An Exploration of the Experiences of Women Who FIFO

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Women who work in mining are clearly in the minority. This study aimed to give a voice to this minority group by understanding their experiences in order to better support them. The experiences of 20 women working at mine sites on a Fly In, Fly Out (FIFO) basis were investigated. A qualitative research method was used. Thematic analysis of data revealed several key attractions: Financial security, work satisfaction, career advancement, sense of belonging, satisfying a sense of adventure, and enduring friendships. Challenges included: Developing and maintaining friendships; community living; physical exhaustion and recuperation during leave; and successfully returning to Perth-based work. Challenges associated with working in a male dominated mining environment included: Lack of female contact; coping with male mine site behaviour; lack of privacy; being the focus of attention; having to prove themselves; and, coping with discrimination and harassment. FIFO is not a long-term option for most women, especially for those who wanted children and/or develop a sense of home and community in Perth. Psychological costs also emerged including: Professional and social isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and, what the researcher has described as 'gender disorientation', in which women seemed to lose their sense of femininity. This paper outlines qualities and behaviours considered helpful for managing FIFO work, provides advice for women considering FIFO work, and makes suggestions for future research.

Background

In Western Australia, 17.1% of the mining workforce is female and Australia wide this figure is 13.6% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2001). In 2007, the ABS Western Australian Labour Force Statistics of the Mining Industry indicated that females comprised 19% of the industry (Sibbel, 2008). These figures refer to the mining industry as a whole. The number of women working on actual mine sites is smaller. This is despite Equal Opportunity legislation and Affirmative Action policies, as well as other government and company interventions that have supported the introduction of women to mine sites (Eveline, 1994; Eveline & Booth, 1988).

Smith, Crowley and Hutchinson (1993) researched younger female mining professionals to better understand why so many were considering leaving a profession that they had strived so hard to enter. Three key problems were identified for these women: Feeling the need to blend into the dominant male culture by being less visible; experiencing ongoing pressure by being a member of a minority group; and a lack of role models to demonstrate whether, or how, it

was possible to combine work and family responsibilities successfully. Other researchers such as Pattenden (1998), Eveline (2002-2003), and Yrke (2004) also reported the numerous difficulties and pressures that these women encounter. Gender conflict and discrimination appear to be central themes, particularly for those women who choose to work offshore, or on remote mine sites.

Gender Issues faced by Women in Mining

Many women in Australian mining report facing pressure in their workplaces by virtue of being in the minority and feeling that they must 'blend in' (Smith et al., 1993). Hence, despite some very public support of women in mining, there are some visible and not-so-visible barriers, some of which are structural and others, interpersonal or sociological (ABCTV, 17 October 2005; Anger, Cake & Fuchs, 1988; Eveline & Booth, 1988, 2002-2003; Gibson & Scoble, 2004; Heen, 1988; Steed & Sinclair, 2000; Yrke, 2004). Gibson and Scoble (2004) asked 50 professional women what hurdles to equality they had encountered while working in mining. A range of issues emerged: Balancing

work and family; a lack of role models and the related issue of barriers to promotion; the interrelated areas of 'mining culture', stereotyping, harassment, and discrimination; being a minority, and the connected issues of health and safety, and lack of facilities.

Fly In, Fly Out Mining

FIFO is used throughout Western Australia for mining and petroleum projects. FIFO is defined as "all employment in which work is so isolated from the workers' homes that food and accommodation are provided for them at the work site, and schedules are established whereby employees spend a fixed number of days at the site, followed by a fixed number of days at home" (Storey & Shrimpton, 1991). The Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia (CMEWA)(2005) indicate that 47% of mining operations utilise FIFO and 42% of mining industry employees are FIFO. Many mining companies state that the viability of continuing with remote mining actually depends on FIFO operations (Buckley-Carr, 2005; CMEWA, 2005; Penn, 2005).

FIFO Research

Until recently there has been a surprising paucity of research undertaken into the impacts of FIFO on Australian employees and their families. However recent research that has been undertaken has identified a number of benefits and challenges associated with the employment practice. Benefits include higher wages and the financial advantages of being accommodated by the company, continued access to facilities in the home community, more (quality) time for joint family activities when at home, separation of work and home/family life, and the at-home spouse's potential for independence and personal freedom (Arnold, 1995; Collinson, 1998; Keown, 2004; Sibbel, 2001; Storey, 2001; Watts, 2004).

Challenges associated with FIFO

A number of challenges have also been identified. Keown (2004) found a wide range of problems associated with FIFO, which include: fatigue, poor concentration and memory, anxiety, depressed mood, irritability, poor sleeping habits, consumption of excessive amounts of alcohol and

cigarettes, and the maintenance of sedentary lifestyles. He also noted that there can be reciprocal effects between work and home; constant worry about domestic issues can affect worker morale, production and safety, and workers can suffer from 'separation anxiety', that is, anxiety associated with being away from one's spouse and family. In her review of the literature, Arnold (1995) also noted psychological symptoms associated with loneliness and isolation, such as passivity, personal withdrawal and disinterest. In addition, there can be relationship restrictions and a limited opportunity for community involvement.

