Our paper reports on the changing situation of women miners over the last three decades and the adaptations and struggles they experience. It is based on qualitative interviews of 22 of these women mining workers recorded between 2006 and 2009. The first handful of women began working in Queensland coal mines in 1979, as labourers, in what was seen by some as a public relations exercise rather than a genuine willingness to embrace equal opportunity. Working in the mines can be a real source of economic liberation for women, probably the best method for those not seeking university educations, provided the debt trap can be avoided. But in pursuing that goal, they face many challenges of adaptation and struggle.

First, they must deal with the domestic sphere, often managing significant domestic responsibilities while working full-time – what Baxter et al (1990) call the ‘double burden’ of paid and unpaid work. Second, they must deal with issues in the productive sphere. Some of these issues relate to their efficiency – and visibility – at work. They must demonstrate themselves to be highly capable, reliable workers, often under a microscope of far greater scrutiny than their male counterparts. Other issues in the productive sphere arise from their conditions of work – achieving job security, obtaining training, developing career paths, and standing up for their rights as workers, including through engagement with labour unions. Third, they must deal with divisive issues or ‘frictions’ arising from social constructions of their gender and sexuality. This includes sometimes defending themselves against harassment, overcoming old prejudices about the role of women from supervisors and workers, and confronting the sexual insecurity of fellow women outside the mines. Fourth, to successfully stand up for their rights as workers, women need to build up solidarities with their fellow workers. This means managing the public view of their social identities so that their gender is not seen as excluding them from the class and occupational identities of their male co-workers. It means developing networks of support, with each other, with male co-workers, and with the union. None of that is easy, as there are many barriers along the way facing women. But for all the hardships, the women love the work and the rewards it brings. As women’s employment increases, adaptations become more favourable, and women begin to approach the numbers that enable them to more effectively force adaptations onto others and go beyond the point of being what Kanter (1977) refers to as a ‘token’ group.