

Good Practice Note

Non-Discrimination and Equal Opportunity



Promoting Women's Employment in Mining

Programa Mujer is an innovative example of how to break with tradition that excludes women from mining operations. The program was an initiative of IFC client Minera Escondida, the world's largest copper-producing mining company, located in the Atacama Desert in the north of Chile. It was supported by Chile's Ministry for Women's Affairs.

In light of the high unemployment rate for women in Chile and the company's role in the local economy and as a job creation source, it was important for Minera Escondida to take special steps to include women in its labor force.

Programa Mujer marked the company's first attempt to integrate women into the operation of heavy mining equipment since production started in 1990. The name and image of Minera Escondida were used country-wide to promote and disseminate the emerging role that women are playing in the Chilean mining industry. After recruiting a small number of women with existing experience, Escondida management approved

the concept of hiring women with no experience. The recruitment ads generated a flood of responses. The company received 936 applications from women with no prior experience, of whom 238 were invited to participate in the recruitment process. The applicants came from a variety of backgrounds; teachers, secretaries, train operators, security guards and fork-lift truck operators.

The applicants underwent a series of evaluations and a rigorous 3-month-long selection process. The final group of applicants attended a 3-month training period that included technical, mechanical and practical matters as well as a focus on safety and corporate values. The next step was a training and evaluation period during which the women operated equipment at the Escondida Norte Mine. The women who were hired on a permanent basis are today part of the mine operations team, operating 360-ton haul trucks, graders, and 90-ton water trucks. While it was not easy to integrate women into shifts where only men had worked previously,

the women's determination meant that they gained acceptance among their workmates by demonstrating that their technical work was safe, of a high quality and productivity. The workforce of Minera Escondida became more inclusive, and the women's presence generated a positive impact on workplace attitudes and behaviors. Early results indicated that high productivity rates and attention to maintenance detail made this a sound business decision as well as the right thing to do.

The project generated excellent PR for the company, challenging the notion of workplace stereotypes. The women were able to gain the respect and recognition of their coworkers, challenging the belief that only men can perform heavy equipment operations.

Source: "Promoting Gender Equality in the Private Sector - Hiring Women in Mining Production Jobs." IFC (2005).

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