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Beyond “Hack It”: FIFO Women and the Structural Realities of Mining in Papua New Guinea

International Women’s Day 2026 and the question of what real change looks like

By Laurentia Laracy

Foreword:

This powerful paper by Laurentia Laracy (lawyer, and specialist in corporate governance and community affairs with long connection with PNG and Melanesia) highlights the need to go beyond simply amending obsolete legislation, such as the restriction on women working underground in PNG’s mines, to reviewing and revising the rules and practises in mining workplaces, especially for women, based upon sound research from PNG and overseas and informed workplace experience and feedback. This includes ensuring safe and welcoming conditions for women (but also for men) to provide such feedback. It must be recognised that equality of opportunity goes beyond simply revoking discriminatory rules, but must also recognise different needs and demands placed upon women in the workforce and within families and society, notably in PNG. It should also recognise wider demands, not just upon women, but also upon families, especially where both partners may be in the workforce, and perhaps facing demanding but unsynchronised FIFO schedules.

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As Papua New Guinea’s mining industry marks International Women’s Day on 8 March 2026, attention will rightly turn to women’s growing visibility across the sector - in engineering, geology, finance, governance, safety and community leadership. Legislative reform is also underway. The proposed amendment to Section 23(2) of the *Mining (Safety) Act 1977*, which currently prohibits women from working underground, signals an important and overdue shift.

Yet history reminds us that legal reform is only one layer of change. Research examining gender and extractives governance demonstrates that prohibitions on women working underground were widespread across former British colonial jurisdictions and beyond, many tracing back to the British *Mines and Collieries Act 1842* [1]. While framed as protective, such laws removed women from formal mining employment and entrenched occupational segregation for generations [1][2]. Although many countries have since repealed these restrictions, their legacy persists in workforce composition and in the enduring perception of mining as “men’s work” [2].

Globally, women remain underrepresented in industrial mining. In Australia, women comprised approximately 22 per cent of the mining workforce in 2022, with significantly lower participation in operational roles [3]. International patterns reflect similar segmentation [4]. Legal visibility does not automatically translate into cultural inclusion.

In Papua New Guinea, as elsewhere, women increasingly participate in mining through fly-in fly-out (“FIFO”) arrangements. Importantly, FIFO is not solely an expatriate model. Many women roster domestically - from Port Moresby and other urban centres to remote mine sites within their own country. Dual-FIFO households are increasingly common. When rosters do not align, couples may see one another only in transit. Grandparents or extended family frequently assume primary caregiving responsibilities.

In remote provinces, internet connectivity can be unreliable. Maintaining family connection may involve irregular video calls timed around children’s routines - attempts to remain a present, if virtual, mother. When emergencies arise, extraction from site may depend on charter capacity, weather conditions and operational timing. The logistics of departure are not always immediate.

The unspoken language of resilience - “if you can’t hack it, you can leave” - frames these challenges as matters of individual endurance. Yet departures are rarely about toughness. They are about relational arithmetic. Where workplace treatment maybe dismissive or belittling, where raising governance concerns carries reputational or relational risk or where roster flexibility is limited, the cumulative strain becomes structural rather than emotional.

Occupational health research provides insight into this strain. The Job Demands/ Resources model demonstrates how sustained demands without adequate recovery contribute to burnout and stress [5]. Studies on recovery and boundary transitions show that repeated movement between highly segmented environments reduces psychological recovery and increases fatigue [6][7]. FIFO intensifies these transitions: extended periods in tightly controlled operational settings followed by rapid re-entry into domestic and community roles.

Globally, women perform more than three-quarters of unpaid care work [8]. A roster may appear gender-neutral on paper. In practice, where care responsibilities remain unevenly distributed, its impact is not neutral.

This strain is not borne by women alone. Research on Australian FIFO workforces has identified elevated psychological distress among rostered workers compared to the general employed population [9]. Relationship strain and mental health challenges are documented across the sector. FIFO can provide strong remuneration and professional opportunity. But the relational and psychological costs are complex. Field breaks intended for rest may instead be devoted to caregiving possibly supporting an ageing parent, assisting a sibling, or managing accumulated domestic responsibilities.

Within organisations, another structural layer emerges. In many frontier and domestic mining operations alike, women are heavily represented in advisory, governance and community interface roles. These positions frequently require the management of tone, expectation and escalation across multiple stakeholders. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s concept of “emotional labour” describes how certain roles require workers to regulate and perform emotion as part of their paid function - maintaining composure and professionalism under strain [10].

Governance advisers may identify procedural risk while preserving relational calm. Community professionals may absorb frustration without holding decision-making authority. HR staff may receive distress disclosures while remaining procedurally neutral. This is work that aligns internal stress with a calm external presentation.

Joan Acker’s theory of gendered organisations demonstrates how ostensibly neutral structures can embed patterned distributions of authority and expectation [11]. Where advisory boundaries are blurred, individuals may carry reputational or relational accountability without holding operational authority or budgetary control. The asymmetry between accountability and authority is not merely organisational; it can be structurally patterned.

Where such roles are contract-based, the asymmetry may intensify. Research on non-standard employment links precarious status with reduced procedural protection and increased occupational health risk [12][13]. Psychological safety — the ability to raise concerns without fear of negative consequences - is recognised as fundamental to effective governance [14].

Research on organisational culture further demonstrates that power asymmetries are amplified in isolated environments where mobility, communication and escalation pathways are constrained [11][14]. The question is not whether misconduct exists in mining — it exists in all sectors — but whether structural conditions enable early correction or silent endurance. Geographic isolation, hierarchical compression and dependence on employer-controlled logistics can reduce informal oversight and delay intervention. In such contexts, behaviour that would attract early correction in metropolitan settings may persist longer before being challenged.

Inclusion also intersects with workforce design in less visible ways. Standardised medical protocols may not account for differences in women's physiology. Routine medicals can include invasive examinations. Iron thresholds may not consider heavy menstrual cycles. Women using hormone replacement therapy may be required to repeatedly declare medication in male-dominated security environments, compromising privacy. These are not pathologies; they are ordinary aspects of human variation. An inclusive workforce does not penalise normal physiology — it designs for it.

Beyond the workforce, Papua New Guinea has seen visible progress in women's participation in mining-related governance. Women landowner associations are increasingly engaged in Memoranda of Agreement reviews and benefit negotiations in projects such as Kainantu, Ramu, Simberi and Wafi-Golpu. Capacity-building initiatives seek to strengthen women's economic participation. These developments matter.

Yet the Sustainable Development Goals are universal in language — SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 16 (Strong Institutions) — and are often segmented in delivery [15]. In mining contexts, SDG alignment is frequently framed in relation to host communities and social investment. But the Goals are not geographically bounded. Gender equality does not stop at the fence line. Decent work applies to contractors and employees as well as to communities. Strong institutions begin with internal governance.

Development research distinguishes between direct implementation and participatory governance models. While direct delivery can achieve rapid outputs, participatory systems are more likely to strengthen institutional legitimacy and accountability over time [16]. Legal reform allowing women underground is essential. But without concurrent cultural, procedural and structural change, deeper inequities may remain intact.

None of this is an argument against mining. Resource development remains central to Papua New Guinea's economic future and to many families' livelihoods. The question is not whether women can work underground. It is whether the systems surrounding that work recognise the full human architecture on which the industry depends.

Resilience is admirable. Structural fairness is better. On International Women’s Day 2026, the PNG mining sector’s challenge is not merely to open doors, but to design institutions in which women do not have to rely on toughness to remain inside them.

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