Blog
Social Justice

(GSR graphic/Unsplash photos/Kelly Sikkema, Ottr Dan)

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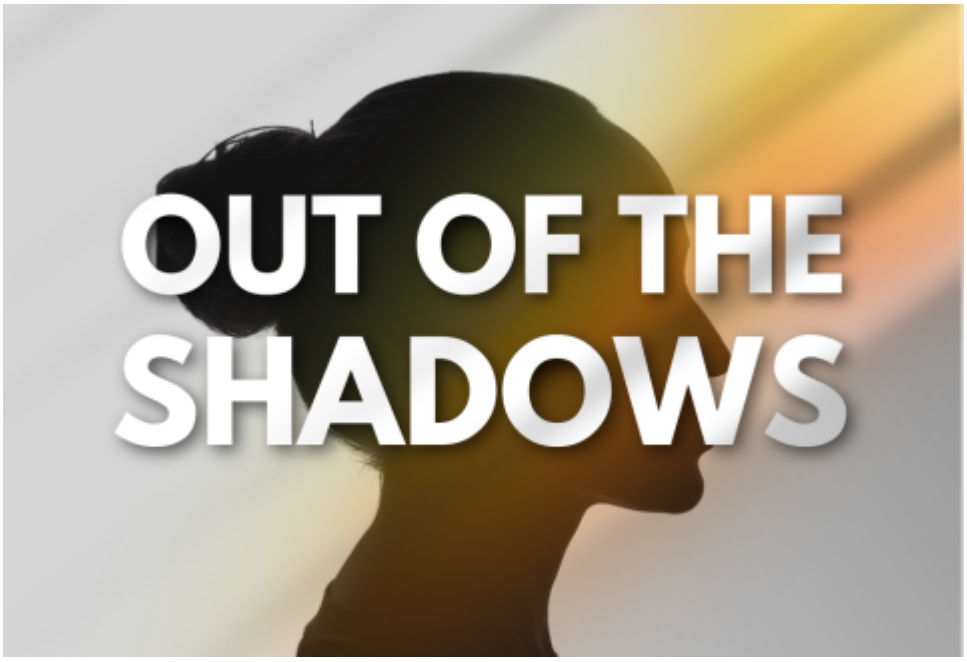


(GSR logo/Olivia Bardo)

Reporting on illegal mining in South Africa's coal belt is not just difficult, it can be dangerous. From the moment I began working with Catholic sisters and church workers in Emalahleni, it was clear that visibility itself carried risk.

In one early visit to a mining area, I traveled with Catholic sisters and priests to meet community members near informal settlements connected to abandoned mine shafts. Police stopped our vehicle, questioned us aggressively and warned that arrests were possible. No charges were made, but the message was unmistakable: Our presence was unwelcome.

Church workers later explained that this kind of encounter is common. In mining communities, authority is fragmented. Police conduct raids focused on illegal miners, but survivors of abuse often say they are not protected and sometimes fear the police as much as they fear criminal groups. At the same time, criminal syndicates controlling access to abandoned shafts closely monitor who enters and who asks questions.

To continue reporting, I had to reduce my visibility. In some areas, I blended into the community, posing as someone seeking assistance rather than as a journalist. This is a common practice among church workers and social service providers in high-risk areas, where openly identifying as a reporter can shut down access or endanger both sources and rescuers.

> In places like Emalahleni, documentation alone is not neutral. Simply listening can put someone at risk.
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Several people interviewed for this story spoke only on condition of anonymity. Some women asked that even small identifying details be withheld, fearing retaliation from miners, partners or local gangs. In settlements tied to illegal mining, women described how speaking out could lead to beatings, eviction or being cut off from food and shelter.

What shocked me most was how normalized exploitation has become.

Girls as young as 14 were described as arriving alone in mining settlements. Women spoke of being treated as property, expected to cook, clean and submit sexually — not only to one man, but sometimes to multiple men as a condition of survival. The language of "marriage" is used, but what I heard repeatedly was not marriage. It was coercion, dependency and control.

Equally disturbing was how hunger shapes choices. Again and again, women and community members told me that poverty, not culture or tradition, drives early unions and survival sex. Food, rent and school fees become leverage. Survival becomes the currency.

Church workers also face risks. Sisters and priests said they are sometimes followed, warned or told to stop asking questions. Their work often happens quietly, without signage, publicity or formal state protection. Safe houses and counseling locations are deliberately kept low-profile.



There is also a moral weight to this reporting. As a journalist, I am trained to document, verify and tell stories. But in places like Emalahleni, documentation alone is not neutral. Simply listening can put someone at risk. Every interview required careful judgment about what could be published, what should be withheld, and how to protect people who had already lost so much control over their lives.

What stayed with me most is not just the danger; it is the silence.

Illegal mining, gender-based violence and child exploitation are widely known problems in South Africa. Yet in the abandoned spaces between closed mines, informal settlements and weak enforcement, abuse becomes invisible. The girls who disappear into these areas rarely appear in official statistics. Their stories surface only when someone accompanies them out.

This is where Catholic sisters and church workers operate — in that gap between what is known and what is acted upon.

For me, reporting this story was a reminder that journalism in such contexts is not only about exposure. It is about responsibility: to sources, to communities, and to the truth that some systems are failing in ways that cost children their childhoods.

Readers may find the details disturbing. I did, too. But what disturbed me most was how ordinary these stories have become to the people living them.

That normalization, of hunger, of coercion, of girls disappearing — may be the most dangerous part of all.

**Read this next:** In South Africa's coal belt, girls disappear — and Catholic sisters quietly pull them back
This story appears in the **Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women** feature series. View the full series.