

Women in mining

The paper will look at gendered forms of power in relation to women in mining. It will first look at the challenges and coping strategies that women employ in underground work. It will show how women in mining are continuously subordinated because of their “differences” and viewed by men as inferior and not capable of doing mine work. This subordination of women and masculinization of the underground labour force has led women to adopting various coping strategies and tapping into different forms of leverage to help them cope.

The main argument of the paper is that women in mining are using non-traditional forms of power and leverage to assert their positions. They are using their sexuality, exaggerating their femininity and ethnicity to get ahead. They are increasingly turning upside down, to their advantage, the attributes that are associated with being a woman. What is seen and perceived to be negative by male miners is being used by women for their own good and to improve their working and financial conditions.

Some of the gender traits that women have turned upside down include their monthly periods. We show how instead of allowing men to use this to discriminate against them, they are using it to gain sympathy from men. We also look at how women take advantage of the fact that they cannot speak *fanakalo* to gain sympathy from the men that speak the same home language as them. While ethnicity was previously used to segregate mine workers, women are tapping strategically on that to gain favours from men without necessarily excluding other men, but making them jealous to a point where there is competition among men to help the women.

Data for this study was gathered through the use of two methods; participant observation and in-depth interviews. This afforded me the opportunity to participate in the natural daily lives of these women. I worked at a mine in Rustenburg for two and a half months doing underground work, changing between occupations and work crews. This allowed me to gather in-depth information on women in mining and go beyond their working lives to how they live in their respective communities.

Introduction

When talking about power in labour studies there tends to be a narrow way of looking at it. This way is often masculine and focused on trade unions and men as centres of power. These tend to be traditional ways of looking at power; power as a form of resistance by employees to employer exploitation. It is normally reflected on the shop floor as work stoppage or go-slow. This way of looking at power often gives voice to the collective and recognises power as operating or effective when practiced by a collective. There is a limited focus on gendered power dynamics, yet they are constantly in operation in the workplace to a larger degree than the orthodox forms of power, namely bargaining power.

I argue that there are other forms of power that operate on the “shop floor” over and above the conventional ways. The case study of women in mining, as we will show below, is used to show that women are using non-traditional forms of power to parody and contest the masculine occupational culture and also to resist employer control on women and their bodies. In this paper I look at different forms of power that women exercise in mining and ways in which they tap into this power in order to manouver the masculine mining space.

Power, Workers and Gender

Silver (2003:13) in *Forces of Labour*, talks about different types of workers bargaining power. She borrows from Wright's (2000) categories of Associational and Structural power. Wright (2000: 962) argues that associational power is made up of "the various forms of power that result from the formation of collective organisation of workers". On the other hand, he sees structural power as power that accrues to workers "simply from their location...in the economic system." Structural power is further divided by Wright into two subtypes, argues Silver (2003:13) “the first subtype of structural power (which we shall call *marketplace bargaining power*) is the power that ‘results directly from tight labour markets.’ The second subtype of structural power (which we shall call *workplace bargaining power*) is the power that results ‘from the strategic location of a particular group of workers within a key industrial sector.’ While the above it giving us a good indication of different power dynamic that rest with labour, it doesn't go further enough. It talks about power as accruing to workers as if workers are one homogenous group. It

focuses on power that accrues to workers as a result of a hostile relationship between labour and capital and does not go deep into power that rests with the different groups of workers precisely because of their gender.

Foucault's (1977) discursive post-structuralist conceptions of power helps us get close to how power was in operation with the mining women, though it is not enough. He sees power as operating in very individualized and decentralized ways. The body as a sight of exercising power is central to his analysis of power. It is this aspect of the body which links up very neatly with how power for women in mining was operationalized.

