

Women's Experiences in the Western Australian Mining Industry: a snapshot in 2010

Susan Barrera, Jenness Gardner, Bob Horstman

Contact: Susan Barrera susanbarrera@yahoo.com.au

Introduction

The debate about the super tax is currently raging. The captains of the mining industry point to the contribution this industry has made to the Western Australian economy, in fact to the Australian economy, and claim that the new tax would jeopardise this. The federal government argues that all Australians should get a better share of the nation's natural resources.

It is therefore timely to examine the contribution of this industry to the ideals of diversity, given the evidence that a diverse workforce is a productive workforce.

The WA economy, in particular, has recently experienced significant labour shortages in some skill areas. There are strong productivity reasons for the mining industry to maximise the use of human capital, both of female and male workers. Better use of female labour in the mining industry would reduce the drain of labour resources from the rest of the economy. All of this has been explicitly recognised by the industry¹, but the impetus for change seemed to be subsumed by the downturn in global economic circumstances experienced in 2008 – 2009.

Given the predictions that another boom will follow the last (if the doomsday predictions of the opponents of the super tax are not realised), it is timely to review the situation of women in the mining industry and assess whether change is needed to improve the participation and retention of women in this industry.

This paper describes the personal experiences of Western Australian women working in the mining part of the resources sector. The data is drawn from a questionnaire and interviews carried out in May/June 2010. The paper provides a short overview of women in mining in WA, before presenting a themed analysis of the findings from the questionnaires and interviews. As many of the issues identified from the questionnaire and interview responses are not new, the paper concludes by revisiting research conducted by the Chamber of Minerals of Energy in WA² and suggesting that the recommendations for change discussed in this paper remain as relevant today as they were before the global economic downturn.

¹ See, for example, Australian Government Office for Women and Minerals Council of Australia (2007) *Unearthing new resources: attracting and retaining women in the Australian minerals industry*. http://www.minerals.org.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/20275/MCA_Women_In_Mining_WebVersion.pdf [accessed June 2010]

² Reflective Practice (report prepared for the Chamber of Minerals and Energy WA) (2008) *Attraction and Retention of Women in the Western Australian Resources Sector*, http://www.cmewa.com/UserDir/CMERPublications/081127-MPR-Women_in_Resources_Ful_report8.pdf [accessed May 2010]

Working in the mining industry

Workforce characteristics

Australia

There are significant monetary rewards for those working in the mining industry. In November 2009, the average weekly ordinary time earnings of full time workers in mining was \$1945.20³. This is higher than any other industry, and the average for all industries was \$1226.80⁴.

Western Australia

In Western Australia, employees in the mining industry are well remunerated. The average weekly ordinary time earnings of employees in the mining industry in November 2009 was \$2228.00 compared to \$1338.90 for all WA employees⁵.

There is, however, a significant difference between the wages of men and women. With the average male weekly ordinary time earnings in mining at \$2327.80, and the average female weekly earnings at \$1745.1, the gender pay gap in WA mining, as at November 2009, stood at 25.0%, slightly higher than the figure for all industries which was 24.1%⁶.

As of November 2009, there were 64,000 employees working in the WA mining industry⁷. This is a relatively small proportion (6.0%) of WA employees⁸. On average, the female employees were younger than the men, with a median age of 34, compared with 39 for men⁹.

As of November 2009¹⁰:

- 9,070 females (14.2%) are employed in the WA mining industry;
- 2.5% (1,600 employees) of WA mining industry employees are employed part time, and of these, 50% are female;
- females are more likely to be employed as clerical and administrative workers (36.4% - more than seven times more likely than males) and professionals (27.9%); and
- males are more likely to work as technicians and trades workers (32.7% - more than three times than females) and machinery operators and drivers (29.5%).¹¹

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) *Average Weekly Earnings*, catalogue 6302.0, Table 10G (original data, November 2009) [Accessed 30 June 2010].

