

Researching *Women in Production and Maintenance Jobs*:¹ Towards a Feminist Praxis

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the initial feminist research commitments and the tensions emerging in the research process of an ongoing collaborative project with women who work in mining production at Inco, a major nickel producer and the largest employer in Sudbury, Ontario.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite des engagements initiaux de recherche féministe et des tensions qui émergent dans ce type de projet qui exige une collaboration continue avec les femmes travaillent dans l'industrie minière chez Inco, un important producteur de nickel et le principal employeur, à Sudbury Ontario.

“Rather than describing at a general level ‘the research’ before getting down to the serious business of discussing ‘findings’ and their relationship to ‘theory,’ the intention has been to draw the process of knowledge production, in research and theorizing, into its product, in the shape of written accounts of it. Thus ‘feminist research’ itself has been centred as a researchable topic.” (Stanley 1990: 4)

This article discusses an ongoing research project, focusing on the relationship between the “researchers” and “those being researched,” how this relationship has affected the research process, and how the issues and problems related to this process have emerged. At the outset, we--the academic researchers

who are writing this article--had three specific commitments for the research: 1) to break down the rigid and impersonal hierarchy between “those being researched” and “researchers” by finding ways to make the research a collective project; 2) to document the women’s experience and to recognize them as experts on what that experience was. “With other feminists, we rejected the view . . . that the researcher is . . . able to understand far better than those being studied what was really happening in their lives” (Armstrong and Armstrong 1990: 135); and 3) to introduce an element of praxis by making the “products” of the research useful to the women whose experience was being explored and not just of academic interest; that is, we shared the

“feminist commitment to a political position in which “knowledge” is not simply defined as “knowledge what” but also as “knowledge for” (Stanley 1990: 15).

The research project is a study of women employed at Inco’s Sudbury, Ontario operations in hourly rated production and maintenance jobs. Inco is a Canadian-based multinational mining company, with assets of \$4 billion and net sales of \$2.4 billion (1994). It has been the largest employer in Sudbury for at least 60 years, employing at its peak over 18,000 hourly employees in mining, milling, smelting, and refining. Ontario mining law prohibited women from working in mining or mining production until 1970 (though the prohibition was temporarily lifted during the Second World War). Inco in Sudbury hired its first women production workers in the late spring of 1974 and by 1976 had hired 100 women in production jobs. By 1994, some of these women had twenty years of experience at Inco and enough seniority to escape the downsizing that had reduced the hourly workforce to fewer than 5,000 (Keck and Powell forthcoming).

Our research is significant for several reasons. First, most of the literature dealing with women’s paid work, including studies of “non-traditional” jobs, focuses on white-collar workers. The women in this study are working-class, blue-collar workers who work in a male-dominated environment. Second, the women are part of the first generation of women in production jobs in mining in the postwar period, and many have twenty years of experience in the industry. Third, employment in all primary industries is declining in Canada but the case of mining is particularly striking: both in Sudbury and in

Canada as a whole, mining is in absolute as well as relative employment decline (Keck and Powell forthcoming). As mining companies increasingly turn to technological change and employment downsizing, the overall number of women in these jobs is decreasing and fewer opportunities to conduct such research will exist in the future.

This project is in the tradition of other feminist research that tries to bridge the gap between academics and activists. The literature on academic-activist collaborations is confident about the importance of such interaction but offers differing conceptualizations of the collaboration, particularly about the barriers and conflicts that may or may not be inherent (Christiansen-Ruffman 1991; Bishop et al. 1991). Class and power differences between academics and “their subjects” are often discussed. Our project is an opportunity to explore these issues because, while the women at Inco work in blue-collar occupations, have less education and are less familiar with the research process, they generally earn more than the researchers, know about mining and the labour process, and have a self-confidence derived from doing work traditionally viewed as “too difficult for women” that tends to redress the balance. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the project could have got underway, could proceed, without their participation and support. Nevertheless, with Stanley and Wise, we are concerned that, despite the “conscious and deliberate . . . acceptance of feminist principles,” our research may not be going “far enough along the path it has chosen” (1993: 32-33). In this article, we examine our project from *within* the research process, rather than after the fact, in the hopes of gaining some

insight that may strengthen our research and of providing a different perspective on the dynamics of feminist research.

Three distinct groups of women are involved in this project: two academic researchers from Laurentian University (referred to here as the LU women); four women who are both researchers and researched--they initiated the project, are members of the Research Advisory Committee (RAC), and are also women interviewed for the project (referred to here as the RAC-Inco women); and forty-two other women in production and maintenance jobs who have been or will be interviewed (the Inco women).

ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

This project is in some ways an illustration of Maria Mies' argument that research must "become an integral part of . . . active participation in action, movements and struggles for women's emancipation" (Mies 1993: 38). It began in the fall of 1993, when the Sudbury Women's Centre organized a screening of the *Glass Ceiling*, an NFB film by Sophie Bissonnette, that examines the barriers women face in the workplace. When the film was over, three members of the (Inco) Steelworkers' Local 6500 Women's Committee (Cathy Mulroy, Betty Wickie, Laurene Wiens) stood outside the screening room talking about the film, and their own work, and their upcoming twentieth anniversary as production workers at Inco. Jennifer Keck, a member of the Laurentian University School of Social Work, a longtime activist at the Sudbury Women's Centre, and one of the organizers of the screening, was with them; Mulroy, Wickie, and Wiens asked if she would help them undertake some kind of

project for their twentieth anniversary. Keck had earlier helped a group of non-unionized Inco clerical workers to launch a pay equity complaint. A few days later, Keck approached a colleague in political science, Mary Powell, also a feminist with union and organizing experience but a relative newcomer to Sudbury, and the two of them met with the group of women, who were then joined by a fourth Inco worker, Sue Benoit, and planning for the project began.

Unlike much feminist research that is either "participatory" or "action-oriented," this research project originated with the women's desire to document their own experiences. They knew their hiring at Inco had been historic and viewed their experience on the job as historically important as well; they wanted a record of it -- for other women and unionists, for their own families and for themselves. The origin of the project has shaped the research process. First, the fact that some of the "women being researched" initiated the project is the singlemost important factor in breaking down the researcher-researched hierarchy. Second, these women were able to initiate the project because they were themselves feminist activists with considerable experience in the women's community and their union, and had a clear vision of why their story should be told. They knew Keck well and had no hesitation in proposing the idea to her because such a project was "the kind of work" she did.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

As mentioned in the introduction, we had three specific commitments for the research process. First, we wanted to breakdown the hierarchy between 'researcher'

and “researched.” The key decision was that the women who had initiated the project would constitute a research advisory committee and that all subsequent decisions--about study design, fund-raising, interviewing, and the “products” of the research--would be made on the basis of a consensus among six women (the LU women and the RAC-Inco women). Although this group makes all of the decisions collectively, we have a division of labour in which the LU women have primary responsibility for the research process and the RAC-Inco women have primary responsibility for substantive elements related to the work and for liaison with the Inco women. Thus, the collaboration is *principally* between the LU women and the RAC-Inco women. In this article about the research process, the voice is that of the LU women; however, as with all material written by the LU women (letters, articles, presentations), the RAC-Inco women have read it, made their comments, and agreed that it can go out.

Second, we deliberately tried to build on the RAC-Inco women’s knowledge and use their work experience and knowledge to guide the project. Hired by Inco in 1974, they started as general labourers, and have done a range of industrial jobs at Inco’s surface operations. Like most women in Local 6500, the RAC-Inco women work only with men; even if two or more women are assigned to the same plant, they usually do not work together because of different work areas and different shifts. Although a number of women have been working underground since 1992, over the years most women worked at six surface sites in Inco’s Sudbury complex: the nickel and copper refineries, the Copper Cliff and Levack mills, the Froot-Stobie rockhouse, and

the Copper Cliff Smelter (including the Copper Cliff reverbs and the matte process plant). The RAC-Inco women have worked at most of these sites in their twenty years on the job, and they arranged for a tour of part of the Inco complex, not only to show the LU women the workplace but to explain the importance of the physical environment, the occupational safety issues, and the considerable isolation of many production and maintenance jobs.

The work knowledge of the RAC-Inco women was essential to the semi-structured interview that is at the heart of the project. The interview format and the questions were reviewed by the group of six women, and the RAC-Inco women, who were the first to be interviewed, both answered the questions and gave advice to the LU women (who were the interviewers) about follow-up questions and issues that needed further clarification. In addition, the RAC-Inco women’s relationship to their co-workers among the Inco women has been crucial to ensuring that as many women as possible are interviewed. Through the Women’s Committee of Local 6500, the RAC-Inco women sent letters to all the Local 6500 women, describing the project and encouraging their participation, and followed up with personal calls in case the women had questions or concerns. Inco also gave the LU women access to company archives and the RAC-Inco women provided first-hand knowledge that illuminated the strengths and weaknesses of the archival data.

