

# COAL RUSHES: PROGRESS REPORT ON WOMEN MINERS, MINERS' WOMEN AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

*Georgina Murray<sup>1</sup> and David Peetz<sup>1</sup>*

1. Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

[g.murray@griffith.edu.au](mailto:g.murray@griffith.edu.au)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the first stage of a project that aims to give an authentic voice to Queensland's women coal miners and women who are or were coal miners' wives, daughters, mothers and sisters, and to help them articulate their rightful place in the history of Australian work. The voices sought and recorded are women and men talking about the role of women in their mining community, their workplaces, their union, their disputes and their homes. We look at the roles of women in their industry, in both paid and unpaid work. Mining work has meant very varied individual and collective experiences for these women. Through interviews, focus groups and written questionnaires, we identify the ideas and practices that inform the everyday experiences of these mining women and men; and how these change and how they go about identifying the changes they want. This paper presents the first results from the first phase of our research.

## 1 INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This paper is a progress report on the first stage of a project that aims to give voice to Queensland's women coal miners and women who are, or were, coal miners' wives, daughters, mothers or sisters, and to help them articulate their rightful, but largely unacknowledged, place in the history of Australian work. It discusses some of the relevant literature and a few of our preliminary observations and women miners and miners' women in the industry.

### 1.1 METHODOLOGY

The project focuses on women in eight mining communities. It will ultimately involve interviews with approximately 80 women associated with the mining industry and union, as well as interviews with a number of men and the collection and analysis of relevant documentation. The 'mining women' in the project will be either women miners or miners' women (that is, miners' wives or partners). So far we have interviewed 33 women and 10 men, with interviews conducted during the period from 27 October to 22 December 2006. The women were initially identified and contacted by the union to obtain their consent to participate in the project. The remaining interviews are to be completed between March and May 2007.

The interviews to date have encompassed five of the eight communities. We will be returning to these five communities in the next few months, and visiting three others for the first time. Interviews have taken place in a number of locations, including homes, the offices of some mining lodges, cafes and an RSL. Interviewees to date have included

four union lodge presidents, two women auxiliary members, six female miners, two geologists and a nurse. The rest were the wives, mothers or daughters of male miners.

Questions ranged over a number of issues. Amongst other things we asked about what they saw as the role of the union. What had it done for them in the past and ways that it could act for them in the future? There is little doubt that some unions have not always acted in the best interests of women (Pocock, 1997). Indeed writers such as Joan Eveline have suggested that there are historic examples of unions that were sexist and built only on male advantage (Eveline, 1994) by forming an entrenched 'boys club's (Probyn, 1993) where the unionists would fight for male rights and then the 'boys' will take their marbles and go home' (Franzway, 1997). This creates a dilemma for those who hold feminist and progressive principles, but Franzway (1997) argues there is no where to go but to continue to make unions aware of women's concerns.

We asked interviewees what it now means to be a wife, mother or daughter of a miner. The literature suggests that this is a 'man's world' and though perceived as such women, as mothers, wives and daughters have always been expected to accompany their men folk, often through the most extreme hardships of climate, habitation, health, danger and isolation (Rhodes, 2005). For the company, wives are an unpaid additional benefit or 'two for the price of one' where 'the experiences of women are rendered invisible when masculine experience and understanding of the world is conflated to represent both men and women' (Rhodes, 2005). We also directed questions to women's group activities around the mine – such as the activities of the Women's Auxiliaries, which were active at key junctures in a number of mining towns (Thomas & Mallory, 2007 (forthcoming)).

## **1.2 BACKGROUND – THE COAL RUSHES**

Why do we refer to the 'coal rushes'? First, the situation in the coal mining industry at present is one of immense enthusiasm and seductive prosperity. 'some people have likened it to the Gold Rushes of the 1800s' (Stephen, 2006). We must first note the size and importance of the mining industry to the Australian economy. According to Heiler et al, in 1996-97, the mining industry accounted for \$22.6 billion or 5 per cent of Australia's GDP (Heiler, Pickersgill, & Briggs, 2000). It was:

particularly important in providing jobs and infrastructure development in regional Australia. Since 1967 these industries have built at least 25 new towns, 12 new ports, 20 airfields and 1,900 kilometers of rail line within Australia. Mining and directly associated manufacturing in metal and non-metallic mineral products, and coal and chemical products, employ[ing] over 400,000 Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 8414.0).

