

## **Women Paying the Price for Stolen Tomorrows – The impacts of mineral-based industrialisation in the Vaal, South Africa**

Participatory Action Research Report  
Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance/WoMin  
October 2015

For the past 15 years I have been struggling to get my husband's money and I don't have the strength now to go further. I have a piece-job that keeps me going but with three children it is not enough and daily life is stressful. If I can face life with all this stress in my life, I want to see me and my children overcome poverty and for Samancor to keep their promises – *Alina Mofokeng, interview, Sebokeng, 11 August 2015.*

In early 2015 WoMin, in collaboration with the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA), undertook a small participatory action research project (PAR) to examine the impacts of retrenchments and ill-health of workers on women in the Vaal Triangle, an area formed by the towns of Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark and Sebokeng about 70km south of Johannesburg. It includes the townships of Sebokeng, Boipatong, Bophelong, Zamdela and Sharpeville and straddles the Vaal River, a major water source for about 12 million people.

As the site of substantial petrochemical, mining and smelting companies, the Vaal Triangle is the heart of South Africa's minerals and energy complex and a major industrial region. It is also the site of some of the worst air and groundwater pollution in the country. In October 2005 the area was designated a pollution hotspot and declared an air priority area for focussed air quality management attention' in terms of Section 18(1) of the National Environmental Management Air Quality Act 2004.) by the Department of Environmental Affairs.<sup>1</sup> This came after years of campaigning by workers and communities in the area and in face of overwhelming evidence of the impacts of the pollution on people and the environment.

Eleven interviews were conducted in August 2014 – six in Sebokeng with women whose husbands had worked at Samancor, and five in Sebokeng with women whose husbands worked at ISCOR. These interviews were preceded by a series of scoping workshops (Bophelong in December 2014<sup>2</sup> and Boipatong in March 2015) and a gender analysis workshop in July 2015 to establish community priorities and concerns.

Key findings from the research:

### ***Impacts of health problems***

Of the 11 in-depth interviews carried out, 10 told of the health problems suffered by the husbands of the participants. These included swollen feet, liver damage, coughing up a 'black substance', body sores and body swelling. Martha Mahlangu, 65, says her husband always "complained about the environment at work – it was dirty. As a mother I worked everyday to

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<sup>1</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006): *Throwing Stones: An account of the Steel Valley struggle against Vanderbijlpark Steel Works*, CSS/UKZN

<sup>2</sup> In partnership with Khulumani Support Group, Bophelong

see my husband recovering from his sickness but the sickness was growing” (interview, Sebokeng, 11 August 2015).

Participant Alina Mofokeng reported similar problems for her husband: “The first time I saw he was sick we went to the clinic thinking it was a cough or maybe TB but when he began to change psychologically, I referred him to the hospital and that is when we found out about the manganese. I had to choose soft food for him – he was becoming like a small child and not eating normal food. When I took for a walk around the township, he would complain about being tired and I would have to ask for help to bring him home.” (Alina Mofokeng, interview, Sebokeng, 11 August 2015).

Five of the women also reported that their husbands had blood in their urine and impaired sexual functioning: “his knife wasn’t cutting well” (participant interview, 11 August 2015) and “he got TB from the manganese and his manhood stopped working” (participant interview, 11 August 2015). Another participant said that when her husband started having sexual problems, she thought he was “being naughty” and it caused tension between them (interview, Sebokeng, 11 August 2015).

Because of the gendered division of labour, caring for the sick is a burden that falls largely to women. This burden is deeply rooted in the patriarchal systems that operate in South Africa. The strongest message women get is that it is their primary responsibility to take care of all in both their immediate and extended family.

### ***Impact on livelihoods***

The impact on livelihoods is marked, as participants revealed in the PAR interviews:

“The way he was retrenched - he went to work that morning and was told to go back home, he would be called back to work. He was never called back. Each time he went to the ISCOR offices, he was told that he would be called back. This was around 1991-2. It was very difficult for the family. The children had to leave school and there was no money for food. It was painful. Niks (nothing), not even a cent” (Hilda Mnisi, 49, interview, Sebokeng, 10 August 2015).

