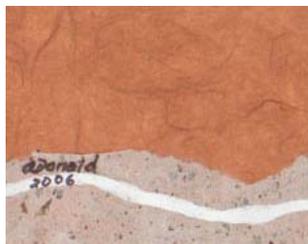


The Shire of Ravensthorpe: How Women Experience a Rural Community in Transition

ALCOA FOUNDATION'S CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM



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Abstract

There are numerous mines that are either planned or are under construction throughout Australia in what have, until now, been regions dominated by broadacre agriculture. While these mining ventures bring new jobs, infrastructure, people and opportunities to their host community, it is usually the case that the management of the social dimension of economic change is often overlooked and the benefits are therefore substantially compromised. This social dimension informs the scope of economic benefits and environmental impacts, just as it determines the potential for inclusive, vibrant communities in which all residents can thrive. Drawing on comprehensive research undertaken in the Shire of Ravensthorpe on the South Coast of Western Australia, this case study focuses on the experiences of two groups of women from a community that until five years ago was dominated by broadacre agriculture but now has considerable mining interests operating within its Shire boundaries. In particular, the work and social experiences of women who are longtime residents of the community are compared with those of women who are recent arrivals, demonstrating the complexity and importance of social dimensions in regional economic development and community management.

There are many reasons why it is useful to view community change through women's experiences. Ground breaking work undertaken by the Minerals Council of Australia in 2007 showed that women's participation in the minerals industry is limited by a number of key structural issues including low levels of part time work, the industry's culture of long hours and overwork. It is not surprising then, that women are less likely to participate in the industry but rather observe and experience the industry and its impact on the community from outside the industry.

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Introduction

There are numerous mines that are either planned or are under construction throughout Australia but particularly in Western Australia and Queensland in what have, until now, been regions dominated by broadacre agriculture. While these mining ventures usually bring new jobs, infrastructure, people and opportunities to their host community, previous work (Mayes 2008; Clements *et al.* 1996) shows that the management of the social dimension of economic change is often overlooked and the benefits are therefore substantially compromised. This social dimension informs the scope of economic benefits and environmental impacts, just as it determines the potential for inclusive, vibrant communities in which all residents can thrive. Drawing on comprehensive research undertaken in the Shire of Ravensthorpe on the Southern Coast of Western Australia, this case study will focus on the experiences of two groups of women from a community that until five years ago was dominated by broadacre agriculture but now has considerable mining interests operating within the Shire boundaries. In particular, the work and social experiences of women who are longtime residents of the community are compared with those of women who are recent arrivals, demonstrating the complexity and importance of social dimensions in regional economic development and community management.

The case study begins with contextual information situating this small, isolated rural community. Key demographic and labour force census information is compared showing how the community has changed in key areas after the construction commencement of a large residential nickel mine. Then, drawing on in-depth, face-to-face interviews with women residents of the Shire of Ravensthorpe, the social dimension of community and regional economic change, through the experience of women, is presented.

There are many reasons why it is useful to view community change through women's experiences. Ground breaking work undertaken by the Minerals Council of Australia (2007) showed that women's participation in the minerals industry is limited by a number of key structural issues including low levels of part time work, the industry's culture of long hours and overwork. It is not surprising then, that women are less likely to participate in the industry but would rather observe and experience the industry and its impact on the community from outside the industry. As Liepins

(2000a) explained, there are multiple expressions and meanings of ‘community’ depending upon social collectives which are influenced by length of residency, economic activity, interests, ethnicity and lifestyle. Each have different experiences of the ‘community’ and awareness of social power relations and influence in the area. She found that “the greatest division between groups revolved around socio-economic position and material quality of life” (Liepins 2000a: 332). The Minerals Council of Australia (2007) work found that there was relatively low material quality of life for many women involved in and around mining which is exacerbated by the often temporary nature of many people’s attachment to mining towns (Haslam McKenzie, Brereton, Rowley, Birdsall-Jones & Phillips, 2008).

The Shire of Ravensthorpe – Background

The Shire of Ravensthorpe, 550 kilometres south-east of the capital city of Western Australia, covers 13 000 square kilometres of which two thirds has been set aside for National Parks and Nature Reserves (Shire of Ravensthorpe 2005). The Fitzgerald Coast covers the area from Munglinup west to Bremer Bay, (see Figure 1) on the south coast of Western Australia. It includes the towns of Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun, the internationally renown Fitzgerald River National Park and Biosphere, the Ravensthorpe Range and inland bush and farm lands.

