens have been struggling.

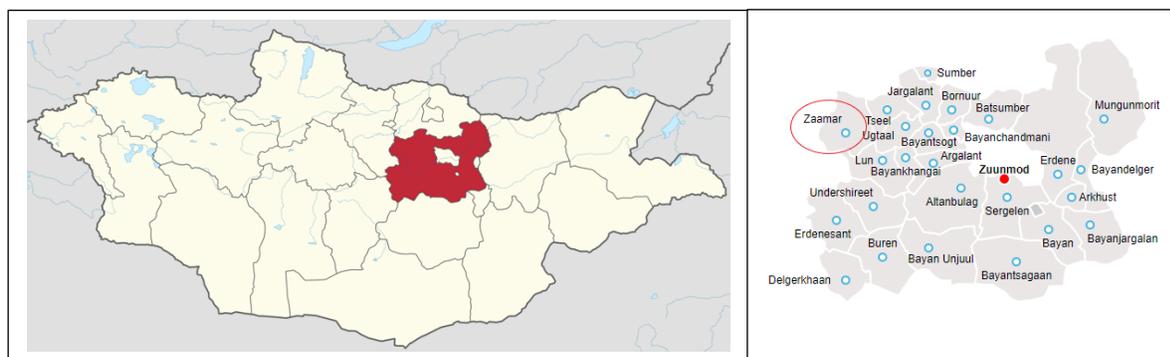
#### 4 Project aims, partners and activities

This project aims to understand the social and economic impacts of the pandemic on ASM workers in Mongolia. It generates evidence-based information to support the Mongolian government's actions, as well as local and international organizations in addressing the impacts of COVID-19, supporting inclusive growth and ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens in both urban and rural areas.

A comprehensive analysis of the surveys, interviews, and focus group activities are examined and discussed in this project end final report. The research results have been shared in a series of online webinars with Mongolian stakeholders, including the central and regional governments, universities, international organizations and civil society.

The Norman B. Keevil Institute of Mining Engineering at the University of British Columbia and the German-Mongolian Institute for Resources and Technology (GMIT), in partnership with the Enhmunh Ergeh Holboo (EMEH) ASM NGO, are implementing the current project. The project's objective is to assess the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on members of the EMEH ASM NGO, and it focuses on understanding the implications of the pandemic on women ASM miners.

The Enhmunh Ergeh Holboo (EMEH) ASM NGO was established in June 2008 as an advocacy group and interlocutor with other stakeholders in order to protect the rights and interests of artisanal and small-scale miners in Zaamar soum of Central Province, Mongolia. Over the years, EMEH members have participated in training programs on occupational health and safety, mining regulation, land rehabilitation, and they have successfully implemented projects with international donor organizations to strengthen the capacity for responsible mining among artisanal miners. Currently, the EMEH has 129 members, out of which 89 are women miners.



Tuv province

Zaamar soum

Following the project's approval on December 18, 2020, the UBC research team submitted the research ethics application to the Behavioral Research Ethics Board (BREB) and was approved on February 17, 2021 (certificate # H20-03888). Through weekly meetings, the UBC team collaborated with local partners from the German-Mongolian Institute for Resources and Technology (GMIT) to develop the survey instrument, interview questionnaires, and to coordinate

data collection activities.

After securing the research ethics certificate, data collection activities were initiated with the distribution of a 31-question online survey to members of the EMEH on February 22, 2021. In addition to the survey, 20 one-on-one interviews with women miners were conducted through Facebook Messenger video calls and telephone calls. The interviews were made up of 12 questions to allow a deeper understanding of the social and economic impacts of the pandemic on the miners and their families. Following the interviews, a focus group discussion was organized with 7 women miners. This final report discusses the key findings based on the survey data that was collected between February 22, 2021 and March 18, 2021, the one-on-one interviews and the focus group discussion. A series of webinars were organized following the conclusion of the data collection activities to disseminate the findings of the study and raise awareness regarding the pressing issues faced by the miners. Two publications were prepared to be featured in online and print format in English and Mongolian. The dissemination activities are discussed further in the subsequent sections of this final report.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Overview of the survey results

