

The 'iron lady' of the Indonesian mining industry

SHE awakes at 4.30am to cook rice and curries, traditional Indonesian meals for the day, for her husband and children. Then she dons her jeans and shirt, steel-toed mining boots, and the helmet that is mandatory for the kind of work she does. She has left home by 7.30am in her four-wheel drive and supervises the pit operations before reaching the neat and tidy air-conditioned office.

Meet Mrs Nortani Nortani, the manager, Mining Operation Services in Kaltim Prima Coal (KPC), an Indonesian mining company operating in eastern Kalimantan.

There is no dearth of women in mining companies, in developing countries or in developed ones. They generally work in 'soft jobs' such as those in offices as clerks, assistants, secretaries, computer operators, seen generally as 'feminised' professions. Women may be found in top managerial positions in marketing and administrative areas. But in mining operations? Sorry, this is viewed entirely as a male domain, where women are too few in numbers to be noticed in the scheme of things.

Indeed, the proverbial 'invisible' glass ceiling that limits women's prospects in other career areas is frostily obvious. Mrs



BY KUNTALA LAHIRI-DUTT

Nortani is indeed one of the very few, and she has risen high enough in the intricate organizational hierarchy of a mining company to prove that it is not impossible for a woman to stay in mainstream mining operations and do well.

Qualified women with mining engineering degrees tend to drop out or change their line, preferring to go into administration, purchase or marketing departments in mining companies. A senior manager in the marketing department, armed with a mining engineering degree and passing files for the past five years says: 'I don't want to swim against the tide', when asked about her decision to change from operations to this white-collar job.

Another female engineer working in the environment unit says that in such a male-dominated industry it is difficult for women to reach as high a position as Mrs Nortani. This begs the questions: is Mrs Nortani an exception? What are the factors that make her so special? Is it personal initiative? Is it a supportive organisational environment? Is this specific to Indonesia or is it a universal phenomenon? Is it really impossible for a woman to do the top jobs in mining? What have the mining organisations done to create a more enabling work environment for women? The list of questions is endless, and mining has been slow to tackle them.

She is an alumna of the prestigious Bandung Institute of Technology, which she attended between 1982 and 1987. At the time, there were only two women and 58 men in her class. Her other female colleague is now a housewife.

Mrs Nortani's doctor father



Mrs Nortani with one of the female operators



Mrs Nortani in her office

and her mother, a teacher, were always encouraging her to find her own career. Even so, her mother taught her to do the household chores typical of a good housewife in Javanese culture. Initially, Mrs Nortani wanted to be an airlines stewardess, but a friend told her that she was 'not tall enough'.

When Mrs Nortani joined KPC in 1987, her job was in exploration, not in production (trial shipments of coal only began a few years later). She married another KPC employee in 1990 and now has three children.

About her 'double shift' at home and at work, she comments: "Every woman works like that. They are experts in multiskilling, something that companies are only just beginning to expect of us. We have done it ever since we came out of our homes to work."

She feels that in Indonesia, poor women in rural communities always work outside of the home, in various ancillary roles in farms, fishing and in collecting fuel and firewood. Moreover, there is a long history of artisanal mining by traditional communities in Indonesia.

However, when mining began in the modern sense of the term, it also brought 'backshift', the night work from 6 pm to 6 am. Local, Indonesian, men found it hard to get used to, and had to put in a lot of effort to adjust their daily rhythm to this new pattern of work.

Mrs Nortani also draws attention to the fact that the conventional belief systems operating in the minds of her subordinates means that in certain situations she has to point out that she is indeed the boss.

Nevertheless, she is quick to point out that she has never had any significant problems. She feels that in comparison with men, women are the more meticulous and diligent operators. "Hardly any accidents have happened to our women operators," she says, and feels this is due to a certain caution inherent in women – supported by the fact that women truck operators are hardly ever caught speeding in the pits.

Moreover, she attributes this more to culture than nature. "Women in our culture are taught to be careful, parents are harder on girls than boys about discipline, and thus it gets

etched in the girl's mind," she adds.

She started out as just a drilling assistant, and it took her 17 long years to reach her current position (she talks about an Indonesian society, which is very hierarchical and puts women at the bottom). This reflects in part, how mining companies operate in the country. Indeed, while she languished as a superintendent for nine years, her male colleagues rose faster in the company hierarchy.

Furthermore, she adds: "Now that I am in this position, and despite a mine being a very male environment, my colleagues can see that I can do the job just as well as them."

Over the years, Mrs Nortani has earned a few names; one of her colleagues calls her 'an iron lady', and yet another calls her 'an oracle' because, she explains: "I am tough in disciplining people." That said, she adds: "On the other hand, I am mild – I can't be too hard to people who are close to me." Her strength, as she perceives it, lies in her interpersonal skills and her ability to communicate.

On the subject of women having a greater presence in mining, Mrs Nortani is enthusiastic, in spite of clearly identifying certain gaps. She feels that mining companies, as harbingers of modern development in remote locations in countries such as Indonesia, should hire more women as a 'strategic move', to show that 'women can do it too', and can make the mines more women-friendly.

She believes the presence of women in mining tends to neutralise the wilder attitudes of men, encouraging them to sober up, cut down on swearing and reduce the propensity for risk-taking. And she feels these positive changes in male behaviour need to be cultivated to improve safety in the mines.

Child-bearing and the related increase in household chores are the major factors in limiting the female workforce. Mrs Nortani is confident that times are changing. She feels that, given the right training, there are many mining jobs that women can, and should do.

"Now that I am in this position, and despite a mine being a very male environment, my colleagues can see that I can do the job just as well as them"

Dr Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt is the community specialist in natural resource management at Australian National University