

Well-fitted clothing just one aspect of Exxaro's Women in Mining mandate

"Nothing fits" has long been the lament of women working in male-dominated environments such as mining. So, Exxaro has redesigned its personal protective equipment (PPE) clothing as just one initiative undertaken by the company's Women in Mining (WIM) committees to attract more women to mining and empower the females in the industry.



Women represent only 13% of the mining labour force of 464 667, according to the Minerals Council South Africa.

"The PPE we provide to our female employees who work on the mines is much more comfortable than it was previously. And it is all thanks to the Women in Mining committees, who are passionate about who they are and their contribution to their work," says Vanisha Balgobind, Exxaro's executive head of human resources and Women in Mining chairperson.

"Establishing the committees was a positive step to empowering women in mining. And the PPE was identified as one of many things that didn't cater for women who work on/in mines. So we set about redesigning the uniform, so it was more accommodating to women," she says. The designers created three types of uniforms and piloted it at sites to get feedback from female miners before rolling it out throughout their mines.

Initiatives

Amongst many initiatives some of the highlights or improvements made by the WIM committees are: make-over of change rooms to have a feminine touch; self-defense courses; Women's Day celebrations; embracing the male counterparts in ensuring Exxaro is successful, celebrating their uniqueness and oneness for the better of the organisation and society.

Furthermore, to protect the women who work underground, underground toilets are reserved for women's exclusive use as they are secured with locks to which only the women have the access codes. There is also a project underway called "women in distress button", where lamps used by women are to be upgraded to include panic buttons.

To further ensure their safety, all female miners have a direct hotline to the CEO to who they can report any victimisation, assault or issues, says Balgobind.

As part of the women empowerment strategy of Exxaro, the WIM committee has also established a female networking forum where female employees can discuss work life balance, family demands, how to deal with pressure in the boardroom and other leadership issues, across the business.

"The environment is one that I believe is conducive for women," says Ling-Ling Mothapo, a senior engineer: metallurgy at Exxaro. "There's no focus on the fact that you're a woman; instead the focus is on what needs to be done to get the job done properly."

"They [Exxaro] make us feel comfortable, and with programmes like Women in Mining, we can openly discuss our issues as women. It makes me feel special and allows me to feel like I'm capable of doing anything," Says Shelva Mudanabula, a mechanical fitter and millwright.

This praise is validation for Balgobind who says all credit must go to the Women in Mining committees for their hard work and commitment to the women's role in the organisation.

Empowering women

"Exxaro is serious about how women are treated, and believes that they should feel as if they're being considered in the workplace – that their needs are being met and the necessary changes are being put in place to enable them to succeed. This is testament to that," she says.

While the primary focus is still on empowering women who comprise a fraction of the total workforce, the WIM committees will turn their attention to male employees in the coming year, where the focus will be on our awareness of celebrating diversity to working together in achieving the Exxaro strategy.

"One of the focuses for the next year is to bring men into the WIM committees so they [men] become aware of challenges women face in mining. In line with our mission, we want to power possibilities not only for our female employees, but for all employees in Exxaro," she says.

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