Connell (2002)'s conception of power, however, seem more appealing for our argument. She recognises that power and gender are constitutive of each other; she sees power as gendered and gender as having dimensions of power, thus the two are constitutive. She talks about power in a very critical way; she sees it as operating through various structures such as the state and bureaucracy as one of the ways in which it is legitimized. Yet, in her structural descriptions and analysis of power, she remains mindful of gender dynamics at play within structures. The point Connell (2002) is trying to show is that power operates in these institutions in ways which favour men to the disadvantage of women.

The question becomes then, where is worker's power in the mining industry if there is power operating at so many different levels as shown above by the different conceptions of power. For workers as a group and specifically men, maybe power still lies in their association with the union. For women it's much broader than that, more so because a number of them are not union members and those who are union members, they are not active participants in the union. When one takes the body and gender seriously, you begin to see that women also practice power, albeit, differently from men. Their power marks a shift and is independent of unions or associational power, broadly. It is power that talks directly to issues of gender and femininity to be specific. Their power therefore, lies not in their structural and association with other workers but in their use of gender, their tapping into feminine stereotypes and manipulating them to suit their end goals. Women in mining are increasingly using their bodies, their beauty, their feminine physical

“inabilities”, and ethnicity to maneuver the mining space and make it bearable for them despite the constant reminder that mines are for men. While some feminist scholars often look at power as instituted in such a way that women are at the bottom of the power hierarchy, in our research we noted that, that is the case when one is talking about orthodox forms of power as per Silver’s argument but this is not the complete picture when one looks at power from other perspectives. In fact the presence of women in mining is not only challenging the masculine culture in mines but also the traditional notions of power associated with mines and masculinity.

Women in Mining

When women were first allowed to work in mining, mines had several criteria they had to first meet. Some of the requirements women had to meet were; a grade 12 certificate, physical and medical fitness. The physical fitness is accompanied by one’s ability to do physically demanding work in a hot and humid environment. This is tested through the heat tolerance screening of each individual. For the mine, it gives them an indication of whether one will be able to perform work underground. Women have contested these requirements, often informally through the use of non-traditional forms of power, in some cases successfully and in others not.

First with the grade 12 certificate that most women could not meet, they collectively contested it by purchasing counterfeit grade 12 certificates. Without this certificate women, specifically, would not enter the mining labour market. These counterfeit certificates therefore emerged in order to subvert what the mines had put as a requirement. According to one of the interviewees, this was done by women out of desperation for jobs and high poverty rate in the region. These counterfeit certificates were hard to verify and the mine eventually decided to drop the requirement from Grade 12 to Grade 8, which most people in the region had. The forging of certificates was a direct challenge to management criteria for selection and a way in which women asserted their power.

Another criterion set by Impala when requesting women from their sources was that they must be able to commute to and from work and be within a 60 km radius from the mines. While this

was not a snag for most women, the few who could not meet it started using addresses of relatives living nearby the mines and others even moved closer renting room in neighbouring townships and villages in order to have addresses rendering them able to commute between work and home and thus employable.

The medical examination is one area where women undergo an X-ray, to check their chest cavity, an eye and ear test. These are crucial for someone working underground and most women pass them unless they are pregnant. The Heat Tolerance Screening, however, is what presents problems for most women.

The HTS is mandatory for all new recruits and those returning from a leave longer than fourteen days. It is an repetitive exercise done for thirty minutes in a carefully monitored environment with a wet bulb kept at 28°C with a margin of 0.3°C, and a dry bulb kept at 29.5°C with a margin of 0.5°C. most women, for several reasons either fail this test or get eliminated before or after participating in it.

Women get eliminated for several reasons such as breast feeding, being on their menstrual periods and being overweight or underweight. During menstruation the HTS centre manager reported that, the body temperature increases and is usually more than the acceptable initial body temperature. Another reason is breast feeding, one is not advised to undergo HTS or to go underground, but some women defy this and go under, in order to support their families. Furthermore, women are not allowed to go for HTS when they are pregnant because when one is pregnant, the centre manager reported, the fat deposits increase and they sweat less because their bodies want to insulate the baby; by virtue of that, when undergoing HTS your body temperature rises higher than is acceptable.

