

General Articles

Women: An unmined resource



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Until a few decades ago, most countries banned women from working in mines. But over time, women have made their way into this male-dominated territory, proving they have what it takes to succeed. Patrick Moser, a Geneva-based journalist, reports.

When Claudia Haney goes half a kilometre underground, she commands respect from the 300 men at K + S Kali's Neuhof-Ellers mine in the German state of Hesse.

The 33-year-old is the first woman to head a mine in Germany.

Mining has long been the exclusive territory of men, with hostility to women reflected in the myth that a woman's presence would cause the pit to collapse.

But over the past decades, women have made their way into the mines. While they remain a minority in the still male-dominated sector, their numbers are growing. That is good news, not just for the women, but also for the mining industry, which faces major skills shortages.

In Australia, mining heiress Gina Rinehart has turned her family company from a small prospecting outfit to a global mining group, in the process becoming the country's richest woman.

In 2007, Cynthia Carroll was the first woman to be named chief executive of London-based mining giant Anglo American.

"I never thought of mining as something a woman shouldn't do," says Cornelia Holtzhausen, the general manager of Anglo American's Kumba iron ore mine in Thabazimbi, South Africa. "I grew up in a mining environment – my friend's father was a metallurgist at a gold mine – and I've always found it very stimulating," she says.

In Australia's mining state of Queensland, authorities launched last year the "Women in Hard Hats" initiative to encourage girls to consider non-traditional careers such as mining.

"Recruiting women is a win-win, as they represent the largest untapped talent pool available to employers needing to address their skills shortages," says Queensland Minister for Women, Karen Struthers. "These industries need women. It is no longer a choice. Mining careers for women need to be a reality not a novelty."

"Increasing women's representation in non-traditional industries will help tackle the skills shortage and allow women and girls to get a slice of Queensland's resources boom," Struthers says.

In Canada's British Columbia (BC), one in 20 jobs is in the mineral exploration and mining industry, but women make up only 16 per cent of that workforce, including a mere five per cent in jobs considered non-traditional for women, such as labourers and heavy equipment operators.

With BC's mineral exploration and mining industry forecasting it will need almost 6,000 additional workers by 2016, a task force investigating the issue said last year that reaching out to women is crucial for the sector.

"It is clear that these challenges are not restricted to BC," the team said in its report *Women: An unmined resource*. For example, private-sector companies operating in

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Australia and South Africa, along with local governments "are purposefully focusing efforts and resources to make the industry more appealing to women and other minority groups".

Yet the report laments that the industry and its culture remain male-dominated, with women reporting they were shut out of social activities. The report also cites a lack of females in senior roles as perpetuating the belief that they are not equal to men.

Until a few decades ago, women in many countries were banned from working below ground.

Sandra Collins was one of the first women to study mining engineering in Queensland and the second in Australia to actually work in the industry. She is now operations manager at a major coalmine in Queensland. But in the 1980s she had to fight legislation that prevented women from working in underground mines to begin her trailblazing career.

"This was a hangover from the days (in the 1800s) when the legislation was formed to get women and children out of the mines," she told the Australian TV station ABC. "It hadn't been changed and it was still on the books."

The ban on women working underground dates back to the mid-19th century. A public outcry over horrendous conditions in British mines, described in a report by a Royal Commission, resulted in the Mines Act 1842 which prohibited women as well as children under ten from working in mines. This practice also found reflection in the ILO's Underground Work (Women)



- Convention (No. 45), which was adopted in 1935, and prohibited underground work for women.

However, in the years following the adoption of the Safety and Health in Mines Convention, 1995 (No. 176) – which calls on member States to develop and implement a coherent policy on safety and health in mines – and lists some key steps to achieve this, the ILO has asked member States to implement Convention No. 176 and consequently consider denouncing Convention No. 45. While Convention No. 45 tried to protect women by excluding them from mining, the principle of Convention No. 176 consists of prevention and protection for both men and women.

“There should be free access for both sexes, complemented by strong occupational health and safety standards,” says Martin Hahn, a mining sector expert at the ILO. “Convention No. 45 had, *inter alia*, aimed to protect women from the then very substantial physical safety and health dangers of underground mining. A lot of the work in the mines used to require great physical strength, which people typically didn’t attribute to women. Nowadays, a lot of the work in large-scale mining is done by

machinery, and safety and health records have improved considerably in well-run mines,” he adds.

Australia’s Mines and Minerals Association (AMMA) says 86 of its members are experiencing skills shortages. The employer organization believes recruiting women will play a significant role in addressing the issue, alongside increasing critical skills training and allowing more foreign miners into the country.

“With 92 per cent of AMMA resource industry employers stating they wish to employ more women, and being an industry where currently fewer than one in five workers are female, there are immense opportunities for Australian women to have a fulfilling and long-term career in the industry,” the association’s Chief Executive, Steve Knott, said at a mining conference in June 2011.

“Traditionally, mining in many countries has been characterized by a strong macho culture of risk-taking, which runs counter to modern occupational safety and health approaches,” says Hahn. “Since this risk-taking culture was fostered by the existence of a highly homogenous workforce, more diversity should really improve things.” ■

