Original article

Breaking the hierarchy: Exploring intersectional employment strategies in the Australian mining industry for Indigenous women

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A B S T R A C T

The Australian mining industry is male and non-Indigenous dominated. Indigenous women continue to perceive themselves as occupying the bottom position on the mine site hierarchy. They experience both racism, sexism, and additional burdens to their male counterparts. Indigenous women have resisted and supported each other against racism including creating formal networks across Australia. It is unknown what, if anything, the industry is doing to break down this hierarchy. Given Indigenous employment data is not typically disaggregated by gender, the cohort has remained largely overlooked in terms of policy or strategy aimed at this group. This paper takes an intersectional approach to understanding what employment policy and practice may assist in dismantling the hierarchy. Qualitative research identified three major themes requiring action: Managing intersectional pressures at work; Intersectionality and career opportunities; and Intersectional risks at work.

1. Introduction

You've got to remember. There's still a generation of men, white men, that are up there. They're still looking down on us [Focus group participant 7].

This paper builds on previous research by the first author (Parmenter and Drummond, 2022) that sought to understand the experiences of Indigenous women in the Australian mining industry. The research showed that Indigenous women represent a double minority, identifying as both Indigenous and female, placing them at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy. Non-Indigenous men are at the top, followed by non-Indigenous women, Indigenous men, and lastly, Indigenous women. This paper goes a step further to detail what is required from industry to break this hierarchy so that Indigenous women can make the most of their choice to work in mining. Previously research in Australia has found little evidence of gender-based policies or strategies for this group (Parmenter and Barnes, 2020; Parmenter and Drummond, 2022). Data to address this question is drawn from interviews with Indigenous women working in the Australian mining industry.

The concept of 'intersectionality' provides a framework for this paper. Intersectionality grew from critical race theory and has been built on by feminists. The concept recognises the intersection between multiple identities, for example, race, class, gender, and sexuality. The idea is that people from different backgrounds experience the world differently based on these identities and the intersecting, and often compounding, experiences that derive from them. Black women will have different experiences of discrimination than those of a Black man or white woman, for example. The term was first theorised over 30 years ago through analysis of three legal cases that dealt with both sexual and racial discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw argued that the court's narrow view of discrimination as either by sex or race ignores the experiences of Black women who experience both simultaneously.

The identity 'Black women', as originally used by Crenshaw, referred to African American women. We have re-interpreted the concept for the Australian context to include Indigenous women. We have used an intersectional approach, not as the defining theoretical structure, but as a practical prism to preference Indigenous voices, and think beyond multiple oppressions to analyse how inequalities have interacted and mutually shaped one another, (Anthias and Yuval-Davos, 1989). Socioeconomic disparities and the construct of class, gender, ethnic, racial, and other characteristics are reproduced in the workplace (Acker, 2006; Özbilgin et al., 2011; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015). The impacts of intersectional disadvantage and discrimination in employment are well recognised by researchers, who have highlighted racist assumptions,

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language and behaviour, isolation and exclusion, and organisations that demonstrate no understanding of Indigenous peoples or culture (Cooms et al., 2022; Gair et al., 2015; Paradies et al., 2015; Watego, 2021). Further, the intersectional issues faced by women are often misunderstood and unrecognised in the workplace (Leroy-Dyer and Menzel, 2023; Suarez et al., 2021).

An intersectional approach is particularly important for an industry that is male and non-Indigenous dominated. Indigenous women are likely to have differing experiences from non-Indigenous women and Indigenous men, yet the needs of this group are rarely highlighted (Parmenter and Drummond, 2022). The absence of any focus on this group is particularly concerning given that the negative impacts of mining affect women disproportionally to men (Horowitz, 2017; Jenkins, 2014; Marsella, 2021). This is particularly the case for Indigenous women, who were (and continue to be) oppressed in multiple ways by Indigenous men (Bolger, 1991; Holcombe, 2018) and by non-Indigenous men and women across diverse contexts (Huggins, 2022; Moreton, Robinson, 2021). Here, intersectionality provides an opportunity to ask how colonialism influences the present-day labour experiences of Indigenous women. For instance, Connell (2016) discusses how colonialism caused a double movement by upsetting Indigenous gender orders while creating new hegemonic projects (such as male-dominated mining industries). The focus from Jackie Huggins, an Aboriginal historian and author's perspective (2022:22) is that:

> Australia was colonised on a racially imperialistic base and not on a sexually imperialistic base. No degree of patriarchal bonding between white male colonisers and Aboriginal men overshadowed white racial imperialism. In fact, white racial imperialist ideology granted all white women, however victimised by sexist oppression, the right to assume the role of oppressor in relation to Black men and Black women.

Historically, in Australia (as in many other colonised countries) mining companies typically employed men, while their wives were expected to care for the home, the children and their husbands' wellbeing (Gier and Mercier, 2006). Yet, in the Pilbara region of Australia, Indigenous women were involved in small-scale alluvial mining activities as early as 1906. Their participation declined with the arrival of industrial-scale mining companies with formal leases in the 1960s. Their exclusion was structurally achieved by the introduction of restrictions on the practice of yandying – the use of a traditional winnowing dish to mine tin in which Indigenous women were highly skilled (Scambary, 2013; White, 1969).

