Courtesy of the Saskatchewan Mining Association

Questions of representation

Majors continue to invest in making mining more attractive to women, but need to dig deeper to boost interest in the production and trades side of the industry

By Dinah Zeldin

Karina Gistelinck, asset president, potash at BHP. In April, the company achieved 40 per cent female representation in its global workforce.

In February 2025, female participation in Canada's mining industry hit an all-time high of 19 per cent, as per Mining Industry Human Resources Council (MiHR) data.

According to Ryan Montpellier, executive director of MiHR, a decade of heavy investment from industry is finally paying off.

"We had not seen huge gains in female participation over the past decade, but now it's going up," he said. "We just wish the slope of the progress would be a little faster."

Hannah Ellix, associate partner in McKinsey and Company's mining and metals practice, said the pace of change is unlikely to pick up significantly in the near future.

"We're seeing very gradual improvements in recruiting numbers [and] in relative retention numbers," she said. "Diversity and inclusion is a challenging problem to solve, and if there were one silver bullet, everyone would have used it by now."

But some major miners operating in Canada are ahead of the curve and have even been named among Forbes' list of the World's Top Companies for Women in 2024. This list of 400 companies included: global giant Rio Tinto, which, according to a company spokesperson, had set a target of 25.8 per cent female representation for its global workforce in 2024, and achieved 25.2 per cent; and Vancouver-based Teck Resources, whose chief inclusion officer, Jackie Scales, told *CIM Magazine* in an email that women represented 29 per cent of new hires in 2024 and currently represent 26 per cent of the company's workforce.

In 2016, Australia-headquartered BHP publicly announced an ambitious target of achieving gender balance—which the company defined as a minimum of 40 per cent women and 40 per cent men—in its global workforce by the end of fiscal year 2025. According to a press release from July 2023, it reached gender balance on its potash team, which includes its Saskatchewan corporate office and the Jansen project that is under construction, with 43.8 per cent female representation.

In April of this year, the company announced that it had achieved 40 per cent female representation in its global employee workforce, which is a 23 percentage point increase since it set the target in 2016.

"When you look at BHP's full executive and C-suite team, it's quite remarkable what they have done on that, and with some of their sites," said Beth Borody, founder and CEO of the Femina Collective, a membership-based organization for female executives in mining that aims to radically transform the experience for women in the industry.

"BHP's CEO is the biggest advocate for this. It takes leaders, and particularly men in these organizations, to say: we're going to be intentional about recruiting and offering opportunities for advancement to women."

Barriers persist

Borody believes that the industry needs more women at the table to address its current challenges, but that it struggles to attract talent because working in the mining industry remains inhospitable to women.

"We have a reputational problem with [mining] being considered unsafe for women," she said. "And it is still not welcoming for women in a lot of areas. For young mothers to be able to do a fly-in-fly-out rotation is nearly impossible. We are seeing remote camps where women are being bullied, harassed and assaulted. Those are still real things that are happening, that we cannot gloss over, and we cannot pretend we have moved on from."

According to Borody, even at the leadership level, women have to remain hyper aware of their self-presentation. "We have to play the game to be seen as one of the group," she said.

For Jocelyn Peltier-Huntley, owner of Prairie Catalyst Consulting and chair of Women in Mining and Women in Nuclear Saskatchewan, recruitment is not as much of a problem as retention.

"Sometimes women face overt forms of bias, like discrimination and harassment," she explained. "Sometimes it's more subtle forms of bias that might be embedded in systems, so it could be related to pay equity, promotion or hiring."

Peltier-Huntley, who now does diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) assessments within organizations and makes recommendations on how to make company culture more inclusive, is a mining industry veteran. After over a decade working as a professional engineer and progressing to management, she learned she was being compensated 50 per cent less than male colleagues at the same level.

"There wasn't a resolution process that was easily accessible to address that," she reflected.

Peltier-Huntley left the industry, in part, due to her experiences with "toxic culture," and went on to pursue a PhD at the University of Saskatchewan, funded by the International Minerals Innovation Institute, Vanier Canada, Mitacs and Women in Mining Canada. Her research used a participatory approach with industry to examine how to effectively support inclusive and equitable workplace practices by activating allies.

"I wanted to try to solve some of the problems I experienced and witnessed happening to those around me," she said.

The outcome of her research is Active Allies, a digital course that aims to train individuals on how to be effective allies in practising DEI in the workplace. An article titled "Facilitating inclusion: workplace allyship interventions to foster a practice of inclusion" that she co-authored with fellow researcher Rosa Moazed was recently published in *CIM Journal*.

According to Peltier-Huntley, the key to boosting retention of women in mining lies in engaging staff at all levels in transforming company culture.

"It is about trying to get everyone involved with the solution, and not just focusing on trying to 'fix' women to fit into a workplace," she said. "If we're not directly impacted by discrimination or harassment, we may not notice when it's happening to someone else. Growing our awareness so we can recognize when it's happening makes us better able to intervene and help create more psychologically safe and inclusive spaces—and that ends up benefiting everyone."

