

Aboriginal Women, Mining Negotiations and Project Development

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This article discusses the role and contributions of Aboriginal women to mining negotiations and project development in Canada. Four interviews were conducted in the summer of 2014 as part of my MA thesis in Native Studies at the University of Manitoba. The results of these interviews are shared so that they may shed light for on-going experiences of Aboriginal communities with this significant industry.

Participants are not named, and aliases are used according to their direction. *Mary Jane and Hazel* are the Joint Venture and Impact and Benefit Agreement (IBA) Coordinators for an Aboriginal community actively involved in mining. Together, they have negotiated numerous agreements for mining that were already happening on and near their traditional lands, as well as future anticipated mining projects. *Marion* is the elected Vice-President of an economic development enterprise representing several Aboriginal communities; she is also the Vice-President of a joint venture with a mining contracting company. *Dianne* is the Indigenous Community Relations Manager for a local operation of one of the largest mining companies in the world. Her responsibilities include coordinating relationships with surrounding First Nation communities, engagement initiatives for mine employees and all community members. *Dianne* also leads a team that coordinates cultural reclamation initiatives alongside land restoration of reclaimed mine sites.

Involvement in Mining

While discussing how these women became involved with their current positions and responsibilities, different factors shaped their decisions and careers.

Mary Jane and Hazel were both chosen and asked to come back to the community by the community's leaders. Both women felt they would come back to the community if and when needed. They explained that they had no prior experiences in mining and had to learn from scratch. *Mary Jane and Hazel* enjoyed their work because they felt there was a real need; they were not focused on their own compensation, but on community benefits.

Dianne studied mining ventilation in college. At the beginning of her career, she had worked underground in two different mines in different northern cities. She acquired a con-

tract at one of the mines, which required her to optimize mine ventilation. She was in fact one of the first women to go underground in this town. After her contract ended, the mining company offered her a full-time position in ventilation. To her surprise, on her very first day of work the company extended her a position in human resources. Most recently, she was offered a position at the mining company she currently works for. At the time, she seriously reflected on whether or not it was the right direction for her ethically as she had previously worked in Aboriginal community governance, but she found that the company celebrated the inclusion of traditional activities, as well as engaging surrounding Aboriginal communities.

When I asked all the women about the factors motivating their involvement in mining, *Mary Jane and Hazel* responded that mining had already happened and was happening on their land, and the community wanted to take part in the benefits:

Mining was already happening, and had happened, and we wanted to take part in the benefits. [Mining] is not perfect, but we wanted to be a part of it. [...] Mining has to be about relationships and partnerships. Community benefits need to be tangible, we have to see them [...] job-sharing, transferable skills, IBAs [Impact and Benefit Agreements], MOUs [Memorandums of Understanding], partnerships, joint ventures.

Marion's reply was:

For a lot a people, especially in our territory ... our nation, there's really no other alternatives except to get involved, especially if there is development taking place within our land. So we looked at it from the perspective that there will be development taking place, and we wanted to be active participants in the development so that we have a say in the terms of how things get done within our territory. [Involved] by necessity through business opportunity [...] you either participate or you sit on the sidelines and don't get your say.

Marion's statement underscores that involvement in mining came from the fear of otherwise being excluded from determining the direction and deliverables of projects.

Mary Jane, Hazel, and Dianne all agreed that mining would take place with or without community involvement, so they had a responsibility to be part of the development. The women realized that involvement in mining and by having a role in directing projects meant gaining benefits for the community. They also emphasized that community benefits need to be tangible, and these benefits need to be seen and felt in the short and long term

Anticipated Benefits from Mining

Mary Jane and Hazel described benefits from mining as job-sharing work arrangements, transferable skills, IBAs, MOUs, partnerships, and joint ventures. They also linked opportunities to the circle of life by acknowledging that all decisions and actions come around full circle. In addition, they elaborated on the importance of networks between and among Aboriginal communities and stressed that Aboriginal peoples need to help one another with opportunities.

According to *Marion*, anticipated benefits from mining came from creating joint ventures:

We have within our nation a holding company, and through the holding company we looked at possible joint ventures with other companies or individuals, with whom we have shared interests and shared goals and shared vision. With regard to the partnering company, we had met several different companies; we finally partnered with [company name] in development and construction of mines. So we don't own the mine, but we help, especially within our territory. The focus within our territory is to get contracts to help the First Nation who are in partnerships with other mines and companies to develop their project and mine. So we submit bids in order to help facilitate the development of their mine.

For *Marion*, benefits from mining meant not only creating joint ventures that would structure community participation in mining but also improving community capacity.