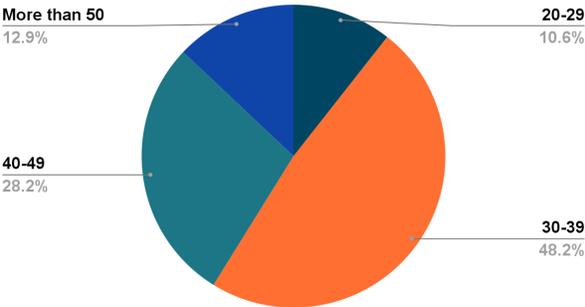
The anonymous survey consisted of a total of 31 questions designed to gain an understanding of the demographics, nature of work, and the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on women artisanal miners. As of April 15, 2021, a total of 95 responses have been registered, reaching and surpassing our goal of collecting at least 70 responses, with 71 fully completed responses representing a survey completion rate of 74.7% (see Appendix A for survey results). The survey was finished and closed on March 30, 2021. Out of the 85 valid survey responses, 84 were completed by women, and 1 by a man.

#### 5.1.1 Demographics

75% of the artisanal miners are married. Close to 50% of the respondents are between 30 and 39 years of age, 28% are between 40 and 49 years old and 13% are older than 50 years of age (Fig.1).

The educational backgrounds of the miners are varied, with all the miners having had basic education and a quarter having completed university. Basic education in Mongolia is accessible to the whole population since all public schools are tuition-free, and parents only need to pay for uniforms, books and supplies. With regard to dependents, 39 out of the 75 survey participants indicated that they have two or more people that they need to care and provide for (Fig 2.). Fifty-seven out of 95 of the dependents mentioned are children under the age of 15. Other significant reasons provided for dependency included health reasons, and unemployment. Due to school closures and layoffs, three quarters of dependents are staying at home.

Fig 1: Age Group

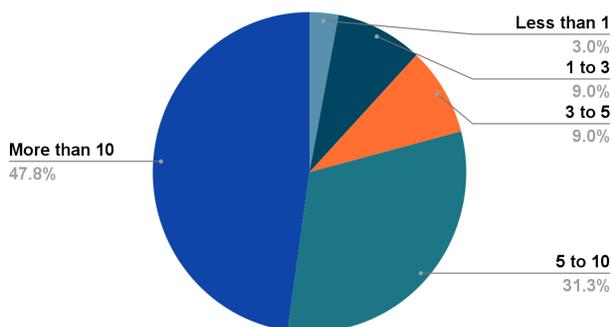


Approximately 86% of the respondents indicated that they have enough information and supplies to protect themselves and their family members from COVID-19 infections, suggesting that national and local information campaigns have been successful in relaying information to the miners.

### 5.1.2 Nature of work

According to the survey results, almost 96% of the artisanal miners are mining for gold (Fig 3.), and of this total, 61% are paid in concentrate. It is interesting to note that 79% of the women miners have been working in artisanal mining for more than 5 years, with 48% having worked for at least 10 years (Fig 4.). According to the data collected, the miners operate as a group, performing a variety of roles such as diggers, washers, and team leaders. Furthermore, ASM activities are their only career, with 91% stating that they do not carry out any other economic activity.

**Fig 4: Years worked in mining**

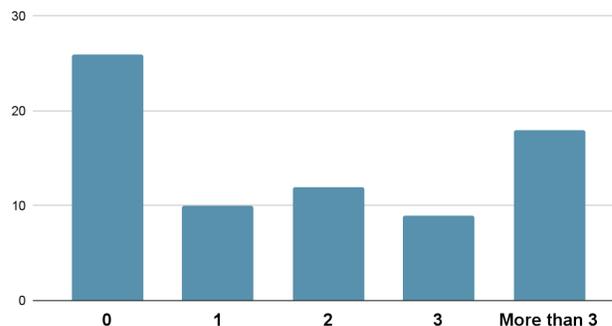


miners and their families.

