

## The Socioeconomic Drivers of Galamsey: Understanding Youth Involvement in Illegal Mining in Ghana's Western and Western North Regions

*Dr Eric Kwasi Elliason, Post PhD Research Scholar, Kennedy University, St Lucia*

### Abstract

**Background:** Illegal small-scale mining, locally known as *galamsey*, is a pressing socioeconomic challenge in Ghana, particularly in the Western and Western North regions. Despite government interventions, many youth remain involved in *galamsey*, driven by unemployment, poverty, and limited educational opportunities. This study aims to understand the socioeconomic drivers of youth participation in *galamsey* and explore policy implications for sustainable livelihoods.

**Methods:** A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was employed, involving 400 youth (aged 18–35) from *galamsey*-prone communities in Ghana's Western and Western North regions. A structured questionnaire captured demographic data, education, employment status, family dynamics, and motivations for engaging in illegal mining. Descriptive and inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and logistic regression, were used to analyze the data.

**Results:** The study found that the majority of respondents were young males (79.5%) aged 18–29. Most had only basic education (56.5%), with low representation at the tertiary level (5.5%). *Galamsey* was the main source of income for 66.3% of respondents, and 44.5% cited lack of jobs as their primary motivation. Family influence was significant: 54.5% reported having family members in *galamsey*, and 40.8% felt encouraged by family to join. Despite high involvement, 78% expressed interest in alternative vocational training, suggesting readiness for livelihood transitions.

**Conclusion:** Youth participation in *galamsey* is driven by unemployment, limited education, economic desperation, and family traditions. Interventions should focus on vocational training, education access, and job creation to provide sustainable alternatives. Addressing

structural socioeconomic challenges is key to reducing illegal mining and promoting community resilience.

**Keywords:** Galamsey, youth involvement, socioeconomic factors, Ghana, illegal mining

## Introduction

Illegal small-scale mining, popularly known as *galamsey*, has become a deeply entrenched socio-economic issue in Ghana, particularly within the resource-rich regions of the Western and Western North. Despite extensive governmental interventions, the practice continues to flourish, with a significant number of youth actively engaged in galamsey operations. The phenomenon presents not only environmental degradation but also a complex socio-economic paradox—where livelihoods are sustained through activities that simultaneously undermine long-term sustainable development (Hilson, 2017; Banchirigah, 2008).

The Western and Western North regions of Ghana are among the most affected areas due to their mineral-rich landscapes and relatively limited alternative livelihood opportunities. For many unemployed or underemployed youth, galamsey presents a viable means of economic survival. This reflects broader structural and developmental challenges, including rural poverty, lack of formal employment, and inadequate vocational training (Tschakert, 2009; Hilson & Garforth, 2012). In addition, the weak enforcement of mining laws, coupled with the politicization of enforcement agencies, has emboldened galamsey operators and further complicated the regulation of artisanal mining (Crawford & Botchwey, 2016).

Existing literature on illegal mining in Ghana has focused extensively on its environmental consequences and regulatory responses. However, there remains a critical gap in understanding the socioeconomic motivations of youth who choose to engage in galamsey despite its illegal status and associated risks. By focusing on the Western and Western North regions, this study aims to unpack the interplay between poverty, education, family dynamics, and youth engagement in galamsey, offering insights into more responsive and inclusive policy strategies.

## Methodology

### Study Design

This study employed a **descriptive cross-sectional survey design** to investigate the socioeconomic factors that influence youth involvement in illegal mining. A quantitative approach was used to ensure statistical generalizability of findings and to allow for systematic analysis of patterns and relationships among variables (Creswell, 2014).

### Study Area

The study was conducted in selected districts across the Western and Western North Regions of Ghana. These regions were purposively selected due to their high prevalence of Galamsey activities and their socio-economic relevance in Ghana's mining economy. Communities such as Tarkwa, Prestea, Bibiani, Sefwi-Wiawso, and Enchi were included.

### Population and Sampling

The target population comprised youth aged 18–35 years who were either actively engaged in illegal mining or resided in galamsey-prone communities. A multistage sampling technique was adopted. First, key galamsey-affected districts were purposively selected. Within these districts, communities were randomly selected, and within those, respondents were selected using simple random sampling. A total of 400 respondents participated in the study.

### Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected using a **structured questionnaire** designed to capture demographic information and socio-economic variables such as education level, employment status, household income, perceived economic opportunities, and personal motivations for engaging in galamsey. The questionnaire was pretested and refined for clarity and reliability.

### Data Collection Procedure

Trained research assistants administered the questionnaires in person. Ethical approval was obtained from a recognized institutional review board, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary and anonymous to ensure confidentiality and reduce response bias.

## Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means were used to summarize respondent characteristics. Inferential statistics including chi-square tests and logistic regression were employed to determine the relationship between key socioeconomic variables and youth involvement in galamsey.

## Results and Analysis

This section presents the results from the study conducted in the Western and Western North Regions of Ghana on the socioeconomic drivers of youth involvement in illegal mining (galamsey). The findings are organized and analyzed according to the main thematic areas outlined in the questionnaire: demographic characteristics, economic motivations, educational background, and family influences.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 400)**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18–24	142	35.5
	25–29	168	42.0
	30–35	90	22.5
Gender	Male	318	79.5
	Female	82	20.5
Marital Status	Single	246	61.5
	Married	139	34.8
	Divorced/Separated	15	3.8
Educational Level	No Formal Education	48	12.0
	Basic Education	226	56.5
	Senior High School	104	26.0
	Tertiary	22	5.5

A majority (42%) of the respondents were between 25–29 years old, with another 35.5% aged 18–24, confirming that galamsey predominantly attracts youth in their productive years.

