

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND MINING EMPLOYMENT IN AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

Greater participation of Indigenous women in mining employment provides opportunities for individuals and families to benefit from mining and allows industry to address the gender and diversity agendas, as well as the current skills shortage. However, while there have been several studies about female employment in the mining industry in Australia, few provide substantial data on the employment of Indigenous women, or detail their employment experience.

This paper draws on three recent studies conducted by the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining (CSR.M), each of which has involved participation of Indigenous women. The aim of the paper is to outline some of the issues and challenges faced by Indigenous women working in mining, and articulate potential strategies for attracting and retaining Indigenous women across all work roles and levels in mining.

Background

Recently there has been a strong push to increase Indigenous employment and training opportunities within the Australian minerals industry. Regulatory frameworks enable Traditional Owners to negotiate agreements with mining companies, making Indigenous employment a legal obligation as well as a social responsibility. Even outside the framework of agreements, meaningful employment of Indigenous people has the potential to enhance relationships with Traditional Owners, which can in turn facilitate land access and a 'social licence to operate'. In the current climate of skills shortages, Indigenous communities can also provide the mining industry with a permanent local workforce. Enhancing the capacity of Indigenous communities and addressing socio-economic disadvantage through employment and training can give practical application to some of the industry's high level policy commitments about Indigenous people.

There has also been a recent push to increase female participation in the Australian mining workforce. Last year the Australian Government's Office for Women (OfW) partnered with the Minerals Council of Australia (MCA) to commission a comprehensive multi-institution three-part research project into the attitudes and experiences of women towards working in the minerals industry with a view to increasing the industry's capacity to attract and retain women (OfW and MCA 2007). One part of the study required a particular focus on the retention of Indigenous women, indicating recognition of the need to understand mining employment from an Indigenous female perspective. However, there is some way to go before this perspective is more fully understood.

Structure of the paper

This paper starts by outlining key statistical data on Indigenous women in mining employment. Some reference is also made to ABS data and results of a 2003 industry survey conducted by ABARE¹. It then explores what attracts Indigenous women to mining, some barriers to their participation, what the employment experience is like for them, and some reasons why they leave. The paper concludes by suggesting some strategies to attract, retain, and ensure that employment has long term socio-economic benefits for Indigenous women.

It is important to note here that recognition of diversity amongst Indigenous women is essential. Just as there is no generalised Indigenous culture, there is also no single, homogenous Indigenous development vision (Martin et al. 2002). The experience of mining employment can vary amongst

¹ Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics

individuals. For example, women from remote communities may differ in their experience to Indigenous women who live in cities and have more exposure to mainstream employment and lifestyles.

Recent CSR Studies

In this paper, qualitative and quantitative data regarding Indigenous women working in the mining industry is taken from three recent CSR studies:

- 1) Indigenous employment in the Australian Minerals Industry 2006
This study involved 12 sites visits, interviews and a practitioner workshop. The purpose was to identify current trends and good practice within the industry. This study was primarily concerned with Indigenous employment in general, but some data were collected specifically relating to the employment of Indigenous women.
- 2) Retention of women in the minerals industry 2006
As part of the study commissioned by the OfW and MCA on the attraction and retention of women in the mining industry, a workforce survey and interviews were conducted with women working at four mine sites across Australia. Nineteen Indigenous women responded to the survey and 26 were interviewed. The aim was to identify strategies, policies and practices to attract and retain more women in the industry.
- 3) Implications of the closure of Zinifex Century Mine for Gulf communities 2007
A workforce survey and interviews were conducted with the Indigenous workforce of Century Mine to assess the contribution of the mine to date to Gulf communities in addition to gaining early understanding of potential impacts of mine closure. A total of 31 Indigenous women participated.

The titles of these studies have been shortened for practical reasons throughout the rest of this paper. They become: the Indigenous Employment Study (Tiplady and Barclay 2006), the Retention Study (Kemp and Pattenden 2007) and the Century Study (CSR 2007).

