

Women face the rock face

What challenges?

In 2002 new laws in South Africa allowed women to mine underground. **Asanda Benya** worked in a women's mine team in a Rustenburg platinum mine to find out what challenges these women face.

The introduction of women in mining is relatively new and it confronts male, macho gender stereotypes and introduces new challenges for mineworkers, mines and unions. The greatest challenge has been to ensure full incorporation of women into this traditionally male-dominated sector.

The introduction of women is particularly challenging because mining is portrayed as highly risky and suitable only for men. Dunbar Moodie in his classic book, *Going For Gold: Men Mines and Migration* talks about mine work as: "... hard labour under conditions of extreme discomfort, deafening noise, intense heat and humidity and cramped space - exacerbated by tension stemming from the need to watch constantly for signs of potential hazard. Every miner can recount several experiences of accidents or near accidents."

I took part in a study on women who work under these conditions at a platinum mine in Rustenburg by working with them. These women held typical male jobs such as winch drivers, equipping helpers, blast trainees, transport workers, panel operators, store issuers, safety representatives and learner officials.

BACKGROUND

The Mining Charter requires that women comprise at least 10% of mining companies' workforces by the

end of 2009. This target is taken seriously by companies because the renewal of operating licenses is linked to how they score on this. To reach this target, they have had to overcome many challenges.

Bringing women into previously male-dominated jobs has been difficult because of the historical exclusion of women from mining, the nature of work shifts and legislative restrictions.

The South African Minerals Act of 1991 banned women from working underground. In 2002, however, this act was repealed and replaced by the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act. Together with the Mine Health and Safety Act of 1996, these laws opened up underground occupations to women and promoted gender equality.

Attracting women into mining jobs has not been a problem largely because of South Africa's high unemployment rate. This has challenged a range of traditions and norms for mining houses seeking to incorporate and retain women in underground work.

To understand these issues I worked underground and lived with mineworkers for two and a half months. I went through all the steps that women go through before they are hired. I also participated in different work teams in many occupations to get a feel of what each job entailed.

CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE

Firstly, underground workers have to undergo a medical examination. This includes eye, ear and X-ray tests, and it is the first challenge that women face as it cannot be conducted if she is menstruating or pregnant as radiation can harm an unborn baby.

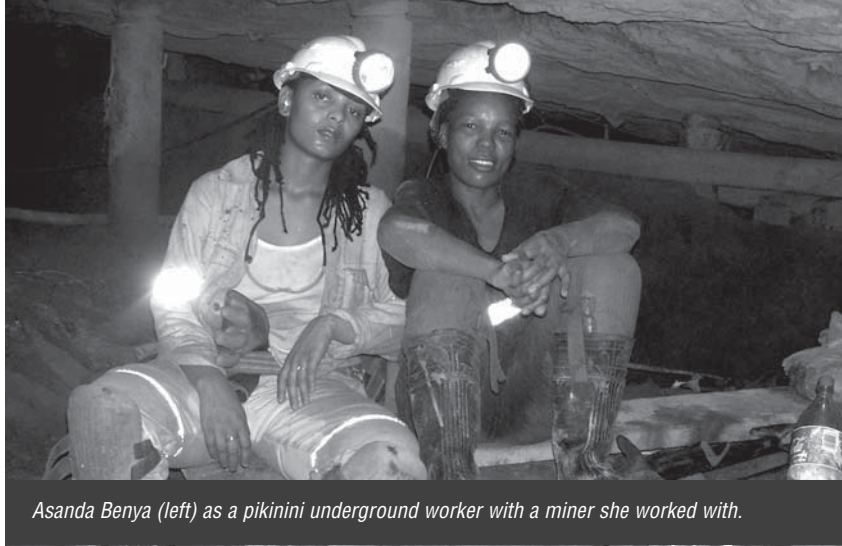
Secondly, it is mandatory that new recruits and those returning from leave longer than 14 days undergo a heat tolerance screening (HTS), *mtshongolo* in *fanakalo* ('language' used in mines for communication across different languages). The screening assesses whether an individual can withstand high temperatures while doing physically demanding work.

Most women fail the HTS for being overweight, above 100kg, or being underweight, below 50kg. This can result in the woman being denied access to the heat chambers for the screening.

Additionally, women's reproductive cycles can hinder the HTS. During menstruation, a woman's body temperature increases to above acceptable body temperatures for mining. During breast feeding or pregnancy women should not undergo HTS or go underground because at this time fat deposits increase and retain heat and as a result the woman sweats less.

Through constant sweating men on the other hand cool off their bodies and generally pass the HTS.

Asanda Benya



Asanda Benya (left) as a pikinini underground worker with a miner she worked with.

Women are at a disadvantage compared to men as failing the medical examination and the HTS makes her unemployable underground.

To cope with failing the HTS, a fraudulent HTS PASS stamp started circulating. Some women used this to deceive the mine authorities that they had passed the HTS when they had failed. Also some women used *umtsbongolo* pills, a concoction from peers, to decrease their body temperature.

The medical examination and HTS however are only the tip of the iceberg in comparison to what women face inside the mine. Here they confront gender stereotypes such as that they are lazy and not capable of mine work.

Some men find it hard to work in teams with women because of traditional beliefs that a woman's place is in the kitchen and the home. Some traditional men even believe that a woman underground brings misfortune and should be avoided. This perpetuates the exclusion of women and increases their alienation in teams.

Women reported that transport to work and working times are challenging for them. They do not

stay in hostels so they have to arrange their own transport which is difficult because shifts start as early as 4am. This means leaving home around 2am and contending with unreliable and sometimes unavailable transport. In some cases women depend on dangerous hitch hiking in order to make it on time for work.

Work-suits also present problems. Most work-suits are one piece. The two-piece suits are scarce and when available only come in certain sizes. The one piece suits are a problem when women go to the toilet as they have to take off all their clothes. Also underground toilets are smelly and dirty and not conducive for use when a woman is menstruating.

When women start working underground, they have to learn *fanakalo* as instructions are mostly given in this language. *Fanakalo* is crucial when a team comprises of people that speak Xhosa, Tswana and Portuguese. Men already have the language so while it is not a problem for women to learn, in the beginning they sometimes misunderstand instructions.

NATURE OF JOBS

Job allocation underground tends to be experience based and most

occupations are already dominated by men. Women are normally slotted in on lower grades because they do not have the experience and skills to perform certain tasks.

In some cases where women have the skills, they lack the physical ability to perform tasks. Drilling, panel operation, winch driving and pipe installation, for example, are physically demanding jobs which women often cannot do. To cope, women sometimes sidestep their jobs and work informally in other sections where they can manage the work. This benefits them in the short term, but it has a negative effect on their career paths because they miss out on promotion and so earn less.

Another challenge women face relates to bonuses. Since they mostly work in sections that are considered easy, they forfeit bonuses which go to those working in demanding sections.

Also women-only teams do not produce as much as men. Most women teams reported that they hardly reached the production targets that enable teams to get bonuses. While the bonus system serves to improve productivity, it is also used by male workers to discriminate against women. Women are not wanted in work teams because men see them as slowing down the team and impacting on bonuses.

USING GENDER AND ETHNICITY

To cope in the mine, both men and women emphasised and exaggerated traits associated with gender. Women use femininity to cope with their work and obtain favours from men. Sometimes when women have had a hard day or week, they lie to their shift supervisors and say they have period pains and need to go to the dressing station to see a doctor or nurse.