

Gender and Gold Mining: The Case of the Maroons of Suriname

by

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the relations between gender and gold mining among the Ndjuka Maroons, forest peoples in Suriname, South America. Today, gold mining has become the primary source of subsistence for many Ndjuka families. Yet in contrast to other parts of the world, few Ndjuka women participate in mining. The researcher examines how the gender system in Ndjuka society accounts for the male domination of gold mining, and how some women have negotiated traditional gender roles. Quantitative and qualitative data support the conclusion that the limited participation of Ndjuka women in gold mining is a product their limited access to critical resources and mobility. The internalization of gender ideology, and the dependence of women on men, prevents women from challenging existing gender roles and power structures in society. The women who engage in mining are typically poor single mothers who have adopted urban gender beliefs. Poverty and prior market experience inform their choice to become gold miners. On a theoretical level, it is argued that gender systems are changing continuously, under the influences of time, space, political process, and economic development. It appears that when the economic contribution of women becomes indispensable to household survival, cultural restrictions to the mobility and economic power of women necessarily weaken. The researcher emphasizes that the heterogeneity among women differentiates the options and constraints of individual women who make livelihood decisions. The conclusion is drawn that development efforts will only be effective when such efforts fully recognize the dynamism of gender systems and the heterogeneity among women.

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Introduction

Small-scale gold mining is attractive to people who are poor and have limited access to the formal labor market. Women, who make up a substantial proportion of the world's poor and marginalized, participate substantially in gold mining. The United Nations has estimated that 10-50% of the world population of small-scale miners are women (UN 1996). In various regions of Africa, women are as likely to participate in gold mining as men (Labonne 1996; Schaffer 1998). Participation in mining typically allows women to gain greater wealth, economic security, and decision-making authority.

Given the potentials for female empowerment, it is curious that in Suriname, South America, local women hardly participate in gold mining. Research among the Ndjuka Maroons, forest peoples in Suriname, provides the basis for this paper. Since the mid-1980s, a gold rush has spread over the Suriname share of the Amazon rain forest. Many Ndjuka have become gold miners, but only approximately one out of every 20 local miners is a woman. This observation informed two research questions: why is a majority of Ndjuka women excluded from gold mining, and what enables a minority of Ndjuka women to work in the mining area? I argue that the answer to these questions can be found through the analysis of gender in Ndjuka society.

Male gold miners explained that women are less suitable for gold mining because they lack the physical strength to work in the mining pit and live in the uncultivated forest. However, this argument is invalidated by observations elsewhere that female miners work long hours at heavy mining jobs, such as digging and carrying ore (Labonne 1996; Schaffer 1998; UN 1996). Moreover, Ndjuka women traditionally perform agricultural work that involves digging for hours in the heat of the day, and carrying heavy bags of cassava through the forest. Even *if* physical capacity limited female participation in pit-labor, there are many other jobs in the mining industry that Ndjuka women can perform, such as cooking or running a mining camp. The employment of Brazilian women in Suriname mining areas further indicates there is no lack of demand for female labor in the country's small-scale mining industry.

I analyze the gender barriers to entry into gold mining, and how some women have negotiated these barriers. I define gender as a socially constructed belief system that shapes the lives and behavior of women and men. Researchers before me have indicated that men and women face different options and constraints in their use of resources. These differences are socially constructed through daily experience rather than determined by sexual dimorphism (Agarwal 1991, 1994; Heyzer 1995; Kabeer 1994; Leach, Joeke and Green 1995; Meinzen-Dick et al. 1997; Rocheleau 1995; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayer and Wangari 1996; Schmink 1999). It is also increasingly recognized that 'women' are not a homogenous group in terms of ethnicity, age, occupation, wealth, or other social distinctions. Yet it remains less clear how this diversity among women affects the livelihood options and constraints of individual women.

In this paper, I explore how gender shapes the participation in small-scale gold mining among the Ndjuka in Suriname. I will:

- * reveal how the Ndjuka gender system drives the male domination of gold mining;
- * explore how the male participation in gold mining impacts the lives of their spouses who stay at home; and
- * examine what enables a selected group of Ndjuka women to use the gold rush to increase their personal and economic empowerment.

I enter the theoretical debate on women and development by challenging the frequently unquestioned acceptance by external researchers of an observed set of gender rules and regulations. My approach to gender is inspired by work of feminist scholars who emphasize the dynamism of gender systems (Leach, Joekes and Green 1995; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter and Wangari 1996; Schmink 1999). I show how the Ndjuka gender system is continuously changing over time and across space. I also aim to provoke a rethinking of the perception of women as a unified group in society. I explicitly focus on the conflicting interests and power inequalities among women.

The Amazon gold rush and its environmental and social consequences have attracted the attention and concern of researchers, media, and the public. However, the roles of women in gold mining booms have remained invisible. Researchers in Africa (Labonne 1996, Shaffer 1998, UN 1996) and Brazil (Cleary 1990; MacMillan 1995) report the presence of women in mining areas, but fall short of explaining their lives and contributions to the mining economy (see Rodrigues 1994). Even less is known about the spouses of gold miners who stay at home. I address this paucity by analyzing the lives and livelihood choices of female miners and spouses of miners.

In the following sections, I first describe the research site, population, and methods. I then analyze the Ndjuka gender system and show how it is changing. Next, I discuss the gold mining boom in Suriname and the lives and economic potentials of male and female gold miners. I conclude with a characterization of the contrasting responses to the gold rush by spouses who stay behind, and of the women who participate in the mining boom.

Research Site and Population

Suriname

Suriname is located on the South American continent, north of Brazil between Guyana and French Guiana. Previously known as Dutch Guiana, Suriname became independent from the Netherlands in 1975. The country is small in size with a total land area of 15,600 km², and rich in natural resources. Tropical rain forest covers 80% of Suriname (WRI 1999). The national language of Suriname is Dutch, but many other languages are spoken including Sranan, the national creole. The population of Suriname is estimated to be 409,000 (ABS 1997). This population is ethnically diverse, composed of Hindustani (East-Indians, 40%), Creoles (people from African descent, 27%), Javanese (15%), Maroons (10%), Amerindians (2.7%), Europeans (2%), Chinese (1.7%) and several other ethnic groups (Bakker et al. 1998: 9). While the majority of Surinamese live in and around the capital Paramaribo, most Amerindians and Maroons live in the forest.

The Maroons

The Maroons are descendants of runaway African slaves who established independent communities in the rain forest. Maroon culture incorporates elements from diverse African cultures as well as adaptations to their Latin American environment. Today, approximately 50,000 Maroons inhabit Suriname (Colchester 1995). They are divided among six societies that claim different territories: Ndjuka, Saramaka, Aluku, Paramaka, Matawai, and Kwinti. The Maroons dominate the practice of gold mining in Suriname. This study focuses on the Ndjuka Maroons, who are also known as Aukaners. The Ndjuka live in both Suriname and French Guiana, primarily along the Lawa, Marowijne and Tapanahony rivers (Figure 1). Today, a majority of Ndjuka men and a few Ndjuka women are gold miners. Of all Maroon groups, the Ndjuka are most actively participating in the gold mining boom (Afoichini, pers. com).

