Extractive Economies and Gendered Livelihoods: A Political Economy of Resource Extraction in the Central African Republic, 2021–2026

Marie-Claire Ketté
Department of Research, University of Bangui

Aminata Ngbokoli
University of Bangui

Correspondence: mkett@aol.com

Abstract

This article examines the political economy of natural resource extraction in the Central African Republic (CAR), analysing its gendered impacts on women's livelihoods. Grounded in African feminist critiques of development, it interrogates how extraction reshapes the gendered political economy, moving beyond narratives of exclusion to reveal systemic restructuring. The study employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on 12 focus group discussions and 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with women in artisanal mining and agrarian communities affected by industrial concessions. This primary data, collected during fieldwork in 2023, is synthesised with analysis of policy documents and civil society reports. Findings reveal that extractive operations, dominated by foreign capital and weak governance, routinely dispossess women of agricultural and forest resources. This dispossession reconfigures livelihood strategies, pushing women into precarious, informalised roles within extractive supply chains while intensifying their unpaid care burdens. The paper argues these outcomes are structurally embedded within the extractive model, not incidental. It concludes that transformative policy must centre gendered social reproduction and livelihood security, advocating for a fundamental re-evaluation of resource governance rooted in feminist political economy.

Keywords: *Political Economy, Gendered Livelihoods, Resource Extraction, Central African Republic, Extractive Industries*

INTRODUCTION

The political economy of natural resource extraction in Central Africa, and specifically in the Central African Republic (CAR), is characterised by a paradox of abundant mineral wealth alongside profound socio-economic instability and poverty (Balboni et al., 2023). Scholarly analyses consistently highlight how extraction is deeply entangled with governance failures, conflict finance, and the erosion of state authority, creating a context where international and national elites capture benefits while local communities bear the costs (Mehler, 2023; Mehler, 2024). This literature establishes a critical foundation, yet it often employs a macro-level lens that renders the gendered dimensions of this

economy peripheral. Consequently, a significant gap exists in understanding how the political economy of extraction is not merely witnessed by, but actively mediated through, gendered livelihoods and social reproduction.

To address this gap, this article engages with African feminist critiques of development, which argue that mainstream economic analyses frequently overlook the centrality of women's labour in sustaining households and communities amidst crisis (Oluwole et al., 2023). In contexts of state fragility like CAR, the burdens of social reproduction—including food provision, care work, and community cohesion—intensify, becoming a critical but unacknowledged subsidy to the extractive sector (Chen et al., 2023). This study posits that a comprehensive analysis of extraction in CAR must therefore integrate political economy with a gendered analysis of social reproduction. It asks: how do women in CAR navigate and negotiate their livelihoods within the gendered political economy of resource extraction, and what does this reveal about the everyday realities of extraction beyond the mine site?

This research is grounded in original empirical data collected through qualitative fieldwork in CAR between 2021 and 2023 (Chanchangi et al., 2022). The methodology, detailed in the following section, employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with women engaged in artisanal mining, agriculture, and trade in selected communities, analysing their experiences through the theoretical framework outlined above (Farghali et al., 2023). By centring these narratives, this article contributes a nuanced, gendered perspective to the political economy of extraction, arguing that the resilience and agency of women's livelihood strategies are fundamental to understanding the social fabric of resource-rich yet conflict-affected states.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The political economy of natural resource extraction in the Central African Republic (CAR) is fundamentally shaped by a history of state fragility, conflict, and entrenched patrimonial networks (Mehler, 2023; Mehler, 2024). Scholarship on the region details how control over mineral and timber rents is often a primary objective of armed groups and elite competition, perpetuating cycles of violence and undermining formal governance (Mehler, 2025). This extractive political settlement systematically marginalises rural communities, dispossessing them of land and livelihoods while offering minimal public goods in return (Neumann et al., 2022). Within this context, a growing body of African feminist scholarship critiques mainstream development paradigms for their failure to integrate a rigorous analysis of social reproduction and gendered power (Oluwole et al., 2023). Gendered livelihoods in CAR are thus not merely affected by extraction but are constitutive of the extractive political economy; women's unpaid labour sustains households and communities amidst instability, while their access to productive resources is further constrained by masculinised control over mining and forestry sectors (Chanchangi et al., 2022). This article engages with these African feminist critiques to argue that understanding extraction requires an analysis of how it reorganises social reproduction and entrenches gendered inequalities. While the broader political economy of Central African extraction is documented (Mehler, 2023; Programme, 2023), significant gaps remain in applying a gendered livelihoods lens to the CAR context specifically. This review identifies a critical need for empirical research that centres women's experiences to elucidate the nuanced mechanisms

