

# Women in mining

## Struggles for gender equality

Women who work in mining, especially those who go underground, work under difficult conditions in which they are sometimes subjected to hard physical work. To make matters worse they face ridicule and sexual abuse from some fellow male workers write **Doret Botha and Freek Cronjé.**

**W**omen's participation in the labour force has increased over the past 30 years, mainly due to expanding economic opportunities and equal employment opportunity (EEO) legislation, which have drawn many female workers into the market. Despite women's growing involvement in the labour force, Eftimie, Heller & Strongman postulate that it is worldwide extremely rare to find any extractive industry companies with higher than 10% female employment, with many being less than 5%. This view is supported by a 2013 study conducted by Women in Mining (United Kingdom) in collaboration with Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), in which it was found that globally, the level of female participation in the industry at all levels is astonishingly low.

In South Africa, the newly-elected democratic government in 1994 initiated substantial socio-political and economic transformation. Accordingly, a number of laws were passed by the South African government in order to support their constitutional commitment to transform the country. The government also introduced major

gender-sensitive policies and practices to reshape the socio-economic framework of the country and to normalise society and the workplace and, in so doing, promote a sense of equity and justice in the country.

Transformation in the South African mining industry is governed by the provisions of the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act (28 of 2002) (MPRDA), and the Broad-based Socio-economic Empowerment Charter or Mining Charter (2002). The Act and the Charter are aimed at improving equity, opportunities and benefits for Historically Disadvantaged South Africans (HDSAs). According to the Act and the Charter, the mining industry was supposed to reach a quota of 10% women in core mining activities by 2009. According to Harmony Gold Mining Company: 'Women employed in core mining activities' implies that women should hold positions equivalent to that of men, in other words, fill positions in mining that includes, among other activities, mining, metallurgy, engineering and geology. J. Burtenshaw adds that women are also required to do the manual labour associated with mining.

The amendment of the Broad-based Socio-economic Empowerment Charter for the South African Mining and Minerals Industry (launched in 2010) set further requirements in terms of employment equity targets. Apart from the requirement of a 40% HDSA representation in core and critical skills by 2015, a further requirement is a 40% representation in management: junior management level by 2011, middle management level by 2013 and senior/executive management level by 2015, writes Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr & Reid.

Despite all legislative measures and well-intended initiatives, the number of women in mining, in South Africa, is still relatively low and they are mainly employed in administrative and supportive positions in the industry. To establish gender equality in the male-dominated mining sector is currently one of the biggest equity challenges in the country. Furthermore, numerous problems accompany the deployment of women in core mining activities (such as shift work, sexual harassment, pregnancy issues, etc.).

Mining companies also run the risk of losing their mining licences to operate if they do not adhere



*Working underground: dangerous and extremely challenging for women miners.*

to the requirements of the Mining Charter. The inclusion of women in the mining sector had and still has various implications for the industry (mineworkers, managers, mining bargaining councils and the relevant state departments) as well as for society at large. Some of the major challenges and implications are highlighted in the section below.

### **GENDER-RELATED ISSUES**

Research conducted at a platinum mine (underground), a copper mine (underground) and a phosphate mine (open-cast) revealed the following 'issues' regarding the deployment of women in the core business of mines.

#### ***Perceptions***

Although great progress had been made to break down historical perceptions regarding the deployment of women in the core business of mines, resistance against women in the male-dominated mining environment still exists, however, to a lesser degree. Stereotypes, such as 'mining is not a place for women', are still present.

As one of the participants of the management target group indicated: 'It is still a cultural and perception

issue'. The participants indicated that initially, when women were introduced in the core business of mining, men and women were afraid of each other. Men were afraid of getting too close to women: they were afraid of getting blamed for sexual harassment. Women, on the other hand, were afraid of men and the male-dominated mining workplace.

However, as time went by male and female workers became used to each other. Women received the chance to prove themselves by showing their willingness and capability to do their work. Resistance against women decreased.

#### ***Discrimination***

Research done by Women in Mining Canada revealed that when women first entered the mining industry, they encountered opposition from some male employees, were exposed to crude jokes and harassment, and struggled to be accepted by their male colleagues. In South Africa, this problem was reinforced by the requirements of the Mining Charter, which intended to help women by enforcing the 10% female representation target, but in actual fact hindered them. Women who

were employed on the mines pre-Charter were assumed to have been appointed on merit and so were treated with respect.

