

Title: Women and Mining in Contemporary Australia: An Exploratory Study.

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Abstract

Claire Williams' (1981) seminal research *Open Cut: The Working Class in an Australian Mining Town* along with 'Hewers of Cake and Drawers of Tea' and *Two for the Price of One: The Lives of Mining Wives* by J.K. Gibson-Graham (1992) and Linda Rhodes (2005) respectively represent significant contributions to knowledge about gender and mining in rural Australia. This paper revisits the key findings of these studies in light of data from recent research in Ravensthorpe, a rural shire in the south-west of Western Australia. In 2004 BHP Billiton announced that a large scale nickel mine would be established in the area with a substantial residential workforce. This residential workforce includes a large number of women with various relationships to the mine. In this paper we investigate these relationships by drawing on data from interviews with women in the shire undertaken in 2008. These interviews suggest that the 'mining woman' of the 21st century is far more heterogeneous than the portrayals of her in the past.

Key Words: mining, gender, rural, class, domestic work.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a significant growth in the literature on gender and rurality in Australia and internationally (Pini 2008; Little and Panelli 2003). However, the majority of this literature has focused on agricultural men and women and gender relations in farming communities. There is consequently a dearth of recent scholarly work on the subject of gender in rural mining communities despite Australia's current 'resource boom'. This paper addresses this lack of academic interest in gender in the resource sector by drawing on an exploratory study of thirteen women living in a resource affected community in rural Western Australia. Data from this study are used to address the question of 'Who is the Australian mining woman of the 21st century?' In taking up this question we turn to earlier seminal studies of women and mining undertaken in Australia by Gibson-Graham (1991; 1992; 1996) and Williams (1981) as well as more recent work by Rhodes (2005) and Eveline and Booth (2002). The paper begins by introducing these studies before turning to outline the methodology of the research. Two interrelated central themes are then explored. These themes highlight changes and similarities between the subjectivities and roles of the mining women described by Gibson-Graham (1990) and Williams (1981) and the 'mining women of the 21st Century' we interviewed.

Women in mining in Australia – the literature

While Claire Williams' (1981) sociological study of two open-cut coal mines in central Queensland between 1974 and 1975 had a broader focus than simply that of 'women', her feminist Marxist analyses provides key insights into gender relations in the mining sector. Her argument is that the men in her sample are struggling with class inequities as manifest, for example, in a lack of control over their jobs and

broader work environment, but women are equally struggling with gender inequities in their marital relationships as they are typically isolated from family, undertake all domestic labour and have limited opportunities for paid work.

Central Queensland was also the focus of Gibson-Graham's (1991; 1992; 1996) research around issues of 'union movement, industrial strategy and gender' specifically in terms of what might today be described as intersections of shiftwork practices and family/community life through a class lens. The work, undertaken at a time when women were just beginning to participate in the industry, centres on dependent predominantly working class spouses variously termed 'mining-wife', 'mining-town women' and 'miner's wife'.

Using a more descriptive approach Rhodes (2005) focuses on women as unacknowledged silent partners in the mining industry as encapsulated in her title *Two for the Price of One: the Lives of Mining Wives*. She draws on seventy interviews with three generations of middle-class mining wives—generation one: pre-1960; generation two: 1960-1985; and generation three: 1985-2000—all of whom were interviewed in Perth Western Australia although they had lived as mining wives throughout the nation and beyond. In moving across these generations she tracks the relationships between broader societal and industry changes and the expectations for and of mining wives. For example, she describes the ways in which generations one and two were more accepting of the dominant 'good wife' discourse that shaped and validated their contributions whereas generation three emerges as seeking to variously renegotiate this discourse.

It is a 'new' generation of 'mining women' which is the subject of Eveline and Booth's (2005) investigation of equal employment opportunity at 'Emsite' a mining community in Western Australia. However, these are 'women mine workers' rather than the 'mine wives' who were the focus of the earlier investigations described above. Interviews and focus groups with workers, managers and union representatives over the period from 1988 to 1998 as well as analysis of secondary material are used to reveal and critique the covert and overt resistance to women mine employees. This includes violence and sexual and verbal harassment.

This necessarily brief overview of Australian studies undertaken on the subject of 'mining women' provides a context for examining our data, and in particular, exploring the extent to which the lives and experiences of 'mining women' today differ from the past. Before turning to this type of comparison the following section provides a brief overview of the research methodology.

