

INDUSTRY SUMMARY REPORT SERIES - 2026

Advancing inclusive change in the mining sector of WA: An intersectional perspective

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



Executive Summary

This project investigates the lived experiences of mining workers and examines how inclusion can be strengthened to support safer and more respectful workplaces across Western Australia's diverse mining sector. Framed through an intersectional approach, the study recognises that workers' experiences are shaped by the interaction of multiple identity dimensions including gender, cultural background, Indigeneity, age, disability, and job role. Rather than considering these factors in isolation, intersectionality provides a lens to understand how they combine to influence access, opportunity, and belonging within a workplace. A distinctive feature of this project is the engagement with both FIFO and corporate office mining workers to explore how their multiple identities shape their everyday experiences of work. Insights from these conversations informed the development of a purpose-built coaching resource for leaders and managers in the sector. The resulting Advancing Leadership Capability Through Inclusive Coaching Toolkit is designed to support culturally aware, ethically grounded, and psychologically safe coaching conversations with colleagues of any age, gender, cultural identity, and ability. Aligned with International Coaching Federation principles, the toolkit equips supervisors, superintendents, and line managers to engage in everyday informal coaching with respect, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to 'do no harm.'

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Introduction and Significance of the Study:

This exploratory study reports on workers' experiences in the mining sector in Western Australia (WA) from an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality describes an analytic framework for studying relationships between identity and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). It takes into account that various social identities (e.g., gender, disability, class, sexuality) overlap and interact to cause diverse experiences of discrimination and disadvantage.

Within the workplace, aspects of how work is designed, managed, and organised, as well as workplace social interactions (i.e. psychosocial factors) may have disproportionately negative impacts on marginalised groups. The mining sector presents a challenging context where although advances in understanding and managing physical risks has been made over the past several decades, those psychosocial aspects of workplace safety remain less understood. Understanding psychosocial factors within the mining industry by taking an intersectional approach is important, as understanding the unique perspectives of individuals who are subject to multiple systems of inequality can lead to more meaningful and socially responsible innovations within a sector that is increasingly attentive to its social licence to operate.

Recent developments within the mining sector in Australia underscore the urgency and importance of this research project. Recently, a group of women launched a class action against Fortescue Metals Group alleging that the company failed to protect them from sexual harassment, sex discrimination, and hostile workplace environments over a nearly 20-year period (Hamilton-Smith, 2026). Their complaint points to systemic organisational failures leading to unsafe workplace environments. Intersectional issues were also highlighted in the MARS Landmark study (Yam et al., 2023) which, among other relevant findings, found that mining workers who were women, who identified as lesbian, gay or homosexual, and bisexual, or who were younger, were all more likely to report having experienced sexual harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual hostility at work. In addition, the Everyday Respect at Rio Tinto (Rio Tinto, 2022) progress report called for a more comprehensive approach to diversity and inclusion, including a focus on intersectionality and a deeper understanding of the lived experience of different groups.

The MARS Landmark study, the class action, and the Rio Tinto report add to a growing body of evidence that psychosocial risks are prevalent and pervasive across the sector and that organisational responses have not kept pace with the scale or seriousness of these issues. They also highlight that within mining workplaces, different groups of workers may be disproportionately or differentially exposed to psychosocial risks as a consequence of their marginalised status. Accordingly, this research addresses organisational failures to recognise the complex interplay of different intersectional identities and how they impact workplace experience, risk exposure, career opportunities, and disparities (Holvino, 2010). Ultimately, this study contributes to practical ways of building an inclusive culture that ensures all mining workers feel safe and respected at work.

Methodology:

This study is a qualitative inquiry underpinned by a constructivist-interpretive perspective. The interpretative approach provides a basis to explore, determine, describe, interpret, and understand participants' perceptions and the meaning they construct about their lived experience (Creswell, 2012). The study was implemented over a 12-months period in 3 phases as follows:

- Phase 1: Ethics application and project planning including exploration of cultural and/or structural factors associated with achieving inclusion in the mining sector.
- Phase 2: Negotiating access, recruiting participants and conducting in-depth interviews and yarning circles.
- Phase 3: Data analysis and preparation of an industry report, industry media, conference papers, and scholarly articles.

