

Women Into Mining Jobs at Inco: Challenging the Gender Division of Labour

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Introduction

In 1974 Sue Benoit was a single mother with a five year old daughter living in Levack, a small mining community located outside of Sudbury, Ontario. After leaving an abusive marriage she was living with her parents and working as a cashier at the local grocery store. She worked long hours for low pay: “That was rough because the total pay to take home was seventy dollars a week and I had to pay \$25 for the babysitter and \$25 for rent. You’d have to be there at eight and the store didn’t close until six and then you’d usually have to balance the tills... by the time you got home it was seven o’clock. It was hard, really hard with a baby.” When she heard that Inco was hiring women for hourly rated blue collar jobs at the Levack mill for the first time since WWII: “it was just like heaven.”

It was an historic occasion when Benoit and other women were hired as blue collar workers at Inco. While the women were not the first generation of women to enter the mining industry, they were the first to enter as permanent workers. With the exception of a brief period during WWII, it was illegal in Ontario for mining companies to hire women at surface operations. The law was changed in 1970.² Between 1974 and 1976 the company hired 100 women for hourly rated jobs at the company’s surface mining operations in Sudbury. The company’s decision was significant because it opened up highly paid, unionized jobs in an industry that was historically closed to women. Access to these jobs had a particular significance for women in a local economy dominated by a single industry- mining- and a labour market shaped by the hiring practices of two multinational mining companies. At the time Inco was the community’s largest and most prestigious industrial employer and its workers earned one of the highest industrial wages in the country.

Few of the women who took the jobs at Inco in the seventies set out to be pioneers. They took the job for ordinary reasons- better pay, benefits and job security.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at *Generations: Women’s Worlds ’99*, Tromsø, Norway, June 21, 1999.

Their experience became extraordinary by virtue of entering a male dominated workplace and challenging the sex/gender division of labour. Whether the women intended to or not, taking these jobs meant confronting powerful ideologies of masculinity and femininity on the shop floor, at home and in the community. While the women earned equal pay, were covered by the same collective agreement and were expected to perform the same work as men, the workplace was not gender neutral.

This paper focuses on the experience of the women during their first decade on the job: getting hired, adapting to male work culture and early signs of resistance. This research is part of collaborative project with Women's Committee of USWA Local 6500 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the women hired in 1974. In 1994 members of the committee approached the authors to do a history of the move of women into blue collar jobs in the 1970s. The project has since expanded to include women in three periods: WWII, the 1970s and the 1990s. This paper is based on a series of in-depth interviews with 26 of the 100 women hired between 1974-76, including 17 women who were still with the company in 1998.

Women, Blue Collar Jobs and Mining

The women who moved into Inco during the 1970s were part of the first generation of women to enter blue collar jobs in mining in the postwar period. While few of them were aware of it at the time, they were breaking into an industry that had been virtually all-male since at least the nineteenth century. Male domination in the mining industry reflects more than social convention and the historical hiring practices of mining companies in Canada. Laws prohibiting mining companies from hiring women were part of a series of protective legislation introduced in the late nineteenth century. Public opposition to women working in mining was led by middle class reformers who viewed women's primary role in the home and by unions who viewed women as both a group in need of protection from exploitation and a potential threat to male labour.³

The first prohibition against hiring women was introduced in the *Ontario Mining Act* in 1890. The original legislation prohibited the employment 'of any girl or woman...

² The *Ontario Mining Act* prohibited companies from employing women to work underground until 1978.

in or about any mine' but amendments in 1912 and 1913 allowed companies to hire women in a 'technical, clerical or domestic capacity.'⁴ The prohibition was lifted temporarily during WWII, but it was not until 1970 that the law was changed allowing women to work at surface sites.

Inco is in many ways typical of companies that dominate the mining industry in Canada. The company has been the main employer in Sudbury, a community of approximately 90,000 located in Northeastern Ontario, for over sixty years. A Canadian-based multinational corporation, the company has operations in Ontario, Manitoba, Indonesia, Great Britain, Japan and most recently Voisey's Bay, Labrador. The company's share of the market has diminished considerably in recent years, but it is still the world's largest supplier of nickel. The mine, milling, smelting and refining complex in Sudbury is the largest in Canada and one of the largest in the world. When the women were hired in the mid-seventies, the company was one of the largest industrial sites in the country, employing between 14,000 and 16,000 hourly rated workers.

The pattern of gender segregation at Inco has been shaped by provincial mining legislation but it is consistent with other industrial workplaces. The company's highly paid hourly rated workforce on surface and underground is almost all male. These workers have been unionized since 1944, first with the International Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Union, and later after a bitter struggle between the two unions, with the United Steelworkers of America in 1965. Most of the women employed by the company were clustered in lower paying office and clerical jobs. Inco was given federal approval to hire women as hourly rated workers to counteract the labour shortage during WWII, but the women were laid off at the end of the war to open up jobs for returning soldiers.⁵ There were no new hirings of women until the mid-1970s.

Historically, the combination of single industry dominance, high wages and dangerous work contributed to Sudbury's image as a 'man's town'. This image reflected the impact that mining had on the local economy. Men who were fortunate enough to get a job at either one of the two mining companies earned a high enough wage to support a

³ Julie White, *Sisters and Solidarity: Women and Unions in Canada*, Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, 1993.

⁴ *Statutes of Ontario*, 1890, Chapter 10, s. 4.

⁵ Sandra Battaglini,

wife and dependent children. Conditions were considerably less favourable for women. Because there were few jobs outside of the traditional mining sectors, women who were in the paid workforce were concentrated in service and trade occupations. Low wages in these sectors meant that it was difficult for women to support themselves or children outside of conventional marriage.⁶

During the 1970s both Inco and the mining industry were poised for dramatic changes. The company responded to the threat of increased international competition, investments overseas and militancy amongst its unionized workers by introducing new technology and transforming the workplace. Employment followed a pattern of hirings and layoffs. Sudbury's economy was booming when the company's workforce reached a peak of 18,966 workers in 1971, but by the end of 1972 the company had reduced its workforce by 3000, mainly through layoff. The company began re-hiring in late 1973 but announced major layoffs again in 1978 and 1982.⁷ It was in this context-- a temporary expansion in a period of employment decline-- that the first women were hired in the postwar period.