The different Maroon societies maintain a large degree of political, social, religious, and economical sovereignty within the nation state of Suriname. The main authority of the Ndjuka is the *granman* or paramount chief who resides in the village of Drietabbetje. He directs lower authorities called *kapiteins* (captains) who rule over villages or clans. The *granman* and *kapiteins* are assisted by *basias* (heralds, police men). The status of these political leaders is legitimized by religious ideology that guides social behavior and organization. The Ndjuka religion has retained many African elements, including the worship of African ancestors and spirits (ThodenVanVelzen and VanWetering 1991).

Ndjuka society is matrilineal, which means that descent is traced through female kinship. The central group of a village consists of the descendants in the female line of an ancestral mother. Such a group is called a *bee* (literally: people from one belly). Different bees that are (mythically) traced back to the same female ancestor form a *lo* (matriclan) (Köbben 1967). For both sexes, matrilineal kin define social relations and support networks. Marriage and residency rules in Ndjuka society strongly reflect their African heritage. Ndjuka communities are polygynous. This means that men are allowed to have multiple wives. Most often, marriages are uxorilocal. That is, a married woman has her house and household in her village of origin. Women who share a husband do not live together, and the man divides his time and attention between the separate households. Only wealthy men can afford to have more than one wife, and the largest number of wives per husband that I observed was three.

Sella Creek

The Sella Creek gold mining area is the primary site where I conducted research. Sella Creek is a small tributary of the Tapanahony river, situated on Ndjuka Maroon territory between the villages of Godolo and Gran Bori (Figure 1). The area is accessible only by canoe. According to Ndjuka gold miners, there are between 60 and 70 gold mining camps present at Sella. Based upon my observations in the area and communication with miners, I estimate that these camps house a shifting population of about 700 people.

Methods

The research that informs this paper was conducted in the summer of 1996 and from June 1998 to May 1999. I conducted fieldwork in Maroon communities along the Tapanahony River, in the capital city of Paramaribo, and in the Sella Creek mining area (Figure 1). My presence at a variety of research sites gave me a better understanding of the diversity of Maroon lifestyles and livelihood experiences. I recorded ethnographic interviews with Ndjuka women and men. I share several fragments of these narratives in this discussion.¹ I also participated in daily activities in the communities and in mining camps, consciously observing and describing Ndjuka life.

In the year 1998-1999, I conducted a systematic socio-economic survey. The respondents (N=219) were men and women, gold miners and non-miners (Figure 2). For the purpose of this research, I defined a gold miner as anyone who was present in the gold mining camps and part of the mining industry or service economy. This definition included not only pit-workers and camp-bosses, but also merchants, cooks, carriers, sex workers and other people. Figure 3 presents the share of gold miners in the job-categories in which they spent most time. The numbers of people who perform certain jobs are slightly underestimated because miners typically combine jobs. For example, female cooks often sell merchandise and take in laundry to generate extra income. Because some services, such as sex work and washing clothes, were only performed as secondary jobs, the number of people that worked in these jobs is not recorded in the figure.

The high mobility of gold miners prevented me from taking a random sample of the Ndjuka population. Moreover, random sampling would not have provided sufficient variation in relevant variables, and would have left me with too few observations of certain population segments. Therefore I used purposive sampling. Even though I tried to interview all women that I met in the mining area, they are a minority group in the survey sample (N=11). Despite the non-random sampling technique, my observations suggest that my sample of the different professional groups in the mining area is representative of the real proportional presence of these people in the Sella Creek mining region. I used the survey responses for statistical and qualitative analysis.

¹ All informant names are pseudonyms

Gender in Maroon Communities

In Ndjuka households and communities, men and women operate to a large extent independent from one another (DeBeet and Sterman 1981; Price 1993, 1988; ThodenVanVelzen and VanWetering 1991). Men provide game, money and city products. Women are almost solely responsible for their offspring, domestic tasks, and agricultural production. To bring in the family cash income, men typically leave the community for prolonged periods of time. Because men are frequently absent from the home, women control the management of the household and agriculture (DeGroot 1986; Price 1993; ThodenVanVelzen and VanWetering 1991). In addition to their dominant presence in the villages, matrilineality makes women central to defining the basic structure of social life and kinship relations (Price 1988, 1993).

Quantitative data reinforce the observed independence of women. In contrast with cases from Africa (Rocheleau and Edmunds 1997) and Asia (Agarwal 1994), many Maroon women own property. Significantly more women than men in the sample owned land, houses and canoes (Table 1).

Sixty-six percent of the Ndjuka women in my sample owned land, 67% owned a house in the interior, and 34% owned a (non-motorized) canoe. Among rural women only, for whom the mentioned assets are most relevant, 84% owned land and a house in a forest village, and almost half (48%) owned a canoe. Formally, no institutions prevent women from acquiring land and other possessions. Moreover, I did not observe any indications of disproportionate female malnutrition, disease or mortality, which have been identified as indicators of women's disadvantaged status elsewhere (Agarwal 1994).

Independent yet not Equal

The apparent autonomy of Maroon women is deceptive. Sally Price (1988), who lived many years among the Saramaka Maroons of Suriname, has criticized the presentation of Maroon society as a feminist paradise. Western researchers, she argues, have misread matriliney as matriarchy. They have misinterpreted the relative independence of Maroon women as their deliberate choice for Western-style feminism (1988: 127). My experiences in Suriname support Price's argument that gender inequity is present below the surface of Maroon society. Inequality between Maroon women and men limits the access of women to political power, money, capital assets and contacts with the outside world (Price 1988, 1993).

Further data analysis reveals the reduced access of Ndjuka women to material and human capital (Table 1). Men have better access to educational resources than do women. A majority of men complete elementary school (6 years). In contrast, most women drop out before or during the third grade. Fewer women (42%) than men (68%) are literate (X^2 , $p < .001$), and fewer women (41%) than men (71%) speak the national language Dutch (X^2 , $p < .001$). Women also earn less money than men do. I measured income as the aggregated cash income of a person over the year prior to the interview, expressed in US\$. Over the past year, every man earned money, while 31% of women had no cash income. Half of the women had earned equal to or less than the equivalent of 80 US\$, and 75% had earned less than 665 US\$. In comparison, the average annual income of men was more than the equivalent of 7,300 US\$.

In addition to possessing less material items and money, women also hold few formal political or religious leadership positions in Maroon society. The tasks of female leaders are primarily related to women's issues and deemed less important by men. A Saramaka man explained this phenomenon as follows:

Men work harder. They go to all the villages to announce things, to give orders, decide what happens. Women organize women's things such as cooking gatherings and specific ceremonies. (village of JawJaw, June 1996)

Female leaders are often excluded from negotiations with outsiders because many women only speak their tribal language, Ndjuka. In addition to Ndjuka, most men either speak Sranantongo, the city creole, or Dutch.

Marital Relations

Male labor provides the basis of female subsistence in the interior. Men clear the forest for the agricultural plots of women, build canoes, and make paddles. A husband also supplies his wife or wives with essential city goods, such as oil, salted fish and pork, rice, kitchen tools, fabrics and other household supplies, or the money to buy these items in the city (Price 1993). Furthermore, men own the motorboats and chain saws that facilitate these jobs. To be single is synonymous with poverty, explains Rosa, a Ndjuka woman:

... if you do not have a husband then you yourself will have to figure out what to do. And if you have to clear [land] yourself, it will never be a large plot, it will be a small plot, nothing more. Because you cannot do [clear the forest] like a man. Or maybe you have family that helps you clear. But for the largest share, if you do not have a husband, you will have to do it yourself with your tools. That is heavy! If you do not have a husband and you do not clear the land yourself, then you will have no place to plant. Maybe a family member who has just returned [from her field] will give you some produce, or a man has a bit for you to take [Village of Mooitaki June 1996]

In the above narrative, Rosa indicates that single women typically only clear a small subsistence plot. Other unmarried women rework old plots, but such land has a lower output. Consequently, single women are typically unable to produce sufficient food for themselves and their children, let alone surplus to sell for money.