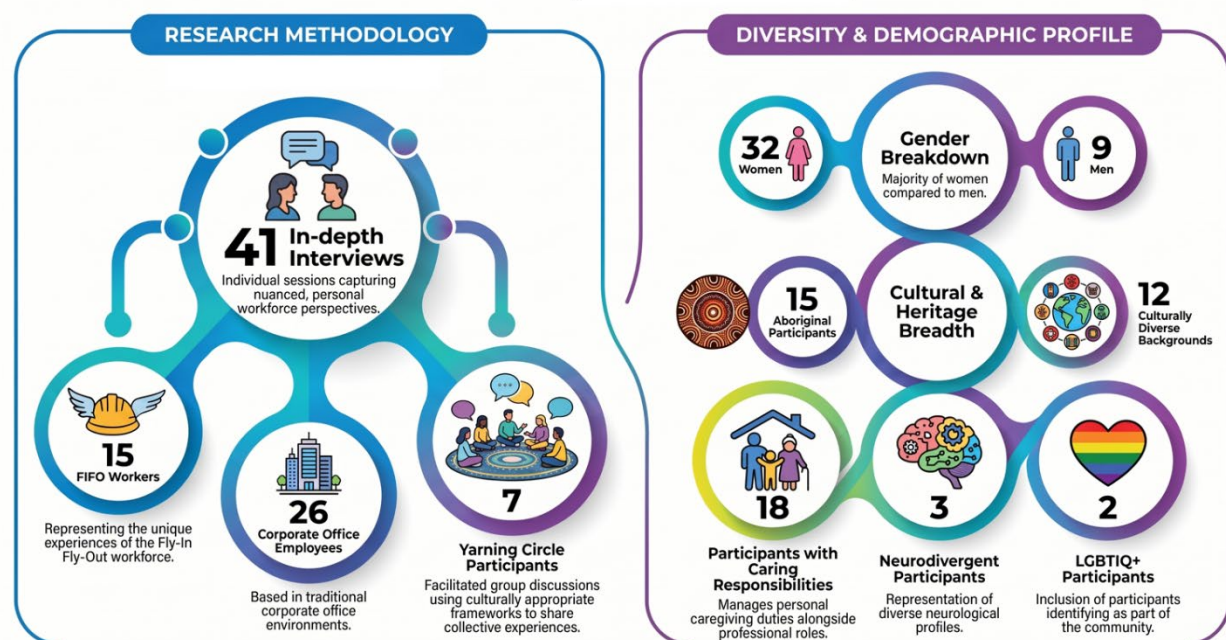
Sample Selection, Recruitment and Data Collection:

Inclusion criteria: The inclusion criteria for this study were that participants were working in the WA mining sector. The study included both FIFO, Corporate office, and residential workers. The broad inclusion criteria ensured that a range of participants were included who self-identified as belonging to one or more of the intersectional identities that form the core focus of this study, including, for example, gender, race, age, physical disability, Indigeneity, sexuality, neurodiversity, or religion.

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Data collection: In-depth interviews were conducted online or in-person, depending on participants' preference, and we also conducted yarning circles with participants of Aboriginal descent.

Research methodology and sample



Our analysis found three dominant themes. These include: Compounded disadvantage and structural invisibility, the ‘diversity hire’ label, and the implementation gap between the intention and impact of organisational responses to regulation. Each of these are described and discussed below.

Compounded Disadvantage and Structural Invisibility

Compounded disadvantage refers to the idea that the experience and effects of workplace mistreatment are compounded through multiple, interacting, layers of disadvantage. Related to the idea of compounded disadvantage, the concept of structural invisibility describes how particular identities are marginalised in the workplace due to systems and structures that privilege the skills, norms, priorities, obligations, practices, and traits of a dominant group(s), thus attributing lower value to those of other groups. Both compounded disadvantage and structural invisibility can occur explicitly through overt or direct actions such as insubordination and abuse, but also implicitly through organisational norms, and workplace systems, structures, and policies.

A common narrative we encountered illustrating these concepts was in the accounts of women in leadership or management positions who faced barriers in carrying out their work due to them being afforded less respect and authority than their male counterparts in similar positions. This particular barrier meant that women in these roles took on extra workload because of the additional labour required to navigate the barriers to them conducting their day-to-day work.

The impact of this additional labour, when occurring multiple times throughout the working day, coupled with the negative interpersonal experience of direct insubordination or ill-treatment, places psychological and physiological demands (i.e. stress) on these workers which their peers, performing similar roles, do not experience, with long term implications for these workers’ health and wellbeing.

The Diversity Hire Label and Associated Effects

Significant progress has been made within the mining industry to improve diversity in the workplace through recruitment policies aimed at dismantling the systemic barriers that have historically restricted access to the industry or specific roles within it. In the midst of these successes, however, there are some negative consequences, including that workers recruited (or those who are perceived to have been recruited) under policies which aim to improve diversity in the workplace have come to be labelled as “diversity hires”. This label is a pejorative that is often weaponised to imply that workers from minority groups do not really belong in the workplace, and that their presence there is explained by quota filling, rather than their individual merits, skills, education, or experience.

The “diversity hire” label leaves those workers who are already marginalised carrying a “burden of proof” as to their belonging in the workplace that their peers and colleagues from dominant groups do not have to meet.

Implementation Gap

Australia’s legislative landscape for workplace inclusion has incrementally developed to support the movement toward improved diversity, equity, and inclusion in the mining industry. However, participants often observed that while their organisation had indicated intent and desire to be an inclusive workplace, in practice, an implementation gap existed between espoused intent and on-the-ground change.

These observations suggest that although progress has been made toward improving representation of marginalised groups in the mining sector, there is much more that needs to be done. Focus must now be placed on addressing those core organisational practices, structures, and systems that marginalise and exclude some workers, and on designing, organising, and managing work in ways that promote and achieve inclusivity. Shifting organisational systems, practices, and cultures, however, requires long term, dedicated, and concerted prioritisation, resourcing, and effort.