Participation of Indigenous Women in the Australian Mining Workforce

The Australian 2006 National Census identified 395 Indigenous women working in mining, representing 0.4% of the total workforce. This figure represented 16% of the Indigenous mining workforce, compared with a 15% representation of non-Indigenous women. There has been an increase since the 2001 Census which identified 156 Indigenous females working in mining, representing 0.2% of the total workforce, and 11.2% of the minerals industry's Indigenous workforce. The coal sector has by far the lowest overall Indigenous employment rate and by commodity, at only 0.3% of the sector workforce (Tedesco et. al 2003). The coal sector also has the lowest representation of women, at only 4% of the sector workforce (Kemp and Pattenden 2007).

The Indigenous Employment Study conducted by CSR in 2006 identified 225 Indigenous women representing 2.2% of the total workforce across 12 participating sites². Women accounted for 20% of the total Indigenous workforce, although there was considerable variation across sites, with female representation ranging from 8 to 33% of the total Indigenous workforce. It is unknown just how many more Indigenous women are working in mining Australia wide.

² These sites were selected primarily on the basis that the operation and/or parent company had shown a commitment to increasing Indigenous employment and would, therefore, be more likely to provide examples of good practice. The largest number of case study sites were in Western Australia (seven) followed by Queensland (three) and the Northern Territory (two) (Tiplady and Barclay 2006).

The majority of male and female Indigenous employees in the Indigenous Employment Study worked in semi- skilled positions (57%) (Figure 1).

	Male	Female	Total	% of total Indigenous workforce
Semi Skilled	578	89	667	56.6
Trade	82	3	85	7.2
Admin	4	73	77	6.5
Supervisor	31	2	33	2.8
Technical	19	2	21	1.8
Professional	7	7	14	1.2
Superintendent	8	0	8	0.7
Specialist	5	2	7	0.6
Manager	5	0	5	0.4
Graduate	1	1	2	0.2
Executive Manager	0	0	0	0
Traineeship	100	60	160	13.6
Apprentice	96	4	100	8.5
Total	936	243		1179

Figure 1: Occupations of Indigenous employees in the Indigenous Employment Study (Adapted from Tiplady and Barclay 2006)

Excluding the Indigenous women in semi-skilled positions (e.g. truck drivers), jobs were aligned with those usually associated with women³. There were significantly fewer Indigenous female apprentices, tradespersons, supervisors and technical, and significantly more women in administration roles. A similar pattern is seen in the female mining workforce more broadly (Kemp and Pattenden 2007).

The Century Study found that just over half (55%) of the Indigenous women who participated worked in mainstream employment prior to their current position at the mine and 45% either did not work or were employed in the CDEP⁴ scheme (Figure 2).

³ 'Female' roles are those work roles usually associated with women, including administration, catering/cleaning and professional support roles such as HR, public relations, community relations. Roles usually associated with men, are mine engineers, metallurgists and operational roles, such as truck driving.

⁴ Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). An Australian Government Initiative for unemployed Indigenous people outside of major urban and regional centres.

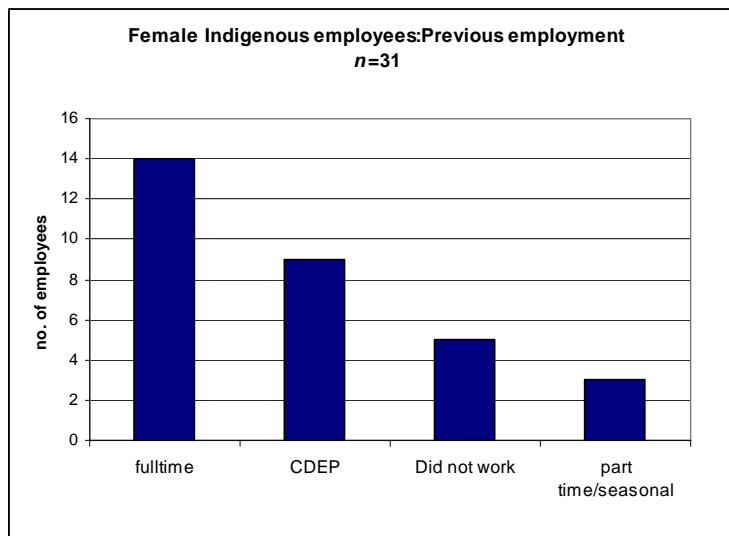


Figure 2: Previous employment status Indigenous women in the Century Study

Although this constitutes some evidence that Century is increasing the Indigenous labour pool, it is unknown how the rest of industry is performing. If mining companies are serious about addressing the socio-economic disadvantage of Indigenous women and creating local sustainability, they will need to consider employing more women who have not had previous experience in mainstream employment, as opposed to simply drawing on the existing pool of 'job ready' people. There is evidence that some mining companies are addressing this issue by investing in 'work ready' programs to prepare Indigenous people for the workforce, however the number of women who participate, and the extent to which there is a focus, on gender is unknown.

