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# Refashioning Women's Self and Mining

## Homemakers and Producers on the South African Mines, 1976–2011

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the specific ways women performed conflicting gender identities at home and when engaged in waged work in South African mines, as compared to other global cases. They fought back the belittling disreputable image of the urban working-class women and yet refused to be identified merely as acceptable housewives or mute witnesses of family disintegration. They negotiated claims for jobs, strove to salvage marriages and objected to domestic abuse. A woman compensated for marriage failure through initiating a new family structure consisting of her children, niece, nephew and/or other street children, and grooming them to achieve social advancement. Women took up the challenge of proving wrong the racist and sexist stereotypes made against them. They expressed dexterity and handiness, and occasionally, exerted themselves like men. Equally, they sought desexualisation of work relations, and qualified this pursuit with their association with “workerist” integrity and a negotiable, moralising approach to the sexual bully. They challenged the union movement on questions of dignity, propriety and representation women. Their manner of all these negotiations could not be understood simply as a coping strategy or adaptive pattern. It expressed and, equally, added to the new African tradition of a “motherist” movement (after Gasá 2007), the union movement’s criticism of domestic servitude (after Iris Berger and Pat Gibbs 2007) and the intersection of race, gender and apartheid (after Luli Callinicos 2007), and women’s rational consideration and action. A quantum of success in achieving a women-friendly work environment is discernible in the women’s life-histories, which are our primary sources.

Keywords: *women mineworkers, mining, motherist movement, family, life-history*

## Introduction

The working careers of the women in the mines were chequered and their experiences variegated across historical moments and between countries. The progress of large-scale mining and a modern (Victorian) domestic ideology initially resulted in the removal of pit women from below ground mining from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The British woman mineworker, for instance, witnessed such developments since 1842.<sup>1</sup> In South Africa, the British mining personnel – engineers and miners – brought about the same industrial ethic and received a prohibitory measure legislated against employment of women from belowground mining in 1898 (when the Chamber of Mines interfered) and again in 1911 (when the Union of South Africa legislated the same).<sup>2</sup> Unlike their British fraternity, however, South African women were not employed in surface mining and other service jobs on the gold and coalmines.<sup>3</sup>

Gold and coal mining firms in South Africa began to employ women in certain service jobs from the mid-1970s. The number of women mineworkers further increased with the dawn of the equal employment opportunity (EEO) and diversity era in the workplace since 2002: The latter provision removed the prohibitive law and also asked mining firms to raise the proportion of female employees to at least ten per cent of the total workforce. This remarkable development placed South Africa in the club of advanced countries, including the United States, Canada and Australia, which adopted equal employment opportunity in the mining industry from the 1970s.

In a span of a decade, South African women and others proved that the mines would not collapse, machines would not jam, and union offices would not shut down due to the presence of women. Such beliefs had long provided popular legitimacy to the prohibition of women from below ground mining in particular. The available literature points to how women have been exposing the hollowness of such masculinist,

- 1 Angela V. John: *By the Sweat of their Brow: Women Workers at Victorian Coalmines*, London 1984. Some pit women, Angela John points out, continued to work in a clandestine manner for a decade or so despite the prohibitive mines act of 1842. Other women were employed for certain mining jobs on the surface, which they lost only because of mechanisation, replacement of women by men for mechanical work, and the influence of domestic ideology. Other countries followed suit. Germany did the same in 1878, Japan in 1928–51, and India in 1929–46.
- 2 Peter Alexander: *Women and Coal Mining in India and South Africa: c1900–1940*, in: *African Studies* 66:2/3 (2007), pp. 201–22.
- 3 Women were employed in the Asbestos mines during all this period. The state followed the logic of health safety and restricted women employment in the Asbestos mines from 1955–56. See Jock McCulloch: *Women Mining Asbestos in South Africa: 1893–1980*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29:2 (2003), pp. 413–433.

sexist discourse.<sup>4</sup> The experience of women in South Africa mirrors that of elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Women certainly grabbed new opportunities for establishing a greater degree of financial, and in a certain sense, social independence and parity with men. Their conditions and gains, it could be said, have been more successful than elsewhere in Africa.<sup>6</sup>

The opening-up of the mining industry was, I argue, a necessary but not sufficient condition for women to seize new fortunes. Various ways in which women negotiated the masculine environment of mining and the domestic ideology, including local traditions of domesticity and femininity had, inter alia, bearing upon their working career and social life.

Moving beyond the narrative of victimhood and passivity, many scholars suggest that women adjusted to the challenges of arduous labour, sex discrimination and sexual bullying in order to secure principal or complementary bread-earning positions. Some of these studies describe a coping-strategy variously termed as “panty down” and “*palliri* work” (securing wage work through sexual services offered to the supervisor) adopted by women for gaining favours, such as allocation of a relatively easy-going job and promotion in the patriarchal, sexist labour relations. They suggest that sexual transactions between men and women were a component in-itself of the overall mining process.<sup>7</sup> On a different note, other studies highlight that women adapted through

- 4 See Jaclyn Gier/Laurie Mercier (eds.): *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry: 1670–2005*, New York 2006; Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt/Martha Macintyre (eds.): *Women Miners in Developing Countries: Pit Women and Others*, Aldershot 2006.
- 5 Jennifer Keck/Mary Powell: *Women into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour*, in: Jaclyn Gier/Laurie Mercier (eds.): *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry: 1670–2005*, New York 2006, pp. 281–295. Laurie Mercier: *Bordering on Equality: Women Miners in North America*, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (ed.): *Gendering the Field: Towards Sustainable Livelihoods for Mining Communities*, Canberra 2011, pp. 33–47. Suzanne E. Tallichet: *Barriers to Women's Advancement in Underground Coal Mining*, in: *Rural Sociology* 65:2 (2000), pp. 234–252.
- 6 George Chauncey Jr.: *The Locus of Reproduction: Women's Labour in the Zambian Copperbelt: 1927–1953*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 7:2 (1981), pp. 135–164, 136, 163. Unlike the South African mines, the Northern Rhodesian (Zambian) mines supported a regular family life for their mineworkers and permitted the presence of women in the mining areas. Women, as wives and companions of male mineworkers, received land from the companies for gardening and marketing opportunities for the produce. Rachel Perks: *Towards a Post-Conflict Transition: Women and Artisanal Mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (ed.): *Gendering the Field: Towards Sustainable Livelihoods for Mining Communities*, Canberra 2011, pp. 177–195.
- 7 Asanda P. Benya: *Women in Mining: A Challenge to Occupational Culture in Mines*, MA Dissertation: University of Witwatersrand (2009); Asanda P. Benya: *Women in Mining: Reproducing Labour in Mines*, Presentation at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Mining History Congress, Johannesburg (17–20 April 2012). Els Van Hoecke: *The Invisible Work of Women in the Small Mines of Bolivia*, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt/Martha Macintyre (eds.): *Women Miners in Developing Countries: Pit Women and Others*, pp. 265–285.

presenting themselves as a male worker and, occasionally, challenged the modern division of labour and other socio-economic and political constraints with an eye towards securing a women-friendly day-to-day practice.<sup>8</sup> Women involved themselves, at times, in workers' unions and harnessed the unions' discourse of equal opportunity and parity with a view to advancing the cause of gender justice and an identity of working women as workers, who were collaborating with men comrades.<sup>9</sup> My study furthers this line of argument. It describes below the manner women strove to prove their own mettle and significance in the workplace in order to be accepted and earn a more dignified standing among their colleagues and in their community; and they sought to promote positive changes in the discriminatory work environment. In addition, they aligned themselves with the workers' union for collective good and interrogated the union for falling short of its promises of industrial democracy for all.