At that time, however, it was not only Indigenous women who were excluded from mining with the arrival of industrial-scale mining, the regional Indigenous men were also denied opportunity when the sector became industrialised in this early period. As Edmunds (1989: 41) states about the Pilbara:

> The attitudes of miners and mining companies have grown out of a work situation that has in practice excluded Aborigines from both its workforce and its goals [indicating] a much wider State and national situation in which a capital-intensive mining industry, dependant as it is on access to vast tracts of land and advanced technology, has taken a high profile and aggressive role in promoting its own interests against a significant number of relevant interests groups.

The history of exclusion and oppression of Indigenous women (and men) has implications for the working experience of Indigenous peoples in mining today. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Pugliese (2021:2) argues that equality policies are not easily implemented due to 'the paternalistic social policies of mining companies in the past, which have entrenched a certain gender hegemony'. Structural issues need to be addressed alongside increasing the number of women employed. 'Add women and stir' is not enough (Eftimie et al., 2009).

The specific socio-political context also influences Indigenous women's employment in the industry. Mazer et al. (2022) compared Kanak women's participation in nickel mining in New Caledonia to Inuit women's participation in Nunuvik, Canada, and found a large discrepancy in participation. Kanak women represent 19 % of the total workforce, 63 % of all women, and 31 % of all Kanak workers at the Koniambo Nickel mine. In contrast, Inuit women comprise less than 3 % of the total workforce, 20 % and 30 % of all women workers, and 23 % less than 2 % of all Inuit workers at Nunuvik. Occupational segregation by gender and Indigeneity was also more marked at Nunavik.

Mazer et al. (2022) argued that Kanak women's access to employment is enabled by both political and functional contexts. The Koniambo Nickel mine is located in the Northern Province where the Kanak have more formal political power than the Inuit in Nunuvik. Koniambo Nickel is majority Kanak owned (51 %), with Glencore owning the remaining 49 %. The authors argue that mining holds a central place in the struggle for Kanak independence, and widespread Kanak support increased local recruitment. The project was seen as creating economic opportunities and social value and contributing to Kanak's independence. The commuting structure to the mine also played a role. For example, the fly-in, fly-out, (FIFO) rotational structure poses a barrier for Inuit women, whereas the Koniambo mine is located within driving distance from home communities. Further, policies for local employment and training, coupled with the high numbers of Kanak workers created opportunities for women to develop skills and move into traditionally male jobs. In contrast, 'nickel mining in Nunuvik plays out as an instrumentalised relationship of exchange within the narrow hiring requirements of the IBA [Impact and Benefit Agreement]' (Mazer et al., 2022:6).

The issues of colonialism, intersectionality, and politics covered here inform the research question in this paper, which is concerned with what employment policies, strategies or initiatives can be implemented to support Indigenous women working in the mining industry. To answer this question, this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides background on the Australian Mining Industry's efforts to increase the representation of women and Indigenous peoples, and research in this area. Section 3 outlines the method used, and Section 4 summarises the themes emerging from the data. The final Section 5 draws on the themes identified to make recommendations for policy and practice. The paper concludes with a summary of the research and suggests future research.

2. The Australian mining industry, gender, and Indigenous peoples

Indigenous women represent the overlapping intersection of the industries' agenda to increase the participation of women and Indigenous peoples resulting in a policy gap (Parmenter and Drummond, 2022). Most major resource companies operating in Australia have recognised a need to increase the participation of women and have implemented policies to meet gender targets, although not specifically for Indigenous women. In 2016, BHP Group Limited (BHP) was one of the first to announce an aspiration to achieve gender balance in their global workforce by 2025, defined as a minimum of 40 % women and 40 % male (BHP, 2022).[2] The company has since increased women's proportion of their global workforce from 18 % in 2016 to 32 % in 2022, as well as a 2.7 % increase in women in leadership (BHP, 2022). For Rio Tinto, women represent 21.6 % of Rio Tinto's global workforce in 2021, an increase of 1.5 % from the previous year (Rio Tinto, 2022a).

The industry has also pro-actively increased the participation of Indigenous peoples over the past two decades, largely driven by the inclusion of employment provisions in Indigenous land use agreements (ILUAs) between customary landowners and companies and company commitments to improve social performance (Harvey, 2014; Owen and Kemp, 2013). Mines are typically located in remote areas with no other major industries therefore mining employment is often seen as a way out of poverty for Indigenous peoples living nearby (Langton, 2015).

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[2] We can only speculate that the other 20 % is non-gender specific.

Indigenous peoples in Australia continue to experience poor outcomes on many typical well-being measures compared to non-Indigenous people, as indicated in the latest Closing the Gap report (Australian Government, 2023). Industry efforts to employ Indigenous peoples have seen some success, with the mining industry being the largest private employer of Indigenous peoples in Australia. Indigenous employees make up 4.8 % of the mining workforce and 3.2 % of the Australian population (ABS, 2021). The number of Indigenous women working in the Australian industry has increased from just 156 in 2001 to 2165 in 2021. Though this is a rapid increase, it also corresponds with an increase in Indigenous male workers (Venn and Biddle, 2018), and as a result, the industry remains male-dominated. Indigenous women represent 28 % of the total Indigenous workforce and non-Indigenous women represent 23 % of the total non-Indigenous workforce in mining (ABS, 2021).

