

So you think you're tough?

Getting serious about gender in mining



DEAN LAPLONGE

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SAMPLE

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The Gender Man in Mining

I was once described in an interview for an Australian mining magazine as “the gender man in mining”. Another article about my work in a Canadian newspaper called me “an offbeat mining industry consultant”. Apparently, it’s not normal for a man to take an interest in gender—particularly in an industry like mining.

The mining industry is gendered. It’s no different to any other industry in that respect. But in mining, it’s only women who are seen to have gender; and gender is only ever discussed as a problem for women. A man in this industry who starts to think, talk or do something about gender is easily viewed as an oddball.

There are many other terms we could use to describe a man who takes an interest in gender. I have heard all of them used to describe me, mostly by men working on the mine sites I have visited. I was once offered a plate of “pooftah food” (salad at a lunchtime barbeque) while

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a crowd of giggling adult male miners waited eagerly to see how I would respond; I ate the salad. I have been drilled about my sexual practices by a group of male managers who decided it was more important to discuss this than the issue we were supposed to be discussing: their leadership styles and skills. I have been called a princess, a faggot, a trouble-maker and a liar. Sometimes, the abuse and the intimidation have come close to getting physical.

When I am on a mine site, I often feel like I'm back in the school playground, having to negotiate how to survive alongside boys who believe that bullying and risk-taking are the only ways they can build and sustain a reputation for themselves as real men. These boys don't stop to think about the impacts their actions might have on themselves or on others. They see it as a necessary rite of passage into manhood to dominate and to intimidate. And it's very rare to find anybody—parents, trainers, friends, managers or colleagues—who will try to stop them.

And let's not convince ourselves that this kind of behaviour occurs only in the workshops or among the labouring classes. I have witnessed the same kind of behaviours and attitudes among managers and senior professionals in mining.

The mining industry is certainly not an easy choice for anybody who wants to engage in serious work on gender. It's not just a gendered industry; it's a heavily masculinised one. Cultural norms about masculinity are deeply embedded in the everyday business practices of mining. These norms are not easy to identify and unpack; and they are even harder to change.

The mining industry is made up of approximately 85% men. Many of these men—and many of the 15% of female employees—support a model of gender that favours the status quo; even as this may be bad for production, bad for safety, bad for women, and bad for workplace morale. Most people just don't appreciate that there are alternatives to the practices of gender that currently dominate in mining. Or if they do, they don't want to think about these, let alone see them working

in practice.

But this is the industry in which I found myself working. And it's an industry I believe is desperately in need of a change in the way it understands and applies gender. I have a vision for gender in mining which goes beyond anything I see being put into practice in this industry today.

I know I'm not the stereotypical man in mining. Those who have met me can confirm I definitely don't look the part. I don't have a background in the more traditional entry points into this industry—I am neither a geologist nor an engineer. I am also certainly no expert in how to run a mining operation.

As a result of my work in this industry, I have learned a lot about the tools and the processes used in mining. I have come to understand (and sometimes ashamedly use) the jargon and acronyms that can make a mining company appear extremely alien to the newcomer. I have become an expert in how to decipher the highly complex standards and procedures which mining companies use to explain the systems of their workplace. The business of mining definitely makes more sense to me now than it did a decade ago. But it's a business I continue to observe and respond to in terms of how gender affects it. And I believe that gender affects it in very profound and often damaging ways.

In 2010, I was invited to be the lead facilitator for the annual safety roadshow run by the Resources Safety division of The Department of Mines and Petroleum in Western Australia. Over a period of several weeks, we toured the State holding workshops for employees of the mining industry, asking them to think about the impacts of "toughness" on their workplaces. Time and time again, I listened to individuals talk about the intense pressure they felt to act tough to fit in while at work.

Throughout my consultancy work in the mining industry I have consciously refused to fit in. I know this can put people off. My ideas and way of viewing the world of mining are not the same as most people who work in this industry. This easily allows those who want things to stay the same to dismiss what I am saying or to write off my ideas as

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irrelevant or wrong. At times, I have felt very much like a freak in the industry. I dress differently, I think differently, and I talk about gender. What kind of a man does this make me in the eyes of miners?