“My husband did get some money after he was retrenched but I don’t know anything about the payment that I or my children must get. I have been following this process of claiming money but I haven’t received anything from Samancor – UIF, surplus money. We paid for the medical costs when my husband was sick because he was still working. After the retrenchment life was tough and responsibilities changed – putting food on the table and prioritizing the education of the youngest child. (Martha Mahlangu, 65, interview, Sebokeng, 11 August 2015)

For Florence Ubisi, her husband’s death led directly to the loss of income and her small business. She had to stop running her small nut-selling business because of the customary one-year mourning period: “... you have to wear black. If you are dressed like that, no one will come close to you. You can’t be touched, no one should brush you, no one will sit next you. No one will buy from you. At sunset you must be home” (interview, Sebokeng, 10 August 2015).

### ***Direct impacts on women's health***

Two of the women reported direct health impacts.

Anna Molomane looked after her husband as he refused to go to a doctor. She has also developed sores on her body and three of her children who were born after her husband started working at Samancor have respiratory problems. "He started getting sores all over his body. He was retrenched in 1992 and started to develop epilepsy (something he was not born with). He was taken to hospital but they could not find out what the problem was. Other symptoms he had include coughing blood and a black, shiny substance and his malehood was affected – he was urinating blood". (interview, Sebokeng, 11 August 2015).

Both Salaminah Mkhuma and her husband worked at Iscor – she worked there from 1988-2008 and her husband from 1980-2005. "He was retrenched in 2000 because he was sick and died in 2007. ISCOR retrenched him because of his illness but never told him what sickness he had. A doctor in Matatiele (Eastern Cape) told him that his lungs were damaged."

She was also retrenched but not for health reasons she says and she only found out that she had asthma and high blood pressure after her retrenchment. She has to use a pump and get regular check-ups for blood pressure.

An earlier research report also noted the impact on women's reproduction: "Lulu used to work for ISCOR as a crane driver. She smiles a lot, but weeps when she speaks of her inability to have children. She has had two miscarriages, and both fetuses had genetic defects (Interviews February, 2004; August, 2005). She has been diagnosed with three types of cancer as well as epilepsy, and relates these to the canal water she played in as a child. 'Many doctors have told me the cancer has something to do with ISCOR.'

"Scientists have found that the canal water contains heavy metals such as benzene, cadmium and the substance mothballs are made out of, naphthalene. This is an extremely toxic substance – it is known to cause cancer, and cadmium causes kidney damage. According to Lulu's mother, 'The ISCOR water has made all my children and grandchildren sick'.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Protracted battles to get healthcare and benefit payments***

In all of the cases documented by VEJA and Womin, the wives and families of deceased workers had to engage in long and often confusing processes to access pension/provident funds, healthcare and other benefits due to them. For those who are married according to customary traditions, there is the added step of having to get a letter from the chief and an affidavit from a magistrate to prove that lobola has been paid.

Christina, 55, had to move from her home in Qunu in rural Eastern Cape to Kwa-Masiza hostel in 2001 because it became too difficult for her husband to send money to her. She struggled for more than four years to access her husband's provident monies and in that time, her daughter lost out as she was over 20 years of age<sup>4</sup> by the time it was paid out. Christina says she had to go to the provident fund's offices in Pretoria four times and eventually had to stage a sit-in. "Others did not push as hard [and they] did not get any payment (interview, Sebokeng, 10 August 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> A child must be under 18 years old to qualify.



VEJA member Victoria Riet conducting an interview with Kwa-Masiza Hostel in the background, 10 August 2015. *Photo: J Pather*

Hilda Mnisi is one of those who was discouraged by the long battle to access her husband's money. She describes the person at ISCOR she went to see as "rude and dismissive" and even though she submitted the required documentation (marriage certificate and her husband's death certificate), she has still not received the provident fund payout (interview, 10 August 2015).

Vumile Nomhamha says "my forms were torn up because I am uneducated". She was told the money has "expired" because it was long ago. She is still unemployed and has not received what was rightfully her husband's. This does not sit well with her and the situation hurts her because she and her seven children are not working. "Everyone needs money to survive". (interview, 10 August 2015).

The demands from the women in the focus group discussion were:

- A lump sum payment rather than monthly payments from the pension/provident fund
- Compensation for medical and transportation costs
- Assistance with burial costs
- To be given the monies that their husbands were entitled to and not to be only reimbursed for costs incurred for burials.



Wives of ex-Samancor workers participating in PAR focus group discussion, Sebokeng, 11 August 2015.  
*Photo: J Pather*

### ***“Infections, not affection”***

In the 1990s, as a result of a global steel crisis and a changing political landscape in South Africa, which saw a reduction in state subsidies, ISCOR and other companies in the area retrenched a significant number of workers.

