Reportage: Black gold and big girls’ toys

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Drive along the Peak Downs Highway from Moranbah in Central Queensland to coastal Mackay, and you will almost certainly come across a train carrying highly prized cargo: lumps of hard, black gold. Each wagon carries at least $12,000 worth. By the time the 2.1 kilometre-long coal train has rumbled by, with its two extra engines at about the one kilometre mark, you will have seen over $1.5 million of exports pass by.

This black gold has brought at least seven thousand people over five years to the Bowen Basin. It stretches from Collinsville in the north – an old coal town with a long history of radicalism – through the relatively new towns of Moranbah, Dysart, Tieri and Middlemount, built in the 1970s and 1980s, through Blackwater and Moura to the mixed industry town of Biloela in the south-east, and westwards to the regional service town of Emerald. The mines exported 155 million tonnes of coal in 2007, and are expected to account for more than 200 million tonnes by 2009. The coal mines of Queensland, like the iron ore mines of the Pilbara in Western Australia, are part of a new folklore. We no longer ride on the sheep’s back, but in the coal wagon. Wages of $85,000 a year are common, six figures very attainable.

When people think about mining, they conjure money and men. But the stories of the Bowen Basin coalfields are as much women’s as men’s. Women play many parts in the coal town tales. Though some were born in the towns, many came with husbands to seek a more prosperous life. In doing so, they had to deal with the physical and sometimes psychological debris created by the working conditions, old and new. Some stayed at home and brought up families. Some went to work and brought up families. They became the backbone of community activities. They fought long battles to make conditions liveable in the coal towns, established women’s auxiliaries, distributed food to strikers and their families, and stood on picket lines. And eventually, they went to work in the mines. The Queensland Resources Council estimates that women occupy 7 per cent of traditionally male-dominated jobs in plant operating, trades and professions, and account for 11 per cent and rising of that state’s mining employment. Women tell us stories of relationships, power and money.

At night, the bright lights you see from the Bowen Basin roads are not small towns, but non-stop mines. Most mineworkers spend half their working...
days on the night shift under the glare of the white lights instead of the tropical sun. The interference with circadian rhythms, and the duration of the shifts, is critical. Robert, a union delegate and former mine deputy (safety official) from Collinsville, told us, ‘The deputies ... will tell you that ... between that eighth and ninth hour you have to really watch your crew, because they are just drifting off, they are not concentrating the way they should be. It knocks you around, that twelve hours, all right. And it is not twelve hours, because then you have to drive home.’ There is substantial research to back up his concerns.

The wages are high not just because the coal is valuable, but also as a result of the working arrangements. The mines dig coal twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Conditions are difficult and the rewards reflect that.

Throughout most of the Bowen Basin, miners work twelve-hour shifts. A common roster is four twelve-hour days, from around 6am to 6pm, then four off, then four twelve-hour nights, then four off, and start again. Whatever the pattern, it means a lot of night and weekend work, a normal week well over the standard thirty-eight hours, and a lot of penalty rates and overtime to be bought out.

Twelve-hour shifts pay well. You can earn more working in the Basin than you could almost anywhere else in Australia with equivalent qualifications. If you live frugally, you will save in a way that you could not possibly do otherwise. This is what some dream of doing, but it does not always happen like that. Wilma from Collinsville described how ‘when the twelve-hour shifts came in, for the first six months we just spent a lot, we had nothing to show for it. We got a block of land because otherwise it was just going to go.’ Many have second houses at the coast, for the money certainly creates a lot of spending power. Marjorie, a mineworker, said, ‘We’ve been in Blackwater four years, we own everything we’ve got except the house – my partner has got a twenty-one foot boat, I’ve got a Club Sport, he’s got a Nissan, we own a house full of furniture.’ In the great Australian tradition, despite the high incomes – or because of the possibility that these incomes provide – you can also accrue otherwise unimaginable levels of debt. As Wilma, a mineworker’s wife from Collinsville, put it to us, ‘Most of them are that far in debt now that they are used to the money they get and wouldn’t want to change.’

The twelve-hour shifts have other advantages. As Kathleen from Middlemount pointed out, ‘There’s just so much you can do and you can choose ... days off, you can get out, if you feel you need to get out of town, when you’ve got four days off.’ Nellie, a mineworker, said, ‘I like the twelve-hour shift because you get it in four and four, and you get it all over and done with.’