Third, we tried to build some kind of praxis into the research. One “product” would be a type of popular history, in a magazine format, combining a chronology and description of the women’s work experience

with photographs and excerpts from interviews. It is designed to be a record for the women themselves and a history they could share with their families and with other working women. Cathy Mulroy, one of the RAC-Inco women, explained that "We want to keep a record of our struggles and what we had to do to get to where we are--we need female heroines." During the research process, the RAC-Inco women became fascinated with the women who had worked for Inco during the Second World War and are now part of a related project to interview these women, now in their seventies and eighties. Ontario District 6 of the Steelworkers, one of the supporters of the project, has indicated an interest in using the results of the research in their work with women in other industrial jobs.

Another "product" would be more formal presentations and papers, intended in part to explain the women's experience to men in the workplace. As Sue Benoit (also a RAC-Inco woman) commented, this research "will really help to open some minds--supervisors, managers, even the guys we work with." Understanding the experience of women in production and maintenance jobs may therefore produce changes to it (Mies 1993: 40). These papers would also be used by the LU women to disseminate the research findings to the academic world, with the particular objectives of exploring the feminist research process and of adding to our very limited knowledge of women's experience *after* they enter occupations that in the past were restricted to men.

TENSIONS AFFECTING THE RESEARCH

Most research projects encounter unexpected conflicts, difficulties in data

collection, or other problems that could not be fully anticipated. We focus here on three main issues affecting our project: the collaborative relationship, the process of data collection, and ethical considerations.

The collaboration has so far been principally between the LU women and the RAC-Inco women. In general, both groups were self-selected, a process that has limitations. Moreover, by creating a research advisory committee, we institutionalized the spontaneous gathering that had led to the project. Although we were unaware of it at the time, this had the effect of providing no real opportunity for other Inco women to join the research advisory committee, even if they had wanted to. One woman was added to the original three Steelworker women but at their invitation (that is, an extension of self-selection). This has the potential for conflict between the RAC-Inco women and the Inco women over the leadership of the project. Although there was a similar process of self-selection and invitation among the LU women, academic research has much stronger traditions of "ownership."

Between the LU women and the RAC-Inco women, there is a division of labour in which the LU women tend to write the "academic" pieces (including proposals, papers) and the RAC-Inco women supply the work-related content. For example, the project is called "Women in Production and Maintenance Jobs" because the RAC-Inco women regarded that as the most accurate descriptor. But our collaboration and division of labour are not always satisfactory. As Acker puts it, we have been forced "to realise that it is impossible to create a research process that completely erases the contradictions in the

relationship between researcher and researched" (Acker et al. 1991: 150). The RAC-Inco women have a tendency to accept what the LU women produce ("sounds fine to me"), not because they do not have criticisms or are intimidated, but because they are (relative to the LU women) less experienced in formal writing and not as accustomed to articulating their work to outsiders. Nor are we, the LU women, always skilled at comprehending what the RAC-Inco women are saying. To take a minor example: one of the worksites at Inco was the (Frood-Stobie) *rockhouse*; the LU women, with very limited knowledge of the worksites, referred to it for months as the *roadhouse*. (We all had a good laugh when the RAC-Inco women set us straight.)

The effort to collaborate is further complicated by the different working conditions of the various groups. Only a handful of the Inco women work straight days; the majority work 12-hour shifts and many live out of Sudbury itself in the small communities on the edges of the Sudbury Basin. Interviews and regular meetings of the research group are difficult to arrange; increasingly, contact among research group members is by telephone, which has tended to undermine the collective process that was developed in the early months of the project. The LU women have never been able to devote as much time to the project as the RAC-Inco women would like, and have been at times unavailable (research leave away from Sudbury, the need to complete doctoral work, etc.).

Although the RAC-Inco women initiated the project, they are relying to a certain extent on the LU women's initiative.

At times this has meant the work has fallen behind schedule and it has also affected what work gets done. For example, we have worked more on the academic products than the popular history, even though the popular history is the RAC-Inco women's priority. This was not obvious as it was happening because we all agreed that the interviews were the key to almost all products, but as we examine the process through writing this article, it becomes apparent that we, the LU women, need to make the popular history our priority.

