

GAINING GROUND: Women, Mining and the Environment



DRAFT GAINING GROUND STATEMENT

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Lake Laberge, Yukon Territory

September 17, 2000

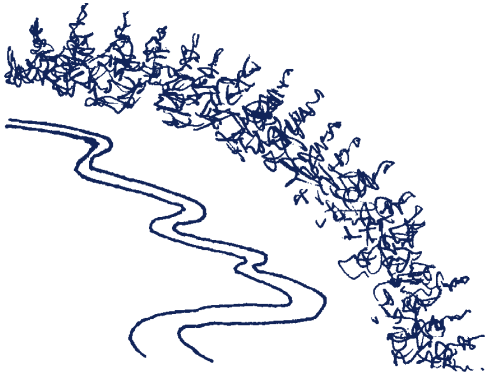
We, as women from many cultures and experiences, know that irresponsible mining practices impact and compromise our communities, our health and environment.

Thus we commit in solidarity:

1. to protect our right to health and safety for our land, ourselves, our families, our economy and our future
2. to support those of us in greatest need

By:

- ◆ reclaiming our economy
- ◆ recognizing accountability of the government and industry
- ◆ educating government and industry on the full scope of impacts
- ◆ demanding industry and government address the many social issues caused by mining that specifically affect women and children
- ◆ empowering communities to address these issues in the best way for them



BACKGROUND ON GAINING GROUND

The idea for *Gaining Ground: Women, Mining and the Environment* came out of the recognized absence of information about how the mining industry impacts women and their families. It is time for the mining industry to evolve and specifically address the needs of women. By speaking their truths, women can affect this change. While technical and economic issues are often carefully reviewed in the mine planning and environmental assessment stages of a project, how the project affects individual, family and community health is seldom scrutinized.

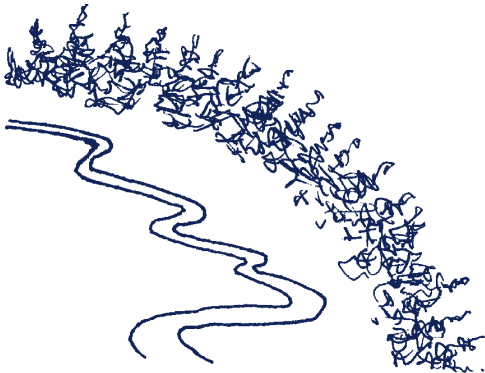
Gaining Ground: Women, Mining and the Environment was a two day gathering held at Lake Laberge, Yukon in September 2000. It brought together women from Yukon communities affected by mining, with women from outside the Yukon who have experience in the health, science, and social science sectors, as well as grassroots organizing. The gathering broke new ground in recognizing the impacts of mining on communities and families; the interrelationship between women, mining and the environment; and set clear directions for positive social change. This pamphlet briefly outlines the results of the workshop. It is intended for use by organizations and individuals who work toward changing mining industry practices.



BACKGROUND ON WOMEN AND THE MINING INDUSTRY

Women participate in the mining industry in different ways. Mostly, women work in administrative positions or in camps as cooks and support staff. In recent decades, women have worked as geologists, engineers, biologists, and in the trades. However, there remains a significant absence of women at the middle and senior management levels of the mining industry. Glancing into the boardrooms of the world's leading mining companies is to glimpse a world that continues to be dominated by men. Most major mining companies like Placer Dome, Inco, and Falconbridge have male-dominated boards. Barrick's, one of the world's biggest gold companies, has no women on its board of directors. Until women are active at all levels of the mining industry, significant change in how the industry impacts and benefits women - as workers and community members - will not likely occur.

As primary caregivers within their families and communities, women are often left to cope with the results and effects of development decisions made by men. Additionally, they may also bear the brunt of these impacts. Limited and impoverished information-gathering during the planning stages about possible impacts on women, families, and communities, results in inadequate mitigative and monitoring programs. Women and women's organizations, who receive very little financial support from governments or industry, are left to pick up the pieces. If there are to be positive changes for women in our communities, women must be able to voice their own perceptions about what life is like for them and fully participate in the planning, decision-making and evaluating process of this development. They must do this from a position of strength within the industry and within communities affected by mining.



SOCIAL IMPACTS

Health and well-being means more than the absence of illness.



