

Subalternity, gender and land dispossession: Women's resource rights under illegal artisanal and small-scale mining expansion

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Abstract

This article systematically reviews how the expansion of illegal artisanal mining (commonly referred to as “galamsey” in Ghana) reshapes customary land governance and deepens women's subalternity in Ghana and comparable Sub-Saharan African contexts. Using a guided synthesis of peer-reviewed and gray literature published between 2000 and 2025, the review integrates de-agrarianisation (agrarian decline) and subaltern theory to examine gendered land dispossession. The findings show that galamsey accelerates land commodification, disrupts customary tenure systems, and privileges extractive land use over agrarian livelihoods. These dynamics disproportionately affect women, whose land rights are socially embedded and often mediated through male authority. Women experience both material dispossession and exclusion as their voices are marginalised in land allocation, mining negotiations, and compensation processes. The review concludes that governance failures and gender-blind frameworks sustain these inequalities and argues for gender-responsive, agrarian-centered land governance reforms.

Keywords: customary land governance, galamsey, gendered land dispossession, subalternity

1 Introduction

Land in rural Ghana constitutes far more than an economic resource. It is a medium through which social identity, cultural memory, and political authority are constructed and reproduced, particularly in communities where customary tenure undergirds livelihoods and anchors collective stability (Nara *et al.*, 2021; Anafo *et al.*, 2023; Agyapong, 2025). The rapid expansion of mining, especially illegal small-scale mining (galamsey), has, however, begun to reconfigure these relationships. Galamsey activities are accelerating shifts in land-use patterns, weakening customary tenure arrangements and redistributing control over land in ways that disproportionately undermine women's rights and agency, notably for those positioned as subalterns within patriarchal governance structures (Hausermann *et al.*, 2018; Adjei *et al.*, 2024). Research shows that even under stable conditions, customary land governance frequently marginalises women through male-oriented inheritance systems and

restricted ownership rights. Furthermore, structural dependence on male relatives renders women's claims to land more precarious and easily displaced as land becomes increasingly commodified by mining interests (Grätz, 2013; Tsikata & Yaro, 2014; Doss *et al.*, 2015; Eshun *et al.*, 2021). The proliferation of galamsey operations further entrenches these inequalities by enabling unregulated land grabs, eroding the authority of traditional custodians, and accelerating environmental degradation (Hausermann *et al.*, 2018). These dynamics disproportionately curtail subaltern women's capacity to farm, sustain livelihoods, or meaningfully influence land-related decision-making (Hilson & Maconachie, 2020). This article systematically reviews how the spread of galamsey intersects with gendered land rights, highlighting how these processes deepen women's subaltern status through the erosion of access to, control over, and benefits derived from land in mining-affected communities.

Given the growing scale of galamsey activities in Ghana and their documented impacts on land availability, rural livelihoods, and community structures (Dery Tuokuu *et al.*, 2020; Afriyie *et al.*, 2023), it is increasingly critical to in-

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terrogate how these transformations reconfigure local land-tenure systems and how they affect women's rights to land and related resources. Studies tend to cast women either as passive recipients of environmental degradation or to assume that mining-induced land losses are experienced uniformly across genders. Such representations obscure the entrenched structural inequalities within customary tenure arrangements and the gendered power hierarchies that shape access to, control over, and decision-making around land (Tsikata & Yaro, 2014; Addaney *et al.*, 2022; Alo *et al.*, 2022). Foregrounding a subaltern perspective is therefore essential. Women, especially those situated at the socio-political margins of customary governance often lack formal claims, and institutional recognition. This makes them particularly vulnerable to dispossession as gamamsey drives the commodification and contestation of land. Their experiences, strategies, and struggles remain underrepresented in mainstream analyses, leading to an incomplete understanding of how mining reshapes local land regimes. This systematic review seeks to address these gaps by synthesising available evidence on the gendered dynamics of land dispossession in mining-affected contexts. It also examines how gamamsey interacts with both customary and statutory land governance systems, highlighting the persistent silences surrounding subaltern women. By centring marginalised perspectives, the review offers a more nuanced understanding of the socio-legal transformations unfolding in gamamsey zones. It underscores the urgent need for gender-responsive, socially inclusive land governance reforms.

1.1 De-agrarianisation

De-agrarianisation explains the decline of agriculture as the primary basis of rural livelihoods, accompanied by shifts in land use, labour, and local economies toward non-farm activities (Bryceson, 2019). In Ghana, the expansion of illegal artisanal and small-scale mining (gamamsey) accelerates this process by converting agricultural land into extractive sites, degrading soils and water resources, and reducing the viability of farming (Hausermann *et al.*, 2018; Afriyie *et al.*, 2023). As agricultural production becomes increasingly constrained, households diversify their livelihoods, often through mining and other informal activities (Hilson & Maconachie, 2020).