But for others the long shifts hold negatives. As Edith from Dysart put it, ‘When they turned it into twelve-hour shifts that really ruined it. The men were too tired. They would go to work for twelve hours and then they would come home, and all they would want to do was sleep for twelve hours until it was time to go back to
work.’ Harriet, from Moura, spoke for several people when she described how her husband got ‘well and truly cranky so the kids can’t look sideways. They’re too young to understand. One of my girlfriends in Emerald tells her elder kids, “Daddy’s on night shift” and then they know not to talk to him’. Leisure time can also be a source of tension in a blokey world. As Nellie said, ‘They finally have got their days off and they go fishing … I am thinking, “What about the missus and the kids?” … They reckon they work so hard for four days that they need a break.’ Some crews can confuse who is family.

Ellen, from Dysart, described the problem for women with children: ‘Mum is mum, dad, doctor, you name it – running to any sporting facilities or anything else. So it is pretty tough because sometimes the little ones are in bed even before dad gets home … A lot of marriages have failed and a lot have survived. But it is pretty tough on the mothers.’

As a result, community and sporting groups are hit: ‘A lot of clubs closed down because they didn’t have male support,’ says Edith. ‘It was left up to the women to take the kids to all their sporting commitments. So the women took over the male role a lot of the times … [but] the women couldn’t run everything and it was really hard.’ We heard a similar story throughout the coal towns. Rhonda in Collinsville said, ‘It has just changed everything. There is no Junior Rugby League, there is no cricket, there is no soccer. There used to be Little Athletics and I think we had gymnastics there at one stage … I played touch football and basketball when I was first married, but all that has changed because there is no one to organise it and to run it … it has changed the town.’ As family and community increasingly rely on women, the women wonder whether they would be better off living on the coast, with access to beaches, better services and larger communities.

What about the children? Harriet, living in Moura but about to move to the coast, put the key issue clearly: ‘I was never a believer in moving away from town because they would never see Dad. But they really don’t see that much of him anyhow. So it’ll make no difference by moving away.’ This is a trend resisted amongst the long-term residents, who have well-established social networks and a strong belief in their community. But for those who have moved their families into the towns, or for some who are recently married – even if they were brought up in the towns – it seems a sensible option.

Coal provides electrical power for Australia and many other countries, and economic power for Queensland. But it is industrial power that shapes the working and living conditions on the coalfields. Two centuries ago, British miners worked shifts of twelve hours, in some of the most cramped, uncomfortable and dangerous conditions imaginable. Workers unionised and organised, and in many countries the industry became a site for some of the most bitter and violent disputes, through which workers won high wages, improved safety and a shorter working
day. Through to the 1980s, Queensland coal miners worked an eight-hour day, Monday to Friday, often with overtime tacked on top. So another important reason for the high wages in mining is the power of unions. In the United States, where unions have always struggled and represent only one in ten mining workers, mineworkers are paid only about one-fifth more than average private sector wages. In Australia, where the majority of the coal workforce is still unionised, mining wages are two-thirds above the private sector average. Nellie, a mineworker from the mostly non-union mines in the West before moving to the Bowen Basin, recalled, ‘I would have to work a thirteen-day fortnight in Western Australia to get the same money that I get here.’

From the 1970s, open-cut technology became popular, particularly for new mines. Instead of digging through the earth to reach the coal, huge machines would remove the earth and dump it into trucks to be carted elsewhere, exposing the coal for easy access. When the mining companies won a major case in the Industrial Relations Commission in the 1990s, the industry moved to seven-day-a-week operations and what became known as the ‘seven-day roster’. For some it was a disruptive roster: one week working mornings, the next week afternoons, and the next nights. For the mining companies, it was not enough – three downtimes each day as workers swapped shifts was wasted time. With twelve-hour shifts, there would be only two downtimes.

Power relations in the industry were changing. The Howard government wrote new industrial relations laws, making it easier for companies to put workers on to individual contracts, use external contractors, open non-union mines and target union activists for ‘retrenchment’ – all of which happened in the industry. The non-union metals mines already worked twelve-hour shifts. As coal exports slowed in the late 1990s, power shifted further to the coal companies. Over several years, twelve-hour shifts became the norm across most of the Bowen Basin.

