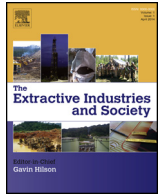




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Research paper

The “un-womanly” attitudes of women in mining towards the environment

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore whether the employment of more women in mining will result in improved environmental management and practices in that industry. The debate about gender in mining regularly includes claims that the employment of more women will help change the industry. These claims rely on essentialist ideas about how women behave, and fail to consider the production of masculinity as the preferred gender for all mining employees. Drawing on the results of a survey which explores the attitudes of women who work in mining towards the environment, I conclude that the sex of employees is not the best indicator of possible change in environmental management and practices in the industry. Women who work in mining do not display a particularly strong or unique connection to the environment which would encourage them to drive change in their workplaces. In conclusion, I suggest that ecofeminism might offer better hope of improved environmental practices in mining; and call for more work to be done to explore how this might work in mining operations.

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1. Introduction

Do women have a better ethics of care towards the environment than men? The answer to this question is an important one for the mining industry today. If the answer to the question is “yes”, the employment of more women in mining could bring about changes in the management of the environment within this industry; and an outcome of these changes could be a reduction in the pollution and damage caused by the ways humans currently mine the earth’s resources.

Mining¹ is an important practice which has allowed for incredible advances in technology, education, and health for human civilisations. The human hunger for what mining

ultimately provides—machinery, energy, personal computers, household appliances etc.—means it is unlikely to disappear as a human practice or as an industry anytime soon; and this despite the growing movement to create post-extractive cultures. Nevertheless, a growing concern about mining is the impact it has on the environment. Because mining is a “*segregative process*” (Bridge, 2004; emphasis in the original), the volume of waste produced is extremely high—more than 99.5% of the mined material in the case of copper. Mining’s impacts on the environment can be extreme and long-term. Polluted water and air travel, and so environmental damage caused by mining is not just localised. Mining is therefore easily read as the “perfect” example of selfish, post-industrial, neo-capitalist practice—it “turns minerals into commodities, controlled by market forces driven by a profit motive that overrules concern for the nature and the environment, and the engineering project assumes superiority over everything else” (Lahiri-Dutt, 2010, p. 331).

Gender is increasingly being promoted as a way to introduce changes to the practice of mining and within the mining industry. The role of women in particular is starting to attract significant attention. Recent research has explored the histories of women in mining (Burton 2014; Mercier and Gier, 2009), the impacts of mining operations on women in local communities (Lahiri-Dutt, 2006; OXFAM, 2009; Sharma and Rees, 2007), the status of femininity in mining (Mayer and Pini, 2010), the role of gender in the training of employees (Andersson and Abrahamsson, 2007;

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¹ In this article, I compact the act of resource extraction into one single term: “mining”. Mining is a complex industry. It demands a wide range of skills from engineers, managers, safety experts, psychologists, human resources personnel, accountants, business planners, architects, and machine operators, to name but a few. A range of different resources are also extracted from the earth, including oil, gas, diamonds, iron ore, petroleum, coal and more; and the extraction methods differ. What is extracted, how much of it is extracted, how it is extracted, and what happens to it after it has been extracted—all these are important in terms of understanding the process of mining. Understandings of what is needed and how to extract it are necessary for any mining business to function in financially and commercially viable ways. For the purpose of my analysis of the relationship between gender and the human practice of extracting non-renewable resources from the earth, however, the single term “mining” will suffice.

Somerville, 2005), the relationship between gender and safety (Albury and Laplonge, 2012, 2013; Ely and Meyerson, 2010; Laplonge, 2014), and the impacts of gender in fly-in-fly-out communities (Clifford, 2009; Lozeva and Marinova, 2010). This work sits alongside an equally emerging interest in exploring women in male-dominated industries in general (Benecke and Dodge, 1990; Corcoran-Nantes and Roberts, 1995; Denissen and Saguy, 2014; Hatmaker, 2013; O'Farrell and Harlan, 1982; Powell et al., 2009; Reskin and Padavic, 1988; Rosell et al., 1995; Smith, 2013a, 2013b). Over the past 25 years, we have also seen the release of many industry and government reports which promote the employment of more women in mining (see, for example, Australian Government Office for Women and Minerals Council of Australia, 2007; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013; Canadian Mining Industry Human Resources Council, 2008; Colmar Brunson Social Research, 2005; International Finance Corporation, 2009; Pattenden, 1998; Queensland Resources Council, 2012; WIM Canada, 2010).