Confronted with the corrosive effect of the ideology of domesticity and femininity and sexualisation of work relations by male miners, the literature underscores, in certain instances, that mining women themselves rebelled against rough marriages and abusive husbands, and exercised financial independence in social life. Indeed, they sired new family structures. The single women – widows, abandoned and others – adopted girls in certain cases and brought them up to become their familial caregivers in the old-age.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, they intimately integrated themselves with and groomed their extended kin, including the children of their sisters and/or brothers, and thereby taking part in the customary reciprocity.<sup>11</sup> In some other cases, the single mothers paired themselves with other married but migrant male miners, who were

- 8 Jennifer Keck/Mary Powell: *Women into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour*, in: Jaclyn Gier/Laurie Mercier (eds.): *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry: 1670–2005*, New York 2006; Laurie Mercier: *Women Miners in North America*, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (ed.): *Gendering the Field: Towards Sustainable Livelihoods for Mining Communities*, pp. 33–47. Joni Parmenter: *Experiences of Indigenous Women in the Australian Mining Industry*, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (ed.): *Gendering the Field: Towards Sustainable Livelihoods for Mining Communities*, pp. 67–86; Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt: *Globalisation and Women's Work in the Mine Pits in East Kalimantan, Indonesia*, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt/Martha Macintyre (eds.): *Women Miners in Developing Countries: Pit Women and Others*, pp. 349–369. Suzanne E. Tallichet: *Barriers to Women's Advancement in Underground Coal Mining*.
- 9 Jennifer Keck/Mary Powell: *Women into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour*, pp. 291–92; Laurie Mercier: *Bordering on Equality: Women Miners in North America*, p. 42.
- 10 Amarjit Kaur: *Race, Gender and the Tin Mining Industry in Malaya: 1900–1950*, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt/Martha Macintyre (eds.): *Women Miners in Developing Countries: Pit Women and Others*, pp. 73–88.
- 11 Martha Macintyre: *Women Working in the Mining Industry in Papua New Guinea: A Case Study from Lihir*, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt/Martha Macintyre (eds.): *Women Miners in Developing Countries: Pit Women and Others*, pp. 131–144.

involved in “a double family life system.”<sup>12</sup> On a different note, other studies show that women negotiated the conflicting gender identities through presenting themselves with manly ability during wage-work and as able housewives at home with an eye towards acceptability in both domains.<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, my research brings to the fore *the way* women first attempted to salvage family life along with maintaining wage-employment, and drew motivation for drudgery from having a personal financial stake in socio-economic advancement of their family and decent upbringing of their children. Here, once she failed to achieve the desired result, women cast a new family structure – consisting of her children, nieces and nephews and/or the street children – headed by the single, sedate mother.

Towards the end, I explain *the particular ways* women confronted the sexist stereotyping of women on the male-dominated mines and redefined women's identities for securing their destiny. I argue that women mineworkers' awareness of the racist and sexist discourses about them informed their endeavours to present a dignified response. Often, they drew from certain elements of the Africanist tradition of womanhood. The latter tradition in itself, increasingly, came into existence through its rough engagement with capitalist industrialisation and racial urbanisation, on the one hand. On the other hand, it was influenced by the missionary preaching of domestic ideology, an educated civilised life; and equally shaped by the emphases of the workers' movement on the labour and civil rights and emancipation from domestic servitude. All this functioned as the conditioning factors to women's endeavours, to which the women's indeterminate agency also added.

The empirical basis of this study and the argument it makes is based on a volume of the life-histories of mineworkers on the goldfields around Carletonville and the coalfields around Witbank in South Africa.<sup>14</sup> In collecting the life-histories for the volume, known as *Mining Faces*, we undertook three rounds of interviews from 22

- 12 Els Van Hoecke: The Invisible Work of Women in the Small Mines of Bolivia, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt/Martha Macintyre (eds.): *Women Miners in Developing Countries: Pit Women and Others*.
- 13 Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt: Globalisation and Women's Work in the Mine Pits in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt/Martha Macintyre (eds.): *Women Miners in Developing Countries: Pit Women and Others*; Deanna Kemp/Catherine Pattenden: Retention of Women in the Minerals Industry, in: Australian Government Office for Women/The Minerals Council of Australia/Women in Social and Economic Research (eds.): *Unearthing New Resources: Attracting and Retaining Women in the Australian Minerals Industry*, Canberra 2007, pp. 105–186, available online at: <http://www.csr.m.uq.edu.au/docs/women-in-mining.pdf> (accessed on 18 August 2014); Joni Parmenter: Experiences of Indigenous Women in the Australian Mining Industry, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (ed.): *Gendering the Field: Towards Sustainable Livelihoods for Mining Communities*.
- 14 Dhiraj Nite/Paul Stewart: *Mining Faces: An Oral History of Mineworkers on the Gold and Coalmines in South Africa*, Johannesburg 2012.

narrators, and one round of interviews from another eight informants between June 2011 and July 2012. Interviews took place at our informants' houses, neighbourhood *shebeens* (informal social and drinking locales) and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) offices.<sup>15</sup> Along with the spoken words, we engaged with the lapses, discrepancies, silences and imaginative inventions found in the recounting of memories and other oral testimonies.<sup>16</sup>

## South African Context

Until 1989, mining firms chose to employ single male African migrants for production works, and the whites for managerial, supervisory and the so-called skilled works. Most African male mineworkers oscillated between gold and coal mines and their rural villages, which were dotted throughout the whole of Southern Africa. These male migrants preferred to build an *umzi* (homestead) at home in the rural areas. After the tumultuous early 1970s, a new type of man, primarily young South African males from the urban townships and impoverished resettlement areas, was encouraged to join the mines. The lure was significantly improved wages and a shorter labour contract. However, these new men soon expressed a desire for a regular family life in the vicinity of places of work.<sup>17</sup>

Mining management and the state had prohibited the employment of women and boys under the age of sixteen from belowground mining since 1898. The Victorian gender norms and the adoption of capital-intensive methods of mining informed the views of mining management and state officials.<sup>18</sup> Equally important was the fact that the rural African family headmen required the women in the countryside to look after the homesteads and labour in the field. These three factors, argues Alexander, led to the prohibition on the employment of women that was enshrined in the 1911 Mines

- 15 Two field staff members, Bongani Xezwi and Jabulile Msimang, in particular helped us complete the interviewing process. Three staff members, Bongani Xezwi, Sharon Harmse and Mukondi Nethavhakone, assisted in transcribing and translating the interviews conducted mostly in the vernacular. Recorded interviews are preserved at the South African Research Chair in Social Change, University of Johannesburg and with Paul Stewart, University of Witwatersrand. We have been humbled by the generosity of 22 informants.
- 16 See Dhiraj Nite: *Sharing Life-History and other Memory: The Mining Persons in South Africa: 1951–2011*, in: *South African Historical Journal* 66:1 (2014), pp. 122–141.
- 17 See Dunbar Moodie: *Going for Gold: Men, Mines and Migration*, London 1994; Jonathan Crush/Alan Jeeves/David Yudelman (eds.): *South Africa's Labour Empire: A History of Black Migrancy to the Gold Mines*, Cape Town 1991.
- 18 The Victorian domestic ideology suggested that the primary role of women was homemaking and caregiving; safe, feminine wage-work was to be made available to poor women.

and Works Act.<sup>19</sup> In the guise of putting a check on detribalisation, the segregationist urban areas regulations further attempted to restrict the presence of African married couples and thereby of African women to three per cent of the total black workforce in the mining areas. Enforcement of the rule, noticeably, differed on the goldfield and coalfield. The strict implementation of the rule on the goldfield meant the number of African women fell below even the permitted level; by contrast, the Witbank coalfield witnessed that the African women formed about 15 per cent of the total population despite renewed enforcement of the restriction from the mid-1920s. Many African colliers chose to stay outside of the single-sex hostel maintained by the mines and setup their own family huts in the *Skomplaas* (settlements, called “locations” in South Africa, built on the farms in the vicinity of the mines).<sup>20</sup>

White managers and supervisors, who formed less than ten per cent of the total workforce, were provided with subsidised housing, commensurate with their status, on the mines and enjoyed a regular family life in company-dominated towns on the goldfields and coalfields in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many women from the families of white mine employees offered supportive roles and on notable occasions assumed frontal roles, for instance in 1922 during the great strike of white miners known as the Rand revolt.<sup>21</sup> Unlike these white families, only a miniscule percentage of African women could stay in the mining areas, as wives and companions of African clerical staff and team-leaders (then known as the boss boys) who qualified and found space in married

- 19 Peter Alexander: *Women and Coal Mining in India and South Africa: c1900–1940*, pp. 201–22.
- 20 Peter Alexander: *Oscillating Migrants, Detribalised Families, and Militancy: Mozambicans on Witbank Collieries: 1918–1927*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27:3 (2001), pp. 505–525. Woman comprised up to half of the total workforce in asbestos mining in South Africa (Northern Cape and north-eastern Transvaal). Here, the absence of prohibition on the employment of women from surface mining and open-cast mining served the purpose of providing an income to poverty-stricken local women in a part of the sector known for simple technology. Asbestos mines, furthermore, could be exempted under the Mines and Works (Amendment) Act of 1956 by claiming to satisfy three conditions: the employment of women only in cobbing and sorting works, keeping the dust level low, regular check-ups of woman mineworkers and forbidding the presence of children. See Jock McCulloch: *Women Mining Asbestos in South Africa: 1893–1980*.
- 21 Jeremy Krikler: *Women, Violence and the Rand Revolt of 1922*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 22:3 (1996), pp. 349–372.