While unmarried or widowed women come to depend upon (matrilineal) kin relations, they also feel that begging a male kinsman for help is shameful. Begging is unattractive because men tend to deliver services of less quality to a sister or mother than they would to their own wife, such as food that is left-over from their own household. As Rosa explains, reliance on kin does not provide security:

Some people [family members] they help you clear forest for a plot, because it is only once a year that the forest is cleared. So maybe they will help once, but he/she will not help every year, two years, three years.

Furthermore, unmarried women are less mobile. Most Ndjuka villages are situated on islands in the river, and women can often only reach their agricultural plots by water. A boat is therefore an essential wedding present that a man presents to a new wife. Women without a boat depend upon others, which in turn creates the obligation to return labor or produce:

If you do not have a husband, you will not have a boat. If you go somewhere, you borrow the boat from someone, you see. Then you go [...]. If you come back, then you announce that you have come, and she will take her boat back.

For all these reasons it is important for a woman to have a husband. But husbands are scarce. Even though many men have two or three wives, there are more women without husbands than men without wives (Price 1988, pers. obs.). This is partially due to the younger age of marriage for women and the larger number of men who migrate, either temporarily or permanently. The surplus of women and the dependency of women upon men leave women with little power to negotiate polygyny or extramarital affairs. Even though the wives of one husband may be friends and help one another in daily chores, women generally detest the existence of multiple wives and/or girlfriends. Second and third wives often feel inferior to the first wife and have less status in society. In theory, a man who desires to marry an additional wife needs the agreement of the earlier wife or wives. I asked Ndjuka women what would happen if a woman refuses. They laughed and agreed unanimously: "Then he will do it anyway."

Men and Women in the Outside World

Several features of Ndjuka culture enable men to acquire experience with the outside world and inhibit women from doing so. In Maroon culture, an important proof of masculinity is the ability of a man to operate outside the community to earn money. The ideology that equates mobility with manhood is reinforced by the Maroon social organization. Men are part of multiple households that are often situated in different villages. These include the man's natal village and the birth-village(s) of his wife or wives. In addition, men usually work for some years outside their communities, and buy supplies in the city. This requires men to travel between the maternal household, the marital household(s), the city, and the work place. Experience with travel, external cultures, and multiple languages make men better equipped to respond to opportunities offered elsewhere.

In contrast, women seldom travel far from their communities. Most subsistence plots are close enough to the community that they allow women to return home after a day's work in the field. Women may reside for longer periods in temporary agricultural camps. But these camps are usually closer to the residential village than are the mining camps, and women work among other Ndjuka women. For produce and supplies from the city, they rely upon men. Their lack of cash for travel and their limited language skills make women from the forest uncomfortable traveling without men outside their tribal territories.

Menstrual Taboos

Menstrual taboos impose a further obstacle on the freedom, status, and mobility of women. These taboos are embedded in the belief in supernatural powers, and isolate Maroon women physically from the community during a portion of each month. Menstrual taboos prohibit a menstruating woman from having sex with or cooking for a man and from touching items used by men. They prevent her from taking part in sacred ceremonies and from washing in the river. These taboos, in short, mark menstruating women as impure and polluting elements that need to be set apart from the rest of society (Small 1999). Ndjuka women and men believe that disregarding menstrual taboos will not only bring harm upon the woman herself, but also upon others. Alicia explains the importance of respecting menstrual taboos by going into exclusion in the menstrual hut:

[if you do not go into isolation] Ooooh we are talking about that! Then, if your father is there, or your husband, in the house, he will get ill. His stomach will be in pain [...]. Maybe he will die because of you. Because he must not eat the food there. That kills the man, it will not kill the woman [...]. He will get weaker, weaker, weaker and weaker [...]. So if you do not go [in menstruation seclusion], and you find your husband dead, you know you brought death. Then people will say: “ooh, that woman of so and so, with the moon-sickness [menstruation], he will come back to kill [take revenge].” And you will not live long. Maybe after two days you will be dead yourself. Then they will say: “well, she sinned.” (Village of Mooitaki, July 18, 1996)

Women themselves have internalized the belief that they will bring calamities upon the village by violating menstrual taboos. As has been shown elsewhere, feelings of responsibility and potential guilt keep women from breaking the taboos (Small 1999).

Scholars disagree about the impact of menstrual taboos on the lives of women (Price 1988; Small 1999). Price (1988) has criticized the representation of menstrual seclusion as a monthly escape of women from the drudgery of daily life. My research supports Price's contention that Maroon women view the monthly banishment as 'one of the more distasteful, inconvenient, and burdensome necessities of life' (1988: 127). Indeed it is unlikely that a woman who desires to escape from the burdens of daily life chooses to be crowded with several menstruating women in a dark and uncomfortable hut. Though female kin may help out with cooking and child-care, women in seclusion are still expected to do their usual jobs such as working in the field. My conversations with Ndjuka women and my stays in the menstrual hut have convinced me that Ndjuka women find the monthly forced banishment extremely boring, restricting their mobility and pleasure while not providing advantages.

Dynamic Gender Systems

Gender systems are complex and dynamic. Culture and gender beliefs are changing with the increasing integration of Ndjuka communities into a globally connected social and economic system. Wealthier men in the most developed villages own TVs and VCRs, youngsters are attracted to fashionable clothing and hairstyles from the city, and plastic items are replacing the elaborately carved wooden household utensils. Over the past three decades many Maroons, particularly Ndjuka, have

moved to Paramaribo (Afoichini pers. com. 1999). Maroons now make up 4.6% of the city population (Schalkwijk 1994: 22). Many other Ndjuka left Suriname as refugees during the civil war (1986-1992), and later to seek better economic opportunities elsewhere. Every Ndjuka has relatives who live abroad, particularly in the Netherlands. National and international migration among the Ndjuka drives cultural change by spreading external ideas and material goods when migrants return for visits.

The gender roles I have sketched here primarily pertain to Ndjuka women who originate from and are living in the forest communities. Due to external influences and changes over time, young women from the urban region are challenging traditional gender roles. These changes are partly driven by practical considerations, as strict gender rules are hard to maintain outside the Ndjuka forest community. Many Ndjuka women in the city will respect some restrictions during their menstruation but have abandoned others. Menstrual seclusion, for example, is extremely impractical if not impossible in an urban setting.

The Ndjuka women who originate in communities along the Cottica River, close to Paramaribo, stand out in their ability to challenge traditional gender roles. For several decades, Cottica Ndjuka women have participated increasingly in public life and market activities through the sale of their crops at the market (Polimé, pers. com. June 1997; July 1998). Conditions of poverty after the civil war motivated these women to expand both the geographical range and variety of their commercial activities. Today, Cottica Ndjuka women dominate the sale of crops and forest remedies at the Paramaribo market, and the resale of city-products in the interior. In doing so, they have acquired considerable economic independence and mobility.

