

# Equal opportunity or another terrain of struggle

## Women in mining

In 1997 legislation permitted South African women to work underground.

**Anna Davies-van Es** examines the nature of this victory for equal opportunity and concludes that women miners face an uphill struggle.

Michael Tummings



**P**atience Kondile is 28 but she has already worked in mining for eight years. She is one of the few women who got promotion within the male dominated South African industry and is in charge of a team of men underground. She says most of the men respect her. There are no toilets where she works but when she requests one, 'they' say they can't do something special because she is the only women in that area. Her eyesight has deteriorated since working underground and she wonders if when she retires there will be compensation.

She works long shifts rotating eleven days on, three days off. She is tired when at home but has to cook and care for her child. It is a struggle to find childcare and there is no company contribution. She is struggling to get a company house

because "she is not married". Patience feels that despite her promotion she gets little money because after deductions there isn't much left.

She believes that, "Women and men should have equal appointments in the stopes. But we are not built the same; the effects on women are worse, so we should have extra protection."

Patience tells a 'success' story in a male-dominated world. She has succeeded in doing her job well and winning the respect of men. But like other women miners she has to deal with sexual harassment, long shifts and gruelling conditions.

Although companies bandy around gender-sensitive rhetoric this often does not translate into support. There is a huge gap between the rhetoric and the reality of women in mining, especially for those underground.

The media have focused on emerging women mine owners or on glamorising women underground as 'progress' post-1994. But the reality for female miners doesn't make the news. This has a racial dimension. It is black women who work at the rock face. Thus they also have to fight the racial barriers in an industry built on cheap black labour. Some transformation has occurred in the industry but apartheid's black male migrant system continues to shape operations.

### NOT A CAREER PATH

In 2005/6, ILRIG (International Labour Research and Information Group) and NUM investigated the impact of mining on the health of women in mines and mills. The research aimed to inform unions representing women and to help



women protect themselves. The project focused on unionised women in sub-surface gold mining in the Gauteng area. We asked women mineworkers about such issues as sexual harassment, stresses at work, illness, HIV/AIDS, employer policies, the impact of the environment on pregnancy and the impact of work and travel schedules on social and family life.

In 2005, of the 127 women employed at the Elandsrand mine in the Carltonville area, NUM estimated that a high percentage, over 90, worked underground. The mine management agreed to give us a tour of a working gold shaft. We travelled in two cages down 2.5 km, kitted out in a one-piece overall. We listened to tales of women's struggles to get two-piece overalls to make it easier to use the toilet (where available) underground. The kit included a heavy lamp belt, hard hat and ear plugs for blasting. The conditions were rough, hot, dusty and it was hard work.

Working underground requires strength in body and mind and some of the women are tiny. We were told stories of discrimination, HIV/AIDS and struggles yet they emerge from the shaft dressed in high heels, gold earrings and smart, figure-hugging dresses as if they were off clubbing, not returning from a 8 to 12 hour shift. This picture contradicts everything you have ever thought about miners.

The key finding of our research was that women tend to work as miners because their economic situation forces them to, rather than as a career path. They are often single mothers with little or no support from partners, which makes

them especially vulnerable to exploitation. A woman mineworker from the Elandsrand mine told us, "It's not easy working underground. You just go in there because it's your job." And a miner from the East Rand said: "I stay in Katlehong, so I must wake-up at 3am. I have a small child who I hardly see; it's very sad for me. Sometimes we work on Sundays too... because of the salary... if we want to achieve something."

They were concerned about the effects of extreme conditions underground on their fertility and unborn children. And when they become pregnant the lack of alternative employment forces them to do inappropriate work or they have to take nine months' unpaid leave.

There is little scientific evidence on the risks to fertility. Research on the impact is often conducted with the intention of arguing for women not to be employed rather than to create safer conditions for both men and women. As Faith Letlala, secretary of NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) National Women's Structure comments, "The companies use health and safety issues to limit women's participation."

The women also face a lack of childcare facilities, promotion opportunities, racism and sexual harassment.

#### NUMBERS OF WOMEN

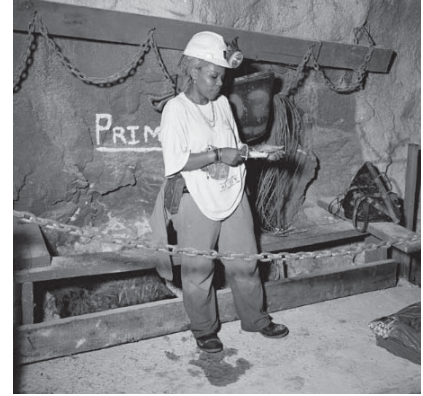
South Africa is the world's largest gold producer with 46.1% of the world's gold, primarily for export. It is a major employer in the country. But with the decline of the gold price since it peaked in 1980 many workers have been retrenched. At

the same time, the sector has experienced restructuring through mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures. In 2001 the minimum wage was set at R2 000p/month for the sector. And according to the Department of Labour in the period 1980-2001, male miners earned higher incomes than females.

