



WOMEN IN MINING

FACT SHEET 2017

Women in the South African mining industry face a range of challenges – some shared by their male counterparts and many more which only women working underground have to deal with. It is a priority of the Chamber of Mines and its member companies to ensure that women working in the industry have the same opportunities open to them as men – and that they are confident that they are safe to pursue them.

OVERVIEW

Although the International Labour Organization (ILO) has had a Convention in place since 1935 prohibiting the employment of women in underground mining work (Convention 54 of 1935), many countries that initially ratified it have since 'denounced' the convention. These countries include Australia (1988), Canada (1978), Chile (1997) and South Africa (1996). These countries are now more likely to be signatories to the ILO's Convention 176 (Safety and Health in Mines, 1995) which covers the rights of all workers.

In the view of the ILO, "Contrary to the old approach based on the outright prohibition of underground work for all female workers, modern standards focus on risk assessment and risk management and provide for sufficient preventive and protective measures for mineworkers, irrespective of gender, whether employed in surface or underground sites".

South African women have played a key role in the South African mining industry since long before they were legally allowed to work underground (from 1996 onwards). This meant they worked in a range of above-ground jobs before they were able to become underground employees.



As they have slowly become formal participants in all aspects of the mining industry's work, women have had to face a range of challenges and restrictions. Over the years, the industry has got better at identifying and dealing with these challenges – thus creating the conditions for more women to work underground.

Working underground is not a straightforward decision, however. South Africa has – in the gold and platinum industries - some of the very deepest mines in the world. And, added to that, is the fact that these mines are historically very labour intensive, with physically arduous work under challenging conditions. Often, the physical strength and effort required from many underground jobs simply precludes many women for being able to effectively do them. Some of the most difficult jobs such as Rock Drill Operators may also have physiological risks for the women doing them.



THE NUMBERS



The number of women working in the mining sector has increased significantly in the last 15 years or so – from around **11 400** in 2002 to around **57 800** in 2015. Women now represent over **13%** of people in the mining industry.

Women in mining (Department of Labour Employment Equity report 2015/16)

Category	Total industry employees	Number of women employees	Percentage of women employees
Top management	1,620	232	14.3%
Senior management	5,141	789	15.3%
Professionally qualified and middle management	19,089	4,105	21.5%
Skilled technical	85,507	14,839	17.4%
Total industry employees	435,639		
Black women		44,433	10.2%
All women		57,806	13.2%

Percentage of women in the workforce by commodity - 2015

Commodity	% of workforce which is female
Gold	11%
PGMs	12%
Diamonds	19%
Coal	17%
Cement, lime aggregates and sand	19%

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THE CHALLENGES

SAFETY

One of the biggest worries facing women who want to work underground is safety – more specifically the risk of sexual harassment, even sexual violence, directed at them by their male colleagues and illegal miners.

Underground conditions mean that women are often especially vulnerable. Crowded conveyances, poorly lit tunnels and work areas, a lack of toilet and changing facilities, and the fact that there are very few other women working near them all make working underground more difficult for women.

There have been some dreadful incidents in the past where women were raped underground (and, in one case, then murdered by her attacker). On a day-to-day basis, women across the industry have reported physical assaults, verbal abuse, being asked to trade sexual favours for employment or other benefits, or being placed in more junior positions with less pay than their male counterparts.

Part of the problem, of course, is the context in which these women are trying to make a living. A patriarchal and sexist culture is not just found in the mining industry – it is across many levels of South African society.

PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS

A more contested issue is the fact that physiologically women face challenges that men do not, and which may make working on a mine – especially underground – more of a challenge.

In the most general terms, most women simply do not have the same levels of physical strength (especially in terms of stamina and weight-lifting) as most men – and this has a material impact on their ability to do much underground work. And, as has been found in physical work capacity testing, women entering the industry tend to be less physically active and fit, and thus less able to cope with the fitness and heat-tolerance levels required for entry.

Working conditions can also make work more physically demanding than is safe. For instance, in situations where women's toilet facilities are far away from the place of work, women may refrain from drinking while on shift, resulting in dehydration and making it even harder to complete physical tasks.

The fact that almost every woman who is physically able to work underground will be of childbearing age also has implications for that work. No pregnant woman may work underground, and the mine is obligated to provide safe above-ground work during pregnancy, maternity leave and breastfeeding.

Additionally, some underground tasks may have a physiological effect on women which they do not have on men.

EQUIPMENT

A significant challenge to women in the industry is the fact that equipment – whether overalls, personal protective equipment, boots or tools – has been designed and manufactured with men in mind. This means overalls that are too big or too tight (or both) and which cannot be easily adjusted and which necessitates complete undressing for use of toilet facilities, boots that are too wide and long, gloves which do not keep foreign matter out, and tools which are designed for larger hands and weight-lifting capacities.

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HOW WE ARE MAKING WORKING IN MINING MORE ATTRACTIVE FOR WOMEN

ADDRESSING SAFETY

Dealing with safety concerns has several components, all of which are taken very seriously by the Chamber's members. Changes that have been made to enable women to feel safe when working underground include improving lighting in working and travelling areas, providing safe toilet, shower and changing facilities, and (in some mines) ensuring that women have work buddies who make sure they do not have to move around quiet areas on their own. Along with physical safety precautions, it is acknowledged that the best way of ensuring women's safety at work is changing the mindset of their male colleagues. In an often patriarchal and sexist South African work context, it is men's attitudes to women which must change in order for workplaces to be safe.

ADAPTING EQUIPMENT

Female employees, unions, management, the Chamber and equipment manufacturers have put in considerable time over the last few years into identifying aspects of equipment that need to change in order to be work-appropriate for women employees. These may include the cut and sizing of overalls, the size and fit of helmets, goggles and earplugs, and the sizing and proportions of boots and gloves. Ensuring that Personal Protective Equipment and working clothing fits properly and is fit for purpose is key to allowing female employees to be fully and safely active in their jobs.

THE IMPACT OF MODERNISATION – WOMEN AND THE FUTURE OF MINING

As the mining industry – in South Africa and globally – moves into the future, it is increasingly clear that the work we and our members do will have to become more modernised. This will create significant opportunities for women in the industry. As mining becomes more mechanised, physical strength and stamina will become less important than fine motor skills, dexterity and problem solving – all of which are more easily acquired by new entrants to the workforce.

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