Challenges with Participating in Mining

During the discussion, *Marion* identified the particular challenges of being a new outfit in the mining industry and the community and indicated that she intends to make connections with other communities looking to become involved in creating joint ventures in mining:

For me, the difficulties are to make the good contacts. The majority of the people in the industry know each other, are familiar with each other. When you are new to the industry, [you need to break] through that to make those contacts so people can know you and your company. Right now, our company is so new that we're trying to prove ourselves within our own territory and through that [method to] expand. Our partner is an international company, so they partner with other people in different countries. So if, on my part, I'm able to negotiate or meet up with a First Nation from another part of Canada, and I bring them to our partner and our venture, I'm able to capitalize on that opportunity with our partner. Connections are difficult when you are new to the industry.

Mining and Community Futures

When negotiating and developing projects, *Mary Jane and Hazel* said they always look to the future and stay focused on the legacy of decisions on youth and future generations. The women specified that they always consider what the community will look like in 15, 20, or 30 years when making decisions. They also added that site reclamation would provide important opportunities for future generations.

Marion also recognized the importance of considering the legacy of decisions on future generations:

I can speak as an Aboriginal person, when we look at negotiations or potential projects within our territory, we always have the teaching of the Seven Generations — where anything that we do today, [...] we have to think forward towards the generations to come. So the work I do today will have an impact on the future. That is always, for me, at the back of my mind; when I do my work, my

day-to-day job, it is there; even if it is unspoken, there is a reason for what I am doing. It is to protect our environment and to protect the future of our people. Those are influences that are utilized when speaking of any kind of development within our territory. Those are very high in priority. For example, you go into negotiations for an IBA, for me, it is important that you start thinking about reclamation right away; you don't put it in as an afterthought. Because it is so important, the environment is so important to us, our land is important, and so is the future of our people. You put those things up front when you begin discussing potential projects.

As reflected in the discussion, the participants all considered how decisions made in the present would shape community futures and indicated that reclamation was a priority in ensuring environmental prosperity and future opportunities for community participation.

Values and Ethics

Mary Jane and Hazel discussed the importance of projects that fit with community benefits and values, versus anticipated financial considerations, at the core of decision-making. They highlighted that communities should decide cooperatively on the ethics that will guide and shape all decisions and relationships and that these ethics are more valuable than any monetary amount. *Mary Jane and Hazel* also explained the importance of respecting Elders and stated that Elders are always invited and welcome to all community meetings.

Concerns on Standardized IBAs

Mary Jane and Hazel showed strong belief that a standardized IBA template could and would never work. They explained that communities are all unique and that they all have different needs and challenges. IBAs need to reflect the realities of the communities involved, and standardized IBAs could never create the flexibility needed to do so. While some communities may need infrastructure, others may need employment or capital, and agreements need to reflect the unique situation of every community.

Advice for Communities

When asked what advice they will give to other communities, *Mary Jane and Hazel* described the importance of always having a goal to work towards, and once that goal is completed, to replace it with another. They stated the importance of always remembering where you come from and where you are going. They also stressed the importance of “equality” when negotiating:

You can't always get what you want, but it is important that everyone remains equal. Equality is a guiding principle for all the mining team; everyone has to be working towards the same goal and have to be in sync. Equality is important between community and company. Even if two people leave a meeting unhappy, at least they are still equal [in their unhappiness].

This statement underscores the importance of synchronicity and equality within teams of Aboriginal negotiators, as well as in relationships with the companies involved.

The participants all indicated that it is important to know who you are as a people and community. In addition to knowing yourself and your community and distinguishing what you want with what you need, *Mary Jane and Hazel* also discussed the importance of staying transparent and accountable to community members, always making sure the community is aware and updated on progress and changing circumstances.

Dianne was very insightful as to what she considered to be the most important aspects to consider when deciding mining on traditional and Treaty lands:

Remember who you are, where you came from, what your rights are, why you have Treaty rights and what that means to you. You can hire people to do due diligence, negotiate, etc. You need to remember who you are, and what that means to you. I've seen community trauma because of mining. [...] The environmental and social impacts are serious. Consider mining and what that means in relation to those values, your history and who you are as a people and community. Be guided by those values and worldviews, and be strong. I worry that some communities are not strong enough in their approach to mining and considering its impacts to the land and community. It's hard to start developing projects with companies, and there's usually so much going on. But you really need to put your history and values at the core of what you are doing, and remember who you are doing it for.

According to *Dianne*, communities must make a commitment to contemplating the cultural compromises that have to be made when considering mining.

The imposition of deadlines on the ability to do full and thorough due diligence was among the main concerns of participants. As *Mary Jane and Hazel* pointed out, while some agreements took merely hours to negotiate, others have taken years. It is important not to allow yourself to be rushed by other parties and to take the time needed to negotiate properly. On the importance of due diligence and research when considering mining, logistics, commodities, and companies involved, *Marion* gave the following advice:

I always say [to community members], don't feel rushed or pressured. Maybe the mining companies are putting additional pressure. For example, there were uranium people that were trying to develop on our territory and as people started to understand, you know, they are fearful of uranium, as many other people are fearful of uranium mining. I always tell the people, you know, don't feel pressured. Do your homework, study, prepare, you know, ask other communities what their best practices are, what works for them. Go into any type of development, or mining, well prepared, [...] what is involved in mining, understand the industry, [and] the companies [involved], be very proactive.