The data presented above has provided some general insight into the participation of Indigenous women currently working in the Australian minerals industry. The next few sections explore factors that attract Indigenous women to mining, the barriers to entering mainstream employment and their experience of mining work.

What attracts Indigenous women to the minerals industry?

The Retention Study carried out on behalf of the MCA and Office for Women found that Indigenous women are more attracted than non-Indigenous women by the opportunity to work with family or friends, the availability of study assistance, and to be a role model for other Indigenous people. Consistent with this, the great majority of female Indigenous employees in the Century Study had three or more relatives or family members working at the mine (Figure 3).

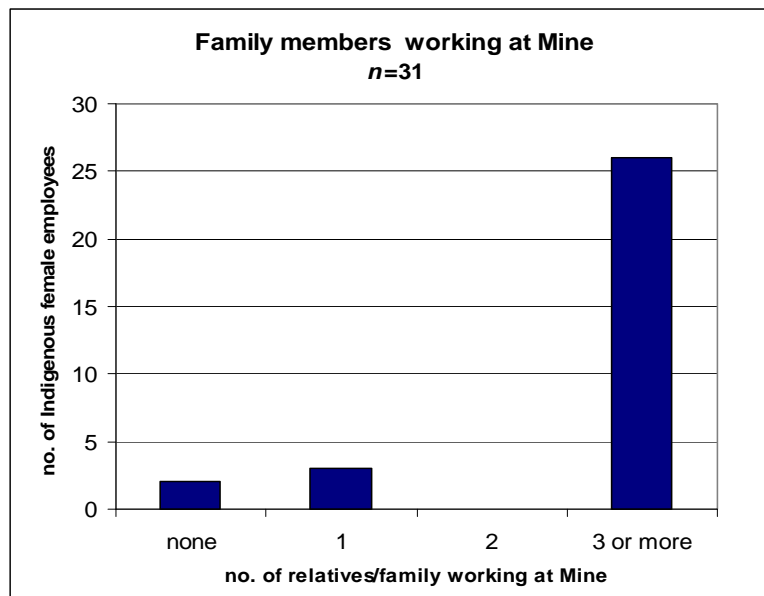


Figure 3: Number of Family members of Indigenous women working at Century

Creating a ‘critical mass’ of female Indigenous employees may explain why Century Mine has a comparatively high number (28% of total Indigenous workforce). For many Indigenous people, engaging in mainstream institutions (such as mining employment) is not solely about fiscal rewards, but it is also part of maintaining kin relationships and customary practices (Taylor and Bell 2004). In areas where communities are long distances apart, the mine can act as a meeting place where in some cases (e.g. fly-in/fly-out) access to transport is also provided.

Some Indigenous women in the Century Study were attracted by the opportunity to prove or better themselves:

“I got the job here just to prove that I could do it.”

“... was wasting my life drinking and smoking [before working at the mine]”

The financial benefits of working, and the positive example this serves for children and others in the community were cited as additional benefits. When asked if working at the mine would help them in the future, around three-quarters (73%) of women said yes.

Barriers to Participation in Mainstream and Mining Employment

Indigenous Australians are more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to suffer from asthma, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and are also more likely to report health risk factors such as smoking and excessive drinking (Tiplady and Barclay 2006), all of which can affect the ability to secure employment. Indigenous women, however, are less likely than Indigenous men to engage in drug and alcohol abuse (ABS 2006), which is a significant safety issue within the mining industry. Statistically, Indigenous women are less educated compared with all Australians, but more educated compared to Indigenous men (ABS 2006).

