

Women also do sexual favours for men in exchange for help and this is common underground. Having a *nyatsi* or secret, second sexual partner enables women to cope.

Women also use ethnic and regional ties to cope. Having close relationships with men from the same region who speak the same home language helps a great deal. Using ethnicity is a coping strategy but it can also be a hindrance. When a woman asks her 'home boys' to help, it is rendered easily. This, however, creates tensions between the men who are asked to help and those who are not. Consequently,

those who are not 'home boys' end up not wanting to help.

Some women tap on tradition and call elderly men 'Ntate' to win them over. Some women also bring men food and fetch them water underground.

It is with these attitudes and conditions that women work. They have to deal with the macho mine culture and with traditional men who battle with working with women. Men tend to see women as trophies and as lazy and slowing down work. It must be borne in mind however that the mine does everything it can to help integrate

women into male-dominated teams. They have put in place policies such as for sexual harassment and pregnancy and there are union representatives who deal directly with women and their issues. ■

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Read the following article for insight into Benya's fascinating personal experiences while working underground.

"If you don't hear the bell, you're mince"

Woman's story of mining underground

In the previous article **Asanda Benya** looked at the challenges women face as underground miners. In this story she gives a vivid account of her own experience when she mined underground in a women's team for two and half months.

My first encounter underground was exciting and scary. Exciting, because I had never been underground before and I was thrilled at this adventure. However, as days went by and going underground became a reality, it ceased to be exciting but rather became frightening.

BEFORE GOING UNDERGROUND

Underground is a world of its own. It's very hot, humid, dark, dangerous and you have to be constantly on the lookout for any kind of hazard. Before the mine allowed me to work underground I had to undergo several tests to assess whether I was fit enough. I had to undergo a

medical examination where they did a full body check and an X-ray.

After passing all the tests I had to register at Teba as a new recruit. This enabled me to get my personal protective equipment (PPE): work-suit, hard hat, gumboots, belt, socks, goggles, reflector vest, ear plugs and chevron strips to make visible my hard hat. It wasn't until this moment that slowly things started to dawn on me.

When I had to undergo a heat tolerance screening, working underground suddenly became a reality. I had to do a rhythmic strenuous exercise to test if my body could do manual work under hot and humid conditions. I had to

climb up and down a 30.5cm step for 30 minutes, with each minute consisting of 24 steps - up and down, up and down. This was a glimpse of conditions underground.

Once I passed the heat test I went for first aid training. First aid also happened to be my first experience of *fanakalo*, the mine language. I had to learn the language since most people use it to communicate with others. It was amazing for me that before I could 'speak' fanakalo, I was considered an outsider but soon after I 'learnt' it, I was seen as a real mineworker, so it was crucial that I learnt it fast in order to be accepted.

UNDERGROUND

The following Monday I started with the real work, I went underground. Due to the darkness underground, we all had to carry our battery and head lamps with us at all times. The battery for the lamp is pretty heavy and has to be tied around the waist.

When underground, my job title changed between being a *pikinini* where I carried bags for women learner officials and a *malayisha* or

the walls have openings where air comes in, head lamps are usually switched off and if yours is on, people complain. There were many of us inside the cage, about 40 people in each deck. To make it inside the cage you have to push or others behind you will do that for you.

Survival of the fittest is the motto when entering the cage. Upon entering the cage, both in the mornings and afternoons, to avoid

about their previous day's experiences, week-end plans, their *nyatsis* (informal girlfriends), money and family issues. Mostly men participate in these conversations, women are usually quiet. Those women who try to participate are ignored and their contributions not given much regard especially if the topic is deemed manly.

When underground as soon as the cage door opened, we all pushed

Asamda Benya



An underground woman worker carrying a ventilation pipe.

general labourer where I shoveled and loaded the ore, installed ventilation pipes, water pipes and compressed air pipes (water is used for drilling to cool down the rock and lift out the dirt and also to drink while compressed air drives and powers the drill) and cleaned drains and walk ways.

My typical day started at 3h45 and I usually left the mine residence at 4h30 and arrived at work at 5h30. At the shaft we changed into our PPE and went to collect our head lamps and sometimes our rescue pack and caught the cage going underground at 6h20.

Inside the cage it's dark and cold,

being pushed too hard, I used to target the spaces directly behind the door. It was not as easy to be pushed when behind the door and also the wind openings were far. Close to the wall was another good spot. When entering, as women we would put our hands up the wall with our backs facing the entrance, in that way we had more strength to resist the pushing from the front.