Where being a freak works in my favour is that I am often invited to “liven up” conferences where delegates might otherwise have to listen to the usual round of talks about “best practice” and “leading solutions”—all explained using graphs that are way too small and with illegible text squeezed onto one PowerPoint slide after another. In contrast, I have been known to use images of a half-naked David Beckham in my presentations, to help me explain cultural shifts in gender among straight men. I have referred to Justin Bieber as a way of explaining how desperate many young boys feel in their attempts to secure a masculinity which is considered normal. My approach certainly shakes things up at these conferences and gives me a chance to introduce new ideas about gender to the industry and its people.

But the problem with a freak show is that it can serve to remind the audience of how normal they are. In seeing me as the freak, mining employees can justify their existing understandings and practices of gender as normal in comparison to the ones they hear me promote. This is great for entertainment; but it does little to bring about change.

I can no longer be the only gender man in mining. If we are going to see some serious changes to the way gender is understood and practised in this industry, gender needs to be something every person in mining understands better. After all, gender is already something every person in this industry does every day at work. And gender is something that is influencing the way employees of the mining industry work.

Without widespread changes in attitudes to gender in mining we will never see the creation of gender diversity in this industry. Mining will continue to be a man-cave for out-dated practices of gender. It will continue to be an industry in which particular attitudes to gender impact on the safety and wellbeing of its employees. And it will miss out on an opportunity to transform into an industry which places gender at the

heart of its entire operations.

Part of my motivation for investigating gender in mining is that I never want to sit on another flight coming home from a mine site while having to listen to sexist comments about the air hostesses from men who think it's all just a bit of after-work fun. I never want to have to see another person get promoted to a senior management position in a mining company despite the fact so many employees have made complaints against him because of his bullying and intimidation tactics. I don't ever want to hear another woman tell me how scared she is living in the mine site village because of the men who come banging on her door at night, every night, asking for sex. I am fed up with seeing women being used on mine sites to support the careers of men. And I never want to have to comfort another crying man as he reflects on the devastation caused to his life and to his family as the result of his career in mining.

The mining industry is one of the most important and influential industries in the world today; and it will no doubt continue to be so for many years to come. Yet the willingness of people in this industry to take on board ideas about gender that do not place the blame on women while continuing to promote hyper-masculinity is pitiful. This industry has a responsibility and a duty to do more to help develop real gender diversity, so that all people who come to work in mining can feel safe and can make a positive contribution without intimidation.

And the people who work in this industry, particularly those in a senior leadership role, need to toughen up when it comes to dealing with gender issues in their workplaces. Yes things have changed a bit. Yes there are now a few more women making successful careers in mining. But this isn't enough.

The mining industry needs to do gender very differently.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the wonderful people I have met during my time working in the resources sector. There are so many dedicated people working in mining and other resource industries who so desperately want to see things turn out differently. I often see how constrained they are by existing habits and systems, and I wish them well in their ongoing visible and subtle ways to bring about change.

In particular, I want to thank Dr. Su Ho who, as communications manager for the Resources Safety division of the Department of Mines and Petroleum, saw merit in my vision and provided me with a remarkable opportunity to work alongside her and her team to explore the impact of toughness on workplace safety and wellbeing among mining employees throughout Western Australia.

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Introduction

The ideas and advice about gender in this book are presented in three sections. These three sections are interrelated and I recommend you read them in order. The reason for this is because the practical advice offered in the third section may not make sense or may be acted on incorrectly without first exploring the new understanding of gender I explain in section one, and then also understanding why we must switch our attention away from women and towards masculinity as I explain in section two.

In section one, I explain a new way of understanding gender that is relevant and appropriate for the mining industry today. Here, I argue that we must move away from seeing gender as an issue for women and towards exploring gender as practices of acting out as men and as women. If I had to sum up the ideas of this first section in a single sentence, I would say this: We need to recognise that we do gender at

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work rather than believe that we have gender when we come to work.

In section two, I offer some criticism of the debate about women in mining. In doing so, I know I risk upsetting people and causing personal offence. There are so many people involved in work to promote women in mining today. But the women-in-mining issue has dominated the debate about gender in mining for too long. And too much time and money continue to go into solving the problem of gender in mining by paying attention to the needs of what we continue to imagine are needy, incapable and helpless women.