quarters, generally adjacent to the mine.<sup>22</sup> In the quest for satisfying socio-sexual needs, others engaged in a culture of homosexual liaisons, locally known as having a *nyatsi* (mine girlfriend), mostly between older, senior black mineworkers and young recruits.<sup>23</sup>

As time wore on, a number of poor wives and other unmarried girls followed their migrant men and often settled down in the informal locations around the mines on un-serviced peri-urban land or nearby townships. Self-built shack dwellings and rented backyard shacks served as an opportunity for living as a female-headed householder and, in certain cases, receiving clients and boyfriends from the mine hostel.<sup>24</sup> These single women were predominantly what Phil Bonner describes as “marriage refugees”.<sup>25</sup> They initially migrated to mining areas to look for “missing” husbands or lovers or escape the options of rough marriages and collapsed rural homestead economies in Mozambique, Lesotho and the South African homelands. They have been described as “marginalised women” defeated by the advent of industrial society.<sup>26</sup> They have also been construed as “women-in-rebellion”, whom apartheid could only temporarily and incompletely quell in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>27</sup> Their success at establishing themselves in the Witbank and Natal coalfields was greater than what they managed on the goldfields.<sup>28</sup>

- 22 San Moroney: Mine Married Quarters: The Differential Stabilisation of the Witwatersrand Workforce 1900–1920, in: Shula Marks/Richard Rathbone (eds.): *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formations, Culture and Consciousness: 1970–1930*, London 1987, pp. 259–269.
- 23 Dunbar Moodie: Migrancy and Male Sexuality on the South African Gold Mines, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 14:2 (1998), pp. 228–256.
- 24 Dunbar Moodie/Vivienne Ndatshe: Country Wives: Housing Preferences at Vaal Reefs Mines, in: Jonathan Crush/Wilmot James (eds.): *Crossing Boundaries: Mine Migrancy in a Democratic South Africa*, Cape Town 1995, pp. 68–81.
- 25 Phil Bonner: “Desirable or Undesirable Basotho Women?”: Liquor, Prostitution and the Migration of Basotho Women to the Rand: 1920–1945, in: Cheryl Walker (ed.): *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, Cape Town 1990, pp. 221–250.
- 26 See Cheryl Walker: *Gender and the Development of the Migrant Labour System, 1850–1930*, in: Cheryl Walker (ed.): *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, pp. 168–196.
- 27 Phil Bonner: “Desirable or undesirable Basotho women?”: Liquor, prostitution and the migration of Basotho women to the Rand: 1920–1945, pp. 245–249.
- 28 Peter Alexander notes that about a fourth of the total workforce lived a family life in married quarters and free-access huts on the Witbank coalfield in mid-1920s. Subsequently, the renewed restriction on their presence reduced it to about 15 per cent. Unlike the goldfields, the size of colliery hostels was small and accommodated an average of 1000 workers. Management permitted about a fifth of its employees to inhabit the *skomplaas* (married quarters and other rented house on the nearby farms). Over 60 per cent of collier’s families were settled in the Natal coalfield. See Peter Alexander: *Oscillating Migrants, Detribalised Families, and Militancy: Mozambicans on Witbank Collieries: 1918–1927*, pp. 514, 517.



While the published literature has tracked the fate of African women, of those who settled around the mines in particular, our findings make it fairly clear that the fate of women took a new turn in the latter part of the 1970s. Faced with the withdrawal of Mozambican and Malawian labour, the mines opened up not just for South African men, but for women as well, albeit for jobs on the surface. Women became kitchen employees from 1975–76 onwards and cleaners in the mine hostels from 1984–85. The number of female mineworkers has further increased since 2002. Through the Mines Health and Safety Act 1996, South Africa joined the small number of countries, where prohibitory legislation was repealed. Under the Mineral and Petroleum Resource Development Act of 2002 and the Broad-Based Socio-Economic Empowerment Charter (Mining Charter) 2004, the industry has slowly been satisfying the clause of ten per cent female employees in “core mining activities” of the approximately half million workforce. Women joined the teams of 20 to 50 workers responsible for drilling, shovelling, winch-driving, tramping, and also as water-person, propping-person, battery-person, safety-person and others.

Of late, research emphasis has been on the recent entry of women into the proper underground mining labour process. It suggests that the feminist movement developed within the anti-apartheid struggle and presented the women's charter for effective equality in 1994. It ushered in the new legislative mandate. Women mineworkers were now faced with a certain difficulty in retaining new jobs, because the mining firms were slow at making working environment congenial to women. Furthermore, black (African) women were largely appointed in production works, while white women got office positions on the surface. Hence, black women voiced the opinion that equal treatment in terms of race did not take place.<sup>29</sup> Women were attracted to comparatively higher wages available on the mines and took up mining jobs to support themselves and/or their family. Unlike their male counterparts, serving the village community and extended kin and kith did not appear to have informed women's initial motivation for wage labour.<sup>30</sup> Our collection of life-histories helps us revisit the conventional understanding of gender relations and texture of family life, as these were constituted or rather had been reconstituted, in some measure, since mid-1970s.

29 Doret Botha: *Women in Mining: A Conceptual Framework for Gender Issues in South African Mining Sector*, PhD Thesis: Potchefstroom: North-West University (2013), pp. 89, 392. Doret Botha/Freek Cronje: *Workplace Opportunities for Women Employed in Core Mining Activities*, in: *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5:23 (2014), pp. 1914–1926. They examined the gender aspect found on the copper, phosphate and platinum mines. A.P. Benya: *Women in Mining: A Challenge to Occupational Culture in Mines*, pp. 84–87. Her case study focused on the Impala Platinum (Implats) mine in Rustenburg.

30 The case was similar to what Carolyn A. Brown finds on the Nigerian Coalmines. Carolyn A. Brown: *Nigerian Coal Miners, Protest and Gender: 1914–49: The Iva Valley Mining*

## Re/creating Family Life and Autonomy

Women were confronted with what informants reported as the belittling image of labouring women in urban/mining areas, variously articulated as promiscuous, men stealers, illegal beer-brewers, and unstable single mothers responsible for child delinquency (*Amalaita* or bastard uncared children). They bore the brunt of the problematic consequences of the socio-economic and political circumstances responsible for belittling the identity of urban single women. In a response to it, they negotiated their claims to a job on the mines and, at the same time, strove to maintain their marriages and objected to domestic abuses. Their financial and familial endeavours were broader in scope as compared to the strategy of Indonesian women coalminers to perform the role of a perfect housewife at home so as not to look different and be acceptable.<sup>31</sup> Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua typified a case of success in her familial pursuit. She was born in the homeland of the Transkei in 1955, married in 1974 and joined her husband at a goldmine's family quarter in 1979. That year she also took up the job of "Kitchen girl" on the mine. She quit her job owing to arthritis in 2008 (see Photograph I). Being married to a team leader qualified the couple for accommodation in the married quarters. She managed, under these circumstances, to save her marriage by persuading her husband against the rumours and reports, which he had heard from his workmates, regarding her character, fidelity and commitment towards their children. Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua recounts the episode:

There was a time when my husband wanted me to quit the mine as we had a baby. We hired a maid to look after the baby. One day my husband came home to find that the maid was not taking care of the baby. Angrily, he said to me: 'You should quit work.' I asked him: 'How can I quit the mine while having debt?' I had also made my own debt, you see. We had a fight. He went to the management to tell them he wanted me to stop working. The manager informed me and replied to my husband: 'She has not done anything wrong for us to fire her from work.' We went home. We spoke to each other then. I told the manager: 'I have debts and we have kids at home. We have to send money to them. You know what our budget is. Now when my husband says I should stop working, will he be able to continue paying for the children and clear those debts made by me?' My husband did not understand. You know how men are. But we spoke and we eventually understood each other. He also brought up the issue that he had heard from his colleagues who said: 'We saw her walking with whomsoever and we saw her laughing with whomsoever in

Community, in: Stefan Berger/Andy Croll/Norman Laporte (eds.): *Towards a Comparative History of Coalfield Societies*, Hampshire 2005, pp. 127–145.

31 Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt: *Globalisation and Women's Work in the Mine Pits in East Kalimantan, Indonesia*, p. 361.

the compound. When she is at work she laughs so much!' I replied to him: 'When I work with other people, I am supposed to be friendly and laugh with them, and be happy to be with the people.' He thought that because I was always friendly with these people this meant there was something upsetting there.<sup>32</sup>

Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua had built up a debt on her own account to educate two older boys. She saw through the education of her daughter who became a shaft-hoist operator on the same goldmine from where she retired. She wanted to redeem her debts and be self-reliant. She managed to win her husband's confidence and her account is replete with the ethics of care and cooperation in a context where women were overwhelmingly faced with male migrancy in the homelands and deserting husbands in the townships and on the mines.

