

Dissertation

The First Mile of Global Value Chain Governance: Empowering Women and Reducing Gender-Based Violence through Third-Party Interventions

Shengwen Li^{1a}

¹ Western University, Canada

Keywords: global value chain governance, women's empowerment, gender-based violence, fragile contexts, third-party interventions, artisanal mining
<https://doi.org/10.46697/001c.150334>

AIB Insights

Vol. 25, Issue 6, 2025

Global value chains (GVCs) often reinforce gender inequality and violence, particularly in fragile contexts. This dissertation examines when third-party interventions enhance women's empowerment and reduce gender-based violence in the first mile of GVCs. Using unique primary data from artisanal mining communities in three African countries, we find that women's inclusion is driven by economic incentives, while empowerment increases through female leadership and hybrid governance. Crucially, reducing intimate partner violence requires educational and socially inclusive interventions, as economic strategies alone are insufficient. The findings offer theoretical insights and practical guidance for NGOs, policymakers, and multinationals seeking to foster more equitable GVCs.

BIG QUESTION

Under what conditions can third-party interventions improve women's empowerment and reduce gender-based violence in the first mile of GVCs?

INTRODUCTION

The 'first mile' of global value chains (GVCs) often encompasses some of the world's most fragile, insecure, and unequal regions (Li & Goerzen, 2024). These are the sites where critical raw materials such as gold, cobalt, and tin are extracted, often by hand, in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) communities. While these materials fuel the global economy and sustain industries ranging from electronics to renewable energy, the conditions under which they are produced remain deeply problematic. For multinational corporations (MNCs), the first mile is not only the beginning of their supply chain but also a focal point of reputational, operational, and ethical risk. Reports of human rights abuses, environmental degradation, child labor, and gender inequality frequently originate from these contexts (Hofmann, Schleper, & Blome, 2018). The first mile is therefore not only an economic challenge but also a profound moral concern.

Women in ASM communities face particularly severe inequities. They often occupy the most physically demanding yet least rewarded roles, such as washing ore in rivers, carrying heavy loads, preparing food for miners, and processing minerals under unsafe conditions. They are rarely decision-makers, have limited access to land and productive assets, and are disproportionately subjected to gender-based violence. These realities stand in sharp contrast to global commitments to gender equality and reveal the persistent gap between international norms and local lived experiences.

At the same time, global expectations have shifted. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality and the International Labour Organization's Convention 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the workplace have heightened international attention to gender justice. Social movements such as #MeToo have further amplified pressure on firms to address gender discrimination. Lead firms now face growing scrutiny from consumers, investors, and civil society to demonstrate responsibility deep into their GVCs. Yet despite these pressures, progress remains uneven, particularly in fragile contexts where governance is weak and gender norms deeply entrenched. Against this backdrop, this dissertation asks a fundamental question: *Under what conditions can third-party interventions improve women's em-*

^a PhD awarded by Queen's University (August 2024)

Dissertation title: "The first mile of global value chain governance: Empowering women and reducing gender-based violence through third-party interventions"

powerment and reduce gender-based violence in the first mile of GVCs?

Third-party interventions, whether initiated by NGOs, governments, or MNCs, are generally designed to improve livelihoods, promote social well-being, and mitigate risks within vulnerable communities. However, many such interventions remain short-lived, narrowly focused on economic outcomes, or overly concentrated on the formal economy, while neglecting the informal settings in which most ASM work occurs. As a result, some interventions unintentionally reinforce inequalities or provoke resistance. These mixed outcomes underscore the need for more nuanced analysis of what works, under what conditions, and why.

This dissertation draws on GVC governance literature (Barrientos, 2019; Gereffi, Humphrey, & Sturgeon, 2005; Gereffi & Lee, 2016), feminist institutional theory (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009), convention theory (Ponte & Gibbon, 2005), and empowerment theory (Kabeer, 1999). The research is grounded in a multi-year partnership with IMPACT, a Canadian NGO operating in ASM communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, and Zimbabwe. This collaboration enabled rare access to remote and insecure first-mile environments that are typically inaccessible to researchers or firms.

