

How Kholo Letsie survives life at a mine



By [Lindsey Schutters](#)

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Working in a mine is not an easy job, especially for a woman. But for Kholo Letsie, an industrial engineer, it is a rewarding and fulfilling career. She shares her story of how she overcomes the challenges and stereotypes of being a young, black woman in a mine, and how she reminds herself of her skills and qualifications every day.



Mining is a tough industry for women. Source: Dominik Vanyi/Unsplash

❏ ***Before we get into the reality you face every day, let's first figure out how you got to coaching miners?***

I looked at different courses and sifted out the ones that I felt do not align with my personality. I wanted something that will allow me to be creative and improve processes, the way people work, and impact their mindset.

I'm from Polokwane originally, but studied at Nelson Mandela University and spent nine years in the Eastern Cape.

For industrial engineering, most of the things that we were taught theoretically, apply in the workplace. There isn't much difference in various industrial engineering varsity programmes. It's mainly dealing with Lean, which is standard.

❏ ***If you lived in Gqeberha, and now in Joburg, you probably speak a bunch of languages. Do you prefer to speak vernacular to make training sessions better?***

Sometimes, if it's a one-on-one, we can take that vernac, which is much better because it's just me and the person. In a group, it's quite difficult because in most cases I never find myself in a situation where I have three or four people speaking the same language.

English is common ground. If someone doesn't understand, then I'm always willing to translate.

When you get to an area and people are speaking a different language, and they realise you can communicate with them in their language, it makes them feel at ease. They're also more welcoming as well.

❏ ***And what about the cultural baggage that comes with it? Are the older men okay with a younger woman showing them a different way to do their job?***

It's always a challenge, especially the older men. In most cases I get there and they will tell me how much how long they've

been in the industry – how long they've been working, and how long they've been operating the machinery.



Kholo Letsie, industrial engineer at OIM Consulting

And I just came straight from varsity just to tell them that they shouldn't do it this way. Do it my way. It is literally a project where we definitely bring improvements.

It's always challenging. It takes a lot of effort to convince people that I'm actually trying to make the work easier for you. That's where we face a lot of resistance.

They're always resisting, especially now you're lady and they kind of looked down on me and just never want to listen.

At some point I'm trying to do things with them, physically demanding things. I want to be there with them so we can do it together, so that it doesn't feel like I'm instructing them and it feels like our project.

I need to be there to listen, and to also get advice. Because even though I can be from varsity, there's quite a lot that I can also learn from them.

■ ***Are there the tribal dynamics also? Like chiefs who still want you to treat them according to their cultural standing?***

As a woman they sometimes expect you to try to bring yourself down when talking to them. I respect that and try to make it work for both of us, for the organisation. I always try to gauge the age to maybe know how they will respond.

I try to learn also from their side, otherwise, we're going to have a lot of conflict, and we probably not going to get much done.

Some guys are really sticklers for cultural traditions, and then you have to act in a different way to get the job done and not upsetting anything.

There are situations where you have to stand up and say, "unfortunately, I'm not trying to be disrespectful, we're here to work and we have to do what has to be done".

■ ***Is it changing? Can you see some positives, or have you just resigned yourself to this life?***

Yeah, it is changing. We had supervisor development workshop a couple weeks ago where this came up. We were talking about coming to work and forgetting to say "uncle".

There can't be compromises to make about how you have to speak to people, especially when you need to delegate. When you come to work, they can't expect that you're still giving them that kind of title.

In the training I was the only lady and I told them that we need to go 50/50. Being in the room means they said they can do it, so you got to do it.



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■ ***Are there guys who try and shoot their shot with you?***

They always do. Sometimes I'll wear a dress and it all changes. They're used to seeing me in jeans and a T-shirt, with everything covered nicely. It's a big change when I decide to go into the office on a day that I don't need to be in uniform, and I wear something I want to wear.

■ ***How do you cope with that mentally?***

In most cases, I just close my eyes and be like: "you know, I'm wearing a dress today, I'm gonna wear my boots and I'm going to work".

You just have to act like you don't see it. Because otherwise, I'll never be free to be whoever I want to be. Yeah, yeah. You just act like you don't see the looks when you greet people or hear the comments. Like you didn't hear anything

■ ***So do you still enjoy what you do, despite the challenges?***

Yes, I love what I'm doing. I don't regret. not even a bit. In consulting you move through different organisations for like six months at a time, I just had to adjust.

I love working with people and making a different difference. Industrial engineers make improvements and capacitate people on how to be independent and be able to work independently.

I've seen people who have grown the Lean workshops that have moved from working on the floor to team leader level. And that is rewarding and impressive.

ABOUT LINDSEY SCHUTTERS

Lindsey is the editor for ICT, Construction&Engineering and Energy&Mining at Bizcommunity

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