One may read MaMathabo's financial and familial initiative as a defence of the private domestic sphere and conservation of patriarchal aspects of the pre-capitalist homestead tradition, for long centred on the productive and reproductive labour of women, generally under polygamy.<sup>33</sup> Scholars like Deborah Gaitskell, Julia Wells and Cheryl Walker have argued in various studies that the African women involved in the anti-pass laws and other agitations over beer-brewing, housing and livelihood were basically defending the family and motherhood and their initiatives meant to conserve domesticity – family and homemaking. These women lacked any feminist consciousness in terms of women's emancipation.<sup>34</sup> Most women workers, observes Pat Gibbs, did not become shop stewards and did not give much time to the union meetings because their time was consumed by domestic chores which they considered a primary responsibility. This theme recurred as the women's necessity of home-making

- 32 Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua was first interviewed at her Badela Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) house on 26 August 2011.
- 33 See Jeff Guy: *Gender Oppression in Southern Africa's Pre-Capitalist Societies*, in: Cheryl Walker (ed.): *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, pp. 33–47. Belinda Bozzoli: *Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9:2 (1983), pp. 166–167.
- 34 Deborah Gaitskell: "Devout Domesticity?": A Century of African Women's Christianity in South Africa, in: Cheryl Walker (ed.): *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, pp. 251–272; Deborah Gaitskell: "Wailing for Purity": Prayer Unions, African Mothers and Adolescent Daughters 1912–1940, in: Shula Marks/Richard Rathbone (eds.): *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formations, Culture and Consciousness: 1970–1930*, pp. 338–352. Deborah Gaitskell: *Housewives, Maids or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg: 1903–39*, in: *Journal of African History* 24:2 (1983), pp. 241–256; Julia C. Wells: *We Now Demand!: The History of Women's Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa*, Johannesburg 2001, pp. 1–10, 113–129; Cheryl Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, Cape Town 1991, pp. xiv–xx.

rather than as a lack of political consciousness or women's apolitical behaviour. This was the conservative side of women's agency.<sup>35</sup> Such readings, after Nomboniso Gasa it could be said, would overlook or underestimate the fact that the familial initiatives of women mineworkers equally challenged certain domestic abuses that threatened their desire for a respectable role as a women, motherhood and advancement of the family.

The familial efforts of Juliet Mkhabela exemplify the foregoing point. Sister Juliet was a fourth generation mineworker, and was born in 1971 (see Photograph II). Resolutely, she pursued a regular married life as well as self-reliant, sedate personal standing. She says:

I managed to look after my children without anyone telling me bad things about them. I got my job in 2003 and by 2004 I broke up with the father of my child as he did not want my early two children. He was not doing anything for me. Hence, I desperately looked for a job. I have three children. They are happily at school. My first child stayed under care of his grandparents from his age six. He came to stay with me after completing standard ten and is now at University of Johannesburg. When I got asthma and went to hospital, my last born was concerned. I had to fight asthma. I told myself that I would go back to work after the Easter holiday. Before I got a job I stayed at home. I would put my children into bed and wait for them to go to sleep. In the morning, I waited with them until their transport came to pick them up. In the afternoon, I waited outside for them. This has gone now as I have been working shifts. The only thing is that I work overtime. All these lead me at times to knocking off late. This has been a problem. My husband, Mr Paul Ngwenya (we married in 2009: the year my father expired) currently believes that a woman is better at home. When I come at night, he is ordinarily uncomfortable. Every time I knock off late, it becomes an issue between us. Oh! [...] On weekends and other holidays, I have no chance to relax unfortunately. I do washing and on Sundays I clean the house. It is a bit better when I am on leave. For the sake of my kids' education, I cannot afford spending money over visiting a beach during holidays. If I could pay someone to help me do house work, things would be nicer (Sighing) [...]. Whatever they want to pursue in education-wise I want to make sure that they get it. When they are educated and working they can nicely take care of themselves.<sup>36</sup>

35 Pat Gibbs: *Women, Labour and Resistance: Case Studies from the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage Area: 1972–1994*, in: Nomboniso Gasa (ed.): *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers*, Cape Town 2007, pp. 315–343.

36 Juliet Mkhabela was first interviewed at her Lynville residence in August 2011.

The working women, increasingly, entrusted their young children to the grandparents because of the financial constraint on hiring any domestic helps. The grandparents often lived in the countryside but in Juliet Mkhabela's case they lived in the nearby township. They relied on such family networks and unswervingly performed double or triple duties. They did not seem to have insisted on the men partners joining them in domestic chores. Here, they appear to have been attached to the Christian [proletariat] patriarchy despite the profound changes which the self-identification of women workers underwent in the wake of the history of proletarianisation and labour migrancy.<sup>37</sup>

Not all familial endeavours were fully successful in maintaining pleasant conjugality. Take the case of Maureen Makgano. She was born into a mineworker's family in 1955 and stayed with her parents in the family quarter. She was one of the first women who were employed in the mines' kitchen in 1975–76. She was married in 1975, but lost her job in 1998, for reasons which remain unclear to her. Maureen Makgano says:

I quit my job of 'kitchen girl' on an East Rand mine in 1978 in order to move to West Driefontein in my pursuit of a normal family life with my husband. My husband worked over there in a bottle packaging shop.<sup>38</sup>[...] Our married life did not survive the brunt of financial hardship and the consequent quarrels. [...] I, then mother of two children, got divorced in 1984. I again became a 'kitchen girl' on the goldmine with the help of my brother-in-law [...]. I was reliable at work and got promotion to the hospital mess. Meanwhile, I lost both children for wants of care. I worked shifts of eight hours, which excluded three hours spent commuting. I often had to stay at the mine kitchen overnight when no transport was available.

According to Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua, who also worked in the kitchens and suffered the loss of two children, management granted the female kitchen employee one Sunday leave every fortnight only after the 1987 mineworkers' strike. Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua worked the day shift between six a.m. and two p.m. while her husband, Noibi James Mohloua (a rockdrill operator who advanced to team leader), often worked the night shift. It is not unreasonable to assume that these temporal work regimes were punishing and widely generalised for these women over a certain period.

The above-mentioned temporal labour regimes, denial of maternity and child care supports from the employer and rough marriages did not whittle away the determination of mining women to foster a family. On the contrary, these women expressed

37 Cheryl Walker discusses the suffrage movement and presents shades of varied patriarchy. Cheryl Walker: *The Women's Suffrage Movement: The Politics of Gender, Race and Class*, in: Cheryl Walker (ed.): *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, pp. 313–345.

38 Maureen Makgano was first interviewed at Khutsong in July 2011. Her account does not figure in our book *Mining Faces*, for we could not manage to undertake another two rounds of interviews with her because of her bed-ridden condition.

marital independence alongside financial self-reliance and, at the same time, gave birth to a new form of the family and the ways of its being. MaMakgano adopted two young kids of her sister and saw them grow. In 2011, she lived with these two adult family members having carved out a new extended kin. She was both reticent and ambivalent about any references to proposals or sexual advances made by her colleagues. She, however, emphatically narrates how she succeeded in holding on to the employment that offered them a degree of autonomy in life. The familial endeavours of our other narrators, Martha Maseko and Keketso Mosiya broadly fell in the league of MaMakgano. Sister Martha was born in 1959, and worked in capacities of tea attendant, mine clerk, hostel secretary, control room staff, and chairperson of women cell on the Kuthala coalmine, owned by BHP Billiton Coal Company, during 1987–2012 (see Photograph III). She got married in 1981 and got divorced in 1988, for “her husband loved another lady a lot.”<sup>39</sup> As a single bread-earning parent, she looked after the education of her own two sons and other niece and nephew from her sister who stayed with her. She wished to see them get educated and have a promising career. Keketso Mosiya was born in 1980 into a mineworkers’ family, and worked on a goldmine since 2009 (see Photograph IV).<sup>40</sup> She came out of an unkind relationship and entered in another relationship with a boyfriend – Tsepo, a miner employed on the same goldmine where she was employed. She exercised her financial self-reliance for proper education and good future for her daughter, Thabang. She also spent on food and sports of the street children in her area.