Much has been written about the negative effects of FIFO lifestyles on relationships and family life (Parkes et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2004; Sibbel, 2004; Watts, 2004). Collinson (1998) reported that pressure is put on personal relationships and above average divorce rates are experienced. This is the result of the many problems that have been associated with regular partings and reunions for workers and their families.

Women and FIFO

Much of the current and past FIFO research has focused exclusively on male workers. A number of studies have specifically focused on female FIFO workers however these have looked at gender issues and the cultural aspects of women on sites (Anger et al., 1988; Eveline & Booth, 1988; Heen, 1988; Wybrow, 1988; Yrke, 2004) rather than at how women themselves cope with a FIFO lifestyle. Steed and Sinclair (2000) investigated the stressors faced by professional women in the mining industry in remote locations and concluded that gender and FIFO rosters are additional stressors on professional women in the mining industry.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some FIFO women experience psychosocial stress and that their experiences are different from those of men. These women are reportedly unable to develop satisfactory lifestyles, either at their home bases, or on the mine sites. Social isolation appears to be a key problem. Finlayson (2005) reported that approximately 80% of

FIFO women are not prepared for the lifestyle, in particular for issues associated with needing to live a double life, not being prepared for living on remote sites after living in the city, and not being prepared mentally for the 'glass ceiling syndrome'.

Conclusions

Mining in remote Australia is fundamentally changing with the increased reliance on FIFO operations. The number of women in the mining workforce is slowly increasing and women are being actively recruited to join the industry, particularly for FIFO operations. Parts of the industry anticipate that more women in mining will improve the industry by introducing diversity and a more cooperative culture. Despite this trend, significant barriers to women's participation are not being addressed, which leads to many women leaving the industry prematurely, to either enter other fields, or to start families (Gibson and Scoble, 2004). There is growing evidence to suggest that women face strong pressures within the industry and that being employed on a FIFO basis exacerbates these pressures. Research on the effects of the FIFO lifestyle on men has identified a number of stressors and negative effects on both male workers and their families, in addition to the benefits of the employment choice. FIFO women face the combined challenges of working FIFO, of working in a male dominated culture, and, if they are mothers, of raising a family. This research aimed to explore the experiences of the FIFO lifestyle on female workers, and how they cope (or do not cope) with the special demands of this work lifestyle.

Method

Participants

The participants were women who work on remote Western Australian mine sites and were, or had been, working on a FIFO basis. A total of 20 women, based in the Perth metropolitan area, were included in the study. The sample group comprised a range of woman across all job types in mining, including the more traditionally male positions such as engineers and operators, as well as those in traditionally more female oriented roles such as administration, safety and laboratory work.

The sample also reflected a range of ages and years of mining experience. Fifteen women were currently working FIFO, one was still working in mining but not on a FIFO basis, and the remaining four were no longer working in mining. Nine women were mining professionals, six were working in operator roles such as truck driving, and five had administration or other roles such as being an exercise physiologist. There was a mix of underground and open-cut workers.

Ages ranged from 23 to 49 years, with a mean of 31.2 years. Mining experience varied from four months to 20 years; the average length of time 6.2 years. FIFO experience varied from four months to 12 years, the average length of time 4.7 years. Fourteen participants were currently married or in a relationship, and six were single. Only one was a mother, reflecting the low incidence of mothers who FIFO.

Design

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to guide the collection and analysis of data. The aim of phenomenological research is to understand the internal worlds of research participants and how they perceive events and experiences in their world. The intention of such an approach is to deeply penetrate the person's mental world (Hayes, 2000). More specifically, an empirical phenomenological approach was employed in which transcripts from many subjects were used (Tesch, 1990).

Procedure

The researcher attended a Women in Mining Western Australia (WIMWA) social function held in Perth and informally promoted the study with that organisation's consent. WIMWA is an organisation that promotes the networking and interests of all women who work in mining within Western Australia. The WIMWA email list was employed to recruit participants. A letter was

emailed to the 420 women on the email list, informing them about the nature of the study, requesting the participation of those who were or had been working FIFO stressing the confidentiality for themselves and for their employer. The letter included reasons why such a study would be beneficial for these women and eligible women were invited to contact the researcher to arrange a face-to-face interview.

The response to the WIMWA email was far greater than expected. Interviewees were selected on the basis of obtaining a broad cross-section of ages, roles, and length of FIFO experience. The interviews lasted between 50 minutes and two hours, with the majority being between one and one and a quarter hours' duration. They were conducted between 3 October, 2005 and 24 March, 2006.

Interview Schedule

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, the interview schedule underwent minor modifications as the interviews progressed.