There is very limited employment data for individual mining operations publicly available. Company-reported data indicates that Indigenous employees represent 8 % of the total BHP Australian workforce (BHP, 2022) and 6.4 % of the Rio Tinto Australian workforce (Rio Tinto, 2022b). A study commissioned by Rio Tinto in 2020 found that Indigenous women represented 23 % of the Indigenous workforce across 16 mines, compared to non-Indigenous women representing 16 % of the non-Indigenous workforce (Parmenter and Barnes, 2020). Indigenous women had higher turnover (7.9 %) than non-Indigenous women (6.3 %), and both Indigenous (6.7 %) and non-Indigenous (5.7 %) men. Indigenous employees have long been underrepresented in senior roles across the industry (Brereton and Parmenter, 2008; Tiplady and Barclay, 2007). In recognition of very few Indigenous employees in leadership positions in Rio Tinto (just 41 in 2020), the company committed $50 million to Indigenous leadership development in Australia over five years, and in 2021, 26 Indigenous employees earned promotions across Australia (Rio Tinto, 2022b). It's not known how many of these employees are women.

There is very limited research evaluating the effectiveness of diversity management strategies implemented by resource companies to increase the participation of women or Indigenous peoples. Diversity typically "refers to policies and practices that seek to include people who are considered to be, in some way, different from the traditional members" of an organisation (Herring and Henderson, 2012, p. 630). While the diversity concept includes gender, race, and ethnicity, the resource industry like other industries, focused first on increasing the participation of 'women' (Kincaid and Smith, 2021). Common diversity programs for both women and Indigenous peoples include targeted recruitment, mentoring, diversity training, or Aboriginal cultural awareness training. Over one-third of Australian resource companies offer paid parental leave (WGEA, 2022), and some offer breastfeeding facilities at their remote sites for women returning to work (Beattie, 2017).

Some major companies also have special entry pathways for Indigenous employees, although very few focus on women. Further, little is known about their effectiveness. To date, most research on Indigenous employment and retention in Australia has focused on the health sector (Deroy and Schutze, 2019; Health Workforce Australia, 2011; Lai et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2013) and the public sector (Gantor, 2016; Larkin, 2013). This research found that racism, lack of cultural awareness amongst the non-Indigenous workforce, and lack of career development impacted negatively on employee retention. A broader study on racism in the Australian Public Service identified several racial aggressions that negatively impact the experience and opportunities for the Aboriginal workforce (Bargallie, 2020).

Research about Indigenous employment at large-scale mines is limited. A study of Indigenous retention at Rio Tinto's 16 iron ore operations[3] in the Pilbara region of Australia indicated that voluntary

turnover is much higher for Indigenous employees within their first year: 17 % compared to non-Indigenous employees, 8 % (Parmenter and Barnes, 2021). This research identified 3 main factors important to improving retention amongst the Indigenous cohort: a culturally competent non-Indigenous workforce; culturally appropriate support mechanisms, and access to professional development opportunities. While these studies have provided insight into the employment experience of Indigenous employees more generally, gender differences were not a focus. This is despite known examples of gender differences in experiences. We know for example that sexual harassment is an industry-wide issue for both women workers and women in mining communities (Botha, 2016; Eftimie et al., 2009; LAWA, 2022; Mangaroo-Pillay and Botha, 2020). In 2018, the Australian Human Rights Commission found that sexual harassment is more common in mining than in any other industry – with 74 per cent of women, and 34 per cent of men, experiencing sexual harassment (AHRC, 2018). The 'Enough is Enough - Sexual harassment against women in the FIFO mining industry' report by the Western Australian government detailed damming evidence of sexual assault in mining camps (LAWA, 2022). For Indigenous women, the 'double diversity' hire can result in, for example, Indigenous women being twice as likely to be harassed (Bergmann, 2022).

The Indigenous employment statistics reported by companies and referred to earlier should be read with caution, as mining companies have previously fabricated data to deflect criticism (See Kirsch, 2014). In this paper, we contest the representativeness of these numbers by showing how the forms of sexism and racism that Indigenous women experience working in the Australian mining industry also fall under the long shadow of colonialism.

3. Method

This paper draws data from a collaborative research project between one non-Indigenous researcher (Parmenter) and one Indigenous researcher (Leroy-Dyer) and the organisation *Indigenous Women in Mining and Resources Australia (IWIMRA)*. The third non-Indigenous author, (Holcombe) has expertise in the anthropology of mining and Indigenous gender relations.

Founded in 2017 by two Indigenous women, IWIMRA is an online community for Indigenous women working in the Australian mining industry. The organisation aims to work with industry to 'provide culturally safe guidance, support and knowledge to ensure Indigenous women are supported while working in the sector' (IWIMRA, 2024). IWIMRA has a base of 138 members across 20 locations in Australia. IWIMRA leadership were interested in investigating intersectional gender-based employment strategies for the sector. These strategies would shift away from the broader focus on 'women' to include consideration of the diversity amongst this cohort. In this case, the experiences of Indigenous women working in the mining industry.

The primary question this paper aims to answer is: What employment policies, strategies or initiatives can be implemented to support Indigenous women working in the mining industry? To answer this question, this paper draws on previous research undertaken by the lead author (Parmenter) and new data sourced from two focus groups undertaken with 10 Indigenous women working in the Australian mining industry at the International Mining and Resources Conference held in Sydney in 2022. Participants were recruited to participate in the research through their membership in the IWIMRA network. All members attending the conference were invited to participate.

Most participants lived and worked in the major mining jurisdictions of Queensland (5) and Western Australia (4), with one from South Australia. Five were FIFO workers, four residential and one drive-in drive-out (DIDO). The participants worked for six different resource companies, one was a contractor and all occupied different job positions. Eight of the women had worked in the industry for more than five years. All women were aged between 25 and 54, seven were married and six

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[3] In 2022, Rio Tinto iron ore opened the Gudai–Darri mine, bringing the total number of mines in the Pilbara region to 17.

had dependent children.

The participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions[4] about their experience working in the industry, whether gender-based or intersectional employment strategies were required, and if so, what they might look like. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and data underwent a thematic analysis using NVivo software (QSR International Inco., Melbourne, Australia). Funding was received via an internal Knowledge Exchange and Transfer grant from The University of Queensland and ethical clearance was obtained from the same university.

Limitations exist to the extent these findings are representative of Indigenous women's experiences and views Australia-wide, due to the small sample size. However, the inclusion of women across multiple sites and companies coupled with the lead author's previous research largely addressed this limitation. In addition, the lead author attended the augural IWIMRA conference in June 2023 to present the findings of the research and received positive feedback and affirmation from the broader group of attendees (over 170 Indigenous women were in attendance) in the form of informal discussions and feedback.

4. Research findings

Three major themes emerged from the focus groups with IWIMRA members. These are: Managing intersectional pressures at work; Intersectionality and career opportunities; and Intersectional risks at work. Data collected during the focus groups with Indigenous women are organised under three intersectional themes, which each necessarily embody racism, sexism and the impacts of colonisation. As we could not separate out these elements of intersectionality, they are referenced throughout this section in keeping with the perspectives of Indigenous women and to ensure that their voices remain central to the paper. Each of these themes informs recommendations for policy and practice in the following section.

4.1. Theme 1: Managing intersectional pressures at work

A major theme arising from the focus groups was the role Indigenous women play in providing support for other Indigenous employees on site. This support is culturally based and reflects the relationality that is embedded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and is anchored in Indigenous ways of understanding and engaging in the world (Kwaymullina, 2005; Jordan and Leroy-Dyer, 2023). One participant explained the connectedness between Indigenous employees and the impact on wellbeing:

> If something happens to one of our mob, doesn't matter where they're from, we all feel the pain for that one person. If something happens to them in the industry, it's going to affect all of us. The non-Indigenous people, they're different to us in that way. We will feel the pain for that person and worry and stress for that person in the industry [Focus group participant 5].

When support is required, it is Indigenous women who tend to take on this role:

> The way that they [Indigenous men] deal with stuff is completely different because they don't have the burden of worrying about other people on the site that are Indigenous or worrying about family stuff. We'll mentor, we'll support and guide each other. We will mother, we will auntie. That doesn't matter where they come from in

Australia, if they're Black, they're with us [Focus group participant 3].

Many felt obliged to be take on the role of a support person on-site despite dealing with their own personal issues. Indigenous women in Australia are more likely than non-Indigenous women to bear children at a younger age, have larger families with cultural obligations to look after them, and are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The implication is that Indigenous women are more likely to have frequent personal challenges outside of work as they support their extended families. Participants believed that the industry acknowledges the need for this support role, but in some cases, the perception is that the industry is either taking advantage of the unpaid informal support provided by female co-workers or where there are formal support roles, they are not well resourced:

> They're [the company] like, "Oh well we are getting this service for free. We don't have to employ someone to go and do this or we don't have to put in a project or a program or a support system or network because [name withheld] is out here doing it." You're just a number to them. We need to put some proper support systems in place. We need to know that they're [other Indigenous people] are doing okay in camp. We need to know if there's an issue at home, what can we do to help you to fix the problem? All these sorts of things that they [the company] don't understand. All they care about is moving the dirt or moving the coal [Focus group participant 1].

One woman said she was questioned by the company as to why she might need to provide support to an Indigenous employee about the mortgage stress they were experiencing due to sharing money with their wider family:

> And they [the company] just turn around and say, "Don't do that." No. That's not Black by the way. We have to help our family because then if they're struggling, we're struggling anyway [Focus group participant 7].

Pressure to share with kin or 'demand sharing' is common amongst Indigenous peoples in Australia (Peterson, 1993). Indigenous mine workers have reported receiving pressure to share wages with extended family and this issue can contribute to a person's decision to leave the job (Parmenter and Barnes, 2021; Parmenter and Drummond, 2022; Parmenter et al., 2023). The sense of obligation to support other Indigenous employees experiencing pressure to share their wages is different from that of 'demand sharing' with kin. Sharing is a marker of cultural identity, a social norm that forms an essential part of relatedness, which is central to Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing (Leroy-Dyer and Menzel, 2023; Schwab, 2006). According to Sansom (1991), the sharing of money is the 'new' Indigenous way of caring for others and sustaining families and communities, adopted in the wake of colonisation. Though both Indigenous men and women practice this sharing economy, women's roles as primary caregivers in their families tend to translate to the workplace as a sense of responsibility for nurturing others.

Likewise, the industrial wage labour system contributes to this gender binary. In the context of mining, this is intensified by the FIFO system which removes workers from their families. Though both Indigenous women and men must make choices about whether to take on such employment, it is clear that for women there are additional pressures that they need to manage due to caring obligations, which some might say is a form of emotional labour.

4.2. Theme 2: Intersectionality and career opportunities

There was a perception amongst participants in this study that Indigenous women are overlooked for training, skills development, and career progression opportunities. This has been a common theme in previous research (Leroy-Dyer, 2016: Parmenter and Barnes, 2021) and

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[4] High-level questions included: Tell me what it's like to work in the mining industry. What are the main issues faced by Indigenous women at your site? Does the site you work at have any initiatives for Indigenous workers that you are aware of? What suggestions do you have for industry to improve working conditions for Indigenous women?