Our above study of the life-histories does not discern any changes, if any, in the manner working women played out the gender identity at home. The choices of single parenthood and monogamous conjugality were found coexisting side by side in the different cases. Of late, the preference for a live-in relationship broadened the list of choices. The new generation of working women, decidedly, turned out to be more impatient with domestic servitude which they saw through a feminist prism (women’s emancipation) rather than what Gaitskell terms, the Christian respectability and viability in domesticity.<sup>41</sup> This notwithstanding, they did not find any way out in terms of their male partners shouldering domestic chores with them.

Below, we move on to the ways women redefined the gender identity during wage-work and confronted sexist stereotypes of them and sexualised work relations.

39 Martha Maseko: First interview at her residence in Ogies in August 2011.

40 Keketso Mosiya was first interviewed at her residence in Khutsong Township, in June 2012.

41 Deborah Gaitskell: “Wailing for Purity”: Prayer Unions, African Mothers and Adolescent Daughters 1912–1940, p. 338; Deborah Gaitskell: *Housewives, Maids or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg: 1903–39*, pp. 255–56.

## Proving Women's Mettle, Desexualising Work Relations

Women were confronted with what our narrators reported as the unsympathetic, racist accusations made against them that "their minds were also black like their skins."<sup>42</sup> Other age-old sexist stereotypes of women bothered them now and then: "The roof would fall, machines would jam, and [union] offices would be closed if a woman were here."<sup>43</sup> Women took up the challenge of proving wrong such racist, sexist stereotyping of the African women. The enduring labour performed by Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua is one such instance:

She worked long hours with hot water, (suffered) cold vapour of the fridges; tactfully dealt with angry or seductive men; taught herself to manage food so that every man at the mine hostel had had food and kitchen stock did not rot. Having improvised such tacit skill of her trade and sociability, she was confident to find how white officials were unreasonable over the matter, and raised such matters at the NUM's forum since 1986.<sup>44</sup>

Siphiwe Litchfield exerted herself to become an effective electrician.<sup>45</sup> She was born in 1977 on the Witbank coalfields, and was certificated in electrical and plant management. She joined Xstrata colliery in 2005 as a weigh-bridge person, was promoted to electrician in 2005 and was elected as National Union of Mineworkers' shaft-steward in 2011 (see Photograph V). She encountered overt resistance to her command from impudent male assistants. Consequently, she resorted to physically pulling electrical cable and wire herself when repairing electrical installations underground. She demonstrated she could do what any other men were known for doing. Here, she struck a chord with the Maoist insistence that women could do everything which men could, the path which women experimented with in other societies, too.<sup>46</sup> Like their male counterparts, women were similarly compelled to improvise (*planisa*) to complete assigned jobs in the context of workplace risk. Keketso Mosiya explains:

42 Siphiwe Litchfield's interview. See below.

43 Ibid. The sexist belief of women being a bad luck in mining was prevalent in many societies in Bolivia, Brazil, post-1842 England, Pre-communist China, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the United States and Australia.

44 See Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua's interview.

45 Siphiwe Litchfield was first interviewed at the Witbank National Union of Mineworkers office in September 2011.

46 Laurie Mercier: *Bordering on Equality: Women Miners in North America*; Jennifer Keck/Mary Powell: *Women into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour*; Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt: *Globalisation and Women's Work in the Mine Pits in East Kalimantan, Indonesia*; Suzanne E. Tallichet: *Barriers to Women's Advancement in Underground Coal Mining*; Linqing Yao: *Women in the Mining Industry of Contemporary*

We work; we make plans even though we are given the rules. You tell yourself that no let's make a plan because I want to finish that job quickly. They (management) want the stof (ore) i.e., gold stones. When there is no stone, they don't care if you are safe or not. They tell you that the stone is what is important on the mine. On an occasion it so happened that there was a strike because there was a manager whom we as people did not want there for the sake of our bonus. They suspended some people because on that day there was no stone. [...]. They never say to you to put yourself in a danger, but that is what is implied in production. There is nothing you can do and it is not that we just put ourselves in danger. Listen, the chief boss presents a (production) target, and tells you that you have to do this much today. It happens that a person gets hurt because the stuff we use underground is very different, you see. We are risking, indeed.<sup>47</sup>

Keketso Mosiya was cautious, kept an eye on production and safety and found it necessary to engage in the work culture of *planisa*. However, she drew the attention of the miner and the shift boss towards the difficulties she faced in finishing work quickly. Yet, she reports that “her complains were summarily ignored – as they had with others.”<sup>48</sup>

As a shaft-steward Siphwiwe Litchfield was combative when her position was challenged through gender and sexist remarks passed on her. Yet, she appeared able to respectfully and firmly inform her detractors of the safe and efficient ways to perform certain jobs and let them know what mistakes they were committing. She reports:

[...] fortunately my father was a mineworker and a shaft-steward as well of NUM. So, I've learned from him how to deal with the situation. I've got good communication skills, fortunately. I know my position and how to speak to elderly people, even though sometimes I had to discipline them. I do it with certain strategy as an African. I was taught from an early age how to speak to elderly people. Even if you find them wrong, you must say: 'But Mr So-and-so, I understand your position and your point of view, but you know the company policy or union policy. You shouldn't do this and that, so as a result you must suffer the consequences.' In this strategy, it's much easier than to allow them to be my superiors, because at the end of the day they are right. They fought for freedom and union rights, so who am I to spoil it and act like I own it. Nonetheless, most of them now believe that we are happy together.<sup>49</sup>

China, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt/Martha Macintyre (eds.): *Women Miners in Developing Countries: Pit Women and Others*, pp. 227–253.

47 Keketso Mosiya's interview.

48 Ibid.

49 Siphwiwe Litchfield's interviews.



Siphiwe Litchfield feels that whites and other men did not grant her the respect she deserved “because she was a black woman, whom they did not regard just as a ‘worker’: not that she was incompetent.” Siphiwe Litchfield’s Africanist behavioural approach proved, professionally, effective. Her predicament and approach were markedly akin to what Joni Parmenter noticed amongst the Australian indigenous women mineworkers. The circumstances responsible for their predicament, Joni Parmenter rightly argues, were the product of intersection of gender, race and colonialism [the colonial legacy in South Africa].<sup>50</sup>

Woman realised, with time, that the demonstration of their handiness and dexterity was not sufficient. The requirement of an adaptive pattern stared at them, which would mutate the masculine work culture and sexualise sociability, which women considered dismissive of their racial and gender identities. They insisted on their recognition as female employees rather than as women or simply as workers, and raised women worker-specific issues. Sister Juliet Mkhabela’s life-story highlights:

[...] how successfully she coaxed the BHP Billiton Coal Company to provide women with a female-friendly overall (work dress), a separate women’s toilet and change-room. ‘I felt awkward in a one-piece men’s overall. I had to remove it from the upper half of her body in the toilet.’<sup>51</sup>

Siphiwe Litchfield negotiated this matter with the Xstrata Coal Company. She succeeded in the installation of a separate female change-room and toilet, which her colleagues named as the “Siphiwe toilet”. She opines that “the company recruits women owing to the legislative intervention. It does not care for them on its own.” All this reminds us of the similar women’s initiatives undertaken in the Canadian Zinc Mine.<sup>52</sup>

Transformation of the masculine connotation of mining and its macho sociability was slow to come into effect.<sup>53</sup> Our narrators disapproved of the patriarchal and gender-insensitive attitudes as well as parlance of male colleagues. To quote Siphiwe Litchfield once again:

My experience at the training centre (CTC) was still not that bad. It turned out bad after I qualified and worked full time in the engineering department as an electrician. I stood and worked with an assistant and a driver. Men will always be men. It is ok on the mine for a man to propose whatever, passing comments, having sex, kissing you, touching you; some do not even propose, he does that. A

50 Joni Parmenter: *Experiences of Indigenous Women in the Australian Mining Industry*, p. 77.

51 Juliet Mkhabela’s interviews.

52 Jennifer Keck/Mary Powell: *Women into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour*.

53 Suzanne E. Tallichet’s *Barriers to Women’s Advancement in Underground Coal Mining* finds gradual changes in sexist behaviour and sexualised work relations.

man passes a remark that he wants to sleep with a woman. It is just horrible. [...]. I had to fight. My father was also a shaft-steward, so I knew about my rights from an early age: 'You do not allow a situation in which a white person messes up you'.<sup>54</sup>

Her frequent insistence on the rights invited a nick name – “*e-mine ngingu-Nomalungelo*” (The Rights) – from the male colleagues. Female probationers also encountered unwanted sexual advances of white trainers. Her insolent assistant and driver were, although, black men. Nonetheless, she invoked the spirit of anti-apartheid. Here, gender injustice was summarily couched in the discourse of the legacy of apartheid.<sup>55</sup> She identified more with the black identity and oppressed racial group than simply a gendered identity, again akin to what Joni Parmenter observed amongst the Australian indigenous women mineworkers.<sup>56</sup> Scholars like Luli Callinicos, Cheryl Walker and Julia Wells argue that the self-representations of the African women revolved around their experiences of being black, more than gendered, identities in the rapidly changing and racially discriminating world.<sup>57</sup> In contrast, Nomboniso Gasa argues that the anti-apartheid nationalist struggle, for instance, Black/African consciousness, subsumed women’s struggles. As compared to these two observations, our study notices that the women mineworkers seem to have, increasingly, confronted the limits of the promises in which, what Nomboniso Gasa argues as, the anti-apartheid nationalist struggle subsumed women’s struggles.<sup>58</sup> Siphwiwe Litchfield, thus, laments that “all I do is the fight against the discriminatory rules. Yet, men who oppress me are the ones I represent (as a shaft-steward) and work with. They say the office is going to collapse and close because it is a woman running it.” Siphwiwe Litchfield’s experience in the trade union movement embodies her efforts to alter an adverse gendered reality under non-racial democracy.

