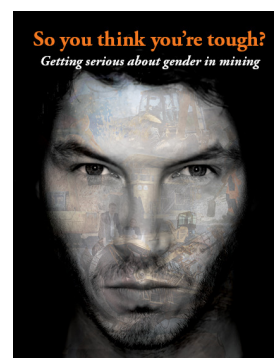

YOU GOTTA BE TOUGH TO EXPLORE GENDER IN MINING

By Dr Dean Laplonge



Dr Dean Laplonge is the Director of Factive (www.factive.com.au), a cultural research consultancy based in Australia and Canada. Dean has completed extensive research and work in the fields of safety communications and gender in male-dominated industries. He has worked for many large resource organisations, including INPEX, Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton Iron Ore, Worsley Alumina, Fortescue Metals, and The Department of Mines and Petroleum (Western Australia).

Dean's book, [So you think you're tough: Getting serious about gender in mining](#) (2014), offers challenging criticism of the existing approach to gender in the mining industry, and provides practical tools for how to explore gender beyond the "women in mining" debate. His research on safety communications has resulted in the development of MySafe—the world's first program to improve the impacts of safety communications on safety in the workplace. Dean is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, and a committee member for MiHR's gender sector study in Canada. Dean currently lives in Canada.



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Debate about gender in mining has been going on for more than two decades. Yet little has changed. The mining industry has utterly failed to investigate its relationship to gender.

In the many repetitive reports that still get issued today to advise mining companies on gender, we read over and over about how women need support to make it in mining. They need mentors, women-only networks, and targeted marketing materials that speak their language. Women continue to be constructed as separate and with distinct needs from men. And it's only ever women who have gender.

When we promote the idea that women need more help, we maintain the belief they are naturally weak. We also maintain the belief that men are successful because of their natural strength and natural abilities. We fail to investigate what it is about the culture of a workplace or an industry which might make it easier for men than women to make it.

When I present my work about gender in mining at academic conferences, the response is inevitably one of disbelief. How can professionals in mining still believe that dealing with gender is about helping women to make it? How can they still understand "gender" as the biological state of being a man or a woman? Why is the work on gender in mining not engaging with the vast body of knowledge about gender that has been developed over the past four decades in a wide range of disciplines?

It's partly lack of skills which prevents the mining industry from addressing gender in more complex and effective ways. As I explain in my book, I risk offending people who work as diversity officers or leaders of women networks in mining. But knowledge of gender and education in gender studies are extremely low among this cohort. The mining industry would never dream of seeking to tackle engineering issues without engaging qualified engineers who have been trained in engineering techniques. So why does it believe that gender issues can be addressed by those who have never formally studied gender?

I wrote this book because I believe that instead of focusing on numbers of women, mining companies need to investigate how gender impacts their workplace cultures and their business practices. In the book, I introduce a new understanding of gender for the mining industry; and then provide practical ways of applying this understanding so that leaders and senior professionals in the industry can start to explore the relationship between gender and mining.

Mining and gender have a historical relationship. The mining industry emerged as a distinct industry at around the same time as we started to develop stricter definitions of masculinity and femininity, and stricter separation of the man's role from the woman's. The production methods and technologies of the mining industry are already therefore gendered. As others have also explored, people who deliver training to mining industry employees often use masculinity as a way of connecting with the trainees. And senior female professionals in the industry often seek to silence all references to femininity when discussing their own successes.

This preference for the masculine over the feminine doesn't automatically exclude women from mining. Women can do masculinity. Indeed, many women in the mining industry do masculinity extremely well; and they like the culture of mining as it is. But in the wider culture it is men more so than women who are encouraged to be masculine. And so statistically speaking it is men more so than women who are likely to find the mining industry an appealing place and one in which they can thrive.

The mining industry prefers masculinity which can be easily distinguished from femininity, and one which has no hint of softness. This industry is therefore unable to recognise diversity in ways of working which could be potentially useful and profitable. And it actually encourages risk-taking among its employees who need to display the tough kind of masculinity that the culture of this industry demands.

I have met many men working in mining who talk about the changes they have gone through to fit into the industry. I have talked with many men who weep as they tell me about the devastating impacts the culture of mining has had on their personalities and lives. I recall a few years ago speaking to a father who was concerned about how much his young son had changed since starting work on a mine site. The boy had become more aggressive and rude and defiant. The father's interpretation of this was that his son was turning "bad". I suggested to him that "bad" was the wrong word to use to describe what was happening. To the contrary, his son was acting out what on the mine site was considered to be "good" masculinity. In order to fit in, the boy had to do swearing and aggression and defiance.

My book draws on my experiences of having worked as a consultant in resource industries and my formal education in gender studies spanning more than 20 years. But I know it will take a really tough mining company, and some senior managers who are really keen to expand their knowledge of gender, before we will start to see any real changes in the gender culture of the mining industry and greater gender diversity impacting on the entire business of mining.