The Gold Rush: Ndjuka in Search for a Livelihood

The gold rush in Suriname is part of the quest for gold that has spread over the larger Amazon region since the 1970s. The current small-scale mining industry in Suriname is much larger than previous mining activity in terms of the number of miners, gold production, and its impact on the economy, social structure, and forest of Suriname. Due to its informal and illegal nature, estimates of the scale and intensity of today's gold industry are highly speculative. Experts in the mining sector estimate that there are between 10,000 and 20,000 small-scale gold miners in Suriname. Estimates of the annual gold production vary more widely, from 10 to 42 tons (DeKom, VanDerVoet and DeWolf 1998; Healy 1996; Pollack et. al. 1998; Veiga 1997).

Only about a quarter of the mining population is Surinamese, mostly of Maroon descent (Veiga 1997). Three quarters of the small-scale gold miners in Suriname are believed to be Brazilian gold miners, called *garimpeiros*. They spread out through the Amazon region when the supply of easily extractable gold supply in Brazil was exhausted, and indigenous territories were closed off from gold miners in the early 1990s (Veiga 1997). Despite their lesser numbers, the Maroons maintain control over mining in their territories.

A Short History of Gold Mining among the Maroons

Maroons have mined for gold throughout their history. Elderly Ndjuka remember how gold miners and their families paddled up-river. Men were digging for gold and women assisted them while also taking care of the children and domestic tasks. One elder man recalled:

In those times you brought your wife and children. You stayed perhaps seven months [...]. The woman washed, cooked, sometimes she lay down in her hammock. When she lay down and she got bored, she took a *baté* [gold-pan] and she washed gold. We would leave with 60, 70 grams. In those days the work was nicer. I worked with a shovel. If I left for three weeks I could leave my money there. Nobody would steal it. At that time there were not many people, at times maybe only five adults. Sometimes you worked alone, sometimes you worked with another man. If you had a grown-up boy, you could bring him. You found more money then, there were not so many costs (camp boss, over 50).

Mining for gold used to be a temporary activity, performed when people needed cash. At present, gold mining has become the primary source of subsistence for many Ndjuka households. Now gold mining has increased in importance, it has become less of a family enterprise. Wives of today's gold miners occasionally pay visits to their husbands, but they have been excluded from the mining process. This situation is strikingly similar to the development of Bolivian tin-mining described by Nash (1995). In both Bolivia and Suriname, mineral extraction became a male dominated activity with increased modernization and market orientation. It is also noteworthy that the few female miners that I met were primarily women who do not have a husband involved in mining.

Political, Social and Economic Forces Behind the Gold Rush

Since the early 1980s, Suriname has experienced severe political and economic crisis. A military coup in 1980 was followed by civil war (1986-1992) between the military government and Maroon (Ndjuka) insurgents. Almost a decade of violence and economic depression destroyed the social infrastructure of the interior. Because forest schools closed during the war, a generation of Ndjuka youths has been left without education. In turn, illiteracy, limited schooling, and ethnic discrimination by city-dwellers close the formal labor-market to many Maroons.

Inflation and consumer prices have increased dramatically since the early 1980s, severely impacting the quality-of-life (Figure 4). Costs of food items increased ten-fold between 1990 and 1997, and more recently, from May 1998-May 1999, consumer prices increased by another 102% (IMF 1999). International markets rather than the Suriname economy determines the price of gold. This makes gold mining wages more attractive than city wages that are paid in the local currency. Gold mining also has the advantages that it offers freedom from city bosses and has low entry barriers in terms of capital and education. Furthermore, the migration of Brazilian gold miners, who introduced advanced mining skills and technology, has made the small-scale mining sector more profitable than ever before. The large-scale forces driving the gold rush are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Heemskerck, in press).

Male and Female Miners in Sella

Modern-day gold miners work with hydraulic power. They generally work in teams with 6 laborers, a boss, and an overseer. Each team usually has a cook, and may temporarily include others who repair machines, perform carpentry, clear the forest or deliver sexual services. Mining teams live together in camps that consist of several personal huts, a kitchen, and, sometimes, additional buildings such as a store. Adjacent camps can form larger clusters that resemble small villages with stores and entertainment provided by TV, videos, music and brothels. Life in the mining camps is emotionally, socially and physically demanding. Miners remain for months in the mining area, far from their families and from the comforts of the community or city. The monotonous diet of rice, beans and salted meat is not very nutritious, and miners are frequently plagued by disease and work accidents.

Men and women perform different jobs in the mining area, although there is some overlap (Table 2). Men primarily work in the mining pits or in support activities such as transport and construction. While both sexes work as shop owners, traveling merchants, camp bosses, and cooks, I only observed female sex workers. Pit-workers, who are exclusively men, constitute the largest group in the mining area (Figure 3). There are large differences in payment systems and earnings between and within professional groups (Table 2). One difference is that people like pit-workers are paid a percentage of the gold extracted by their team. Others such as cooks usually receive a fixed wage.

Most female Ndjuka who are working in the mining industry are traveling merchants. Because earnings vary widely between people and between visits, it is difficult to estimate their average income. The median net amount earned from selling merchandise was about 10 gram per month (g/month), which is low compared to the earnings from other activities. For example, cooks typically received about 60 g/month in fixed payments, while a majority of pit-workers reported earning 40 g/month or more (Table 2). However, many female merchants provided multiple additional services during their time in the mining camps such as cooking, washing clothes, cleaning campsites and providing sexual services. The women's real earnings were therefore higher. Even 10 g/month (about US\$90) is well above the typical wages paid in Suriname's public and service sectors in 1998-1999.

Spouses Who Stay Behind

In many small-scale societies where mineral extraction supplements household incomes, all household members contribute to the extraction process (Bullard 1990; Friedeman 1985; Gray 1986; Schmink and Wood 1992). As mentioned earlier, this was the case when Ndjuka families mined in the past. Today, most spouses of Ndjuka gold miners are no longer involved in mining and remain in the forest communities downstream.

Barriers to Mobility

Ndjuka women in the forest face significant gender-based barriers to entry into gold mining. I asked Ndjuka women why they were not participating in gold mining. About a fifth of women (19%) mentioned the lack of access to transportation as a reason to stay at home. Many women blamed their lack of mobility on the refusal of male kin or a husband to provide transport. Because men control motorized transport and women usually lack the cash to pay for it, travel to the mining area is not an option for many women.

It is difficult to say to what extent barriers to the mobility of women are real or imagined. Cultural expectations of proper gender roles are so deeply ingrained that many Ndjuka women do not even consider independent travel and participation in money generating activities. Women expressed the fear that they would be stigmatized when they break with expected gender roles. "If you go as a woman by yourself [to the mining area]," a woman asserted me, "the people will say you go 'whoring' (perform sex-work)."

The roles that Ndjuka society assigns to women are incompatible with engagement in mining. Women mentioned they could not go to the mining area because they needed to take care of the household and children, or because husbands objected. Women themselves may perpetuate some of these restrictions by internalizing the belief that women should be mothers and farmers, while their husbands are responsible for the cash income. Women may also help to enforce gender roles by stigmatizing women who do go to the mining areas. Ndjuka women who work in the mining area tend to leave their children temporarily in the care of others, most often female kin. However, such a solution is not available to everybody; some women commented that their husbands did not allow childcare arrangements. Because women are essentially dependent upon men, male authority is a very real obstacle to the independent participation of women in money-generating activities.

