

No 'macho' image needed for this miner

Bridgette Radebe has become a major player and a permanent feature in the landscape of the local mining industry, and thus far is sadly the only serious black female player. She says she does not believe she has to adopt a pseudo macho image to be taken seriously in a traditionally male dominated sector; she is feminine to the core. Shavana Mushwana spent some time with her:



Chairman of Mmakau Mining Bridgette Radebe, photographed with Shaft Sinker's Piet Nel. She says that when she started out 15 years ago there was only legislation that said as a black person she could not get involved in mining, could not own mineral rights, and as a woman was legally barred from going underground."

Radebe likes relating how three National Union Metalworkers (NUM) officials: Kgalema Motlanthe, Cwede Mantashe and James Motlatsi all rolled on the floor with laughter the day she told them she was venturing into mining. That was 15 years ago.

Today Radebe sits at the helm of Mmakau Mining, a diversified mining company that has recently ventured into sinking shafts, through a 25% in Shaft Sinkers.

Mushwana: Are you happy with the current state of the industry visa vis Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)?

Radebe: "I am happy that a number of deals have been struck which considering the short space of time, is a good achievement, clearly partnerships at an equity level are happening to a certain extent. (Empowerdex a local economic empowerment rating agency says R12-billion in deals were concluded in 2003 as opposed to the R5-billion transactions of the previous two years).

"However, I am not happy with the implementation of broad based empowerment visa vis skills development, worker literacy and employment equity. There is clearly a lot of work that still has to be done in this regard. The other area that still needs a lot of attention is community involvement and development in those places where mining operations take place.

"To which extent are we going to make sure that the dividends benefit the respective communities, and the profits are invested in community development?" she asks.

Is it true that BEE transactions have so far only benefited a few individuals who are connected to the ruling party?

"I can only speak for myself. There was no ANC when I started out 15 years ago, there was no Mining Charter, only legislation that said as a black person I could not get involved in mining, could not own mineral rights, and as a woman I was legally barred from going underground. There was a strong belief among miners that if a woman went underground the mine would suffer a terrible accident. It was an industry dominated by exploitive labour practices especially in contract mining, and contractors were reduced to mercenaries.

"However it is important to point out that these supposedly 'few' individuals do not own any mines, they are not the investors. It is not the ANC or the government that own these companies and mines.

"That question," she adds, "is best directed to these old established companies. Ask them why they are choosing these partners. But I think it is also critical to point out that BEE con-

"The people leading these transactions, in reality own a small stake of the partnerships, but because they are chairing these transactions a perception is created that they own all the shares.

"Because a person is the face of the transaction, unfortunately a perception is created that the entire 25% stake is his, and when you interrogate the deal you find that he actually owns a very small stake.

"In some of these transactions you also need a dynamic leader who will make the financiers come on board. In certain instances when mine owners approach banks with an unknown face, the financiers will refuse to entertain the deal, as mining is considered a high risk," Radebe explains. "And precisely because mining investments are considered high risk, many institutions view it as venture capital and they do not readily fund mining investments especially if it is exploration.

"Deal making is also a two-fold process; anybody who wants to be an entrepreneur must go out and hunt for jobs.

"If I could crack it in the dark days of apartheid, what would make it difficult for people that are not politically connected to succeed," she asks.

What do you think motivates white capital to seek out such individuals?

"I don't know what these people think, I don't know because I am not there when these decisions are made. All I know is that Mmakau Mining has a track record with skills and capacity that would encourage any investor to pursue a business relationship with the company."

What can black business do to discourage this mindset?

"We can try to raise the levels of consciousness about broad-based empowerment. I believe the Minister has displayed leadership in this regard.

"We should continue to encourage established firms to target individuals and groups that are not in the spotlight, people with the spirit of entrepreneurship and a solid business track record of running successful operations in the townships for instance. I would also like the big players to forge closer links with organisations like the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce, the South African Mining

What can black business do to discourage the rent a black syndrome?

"In my case I have been proactive in my capacity as SAMDA chairperson, in establishing a database of black mining companies, and canvassing the big players to include these companies in their transactions.

"It's very annoying and disheartening, when partners are roped in for the convenience of a tender process, only to discover that beyond the bidding process, these partners do not play any meaningful role, or they get bought out for ridiculously low fees. It is usually small companies that are guilty of this practice.

"While the black partners might not be able to run the first mine, the partnership should be designed in such a way that they should be groomed to run the second mine; if there is no second or third mine, make sure there is a transfer of skills.

Are you happy with all aspects pertaining to the mining legislation?

"I would like to see the budget of a body like Mintek and other science councils enhanced, so that they can continue with robust projects in research and technology.

"I think the Royalty Bill should be levied on profit and not gross revenue, because while the legislation is designed to address our needs, it can potentially destroy newcomers into the industry, because in most cases there is no revenue, especially in the BEE companies. I also think the Royalty Bill should only kick in, in five years time, when the conversion from the old order law to the new order law has been completed.

"Institutions like the University of the North (UNIN) and the University of North-West should have mining faculties; it does not make sense that a place in the rural areas where the mines and minerals are located is not a breeding ground for mining academic culture. I am happy that UNIN has started a faculty of mines; I would like it to become more robust. That's where the bulk of black people go to varsity.

"I am very happy with the labour laws when it comes to protecting the rights of workers; it is very difficult today to exploit workers.

"The politicians have done their job; it is for us the business people to start the implementation.

Are you and your brother (Patrice Motsepe) about to form a mining dynasty?

"I think it is more a question of the background that we grew up in; because our community was robbed of their mining royalties, mining became an inextricable part of our lives.

"If it does happen that Patrice and I work together, I am sure that the company would be a very dynamic one for as long as the patriarchal culture of our society and mining industry does not undermine the contributions of the female partner."

You have just bedded a deal with Shaft Sinkers, are we to assume that wherever Mmakau operates it will be partnered by Shaft Sinkers?

"Ideally that should be the case, I will always motivate for Shaft Sinkers' involvement, but I will also have to take into account the views of my business partners. There is no better mining construction and shaft sinking company than Shaft Sinkers."

What is on the horizon?

"In the next few years I am looking forward to sinking more shafts, not only on our mines, but I am looking beyond South Africa. I am passionate about the rest of Africa, and this agreement with Shaft Sinkers was signed under the auspices of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)." ■