Indigenous women (and men) continue to dominate lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs in the industry. This is a legacy of the racist policies and practices that still exist within colonial structures and systems in workplaces (Cooms et al., 2022; Leroy-Dyer and Menzel, 2023), that privilege whiteness, where racist stereotypes portray Indigenous peoples as lazy, non-productive, and unwilling to work (Leroy-Dyer, 2021). For Indigenous women, the intersection of race and gender compounds these stereotypes.

The impacts of automation were a concern for many of the women in this study, especially those in jobs that are targeted for automation (see also Holcombe and Kemp, 2019), such as truck driving:

> The problem we see is that a lot of people been put on trucks and now that's their skill set. They haven't bothered to try and get them skilled up…where are they going to go? [Focus group participant 5].

One participant also commented on the need to start teaching technology skills to children but noted that many will not have access to the devices required to learn these skills: Get them skills in that technology space…that's what our kids need to know. But a lot of our kids can't afford these computers, laptops. That's where we're getting left behind again, where these mining companies could donate all this to our kids, like in the schools, so that they've got one to go home with or something [Focus group participant 9].

Participants noted a gap in training for technical labour but also a lack of recognition from industry of the emotional labour Indigenous women provide. There was a strong view that Indigenous women employees were not valued by the industry. Women spoke about how the intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous women, has provided a unique strength and resilience, which is not recognised or valued by the industry. One participant said:

> We need to move up in leadership roles to change stuff. Because if you never had trauma or anything like that, when you get into those leadership roles, you don't know how to empathise with someone, change it. You don't know how to influence and change the organisation. That's why if we, as Indigenous women, step up in those leadership roles, we cover everything …we know how to fix it. It's not tooting our horn. Trauma has built us more resilient and stronger to come up with solutions. It actually adds value to a business. Because we can bring a different perspective into the business. And when I did my role, I'd done it very well. I was thinking always outside the box [Focus group participant 1].

Another participant added:

> Yeah. With Indigenous women in leadership roles…, there's definitely more value to have us in that discussion than not to have us. And that's from retention to social issues in the camps or in corporate [affairs]. Women are always the ones that always step up when there's situations like… How do you put it? Tough times? When there's tough times in the industry, who steps up and takes on that responsibility? Women do. We carry it through [Focus group participant 7].

These views represent the sentiments of Indigenous women Australia-wide. Indigenous women in Australia significantly contribute to caring for and supporting families and communities, yet this emotional labour is 'largely unseen and undervalued' (AHRC, 2022: 64; Evans, 2021). The Indigenous women in this study spoke about their role as leaders in the community and their motivations for working in the mining industry to benefit their families and broader communities. One woman said:

> It's broken the cycle of poverty for a lot of us that do work in the mining industry. We've got to support our children, our grandchildren and we've got to create pathways for them as women being matriarch to our countries… we are the leaders. We are the backbones to our families. So, helping our children create a lifestyle, and

by us showing it to them will help them build a better future for them and their children. This industry is good in that sense for us because the money, financial stability. That is a good thing for us, a positive note for us Aboriginal women [Focus group participant 3].

Matriarchal forms of leadership are at the forefront of the 'doing work' in the community. However, that leadership regularly extends itself toward community programs, governance work, and organisational structures for change (Jordan and Leroy-Dyer, 2023; Ryan and Evans, 2020). Again, much of this is volunteer work and is under-recognised – though it may be supporting essential community infrastructure (Lawrence, 2006; Holcombe, 2018).

4.3. Theme 3: Intersectional risks at work

Indigenous women in this study reported experiencing racism and/or sexual harassment while working in the mining industry, echoing the findings of the Broderick report commissioned by Rio Tinto (Broderick, 2021). Racism, a legacy of colonisation, has been identified as one of the determinants of Indigenous health at a national level (AIHW, 2022). Racism is an industry-wide issue for both Indigenous men and women in mining. However, studies have shown that Indigenous women experience racism and sexual harassment disproportionate to other groups (Evans, 2021; Leroy-Dyer, 2016, 2021, 2022; Leroy-Dyer and Menzel, 2023; Plater et al., 2020).

Despite anti-discrimination laws and zero-tolerance organisational policies, Indigenous women, in particular, have little to no protection against the damage racism causes in the workplace (Leroy-Dyer and Menzel, 2023; Watson, 2022). The lack of career opportunities and exclusion amongst other things creates an invisible barrier or 'white ceiling' that impacts well-being, job satisfaction, career development and progression, and often leads to Indigenous women exiting the workplace (Leon, 2022; Plater et al., 2020). One woman in this study commented on how race is used in conjunction with sexual harassment by non-Indigenous men to intimidate and silence Indigenous women:

> I think it's the silence and the shame of Aboriginal women not saying anything if they are harassed because it becomes a stigma, that "he said, she said" type of stuff and, "Oh, why would I even want to be with you because you have Black skin?" [Focus group participant 4]

The focus groups did not provide an opportunity to draw out if the sexual harassment was predominantly from Indigenous or non-Indigenous males. Rather, the focus of the discussion was on the intersection between race and gender subordination with the implication that the perpetrators were all non-Indigenous, as the quote above indicates.[5] This quote suggests that there is some internalisation of racist stereotypes that serve to subordinate and disable Indigenous women from speaking up. These "hidden injuries of race" (per Cowlishaw, 2004) reflect a form of stigmatisation, where women do not feel confident or empowered, but rather are kept 'in their place'. The deep colonial history across all parts of Australia where Indigenous women were domestics – in a form of servitude - and predated upon by non-Indigenous men has been extensively examined (see Collingwood-Whittick, 2018; Huggins, 2022; McGrath, 1987).