European settlement came to the area in the late 1860s and established isolated farms and later, there were mining discoveries, including gold and copper, none of which came to much after the initial discoveries, although mines were re-opened from time to time depending on world commodity prices. Esperance, 160 kilometres east of Ravensthorpe was, and continues to be, the principle port and commercial centre servicing the south-eastern region of Western Australia. The town of Ravensthorpe was established in the early 1900s and is 50 kilometres inland from the small coastal settlement of Hopetoun, a favoured holiday destination for many families from the agricultural area to the north (known as the southern Wheatbelt). Agriculture has been the enduring industry and during the boom years of the 1960s and later in the 1970s, there were several major land releases (Shire of Ravensthorpe 2006). For a century,

the area has been relatively marginal with small, incremental increases in the local population.



Figure 1: Ravensthorpe Hopetoun District.

Source: Shire of Ravensthorpe (<http://www.ravensthorpe.wa.gov.au/maps>) (Retrieved, September, 2008)

This changed in March 2004 when BHP Billiton approved commencement of the Ravensthorpe Nickel Operation (RNO). Consisting of an open-cut mine and hydrometallurgical processing plant, the venture has an expected ore-reserve lifespan of twenty-five years (RNO 2008). Unlike the earlier mining ventures (Shire of Ravensthorpe 2006), this project is the first (and so far only) modern, large-scale mine in the area. Described as Australia’s ‘largest nickel laterite mine and processing plant’ (Clark 2007), RNO requires an operational workforce of 650 staff (Ravensthorpe Nickel Operation 2008). BHP Billiton has opted for a residential workforce thus increasing local employment opportunities not only during the construction phase but also throughout the mine’s operational life. Officially opened in May 2008, RNO had at that point undergone plant commissioning processes and begun to ‘ramp up’ nickel production (BHP Billiton 2008). At that time approximately three hundred employees

and their families were residing in the Shire of Ravensthorpe and adjoining Shire of Esperance (RNO 2008).

The establishment of this large scale mining investment has meant that the local economy has changed significantly from the established industries of agriculture and fisheries into an area dominated by mining income and the multiplier impact of a mining labour force. Unlike other mining developments however, BHP Billiton intended to rely on local workers for their staff, a move away from the usual fly-in fly-out (FIFO) scenario. Until the mine's establishment there was relatively little change in the total labour force but between 2004 and 2006 the local workforce increased by 16 per cent. The mining sector is now the major employer in the Shire (Goldfields-Esperance Economic Perspective DLGRD 2006).

Not surprisingly, in line with general mining workforce trends, the median individual, household and family incomes have increased in Ravensthorpe since the mine was established as shown in Figure 2. This has surpassed that of Esperance previously always considered to be a more affluent community.

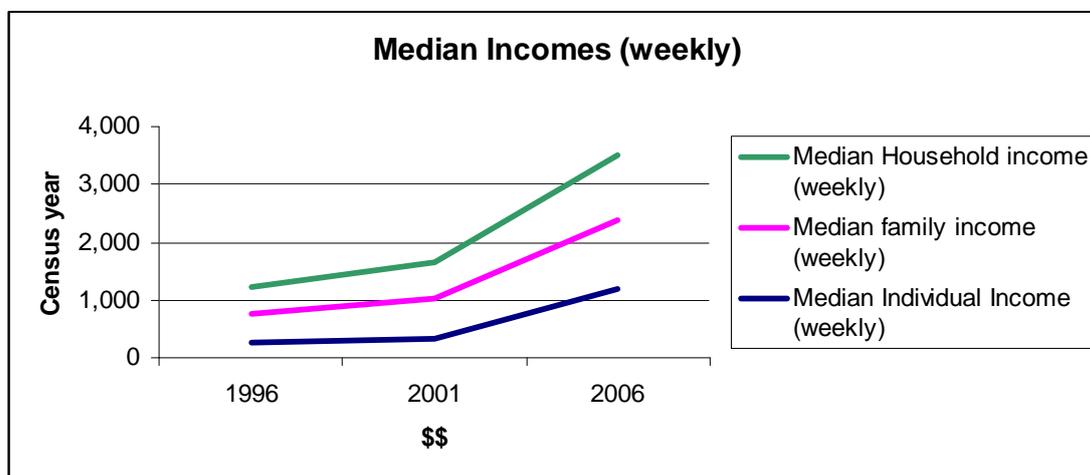


Figure 2: Median individual, family and household incomes in Shire of Ravensthorpe (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Community Profile Time Series: Ravensthorpe 2006).

As already noted, RNO committed to the Western Australian government that the mine would establish a residential workforce and real estate values in Ravensthorpe

and the picturesque hamlet of Hopetoun quickly escalated as shown in Figure 3.