Women employed on the mines under the Charter run the risk of being seen as 'quotas' and are therefore not being taken seriously, as indicated by Reichardt. This view is also supported by findings of the research we carried out. Some female participants indicated that they still experience severe discrimination by their male co-workers. Some male co-workers still believe that mining is not a place for women and that women belong at home. The male co-workers are often outspoken and the female workers feel degraded and humiliated by remarks and comments made by them, especially when referring to women's ability and capability of performing mine work.

The perception still exists that women cannot do what men can do in the mining environment: women constantly have to prove themselves. In addition, the female participants reported that they often feel unwanted at the mining companies. They also often feel that they are appointed in positions due to the requirements of legislation

and not because of their abilities. The following comment illustrates the type of discrimination that female workers experience in the mining industry: "They make bad comments. They will say "just look at that woman she nominated herself". Sometimes they say "do this" and then you feel that this work is hard, you can't do it. Then they laugh at you. They tell you "50/50, you said you wanted to come and work here, so let's do it". So even if you feel no, this is too much you just drag yourself to show them that you can do that."

### UNDERESTIMATION OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

It was also evident from the research that the male employees do not readily accept women in leadership positions. The women in leadership/management positions often feel that their abilities to lead and manage are underestimated. It was indicated that the men do not readily take instructions from female employees, due to their traditional and cultural background. Furthermore, the

concern was raised that women are often appointed in leadership positions but do not necessarily have the skills and capabilities to be appointed in these positions. Men feel that women cannot stand their ground, and this often leads to them overruling women.

### ISOLATION

Mining is production-driven and depends highly on reaching production targets. Therefore mining teams are compiled to ensure the highest productivity and consist mainly of men. It is often found that only one or two women work together with 10 to 15 men in a team. Women often feel isolated in the male-dominated mining environment; they feel uncomfortable and unsafe in the presence of so many men. The following comments were made in this regard by two female miners:

"I think just because there are less women and more men, you feel alone. Because sometimes you feel that the men they are sitting there talking and you are alone, you

can't just go there sitting alone. It's something that discourages women to work there. There are no other women around."

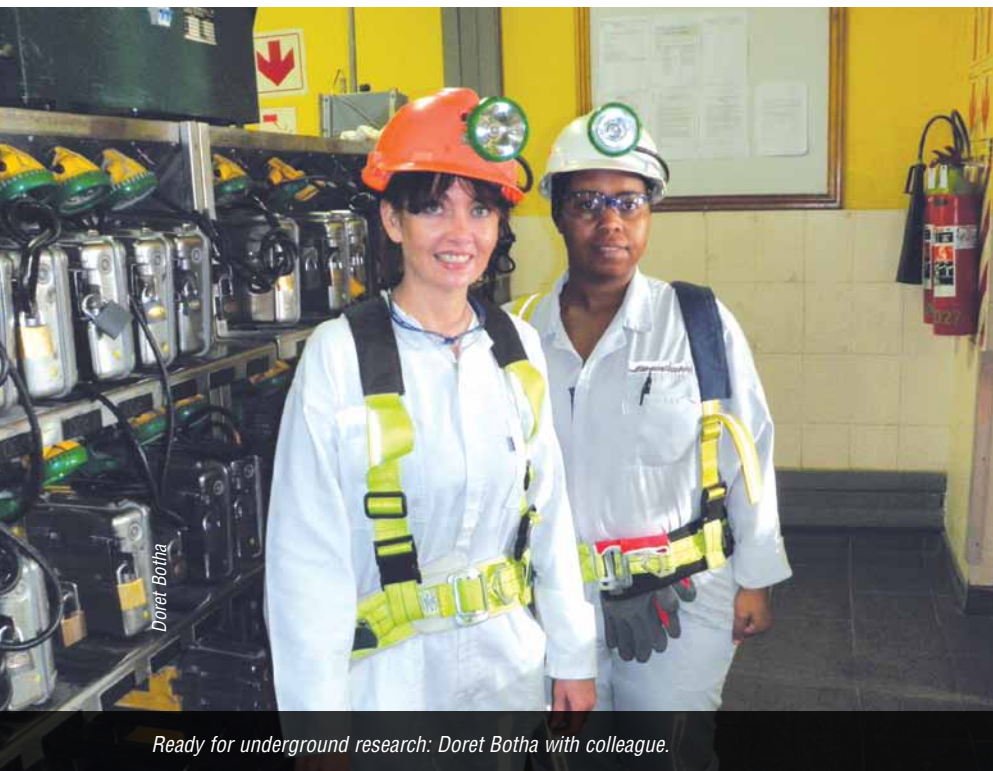
Adds another: "The mining company must employ more women. Women will not be that alone and will not feel so uncomfortable in the presence of males."

### SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment occurs in every kind of work setting, but some settings are more prone to sexual harassment than others. A strong predictor of sexual harassment is a work setting with a high male-to-female ratio, such as the mining industry as indicated by various studies. Therefore, women working in a male-dominated workplace such as mining are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment.

The participants from all three mines included in the study confirmed that sexual harassment is seen as a serious offence and that training and education takes place regularly at the mines. Newly recruited employees undergo training sessions on sexual harassment during induction courses. The companies also engage in regular awareness campaigns on sexual harassment and outline the procedures to follow if sexual harassment occurs. Despite these attempts, sexual harassment remains an issue and incidents do occur. The following main concerns regarding sexual harassment were raised:

- Although the majority of the female participants indicated that they know exactly what procedure to follow if sexually harassed, there are still women who do not know their rights and who are still afraid of reporting sexual harassment attempts or incidents. The following reasons were put forward for why women often remain silent: they are afraid of losing their jobs at the mine, they do not want to put their male co-workers in a 'bad' position, and they do not



Ready for underground research: Doret Botha with colleague.



- find it easy to lodge complaints of harassment with male supervisors.
- Due to the nature of the mining industry as a male-dominated workplace, men are used to communicating in certain ways and often use ‘bad language’ when carrying out heavy tasks. Female co-workers often feel offended by the way men communicate and by the type of language they use. Furthermore, it was indicated by the female participants that they are ‘called names’ and that they are exposed to ‘unwelcome verbal comments’, especially when they are being transported in packed cages.
  - It is reported that working the night shift contributes towards the occurrence of sexual harassment incidents. Women do not feel at ease and safe when working with so many men during the night. Male co-workers often take advantage of these circumstances and scare women with their verbal offensive comments, as also noted in the following comment by a female miner: ‘To be honest, we are sexually harassed. They take advantage of us, because we are women and we are working at night with them. It is very uncomfortable. Let me just stop right there, because it is very uncomfortable’.

### **NEW WORK LIFE CHALLENGES**

Working conditions in the mine are often accompanied by new work life challenges. Working women are forced to balance their paid work with unpaid labour at home. This implies that they have to balance challenges at work, often physical hard work, with their daily responsibilities of running their households as well as taking care of the children. In general, female miners tend to work longer hours than men, because of their added informal responsibilities at home. Female miners are also often obliged to work in shifts. This implies, among

others, that they are working for long hours as well as missing out on an important part of their families’ lives, and in particular their children’s lives. This places tremendous pressure on female workers and, in this case, the female miner.

### **ABLUTION FACILITIES AND CHANGE HOUSES**

Although the mining companies have built and upgraded change houses and ablution facilities to accommodate women in core mining positions, a lack of adequate facilities still exists. This is worsened by increasing numbers of women employed by mining companies in order to meet the 10% target required by the Mining Charter. Some mining companies are not yet fully prepared to accommodate all these female employees. The following main concerns regarding change houses and ablution facilities were raised by the female participants employed in core mining positions:

- Change houses are too small and do not accommodate the number of women using them.
- Only open showers are provided. Women want to be private and require showers with curtains or doors.
- Change houses and ablution facilities should be feminine, comfortable and provided with equipment that address the special needs of women.
- Change houses and ablution facilities should be regularly cleaned.
- Ablution facilities underground should be treated in the same way as facilities on the surface. It should be women-friendly and regularly cleaned.
- Change houses and ablution facilities should be as close to the plant as possible, because women do not feel safe, especially at night.
- Ablution facilities should not be shared with men: separate facilities for men and women should be provided.

### **PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE) ISSUES**

Although great progress had been made regarding the provision of PPE that is designed with women in mind, deficiencies and limitations are still prevalent. Some mining companies still provide overalls (shirts and trousers), shoes and gloves that are not women-friendly and are designed with men in mind. The female body differs from the male body; so overalls, shoes and gloves designed for men do not secure a perfect and comfortable fit.

