

MINING

DIGGING A WAY OUT OF THE *MANHOLE*

Women are making small – yet significant – strides in the mining sector, writes **Penny Haw**

Integrating women into mining in South Africa is highly challenging, not only for cultural and operational reasons, but also – as reports of workplace assault, rape and murder attest – because of issues of safety.

“We still need to do more to ensure women feel that the mining sector is one in which they have a career and a future, one in which they can develop their talent,” said Minister of Women in the Presidency Susan Shabangu at the Mining Indaba in Cape Town earlier this year.

While, at about 15%, the overall representation of women in mining jobs exceeds the conditions of the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act, which requires women to hold 10% of so-called core mining jobs, transformation is slow in a difficult environment that remains dominated by men. Predictably perhaps, given the nature of the work, the most significant inroads are being seen in top and senior management. According

to the 17th Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report, women account for 15.2% of top managers in mining, which is up from 14.5% for the previous year. Those inside the industry concur; moves are small, but they’re happening.

Nompumelelo “Mpumi” Zikalala, vice president of De Beers Sightholder Sales South Africa – ready for the challenge

The first time Zikalala learnt about engineering was when representatives from De Beers visited her high school in Vryheid, KZN, in the 1990s. “I knew nothing about the mining industry,” says Zikalala, who now, as vice president, heads the De Beers Sightholder Sales South Africa (DBSSSA) business in Kimberley, where the company undertakes diamond sorting, grading and valuation of its production. She is also a member of the De Beers Consolidated Mines board. “What attracted me to

engineering was that I was good at maths and science, and the De Beers executives said the mining industry was the most difficult, especially for women. That’s what sold me on the career opportunity.”

She chose chemical engineering and started her career as a bursar on De Beers’ Cullinan Mine, where she learned the four Cs (colour, clarity, cut, and carat weight) of assessing the quality of diamonds. In 2007, she became the first female general manager of a major diamond mine when she was appointed to the position at the group’s Kimberley mine. She held the same position at Voorspoed Mine from 2010 before moving to DBSSSA in 2013, and she was appointed to the board in 2014.

Throughout her career, Zikalala has been one of the youngest appointed in particular positions and often the first and/or only woman. Accordingly, she has always been a keen advocate for gender equality in mining. ►



financialmail WOMEN 25

MINING



"Twenty years ago, when I visited a gold mine as a student, there were lots of wolf whistles that made [the experience] uncomfortable," she recalled during an International Women's Day discussion hosted by De Beers' parent company, Anglo American plc. "The culture is more accommodating for women these days; [having] more women makes it easier."

Women need determination and resilience." – Nompumelelo "Mpumi" Zikalala

But while great strides have been made in skills and capacity development and women are found at all levels of employment in the mining sector, the challenge, says Zikalala, is a shortage of specialised skills – which is linked to low numbers of learners entering technical fields of study.

Her advice to women on the brink of their careers who might consider entering the mining industry is encouraging. "Our country needs leaders, and everyone has the ability to become one. You need to believe in yourself and look for opportunities," she says. To make it in

the mining sector, according to Zikalala, "women need determination and resilience. There are many opportunities, but you will experience challenges and you'll need to bounce back."

De Beers, says Zikalala, has a more mature and transformed environment than many other mining organisations. "Our management is dedicated to developing women in mining, and we are always willing to have conversations to improve this area," she says. "However, as a whole, the industry is at a variety of levels of maturity and has a long way to go."

Michelle Lawrence, technical director of Kropz Fertilizer's Elandsfontein – thriving in a male-dominated industry

When, as a chemical engineering graduate from the University of Cape Town, Lawrence began working in the sector about 15 years ago, most mining operations did not even have toilet facilities for women. Moreover, she was warned that she'd "have to work harder than male colleagues" to prove herself.

These days – having previously worked at Impala Platinum, DRA Mineral Projects and Qinisele Resources, and having added a GDE in mineral economics to her qualifications – Lawrence is the technical director of Kropz Fertilizer's Elandsfontein phosphate mine, where she's been since 2013.

She's pleased to report that things have changed. "New mines are now designed to cater for women, and older operations have been converted to provide for women's needs," she says. "Women have proven that we can and do bring a different perspective to male-dominated careers, and industries are adjusting. Women are well supported at Kropz."

That's not to say you won't come across gender bias in mining, regardless of whether you're a miner, truck driver, engineer or director, which, says Lawrence, means women have to be more assertive. "Hard work, a thick skin and a sense of humour have helped me," she says. "That and the ability to use constructive criticism effectively and not take things

Women have proven that we can and do bring a different perspective to male-dominated careers."
– Michelle Lawrence

personally make things easier in what remains a male-dominated environment. In fact, I love what I do and the people I work with."

Gender equity objectives notwithstanding, Lawrence believes it's a particularly important time for mines to increase the numbers of women they employ. "The world needs mining – there's no escaping that. However, it needs to be done differently to how it's been done in the past," she says. "Responsible, sustainable mining practices, such as those we've implemented at Elandsfontein, need to be embraced. I would like to see an industry where this is the norm. I believe women are more sensitive to the needs of future generations, and more women are required in mining to drive this change." •



Michelle Lawrence

IMAGES: MARK AGNOR/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, SUPPLIED