These changes have important gender implications because women's access to land is largely mediated through customary tenure rather than ownership. As mining increases the commercial value of land, customary rights based on cultivation become more insecure, leaving women with limited access to productive land and fewer opportunities to benefit from extractive activities (Tsikata &

Yaro, 2014; Doss *et al.*, 2015; Addaney *et al.*, 2022). Simultaneously, land governance shifts from lineage-based stewardship to market-oriented transactions dominated by local elites (Peters, 2013; Luning & Pijpers, 2017). This review employs de-agrarianisation theory to explain how mining-driven land-use change restructures rural livelihoods and customary land governance, creating conditions that intensify women's dispossession and complement the subaltern perspective adopted in this study.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The literature on artisanal and small-scale mining and land governance reveals both converging and divergent insights when examined comparatively. Across studies, a consistent pattern emerges that mining expansion accelerates land commodification and weakens customary tenure systems. Studies by Hausermann *et al.* (2018) and Luning and Pijpers (2017) emphasize the growing influence of elite-controlled, monetised land transactions, while Peters (2013) indicates an uneven persistence of lineage-based authority in some contexts. Similarly, while Doss *et al.* (2015) and Tsikata & Yaro (2014) highlight structural gender inequalities embedded in customary tenure, other studies point to variations in women's ability to negotiate access depending on local institutional arrangements and social capital. Taken together, the literature suggests that although the socio-environmental impacts of mining are widely acknowledged, their implications for land governance and gendered access are context-specific and mediated by overlapping customary and statutory systems. This comparative synthesis underscores that women's land dispossession is not uniform but shaped by localised power dynamics, thereby reinforcing the need for more nuanced, context-sensitive analyses of subaltern experiences.

These variations in the literature indicate that empirical evidence alone cannot fully explain the differentiated experiences of women in mining-affected communities. A theoretical framework that integrates subalternity and de-agrarianisation is therefore necessary to explain how gendered land dispossession is produced and reproduced within changing land governance systems. This review draws on subaltern theory to examine how women's land rights are structurally constrained within Ghana's land governance systems. Subalternity, as theorised by Spivak (1988), captures forms of exclusion that operate through the denial of voice, representation, and decision-making authority rather than through formal legal absence alone. It is a standpoint that challenges the neutrality of tradition and questions how dominant narratives exclude women under the hegemonic guise that serves the privileged interests of men (Gramsci, 1985).

Building on this foundation, this review adopts a subaltern feminist perspective to examine how gender shapes experiences of exclusion within customary land governance. While classical subaltern theory explains how dominant institutions silence marginalised groups, subaltern feminism highlights how patriarchal social relations intersect with political and economic structures to produce gender-specific forms of dispossession and invisibility (Narayan, 2019; Mohanty, 2003). This perspective is particularly relevant in rural Ghana, where women's access to land is mediated through customary institutions that privilege male authority and where extractive expansion further constrains women's participation in land governance.

In rural Ghana, women's land access is predominantly mediated through customary tenure arrangements that privilege patrilineal inheritance, and male authority. Although statutory frameworks formally endorse gender equality, land allocation, dispute resolution, and land-use conversion remain controlled by male-dominated customary institutions. Subaltern theory, therefore, provides a critical lens for analysing how women are positioned as marginal actors in land governance, where their claims are rendered informal, and politically invisible.

In galamsey-affected contexts, these structural exclusions are intensified by the commodification of land and the prioritisation of extractive land use. As customary tenure systems are reshaped to accommodate mining interests, women's agrarian use rights lose legitimacy and are rarely recognised in mining negotiations or compensation processes. Decision-making spaces around mining access and land conversion are dominated by male elites and state-customary alliances, further marginalising women despite their disproportionate exposure to land loss and environmental harm. Framing these dynamics through subaltern theory allows this review to conceptualise women's dispossession as an inherent structural feature of extractive-driven land governance, rather than merely an incidental byproduct of illegal mining.

The conceptual framework, presented in Fig. 1, integrates de-agrarianisation, and subaltern theory to explain gendered land dispossession in galamsey-affected rural Ghana.