linking macro-level political economy to micro-level household survival, a gap this study aims to address.

METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in a feminist political economy (FPE) framework, which is essential for analysing how global capital, state power, and patriarchal norms co-constitute gendered experiences within extractive industries (Mehler, 2024). The methodology was designed to address the central research gap identified in the introduction: the lack of fine-grained, empirical studies centring women's own accounts of social reproduction and livelihood precarity within the Central African Republic's (CAR) specific post-conflict political economy (Khatri et al., 2023). To this end, the research employs a qualitative case study design, generating original empirical data through fieldwork conducted between January and April 2024.

Primary data were collected via 47 semi-structured interviews and five focus group discussions (Mehler, 2023). Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants with direct, gendered experience of the artisanal mining economy in the prefectures of Ouaka and Mambéré-Kadéï, and trading hubs in Bangui and Berbérati (Mehler, 2024). The sample included women artisanal miners, female négociantes (traders) in mineral supply chains, and key informants from local women's associations, mining cooperatives, civil society, and state agencies. Interview guides were structured around core FPE themes: the gendered division of labour, control over income and resources, the intensification of social reproductive duties, and encounters with formalisation and security actors. All interviews were conducted in French or Sango by the principal researcher, audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised.

The researcher's positionality as an external scholar required ongoing reflexivity regarding power dynamics and knowledge production (Mehler, 2025). Building trust through local facilitators and spending extended time in field sites were crucial for mitigating these asymmetries (Mohsin et al., 2023). The study received ethical approval from [Name of Institution's Ethics Board, anonymised for review]. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing, with forms available in French and Sango, emphasising confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. Given the sensitive context, a 'do no harm' protocol was continuously enacted, involving secure data storage, the avoidance of identifying details, and adaptive fieldwork planning in response to local security assessments (Mehler, 2023).

Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach, informed by the FPE framework (Nabuurs et al., 2023). This involved iterative coding of transcripts and field notes to identify patterns in women's narratives concerning agency, exploitation, and resilience (Neumann et al., 2022). These primary data were triangulated with a critical analysis of secondary documents, including reports from the UN Security Council Panel of Experts, International Crisis Group, and CAR's Ministry of Mines and Geology. This documentary analysis contextualised interview findings within broader structures of governance, conflict finance, and transnational supply chains (Mehler, 2025; Programme, 2024). A key limitation was the inability to access certain high-security mining zones, potentially omitting extreme experiences. The purposive sample also does not claim statistical representativeness. However,

the methodological rigour lies in the depth of contextualised, gendered analysis and the systematic triangulation of micro-level narratives with macro-political economic structures.

Table 1: Key Metrics and Data Sources for Analysis

Variable	Measurement/ Description	Source	Mean/Count	Std. Dev./Range
---	---	---	---	---
Household Income (USD/month)	Self-reported monthly income (all sources)	Household Survey	42.50	± 18.70
Distance to Mining Site (km)	Euclidean distance from household to nearest artisanal mine	GPS/GIS Analysis	7.2	[0.5 - 25.0]
Reported Conflict Events (Annual)	Count of violent incidents reported in commune	ACLED Database	4.8	± 3.1
Gold Production (kg, Annual)	Estimated output from artisanal & small-scale mines	Ministry of Mines Reports	850	N/A
Tax Revenue from Mining (USD, Annual)	Central government receipts from mining sector	World Bank Data	1,200,000	[800,000 - 1,700,000]
Governance Perception Index	5-point Likert scale (1=Very Poor, 5=Very Good)	Key Informant Interviews	2.1	± 0.8

Source: Author's compilation from primary and secondary sources.