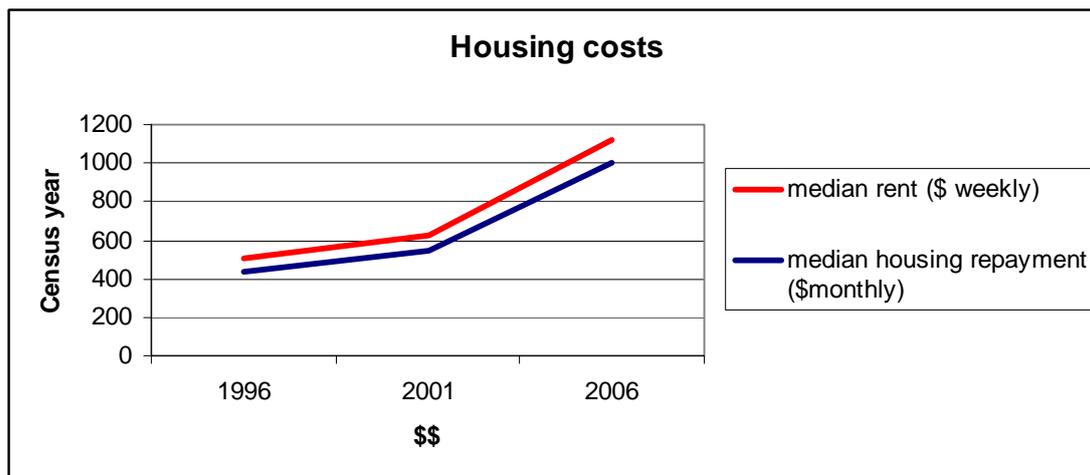


Figure 3: Median rent and housing repayment in Shire of Ravensthorpe 1996-2001. (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Community Profile Time Series: Ravensthorpe 2006.)

Despite the increased demand for housing, the average household size did not change and the average number of people occupying a house in fact declined, indicating that there were fewer families coming to the Shire with the mine than couples.

Demand from mine workers and the Company outstripped supply in Ravensthorpe and Hopetoun causing a real estate bubble and considerable disquiet. The number of people living in caravans and other improvised accommodation trebled in the decade 1996 to 2006.

Landcorp, the trading enterprise established by an Act of Parliament which rezones and develops land on behalf of the State government, developed large tracts of government land adjacent to the town of Hopetoun. The process of rezoning the land was time consuming and onerous, requiring the involvement and co-ordination of multiple government departments including Native Title, Environment and Conservation, Planning and Infrastructure, Planning Commission, Landgate, Heritage, Water Corporation and the local government authority; none of whom appeared able to co-ordinate their decision-making processes. Delays were exacerbated by skilled labour shortages in all areas.

Census information shows that the demographic descriptors of the Shire changed after construction of the mine began. There were considerably more (37 per cent) men than women in the Shire on Census night and considerably more people reported being born outside of Australia than was the case in 2001. However, it is difficult to assess whether this is due to a high proportion of construction workforce or whether this is indicative of ongoing workforce trends in the Shire of Ravensthorpe.

Methodology

This case study draws on nineteen, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with women residents of the Shire of Ravensthorpe undertaken during May 2008. The women interviewed range in age from their early-twenties to their mid-sixties, and represent a diversity of experiences and contributions in relation to the local agricultural and mining industries. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Names and other identifying markers have been withheld to protect the privacy of interviewees.

The interviews were semi-structured around perceptions of roles and opportunities in both the farming and mining industries prominent in the area, focussing on:

- advantages facilitating participation in either or both industries;
- constraints on participation; and
- leadership roles and opportunities.

Of the nineteen interviewees, nine were farming women living and working on farms in the area prior to the arrival of RNO. The other ten interviewees were newly-arrived in the Shire directly as a result of connections to the mining industry. These interviewees were residing in the small coastal community of Hopetoun, where the majority of residential mine staff and their families in the Shire live. The term “farming women” is used here to describe those women living on farms, while the term “mining women” is also used comprehensively to include those women employed in the mining industry, as well as those whose partners or other close family members work in the mining industry while they themselves do not. It is an important note that the women interviewed do not necessarily identify with these

categories. Without intending to homogenise or essentialise these groupings, this case study is organised around farming and mining women as separate cohorts in recognition of the ways in which the differing circumstances and contexts of “mining” and “farming” inform the experiences of these women.

