On-screen: Struggles and Triumphs of Women in Coal Mining Noemi Hall, PhD EIS 2016. April 26, 2024 Sarah Luna Memorial Ted-Style Talk Session 2024 Epidemic Intelligence Service Conference. CDC logo on bottom right.

[APPLAUSE]

NOEMI HALL: Would you want your daughter to be a coal miner?

PRESENTER 1: A woman can't be a coal miner.

PRESENTER 2: It's just not right. You want a woman taking a man's job?

PRESENTER 3: It's just no place for a woman. Besides that, they just can't do the work. And anyway, it's just too dangerous for a woman.

PRESENTER 4: A woman underground is just plain bad luck.

NOEMI HALL: These are all quotations taken from interviews and newspaper articles in the 1970s. Because it wasn't until 1974 that women were hired to work in underground coal mines in the US. And that's had a lasting impression on how we think of coal mining today.

So you probably heard those men's voices and thought, that's just old-fashioned thinking. That's outdated. But I'm willing to bet that if I were to ask you right now to picture a coal miner, the first image that would pop into your mind would be something like this, a man, his face covered in coal mine dust.

But in reality, women have had a role in underground coal mining for over 200 years. We see here women working at the surface of a coal mine in England in 1900. They're wearing long skirts over their working pants. And prior to the 1840s in England, women and children worked in underground coal mines.

But when legislators heard of their hard labor, they passed laws preventing women and children from working in underground coal mines in England. These same paternalistic protection laws inspired US legislators to follow suit. So that by 1932, there were 17 states in the US that prohibited women from working in underground coal mines. Now, of course, during war time, women were expected to pitch in as part of their patriotic duty. And we see here women in Wyoming in 1942 doing just that.

But perhaps the most enduring image of women in coal mining is that of the hardworking coal miner's wife, devoted to her husband, taking care of the children, keeping everyone clean, clothed, and fed. The wives, mothers and daughters of the coal camps were instrumental in supporting the men and supporting the union during times of strikes.

We see here this newspaper article describing the 1900 anthracite coal strike. It quotes the president of the union, John Mitchell, describing the wives of miners as a crucial tool in a successful strike and recommended viewing for anyone who hasn't seen it is this award-winning documentary, Harlan County, USA, which depicts life in a coal mining community during a 1973 strike in Kentucky. It provides a stirring example of the role of women in the community supporting unionization efforts.

But it was around this same time in the '60s and '70s that women were tired of being in the background, fed up with just playing a supporting role in the lives of men. Divorce rates across the country were rising. And there were increasing choices leading to greater independence for women. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was intended to abolish discriminatory hiring practices on the part of the US government and its contractors. And the 1967 Amendment finally added gender as a basis for non-discrimination. Women were going from being homemakers and bread bakers to breadwinners.

But it still wasn't until 1974 that a consent decree forced the US steel industry to hire women to work in their underground coal mines. Now, if we want to hear about women who have made history, I'd like to introduce you to Anita and Diana, both former hospital workers, and the first women officially on the payroll at an underground coal mine in the US. You see them here about to start their shift, going underground to dig Appalachian coal, moving mountains, proving their ability to work alongside the men. And they're proud to be mining coal.

But just because the laws around coal mining were changing, it didn't mean that the culture around coal mining would transform overnight. There were still superstitions in place, including the idea that the presence of a woman underground would cause disaster to strike. So in 1977, in Tennessee, there was an environmental group that wanted to take a tour of an underground coal mine. This was a group that was made up of a number of men and one woman.

When they called the mine operator to set up the tour, he looked at the list of names in front of him and said, I can't have a woman going underground. The men would walk out. The mine would shut down. Now, if you fellas want to come take a tour, that's one thing.

But if you insist on bringing her, forget the whole thing. Well, you can imagine this caused a stir once it hit the desk of Betty Jean Hall, a lawyer, formerly from Kentucky, who became the first director of this advocacy group, The Coal Employment Project, which included among its goals, bringing legislative action against coal mine owners denying work to women.