A number of factors set the stage for Inco to begin hiring women in the 1970s, including the broad pattern of social change affecting the status of women, the postwar increase in women's labour force participation, changes in the structure of the family and the emergence of a vigorous second wave women's movement with its demands for economic equality and affirmative action. Public policy both reflected and influenced these changes as governments increasingly viewed women as full-time participants in the labour force.⁸ In 1970 human rights legislation in Ontario was changed to include gender as grounds for discrimination for the first time. The same year the *Ontario Mining Act* was amended to allow mining companies to hire women for production jobs at surface operations. There were also important changes in the nature of work as increased

⁶ Jennifer Keck and Mary Powell 'Working at Inco: Women in a Downsizing Male Industry', In Marg Kechnie and Marge Reitsma-Street, eds., *Changing Lives: Women and the Northern Experience*, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1996.

⁷ Employment figures based on the company's annual reports. See also Jennifer Keck and Mary Powell 'Working at Inco: Women in a Downsizing Male Industry' and Dieter Buse, 'The 1970s' in Carl Wallace and Ashley Thompson, *Sudbury Rail Town to Regional Capital*, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1993.

⁸ Barbara Cameron, 'From Equal Opportunity to Symbolic Equity: Three Decades of Federal Training Policy for Women' in Isa Bakker, *Rethinking Restructuring: Gender and Change in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

mechanization and automation meant that physical strength and endurance were less critical for job performance at Inco and other mining operations. The combined impact of these changes meant that for the first time since WWII women could imagine themselves working at a ‘man’s job’ in the mining industry.

The company: ‘We’re all for women’

Inco’s decision to hire women for its hourly rated workforce in Sudbury can be traced to the early months of 1974. On January 23rd the *Globe and Mail*’s business section reported that several mining companies had begun to hire women as mill workers and truck drivers on surface to address a continuing shortage of male workers in the industry. There was no such shortage in Sudbury and a spokesperson for Inco indicated the company planned to recruit 100 men ‘from district sources’.⁹ Two days later Inco’s public affairs director in Sudbury was asked by a local reporter to clarify the company’s policy on hiring women. In an article that received front page coverage in the *Sudbury Star*, Don Hoskins announced that he was ‘all for women’. The only reason that women had not been hired at Inco’s operations in Sudbury was simple, ‘they just haven’t applied.’¹⁰

The response to the company’s ‘willingness and definite intention’ to hire women was described in *The Triangle*, the Inco’s in-house publication, as ‘immediate’ and ‘overwhelming’.¹¹ Within days of the announcement, women began to flood the company with applications. The prospect of women getting hired for a ‘man’s job’ in mining attracted widespread media coverage as outraged radio talk show hosts debated whether or not women could do the work and whether or not they should be allowed to take ‘men’s jobs’. One woman remembered hearing the Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau commend Inco for its decision to hire women on an evening newscast. Even prominent feminists entered the fray. When asked to comment on Inco’s plans to hire women Laura Sabia, Past-President of the National Action Committee on the Status of

⁹ Lawrence Welsh, ‘Mining executives claim labor shortage now at critical stage’, ‘Mines turning to women for work in operations’, *The Globe and Mail*, January 23, 1974, B1.

¹⁰ ‘May welcome women in area mines’, *Sudbury Star*, January 25, 1974, A1.

¹¹ ‘Ladies/ First Ladies’, *Inco Triangle*, August, 1974.

Women, accused the company of ‘tokenism’ and not going ‘far enough’ in its plan to hire women.¹²

In its public statements the company stressed that it was ‘business as usual’ at its recruitment office. Standard policies applied and female applicants would be ‘treated exactly as males.’ Women who were interested in a job would have to meet basic qualifications, pass a medical examination and undergo established training. If hired they could expect to receive ‘equal opportunities, equal benefits and equal pay’.¹³

The first three women were hired at the nickel refinery in May and another 21 were hired by the end of the summer. By August the company was meeting with representatives of the union to discuss plans to expand dry facilities for up to 100 women ‘if the need arises.’ That plan was confirmed in the company’s 1974 report. Describing the move of 57 women into the surface plants as ‘successful’, the report announced plans to ‘substantially increase the number of women’ working at its surface plants.¹⁴ The company reached its target of hiring 100 women in October 1976.

At least one senior manager was sympathetic to the prospect of hiring women as hourly rated workers. Chris Dunkley was the superintendent responsible for overseeing construction of the newly built nickel refinery. Trained as an engineer in Britain, he had memories of women’s work during WWII and was convinced women would be able to handle work at the nickel refinery because the new plant was largely automated and therefore did not require the level of heavy lifting associated with the industry. In an interview with Mick Lowe in the *Financial Post* twenty years later he admitted that few members of senior management anticipated the reaction the decision would have on the shop floor or in the community: ‘those women were in for a rough ride.’¹⁵

The Women: ‘It was good money and I thought I could do the job’

It was just sort of a competition one day. Why don’t you go and apply and so I did. I just went at the beginning of the day and stood in line with all the men and all that. They would either say that we are hiring or we are not. ... you would get some strange looks too. Here you are standing in this line

¹² Based on interviews with the women who were hired in 1974-76.

¹³ ‘Ladies/ First Ladies’, *The Triangle*, August, 1974. Also ‘May Welcome Women in Area Mines’, *Sudbury Star*, January 25, 1974.

¹⁴ Inco, Ontario Division, *Inco Report of Operations*, 1974, 33.

¹⁵ Mick Lowe ‘Hard Rock Women’, *Financial Post Magazine*, January 1995, 24.

with all these men... but actually there was quite a few women in the line.