With changes in power between workers and the companies come changes in work. A growing share of the workforce consists of external contractors – not employees of the mining company, but of some other entity. Contractors were 6 per cent of the Queensland coal workforce in 1996; by 2005 they were 47 per cent. Some work side by side with mining company employees, doing the same job but on different conditions. Some contractors are unionised, but many are not. Insecurity is inherent: Faye from Dysart told us how her son ‘went to work one day and they just put the whole crew off … and it was immediately off that mine site and they wanted them out of the camp’. Because women are newer to the industry, a disproportionate number of women are contractors. Eloise, a mineworker, said, ‘A lot of times, being contractors, they’re too scared to do anything because they’re scared to lose their job – even the men.’ In this environment, it also becomes easy for the mining companies to replace striking unionists with non-union contractors.
These days, it’s hard to start with a job in a mining company. You must first get your certificates, then do your time with a contractor – maybe a year or two, until someone in a mining company decides to take you on. Some like it – for Harry in Middlemount, the contracting firm ‘treated you like a person, whereas in a mining company they treat you like a number. That is all you are’. But others do not. Jane in Moura described ‘two years of pretty much going from contractor to contractor. It might have only been a month’s work and then they’d finish up. And you might have got two days here one week and two days there. So it was really quite tough for us’. The uncertainty ended when her partner got a job with a mining company.

With changes in work come changes in the towns. Towns like Tieri, Middlemount and Dysart were built by mining companies in the 1970s and 1980s, to service new mines. Before then, the companies had refused to provide all but the most minimal services. One mining executive famously said, ‘Peabody came to Australia to mine coal, not to build houses’. So when a mine opened up near Moura in the 1960s, the workers and their families camped in caravans and tents. Elaine described how she ‘had three children in the caravan, and my father and my husband … When we first went there it rained, we lived in a quagmire of mud … you didn’t have an annexe at that time because you couldn’t afford it and so you had the caravan and you had the fridge out in the rain’. There were pit toilets and open drains. A long strike for better living conditions followed. Through struggles such as these, and under pressure from governments, the companies were forced to provide decent housing and facilities for their workforce.

But no more. As new mines in remote areas opened up in the 1990s, companies worked out it was cheaper to fly workers in and put them into demountable accommodation, known as ‘dongas’, for a week or two and then fly them home, rather than build towns with houses and facilities. ‘Fly-in, fly-out’ was born. Imagine a shipping container with windows, a door and air-conditioning units, divide it in two so each worker has half, and that is what a donga resembles.

The companies also worked out that you could apply the same principles to existing towns, like those in the Bowen Basin. Get a contractor to build and run ‘donga camps’ (more formally, ‘single person’s accommodation’) in and on the edges of the towns. The camps will be self-contained in terms of providing food for their transient residents, but can take advantage of the existing facilities in the town. With a bit of luck, you do not even have to worry about the costs of flying the workforce in and out, as they will drive themselves to work from the coastal towns or surrounds every few days.

So each Bowen Basin town has two populations – the locals and what the Bureau of Statistics calls ‘visitors’. On census night in 2006, between a fifth and a quarter of those counted in each town were visiting, compared with just 7 to 10 per cent in 2001. In these four years, the number of visitors trebled or quadrupled in the towns across the Basin, while the number of people normally living there grew by an average of
just 15 per cent. In Blackwater, Middlemount and Tieri, virtually all of the population growth has been male. In 2001, Blackwater had 124 men for every hundred women; by 2006, there were 173. In Tieri, there are now almost twice as many men as women.

It is mostly men who live in the dongas. But there are a small number of mining women who live in them, usually working for contractors. Most of the women working the mines live in the towns. Sometimes they have been attracted to the region by the same financial allure that brings the men; sometimes they are in the towns already, recruited as wives or relatives of men in the mines. For Kim, who was living in Bundaberg while her husband commuted seven hours to a mine every four days, working the mine was, ‘I guess you could call it, a marriage saver’. Now they are in rare ‘married persons’ accommodation’ for four days at a time, and then share the drive to or from Bundaberg.

Those visiting men who are not living in the donga camps board or share houses – sometimes even rooms. They may be ‘hot bedding’, sharing a bed – though not at the same time – with someone whom they might never meet from a mirror shift. Town rents are stratospheric. This is tolerable for those receiving mining wages, but in most of these towns they are still a minority of the workforce, and for low-waged workers in the service industries, housing and food costs can be prohibitive. ‘The accommodation’s just so high and they’re not going to come out here to pay $400 a week to earn $500 a week, are they?’ Brendan Fenlon, owner of Moranbah’s Black Nugget Hotel, was reported as saying. So despite – or because of – the boom in mining jobs, services in the towns suffer from labour shortages.

