

Creating a space for women artisanal miners

Michelle Goliath, a PhD student in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of the Free State, has a passion for helping the most vulnerable people in society who have run out of conventional employment options.



Michelle Goliath played a major role in establishing the first ethically sourced, fair, women-owned, artisanal diamond process.

She has been working with approximately 3,000 diamond mining zama zamas (illegal miners) over the past three years. Together, they negotiated an agreement with private sector mining and public sector stakeholders to include the zama zamas as legal artisan miners in the formal mining economy.

“My research includes zama-ism psychology, a philosophy which looks at the contestation of space and rules, how people navigate the illegal when they are faced with desperate choices,” Goliath explains.

Like a Picasso painting

One of the highlights of her career so far was being part of a big first: the complete, ethically sourced, fair, women-owned, artisanal diamond process.

“A rough stone includes the story of the women who dig it from the earth, legally (under permit), ethically sourced. Instead of being exploited, the same women now sell their diamonds for full value to a legal tender house through a legal buyer or directly to the cutter and polisher. The cutter and polisher also train the women to cut and polish the stones themselves. The

women then sell the stones to jewellery gold- and silver-smiths who artisanally craft this into an engagement ring or Wakanda gem spea', to be sold in the open market locally and internationally," she says.

Goliath believes these products will become priceless works of art. "Like Picasso paintings, they are each uniquely produced by hand with a story and Kimberley process certificates."

Negotiating a legal path

This project had a big impact on Elisa Louw, a former street seller and domestic worker. She tells her story: "I was tired of domestic work and decided to work at the mines as a zama zama. I began with nothing and had to borrow tools and learn from others."

Louw started working in the mines in 2013; in 2014, she found her first 75-pointer diamond which she sold for R1,500 on the black market. "The black market was good then," she says

She later recruited other zama zamas to register and obtain legal permits for mining. She has also recruited people to start a legal mining co-op. "It was difficult then. People did not understand what it meant to be legalised," Louw explains.

But she worked hard and at the end of 2016, the Batho Pele Primary Mining Cooperative was established.

However, it was a hard and difficult journey before they were given their permits early in 2017. The mines took their IDs and issued them with eviction letters. "They called us names – terrorists, robbers, rapists, etc. But in a meeting with the South African Police Service, the Department of Mineral Resources, the Sol Plaatje Municipality, and the international Swedish Housing Company, Michelle spoke for us."

"She represented the Swedish Housing Company. She informed all parties that we did not want to fight, but that we were looking for a licence to work. She helped us to obtain our legal permit to mine."

"It was such a relief when we received the permit. I could go home and sleep without worrying about the safety of the old people and children who are mining.

"The permit changed my life as a woman. My voice is heard; my words count. I am proud of myself," Louw says.

Blood, sweat and tears

The two cooperatives they created, Batho Pele Primary Mining Cooperative and the Women in Artisanal Scale Mining, have already signed agreements with Canada and the USA for the export of fair-trade-certified gem products.

The journey towards this big achievement took two years of literally blood, sweat, and tears. "Society labels zama zamas negatively as terrorists. In a way, you become a zama at heart once you live with people every day who are fighting for economic inclusion. You fight the illegal diamond trade that exploited people as digging slaves. You fight formal mining, which is a difficult sector to enter as a woman. You literally fight others with stones for territory. You fight political fights, land fights, the system at every level, to seek an existence," Goliath explains.

She believes the mining industry can be a tough environment. "It is exploitative at many levels. It showcases rare talent, but under duress. At artisanal scale it is even worse. The only future women have, is to lead themselves, to create their own fairer system, to redesign a full value chain that allows broader participation," she says.