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DIGGING DEEP TO BUILD A BETTER FUTURE

The West Australian (Saturday edition), Perth

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The resources sector is bringing about wholesale workplace change at breakneck pace

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It's a crisis that has exposed high-sounding mission statements of Australia's resources companies promising equal workplaces as tissue-thin for many women employees.

Revelations of the prevalence of sexual misconduct in fly-in fly-out operations, its corrosive impact and the failure to tackle it effectively have shocked the mining industry into its biggest shake-up since 2014, when FIFO mental health emerged as an emergency issue following a series of suicides.

Then, as now, unwanted hea-

dlines led to a parliamentary inquiry which recommended a series of reforms to workplace operations including rosters and a code of conduct.

This time much of the industry has been up-front acknowledging the urgent need to act to improve safety on sites and is not waiting for legislators or regulators.

News of serious sexual assaults at remote WA mining camps sent shock waves through the community in June, plunging city boardrooms

and their spin doctors into crisis mode.

A #MeToo reckoning was their doorstep and Chamber of Minerals and Energy boss Paul Everingham, pictured above, found himself front and centre.

His phone rang off the hook as top executives he represented from across the State grappled to respond to front pages unearthing dark truths in the industry.

Shocked and devastated for victims, Mr Everingham called an unprecedented meeting of leaders from a cross section of



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industry in June.

“This can’t be what we represent, this can’t be what we stand for,” he recalled thinking at the time. “It wasn’t gossip. It wasn’t rumour. It was a fact. For a lot of people in the industry, it really brought home that this was real, this was happening on our mine sites.”

Just months earlier Mr Everingham had been quoted in this newspaper saying that 2020 had been the toughest year of his professional life.

That was premature. He would soon rack up 25 site visits, and counting, assessing the issue alone after media attention swelled and a powerful parliamentary inquiry was announced on the back of The West Australian’s reporting.

In truth, though, the problems for women workers has been mining’s dirty secret for some time.

A handful of companies had initiatives to improve in train prior to the inquiry, following the national work sexual harassment 2020 report, titled Re-

spect@Work by The Human Rights Commission.

That report found 40 per cent of the mining workforce had experienced sexual harassment in the past five years. But incredibly almost 75 per cent of women in mining reported harassment.

Comparing the need for cultural transformation to the decade-long battle to shift attitudes to safety, a key industry figure warned that eradicating sexual misconduct couldn’t be as arduous and was a matter of urgency.

“This time around, we haven’t got 20 years to try and sort this out,” Association of Mining and Exploration Companies chief executive Warren Pearce said.

“The reality is we’ve got to start making steps towards

improved outcomes very quickly. We’re behind the times. You feel the attitudes more general in society have moved very substantially and our industry wants to keep up with them.”

Mr Pearce said it was the most accelerated cultural shift

the industry had seen. Both Mr Pearce and Mr Everingham said the industry was ready for change and wouldn’t wait for inquiry recommendations from the committee, chaired deputy Liberal leader Libby Mettam, to start the process.

The momentum has been such that Ms Mettam said her committee was looking to complete a stocktake of progress since the start of its inquiry before collating recommendations. A task force formed by the CME is preparing its own industry recommendations to create long-lasting change, planned for release in the new year, which may standardise politics and initiatives throughout the sector.

Rio’s iron ore chief executive Simon Trott said the inquiry had united the industry in its desire to stamp out sexual harassment and sexual assault.

“Work does not stop at the conclusion of the inquiry. At Rio Tinto, we have a major body of work under way to prevent sexual harassment, to provide support to anyone impacted and to create long-term cultural change,” he said.

Significant investments have already been made by several companies, from developing new training material and courses to holding on-site sessions, launching internal working groups, upgrading security or site configuration.

Energy giant Chevron will be among the last companies to

appear before the committee during its final hearing on Wednesday. A spokesperson said Chevron had volunteered to appear, an indication of the company’s desire for a solution to the problem.

McMahon chief executive and managing director Mick Finnegan said the major contractor was devoting more time and resources to addressing the issue.

“A longstanding female employee who I met with this week feels that these changes are already making a positive difference and giving people confidence to speak up,” he said.

“There is no doubt that the inquiry and the media reporting has shone a spotlight on an issue that needs addressing immediately.”

Chronic under-reporting that hid the extent of the problem was highlighted by several companies The West Australian spoke to.

Mr Pearce and Mr Finnegan said more work needed to be done to create appropriate avenues for victims to come forward and to make them feel comfortable and trusting that their complaints would be actioned.

Fortescue CEO Elizabeth Gaines said while the committee’s research was important, the company had launched its own Workplace Integrity Review to understand the issue.

“We are confident that employers in the mining sector can be leaders in preventing workplace sexual harassment, just as we have been leaders in the field of ensuring workplace safety,” she said.

Key initiatives have included following BHP and Rio’s lead to limit alcohol to four daily



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drinks, providing alternative social options, enhancing physical safety features, and refreshing training and induction programs.

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AMEC chief executive Warren Pearce





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Above: Mining company representatives Felicity Hughes, Linda O'Farrell, Paul Everingham, Simon Trott, Fiona Hick, Brandon Craig and Jessica Farrell. Below: Rio Tinto's Simon Trott, FMG's Elizabeth Gaines, and BHP's Brandon Craig.