Analysis

A thematic analysis of data was conducted, which involved systematically sorting the data into recurrent ideas or topics drawn from the interviews in order to identify themes (Hayes, 2000; Smith & Langenhove, 2001). The overall aim of these analyses was to develop a conceptual overview of the participants' experiences and coping mechanisms. In addition, demographic details were examined to ascertain if there were any patterns in relation to the identified themes.

Results

The following section presents the resultant themes, namely: FIFO related issues, gender related issues, reasons for staying or leaving FIFO, qualities and behaviours required for a FIFO lifestyle, and the psychological toll of the lifestyle.

FIFO Related Issues

Attractions. The women reported a number of attractions were associated with the FIFO lifestyle: the nature of the work, the lifestyle,

community aspects, and financial rewards. Many participants reported a love for the actual work and/or an opportunity to satisfy their adventurous side. Some participants reported that the FIFO lifestyle enabled them to have "the best of both worlds" in that they are able to get into the outback but also enjoy all the conveniences and/or social life of a large city.

Consistent with several other studies (Gent, 2004; Keown, 2004; Watts, 2004), remuneration was a primary motivator, as well as the relatively carefree domestic life on site. Given that all participants worked up to 13-hour days and often there was a two to 30-minute bus ride to and from work, it left little of the day for additional activities. After-work activities were focused on either preparing for work, or unwinding such as reading, knitting, speaking to people on the telephone.

Consistent with previous research (Arnold, 1995; Storey & Shrimpton, 1991; Watts, 2004), some women in the current study liked having work and home clearly delineated. Many were also glad to avoid the drudgery of 'nine to five' commuting. The regular leave allowed for 'quality time' with family and friends and/or working on projects such as renovating houses.

Some participants were attracted to the sense of community. They valued the mine site culture, often feeling as though colleagues were family. Some had made close friends during their mining career. A number were in relationships with men who worked at the same mine site and were on the same roster, they found FIFO advantageous in enabling them to be in a relationship.

> *I reckon I've got the best job in the world. I like what I do, I like the people I work with, I get paid really well for what I do, I get frequent flyer points every week. There's a lot of good things about it, a good lifestyle. Could go away every break if you want to.*

Challenges. Participants reported a range of challenges with the FIFO lifestyle. These

related to relationships and friendships, community living, returning to a Perth-based life, and trying to fit in a full life during breaks.

For many, their social and personal life was work-focused because they worked with their partners and/or they chose to socialise with colleagues on leave breaks. However, on-site friends regularly shifted to other sites and then it tended to be difficult to stay in touch. Some women reported that it took effort to stay in touch, and they had lost contact altogether with old friends back in Perth. The loss of contact had been due to the difficulty of fitting in with each other's schedules, or because they no longer had things in common. Friends were often working when participants wanted to socialise while on break.

Several participants reported difficulty in developing friendships outside of the mining industry. Such participants, along with participants who had moved from rural Australia, or another major city, to be based in Perth for their FIFO job, lead quite lonely and socially isolated lives. This was especially so if they did not enjoy socialising with colleagues. Furthermore, it was regarded as impossible to regularly participate in community activities, sporting clubs, or attend courses.

Intimate relationships were reported to be also affected by FIFO. It was generally agreed that there were limited opportunities to meet potential partners in Perth, given the lack of social opportunities. The small number of participants who had relationships with men who were not working a FIFO roster, did not necessarily find it difficult for themselves, however, often they were aware that their partners were lonely without them. These participants often felt guilty that they were off doing adventurous things, while their partners played 'househusband'.

Many participants, but not all, enjoyed the benefits of community living. Some found it overwhelming to work and socialise with the same people, along with the lack of privacy and institutionalised nature of camp life.

According to participants, mine site work culture is one that values working hard. Work team and community members strongly supported this work ethic and it was expected that workers 'give their all' on site. This was especially noticeable, but not exclusively so, among operational workers who worked in areas where the pressure of meeting targets was relentless. For women, this was exacerbated by a male workforce culture that keeps a close eye on the performance of female workers.

According to participants, adapting to the long hours, the roster and the type of work can be physically, intellectually, and psychologically challenging. In addition, professional women often spent the first years of their career on mine sites, so they had a steep learning curve. Many responded to the pressure by regularly working longer than their usual shift, although some non-professional women also worked longer hours. The majority of participants reported being exhausted at the end of a work roster. At least the first day (or more) of their break was spent resting. Leave breaks could seem busy with some feeling as though they were on a treadmill.

Motherhood is another difficult issue to navigate. Only one participant in this research was a mother and most believed that if you wanted children you could not work FIFO.

Coping mechanisms. Participants were asked what advice they would offer to other women to cope with the lifestyle. Advice to manage the practical everyday issues associated with FIFO as well as coping with the emotional and social were offered. Practical suggestions for coping with camp life included owning two sets of belongings in order to minimise what one needs to carry back and forth, and taking one's own food because of the lack of variety. Strategies to minimise the impacts of physical exhaustion included settling in back home as soon as possible so that one's rest and relaxation time was maximised, getting early nights, and exercising.