Factors that impact on participation rates of Indigenous women in mainstream employment have mainly been attributed to family and cultural responsibilities. Indigenous women are more likely to bear children at a younger age, and are often responsible for caring for larger numbers of dependents or others than non-Indigenous women (ABS 2006). A young family may be a constraint in terms of starting a career; however Indigenous women also often have a close extended family that may care for the children while they work. Dominant values in some Indigenous communities regarding women’s involvement in waged employment may also influence individuals’ desire to participate (O’Faircheallaigh 1998).

Other cultural factors attributed to lack of participation of Indigenous Australians include the availability of hunting and gathering activities and whether a person speaks an Indigenous language (Hunter and Gray 1999).

In relation to the minerals industry, the Retention Study concluded that while some barriers to participation in the minerals industry are common for all women, Indigenous women face additional employment challenges to non-Indigenous women, such as systemic social disadvantage, complex family responsibilities and issues associated with holding positions of authority over other Indigenous people, as well as cultural pressure to stay at home and look after children and family members (Kemp and Pattenden 2007).

Working in the mining industry may not be considered culturally appropriate for some Indigenous women. Some have argued that mining and its negative environmental effects is in direct opposition to the Indigenous worldview (Trigger 2002, Yanner 2002) whereby a responsibility exists to care for 'country'. The word 'country' was adopted by English-speaking Aboriginal peoples to describe their reciprocal relationship to homelands. If you are doing the right thing ecologically, the results will be social and spiritual, and vice versa (Rose 2002:49). Some women may therefore refrain from working in mining for this valid cultural reason.

In some circumstances cultural tensions can mean very practical challenges for Indigenous women in the mining workplace. For example, amongst some Indigenous groups in northern Australia, red ochre is specifically the domain of men (i.e. important in male ceremonial contexts) and it is considered offensive and dangerous for women to touch, or be in close contact with. This clearly makes it very problematic and challenging for Indigenous women to work in an open cut pit, where ochre can be uncovered regularly.

What is the employment experience like for Indigenous women?

The employment experience for Indigenous women appeared to be generally positive in the Century Study, notwithstanding the dissatisfaction expressed about some aspects of the workplace.

The most commonly reported 'best aspect' of working at the mine was meeting new people and the 'worst aspect' was being away from family. Some participants said working at the mine had increased their self esteem. For example, one woman said:

"... got me to be more confident in myself, learning more ..."

Some women said that they experienced added familial and community pressure to share money (humbug⁵) since working at the mine. One participant said:

"Have to pretend you're broke sometimes, have to harden up, took me a lot of years to get over that"

"Lots of humbug from my family, that's why some people move away"

Pressure to share with kin or 'demand sharing' is noted in the literature for both genders (Petersen 1993, Trigger 2005) and is important in the constitution of social relations in egalitarian societies. Currently little is known about how income from mining employment is distributed by Indigenous workers and how many people benefit. Further, as O'Faircheallaigh (1998) pointed out almost a decade ago, there is a need to determine whether waged employment will sharpen, or reduce inequality between Indigenous men and women.

Some participants commented that women from the local Indigenous communities near the mine were more likely to be shy and would benefit from support.

⁵ Aboriginal English for 'pressuring' or 'annoy'

“Most young people back there [Indigenous community] haven’t mixed with the mainstream before, they are shy.”

“... get people from community that are not used to the environment here...hey...need someone to help people get through...who they can relate to”

Little is known about the current aspirations of Indigenous women in mining. However, more than half (55%) of Indigenous women in the Century Study planned to stay working at the mine as long as the mine was operating (Figure 4).