There was strong agreement from participants in this study that people accused of sexual harassment are either protected or transferred to another site rather than dealing with the issue appropriately. Some of the women in this study had personally experienced sexual harassment and racism, but did not feel comfortable reporting it to non-Indigenous employees in support roles due to privacy concerns:

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[5] However, we are aware of the evidence within some Indigenous communities of the high rates of gender and family violence perpetrated *within* families (Bolger 1991, Blagg et al. 2018).

We don't feel culturally safe even talking to the EAP [employee assistant program] that the company has contracted. And you can't even go and talk to your mentors or anything like that because a lot of them are non-Indigenous [Focus group participant 8].

This reflects the findings globally (Botha, 2016) and in Australia (LAWA, 2022). Botha (2016) found that women in the industry are less likely to report sexual harassment, believing little or nothing will be done. A parliamentary inquiry into sexual harassment in mining and resources workplaces heard how sexual harassment was "generally accepted or overlooked", and that employees held a distrust in existing hierarchical management structure, which presented a barrier to reporting sexual harassment (LAWA, 2022 p. iii). In addition, this report found inadequate culturally safe and sensitive options to report incidents of sexual harassment or assault for Indigenous women (LAWA, 2022 p.71). This finding was the only mention of marginal groups within the female cohort. We suggest that Indigenous women are being sexually harassed due to the intersectionality between race and gender, because they are women and Indigenous, they are more likely to be harassed as they occupy the bottom of the mine site hierarchy. The history of sexual and labour subordination (Huggins, 2022) shadows Indigenous women, and is never far from the light.

5. Breaking the hierarchy: Addressing the policy and practice gap

By centring the voices of Indigenous women in this article, we have sought to illustrate why the difficulties faced by Indigenous women can be traced to particular gender and racial norms that take their shape and structure from the legacies of a patriarchal colonial system. Drawing from an intersectional view of the challenges encountered by Indigenous women, this article suggests the following four recommendations for industry to improve employment conditions for Indigenous women.

5.1. Improve Indigenous employment data collection and monitoring

Perhaps the most obvious starting point to improve conditions for Indigenous women working in the industry is to collect and report employment data for this cohort. In Australia, very few companies disaggregate Indigenous employment data by gender, whether these women are living locally or what jobs they hold. This brings into question the motivations of the industry to report accurate figures, and which indicators they choose to report on and which to withhold (Jenkins and Yakovleva, 2006; Mahoney et al., 2013). An analysis of diversity and inclusion-related indicators across eight major mining company sustainability reports between 2012 and 2019 found that reporting on these indicators had increased over time, but that there are opportunities to improve reporting on issues such as ethnic diversity, age, and 'invisible' diversities (e.g., sexual orientation) (Kincaid and Smith, 2021). The authors argued that there is a tendency to report easily obtainable demographic data, and several known issues were omitted altogether. A notable exception to such limited reporting is Dominion Diamond Mines in Canada, where the company is required to report employment data under legal agreements with customary landowners over the Ekati mine. Ekati Diamond Mine presents employment and contractor data by gender, priority group, skill level, and traditional or non-traditional roles in its annual Socio-Economic Agreement Report (Dominion Diamond Mine, 2019).

Such disaggregated reporting provides visible indicators of the progress in this area by tracking change at a more granular level, including tracking whether employment targets are being met in land use agreements and amongst which Indigenous groups, i.e. customary landowners or those from elsewhere. It is important to reiterate that company employment data are not verified by an external party and should be read with caution. For example, Stuart Kirsch (2014) discussed intentional measurement errors made by mining companies as a means of avoiding criticism. Likewise, others have argued that the audit culture of compliance measures, exemplified by the annual sustainability reporting, simplifies complexity and masks local-level relational accountabilities (Fonseca, 2010; Boiral, 2013).

5.2. Provide formal, well-resourced positions to support Indigenous employees

Establishing a formal support role for Indigenous employees would assist in addressing the burden placed on Indigenous women to provide this support informally. Indigenous Support Officers located on-site were found to be highly valued by Indigenous employees in previous research (Leroy-Dyer, 2016; Parmenter and Barnes, 2021). Most major mining companies in Australia already have employees in the role of 'mentor' or 'support officer' for their Indigenous employees. However, a study of Indigenous retention at Rio Tinto Iron operations in the Pilbara region of Australia highlighted a range of factors inhibiting the effectiveness of the role. These include the broad scope of the role, large caseloads (100+), mismatched rosters with employees, cultural factors (men's and women's business), and their ability to influence those in more senior positions (e.g., supervisors of Indigenous employees) (Parmenter and Barnes, 2020).

The core role of these support officers is to assist Indigenous employees to transition into the local workforce and provide ongoing guidance. The role also requires engagement with leaders or supervisors of Indigenous employees to build awareness about the challenges Indigenous employees face and champion Indigenous employment and career development across departments, including management, human resources, learning and development, trades training, and cultural heritage team. In addition, these officers are regularly asked to facilitate cultural events on-site or provide advice to non-Indigenous employees about Indigenous culture (Leroy-Dyer, 2016; Parmenter and Barnes, 2020).