As the mix of the towns changes, with more contractors, more men living in donga camps or hot bedding, and more women leaving the towns, the old timers mourn what they see as a loss of their community: ‘I, myself, don’t think the community is today what it was even ten years ago,’ said Kaye. ‘I mean you could go up town now, you could go shopping and not see one person that you know, whereas ten years ago you could go up town and it’d take you three hours just to buy a loaf of bread because you knew everybody – “come and have a coffee” or “come and do this” they’d say.’ Kathleen commented, ‘I used to walk after dark all the time when I first came here but I don’t anymore. And I know most other people don’t either, and most other people that I know with children don’t allow their children to just go anywhere anymore. But I mean I suppose that’s pretty normal in most towns’.

Drive along the highway from Moranbah to Mackay and you may come across something small and white. Stop and look. Small signs, looking hand-made, planted by the side of the road. They say ‘accident site’ and include a simple drawing of a car, or cars, in collision. We counted twenty-four of these signs beside the road as we drove along in an Easter break. Local activists – the Nebo Community Development Group – have put up the markers to commemorate the accidents that happen, on average, once every ten days. Many are single-vehicle accidents.
The working visitors to the coal towns come from many places. They come from Rockhampton, Gladstone, Yeppoon, Brisbane, the rural hinterland or even overseas, but most often they come from Mackay, the boom town of the Queensland coast.

Trevor Deakin was one. A father of three, he was killed in a single-vehicle accident in 2004, while driving home from work, in a hurry to get home to Mackay after working two twelve-hour shifts at the mine just before the Easter break. ‘You don’t get time to grieve,’ said Dawn, the wife he left behind, who now campaigns to get people to rest before driving home. She made a DVD which she shows to mineworkers with an official from Queensland Transport. ‘My main saying is, there’s no point in rushing home to your family if you don’t make it. Money isn’t everything, people are everything. You can’t replace lives,’ she says through the DVD. Her daughter, Cassie, adds, ‘I don’t think it’s fair for anyone else to have to go through what we went through when we lost Dad’.

The Peak Downs Highway is not a particularly badly designed road. The trouble is, people are not designed to drive along it in the condition some do – after several days of twelve-hour shifts. Or even before several days of twelve-hour shifts. The highest incidence of declared fatigue-related accidents occurs between 4 am and 6 am: workers getting up in the wee hours of the morning, not waking the family, and driving to work when they are not fully awake and their body tells them they should still be asleep. If fatigue is a major killer, speed is its frequent accomplice; hurrying to get home, or to work, 71 per cent of vehicles speed. One in twenty goes at more than 118 kilometres an hour.

If white line fever is the biggest threat to mining families these days, it is not the only one. The mines are still dangerous places in which to work. Kathy from Collinsville, referring to the dust and fumes underground miners inhaled, said, ‘You look around here, there are a lot of women who are widows’. The effects of accidents are more overt. In 2005, there were two deaths in open-cut mines (near Middlemount and Moura). An underground miner was crushed to death at Moranbah North last year. He left a wife and four children. There are over two hundred reported ‘lost time’ injuries a year, and then there are the unreported ones – so many that the method of collecting statistics has just been changed to try to make them accurate.

Go to the small community information centre in Moura and you can see a list of all the 422 men who died in coal mine deaths between 1882 and 2003. Walk along the main road through town and, outside the ambulance station, you come to a sculpture of an underground miner – a memorial to the twelve men who died in the explosion at Moura No. 4 mine in July 1986. Their ages, listed on the plaque, range from fifty-seven to just eighteen years. Eleven years earlier, thirteen Moura miners had been killed in an explosion at Kianga No. 1 underground mine. Unbelievably for the town, in 1994 a further eleven died when the Moura No. 2 mine exploded. The town knew these men as husbands, sons or fathers who died before their time. It took fifteen years for the mining company to settle compensation for wives and families affected by the 1975 disaster.
The more senior women remember their fear, how it was ‘scary when we heard of the disaster because you don’t know who was involved. You don’t know if it was any of your friends’ sons or that sort of thing’. ‘We ran around the streets all night trying to find out,’ Nancy recalled. And they remember the media being ‘in your face’ after the 1986 disaster, ‘hounding’ the townsfolk. Moura lives on as a coal town, despite media predictions of its demise after the 1994 disaster. But the mines are open cut now, and whenever a whiff of speculation gets around about the possibility of a new underground mine opening up – or of any mining activity near the resting places of the entombed – a collective shiver goes through much of the town.