Open cut mines outnumber underground mines in Queensland by about 2:1.

The 'rush' concerns the boom the industry is presently experiencing. Frank, in 2005 wrote from a Queensland Government web site, that

Australian mining industry chief executives are smiling broadly at the growing demand for Australian resources from China. Australia-wide, a surge in mines, wells and processing plants has begun as a result of the rapidly escalating demand... In Queensland, the Department of Natural Resources and Mines (DNRM) states that as of June 2004, there were 95 significant operational mineral mines in Queensland – [amongst which are] 44 coal mines that produced a total of 160 million tonnes of saleable coal. This is a big change from the 1990s, when 'the mining industry was struggling with lower prices and geologists, miners and drill rig experts were finding it difficult to make ends meet (Frank, 2005).

Though the mining sector is said to demonstrate the benefits of Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) through the 'strong productivity growth' great productivity gains shown in the sector (Business Council of Australia [BCA], 2005), the ABS records that labour productivity in mining actually fell by 24 per cent between 2001-02 and 2004-05. Despite this, wages grew by 22 per cent over the same period, while operating profit before tax grew by an outstanding 61 per cent. Overall industry gross value added grew by only 1 per cent, but the value of mining exports grew by 27 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 8417.0).

We also speak of the coal 'rushes', then, to refer to the increasing working hours being put into the industry by workers, the way that some of them travel long distances, by plane or automobile, to get to and from the mining locations, and the impact this has on their spouses, families and communities.

The women and men interviewed for this project spoke about the role of women in their mining community, their workplaces, their union, their disputes and their homes. Their words reflected a period of corporate economic plenty and their high wages. Within this boom climate they identified issues they regard as significant for women working in and around the mines, including: the recent move to 12 hour shifts; the massive use of contract labour, the consequent problems around issues of housing and also contingent new fly-in and fly-out or drive-in/drive-out conditions and living arrangements.

We look at these four issues in a signalling, rather than systematic, way as the issues effect: women and family life, women as mine workers and women and the community. Mine work and its organization has meant very varied individual and collective experiences for women, and those interviewed were no exception.

## **2 DISCUSSION**

### **2.1 WOMEN IN MINING**

The ABS estimates that 13 per cent of employees in the mining industry are women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 6310.0). This gives Australian women a broadly similar level of involvement as in the US, higher than in several countries such as Canada, New Zealand and the UK, and lower than some others such as Bulgaria, Ukraine and Romania (International Labour Office, 2002).

Only a small proportion of these women are blue collar mineworkers, that is, production or maintenance workers. Most women are either in the offices, working in administration, or in professional positions such as geologists or engineers. In the absence of more disaggregated data from ABS, perhaps a closer proxy for the representation of women in the blue collar workforce is the proportion of union members in mining who are women, which is just under 2 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 6310.0). Broadly consistent with this, DEWR estimated that 3 per cent of collective agreement-covered employees in mining are female (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and Office of the Employment Advocate, 2004).

Mining companies have been making gestures towards increasing female employment in the industry but, reflecting the low level of female employment, collective agreements (CAs) in the mining industry had the lowest incidence of paid maternity leave in 2002-03 of any industry, at just 2 per cent of agreements (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and Office of the Employment Advocate, 2004).

Although some of these mining women are doing well, increasingly mining companies are taking action, either voluntarily or because of legislation, to counter the larger gendered imbalances found. The ILO suggests that the major mining companies are

developing measures that include 'policy development, training, development, and research initiatives to identify the underlying causes' of inequalities and that they are 'increasingly developing and implementing equal opportunity policies and some have affirmative action policies' (International Labour Office, 2002). An example of woman who has benefited from this approach is Tina Markovic, Queensland's 'first ever female manager of a major mining operation [who] runs BHP Billiton's Mitsui Corporation's Poitrel Mine' and is reported as agreeing that the mining industry is becoming more female friendly (Peacocke, 2006).