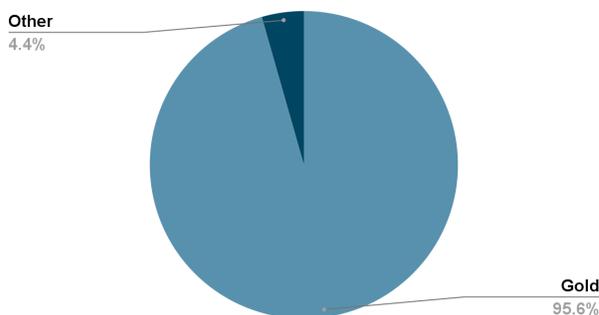
### 5.1.3 Social effects

Women artisanal miners are facing severe social difficulties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. 94% of the survey participants (Fig 5.) reported an increase in their amount of household burden due to school closures and having greater responsibility for the dependents under their care. It is also concerning that 3 out of 4 respondents have reported an increase in domestic and gender-based violence. The 2017 National Study on Gender-based Violence<sup>9</sup> found that 57.9%

**Fig 2: Number of dependents**



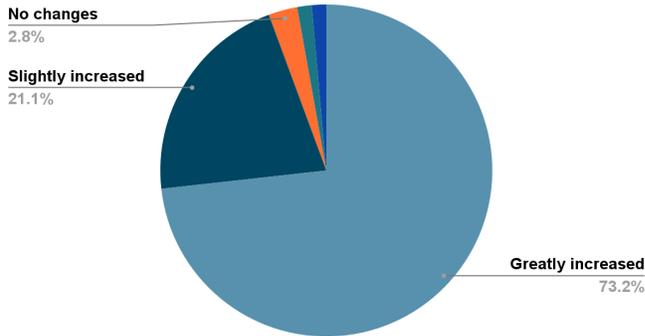
**Fig 3: Commodity being mined**



91% of the miners conduct artisanal mining without any land agreement, and 94% indicated that the pandemic has made obtaining licenses much more difficult. This question will be explored in more detail during the interviews. However, there have been reports that the government has temporarily suspended ASM licenses, making it illegal to conduct ASM activities. Furthermore, policing has increased, making it difficult for the miners to carry out their work. This situation has further aggravated the social and economic impacts of the pandemic on the

<sup>9</sup> <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/publications/2017-national-study-gender-based-violence-mongolia>

**Fig 5: Domestic Burden**

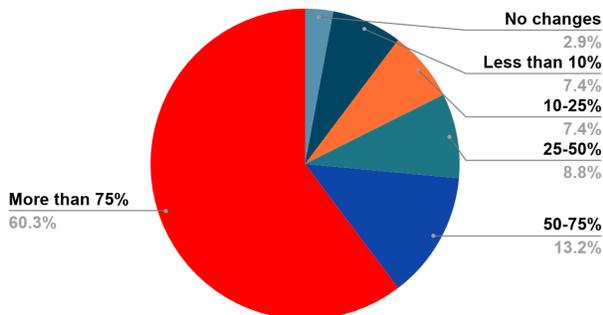


medicine. Of the 69 women surveyed, 87% reported a negative impact on their household’s food and nutrition. Not surprising, and yet disconcerting, is the fact that 40 (57%) survey participants indicated that their mental health has been greatly negatively impacted, while another 21 (30%) participants reported a slightly negative impact on their mental health (Fig 6). There was an even split in results from the Miners regarding whether they experienced an increase or decrease in monitoring visits from the local provincial government in order to ensure that ASM workers are working in their allotted areas.

**5.1.4 Economic effects**

It is evident that women artisanal miners in the region are facing severe economic difficulties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, 99% of the participants confirmed that conducting artisanal mining in the region has been greatly impacted by the travel and gathering restrictions instituted by the national and local governments. This, in turn, has consequently led to a severe drop in income for the miners (Fig. 7). It is interesting to observe that even though Zaamar sum has not experienced any COVID-19 cases, the same restrictions applied to areas with COVID-19 cases are enforced in the sum.