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) *Average Weekly Earnings*, catalogue 6302.0 (Western Australia, original data, November 2009) [unpublished data].

⁶ *Ibid*.

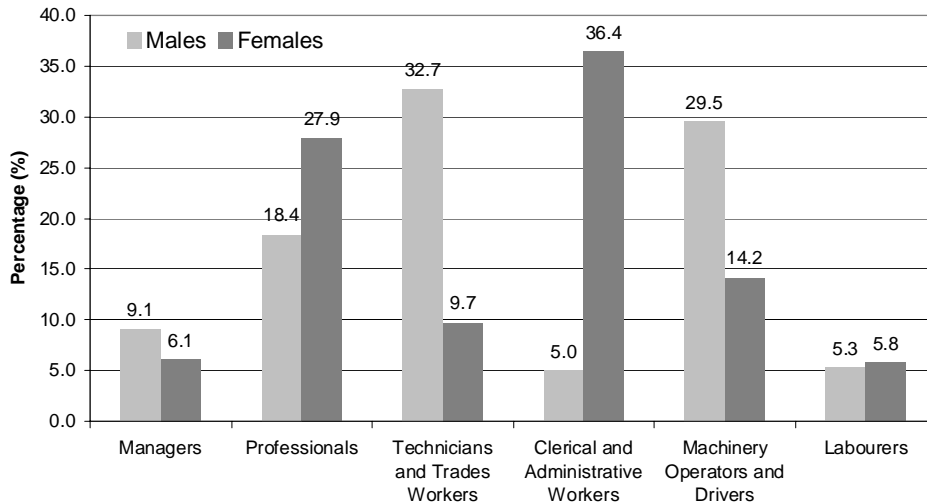
⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) *Employed Persons*, catalogue 6291.055.003, Datacube E06 (original data, November 2009) [accessed 30 June 2010].

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) *Employed Persons*, catalogue 6291.005.003, Datacube E12 (original data, November 2009) [accessed 30 June 2010].

¹⁰ ABS, *Labour Force*, detailed quarterly, cat. no. 6291.0.55.003, data cubes E09 and E12

¹¹ *Ibid*



Part time work

As at November 2009, women made up 22.8% of the mining industry workforce, compared with 45.7% of all industries¹². At this time, part time workers made up only 7.9% of the workforce in this industry, compared with 29.6% of all industries¹³.

Results of the research

Methodology

A short questionnaire was circulated to the Women in Mining (WA) email list.¹⁴ It consisted of twelve questions covering biographical information such as length of service in the mining industry, job role, full time or part time status, shift rosters and family responsibilities and questions about the nature of the job such as career prospects, company policies on work/life/family balance and open ended questions on the culture of the mining industry. A total of 45 women responded to the questionnaire, some in writing. Others agreed to be interviewed by telephone. The sample of women was self-selected. All respondents were given a guarantee that their responses would not be used in a way that would identify them.

The following provides a short comparison of key characteristics of the women in the sample with employees more generally in the mining industry.

Number of years working in the resources industry

The average length of service of the women in the sample was 10.9 years. Unfortunately data was not available to make a direct comparison. The table below provides some context showing length of service with employers in the industry.

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) *Employed Persons*, catalogue 6291.055.003, Table 6 (original data, November 2009) [accessed 30 June 2010]

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ The Women in Mining Network (WiMNET) is a network under the auspices of The Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (The AusIMM) which represents 10,000 professionals working in the global minerals industry. WiMNET is aimed at increasing the participation of women in the minerals industry and the activities of The AusIMM.