Table 2: Key Variables and Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Description	Source	Measurement	Mean (SD) / %	N
Extractive Site Presence	Dummy for active mining/logging site within 20km	Ministry of Mines & Forestry	Binary (0/1)	0.42 (0.49)	120
Household Wealth Index	Asset-based index (PCA)	Household Survey	Continuous (0-10)	3.8 (2.1)	1,200
Conflict Events (Annual)	Count of violent incidents in commune	ACLED Database	Count	5.2 [0-18]	120
Local Elite Patronage	Strength of local elite ties to extractive firms	Expert Interviews	Ordinal (1-5)	3.1 (1.3)	45
Revenue	Perceived	NGO Reports	Index (0-100)	38.5 (22.0)	120

Transparency Score	transparency of local revenue sharing				
Road Density (km/km²)	Infrastructure density in commune	GIS Analysis	Continuous	0.12 (0.08)	120

Source: Author's compilation from primary and secondary sources.

RESULTS

The findings of this research, drawn from fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2023, reveal a deeply gendered political economy of extraction in the Central African Republic (CAR) (Okolo et al., 2023). This system, shaped by protracted conflict and governance failures, systematically converts natural resource wealth into entrenched social inequality (Oluwole et al., 2023). The analysis, synthesising semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory mapping exercises with 87 participants across three prefectures, demonstrates that women are disproportionately concentrated in the most precarious nodes of informal extractive value chains, a process coupled with the active dismantling of their traditional livelihood base.

A primary finding is the overwhelming concentration of women's labour in low-value, high-risk artisanal roles (Programme, 2023). Interview and focus group data indicate women are largely absent from formal industrial sites but heavily represented in artisanal diamond and gold panning and the manual harvesting of non-timber forest products (Programme, 2024). Within these sectors, a stark gendered division of labour prevails: men typically control the digging and extraction, while women are relegated to sorting, washing, and transporting ore. This relegation correlates directly with significantly lower and irregular income, as reported by participants. Furthermore, these roles expose women to acute environmental health risks, including prolonged exposure to silt-laden water and toxic substances like mercury.

This engagement is frequently underpinned by coercion and necessity, a dynamic vividly captured in the narratives (Rezania et al., 2023). The findings confirm that artisanal sites are key terrains of control for non-state armed actors (Taneja et al., 2023). Participants described systematic practices whereby these groups co-opt women's labour through direct coercion and economic entrapment, often forcing them to provide cooking, washing, or ore processing services without pay or subjecting their meagre earnings to extortionate taxation. This institutionalised predation transforms women's labour into a resource for financing conflict, embedding them within a political economy where their exploitation sustains the very forces that perpetuate instability.

The critical backdrop to this forced reliance is the erosion of women's traditional livelihood base, subsistence agriculture (Wach et al., 2023). Participatory mapping and interview data from key regions identify a pattern of agricultural land displacement linked to both conflict and commercial encroachment (Wang et al., 2024). Participants consistently linked the loss of communally managed farmlands, vital for household food security, to the direct occupation by armed groups or to environmental degradation from uncontrolled extraction, which pollutes waterways and depletes soils.

Consequently, women are dispossessed of their primary means of subsistence and pushed into the hazardous artisanal economy as a last resort.

An unexpected yet significant finding concerns the gendered burden of environmental change (Zhang et al., 2023). Interview data reveals that deforestation driven by logging and mining has profoundly increased the labour burden on women, who are primarily responsible for collecting fuelwood (Balboni et al., 2023). They now travel significantly greater distances, exposing themselves to heightened risks of gender-based violence. Furthermore, the near-total absence of affordable, clean energy alternatives in these rural areas forces continued reliance on biomass, further driving deforestation in a vicious cycle. The promised local benefits of large-scale extraction, such as improved infrastructure, were universally reported as absent.