Still, as in other industries, the ILO reports that the average remuneration of women in mining is below that of men; 'the representation of women in senior management positions is less than that of men; and the average turnover of female employees in mining is higher than that of males' (ILO 2002).

The women miners we spoke with described generally how, most of the time, they were treated as equals by their male coworkers – as 'one of the boys'. They enjoyed the work, and driving the big trucks. But it was not a universally positive experience. We heard stories of the implicit tests new women miners experienced – how would they cope with swearing, with the images of women on the walls? They were expected to adapt to the men, rather than the men to them. We heard about the problems of going to the toilet on long shifts. We heard stories of harassment. We also heard how when they chose to take such matters up with the union, they got support from the union. From these early preliminary discussions our findings would support those of Joan Eveline and Michael Booth (2002) these women are experiencing raw sexual politics as miners. An environment where they have to 'take it like a man' and enter a very masculine environment produces 'the woman miner' in a context where the barriers between work and personal life are particularly mobile and highly contested.

## **2.2 THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE MINING WORKFORCE**

Increasingly, mining companies have sought to keep the mines open 24 hours a day and running seven days a week work. Thus in 2000

70 per cent of Australian mines work seven days a week, ranging from 93 per cent in Western Australia to 75 per cent in Queensland and 38 per cent in New South Wales, with coal mines far less likely to work in this way (60 per cent). As far as daily hours of operation are concerned, 86 per cent of all mines operate 24 hours a day (77 per cent of coalmines) (International Labour Office, 2002).

The mining industry has historically been highly unionised in Australia, but has become subject to a systematic campaign by several major employers for deunionisation. Partly as a result of this, and partly to achieve cost savings, the mining workforce has undergone three major transformations.

### **2.2.1 AUSTRALIAN WORKPLACE AGREEMENTS**

First, there has been extensive use of individual contracts, particularly Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). These are more common in mining than in any other industry (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and Office of the Employment Advocate, 2004). They are especially common in metalliferous mining, where union density is low (about 14 per cent), but are also used in coal (where density is 58 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 6310.0)) as employers systematically seek to reduce union influence in the sector. In some mines signing an AWA is a condition of employment, though in one mine in the region, where AWAs had been a condition of employment, a majority of workers had signed up to the union and were seeking to negotiate a collective agreement.

### 2.2.2 MINING CONTRACTORS AND INSECURITY

Second, the industry has seen the growth of 'contractors', that is, the use of employees working for contractor corporations in the mines. These contractor workers would not have the security of employment of permanent mine workers, and can generally be terminated on a day's notice. The contractor corporations for whom they work, in a form of labour hire arrangement, typically also provide the equipment (eg trucks) with which they work. Our informants told us that, typically, the equipment provided by the contractor corporations was of inferior quality to that provided by the mining company, being more likely to break down, ride roughly or leak dust.

In 2000, 37 per cent of mines (including 29 per cent of Queensland mines) used contractors for 25 per cent or more of their workforce. Some 15 per cent of Queensland mines used contractors for their whole workforce.

By 2004-05, contract employment in minerals companies was equivalent to 17,857 full-time employees (16 per cent of the workforce). This was an increase of 18 per cent on 2003-04 (though the latter was, in turn, a 5 per cent drop on 2001-02) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 8417.0).

The women miners, and the miners' wives, that we spoke to uniformly indicated that working for a mining company was preferable to working for a mining contractor. Most of the women miners we met had worked for a contractor before getting a job with a mining company. Mining companies rarely recruited directly any more; they would obtain their additional workers from the contract employees they preferred. So the mining women to whom we spoke saw contractor employment as a transitional stage to obtaining a proper job.

In turn, this meant that obtaining employment in the mining industry was a precarious business, and not the easy promise of prosperity portrayed in the popular media. Until they obtained employment with a mining company, they were insecure. One of the wives we spoke to described how unsettling it was to have moved to the town with her husband in such insecure employment. This was a view mirrored by the women miners who went through the contract experience. This was not a quick process. Some we spoke to managed to get a proper job within nine or twelve months of starting with a contractor. We were referred to others who had been with contractors for up to three years.

