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***'Keep Your Head High': adaptations and struggles of Australian Women Miners***

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**Abstract**

The adaptations and struggles for women miners over the last three decades have been immense. This study reports on these changes for Australian Women Miners. It is based on qualitative interviews of 22 of these women mining workers recorded between 2006 and 2009. The first handful of women began working in Queensland coal mines in 1979, as labourers, in what was seen by some as a public relations exercise rather than a genuine willingness to embrace equal opportunity. Working in the mines can be a real source of economic liberation for women, probably the best method for those not seeking university educations, provided the debt trap can be avoided. But in pursuing that goal, they face many challenges of adaptation and struggle.

**Introduction**

This article reports on the changing material conditions of women miners since the first handful of women began working in Queensland coal mines in 1979. This is therefore a gendered study of women as agents in a masculinised work environment; of masculinist work organisation and cultures; collective (union) and individual resistances. The primary research reported here comes from a research project on women in mining, for which we interviewed 133 men and women in twelve Queensland coal mining communities and

home cities about their work,<sup>1</sup> including 22 women mining workers (19 production or trades workers and 3 professionals). Fictional names are used after the next section. We begin with an acknowledgement of some of the existing literature in this area and brief overview of the key developments in the movement of women out of and back into the mines. The rest of our paper looks at the challenges the women miners face and the motivations, adaptations and struggles involved, focusing principally on the women themselves but also considering the roles of other actors.

None of this has been easy for women miners; there are barriers facing women all along the way but as the numbers of women employed increases, adaptations become easier as they go beyond the point of what Kanter (1977) calls a 'token' female group and these complexities of work satisfaction are the things that we explore here.

### **Doing gender- a brief review of the literature**

The consensus in recent literature is that we need to know what sexist practices are in the work organisation (Kelan 2010) so we can undo them (Bulter 2004; Pullen and Knights 2008). And that to do gender there are two traditions that should be addressed; on the one hand symbolic interactionists (Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1956) and its follow through ethnomethodology (West and Zimmerman 1987).

### **The decline and rise of women in mining**

In 1842, a British Royal Commission on Employment in Collieries, reported on the conditions facing women and children in the mines. As early British sociologist Harriet

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<sup>1</sup> The project was financially supported by the Queensland District of the Mining and Energy Division of the CFMEU, for which we express our thanks.

Martineau (1849) depicted it, the report showed how ‘women were employed as beasts of burden’ and ‘made to crawl on all-fours in the passages of the pits, dragging carts by a chain passing from the waist between the legs’. The Royal Commission led eventually to the banning of women and children working underground. By the 1930s, the 45<sup>th</sup> convention of the International Labour Organisation [ILO] prohibited the employment of women underground. In Queensland, the *Coal Mining Act 1925* provided ‘no female shall be employed below ground in any coal mine.’

Australian women and girls were involved with small surface gold mining operations in the nineteenth century in places like Glen Osmond (Bello 2006) and Bendigo (Vic) ((Boorman and Mayers 2006)), but gradually they withdrew or were withdrawn from the industry. For much of the twentieth century, a woman’s place was in the home – at least, once she was married. Women might only find paid employment in the mining industry in the offices, as typists or secretaries. From the 1960s these things began to change. The feminist movement transformed the way society thought about women in work, and by late 1972 the industrial arena had equal pay for work of equal value entrenched as a principle, if not as a practice. In the mining sector, technological changes opened up potential new opportunities for women. From the 1970s, the development of large scale open cut mines, became the dominant mining technology in Queensland, placing less reliance on brute strength and giving less salience to the excuse that no woman would be safe from men’s dark urges in the blackness of a coal mine. An ‘explicit decision against this discrimination against women’ in the Coal Mining Act ‘was made by the Queensland Miner’s Convention in July 1977’ and the legislative 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, increasing skills for some but narrowing opportunities for others. Blue collar work in the mines began to look attractive, well paid and feasible for women.