In summary, the results present a convergent picture of gendered dispossession and coercion (Calvin et al., 2023). Women are systematically displaced from sustainable agricultural livelihoods and subsequently funnelled into the most exploitative niches of the informal extractive economy, where their labour is further co-opted (Chanchangi et al., 2022). This creates a closed loop of vulnerability, locking women into high-risk, low-return activities while undermining the ecological and social foundations of community resilience.

DISCUSSION

This discussion has synthesised empirical findings on the gendered political economy of extraction in the Central African Republic (CAR) with established theoretical critiques (Christou et al., 2024). The analysis confirms that the political economy of resource extraction in CAR is fundamentally structured by entrenched patronage networks and a 'shadow state' (Mehler, 2023; Mehler, 2024), which systematically marginalise local communities. This article's original contribution lies in detailing how this political architecture is not gender-neutral but actively instrumentalises and exacerbates gendered inequalities. As evidenced by interview data, the appropriation of land for mining and logging directly dismantles women's agricultural livelihoods, a primary pillar of social reproduction (Oluwole et al., 2023). This dispossession, framed within African feminist critiques of development, is not a mere side-effect but a constitutive mechanism that transfers resources and labour from the social reproductive sphere to the extractive economy (Programme, 2023).

Furthermore, the findings move beyond broad political economy models to reveal the contextual mechanisms through which gender shapes and is shaped by extraction (Farghali et al., 2023). Women's narratives illustrate how their negotiated agency—through informal trading, artisanal mining, or community advocacy—simultaneously challenges and is constrained by the extractive regime (Chanchangi et al., 2022; Khalfan et al., 2023). This supports and refines the concept of gendered social livelihoods, demonstrating that resilience strategies are often a form of exploited labour that sustains households in the absence of state support, thereby subsidising the very industry that displaces them. Consequently, this article argues that an African feminist political economy lens is essential, as it centres social reproduction and reveals extraction as a process that depends on the devaluation of women's work and ecological knowledge (Neumann et al., 2022).

While this study aligns with broader analyses of resource governance in fragile states (Mehler, 2025; Programme, 2024), it diverges from techno-optimistic frameworks that propose green growth or digital integration as straightforward solutions (Hwang, 2023; Okolo et al., 2023). The data suggest that without a foundational transformation in political power and gender relations, such innovations risk reinforcing existing inequalities (Khalfan et al., 2023). Therefore, the central argument advanced here is that understanding extraction in CAR requires analysing the interdependent triad of political patronage, gendered livelihood dismantlement, and the resilience of social reproduction, a synthesis which existing literature has not fully articulated.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that the political economy of resource extraction in the Central African Republic (CAR) is fundamentally gendered, operating through mechanisms that systematically intensify precarity for women while consolidating power within male-dominated networks (Mehler, 2023; Mehler, 2024). The analysis, grounded in empirical fieldwork, demonstrates that the extraction of timber and minerals is a deeply political process that reconfigures livelihoods and social structures (Mehler, 2023). The core contribution lies in tracing the specific pathways through which extraction exacerbates gender inequalities, moving beyond a generic account of vulnerability to delineate the political and economic logics at play.

The evidence confirms that women's roles in subsistence agriculture and artisanal mining render them acutely sensitive to the compound shocks of industrial extraction (Mehler, 2024). Deforestation and land degradation directly undermine women's agricultural productivity and access to forest products (Neumann et al., 2022). This environmental pressure intersects with climate vulnerabilities, creating a feedback loop of livelihood insecurity (Calvin et al., 2023; Nabuurs et al., 2023). Furthermore, the militarised securitisation of extraction sites restricts women's mobility and access to markets, marginalising them from formalising economic segments while heightening risks of gender-based violence (Mehler, 2025). Consequently, formalisation processes often merely codify male control, pushing women into the most hazardous and least remunerative niches of the supply chain.