Interpersonal advice included being outgoing and sociable upon commencement of work to gain a sense of belonging and emotional support. It was common for participants to choose to walk home from work with female colleagues – if there were any – to talk off the day's stressors. Some participants went to the wet mess (on-site bar) to do this but, once again, this depended on how comfortable women were with the gender politics.

> You work so closely with these people and spend so much time with them. It's like a family relationship. So you tend to share things that you certainly wouldn't otherwise.

A challenge and regret of choosing a FIFO lifestyle was a sense of isolation and loneliness. Participants believed that one must be self-reliant and create comfortable interpersonal boundaries. For some, this meant retreating to their donga (accommodation) after dinner for privacy. Mining professionals tended to take great care to present a professional persona. They were mindful about the people from whom they sought support and how they behaved with subordinates. Some participants relied on emotional support from home, including speaking to friends, family, or partners over the telephone or using the Internet, if accessible. The onus was often on participants to maintain Perth friendships. Those with off site relationships reported that it helped significantly if both parties made an effort to keep daily contact so that there is no catch-up period when they are reunited.

Gender Related Issues

Participants' experiences of working in a male dominated environment varied. At the one end of the spectrum, there were women who were comfortable with it and/or preferred to work with men. At the other end of the spectrum, there were women who had lasting 'psychological scars' from the experience. The majority of women were challenged by at least some aspects of the environment and, to some extent, had coped successfully.

Some important variables. Participants'

experiences seemed to be influenced by variables such as the type of job they did, the part of the mine in which they worked, the number of women with whom they worked, the size of the site, the type of culture already established, the amount of mining experience, coping abilities, existing attitudes towards men, and previous experiences of working or living with men.

The amount of contact the female miners had with male workers, and whether the work was office or operationally based, appeared to be a key variable. Managers and workers in operations areas were reported to be more extreme in their negative attitudes towards, and treatment of, women at mine sites. Hence, both professional and non-professional women faced similar challenges if they were directly dealing with operations workers.

The bigger the mine the more segregated the workers, so some participants from the larger sites knew little about the politics of the different areas. Conversely, on smaller mine sites, participants were more familiar with, and were affected by, many or all areas of the mine. Organisational cultures also varied. Some mine sites had women in very senior positions, and up to half of the employees in some professional departments were women. In contrast, other sites had few women overall, and none in senior positions. Interestingly, in the underground operations crews, the women tended to be separated into different crews. Hence, it was not usual for operational women to work alongside other women.

Another important gender aspect was awareness by female employees of whether a company would support any harassment claims, and whether male workers and management actively supported anti-harassment and discrimination policies. Participants' experiences fell along a continuum, from those women who felt totally supported, to those who had endured some truly demeaning, dangerous, and/or intolerable situations.

Attractions. It did not appear that working in a male dominated environment was a major

attraction for taking a FIFO job. Some of the younger, newer recruits to FIFO enjoyed the attention they received, however, this initial enjoyment often waned. Others found the attention difficult. Some described that men could be quite protective, ensuring that certain women were not exposed to unscrupulous men. Many research participants found that their male colleagues sought their counsel on personal issues. Some participants enjoyed this unofficial role, whereas others felt uncomfortable or resented it.

> Because I'm a girl, the guys will unload their problems on me about their wives... Obviously they are not going to go to other guys saying they are having problems with their missus. So they come to me.

Challenges. A number of challenges of working in a male dominated mining environment were identified and included: The lack of female contact; coping with day-to-day male mine site behaviour; lack of privacy; being the focus of attention; proving oneself; and, coping with discrimination and harassment. In addition, some of the women were tired of being the focus of gossip.

All participants reported that they had to learn how to adjust to the male mining environment and male culture. The kinds of adjustments varied, with some women reporting a small number of issues, which were mildly irritating, and others experiencing significant problems. Overall, women who had been working in the industry for longer periods of time believed that attitudes towards women had improved. It was also not uncommon for this to be backed up by management, who sent clear messages that harassment would not be tolerated. Overall, participants believed that the larger mine sites were mostly harassment-free. Smaller mine sites were more likely to be 'old school' in that discriminatory practises were still present. Overall, women who worked in the operations areas were more likely to report that they have been subjected to harassment and discrimination. Women who were office based were likely to

report more subtle forms of gender difficulties.