It is also important to note that four of these women fall into both the farming and mining categories. That is, at the time of interviewing four of the farming women had been, or were currently, in paid work in the mining industry. Five of the mining women were in paid work directly in the mining industry. Those working in the mining industry were working at the Ravensthorpe Nickel Operation (RNO) site at Bandalup Hill in Jerdacuttup, fifty kilometres from Hopetoun. The remaining five mining women were not involved in the mining industry. Four were not involved in paid work at all, and one woman had paid work outside both the agricultural and mining industries. Seven of the farming women and six of the mining women had (young) dependent children.

Women’s roles

Domestic roles

The farming women interviewed here are all responsible for the bulk of the housework: shopping, cooking, cleaning, washing, and organising of children. Of the ten mining women interviewed, eight, whether in paid work or not, also undertake the bulk of the domestic work—again, cleaning, cooking, shopping, washing, organising and transport of children. A further two of the mining interviewees employed a cleaner, but were still responsible for cooking, shopping, washing and organising of children.

Industry roles

The farming women interviewed undertook farm work of the same nature and scope as other farming women documented elsewhere in this report. ‘Farm-related’ as performed by the women interviewed here encompasses acting as “gofers” (Ghorayshi 1989), feeding animals, doing tractor work, and attending to much of the bookwork including GST requirements. This work is unpaid.

Those farming women in this cohort who also have in the past worked or are currently working in the Ravensthorpe-based mining industry are engaged in a limited range of roles, namely administration, catering and cleaning.

In one farming interviewee's estimate 90 per cent of the farming women who took up mining employment during the construction phase worked for catering and cleaning companies. Anecdotal evidence regarding the activities of other local agricultural women who also have work in the mining sector, suggests that these roles are representative of farming women's employment in the local mining industry. This is consistent with recent findings that women in the Australian minerals industry are mainly employed in administrative and clerical positions and remain under-represented in managerial and supervisory areas (CSR 2006). As one farming woman pointed out, however, the mine presents farming women with a 'whole new range of employment opportunities other than the more traditional nursing and teaching' roles.

The roles of the five mining women in paid work in the mining industry span health and safety, security, administration, and ore control with anecdotal evidence of another woman employed as a process engineer. One interviewee commented that there are 'definitely more men than women' in the pit area and a few young women in the plant and crushing areas. In her experience at RNO, women were mostly employed in administration. This appears to suggest, first, that mining women occupy a broader range of roles than do the local farming women and, second, that they too are under-represented in senior roles.

Advantages facilitating participation in mining industry

Women in both the farming and mining groups perceive being local, both in terms of living in the area and of having access to local networks of friends, as an advantage in gaining employment with RNO.

One farming interviewee expressed surprise that her job application for an administration position was successful given that non-local peers (specifically, friends

living in Perth) had been consistently unsuccessful. She explicitly attributed her success to being a local resident. Other 'pre-mine' women have described cases where local women have been employed more-or-less on the spot, as it were, as a direct result of being in the right (local) place at the right time. Yet others have found that employed friends or partners are able to provide insider-knowledge about upcoming jobs along with advice concerning the best way to get one's resume noticed.

One mining interviewee, who gained employment with RNO after moving to Hopetoun as a result of her partner's employment in the industry, noted that her job was classified 'local employment only' that narrowed the field of applicants. There is also a perception among both mining and farming women that mining women with partners in 'powerful' positions in the industry have an advantage not only in knowing what jobs are becoming available but also in the receipt of preferential treatment.

Constraints on participation

Interviewees in both the farming and mining groups identified a range of shared and also cohort-specific constraints. Constraints experienced by both mining and farming women include lack of access to formal childcare and inflexible working hours. Constraints specific to farming women encompass role clashes and a lack of interest in, or ethical rejection of employment with RNO. In each group the identified constraints tend to operate as interlinked barriers rather than as separate issues.

Though farming interviewees in the overall cohort did not explicitly refer to the limited number of positions taken up by pre-mine residents and the difficulties of getting noticed in a global online recruitment system, this is a widely discussed source of tension in the broader community (Mayes 2008). The relatively small number of pre-mine locals employed by BHP Billiton on the RNO site, 70 in a workforce of 650, is explained as a local absence of appropriate skill sets (BHP Billiton 2008). The level of expected formal qualifications held by mining industry professionals is increasing (CBSR 2005) and this project is no exception its requirement for highly-trained staff. For farming women without mining backgrounds the lack of relevant education and

industry experience constitutes a restriction in terms of the areas of participation, (these women are likely to be confined to non-professional, non-career positions), compounded by lack of access to and time for training in this area. This would also be true, at least in part, for many women accompanying mining partners.

