

Welcome from the Publisher



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Publisher

Welcome to this first issue of *Women at Work*, a supplement of *Occupational Health Southern Africa*. The South African Constitution (Section 9(1))¹ states that “Everyone is equal before the law”, and that the “state may not unfairly discriminate... against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, [or] pregnancy” (Section 9(3)). These rights have been encoded in progressive post-apartheid employment legislation such as the Employment Equity Act.²

Women now have an equal right to participate fully in all sectors of the economy, and it is unlawful – although still, sadly, common – to pay a female employee less than her male counterpart for the same work, simply on the grounds of sex or gender. While the participation of women in (or seeking) paid work in South Africa has increased over the past 30 years, from 40% in 1994³ to 55.8% in 2024,⁴ many in society still perceive certain economic sectors and jobs to be the ‘natural’ preserve of men. The prime example of this is mining in South Africa, where – despite progress – women still constitute only 19% of the formal workforce,⁵ and continue to face daily hazards such as gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment. It is for this reason that we chose to focus on women in mining in this first issue of *Women at Work*.

Reflecting on her 30-year career in mining, renowned occupational medicine practitioner and author, Dr Vanessa Govender, celebrates the changes she has witnessed in the industry, while drawing attention to the work that still needs to be done to make it more attractive to women. She commends the Minerals Council South Africa’s (MCSA’s) commitment to gender equity and inclusion, from the coalface to the boardroom, in its [Seven Foundational Measures for Women](#). Reminiscing about her early experiences in underground mining, where everything from personal protective equipment (PPE) to ablution facilities was purposed for men only, she sees evidence of change today, but warns that GBV and other more subtle forms of psychological hostility continue to make the sector a challenging occupational choice for women.

One of the most tangible improvements in the lives of female miners has been the introduction of PPE suited to their anatomy and sanitary needs. Kate Collier, a partner at Webber Wentzel, discusses the recently promulgated [Guideline for a Mandatory Code of Practice for the Selection and Provision of Personal Protective Equipment](#)

[for Women in the South African Mining Industry](#)⁶ (2023) – an updated and more comprehensive version of the 2015 Guide, which has been informed by SIMRAC research.

The Women in Mining initiative of the MCSA has taken the lead in developing and driving policies to make mining a safe, equitable, and rewarding sector for women. Its Seven Foundational Measures reaffirm zero tolerance for GBV, develop employment policies for gender inclusivity and diversity, collect and report gender diversity metrics, initiate unconscious bias training to tackle sexist culture in the workplace, deploy company-wide surveys to monitor workplace experiences, advocate for physical spaces in mines and PPE that accommodate the needs of women, and address stressors that impact the psychological and physical wellbeing of female employees. Dimpho Moepane, from the Health Department at the MCSA, outlines progress made and challenges that remain, especially for women underground, who comprise the group that is most exposed to GBV and sexual harassment in poorly lit work areas and ablution facilities. She also points out the health hazards for women who, for fear of being followed and assaulted in dimly lit facilities, choose to forgo regular bathroom breaks. Suppressing the urge to urinate causes urinary tract infections; dehydration is an associated risk.

Women also work in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), an important economic sector that contributes 15–20% of the global non-fuel mineral extraction.⁷ Whereas it is estimated that women make up less than 10% of the global workforce in industrial and large-scale mining, globally, they make up 40–50% of the ASM workforce.⁸ The precarity of their work exposes them to dire GBV and sexual harassment hazards, as there are no policy and regulation frameworks to protect them. Nor are they covered by occupational health legislation, so they are highly exposed to health hazards associated with lack of PPE. Professor Dingani Moyo, an occupational medicine practitioner based in Zimbabwe, and colleagues examine the health hazards faced by women in ASM in sub-Saharan Africa, and recommend the enactment of gender-sensitive legislation in Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries to protect the health of women working in this important sector. An encouraging development is the establishment of women’s mining associations across the region since 2018, which can advocate for such legal protections.⁹

The scourge of GBV is, of course, not restricted to women who work in mining. Nina Benjamin, from the Labour Research Service (LRS), considers its effects more broadly on women in the world of work. She points out that women workers are exposed to GBV not only at the workplace, but also on the way to and from work, and even at home. While domestic violence used to be considered a ‘personal’

rather than a work matter, the International Labour Organization's Convention 190 challenges this notion, because violence at home affects a woman's ability to work. The psychological wounds are carried into the workplace, and – in some instances – an abusive partner might even intrude at work. The LRS works with trade unions to address GBV and marginalisation of women and LGBT workers, and Benjamin outlines some of the initiatives undertaken in sectors such as the garment industry, public health, and education.

Women in South Africa enjoy legal protections against GBV, yet many suffer in silence. Jayson George, from Bowmans, points to factors such as shame, fear of physical and economic retribution, and inadequate knowledge of the law and its procedures as reasons for choosing to remain silent. Yet, the law is robust and the procedure for taking out a protection order is simple and free. Since GBV at home affects women at work too, there is a need for more education in the workplace about the legal actions victims can take when suffering gender-related abuse – wherever and whenever it occurs.

The promulgation of the Guideline for a Mandatory Code of Practice for the Selection and Provision of Personal Protective Equipment for Women in the South African Mining Industry, in 2023, was a great stride in the drive to make mining a more equitable employment sector. While much work remains to be done, it is important to celebrate the progress that is being made. ♀

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