Menstrual taboos further complicate labor in the mining area. These taboos prevent women from traveling with men and from working as a cook or sex worker during their menstruation. This makes women less attractive as laborers to camp bosses. Furthermore, menstrual taboos are difficult to follow in the mining area because female support networks that help women cope with seclusion are absent. I observed that some women prevent menstruation by taking oral contraceptives continuously while in the mining area. Yet oral contraceptives are not readily available and are expensive.

Social and Environmental Consequences

Despite their minimal participation in gold mining, wives and daughters of miners experience its impacts. The social consequences of the gold mining boom remain unclear. There are signs of increased violence and economic inequality within Ndjuka communities, but not all these developments can be attributed to gold mining. In contrast to findings of other research on male labor migration

(Basch 1986; Chaney 1982; Collins 1987; Kedit 1991; Wright 1995), the prolonged absence of Ndjuka men does not seem to impact the workload of their wives. Women and men agree that husbands usually return to prepare the agricultural plots of their wives. Among all male gold miners with a farming partner (N=70), only one man had not cleared land for his wife. The fact that the clearing season coincides with the least productive period in mining may facilitate the return of men. Due to their traditional independence in terms of domestic and agricultural work, women are well adapted to the absence of men.

More serious is the damage of small-scale gold mining to human and ecosystem health. Recent research in Suriname (Antonius-Smits et al. 1999) and Venezuela (Faas, Rodríguez-Acosta and Echeverría de Pérez 1999) revealed a relationship between the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and the presence of sex work in and around mining camps. Miners who are (unknowingly) infected may bring STDs to their homes. Gold mining also enhances the spread of malaria and other tropical diseases, and prevents their control (Cleary 1990; Greer 1993; MacMillan 1995). Furthermore, mining related mercury pollution contaminates the food-stocks and damage the health of people in communities nearby mining areas (Akagi et al. 1995; DeKom, VanDerVoet and DeWolff 1997; Pollack et al. 1998; Veiga, Meech and Hypolito 1995). Today, women and children make up the majority of the population in these communities.

Despite the negative environmental impacts of gold mining, most women have welcomed the mining boom. Spouses of miners recognize the potential economic benefits of male labor in the gold fields and allow or encourage their husbands to go. In practice, women have little say over the earnings of a mining husband, who divides his money over multiple wives and girlfriends and himself. Even so, spouses of gold miners are generally economically better off than are other women. The invisibility of the health impacts of gold mining, and the clear economic benefits, explain the positive view Ndjuka women hold of gold mining. Perhaps women will question the benefits of gold mining when the health consequences of the mining boom become more apparent. On the other hand, it is unlikely that gold mining loses its popularity as long as it is the only activity that provides Maroon household with desperately needed subsistence income.

Women in the Mining Region of Sella Creek

Women are crucial for the functioning of mining camps. Rodrigues' (1995) ethnography of women in Brazil mining camps shows that women not only take care of the well-being of miners, they also provide a sense of social stability and community. In Suriname today, Brazilian women make up the majority of women in the mining area. They are primarily employed as cooks for mining teams. In contrast, only one or two of the Ndjuka women who migrate to Sella Creek work as camp-cooks. More often, Ndjuka women are merchants and traders. They travel to the gold fields to start cantinas or to engage in *hosselen*, the informal sale of goods and services. Harsh work conditions make miners eager to buy small luxuries such as cigarettes, chicken and canned food.

The prices of the products of merchants in mining camps are paid in gold, and typically 3 to 10 times higher than prices in the city (Table 3). For example, gold miners paid the equivalent of about US\$4.50 for a pot of peanut butter, and US\$38 for the popular malaria medicine Halfan. In Paramaribo, the same products cost US\$1.60 and US\$5.77, respectively. Even though work in the mining area offers potentials for economic empowerment, only a few Ndjuka women have responded to this opportunity. What has enabled these particular women to negotiate traditional gender roles and travel to Sella Creek?

The Story of Carina

Life history analysis can provide an in-depth understanding of the decision-making processes that drive women to become entrepreneurs in the gold mining industry. I will share the story of a woman who I call Carina. Her life provided an excellent example of the circumstances that can influence the choice of a Ndjuka woman to become directly involved in gold mining. Carina was born in Albina, a village that is part of the Cottica region, and situated in the North-East of Suriname. Her life was severely disrupted during the civil war, when the Cottica region became the center of military and guerrilla activity (Polimé and Thoden van Velzen 1992; Thoden van Velzen 1990). Cottica Ndjuka communities were raided by the army and the people fled to the city and abroad.

When Albina was almost entirely destroyed during the civil war, Carina and her three children left for Paramaribo. The ever-increasing costs of living in the city made life a continuous struggle against poverty. To make ends meet, Carina started *hosselen*. She bought cheap clothes from Dutch aid programs. She resold these clothes in French Guiana where prices were higher. Around 1993, the French government began to enforce strict border control in an attempt to fight drug smuggling. People were no longer allowed to cross the border between Suriname and French Guiana without the appropriate travel documents.

Many Ndjuka view the restrictions upon their freedom of movement as inappropriate. Ndjuka families have lived on the two sides of the Suriname-French Guiana border long before colonial powers created this geo-political border. In the opinion of the Ndjuka, the border that divides their territory is artificial. Like many others, Carina ignored the new border laws and continued her trading ventures. Soon she was caught by the border patrols and had to pay a large fine. This incident made her decide to relocate her clothing resale business. Her brother took her to the mining region in 1993, where she found no interest in clothes. She began to cook once in a while, and noticed that the gold miners were loyal buyers of her meals. She left Sella, returned with a lot of food, and began to sell both processed

food and freshly cooked meals. The hospitality of her *nyan-nyan oso* (lit: eat house, cantina) soon gained popularity among miners in surrounding camps. By selling plates of chicken with French fries for the equivalent of 7-9 dollars, she can make enough money in a short time to sustain her family.

Female Miners

The life stories that I recorded from Ndjuka women who participated in gold mining were comparable in many ways. The Ndjuka women who work in Sella Creek originate primarily from the Cottica region and now reside in Paramaribo. Strict obedience to the Ndjuka gender system has eroded under influence of the rich urban mixture of ethnic traditions and cultures. Even if they did not have a formal job, life in the city required Ndjuka women to interact with outsiders when they went shopping or if they had children in school. Maroon women from the Cottica region also have reputations as good merchants. All the women I interviewed in Sella had experience with *hosselen* before they arrived in the mining area. Skyrocketing inflation, decreasing economic options in and around the city, and the closure of the border with French Guiana, forced female entrepreneurs to search for new, more profitable markets.

Their ethnic background makes it easier for Maroon women than for other women to work in the mining areas. They can often travel with kin and have extensive social networks in the Maroon-dominated mining world. For Carina and all other saleswomen who I met, introduction to the mining area by a brother, cousin or father was crucial. Even though they are emancipated Ndjuka women, traveling alone to the isolated, male-dominated mining environment is not a decision any woman makes easily, for she knows it will be demanding.

Another characteristic of female Ndjuka gold miners is that they are typically poor single mothers who are the main breadwinners of their families. Female kin looks after their children while these women travel to the mining area. Work as a traveling merchant is attractive because it allows women to stay for shorter periods than cooks, for example, who have to stay for several months in a row in the mining area. The absence of a husband increases the mobility of a woman and forces her to earn enough to sustain a family. On the other hand, their acquired economic autonomy makes women more critical and demanding towards a new male partner, and less likely to (re)marry out of necessity.

