

Women Miners: ‘We’re in like a virus and we don’t mind the work either’

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Abstract

In mining, women constitute what Kanter (1977) calls a ‘token’ group, representing only a small proportion of workers. In the 1970s and 1980s many were originally recruited for corporate publicity purposes. Now they work on trucks, draglines, water trucks, scrappers, augurs, excavators, belly dumpers, graders and power shovels, but within a masculinist culture. Our qualitative project in the Queensland coal mines reveals problems, including harassment from supervisors and colleagues, that some have faced. Women’s interpretation of the reasons for these difficulties, the impact of visibility on expectations of women, their involvement with the union and the role of ‘critical mass’ and ‘critical actors’ in taking actions that advance the interests of women miners, are reviewed. Without access to collective resources or supportive structures, individual actions are problematic and the position of ‘token’ women is tenuous.

Keywords: Women’s Employment, Women in Mining, Harassment, Women and Unions, Critical Mass in Gender Studies

Why would any woman want to be a miner? Research indicates men ‘fear and resent’ the new competition from women and they subsequently devise protective strategies (Burton 1991) that are sustained, in an environment where the norm is masculine (Eveline & Booth 2002), and where women fit in as best they can (Connell 1994). In a seminal study, Kanter (1977), identified the importance of the proportion of a work group or workplace occupied by women (or other minorities). She focused on the problems faced by ‘tokens’ within ‘skewed groups’, which are ‘those in which there is a large preponderance of one type over another, up to a ratio of perhaps 85:15’. These problems included: visibility, which generates performance pressures; polarization, by which differences between tokens and ‘dominants’ are exaggerated, leading

dominants to ‘heighten their group boundaries’; and what she calls ‘assimilation’ of individuals into pre-existing stereotypes about their group, which leads to tokens being trapped in particular roles. Currently women are very much in that group defined by Kanter as ‘tokens’, accounting for just 10.4 per cent of the mining industry, with many of those being office workers – women account for just 1.9 per cent of Tradespersons, 6.3 per cent of operators and production workers and 2.4 per cent of supervisors (Queensland Resources Council 2008).

Kanter’s research concerned female and male sales people in a decade when the feminist movement had only recently asserted itself. We examined women in an occupation whose masculine definition has historically been much more deeply embedded in the physical characteristics of the work (and in the protection of women from danger or exploitation) than sales, but also at a time three decades later when notions of gender equity have somewhat greater social acceptance across western societies than in the 1970s. (For example, by 2007 only 20 per cent of Americans agreed that ‘women should return to their traditional roles in society’, compared to 30 per cent two decades earlier (Taylor, et al. 2008).) Kanter’s research also spawned a body of literature on whether women needed to attain a ‘critical mass’ (she did not use the term herself) to achieve change, particularly in the political sphere, although the latter aspect has been questioned as a result of the seemingly weak links between women’s share in legislatures and advances in outcomes for women (Childs & Krook 2006, Dahlerup 2006). Childs and Krook (2006) argued for a focus away from ‘critical mass’ and towards ‘critical actors’. Our research enables the identification of some critical actors for women in the mining industry. We interviewed 133 men and women in twelve Queensland coal mining communities about their work, including

22 women mining workers (19 production or trades workers and 3 professionals). Fictional names are used throughout.

Early women mine workers

Through most of the first half of the twentieth century, women were excluded from mines, a reaction to a global history of women in mining that contained countless stories of their brutalization, exploitation and death (Martineau 1849). From the 1960s things began to change. Feminism transformed the way society thought about women at work, and in the industrial arena equal pay for work of equal value was entrenched as a principle, if not in practice, in late 1972. In the mining sector, technological changes opened up potential opportunities for women that did not exist before. Until 1977, Queensland's Coal Mining Act provided 'no boy under the age of 16 and no female shall be employed below ground.' An 'explicit decision against this discrimination against women was made by the Queensland Miner's Convention in July 1977' and that bar on women in mines was repealed. Meanwhile, the traditional area for women in the industry, office work, was subject to its own technological revolution that increased skills for some but narrowed opportunities for others. Blue collar work in the mines began to look both attractive and feasible for women. In less than two years, the Queensland Colliery Employers Union recruited its first female members. Now women work on trucks, draglines, water trucks, scrappers, augurs, excavators, belly dumpers, graders and power shovels.