The Yukon Health Act, assented to in December 1990, is territorial law. It has the following definition of health:

- ◆ *“That health means the physical, emotional, social, mental and spiritual well-being of residents of the Yukon in harmony with their physical, social, economic, and cultural environments”*
- ◆ *“That people can achieve and improve their well-being through prevention of illness and injury, promotion of health, and collective action against the social, environmental, and occupational causes of illness and injury”*
- ◆ (Declaration of Policy) *“It is hereby declared that the primary objective of Yukon’s health and social services policy is to protect, promote and restore the well-being of residents of the Yukon in harmony with the physical, social, economic and cultural environments in which they live and to facilitate equitable access to quality health and social programs and services”*

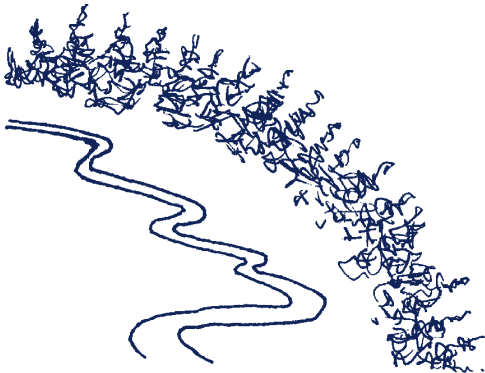
What implications does this Act have for the way the mining industry currently operates?

Until recently, discussion around the impacts of mining has mainly focused on physical impacts to the environment. In listening to the voices of women, we have identified emerging concerns around social impacts that affect women's health as individuals, as well as their families and communities:

"In mining, when you look at the feast and famine cycle—the way mining's been operating—that's very hard on health. Because what you do is set up a family to have an income; and then they adjust to a standard of living. They pay their debts, they start eating properly again. The stress goes down. And then they bottom back out again; they accumulate debt, they don't eat right, they have stress. They get more money again, they pay a bit of debt off, they buy a new vehicle... It's this really unhealthy cycle of stress... psychological and physical impacts" (health worker)

Women, as workers, wives, caregivers and mothers are often left to mediate the effects of a boom and bust mining cycle.

"When things are up and running, there's lots of economic activity. When shut-downs occur, people have to adjust their lifestyles and maintain payments taken on when expecting a good paycheck. It can be very difficult. People have moved to the communities, bought homes, and then can't sell them once the mine shuts down. In the 70s and early 80s, even though there was a lot of prosperity, there were no programs there. There was a lot of family violence. There was a lot of drug and alcohol use. It seemed like there was a real split in the community. (former mine labourer)."



Social impacts affecting well-being that are associated with mineral development include:

- ◆ increased stress upon individuals and families
- ◆ increased level of domestic violence against women and children
- ◆ increased levels of substance abuse (drugs and alcohol) as well as gambling
- ◆ increased stress upon nearby communities
- ◆ presence of an “ethic of exploitation” of women resulting in increased levels of sexually- transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, family abandonment
- ◆ misdiagnosis of effects of contamination as “autism” or attention deficit disorder
- ◆ transiency (moving around) of mining families
- ◆ geographic and social isolation
- ◆ disruption of culture and communities, including the marginalization of elders
- ◆ “boom and bust” lifestyle destabilizing to women, children, families and communities

All of these have not only social, but financial costs borne by taxpayers, not mining companies.

“Mining is exploitative. And so I found when I was working there—that when you start with your sole employer—your sole role model—the leader in the community is that exploitative, it goes right down the line” (health worker in a mining community)

CHANGES TO BUSH LIFE

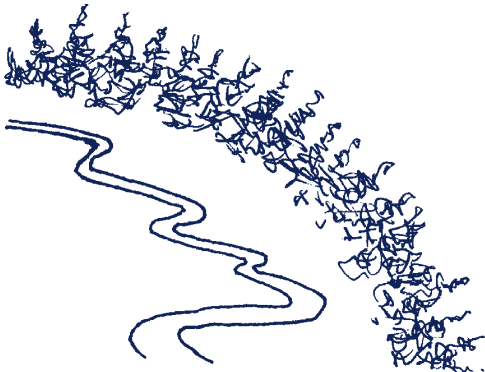
“It’s hard to play the [environmental assessment] game when you know you have so much to lose.”

“Everything we did was a bit frustrating. I never saw any change as a result of anything I did.”

“To go into the fight was so depressing. It was hard to function afterwards on a personal level.”

