Foreword

Though women all over the world toil as miners, and have done for centuries, mining is seen as a quintessentially masculine endeavour. *Gendering the Field* puts a definitive stop to the gender-blindness of such a view. We have Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, the editor and a contributor to this book, to thank for this corrective move.

For many years Lahiri-Dutt has championed the cause of women in mining. She has challenged the preoccupation of minority world feminist scholarship with women living in mining communities and argued for more analysis of women working at the actual mine-site. Her interest in women in mining grew out of important research into artisanal small-scale mining on the coal fields of West Bengal. Here women to this day work with men scavenging for coal, wheeling it to market in improvised vehicles, living alongside their pits and conducting family life in the interstices of mine work. Such a world seems far from the large-scale mines that occupy a privileged place in the global imaginary. In our resource hungry world we are familiar with the huge excavators operated by well-paid men gouging out minerals, moving mountains and transforming landscapes in a matter of years. Or the construction of ever deeper underground mines where sophisticated computer models guide the operations of advanced machinery ‘manned’ by fly-in/fly-out miners working 12 hour shifts. To this technology intensive, heroic, and above all masculine landscape Lahiri-Dutt has added a panorama of poor women and men using rudimentary tools to produce vast amounts of mineral output, outside the regulatory embrace of union organisation and health and safety laws. Exposés of the extent of this artisanal mining ‘industry’, such as those by Lahiri-Dutt for India, have forced a long overdue shift in international mining policy and planning.

Widening our perspective so that we can see what is in front of us differently is one of the key contributions of feminist scholarship. Another is adherence to an action oriented mode of research. No matter how theoretical, empirical or pragmatic, feminist scholarship seeks to change the world in which we live, bringing greater dignity and justice to those who experience discrimination. Lahiri-Dutt’s research has done this for small-scale artisanal miners. But she has not stopped there. From this situated research experience she has embarked on an impressive action-oriented engagement with the mining industry as a whole. *Gendering the Field* is a testament to her determination to leave no shaft in these complex workings unexplored. The authors she has collected together in this volume explore crucial gender issues across the board of large and small mining operations in North America, Canada, Australia, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Mongolia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Chapters include perspectives
of indigenous women and women in support industries such as sex work and other input suppliers. All contributors are concerned to address the community level development implications of mineral extraction.

The collection offers a refreshing engagement with contemporary gender and development theorisations and their application in the ‘field’ of mining. While there is a strong element of criticism of the status quo in the mining industry with respect to the treatment of women, there is also an even-handed appreciation of the attempts being made by corporations and governments to address inequalities and listen to the concerns of women, particularly indigenous women, involved in mining operations. The collection contains both healthy scepticism and generous acknowledgement of the advancements made in the name of sustainable development in mining areas.

Perhaps the most difficult issue confronting social scientists concerned about gender equality, economic justice and sustainability in the global mining industry is that of the non-renewable and thus inherently unsustainable nature of mining activity. As with many political victories, the timing for women is all wrong. Having been ousted from underground mines as the industrial revolution gathered pace in the northern hemisphere minority world, women have only relatively recently been accepted back into the mining workforce, just as the mining industry has become perhaps the major political hurdle to addressing the social and environmental challenges posed by climate change. And in majority world nations where mineral riches are increasingly being exploited on a large scale for international export, mining development offers women and men alike a real chance to get ahead. At the same time, there is greater realisation of the devastating consequences for proximate ecologies and global environments of such scaled-up operations. What’s more, there is little evidence that the exploitation of mineral riches in poor nations leads to greater wellbeing. So, as many of this volume’s authors admit, development itself is under question.

What might sustainability mean in connection with the international mining industry? This important book provides an answer to this question by outlining ways of thinking about the community livelihoods that might be supported alongside minerals development. Shifting the centre of attention from sustaining a controversial ‘development’ to sustaining the livelihoods of women and men in surrounding communities opens up the space to allow a range of practical initiatives. For example, procurement practices can distribute the economic benefits of mining to a wider region and to women, and negotiated agreements can safeguard the spiritual and social needs of indigenous communities living in the vicinity of mining activities. There needs to be many more strategies for transforming a non-renewable activity that destroys landscapes into renewable economic practices that support livelihoods and replenish ecologies. As women
enter the mining industry in greater numbers and as their longstanding contributions in artisanal small-scale activities gain greater recognition it is timely to raise these important and hard issues of planetary survival. While there is no necessary connection between women and sustainability, it remains a commonplace observation that where women are able to survive well, their families and communities survive well too. The combined attention to gender and sustainable livelihoods of this volume signals an important turning point, not only for mining industry scholarship, but also hopefully for minerals development policy. We now know that mining companies can attend to gender equality and still perform well in the marketplace. They can also support community livelihoods and compete in the cut and thrust of a competitive industry. Perhaps the next challenge is to see how they can also become responsible and reparative environmental citizens and survive as businesses. The evidence provided in this volume allows us some hope for the future.

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