The motives of women moving into the mines were told to us as variously: the money; because their fathers, grandfathers and brothers were in the mines; the acquisition of new skills; and as the fallout of relationships, either because they needed to find something compatible with their husbands' ant-social shift patterns, or

because of necessity arising from because separations or divorces that left them stranded in company towns. All enjoyed the work. Many, like Iris enjoyed her new mining identity and the companionship of the men, but they also were aware of their visibility:

They were good. There was the odd one that jumped up and down... But we knew that we had to work really hard ...we knew that if we didn't set an example, we didn't get any more women in...We used to say that to each other on a regular basis.

For some women miners who had brothers, husbands and fathers already employed in the mine. Re-entry into the mine as a miner was not hard for women with relatives there. Companies gave miners' sons jobs ahead of strangers and this extended to daughters. For some, though, the transition to miner was not easy. Often things turned out different to how they seemed. Hannah said:

The initial girls were put on as part of a publicity stunt by the mine because several other mines were doing the same thing and they were all in a race. The thing is, once they'd been put on then they were stuck with them and they just tried to make things basically difficult you know, to make you want to go away. But they'd never had that sort of income before so they weren't going anywhere...‘No, we're here. We're in. We're like a virus. We didn't mind the work either.

Similarly Eloise, who had a father and brother in the mines, had worked in a number of mines. She loved her job and had been used extensively for company publicity as a pretty woman – a token in the common sense of the word. But she ended up taking on the company from her relatively isolated position, thereby also taking on the role of ‘critical actor’ (Childs & Krook 2006) – a role which the union also acquired:

they didn't want women out there; they didn't want me there. Why would they want anyone else?...I've been through four companies since I've been there, there's still that thing...this mining culture...When I finished my [trainee] time they didn't want me there...The company said “yeah the job will be available but basically it's not available to her” and the union stepped up and said “well if you don't give her this job this is grounds for discrimination”...So we backed the company into a corner and I stayed there.

Women like Nellie knew that some mines were not worth applying for work in:

we spoke to blokes who we worked with in Western Australia who had no problem with us and they said “Don’t bother” because you would never get a job. They won’t employ women because they are trouble”. But that was prior to ’99, before everyone desperately needing workers.

The result of this mismatch between the ideal and the reality led in some cases to discrimination and harassment.

Discrimination, harassment and women’s strategies

Women miners spoke of the problems they faced as women miners and how they developed strategies to combat them. Leila identified harassment from men as the worst thing about her job: “They don’t realise how hurtful they can be.” Moira thought some of the men were antagonistic to women, and women’s visibility highlighted scrutiny of their performance:

just a few of the guys were actually very anti-women in the workplace and they certainly let us know that we weren’t supposed to be there. I just let it go over my head...treat it with the contempt it deserves. I basically said to one of the guys.... “look, we’re here, get used to it. Deal with it.” Ever since then he was good...If you made a little mistake, if you didn’t back up to the dump properly and you didn’t dump your load over the edge properly, it would be “oh bloody women”.

Eloise described how a male had written sexually graphic details about her which went into the work system, from which one of the few female supervisors was able to read a transcript of his comments:

She found out about it, and got the printout, and got it all on paper, and went through it.... He lost his job...I couldn’t believe that the silly bugger would do something like that.

However, Eloise pointed out that she ‘mainly had problems with supervisors and managers [who] wanted to test me out to see if they could break me’. Gendered resistance to unfair power relations within the structure of the mining company (Eveline & Booth 2002; Braverman 1974) is important here. Assuming the language

of masculinity and becoming ‘one of the boys’ was a commonly chosen strategy by the women, a form of ‘assimilation’ into male culture (a different use of the word to that by Kanter (1977)). Marjorie explained it this way:

I’m not going to go out there wearing an apron. I’m entering a male environment; so therefore, I’ve got to be one of the guys. If I want to be treated as a woman I’d stay home... I don’t take offence at anything... So I’ve never had a problem.

The solution for Wynn was:

I was in a man’s world so you just do what they do...I never ever asked for a locker, I never asked to have my own toilet because I was not interested. I wanted to be a plant operator, not worry about that I had nowhere to put my boots.

Others remembered their early assimilating tactics with regret:

you did have people try to come onto you....Usually married men. The mistake I made was playing dumb ...In hindsight, what I should have really done was totally humiliate him because later, some of them, they’d be thankful that you’d let them withdraw but they’d treat you really terrible later on.

Female-friendly facilities (or their lack) was also an issue. There are no childcare facilities in any of the mines we had contact with. Women had to fight to get their own toilet and shower blocks. Elsa, a miner’s wife, noted that:

women don’t get a fair go... I think that sometimes it can be degrading to them. Because they don’t get their separate showers, they don’t get treated as a woman.