The participants who appeared the most negatively affected by their experiences had worked underground. They seemed to be subjected to the most extreme forms of behaviour, (although this may be an artefact of the small sample size in this study and would be worthy of further investigation). The women spoke of being tested by the men to see if they could cope with the work and culture. Apparently, the men also tested the men, however, a crucial difference was that women were not familiar with male ways of testing and were often isolated from any same-gender support. Participants mostly noted steep learning curves in which they had to quickly learn how to "harden up" if they were to survive. They felt the pressure to "prove themselves" in a man's world. Extreme, but not uncommon testing behaviour included: verbally abusing women; aggressively defending their stated positions; giving women heavier work loads; patronising women; watching their every move; making suggestive or derogatory remarks; displaying inappropriate pictures; or, making negative remarks about women in mining, in the presence of a lone woman. Some women in supervisory operational roles reported being psychologically bombarded and worn down.

Women who drove trucks and worked on machinery were generally not given any favours. Adjusting to the physical side of the job was reported as being quite a challenge. These women often felt that they must outperform male colleagues if they were to be considered equals. Any sign of weakness was used against women, to further test them and drive them out. If women left, it was confirmation of the long held belief that 'women do not belong underground'.

These incidents highlight another important aspect of being a woman on a mine site: one must always be seen to be self-sufficient. If a woman expected or accepted assistance from the men, then this usually came at a cost, especially if one used her femininity

to gain favours. Generally, the cost was that they lost the opportunity to be considered an equal. All participants, except some of those who were very new to the industry, took great care to separate their femininity from the work place.

> *You've got about a two to three favour leeway to use your femininity to get help but if you use it all the time then it won't get you anywhere. It'll be to your detriment…they can make your life hell.*

A less common problem reported by two participants was of female colleagues' underwear being stolen from the washing line and one of the women receiving lurid telephone calls. Although this type of incident did not occur frequently, it was disconcerting to all women on site. In one incident, apparently, all the men were on a keen look out for the culprit. One night they incorrectly caught a man who was innocently hanging out his own washing! This is an example of how some men will act to protect their female colleagues. Only one woman reported personally being accosted.

Less extreme but also challenging behaviour included: Constant sexual references in conversations; men seeking the professional and/or personal support of female colleagues but leaving the woman in the lurch when she was in crisis; and, men just not wanting to know about any problems that the women may have been having.

More benign, but nonetheless annoying to the participants, was the constant focus on sport, sex, drinking and other traditionally male topics of conversation, with little or no tolerance for traditionally female conversation topics such as fashion, health, beauty, and shopping.

The literature commonly refers to discrimination against women in mining with respect to job promotion (Gibson & Scoble, 2004; Smith et al., 1993; Steed & Sinclair, 2000) and this small-scale study supports these findings. Once again, women who worked underground experienced this form of discrimination most strongly. Underground female workers were the more likely to report that they had to exceed the performance of their male colleagues in order to be considered professionally equal. This meant working harder and faster, and out performing the men. Importantly, these performance criteria applied whether it was the woman's first day on the mine site or her twentieth year.

The male competitive culture was strong underground. This culture, coupled with the pervading belief that 'women don't belong underground', made it extremely difficult for women who operated machinery to advance beyond truck driving. All reported watching male colleagues, whom they had often trained, being promoted over them, year after year. Another challenging aspect, particularly for machinery operators, was the tendency for women to pay more attention to detail and to be more cautious with equipment. This could be undervalued or treated with contempt.

There was one area of operations work however, where being a woman was reported as being inherently beneficial and where there was seemingly little resistance from male colleagues. Women are becoming valued in mine organising roles, such as operation of computer software, which manages the movement of all equipment on site. Women are also being increasingly recognised as being able to attend to multiple tasks concurrently and to do so for long periods of time. They tend to perform well under stress and are appreciated by colleagues for providing them with guidance (Gibson and Scoble, 2004).

Mining professionals were less likely to report discrimination with respect to job promotion although there was evidence that this does still exist. Impediments to promotion for female mining professionals, however, seemed more likely to stem from women not staying on site long enough to be considered for advancement. Often they did not stay because they wanted to have children and/or because of the challenges discussed previously in this paper. According to participants, little is done to support mothers staying on site.

Coping mechanisms. A variety of strategies were used by women to cope with

working in a male-dominated environment including: seeking advice, support and/or protection from family, friends and colleagues; changing one's behaviour and attitudes; and, a high degree of self-restraint. Besides two women who reported that they felt more at ease in a mining environment, the majority of women reported feeling constrained on site. Some felt mildly irritated while others felt stifled and angry. Most participants concluded that there are certain ways that women must behave in order to adapt. It was not unusual for women to report feeling as though they live two separate lives; having a "split personality" in which, "I put on a mask as I board the plane to go to work" and take it off once home.