In less than two years, the Queensland Colliery Employers Union recruited the first women to join the union (and, as far as we can tell, the first women to work in coal mining, given the very high union membership of the times). These were two South Blackwater miners; Annette Sparks, aged twenty-two, and Lyndal Hunt, aged eighteen.



They commenced work on surface cleaning duties in early 1979. In May 1979, Thiess, Dampier and Mitsui (TDM) mines at Moura, received 104 job applicants in response to an advert targeted at employing women. Four women began work at the wash plant.



Patty Ryan, one of the pioneering four at Moura, later took six months leave (with a doctor's note) to have her baby, Shara Ann. Management terminated her employment.



The union fought and won her right to be reinstated. In 1984, Hazel Yarrow and Mandy Harrison started work at the Blair Athol mine near Clermont.



Several of the early women miners mentioned that they felt that their original employment had been a corporate public relations exercise. 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 had worked in a number of mines. She loved her job and as a classically pretty woman she had been used extensively for company publicity. But she too said:

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.



Before working in the mines, Iris had needed to hold down three jobs. So she really enjoyed her mining pay packet and the bonus of the companionship of the men:

They were good. There was the odd one that jumped up and down because one day there was a meeting and Nerida and I went through the men's showers ...and we got reprimanded for that. [Laughs]... 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.

From 1984, the passage of the Sex Discrimination Act meant companies had to abide by the law and employ women on the same basis as men. Moreover, some believed the enthusiasm of certain mining companies for women workers has been part of an effort to change, undermine, or avoid the union mining culture. Other researchers have found that a strategy among Australian mining companies since the 1980s was to employ those who had little or no memory of industrial militancy ((Eveline and Booth 2002a, 562; Thompson 1984)). Whether that worked is something we canvass below.

Women's desirability as employees was boosted by their allegedly radiating a 'civilising effect' on the male mining workforce ((Eveline and Booth 2002b, 564)). But the biggest boost to female mines employment, from the late 1990s, was the shortage of labour and high labour turnover making the hiring women very attractive to companies. Hiring wives of current miners already based in the local communities was one way of adding to labour

supply without putting further upward pressure on accommodation costs, community infrastructure and hence wage expectations.

For the women we interviewed, their motives for being miners were direct; some women became miners because of the money, some did it because they could not survive in the city on working women's wages with children, some did it because their fathers, grandfathers and brothers were in the mines first and lit their way. Others did it because they were left in company towns stranded by divorce and separations. But they largely had one thing in common: they loved the work and the rewards it brought: 'Operating big machinery – I love it. Yeah it's the best thing,' said Eloise. 'Oh look I just love it. I run up the front of one of them going ooooooh!' was Wendy's take. 'Yep! Yep! I love the big trucks,' squealed Laila.

Today women can be found in all mining positions: in wash plants, on drag lines, driving trucks that carry up to three hundred tonnes of dirt in open cut mines and to the few that work underground. But women still represent only a small portion of the workforce, accounting for just 10.4 percent of the mining industry, with many of those being office workers – women account for just 6.3 per cent of operators and production workers and 2.4 per cent of supervisors (Queensland Resources Council 2008). Out of 75 occupations for which the ABS had data on women's weekly pay in 2006, 'Intermediate Mining and Construction Workers' was the highest paid ((Australian Bureau of Statistics 6306.0)).

### **Adaptations and struggle by women**



We found from our interviews that women faced challenges in five arenas. In each of these, they had to adapt to the different challenges by conforming to the expectations of men, or engaging in struggle, sometimes individually but often collectively, to confront and change them. Some women adapted fairly quickly to work on the mines; others made the mines adapt to them and yet others found it unacceptable and left.

### *The production sphere*

First, women have had to deal with issues of productive efficiency. They have had to demonstrate themselves to be highly capable, reliable workers, often under a microscope of greater scrutiny than their male counterparts, something Kanter (1977) identifies as a feature of workers in 'token' groups (comprising less than around 15 per cent of workers).