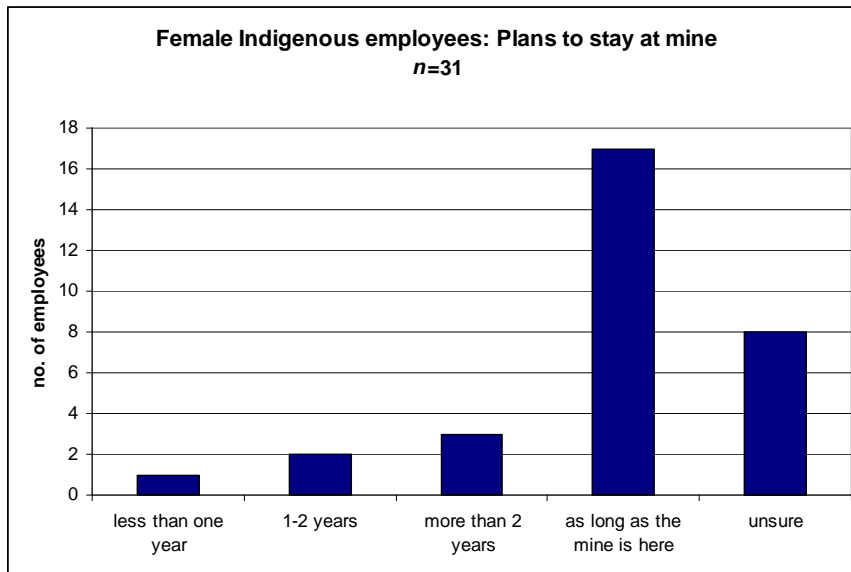


Figure 4: Indigenous women’s plans to stay working at Century

There is also some evidence of Indigenous women wanting more training which implies a desire for career development. For example, 94% of women who participated in the Indigenous workforce survey as part of the Century Study said they would like to receive training, of whom 23% requested management training.

Some Indigenous women who participated in the Retention study thought that their supervisors did not respect them as much as non-Indigenous women, or Indigenous men, and felt they were perceived to be *“at the bottom of the food chain”*.

“Male supervisors don’t take you seriously... they’re not going to listen to a woman, think a woman can’t know any better than they do, especially a black woman.”

The Retention Study also reported that some Indigenous women may have issues with supervising Indigenous men. However, holding positions of authority over another extends beyond just the dimension of gender. Age, status, position within family and community and complex kinship rules are all relevant factors in determining if supervision might be problematic (Parmenter and Kemp 2007).

Why do Indigenous women leave mining employment?

The Retention Study concluded that women mainly left work at the mines to start a family. Indigenous women who already had children said they would leave if their family was sick. Many Indigenous people have strong ties and responsibilities to their family, which can often be large. Indigenous female respondents in the Century Study mostly indicated that the roster structure, family reasons, lack of communication and discrimination are the main reasons that influenced them to leave work at the mine.

The Century Study found evidence that more a flexible approach to re-entry and retaining women is beginning to emerge. For 35% of Indigenous women who participated in the survey, it was not their first time working at the mine. The Indigenous Employment Study supported this finding, indicating that many Indigenous people come and go from the workforce several times before settling to a more permanent job. Allowing for more flexible human resource systems may be more resource intensive to begin with, but clearly it has potential to pay off in the longer term for the minerals industry. The Century Study found that although none of the Indigenous women had previously worked in the minerals industry, 40% planned to stay in the industry after the closure of Century (forecast to be around 2016).

Strategies to increase participation

The agendas of increasing Indigenous employment and female representation within the minerals industry are currently being driven separately, resulting in separate strategies. However, Indigenous women represent the overlapping intersection of these agendas (Figure 5)