While they cannot manipulate body weight and pregnancy, they can manipulate other factors that prevent them from undergoing and passing HTS. The easiest ones to deal with is breastfeeding which most women often lie about and those who are their monthly periods often take certain pills in order to postpone menstruation or pause it for a couple of days until they have undergone

HTS. The most used strategy, however, where women directly parody and contest management control over who can and cannot undergo HTS is the use of *mtshongolo* (HTS) pills. These pills are taken in order to regulate and decrease body temperature and thus allow women to pass the HTS. Failing which women resort to a fake HTS stamp. The fraudulent stamp is normally used to change the HTS results and deceive the mine staff into believing that the said woman has participated and passed the heat tolerance screening. The stamp is illegal and not accepted by the mine and so they mine and HTS centre have started working closely together in order to prevent women from manipulating the system. There is however, nothing that can be done by the mine to stop women from buying HTS pills from pharmacies around Rustenburg.

These are some of the ways in which women, before they are incorporated into mining contest, directly, management control over their bodies and their incorporation into mining.

Underground Mining

Once underground, women are mainly slotted in and concentrated in low-status jobs. There are very few women in occupations and sections that are considered masculine; the stoping section, and occupations such as panel operator, scraper winch operator and rock drill operator. Since these are deemed difficult, mines have few women hired to do them. While mines have these women in such occupations

There are, however, panel and winch women operators on the mine books. On the ground, however, these posts are hardly ever filled by women. What that means, is that while the mine may have ten women winch operators on its books, in reality none or very few of these women actually work as winch operators. The women, with the help of men, defy these formal job allocation structures and informally allocate “easy” jobs to each other underground. While gender is taken into consideration when allocating women to jobs, women do not let it be an incapacitating feature, they are finding ways of working the system and manipulating it to advance their interests. They informally allocate jobs underground but on surface they still

reflect as working in their allocated occupations. Furthermore, they are still paid as if they are working in their officially allocated jobs not in the ones they deem doable.

There is another side to this informal job allocation which is driven by men mine workers and benefits them more than it does women on the financial front and on the workload and occupational health and safety side. Over and above women moving to other teams voluntarily, there are women who are manipulated by men to move teams. Some women are not wanted in work teams because men see them as slowing down teams and thus impacting on the team's production level and bonus remuneration. Some women interviewees reported having been chased away from their teams by male co-workers because of the bonus scheme. Sarah reported:

The first team I worked with did not want me, and a man from another team within the same section came and told me to move to his team because work was easier there and as a woman I would cope better. I moved. After months of working with his team, I was told that he moved me because he wanted to work with my team and get the bonus money.

Some miners reported that while *maching-ching* (bonuses) have helped increase production, it has also led to an increase in sub-standard work. Tokolo, who is a miner, remarked:

Because workers want to get *maching-ching* month-end, they disregard good working standards and they work sub-standard and this often results in accidents, most times minor accidents but sometimes people have even died.

The accidents that happen in these highly producing teams are another reason men do not want women in them. Sello stated:

Women are weak and they can't function after an accident, especially death. They continuously talk about the possibilities of rock falls and death. In mining, accidents cannot be prevented all the time and men understand that and it's easier to work with people that understand that.

Lulama remarked:

Women are always very careful, very slow and they don't want to take

chances. In mining, not taking chances means no bonus end of the month. Being slow means you take home a small salary. Never, never!!! Not when the white man wants to give us more money, if we only work harder.

Men often reported that women are emotional, lazy and incompetent. They sometimes feel that women are slowing them down; hence they end up doing the work for them so that they can finish on time and meet their production targets and get bonuses. These stereotypes about women being lazy, incompetent and slowing down work are prevalent underground. In all the teams I visited, most women winch operators could not operate the winch and in some cases were not even allowed to touch it by their male co-workers. Women who were hired as winch operators ended up working as equipping helpers.