Constraints for farming women

Childcare

For the farming women, in particular those with small children, lack of access to formal childcare facilities presents a significant ongoing barrier to taking up paid work either directly or indirectly available as a result of the mine's arrival and subsequent population growth. The majority of the farming women when asked about the opportunities arising from having RNO in the area were quick to point out this lack.

Paid childcare, as many of the women also emphasised, is not only scarce but what is available is too far away from them to be of use. The day care centre operating from early 2008 from a temporary site in Hopetoun and soon to be relocated to a building alongside the Hopetoun Primary School is the first of its kind in the Shire. Though family day care and babysitting services are available locally they cater for a very limited number of children and are located in townships 50 kilometres and further from many farms. Many of the interviewees noted that the Hopetoun-based centre was for BHP Billiton employees and that women whose partners were also employed at the mine would be given first priority. However, once the centre is fully operational and able to accommodate larger numbers of children including those from the broader community, distance will remain a problem. While the mine is close to many farms, this day care arrangement could involve a round-trip for farming women with children seeking employment on the mine site in the vicinity of 200 kms per day. Even if these women were to take their children to Hopetoun and then take the RNO bus to and from the mine site, this travel would still amount to 100 kms per day, just as it would make the already long working day, as day shifts for residential staff at May 2008 had just been reduced from 10 to 9 hours, with other arrangements calling for 10 and 12 hour shifts, an even longer day.

Lack of flexible work hours

Closely related to the difficulties in arranging childcare is the absence of “child-friendly” work hours. In the construction stage many local farming women—in some interviewees’ estimations up to twenty percent of their peers—worked in the associated catering industry. As ‘K’ explained it, this was possible because the women :

... were able to play around with the [work] roster a bit.

This flexibility allowed women to work around children’s school hours, for example, thus reducing the need for formal childcare.

However, as the mine moved into the operational stage, the nature of employment also changed: ‘K’ explains:

These flexible rosters just aren’t there. If they were I might think about going and trying to get an administration job or something during school hours.

As another farming woman, ‘G,’ noted:

There are no split shifts. The ladies I know who are working at the mine are doing long hours.

These long hours make it difficult to arrange sharing of the childcare with other local women, just as these conditions create often insurmountable role clashes with women’s farm duties. Some flexibility of working hours may be possible once employed and there is anecdotal evidence that this has occurred to very limited extent and at the discretion of individual bosses. Inflexible working hours remains an exclusionary barrier to gaining employment in the first instance. This too is a broader phenomenon: lack of flexible work arrangements and the difficulties of maintaining family life are widely reported negative aspects of the industry particularly for women with children (CBSR 2005; CSRM 2006).

Role clashes

Fitting in additional work to their already busy farm schedules is difficult, if not impossible to sustain, for the majority of the farm women interviewed here many of whom are expected to, and of necessity must, continue in their usual on-farm roles.

As 'D' expresses this:

If you go off to work then you've still got to do everything when you get back home and that can create a huge stress.

For many of those interviewed this is a limiting initial barrier. 'F' says she was very tempted to seek employment on the mine but in reality had to realise that *I've got enough to do here so I'd better stay here.*

This situation is exacerbated by the ongoing skill shortage and the additional drain on the local labour force brought about by the arrival of lucrative and long-term mining opportunities in the area. Competition with the mine for labour has meant ongoing difficulties attracting farm labour and the unfilled gaps inevitably fall to farming women and children in the area to fill (Mayes 2007).

Attempting to do both jobs, paid employment in the mining industry and, usually unpaid, farm work, creates significant stresses so that some who have attempted this have since given up off farm/mine work: As 'K' bluntly put it:

I couldn't work on the mine and do everything else that I had to do here as well. It was too much.

Interviewees also referred to many friends who had tried to do both jobs and found themselves worn out and made unhappy by it.

As was reported a decade ago, (Elix and Lambert 1998; Haslam McKenzie 1998) it is possible for men to work off farm precisely because women take over additional tasks in the day to day running of the farm. Male farmers appear to be seeking, and have

available to them, shift work rather than day work positions. For example some shift workers at the time of field work were on a 12 hour day, 14 days on and 7 days off roster. Farming men on this roster are able to undertake many of their traditional farming tasks between shifts.

It does not appear that men are taking on women's tasks in order to facilitate women's employment in the local mining industry. This may be due to imbalances in earning power. During interviews it became clear that many of the farming men saw the women's off-farm work as providing "pin money" rather than as a substantial contribution. On the other hand men's off farm work was seen as of significant benefit to the long-term sustainability of the farm.