Between 2018 and 2022, IMPACT implemented three major projects and collected large-scale primary data through structured surveys administered by trained local data collectors. The combined dataset includes more than 3,500 women and men, including miners, community members, and participants in various intervention types. The interventions examined fall into three broad categories:

- Economic and financial inclusion programs (e.g., Village Savings and Loan Associations)
- Community governance structures (e.g., mining associations)
- Rights-based and educational programs (e.g., Gender Dialogues, Women's Rights Groups)

Using descriptive and quasi-experimental methods (e.g., propensity score matching), this dissertation examines the effects of interventions under real-world conditions characterized by high levels of informality and fragile institutional environments. Three studies investigate how different interventions influence women's empowerment and gender-based violence in the first mile of GVCs.

STUDY 1: SOCIAL GOVERNANCE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The first study examines the role of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) in DRC. Although VSLAs are usually introduced as financial inclusion mechanisms, they also function as grassroots social institutions that can influence norms and patterns of participation. Guided by feminist institutional theory, the study explores how VSLAs influence gendered environments through two strategies: conversion and layering.

During the outreach phase, VSLAs relied primarily on conversion by framing participation around livelihoods and

income generation rather than as gender equality initiatives. This framing was critical, as it made participation socially acceptable and encouraged women to join without appearing to challenge male authority. Once established, the introduction of women into leadership roles reflected a layering strategy that created new opportunities for women within existing institutional structures. Female miners reported improvements in savings, income, land ownership, and public recognition of their capabilities.

However, these gains had limits. Women's bargaining power within households and their ability to influence community-level decisions changed little, as entrenched patriarchal norms continued to constrain agency. The findings suggest that livelihood framing can facilitate women's entry into economic programs and that leadership roles strengthen agency, but empowerment remains partial unless interventions also address power structures within households and communities.

STUDY 2: COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The second study investigates mining associations in the DRC, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. These associations oversee access to mining sites, negotiate with buyers, and manage local resources, making them influential governance bodies in ASM communities. Although they have the potential to democratize decision-making, the study finds that, in practice, mining associations often reproduce existing inequalities. Women's participation was strongly conditioned by access to land, tools, or social networks that many women lack. Male elites frequently dominated leadership positions, and associations rarely created meaningful opportunities for women on their own.

However, when associations were supported by NGOs through training, resource provision, and advocacy, outcomes improved considerably. Women engaged in these programs reported greater autonomy in choosing work, stronger bargaining power within households, enhanced confidence in public speaking, and a more recognized presence in community governance. The combination of community governance and external NGO support proved far more effective than either mechanism alone. The results show that community governance can be a powerful platform for empowerment, but only when local structures are strengthened through strategic partnerships. Without such support, community institutions are more likely to entrench exclusion than challenge it.

STUDY 3: REDUCING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The third study focuses on intimate partner violence (IPV) and compares the effectiveness of three interventions in the DRC: economic empowerment through VSLAs, advocacy-focused Women's Rights Groups, and mixed-gender educational programs known as Gender Dialogues. The analysis reveals that economic empowerment alone does

not reduce IPV. While VSLAs improved financial inclusion and independence, they did not significantly reduce violence and, in some cases, risked reinforcing tensions within households if men felt their authority was threatened.

Women's Rights Groups provided valuable support networks but had limited impact on shifting community-wide norms. By contrast, Gender Dialogues, which are community-based sessions engaging both men and women, were far more effective in transforming attitudes and reducing the social acceptance of violence. Participants in these sessions were substantially less likely to justify wife beating in five of six scenarios, demonstrating meaningful shifts in gender norms. Only norms related to infidelity remained resistant. The findings underscore that knowledge-based and inclusive interventions are essential for challenging deeply ingrained norms and reducing IPV.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, the three studies (Table 1) show that improving women's empowerment and reducing gender-based violence in the first mile of GVCs requires interventions that account for complex institutional and social dynamics. Economic initiatives increase participation when framed around local livelihoods but yield limited changes in decision-making without deeper institutional support. Community governance can empower women when paired with NGO-led training and resource access, but it tends to reinforce exclusion when left to existing male-dominated structures. Gender-based violence declines only when interventions engage both men and women in shifting social norms, as economic programs alone do not reduce IPV. Because empowerment is layered and context-dependent, which are shaped by resources, institutional arrangements, and social norms, interventions are most effective when carefully designed, appropriately framed, and embedded within local systems. These findings generate three cross-cutting practical insights (Table 2) that have practical implications for policymakers, MNCs, and NGOs.

