

Worth the debate

Getting serious about the connection between gender and safety

■ Dean Laplonge

Discussions on gender in the mining industry are generally limited to the under-representation of women in the workforce and the “glass ceiling” they encounter. There seems to be an assumption that safety has nothing to do with gender: we are not taking gender seriously. However, I believe we do so at our own peril. Many different research methods have been used to investigate the relationship between gender and risk, and the conclusions are always the same: men take more risks than women.

The skewed notion of a “real man”

Despite the rise in popularity over the past decade of the groomed-to-perfection so-called “metrosexual,” the Rambo culture of invincibility and destruction remains strong. From an early age, boys continue to learn that displays of strength will help them avoid ridicule and that they will be more accepted if they have big muscles, can cope with pain, compete and win. This machismo does not always end when he exits the playground, as “real men” tend to search for occupations where the work, location, pay and industry reputation can feed their desire to appear masculine – and I believe that mining is one such industry. Although women have been working in the sector for centuries, mining is still largely seen as a man’s world.

Within that world, the man who wants to appear the most masculine may be inclined to take risks, as requests for assistance or displays of fear can be perceived as a sign of weakness. The problem is that this “real man” version of masculinity is not agreeable with the safety standards demanded by today’s mining culture.

Tackling sensitive issues

In social contexts where masculinity can potentially promote at-risk



Seeking input from mining employees about their experiences of dealing with “toughness” in the workplace.

Courtesy of Resources Safety Division, Department of Mines and Petroleum (Western Australia)

behaviours, we have witnessed the development of targeted solutions. For example, in the area of road safety, there are advertisements aimed specifically at young men, utilizing images and language that resonate with them. In sports – where we regularly hear of disrespectful behaviour by players off the field being exhibited towards women – peer-mentoring programs are being used to change how men respond to each other’s behaviours. In the mining industry, however, my experience has been that training programs generally only make vague references to discrimination and workplace sexual harassment. We isolate our discussions about gender to concerns about women, making little attempt to address how otherwise socially accepted masculine behaviours may be putting people at risk.

Whenever you investigate gender, you must be prepared to tackle sensitive issues relating to bodies, power, equality and sexuality. The companies

most likely to see an impact on their safety culture are those that will avoid quick-fix solutions, not opting for a two-hour training session or pop-psychological responses. I am consistently asked to deliver this kind of training and I always refuse. You cannot put a group of men in a room for a few hours and expect they will emerge behaving differently.

The resource industry needs to pay attention to how their business systems and processes, recruitment strategies, internal communication methods, and even the physical design of their mine sites contribute to the development of a gendered culture in which not all seemingly “normal” masculine behaviours are considered safe.

An issue to be taken seriously

In 2008, I launched the “Mining for a safer masculinity” project. In our research and site-based work, we have been able to test some innovative

solutions to gender issues facing the mining industry. Although the solutions have not always been perfect, one fact consistently emerges: companies are not taking the issue of gender seriously.

Many companies have a vision that makes some reference to diversity, but few appear to have a plan in place that ensures this vision becomes reality. They lack awareness of how to integrate gender diversity throughout their operations, as they do not understand the importance of “mainstreaming” gender to ensure it is not just a sideline cultural topic of little relevance to the workplace.


In my experience, the strategies for dealing with gender equality are rarely planned, and the result is that little gets done. I have witnessed gender-related issues being handed over to a summer student who uses Google as her only aid to learn about gender in the workplace. I have heard a mine manager inform his leadership team he wants 30 per cent of its positions filled by women within two years; and he expects the male members to support this without dissent.

I have also been surrounded by 100 underground miners, listening to them scream abuse because their manager has introduced me as somebody who can teach them how to be “better men.” One man declared: “You try to change us and we’ll walk.” This occurred at a place where a fatality had recently occurred and where a man approached me with tears in his eyes to confess he had not hugged his wife in years because of the impact the workplace culture was having on him.

The mining industry may not be the most dangerous industry in Canada, but 85 per cent of its workforce is comprised of men. So, if we are

serious about safety, we need to start thinking seriously about gender.

This industry needs people who are willing to recognize their own vulnerabilities. It needs workers who

understand the limits and fragility of their bodies and who understand the connection between what it means to be a man in this world and what it means to stay safe. 

TIPS FOR ADDRESSING GENDER ISSUES IN THE WORKPLACE

- ❑ **Conduct a gender review.** Use an established methodology to help identify areas of strength and weakness when it comes to mainstreaming gender throughout your business. This process involves conducting interviews, completing document reviews and holding focus groups with key personnel to reveal what needs to be done to ensure your company offers a gender-fair workplace.
- ❑ **Pilot a gendered behaviours mentorship program** with a few crews or workplace teams at mine sites: this approach has proven to work exceptionally well with male sports teams. It is a focused attempt to help men forgo assumptions about gender and to find newer and safer ways of behaving.
- ❑ **Provide participatory training for safety personnel** to ensure they understand the link between gender and safety. They will then be better equipped to recognize and respond to at-risk behaviours.
- ❑ **Encourage your leadership team** to engage in some awareness training and to learn about how gender impacts the workplace. This is not a solution, but it is an important way of fostering dialogue.

For the above to work, a company needs to commit time and money. It is important to enlist the help of experts to get the process started, as they can set you on the right path and provide the skills to sustain a company's efforts.

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