Because Betty Jean saw a need. There were women in Appalachia who wanted these jobs in coal mining, and they were going to have to fight discrimination to get them. The kind of discrimination where, when jobs were posted at the mine site, they were posted in the men's bathhouse where women just didn't have access. And if women found out about these jobs and applied anyway, their applications were often just being ignored.

Now, of course, these women didn't have any prior experience working in underground coal. But then again, neither did most of the men who were being hired to do the work. So when women went to the mine owners to complain about not being hired, being ignored, they were told, well, we can't hire just one woman.

So on top of the tremendous effort of Betty Jean and her team bringing lawsuits against these mine owners, they also developed workshops to prepare women for entering coal mine employment. These workshops included assertiveness training, introducing women to the tools of the trade, and offering helpful counsel, such as when you go to apply for a job at a coal mine, bring a friend with you. Because if there's more than one woman going to work underground together, that means there's safety in numbers.

Just because women could get past the barrier of being hired, didn't mean that they were being accepted, let alone respected by their new colleagues. So as I was going through the archives of The Coal Employment Project, I came across headlines. Headlines describing the type of treatment and harassment that women faced working underground. And these are just the issues that made it into the papers.

So after seeing all this, you may be wondering, well, why would women even want to work under these kinds of conditions? You remember Anita and Diana. They were the first two women hired to work underground. They made twice what they'd been earning as hospital workers once they started mining coal.

Another woman hired around the same time described her previous job, waitressing, where she worked six days a week for just $40 pay. Women in Appalachia who are working outside the home at this time earned on average $1.60 an hour. The jobs in coal mining were starting at about $50 a day.

Another woman hired in the 1970s said we should have more women mining coal. The more women we have, the more support we get. Once women can show that we can mine coal, then other jobs that women have never been able to get that pay better will open up for us. My wages will upgrade other women's wages.

We're not content with working for low pay at shirt factories anymore. Well, now that women can be hired to work as underground coal miners, are we satisfied now? We still don't have equal representation of women working underground in coal mining today.

Now, earlier when I asked you to think about a coal miner, if you imagine coal mining as primarily the domain of men, you're still not wrong. Over 90% of underground coal miners in the US today are men. So if the women in the 1970s fighting to break into coal mining didn't make a lasting change in the face of the industry, does that mean that we failed?
No. These women didn't take those jobs because they envisioned their daughters and their daughters' daughters someday mining coal, too. They took those jobs to support their children, to support their families, working towards that classic American dream of providing a better future for their families.

And we know that the times have changed. In the 1960s, it would have been absurd to picture a woman as a coal miner, just as it would have been absurd to picture a woman as an airline pilot, or a surgeon. Even in our own program, in 1951, it would have been absurd to picture a woman, as an EIS officer. But today, 78% of EIS officers are women.

AUDIENCE: Whoo!

NOEMI HALL: Male-dominated industries have opened up to include women. We have jobs, careers, lives available to us today that weren't even possible just over 50 years ago. And yet what we can learn from the example set by these trailblazing women in coal is the spirit of working together to fight for change, to not take no for an answer when it's a no that's keeping you from achieving your potential.

So we're sitting here today. And I see in front of me a room with plenty of accomplished women. And we acknowledge that we have come so far.

But we also have to acknowledge we still have so much farther to go. There's more change to keep fighting for, the kind of change that's about more than just making sure women can be hired to work alongside men, the kind of change that means supporting women throughout their careers and throughout their lives. That means extending access to parental leave and ensuring affordable childcare is available for women in all fields.

And unfortunately, we're still battling a gendered pay wage gap today. The US Census Bureau said that in 2022, white women earned 84% of what white men made. For Black women, that number goes down to 70% of what white men made, Hispanic women, 65%, and Native American women, 55%

So these issues of women's employment, this is about politics. This is about feminism. But if you were to go back into the 1970s and ask those women breaking into coal, they would tell you that at its core, it's about the ability of a woman to provide for herself.

One woman mining coal in Harlan County, Kentucky in 1980 was featured in the documentary Coal Mining Women. And she said I don't see that I'm making history. I'm just making a good living.

Women today deserve to have the ability to support themselves and their families, to stand on their own two feet with dignity. We have the choices and the opportunities available to us now to get ourselves there. And we have women like these and these to thank for it. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

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