54 Siphwiwe Litchfield’s interviews.

55 A similar argument appears in the academic work of Helen Moffett: *These Women, They Force Us to Rape Them: Rape as Narrative of Social Control in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32:1 (2006), pp. 129–144.

56 Joni Parmenter: *Experiences of Indigenous Women in the Australian Mining Industry*, p. 78.

57 Luli Callinicos: *Testimonies and Transitions: Women Negotiating the Rural and Urban in the mid-20th Century*, in: Nomboniso Gasa (ed.): *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers*, pp. 153–206, p. 182. Cheryl Walker: *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, pp. xiv-xx; Julia C. Wells: *We Now Demand!: The History of Women’s Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa*.

58 Nomboniso Gasa: *Feminism, Motherism, Patriarchies and Women’s Voices in the 1950s*, in: Nomboniso Gasa (ed.): *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers*, pp. 207–229, 214–227. Nomboniso Gasa: *Let Them Build More Gaols*, in: Nomboniso Gasa (ed.): *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers*, pp. 129–151, 146–150.

Siphiwe Litchfield and others have been questioning sexist language. They have had a measure of success in making male colleagues question their tradition of cracking jokes which women would find offensive. Keketso Mosiya says:

Even when they (men colleague) play, they use abuses and things like that. You are also there when they talk or joke, which are often related to woman issues, such as she is hot; that woman in the mine no, I don't want a women in the mine. Now, that man realises your presence when you are approaching him. He realised, no, what I have just said is not right because there is a woman here. Some men also say to them 'no you cannot say a thing like that'. Happily, a few male colleagues direct such reprimands against other crazy guys. Some of these instances depend on what work you are assigned to, what you are doing.<sup>59</sup>

The sense of guilt generated among tradition-bound men might have been small, but was a crucial achievement. Keketso Mosiya highlights the significance of a necessary vigilance on the part of both women and men in this regard.

In her unpublished dissertation, Asanda Benya details the challenges women-in-mining presently encounter and their coping strategies in the Rustenburg platinum fields.<sup>60</sup> Asanda Benya highlights formal and informal allocations of jobs which have slotted women into a quasi-gendered, dual labour market below ground. Female labour is often viewed as supplementary labour. Women below ground swap jobs with men to do less demanding physical work. This informal allocation of jobs is known to implicate sexual bribery and the threat of becoming *anyatsi* (temporary sexual partner or mine girlfriend). Asanda Benya explains such sexual transactions as coping strategies undertaken in a macho mining world and to which no stigma is attached.

A gendered dual labour market appears to have entrenched itself and become something of a norm in many mines. Keketso Mosiya reports:

We as normal mineworkers just perform an assigned task. We are allocated different jobs. Some work in the skwere (work-face). They drill and blast. We women collect samples; go out with samples; work at the battery bay – the place where we put the Makalanyane (underground tram) and drive winches. Usually, women are not allocated tough jobs, you see. These are not manageable for women. You see, when people are in a good position and we as women, I don't know what we use, have things I don't know; for me to get something I use myself to get what I want from the person I work with. When I see that it is difficult for me, I will promise to sleep with him, yes; but that is what we hear, we have not seen these through.

59 Keketso Mosiya's interviews.

60 Benya: *Women in Mining: A Challenge to Occupational Culture in Mines*, pp. 84–87. Asanda P. Benya: *Women in Mining: Reproducing Labour in Mines*.

Here, Keketso Mosiya fumbles in discussing sexual transactions and, definitely, distances herself from the practise which she describes as hearsay. Clearly, she does regard such occurrences as stigmatising.<sup>61</sup>

While for Asanda Benya, sexual bribery was understood as a coping strategy, it needs to be fully explicated. Sexual bribery, as these were in some cases, was not exceptional to the South African work environment. Women adopted it as a scheme of coming to terms with the male-dominated mining in other societies too. Mercier observes that '[a] woman had to prove her capabilities and accommodate men in various ways to win acceptance' on the United States zinc mines.<sup>62</sup> Suzanne Tallichet notices that there were the women who refused to accede to sexual advances made by their supervisors (miner and others) and bore the brunt of performing really enervating, risky tasks on the United States coalmines. Others reciprocated supervisory favours and helped perpetuate sexualised relationships.<sup>63</sup> The *palliri* work was similar in substance on the Bolivian small mines.<sup>64</sup> Pat Gibbs finds the matter of sexual advances from the supervisor confronting the manufacturing women in Port Elizabeth in South Africa.<sup>65</sup>

On the South African mines, sexual bribery – the method of panty down and *palliri* work – was not simply viewed as sexual harassment or bullying. Its existence as part of the informal allocation of jobs and an expression of women's adaptive pattern toward the sexualised work relations, this study argues, can be more fully understood in the context of a long-standing "mine-wife" culture of homosexual liaisons, which Dunbar Moodie first identified and which continues, but in seemingly less institutionalised fashion. It can also be comprehended as an informal resurfacing of the "picannin system" (the African assistant of the white miner).<sup>66</sup> This cultural pattern, in terms of what Asanda Benya describes as a coping strategy of women mineworkers, however,

- 61 Doret Botha's informants appear to convey a similar impression. She observes that the copper and phosphate mines fared better than the platinum mines by creating facilities (change houses, ablution facilities, and *crèche*) that are women-friendly and addressing complaints of sexual harassment. Doret Botha: *Women in Mining: A Conceptual Framework for Gender Issues in South African Mining Sector*, pp. 371, 429.
- 62 Laurie Mercier: *Bordering on Equality: Women Miners in North America*, pp. 41–42.
- 63 . Suzanne E. Tallichet: *Barriers to Women's Advancement in Underground Coal Mining*.
- 64 Els Van Hoecke: *The Invisible Work of Women in the Small Mines of Bolivia*.
- 65 Pat Gibbs: *Women, Labour and Resistance: Case Studies from the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage Area: 1972–1994*.
- 66 One of the authors of *Mining Faces*, Paul Stewart, during a stint of ethnographic participant observation on the mines in 1999/2000, could not fail to notice the stares of old mineworkers watching the new recruits (of which he was one) shower after heat-tolerance testing and was subject to sexual advances on one occasion by his host at a rowdy, virtually exclusively male, social gathering in the single sex hostel compound. Amused miners sitting alongside helped him quaff the beers liberally pressed on him until the hopeful suitor passed out.

persisted up on the margins of the history of collective struggles, as it were, for a regular family life and against the picannin system from the mid-1980s.<sup>67</sup> In addition, the role of pecuniary and non-pecuniary compulsion – financial hardships, pressures of unemployment, undue workload, lack of associational power – requires examination. Juliet Mkhabela, for instance, informs us of the episode:

[...] one of my female colleagues charged a male miner with sexual exploitation. As shaft-steward, I conducted an investigation and found little evidence to supporting the charges. I got a sense that my female colleague had been seeking a favour for some time from the miner and that the social transaction between the two turned sour at a certain point.<sup>68</sup>

On a different note, Siphwi Litchfield says:

The cases of sexual bullying now and then knock the door of her office (shaft-steward). The female members of the NUM discuss this matter also at the Women's Forum of the NUM. The shaft steward, usually, chastises the culprit and offers moral advices. They do not like to take away someone's employment.<sup>69</sup>

The experiences of these two shaft-stewards – Juliet Mkhabela and Siphwi Litchfield – illustrate a continuum in the modes of women redefining the gender identities at home and during wage-work. They sought to desexualise work relations and dismantle domestic servitude but with a sense of “workerist” human integrity – workers solidarity for the protection of employment, and the recognition of men's primary responsibility as bread-earner. They did not represent acute estrangement. The dominant thrust of women's adaptive pattern aimed, indeed, at desexualised relationships, a negotiable and moralising approach to the sexual bully, and celebration of staid womanhood. A wounded woman, usually, did not share the approach of negotiation and moralisation to the sexual bully at the outset, which was different from a woman's decision of not reporting certain “minor” incidence of bullying. Take this case:

[...] We are now used to this. We are immune to these things'. We don't realize its sexual harassment anymore. We had a case of Ms Precious Mlilwane in 2010. A guy, Arthur Tailor touched her breast in the workplace. She told the guy that she does not like what you are doing to her. It is sexual harassment. The guy said 'I did not do anything; I just touched your breast.' Precious argued that this is my

67 Dunbar Moodie: *Becoming a Social Movement Union: Cyril Ramaphosa and the National Union of Mineworkers*, in: *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 72/73 (2010), pp. 152–180. Dunbar Moodie: *Comprehending Class Compromise in the History of Class Struggle in South African Gold Mines: Variation and Vicissitudes of Class Power*, in: *South African Review of Sociology* 41:3 (2010), pp. 99–116.