In 2003, there were only 20 000 women in the mining and quarrying industry in South Africa out of 509 000 workers. The industry remains the domain of black male contract labour with a compound system which continues largely intact. However, although the mining industry does not employ many women, it still affects women's lives. The migrant labour system has shaped the lives of women in rural southern Africa for generations. Women as wives, mothers and children kept the family going in order to 'allow' male migrants to go to the mines.

The Mines and Works Act of 1911 banned women from working underground although they worked in other capacities on mines including as nurses and administrative assistants. However, post-1994 government policy changed and discriminatory laws were repealed. In 1997, it became legal for women to work underground, but more than ten years later the majority of women are mainly in clerical and administrative positions. The few female managers, 6.9% of management in Gauteng, tend to be white women. In fact, the number of women employed in the mines from 1980 to 2001 declined, alongside the decline in numbers of men. Little information is available on women but they work deep underground as

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miners, blasters, loco-operators, winch-drivers and electrical assistants.

In 2001, the Mining Charter committed companies to 10% representation of women at all levels in the industry and to create an enabling environment within five years. Companies are attempting this in the context of job shedding. Thus it is hard to increase women quotas. The 2003 wage review reflected that employers are moving extremely slowly towards the inclusion of women. However, indications from NUM show that numbers of women working underground is increasing although working conditions have not altered to accommodate them.

Most women employed in mining activities are in coal mining and surface mining, but increasing numbers are working in deep-level gold mining. Some underground women workers have even managed to obtain blasting licenses. This is significant as for decades blasting certificates were used as a job reservation instrument to keep blacks out of skilled jobs.

There are more women in mining, possibly because of the Mining Charter, but like much empowerment-type legislation, it mainly promotes women capitalists. There is a lack of urgency around creating an enabling environment. The environment fails to take a gender-sensitive perspective which would create a safer, more productive workplace for both women and men.

#### WHAT WOMEN MINERS CONFRONT

Women who work in the industry find themselves conflicted. Often strong women in union branches feel that things have changed.

Claimed the deputy secretary of the Western Cape women's structure, "There are a lot of opportunities for women in this industry if they are willing to learn, because there is no such thing of women not being able to be engineers, mechanics, auto-electricians or any work that men have done in the past." Whilst they admit there are problems, the women interviewed did not feel marginalised, "I never felt affected in any way by being a woman in this male-dominated industry."

But our research showed that this is not the case for most women. Both women professionals and at the stope face difficulties. They are struggling with basic issues. They need appropriately-sized personal protective equipment, underground toilets, changing rooms, fair pay and career development.

Whilst women working underground is new in South Africa, their experiences are similar to women elsewhere, such as in Canada where women have worked underground for over 30 years. Although some women integrate well, others face daily discrimination and harassment. All face company processes that are not designed to empower them. Even in Canada women are not routinely equipped with size-appropriate personal protection equipment (PPE) and work clothing. As a result, 30% of Canadian women spend time locating and ordering appropriately-sized PPE and incur costs their male workers do not.

There are other less easy things for South African women to deal with too. A woman found a

colleague's sperm in her pocket after being pushed and shoved in an underground lift. Women are too scared to report an injury for fear of being told they are letting the team down or are incapable of doing the job. Sometimes women are referred to as 'bafazi' (woman), and there are cases where they have reported sexual harassment and union representatives unhelpfully told them to talk it out with their victimiser. Women are also accused of being vindictive by both female and male workers for trying to live with dignity.

In an industry shedding jobs, inclusion of women and all that means in terms of logistics and addressing sexism is a tough job. There is a tension between the struggle for equal opportunities and the need for women's specific needs to be taken into account. Often women say "things are fine", when it is clear they are not. It would be interesting to look further at why they claim they are not affected when they are in gendered ways. The attitude that things are better now or that "women themselves must take up the opportunities available" fails to recognise the reality that women have no choice. They face the threat of dismissal or losing the respect of male colleagues, or that their concerns may be non-issues for the union. Women will have to fight robustly for these problems to be addressed. LB

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