Marion also explained the importance of continuous capacity building to ensure full access to opportunities for participation:

[Capacity building] is one area where I think we lag, not only as First Nation communities, but in the general population. We have so many miners that will be

retiring in the near future. Yet, there are still many mining projects coming up. So, who is going to take over those mining jobs, especially in our own territory? We are still building capacity. We are still training people to go into the mining industry, training people in milling and processing, training people in blasting. So, that is the key right there, in terms of preparing for capacity. Build your capacity in advance. Let's say, the Ring of Fire in Northern Ontario ... they know there is a huge mine there and the potential is great. For me, if I were a leader in that area, I would be looking at ensuring the people are trained to take the jobs that are out there. And that people are ready not only for set aside contracts, but that people are employed and that they benefit from the extraction of the resources of their own land.

Advice for Companies on Engaging with Communities

When asking about advice for companies, *Dianne* was adamant that it is always the companies' responsibility to build relationships with the communities whose land they are anticipating operating on:

It should come from the companies. The companies that are engaging with communities need to be open to talking to everyone. Some companies are scared to consult with communities in fear that they'll resist or make things more difficult. They consult and engage as little or as far as they can to get the project to move forward. But, those voices that [the companies] are silencing will always be heard in the end. Companies need to engage them from the start, and need to be open to listening and considering their points of views. If you silence people or groups of people, ignore and don't listen to them, they'll always be heard in the end ... and they'll be angry that they were silenced.

This statement underscores the importance of looking to community consultation and engagement as a means of building long-standing relationships with Aboriginal communities, which leads to more effective Social Licence to Operate.

Women in Mining

When reflecting on how being a woman shapes their approach to mining negotiations and project development, *Mary Jane and Hazel* believed that women often adopt a more protective approach to their jobs, colleagues, and communities:

As women, we are mothers to our kids, but also of leadership and to the community ... need to protect and think with heart and head at the same time. We are the front-line protectors of community leadership. So the role of mother extends to all aspects of our work and community. As women, we are protectors of the community, and sometimes we need to step away from our role on the mining team and give guidance to leadership.

On the question of how gender shapes her approach to mining, *Dianne* responded as follows:

Women are the traditional protectors of water. A couple times in my career, I was able to feel the significance of water and my role as a woman and how it relates to mining. Once, I was underground, in this very male-dominated industry, which is run with overwhelming male values. And I could see water coming in all around me through the crevices. And the water was clean, pure, and crystal clear. To me, that showed me how much this industry is begging for the female. It's crying for it. More involvement of women, more consideration of the female perspective and the approach of women. Everyone knows it has to happen for the industry to move forward. It's going to be hard, and there will be resistance, as with all kinds of change. But it has to happen. The nature of the extractive industry is male and it needs balance. The intellect is traditionally the domain of men, as is numbers, money, accounting, etc. Women think and feel with their hearts and intuition. That is what is lacking. It's that we have to feel whether or not decisions are ethical, be guided by our intuition, and do right for the community. It's not about money and profits, it's about being responsible for and about the decisions that are being made, and for the communities in which we operate. [...] We can talk about the glass-ceiling, status-quo, etc. But the difficulty is that the values of this industry are male. It's hard to make space for who we are as women, acknowledging and accepting that we are who we are, and that these are good things. Emotions, feelings, intuition, are all qualities that are female and should be embraced. It translates to more CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility]. A lot of time, women to fit in, try and adopt the attitudes, qualities, and approaches of men. That just continues the cycle. We need to accept who we are, the differences between and among us, and the contributions that diversity brings. Being a woman enables me to see through the issues at what the core problems are. Most of the time, problems come down to a lack of balance.

Dianne's thoughts highlight the many benefits of making space for women in the mining industry. She acknowledged that the industry is shaped and organized by male values and that the way forward is to celebrate diversity of approach. She then pointed out that women have different approaches to decision-making and that making space for balance would solve many of the problems currently plaguing the mining industry. Celebrating balance would solve the dreaded glass ceiling and status quo that frustrate women in the workplace. It would also make corporate social responsibility, community engagement, ethics, and relationships intrinsic in all decisions and projects.

Summary

The women consulted for this project confirmed that Aboriginal women bring a unique approach to resource development. Women carry with them increased emphasis on the intersections between values and ethics, and alluded that the responsibilities brought by motherhood extended to their professional lives. The importance of considering future impacts of their decisions was critical. Keeping youth and future generations in mind shaped the values and ethics directing their work. These women felt that there was no alternative except community participation in mining as projects would move forward with or without their involvement, and impacts would only be compounded without directing and shaping outcomes for the community.