While their hiring was of historical significance few of the women who applied in 1974 were interested in being the first women to break new ground for women in mining. Like the men, they were motivated first and foremost by the prospect of a 'good job' at Inco and its promise of better pay, benefits, and job security.

The women heard about the jobs from family, friends and the media. News that Inco was willing to hire women was widespread: 'I don't know anyone in that small community who hadn't heard that Inco was hiring.' While some women thought they would be the only ones interested in such work, they were surprised to find that there were hundreds of applicants.

Everyone seemed to be talking about the fact that Inco was going to open their doors and I thought here I am almost 5'8" a 160 pounds strong and I'll just go and apply... the woman behind the counter said I suppose you think you are one of the first... then she preceded to show me file cabinets full of applications... hundreds and hundreds... I would have imagined thousands of applications were in.

It was clear from the outset that they were a different type of applicant than was the norm for a labourer's job at the employment office. At least one of the women who applied during the first few days had to insist on getting an application:

he reached under the counter and threw an application at me... I looked at it and it said, um, it was for office work and I gave it back to him and I said no, I don't want to do office work; I want to be a labourer. So, anyway, he thought that was a big joke and the whole place burst out laughing and I reminded him that he couldn't refuse me an application. So he reached under the counter and threw another one at me and I filled it out and was called a few weeks after for an interview.

The interviewers at the employment office wanted to know how women would adapt to conditions in the industry and the masculine work environment. One woman was warned that 'it's dirty work over there'. Referring to her previous job as a nurse's aide, she replied 'well you know if I can wash men that have poohed and peed themselves, and I can lift men by myself to their geriatric chair I'm pretty sure I can handle any thing you dish out over there. So I guess he was impressed with that because I was hired.' Other women were asked how they would react to sexual advances:

one of them asked me what I would do if one of the men in the plant made a pass at me... that was such a big deal... every other woman that went after

was asked that question too... I said I'd slug the guy... I ended up with the nickname 'slugger.'

While the interviewers at the employment office were concerned with how the women would adapt to the new work culture, the women-- like most of the men standing in line with them-- were motivated first and foremost by the prospect of getting a high paying job. Their education backgrounds ranged from grade 8 to first year university, but most of the women came from low paying jobs in the female-dominated sectors. Even the women who had worked in traditional male sectors were caught in low paying and dead-end jobs. Both groups stood to gain from a job at Inco. The average wage for jobs in the service sector was \$2.50 an hour compared to \$3.99 for a position as a process labourer at Inco.¹⁶

All of the women we interviewed stressed how important the pay was: 'like we all went there for the money. I mean nobody in their right mind would go and work in a dirty place like that for nothing. It was good.' Many of the women considered this their only option for earning a good wage: 'where else would I make this kind of money with a grade ten education?' The prospect of earning a 'man's wage' was particularly important for women who were struggling to support themselves and children on women's wages. Of the 26 women we interviewed 18 of the women had children or other dependents to support when they were hired.

I had no idea what it looked like inside of the place. I just knew they paid really good. They paid good money and I had two kids to support and it had all of these benefits if the kids get sick.

I had just asked my husband to leave. I had two sisters and my two kids to support. He was supposed to give me support but he didn't. I had to find a job, a good paying job.

For many of the women financial security was associated with independence from male partners, creditors and the state. Several women described how the job at Inco became their 'ticket' out of a difficult relationship:

I was scared of him because I used to get beat up every other day... so I thought I wanted to get out of here... I waited and applied to Inco... when I found out I got the job friends helped move me and the kids out.

¹⁶ Wage Rate Survey, 10 October 1974, Regional Municipality of Sudbury, *Community Profile*, 1975, p. 11-17. See also J. Keck and M. Powell, *Women's Work in Northeastern Ontario: Preliminary Findings about Women in the Mining Industry*, INORD Research Grant Series #3, Sudbury, p. 14.

For others it meant being able to escape the rules and regulations of state assistance:

I was living in a low rental and on Mother's Allowance... I didn't want to raise my son there... my first cheque I moved out.

There was also the prestige attached to joining a large industrial employer with 'lots of opportunities for advancement.'

While financial security was the primary motivation, there were other reasons for seeking a blue collar job at Inco. The physical nature of the work was attractive to some of the women:

It was something I always wanted to do. I could never see myself sitting down at a desk and typing. I could never see myself waitressing... I figured that Inco was the best opportunity. I got lucky I guess.

Women were also attracted to the challenge of entering an industrial work setting and the promise of an adventure: 'I was sort of goaded into going, friends were saying I would never make it... so I had to go. It was a challenge.'

Family background also seemed to play a role. Many of the women described households where they had been accorded 'equal treatment' with their brothers and where the traditional division of labour between male and female work at home had been challenged.

There was no boy's work or girl's work at our house. It was an equal opportunity household. Whatever has to get done gets done... there was no his job to cut the wood and her job to do the dishes.

These women often worked with their fathers on house construction and car repairs:

I've always been working with dad when he was working on the car... I could change a carburetor by the time I was 14... I taught my husband how to change the brake shoes on our car... so I guess I'm mechanically inclined.

Other women challenged the view that they were moving from jobs in traditional female sectors that were less demanding on themselves or their families. One woman described how she had worked at two jobs as a waitress and school bus driver to support her husband and four children before taking the job at Inco:

I'd begin at seven in the morning with the school bus... then I would go to the restaurant in the afternoon... I'd get home around 10:00 at night... my first pay cheque at Inco was double what I made before... and for an eight hour day.

Women also described their shifts as bar waitresses where they were expected to carry heavy trays, work long hours and deal with large crowds of men.

Regardless of their motivation, the women were determined in their decision to apply for the job; often defying the advice of immediate family. All of the women hired were from the local area and many of them came from families with ties to Inco's workforce that extended back generations. Often their fathers, brothers, uncles and even mothers and grandmothers had worked for the company. In several cases the women were hired alongside sisters and sisters-in-law. Many parents were ambivalent about their daughters' decision to enter a man's job in mining. While some fathers were proud that their daughters were joining them at Inco; others wanted 'better for their children':

I have two brothers, and when I was growing up he (my father) had always encouraged them to get a university education because he didn't want them to wind up working at Inco, like he did... he was also concerned for my safety.

