



The Me Too Mining Association's DIGGER acronym and educational program address what people can do when they observe harassment and discrimination occurring.

Digging into discrimination

The Me Too Mining Association is working to make the industry a safer and a more inclusive place for everybody

By Alexandra Lopez-Pacheco

It has been four years since the #metoo movement shattered any delusions that workplace sexual harassment and assault are rare – including in mining operations. It has been three years since Susan Lomas founded the Me Too Mining Association to empower the mining industry with tools to bring about the changes needed to end the problem. But even with the passage of time, sexual assault and harassment have not disappeared from the workplace. The industry, it seems, has not learned the lesson that it should be taking action to keep its workers safe from sexual assault and harassment.

The most recent and public example of the lack of understanding about how serious the situation is originated in Australia, where executives from Rio Tinto, BHP, Woodside, Fortescue Metals Group and Newmont found themselves issuing public apologies for their lack of action.

The statements came on the heels of the announcement of a Western Australia parliamentary inquiry into sexual harassment and assault in the mining sector, which in itself, followed news that police had laid charges of rape against two BHP workers and had investigated other incidents of sexual assault and harassment over a number of years.

During an unprecedented media conference in June, the mining executives collectively apologized to all the victims of the abuse in their industry and pledged to create safer workplaces for women. Paul Everingham, CEO of Western Australia's Chamber of Minerals and Energy, was quoted at the time as saying he previously hadn't been "necessarily thinking that this is the most significant issue on mine sites, but over the last 12 months, you know, I readily admit, I've learned a lot and it's certainly prevalent."

In August, submissions to the Australian government inquiry were made public. According to reporting by Reuters, BHP said that it had fired 48 employees since 2019, following complaints of sexual harassment, allegations of rape and unwanted sexual touching. The company said it found 73 substantiated reports of sexual harassment during the two-year period. In the same article, Rio Tinto said it received one reported case of sexual assault and was able to substantiate accounts of 29 of sexual harassment. It was unable, however, to verify 14 additional claims. Fortescue reported 20 harassment incidents in 2021 and 11 in 2020.

Lomas has known how prevalent the problem is for more than 30 years, in part because of numerous personal experiences as the target of distressing and traumatizing sexual harassment while working as a geologist in mining sites across the globe.

"I've worked in the isolated camps in the North; small and big exploration camps; mines and offices in more than 30 countries," said Lomas. "I've seen a lot of different environments. That kind of exposure helped me realize how many different types of workplace environments there are in mining."

When the #metoo movement broke the silence and denial about sexual harassment and assault in other industries, Lomas took a year off her consulting work to study anti-harassment programs across sectors and identify the most successful approaches to prevention.

In her capacity as president of the Me Too Mining Association, Lomas is often seen as the go-to person to provide commentary on situations like the one in Australia. In fact, she was interviewed by the *Financial Times* on precisely that topic. But more than speaking out after assaults or harassment have been revealed, Lomas believes that steps can and should be taken to prevent the actions in the first place.

It turns out that harassment and discrimination are enabled by the very culture of silence and minimization behind the industry's denial. The solution, Lomas concluded after her research, lies in culture change.

"Discrimination is not always done with malicious intent," said Lomas, who was a presenter at CIMVTL21. "Some people are just uncomfortable and say things that are completely inappropriate."

When discriminatory and degrading attitudes and values are minimized and normalized, victims of the abuse are left feeling alone behind that wall of denial, not knowing who to turn to for help. Bystanders who witness abusive and degrading behaviour often look the other way for a variety of reasons, inadvertently giving perpetrators of the abuse a sense of protection and empowerment.

"Me Too Mining's mandate is culture change and removing the support system that keeps [perpetrators] feeling supported in their behaviours," said Lomas. "The research looks into what stops us from becoming an active bystander and intervening and [shows] that you just need to know what is making you hesitate to help you to overcome it."

DIGGER

Based on that research, Me Too Mining created a customized bystander-intervention program for the mining industry.

The association's four-and-a-half-hour-long DIGGER program provides participants with industry-specific scenarios

and skills training on different types of bystander responses and the role they play in creating either a positive workplace culture or one that is complicit in allowing degrading and abusive behaviour. DIGGER is an acronym that stands for an active bystander's toolkit – Direct action, Indirect action, Get a co-worker, Get an authority, Engage the target, Record and report.

“It's really hard to stand up to harassers when you are the target of the harassment,” said Julia Gartley, a senior process engineer, who was a victim of horrific sexual violence in a mining workplace early in her career and who is now director of Me Too Mining. “How powerful would it be if that target does not have to be the one who speaks up? If somebody in a meeting makes a rude comment and someone else says, ‘Well, that was rude.’ Or when someone hears the jokes or sees inappropriate photos or hears rumours and has the courage to speak up. How much that would change things.”