Because the mining industry was historically viewed as a ‘man’s world’, PPE was designed with men in mind. As women differ from men in terms of size and shape, their PPE should be adjusted and developed to ensure a proper fit, comfort and protection. According to Badenhorst, the lack of correctly fitting PPE can affect the way women are protected as well as the way in which they are able to perform their jobs. Ill-fitting PPE restricts the ability of employees to move easily and exposes them to environmental hazards associated with mining. Therefore, PPE needs to be developed with women in mind. Badenhorst emphasised that manufacturers therefore play a crucial role in the provision of correctly fitting PPE.

### **PHYSICAL CAPABILITY**

Work in the mining sector is associated with difficult working conditions and mining, especially underground, is considered one of the most physically demanding occupations, writes S. Schutte. Due to women’s smaller physical work capacity and physical strength, they may experience undue physiological strain when performing prolonged and strenuous physically-demanding tasks. This view was also reinforced by our research which found that women experience difficulties in performing mine work that requires physical strength and stamina as

well as operating the following heavy machinery: load-haul-dump loaders, rubber dozers, rock drills and winches.

Furthermore, the male co-workers experience unique problems if women are appointed in positions that require physical strength. These problems include, among others, production targets not being reached and delays.

According to Badenhorst a female employee can do any job that she is qualified to do, provided that she meets the requirements inherent for a specific job. Furthermore, an employee should not be employed in a job or conduct tasks for which he/she is not medically fit or if he/she does not have the required physical and functional capabilities. The health and safety of the employee and co-workers should not be compromised.

### TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Globally, one of the main challenges that women face in the mining industry is insufficient professional and career development. This view is also supported by the research findings which revealed a need for more training opportunities, an effective mentoring system, proper career guidance, financial support and a development programme for internal employees.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that various factors need to be considered for the successful and sustainable deployment of women in the mining sector. It requires a special devotedness from the relevant state departments, management, mining bargaining councils, male co-workers, as well as the women themselves. The following recommendations are made to address some of the issues:

- Regular diversity training and workshops should be conducted to create awareness of men and women's workplace issues and to stimulate an environment in

which people's differences can be respected.

- Mining companies should implement measures such as career counselling to support women in dealing with issues at the workplace. Career counselling could include: identifying women's strengths, assisting in confronting myths and stereotypes in the workplace, learning negotiation skills, assisting in balancing home and work responsibilities, preparing women to handle sexual harassment in the workplace, setting up specific support groups for women, and so forth.
- Mining companies should investigate job arrangements, such as childcare facilities, day shift work for women with new born babies and a shift and transport allowance that could enable female employees to balance their economic (work) and parenthood (caretaking) responsibilities.
- The effective implementation of the employment equity and skills development policies is important not only to comply with legislation requirements, but also to ensure an equitable and skilled mining workforce. Mining companies should provide a detailed skills development plan, career development matrices of each discipline, individual development plans for employees, mentorship plans for employees as well as a bursary and internship plans in their SLPs. The implementation and operationalisation of the above-mentioned plans are vital.
- As suggested by Badenhorst, proper ablution facilities and change houses provided for women need to be created in order to ensure their privacy, protection and dignity. This includes the provision of decent toilets, underground and at the surface, that provide for the specific needs of women (which include sanitary bins for the disposal of sanitary towels).
- Sexual harassment should not be tolerated. A good sexual harassment policy should be developed, implemented and operationalised.
- Women often feel isolated in the male-dominated mining workplace, as revealed by the empirical findings. Mining companies should therefore implement specific measures, such as the appointment of more than one woman in a specific team, especially when working night shifts. And the provision of canteens for women.
- Gender differences in terms of size and body build, physical work capacity (aerobic capacity), physical strength and heat tolerance should be considered when appointing women in positions that require physical strength and stamina. An employee should not be appointed in a position or conduct tasks for which he or she is not medically fit or does not have the physical and functional capabilities as suggested by Badenhorst.
- PPE should be designed and developed with women in mind to ensure a proper fit and not compromise the health and safety of female employees. Continued research on PPE issues should be conducted to reveal limitations and deficiencies. Strategies should be employed to address PPE issues. <sup>LB</sup>

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