The framework illustrates causal progression from extractive pressures to gendered outcomes, while highlighting feedback loops that reinforce women's subaltern positioning within customary and statutory land governance systems. The framework shows that subalternity reinforces exclusion from land governance structures, thereby accelerating dispossession and deepening processes of de-agrarianisation. Guided by this framework, the review interprets existing literature through the intersecting processes of de-agrarianisation and subalternity, focusing on how extract-

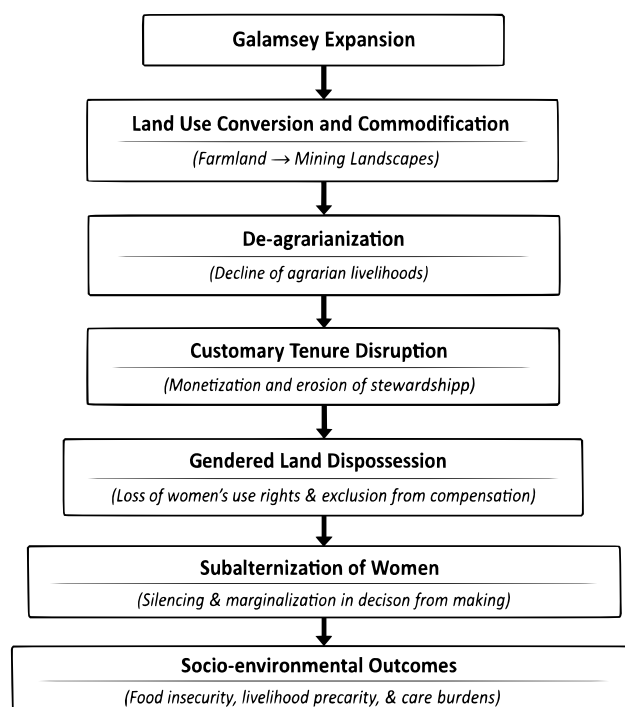


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework linking galamsey expansion, de-agrarianisation and women's subalternisation.

ive land-use change restructures access, agency, and recognition within customary land systems.

2 Materials and methods

This study adopts a systematic review methodology to synthesize the empirical and theoretical intersections among galamsey expansion, gendered land rights, and the dispossession of subaltern women in Ghana. Systematic reviews are well-suited for analysing socio-environmental issues because they enable transparent and replicable knowledge while minimising researcher bias (Snyder, 2019; Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). A search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and African Journals Online (AJOL). The search covered publications from 2000 to 2025, capturing the period in which artisanal mining intensified and reshaped rural land governance across Africa (Hilson, 2002; Luning Pijpers, 2017; Stacey, 2025). The review applied structured search syntax to link terms such as “illegal mining”, “galamsey”, “gender and land tenure”, “women's land rights”, “customary land”, “subaltern women”, “artisanal mining”, and “resource extraction and gender”. Reference lists were manually screened to capture works on gendered land relations and mining impacts. Gray literature was included only if it provided empirical evidence or theoretical insights, consistent with best practices in systematic evidence synthesis (Booth *et al.*, 2024). The study

applied predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria before title and abstract screening to ensure transparency and consistency in the selection of articles, and to minimise selection bias. Studies were included if they focused on artisanal or small-scale mining and examined the gendered dimensions of land access, resource governance or customary tenure systems within Sub-Saharan Africa. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on large-scale corporate mining; lacked a gendered analysis; did not address land tenure or governance processes; were conducted outside sub-Saharan Africa; or did not provide empirical or theoretical evidence relevant to the review objectives. Following title and abstract screening, and subsequent full-text screening, 57 studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final review. The PRISMA flow diagram (Fig. 2) summarises the study selection process, illustrating the progression from the 156 records initially identified through database searches to the final set of eligible studies.

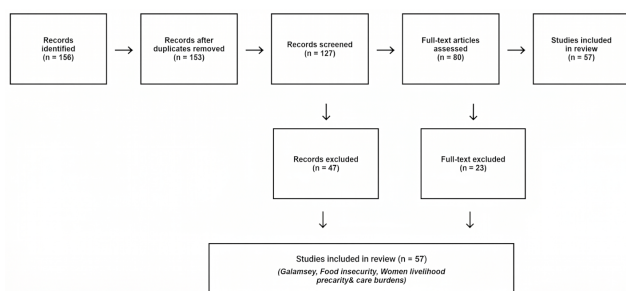


Fig. 2: PRISMA flow diagram of study selection process (adapted from Page et al., 2021).