> *In the early days I would just take it. In the latter days I became very defensive because you get to stage of being sick of being treated like dog shit... In the end you tend to become one of them. You become a split personality, around home and your friends you're a normal person and then when you're back at work you tend to be exactly like them, and drink in the wet mess say the same words, and listen to the dirty jokes, and tolerate it. It just happens, you tend to become 'one of the boys'.*

These women reported dressing conservatively, or like a male, being very aware of whom they spoke to, where and for how long, and ensuring that they were self-sufficient - that they could "hold their own". Many women believed they had to suppress all signs of femininity: They could not dress in a feminine manner, wear make-up, or even do their hair. This suppression extended to curtailing female oriented conversations, not being seen as "emotional", or showing any sign of weakness. For most participants, it also meant not having sexual relationships on-site or, if so, only after having known the person for a very long time. If male friendships were risked, women were cautious with regard to gossip and that the man in question did not misconstrue the friendship for sexual interest.

Many women reported learning to "toughen up" on site: They tried to appear confident, and to ask firmly for what they needed and act as if they expected to get it.

> *I don't tolerate fools anymore; if someone acts stupid then that's it. I tell them off.*

> *I mentioned the problem to my supervisor and he said, "You're a chick on a mine site, get over it, deal with it". From that moment I said to myself that I just have to deal with it.*

> *When I first started as a happy fresh-faced geo who had just started there and they'll push you and push you until you either break or you toughen up and when you toughen you they'll either call you a ball breaker or a bitch... It's tough for the girls and it doesn't matter which way you go you're going to end up with some kind of label.*

Most participants reported that they needed skills that ensured that men did not transgress their personal boundaries. Women in supervisory roles also learnt quickly never to let a man get the "upper hand". Participants reported that men would be constantly "pushing the boundaries", so if they did not firmly and immediately set them, the men would not respect the boundaries, or the woman. However, in other situations, participants reported that if the boundaries are too restrictive then women risk becoming alienated. For example, if a woman complained about girlie pin-ups or sexual comments, then the men may isolate her.

The researcher explored how the women handled the frustration they experienced resulting from these situations. Most participants reported that they did not show or express their frustration outwardly, as this would indicate weakness or, even worse, that they were "emotional". Many of the women suppressed their frustrations by using appropriate self-talk or distractions. Distractions included working harder or surfing the Internet for holiday destinations, or items to purchase.

Others waited for an appropriate situation to let off steam on site, or until they were on leave. Some found solace in the natural environment of the mine site.

It was not uncommon in the beginning of a woman's FIFO career, for her to go back to her donga at night and cry. Some participants called loved ones for support, however, many were self-reliant. Several participants were in relationships and some shared the same roster and lived on site with their partner and thus had their partners' support on a daily basis. Exercise, such as walking home or visiting the on-site gym, was also reported as being useful.

Some participants had the support of mentors or management. In the latter case it often depended on the company culture: If the culture was one of zero tolerance of discrimination and harassment, then women could confidently report incidents. Often women reported incidents as a precautionary measure: if they experienced a worrying incident, they want to make sure that if anything else occurred, someone in authority was aware and supportive. Support was much more likely to come in the form of mentoring or advice.

Reasons for Staying or Leaving FIFO

The majority of participants in this study had planned to stop working FIFO in the medium term, and some had already left. Those who had worked FIFO for more than five years were likely to have had breaks of several years. Most agreed that it was too difficult to indefinitely live a FIFO lifestyle. Reasons cited for leaving included: the novelty wearing off, wanting to live a "normal" life, and having a routine that fits in with friends and family in Perth. Some were tired of having no choice in what they ate or what time they ate. They wanted to change their own bed, sleep in their favourite sheets, and do their own cooking and chores. They were tired of the constant contact with colleagues and the restrictions of communal living. They wanted their home to feel like a home, rather than somewhere they just visited. They wanted to participate in sporting and social groups, or enrol in courses. Some had taken heed of their

partners' requests to be home permanently, to share their lives on a daily basis. Many felt tired or burnt out.

However, circumstances can make leaving difficult, either on a practical and/or emotional level. A small number of participants had been very stressed by the transition while others who were currently attempting the change felt trapped by their circumstances. Financial commitments such as mortgages, or believing that they couldn't live on an average "Perth wage", made the prospect of leaving scary, as did the loss of community.

There was also some uncertainty as to how they would cope with all that is associated with a nine to five job such as commuting, the potential blurring of work/life boundaries, less holiday leave, and being in a more gender-balanced environment. A couple of participants, who had worked underground for many years and were leaving the industry, spoke emotionally about the difficulties of learning how to "become feminine".

Qualities and Behaviour needed for a FIFO Lifestyle

The most common personal attributes, as reported by participants, that helped participants adjust to the FIFO lifestyle were being open-minded, independent, sociable, practical, and confident, as well as having a sense of humour. Another important quality was being persistent or "stubborn" in achieving what one sets out to do. Some participants believed that women must accept that they will be working in a man's environment, as well as adapt to the harsher physical environment and conditions. It was also important to be self-reliant, practical, and resourceful, while also being able to blend into the community. Being confident and adventurous, and enjoying challenges, as well as having a drive to prove oneself were also considered beneficial. Finally, many participants believed that being single is easier, although an understanding partner can be an asset.