“Between 1993 and 1998, 46,000 jobs, including 20,343 manufacturing jobs, were cut on the Gauteng side of the Vaal Triangle...In the first decade of democracy, about two million full time formal sector jobs were cut in the name of competitiveness and productivity. Iscor alone cut 30,000 jobs nationally...”<sup>5</sup>.

Many of the workers were retrenched because they were sick, but the company did not disclose this to them. “ISCOR gave us infections, not affection” is how one ex-worker described it (interview, 10 December 2014, Bophelong).

“Under apartheid, mining and industry were virtually immune to effective environmental regulation and workers suffered the negligence of health and safety standards. For the majority, access to wages took precedence over labour conditions. This placed them in an ambiguous relationship to the environment. Peter Lukey observes that ‘workers are closely linked to environmental degradation both as victims or, as labour in dirty industry, directly involved in the generation of toxic pollution’.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006) *Op.Cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). *Ibid.*

The same report goes on to point out that South Africa's industrial workplaces are generally highly polluted environments and workers are often not provided with proper protective clothing and masks. Workers who live near polluting industry thus get a double dose – at work and at home.

Medical evidence presented at a court case in 2001 showed<sup>7</sup>:

- Symptoms of illnesses as revealed in 500 questionnaires obtained from local people, pointed clearly to heavy metal poisoning, for example kidney diseases and various types of cancer.
- Tests of 26 people showed higher cadmium than the South African reference levels (the standard or average amount of cadmium in South Africans' bodies) .
- The 26 people tested showed DNA breakages 30 per cent higher than the SA reference level, and 50 per cent higher than the international reference level. The only common factor linking the 26 was that they all lived in Steel Valley and must have been exposed to a cadmium pollution incident or subjected to permanent ambient exposure.

A 2004 study<sup>8</sup> on air pollution in the area calculated that the direct health costs associated with only three specific air pollutants (sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and PM10 particulates<sup>9</sup> would result in:

- about 11,600 people in the Vaal being admitted to hospital with respiratory problems;
- 90 cardiovascular (heart problems) per year,
- 25 premature deaths per year,
- 24,000 cases of chronic bronchitis per year and,
- restricted activity days of around 78,750 (9 days per year per economically active person).

A 2010 Benchmark Foundation report found that “there is pollution of surfaces and groundwater with phenols, iron, oil, fluoride and other hazardous substances, causing illnesses such as lung damage, respiratory problems, sneezing and skin irritation. People in the community have become sick with kidney failure, blood in their urine, tiredness and lack of concentration” .<sup>10</sup>

In 1999, medical tests carried out on 509 workers at Samancor that showed that most workers (from all sections of the plant), suffered from manganese poisoning. Manganese poisoning affects the brain, as well as other vital organs, such as the kidneys. Although the medical report to Samancor recommended that workers should be informed of their individual results, the company did not implement this. Instead, it proposed voluntary retrenchments and, when workers did not agree, implemented forced retrenchments. The retrenchments gave redundancy but not illness benefits.

Workers retrenched by Iscor before Mittal's takeover also observed that they received no compensation for occupational illness:

They note that manganese from Samancor is just one of a number of toxic substances used or emitted at the plant at Vanderbijlpark and workers at the coke ovens,

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<sup>7</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Cock and Munnik(2006). Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Particulates small enough to inhale.

<sup>10</sup> Benchmarks Foundation (2010): Action Voices 2010 – Benchmarks Foundation Community Monitoring Project, <http://communitymonitors.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ActionVoiceslowres.pdf>

smelting furnaces and tapping floors are also subject to extreme heat. Coke oven workers are typically exposed to a variety of volatile organic compounds, including benzene, and to hydrogen sulphide, carbon monoxide, ammonia and particulates. Furnace and tapping floor workers are exposed to heavy metal fumes, carbon monoxide and particulates. Further down the line, they are exposed to vapours from solvents and acids (pickle liquor) used to clean metal surfaces and to various chemicals used to coat it. Workers say typical symptoms include “high blood pressure, kidney problems, headaches, swelling feet, eye problems, ulcers [and] body swellings” [Cock and Munnik 2005: 41]. Respiratory illnesses are also widely reported while cancers should be expected.<sup>11</sup>

Several workers observed that they were retrenched when they showed signs of occupational disease, but they were unable to corroborate this because the corporation claimed that their health records had been lost in a fire. They believe that Iscor used mass retrenchments to dispose of occupational health liabilities. The corporation agreed with Numsa to retrench workers over the age of 45, reversing the common practice of “last in, first out” and enabling Iscor to rid itself of workers who were already sick or whose long term exposure put them at risk. As at Samancor, workers say the union did not consult them on this policy change.<sup>12</sup>

According to Samson Mokoena, the head of the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA) “during this transition period, no proper labour laws were followed including exit medical check-ups and sorting out pension fund payments.”