Thematic analysis was conducted following the iterative framework of Braun Clarke (2006) to identify recurring patterns and conceptual linkages. Articles were coded using an iterative approach that combined deductive and inductive strategies. Deductive codes were derived from the conceptual framework, particularly the dimensions of deagrarianisation (e.g., land-use change, livelihood shifts) and subalternity (e.g., exclusion, voice, recognition). Inductive coding allowed additional themes to emerge from the data, such as environmental burdens and governance gaps. The methodology is guided by subaltern feminist perspective, which emphasises how overlapping patriarchal, customary, and extractive systems produce gendered forms of marginality (Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 2019). While systematic procedures enhance transparency and rigor, limitations include the uneven availability of gender-disaggregated data, the underrepresentation of subaltern women's voices in mining research, and the dominance of case studies, which limit generalisation. These silences in the literature substantively reinforce the central argument of this review.

3 Discussion

This review synthesises existing studies to clarify how galamsey-driven land-use change restructures rural livelihoods and governance by producing gendered powerlessness and mobility pressures, rather than framing illegal mining solely as an environmental or regulatory challenge (Hilson & Maconachie, 2020; Afriyie et al., 2023). Across the reviewed literature, a consistent pattern emerges: the expansion of artisanal and small-scale mining accelerates the conversion of agrarian land into extractive landscapes, undermining customary tenure systems and destabilising land-based livelihoods (Maconachie & Binns, 2007; Hausermann et al., 2018). While these transformations affect entire communities, their consequences are unevenly distributed, with women experiencing heightened vulnerability due to the relational and socially embedded nature of their land rights (Tsikata & Yaro, 2014; Doss et al., 2015).

A central process identified in the literature is the reconfiguration of customary land governance under extractive pressure. Mining expansion fragments traditional authority stewardship toward short-term, monetised transactions negotiated through informal or elite-controlled channels (Peters, 2013; Luning & Pijpers, 2017). Evidence from Ghana and comparable West African contexts shows that chiefs, lineage heads, and local elites increasingly prioritize extractive value over agrarian land uses, weakening accountability mechanisms and tenure security (Van Bockstael, 2014; McQuilken & Hilson, 2016; Andersson Djurfeldt, 2023). Within these reconfigured governance arrangements, women are routinely excluded from decisions on land conversion, mining negotiations, and compensation processes despite their central role in agricultural production and household subsistence (Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003; Addaney et al., 2022).

The evidence reviewed shows that galamsey-driven land-use change restructures customary land governance in ways that systematically deepen women's dispossession while reinforcing their subaltern positioning. While this review centres on women as a structurally marginalised group, it recognises that women are not a homogeneous category. Access to land, mining opportunities, and decision-making is mediated by intersecting factors such as class, kinship, social capital, and proximity to customary authority. Some women may derive benefits from extractive economies even as the majority experience heightened vulnerability (Lahiri-Dutt, 2012; Tsikata & Yaro, 2014).

As agricultural land is converted into extractive sites, control shifts from lineage-based systems to informal, monetised arrangements dominated by male elites, weakening tenure security. Because women's land rights are largely me-

diated through social relations and cultivation rather than ownership, these shifts translate into loss of access, exclusion from decision-making, and limited recognition in compensation processes. In subaltern terms, this reflects not only material dispossession but also political and epistemic marginalisation, where women's voices are excluded from arenas in which land-use decisions are negotiated and legitimised. Epistemic marginalisation refers to the exclusion of women's knowledge, perspectives, and experiences from land governance and mining-related decision-making. At the same time, environmental degradation undermines agrarian livelihoods, while gendered barriers restrict women's entry into mining economies, leaving them excluded from both systems. This dual exclusion produces livelihood precarity and constrained agency, illustrating that women's dispossession is structurally embedded in the intersection of extractive pressures, patriarchal land relations, and governance systems that normalize their invisibility and silence.

The review further demonstrates how de-agrarianisation and subalternity interact to shape gendered livelihood trajectories, including increased vulnerability to rural-to-urban migration. As galamsey activities degrade farmland and contaminate water resources, agrarian livelihoods lose economic and social viability, particularly for women whose access to land is tied to cultivation rather than ownership (Agarwal, 2018; Bryceson, 2019; Sedegah, 2025). At the same time, women's limited access to mining economies due to gendered labor hierarchies and exclusion from decision-making spaces restricts their ability to benefit from extractive activities (Behrman *et al.*, 2012; Lahiri-Dutt, 2012; WoMin Collective, 2017; Brottem & Ba, 2019). The combined effects of land loss, environmental degradation, and restricted agency push many women toward precarious coping strategies, including informal urban employment, expanded unpaid care work, and dependence on remittances (Daley & Pallas, 2014; Manduna, 2023). Migration in this context primarily reflects structural displacement, overriding traditional opportunity-driven mobility pathways. The displacement of women from agricultural production also has broader implications for household food security, as declining food crop cultivation increases dependence on purchased, often imported and processed foods, thereby reducing local food self-sufficiency and exacerbating rural nutritional vulnerability (Agarwal, 2018; Bryceson, 2019).