### 2.2.3 THE MOVE (BACK) TO TWELVE HOUR SHIFTS

The 12 hour shift has a long mining history, as noted in this British museum record of occupational definitions from 1849:

**Screeners:** Men who pass the coals over the skreens into the waggons, and clean them from stones, slates, brasses, &c. They should be paid in proportion to the quantity of dirt picked out from among the coals. Their wages are about 2s. 6d. to 2s. 8d. per day of 12 hours

**Trappers:** A little boy whose employment consists in opening and shutting a trap-door when required: his wages are 9d. or 10d. per day of 12 hours (Durham Mining Museum, 2007).

By 1888 the trapper's daily wage had risen to 1s to 1s2d and his shift length had dropped to 8 hours (Durham Mining Museum, 2007). These little boys are no longer in the mines, but the twelve hour shift is back.

In 2002-03, DEWR estimated that the average *ordinary-time* weekly hours in mining collective agreements, at 37.1, was the equal lowest of any industry, though the industry also had the highest incidence of staggered breaks (Department of Employment

and Workplace Relations and Office of the Employment Advocate, 2004). Yet Heiler et al had pointed out that ABS data showed, by 1997, the average *actual* hours worked in the industry by full-time employees had grown to 51.7 (compared to 46 hours in 1983), well above the all-industry average of 44.3 hours (by the equivalent of almost a full day) and indeed the highest of any industry (Heiler et al., 2000). The difference was accounted for in part by high rates of (paid, often mandatory) overtime, but also by differences between states, and between the union and non-union sectors, and hence between the metals and coal mining sectors. In 1997, 60 per cent of metals mining employees, but just 4 per cent of coal mining employees, worked over 49 hours per week. Between 1988 and 1997, while several countries saw reductions in hours worked in mining, Australia experienced one of the largest increases (Heiler et al., 2000).

A central feature of increasing hours has been the move (back) to twelve hour shifts. In 1995, roughly one third of mining workplaces had at least some employees on twelve hour shifts. Heiler et al's survey showed that, by 2000, over half of mine sites had twelve hour shifts, including 70 per cent in metals mining but only a minority in coal, mainly because NSW coal mines (unlike Queensland ones) had a low incidence of 12 hour shifts. Coal mines were less likely than metals mines to have long runs of consecutive shifts (Heiler et al., 2000).

Since then, as foreshadowed by managers in their survey, twelve hour shifts appear to have spread through coal in Queensland. All of the people we have spoken to so far as part of this project worked at mines (or their spouses worked at mines) where 12 hour shifts were the norm. In most cases, miners would work three or four consecutive days in a row, but there was pressure from some companies to move to a 14/7 shift arrangement (14 consecutive days of 12 hour shifts, followed by a 7 day break). The mining corporations have pushed for 12 hour shifts because of the lower costs involved (for example, less time lost through shift changeovers, lower transport expenses and, if average hours increase, lower recruitment and training costs associated with a smaller workforce).

## **2.3 WOMEN AND FAMILY LIFE**

Clare William's mining study points to the interdependent connections between capitalism and patriarchy in mining communities, as women are simultaneously exploited in paid and unpaid work; as domestics and wage workers and in the company's vested interest in keeping going this hierarchal patriarchy (Williams, 1981). Betty Alveen Cosgrove's, doctoral thesis also identifies this long history of dual exploitation of women by the mine operators when she writes about the mining community at Mt Morgan during its history from 1888-1927. She identifies a very sex segregated set of mining family relations:

Male group relationships at Mount Morgan extended from the workplace to leisure, at hotels, sports or other pastimes...[whereas for women]...Home and family, church and localized community gatherings encompassed social life... [and] the primary role of women in the gender division of labour was undisputedly domestic and socially subservient, albeit that some women conducted boarding house, shanty and tent kitchens of canvas and shingle in the 1880s. (Cosgrove, 2001)

In another later historical perspective Grace Johansen suggests that 'the rural patriarchal economy sustained the notion of rigid gender and class differences in regional Queensland to a far greater extent than those in metropolitan Brisbane because of the ... masculine nature of the rural industry.' (Johansen, 2002).

