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Vulnerability of women living in mining communities: a case study of smash block informal settlement, Thabazimbi local municipality, Limpopo, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Smash Block Informal Settlement is one of the fast-growing mining communities located in Thabazimbi Local Municipality, South Africa. The presence of a mine in a community presents both opportunities and challenges for socio-economic development. The opportunities and challenges manifest themselves with respect to the social, economic, spatial (physical and environmental) and political realms in the area. Exploiting the opportunities and converting the challenges into spatial transformative projects and programmes, though possible, is not easy to undertake. This is because mining communities face different, multiple and dynamic challenges such as unemployment, pollution and poor infrastructure and services. In this set-up marginalised and peripheral communities and groups such as women, the elderly, the poor and youth become vulnerable to the impacts of spatial inefficiencies and inadequacies within specific neighbourhoods or regions. This study was carried out to examine the vulnerability of women living in Smash Block mining community with respect to access to basic infrastructure and services necessary for ensuring a functional urban mining housing settlement. In order to situate the discussion within the wider vulnerability and mining informal settlements discourse, scholarly literature in mining communities and vulnerability was reviewed with a view to isolating the key vulnerability and women (gender) models, theories and framework of analysis for use in reducing the smash block informal settlement in Thabazimbi and women's issues in the study area. This literature review was important in highlighting the generic conceptual factors that influence women's vulnerability in informal mining settlements communities. At the same, this literature review was able to assist in the determination of a mix of strategies that informal mining settlements can adopt in seeking to adapt and mitigate informal mining settlements challenges for women in the study area.

The study adopted both a qualitative and quantitative dimension making use of a phenomenological research design over-arching approach. A total of ninety three (93) randomly sampled respondents from Smash Block Informal Settlement participated in the study. Semi-structured and structured interviews were conducted to collect data for the study. The data was analysed by means of content analysis, thematic analysis as well as through the use of descriptive statistics, which enabled the researcher to identify important informal settlement themes that explain the increasing physical, unemployment, poverty,

safety, infrastructure, environmental, equipment and facilities vulnerabilities of women in the study area.

The findings of the study revealed that most of the women in Smash Block Informal Settlement only have basic primary education and some of them are non-South Africans. Inadequate education and insufficient migrant rights are at the core of vulnerability of women in the settlement. In this set-up, non-South African women trade off human rights in exchange for access to employment, shelter, food and acceptance in the community. The majority of the women came to Smash Block Informal Settlement with the aim of securing employment and living closer to their spouses. However, most of the women have failed to secure permanent employment as employment opportunities are few and limited. 30% of the women interviewed were non-South African and were not prioritised for work by local mining companies. On the other hand, unemployed South African women highlighted that corruption fees were charged in exchange for bribing ones way to a job. Without such a bribe, it was difficult to access paid employment by women in the study area. Generally, the study corroborated earlier and similar studies that underlined that life in Smash Block Informal Settlement was not easy for women as they reside in areas that lack basic services such as tap water, electricity, houses and better streets. Consequently they spend most of their time fetching water from the street tanks (mobile water bowsers) provided by the mining companies. In addition, the women depend largely on paraffin stoves for cooking and paraffin lights/candles to light their houses at night, chewing into any savings that they may have. The women further complained that they were largely excluded from community projects happening in their communities. Instead, they are only informed of development within the community, promised jobs but were never employed. All of the above lead to poor living conditions for these women exposing them to different vulnerabilities. In order to address the identified challenges, it is recommended that the women form an informal Settlement Housing Advocacy Group/NGO/Forum. The women can use this platform to express their concerns, make inputs and be better integrated in the wider mining and local authority development structures such as the integrated development plan (IDP), spatial development framework (SDF) *etc cetera*.

Key words: *Vulnerability, Women, Mining community, Basic needs, Unemployment*