First, interventions are most effective when they are framed around local livelihood priorities. Programs that position gender inclusion as a pathway to improved income and economic security attract broader participation and face less resistance. For policymakers, this requires integrating gender objectives into mainstream economic development strategies rather than isolating them in separate policy domains. For MNCs, presenting gender initiatives as livelihood-enhancing strengthens local buy-in and aligns empowerment with the economic realities of sourcing communities. For NGOs, rooting programs in community-identified priorities improves outreach and creates a natural entry point for deeper empowerment efforts.

Second, meaningful empowerment depends on expanding women's access to productive resources and leadership opportunities. Even well-designed governance interventions fall short when women lack land, tools, capital, or institutional representation. Policymakers can address these constraints by reforming land, property, and resource rights to ensure that women have a legal and practical basis for

participating in community governance. MNCs can contribute by supporting suppliers in creating leadership pathways for women and by facilitating women's access to essential resources within value chains. NGOs play a vital role by pairing leadership training with efforts to dismantle structural barriers that limit women's participation, thereby fostering more inclusive and representative local institutions.

Third, reducing gender-based violence requires shifting social norms, which in turn demands inclusive engagement with both men and women. Policymakers can embed community-based gender education within national development frameworks and anticipate unintended consequences in regulatory reforms that overlook gendered constraints. MNCs can incorporate mixed-gender norm-change initiatives into responsible sourcing and human-rights due-diligence practices. NGOs should prioritize inclusive program designs that encourage joint reflection on gender roles, rights, and conflict resolution, while also building the long-term community structures needed to sustain progress.

Across these insights, the sustainability of interventions emerges as a unifying imperative. Short project cycles and abrupt exits weaken empowerment gains, whereas multi-year partnerships, continued training, and locally led support networks enable new norms and capacities to take root. Taken together, the findings show that interventions succeed when they align with local realities, expand women's practical and strategic agency, engage men as partners in change, and commit to long-term institutional strengthening. By acting on these lessons, policymakers, managers, and NGOs can advance SDG 5 while building more resilient, equitable, and sustainable GVCs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my dissertation supervisor, Anthony Goerzen, whose exceptional mentorship, thoughtful guidance, and unwavering support have shaped every stage of this research. I also extend my deep appreciation to our partner organization, IMPACT, for granting access to invaluable datasets and for their consistent collaboration throughout this project. Their commitment to supporting meaningful, field-based research greatly enriched this work. I am sincerely thankful to all who contributed to this journey, both academically and personally.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shengwen Li is an Assistant Professor of International Business and Sustainability at the Ivey Business School, Western University. Her research examines global value chain governance, women's empowerment, and sustainable development in fragile contexts, with a particular focus on the role of third-party interventions. Her work has been published in the *Journal of World Business*. Before entering academia, she worked on conservation initiatives and environmental stewardship programs to help multinational

