
Searching Through the Scraps

Dawn Paley - La Serena, Chile, January 7, 2005. For Canadian Dimension magazine.

Beginning in the 15th century silver exploitation of Potosi and continuing to today, women have been involved in intricate and often invisible ways in the Bolivian mining sector.

Searching through the Scraps: Women and Mining in Bolivia

When Bolivia's mining sector was privatized in 1985, the formerly nationalized mines were fractured and split, the minority falling into the hands of larger private enterprises, and the vast majority left to survive on their own, with no state or foreign investment. Today, 85% of miners work in cooperative structures, using manual extraction methods and generally living in less organized and less prosperous circumstances than during the existence of COMIBOL.

From 1952 to 1985, COMIBOL was the major organization representing miners, union regulations formally excluded women from working inside the mines. In this era the most visible representation of women in the mining sector was through 'Amas de Casa' organizations, where wives and partners of miners organized to lobby for improved working and living conditions for miners and their families. The tradition of the Amas de Casa continues today, and part of the legacy of their struggles is the recognition that women's work in the household is an integral and productive element in the mining sector.

Other than working in the home, women have and continue to contribute their labour to the mining sector in a variety of ways. With only 6,000 women cooperative members out of an estimated 60,000, it follows that the vast majority of women are autonomous workers, whose activities range from informal trade to mineral salvaging. There are men as well as women working in all types of informal labour in the mining sector, however all able bodied men are presented with the option to work inside the mines for a better wage, a choice which is not extended to women.

Today, working inside mines remains almost exclusively the domain of men, and women are kept on the margins of the mining sector through a combination of discriminatory regulations and cultural beliefs. The forms of labour open to women are so insecure -and the financial benefits so few- that it is not unusual for young children to work alongside their mothers, searching together for mineral scraps in mine dumps and rivers.

Palliris: On the bottom of the pile

We had arranged to meet in Potosi first thing in the morning, but when 10 o'clock came around, Alejandra Lopez was nowhere to be found. When she arrived, Lopez, president of a palliri (hand picker) organization in Potosi, explained that she had been organizing a memorial service for one of her comrades, a palliri who was killed the day before while she worked sorting through mineral tailings on Cerro Rico. This was my introduction to the world of women's work in the mining sector in Bolivia, a world where women's rights and health are far from guaranteed.

"Women working as palliris don't know about engineering, and there is very little capacity building that takes place" says Lopez, referring to the feminized trade that sees women working outside the tin mines of the Cerro Rico in the city of Potosi to survive. While palliris have formed cooperatives in Siglo XX, a mining region in northern Potosi, and have a loose organizational structure in Potosi, for the most part their labour is informal and autonomous.

In Northern Potosi, palliri leader Nora Escueza explains that as the leader of a palliri cooperative she is paid a small salary from the Federation of Mining Cooperatives, but that her participation within the federation -an environment which she describes as "very masculine"- is limited. The palliri cooperative is meant to bring women workers together, however a serious lack of resources hampers any real possibility of using the organization as a platform for improving working conditions for women.

The work of palliris is difficult and time consuming, most working six days a week for more than eight hours daily to make ends meet. On a warm and windy November morning, I walked through the enormous tailing piles outside of the Siglo XX tin mine with Escueza as my guide. We stopped to talk to two women working in a hole, invisible from above.

"We sort and concentrate tin" Alicia Mendez explained, between turns lifting and moving large stones from below her knees to a pile above her shoulders, hitting them together so that the fine wet sand clinging to them falls to the ground. She's testing to see if any of the stones contain tin, and as she works, she fills a wheelbarrow with those that do. At the end of the day she will sort through the pile in order to salvage the tin that she separated, which she'll later sell to a local buyer.

"We get paid for what we find" she says "And there is a long delay between the hours we work and when we get paid". Working outdoors, year round, Mendez estimates she can average \$150 CDN monthly, enough to keep a roof over the heads of her seven children, but not enough to take time off or to stop working as a palliri, which she says she'll do "as

long as God lets me live”.