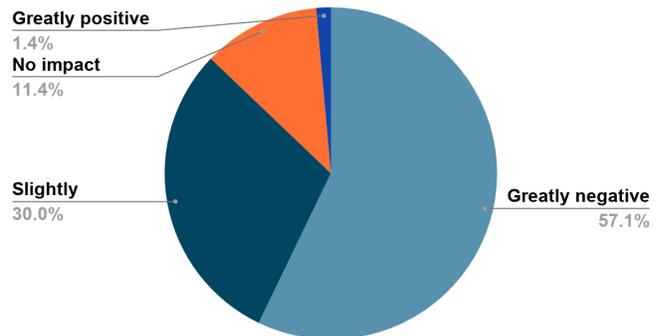
**Fig 7: Reduction in income**



of Mongolian women have experienced gender-based violence in their lifetime. The Mongolian One-Stop Service Centers that provide shelter and support for women experiencing violence reported an increase of 90% in their services when compared to the previous year<sup>10</sup>.

3 out of 5 survey participants perceived that crime has increased in their region. 75% of the respondents indicated that they have experienced increased difficulty getting access to healthcare and

**Fig 6: Mental Health Impact**



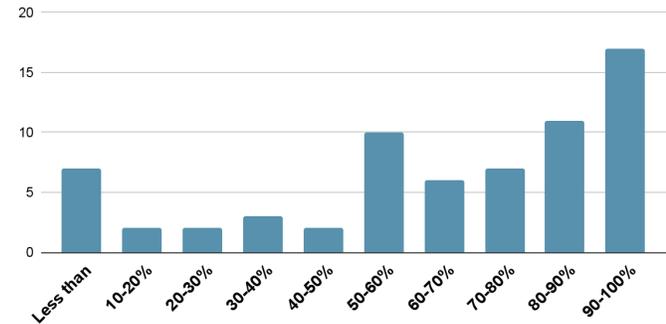
ASM is the main economic activity for 90% of the survey participants, and represents at least 50% of their family income (Fig 8). The pandemic restrictions have had a devastating effects on the miners’ incomes and their ability to provide for their families. Even though some have reported that they are able to sell their

<sup>10</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/mongolia/mongolian-women-get-help-escape-violence-even-amid-pandemic>

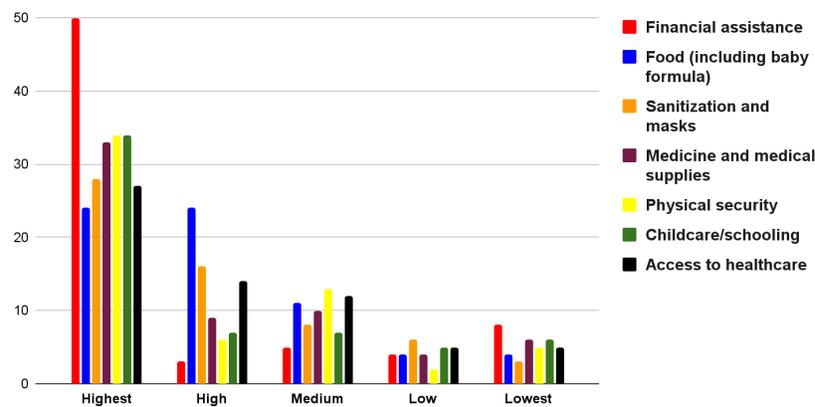
production for higher prices as a result of an increase in gold value, the relatively low levels of production and restrictions in conducting their work have led to significant income reductions. 9 out of 10 of the respondents have not received any form of assistance, financial or otherwise, since the pandemic began, and the few who have received help reported that it was primarily from family members.

The survey participants were asked about their key priorities during these times of pandemic. 71% of the respondents indicated some form of financial assistance as the highest priority to help them confront the economic difficulties caused by the pandemic. Similarly, 72% ranked food assistance as either the highest or high priority. For 65% of the participants, healthcare was ranked as high priority. Other 68% indicated medicine and medical supplies as high priority. It is noteworthy that a total of 67% indicated physical security as highest or high priority, and 69% indicated childcare and schooling as highest or high priority (Fig 9).