The Drawbacks of Working in the Mining Area

Some women enjoy the independence and high income of their activities in the mining area, as does Martha, the only married sales woman I met. Her husband did not encourage or support her trading activities, but economic needs overruled his objections. When she comes to Sella, Martha travels around the mining region for several days to sell cigarettes and *apadongsida*, a palm-fruit juice that is said to strengthen the blood. She returns home when all the produce is sold. Martha's income from *hosselen* exceeds her husband's formal wage. Without it, it would be impossible for them to sustain their family.

Few women find that the economic opportunities offered in the mining camps make up for the hardships they experience. Only a lack of alternatives keeps them going. There are many reasons not to choose a life in mining. Travel to and in the Sella Creek area is exhausting and expensive, as is the transport of merchandise. In addition, women frequently confront malaria and sexual harassment. Traveling women also regret having to leave their children in the care of others for long periods. One woman felt that she was failing as a mother, because her efforts to provide economically prevented her from giving her children the personal attention they deserved.

Female Ndjuka vendors lament their lack of power when gold miners disappear without paying their bills. Male and female shop-owners, traveling merchants and sex workers are often paid on credit. Merchants complain that miners fail to pay over half of the bills. In the month that I met John, a shop owner, he had sold goods valued at 135 gram of gold on paper. He had only received 23.4 g in payment. “If you go looking for your money,” he said, “you will only lose because you have to walk far and close the store.”

Many women with whom I spoke wanted to quit their work in the mining industry as soon as possible. Women with alternatives, such as a well-paying job, a husband’s wages, or remittances from family abroad, do not become saleswomen in the forest. Two women mentioned they would stay away from the mining area as soon as they would find someone to provide for them and their children. Others planned to quit when they had saved enough to set up a small business Paramaribo.

For Ndjuka women who were participating in market activities, the gold mining area opened up an attractive market where earnings were high relative to wages paid in formal jobs. Small-scale gold mining provided a unique economic opportunity when traditional livelihood activities faded. Despite the general dislike of participation in the mining business, I noticed an increase in the number of women working in the mining camps between 1996 and 1998. This suggests that under the current economic conditions in Suriname, few women have the option to stop their mining job. On the contrary, my research suggests that the increase in poverty that characterizes present-day Suriname will continue to drive women into the gold mining service economy.

Lessons Learned for Women and Development

Several lessons for women and development theory and practice can be taken away from this analysis. First, I show that time, space, political process and economic developments have a considerable impact on gender systems. I use the example of Ndjuka women in Suriname to show that when away from traditional, rural communities, women are likely to adapt to a new urban gender system. Increased integration in the national economy and a lessening of the economic dependence of women on men further challenge existing gender systems.

The case study shows that political and economic hardship may force traditional gender roles to be replaced by practical considerations of family survival. In other words, when the economic contribution of women becomes indispensable to household survival, cultural restrictions to the mobility and economic power of women necessarily weaken. In this sense, Cottica Ndjuka women are merely part of a general trend that characterizes Latin America since the 1980s, namely the increasing participation of women in the labor force in response to poverty and the marginalization of men from the household (see for a description of this trend, for example, Bolles 1991; Momsen 1991; Safa 1995; Wekker 1994).

The second lesson from this study is that it is inappropriate to present 'women' as a unified group with overlapping interests. This may seem obvious. Feminist scholarship has made us increasingly aware of the contrasting views between women who are rich and poor, from the Western or the developing world (Mohanty 1988, see also Momsen 1991; Rocheleau 1995; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayer and Wangari eds. 1996; Tsing 1993). However, much research continues to group 'poor women' together, particularly when they are from one ethnic group or region. My analysis shows that seemingly similar women may have substantially distinct and even contrasting options and constraints when making livelihood decisions due to differences in geographical or ethnic background, marital status, wealth or other social characteristics.

Conclusions

Small-scale gold mining offers potentials for female empowerment and can be performed by women as well as men. However, Ndjuka women from the forest communities face many real and abstract gender barriers to entry into gold mining. The Ndjuka gender system assigns Ndjuka women less access to resources, mobility, and authority positions than men, and the internalization of gender beliefs and the dependence of women on men make women feel socially inferior and incapable of independent travel and of generating money away from the community. In doing so, the gender system denies women the power to negotiate their roles and power in society, to challenge disliked cultural practices, and to effectively respond to socio-economic change.

Even though small-scale gold mining has many negative health effects for local people and the environment, many spouses of miners welcome the participation of men in mining because it sustains their poor families. Small-scale gold mining also offers poor urban women increased opportunities for personal and economic empowerment. The Ndjuka women who work in the mining area are typically poor single mothers who have adopted urban gender beliefs. Their previous engagement in market activities and increased poverty motivated their travel to the mining area. Working conditions in the gold mining region are emotionally and physically demanding. Yet female Ndjuka entrepreneurs and family breadwinners perceive work in gold mining as the only option that provides sufficient income to sustain their families.

It has been emphasized throughout this paper that gender systems are dynamic, and women form a heterogeneous group. In addition to the variation in gender systems over time and across space, the personal ideologies of women themselves also affect the capacity of women to adapt to change. Development efforts aimed at the empowerment of women will only be successful if they integrate such a dynamic approach to gender and to women.

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Tables

Table 1: Comparison of ownership of material, human, and monetary resources between Ndjuka women (N=91) and men (N=128).

	Median			Mean		
	<i>sample</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>	<i>sample</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>
Age	31.5	31	33	34.4	34.0	35.0
<i>Material Capital</i>						
house in interior (y/n)	yes	Yes	yes	63%	59%	67%
land (y/n) **	no	No	yes	45%	30%	66%
canoe (y/n)	no	No	no	28%	29%	34%
motorized canoe (y/n) **	no	No	no	18%	30%	1%
house in city (y/n)*	no	No	no	23%	29%	14%
<i>Human Capital</i>						
education (years)**	5	6	2	4.64	5.60	3.39
finished elementary school (y/n) **	no	Yes	no	45%	57%	29%
literacy (y/n)**	literate	Literate	illiterate	57%	68%	42%
Dutch speaking (y/n)**	yes	Yes	no	59%	71%	41%
<i>Monetary Capital</i>						
earn cash income (y/n) **	yes	Yes	yes	88%	99%	69%
annual income (US\$) *	1350	2700	80	5480.83	7313.37	2346.93

*= significant difference between men and women's means at the .05 level

**= significant difference between men and women's means at the .001 level

Text:

I provide both the mean and the median of selected variables to minimize distorted data interpretation due to the large variance within same-sex groups. The light shaded row covers ownership of land, the only area where women are significantly advantaged over men. The dominant dark shaded areas represent the areas where men do better than women at the 5% significance level or higher. Differences in the non-shaded rows are statistically not significant.