68 Juliet Mkhabela's interviews.

69 Siphwi Litchfield's Interviews.

private parts, which you do not have any claim to touch especially at workplace; you are not even my boyfriend; you are too old and like my father. The lady went to the foreman to report the incident. The foreman did not want to register it. He asked both of them to go on work and sort out between them, else lose your job. Precious was off from work for two weeks because the people were swearing at her saying that she thinks herself better than all other ladies here; she wants the guy to lose his job. I argued with them that we must do something about it which is wrong even according to the mine policy. Yet, we had to back down. The suggestion came that we should have our ways and techniques in situation like that: how you tell the guy that you do not like what is happening. [...]. The men were not habitual seeing women at work. Remember, some of them came from the rural areas and left their families back there. When they come across women, it is like hoo! ... I worked underground while I was doing apprenticeship. I've got a nickname in the mine – 'e-mine ngingu-Nomalungelo. I am Nomalungelo. This name in Nguni means rights, because I always say yilungelolami – it's my right! I don't mind. It was really hard. When there were two men for the job, they would assist each other. But just because I refused to sleep with that guy, now I had to work alone. I said: 'It doesn't break me; it makes me strong'. So nakhungilangaqhubeka, here I am. I soldiered on.<sup>70</sup>

The initial resistance to sexual bullying by Precious Mlilwane and Sipiwe Litchfield succumbed to the norm of workerist integrity and they had to adopt a negotiating, educative approach to the bully. This change, initially, seemed exasperating to them; but as the victim they took it as “the art of possibility”. The latter made a sense to them in the context of the preponderance of men, the necessity of manly aptitude and workerist integrity as shared virtues, and the prevalence of unfavourable power relations. Further, the latter owed much to the fact that the mining firms universally began to employ increasing number of women under the pressure of the era of equal employment opportunity scheme and lacked any genuine commitment to gender justice.<sup>71</sup>

70 Sipiwe Litchfield's interview

71 Sipiwe Litchfield's interview; Laurie Mercier: *Bordering on Equality: Women Miners in North America*; Jennifer Keck/Mary Powell: *Women into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour*; Deanna Kemp/Catherine Pattenden: *Retention of Women in the Minerals Industry*; Joni Parmenter: *Experiences of Indigenous Women in the Australian Mining Industry*; Suzanne E. Tallichet: *Barriers to Women's Advancement in Underground Coal Mining*; Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt: *Globalisation and Women's Work in the Mine Pits in East Kalimantan, Indonesia*; Martha Macintyre: *Modernity, Gender and Mining: Experiences from Papua New Guinea*, in: Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt (ed.): *Gendering the Field: Towards Sustainable Livelihoods for Mining Communities*, pp. 21–32.

## Through Workers' Union

Women joined the National Union of Mineworkers in the midst of struggles for liberation of the workplace and abolition of the apartheid from the 1980s. MaMathabo and other kitchen employees insisted on running the kitchen during the three-weeks long mineworkers' strike in 1987. She believed that better-fed stomachs were necessary for the mineworkers to hold a successful strike. She reports that the kitchen employees received one Sunday leave in a fortnight as a result of the 1987 mineworkers' strike. It added some family-time in their life that was otherwise fully consumed by the work. She aired the grievance of racial discrimination in job allocation and promotion faced by the kitchen employees. Improvement slowly came about. The mineworkers went on a strike over food on her goldmine in 1999. Consequently, a slew of reforms were adopted which included training of kitchen employees. MaMathabo was one of 22 women who received such training in 2003 and the benefit of promotion.<sup>72</sup>

Most women took membership of National Union of Mineworkers. A few of them got elected as shaft-stewards. Others participated in the Women Forum of National Union of Mineworkers. Women were, basically, attached to the popular culture of unionism. With a view to gaining female-friendly re/production arrangements, they saw the need of tackling through National Union of Mineworkers the power dynamics seen in the labour management relationship and social relationship amongst workers. Until 1987, kitchen employees have coaxed only one benefit from the employer. They received security guards to escort them between the hostel gate and the kitchen, thereby defending themselves from any men who might have bullied them.<sup>73</sup> Subsequently, they articulated women-specific demands and strengthened the union's collective bargaining over housing allowance, weekend leave, family leave, maternity leave, sickness leave, and a bursary scheme for children, benefits of medical care and pension, living wages, and industrial democracy. They secured many of them, but under the corporatist model of collective-bargaining and democratic-dispensation. Our narrators did not delve into the kind of details on women's involvement in strike-actions which Jennifer Keck and Mary Powell observed amongst the Canadian women mineworkers.<sup>74</sup>

Women shared with us their grievances of a tepid engagement of the union with the women-specific issues, such as maternity leave, male chauvinist prejudices at work in job allocation as well as promotion, and sexual advances which men colleagues hurled on women. Women frequently discussed and passed resolution on these problems in the Women Forum of National Union of Mineworkers, reports Martha Maseko,

72 Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua's interviews.

73 Mathabo Cecilia Mohloua's and Maureen Makgano's interviews.

74 Jennifer Keck/Mary Powell: *Women into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour*.

chairperson of the Women Forum in the Kuthala region.<sup>75</sup> They identified the hurdles in terms of underrepresentation of women among the office-bearers and in the decision-making process. They interrogated the union movement and, occasionally, mounted a transformative challenge to the detractors. Sipiwe Litchfield sums up:

I love the NUM but I do not think they are doing enough. We thank them for the law of ten percent women employment on the mines. Previously, only white wife and daughter worked here in the office. The women now must take care of themselves. Look, the NUM calendar for 2012 that does not have a single woman leader on the cover page. Fortunately, we have a women structure in place. The only challenge before us is that how to take the key position in the union. At the election time, men do not support a woman for that position. Recently we had election for Coordinator of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). Two branches voted for me and other two branches for a man. The third branch did not cast its vote. There is still a deadlock. The post is still vacant. There is no woman in the national executive, whereas we are to celebrate 30th anniversary of the union.<sup>76</sup>

Sipiwe Litchfield did not question the virtue of a corporatist model of collective bargaining. Her initiative for representativeness was in the league of a feminist resolution of women trade unionists. Women submitted to the Congress of South African Trade Union (Cosatu), of which the National Union of Mineworkers was the largest affiliate, a call for a 50 per cent quota system in 1997. It was turned down. Whereas women became very passive participants in the Women-Forums since 1994 in the aftermath of transition into a democratic republic, the Forums could not shake up the tepid attitude of the union. Matiwane Albertina, a seasoned trade unionist and manufacturing worker, opined in her interview in 2005: “We are still not there [...] because men are still chasing the power and we are still being left behind. I hope that this is going to be sorted out soon.”<sup>77</sup> Her wish, still, remains a far cry, and had a grievous fallout for all. Juliet Mkhabela quit the shaft steward’s office in 2006, because she could not work with other “crazy”, aggressive men. The union programme did not excite Keketso Mosiwa anymore, for she did not find any substantive resolution of her predicaments, including the workload under the productivity-based payment.

75 Martha Maskeo’s interview.

76 Sipiwe Litchfield’s interview.

77 Pat Gibbs: *Women, Labour and Resistance: Case Studies from the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage Area: 1972–1994*, pp. 341–342.