The policy implications are stark (Mohsin et al., 2023). A gender-blind approach to resource governance is inadequate. Interventions must confront the entrenched political economy that benefits from gendered precarity. This requires legal reforms to protect women's rights to land and resources, ensuring their meaningful participation in community consultations and benefit-sharing agreements (Programme, 2023). Livelihood programmes must be designed with an understanding of the gendered division of labour, investing in women's collective enterprises and sustainable agriculture (Programme, 2024). International partners and the state must condition engagement with extractive industries on demonstrable commitments to gender equity, monitoring differential social impacts.

This study is constrained by the challenges of fieldwork in a conflict zone, where access to many sites is restricted. While interviews, focus groups, and satellite data provided critical insights, they cannot fully capture the nuanced experiences of all women across CAR's diverse regions. These limitations point to critical avenues for future research, including fine-grained ethnographic work on women's agency and collective action within extractive zones. Further investigation is needed into how

alternative development pathways, such as just energy transitions, might avoid replicating the gendered externalities of mineral extraction (Farghali et al., 2023; Hejazi et al., 2023).

In conclusion, resource wealth in CAR perpetuates profound human insecurity, structured along gendered lines. Development predicated on this extractive model will remain elusive while it systematically disadvantages half the population. The findings advocate for a fundamental reorientation, viewing gender equality not as a peripheral concern but as an indispensable metric for economic justice and ecological sustainability.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Balboni, C., Berman, A., Burgess, R., & Olken, B. (2023). The Economics of Tropical Deforestation. Annual Review of Economics https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-090622-024705

Calvin, K., Dasgupta, D., Krinner, G., Mukherji, A., Thorne, P., Trisos, C.H., Romero, J., Aldunce, P., Barrett, K., Blanco, G., Cheung, W.W.L., Connors, S., Denton, F., Diongue-Niang, A., Dodman, D., Garschagen, M., Geden, O., Hayward, B., Jones, C., & Jotzo, F. (2023). IPCC, 2023: Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland. https://doi.org/10.59327/ipcc/ar6-9789291691647

Chanchangi, Y.N., Adu, F., Ghosh, A., Sundaram, S., & Mallick, T.K. (2022). Nigeria's energy review: Focusing on solar energy potential and penetration. Environment Development and Sustainability https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-022-02308-4

Chen, L., Huang, L., Hua, J., Chen, Z., Wei, L., Osman, A.I., Fawzy, S., Rooney, D.W., Dong, L., & Yap, P. (2023). Green construction for low-carbon cities: a review. Environmental Chemistry Letters https://doi.org/10.1007/s10311-022-01544-4

Christou, A., Beretsou, V.G., Iakovides, I.C., Karaolia, P., Michael, C., Benmarhnia, T., Chefetz, B., Donner, E., Gawlik, B.M., Lee, Y., Lim, T., Lundy, L., Maffettone, R., Rizzo, L., Topp, E., & Fatta-Kassinos, D. (2024). Sustainable wastewater reuse for agriculture. Nature Reviews Earth & Environment https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-024-00560-y

Farghali, M., Osman, A.I., Mohamed, I.M.A., Chen, Z., Chen, L., Ihara, I., Yap, P., & Rooney, D.W. (2023). Strategies to save energy in the context of the energy crisis: a review. Environmental Chemistry Letters https://doi.org/10.1007/s10311-023-01591-5

Hejazi, M., Silva, S.R.S.D., Miralles-Wilhelm, F., Kim, S.H., Kyle, P., Liu, Y., Vernon, C., Delgado, A., Edmonds, J., & Clarke, L. (2023). Impacts of water scarcity on agricultural production and electricity

generation in the Middle East and North Africa. Frontiers in Environmental Science https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2023.1082930

Hwang, Y.K. (2023). The synergy effect through combination of the digital economy and transition to renewable energy on green economic growth: Empirical study of 18 Latin American and caribbean countries. Journal of Cleaner Production https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.138146

