



# The construction of exploitable gendered mining bodies

**Asanda-Jonas Benya**

Currently there are close to 58 000 women working full time in mines across South Africa. Some toil underground lashing rocks, installing support, water and ventilation pipes, drilling rocks; others hoisting ore up to surface where it is processed. Their inclusion in underground occupations is as recent as 2002 when the 1911 Mines and Works Act No. 12 and the South African Minerals Act of 1991 were repealed and replaced by more 'inclusive' and somewhat 'progressive' legislations which promoted the inclusion of women in mining.

## Normalisation of women's exclusion

When women were excluded, mines were considered 'a man's world', to a point where the relationship between men and mines seemed natural and eternal. Their exclusion in South Africa and elsewhere was largely informed by colonial Victorian, religious and cultural ideas about women's bodies. There were also superstitions and myths about women's bodies which normalized their exclusion, especially from underground. Alexander (2007) argues that the colonial and apartheid history of South Africa restricted the movement and residency of Africans, especially women; mechanization, geographical location of mines, single sex hostels and the migrant labour system guaranteed the exclusion of women from mines. There were exceptions, however, mainly in asbestos mines, where women were almost half of the workforce from the 1890s until the 1980s (McCulloch, 2010). Despite evidence of women working in mines, cobbing and sorting ore, the myth of their bodies as weak and thus unsuitable for mine work persisted. In some instances, their bodies, due to menstruation, were believed to not only be 'leaky' and 'polluted' but to have powers to influence seismic events underground leading to rock falls, and even to cause minerals to disappear.

## Naturalising men's exploitation

Men, on the other hand, especially black men, were viewed as the desirable bodies, naturally suitable for underground work. Daily and consistently, the mines constructed them, through disciplinary power and techniques deployed by the mines, colonial and apartheid state, as the natural labouring bodies. To do this, mines delinked whiteness from the laboring class. Through job allocations and reconfiguration of teams, mines actively distanced white bodies from the 'degrading' and strenuous work underground, and upon them bequeathed the honour of master, the virtuosos in the underground world, and

also charged them with the vocation of maintaining white respectability and superiority. Conversely, they insisted on linking particular traits with black bodies and masculinities: risk taking, working hard and the ability to tolerate dangerously hot and humid underground working conditions and deplorable hostel living conditions. They then encouraged, rewarded and valorized these traits underground where rocks were constantly threatening to fall and thus threatening production or bottom line of the mine. What became lost in this 'production machine' was how mines were not only producing platinum or gold, but were producing the mining bodies they wanted in order to produce the minerals and metals they 'needed'. The production of masculine mining bodies that are expandable and easily exploitable has become prominent with the inclusion of women in mining. Hence, mining masculinity, which facilitated the exploitation of men's bodies and their objectification, became closely guarded as it was synonymous with productivity, the production of surplus value and ultimately profits. The exclusion of women was thus necessary.

The insistence on excluding women, therefore, has little to do with protecting men's jobs, and more to do with protecting profits that depend on the mobilisation of mining masculinity, reproduction of its logics and practices. The inclusion of women in mining illuminates how mining bodies are produced, how men's bodies have for a long time been targeted, trained, managed and essentially 'disciplined' in order to help mines 'extract' not only minerals, but labour power by mobilizing masculinity.

While women have been included in mining they remain on the margins or excluded. As I argue elsewhere, their exclusion happens through alienation from their day-to-day work and spatial separation and isolation from their teams - using the argument that their bodies are incongruous with minework.

## Negotiating marginality: feminist refusals

What has been given little attention in discourse when making sense of women's marginality in mining is perhaps the fact that it is this marginality that has allowed women 'freedoms'. We have also not paid much attention to how some women are also using self-exclusion as a strategy to escape daunting and dangerous minework, how they are using their alienation and isolation as a means to 'freedom' at and from work. They are free from expectations to be productive at all costs, even to their demise, an expectation that is at the core of mining

masculinity. When using a feminist lens to make sense of how women negotiate underground, one sees that the self-exclusion can be read as a strategic refusal, a refusal to be turned into a machine, exploited underground and discarded once wounded or sick, like the half a million men sick with tuberculosis and silicosis and disabled due to mine injuries.