**Fig 8: Contribution to household income**



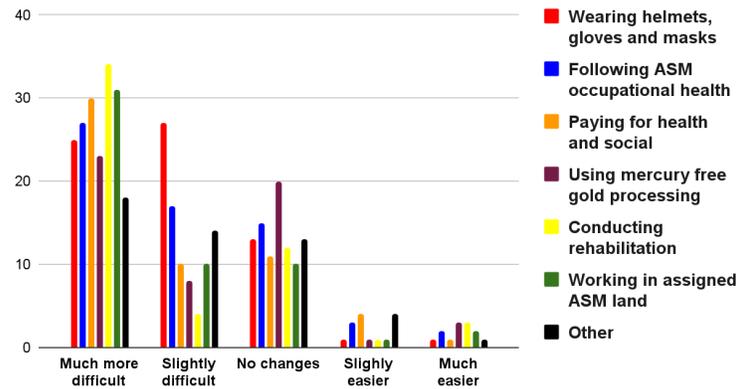
**Fig 9: Priorities identified to help overcome the difficulties**



### 5.1.5 ASM practices

The pandemic has also made the following health and safety practices more difficult: wearing helmets, gloves and masks, paying for health and social insurance, conducting mercury-free gold processing, conducting rehabilitation of degraded ASM land, and working in assigned ASM land (Fig. 10). These difficulties have the potential to lead to further health problems and/or injuries for miners, and they can result in degradation in the quality of water and land in the region.

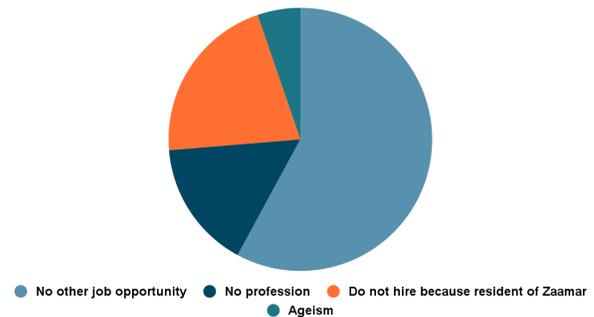
**Fig 10: Difficulty of practicing ASM best practices**



## 5.2 Overview of interview results

A set of 12 questions were prepared for one-on-one interviews with 19 women miners to encourage a deeper understanding of the socio-economic impacts faced by women ASM workers in Zaamar soum. The interviews were conducted by project members Ms. Munkhzaya and Ms. Bolormaa by Facebook video calls and telephone interviews. The interviews were conducted between March 11, 2021 and March 27, 2021 (see Appendix B for interview questions and results).

**Fig 11: Reason for ASM activity**



### 5.2.1 Reason for ASM activity

Most of the participants suggested that they do artisanal mining for a living because there are no job opportunities in Zaamar soum available to them other than doing artisanal mining. The only other job opportunity they have is working for a mining company, but since companies do not hire citizens of Zaamar soum, people often have to lie and say they are not from Zaamar soum in order to get hired.

### 5.2.2 COVID-19 related questions

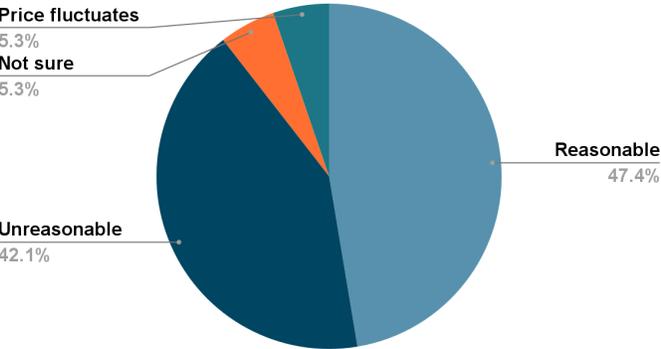
All participants reported that COVID-19 had a strong impact on them as a result of the regulations and restrictions imposed during the pandemic. For example, roads were closed, leaving them unable to go outside of town to the mine sites, and with no job, they had no access to income. 11 of the participants did not have any financial reserves to help them cope with the reduction in income; the other 8 participants had roughly 1 to 4 months of reserves but said they had already depleted these reserves. In addition to these impacts, participants also mentioned following issues:

- Pressure from local police increased the accidents they experienced while being chased by police and mining company security staff.
- The confiscation of mining equipment by police and security staff.
- Due to financial pressures, they have been forced to take loans from pawn shops.