When twelve hour shifts had been introduced in coal mining, they replaced the 'seven day' roster, which in turn had replaced a system whereby people had the option of working overtime on weekends voluntarily. The seven day roster had meant most

workers were meant to only one consecutive Saturday and Sunday per month, and it became known as the 'divorce roster'. So some respondents considered that the twelve hour shifts were better than the seven day rosters that immediately preceded them.

Nonetheless, our interviews revealed dissatisfaction with twelve hour shift arrangements amongst the miners' wives, particularly those with young children. For these households, the twelve hour shifts in the mines put all the burden of looking after the children on the mother. On the days when the husband was on day shift, he would not come home until almost before the children were due to go to bed, and/or would be getting up and going before the children got up. And when he came home he was tired and, often, cranky. One wife described the process by which she got up very early with her husband, prepared his 'crib' (lunch) – as most mining wives did – drove him to the bus pick up location, then went home and prepared the children for school and drove them. Then it was on again when the kids finished school for the day. When the husbands were on night shift, their wives would barely see them, as they slept most of the day, and they would be cranky when they did see them. Though having several consecutive days off was a benefit, the first day off the husband spent recovering from the shift period anyway. For one wife and mother with young children that we interviewed, it had just got too much. She had decided to move out of town, to the coast. Her reasoning: she and the kids would be happier there, and they would see no less of her husband. He would be able to drive (a two hour trip) there to spend most of his 'off' time with them anyway.

This strong disapproval of 12 hour shifts was not a view universally shared by wives. For those whose children had grown up, or for those who had no children, it was easier to adapt to them. Sometimes, they would be able to obtain a job with similar shift arrangements to their husband's (for example, as a camp cook), and have large amounts of free time together. More often, they would work to a different shift pattern, perhaps a conventional five day week, in which case they would perhaps get only one weekend a month where they could go away together.

## **2.4 HOUSING, FIFO AND DIDO**

In many towns the mining companies have ceased the practice of building housing for their workforce, a practice that was the focus of some major industrial disputes in the past, disputes which eventually led to some mining towns being quite well designed and liveable (Thomas & Mallory, 2007 (forthcoming)). Now, the coal rush regions are places where 'the price of living...has gone through the roof' and rents are comparable to 'ritzy suburbs in Sydney or Melbourne' (Stephen, 2006). Those with permanent jobs on the mines can afford it, but for those on contracts with families it adds to the sense of insecurity, while low income earners in the towns who do not work in the mines are left totally 'out of the loop' (Callow quoted in Stephen, 2006). One of the women we spoke to had lived in a caravan with her daughter when she moved to a mining town in search of work. It was not an unusual experience.

With housing an expensive risk, contractors typically live in 'dongas'. A donga is a detached, demountable building with amenities (connections to water, electricity and sewerage), suitable for a single worker. The mining towns have very large donga camps, with their own catering, run by specialised contractors to service particular mines. The donga camps were predominantly male, but there were a small number of single women living there. Other single men, men with out-of-town families, shared houses.

Most of the women miners we spoke to had not lived in the dongas. One of the advantages for contractors and mining companies of hiring women who were already living in the town was that they already had their accommodation. We were told that,

where a mine was seeking to minimise union influence, they might only hire wives of non-unionists.

Fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) is a growing phenomenon occurring around mining towns where the male partner (usually but not exclusively) flies into a mining work-site and lives there in a 'donga'. His/her other home, where he returns to at the end of his shift cycle, is the one that contains his/her family. The ILO figures suggest that over '60 per cent of Australian mines are located in a settled mixed community, with 16 per cent in relatively isolated mining towns and a further 22 per cent being fly-in/fly-out operations. Almost all the mines that operate less than seven days a week or less than 24 hours a day are in settled communities' (ILO 2002).

A growing number of women, like the mother of young children we mentioned above, are moving out of the mining towns to the coast while their husbands work in the mines. Alternatively, they never move to a mining town in the first place, their husbands driving to and from their places of residence at the coast and the start and end of their shift cycle. They are, in effect, a subset of FIFO - 'drive in drive out' (DIDO) workers.