As a result, workers began organising. Samancor workers established the Samancor Retrenched Workers Crisis Committee (SRWCC) and mounted a campaign demanding full reasons for their retrenchments and proper compensation for occupational illness from the corporation. The Vaal Working Class Crisis Committee (VWCCC) emerged in response to mass retrenchments in 1998 and successfully challenged Iscor on unfair evictions from houses and hostels, unfair labour practices connected to outsourcing, and corruption.

This led to the Vaal Environmental Justice (VEJA) working closely with the Vaal Working Class Crisis Committee (VWCCC) and the Samancor Retrenched Workers Crisis Committee (SRWCC). The VEJA was formed in January 2004 and launched in October 2006. The organisation has ten affiliates from different areas in the Vaal including Sebokeng, Sebokeng, Sharpeville, Bophelong, Boipatong, and each affiliate forms part of a steering committee. VEJA’s demands are:

- The end of pollution in the Vaal Triangle.
- The repair of pollution damage to the environment.
- Compensation for pollution damage to people’s health & livelihoods.

The VEJA worked with these workers structures and mounted a five year campaign – including monthly protest marchers to highlight the issues. WoMin partnered with VEJA in early 2015 to undertake this research.

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<sup>11</sup> Hallowes and Munnik (2006): Poisoned Spaces – Manufacturing wealth, producing poverty - groundWork Report 2006, <http://www.groundwork.org.za/reports/gWReport2006.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Hallowes and Munnik (2006). Ibid.



VEJA activists marching against Accerlor Mittal. VEJA photo archives

### ***“Steeling our tomorrow”***

The Vaal Triangle’s pollution problems are a result of uninterrupted pollution going as far back as the 1950s. This is due to the activities of the heavy industries based in this area – two of Accerlor Mittal’s major steel-plants (Vanderbijlpark and Vereeniging), Sasol (a petro-chemical company) and Eskom’s Lethabo power station all add to the toxic mix.

The Vanderbijlpark Steel Works looms like a dark, dangerous presence over the landscape. It is never still. Its large black slag heaps are continually built by huge trains offloading slag. Effluent water rushes down unlined canals past a number of smallholdings and townships, to the Vaal River. By day, the work’s smoke and vapour plumes mark the sky. By night its lights, noise, flares and smells remind its neighbours of its presence. They are also reminded of their powerful neighbour by a series of devastating changes that have befallen their bodies, their animals and plants, their land and their dreams for the future.<sup>13</sup>

For Strike Matsepo, 74, the Vaal area “used to be a good place”. But in the past 15 years several of his animals were born with birth defects and many have died. “In all 30 cows, nine calves, five sheep, six goats, three tortoises, seven dogs, two cats, one pig and 20 chickens have died. One pig was born here with a penis in his anus.” Matsepo presently suffers from blood in his urine, tiredness and lack of concentration. He recently spent six weeks in hospital with kidney failure. His sister Alinah came to live with him, but she died in July 2004 of kidney failure and cancer. Strike comments with some bitterness, “My sister would be alive now without ISCOR.... Now they supply us with piped water, but it’s too late for her”. Other family members are also sick, and report that they stay inside the house because the dust and air pollution is so bad.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). Op. Cit.

<sup>14</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). Ibid.



A view of Accerlor Mittal's Vanderbijlpark steel mill.  
*archives*

*VEJA photo*

Steel is central to any industrial economy (Fine and Rustomjee, 1996) and is so closely linked to the industrial life of a country that its cycle of boom and bust mirrors those of the economy as a whole.<sup>15</sup> The South African steel industry is a key strategic industry, directly representing 1,5 per cent of the country's GDP and indirectly supporting strategic sectors of the economy, the top five of which, it is estimated, support 15 per cent of GDP and employ eight million people. Steel adds R26 billion to the economic value of South Africa's iron ore and if this capacity was lost it would add 1 per cent of GDP to South Africa's trade deficit. The domestic steel industry is the only one in sub-Saharan Africa; there is a positive correlation between GDP and steel production for developing countries around the world and the loss of our domestic steel production capacity would constitute a grave threat to the growth drivers set out in the National Development Plan, the Industrial Policy Action Plan and President Zuma's nine-point plan for economic growth.