Methodology

This exploratory research is part of a larger two year study of the Ravensthorpe Shire in the south-west of Western Australia which has investigated changes occurring in the community as a result of a new BHP Billiton nickel mine—Ravensthorpe Nickel Operations (RNO)—which commenced construction in 2004 and was officially opened in June 2008.¹ As part of this investigation the perspectives were sought of newcomers to the area, in particular those who had come to live in the area as a result of the nickel mine. In the process, and as a result of reading the literature on mining women, the diversity encountered in terms of women's relationships to the mining industry stood out very clearly.

The case study site is of particular interest to the question of ‘Who is the Australian mining woman of the 21st Century?’ as many of the recent changes that have occurred in the resource sector that have a considerable impact on gender relations are manifest here. These changes were just emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s at the time of Williams’ (1981) and Gibson-Graham’s (1990; 1996) research. They include the globalisation of the resources sector, vertical integration of the industry so that mining and processing occur at the one site, the use of fly-in fly-out rather than or as well as residential workforces increasingly housed in (relatively) nearby non-mining towns, and the entry of women as employees in mining.

Interviews were undertaken with thirteen women involved in the mining industry. Women were selected to provide insight into the potential diversity of who constitutes the category ‘mining woman’ in 21st century Australia. Eight are employed at the mine in different roles. Of the remaining five women three are not involved in paid work while a fourth is a farmer and a fifth works in the service sector. These women were interviewed as ‘mining women’ because they reside in the town as a result of the mine, whether this is because of their own, their partners’ or parents’ employment. The sample also was selected to ensure diversity in the employment status of the women and their partners/parents at the mine. The age of the women ranged from early 20s to mid 60s.

All but two of the women are married. These two women include a person who has never married as someone who is divorced. This divorced woman, like eight others in the sample, has dependent children. A further factor in choosing the sample was to

ensure diversity in the residential background of participants. Three of the women lived in the shire prior to the mine's opening and are long term residents while the remainder's residential status is tied to the mine operation. Some of the women had arrived with the first cohort of employees in 2006 while others we interviewed had resided in the shire for six months or less. A final focus for sampling was the women's country of origin. In particular, given the large percentage of South African born residents employed at the mine, especially at managerial level, it was thought necessary to include representatives from this population in the interview sample. Thus, of the thirteen, three are South African born. The remainder are all Australian. There are no Indigenous women in the sample which is reflective of the non-existent Indigenous mine-related population residing in the area.²

With the exception of one interview, all were conducted in the women's homes. The interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. This analysis is ongoing; this preliminary stage has involved a phenomenological approach based on interpretive epistemological traditions (Creswell 1998). The process included coding, reflecting, sorting to identify patterns, similarities or differences between variables; then isolating these and using them for developing a small set of generalizations for comparison with the literature (Miles and Huberman 1994).

How does the 'mining women' of the 21st Century see herself?

The majority of the women interviewed, including those directly employed on the mine site, did not identify with the title 'mining woman' or 'mining wife'.³ Interviewees cite a sense of distance from the (working class) task of extracting ore. In line with the vertical integration of mining processes as occurring from the 1980s

onward, RNO is both an open cut mine and hydrometallurgical process plant. The majority of workers engaged on the mine are in processing and 'corporate' roles as opposed to 'hands-on' extraction of mineral associated with the archetypal cultural identity of 'miner'.

However members in the broader host community make use of this term to collectively describe these women. Just after asserting that they did not see themselves as 'mining wives,' two women related an anecdote in which they had asked another woman not directly employed or associated with the mine to join them for a swim. The other woman's child, very eager to go to the beach, begged his mother: 'please, please let's go to the beach with the mining women.' In the broader context of local tension over the arrival of the mine, this designation may well have negative connotations just as it may function as collective noun for a group whose lifestyle and perspectives may be largely foreign to local pre-mine residents. This was articulated clearly by the three women interviewed who were also 'farming women' in that they lived on working farms. One's husband was now employed at the mine and she worked the farm herself while in the other two instances it was the women who had taken off-farm work at the mine. One reflected on how taking work at the mine could also signal a shift in identity for her and her family:

When I first applied for this job I went to a P and C meeting and had a mother say, "Oh gee, I hope we don't get any mining brats at our school when all these changes happen." And I was kind of sitting back thinking to myself "Well, if I get this job does that then change my children to mining brats?"

A further determinant of the ambiguity women felt about the term 'mining woman' may be related to changes in labour relations in the resources sector as well as shifts away from collective notions of class. Union profile and industrial activity which were so central to the studies by Williams (1981) and Gibson-Graham (1991; 1992; 1996) have been diminished in the contemporary mining industry (Ellem 2004).

