

Building a Gender Diverse Mining Workforce in the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region

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CLUSTER RESEARCH REPORT:

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Introduction

“Building a Gender Diverse Workforce in the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region” is part of a much larger overarching project called Regional Workforce Development in Rural BC. The Regional Workforce Development in Rural BC Project is spearheaded by Selkirk college and the goal is to collectively assess comparative workforce development strategies in ways that inform future policy, planning, and action in the Columbia Basin-Boundary region. The purpose of this brief is to present findings from a study conducted in 2018 seeking to better understanding the fundamental issues and barriers facing women wishing to enter the mining workforce.

The Kootenays have a long and rich history in mining. Early mining operations started in the region in the 1880’s (Taylor, 1978). Mining in the Kootenay region has changed a lot since the late 1800’s, however, mining still remains the economic backbone of a number of communities in the region. There are numerous mining operations in the region and the majority of employment opportunities in the British Columbia mining industry are in the Kootenay region.

Between June and August 2018, targeted interviews were completed with participants from the mining and support sectors in the Columbia-Basin Boundary region of British Columbia (BC). Participants included representation from academic, government, industry, and other civil organizations (e.g., professional bodies). Participants were asked questions about the role of gender in the mining sector, barriers for women trying to access jobs in the sector, and opportunities to build a more gender diverse mining sector.

This document has two objectives: 1) To summarize the results of the interviews; and 2) To provide insight into how those results can inform understanding and recommendations for building a more gender diverse workforce in the Columbia Basin-Boundary region.

Methodology

Data collection consisted of thirteen one-on-one interviews. These interviews took place primarily in the Kootenay region, either at the participants' place of employment or at a coffee shop. In some cases, an in-person interview was not possible. In these instances, interviews were conducted over the phone. The interviews were conducted between June 14th, 2018 and September 21st, 2018. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis and coding. In addition to the interview, a document analysis was completed to support and elaborate on themes that emerged through the interviews.

Findings

Through the interviews, there were several key themes that emerged. It is important that these results are based on a small sample and do not necessarily reflect the population as a whole, however they provide a useful insight into the mining workforce.

In a detailed review of the literature and during the interviews three themes regarding gender and the mining workforce in BC emerged. The following is a breakdown of key findings from this research project. The first major theme that emerged concerns rural small towns and the dynamics of rural communities. This theme will be referred to as "Rural Small Town Dynamics". The second major theme that emerged was "Community Supports", which included training opportunities, childcare, and education. This theme this "Community Supports". The third and final major theme that emerged concerns mining companies. This included company policy, diversity mandates, policies, and hiring processes. For the purposes of the research, this theme is "Company Culture, Practices and Policy".

Rural Small Town Dynamics

During the interviews, participants highlighted the positive aspects of living in rural small-towns. These positive aspects were typically characterized by recreation opportunities and access to nature. Recreation was highlighted as being one of the key reasons why participants were attracted to the Kootenays. Participants were also attracted by the sense of community and the family values that characterize rural small-towns in the Kootenays

Participants also highlighted the challenges associated with retention due to the limitations they faced in small towns. The primary retention issues identified can be classified as community supports. Child care, education opportunities, and housing, were the primary issues brought up by participants relating to retention.

Community Supports

Child Care

Child care and the responsibility of looking after children was a major barrier discussed by numerous participants. Based on the responses of participants there were three key elements to this issue: gendered responsibility of child care, lack of child care spots, and lack of extended hour child care. The first element raised by participants was that child care has traditionally been the responsibility of women. The second element raised by participants was the general lack of child care spots available in the

10 of the 13 participants identified child care as a major barrier for women entering the mining industry.

Columbia Basin-Boundary region. Participants emphasized that there was a shortage of child care spots in the region and that this created a barrier for those hoping to access mining jobs. The third element raised by participants was that there is a shortage of child-care to meet the needs of shift workers.

Education and Training Opportunities

Training and employment opportunities are another support highlighted by participants. Training opportunities are organized into three key areas: onsite job training, local college education, and university education. On site job training is very important in the mining sector, particularly for hourly workers. Participants highlighted the onsite training available for hourly workers at Teck Coal. All hourly workers, who are hired to do active mining, start as haul truck drivers at Teck Coal. Local college education is a key support for women entering the mining field. There are two main colleges in the Kootenay region: Selkirk College and the College of the Rockies. Participants emphasized that the local colleges are considered “pre-university” and students are only able to start their undergraduate degrees there before transferring to other institutions. The key issue brought up by participants in relation to local college education, was the shortage of skilled trades people in the region. The third level of training is university education. There were two aspects of university education brought up by participants. The first aspect concerns the availability of mining programs in BC. The second aspect, brought up by three participants, concerns the interest of university educated professions to relocate to the Kootenay mining region.

Housing

Housing affordability and availability were major concerns brought up by numerous participants. It is important to note that these concerns were mainly brought up in relation to the Elk Valley which includes the communities of Fernie, Sparwood, and Elkford. Participants also highlighted that this was a community challenge for both women and men and for all sectors, not just mining. Both participants expanded on this by explaining how rental shortages impacted current residents looking to upgrade or change locations, as well people moving into the community.