Length of service with employer/business at February 2008 (Australia) ¹⁵

	Less than 12 months	1 and under 2 years	2 and under 3 years	3 and under 5 years	5 and under 10 years	10 years & over	Total
MALES							
Mining	20.90%	16.30%	13.10%	13.70%	14.20%	21.80%	100.00%
Total all industries	21.00%	11.40%	10.70%	13.50%	16.90%	26.50%	100.00%
FEMALES							
Mining	34.60%	10.60%	13.80%	6.90%	23.40%	10.60%	100.00%
Total all industries	23.40%	12.90%	10.90%	14.10%	17.30%	21.40%	100.00%
PERSONS							
Mining	22.80%	15.50%	13.20%	12.80%	15.50%	20.30%	100.00%
Total all industries	22.10%	12.10%	10.80%	13.70%	17.10%	24.20%	100.00%

Part time work

Of the sample, 11.1% of women worked part time (n = 5), making the sample slightly more part time than is the case across the industry where only 7.9% of employees are part time.¹⁶

Working shifts or Fly In Fly Out (FIFO)

The difficulties of balancing work and life are compounded when women work shifts. Life is made more complicated when the work involves regular visits to a remote site, via Fly-In-Fly-Out arrangements which are characteristic of the mining industry.

The respondents were asked: Do you work shifts, and, if so, what roster do you work, e.g. two weeks on and one week off?

Of the sample, 26.7% (n = 12) reported working shifts or FIFO. The remainder work regular working hours. A number of women did mention that regular site visits were a feature of their working responsibilities. In addition, a number had worked shifts or FIFO in previous jobs. This is much higher than the figures quoted in the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (AusIMM) 2009 Remuneration and Employment Survey Report¹⁷ which reported that 15.7% of the respondents (mining employees) were undertaking FIFO work. This survey also reported that 72.7% of respondents worked Monday to Friday.

Women with family responsibilities

Respondents were asked “What family responsibilities do you have?”

For the purposes of enumeration, having family responsibilities was defined as meaning that the respondent was caring for or supporting at least one dependent family such as a dependent child or parent.

Of the respondents, 68.9% (n = 31) reported that they had no family responsibilities. While this seems a very large proportion, it is very difficult to find suitable comparative data to contextualise this. It was also impossible to find data to determine whether this was reflective of female employees in the mining industry more generally. In order to provide at least some context, a specific ABS report from NSW indicated that in the six months to October 2005 an estimated

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) Labour Mobility, catalogue 6209.0 Datacube 4 (February 2008, original data) [accessed 02/07/10]

¹⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) *Employed Persons*, catalogue 6291.055.003, Table 6 (original data, November 2009) [accessed 30 June 2010]

¹⁷ Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (2009) Remuneration and Employment Survey Report (report purchased 2009 from www.ausimm.com.au/shop)

2,416,500 or 48% of persons aged 18 years or over in New South Wales (NSW) provided care for another adult or child, compared to 42% in October 2000. A higher proportion of females provided care (53%) than males (42%). Of those who provided care, 1,909,500 persons (79%) provided care on an ongoing or continual basis¹⁸. Very similar results were found for an equivalent survey conducted in Queensland in 2002.

Of the 31.1% (n = 14) women with family responsibilities, half worked part time, and the other half worked full time.

Employer support for career development

Respondents were asked “What are your career prospects with your current employer? What does your employer do to help you achieve your career goals?”

Responses varied a great deal, but roughly fell into three categories. About one third of women rated the company’s interest/support for their career prospects as very positive:

Opportunities are abundant! There are many career, professional and talent development programs in the company.

Others mentioned programs which were designed to develop leadership skills:

My employer provides in-team mentoring on studies, in-house technical talks, training, access to attending conferences and leadership programs.

Financial support in obtaining additional qualifications was the most frequently reported support from employers.

It is noteworthy, but not surprising, that a clear relationship was apparent between the size and resources of a company and the respondents’ reporting that the company supported their career aspirations.

Another third viewed their employers’ support in a less favourable light:

My employer doesn’t assist in my career goals, I’ve set them for myself and if I’ve taken everything out of this position that I wanted, I’ll move on.

My employer does nothing to help me achieve my goals

(There are) “No career prospects as a part timer”.

A small number of respondents reported that, having determined that there were no further career prospects for them with their employer, they had set up their own companies or were planning to move on as soon as possible.