When asked for reasons for not letting women operate the winch, men replied by saying:

We feel sorry for them. Winch driving is not easy and watching them operate it makes you feel sad. There is no way they can have babies after a year or two of operating the winch. We don't mind older women that have had children using it, because they have had children already.

Men therefore end up operating the winch on behalf of women and only allowing them to do what they call "small easy tasks". Men wanting to perform duties for women shows the continuation of the gender dichotomy wherein women are seen as the protected and men as the protectors (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Some men even find it hard to work in teams where there are women because of their traditional beliefs that a woman's place is in the kitchen and at home. They go as far as believing that a woman underground brings misfortune and should be avoided as far as possible. This further perpetuates the exclusion and alienation of women by teams underground.

While some women dislike these stereotypes and traditional views of what their role is and work hard to debunk them, others invoke them when they do not want to do the work. They use these label to their advantage and to get sympathy from men. They are turning upside down what is considered negative to their advantage and using these very claims to justify doing not doing their work.

These quotes show how men are driven to work harder in order to get bonuses at the end of the month. We see above how women use or tap into the physical stereotypes, about women being weaker than men, to their advantage. How they manipulate work allocations and in turn are manipulated by men. When looking at these women and what they are doing from an employer point of view, they are disregarding official orders to do certain jobs underground and making up their own. The very same excuse that they use to get out of certain teams is also manipulated by men in order to gain access to teams that have high productivity rate and thus high bonus pays. While they benefit on the one side, they lose out on another. There is no denying that women are indeed tapping on their “femininity” and using it as a form of power to cope with their work underground. They invoke femininity and feminine characteristics which evolve mainly around their inability to lift and carry heavy material.

While they may lose out on bonus money because of their informal job allocations, they get extra money in other ways. They reject the formal way supported by employers and have come up with other means of earning more money. They adopt other survival strategies that often involve forming relations with men. Women engage in sexual relations with men in order to get ahead and get promotion. There is an understanding and acceptance amongst the women that sexual relations are one of the ways in which one can get money and promotions at work.

There is a complete rejection of the negative connotation to transsexual relationships, instead they are viewed as a survival strategy. These relationships are not always initiated by men, women strike them up sometimes and they engage in intercourse with these men in exchange for money, gifts, transport to work, especially given the early working hours in the mines and other luxuries such as going out for dinner and weekends at Sun City. Tangible material benefits are

not the only benefits these women reap, by engaging in sex with a shift bosses or miners ones workload can be greatly decreased from the standard expectation.

The men that women strike up relationships with are carefully selected based on how much they earn or if they earn more than the woman. It is quite common to have a *nyatsi*¹ in the mine, and it is not a secret or something to be shy about. In fact, some women even boast about how many *nyatsis* they have and what the *nyatsis* do for them. Therefore, having a *nyatsi* enables the women to use up all or the major part of their salaries to meet their family responsibilities while they are taken care of by their *nyatsi*. Several men reported that “women are getting paid double at work”. One male worker proclaimed: They get paid for sitting around and watching us work, and they get paid for having sex with some of our co-workers.

Ngai (2005:141) also noted a similar use of sexuality in China. She calls the women “sexualized bodies” to denote the way in which women’s bodies are looked at. She argues that where “capital goes, there is a proliferation of sex trade and sex discourses”. In mining towns, too, there is a proliferation of sex trade.

Both male and female *nyatsis* know their position in the relationship – that they are extra partners and should not do anything to jeopardise the steady relationship of the other partner. Most *nyatsis* are married; therefore, the relationships are only “valid” at work and very weak outside work, to the point where a woman is not allowed to have the man’s contact details lest she calls when the man is at home with his family. Not all women have *nyatsis* to do things for them. There were some pronounced differences with regard to age groups. The older women tended not to have *nyatsis*, and they work harder than the younger women. They work hard because they “[we] have families to feed and bills to pay” while the younger ones can rely on *nyatsis* to meet their financial obligations. The women in mining were again using sex to get what they want as a form of protest to the normative sexual relations. According to Fletcher (2000), it is common for women in male-dominated sectors to use sexuality to obtain favours.

