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Responsible Mining Foundation

Research Insight: Women miners

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The gender session held this year at PDAC, the world's largest mining conference, would certainly not have been on the programme a decade ago.¹ Delegates heard personal stories from female mining executives of how they had been ignored, side-lined or abused earlier in their careers. They also heard about the #MeTooMining initiative and its practical advice for what witnesses of sexual harassment or violence can do.² And mining company representatives talked about their efforts to overcome the biases and barriers limiting the recruitment and retention of women workers.

That such discussions are now taking place at industry events shows that the narrative on gender and mining is shifting from the periphery to the mainstream and from theoretical debates to discussions on practical and strategic matters. The business case for gender-aware mining is now well established and it is no longer a question of 'why should' but rather 'how can' mining companies better address the needs and interests of women workers.

So, how have mining companies responded to the challenges of making the traditionally male-dominated industry safer and more suitable for women workers? The gender-related results of the Responsible Mining Index (RMI) 2018 show how large-scale mining companies are performing on these issues.

More gender-balanced companies

The RMI 2018 results reveal that most of the 30 companies assessed show little or no evidence of efforts to strengthen the gender balance of their leadership and governance teams. The companies scored an average of only 4.5% on the question of implementing interventions to bolster the diversity and inclusivity of their boards and senior management. These results tie in with other research that has shown very low levels of women's participation at these levels.³

Beyond board and senior management levels, there is also much room for improvement in gender diversity across companies' entire workforces. Estimates suggest that women occupy approximately 10 per cent of jobs in the large-scale mining sector.⁴ Gender-based bias and discrimination in hiring practices play a role in this, as do work schedules that interfere with family responsibilities and cause social isolation, making mining work unattractive for many women. It is also worth remembering that up until relatively recently, women were prohibited from working in underground mines in many countries. The bans on women underground miners were repealed, for example, in South Africa just ten years ago and in India only this year.⁵

Companies stand to benefit from having more women in their workforces. Research indicates that a more gender-balanced board and leadership team contributes to stronger environmental, social, and governance performance, which in turn, leads to better business performance.⁶ Higher female workforce participation can also raise attendance and retention rates and reduce organizational risks within businesses.⁷ Mine managers cited that greater gender diversity fostered innovation and improved team dynamics and communications.⁸

Encouragingly, some companies are leading the way on promoting gender diversity. One leading practice identified in RMI 2018 was the plan of action set out by BHP to achieve gender parity across the company by 2025, including linking the bonuses of the most senior staff to achieving a 3% increase in female staff each year. And Goldcorp, for example, has a comprehensive training, development and mentoring programme specifically for its female employees, which focuses on the women's personal and professional growth. Another leading practice identified in RMI 2018 was the commitment by Newmont, as a member of the Paradigm for Parity Coalition, to achieve gender parity in senior management by 2030, with a near-term goal of women holding at least 30 per cent of senior roles.⁹ Other companies, including for example Goldcorp, AngloGold Ashanti and Anglo American, have set similar targets for women's representation on their boards.

Better site-level safety

It is at mine-site level where women are most vulnerable to unsafe and hostile working conditions. Basic requirements, such as fit-for-purpose goggles, helmets and other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), or secure toilet and changing room facilities, are often lacking for women workers. The dimly lit and confined environment of underground mines makes them particularly unsafe for women, with the heightened risk of gender-based harassment and violence. A study in Canada, for example, found that almost 40 per cent of women working in mine sites reported having experienced harassment in the last five years.¹⁰

The RMI 2018 results show that the vast majority of the assessed companies are unable to demonstrate that they have systems in place to ensure the provision of gender-appropriate PPE for their women workers: over 75% of the companies assessed scored zero on this question. And while many have policies in place to prevent sexual harassment, 75% of the companies show no evidence of systematic measures to prevent harassment of women workers. Only one company, Barrick Gold Corporation, demonstrated systems to prevent gender-based violence.

The Chilean state-owned enterprise CODELCO, one of the top performers on these issues, has established company-wide principles and guidelines on the provision of gender-appropriate bathrooms, changing rooms, work clothes, PPE, and rooms for women workers to express and store breastmilk. The South African companies AngloGold Ashanti and Exxaro also perform well on the provision of gender-appropriate PPE.

Role of other actors

Mining companies have a direct responsibility to ensure safe working conditions for women as well as men, and have a direct role to play in making mining more suitable and welcoming for women workers.