- Mining companies have laid off employees
- The prices of food and other consumables had increased and capacity for procurement decreased.
- The inability, due to the pandemic-related restrictions, to go to Ulaanbaatar for medical checkups and to access medical services since many ASM miners live with chronic disease.
- Due to lack of cash, they were forced to buy food on credit.
- Their only source of income was the “child money” provided by the government.

As shown in Fig. 12, the price of gold has been inconsistent and some interviewees mentioned that it has increased while others spoke about a decrease depending on the buyers.

**Fig 12: Reasonable gold price**



Although in some cases, it seems the price of gold has gone up, COVID-19 related issues regarding the inability or reduction in work has led to an overall reduction in income for all participants. The interviewees reported that although they wear a mask when they go to town, it is difficult for them to wear a mask when they are working at mine sites because of dust in the air and resulting difficulties with breathing. Miners also mentioned that they are concerned about their children's education since distance learning is difficult and inefficient, and online lessons are sometimes unfeasible due to the lack of smartphones/devices and inability to buy data. When asked about what assistance the local or national government could offer the ASM community, the miners mentioned permission to land, reinstating the tripartite cooperation agreements between company-government-ASM, increasing employability through the implementation of training and educational programs, and financial and food support were the most common responses (Fig. 13).

When asked about the key issues that need to be addressed within the community and industry, the following issues were raised by participants:

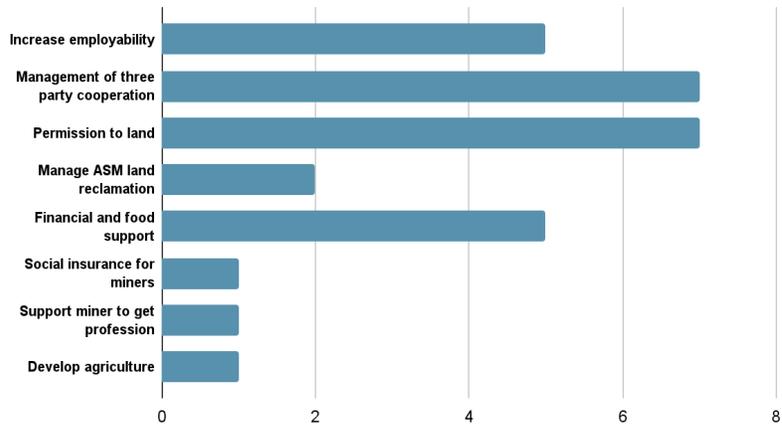
- Without ASM land permission there is no income and poverty increases
- No support from local and national governments
- Police violence
- Discrimination against the citizens of Zaamar soum
- Need to increase access to medical services, and social and health insurance
- Concern for youth as they have limited prospects for the future
- Environmental issues: pollution, dust, land degradation

**5.2.3 Overview of focus group discussion results**

The focus group discussion was held on April 6, 2021 and consisted of 7 women ASM miners. The objective of the focus group discussion was to go beyond the impacts identified in the survey and interviews and reflect on potential solutions and the role different stakeholders could have in implementing solutions. To facilitate this discussion, four questions were prepared and presented to the focus group participants.

All the participants said that tripartite agreements (local government-mining company-ASM NGO) provide them with the best opportunities. Mining companies used to allow ASM NGOs to mine on tailings after the depletion of the deposit and prior to environmental reclamation, and the local government would play the role of the managing party. ASM miners are also ready to participate in environmental reclamation but need support. The participants further mentioned that these tripartite agreements should be signed only with residents of Zaamar soum since, according to ASM law, miners can get license on land only in a partnership with other miners. Some miners make their documents appear as though they are partners but in reality, they are shell partners whose aim is to circumvent making an agreement with the ASM NGO. Participants also mentioned that representatives from the local government have a tendency towards nepotism, providing permissions to land only to their relatives.

**Fig 13: Local and national government assistance**



The participants noted the strengths and role that should be played by the ASM NGO in allowing ASM workers to become more coordinated, organized, to unite and deliver their voices, increase the stability of their income, reduce the risk of losing their lives and developing health issues, decrease threats, increase sustainability, and improve their livelihoods. They believe that the government should accept and support ASM, and that it is important to strengthen the activity of EMEH NGOs.