¹ This is an extra partner that men and women get. Women normally use it to refer to their second or third boyfriend.

Since most women do not like working underground but do it for the sake of having a job, on a micro level they often adopt several forms of bodily control. They sometimes fall pregnant in order to be moved to surface. The Mine pregnancy policy states that if a woman falls pregnant she has to be moved from underground and given alternative employment of surface. However, if no alternative employment is found on surface; the pregnant employee must go home until she has given birth. Pregnancy is therefore another way in which women contest employer job and positional (underground or surface) allocation. In this instance women have the leverage to decide to fall pregnant and they are using pregnancy to get what they want and to be moved to sections they want to work in-namely on surface.

While this is some form of power women have it doesn't always yield positive results, sometimes there are no available positions on surface and women are faced with even dire situations of having to forego their income for as long as they are pregnant and breastfeeding.

If no alternative employment is available on surface, the negative aspect is that, women can stay at home for as long as eight months. For women who breastfeed, this is even longer and can take up to a year and a half. Women, therefore, control their bodies and prevent themselves from conceiving in order to keep their jobs.

Most men find it hard to take instructions from women and they often do not carry out or comply with such instructions. This is more common with new and younger women learner officials. According to Jole, black men find it particularly hard to take instructions from young African female learner officials. This presents problems for the officials as they have to try to get these men to submit to their authority. Gender literature argues that to cope with the culture and job demands and be a part of the work force, women employ different strategies (Mainiero,1986; Humphrey, 1987; Gruber, 1998). These strategies could include getting men to be on your side, adopting the behaviour of male mine workers (take- it-like-a-man attitude), or completely submitting to male authority. While the literature suggests many coping strategies used by women in male occupations, what has tended to dominate in my encounters with women revolves around their use of men.

To cope, learner officials use different strategies to try to win over their crew members. One of the strategies is having a respectful and close relationship with the shift-supervisor assistants (*pikininis*). Some women reported that the *pikininis* are helpful in clarifying misunderstandings, in getting the shift supervisor to listen and help where they can. They act as a bridge between the miners and the shift supervisors and aid in smoothing the relationship. The role of the shift supervisor is also very crucial in getting women, especially learner officials, accepted and integrated into teams. One of the shift supervisors reported, “I ensure that the men make it their responsibility to look after the women”.

To make sure they do not face a situation where they have to go home, the women befriend HR personnel. This is because when they are pregnant the HR Department decides who gets alternative employment and where. Again we see how friendship is seen as a source of power, as something that the women can use to play the system and rules.

Age is another source of power for women, the older women use their age to get accepted by teams. They are, however, not accepted as mineworkers but as adults who must be respected by younger workers underground. These older women use their age not only to be accepted but also to get away with performing some duties and from being received with hostility. It is easier for women to tap into this form of power, as miners still hold on firmly to traditional views on how to treat older women. African culture expectations are usually invoked by these women and younger men, in most cases, immediately respond and concede.

A woman’s marital status was also another way in which women legitimized their actions of not wanting to do certain jobs. Married women often brought invoked their status as a wife to get men to help her. Words such as “I am a wife and my husband usually does certainly jobs for me” got some men to assist the woman.

Women with fuller figures also used their bodies to their advantage. Unlike younger and smaller women, these women were easily respected by men, though not as workers but as women, what

most men often called, “real African women”. This often won them favours from men and they played into these constructions of what a real African woman is supposed to look like.

Another power strategy used by women in mining is what they call “professional bribing”, whereby the female mine worker brings crew members cold drinks or meat when the crew has performed well. This is done to gain respect and facilitate co-operation between the female worker and her crew members. Some women reported that bringing drinks or cold water for men helps with the incorporation and acceptance of women, and others disagreed.