With our research findings in mind, we developed the *Advancing Leadership Capability Through Inclusive Coaching Toolkit* to support culturally aware, ethically grounded, and psychologically safe coaching conversations with colleagues of any age, gender, cultural identity, and ability. The toolkit emphasises ethical coaching practice aligned with International Coaching Federation guidelines, ensuring that supervisors, superintendents, and line managers who engage in everyday informal coaching are equipped to do so with respect, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to ‘do no harm.’

The coaching toolkit is a step-by-step inclusive coaching framework for leaders that guides them in how to prepare for a coaching session, how to conduct it effectively, and how to follow up afterwards. The toolkit offers a suite of practical templates, checklists, and resources that can be tailored to meet the unique needs of each coaching situation.

What is Coaching-Informed leadership?

Coaching-informed leadership shifts interactions from purely directive instruction (“do this as instructed”) to more collaborative problem-solving (“let’s look at how we can work through this together”). This shift does not reduce accountability, or lower operational or safety standards. Instead, it strengthens performance and builds relationships by improving clarity, ownership, engagement, and capability across teams.

A coaching-informed approach is effective in the mining and resources sector because it strengthens the core purpose of leadership itself. Leadership in this context is not only about directing tasks, maintaining compliance, and delivering production outcomes, it is also about enabling people to think clearly, communicate openly, and perform safely under pressure. Coaching and leadership are therefore not separate disciplines.

This toolkit supports leaders to create working environments where everyone feels seen, heard, valued, and able to contribute fully. It helps leaders:

- Build trust and psychological safety.
- Improve communication and connection.
- Recognise unconscious bias and assumptions.
- Adapt coaching approaches to individual needs.
- Foster belonging, wellbeing, and engagement.
- Support performance while maintaining dignity and respect.

When leaders consistently apply a coaching-informed approach, they strengthen both people and performance. Teams become more engaged, more capable, and better equipped to operate safely, effectively, and collaboratively in complex environments.

Ultimately, this toolkit is designed to embed inclusion not as a standalone initiative or compliance requirement, but as a practical, everyday leadership capability reflected in how leaders listen, communicate, support, and develop their teams in the moments that matter most.

Internationally, there is a large body of research examining how organisations respond to societal and regulatory demands, including those relating to discrimination, equity, and inclusion at work. Researchers consistently find that even when organisations appear to support socially desirable change, in practice, they often do not achieve it (Bisom-Rapp, 2001; Edelman, 2016). These researchers suggest that when responding to external demands for change (for example, public demands, market demands, regulatory demands) organisations will often implement “symbolic” structures. These structures serve a legitimising function in that provide evidence of the organisations having responded to the demands of various stakeholders, but they are often not substantive – they tend to avoid more comprehensive and difficult, but necessary, changes to the work environment or core operational systems. They are therefore, often, ineffective because they do not substantively address the underlying structural issues and power dynamics such as those that maintain and perpetuate the exclusion, discrimination, and inequality in the workplace that are experienced by marginalised groups and may even exacerbate or amplify them.

Our *Advancing Leadership Capability Through Inclusive Coaching Toolkit* is a step toward substantive change to progress inclusion in mining workplaces. Leadership requires more than technical expertise, compliance knowledge, and performance management. Leaders have an important role in creating workplaces where people feel safe, respected, valued, and able to contribute at their best- regardless of background, identity, experience, or circumstance. The coaching-informed leadership toolkit recognises that leadership capability is strengthened through direct and indirect coaching skills. At its core, coaching increases a leader’s ability to listen deeply, remain curious, ask meaningful questions, and create psychologically safe conversations that support both performance and people outcomes.

In complex and high-pressure environments leaders need practical approaches that work. This toolkit has been designed with that reality in mind. Rather than adding complexity, it provides adaptable frameworks, coaching practices, and identity-specific guidance that leaders can apply during everyday interactions - whether addressing performance, supporting development, managing change, building confidence, or navigating difficult conversations.

Importantly, building leadership capability through coaching skills does not mean lowering standards, avoiding accountability, or treating everyone the same. It means leading with fairness, awareness, and intentionality. Recognising that people may experience the workplace differently and that effective leadership requires adapting communication and support to help individuals succeed. Inclusion and performance are not competing priorities - they are mutually reinforcing concepts.

By applying the principles and practices in this toolkit, leaders can strengthen trust, improve engagement, enhance team cohesion, reduce unnecessary barriers to performance, and foster environments where diverse talent can thrive. Small shifts in how leaders listen, question, respond, and coach can create significant shifts in confidence, capability, belonging, and operational effectiveness over time.

Ultimately, advancing leadership capability through inclusive coaching is about developing leaders who can achieve strong operational outcomes while bringing people with them. The invitation for leaders is simple: lead with curiosity, coach with intention, and create spaces where every team member has the opportunity to contribute, grow, and succeed.



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