The responses from the remaining third were tempered. Some women expressed a lack of interest in further promotion:

I’m not ambitious, but employer would contribute to further education costs. My advancement is solely up to me.

Others felt that they would have to relocate to get a promotion.

¹⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (Oct 2005) *Managing Care and Work, New South Wales*, Catalogue 4912, accessed July 2010

My prospects OK but not in Australia; there are limited training funds.

The assumption from the women surveyed that part timers have no career options is troubling, but not confined to the mining industry. And while it is difficult to provide career development in a small company, there are strategies which could be put in place to reduce turnover of valuable staff.

Company's family friendly policies

Respondents were asked, "What are the company's policies to make it easier for employees to manage family responsibilities?"

Some companies have obviously made significant efforts to promote their family friendly policies, for example, the employer of this respondent:

(The) company has great policies to assist in managing family responsibilities including flexible work times, maternity leave, careers leave.

However, there is a caution:

While policies are great, the practical application can be difficult.

Another respondent acknowledged that, while the company policies may be in place, individuals may feel inhibited from using them:

The hard part is managing the assumptions and expectations of yourself/others. The guilt you feel when you take time for family/personal time, and the clock watching when you come in late from dropping kids at school, or when you take personal time for extra hours done, but others don't see that.

Others noted the lack of support at senior levels:

I must note that there are some people, including a senior woman that does not agree that part time should exist.

A number of women, particularly those without family responsibilities, were not aware in detail of their company's policies:

I honestly don't know. I know we have maternal and paternal leave. And if you have a family emergency you get 3 days off.

We have no policies as such, it is up to the individual to negotiate these with their manager. It seems that the harder the role to fill, the more they are open to negotiating this flexibility.

Many mentioned the difficulties of the FIFO working arrangements.

(We are) Unable to cater for family responsibilities in remote areas.

The Camp manager is fairly inflexible. We must take our leave in two week blocks as this makes it easier for the employer to bring in relief staff on a 2 week on, 1 week off roster

Only help was for married men with children. Options for mothers are very limited, especially those who were previously working in FIFO roles. We have many who having a baby means losing their job, as they cannot get residential jobs.

As I work on a FIFO site, all the women who fall pregnant leave their job to raise their children at home and rarely return to work here. Some pick up part-time work in our head office in Perth, but these positions are few and far between.

One respondent believed that more could be done:

I think companies have a way to go with maternity leave arrangements + treating part timers. Companies should consider sponsoring extra child care facilities at remote mine sites so females can more easily go back to work.

Another woman had become discouraged:

In a previous ... mining company, the career and promotional opportunities, international travel and flexibility and work life balance were some of the key drivers for me leaving.

One woman summed up her feelings succinctly:

Mention the issue (work and family) and you're dead.

Percentage part time employees by selected industry, Australia Nov Quarter 2009¹⁹

Mining	3.1%
Manufacturing	14.1%
Construction	15.5%
Public Administration and Safety	16.0%
Financial and Insurance Services	16.1%
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	19.8%
Information Media and Telecommunications	20.7%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	21.3%
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	24.2%
Education and Training	37.1%
Administrative and Support Services	39.0%
Health Care and Social Assistance	43.9%
Retail Trade	47.1%
Accommodation and Food Services	57.9%

It seems mining companies have some changes to make yet in order to enable their employees to manage their work and family pressures. In particular from these comments it appears that part time work is not well accepted in the industry, perhaps because of its relatively low incidence. According the ABS Labour Force survey²⁰ part time work is very common in Australia, with part timers accounting for 29.9% of the Australian labour force in November 2009. Mining, however, has the lowest incidence of part time employment of any of the industries in Australia with just 3.1% of the mining workforce being part time. In Western Australia, the percentage is even lower, with only 2.5% of the mining workforce being part time.²¹ In Australia, part time work is the most common way in which people with caring responsibilities manage to work and care for their families and thus the low incidence of part time work in this industry is of concern.