Mine jobs unattractive and /or ethically problematical

A further barrier articulated by farming women centres around the lifestyle associated with mining. As many women pointed out, and as is well-supported in the literature (Alston 1995; Elix and Lambert 1998; Gray and Lawrence 2001; Haslam McKenzie and Lord 2001) farming is seen as more than a job, rather as a specific highly valued lifestyle. As 'J,' explaining why she wasn't interested in working on the mine, made it clear:

I just don't think I'd like the lifestyle and I would hate it if my partner worked on the mine.

Closely related to this is a sense of opposition in terms of local politics and also broader ideological perspectives as 'G' says: *I don't agree with what they do.* According to 'K', few local farming people work at the mine because:

... it's basically the community against the mine. And you can't be against the mine and go there and get a job can you?

There is also evidence of social pressure: both 'C' and 'K' referred to community resistance to farming women working on the mine as encoded in local conversations around negative perceptions of complicity with the mine (as unwelcome intruder in the farming community). Two other interviewees suggested there was a sense in the

farming community at large, particularly in male circles, that the mine was a threat to current domestic relationships.

Constraints for mining women

Childcare

Access to childcare services is certainly a serious concern for mining women with children. Those offered employment with BHP Billiton now have access to a child care service close by in Hopetoun where the majority of BHP Billiton staff and families reside. Those mining women interviewed here who are in paid work and with children requiring care make use of this service. Even so, lack of childcare remains an issue for many mining women who would seek non-mining-industry work. Anecdotal evidence from several interviewees suggests that in a small number of cases ‘stay-at-home’ husbands undertake childcare responsibilities enabling women to take up mine work.

Lack of flexible work hours

The long hours and lack of part-time work make mining industry employment less attractive for women who don’t want to be away from family for extended periods, and for women who find it stressful placing their children in long day care. The following comments from ‘B’ and also ‘S’ typify these positions:

‘B’ I don’t want to leave my children in care. It’s the emotional thing as well. You’re leaving your baby with somebody else. Somebody else is going to feed them the food that makes them go.

‘S’ I’d like to work if something comes up but I don’t want to be working from 7.00am to 5.00pm. But if I can work you know a day or a half day ...

This is particularly important for women who have accompanied spouses to Hopetoun in order to minimise family separation. After all, as ‘S’ pointed out:

We wanted to be residential. We didn’t want to do the fly in fly out with little kids.

While mining women do not emphasise a role clash in terms of juggling two jobs (off-farm mining work and ongoing farm commitments), those with children in particular note that it is difficult combining long hours and domestic work:

‘N’ *Basically on your day off, it sounds terrible, you clean house and catch up with housework. On a Sunday afternoon you cook your meals and freeze a whole lot of them in case you come home and don’t feel like starting a meal from scratch. With kids obviously you can’t eat at 8pm.*

Assumptions made about women which may shut them out of participation

Taken collectively, these discussions with local women suggest that there may well be an industry assumption that high pay rates alone are sufficient incentive for both farming and mining women to find a way around the barriers discussed above. There may exist a corollary assumption that relatively high salaries for male positions make it unnecessary for mining women to take on paid work, just as there is evidence of ongoing dependence on women’s unpaid labour to enable partners to meet the long hours required by the industry as documented by Rhodes (2005). A further likely implicit assumption is that the opportunities and barriers are the same for all women whether from mining or farming backgrounds. On the other hand, children are broadly recognised as a differentiating factor.

Impact on community roles

Farming women

Community work and attendant strong sense of community are recognised as crucial aspects of rural living (Haslam McKenzie 1999). Farming women interviewees perceive a decline in community work and participation, particularly in sporting clubs, as a result of pressures from increasing farm commitments, in part due to local labour shortages, and of mine employment. The women currently employed in the mining industry, and those with partners working on the mine, reported a reduction in their participation in voluntary community work. This decline is tempered by an acknowledgement that as children grow older the level and type of community involvement changes. This change may well play a part in the reductions noted. At

the same time it is important to keep in mind that in smaller communities the loss of a small number of active community members can make a significant difference:

‘D’ those working on the mine are no longer available to do community work, to come to busy bees

‘F’ I did notice that because women had work there [in the mining industry], that possibly the community sorts of things aren’t as strong as they were a couple of years ago

Mining Women

Mining women also report a decline in their own community roles as a direct result of long hours of employment and also shift work cycles. At the same time, anecdotal evidence was offered regarding a number of other women who had moved away from previous community commitments upon taking up employment in the mining and related industries:

‘N’ I was involved with X last year. I’ve given up now because I’m working.