The minor interventions and skills outlined by DIGGER not only help change the culture, they can potentially also help reduce more severe attacks.

“Like anything else, you have to practise,” said Gartley. “I'm not saying it's easy, but if you practise these little steps and you ever witness something that is more toxic or extreme, you may have built up the strength to be able to speak up and it might have a much more powerful impact.”

Addressing all forms of discrimination

Ross Sherlock, a professor who is the director of Laurentian University's \$104 million applied research and development initiative Metal Earth, was impressed with the positive impact DIGGER had on his 2019 class. He invited Me Too Mining to conduct its program as part of the health and safety training his students received before they were sent for summer work in the field. “We need to train them on workplace safety but also what the workplace environment is going to be and their rights as an employee and what is inappropriate in a workplace,” said Sherlock. “Susan and her colleague [Gartley] were very effective and I think it opened the eyes of the students that this is a potentially dangerous environment you can get into but that you also have a right to health and safety.”

DIGGER's benefits extend to reducing all forms of discrimination, not just misogynistic actions, according to Lomas.

“The same tools that deal with sexual harassment are the ones to deal with any inappropriate behaviours whether it is racism, bullying, intimidation, or discrimination,” said Lomas. “It's putting the light on the situation so it just doesn't keep happening in the dark.”

That was one of the reasons Cape Breton University geology professor Jason Loxton invited Me Too Mining to speak to his engineering students. “We were about to send a group of students predominantly from India into northern rural Alberta, which might not necessarily be the most ideal environment for them,” he said. “They had to potentially prepare for racialized harassment in work-camp settings.”

The vast majority of the comments Loxton received from the students after the presentation were very positive. “Some of them were from people who expressed both a complete lack of awareness before that there was a [harassment] problem and a really strong desire to do things to change it afterwards.”

There was an additional reason why Loxton invited Me Too Mining into the classroom: out of approximately 180 students,

over 90 per cent were men. “The goal was to recognize that same gender imbalance is represented in industry, I wanted to create 180 allies.”

Some participants in the DIGGER program have gone on to share stories with Lomas about times they witnessed harassment but did nothing.

“I'd actually be shocked if you could find anyone who has spent time in the field who does not have a story that they probably shrugged off but should not have shrugged off,” said Loxton.

Many feel guilty by their inaction, explained Lomas. She shared an example of a man who told her that on his first job after graduating from university, he witnessed the cooks being repeatedly harassed by the diamond drillers, who were significantly older than him. “He was intimidated by them so much that he remained silent, but he still carried the guilt and shame 30 years later.”

Since launching Me Too Mining, Lomas has also heard from men who have been victimized in mining workplaces. In a hyper-masculine culture such as in mining, male victimization remains a hyper-taboo subject, but the reality is that, “men also get sexually harassed, bullied and even sexually assaulted,” said Lomas. “And that's a conversation that hasn't really been a part of the topic in the past, but we've brought it into our discussions, so we're very inclusive.”

Working around COVID-19 limitations

Between February 2018 and March 2020, Me Too Mining worked tirelessly to raise awareness through having a presence at industry conferences. “Our bystander training tool was really starting to impress a lot of people and we were having conversations with mining companies about giving our course and then COVID hit,” said Lomas.

Slowly, things have been picking up since then, but it seems the industry overall continues to be gobsmacked by revelations of sexual harassment rather than rolling up its sleeves and supporting Me Too Mining's initiative for culture change. The organization's phones have not been ringing off the hook with offers of funding or company-wide bookings for the program. The *Financial Times* article mentioned some of the performative changes BHP has implemented, such as installing additional security cameras, providing security escorts for women, and limiting in-camp alcohol consumption to four drinks per day, but it did not mention DIGGER while quoting Lomas or include any reference to mining companies implementing similar programs of their own. Instead, it stated that “employees of BHP and other mining companies have been trained to act with respect for some time.”

“The biggest challenge is how do we implement [company-wide culture change regarding sexual harassment and assault] and broaden the scope of our health and safety training in mining to include the types of challenges that are not necessarily as black and white as ‘don't use certain types of shovels in a conveyor?’” said Gartley. “Right now, we are a group of volunteers. All of us have other full-time jobs and we're doing this in our free time because we think this is important and it's not something that currently exists widely in the industry.”

It seems the ball is now in the industry's court. **CIM**

Susan Lomas' CIMVTL21 presentation, “Safe, Inclusive and Respectful Workplaces through Allyship and Active Bystanders,” can be accessed on the CIM Academy website: <https://academy.cim.org>