The Trump effect

The hostility of U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration towards DEI initiatives has been unequivocal, but its impact among mining's leaders is unclear.

"Some organizations are moving forward, but some are wondering if they need to be stepping back," said Peltier-Huntley. "There are definitely discussions happening within organizations about where they stand on DEI, especially those operating in the U.S."

Courtesy of Rio Tinto

A loader operator at Rio Tinto IOC operations in Labrador City, Newfoundland and Labrador. The company achieved 25.2 per cent female representation for its global workforce in 2024.

According to Borody, an industry-wide backlash to DEI has been present for a few years, with some men in the industry worried about women receiving preferential treatment because new policies were challenging existing power dynamics; however, recent events have added fuel to the fire.

"Trump coming into the White House has just amplified what was already happening and given a much stronger foothold for companies to jump on board by removing DEI policies, because now you have one of the most powerful countries in the world saying it's not important," she said. "It puts women in danger of not being promoted, and of not being given the same opportunities as men."

However, neither Montpellier nor Ellix have observed any impact on Canadian mining companies' commitments so far, with both citing the industry's need for labour as a powerful motivator for companies to remain invested in DEI initiatives.

"Of the conversations I have had with my clients, both in Canada and in the U.S., there isn't any backing away from their commitment to creating inclusive environments at sites, wherever those may be," said Ellix. "Companies are thinking about DEI differently than they did a few years ago, but it is a trend that started before the more recent U.S. administration. Over the last three to four years, there has been a move to what I call neutral inclusion."

Ellix pointed to a steep decline in companies offering mentorship and career development programs specifically targeted at women and minorities.

"At face value, you could say [that] in 2025 there are fewer programs uniquely available to women," she said. "But [McKinsey's] research is showing there is actually just a greater willingness to include more people in the fold of what we would consider supportive HR [human resources] programs."

Montpellier, whose organization supports Canadian mining companies by providing training, a toolkit with case studies and workshops to help them on their DEI journeys, echoed Ellix: "We haven't seen companies shy away from DEI-related initiatives. Perhaps some may have rebranded them a little bit as respectful workplace initiatives."

Courtesy of the Femina Collective

At this year's PDAC conference in Toronto, the Femina Collective encouraged female attendees to wear bright colours to stand out.

Drilling down into representation

According to Montpellier, the mining industry has made great headway in hiring women for head office roles but is struggling to attract women to work on the production side.

"In occupations that are not mining-specific, but that are traditional HR, finance and managerial occupations, women make up over 60 per cent of the mining workforce," he explained. "When you get into physical science or engineering occupations, it's about 20 per cent, but when you go down to trades and production occupations, women only make up two or three per cent of the workforce."

He noted that this is not exclusively a mining issue. "Women are not choosing to pursue careers in those occupations," he said. "If we want to significantly increase female participation in the mining industry, we have to start much earlier to attract women into the occupations that our industry needs."

In 2024, MiHR worked with Pamela Schwann, president of the Saskatchewan Mining Association, to conduct a labour market analysis for the province, whose mining sector is currently in a growth phase.

The 2024 Saskatchewan Mining Labour Market Analysis report revealed that while women comprise 46 per cent of the labour force in Saskatchewan, they accounted for only 13 per cent of mining industry workers, despite national and local efforts to draw more women to the industry.

"We're going to need 15,000 more workers over the next decade. That means essentially rehiring our existing workforce over that period," said Schwann.

According to Schwann, the report revealed the same major reason for the slow progression of female representation in the industry as MiHR's national data: a lack of women in production or trades.

"I've been in the industry for over 30 years, and I was definitely one of very few female geologists, and there were fewer female engineers at the time," she said. "Numbers have really increased, and now we are seeing more women in leadership positions in mining."

Schwann added that girls need female role models in mining. "If they are there and you see them, you can aspire to be there," she explained. "The focus has been on trying to get women into careers like engineering, but most of the mining workforce is in production and trades. [However] only two per cent of the women in mining are in trades."

According to Schwann, Canada's education system has not been focused on promoting education or careers in the trades and this has impacted both genders' interest, resulting in a small labour pool. She suggested that industry needs to ramp up efforts to make trades appealing to young people, and of course, to do so in a manner that is engaging to girls.

A goldmine of talent

Schwann pointed to two promising company-run pilot programs in Saskatchewan that she hopes will start a trend: paid training that provides participants with a taste of what it is like to work in the industry and the skills to work in the sector.

One is the Northern Indigenous Training program spearheaded by Saskatoon-based uranium giant Cameco and supported by the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, which is partly funded by the provincial government and will provide pre-trades training focusing on industrial and heavy-duty mechanics, carpentry, electrical, plumbing and welding. The three-year program launched its first cohort in January 2025 with 10 participants, all of whom are women.

"We want women to see themselves in non-traditional roles," said Cameco's Indigenous engagement director, Kristin Cuddington, in an article on the company's website.