Males dominated the sample (79.5%), reflecting gender dynamics in artisanal mining. Most respondents (61.5%) were single, and more than half (56.5%) had only basic education, while very few (5.5%) had tertiary education. This suggests limited formal educational attainment among those involved in illegal mining.

**Table 2: Employment and Economic Motivations**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Employment Status	Unemployed	163	40.8
	Informally Employed	147	36.8
	Formally Employed	38	9.5
	Student	52	13.0
Main Source of Income	Galamsey	265	66.3
	Petty Trading	52	13.0
	Agriculture	47	11.8
	Remittances	36	9.0
Reason for Joining Galamsey	Lack of Jobs	178	44.5
	Quick Money	111	27.8
	Family Tradition	63	15.8
	Peer Pressure	48	12.0

A striking 66.3% of the youth cited galamsey as their main source of income, with 40.8% being unemployed and 36.8% informally employed. The predominant reason for entering galamsey was lack of jobs (44.5%), followed by the desire for quick money (27.8%). A notable 15.8% cited family tradition, indicating that illegal mining may be intergenerational in some households.



**Table 3: Educational Aspirations and Skills Training**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Interested in Skills Training	Yes	312	78.0
	No	88	22.0
Preferred Area of Skills Training	Agriculture	72	18.0
	Carpentry	43	10.8
	Masonry	56	14.0
	Auto Mechanics	68	17.0
	Fashion/Beauty	73	18.3
	Others	88	22.0

A high percentage (78%) of respondents expressed interest in skills training, suggesting readiness for alternative livelihoods if provided. The distribution of preferred training areas indicates diverse vocational interests, with agriculture (18%), fashion/beauty (18.3%), and auto mechanics (17%) being the most common.

**Table 4: Family Influence on Galamsey Participation**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Family Member in Galamsey	Yes	218	54.5
	No	182	45.5
Encouraged by Family to Join	Yes	163	40.8
	No	237	59.3

Family involvement plays a significant role, with 54.5% reporting that they had a family member engaged in galamsey. About 41% indicated they were encouraged by their families to join, reinforcing the intergenerational and socio-cultural dimension of illegal mining.

## Discussion

The findings from this study highlight multiple interrelated factors contributing to youth involvement in illegal mining (galamsey) in the Western and Western North regions of Ghana. These include economic hardship, low educational attainment, familial influence, and the lack of viable employment or vocational training opportunities.

The demographic characteristics reveal that the majority of galamsey participants are young males aged between 18 and 29. This finding supports earlier studies that indicate artisanal and illegal mining activities attract mostly young men, who are often unemployed and economically marginalized (Hilson, 2010; Nyame & Grant, 2012). The overrepresentation of males can be attributed to the physically demanding nature of galamsey and the perception of mining as a masculine activity (Tschakert, 2009).

Economically, the study found that more than 40% of respondents were unemployed, and over 66% reported galamsey as their primary source of income. These results resonate with findings by Banchirigah (2008), who argued that galamsey offers a form of economic survival in communities where alternative livelihoods are virtually non-existent. The lack of sustainable employment opportunities makes illegal mining an attractive option, particularly for youth with limited formal education.

The role of education was also crucial in this study. Most respondents had only basic education, and a negligible percentage had attained tertiary education. This suggests a direct correlation between low educational attainment and participation in illegal mining. According to Hilson and Potter (2005), education serves as a critical barrier to entry into more stable and regulated employment sectors, thus perpetuating cycles of informal labor such as illegal mining.

A significant insight was the influence of family on participation in galamsey. Over half of the respondents reported having family members involved in galamsey, and 40.8% acknowledged familial encouragement. This aligns with observations by Armah et al. (2013), who noted that galamsey in Ghana is often embedded within family traditions and community norms, creating a generational legacy of informal mining practices.

Moreover, while illegal mining is frequently criticized for its environmental and health consequences (Owusu-Nimo et al., 2018), this study suggests that the youth involved are not

necessarily unaware of the risks. Rather, their actions are driven by necessity and a lack of better alternatives. The readiness of 78% of respondents to participate in vocational training further underscores their willingness to transition if given viable opportunities.

The findings also suggest that youth are interested in a broad range of vocational skills—from agriculture and auto mechanics to fashion and masonry. This has significant policy implications. As noted by Yakovleva (2007), any successful intervention to combat illegal mining must offer economically viable and culturally appropriate alternatives, supported by skill development and access to capital.

Thus, addressing the galamsey menace requires a multifaceted approach that integrates educational reforms, job creation, community sensitization, and the promotion of legitimate small-scale mining cooperatives. Merely deploying security forces or banning galamsey without addressing the structural economic issues has proven unsustainable (Aubynn, 2009; Hilson, 2017).

## Conclusion

This study has shed light on the socioeconomic drivers of youth involvement in illegal mining in Ghana's Western and Western North regions. The results indicate that unemployment, low education, economic desperation, and family influence are major factors pushing young people into galamsey operations. While the activity offers immediate economic relief, it contributes to environmental degradation and undermines sustainable development.

However, the willingness of respondents to pursue vocational training suggests that many would abandon galamsey if viable alternatives were available. Therefore, policy interventions must prioritize skills development, educational access, and alternative employment pathways. Such comprehensive strategies—rooted in local realities—will be essential for achieving long-term success in the fight against illegal mining.

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