What does the 'mining woman' of the 21st Century do?

Williams' (1981: 49) describes the central Queensland sites as 'masculine frontiers' where women are viewed as 'other' and 'out of place'. She notes the way in which a tough and aggressive masculinity is privileged by the male workers and reports on the men's resistance to the idea of women reshaping the male preserve of the mine worksite. The gendered occupational segregation that has been characteristic of the mining sector remains the same today with women representing just 3% of all employees at mine sites and in minerals processing operations (Minerals Council of Australia 2006). Indeed, none of the women interviewed in the Shire of Ravensthorpe worked in these specific areas despite the fact that some had qualifications for such work. In other fields of work at the mine outside of processing women's participation is also impeded, interviewees argued, by the long working hours (10-12 hours), the lack of flexible work-practices such as availability of part-time work and limited ready access to child-care. Thus the women who could take up what they described as the 'new opportunities' provided by the mine are typically those who do not have dependent children. This was particularly an issue for women interviewed as they were well aware of the limited employment choices in the rural shire. As they explained, apart from the mine most of the available work was poorly paid and offered no career path.

This theme, of the circumscribed nature of the paid work opportunities of 'mining women' is key to research undertaken by Williams (1981), Gibson-Graham (1991; 1992; 1996) and Rhodes (2005). It is therefore critical that this continues today. Also seemingly resistant to change is the ongoing exploitative gendered division of domestic labour that is so well documented in these earlier studies. Asked about the sharing of domestic work one young woman in her twenties who, along with her partner, had a full-time professional position at the mine laughed, 'I do a lot of housework and he goes fishing'. For 'mining women' who were not in paid work the issue of the domestic division of labour was closely tied to the Rhodes' (2005) notion of the 'good wife'. Two stated, for example:

I'm happy to do it (all of the housework). I mean he wouldn't have time to do it. And he's so tired and exhausted and on the phone.

I don't work so I shouldn't expect him to [share the housework]. Although every now and then I just lose it and go "well I would like some help around here" but no, that's my job.

Similarly, economic dependence is presented as a privilege, as a choice not to work. Even so, woman claiming this privilege as a joint decision for the benefit of their children at the same time talk about how they would like to do some part time work. One woman with young children, who had taken up a full-time position at the mine, described the personal benefits as a shift from feeling 'trapped' to a sense of self-worth:

It's incredible how your self confidence improves. I'm so much more positive about everything just by going to work.

Other women made similar comments, each of which can be seen as an expression of personal sacrifice in terms of loss of autonomy and confidence reminiscent of the experiences described by many of the women in Rhode's study.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on an exploratory study of 'mining women' in a shire in rural Western Australia. Its central purpose has been to investigate the question of 'Who is the mining woman of 21st Century Australia?' particularly in the context of earlier seminal research on women and mining. Two key themes have been explored which emphasise a process of change as well as one of intransigence. The first concerns the interviewees' ambivalence about and/or resistance to the term 'mining women'. In previous studies this terminology was engaged in a much less problematic way to describe women associated with the resource sector. The women at the centre of this research also appeared to use the term to describe themselves and others around them. However, the data from these interviews suggests that 'mining woman' should no longer be taken as a self-evident category given the heterogeneity of women associated with the sector today and also their own distancing from this identity. The second theme to emerge from this paper is that the roles and work of 'mining women' has changed only minimally in recent years. Despite the exhortations of the resources industry of their desire to be inclusive of women (see Minerals Council of Australia 2006) the employment of women remains limited and is largely contained in

administrative roles. Importantly, women in mining communities continue to be responsible for a disproportionate level of domestic and familial labour. The 'feudal' relations that define the lives of the mining women studied by Gibson-Graham (1992; 1996) thus appear remarkably resistant to change.

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¹ This larger research project was undertaken by Dr Mayes as part of the Alcoa Foundation's Sustainability and Conservation Programme at Curtin University of Technology.

² According to ABS 2006 census data, the indigenous population in the region at 1.7% of the total population is lower than the Australian average. Though there is an indigenous employment policy at this mine, we are not aware of any indigenous women living in the area as a result of the RNO.

³ In one interview the partner was present for the whole discussion. When we asked his spouse whether or not she saw herself as a 'mining woman' he interjected to assert that he didn't see himself as a 'mining' man precisely because he worked in processing.