While some companies, particularly some of the larger ones, have implemented some excellent programs to assist women with caring responsibilities, these approaches are not yet embedded in the culture of the industry more generally. Much is made of these issues, and a raft of remedies recommended in both the Australian Government Office for Women/Minerals Council of Australia 2007 report²² and the Chamber of Minerals and Energy 2008 report²³.

¹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, November 2009, *Labour Force, Australia*, Detailed, Quarterly 6291.0.55.033, DATACUBE E06, accessed July 2010

²⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Nov 2009 Labour Force, Australia trend data, catalogue 6202.0

²¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, November 2009, *Labour Force, Australia*, Detailed, Quarterly 6291.0.55.033, DATACUBE E06, accessed July 2010.

²² Australian Government Office for Women and Minerals Council of Australia (2007) *Unearthing new resources: attracting and retaining women in the Australian minerals industry*.

Benefits and disadvantages of working in the mining industry

The respondents were asked “What do you like most about the way the company treats its employees? What do you like least?”

A number of women commented favourably on their company’s treatment of them and the evolving recognition of the need for family friendly responsibilities:

We are treated fairly and involved in decisions.

This company has an excellent attitude towards staff retention and engagement and ensures that a fair and balanced workplace is evident.

The mining industry despite its male dominance has evolved and some issues such as family concerns which may have been traditionally been a consideration only for women, has changed and they have become as important to male colleagues as female colleagues.

Others take a more negative view:-

It is still a very male-dominated industry. If you are a female, unless you are a skilled professional (engineer, geologist etc) your career prospects are better if you are attached to a male in the industry.

Others love the industry itself and the people working in it:

I have been able to create and shape a niche within the industry by using my subject expertise, knowledge and interests, and have always loved the general style of people - passionate, commonsense, practical and can-do attitudes.

Some felt that the acceptance of women in the industry was increasing:

I think the presence of women in mining has improved since I started. When I did vacation work in 1999, I couldn't get work uniforms out of the company stores as the work uniforms for females were all for office people (skirts etc) so I had to drive to (a nearby town) to pick up stuff.

I think we are a long way off from an equal workplace, if such a thing even exists, but I think in the last 20 years a lot of changes for the better have happened. I used to be worn out, and not want to be a ‘pioneer’ anymore, but now I am more excited, as my immediate management team is genuinely supportive and I really appreciate that.

The lack of female leadership or acceptance of women as leaders was an issue for some:

I see very few women in senior management positions in Mining companies outside of the traditional, core business areas of HR, Workforce Management and Finance.

As a supervisor, I find that some men have a real problem with me issuing orders, however, on the flip side, other men are so keen to impress that they go out of their way to help. It is definitely harder to progress as a woman as you have to prove yourself to be capable of the job before anyone will take you seriously - I don't think this is the same for men.

http://www.minerals.org.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/20275/MCA_Women_In_Mining_WebVersion.pdf [accessed June 2010]

²³ Reflective Practice (report prepared for the Chamber of Minerals and Energy WA) (2008) *Attraction and Retention of Women in the Western Australian Resources Sector*, http://www.cmewa.com/UserDir/CMERPublications/081127-MPR-Women_in_Resources_Ful_report8.pdf [accessed May 2010]

(T)here is still sexual discrimination in mining (even in a corporate office) and no amount of policies or training will change that. The lack of females in upper management and especially on boards is disappointing. Mining is very much a boys club, and their arrogance means that they cannot even see the insular effect of having all males on a board, nor even consider what having a female can bring to the discussion.

In a leadership role I often find that if there is a disagreement of opinions the cause (in the eyes of others) is not because I am a tough boss with high standards or have a varying technical opinion or a different style of communication but because I am a women.

The challenge for both men and women in reconciling their work and family aspirations remains:

The pay is good but the job dominates your life, making it difficult to have a fulfilling family and social life AND to be seen as a high performer. Work/life balance comes at the expenses of your career in many cases – for males and females.