The mining industry affects life in the bush for families in many ways:

- ◆ Finding out information about the project is very difficult when you do not live in town. Stress builds as feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness grow.
- ◆ It is difficult to maintain a subsistence lifestyle and have adequate time to review documents.
- ◆ It is expensive to mail letters, make phone calls, send faxes, and otherwise stay involved in the environmental review of projects.
- ◆ Changes to water quality as the result of mining operations may mean that water is sought from elsewhere. Families sometimes move their camps so they are farther away from the mine site.
- ◆ Harvesting patterns change as families avoid harvesting animals that may have been affected by the mine, or may lose their access entirely.
- ◆ It is intimidating to speak out in public against a project.
- ◆ Getting involved at the environmental assessment stage is too late, but it is nearly impossible to get involved at earlier stages of the project when it might be more effective. This leads to a sense of futility about engaging in the process.



COMMUNITY MONITORING

“We can’t wait until the moose are orange before we take action”

Women in communities affected by mining draw on local knowledge to sum up the overall change that occurs when a mine is operating and closes down. They have initiated soil and water sampling programs to test for themselves the amount of contamination mines are generating.

To be effective, community mine site monitoring must:

- ◆ value local knowledge
- ◆ train local community members instead of using imported “experts”
- ◆ compare to baseline studies
- ◆ use credible sampling techniques and protocols, record everything
- ◆ reduce social and geographical isolation to empower concerned community members
- ◆ foster alliances
- ◆ result in action, respond to harmful impacts

A holistic monitoring approach is concerned with achieving positive social and environmental change.

ABANDONED MINES

In 1915 the O'Donnell roast bed was built near Sudbury to extract copper by setting large piles of lumber on fire over ore. This expelled the sulphur from the rock as a gas and melted the metal. The work camp here gave jobs to people from all over the world, many who had no other options or connections in Canada, and they bonded as a community. The sulphur smoke was strong enough to cause nose-bleeds. People would lie down on the ground to catch their breath on the way to work. No gardens could be grown because the metals and sulphur killed the plants around the roasting beds. They knew this was environmental contamination in 1916.

Seventy years after closing, there are still high copper and nickel levels that are toxic to plants; the landscape is barren. Although the children who grew up in the camp remember it fondly as a strong community, 66% of the employees who worked there left within their first month of employment due to the harsh living conditions and health effects. Due to mechanization, the mine laid off 80% of the work force in 1919 within 4 years of starting operations.

Unionization has brought about improvements to workplace health and safety standards. However, mine development and abandonment patterns remain largely the same. Jobs are short lived while social and environmental impacts are long term. Generally, an abandoned mine leaves behind:

- ◆ unemployed community members, often in a town built only for the purpose of mining
- ◆ lingering health effects from poor workplace health and safety standards while the mine was operating
- ◆ ongoing harm to health from impacts of polluted food, water and air (such as cancers, asthma, gastric disorders, heart disease)
- ◆ uncertainty and change of food sources; people cannot rely on the health of fish and wildlife populations in remote locations where mines are built and left untended
- ◆ increased burden of food preparation and health care, which usually falls upon women



RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief overview of issues related to social and environmental impacts of mining led to the following recommendations.

Within Community

Foster individual and community action and communication to:

- ◆ encourage and empower individuals, especially women, to trust intuition, find support/allies within and outside of community;
- ◆ understand that your right to well-being is protected under laws such as the Yukon Health Act;
- ◆ understand that you have a right to access information from companies and government, and that you have a right to have this information explained to you and your family/community;
- ◆ you have the right to speak up and ask blunt questions; and
- ◆ realize that there are groups and individuals who can help you to get your message heard and read, whether it's writing a letter, getting access to newspapers/radio, or simply putting you in touch with someone who shares your concerns.

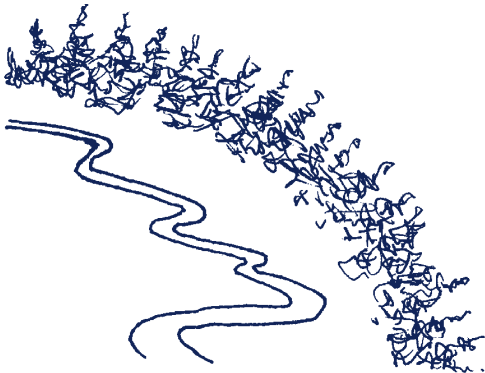
Within Industry

Demand accountability of companies to:

- ◆ offer financial planning courses so that people are better prepared for the difficulties that occur when mining fails
- ◆ understand that elsewhere in Canada, communities have negotiated for companies to recognize their accountability for social impacts
- ◆ agree to provide education and training for different jobs in mining with transferable skills (such as assaying, first aid, workplace safety)
- ◆ reclaim mine sites to functional ecosystems that do not pollute in the long term
- ◆ negotiate agreements for companies to set up funds — *before and after development* — for alcohol and drug counseling; reclamation and environmental protection and education; funds to help to deal with social and environmental problems that arise beyond the life of the mine

