



**‘KEEP YOUR
HEAD HIGH’:
ADAPTATIONS AND
STRUGGLES OF
AUSTRALIAN WOMEN
MINERS**

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Debate in the literature

- Women who operate in male dominated work:
 - Men who fear and resent women (Burton 1991)
 - The norm is masculine (Eveline and Booth 2002)
 - Women fit in where and when they can (Connell 1994)
 - Numbers of minority crucial to their token status (Kanter 1977) -> women need 'critical mass' to achieve change (Dahlerup 2006)
 - Problems where there are tokens and dominants with high token visibility and assimilation into stereotypical roles (Williams 1989)

Our question

- what happens when women move into a male-dominated, blue-collar occupation in the mining industry?
 - motivations
 - challenges
 - adaptations
 - struggles
 - actors
 - critical mass v critical actors
 - assimilation

The decline and rise of women in mining

- 1842 UK Royal Commission: Women 'employed as beasts of burden'
- banning of women and children underground
 - Qld Coal Mining Act 1925
 - ILO Convention 1945
- Qld employment bar lifted 1977
 - first women miners 1979 South Blackwater (2), then Moura (4)



Vincent Van Gogh, Women Miners Carrying Coal , 1882



4
Lyndal Hunt & Annette Sparks,
South Blackwater 1979

Motivations of **the companies** and the women

For the company;

- The Sex Discrimination Act came in 1984
- Putting women on as a PR exercise?
 - *The initial girls were put on as part of a publicity stunt by the mine because several other mines were doing the same thing and they were all in a race. The thing is, once they'd been put on then they were stuck with them. And they just tried to make things basically difficult you know, to make you want to go away. But they'd never had that sort of income before so they weren't going anywhere* (Hannah)
 - *When I finished my [trainee] time they didn't want me there* (Eloise)
- A civilising effect? [Eveline & Booth 2002]
- Responding to labour shortages, minimising cost additions⁵

Motivations of the companies and the women

- For the women:
 - the money
 - Mixed reasoning:
 - could not survive in the city on working women's wages with children,
 - had fathers, grandfathers and brothers in the mines
 - went through divorce/ separation in company towns.
 - the work itself:
 - *Oh look I just love it. I run up the front of one of them going 'oooooh!'* [Wendy]
 - *Yep, yep! I love the big trucks* [Laila]



Moura 1979

Responses and adaptations by men

- Rationale for their exclusive reasoning
 - A history of their (and children's) exploitation
 - physical requirements
 - sexual danger
 - bad luck
- *(Men) close up slightly...Probably not quite so boisterous, that sort of thing...A lot of the older guys sort of quieten up.* [Zac]
- *Generations have changed...but you still have a certain [number] still against women* [Deena]
- *'mainly had problems with supervisors and managers [who] wanted to test me out to see if they could break me.'* [Eloise]

Adaptations and struggle by women

- The domestic sphere
- The production sphere:
 - performance
 - the employment relationship
- The social construction of gender and sexuality
- Managing social identities and support networks

The domestic sphere

- Still doing it

I still take [my daughter] to school, I pick her up, I take her to work, you know I still try and do my motherly, I still cook..

So nobody makes your crib?

No, they say 'where's mine?' ... I still do all those things for them, wash and iron me son's clothes and do everything for them, 'cause it's like my job [Monica]

The production sphere: performance

- visibility & scrutiny [Kanter 1977]
 - *You know if you made a little mistake, if you didn't back up to the dump properly and you didn't dump your load over the edge properly, it would be 'oh bloody women drivers.'* [Moiria]
- Yet well regarded as workers
 - *we're just a lot more careful, we ask a lot more questions and just treat the machinery a lot more carefully* [Deidre]
 - whereas men's philosophy is *'just drive it like you stole it'* [Marcia]

The production sphere: The employment relationship

- **achieving job security**
 - *because I was one of the bunnies I said “yes, I will go, and give my son an opportunity at the mine,”* [Maxine]
- **obtaining training and skills career paths**
 - *A lot of the other guys are multi skilled, we’re not.* [Moirra]
- **addressing their rights as workers**
 - *the original reason I joined the union was to protect myself from arseholes in the industry.* [Danielle]