Hosted at the company's Rabbit Lake mine site, which is in care and maintenance, the program offers a glimpse of life at camp as well as an opportunity to learn on real equipment and to be mentored by company employees. Cameco provides a salary and covers participation costs, and will offer graduates a limited number of apprenticeship positions.

The other is the BHP Potash Academy, run in partnership with Carlton Trail College, a community college based in Humboldt, Saskatchewan, that works closely with industry to support workforce development opportunities.

Also launched in January 2025, the eight-month, paid traineeship provides a mix of classroom learning and on-site training to equip participants with essential skills for production or maintenance technician roles at BHP's Jansen site, which is expected to begin production in late 2026. The first cohort has 13 participants, over half of whom are women. Upon completion of the program, trainees will be offered permanent, full-time employment at the Jansen mine.

According to Schwann, BHP's remarkable achievement of gender parity at its potash division in 2023 was achieved by a number of strategies—including importing top talent from other BHP global operations, such as Karina Gistelinck, asset president, potash, from its Melbourne head office, as well as being a preferred employer and attracting women from other companies. Now, BHP is prioritizing developing female talent by targeting women and Indigenous people for spots at the BHP Potash Academy.

"They're a new company in Saskatchewan, and quickly ramping up operations, so they haven't had the opportunity to develop a lot of talent independently," said Schwann. "But their new program is one of BHP's initiatives to attract more women into trades and production."

Investment by majors

Rio Tinto remains committed to being among the mining companies leading the industry in attracting women and transforming company culture. In 2024, 32 per cent of the company's global senior leadership team was composed of women.

"Our broader diversity targets include increasing the number of women in our business, including in senior leadership, each year, aiming for 50 per cent women in our graduate intake," said a company spokesperson in an email to *CIM Magazine*.

According to the spokesperson, Rio Tinto has taken actions to support an inclusive culture, including improving site facilities to ensure sufficient access to bathrooms for women, enhancing site and camp safety, offering free sanitary products, and upgrading breastfeeding and pumping facilities. It has also created employee resource groups that bring together employees and allies from diverse backgrounds to drive meaningful change across the business.

Although the November 2024 *Everyday Respect Progress Review Report* revealed serious challenges, including resistance and backlash to company efforts to foster inclusivity, the company remains committed to making meaningful change.

"Change is happening and we are making progress," CEO Jakob Stausholm wrote in a 2024 Rio Tinto report entitled *Our Ongoing Journey*. "We have a long way to go, but we are more committed than ever to transforming our culture."

Teck's leadership is also committed to supporting a cultural transformation that will not only attract women to the company but will ensure women have support to advance in their careers. The company's CEO Jonathan Price chairs the companies' Inclusive and Respectful Workplace Committee, and 25 per cent of the company's senior management and 27 per cent of its board of directors are female.

According to Scales, Teck has a goal of increasing the representation of women in its workforce to 30 per cent by 2030. To support the talent pipeline, Scales revealed, Teck focuses on early outreach through elementary and high school engagement in the communities in which it operates and invests in programs at community colleges.

Scales added that the company provides female staff with support through a global Women's Network and local women in mining groups at each operation. The groups' activities include workshops on career development, peer learning

Courtesy of the Saskatchewan Mining Association

Stephanie Shelstad, journeyperson welder at K+S Potash Canada. Women currently only make up two or three per cent of the trades and production roles in the mining workforce.

circles, networking with leaders, and advocating for and actioning changes on site that reduce barriers to employment and advancement.

Teck's 2024 sustainability report revealed a strong commitment to gender pay equity: the company has conducted annual salary reviews for all non-union employees since 2017. In 2024, the reviews—which were evaluated by an external party—found no indication of any systemic gender pay issues within the company.

According to Scales, Teck works to prevent risks of gender-based violence and harassment by providing its entire workforce and all contractors with training on how to foster a respectful workplace and speak up if they witness harmful misconduct. The company has also integrated trauma-informed training for HR, health and safety, and legal and security staff to ensure processes recognize the impact of trauma and that people have the support they need.

The dawn of a cultural transformation

Ellix said that, due to the infamous skills shortage looming over the industry, the past five years have seen many of her clients changing approaches and policies to attract and retain talent by casting a wider net in their recruitment efforts and offering more flexible work arrangements.

These changes, she observed, have rendered the industry more hospitable to women, slowly setting in motion a broader, industry-wide cultural shift towards greater inclusivity, and pushing companies to respond to the evolving needs of their increasingly diverse workforce by investing in things like separate accommodations and gym facilities at sites.

One emerging practice that has helped to increase the representation of women has been an increased openness to recruiting talent from other industries: Ellix reported that some companies have brought in HR executives from retail and manufacturing.

"These [practices] would have been considered irrelevant in the past, but now there's a recognition that there's stuff to learn from other industries on how to better manage people, and there is also more emphasis on soft skills with industry training available for junior and middle management," she said. "As we bring in more experienced, inspirational leaders from other industries, and learn about HR best practices and invest in good supervision and management, these things will start paying dividends in diversity as well." CIM