Sometimes the concern came from familiarity with the workplace and the response their daughters could anticipate on the shop floor:

My Dad thought that this was not a world that I wanted to be in. I think my father knew that some men couldn't get over my being a female and that would cause me problems. I don't think he had any doubt in his mind that I was capable of doing the work and that I probably would run into situations.

Even mothers who had worked at Inco during WWII expressed their concerns. A woman who had worked at Inco during the war expressed her dismay at having her daughter take the job at Inco, 'It was ok when we worked there during the war... there were no men for the jobs... but mining isn't a place for a woman.'

While many women found their partners supportive of their decision to apply for a high paying job at Inco, others faced opposition. In a few cases this was because the women got hired when their husbands did not:

He dared me to apply for the job in the beginning... but he wasn't too happy when I got the job and he didn't... I didn't care, I wasn't giving this opportunity up.

Other women had husbands who did not like the idea of them working side-by-side with men:

Well he didn't think too much of me taking the job because he didn't like me around that many guys to begin with anyhow.

Despite these obstacles, the women were persistent, contacting the employment office every week, and sometimes every day, to find out if the company was hiring.

I started pestering them. Every morning at 8:00 a.m... every afternoon at 2-3:00 o'clock I'd call them. I got them to take a file folder on me... and mark it in.

Once they were told they had the job, there was little hesitation in taking it: 'I got the call saying you're hired and it was the happiest day in my life.' While they were not interested in breaking new ground for women, the women soon found themselves on the frontier of working class feminism.

Getting Started: 'You got dirty and tired but you showered... and the pay was good'

Like their male co-workers the women began as process labourers. The work involved shoveling, sweeping, hosing down dirty areas and in some cases painting and unloading supplies. The women responded to the first day with more than the usual apprehension.

You have no idea what to expect... when we first walked in we saw these flotation cells and they're all bubbling and its seems like it's really hot, it was very scary... walking over the grating and looking down three floors... I had never seen this kind of machinery in my life.

It took awhile to get used to the heavy machinery and the noise, dirt and smell of an industrial work environment.

In the mill it was really dirty, from the time you walked in you were dirty. Like I got dirty just looking at it. There was a smell of lime, varsol and sometimes when the gas was coming in you'd have to sit in the lunch room. Lots of noise.

It's like nothing in your experience... it's not like walking into an office cause everybody knows what an office looks like.

One woman defined a process labourer as 'a technical term for seeing how dirty you could get by the end of the day'! While the environment was foreign, there was also a sense of adventure:

They took us on a tour of the place and from the moment they opened the door my eyes just continued to get bigger because I realized what I was going to learn here... the whole Inco experience was an adventure.

Few of the women had experience with this type of physical activity, but this was something they could overcome:

It was hard to get out of bed the next day. The first three days you had to roll out of bed because your body was so sore... Just until it got used to the idea that this is what we had to do... it was hard on your body but you got used to it.

Despite their initial trepidation, most of the women discovered that their jobs were not difficult to learn. Process labourer was the entry level classification for all blue collar jobs and most of the training was on-the-job:

I'm really pigheaded, I figured they wanted me to shovel, I'll shovel this damn stuff, and there's got to be a knack to everything... so one of the foremen came by and I'd ask what am I doing wrong? So he'd say well use your foot, cause if you try if you just used your arms if you start at the top of the pile you just get two rocks... use your foot to push the shovel underneath.

While their first few weeks were difficult, the first pay cheque reminded the women why they had taken the job:

I remember my first pay cheque that I came home with... I was making double plus what I was making at my other job... I didn't want to cash it right away. I brought it home and showed it to my husband and his eyes went wide. He said 'Wow, we're in good times now, eh baby?'

A Woman in a Man's Job: 'this was their place and we were going to change things'

While the women had little difficulty doing the work, adapting to being a woman in a man's job proved to be more of a challenge. After the first few weeks the women were assigned to work crews, primarily with men. Even if three or four of them worked in the same department, they were often not on the same shift.

From the beginning it was clear that the women were 'different' and that the difference reflected their gender. This was not just any workplace. From the names of their jobs and the size of their work-clothes to the reaction of co-workers and supervisors and battles over washrooms and change facilities, this was clearly a 'man's world'.

Its strange because you got your hard hat on and you got a great big pair of boots and you have your work clothes on... and you figure you look stupid as hell... I've usually got makeup, dressed up and high heels and here I am

trucking in there with big work boots on... it was strange but you got used to it

The women soon discovered that being treated the 'same as a man' meant having to become more 'like a man' and adapt to masculine work culture. The term describes workplaces that have historically been male-dominated and where work is organized with the assumption that workers are male and that their incomes support women. As Cockburn, Willis and Luxton point out, the equation of work with masculinity is often an integral part of large scale industrial setting where the work involves manual labour and heavy machinery and where the work environment is noisy, dirty and noxious.¹⁷ The idea that the work is 'men's work' reflects the view that men and women are inherently different and that difference is attributed to biology. In addition to having qualities that make them more suited to performing heavy, physical work, men's status as primary wage earners means they have more of a right to high paying jobs in the industry. It follows that women are often perceived to be physically and psychologically inadequate to the work. The association of masculinity with work is also one of the ways that workers take pride in being able to do work in an industrial environment. In the case of mining, masculine work culture had a long and rich tradition because of the harsh conditions that prevailed and the legislated ban against women in the industry.¹⁸

From the outset the women were sensitive to the fact that this was a different work culture and many of them initially felt out of place:

Just like you are intruding. Like you are going someplace where you are not supposed to be. Like wow what am I doing here and these guys how are they going to take it.

there were guys hanging off the ladders and sitting on landings all whistling and I thought, my god this looks like these guys have been in prison for years. It was almost as if these men had not actually left the houses at seven o'clock this morning. They hadn't seen women... You know they saw a few secretaries walking around but never women coming to work with them.

