

Women in mining in 2022

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Historically, women were prohibited from underground mine work according to the 1935 International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention. Many countries have since ratified and denounced this Convention, including South Africa, which did so in 1996. There have since been many efforts leveraged off South Africa's comprehensive equality laws and regulations to increase the participation of women in all levels of work across the different sectors of the economy. However, despite a legal system that includes various laws that encourage diversity, and guarantees equal treatment at work, the South African mining sector is still not representative of the population, with a relatively low participation of women across all levels. According to the 21st Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report (2020–2021),¹ only 16% of the employed mining population are women. This is 25 years after South Africa denounced the ILO Convention of 1935, prohibiting women from underground mining work. The transformation of the sector is happening too slowly and more needs to be done.

In recognition of the need for accelerated transformative actions in the sector, the Board of the Minerals Council South Africa commissioned research in 2019, which sought to identify the barriers that women faced in the mining sector, and the challenges that contributed to the high attrition rates of women, especially in core mining roles, over the long term. The results of the research were included in a white paper,² which saw the establishment of the Minerals Council Women in Mining (WiM) initiative and the Women in Mining Leadership Forum (WiMLF) in August 2020. The WiMLF set stretch targets in its WiM strategy to at least double the percentage of women in mining by 2025, reaching 30–40% in the next five years, and ultimately achieving a 50% representation of women over the next decade. These are ambitious targets, which require focused and targeted strategy and action to eliminate the challenges faced daily by women in the mining sector.

Challenges such as a lack of gendered personal protective equipment (PPE), discriminatory practices in the hiring and promotion of women, lack of gender pay parity, physical and psychological harassment, and a built environment that is not conducive to women's safety, are amongst a myriad of challenges faced by women in the South African mining sector. Research and women's lived experiences indicate that these challenges are not exclusive to South Africa, but are endemic to the global mining sector.

Mining is a high-pressure environment that requires an emphasis on physical safety. Health and safety concerns are front of mind for every individual operating in the mining sector. According to the Wits Mining Institute, environment, community, health, and safety concepts have become integral parts of the everyday mindset of companies operating in the sector.³

Over the past two years, the Minerals Council WiM initiative has carried out several crucial workstreams that tackle the challenges women face in the industry, as part of the overall WiM strategy. One

of two key outputs in 2021 was a survey conducted among member company employees about the provision and use of the appropriate gendered PPE at the respective operations. This survey was based on the research findings by the Mine Health and Safety Council (Project SIM 100904), which were utilised by the Department of Mineral Resources in its 2015 Guideline for the compilation of a mandatory code of practice on the provision of personal protective equipment for women in the South African mining industry.⁴ The findings from this project provide detailed guidelines on the selection, provision and use of PPE in the workplace, which is not only based on hazard identification and risk assessment and mitigation, but also considers female anatomical and physiological make up. The findings from the WiM survey indicated that there are still areas that need to be addressed in the provision of gendered PPE, and that there is a need for close collaboration with all stakeholders to ensure that women's needs are fully catered for in the provision of PPE, to ensure a safe working environment.

The results of Research Project SIM 100904 have been discussed at WiM meetings, and members and occupational health personnel have been conscientised about the findings and the upcoming amendments to the Mine Health and Safety Act, relating to the guidelines on the provision of PPE and the required mandatory code of practice.

Further to this, Minerals Council WiM members are part of the multi-stakeholder consultative team, which includes the Mine Health and Safety Council and the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, and which is drafting formal guidelines and a code that will assist employers in providing suitable PPE for WiM, where required. The drafting of the Guideline is a crucial element in further developing legislation that practically removes barriers to women's full participation in mining and ensures their safety.

Physical and sexual harassment are pervasive risks that women face daily in their operations on the mines. Harmful behaviour is practised between employees at various levels in the sector, and women are the most vulnerable due to the nature of the sector, its history, and traditionally held views, which are rooted in biases, toxic masculinity and a male-dominated culture. The settings in which many employees work contribute to, and exacerbate, their experiences of harmful behaviours.

A study was conducted by the Minerals Council WiM in 2021 to understand the drivers of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) in the mining sector. One of the findings indicated that the built physical environment, amongst other drivers, contributed to the risk of physical harassment that women face. This risk is heightened in core mining operations underground. Therefore, not only do women have to contend with fall of ground, chemical hazards, noise, dust inhalation, etc., but they also face the hazards of falling prey to harmful behaviours in constricted and poorly lit environments. This is especially the case where the ablution facilities are unisex, far from

the rest of the team, and along paths that are not well lit. The physical environment is not the only contributing factor to the risks faced by women, but it is a significant contributor.

On 14 July 2022, the Minerals Council Mining Industry Occupational Safety and Health (MOSH) team launched the Underground Workplace Visibility Leading Practice. The event highlighted the adoption of light-emitting diode (LED) lights mounted on the rockface to improve visibility, and the ability to identify hazards timeously and improve production. A further positive linkage to improved visibility is improved physical safety for women working underground. The survey on PPE conducted by Minerals Council WiM found that women working underground sometimes delayed visiting ablution facilities during their long shifts, for fear of harassment. This has health implications as underground work is physically demanding, rendering women prone to health complications due to their physical safety fears. Improved underground workplace visibility is a welcome step in the right direction that will have positive outcomes for women's health and physical wellbeing, creating safer work spaces for all.

Progress is being made, but more needs to be done to get greater participation and inclusion of women in the mining industry.

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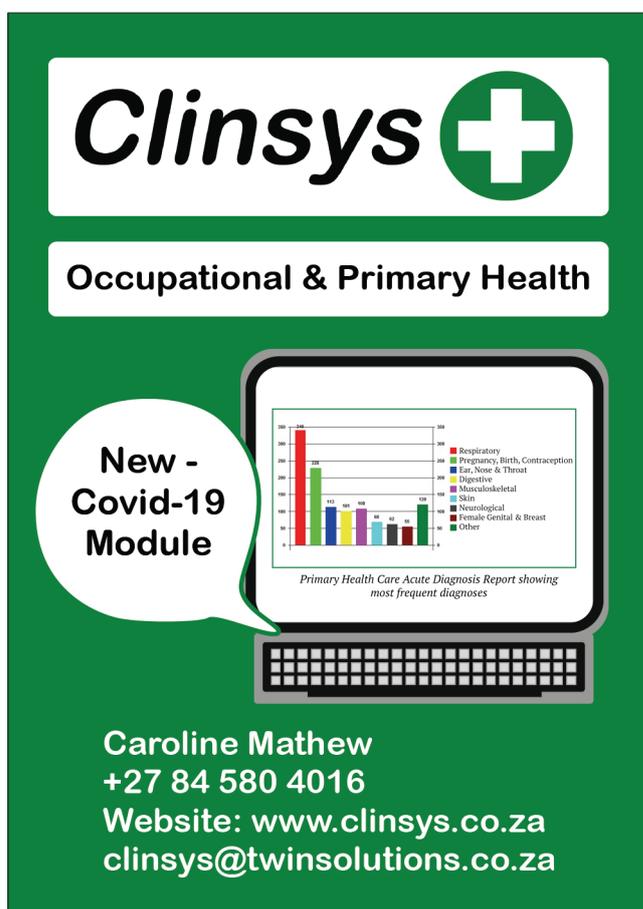


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