The role of support officer/mentor appears to be a "one size fits all approach to Indigenous employees that presumes sameness" (Bargallie, 2018:180). Further, Bargallie (2020) notes that in the Australian Public Service, the role of the unpaid 'native informant', where employees are expected to do 'all things Indigenous' and provide cultural advice to non-Indigenous co-workers was prevalent. As a first point of contact for Indigenous employees, these support officers/mentors often don't have the mental health training to appropriately manage reported issues, or an adequate referral system in place to assist those employees. For example, a culturally safe option would ensure employees had access to an Aboriginal Health Worker.

Given the breadth of the role of support officer/mentor, consideration of caseload is important. The level of support required varies amongst the Indigenous workforce. Some Indigenous employees may not require or want any support, and others might require intensive support, for example, those for whom it's their first mainstream employment experience. The caseloads for individual Indigenous Support Officers in the Rio Tinto study ranged from 32 to 162 (Parmenter and Barnes, 2020). A system to assess Indigenous employee retention risk and required engagement frequency was being developed at the time of the study to assist with managing the caseload and resourcing. Where caseloads require more than one support officer at any given site, both male and female support officers are preferred (Parmenter and Barnes, 2020). Consideration should also be made to ensure the person in this role supports all Indigenous employees, not just Traditional Owners. One participant in this study reported that Traditional Owner employees actively exclude Indigenous employees who fly in from other regions.

In addition to the large caseloads, the hours that support officers/mentors work are usually from nine to five, which is different from most mining crews who are on 12-hour shifts. Support officers in the Leroy-Dyer (2016) study reported only being able to visit Indigenous employees every 6–8 weeks and, therefore, were unavailable when needed.

Support officers themselves also reported a lack of support for them in their role, stating there is "no one to debrief with, you just have to find your own way to cope" (Leroy-Dyer, 2016:388).

5.3. Develop and track skills and leadership for Indigenous employees by gender

Providing opportunities for Indigenous women to develop skills will require a management system that does not rely on the goodwill of individual supervisors. The professional and skills development of Indigenous women (and men) is becoming more urgent in the context of the industry's shift to automation or the so-called 'fourth industrial revolution' (Schwab, 2017). Indigenous employees are concentrated in roles that are targeted for automation (e.g., Truck Driving), and as such particular focus should be on these roles. Women with school-aged children may be more impacted, as some companies offer a roster during school hours for women only. In addition, women may be more likely than men to prefer a residential role (Parmenter and Barnes, 2020; O'Faircheallaigh, 2013). As a first step, understanding the aspirations of Indigenous employees for working in an autonomous industry is required. This is a key knowledge gap, as little is known about the aspirations, their current capabilities, and what implementation or development strategies will be required to take advantage of this shift.

Equally important is ensuring that appropriate support mechanisms are in place for potential leaders. For example, a participant in this study commented that many Indigenous employees are too humble and shy to self-promote, which hinders career development. This has also been found as an issue in previous research in Australia (Parmenter and Barnes, 2021; Parmenter et al., 2020) and Alaska (Haley and Fisher, 2016). A shift is required from a focus on recruiting Indigenous peoples to ensuring structures are in place to support and retain these new employees. Performance reviews and training plans should align with the cultural values and needs of Indigenous women and include, culturally sensitive mentoring, skills development, and leadership training, to ensure Indigenous women have self-determination over their own lives and careers (Leroy-Dyer and Menzel, 2023).

Some mining companies, such as BHP and Fortescue, have leadership programs for Indigenous employees. According to company reports, they are starting to see the benefits. For example, Fortescue's Leadership and Excellence in Aboriginal People (LEAP) program provides a range of professional development opportunities for Indigenous employees and BHP's Indigenous Development Program (IDP) creates pathways for women and Indigenous peoples to move into leadership roles (BHP, 2020a; BHP, 2020b; Fortescue, 2024). Rio Tinto, for instance, has increased the number of Indigenous leaders fivefold since November 2020 (Rio Tinto, 2022a). Whilst this is encouraging, as we indicated previously, very few mining companies publicly differentiate their Indigenous employment statistics between men and women, therefore, it is difficult to ascertain the specific benefits for Indigenous women. Indigenous employment data must be disaggregated and reported by gender to ensure Indigenous women are provided opportunities. Likewise, retention amongst this new cohort of Indigenous leaders is one to watch.

5.4. Recognise Indigenous women's unique risks at work

A more proactive approach to assessing risks on mining sites is required so that Indigenous women employees are less likely to experience racism, sexual harassment, and associated mental health concerns. According to Laplonge and Albury (2013):

> Gender tends to be deemed of concern only to personnel in human resources where it is linked to organisational values around 'diversity' and individual company goals about the number of women in the workforce (2013: 1).

Indigenous women in this study spoke of the 'silence and shame'

around sexual harassment, unwillingness to report incidents and protection of perpetrators. Recognising the deep colonial history of Indigenous women's subordination in sexual and labour terms (Huggins, 2022) is a key to addressing this intersecting factor: perhaps as a form of truth-telling which could go some way to understanding and dismantling this contemporary shadow causing shame. Sexual harassment is best considered primarily as a work, health, and safety issue, not simply a Human Resources (HR) matter, according to the Western Australian Government. The 'Enough is Enough' report found that sexual harassment was historically dealt with as a Human Resources matter and that attention should elevate it as a serious health and safety issue (LAWA, 2022). The report argues that industry and regulatory practice must now adapt to accommodate the characteristics of the psychosocial harm that sexual harassment causes. In addition, "government entities, industry bodies, unions, and stakeholders must work together to ensure these messages translate into substantial changes at all levels of FIFO workplaces" (LAWA, 2022:119).