Within government:

- ◆ lobby policy makers to understand that there are specific social problems associated with a single-industry economy, based on resource exploitation
- ◆ demand that industry and government accept fiscal responsibility for the shut-down of a mining community — *that this be considered an economic disaster* — and provide appropriate resources such as emergency response teams



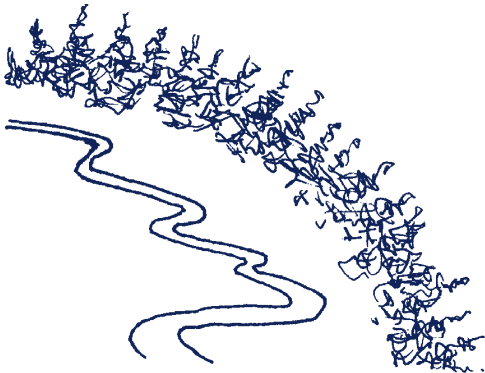
Future Directions:

- ◆ educate communities about both the benefits and drawbacks to mining, that it is often a temporary industry not only dependent on ore reserves and maintaining production, but also on the influence of stock market prices in determining whether the mine stays open
- ◆ carry out monitoring programs
- ◆ determine alternatives for the health of the community as a whole
- ◆ support local economies (such fishing, subsistence, trapping, etc.)
- ◆ reduce the appeal of mineral development by increasing the appeal of other economic activities
- ◆ provide financial resources from the initiation of the mine for the long term care and maintenance of community and environmental health.

“So the reality is that mining affects us all, whether or not we are directly involved in benefiting from the economic development. ...We the women, who are keepers of the hearth and home must be active advisors to our young people, our leaders, and our Chiefs. We must take an active role in determining the future of the lands and resources we have. Our job is to see to the well-being for the next generations to come”
(elder)



Working for change when the odds are against you is stressful. Recognizing the importance of maintaining balance and restoring energy, twelve women attending the Gaining Ground conference worked together in the evening and came up with the following song which was performed at the closing of the event. The message, although reflected in humour, is a serious one given from the perspective of a Mother earth who is fed up and demanding respect.



IF YOU CAN'T MINE NICELY

 G C
Testosterone teens with ten ton trucks
D G
Tearing up the earth to make big bucks
G C
A thimbleful of gold from a mountain of rocks
 D C
 G
There's a lot more at stake than the rise and fall of stocks

CHORUS:

D
It's all fun and games
 G
Til the mountain loses its soul
 D
If you can't mine nicely
C D
Don't you mine at all

I wish those boys would get an education
We're losing all the moose and fish and vegetation
Your father lost a lung, your mother lost a breast
Thoughtlessness and greed puts my patience to the test

I've given and I've given, won't give much more
I'm supposed to last forever but I'm running out of ore
I'll always be your mother and I want to make you see
If you want to live in this house, show respect for me

Listen to the ones who take time for reflection
They know we're surrounded by abundance and perfection
Connectedness of life, to me this means health
If you can hear my wisdom you can share my wealth

*Songwriters: Lisa Taylor, Cynthia Onions, Sue Moodie,
Nan Love, Lana Miller, Ruth Warren, Sally Smith, Sara
Keeney, Lisa Sumi, Nicole L, Natalie Edelson, Anne Louise*

ORGANIZATIONS TO CONTACT:

Yukon Conservation Society

Box 4163 Whitehorse
Yukon Y1A 3S9
Phone: 867-668-5678
Fax: 867-668-6637
Email: yics@yics.yk.ca

Yukon Status of Women Council

503 Hanson Street Whitehorse, Yukon Y1A 1Y9
Phone: 867-667-4637
Fax: 867-667-7004
Email yswc@yknnet.yk.ca

MiningWatch Canada

880 Wellington Street, Suite 508
Ottawa Ontario K1R 6K7
Phone 613-569-3439
Fax: 613-569-5138
Email: mwc@magma.ca
www.miningwatch.ca

Project Underground

1916A Martin Luther King Jr. Way
Berkeley, California USA 94704
Phone: 510-705-8981
Fax: 510-705-8983
Email: project_underground@moles.org
www.moles.org

Center for Science and Public Participation

P.O. Box 22551
Juneau, Alaska USA 99802
Phone: 907-364-3665
Fax: 907-364-3669
Email: acrook@csp2.org

A detailed resource list is available from the Yukon Conservation Society and the Yukon Status of Women Council in the Gaining Ground final report.