Table 1. Summary of key findings across the three studies

Study	Focus of Intervention	Sample	Key Findings
Study 1	Economic and social intervention via village savings and credit associations	2,143 miners and community members (2018–2020)	• Conversion-based framing that emphasized livelihoods, financial opportunities, and community savings significantly increased women's participation despite restrictive gender norms. • A layering strategy that placed women in leadership positions enhanced personal agency, financial security, and economic outcomes. • Changes in household and community-level decision-making remained limited, reflecting persistent gendered institutional constraints. • Empowerment improvements weakened after NGO exit, raising concerns about long-term sustainability.
Study 2	Community governance through mining associations	343 registered miners; 203 independent miners; 368 association members (2020–2022)	• Women's participation in mining associations was highly dependent on access to productive resources such as tools, land, and capital, demonstrating enduring gender-specific constraints. • Mining associations on their own provided limited empowerment because of entrenched male dominance and exclusionary norms. • When supported by NGO-led training, capacity building, and advocacy, associations enhanced women's work autonomy, confidence in public speaking, and economic security. • Gender gaps persisted, with men benefiting more in terms of income, mobility, and household decision-making power.
Study 3	Comparative analysis of three interventions: village savings and credit associations, Gender Dialogues, and Women's Rights Groups	1,030 participants across six intervention sites and one control site (2019–2020)	• Village savings and credit associations strengthened economic independence but did not reduce intimate partner violence. • Gender Dialogues, the only mixed-gender and educational intervention, generated the most significant reductions in IPV by shifting social norms through joint male–female participation. • Women's Rights Groups improved awareness of rights but were less effective in changing male behavior or reducing violence. • Overall, economic empowerment alone proved insufficient; inclusive, norm-shifting interventions are essential for meaningful IPV reduction.

corporations integrate water management and biodiversity considerations into their business strategies.

Submitted: August 15, 2025 EST. Accepted: October 10, 2025
EST. Published: December 03, 2025 EST.

Table 2. Practical insights for strengthening gender outcomes within GVCs

Core Insight	Implications for MNCs	Implications for NGOs	Implications for Policymakers
Frame interventions around local livelihood priorities	Position gender initiatives as livelihood-enhancing to increase acceptance and reduce resistance in sourcing communities.	Align program design with community-identified livelihood needs to strengthen outreach and participation.	Integrate gender goals into mainstream economic development policies rather than treating them as stand-alone agendas.
Expand women's access to productive resources and leadership roles	Support suppliers in enhancing women's access to land, tools, and finance, and develop clear pathways for women's leadership in local governance structures.	Pair leadership training with efforts to remove structural barriers (e.g., resource constraints, exclusionary norms) that impede women's participation.	Reform land, property, and resource rights to ensure women have the legal and institutional foundation necessary to participate fully in local governance.
Engage men to shift harmful gender norms and reduce gender-based violence	Incorporate mixed-gender norm-changing programs into responsible sourcing and human-rights due-diligence frameworks.	Prioritize inclusive program designs that engage men and women together in dialogue on gender roles, rights, and nonviolence.	Embed community-based gender education and violence-prevention programs within national gender and development frameworks.
Ensure sustainability through long-term institutional support	Develop multi-year partnerships with NGOs to sustain empowerment gains and reduce post-project backsliding.	Build local support networks and follow-up structures that enable communities to sustain progress independently.	Invest in locally led capacity-building initiatives and anticipate unintended consequences in regulatory reforms that might reinforce exclusion.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

- Barrientos, S. 2019. *Gender and work in global value chains: Capturing the gains?* Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108679459>.
- Gereffi, G., Humphrey, J., & Sturgeon, T. 2005. The governance of global value chains. *Review of International Political Economy*, 12(1): 78–104.
- Gereffi, G., & Lee, J. 2016. Economic and social upgrading in global value chains and industrial clusters: Why governance matters. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 133(1): 25–38.
- Hofmann, H., Schleper, M. C., & Blome, C. 2018. Conflict minerals and supply chain due diligence: An exploratory study of multi-tier supply chains. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 147: 115–141.
- Kabeer, N. 1999. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3): 435–464.
- Li, S., & Goerzen, A. 2024. Improving global value chain governance: Empowering women through third-party interventions within institutionally fragile contexts. *Journal of World Business*, 59(3): 101533.
- Mackay, F., Kenny, M., & Chappell, L. 2010. New institutionalism through a gender lens: Towards a feminist institutionalism? *International Political Science Review*, 31(5): 573–588.
- Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (Eds.). 2009. A theory of gradual institutional change. *Explaining Institutional Change* (1st ed.): 1–37. Cambridge University Press.
- Ponte, S., & Gibbon, P. 2005. Quality standards, conventions and the governance of global value chains. *Economy and Society*, 34(1): 1–31.