¹⁷ Meg Luxton and June Corman, 'Getting to Work: The Challenge of the Women Back Into Stelco Campaign', *Labour/le Travail*, 28; Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change*, London: Pluto Press; Paul Willis, 'Shop Floor Culture, Masculinity and the Wage Form,' *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory*, ed. J. Clarke et. al. London: Hutchison.

¹⁸ See Marat Moore, *Women in the Mines: Stories of Life and Work*, New York: Prentice Hall, 1996.

The men were given little preparation that the women were coming and the situation was tense at first:

it was bad because nobody else would talk, the men were too afraid to talk to the women and we of course were scared... we found out later the company had a long talk with the men before we came and warned them about pictures and whatever... to make sure they were dressed properly and that nothing was hanging out... to urinate in the proper place

the boss told them, okay now we are going to be having women working in here. You can't be running around with holes in your crotch and can't be swearing and everything else... they figured they would have to change and they resented us for that. Because they figured holy Christ they can't say the F word or nothing any more.

The reception the women received depended a great deal on the reaction of front-line supervisors. Most of them had traditional mining backgrounds and had worked with men for most of their work lives. They had little training or preparation for dealing with the integration of the new workers.¹⁹ Many of them did not want the responsibility for supervising the women because they anticipated that there would be problems:

He was put in charge of us. And it was the thing that he didn't want. I mean nobody wanted to be in charge of the women. Because they didn't want to be you know, hey you having a good time with those women.

Others were blunt about their opposition. These were men's jobs, if women were going to take these jobs they would have to prove they could 'be men':

he said he didn't want us new four girls, he didn't want women working there at all. He pulled us in the office and told us from this day on you're going to have to prove you're a man.

Other women were warned that this was no place to find a husband. This seemed like odd advice, especially for the women in the group who were already married: 'I thought I have a husband, I'm not going to look for one, I've got one.'

While some men were supportive and helped women adapt, many resented the fact that women were being hired in what was for them a 'man's job'. Opposition to the women took many forms. Most of the men challenged whether or not women would be able to do the work and there was a constant testing of their abilities. There were complaints that the women were getting 'cushier jobs' and had better dry facilities (shower and change rooms). Other men tried to undermine the women by using crude

¹⁹ Mick Lowe 'Hard Rock Women', *Financial Post Magazine*, January 1995, 24.

jokes, social ostracization and refusing to help train the women. There were also more hostile forms of harassment in the form of threats and physical assaults.

The women offered different explanations for this behaviour. Few of the men had experience working with women and they had a difficult time believing that women would be physically able to do the work. Mining jobs were for 'tough' men. There was also the view, widely prevalent, that good jobs at Inco were for male breadwinners.

Women with male partners were accused of not needing the job:

One of the men found out that I took my husband back. He said you got hired on here because you were separated, now you're married. I said, no I did not get hired on here because I was separated. But he got all upset over that. He says, what are you doing here if you've got a husband to support you.

Single women were more acceptable because they were supporting children, but even they found themselves having to defend their breadwinner status:

You could feel the tension in the lunchroom especially... the women are taking our jobs away and they're taking food out of my kids mouths... it didn't take very long before I'd say look, I'm a single parent, would you rather see me on mother's allowance and you're supporting me through your taxes or get me working

The situation was particularly tense during layoffs or when their seniority allowed women to compete successfully against men for positions:

One guy with less seniority threatened us with a shovel... he was peeved off because we had a month more than him and we had the choice of the jobs before he did. And he was a big guy.

The debate over whether or not the women should be working in men's jobs went beyond the shop floor and extended into the community. The women found they had to defend their jobs with friends, neighbours and others in the community. There were all kinds of allegations ranging from accusations that the women were stealing men's jobs to rumours that they were having sexual affairs with the men. One woman described her reaction to a radio talk show:

This guy had his own talk show the women would call in and the names that we were called. We were going to sleep with their husbands. And I called in one day, and I was just so angry and upset, I had been on welfare too with four children and I told them a man can work anywhere in an office or what, and if he's going to run around, he's going to run around.

Women faced opposition in their own neighbourhoods:

down the street, believe it or not I've had women call me an Inco whore. And this really ticked me off because before I got hired on at Inco, about a month and a half before they hired me, I had asked for welfare assistance, and then I got called welfare bum. Then when I got on I got called Inco whore and I stopped a woman one time and I told her, you're never satisfied, people like you, you've got nothing better to do with your time than put us down, now I'm working, and they thought we took showers with the men.

While there was widespread concern that women were stealing men's jobs, many of the women felt that the resistance went deeper, especially for the men at the plant. There was something about the job and the workplace that made it inherently male and therefore part of male privilege. Hartman argues that both employers and male workers have a vested interest in maintaining occupational segregation and the traditional division of labour at the workplace.²⁰ Some of the women supported this view, suggesting that many men simply resented the presence of women in a male workplace:

that attitude was still there that we didn't belong... that we weren't going to survive... and we had no right to be there... in my mind that was the attitude we got

While there was little publicity about the issue, sexual harassment was another reminder that the women were 'different' workers. Sexual harassment demonstrates the complex relationship between sexuality and the paid workplace and is one of the ways men used sexuality to maintain masculine dominance in the workplace. Harassment took many forms. Sometimes it involved foremen or shift bosses. One woman was assigned extra work shovelling asphalt after she refused the invitation to go to her foreman's camp after work. Another woman described a more threatening situation that involved a shift supervisor:

he would say to me, okay come with me and he would take another guy and bring us to this god forsaken place where no-one's ever going to work there because it's full of dust and muck and he'd say, oh, I forgot to get the tools and he'd send the guy down, then he's left alone with me and he'd try rubbing his private area against my knee and I told him, if he appreciates talking in a deep tone he wouldn't do it ever again. But then he tried calling me at home and asking me if I would meet him and I told him I'm not desperate for company and that I don't sleep with a pig

²⁰ H. Hartman, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union' in L. Sargent, ed. *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, Boston: South End Press, 1981.