What has also been deemed to be efficient in helping male mine workers accept and submit to the authority of women miners has been good performance and outstanding knowledge of the work by the women.

One female learner official asserted:

Being at work on time, providing the team with material and having more knowledge than them makes it easier for them to accept you as their superior or team member.

Another added:

If you demonstrate that you know your work very well and are also willing to learn from them, it becomes easier for them to accept and respect you.

Another factor that contributes to being accepted by male workers is supplying them with all the material they need on time. According to Reitumetsi:

This helps them trust you more and they become willing to work with you because they see you as helping them achieve their targets by providing material.

When a woman does not know her way around the job, the male workers tend to be disrespectful reported the women.

Other women have indicated that respecting men, calling them *Ntate* and fetching them water helps one gain respect. A learners official said: If you call them *Ntate*, they're more likely and willing to help you, and they co-operate if you are the one giving orders. The more respect you give the older men, the more they tend to side with you and help you accomplish tasks.

Giving men attention is another power strategy that is commonly adopted and used by women. Fikile reported:

If they want to play with you, you must play along. If you do not, they are less likely to help you when in need of assistance.

With younger men, the women use their charm to win them over, either by chatting with them on the way to the cage or bringing them water when they are thirsty.

It is clear that men and women tap into different forms of power that are not always linked with tradition trade union power. Both men and women tend to emphasise and exaggerate traits associated with their gender and derive power from those traits. Women use femininity to legitimize some of their claims or to get leverage and obtain favours from men. Occasionally, women do sexual favours for men in exchange for help.

To further show the use and exaggeration of femininity to cope with work, sometimes when the women have had a hard week or day at work, they sometimes make up stories to their shift supervisors and say they have period pains and need to go to the dressing station (mine clinic) to see a doctor or a nurse.

Some shift supervisors and HR assistants remarked that when women lie about having period pains there is no way of proving it and they often have to take their word for it.

“If they say they have period pains, then they have period pains. What do we (as men) know about period pains or how painful they can get? So we can't say they're lying. What if they're telling the truth and they collapse underground? It's tricky for us”

The power strategies employed by women underground are often linked to how women are socialised.

Women also tap into culture and ethnicity to get men to help them with their duties. The societal belief that women are soft, are child bearers and that their place is in the kitchen is often used to appeal to men to do work for women. Some African cultures, workers reported, “do not allow men to watch women do physically demanding work without helping them”. Sotho men, for example are well known for being helpful and this, according to one of my interviewees, is what they are taught in the Sotho culture – to do the physical work for women.

Bodies in mining are a site of struggle and power, sites of struggle in that bodies are often invoked when referring to women as incapable of working underground. These very bodies are again invoked when women want to make gains and benefit from the work and men they work with. Women use their bodies to get men to help them; they use their sexuality to get favours from men. It is clear that they make a plan with their bodies in order to sustain themselves in the “macho” mining environment.

Mines have always had a culture that fears authority, and previously this was instilled to help control workers by management and increase production. This fear of authority has continued into this new era, women are using this authority-fearing culture to their advantage when men are malicious towards them. The women who have been given higher-status jobs underground such as learner officials tap into this culture that fears and obeys authority to get work done. To ensure that workers are working according to safety standards and to control their productivity, women learner officials use the charging strategy, whereby they charge workers money for any substandard work done. This culture of fear of authority is also invoked by women when men are making demands on them or ill-treating them.

Conclusion

The women in mining were not contesting the mine stipulations in organised and formal ways, but in informal and sometimes individual ways and were still effective nonetheless in achieving

their goals, not only as individuals but as a collective. While these were sometimes individual protests, their gains were collective gains.

Beauty, marital status, fuller figure and other factors are all used as a source of power by mining women. We need to move beyond thinking that solutions for labour lie within trade unions only. Since some trade unions are not serious about gender struggles, women are tapping into other forms of power to assert their position as workers and make gains.

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