The social construction of gender and sexuality

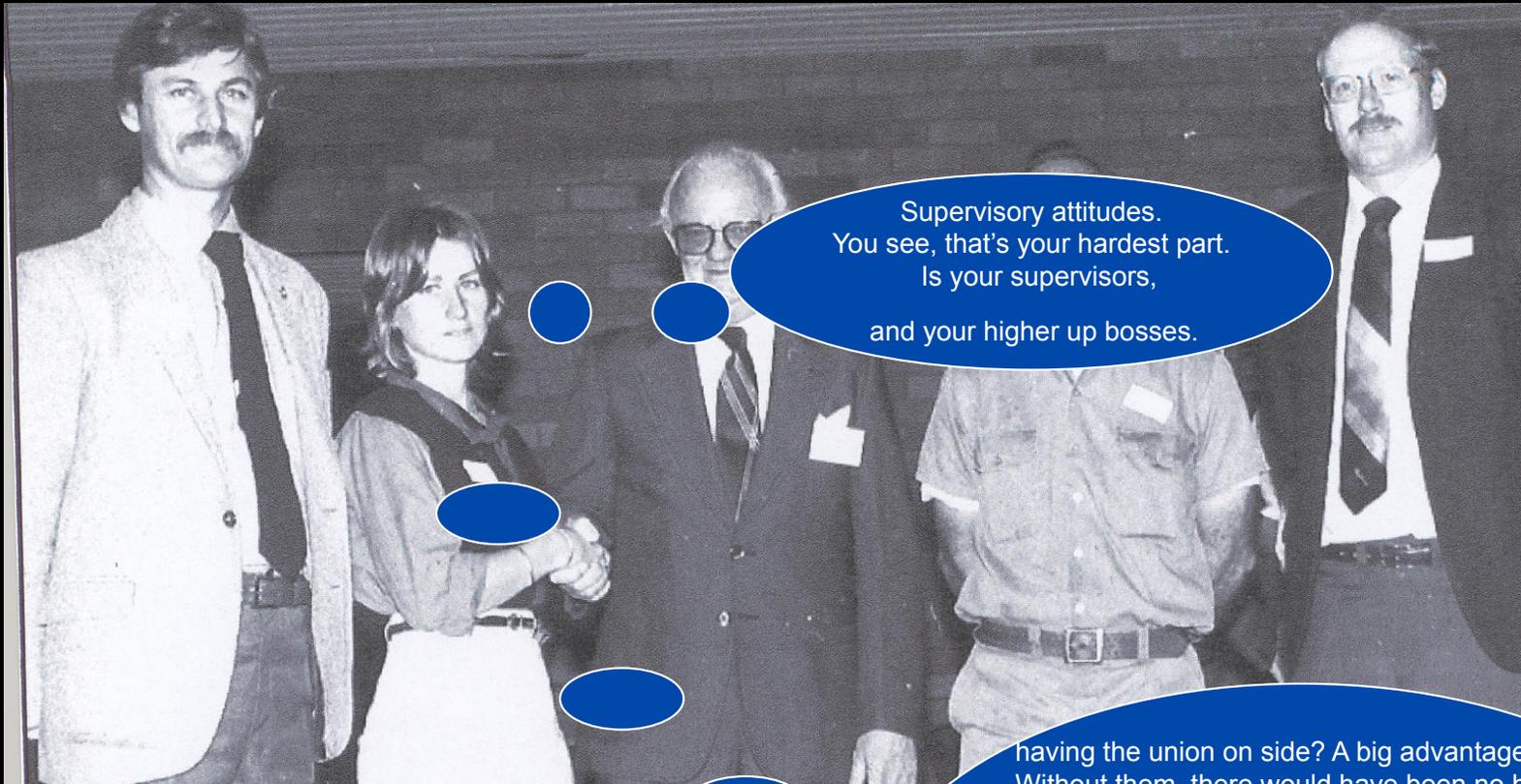
- overcoming old **prejudices** about the role of women from supervisors and workers, and other women
 - *I personally don't believe that a woman should be out there any way... My mother always taught me that, "Unless you are going to piss standing up, don't do a man's job"* [Opal]
- defending themselves against **harassment**
 - *They don't realise how hurtful they can be* [Leila]
- confronting the sexual **insecurity** of women outside the mines
 - bailed up in the supermarket: *I said to her "luv, have you had a look at him seriously?" I said [laughter] "if I'm going to do it, it ain't going to be with your old man.* [Wynne]

Managing social identities and support networks

- to be seen as part of same occupation/class
 - challenge if women seen as a means of undermining conditions: *“if you guys cannot do it we’ll get some women in here.”* [Tessa]
 - it took three months to get accepted but: *‘By the time I left out there, I got along famously; they were a great bunch of blokes.’* [Wendy]
- developing networks of support
 - *I tell them, “don’t get me wrong, don’t think that I like you now just because I’m standing up for you.”... that’s what you do, you stick together’* [Robyn]
- **one of the boys?**
 - *I’m not going to go out there wearing an apron.* [Marjorie]
 - *if you’re going to be one of the boys, make sure you know (the) limits. Be prepared... They have to respect you, as a woman. But, respect you for the work that you do.* [Eloise]

Adaptation and struggle by the union

- No blue collar union with heavily skewed male membership finds it easy to accommodate and respond to women.
- Yet women have longstanding historic role in union as workers and via women's auxiliaries
- proactive steps:
 - voted to end female employment bar
 - pressure for maternity leave for pioneer women
 - 'women in mining' training courses
 - discrimination cases



Supervisory attitudes.
You see, that's your hardest part.
Is your supervisors,
and your higher up bosses.

having the union on side? A big advantage.
Without them, there would have been no hope.
I mean, they not only helped me, they helped me
financially. They also helped me, you know,
with all the research, you know.
My position. My rights. My everything.
They were there. They were backup.
They were people I could talk to. They were support.
They were behind me 100%. They really were.
And that's why I always say to people,
I'm a hundred percent for my union.

Conclusions

- Problems identified by Kanter such as impact of visibility on performance expectations as strong as for Kanter
 - but assimilation towards traditional male, not traditional female culture
 - though some subject to sexual innuendo or harassment
- Structural issues but women not without agency
 - individual women, the union and particular men can all be critical actors
 - critical mass is not sufficient to address fairness
 - collective action by small groups important, but without access to collective resources or supportive structures, individual actions are problematic and the position of 'token' women is tenuous
- Women's adaptations and struggles have centred around challenges on domestic and productive spheres, social constructions of gender/sexuality and developing collective identities/support networks
- As women's employment increases-
 - adaptations become more favourable,
 - women begin to approach the numbers to more effectively force adaptations onto others and go beyond the point of being a 'token' group
- One day, perhaps, women will not have to become 'one of the boys' to survive.

Conclusions

Yeah, there was some hard times in there. And hard to keep your chin up because, “oh I don’t wanna go there”, “yes, you do!” It’s because you love doing it. “Don’t let em win. Out you go. Keep your head high. You can do this!” And I did. (Wendy)



Thank you for listening