At first when going down my ears would be blocked because of the air imbalance between the surface and underground.

In the cage there is an indescribable buzz and conversation. People usually talk

our way out and paced to our different working stations. The walk from the cage to the work station took about 20-30 minutes. There we took off and left our sweaters and lunch boxes.

Before leaving for our working stations, each miner was procedurally expected to visit the stope to detect gas levels at all working areas that had been blasted the night before.

The miner also briefs his team on what is to be done. At the working station we got down to work immediately because by 13h30 we had to be done with the day's work and back to the cage waiting station.

On arriving at the stope or development we removed any remaining ore from the previous night's blasting, removed unstable rocks from the walls, cleaned the hanging and side walls to mark for drilling (prepared the face), installed support on panels (a stope where drilling takes place) and installed ventilation pipes and compressed air pipes. Thereafter, a RDO (Rock Drill Operator) drills and a miner with the help of general labourers charges up with explosives in order for it to blast in the evening.

In days when I worked on the development side, I sometimes helped install railway lines for the locomotive that collects ore, cleaned the drains to ease the water movement, and transported bags of explosives and other material. Due to time constraints and the long distance from the store room to the working station, sometimes we each carried three bags each weighing 23,5kgs to the stopes or carried heavy roof bolts.

These tasks take a while to complete and are done in a hurry to make it on time for the cage pick ups, hence the morning rush and also, it is important that everything is done and everyone back on the surface by 16h00 at the latest. This ensures that blasting is done on time and there is enough time for the air to clear of fumes and for the night shift to start.

When doing these tasks your eyes and ears always have to be attentive. Mostly this is because machines can start operating while you are inside a stope or panel but if you are attentive you can hear the warning bells and move or make a signal that it's not safe to start operating it. If you don't hear the bell, and an operator starts a machine with you inside a panel, you are as good as mince.

Also rocks make a certain sound when they are unstable or when

there is going to be a seismic event hence it is important always to listen very carefully.

On one occasion, I was almost scooped by a winch (hand driven machine with a drum and rope to assist in pulling the ore to the tipping point) because I did not hear the bell. I was inside a stope, busy clearing the ore when a winch scraper came through and almost scooped me alive. Needless to say, after that I was chased away by the team because of the scare I gave them. After that encounter I was always careful.

THE HARD PARTS

The first weeks were not at all easy. I had to get the trust of workers. I soon learnt that taking photos before I had fully gained their trust was a big NO. This was because they thought I would expose them for working and wearing substandard PPE and this is a norm underground.

Back on the surface, we returned lamps first, then went to shower and headed back home. I stayed in single quarters with other underground mineworkers who worked in support services whereas women mineworkers commute between their homes and shafts.

In the change rooms where we showered, I had some of my shocking experiences. Women all walked around naked, with no towels around them. This was traumatic at first but with time I got used to it. While I never managed to walk around like them, I got used to seeing them like that and it became a norm. At first women found it weird that I always had a towel around me, this made others uncomfortable around me and to some degree at first, impacted on their openness with me, but we all soon got used to each other's ways.

One of the saddest days was when one of the workers on my level died because of a fall of ground (FOG).

When his body was taken out, all the workers who were waiting for it on the surface were so sad, even those that didn't know the man personally. The deceased's home boys were worse, one of them was running around and shaking like a mad man, others were somber and emotionless.

The mood at the shaft the day after his death was grave. In the cage people were quiet and underground you could almost feel and touch the sadness. On the flip side, funerals are excursions, an opportunity to explore the country. Workers go in huge numbers to funerals, whether they know the person or not.

Some of the working stations were so scary to a point where in order to move, I had to crawl (stopes are narrow for safety reasons so you crawl or at best walk with head bent). Touching one rock could result in a fall of ground because some parts could not be supported, but mining had to continue. Just being in those stopes was nerve racking.

The best way to move under such places was to look at the rocks and crawl frontwards so that you could avoid the very dangerous zones and not touch where there is instability. For me this didn't work, looking at the rocks was more nerve racking to a point where I had to crawl backwards, facing down not up.

While some moments were scary, in general the whole experience was wonderful and I enjoyed most of my time working underground. I am deeply grateful to the mine management for affording me the opportunity to work at their mine. My respect and gratitude goes out to all those men and women who work deep underground, under dangerous and unpredictable conditions, just to feed, clothe and educate their children. I'm grateful that they opened their doors and allowed me to work in their teams and imparted their knowledge to me. ^{LB}