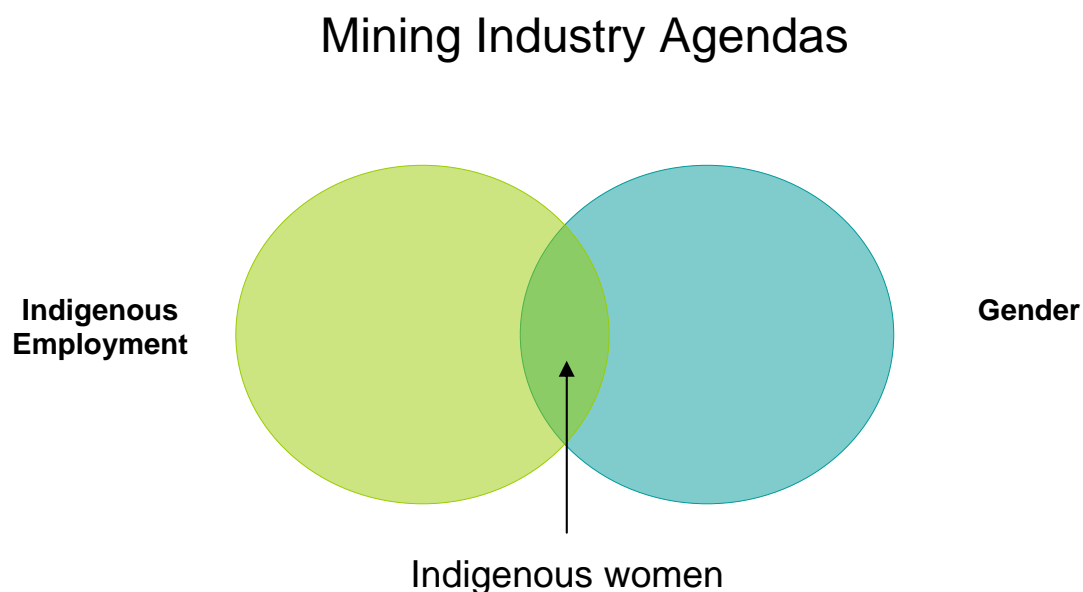


Figure 5: Mining Industry Agendas

Although suggested strategies from both agendas can be applied to Indigenous women, there has been little acknowledgement of this overlap, therefore little focus on strategies specific to Indigenous women. Recommended strategies from both the CSRM Retention and Indigenous Employment Studies apply to Indigenous women. These include:

- Leadership
High-level commitment to both the gender and Indigenous employment agenda should be replicated at all levels of the industry.
- Mentoring and support
Mentoring is widely recognised by practitioners as an effective strategy for reducing turnover rates for Indigenous employees (Tiplady and Barclay 2006). Mentoring is a process whereby experienced employees provide support for new or less experienced co-workers. All of the Indigenous women who participated in the Century Study had not worked in mining prior to their current position, and either said they had benefited from an informal mentor during their employment or advocated the company appointing a formal Indigenous mentor position.

- More flexible human resources systems and policies

Conventional human resource (HR) systems often make it difficult for Indigenous people to enter the mainstream workforce (Tiplady and Barclay 2006). The Indigenous Employment Study identified 'good practice' recruitment strategies in participating operations. These included face-to-face rather than written communication, using selection centre workshops to more accurately identify individual skills and abilities, and adopting flexible strategies to manage problems with drug and alcohol use (Tiplady and Barclay 2007).

Roster patterns, including shifts changes, twelve-hour shifts and long absences from home, are common issues for employees in the mining industry. This issue may be compounded for Indigenous women, who often have larger families and associated responsibilities. There is scope to investigate opportunities for more flexible roster pattern and shift lengths. Some mining operations are now also incorporating cultural leave into their HR policies for Indigenous workers.

- Career development

Career management processes may be in need of attention to ensure better opportunities are available for women, including Indigenous women. As evidenced by the Indigenous Employment Study, the great majority of Indigenous women currently working in mining are in semi-skilled positions. Both the Retention and Century Studies found that Indigenous women are interested in further personal and career development.

- Creating a 'critical mass'

Many Indigenous women are attracted to work in mining by the opportunity to work with family and friends; hence, achieving a 'critical mass' at sites where there is a significant Indigenous population is likely to attract more Indigenous women to the workforce, and provide support to retain them.

- Working environment

Delivering cultural awareness training as part of all site inductions is an important way to acknowledge and respect and Indigenous values, and should include a gender dimension.

Addressing the 'maleness' of the workplace by providing appropriate facilities and amenities for women will help female employees, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to feel more comfortable in the workplace.

- Systems and process improvements

Setting goals and targets and improving HR data recording, monitoring and evaluation from both gender and Indigenous perspectives is also important.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed key findings from three studies recently conducted by CSRM that had substantial involvement of Indigenous women. Although these studies provide an insight into some Indigenous women's experiences and aspirations in mining employment, more dedicated research focusing on Indigenous women in mining is warranted. What strategies over and above the already articulated are needed for Indigenous women?

If mining companies are to attract and retain more Indigenous women, as well as contribute to the long term 'sustainability' of Indigenous communities, it is crucial that they understand the impacts of employment more fully. How mining employment impacts on family and cultural obligations, the tensions that may be created and the extent to which women and communities are benefiting, are all relevant factors in determining a way forward for mining companies to ensure better outcomes in the long term for Indigenous communities more generally.

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