Baranquilleras: Far enough down the River

Chuquini is a community in the tropics north of La Paz, built around two gold mines and home to a population of about 2500. Informal housing and unsteady wages are the norm, and while some of the miners talk about finding a nugget, or reminisce about a good year, for most, depending on gold to get by leaves them living hand to mouth. To make matters worse, it is estimated that there are 120 families working in the river, which also serves as the local garbage dump, to make ends meet.

“People, and especially women, work in the river because it is their only access to the resource” explains baranquillera leader Lurdes Dabo, referring to the young and old immersed up to their waist in water shoveling sand and rocks into metal chutes. Baranquilleras work downstream from the gold mines, and their work is, according to Dabo, “the most precarious” type of work that exists in gold mining communities.

After filling a metal chute with rocks to form a rudimentary filtration system, baranquilleras spend up to ten hours a day shoveling mine tailings into the filter, hoping to collect small grains of gold from their filter at the days end. The disconnect between the amount of work a baranquillera does in a day and the final product is mind blowing, some ending a full day of shoveling with a few flecks of gold, weighing but a quarter of a gram. “We trade this for food”, one woman told me, “and tomorrow we do it all again”.

Gold traders are open twenty four hours a day in Chuquini, where a baranquillera, wet from the shoulders down after a long day’s work, can trade her daily find in for an average of \$4 CDN, often not enough to feed her family. Tuberculosis, caused by malnutrition and pollution, is common in the region; however there are no health clinics. In Tipuani, a neighboring village, there is a clinic but there are no doctors.

Searching for Alternatives

While working inside of the mine is far from a solution for women in the mining sector in Bolivia, it should, at minimum, be an option. “I know women could work inside the mine”, reflects palliri Alicia Mendez, “but we’re not allowed to enter, so we work outside”. If all women had equal opportunity to enter the mines, it would allow them the choice to work for higher pay in a more organized environment.

“Women working outside mines complain about their situation”, says Claudia Ricaldi of the Bolivian non governmental organization CEPROMIN, “but talking is one thing. It’s time for these women to take the initiative and enter the mines, regardless of whether the men ‘let’ them or not”. Capacity building is high on the list of palliri needs, as palliri leader Lopez explains that “Women working as palliris don’t know their rights as workers, and until we do, we will continue to be the most oppressed workers in the mining sector”.

The needs and desires of women working as palliris or baranquilleras reflect the needs of mining communities at large, however with a greater sense of urgency. “Palliris are too often used for other peoples benefit” palliri leader Lopez states, continuing without hesitation “many of the NGO’s here in Potosi who claim to be working in our name do not listen to our needs.”

“Baranquilleras organized two years ago with help from the International Labour Organization” says Dabo, whose primary goal as leader of the organization was to find employment alternatives for baranquilleras outside of the mining sector. The ILO also set up a project in the region three years ago, where women working as baranquilleras were invited to learn to sew and make clothing as an alternative way to support their family. Both ILO projects ended last year, and the sewing machines now sit silent because there are no funds available to pay a teacher to instruct the women how to sew.

Dabo hopes that the baranquillera organization and efforts for alternative careers in Chuquini will continue, but without funds, she says, there is “no real hope or expectation for positive change”. Canadian NGO CECI has recently started a project in Chuquini, the aims of which are to research and document child labour in the area. Unfortunately, this project is another example of a project which fails to provide real alternatives to the most marginalized members of the community.

Change for women working on the fringes of the mining sector in Bolivia necessitates the formation of respectful relationships between these women and the Bolivian government, NGO’s, and mining cooperatives. Women need to be engaged as active participants, and not treated as passive recipients, in the development of initiatives meant to improve their precarious situation in the mining sector in Bolivia.

-30-

This article was made possible with assistance from the Public Service Alliance of Canada's Social Justice Fund.