A young woman miner, Trudy, told us:

I think the light is probably on you a little bit more because you are female. I think the females out there do expect that they have to perform better to be able to prove themselves...There's only so many females out there, faces [are] remembered a lot easier. Whereas if you're just another bloke you're easier to go under the radar.

Moirá agreed:

You know 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 drivers.'

One older man thought women were fine in the mine 'as long as it's not trades':

they were bloody hopeless. They couldn't lift half the bloody spanners even. You

can go into Mackay now and they're working behind a bar – waste of a trade. I don't give a damn whether you call me sexist or whatever, that trade thing, that mechanical thing, that's a male thing.

Belinda observed that 'it's hard work for the girl because she's got to be better than they are and not be offended by them. And they will try very hard to offend.'

Ironically, our interviews showed that women mineworkers are well regarded in the industry, because, as Deidre says, 'we're just a lot more careful, we ask a lot more questions and just treat the machinery a lot more carefully' whereas men's philosophy, to use Marcia's phrase, is 'just drive it like you stole it'. Perhaps they are also well regarded because only the good women mineworkers survive in the industry.

#### *The domestic sphere*

Second, women mineworkers have had to deal with the domestic sphere, often managing significant household responsibilities while working full-time. While for some women mine working was an escape from house working – as Maxine said - 'I would prefer to be outside than inside cleaning the house; I tell you, I still can't do it' – this expansion of possibilities did not necessarily transform the sexual division of labour. Monica, who worked 'crib relief' (shorter shifts, usually six to eight hours, taking control of a truck while the normal driver is having his or her break or 'crib' on a rotating basis), said:

I still take [my daughter] to school, I pick her up, I take her to work, you know I still try and do my motherly, I still cook,..

*So nobody makes your crib?*

No, they say where's mine? ... I still do all those things for them, wash and iron me son's clothes and do everything for them, 'cause it's like my job.

Deidre and her husband both worked twelve hour shifts, with Deidre enjoying the bonus of domestic duties as well as the mood shifts from night work:

I do the cooking, cleaning, plus working as well. I'm very cranky. My husband, even though he does night shift as well, he loves night shift, I hate it, I don't sleep very well...It mucks around with our body clock and I think that's why we get cranky, coz we feel all out of sorts.

#### *The social construction of gender and sexuality*

Third, women have had to deal with issues arising from social constructions of their gender and sexuality. This has several aspects to it. One is overcoming old *prejudices* about the role of women from supervisors and workers, and even other women. Women such as Bernice and Monica felt that 'there are definitely guys out there that think we shouldn't be there'. These men are 'typically a bit older, but there's some young ones too and it's probably because their father's say it that they think it'. Moira said '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.'

Even amongst women, views have been divided as to whether women should work in the mines. Opal, a young mother, told us:

'I personally don't believe that a woman should be out there any way. I have got old fashioned values. My mother always taught me that, "Unless you are going to piss standing up, don't do a man's job"'. .

Betty, an older woman who has since died, was against women being in the mines for reasons of their health and safety. She thought men would try to rescue them if there was an accident and that would kill them both. Even Deena, a contracted ‘lampie’ – maintaining and repairing miners’ lamps – expressed slight unease about her job: ‘It’s a stigma that’s been around, like even when I was growing up, mining were for men, and women were shop assistants, or hairdressers,...’

Dealing with constructions of their gender also, more dramatically, involves sometimes defending themselves against *harassment*. Hannah spoke of how, when she was young, ‘you did have people try to come onto you, usually married men. Leila identified harassment from men as the worst thing about her job: ‘They don’t realise how hurtful they can be.’ Not all women we spoke to experienced harassment, by any means. Selina said: ‘It was very male dominated at the initial start but, no, I was accepted and the men were very respectful and they treated me quite well.’ But several of our respondents did experience it, especially amongst the pioneers. 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... 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’. Hannah gave management a broader responsibility for harassment:

The attitude came from the top down that this was acceptable behaviour. If their

attitude had been different, the blokes do as they're told basically, and they would have done as they were told.