The women-in-mining discussion is not a sexist concern; it aims to provide opportunities for women to find fulfilling careers in the mining industry. But it is most definitely a sexist approach which sees women as lacking and in need of assistance, while at the same time we ignore the histories and structures of the mining industry which have always made this industry more suitable for men.

I also argue for a need to explore masculinity in the mining industry. The problem of gender in mining is intimately related to practices of masculinity, not women.

Throughout this book, I argue that gender should not be confined as a human resources issue; it is a workplace-wide issue. Gender—or masculinity specifically—already permeates the mining industry. It affects everything about mining, including systems of production, budgeting practices, the organisation of work, safety, and workplace cultures. It also affects the way we design and run our mine sites. Section three therefore provides some practical tools for how to translate the new understanding of gender into workplace action.

The answers to all the gender issues in the mining industry are not to be found in this book. But the ideas for how to start discovering them on your mine site, or for thinking about these possible answers in relation to this industry or other male-dominated industries, hopefully are.

So let's start getting tough and getting serious about gender in mining...

Section 1

A New Understanding of Gender in Mining

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We need a new understanding of gender in the mining industry. Indeed, we need a new understanding of gender in a whole range of resource industries including oil and gas, as well as in associated industries like construction and manufacturing. In the following chapters, I will explain how this new understanding will work. In doing so, I will talk about some important topics relating to gender that are not being discussed—but which need to be discussed—on mine sites today.

There's an obvious link between women and gender. Many people working in the mining industry willingly accept and promote this link; even if they do so in ways which, as I will point out, are limited and limiting.

Rarely if ever, however, do we hear any debate in mining about the links between gender and safety, gender and the history of mining, or gender and leadership in a mining company. These are all important links too. Analysing these links, and others, is vital if we are to see any real and sustainable changes in the gender culture of mining.

Even rarer is a debate about men and gender. When senior managers in mining agree to start talking about gender in their workplaces, invariably they focus only on women. Primarily, they talk about numbers of women. The problem of gender quickly becomes a problem of women and for women.

But the gendering of men and the ways men act out their genders cannot be ignored, not in an industry like mining. In mining, the majority of employees are men. And this industry continues to promote a particular version of masculinity—what I will later describe as “hyper-masculinity”—as the preferred way for its workers to behave.

By applying a new understanding of gender across all elements of the business of mining, we can certainly accelerate increases in the number of women coming to work on mine sites. This outcome alone must surely be a good thing. After all, the primary aim of the current debate about gender in the mining industry is to get more women to come and work on mine sites.

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But the new understanding of gender I propose will also result in an increase in different kinds of men coming to work on mine sites. This may seem a somewhat strange and unnecessary outcome. The debate about gender in the mining industry to date has never suggested we need more male workers. If the majority of employees in the mining industry are already men, what good will it do for gender diversity if we see yet more men coming to work here?

I am talking about different kinds of men—men who have different outlooks on life, different skills and experiences, and different ways of approaching the business of mining. Gender diversity is not about more women; it's about more diversity in the way we act out our genders.

The mining industry definitely needs a greater diversity of employee skills, innovations and ideas. It needs people who have different ways of thinking to help wipe out so much of the inefficiency and waste that we currently see throughout this industry. A stagnation of new ideas and a repetition of inefficient practices in mining are the results of a myopic view of the kind of person who is a good fit for the industry today. We can overcome this myopia by expanding our understanding of gender and by seriously supporting more diversity in the way we allow people to practise gender on mine sites.

By moving beyond the widely held view that gender relates only to women, we can also expect improved safety outcomes, healthier and more enjoyable workplaces, and significant changes to the way the everyday business of mining works.

Shifting our thinking about gender.

Before we can think about how any new understanding of gender will affect mining—or, indeed, why one is needed—we must first know what it is. Some significant readjustment in the way we think about gender is necessary before we can even begin getting our hands dirty with a practical application of gender to the business of mining. And that's the

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aim of this first section of the book.

The three chapters in this first section challenge us to question the belief that gender is something we have or something we possess. It urges us to let go of the idea that gender is something we are born with and which we develop quite naturally. Instead, we must start to consider gender as heavily dependent on institutions, cultural norms and myths, and our relationships with others.

The preferred view of gender in the mining industry today assumes gender to be a natural part of who we are—that we behave as men or as women because that's who we are. But we must start to think about how the everyday practices of the business of mining help to produce the genders of its employees. We must also start to consider how wider cultural understandings of gender affect the way we work as men and women in mining.

