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Women in mining : occupational culture and gendered identities in the making

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2016

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/22425

Benya, Asanda (2016) Women in mining : occupational culture and gendered identities in the making, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/22425>

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Abstract

This research contributes to an understanding of how female mineworkers make sense of themselves and how gender identities are constructed in mining. Mine work has for a long time been seen as allowing for particular masculine self-formations and mineworkers embodying specific mining masculine subjectivities. The entrance of women in South African mines from 2004 and their allocation into occupations that were previously exclusively reserved for men is a significant challenge and a disruption to masculine subjectivities and the occupational culture. This thesis illustrates what transpires when socially constructed gender boundaries are crossed. This is what the women are doing with their entry into underground mining.

For ten and a half months, between 2011 and 2012 I worked in the mines and lived with mineworkers. During this period I completely submerged myself into the life world of mine workers to get an in-depth understanding of the ways female mineworkers understand themselves and navigate the masculine mining world. I managed to get the subtle, nuanced, instantaneous and unnoticeable ways which produce and reproduce the fluid and contested gender identities.

Drawing on insights from a range of feminist theorists and feminist readings of theories I argue that the construction of gendered identities in mining is an ongoing embodied performative process which is articulated in fluid ways in different mining spaces within certain structural, relational and historical constraints. The thesis presents a typology outlining four categories of femininities; *mafazi*, money makers, real *mafazi* and *madoda* straight, that are performed and produced underground by women mineworkers. At home these performances are unstable and disrupted as women attempt to reconcile their role as mothers, wives and their workplace

identities as underground miners with their notions of femininity. This necessitates a renegotiation of gender ideologies, performances and identities.

In this thesis I succinctly present the fluid, multiple, contradictory and contested processes involved in constructing gendered identities; above ground, underground, and at home. Drawing from this evidence I conclude that women do not approach the workplace or labour process as empty vessels or act as cogs-in the mining machines but are active agents in the construction of their gender identities.

The key elements I use to analyse gendered identities are; gendered spaces, embodiment, social and material bodies (as sites of control, resistance and agency) and performativity. I argue that all of these converge and are central to the construction of gendered identities.

Key Words:

Women in mining, gendered identities, subjectivities, femininities, masculinities, gender performances, embodiment, gendered spaces, gender transformation.