While sexual harassment by supervisors was serious because management had more control over the women's working conditions, women often found it difficult to deal with harassment by co-workers. This was a contentious issue with both men and women. Part of the problem was that masculine work culture was already highly sexualized before the women entered the workplace. Men used sexual language to describe working conditions, make jokes and in the course of everyday conversation. One woman described the situation:

Like your whole body was insulted... it was either your breasts, or like they knew you were separated... so it was you're not getting it. I wasn't used to that

There were also battles over pornography and pinups:

the first thing that went up in the lunch room when we were there were pictures of naked women. Well two of us were quite upset. We didn't think that is was appropriate but we were the minority this was their lunchroom. But two other women came in the next morning with *Playgirl*. Well it didn't take long for the pictures to disappear because the men no more wanted to look at other naked men than we wanted to look

New women were the most vulnerable. One woman described her first experience in the lunch room:

some guy yelled out, Hey Shera, and I thought maybe it was one of the gentlemen that were teaching us so I turned around to look and this guy yells out, Do you suck cock? No one corrected him for it, nothing was said to him, but I didn't leave the lunch room neither. I stood my ground by sitting down and ignored it. But I thought I was going to die. I had tears in my eyes.

Most of the women we interviewed stressed that the more hostile behaviour tended to come from individual men, rather than groups of workers. Unfortunately one individual could make life very difficult for a woman on shift, especially if she was working alone.

The women's experience with harassment and their response to the problem varied widely. Some women had no direct experience with the problem and therefore had few concerns. Others found some of the behaviour offensive but considered it to be part of what was to be expected in a male work environment. One woman described her response to graffiti:

if they wouldn't be writing that stuff they wouldn't be guys... I mean nobody's walking up and saying anything... like I'll give you twenty

bucks or anything... they all talk behind your back and you never know who wrote it.

Other women relied on humour and quick repartee to diffuse difficult situations.

Regardless of their position on the broad issue of harassment, all of the women were clear that unwanted sexual advances or touching was unacceptable:

I don't mind if someone tells a dirty joke or whatever, but I said as long as nobody touches me or harasses me directly... you don't have to change for me I don't care.

All of the women we interviewed stressed that the resistance from men was far from universal. Many of the men provided support and helped the women adjust to the new work environment. The gender politics were varied at different sites depending on the workplace culture, the reaction of supervisors, whether or not the women were the first at the work site and the response of individual women.²¹ Some of the work sites were located in small communities that had once been company towns. Local women were hired at these sites and they found it easier to be accepted. A woman who had worked at the mill in Levack explained what it was like to come from a small town:

In a small community you knew them... they knew your father... they went to the Legion with your dad.

Older men also seemed to be more accepting and willing to help the women adapt; sometimes because they had experience with women during the war years.

While problems persisted at different work sites, the tensions eased as the women were accepted as part of the shift. It was important to prove you could do the work:

At first it was hard because they obviously didn't want us around. But when they knew we were sincere about learning they were pretty good.

They treated us fairly, but you had to do your share of the work... if they had to run around doing all your work, well then forget it. They wouldn't even talk to you.

Mining culture proved to be conducive to both team work and the development of close relationships between workers on the shop floor. Many of the women found themselves developing close friendships with the men in their departments and in some cases with the foremen and supervisors.

²¹Meg Luxton and June Corman make a similar in observation in their study of workers at Stelco. See *Hard Times*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, in press.

From the guys who worked in the lab to the guys that worked on the floor most of them were just excellent people.... They are almost like my brother. They are human beings and they are sympathetic and they are everything that is great.

Other women were more philosophical. They needed the job and were willing to put up with the problems:

I was there to give them my eight hours, whether they wanted to spit at me or shit on me or whatever they wanted to do. But I found the more you stood up to them the more respect you got. And on every shift there were some men who just hated women being there. And there were some guys who just got used to the idea.

Shift Work and the Double Day ‘Shift work means missing your family’

The struggle to be a woman in a man’s job extended beyond the shop floor to the women’s lives at home. Like other working women- and unlike most of the men they worked with- the women were forced to balance their paid work at Inco with unpaid labour at home.

Trying to balance an eight hour day at Inco with their responsibilities for keeping up a household and raising children called for long hours. Most of the male co-workers had wives to perform this work:

No matter what shift I was on I wouldn’t stay in bed all day just because I worked grave yard all night. I had to get up... do the laundry... make them supper. Then I would get a couple hours sleep before I go to work at night and they were in bed by the time I left. It was just a mad run. It was no easy chore... I had to do baking and cooking and cleaning and doing floors. I told the guys they were really lucky all they had to do is go home and eat. I even had to buy the groceries before I could cook.

Shift work was a major problem, especially for women with family responsibilities. Continuous production in industrial workplaces is one of the ways that the work is organized around the assumption that workers are male and that their incomes support women who perform unpaid domestic labour. None of the women had enough seniority to be eligible for steady day shifts which meant that they had to work on rotating eight hour shifts. It took some time to get used to the schedule and women found that it wreaked havoc on their bodies for the first while.

Women with children found it particularly difficult. One woman described the impact that shift work had on family life:

the 7-7-6 schedule where you work 7 days in a row... was a horrendous schedule, it was terrible for families you never saw your children... you had no choice you just had to work, but I mean you saw your family on day shift but on graveyard you slept, or 4 to 12 was the worst for me, because when I left for work he'd be in school and when I got home he'd be sleeping of course. I'd get up on the morning and he would have gone back to school

Many of the women felt that they missed out on important events: 'You couldn't get them to an arena first thing Saturday morning... and I had to book off sick to make it to my son's first communion.'