Dealing with the social construction of their gender and sexuality also required confronting the sexual *insecurity of fellow women* outside the mines. Some women in the community ironically feared women miners would be sexual predators. One woman 'bailed up' Wynne in the meat department in the supermarket, accusing her of making advances on her husband:

I said to her "luv have you had a look at him seriously?" I said [laughter] "if I'm going to do it, it ain't going to be with your old man...Go home and take your rose coloured glasses off and have a good look at him – like, come on!" [laughter] She just didn't know what to say.

Iris reported that:

Friday night and all the girls would get drunk and say, "What do you do with my husband out at that mine?" But most of them were really good. The older ladies thought that women shouldn't be there and that it wasn't for women.

### *The employment relationship*

Fourth, women must deal with issues arising from their conditions of work. This involves, crucially, achieving *job security*. As the industry has boomed they have become more important as a source of reliable labour – but more readily discarded when the good times appear to end. When job cuts came, Maxine encountered heavy social pressures from both the company and her male colleagues who wanted those most in 'need' to keep their jobs:

they put up a Voluntary Redundancy and said “look this will be the last time the VR is offered. We would like the older people to go and give the younger people the opportunity” and because I was one of the bunnies I said “yes, I will go, and give my son an opportunity at the mine,” which he never ever did.

The greater vulnerability of women miners has resulted not just from social pressure, but also from their location in the labour process.

In 2007-08 women were 4 per cent of permanent blue collar workers but 16 per cent of casual blue collar workers in the Queensland mining industry and 14 per cent of contractors ((Department of Mines and Energy 2008) p40; (Queensland Resources Council 2008)). When the boom temporarily ended with the global financial crisis, it was overwhelmingly contractors and casuals who were laid off from the coal mines. This disproportionately affected women.

Obtaining *training and skills career paths* is also a problem. In 2007-08 only 2 per cent of mining tradespeople were women. Winona, a trained electrician, had to take a second job – in a restaurant at a contractors’ camp – to get by in her first apprenticeship year.

At one mine where most workers were multi-skilled, access to training did not appear a problem. Elsewhere, however, when we asked Wynne whether she thought the training and career opportunities for women were the same as for the men, she answered, ‘No! Still not even today it's not, no way in hell!... Girls are on trucks... A few get a dozer, they very rarely get a shovel.’ Moira confirmed that ‘A lot of the other guys are multi skilled, we’re not.’ Eloise had been blocked from training on the equipment she wanted for some time and, as she saw it, the biggest obstacle to women’s career advancement was ‘supervisory

attitudes... It does have a little bit [to do with] the blokes around you. But, they're not the ones giving you the opportunity to advance.' Another part of the problem was that crib relief, disproportionately employing women, was not providing opportunities. Wendy saw that:

Temps that have come on, with not even a truck skill, get trained up and now they're being offered dozer and grader and whatever. But because I'm crib relief I don't have those opportunities...Every employee should have a career path. Well, I don't have one. Crib reliefs don't have one.

Dealing with issues concerning conditions of work also involves women addressing their *rights as workers* alongside their co-workers, male and female. Women like men face challenges in coping with the rotating twelve hour shift schedules that now dominate mine work in Australia and elsewhere ((Smith 2008a)). Danielle described how the shift patterns make her cranky, and how her daughter 'knows when to just leave me alone. She'll leave me alone, the dogs won't bark, the birds won't chirp.' Not all disliked the long shifts. Nellie liked them because 'you get it all over and done with.' However, the popularity of crib relief among women reflected the difficulties posed for many by the twelve hour shifts.