At the same time, other stakeholders can do much to support and drive change within the industry. Producing country governments can prohibit discriminatory labour practices and set requirements for women's employment and gender-appropriate safety equipment in mining companies.¹¹ It is no coincidence, for example, that it is South African and Chilean companies that perform best in RMI 2018 on ensuring gender-appropriate sanitation facilities and safety equipment, as both these countries have put special policy measures in place for women workers. South Africa requires mining companies to draw up a code of practice on the provision of PPE for women workers and to employ women in at least 10% of core mining positions, while Chile, in 2012, issued a national standard on 'Gender equality and reconciliation of professional, family and personal life'.¹²

International initiatives can raise global awareness of gender issues in mining and can work towards improving policies and practices. One such example is the Women's Rights and Mining group, an international multi-stakeholder group initiated by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has been working to support women's rights in mines and in mining-affected communities.¹³

More broadly, the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights has been developing practical recommendations for companies and states on what it means to protect, respect and remedy the rights of women in a business context, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The Working Group's report will be presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2019.¹⁴

Mining workers and their representatives are also making change happen. IndustriALL Global Union, an international federation of labour unions, promotes gender diversity and tackles gender-based violence in the workforce, including in the mining sector. An IndustriALL affiliate, Sintracarbon, a labour union in Colombia, has negotiated in a collective bargaining agreement with the Cerrejón Coal Company a clause stipulating that at least 25% of the new hired workers by the company should be women. Finally, networks of women miners are coming together to bring gender-related issues to the fore.¹⁵

Making mining work for women

The Responsible Mining Foundation (RMF) recognises the efforts made by a few companies to strengthen gender equality and gender diversity in their workforces and governance bodies, and encourages more mining companies to adapt and adopt the good practice models already available. RMF also supports calls made by groups such as Oxfam International for governments, mining companies, industry associations and investors to promote gender equality.¹⁶ The practical measures that companies can take include: (1) reviewing their recruitment and workplace practices for any unintended barriers and biases against female applicants; (2) providing educational bursaries, internship opportunities, vocational and technical training programmes to female as well as to male participants from local communities; (3) developing company-wide gender equity strategies, creating professional development opportunities for female employees and promoting women's mobility into leadership roles; (4) taking strong measures to protect workers from gender-based harassment and violence; (5) ensuring gender-appropriate PPE and health and sanitation facilities for women workers; and (6) providing gender-awareness training for their workers and incentives for managers to increase the gender diversity of their teams.

Taking such steps would go a long way towards enabling mining companies to make their businesses more gender-equitable, more gender-inclusive and, ultimately, more successful.

¹ The Prospectors & Developers Association of Canada (PDAC) 2019 Convention: www.pdac.ca/convention

² www.metoomining.com

³ Mining.com 2018. Only 13% of board members in the mining industry are women: Bedford. <http://www.mining.com/13-board-members-mining-industry-women-bedford/>. Financial Times. 2018. BHP on track to achieve 50% female workforce by 2025. www.ft.com/content/063eb6bc-d10f-11e8-a9f2-7574db66bcd5. Women in Mining (UK) and PwC. 2013. Mining for talent: A study of women on boards in the mining industry by WIM (UK) and PwC. www.pwc.com/gr/en/publications/assets/mining-for-talent.pdf.

⁴ Women in Mining (UK) and PwC. 2013. Mining for talent: A study of women on boards in the mining industry by WIM (UK) and PwC. www.pwc.com/gr/en/publications/assets/mining-for-talent.pdf

⁵ Minerals Council South Africa, 2017. Women in Mining in South Africa. Fact Sheet.

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⁶ International Finance Corporation (IFC). 2018. Women in Business Leadership Boost ESG Performance: Existing Body of Evidence Makes Compelling Case. www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/0c46a0b8-cc3b-4da0-8dcf-bde5af9ac166/PSO42.pdf?MOD=AJPERES

⁷ International Finance Cooperation (IFC). 2013. Investing in Women's Employment: Good for business, good for development, World Bank group, Washington. www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/sustainability-at-ifc/publications/publication_report_investinginwomensemployment

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ www.paradigm4parity.com

¹⁰ Mining Industry Human Resources Council Canada. 2014. Strengthening Mining's Talent Alloy: Exploring Gender Inclusion. www.mihr.ca/pdf/MiHR_Gender_Report_EN_WEB.pdf

¹¹ The Advocates for Human Rights. 2019. Promoting Gender Diversity and Inclusion in the Oil, Gas and Mining Extractive Industries.

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¹² ICMM. n.d. Promoting gender diversity in Chile. www.icmm.com/en-gb/case-studies/promoting-gender-diversity-in-chile

¹³ www.womenandmining.org.

¹⁴ OHCHR. n.d. Gender lens to the UNGPs. www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Business/Pages/GenderLens.aspx.

¹⁵ <https://internationalwim.org/>

¹⁶ Oxfam International. 2017. Position Paper on Gender Justice and the Extractive Industries. <https://www.oxfam.org.au/what-we-do/mining/the-gendered-impacts-of-mining/>.