Securing child care proved to be an on-going problem. There was no organized child care available for shift workers in the community. Most of the women relied on informal supports through family members or sitters from the neighbourhood, but arranging child care could be difficult, especially for single mothers. When there was a breakdown in these arrangements it was difficult to explain the problem at work:

You would be getting ready for work at 11:00 pm and your sitter would not show up. My daughter would be in bed and I would be desperately trying to find someone who could come and look after her. Your foreman would never believe that you didn't show up because you didn't have a sitter.

The problem was not restricted to parents of young children. Older children and adolescents also required supervision, especially during afternoon and graveyard shifts:

It was really hard when he hit the age where he was kind of too old for a baby sitter but too young to stay home alone.

For many of the women the problem went beyond the provision of alternative care. Shift work meant they were missing out on an important part of their family's, and in particular, their children's lives.

The women developed a variety of strategies to accommodate their paid and unpaid work lives. Some women applied to work steady graveyard shift to ensure that they would be able to spend time with their children in the morning and after school. Others pressed male partners and older children to share in the household duties. Many women described to us how proud they were of older siblings who were often given responsibility for housework and the supervision of younger children. Single parents took in boarders to try and accommodate child care needs. As difficult as it was, the job was worth it:

The kids didn't understand it at first. Like, how come I'm not there at night anymore when I'm working afternoons. It took them awhile but they accepted it. There was more money coming in

Getting Active in the Local 'we were part of a generation that stood up for our rights'

Like most of the men they worked with, the majority of the women were not radical. They were prepared to challenge conventional gender prescriptions to earn a man's wage but few of them considered themselves feminists or were interested in broader political struggles. Still, few of the women remained untouched by the militancy of mining work culture and the impact of women's movement in the 1970s. It was not long before a small number of women emerged who were willing to hold the company- and the union- to the original promise that they would be treated the 'same as men' and receive 'equal treatment and opportunities.'

Women became active with the union under much the same conditions as new male workers. They were recruited early, often after complaining about conditions on the shop floor, and put on health and safety committees at the various plants. The first two women union stewards took office in 1975; women were also elected as delegates to the Ontario Federation of Labour convention the following year. While the union gave early support for the women to become active, there was generally more support for the women working on traditional union issues than there was for their attempt to challenge differences based on gender. This was probably not surprising given the large number of male workers and the union's traditional support for the family wage.

A women's committee was established in 1977 to address this problem. One of the organizers challenged the company and the union in an article that appeared in the union's newsletter, *The Searcher*:

Over the last three years women have had to prove themselves to the company and the union. As women workers we share and support the concerns and struggles of our brothers... Now we want to be active so we can have a voice in our local... that is not our privilege, it is our right.²²

The strategy of separate organizing based on gender met with mixed reviews from men active in the local. While the committee had the support of the union President and other

²² *The Searcher*, 1977.

key activists, many men wondered why women needed a special committee to represent their interests when the union represented the interest of all workers. Even some of the women disagreed with the need for a separate committee. One woman who was active at the time remembered being accused of being a 'women's libber'. Activists with the committee remained convinced that there were problems 'peculiar to women' that needed to be addressed including 'maternity rights, child care, job opportunities, company attitude towards women and the aspects of health relating specifically to women.'²³

One of the first issues the committee tackled was maternity leave. The women were concerned that pregnant women workers did not receive 'same treatment' as workers who were injured on the job. Under section 11.29 of the collective agreement the company could ask a pregnant employee to leave on unpaid leave of absence at such time as she could not in opinion of company perform her normal duties. This meant that a woman would be without income for nine or ten months if she was asked to leave. This was in sharp contrast to section 11.23 that obliged the company to find alternative employment for employees who were unable to perform their regular work owing to age, disease or occupational injury. The fear of being laid off led a number of women who became pregnant in the first few years to not tell managers that they were pregnant as long as they could manage the work. The women's committee proposed changing the policy to be more consistent with policy for injured workers. While this proposal was rejected by management during bargaining that year, the presentation marked the first time the union had addressed issues specific to the women in bargaining.

The profile of the women increased dramatically during the 1978-79 strike. In September 1978 the local rejected Inco's latest contract offer and began the longest strike in company history, lasting eight and a half months. At first the women were assigned to work with the strikers' wives to turn out a daily quota of 800 to 1000 sandwiches in the kitchen at the steel hall. But kitchen work was not for everyone and many of the women rejected the assignment to traditional women's work to join their brothers on the picket line. Women also played a prominent role on committees responsible for distributing vouchers, general information and aid to striking workers and their families.

²³ *ibid.*

The strike became a politicizing experience for many of the activists. One of the women was on the emergency drug and benefit committee and helped organize the workers in the kitchen. She remembers the first time she went on a speaking tour:

They wanted someone to speak in B.C. to the University of British Columbia students and another group for International Women's Day... I told Harvey (Wyers) that I couldn't do it. I didn't know anyone there... Here I was from a small town and I'd never done that kind of thing... I ended up going there for five weeks.

Another activist, remembered meeting the union President for the first time when she walked into his office to complain about kitchen duty. He responded by putting her on the committee allocating aid to striking families. She later became the only member of Local 6500 to join the Wives Supporting the Strike Committee. Like many of the women who became active during the strike, she had never spoken in public before. She found her political voice before 500 people in Toronto where she spoke on a panel with some of the wives about being a woman and a worker on strike at Inco.

By the late seventies women had sufficient experience to begin to challenge gender discrimination on the shop floor with the support of the union's grievance procedures and human rights legislation. Three cases received high profile in the media. In 1976, Shirley Brown, a worker at one of the company's mills and an activist with the union, was denied a transfer to a newer facility because there were no washroom and dry facilities for women at that mill.²⁴ With the support of her union grievance officer, Brown launched a complaint with the Ministry of Labour and in 1978 the Ministry ordered the company to build a new dry or transport Brown, on company time, to the nearest facility with a washroom for women. Brown never did work at the Clarabelle mill but the company was forced to build washroom facilities and a dry for women at that plant.²⁵

A second case involved two women who filed grievances after company officials blocked their attempts to transfer to the cottrell area of the Copper Cliff smelter in 1979.²⁶ Two smelter workers, Marie Emery and Olive Richer, were refused training jobs in the cottrell area of the plant because the company did not want men and women to work

²⁴ The Clarabelle Mill was a newly constructed facility where it was possible to be assigned steady day shifts. This was important for workers like Brown who was a sole support parent at the time.