Kanter (1977) wrote of how women would sometimes turn against other women, through permitting or encouraging statements prejudicial to other women, or by allowing themselves or other women to be a subject of humour. We did not find this, but we did find divisions amongst women, based on what they thought were the origins of anti-female behaviour in the mines. Some of those who did not suffer harassment themselves appeared to believe harassment was related to the women’s failure to choose strategies to prevent it. Nicola, an engineer, said

I wouldn't really let them treat me differently or leave me out of things so it's got a lot to do with the individual as well. So if...you wanted to be treated special then they will treat you different and you won't be part of everything.

According to Bernice:

if you let them know that it bothers you a little bit they'll make sure it bothers you a lot. [laughter] They're just big kids, they'll just go how far we can push this I wonder, and so the minute you give it any attention they'll go 'got you' and they'll just keeping reeling you in.

For some women, pornographic pictures were a problem. Vicki discussed how her group dealt with it 'years ago' through some collective action:

That was everywhere. And we used to bring pictures of men out and stick 'em up beside the women. We thought if that was good enough to have the nude women, then we could have the men. That became a running joke and after a while they started taking them down themselves.

Overall the women who appeared to be in the most vulnerable positions or who had faced the worst experiences tended to be those where there were few if any other women, or where they lacked a male mentor (husband, brother, father) in the workplace. The particular decisions taken by supervisors, male colleagues, the union and women themselves also made a difference. Sometimes these became critical actors. Thus 'critical mass' was a factor but it was not the only factor. 'Support' mechanisms were also important.

Supports and unionism

Successful women are dependent upon building support networks in both their domestic and working 'crew' worlds (Smith 2008). Many women experienced support from their fellow workers. Eloise spoke of camaraderie, friendship and mutual aid:

I like these fellows, you know... when you work with people for a period of time, you start to form a friendship.

Others were dependent on the support of the union. Eloise used the collective force of the union to fight a longstanding harassment case against the company. She had returned to work with the help of the union, not for the money but because she wanted

to stick it into them, I'm back and this is what I've done! Don't mess with me!It was quite stressful because it went on for nine or 12 months ... coalmining industry has still got a culture, it's still got that male testosterone thing but it's a lot better.

Some of the women who had used the union felt that they would like to be more active in it but that they were too vulnerable to being singled out for retribution, as Danielle said:

if I was financially better off and maybe if I had a partner; if I wasn't in the situation of survival that I'm in I'd be in there, 'cause I really believe in what the unions stand for and what they're doing. But I'm held back because I have to tread carefully...the original reason I joined the union was to protect myself from arseholes in the industry....

Although not all respondents were enthusiastic about what the union had done for women, several were active in the union. Nadia was a union delegate who was in 'boots and all' fighting for the union. Another former delegate was Robyn:

I did that for the next five years... [they said] ..."You're trustworthy because you're the women's representative and you've been a union delegate so we trust you to handle the overtime roster. We know you're fair". Yeah, because nobody can put anything over on me... I won't be bullied, I am the bully.

Overall, Hannah thinks, companies do not discriminate on gender lines, as what they want is *yes people*:

See a lot of people don't understand the wages were high because we went on strike to get them high and a lot of other conditions as well ...A lot of our conditions weren't just for comfort, they were to try and keep people alive and that's going too.

Deena, the wife of a union delegate, said 'Every woman, if it comes to that, should be in a union if they're working in the mining industry...It's not a male orientated thing,

but there's still a lot of male chauvinists out there, and' – she turned to her husband, who laughed as she said, 'that's not excluding you either!'

Concluding remarks

The problems of women miners arise primarily from a structurally gendered situation. The skewed workforce within which most mining women work creates particular problems including some identified by Kanter (1977) and still as relevant today, including the impact visibility has on performance expectations. There are pressures for women to assimilate into the male culture, but at the same time their difference makes some of them subject to sexual innuendo and harassment. The mines are a site of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1994) where the norm is masculine and to be feminine or female may be to be ultimately defined as lacking the necessary drive, force, commitment, skill and competitiveness to be able to sustain respect or authority (Eveline and Booth 2002). But nor are women entirely without agency: individual women, the union and particular men can all be critical actors in advancing or failing to advance the interests of women in the mines, and collective action with other men and through the union is still the main source of advancement of their interests *as workers*. Childs and Krook (2006) highlight that critical mass is not sufficient to address fairness for women, and that attention must be paid to critical actors, including their role in promoting individual or collective action for change. Collective action by small groups of women or large unions can be important. However, without access to collective resources or supportive structures, individual actions are problematic and the position of 'token' women is tenuous.

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