The difficulty lies in the lifestyle choices. As an (employee) it is a distinct choice that needs to be made between work and family life. There is no crèche on a mine site, so if you decide to start a family, the options are considerably less career-wise. It would be a shame to let go of a career, so hard won, due to the decision to start a family/be with your family.

Others commented about the mining industry culture:

I find that the mining industry is simply a huge magnifier of gender issues that exist elsewhere in our society, so the problems with gender inequality will need to be addressed in wider society before a real difference is noted within the industry

The prevalence of “jobs for boys” rather than merit based promotions was a key factor in my decision for leaving my previous employer. I have noticed that the issues I was faced with in my previous position seem symptomatic of the industry. I still notice that women are often talked over and dismissed in meetings with both senior and line management.

Working in a male dominated industry I find that I have to work harder to prove myself that I am capable of achieving the same results as male co workers.

There is a “bloke” attitude here where women seem to be tolerated in the profession, and even considered equals, but we are not automatically included in impromptu meetings or decisions because “the guys just got on with it”.

I think the industry still has a bad name for women, not in the professional roles but in the operator roles. It is still seen as a “man’s game” with the exception of some “women friendly” jobs like truck driving and site admin.

Does international experience provide clues for additional policy responses?

The focus of this article has been on company and employer organisation policies and practices as they impact on the participation of female workers in the WA mining industry. We have not considered what role could or should be played by other institutions such as trade unions or state or federal governments. For a more comprehensive analysis of female participation in mining, the role of Government support for parental leave, childcare, affirmative action, antidiscrimination mechanisms among others would need to be considered.

The authors note that Scandinavian countries such as Norway have a significantly higher participation rate for women in the resources sector than Australia, suggesting that there is scope for considering the policy responses in these countries and their potential application in Australia.

While the federal Australian government is only now providing across the board paid parental leave pay (from January 2011), Norway has had government funded maternity leave since 1956, and parental leave since 1978. Currently in Norway the mother receives 48 weeks on full pay or one year on 80% pay, and fathers receive six weeks or 30 working days paid leave.

In December 2003 the Norwegian Parliament amended the Public Limited Companies Act to give public limited companies five years to either ensure that women held 40% of the seats of each listed company or risk closure. The requirement came into effect on January 1, 2008 and the government is considering extending the law to cover family companies.

Arguably, these Norwegian Government policies (along with extensive provision of government-funded childcare and a thirty year history of the operation of a Gender Equality Ombudsperson) help create a culture that values women's participation in the resources sector.

A more detailed analysis of the culturally specific aspects of these Norwegian policies would be needed to determine their relevance to Australia and that is beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion

It is not possible to draw firm conclusions from the field work research given the sample size and the self-selected nature of the respondents. However some tentative conclusions can be drawn. While some respondents worked for firms with developed diversity policies that were systematically applied this was not always the case. Historically mining has been a male-dominated industry and significant evidence of barriers emerged for women wanting to work in most operational mine site roles.

The 2008 WA Chamber of Mineral and Energy report "Attraction and Retention of Women in the Resources Sector"²⁴ contains numerous recommendations on promoting female employment in the sector that can be grouped into HR practices promoting diversity such as recruitment and selection; career paths, training and development; EEO and work-life balance initiatives; and environmental factors such as workplace culture, work environment and industry image.

While the global economic downturn seems to have led to this report not receiving the attention warranted, our research suggests that issues identified in the CME report among others, remain prevalent in women's experiences of the mining industry in Western Australia. At the level of the individual mining company and employer-employee relationship the implementation of the recommendations of the CME report mentioned above would deal with the great majority of the issues identified in our fieldwork and significantly promote the employment of women in the WA mining industry.

²⁴ Reflective Practice (report prepared for the Chamber of Minerals and Energy WA) (2008) *Attraction and Retention of Women in the Western Australian Resources Sector*, http://www.cmewa.com/UserDir/CMEPublications/081127-MPR-Women in Resources Ful_report8.pdf [accessed May 2010]