

Over the past 3 years, I've been charged with the study and reporting of women's perspectives and experiences in their work with resource extractive industries – primarily mining in northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan and primarily with Aboriginal women.

Why did PWH decide to look into this you may ask?

Several years ago, our board members from northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan expressed the need to look at the socio-economic and health outcomes of the ever-emerging industrial development within their regions. They wanted to know if Aboriginal women were being recruited and therefore benefiting from resource extraction. And what are the challenges and opportunities for their work within this sector.

While it is a growing area of research, there continues to be very little information on women, and Aboriginal women specifically, working in mining in Canada.

These past years have opened my eyes, and hopefully those of others, to the diverse and on-going complexities of a road hard won by women working in the field. Up until that point I had never gone to a mine site let alone bunked at a mining camp. I have been able to tour a uranium processing plant but have yet to go underground!

When pulling together this presentation, I was struck with the information I had at hand and how I could condense three years of research into a short timeframe. I will take this opportunity to touch on each of the three PWH's studies, with a particular prelude to where they overlap:

1. Training
2. Work-related injuries

3. Challenges to women's employment

To quickly overview:

In the first year, I met with nine Aboriginal women in Northern Manitoba.

Year two flew me to a uranium mine in Northern Saskatchewan where I met with eight Aboriginal women.

This past year, I held personal and phone interviews with seventeen women of diverse backgrounds working in BC, the Yukon, the NWT, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Just to give you a flavor of the different positions held, there were hoist operators, supervisors, mill processors, trainers, health and safety coordinators, caterers, underground miners, housekeepers, geologists, office administrators, engineers and environmental coordinators. They ranged in ages from their early twenties to their early sixties and had worked anywhere from under 1 year to over twenty in the industry.

Importantly, and what was discussed in a previous presentation, I relied heavily on relationships to access the women. It is more difficult than one would think to find these women.

In many cases, but particularly with this past year's project, women were very concerned about participating in a research project where they could be identified and potentially lose their jobs. So confidentiality is strongly at play. Others felt more at ease providing critical perspectives if they were no longer employed in the industry, such that I found in my work in Northern Manitoba. And interestingly, in Northern Saskatchewan, the women were happy,

almost relieved, to have an outsider listen to their stories. Indeed to tell their stories.

To begin, all of the women were asked about their workplace training. Their responses varied. All of the women had been trained and had ongoing training in one form or another, be it formal or informal, on-the-job, through and apprenticeship with a senior co-worker or simply through observation. Several had provided training to new recruits.

On the positive side, those who had training close to home or whose training was continually updated spoke positively about this experience.

On the negative side, some of the women felt intimidated by the male-dominated group dynamics during training. They felt they couldn't ask questions for fear of looking dumb. Or they perceived that the peers who were training them didn't have enough experience to do so. To quote one woman

- being new. I was afraid to say something wrong that I kinda had to prove I was one of the guys a little bit. I didn't wanna ask too many dumb questions but then I think they assumed I knew some of the stuff, but I didn't.

Certainly what came out of the last study is that training has improved, increased and become more formal over the last several years. Women stated that this may be due in part the growth and girth of the industries, their awareness of costs associated with time lost to injury and generally the trend towards greater workplace safety and injury prevention. As one woman stated, the ideology used to be "we're here to produce (but don't get hurt) and now it's we're here to produce and do it safely".

I will turn now to work-place injury

Being safe on the job was implicit throughout the projects. When women were also asked whether their training adequately prepared them for their work one said, “I don’t think there’s any such thing as adequate safety training. I think it should be ongoing.”

There was a general recognition that employees are not just responsible for their own safety but also for their larger crew. One woman stated, “You need to watch out for yourself but you also need to realize that there’s a whole site of people here”

There were certain associations that the women saw as leading to injury –I’ll refer to three:

- Routine
- Improper hygiene
- Improper fit of personal protective equipment

As I said, all the women received training. But once they are put into their positions and start the day to day routine, one can have an inflated sense of confidence or lose a sense of awareness due to repetition which can lead to injury. In her words, I find a lot more people get injured because it’s the routine of it all. ‘Oh okay, well I’ve done this a million times.’ And it could be that million and one time that chaos happens and you get hurt. The more routined you get, the more seasoned you get, the more comfortable you get? Then you’re not as cautious.

Regarding hygiene

It is hard to explain what it is like to be at a uranium mine, especially after a few months after the meltdown at Fukushima Dai-chi nuclear

plant in Japan. I was very interested to know what it was like for the women to work so closely with uranium, what health concerns they had, if any. One of the women expressed how her initial orientation over twenty years prior to our interview really stuck with her. She said,

This isn't a Cornflake factory. You know, it's a dangerous metal – that we work with here... so I've always protected myself, You've got to keep yourself, your hygiene up

Since that time she has taken serious and day-to-day personal protection because she knows the potential harmful effects of uranium. She is appalled that operators put their work gloves into their hard hats, which means that any contamination is now going directly on their heads. Or that “operators come through the plant, through the administration, touching the doorknobs with their work gloves when they're on their way taking samples to the lab and stuff. And there's a lot of people upstairs here that smoke, and they're touching the same doorknobs to get outside to go and have their cigarettes.”