Governance failures emerge not simply as implementation gaps, but as structural features of legal pluralism. The enactment of Ghana's Land Act, 2020 (Act 1036) represents an important attempt to harmonise statutory and customary land administration and strengthen tenure security. However, from a subaltern perspective, the effectiveness of

these reforms depends on whose rights are recognised and protected in practice. While it formally acknowledges customary interests and promotes equitable land governance, women whose claims are primarily based on cultivation, kinship, and customary use rather than documented ownership may continue to face exclusion where formal registration and documentation become prerequisites for asserting rights. In mining-affected communities, where land values increasingly reflect extractive rather than agricultural potential, formalisation may inadvertently facilitate the concentration of land in the hands of politically connected actors and customary elites who possess the resources to register and transact land. This process may produce what can be understood as administrative dispossession, whereby legally sanctioned procedures reinforce existing power asymmetries and marginalise subaltern women whose customary claims remain weakly recognised. The Land Act therefore exposes how legal reform alone cannot secure equitable land governance unless implementation explicitly safeguards socially embedded land rights and women's meaningful participation in land administration (Peters, 2013; Chigbu *et al.*, 2019; Addaney *et al.*, 2022).

The coexistence of statutory mining regulations and patriarchal customary tenure systems creates institutional ambiguity that enables opaque land transactions and weak enforcement (Lund, 2017; Chigbu *et al.*, 2019; Sinclair, 2021). Gender-neutral policy frameworks further obscure women's differentiated vulnerabilities, allowing extractive priorities to override agrarian livelihoods and social equity considerations (WoMin Collective, 2017; Elmhirst *et al.*, 2019; Meinzen-Dick *et al.*, 2019). As a result, regulatory responses that focus on criminalisation or environmental remediation alone have limited effectiveness and, in some cases, exacerbate existing inequalities (Dery Tuokuu *et al.*, 2020).

By integrating de-agrarianisation and subaltern theory, this review advances a conceptual synthesis that reframes women's dispossession as a governance outcome shaped by power, voice, and recognition, rather than as an unintended side effect of illegal mining (Spivak, 1988; Peters, 2013). Women's marginalisation operates simultaneously at material, political, and epistemic levels, reinforcing cycles of exclusion within land governance systems. The discussion underscores that addressing galamsey-related impacts requires moving beyond descriptive accounts of harm toward governance reforms that confront gendered exclusions embedded in both customary and statutory land institutions. Without centering women's agency and agrarian livelihoods within land governance, efforts to regulate illegal mining or promote rural development risk reproducing the inequalities they seek to resolve.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

This review has shown that galamsey-related land-use change operates through entrenched governance structures that systematically marginalise women within customary and statutory land systems. Rather than reiterating empirical patterns, the central contribution of the review lies in its conceptual synthesis: demonstrating how de-agrarianisation and subalternity explain why women's land dispossession in mining-affected contexts is sustained through the interaction of extractive pressures, patriarchal tenure arrangements, and legal pluralism. De-agrarianisation and subalternity explain why women's agrarian land claims, political voice, and livelihood security are consistently undermined as land governance becomes increasingly oriented toward extractive value.

From a policy perspective, addressing galamsey-driven dispossession requires shifting beyond environmentally framed interventions. Mining and land governance frameworks should explicitly recognize women's agrarian use rights as legitimate claims, rather than favoring formal ownership alone (Agarwal, 2018; Meinzen-Dick *et al.*, 2019; Sedegah, 2025). This includes embedding gender safeguards within mining approvals, land-use planning, and compensation mechanisms, as well as strengthening oversight of customary land transactions to reduce opacity and elite capture (Peters, 2013; Chigbu *et al.*, 2019). Given the persistence of legal pluralism, reforms must engage customary institutions by strengthening statutory oversight mechanisms - such as customary land secretariats - to promote transparency and protect vulnerable land users.

At the level of practice, the findings underscore the importance of institutionalising women's meaningful participation in land allocation, dispute resolution, and mining-related consultations. Supporting women's collective organisation and recognising agrarian-based livelihood claims into land governance processes are critical steps toward countering extractive-driven marginalisation (WoMin Collective, 2017; Agarwal, 2018). Without such measures, interventions aimed at regulating illegal mining or promoting rural development risk reinforcing the gendered inequalities that underpin women's dispossession and vulnerability.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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