Research participants offered a wealth of advice to would-be female FIFO workers,

covering areas such as: reasons for considering the work; how to deal with gender politics and community living; finding a suitable mine site; and, preparing for leaving the industry.

They advised against doing FIFO simply for the money, as this does not assist with enduring difficulties. Most knew of both men and women who had begun work for this reason and then felt trapped in what other research has dubbed the "golden hand-cuff" syndrome (Keown, 2004; Watts, 2004) in which workers become dependent on their high remuneration. One must be motivated and realise that FIFO work is demanding: everyone is expected to "pull their own weight", time on site is almost solely work-focused. Furthermore, some believed that women should simply expect that sexism will exist, and accept it.

In addition, clearly planning one's career and life, and seeking support can guard against the pitfalls of leaving FIFO. It was also advised that women should be realistic about the lifestyle: know that it is very difficult to balance work and family, and that there will be a lot that one will miss out on at home. In addition, before taking on the position, women should ascertain whether those who will be affected at home are comfortable with their decision, and will support them. If possible, get those significant others to visit and experience the mine site as soon as possible after commencing.

Support both at home and on the mine is critical. Participants advised that women should make the effort to be sociable and outgoing, and establish a support network quickly: strive to get along with everyone, like newcomers to a small country town, while clearly indicating to male colleagues what behaviour is and is not acceptable. Furthermore, women should always be professional at work, and not mix work and "play". Special care needs to be taken in terms of dressing appropriately.

> *Stand up for yourself. Stay sane by not taking things personally like the abuse or anything. Keeping your mouth shut, listening, working hard, doing that little bit extra, paying attention and staying*

> *safe.*

The Psychological Toll

For many participants, there were psychological costs associated with working FIFO, including periods of feeling "low" or "depressed". Anxiety and physical exhaustion were also experienced.

> *I have gone up against the real extremes of my personality trying to cope with Fly In Fly Out. I have seen myself doing things that I don't like about myself... It nearly broke up my relationship.*

> *Sometimes I'd just go back to my room at night and cry on my own saying, 'I've had enough of this, it isn't fair.' You go through bouts of depression being in situations like that too. I suppose I got through it by being determined that I wanted to make it work and prove that I could do the job.*

> *I had to get aggressive, not aggressive, but had to become outwardly stronger whereas inwardly I was probably becoming weaker and weaker and weaker. Excuse my French but it was fucking with my head. I just couldn't handle it any longer. It just got to the stage where they had beaten me.*

Times when participants seemed particularly vulnerable were at the commencement of FIFO, or when wanting to leave FIFO. If one has adjusted well to the lifestyle then it can be frightening to go back into a conventional life. Some participants seemed frozen in fear at this prospect. In addition, some women found the lifestyle a lonely one, which made experiencing depression a more likely outcome. Some had sought professional advice and taken anti-depressants.

The other 'cost' – which may be considered more sociological than psychological – was the damage to gender relations. Some women had developed empathy towards men and the male point of view.

However, many women had become jaded and disillusioned, as their opinions of men worsened: Sadly, for some, to the point where they were unsure or unwilling to seek out a relationship. They had listened in disbelief to the attitudes their colleagues had towards the women they dated, their wives, and women generally. At the end of day, these women wondered how any man could be trusted.

Discussion

There were a number of strong attractions to working FIFO for women, such as the money, the nature of the work, the environment, and the travel. In addition, for the mining professionals, it was about career progression. The attractions of working FIFO, and a commitment to making their choice of work a success, meant that many women endured the challenges and obstacles. Yet, many participants intended to return to Perth based work in the near future given the associated drawbacks.

Upon commencement of FIFO, most women had been confronted by a foreign male environment and communal way of life, as well as a foreign physical environment. Furthermore, usually the job was new, and there was a steep learning curve. For some participants, the experience was generally a positive one: they gained confidence as they became competent at their work; they enjoyed the initial attention they received by being a part of the minority; and, they may have even found a sense of belonging or a 'family' within the community.

One of the most difficult challenges related to proving themselves on the mine site, particularly with regard to work skills. This was made particularly difficult for professional women because of the lack of mentors and female role models, while non-professional women were often faced with physically demanding circumstances and isolation from other females.

Many women experienced the additional stressors of: constantly being scrutinised; keeping appropriate boundaries with male colleagues; and, the lack of female colleagues. There were also non-gender related stressors such as the

restrictions of communal living and the difficulties associated with creating or maintaining a satisfying lifestyle in Perth. For example, many women reported difficulties maintaining friendships, taking part in community activities, running a household, attending various medical and personal appointments, as well as finding the time for rest and relaxation during leave.

Options for intimate relationships were limited and women who wanted to have children could not continue FIFO, unless their partner took primary responsibility for the children. Most participants did not expect to meet men outside of mining circles. If they did develop a relationship with someone outside of mining, then the challenges of maintaining such a relationship were great. The least problematic relationship was with someone who also worked in mining, preferably also working FIFO and, ideally, on the same site and same roster. If such relationships were established, they had the potential to work quite well. The partners could share similar lives, work towards ambitious financial goals, and provide mutual emotional support.