Drive along Dysart’s main street, and you will see a new town clock on the median strip, away from any other buildings or monuments. It features etchings of mining scenes and, on the clock face, the words ‘Dysart Miners’ Support Group Inc’. This is a band of activist women set up in 2001 during a bitter industrial dispute over job security and the use of contractors – a dispute that followed a series of retrenchments in the mines. It was established after a public meeting of four hundred local women concerned about the threat posed by the companies’ demands, not only to employees’ security but to the viability of the town itself. As Beth put it, ‘The women were out at the mine and cooking and everything and helping – and still couldn’t find out anything … The girls were getting cranky with the guys, not knowing anything’. They set up their own picket line at the edge of town (rather than at the mine site itself, where the miners’ picket line was) to show solidarity with their partners but also to develop a solidarity amongst themselves in a financially and emotionally stressful period. Their picket line stood fast until the dispute was resolved.

The idea that women in a coal town would play a major role in an industrial dispute has a long history, both here and overseas. Kathie in Collinsville recalled how the women swung into action during a ‘stay down’ strike in 1952, in which the men occupied the underground tunnels and refused to come to the surface. A women’s auxiliary was established with help from the Union of Australian Women, and food supplies were brought to the town from Brisbane. Women cooked meals and left them at the pit-head where one miner ‘would come up and get all the food. It would all be left at the entrance and they would take it down in a skip …’ That was a wonderful thing, like it was a good fight on the men’s part to stay down there all that time in the dark, that is fighting for conditions’. Other women and men went away to address meetings across Queensland to get support for the strike. As Betty described it, ‘We were treated as people with brain enough to know, which was very good, we were lucky really – a lot of women weren’t treated as people with brains’.

There are similar stories about later disputes. For example, during the six-week dispute in Moura for better living conditions in 1963, the women’s auxiliary played a key role. Judith Martin, one of the strikers’ wives, travelled to Brisbane to speak publicly about conditions and to give evidence in an arbitration case. She showed the judge a
bottle of Moura drinking water. ‘My goodness, is that what you drink?’ reportedly said the judge, ‘I think you might have to dilute it with a bit of whisky, wouldn’t you?’ For many years, a cooperative in Moura, staffed mostly by women, provided the town with reasonably priced groceries. In 1980, women’s auxiliaries kept the towns alive during the twelve-week ‘housing tax’ strike. They organised the supply and distribution of food to the families. This dispute has a special place in the folklore of the Bowen Basin, as it was caused by a decision of then Treasurer John Howard, and saw him humiliated (and, according to folklore, headlocked) when he went to Blackwater to defend his proposed tax. Some in the coal towns attribute his subsequent industrial relations policies to the trauma of meeting the Blackwater locals.

As the big disputes became less frequent and shorter, the women entered the workforce in large numbers, others left town and the women’s auxiliaries gradually wound down. Their partial emulation in the Women’s Support Groups in towns like Dysart and Moranbah reflects not only the traditions of the sector but also the tensions facing women in the mining towns, having to juggle work, family and community responsibilities. The Dysart group remains active in the community, donating fridges to the primary school, lockers to the high school, playground equipment to the local kindergarten and, remarkably, raising enough funds over a four-year period to have the Dysart Monumental Town Clock, costing $52,000, built and unveiled in December 2007.

Go on to a mine site in the Bowen Basin and you will see something unimaginable in the underground mines of decades past: women working the mines, operating the equipment and driving the massive trucks. As demand for labour has increased, and women have joined the workforce, the mines were undoubtedly the best-paying place to work. As Danielle said, ‘I love those big trucks, I think they’re awesome.’ Kim talks of the allure of ‘the big boys’ toys – you know, the girls get addicted to that too’.

The first handful of women began working in the Queensland surface mines in 1979, as labourers, in what several saw as a public relations exercise rather than a willingness to embrace equal opportunity. Some believe the enthusiasm of certain mining companies for women is part of an effort to change or avoid the union culture of mines. Certainly, new blood is often used to promote cultural change. As Eloise, a mineworker, said, ‘They don’t want us older people here who have been here all these years. They want to put on these “clean skins” [inexperienced mineworkers], so that they can mould and shape them how they want’. There is no real evidence, though, that women are less prone to militant action than men. On recruiting their first female members in 1979, the miners’ union reported it as following ‘lobbying by the miners union of the Mines Department “for the elimination of the rule discriminating against women”’. In the mid-1990s, the miners’ union held its first ‘Women in Mining’ training course in Emerald.
Today, women can be found in all positions, from the wash plants through to drag lines and driving trucks that carry up to three hundred tonnes of dirt. ‘Like, a tyre is twice my height. Just a tyre!’ marvelled Danielle. But women still represent only a small portion of the workforce. Deidre said, ‘The females have to try a lot harder because it’s always been a man’s thing to be in the mining industry. Oh yeah, we have to prove ourselves a lot more than what the guys do. I think it puts a lot more pressure on you too’.