In this article, I seek to further the gendered analysis of mining by exploring the attitudes of women who work in mining towards the environment. I seek to answer an important question: Can we rely on these women to save the environment that is being mined? I draw primarily on the findings of a survey in which 49 women with experience working in mining shared their attitudes towards the environment and its management within mining. I analyse the results of this survey alongside the findings of other studies which have explored the link between gender and the environment, including the attitudes towards the environment of women working in similar male-dominated industries.

Women have noticeably been involved in activism against human activities which threaten the planet like mining (Gaard, 2011; Merchant, 1980; p. 66; Mies & Shiva, 2014; p. 3, 246; Rocheleau et al., 1996b; p. 14). The issue of whether women are better, or even natural, protectors of the earth has been widely discussed and debated in narratives of environmentalism and ecofeminism (Brú & Cabo, 2004; p. 221; Jackson, 1993; pp. 392–397; Nightingale, 2006; p. 165–167; Stoddart and Tindall, 2011; Warren, 2000, pp. 52–54). Warren (2000) identifies nature as a specific feminist issue because an understanding of nature helps us to understand the “oppression, subordination, or domination of women”; and even promotes “Nature is a feminist issue” as the “slogan of ecofeminism” (p. 1).

I conclude, however, there is little evidence of a deep concern for environmental issues among women who work in the mining industry today. The results of the survey show no strong desire on the part of such women to change the way the environment is perceived and managed in the industry. This should not be read as a failure on the part of these women, or indeed all women who work in mining. Rather, I respond to the results in two ways. Firstly, I argue that women who work in mining are not immune to being influenced—or gendered—by the existing masculinised culture of the industry. Instead of relying on women to save the mined environment, we should further challenge and change this gendered culture such that the environment benefits from a more feminist practice of mining. I therefore argue that a turn towards a better understanding and application of ecofeminist ideas by both men and women who work in mining offers a more promising solution to improving environmental management and practices in this industry.

2. Defining “women who work in mining”

Women have a long history of working in mining. On a global scale, women continue to work in mining in large numbers. Claims that women are underrepresented in mining today is factually inaccurate if we include women who work in artisanal mining in developing contexts (Hinton et al., 2003). The women I am

concerned with in this article are, however, those women who work in the mining industry in liberal democratic societies such as Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and the United States. The survey carried out as part of my research was targeted at these women. The experiences of these women differ from those of women who work in artisanal mining in that they may not have the same “intimate knowledge of their ecosystems” as women who rely on such knowledge for basic survival (Nightingale, 2006). Their knowledge of the environment and its resources is arguably more closely connected to that of privileged men than women whose knowledge about such matters is “gained from their role as subsistence providers of the households” (ibid.).

To focus on such a small and specific group of women to explore attitudes towards the environment is a very (eco)feminist thing to do. This is important, because as I discuss in the conclusion of this article, a turn towards ecofeminist ideas may be a better way of ensuring changes in environmental management in mining than a reliance on simply employing more women. Elmhirst and Resurreccion (2008) observe that “Arguments have been made for more context-specific and historically nuanced understandings [in ecofeminism] of the relationship of specific groups of women with specific environmental resources [. . .]” (p. 7). My analysis takes the women who work in mining in liberal democratic societies as a specific group of women. It takes mined non-renewable resources (e.g., oil, gas, minerals) as the specific environmental resources. It considers what these women who are professionally connected to the mining of these resources think about the environment.

3. Attitudes towards the environment of women who work in mining

In 2015, I ran an online survey to ask women working in resource industries to share their attitudes towards the environment. The survey asked for details of the employment status of each respondent, including how long they had worked in the extractive industries, and their current position at work. The respondents' professional attitudes towards the environment were gauged by asking them about whether they supported the current environmental practices of their employer and if they had raised an environmental concern at work. The respondents were also asked if they had participated in environmental campaigns and to share examples of “environmentally friendly” actions they had taken in their personal lives. The purpose of this latter inquiry was to see if these women adopted different attitudes towards the environment on a personal level than they did in the workplace.

The survey was advertised on Factive's website (www.factive.com.au) and on a variety of social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. A link to the survey was included in a mail out Factive sent out to its database of approximately 750 people. It was also sent out to a number of women in mining networks and associated groups located in Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The survey ran for a period of approximately 2 months. In total, 51 respondents completed the survey. 1 of these identified as “male” and was therefore removed from the analysis. The survey was set up in such a way as to deny access to any of the questions unless the respondent identified as “female”. A further respondent was ineligible because they indicated they were not currently employed in a resource or extractive industry; and again their ability to respond to further questions would have been blocked at this point. The total number of eligible responses was therefore 49.

3.1. Findings

The majority of respondents (40) identified as currently working in the mining industry, while the remaining respondents

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