Table 2: Payments system for and monthly earnings of several professions in Sella creek

Profession	Payment system(s) observed in the Sella Creek mining area	Earnings (gram gold/month)
<i>Jobs performed by both women and men</i>		
Boss/machine owner	60-70% of gold extracted minus production costs (machines, transport of supplies, oil, camp, food)	range: 14-1,063 median: 140
Cook	10 g/pit worker/month, or 5 g/pit worker/month + 30 g from boss, or stable wage paid by boss	60 60 25, 30
Shop owner	Profit from sale products that are priced 3-4 times those in the city, minus transport and acquisition costs.	160, 606 ¹
transient vendor	see above	range: 0-50 median: 10
<i>Jobs exclusively performed by women</i>		
Wash clothes	1 g/pp/load	20
sex-worker ²	3-5 g/time 8, 10 or 15 g/night (on credit more expensive)	n.a.
<i>Jobs exclusively performed by men</i>		
transport tractor	10 g/barrel of oil (200 liter)	varying
transport All Terrain Vehicle	1.5 g/25 kg transported (cash payment) 2 g/25 kg transported (credit payment)	varying
pit laborers	5% of gold extracted	range 13-150 ³ median: 40
overseer	5% of gold extracted	range: 20-325 median: 50
carrier	1 g/40 l. (1 trip) 10 g/barrel of oil (200 l) (8 days)	range: 35-100 median: 60
concession holder	5% of gold earnings (although often not paid)	n.a. ²
all-round: carpentry, clearing, construction	1 g/produced board, 15 g for cleaning the camp from weeds, 1 g/m ² forest cleared with steel-saw (large trees and under-story)	n.a. ²

¹ The amount presents the amount sold in cash and credit. Because miners frequently do not pay their debts to shop owners, the real profits are much less. The estimate is based upon the information of two cases of men who were exclusively shop owners. Most shop owners had also other jobs such as being a cook and all-round work.

² Because these jobs are typically performed in addition to other jobs, it is not possible to estimate a monthly wage earned from these activities by their practitioners.

³ Statistics are exclusive of two outliers of laborers who had just arrived from working on dredges, where they had earned considerably more.

Table 3: Prices of selected items: prices observed in Sella Creek mining area, as compared to supermarket prices in Suriname guilders (converted in dollars) paid in the city 1996/98/99

Items	gram gold	US\$ (sales)	US\$ (buy)
<i>Smoking</i>			
Hollywood (carton cigarettes)	2	18	6.67
Tacoma (carton cigarettes)	1.8	16.2	4.46
Cigarette paper (job)	0.2-0.3	2.7	0.19
<i>Beverages, alcoholic and non-alcoholic</i>			
Martini (bottle)	3	27	8.21
Campari (bottle)	4-5	40	12.56
Borgoe (local rum, bottle)	1.8	16.2	3.08
Soft drink	0.2-.05	3.15	0.64
Beer (can, diverse brand names)	0.4	3.6	0.87
<i>Canned fish and meat</i>			
Cornet beef	0.7-0.8	6.75	1.12
Sardines in soya oil	0.3	2.7	0.96
Sausages (large can)	0.6-0.7	5.85	1.54
<i>Bread spreads</i>			
Margarine (tin)	0.7	6.3	1.28
Peanut butter	0.5	4.5	1.60
Meat spread (can)	0.2	1.8	0.64
Bread with butter, marmalade or peanut butter	0.2	1.8	0.20
<i>Sweets</i>			
Guava sweet (Goiabada Rio Verde)	0.7	6.3	1.60
Lolliepop (Chupa)	0.1	0.9	0.19
<i>Additional foods</i>			
Salted meat (bucket)	16	144	42.31
Rice (bag 25 kg?)	4	36	7.37
French fries with chicken (1 plate)	0.8	7.2	2.56
French fries with chicken and mayonnaise and ketchup	1	9	3.21
<i>Medicine</i>			
Polar Ice (skin medicine)	1	9	1.44
Halfan (anti malarial)	3.5-5	38.25	5.77
Quinine Pill (anti-malarial)	2.5	22.5	12.18
Paracetamol (pain killer)	0.1	0.9	.

* On average, gold paid about US\$10 per gram in the summer of 1996, and about US\$8 in 1998-1999, when sold through unofficial gold dealers. In the calculations, I used 9US\$ per gram.

** 1 *deci* is a tenth of a gram

Text:

Prices of products in the mining camps are paid in grams of gold (column 1). Converted to US\$, the sales prices (column 2) are three to ten times higher than the dollar-equivalent of prices paid for these products in a Paramaribo supermarket (column 3). The prices fluctuated with seasonal changes. Prices in the dry season, when transport becomes complicated and expensive, are about 10 to 20% (and even up to 100%) higher than rainy-season prices. Because the prices differ slightly from place to place, the table provides averages.

Figure 1: Research site: Suriname, the Ndjuka territory along the Tapanahony River, and the Sella Creek mining area

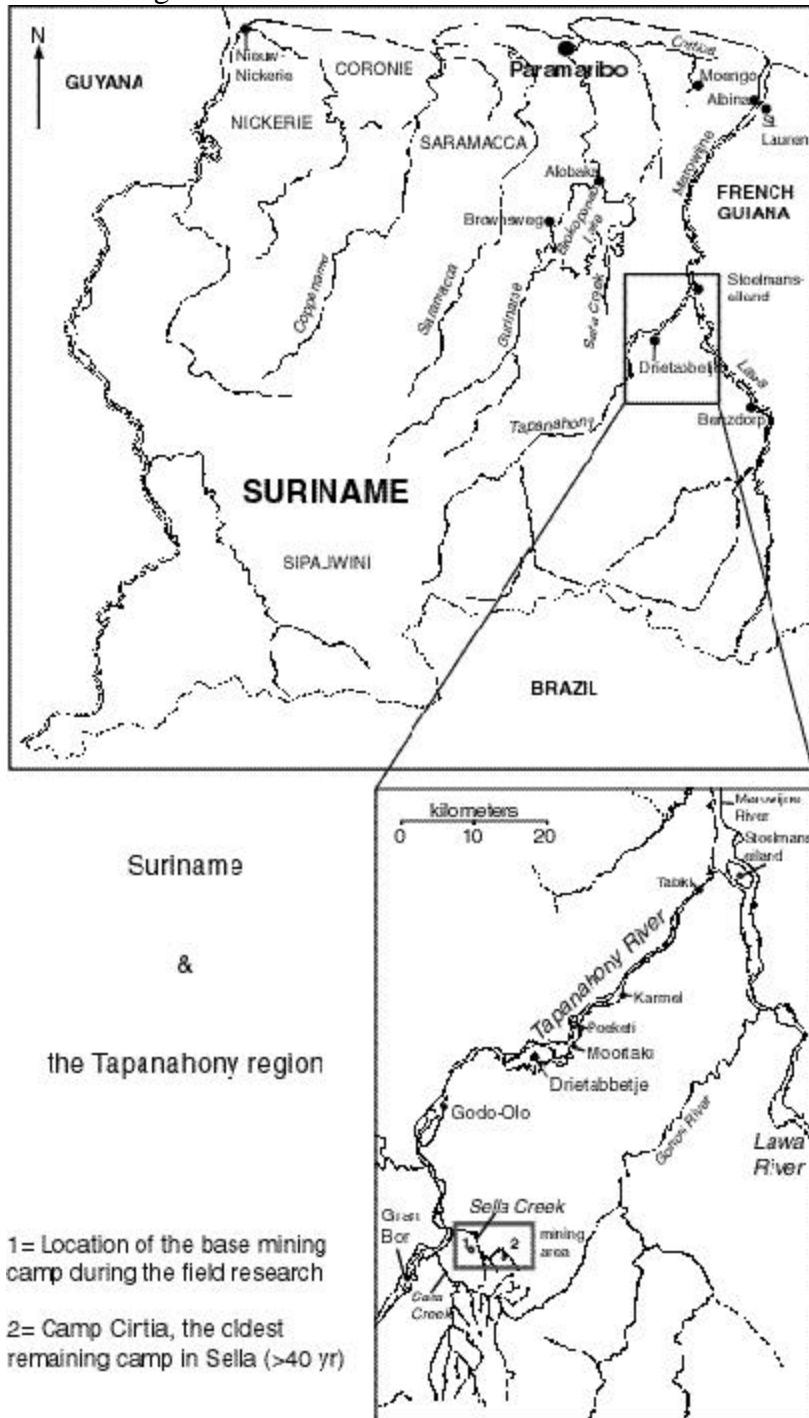


Figure 2: Male and female gold miners and non-miners in the survey sample population (N=219)