Before COVID-19, the members of the NGO were more active. They were trained in best practices for ASM, and they had agreements with local mining companies. They used to mine the tailing from mining operations and also conducted environmental reclamation. Due to COVID-19, the members have had to be less active, the financial capability of the NGO has been reduced, and due to the lockdown, the planned activities of the NGO have been postponed. In the future, they would like the ASM NGO to have the capacity to provide social and health insurance, and to facilitate their learning from AS miners in other countries.

The issue regarding the confiscation of mining equipment, threats, and violence from police and mining company security personnel were brought up and mentioned again since when they are without land agreements and have travel restrictions placed on them, the miners are forced into illegal activity through which they face criminal charges and penalties.

## 6 Findings

### 6.1 Economic issues

The findings, based on the survey responses, interviews and focus group discussion reveal the multilayered and compounding social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on

women and their families. The majority of these ASM women have been miners for more than five years, confirming that mining is not a transient occupation. They rely significantly on the income from ASM to support their families. The loss of income is impacting women's independence and ability to provide for their families.

The inability to work, combined with the lack of other economic activities in the region and a dearth of jobs from formal mining companies leave ASM as the only option through which to support their families. Most of the miners reported having multiple children/dependents, and rising food prices, coupled with the reduction in income due to mobility restrictions imposed by the government have made making ends meet difficult. Many of the miners had no financial reserves or have already depleted the few months of reserves they had and have resorted to taking out loans and taking on debt.

## **6.2 Social Issues**

Gender-based violence has increased and is being experienced by many of these women who, as a consequence, rank physical protection of highest priority to them, alongside the need for immediate financial help and food assistance. This difficult situation has significantly impacted the mental health of the women. It is not farfetched to suppose that their families are also being considerably affected since many of the women have dependents, with the majority being under aged.

Since many of the AS miners are also middle-aged and above, and have worked under harsh conditions for extended periods of time, most have chronic illnesses or disease and are unable to buy medicine, or travel to Ulaanbaatar for medical treatment because of travel restrictions. These health services are not available at the soum level, and they must travel to the city to obtain medical services.

## **6.3 Legal issues**

From the survey, as well as the interviews and focus group discussions, the suspension of ASM licenses has also resulted in important consequences with respect to the artisanal miners' ability to maintain formalization. This could be due to the backlog as well as the slower pace of government work in processing their applications. However, without legal contracts, the miners are put in a difficult situation. As most of them rely on income from ASM activities, they need to go out into the field and work, but by doing this, they are exposed to penalties and can be charged for criminal conduct and burdened with more fees. With the suspension of ASM regulations and the general governmental shift from a policy of "support and formalize" to one of "regulate and enforce"<sup>11</sup>, and with the amendments to the Mineral Law still ongoing, the miners are facing legal risks and are being pushed into illegal activity.

The confiscation of mining equipment and (occasionally) their vehicles are not helping alleviate the situation for the miners. Threats and violence from the police and mining company security personnel are also issues that were repeatedly brought up by the ASM miners.

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<sup>11</sup> Levin Sources (2019). Abridged Report: Evaluation and Strategic Plan of the Mongolian Artisanal and Small-scale Miners National Federation (ASMNF)

## **6.4 ASM National Federation**

From the interviews, focus group discussion and interactions with the ASMNF, it was evident that the ASMNF plays an important role in providing a united voice for the ASM NGOs and miners in the organization. As such, it provides training and services, and raises awareness. The ASMNF has been successful in gaining access to policy makers and has been involved in providing technical input on ASM-specific policy and laws<sup>12</sup>.

The ASMNF is crucial to the continued support and advocacy of AS miners in Mongolia and with the SDC funding support having ended in 2019; the organization is concerned with its future. Furthermore, study participants believe that the pandemic has contributed to limit Federation's capacity to execute its mandate.