‘B’ I’d love to do community work but I don’t. I could do something on my week off but community groups need someone who can be there every day of the week.

Young women

Young women are here defined as between 18 years, the minimum age for working in the mining industry, and mid 20s. This section summarises the experiences and perceptions of the two interviewees, one with mining industry experience and one without, who fall into this category, showing both divergences and similarities to other interviewees. While two interviewees is not representative, their experiences nonetheless provide insight to the tensions of two large industry sectors in a small community.

For the young woman with mining industry experience, the arrival of the mine had provided her with an opportunity to return to the area and to make (relatively) good money. Importantly though: *‘M’ I actually didn’t want to come back but I had no*

money. The other interviewee expressed a lack of interest in working in the mining industry and felt that other young women in the area were similarly disinterested in a mining industry lifestyle. Neither interviewees see or desire long-term employment in the industry. Anecdotal evidence indicates that other young women in the area have also worked in the industry for a period in order to make some money before moving on to other places and enterprises. The value of this opportunity as enabling other achievements, however, should not be underestimated just as the pragmatics of ‘getting ahead’ is well noted in the literature as an important motivation for many workers in the mining industry.

In addition, some interviewees from the farming cohort saw the mining industry as a means for daughters (and sons) to return to the region for a while, just as others related stories of young women who had returned or were able to stay in the region (though not indefinitely). As “F”, a farming woman, explained:

Older children are eyeing that mine off and thinking: ‘Oh great. There might be a job there for us.

Opportunities for leadership in agriculture

Though women are taking on more of the farming work there is no evidence in this cohort of parallel opportunities for taking up leadership roles. The well-documented (Shortall 1992; Alston 1997; Alston 1998; Elix and Lambert 1998; Liepins 2000; Pini 2005) masculine traits of the agricultural industry appear to still prevail. For many of the women interviewed here who found themselves undertaking more farm duties this did not include a greater role in decision making or a higher profile in traditionally male areas of farming practice; these women did not perceive any change in their status. Those who had taken on these traditionally masculine tasks, however, also did not report increased opportunities for leadership. Even though she was doing most of the farming tasks, ‘K’ felt that:

The men definitely think that I’m just playing. I’m not playing. Oh my God I’m not playing and every time I get a chance I tell them I’m not playing.

Another interviewee was very explicit about the lack of opportunities for leadership in agriculture. When asked to think generally about whether women are taking on more leadership roles, 'E' responded: *I don't think you can really say that ...* Further, as 'D' argues, many farming men are not interested in mining work thus reducing the potential for women to step into their roles:

I don't see my husband working up at the mine. He's too busy being a farmer and doing what he's best at.

Opportunities for leadership in mining

The responses from the 'mining' women regarding leadership opportunities are somewhat ambiguous. Many felt that this was not relevant for them as they were not interested in developing a career or even remaining in the industry in the long-term. The following responses encapsulate this position:

'B' *I'm only in it for the money. I'm not in it for career.*

'P' *I'm not interested in taking a leadership role.*

On the other hand, several interviews felt there was potential though were somewhat reserved in their judgement. For example, 'A' felt there was potential but was struggling with how to reconcile the industry and children, just as she expressed concerns about whose career—hers or her partner's—would then take precedence. Though she is very interested in pursuing a career in the industry, she is aware of a need to:

make a decision whether I want to have a family or stay in this industry.

Women's observations

A substantial number of farming women (seven out of the nine interviewed) and a smaller group within the mining cohort (three out of the ten interviewed) saw the local mining industry as significantly broadening the range of options for local women. The farming women talked of this in relation to gaining employment skills and experience,

in particular outside the more traditional roles of teacher and nurse; improving self-confidence; and achieving greater personal independence.

For 'M' it was a chance to get her foot in the door:

And once you've got your foot in the door in that sort of industry [mining] you're never really going to find it hard to get a good job.

'F' was tempted to seek work on the mine as a way to:

do something different. Get some other skills

'C' noted a profound change in her personal position:

my outlook on life changed once I started earning my own money and had a bit of independence.

Other farming women talked specifically about the pleasures of having a challenge, and of exposure to new viewpoints.

The mining women also spoke of opportunities for independence. For 'N' not having employment contributed to a sense of being "trapped" and feeling "down." Having a job made a big difference:

It's incredible how your self confidence improves. I'm so much more positive about everything just by going to work.

As 'N's' comment suggests, lack of access to paid employment is debilitating. This was borne out by comments from other mining women who also felt a loss of self-confidence and status when they were unable to gain suitable employment in the area.

