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# Women in the Australian Mining Industry

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Mental Awareness, Respect and Safety  
(MARS) Centre Research Report



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## Aim

This report synthesises existing research on women’s participation in the Australian mining industry to identify the structural and cultural factors shaping gender inequality across the sector.

Drawing on research conducted over the past four decades, the report brings together what is currently known about how mining workplaces operate and how organisational practices, work arrangements, and site cultures shape the experiences of women across the sector. While many companies have introduced diversity and inclusion initiatives aimed at improving gender balance, the evidence suggests that challenges persist in areas such as operational roles, leadership pathways, and workplace culture.

Specifically, the report examines how employment systems, career pathways, workplace culture, and the spatial organisation of mining work influence women’s participation, career progression, and retention. Rather than focusing solely on recruitment or individual career choices, the report considers how organisational practices and work environments shape gender outcomes within mining operations.

By synthesising existing research, this report aims to identify the key structural and organisational issues affecting women’s careers in mining and to provide insights that can support more effective industry strategies for building a diverse, inclusive, and sustainable workforce.

## Method

A search was conducted in January 2026 using four of the most relevant databases to find empirical research from 1986-2025. Journal articles (written in English) had to address any aspect of gender equity in working in mining in Australia. Twenty-nine studies met the criteria and were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis method to identify common patterns emerging from the literature, leading to the development of concepts based on the material. The findings are presented in the following section.

These findings are based on a systematic review of research on gender and mining in Australia from 1980–2025. The review identified several consistent themes across the research literature that help explain why women remain significantly under-represented in the mining workforce despite sustained diversity initiatives.

## **1. Persistent occupational segregation**

Women remain significantly under-represented, particularly in operational and technical roles. Although participation has increased slightly over time, most women in mining are concentrated in administrative and support functions rather than production roles. Research consistently shows that representation in key operational occupations, such as operators, trades, and engineering roles, remains very low. Early career pathways such as apprenticeships often lack visible female leadership, which can discourage women from entering or remaining in these roles. These patterns contribute to persistent gender pay gaps because operational roles often attract higher wages, site allowances, and bonuses associated with remote work.

## **2. Structural features of mining work**

The organisation of mining work presents structural challenges that disproportionately affect women. Mining operations typically require: long shifts, extended swing cycles, fly-in fly-out (FIFO) or drive-in drive-out (DIDO) arrangements, and extended periods away from home and community. These working arrangements can create barriers for workers with caring responsibilities and may discourage long-term participation for many women. Research indicates that flexible work policies often exist formally but are difficult to access in operational roles. The concept of the “ideal worker”, someone who can demonstrate endurance, continuous availability, and geographic mobility, continues to shape expectations in the industry. This model aligns with historically masculine work patterns and can disadvantage workers who cannot conform to these expectations.

## **3. Leadership barriers and limited career pathways**

Women remain significantly under-represented in leadership across the mining sector. Research suggests that leadership norms in mining continue to favour traditionally masculine characteristics such as toughness, individualism, and risk tolerance. Alternative leadership styles, such as collaborative or participative approaches, are sometimes undervalued within operational contexts. Another barrier identified in the literature is the limited availability of female role models and mentors, particularly in technical pathways.

#### **4. Workplace culture and gender relations**

A consistent theme across the research is the persistence of hyper-masculine workplace cultures in many mining environments. Studies document ongoing experiences of gender exclusion, sexist behaviour and harassment, bullying and hostility toward women in operational roles, and social isolation for women working in remote sites. The risk of harassment and gender-based hostility can be amplified by contextual factors including remote camps, skewed gender ratios, alcohol availability, and isolation from external support networks. Research also highlights the psychological impacts of these environments, including reduced job satisfaction, increased stress, and higher intentions to leave the industry among women.

#### **5. Strategy versus implementation**

Many organisations have introduced diversity and inclusion policies aimed at increasing women's participation. These include gender targets, leadership programs, and reporting frameworks. However, research suggests that these initiatives often focus on representation targets rather than structural change. In many cases, organisational diversity strategies are not strongly linked to operational practices such as roster design, career pathways, or site culture. This can result in a gap between stated commitments to gender equity and the lived experiences of workers on mine sites.

#### **6. Intersectional experiences**

The literature also highlights that women's experiences in mining are not uniform. Indigenous women, in particular, face overlapping barriers related to gender, race, and organisational hierarchy. Research shows that Indigenous women are often concentrated in lower-paid roles and face additional pressures related to community responsibilities and workplace discrimination. Intersectional experiences remain under-researched, indicating the need for more targeted industry strategies that address diverse workforce needs.

This report shows that gender inequality in the Australian mining industry cannot be explained solely by recruitment challenges or pipeline issues. Instead, it reflects the interaction of structural, organisational, and cultural factors embedded in the design of mining work.

Employment systems such as FIFO rosters, long shifts, and remote site work interact with historically masculine workplace cultures to shape who can participate, progress, and remain in the industry. While formal equality policies and diversity initiatives have produced incremental improvements, they have not fundamentally altered the institutional conditions that sustain gender disparities.

Addressing gender inequality in mining will therefore require more than increasing the number of women entering the industry. Meaningful progress is likely to depend on structural changes to work design, leadership pathways, site culture, and organisational accountability.

For industry leaders, this means shifting from symbolic diversity initiatives toward integrated workforce strategies that address the operational realities of mining work. Such approaches are critical not only for improving gender equity but also for strengthening workforce sustainability and talent retention across the sector.

Additionally, the lack of academic research in this space, highlighted by this review, provides an opportunity for industry to work with researchers to further understand contemporary issues and provide sustainable solutions to improve gender equity.

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