This may sound a bit too complex right now. Wouldn't it just be easier and quicker to employ more women? If we had more women in the workforce, wouldn't this automatically bring about the gender changes that the mining industry needs? Others may have questions about what is meant by the idea that gender isn't natural. How else could we possibly understand gender? And why do we need to understand gender differently? Who benefits from this new understanding of gender? What's in it for me?

These kinds of questions—and others—are all relevant and important. We should keep asking them.

But for starters, we should not be afraid of the complexities of gender. We should not seek to simplify gender into a battle between men and women. This is the approach we are currently taking to gender in the mining industry. It's this approach which is creating so many of the problems relating to gender on our mine sites—bullying, harassment, inequalities, injuries, low morale and inefficiency.

Attempts to get more women to work in mining are also failing. We need to face this fact. There has been no significant increase in the

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overall percentage of female employees in the mining industry. It goes up and down a percentage or two, but nothing more than that. Women still find it difficult to secure positions as senior managers in resource companies. Yet we have been having a debate about women in mining for almost 25 years.

And no—we cannot expect to see automatic changes to the culture of mining simply by increasing the number of women in the workforce. Despite what we might like to assume, not all women have natural characteristics which are different to those we might expect to find in all men. We might like to imagine that all women are soft, gentle, caring and better at communicating, but this is simply not true.

There are many different kinds of women, just as there are many different kinds of men. The kind of woman who might be attracted to the mining industry today is not necessarily going to be the kind of woman who will bring about change. She may well be attracted to the mining industry because she likes the masculine environment it offers.

Moreover, it's just wrong to assume that women are there to help change—or tame—our masculine workplace cultures. Women are not responsible for changing a world that has been created and is still run by men. I'm sure most women have much better things to do.

When we hold on to a belief that gender is natural, we remove the possibility of any change. Men are men and women are women, and there is nothing we can do to change this—that is the only conclusion we can find. And so all we have available are patchwork solutions—like “women in mining”—to help us deal with a situation we otherwise see as beyond our control. The result is that we allow existing unsafe and unequal practices to continue under the guise that these practices are biological truths, genetic fate, or perhaps natural remnants of an imagined caveman history.

I have heard this kind of response many times from senior managers in mining. They argue they have tried everything they possibly can to bring about changes to the gender culture on their mine sites, but that

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everything they have tried has failed. In conclusion, they state that we have to accept that mining really is a man's world. They don't always put it this way. But when they say that women just don't want to work on their mine sites, they mean the same thing.

I aim to show that we have not tried everything. We have not done everything we can to change the gender culture of the mining industry. We have not yet shown any evidence of trying to think about gender beyond the simple man-versus-woman model. We continue to talk and act as if the problem of gender is a problem of women, and as if masculinity and men play no part in the gendering of mining.

We have certainly failed to consider that the problem may be related to how we understand gender and how we then apply this understanding in our workplaces. We have also failed to consider how the current culture of mining might actually work to encourage practices of gender which are discriminatory, unfair, disruptive and abusive.

If we recognise gender as something we do and not something we have, we can start to consider what it means to be involved in the doing of gender while we are at work on mine sites; and we can then start to think about doing gender differently. An emphasis on gender as practices and habits allows for the possibility of immense changes in the way we go about the entire business of mining.

Out With Old Gender

Let's begin by looking at the way we understand gender today.

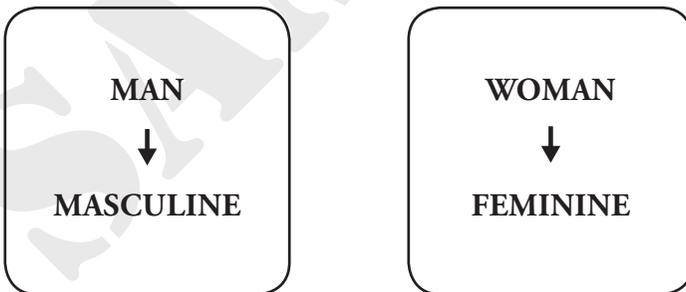


Figure 1: The stable sex-gender model

In many ways the stable sex-gender model offers us a very simple way of understanding men and women. And the simplicity of this model