²⁵ 'Jobs shut to women at Levack', *The Sudbury Star*, July 10, 1978.

²⁶ The cottrells are huge vessels that accumulate dust and gases from the furnaces that lead to the superstack. The cottrell jobs were 'cleaner' and paid a higher rate than the women's regular jobs.

alone at a remote location. The company reversed this position in January 1980 after both the union and the human rights commission became involved. The smelter manager explained the company's new position in the *Sudbury Star*:

It was past practice to not allow a man and a woman to work together without additional supervision... However contractually women are entitled for those jobs and we have an obligation.²⁷

The third case set an important precedent in the area of reproductive hazards. In 1984 Laurene Wiens launched a human rights case over the company's refusal to let women work at the IPC section of the nickel refinery. Wiens, one of the first three women hired at Inco in 1974, had the necessary seniority and qualifications to bid on a higher paying job as an operator at the Nickel Carbonyl Plant. She was refused the position because of concerns that the chemical that would be used in the event of a carbonyl gas leak posed a potential health threat to a pregnant woman's fetus. The policy to exclude women from jobs in this part of the plant had been endorsed by both the company and union. After an unsuccessful bid to grieve the company's decision, Wiens launched a human rights case in 1984. In 1988 the commission ruled that while Inco had acted in 'good faith' in developing and applying the restrictive policy, the risk of exposure to the harmful chemical was small and it was up to individual women to decide whether or not they were willing to assume that risk.²⁸

The profile of women's issues within the union and the workplace declined considerably over the course of the 1980s. This reflected several factors, including the decline in the number of women workers following the layoffs in the late 1970's. In October 1977 Inco announced that 2200 workers would be laid off. One in three of the women hired in 1974-76 were amongst those laid off because they were among the workers with the least seniority. In 1982 as demand for nickel and copper declined and prices fell, Inco reported its first loss since 1932. This time the number of hourly rated workers fell below 10,000 for the first time since the 1930s. With layoffs and job security dominating relations between the union and company, there were few attempts to raise the profile of gender issues. Fewer than 25 women remained by the end of the decade.

²⁷ Tony Van Alphen, 'Moms work in smelter following lengthy struggle', *The Sudbury Star*, January 25, 1980.

²⁸ Lorne Slotnick, 'Barring women from refinery illegal, Inco told', *The Globe and Mail*, March 7, 1988, A1 and A2.

There was no new hiring until 1988.²⁹ Ten years later there were 50 women in an hourly rated workforce that had been downsized to fewer than 4200 workers. Nineteen of these women were part of the first cohort of women hired in 1974-76. These women had managed to survive the downsizing and restructuring and now had twenty-five years experience in an industry that was virtually all-male for most of this century.

Conclusion

Maybe I could've got a job somewhere, in a kitchen or something, making maybe what 5, 4, 6 dollars an hour but if it wasn't for Inco I wouldn't have what I have right here today... to give what I can to my kids.

In many respects the story of the move of women into blue collar jobs at Inco is a very ordinary one. A group of workers applied for and were successful in getting jobs that paid them more than they could earn at their previous jobs. With the income they earned the workers were able to support themselves, raise children, buy homes and pay for their children's education. What makes this story 'different' and the lives of the workers 'extraordinary' is that the workers were female and the jobs they applied for were historically male jobs in mining. In going to work at Inco women like Sue Benoit were leaving the minimum wage non-unionized jobs available to women and moving into the well-paid jobs that had in the past been available only to men. In an era when gender ideology was in transition these women found themselves on the frontier of the second wave of the women's movement.

If the workplace was not radically transformed by their presence, the experience of the women who moved into Inco during the 1970s is significant because it demonstrates that women are both willing and capable of performing industrial jobs and that while it is difficult they can combine this work with their responsibilities for raising children. The women who moved into Inco during the 1970s were willing to confront the gender division of labour to enter men's jobs in the absence of a local campaign by the union or the women's movement and despite the fact that there were few role models or

²⁹ Jennifer Keck and Mary Powell 'Working at Inco: Women in a Downsizing Male Industry', In Marg Kechnie and Marge Reitsma-Street, eds., *Changing Lives: Women and the Northern Experience*, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1996.

supports to help the women make the transition to a male dominated workplace.³⁰ Their prominence as activists in the union and on the shop floor belied their small numbers and minority status at the workplace.

The experience of the Inco women underscores perhaps the most fundamental of all points about gender discrimination: it is the social construction of gender that has kept women out of these jobs. Male domination in mining reflects factors that are historic and structural. Women were excluded from the mining industry as a matter of law beginning in the nineteenth century, a prohibition that remained in place for surface jobs until 1970 and for underground jobs until 1978. Women were hired for the first time mid-decade, but many lost their jobs during the period of restructuring and downsizing in the 1980s.

The example of the Inco women serves to remind us of the importance of vigilance in challenging the gender division of labour and the occupational segregation it supports. This is particularly the case in the absence of any government commitment to supporting full employment and the current climate of official hostility to employment equity in Canada. The push to get women into working class male-dominated jobs has waned considerably in the trade union and women's movement in the 1990s. This is perhaps not surprising given the declining patterns of employment in these industries. Jobs in the blue collar sector have been hard hit by the introduction of new technologies, restructuring and downsizing and more recently forces related to globalization. But these jobs are still important. They pay high wages and benefits, are often unionized and offer a degree of job security that has few parallels for working class women- or men.

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³⁰ Educational programs promoting the move into non-traditional jobs did not emerge in most Canadian cities until the late 1970s. See Meg Luxton and June Corman, 'Getting to Work: The Challenge of the Women Back Into Stelco Campaign', *Labour/le Travail*, 28.