## Upshot

Previously occluded, this is the outline of the role of women who started to work *on* the mines in the 1970s and 1980s and whose daughters worked *in* them after 2002. In styles of life, opportunities and attitudes, this signalled a major shift. Whereas the mothers overtly confronted racial and sexualised work relations and struggled to keep their jobs and their families, the daughters have managed a leap in social advancement. The familial endeavours of women on the South African mines never meant to define gender identity just as acceptable housewives or “*palliri*” women. Nor were they mute witnesses of family disorganisation. Women strove to salvage their monogamous families, maintain self-reliance and avoid domestic abuses. They insisted on staid womanhood and, at the same time, overstretched themselves to perform double or triple responsibilities. In case of failure of the marriage, they engendered a new family structure, which involved nieces, nephews and/or other street children and groomed their extended kin to secure social advancement. Some bore irrecoverable tolls, including the loss of babies. Others roped in the grandparents to minimise the double/triple burden. They sought modern reproduction supports from the employer for helping women execute double/triple duties.

At work, women proved their handiness and dexterity. They plunged themselves in noticeably manly, audacious labour, on one side, and, on the other, in the initiatives noticed for intelligence and dialogical, courteous [African] attitude. Equally, they struggled for female-friendly provisioning in the workplace, and desexualised relationships. They insisted on recognition of the rights afforded to them under democratic dispensation, and thereby interrogated the macho attitude and male-chauvinist language of mining. Their self-representation revolved around challenges faced as being black and the collective committed to job protection for all. Such “workerist” human integrity meant the representative and management adopted a negotiable, moralising approach toward the sexual offender. Women worked through the workers’ union to tackle the power inequality and reinforce the claims of union movement for industrial democracy for all and gender parity. In 2011–12, they were struggling for effective women’s representation with a view to overcoming the tepid activism ~~of~~ on women’s questions. Postponement of this agenda in the power corridor was apparently drawing away the dispirited member.

The particular manner in which women expressed themselves at home and wage-work was, ~~as~~ suggest many studies, women’s coping strategy or adaptive pattern. Women did not achieve all the desired ends through this manner, for the entrenched patriarchy and unholy collusion among management, workers’ union, male workers, and in some cases the state power as well put up new hurdles. Such forces coerced

women to agree to their ways.<sup>78</sup> Poverty and sexual vulnerability of women limited the range of negotiations. Other studies underscore the factors which conditioned variation in the adaptive pattern seen in different societies. The specific adaptive pattern of the Australian indigenous women included their identification more with the oppressed racial group than the female gender, and the use of courteous approach towards junior men. This expressed, argues Joni Parmenter, their experience of intersection of race, gender and colonialism.<sup>79</sup> In the same vein, the present discussion identifies the factors, which conditioned women's adaptive pattern in South Africa.

The ideology of domesticity, as it became refashioned until mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century, informed women mineworker's familial endeavours. The new domestic ideology was far from the time-immemorial pre-capitalist African one. The Christianisation of the African society by the Churches brought in the Christian domestic ideology. The latter emphasised the notion of monogamous conjugality, as opposed to the tradition of polygamy. It stressed the virtues of family, motherhood and homemaking, women's main devotion to motherhood and homemaking and men's role in bread-earning, and the virtue of modern education for a civilised life. The missionaries were the most successful in winning over the trust and devotion of women, who ardently extended the new message received from the Christian missionaries to other family members by mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century. Women learnt the new norm of respectability in domesticity. It was, decidedly, in conflict with the economic condition of working women; nonetheless, they sought viability in family and homemaking. They expressed this spirit in the fierce agitation, in what Nomboniso Gasa terms as the Motherist Movement, against the pass law [that asked the blacks to carry the passes, issued by the state, as a proof of permission for staying in urban areas], prohibition on beer-brewing, and the rule of residential permits since 1913 and onwards. Such agitations were the struggle for family life in a context, where the segregationist and apartheid states denied any privileges of domestic or family life to the African women in the white areas, for instance 87 per cent of the total national land.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, women's experiences illustrated their

78 Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt: *Gender (plays) in Tanjung Bara Mining Camp in Eastern Kalimantan, Indonesia*, in: *Gender, Place and Culture* 20:8 (2013), pp. 979–98; Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt: *Globalisation and Women's Work in the Mine Pits in East Kalimantan, Indonesia*; Laurie Mercier: *Bordering on Equality: Women Miners in North America*; Jennifer Keck/Mary Powell: *Women into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour*; Deanna Kemp/Catherine Pattenden: *Retention of Women in the Minerals Industry*; Joni Parmenter: *Experiences of Indigenous Women in the Australian Mining Industry*; Suzanne E. Tallichet: *Barriers to Women's Advancement in Underground Coal Mining*; Asanda P. Benya: *Women in Mining: Reproducing Labour in Mines*.

79 Joni Parmenter: *Experiences of Indigenous Women in the Australian Mining Industry*.

80 Julia C. Wells: *We Now Demand!: The History of Women's Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa*, pp. 127–40; Deborah Gaitskell: "Devout Domesticity?": *A Century of African Women's Christianity in South Africa*, p. 272; Deborah Gaitskell: *Housewives, Maids*

black, more than their gendered, identities; for the patriarchies of their fathers and contemporaries were deeply undermined by systematic oppression. The vulnerability of both sexes, after Luli Callinicos, had much in common.<sup>81</sup> Such experiences and the union movement appear to have been the source of “workerist” human probity and transformative, moralising approach adopted toward the African sexual bully in the workplace.

The ideology of the motherist movement, argues Nomboniso Gasa, was anything, but conservative. It encapsulated women's opposition to domestic abuses. Its origin did not lie in the missionary message, but the working women worked it out.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, women's opposition to domestic abuses drew messages from the demand for emancipation from domestic servitude, which the workers movement articulated and the African women increasingly became part of from late-1930s.<sup>83</sup> The workers movement laid down the ground for feminism to grow, argues Iris Berger.<sup>84</sup> Clearly, Siphwe Litchfield frequently refers to the legacy of her mining father and background in workers movement for her sense of emancipation and equal rights, which she persistently stood for. The workers movement, National Union of Mineworkers, was the vehicle of industrial democracy and African nationalism amongst women. Consequently, women took it as their duty to prove wrong the racist and sexist discourse: that their minds are black like their skin; the roof would fall, machines jam and offices close if a woman was there. It was simply their originality to prove the male chauvinist wrong by exerting as a man. Equally, women learnt to contain their own radicalism in the face of a power corridor within the union movement and labour management relationship given the preponderance of men in the mining industry and a shared understanding of workerist human integrity. Almost all our informants attribute having left the worst aspects of racial discrimination and stalled social progress to their organisation, the National Union of Mineworkers. All this distinguishes to a large extent the experience of South

or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg: 1903–39, pp. 254–55; Nomboniso Gasa: *Let Them Build More Gaols*, pp. 137–50.

- 81 Luli Callinicos: *Testimonies and Transitions: Women Negotiating the Rural and Urban in the mid-20th Century*, p. 181.
- 82 Nomboniso Gasa: *Feminism, Motherism, Patriarchies and Women's Voices in the 1950s; Nomboniso Gasa: Let Them Build More Gaols*.
- 83 Iris Berger: *Generations of Struggle: Trade Unions and the Roots of Feminism: 1930–1960*, in: Nomboniso Gasa (ed.): *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers*, pp. 185–206. Pat Gibbs: *Women, Labour and Resistance: Case Studies from the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage Area: 1972–1994*.
- 84 Iris Berger: *Generations of Struggle: Trade Unions and the Roots of Feminism: 1930–1960*.

African women mineworkers from what Lahiri Dutt finds between the Indonesian women miners and Joni Parmenter observes between the Australian indigenous women miners.<sup>85</sup>

## Appendix



Mathabo Cecelia Mohloua.



Juliet Mkhabela.

85 Women miners' desire for wage-works did not withstand the pressure of claims made by the jealous and suspicious husbands and care-seeking children. The non-availability of proper maternity and child-care provisions worsened the challenges of working women. This kind of work environment was in-itself an expression of the absence of any urgency felt by the mining firms for retaining women employees. See Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt: *Globalisation and Women's Work in the Mine Pits in East Kalimantan, Indonesia*; Deanna Kemp/Catherine Pattenden: *Retention of Women in the Minerals Industry*; Joni Parmenter: *Experiences of Indigenous Women in the Australian Mining Industry*. Many of those who succeeded in other cases were pre-eminently single mothers and who campaigned for industrial reproduction supports for motherhood. See Laurie Mercier: *Bordering on Equality: Women Miners in North America*; Jennifer Keck/Mary Powell: *Women into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour*.



Martha Maseko.



Keketso Mosiya.



Siphwe Litchfield.

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