The process of data collection has also presented problems. While the research is partly based on company records, it hinges on the interviews with the forty-six women still employed in production and maintenance jobs at Inco. Most women have been interested in discussing their work experience: so far, only two have declined to be interviewed. While the RAC-Inco women worked on the questionnaire at every stage, the LU women alone have been conducting the interviews, for two reasons. First, women would be more willing to speak to researchers "outside" their work environment and second, it would ensure confidentiality for the relatively small group of women to be interviewed (who might, for example, be critical of the Women's Committee, the union, co-workers). These qualitative interviews have made it clear that there is not *one* experience but many. Despite important commonalities--they are all employed by the same company, working in the same city, members of the same union, and governed by the same collective agreement--women give quite differing reports about their overall work experience, relations with co-workers and supervisors, health and

safety concerns, relations with the union, reaction of family members to their work, motivation for seeking employment and for staying on the job, and general level of satisfaction.

But the fact that the LU women have sole access to the original interviews raises fundamental questions about the *analysis* of the data, questions that are only deepened by the diversity of experience reported. The RAC-Inco women must be involved in establishing our findings; their role must be as participants not as audience. At present we have planned two mechanisms to ensure the participation of the RAC-Inco women and to provide more accountability to the larger group of Inco women: for the LU women and the RAC-Inco women to develop findings collectively, using excerpts of the transcripts which have been edited to remove identifiers, and to hold focus groups with the Inco women to share our findings and get their views.

The local political environment also affected data collection. Early in our project, the union and company negotiated a new collective agreement, and it was not until the agreement was actually reached that we could be certain that there would not be a strike. The community of Sudbury has always been powerfully affected by strikes at Inco and this one would have been no exception. Carrying out a research project such as this (i.e., seeking to understand long-term work experiences) would have been impossible during or immediately after a strike.

A sharp university-company conflict also had the potential to affect data collection but so far seems to have passed without impact. In June 1995, Laurentian University awarded an honorary degree to the president

of Inco, in recognition of Inco's longstanding support. At the same convocation, it also awarded an honorary degree to a community activist in recognition of her contribution to Sudbury. Her acceptance speech, urging graduates to take responsibility for their actions and use their education to better their community, criticised Inco and argued that it has exploited the people and environment of Sudbury. The audience gave her a standing ovation but the company was outraged at the criticism and at what it perceived to be an insult to its president (Lowe 1995). Relations between the university and the company were strained and the researchers had to be cautious about asking for company records or interviewing company officials during the period of greatest tension.

Ethical considerations in this project arise primarily from the vulnerability of the women being "researched." While the LU women stand to gain considerably from the research (the stories of these women provide a unique opportunity and window into the world of the first generation of women to enter the mining industry since the Second World War), the overall stakes and risks are greater for the Inco women (including the RAC-Inco women). The women want to have their stories heard, but they are a vulnerable population because of their unusual visibility in the workforce. Participation in the study could potentially jeopardize their relationship with their employer, co-workers, and union.

We have tried to acknowledge these risks in the consent forms, which allow each woman to decide (1) whether her name can be used in connection with the study; (2) what, if any, parts of her interview can be used directly in the text; and (3) whether the transcript or

tape of her interview will be donated to the university archives at the end of the project. Each of these provisions is designed to ensure that the women have as much control as possible over who has access to their stories and how they will be used in the study.

Some issues are particularly sensitive, and among the most contentious is sexual harassment. During the course of our research, several cases involving women in our study have become public because they resulted in charges under the *Criminal Code* and complaints under the *Ontario Human Rights Act*. Media coverage has increased attention to the subject and has intensified debate at the workplace. The women in our study have widely differing views about whether and to what extent sexual harassment is a problem. Some are or have been deeply affected by it, and at the very least we need to ensure that participation in the project does not worsen their situation.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT

This research project is ongoing and other issues and problems may well surface as it continues. Two lessons are evident now. First, the project would not have been possible without the inspiration of the RAC women, their insights about their work, and the courage and energy they have brought to the task of documenting their collective experience. Nor would it have been possible without the generosity of the larger group of women in Local 6500, who have shared their diverse and compelling stories with us. It has not always been easy, but they, too, view the project as having potential benefits for their co-workers and for the women who will come after them. The union and the company, though they have

very different interests, have supported the project with funds, access to records and personnel, and encouragement. Although it is possible that the project will yield some results that are critical of them, neither the Steelworkers nor Inco has asked anything of the project beyond copies of the products of the research.

At the same time, the "construction" of knowledge in a project such as this is a process fraught with unseen dangers. Writing this article has brought into focus some pitfalls previously unseen, even though we had actually fallen into them. The ideals we set out for ourselves are not always evident in practice. It is important that we consider the process of knowledge construction--that is, how we create research questions and move to data collection and analysis--as a subject matter in its own right. Reflection and action need to be critical elements of the research process itself. It is only through this type of self (and group) examination that we can begin to address the problems posed by more traditional approaches to research.

ENDNOTES

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