Mining companies employ women in core mining activities to work side by side with men, often in isolation and are frequently at risk of sexual abuse and/or harassment (Botha, 2016; Hersch, 2018; Karami et al., 2019; Mangaroo-Pillay and Botha, 2020). This means that strategies to ensure women are not isolated in male work teams on-site are needed. The presence of a critical mass of women in all-male work teams is important for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. Isolation in traditionally female jobs (e.g., administration) can also be an issue for Indigenous women on-site who do not feel safe reporting incidents of harassment or racism. Where possible, placing Indigenous women with other Indigenous women provides additional support. As one Indigenous woman in this study stated:

> We've always been together in groups. We've always gathered in groups. That's how it's just been ever since… you can't break that. I went to [company name withheld] with a group of seven other Aboriginal girls. We done all our training together. We were the first group of Aboriginal women to go onsite together. It worked because we had each other [Focus group participant 2].

For FIFO sites, it is equally important to ensure that women are not isolated in the mine camp. The first author of this paper has visited many mine sites over the past 15 years and has rarely been provided accommodation in an area with other women, and often far from the main camp facilities. A female colleague was recently placed in an all-male dormitory with shared bathroom facilities (with men). The company involved was very apologetic when this was brought to their attention. However, clearly, in many contexts, there is no system in place to ensure women are supported to feel safe in camp accommodation.

In Papua New Guinea, the Business Coalition for Women (BCFW) has developed a 'Gender Smart Safety Program' that recognises that women have different safety concerns from men (Laplonge, 2018). Mining company St Barbara has since incorporated the program, undertaking annual gender audits to identify and mitigate risks for women at Simberi Mine in Papua New Guinea. This program has reportedly resulted in an 18 per cent increase in women feeling safe in its first year (Factive, 2019). There are also many straightforward actions that this mine site implemented, such as providing safe transport options to the site from the community and identifying and addressing the physical risks and hazards on site from a female perspective. The company has also implemented a program addressing family sexual violence, delivered to both employees and community members. Importantly, gender norms are different across countries and contexts and influence how women participate in the mining industry. Industry must understand this context by including gender analysis in Social Impact Assessments and women's inclusion in community engagement.

Parmenter and Drummond (2022:8) suggest that culturally safe reporting mechanisms should be implemented for women around "sexual harassment, racism, gender-based discrimination, violence and bullying", and that Indigenous women should be included in their design

and implementation. A culturally safe workplace is one where there is no assault, no challenge to or denial of identity, and where people are respected and can work together with dignity (Williams, 1999). The elimination of racism is vital and goes hand in hand with cultural safety. Mining companies need to ensure that a zero-tolerance policy against racism is taken seriously and any breaches are reported and acted upon. The women in this study reported that mining companies failed to act when breaches were reported. One positive step an organisation can take is to educate the workforce about how to be a good ally and have effective workplace conversations around racism (Diversity Council of Australia, 2022; AHRC, 2020). While the implementation of Aboriginal cultural awareness training in the industry is now common, the practice often requires a more sophisticated approach to avoid unintended, negative consequences (Parmenter and Trigger, 2018).

Ultimately – this is not just a women's issue, as gender is a social category, so to it is relational. Hegemonic, eurocentric discourse stemming from colonisation still prevails in many workplaces in Australia where whiteness is privileged, and institutional racism and sexism are the norms, including within the mining industry. Understanding the concept of intersectionality as a lived experience can support and guide transformation in a mining workplace so that Indigenous women are not left behind. The future of work for Indigenous women in the Australian mining industry involves comprehensive labour market policies and programs, implemented by organisations that are intersectional and Indigenous-centric (Leroy-Dyer, 2022).

6. Conclusion

The stories of Indigenous women in this study offer new insights into our understanding of intersectional factors around women's subordination in large-scale mines and add to the growing body of evidence from around the world of the various challenges women face in the extractive industries (Horowitz, 2017; Kahn, 2013; Lahiri-Dutt ,2011, 2022; Nightingale et al., 2017; Pugliese, 2021). This evidence, however, continues to be overlooked rather than driving change in policy and practice. Gender was one of the lowest-performing areas of Environmental Social and Governance (ESG) factors in a recent assessment of the world's 40 largest mining companies by the Responsible Mining Foundation (RMF, 2022).

We demonstrate that despite an increase in participation, policy and practice continue to ignore the unique experiences of Indigenous women in the mining workforce. We outline some practical ways in which mining workplaces can contribute to closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage and empowering Indigenous women in the workplace. These include providing well-resourced support roles for Indigenous employees, developing and tracking career skills and leadership development, and understanding the unique risks faced by Indigenous women on-site through initiatives such as Gender Audits. The most obvious of these changes are to start reporting Indigenous employment data by gender to bring visibility to this cohort. It also means working to challenge and dismantle both racism and sexism by decolonising the harmful practices that permeate the workplace. Importantly, understanding the local context from which the female worker cohort are emerging from is essential, in addition to company policies and practices to support Indigenous women working in the industry. The more control Indigenous peoples have over mining development and employment opportunities, the more likely Indigenous women can experience positive outcomes from mining employment. Future research should focus the analysis on the extent to which policy initiatives to ensure culturally safe and inclusive workplaces have been implemented for Indigenous women and what an explicit Indigenous mining intersectionality framework might look like.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Joni Parmenter: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sharlene Leroy-Dyer:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Sarah Holcombe:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

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