

WORKPLACE CULTURE



Seeing gender differently

BY DEAN LAPLONGE

When the term “gender” comes up, we are used to discussing women: women in the workplace, women in mining, equal pay for women, and discrimination against women. All these issues are important. That women still do not enjoy full equality in the workplace is unacceptable. But gender does not equal women. And, until we move beyond this obsession, we will never achieve gender diversity in the workplace.

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Efforts to improve gender diversity in male-dominated industries like mining and construction are going nowhere. If we compare reports on women in mining today with those released almost 20 years ago, we find the same issues being discussed. We uncover the same problems and we recommend the same solutions. We continue to talk about numbers of women, insisting on the need for changes in recruitment practices, availability of more mentors and provision of awards for women who have “made it.” The discussion about gender in these industries, and others like them, is always and only about what to do with women. The methodologies used in the research see women as the problem and women as the solution. The result is that we allow the men and the masculine structures of these industries to continue with business as usual as if gender has nothing to do with them.

But the term “gender” has long been understood as something far more complicated and diverse than the masculine-feminine binary will allow. Gender is cultural – the culture we live in expects us to practise and play out our genders in certain ways. We can say that we *do* gender, but it is definitely not something we are. Gender is also structural – it is embedded in our organizations and institutions and affects the way they run. A critical aspect of freedom for women was always to argue that women (and men) could do gender differently. We now live in a world where many people have discovered very different ways of doing gender.

These ideas should be impacting the way we respond to gender in male-dominated industries. But they are not.

Industries like mining are engaging in a debate about gender in a cocoon. And the results are devastating, not only for women, but also for these industries as a whole. A recent

report issued by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives identified that, with current practices, Canada will close the gender equality gap between men and women by the year 2241. Do we really want to wait that long? People working in highly masculinized industries continue to have a higher risk of injury and depression. Bullying and harassment are commonplace. The long work hours, the isolation and the time spent away from families are often cited as reasons for this. But

the pressure on employees to work like “real men” also plays a role. Yet all we seem to want to do is bring in a few more women, as if to suggest that women, whom we wrongly assume are all softer than men, will tame our workplaces.

To begin to address this problem, we need to move this topic out of human resources. This is a work-

place-wide issue. Gender impacts on safety – what it means to be a “real man” in a workplace – can affect the risks a person will take to get the job done. It affects business planning, decisions about production, budgeting and the wider workplace culture.

Those who are responsible for workplace gender programs must study more about the histories of gender, gender movements and the different ideas about gender that have emerged in a wide range of disciplines over the past few decades. They need to be able to recognize that gender means more than women in the workplace. They need to be able to explain and respond to gender as it permeates the organization.

We also need more people who have extensive knowledge about gender to be working at all levels in our industries – as board directors, managers, consultants and general employees. It is extremely rare to find experts on gender working in male-dominated industries. We should be asking why.

Gender has played an important part in determining how industries like mining, oil and gas, and construction have developed. In all these industries, assumptions about gender have affected production processes, leadership and management styles, safety, workplace cultures and the design of work sites. If we fail to consider gender as something more than women, we fail to scrutinize and respond to all this. And we fail to find ways to develop real gender diversity that can benefit many more women and many of our men. **CM**

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