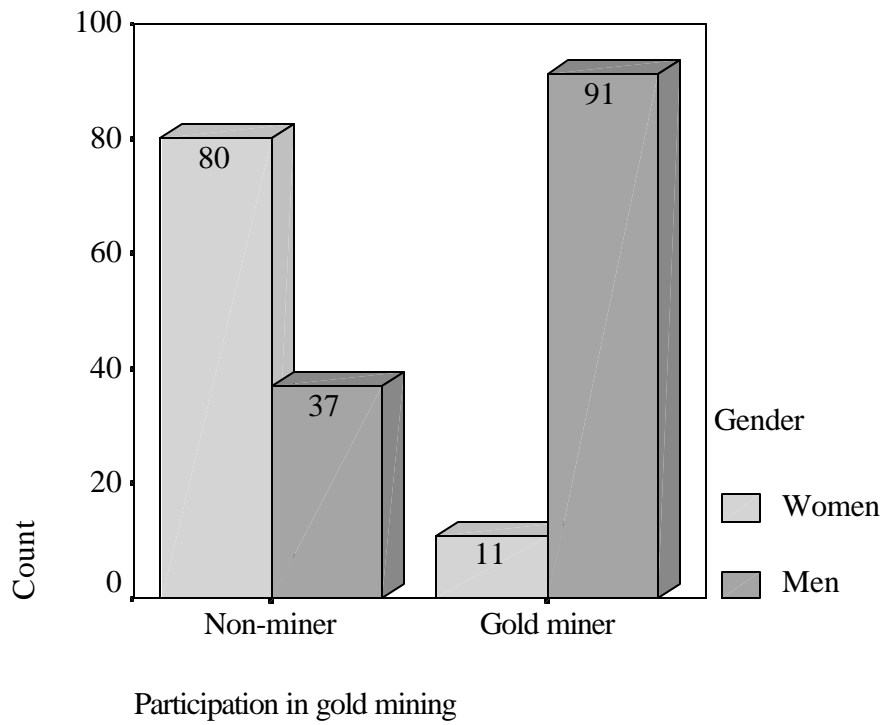


Figure 3: The percentage representation of different professions in the mining economy in the survey sample

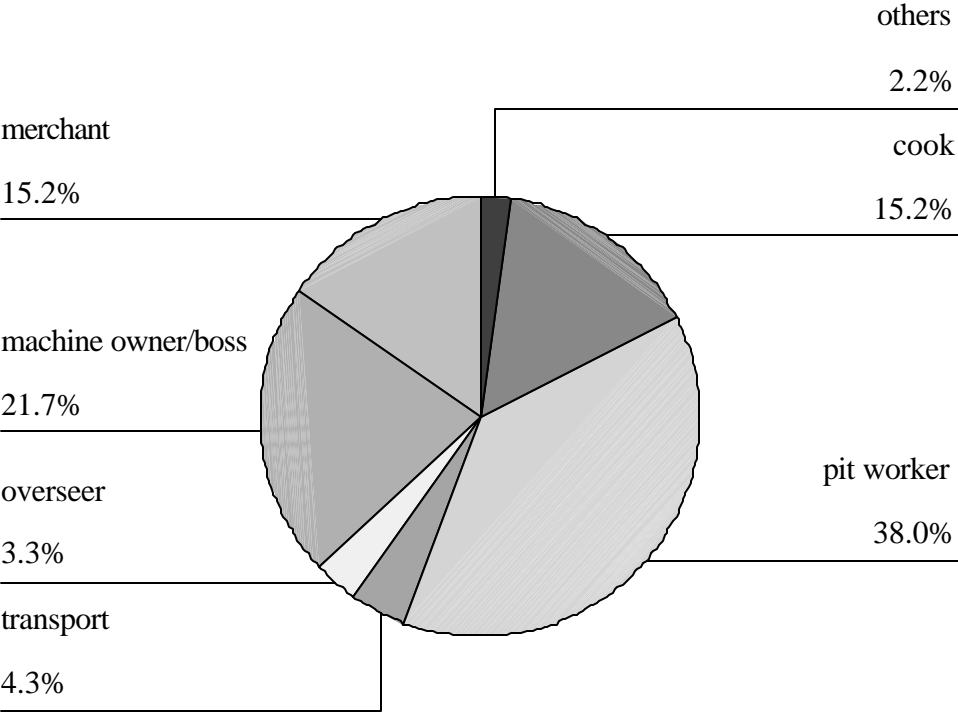
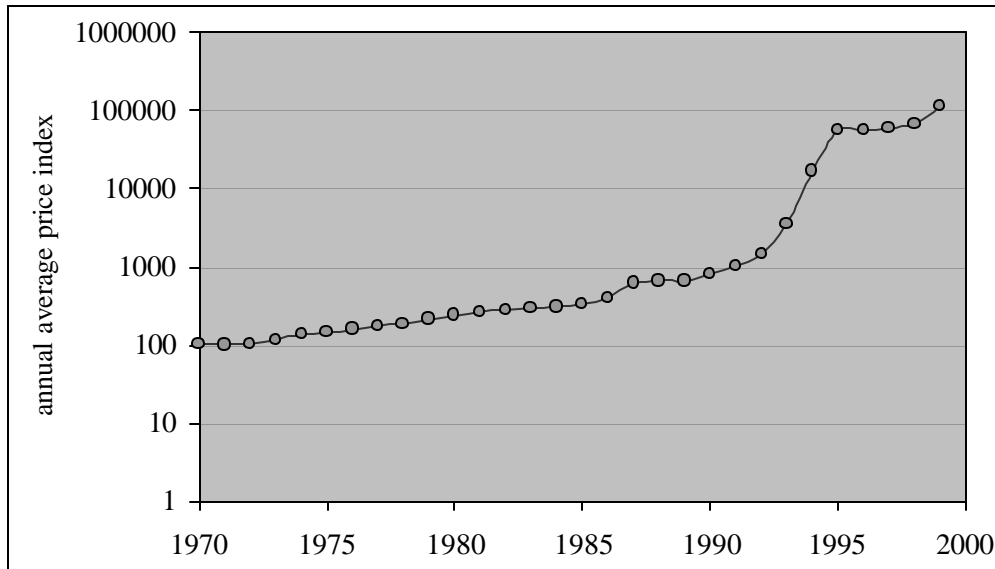


Figure 4: Consumer price index, annual average (1970=100)



Source: General Bureau of Statistics: Consumer Price Index numbers (ABS, 1997: 36), data of 1997 and until May 1999 from ABS (unpubl.) (base=1998)

Text:

Consumer prices have increased exponentially over the past decades. Prices skyrocketed since the early 1980s, coinciding with the military dictatorship and civil war. The Suriname guilder has devaluated rapidly in the past two years. From May 1998-May 1999 consumer prices increased by 102% (IMF 1999).

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