Now the labour shortage is on the women’s side. So is their reputation as good workers. ‘We’re just a lot more careful. We ask a lot more questions too, I think, than the guys do and just treat the machinery a lot more carefully. And the machinery is very expensive.’ We heard other men and women repeat Deidre’s words several times around the Bowen Basin.

However, the women in the mines still face resistance from the legacy of a traditional, blokey industry culture, and a slowness of organisations and individuals to adapt to change. Wendy expressed frustration at ‘the battle I’ve had to do, just to get toilets for women!’ Nellie had problems with older men set in the ways of the past, but said, ‘The young ones are good.’ Even amongst women, views are divided. Elsa, a miner’s wife, expressed a fairly common view when she said, ‘I have a strong feeling against women working in the mine sites. I know this sounds sexist and everything else. I think it’s degrading to women because men will never change’. Yet the women working the mines have no doubts about their right to be there. And Daryl, a mineworker’s husband, was very clear: ‘I’m very proud of my wife for what she does.’

Male resistance to women underground is still strong. As Cliff, a retired male miner told us, ‘But women underground … it’s completely different under there, as far as I’m concerned it’s not a women’s place … Working out somewhere where the rig might roll over on top of you or something like that, a couple of guys could lift it off you whereas a couple of women couldn’t’. Nowadays, women go underground as engineers or geologists, but as underground miners they are still rare.

In the open cuts, the environment is more welcoming – though not universally. Danielle explained, ‘I think to survive out there you have to have a passion to do it … There’s some good people, there’s some real good people but you get people of all walks of life. There’re some real scumbags too’. The trouble is, it only takes one scumbag to make your life hell.

We heard stories from some women who had adapted fairly quickly to work on the mines – or who made the mines adapt to them. Marjorie, for example, said she had experienced no discrimination or differential treatment: ‘Probably some of their attitudes out there are that women should still be at home in front of the kitchen sink, but I soon sort them out.’
But we heard other stories of harassment, both physical and sexual, from managers, supervisors and co-workers. And we heard remarkable stories of persistence and bravery in the face of horrendous obstacles. Eloise, with the support of her union, won a case in the Anti-Discrimination Tribunal after being on stress leave for nine months following discrimination and harassment by managers and supervisors. ‘What I wanted was to be treated with respect,’ she said. Another mineworker, Wendy, described how sexual harassment by an older worker only ended when her husband, who also worked at the mine, ‘went to him’. Others we met, who had not had a male relative or mentor at the mines, often faced more difficulty. Wendy reflected, ‘Yeah, there was some hard times in there. And you know you had to keep your chin up because … you love doing it. Don’t let ‘em win. Out you go, keep your head high. You can do this. And I did’. Leila confirmed, ‘Just be strong and be yourself, [but] never act like you know everything’.

Nellie, who used to work with young children before she began driving the big girls’ toys, had another angle: ‘I have been known to say, that is why I can work with men so well. If you can work with kids, you can work with men!’

So what is life like for the women of the coal towns? They have very diverse experiences, but there are some common themes, too – themes relating to the fundamental changes in the nature of the towns, as work arrangements shift to suit the needs of the mining companies, and the towns increasingly comprise split families and dormitories for workers who live at the coast and work at a mine site twenty kilometres away.

The women’s gutsiness is tangible. Women who move with their husbands from places far away to work in an uncertain industry must have it or they would not survive. Those women who stand up and fight alongside their men for decent living conditions and viable communities have it. And the women who confront tradition to work in the mines – sometimes by themselves, unaided by brothers, fathers or husbands – have it in bucketsloads. They are proud people living in what are, despite all the changes, proud towns. And rightly so.

When we asked ‘What is the best thing about being a mineworker’s wife?’ the most common answer was, ‘The money!’ But beneath the surface there is a more complex story. Deidre, who is a mineworker herself, described much of what we saw: ‘People think, you know, miners make a lot of money, whatever, but we also have to do the long hours. We don’t get a social life like other people do, and miss out on a lot of things. Sure we do get the good money, but you also gotta look at all the downsides too. And you fall into that trap, once you’ve earned that good money – you sort of could never really take a step back and go to something like working at the supermarket for two hundred dollars a week. It would be so impossible to do. So it’s one of these industries where you get hooked into it.’