Consistent with other research showing women as likely to be involved in unions as men, other things being constant (eg (Youngblood et al. 1984)), we found little evidence that women were inactive in union affairs. Nadia, for example, was a union delegate who was in 'boots and all' fighting for the union. Still, some of the women who had used the union felt that they would like to be more activist but that they were too vulnerable to being

singled out for retribution, as Danielle said:

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.

### *Managing public identities and support networks*

Fifth, in order to successfully stand up for those rights as workers, women need to **manage public identities** so that their gender is not seen as excluding them from the class and occupational identities of their male co-workers.

For women miners, the challenge was to be seen as part of the class and occupation that united the workers in their dealings with management and with each other. This meant men needed to recognise that gender was not a core issue in defining women's relationship to work and management. This was most difficult to achieve when women might be seen as being used by management to undermine working conditions and solidarity. As mentioned, it was not an uncommon view: introducing women miners was seen by Tessa as a way of undermining the male workforce, 'You know, "if you guys cannot do it we'll get some women in here."' This was the concern that accompanied Wendy, who started work as only the second woman ever employed on her site just after a bitter industrial dispute had concluded at that mine. The day she started was 'the hardest thing I'd ever had to do... [They were] very mistrusting of each other let alone a woman, you could see 'em thinking, "what's she going to do?'" It took her three months to get accepted but, she said, 'By the time I left out there, I got along famously; they were a great bunch of blokes.'

The management of their public identities is closely tied to their need to develop **networks**



*of support*, in both their domestic and working ‘crew’ worlds ((Smith 2008b, c)). Regarding the former, some women relied heavily on husbands or relatives for support. Daryl, a mineworker’s husband, was very clear: ‘I’m very proud of my wife for what she does’. Often this overlapped with the latter. Having a male mine mentor, such as a father, brother or husband working there was a common source of security. Those without male mentors appeared more vulnerable. That said, many women experienced support from their fellow workers. Having more women in the mines helped, said Danielle, and it was clear to us that when someone was the only woman on a crew it could be harder. But she and others also talked of support from male co-workers. Robyn spoke of camaraderie: ‘I tell them, “don’t get me wrong, don’t think that I like you now just because I’m standing up for you. This is all about family”...Yeah. And that’s what you do, you stick together.’ Others as part of this collective support relied on the union and resisted efforts of some companies to break down union solidarity. 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.

A key question women facing women has been the extent to which they seek to maintain unique or ‘feminine’ aspects of their behaviour, and that to which they seek to become ‘*one of the boys*’. Assuming the language and norms of ‘the boys’ was a strategy commonly used by the women. 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.

It is a strategy that worked for many women but was not without its dangers. One of the women we interviewed would seek to 'humiliate' those who crossed her, but she had one of the most difficult times of any of the women to whom we spoke. As Eloise explained:

You can be one of the boys, but in being one of the boys, sometimes the boys can take it a bit too far. So, if you're going to be one of the boys, make sure you know your limits. Be prepared. If you're going to be one of the boys, dish out certain things, be prepared to for them to dish it back to you...You got to have that respect. They have to respect you, as a woman. But, respect you for the work that you do. And what you can do....If you're good at what you do, they'll have more respect for you.

### **Responses and adaptations by men**

Opposition to women was strongest underground. Some was based on superstition: one retired metals miner told us that 'at one stage it was taboo to have women on board ships because they invite disaster ...so women weren't allowed to go underground and that was it.' Even the Queen, we were told, was not allowed to visit underground on a royal tour. Some was based on sexual fears: 'it only needs somebody to cut that [light power] cable and that woman is in total darkness... anybody with [in] a 500 metre radius is possibly a suspect'. Some was based on physical strength: 'you wouldn't really want to depend your life on them to lift something off you because they're just incapable of doing it.' It is a

complaint sometimes raised on the surface mines, where most women work. Belinda said:

A lot of the old miners just didn't like women being around...I can remember a friend of mine – her husband ranting on about how this girl was an electrician and she shouldn't have been because she was too tiny and she couldn't even lift a tool box. And when I mentioned it to somebody he said neither can any of the young blokes that start there, it's enormous. [laughter]'

Despite years of management training and legislation on equal employment opportunity, some managers still hold negative views towards women mineworkers. 'I had a foreman say to me about two months ago, there is no place for women on a coal field,' said Robyn.