Company Culture

A key theme that emerged during the analysis of the interviews was company culture, practices and policy with regard to workforce diversity. Within this theme, four key sub themes arose: general company culture, diversity in recruitment, job opportunities, and barriers to upper level management.

General Company Culture

General company culture, with regard to this research, refers to the general values, goals, and behaviours that contribute to the social and psychological environment of a workplace. Out of thirteen participants, ten referred to company culture. Of the ten participants who mentioned company culture in their interviews, six gave generally positive reviews, while the remaining four referred to company culture in a negative way. Of the six participants who expressed positive feelings regarding company culture, five were currently employed in the mining sector.

“[The] corporate will to change mining site culture has promoted change”

Participant #2, 2018

There were four participants who felt that company culture was negative with regard to gender and female employees. Of the four employees who expressed negative feelings regarding company culture, three did not actively work in the mining sector. They were from a range of sectors, including interventionalists. This shows that those participants who were currently working in the mining sector, perceived company culture differently than those who were working in a support industry or in interventionalist roles.

Job Opportunities

A key concept that arose regarding company culture, practice and policy was the idea of job growth and opportunity for those applying and currently working in the mining sector. In general, there was a very positive response from participants regarding the growth and job opportunities available to those working in the sector. Participants actively working at Teck expressed that there were numerous opportunities for job growth.

One main challenge that was brought up with regard to gender diversity and women in the mining sector was barriers to upper level management. Participants identified two key barriers with regard to barriers to upper level management. The first barrier was the process of succession. The second challenge to upper level management identified by participants was the lack of gender diversity in management teams. Participants were concerned that upper level management teams were not gender diverse. As a result, participants felt this was a barrier.

Diversity in Recruitment

A key theme discussed by participants was diversity in recruitment. Generally, this referred to how new employees were recruited into the mining sector. In their responses, participants highlighted diversity in recruitment with mining companies.

Key Research Themes and Drivers of Change

Mentorship Programs

Mentorship is a powerful way to create change in a workplace. Mentorship creates the opportunity for those currently working in the mining sector to guide, provide advice, and build relationships with those who are thinking about entering the industry. The results from this research identified mentorship as a driver of change. Two participants in this research referenced mentorship when discussing their career trajectories in the mining sector. In these cases, the participants were referring to personal connections, such as a family member or significant other who worked in the mining sector. These connections gave the participants an understanding of the field before applying. Mentorship programs help break down this perception by giving new employees and prospective employees an insight into the workplace. It is important to note that mentorship alone is not powerful enough to create significant change within a workforce. It can be one tool used to drive change, but it needs to be implemented along with other efforts such as a strong company policy.

Shifting Narratives and Public Perception

Another driver of change revealed by this research, was the shifting narratives or shifting public perception of the mining industry workforce. While this research only represents a small sample, it does show that there is a difference between what the literature is saying about women in mining jobs and what is actually occurring on mine sites. If it is the case that the actual experience of women in mining is more positive than suggested in the literature, it is important

that public perception be changed by changing the narrative around mining. Sharing positive stories about women working in mine sites with other women and communities can change the narrative around mining and shift the perception from “non-traditional job” to “job”.

Conclusion

The Columbia Basin-Boundary region mining industry is a significant economic driver for BC and Canada. The communities in the region provide the workforce to support the Kootenay mining industry. The purpose of this research was to explore the barriers facing women who wish to enter the mining workforce in the region. The goal of this research was to identify barriers, and to explore ways in which to remove them and create more opportunities for women who wish to enter into the mining workforce.

This research highlights some key themes around women in the mining workforce. Participants identified what was driving positive change within the mining sector. Strong mining company practices and policy are creating frameworks and guidelines that ensure diversity and inclusion are at the forefront of company culture. Mentorship programs are helping current and prospective employees learn more about the industry. In addition, mentorship programs are sharing knowledge and creating networks. Public perception and the narratives about women in mining are changing. The stereotypes of women not liking mining because it is “dirty” or “dangerous” are being eroded and replaced by positive stories of women working and thriving in the mining sector. However, there are still major systemic barriers that impact the attraction and retention of women in the mining workforce.

The major barrier to greater gender diversity in mining is caused by limited community supports. To begin with, there is a lack of child care spots that meet the needs of shift workers. Additionally, limited spots available in training and education programs causes a barrier for those wishing to develop a trade. Finally, a lack of affordable real estate and rental stock creates housing challenges for those needing to relocate to enter the mining workforce. These barriers are well documented in this research and in numerous other research projects. In addition, these barriers are not just evident in the mining sector. Women may also face these barriers in other resource industries like forestry, agriculture, and fisheries. Ultimately, these barriers erode the workforce in all resource based or shift work jobs.

Looking forward, it is imperative that the communities and companies in the Kootenay region work to address these community support barriers. There are powerful drivers of change at work in the region and it is important to remove the barriers. Mining does not need to be classified as a “non-traditional” job for women. Mining is simply a job and there are many women in the Kootenay region who are eager to work in the sector. Breaking down these barriers is imperative to building a diverse and strong workforce in the Kootenay region.