Many of the women referred to Personal Protective Equipment as the frontline measure for injury prevention. PPE includes hard hats, gloves, steel-toed boots, earplugs, coveralls, safety vests, safety glasses etc. That said and after decades of women's participation in the industry, many of the women still struggle to find proper fitting PPE. For some of the women, finding PPE their size is their biggest concern when it comes to their safety. One woman said that she wore double wool socks plus slippers inside her boots. She went on to say:

a lot of girls have floppy boots, which is not really safe when you're walking around underground. But they have to be special-ordered in. Cause I work with a guy who's 6'3" and his feet are gigantic, and they to special-order in boots for him. So I'm sure that they would have to

special-order...which is kinda funny, they'll special-order bigger boots for the guys, but they definitely don't stock very many small boots for the women

The majority of the women in all three projects had experienced a work-related injury, regardless of their positions. These ranged from tangible physical injuries like broken bones, sprains, ripped muscles, twisted ankles, crushed hands, stretched nerves, back and shoulder injuries, burns from solutions, edema of the legs, and eye injuries.

Less obvious physical injuries included elevated cholesterol levels, food related illnesses, respiratory problems and ergonomic discomfort.

While I expected to find and did find injury based on repetitive movements such as lifting heavy sledgehammers to bags of housekeeping linens, I was surprised to hear the extent to which women's health was so greatly impacted by the sedentary nature of administrative positions. Coupled with long hours, twelve-hour shift work and poor nutrition, one woman stated that her "heart and liver were doing things that weren't real. My heart cholesterol-triglycerides-has practically doubled, if not tripled in the years that I've been here, that really scared me."

She went on to state: a lot of office people, we sit for eleven hours. You go to eat, you go to your room, you're sitting again. So unless you make it a part of your life, you can really injure your body here. And not that we're injured physically injured, we're injuring our hearts, and our livers, and our kidneys".

A sizable number of the women related their experiences around food. For the vegetarians and vegans, food options were scarce since

meat forms the foundation for most meals provided. Women experience weight fluctuations over their bi-weekly shifts, heartburn, feeling sick having low energy, and noticeable differences in defecation while eating camp food. One woman encouraged the posting of nutritional charts and the provision of more fresh vegetables and fruit and less starch, grease and meat.

In addition to poor nutrition, the nature of shift work destabilizes women's exercise regimes. Many women I've talked to who live in the camps feel intimidated by the men using the exercise rooms. Women told me that the men in the gym will openly gawk at them and talk behind their backs. So instead of using free time for much needed physical activity, some of the women preferred to go back to their rooms and watch a movie.

The dominance of men in the workforce goes without saying and presents an on-going challenge to women in the workforce. Women described how sexual harassment and intimidation is at times insidious and other times quite blatant. This affects women's health and well-being, causing stress and anxiety.

Women felt that they could do the same job as the men in the mines. While they tend to fill the traditional jobs more readily, when they do enter the non-traditional positions, they have not always been well received or accepted by their male co-workers. Men have made no bones about stating directly to their women co-workers that they shouldn't be there and that they are taking away their jobs. Because of this work culture, women feel they need to prove their abilities by working extra hard. The stress of this can take an emotional toll as one woman stated, "I've had a lot of sleepless nights. If you messed up, the guys go "there you go" send a woman to do a man's job..." it just makes me boil inside.

But women have also made no bones that they are staying in the workforce. While it has been difficult to maneuver in an “old-boys” club as the only woman or handful of women, they have talked back, stood their ground and claimed their rightful place. As one woman pointed out to a disgruntled male colleague, he did not rely on his penis to drive a bulldozer, so there should be no reason why she couldn’t drive either.

Although there seems to be strict harassment policies in place in many of the mines where the women were working, one woman spoke of being stalked, and another told me of how she would find naked photos of women plastered in her room. Some chose to report incidents and other chose not to. For those who did, swift action was taken, for those who didn’t, they did so because they didn’t want to look weak and have the guys win by making her leave.

Again, the women felt they had to toughen up, put up with the crude jokes, slander and teasing to get by. They also got by by keeping to themselves, wearing “tom-boyish clothing” and again going above and beyond to prove their abilities.

Getting by and being tough has also meant that women have not always disclosed when they have been injured. One woman related to me how she tripped on a metal staircase and broke her kneecap. Instead of reporting this immediately, she went back to work, despite the jarring pain. She said she was humiliated and embarrassed and said “I don’t know if it’s because I’m the only chick, if I had to act tough but I walked on it”. She had to go on leave for several months while she healed from this injury. This is not an isolated example.

The final piece that I will talk to is about the multiple roles women play, as employees, as caregivers and mothers. The responsibilities

of motherhood coupled with the lack of childcare were identified as a significant challenges for women's retention in the workforce.

As stated by one participant, "You can't get to work if you don't have daycare."

Due to the nature of non-traditional employment, many women are also required to do shift work or several days on and several days off. For many of them, this irregular working schedule means that once she becomes a mother, she can no longer work.

An additional concern for women is the unknown health effects of working in a mine when pregnant. One woman expressed how she had recently experienced two miscarriages. She could not make a direct correlation to her job, but it caused her to question her exposure to workplace chemicals and toxins. While she was never concerned for her own health once she became pregnant she felt "safety was in a totally different place" She said I knew I wasn't doing anything to affect me, but it was stressful in that I didn't know what I could do or couldn't do...or how to handle this. Women also expressed anxiety around when to tell their boss about their pregnancy or their plans to become pregnant. That they may lose opportunities to advance in their careers was another reason why women did not disclose their desire to have children, or simply stated that they wouldn't be having children.

In sum, over three years, women have shared their insights into what it is to live and work in a mine. Across the board, while there are some variations, women continue to be confronted with similar challenges within the sector – be it a continued pushback from a male-dominated work force, or the need to find balance between two sets of homes and families. They are also gaining in numbers and in ground in this ever-expanding economic force in Canada.

Our first two reports are available on-line, the third will be available this summer.

Thank you for your interest and attention!