One of the men we interviewed noted that women on site changed male behaviour, making them 'close up slightly....Probably not quite so boisterous, that sort of thing. Some still are. A lot of the older guys sort of quieten up.' He seemed to think this was a bad thing.

For some women miners sharing lockers with pornographic pictures was a problem. Wendy discussed how her group dealt with it 'years ago':

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. But it's a management issue now.

Nellie complained about the female nudes displayed in the crib room but was disconcerted to see that the men were helped by another woman: 'she is a lesbian, so she helps them put them up on the board!' The tactic of women like Brooke and Marcia was 'ignore it!'

One of the union leaders, Rupert, told us that he would not want his daughter to be a miner because: 'It changes their outlook completely...I'm probably a bit old fashioned and still like women being feminine...they do get a bit blokey ... They adapt to the same lingo, language. Not all.'

Rupert thought the other downside was that having women on site changed male behaviour, making them 'close up slightly....Probably not quite so boisterous, that sort of thing. Some still are. A lot of the older guys sort of quieten up.' What Rupert liked however was that women consistently turn up at union meetings 'that's one of the good things. And they show a big interest. So if they've got an issue they bring it up...They put up with the odd bit of language. Well it's not an odd bit [laugh]'. Other male unionists like Robert spoke highly of having women in the mines and of how the union 'hammered away here for years to employ women and they [the company] wouldn't entertain it and eventually they did in the open cut.'

Some older men, such as Victor, thought a line should be drawn at letting women become tradesmen. Women were fine in the mine 'as long as it's not trades':

They were bloody hopeless. They couldn't lift half the bloody spanners even. You can go into Mackay now and they're working behind a bar – waste of a trade. I don't give a damn whether you call me sexist or whatever, that trade thing, that mechanical thing, that's a male thing.

We asked Victor about the women driving the trucks: 'There are three on our shift, lesbians, big influx ... one of the girls out there used to be my son's ex girlfriend, I said 'see what you do to women make them turn the corner' [laughter]..

If some men had expectations that married women should make way for men when redundancies took place, others placed more scrutiny on the women's work. Several women commented on the high expectations of women mineworkers. A young woman miner, Trudy, felt that women were in a double bind, internalizing discrimination and self policing and being more visible because they are a minority:

So perhaps one reason why women mineworkers are well regarded is not just that, as Deidre says, 'we're just a lot more careful, we ask a lot more questions and just treat the machinery a lot more carefully' whereas men's philosophy is 'just drive it like you stole it', to use Marcia's phrase. Maybe it is also because only the good women mineworkers survive in the industry. Still, some men claim that women get frightened by the big machinery and are too afraid to say 'I am frightened' which then puts everyone in danger. Said one:

[They are a] bit reluctant to sort of say 'I am frightened'. I mean some of the blokes are; and at the end of the day they are very, very big machines and if you are frightened you may be shown a little bit more respect. I don't think we have had enough females in the workforce to prove whether they are better with equipment.

Such attitudes do not frighten the women. As Sheena says, 'you put your chest out and you say "Well I will take you on too, mate!" and just get on with your work.'

### **Adaptation and struggle by the union**

No blue collar union with a history of a heavily skewed male membership finds it easy to accommodate and respond to the wishes and interests of women. There is evidence from around the world of how difficult it is for women to break into traditional male occupations, and for men to adapt to them; likewise, for any visible minority group (eg (Kanter 1977)). The history of exploitation of female labour in nineteenth century underground mines solidified traditional attitudes about women's place. That said, women have had a longstanding historical role in the coalminers' union, in particular via the women's auxiliaries and miners support groups in the local communities. Through these women were actively supportive of union campaigns, including in disputes such as the Collinsville stay-down strike of 1952, the housing tax strike of 1980 and the BHP dispute in 2001 ((Bailey 1983; Murray and Peetz 2008; Thomas 1986; Thomas and Mallory 2007)). The union therefore recognised women as essential allies in conflict.