We are yet to interview any wives of FIFO mineworkers for this project. Other research suggests that many FIFO workers have made an 'informed choice' to work on a FIFO basis, reflecting their assessment of 'work satisfaction' (including money) and 'development needs' (Sibbel & Kaczmarek, 2006). By implication, they are highly satisfied with the choices they have made. But some FIFO spouses have encountered problems, as revealed in a public forum (ABC Western Australia, 2002):

We are doing it for the money, but the loneliness and stress and adjustments you have to make makes you wonder if it is worth it... The mother suddenly has to try to become the mum and dad, cope all alone with 'whatever' pops up, and still maintain as much normality and stability as she can (Terry).

I have also observed a percentage of these "work away dads" who enjoy the "escapism" if I can use that term, of getting away from all domestic responsibility and sadly watch their "couldn't care less" attitude as their excited little ones greet them at the airport. Sometimes they don't even get a hug or any acknowledgement other than a gruff "get in the car when you're told" and the wife/partner gets a dutiful peck on the cheek without any sign of feeling (Robyn).

[W]hat seemed like a good idea has turned into an absolute nightmare. If you have family and friends to support you then you stand a chance but in my case I have tried to make friends but it hasn't been easy and now I often go for two weeks without seeing another person... I really hate the idea of taking medication but things had sunk so deeply that I had no other choice (Sue).

This is an issue we plan to investigate further in the next phase of research.

## **2.5 COMMUNITIES**

Although the mining communities are in the middle of the coal rushes, things are not necessarily as good as they would on the surface appear. With the influx of prosperity, we might expect there would be greater medical facilities, pharmacies, and people to help with voluntary organizations such as meals on wheels, or to take part in sporting fixtures to create collective entertainments and so on. However, when the women were part of the new population influx they mentioned feelings of being isolated from their families in other towns and cut off from the 'old timers' and they mentioned experiencing a feeling akin to stay-at-home-blues. 'Old timers' (really, people in their 40s or 50s who had moved to the towns in the 1980s) lamented the loss of a sense of community. They

complained of how you could go into the town centre and not know the people there, unlike times gone past. It was not because the population had grown – the town was no bigger than twenty years ago – it was because many of the former residents had left (sometimes to the coast, while the husband retained his job at the local mine but commuted to the coast), and there was now a large itinerant component to the population – the contractors in the donga camps. Some even commented to us that the town was no longer as safe as it used to be.

Dawson, McCulloch and Baker (2001) described how, in an evaluation of the impact of twelve hour shifts in regional mining communities,

[I]nitially many male employees regarded the impact as positive. However, after 12-18 months, it was observed that participation in sporting teams had declined and that travel away from the community had significantly increased. Given the central role of sporting teams within the social fabric of the community, it has been suggested that 12 hour shifts contributed significantly to the declining sense of community and social disintegration within the township. Similarly, many of the female partners indicated that the transition to 12 hour shifts had provided 4-day periods of leave on a regular basis with a subsequent increase in the time spent away from family engaged in male-only leisure pursuits (eg. fishing, shooting, farming).

Similar findings have been made by others regarding the impact of twelve hour shifts (Heiler et al., 2000) and of FIFO arrangements (Intergroup Consultants, 2005). Ritter (2001), writing from the World Bank perspective, used a Canadian example to suggest that the fly-in/fly-out regime has community advantages, including minimising the risk of loss of major investment in the community or enterprise for the private and public sector if the mine should fail and minimising the human cost associated with it. Our interviews revealed the more negative patterns mentioned in the research. Once-thriving sporting clubs and competitions were under threat, as they could no longer round up sufficient participants. In a town servicing a twelve hour shift mine, Saturday was just another day of the week for a large number of people, and often they would be working or sleeping, and many of those who were not either of these were at the coast.

### **3 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Mining booms like the one currently experienced in Australia are cyclical, something which recent coal price cuts remind us (Trounson, 2006). We can therefore ultimately expect changes which may make workers' conditions worse (downturns seldom mean anything good for workers) in these mining communities. In future we aim to have more than a impressionistic pastiche; we hope to be able to make definitive statements about the effects of 12 hour shifts, housing shortages, fly-in/fly-out and drive-in/drive-out and the role of the union on mining women and how they see the future of their lives and what they need to make that future a bright one.

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