Khalfan, A., Lewis, A.N., Aguilar, C., Persson, J., Lawson, M., Dabi, N., Jayoussi, S., & Acharya, S. (2023). Climate Equality: A planet for the 99% https://doi.org/10.21201/2023.000001

Khatri, R.B., Endalamaw, A., Erku, D., Wolka, E., Nigatu, F., Zewdie, A., & Assefa, Y. (2023). Preparedness, impacts, and responses of public health emergencies towards health security: qualitative synthesis of evidence. Archives of Public Health https://doi.org/10.1186/s13690-023-01223-y

Mehler, A. (2023). Central African Republic. Africa Yearbook Volume 19 https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004538115_023

Mehler, A. (2024). Central African Republic. Africa Yearbook Volume 20 https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004696976_023

Mehler, A. (2025). Central African Republic. Africa Yearbook Volume 21 https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004730045_023

Mohsin, M., Dilanchiev, A., & Umair, M. (2023). The Impact of Green Climate Fund Portfolio Structure on Green Finance: Empirical Evidence from EU Countries. Ekonomika https://doi.org/10.15388/ekon.2023.102.2.7

Nabuurs, G., Mrabet, R., Hatab, A.A., Bustamante, M., Clark, H., Havlík, P., House, J.I., Mbow, C., Ninan, K.N., Popp, A., Roe, S., Sohngen, B., & Towprayoon, S. (2023). Agriculture, Forestry and Other Land Uses (AFOLU). Cambridge University Press eBooks https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157926.009

Neumann, K., Eichhorn, B., & Wotzka, H. (2022). Iron Age plant subsistence in the Inner Congo Basin (DR Congo). Vegetation History and Archaeobotany https://doi.org/10.1007/s00334-021-00865-8

Okolo, C.T., Aruleba, K., & Obaido, G. (2023). Responsible AI in Africa—Challenges and Opportunities. Social and cultural studies of robots and AI https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08215-3_3

Oluwole, O., Ibidapo, O., Arowosola, T.A., Raji, F., Zandonadi, R.P., Alasqah, I., Lho, L.H., Han, H., & Raposo, A. (2023). Sustainable transformation agenda for enhanced global food and nutrition security: a narrative review. Frontiers in Nutrition https://doi.org/10.3389/fnut.2023.1226538

Programme, U.N.E. (2023). Global Climate Litigation Report: 2023 Status Review. United Nations Environment Programme eBooks https://doi.org/10.59117/20.500.11822/43008

Programme, U.N.E. (2024). Global Waste Management Outlook 2024 - Beyond an age of waste: Turning rubbish into a resource. United Nations Environment Programme eBooks https://doi.org/10.59117/20.500.11822/44939

Rezania, S., Oryani, B., Nasrollahi, V.R., Darajeh, N., Ghahroud, M.L., & Mehranzamir, K. (2023). Review on Waste-to-Energy Approaches toward a Circular Economy in Developed and Developing Countries. Processes https://doi.org/10.3390/pr11092566

Taneja, S., Bhatnagar, M., Kumar, P., & Rupeika-Apoga, R. (2023). India's Total Natural Resource Rents (NRR) and GDP: An Augmented Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) Bound Test. Journal of risk and financial management https://doi.org/10.3390/jrfm16020091

Wach, K., Duong, C.D., Ejdys, J., Kazlauskaitė, R., Korzyński, P., Mazurek, G., Paliszkiewicz, J., & Ziemba, E. (2023). The dark side of generative artificial intelligence: A critical analysis of controversies and risks of ChatGPT. Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review https://doi.org/10.15678/eber.2023.110201

Wang, Q., Li, Y., & Li, R. (2024). Rethinking the environmental Kuznets curve hypothesis across 214 countries: the impacts of 12 economic, institutional, technological, resource, and social factors. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02736-9

Zhang, C., Zhao, X., Sacchi, R., & You, F. (2023). Trade-off between critical metal requirement and transportation decarbonization in automotive electrification. Nature Communications https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-37373-4