Within the South African steel industry, ISCOR (now Accerlor Mittal South Africa) is a giant, controlling more than 80 per cent of the local steel market, with direct influence on important downstream sectors, such as automobile manufacture, industrial tools and machinery, construction and mining and upstream control of iron ore and coal mines.<sup>16</sup>

ISCOR was started in the 1920s and played a crucial role in South Africa's industrial development. It responded to the strategic needs of crucial, large scale industries such as the mines and railways; enabled the growth of a large metal engineering and automotive sector, and was crucial to the development of an arms industry since World War 2, which was later deployed to defend apartheid.<sup>17</sup>

In 2004 ISCOR became part of the world's biggest steel empire – Mittal Steel – as a result of the privatisation and globalisation of ISCOR. Mittal Steel is the largest steel producing

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<sup>15</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). Ibid.

corporation, operating in 14 different countries, and employing 220,000 people with revenues worth billions of dollars. Accelor Mittal contributes an estimated 65 per cent, to the GDP of the Vanderbijl area. At its peak, 20,000 workers were employed the company.<sup>18</sup>

Accelor Mittal also has a reputation for environmental degradation and unfair labour practices (in Ireland, Mexico and South Africa), including unfair dismissals (Romania and Poland). The Mittal business model is to:

- buy derelict or ailing industries at minimal cost
- squeeze substantial donor funding out of multilateral institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank
- engineer quick turn-arounds through global knowledge-sharing, retrenchment and the dissolution of legacy costs
- use market monopoly for an aggressive pricing structure and if the turn-around fails, to dispose of the assets quickly and neatly.<sup>19</sup>

The Vanderbijlpark Steel works has also profoundly shaped Vanderbijlpark as a company town.

“Its construction was a profoundly masculine as well as a racist enterprise and the men who designed, managed and built it came for opportunity or were driven to work there by coercion. Many of those who are settled in the area have families in rural South Africa, in Lesotho and Mozambique and a part of the labour force still migrates for work.”<sup>20</sup> Single-sex hostels were built for black male workers in townships such as Boipatong and Sebokeng while white workers lived in Vanderbijlpark town.

It is also important to note that in the Vaal, more men than women have jobs and women are more likely to have low paying work. Women are thus more likely to be poor. Poor households also tend to be larger than better off households, so what money comes in has to support more people. Most of those supported are children. They are the majority of the very poor. Pensions and child support grants mitigate this poverty to some degree, but do not reverse it.<sup>21</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In September 2015 Accelor Mittal SA indicated that it would be reviewing the viability of largest steel mill (Vanderbijlpark) and would mothball two operations as a result of plunging steel prices and slowing demand. It is estimated that 400 direct employees and contract service employees will be affected by the closures.<sup>22</sup>

A recent newspaper report provides some background to the current slowdown: “The global steel market has been dominated over the last decade by the People’s Republic of China which has installed capacity to produce 1.1 billion tons of steel. The PRC’s steel exports account for well over half of the global steel market – presently estimated at 800 million tons. However, the global recession and depressed demand all over the world has recently led to a glut of

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<sup>18</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Cock and Munnik (2006). Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Hallows and Munnik (2006). Op. Cit.

<sup>21</sup> Hallows and Munnik (2006). Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.bdlive.co.za/business/industrials/2015/09/01/arcelormittal-sa-steel-mills-to-close-as-industry-crisis-bites>

steel in the global market. In these circumstances and on the back of low production costs highly competitive Chinese steel exports have penetrated a large number of export markets in developed and developing countries alike, including the South African steel market."<sup>23</sup>

It is estimated that the price of imported steel is currently 12 per cent below the cost of production seriously undercutting the competitiveness of South African producers and constituting a direct threat to the domestic steel production sector. These retrenchments will result in even more devastating impacts for the women and workers in the Vaal Triangle.

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<sup>23</sup> Minister Rob Davies quoted in <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/ycls-a-eom-forum/MYBvZhkzxoo>