The refusal by some women takes the form of 'quietly' refusing to be permanently located inside the stopes, which are the epitome of masculinity or quietly refusing to do the work. This is not to say women's silence is an act of obedience, but rather a demonstration of courage, a refusal, a form of defiance and a productive use of the economy of the invisibility (Gasa, 2007 and Motsemme, 2004:910). These women choose differently.

To 'quietly' refuse to do work sometimes comprises working slowly - to *swaya-swaya*: 'You take maybe an hour or two hours to go to the stores instead of twenty minutes ... when they find you, they shout and shout and you just keep quiet .. they carry the things you didn't want to carry in the first place...' To *swaya-swaya* also includes agreeing to do work, but doing it *your own way*, not in the *mine's way* or *men's way* - that is refusing to do masculinity in order to do the work.

Alongside refusing to be in the stope underground and do minework was also a refusal to use the spatially corresponding language underground, Fanakalo. Fanakalo is an underground mining language, one that legitimises one's position and gives them the status of being a 'real' mineworker. When a woman speaks Fanakalo she is given 'honorary citizenship', this citizenship comes with work and productivity expectations. Some refused that citizenship and chose to be outsiders. The refusal to speak Fanakalo was their way of distancing themselves from the mineworker identity, the underground world, its culture and logics, and symbolically distancing the self from masculinity associated with the language and seen as key when mobilising productivity underground.

In some occupations such as *pikininis*, which are essentially assistants, women refused to be called *pikininis*, insisting on being called 'shiftboss assistants'; others refused to be called mineworkers, insisting to be called *women who work in mining*. These were ways of contesting and rejecting the naming which for them symbolised objectification and turning workers into machines or servants.

Sometimes they refused to interact with the union or to join the same unions that the majority of underground male workers joined. Instead, they chose to join unions that are associated with workers who are located above ground, unions that they argue 'take women's demands seriously'.

These women's refusals thus 'disturbed' workplace order and exploitation of workers by disrupting while also reinforcing some gender stereotypes and gender expectations to their individual and collective benefit. In some cases they refused

their objectification and actively chose to deviate from the underground orders and norms. It is this deviation, or 'wandering' away from the official and unofficial but generally acceptable masculine paths, that enabled them to lay claim to some freedoms. These wilful acts of *these women* are reinforced by their marginal status in mining, the status which comes with 'not being male', not performing or embodying mining masculinity.

Through their actions, these women were saying: 'We refuse to be what you want us to be, we are what we are, and that's the way it's going to be'; they were thus choosing, 'that space of refusal, where one can say no' (hooks, 1990: 150). They were refusing to assimilate, to mimic men, and were choosing instead to carve a space for themselves on the margins where they could be who they wanted to be, where they could live or work in alternative ways and refuse domination and co-optation into sustaining mining masculinity as the norm. These women's active and strategic refusals allowed them to take certain subject positions that were not objectifiable, even though still exploited.

I suggest that these refusals should be read as windows through which to re-imagine resistance, and male mineworkers should borrow from some of the strategies deployed by women in the construction of their social and political subjectivities.

***Asanda-Jonas Benya is a lecturer in the Sociology Department at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and a fellow at the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) at Wits, Johannesburg. Her research concentrates on labour studies, gender and the extractive industries, and feminist and labour movements.***

## References

- Alexander, P. (2007) 'Women and Coal Mining in India and South Africa, c1900-1940', *African Studies*, 66(2-3), 201-222.
- McCulloch, J. (2010) 'Women Mining Asbestos in South Africa 1893-1980', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29(2)
- Gasa, N. (2007) 'Feminisms, motherisms, patriarchies and women's voices in the 1950s', in Gasa, N., *Basus' iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo/ they remove boulders and cross rivers: Women in South African History*, 207-229.
- hooks., B. (1990) *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Boston: South End Press.
- Motsemme, N., 2004. 'The mute always speak: On women's silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission'. *Current Sociology*, 52(5), 909-932.

## University of the Witwatersrand

Contact the editor for questions or contributions: [Claire.Ceruti@global-labour-university.org](mailto:Claire.Ceruti@global-labour-university.org)

*The GLC has been supported in 2019 by the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), the ICDD at Kassel University and the Center for Global Workers' Rights at Penn State University.*