## **7 Dissemination activities**

### **7.1 Webinar with EMEH ASM NGO**

The first of the series of webinars to present the results of the study was done on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021 with the presence of several members of the EMEH ASM NGO and the head of the NGO. The members commented that the study was able to represent the realities on the ground very clearly. Several of the members asked about the other dissemination activities and expressed interest in being allowed to participate in the multi-stakeholder webinar.

### **7.2 Webinar with GMIT students**

The second of the webinars was done on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021 to present the results of the data collection activities to the GMIT students. During the webinar a UBC professor delivered a presentation about some of the technical, environmental and social global issues related to the ASM sector. The aim of the webinar was educational in providing context and realities of ASM around the world and in Mongolia. The recording of the seminar was uploaded to YouTube: <https://youtu.be/UpVYfMnr8sw>

### **7.3 Webinar with ASMNF**

The third of the webinars was done on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021 where the results of the study were brought to the executive team and other provincial local ASM NGO leaders. The UBC team opened the webinar by providing an overview of the research project and introducing the research team while welcoming the participants to provide input and share their experiences. It was then presented the research findings followed by a Q&A session.

Land distribution and availability for mining activities was a common issue raised by the ASM NGOs, who proposed that decision makers consider the possibility for the mining legacy sites to be used and rehabilitated by artisanal miners who have experience in rehabilitation work. Miners report that there is an increase in unemployment in the region and lack of job alternatives. Several ASM Associations have requested support and assistance from the local authorities and central government to implement programs that encourage a transition to other economic activities. Participants shared their concerns over the future of their children and raised questions on discrimination and lack of financial resources for their children to receive university education.

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<sup>12</sup> Levin Sources (2019). Abridged Report: Evaluation and Strategic Plan of the Mongolian Artisanal and Small-scale Miners National Federation (ASMNF)

#### **7.4 Multi-stakeholder webinar**

The fourth and final webinar was conducted on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The webinar was well attended with a total of 49 participants ranging from civil society, academia, representatives from the ministries of Mines and Education, parliament members, local governors, representatives from foreign embassies, international finance organizations and members from artisanal mining NGOs, and ASM National Federation. The webinar was recorded and uploaded to YouTube: <https://youtu.be/TOkcYcXx88A>

Participants actively asked questions using the chat box and the research team was able to address all of them. The main topics of discussion centered on the legal framework of artisanal mining, the tripartite agreement between artisanal miners, mining companies and local government, and land access issues. ASM NGO representatives and ASM NF members brought forth the issues facing the ASM community, with government officials and Zaamar soum governor responding to the issues brought up in a healthy discussion.

### **8 Recommendations**

There is a need to conduct an assessment of the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on ASM communities across Mongolia in order to be able to effect changes in the situation of ASM miners. This is particularly true in terms of preventing ASM communities from falling into severe poverty, preventing miners from experiencing physical harassment, and creating conditions to promote collaboration with mining companies, and implementing tripartite agreements. Implementing local economic development programs that promote diversification alongside introducing lifelong learning and skills development programs for ASM miners will help them find other jobs or start a small business. Such an approach has the potential to reduce the dependency on the mining sector and encourage artisanal miners, who often enter into ASM due to the lack of job opportunities, to find other sources of income.

Through the implementation of this project, the webinars and meetings with stakeholders, it is evident that lack of information and misperceptions about what ASM is, how the sector is organized and who are the artisanal miners. Despite positive progress through implementing the SDC project and other programs, the old view of "ninja" illegal miners still exists. All stakeholders have a role to play in this regard. However, the media has an essential role in educating and raising awareness at the society at large, not only in Ulaanbaatar but also at the soum and aimag levels.

There seems to be currently greater importance for such awareness-raising activities since in the following months, members of the Mongolian parliament will be making proposals to amend the Minerals Law, which is an opportunity to address many of the challenges existing in the ASM sector.

The establishment of the ASM National Federation was an important step to organize and formalize the Mongolian ASM sector. In addition, to provide support to the miners, the ASM NF is also the direct interlocutor with the government and other institutions. Ensuring that such an organization exists and has the resources to implement its mandate effectively is beneficial to the miners and the government. Therefore, it is paramount that funding mechanisms are put in place to allow the organization's long-term viability. In this regard, artisanal miners, the Mongolian government and the international community have all an essential role to play.