An additional problem for women was that they did not have the same opportunities to relax as men did on site: The main form of recreation revolved around the wet mess, which was not considered to be a safe place for many participants. Pattenden (1998) reported that women on mine sites can experience, "intense professional and social isolation" (p. 27). This research confirms this finding as well as indicating that there is also the risk of social isolation in Perth. This exposes women who work FIFO to depression and anxiety, which some participants reported.

A key finding to emerge from this study relates to how these women managed gender identity. The feminine is denied in traditional mine culture and participants were under great pressure to conform to the expectations of the dominant culture. The small number of women who did not feel pressured reported that they were more comfortable in the presence of men

than women, and tended to have been "tomboys" in their youth. The remaining participants repeatedly reported that any traits that were perceived as feminine were immediately derided. Those women who fought this culture found it difficult, if not psychologically damaging.

In order to survive, most women in this study complied with this gender pressure by masking their femininity: They dressed in a masculine fashion, stopped attending to their hair, stopped wearing make up, stifled any signs of emotion, restricted "girlie" topics of conversation, and were careful about expressing any discomfort regarding aspects of the male environment in which they worked and lived. This was consistent with Steed and Sinclair's study (2000) in which several participants reported that they had to, "alter their own way of communicating in order not to be perceived as too bossy or too feminine" (p. 20).

Some participants in this study actively showed support for the culture, such as the selling of girlie magazines on site. Some played the masculine game and displayed their own male pin-ups. Most participants supported female solidarity by not criticising the actions of other women on site. However, privately, several reported that they wished some female colleagues would not challenge the status quo.

> *It is their environment. You've chosen to enter a male dominated environment. If you go in with a lot of high expectations of the way that they should behave, then that's when it creates dramas.*

It was emotionally demanding for some participants to constrain their natural personalities over such long periods of time.

> *I've discovered I become a different person when I go up there. I become this tough, no nonsense, unbreakable, don't-push-me-around person that I don't like.*

> *I was always torn between having to be tough and saying I'm not supposed to show my emotion at work and no, that's who I am and if they can't accept that then what hope is there for women in the*

industry, going in and acting like men.

Loneliness, isolation, and depression were reported. The researcher also found evidence that many women forgo, or became unsure of their identity as women, in the absence of an environment that affirms this and denies opportunities for free expression. It is as though some women become 'gender disorientated' as a result of their working FIFO.

> *You've got to think like a man. On my breaks I might be more feminine than I am on the mine site. I like to dress up and wear nice clothes. The shirts are all designed for men, the pants they design for women end up coming up under your breasts. They're awful.*

The women who seemed to cope the best were able to clearly and consistently delineate their sense of identity from their work identity, and were able to have this affirmed by friends and family during their breaks.

Conclusions

There are many reasons why women are attracted to working FIFO; however, there are many challenges to be faced. These challenges relate to the lifestyle and the male dominated environment. The lifestyle and work can be fulfilling for some women bringing them financial security, work satisfaction, career advancement, a sense of belonging, enduring friendships, and, possibly, a husband or partner whom they work alongside.

However, FIFO is not a long-term option for most women, especially those who want children and/or to develop a sense of home and community in Perth. This research also found that there are psychological costs for many women working FIFO. These costs can include: professional and social isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, physical exhaustion, and, what the researcher has described as, 'gender disorientation', in which the woman loses her sense of femininity.

Women considering a FIFO job are advised to discuss their decision with those loved ones who will be affected, to ensure that they will have the emotional support they need.

Newcomers are likely to cope better if they quickly develop a support network on site, in addition to a home-based support network, as well as develop a daily routine that includes social interaction and support, adequate rest, and exercise. Other important aspects to consider include how the woman considering FIFO will retain a sense of femininity, and make a smooth transition to non-FIFO work when they want to discontinue.

Research Limitations

Finally, the limitations of the research must be kept in mind when considering the findings. The researcher's own biases may have influenced the findings, given the exploratory, interactive and interpretive nature of the qualitative research methodology. Another limitation is the small sample size (20), which naturally affects the generalisability of the study. Finally, a self-selection bias in the sample may exist, that is, these volunteers may have been motivated to participate because they had an agenda, such as wanting to complain about their experiences in the industry. This may have created an artefact in the findings of the present study.

Recommendations for Future Research

In the present research, there was some evidence that women's experiences vary depending on the size and culture of the mine site on which they work, and the nature of their job. Hence, it would be valuable for future research to investigate these variables. No clear pattern emerged from this research as to whether older or younger men were more sympathetic to the plight of female miners. Conflicting reports suggest that further research on this might also be useful, as would a comparison of male and female experiences.

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