Conclusion

Roles, Opportunities and Constraints

The women interviewed here, whether in the farming or mining group, and including those in full-time paid employment, take responsibility for and perform the large majority of domestic tasks. Mining roles encompass service industry positions in catering and cleaning (for the majority of farming women in this cohort), and administration (for some of the farming women and also the mining women), and less senior positions in health and safety, security, and ore control (for the mining women alone).

Interviewees noted being local, as in living in the area and having networks of friends, is their prime advantage in gaining work. It would seem that mining women have a greater advantage in terms of information and access to support through

influential partners with mine employment. Some RNO positions are advertised as restricted to local residents. Mining women may also have an advantage in terms of privileged access to limited formal childcare places. Living in Hopetoun, as opposed to outlying farms, is also a relative advantage in that a formal childcare service and RNO work-bus route are close by.

Opportunities for women to find paid work in the farming industry appear to be non-existent. Opportunities for gaining work in the mining industry appear to be curtailed by traditional barriers experienced by women in general, and in particular by those in the mining industry at large (see Minerals Council of Australia 2008). Though lack of childcare services and flexible working hours appears as a constraining factor for both groups these issues operate in different ways and to varying extents for each group. The barriers identified here are cumulative in that more than one barrier is experienced by a given individual. For example, for many farming women the key, interlinked, issues are lack of access to formal childcare services (a situation unlikely to change given their geographical isolation), exacerbated by the lack of flexible and part-time working arrangements in the local mining industry, which in turn makes it very difficult if not impossible to meet not only existing domestic but also farm work commitments. For mining women in Hopetoun, though access to formal childcare is available, the inflexible and long working hours make employment in the mining industry unattractive, especially when partners are also working in the industry, because of the length of the time children need to be in care and the pressures of meeting domestic commitments. In addition, the farming women note a level of community disapproval of the mine (see Mayes 2008 for further details) and an associated moral dilemma in seeking work there. Barring this last constraint, these barriers are well noted in the literature, just as ABS (2008) statistics show that male, full-time positions constitute the majority of jobs emerging from the mining boom.

Farming and mining women noted a reduction in community and volunteer work as a direct result of taking up employment in the mining industry, due to both the long hours required and also the shift work cycles.

The non-representative sample of two young women suggests that this group may have an ambivalent perception of the industry: for one interviewee it presents an opportunity to make some money while the other interviewee described her complete lack of interest in the mining industry particularly as a lifestyle. Both these

perspectives are supported by anecdotal evidence of the experiences of other young women in the area.

Opportunities for leadership, as a result of the recent arrival of large-scale mining in the region, in either the agricultural or mining industry are not reported by the sample of mining and farming women interviewed here. At the same time, a desire for greater leadership is evident in the farming cohort. These women however are largely uninterested in a mining career. Serious involvement in both farming and mining is not seen as sustainable, just as mining industry work is subordinate to farm interests. Of the mining women, the majority were not pursuing a career nor were they interested in seeking leadership opportunities. Those few who were career-oriented and looking to attain a leadership role, expressed concern that this ambition was not compatible with raising a family, and would then involve a choice between family and career.

Though leadership goals and opportunities in the mining industry were not the focal point for the majority of women interviewed, the farming group in particular observed highly-valued opportunities for developing a broader range of work skills, for raising self-confidence, and for increasing personal independence.

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Sustaining Gondwana is a strategic initiative of Curtin University of Technology that has been funded by the Alcoa Foundation's Conservation and Sustainability Fellowship Program and by the University. Its aim is to research conservation and sustainability issues along the south coast of Western Australia, from Walpole to just east of Esperance. The vegetation and fauna of this area is so diverse that it is considered to be one of the world's bio-diversity hotspots. The five year program, which is connected internationally with other Universities and Sustainability Institutes, was launched in November 2005.

The initiative is co-ordinated by Sustainability Cabinet members, Professors Daniela Stehlik, Jonathan Majer and Fiona Haslam McKenzie. Postdoctoral Research Fellows have been and continue to be appointed to work on issues related to this region, and their research is augmented by activities of the cabinet members themselves as well as their graduate students. Findings are being published in journals, conference proceedings and books. However, there is a need to communicate early findings, data sets and activities of group members in a timely manner so that stakeholders can benefit from outputs as soon as they become available. This is the aim of the *Sustaining Gondwana Working Papers Series*, which is being produced on an occasional basis over the life of the initiative.

The papers are not subject to peer review, but are edited by cabinet members in order to maintain standards and accuracy. Contributions from researchers and practitioners who are active in the region of focus can also be considered for publication in this series.

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