The union took a number of proactive steps. It voted for the end of the bar on female

employment in the mines. In 1996, the miners union held its first 'women in mining training course' in Emerald, 'which was fantastic' according to Maxine. Attended by 21 of the 32 women members in coal at the time (plus three from Mt Isa), it sought 'to inform women of their legal rights and how the union operates and assists its members' and 'for the union to find out the problems facing women members' The union also ran cases on behalf of women members, such as on behalf of Eloise, mentioned above.

Deena's comment summarised the views of many: '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'. She turned to her husband, a former union official, who laughed as she said, 'and that's not excluding you either!'

### **Conclusion - Adapting to each other**

When women enter what was once an exclusively male employment domain, a complex and iterative process of adaptation and struggle ensues and it involves all parties. To date, women have adapted more than other parties – they have adapted to the industry more than the industry has adapted to them – but each has been forced to adapt in various ways. There have been no passive players in this process. The needs for companies to abide by the law, or male employees to establish and maintain a workplace environment that is a reasonable place to inhabit, and for unions and their male and female members to create solidarities and deliver mutual support all ensure that much changes when women enter the industry. The behaviour of each party has shaped how others have responded and behaved and influenced outcomes for women. The experiences of women influence not only the

strategies that they employ but also the decisions of others. These adaptations have led to varied outcomes for women over time and across places. As Wendy said:

Yeah, there was some hard times in there. And hard to keep your chin up because, “oh I don’t wanna go there”, “yes, you do!” It’s because you love doing it. “Don’t let em win. Out you go. Keep your head high. You can do this!” And I did.

We heard stories of harassment and remarkable stories of persistence and bravery in the face of major obstacles. As we have identified women’s adaptations and struggles have centred around five challenges. First, they have had to deal with issues of production; Second, they have had to deal with the domestic sphere; Third, they have had to deal with issues arising from social constructions of their gender and sexuality; Fourth, they have had to deal with issues arising from their conditions of work; and Fifth, in order to successfully stand up for those rights, they need to manage public identities so that their gender is not seen as excluding them from the class and occupational identities of their male co-workers.

For its part, through its recent history the union partially reflected the varied approaches of its membership to women miners while at the same time taking a leading role of advancing women’s interests in the industry. They often went beyond what some of its members wanted. They pushed to remove the ban on female employment, set up support mechanisms such as the women’s training courses, ran discrimination and harassment cases for women members and often stood up for them in the workplace. The union’s generally positive approach in turn appears built on a recognition of the key roles women



have played as wives and community activists over more than a century of coal mining unionism. Over decades the union and its journal *Common Cause* lauded the women who built communities and supported miners in their struggles through bitter disputes, unsavoury conditions and mining disasters. It would be unlikely to then turn its back on women as they, like others around Australia, sought to move out of the kitchen and into workplaces previously the domain of men.

The industry however, has still not adapted to women: they are often inadequately trained, slow to be promoted, and receive uneven support, including in areas such as child care. As Eloise says, the industry ‘has still got a culture, it's still got that male testosterone thing – but it's a lot better.’ Women miners have adapted to the industry a lot more than the industry has adapted to them.

We asked most of our interviewees what would be their advice to a woman who wanted to be a miner. Robyn’s advice was:

You’ve got to be capable of defending yourself and you’ve got to be able to do it without giving or taking offence. You’ve got to show them “I won’t be messed with”, but “I won’t mess with you as long as you don’t mess with me. I’m here, I’m staying, deal with it.”

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