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# Women Must Move From Participation to Leadership in Mining: Vedanta CEO Deshnee Naidoo

*Women represent over 23% of our workforce, contributing across operations, technical functions and leadership roles, and we are targeting over 50% women hiring among fresh STEM, said Vedanta CEO*



**Himanshu Ojha**

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## Summary of this article

- Deshnee Naidoo, CEO of Vedanta Resources Limited, discusses her leadership journey and the barriers women still face in the mining industry.

- Deshnee Naidoo highlights how technology and progressive policies can help increase women's participation in mining and heavy industry.
- Deshnee Naidoo explains why leadership support and structural reforms are key to closing the gender gap in mining.

As the mining and metals sector undergoes a transformation driven by the energy transition and rising demand for critical minerals, it continues to remain one of the most male-dominated industries. In this context, **Deshnee Naidoo, CEO of Vedanta Resources Limited**, reflects on her leadership journey, the barriers women still face in heavy industry, and how technology, policy support and organisational change can help create more opportunities for women in mining.

**Q You are among the few women leading a global mining and metals major. What were the defining moments in your journey that shaped you as a leader?**



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**A** The defining moments that shaped me professionally and personally stem from the intersection of opportunity and circumstance.

I was awarded an Anglo American bursary to study engineering in 1994, which is how I entered the mining industry.

I became Chief of Staff to the CEO of Anglo American, Cynthia Carroll, in 2009 and thereafter became the first non-CA CFO for the Thermal Coal division. Seeing one of the most powerful women in mining in action made my career dream feel closer to reality — both in the way she drove for results and in how she remained a 'hands-on mum'.

I became CEO of Vedanta Zinc International in 2014, at 38. Our Chairman, Anil Agarwal's belief in me motivated me to go above and beyond. We built the greenfield Gamsberg Zinc Mine project in South Africa 46 years after its discovery. Our Chairman's purpose of giving back to society deeply shaped my leadership approach.

As CEO of Vale Base Metals in 2023, we carved out the business from the Group at a \$26 billion valuation to better support the global energy transition.

As CEO of the Vedanta Group for the past year, I have been leading the organisation through its demerger and multiple growth plans to support India's rising demand for natural resources.

All these diverse experiences and defining moments have taught me about innovation in business transformation, taking stakeholders along, using positions of authority to serve society, and embedding safety and sustainability into all solutions.

**Q Mining remains one of the most male-dominated industries. What invisible barriers still exist for women at the top?**

**A** Progress in our industry is real and measurable, and I want to acknowledge that first. At Vedanta, our Chairman has been a strong advocate for gender diversity and has asked us to build a roadmap to achieve 35% women representation across all levels of the organisation. Today, women represent over 23% of our workforce, contributing across operations, technical functions and leadership roles, and we are targeting over 50% women hiring among fresh Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM) recruits.

That said, structural and cultural barriers still persist across the industry. Women are often expected to balance demanding careers alongside societal expectations of being primary caregivers. In the workplace, unconscious biases can still shape perceptions about the roles women should occupy, particularly in physically intensive or operational environments.

At senior levels, the barriers can be even more subtle. Beyond bias from colleagues, there can sometimes be internalised doubts that women themselves carry about stepping into leadership roles.

At Vedanta, having our Chairman Anil Agarwal as a strong sponsor of this agenda sends a powerful signal across the organisation. Ultimately, breaking these invisible barriers requires not just representation, but sustained sponsorship, cultural change and the confidence for women to step forward and lead.

**Q Globally, women account for a small percentage of the mining workforce. What structural changes are needed to meaningfully increase participation — especially in operational and field roles?**

**A** Increasing women's participation requires systemic change across the entire value chain. First, operational environments must be designed for diversity from the outset. This includes site infrastructure, equipment design, safety gear and accommodation standards so that everyone on site feels safe, respected and supported.

Second, the talent pipeline must be strengthened through earlier engagement in STEM education, vocational training and technology-led learning. At Vedanta Limited, women now account for over 35% of our STEM fresher hiring.

Equally important is career progression. Our V-Aspire leadership programme, powered by AI-led assessments, has accelerated the development of over 200 leaders in the past six months. This is complemented by progressive people policies including flexible work hours, a monthly 'No Questions Asked' work-from-home day, childcare sabbaticals and spouse hiring support, enabling women to navigate different life stages without stepping away from long-term careers.

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BY **Priya Agarwal Hebbar**

**Q Safety, infrastructure, and cultural biases often deter women from core mining roles. What practical reforms can companies implement immediately?**

**A** At Vedanta, we have been actively adapting our ecosystem to enable both women and men to thrive. The opportunity today is greater than the challenge, because modern mining and manufacturing are being redesigned and inclusion can be built into that transformation from the outset.

Practical reform begins with operational fundamentals. This includes PPE designed for all body types, safe and reliable transport, hygienic facilities, inclusive shift structures including night shifts backed by enhanced safety systems, and predictable rosters.

Technology is also reshaping heavy industry. Automation, tele-remote operations and digital control rooms are shifting the focus from physical strength to skill, judgment and process discipline, creating a more level playing field.

For example, at Vedanta Aluminium, women are increasingly taking on frontline technical and operational roles across smelting, locomotive and power operations, supported by inclusive infrastructure and targeted training. Alongside this, we have strengthened workplace culture through gender bias and unconscious bias training programmes, and by consciously making our workplace language more gender-neutral.

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**Q India is pushing for manufacturing-led growth and critical mineral security. How can this expansion avoid repeating past gender gaps in heavy industries?**

**A** India is building its next generation of mines and factories at a moment when technology and talent pools are both evolving rapidly. If we replicate legacy industrial models, historical gender gaps will scale. But if inclusion is designed into new systems from the outset, the outcome can be very different.

The opportunity is significant. India's demographic dividend includes a large, young and technically skilled pool of women ready to participate in core industrial growth. Advancing women in mining is therefore not symbolic; it is a strategic talent decision.

Technology is already reshaping operational roles. At Hindustan Zinc Limited, digital mines and tele-remote operations at Rampura Agucha, Zawar and Sindesar Khurd mines are redefining frontline work. At Vedanta Aluminium, digital smelter control rooms, drones, and advanced process automation allow engineers to manage operations through real-time analytics. Similarly, Cairn Oil & Gas uses digital oilfields and remote well monitoring to manage complex field operations.

When modern technology and inclusive hiring converge, gender diversity becomes a natural outcome of next-generation industry.

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**Q What role should policy play in increasing women's participation in mining and metals?**

**A** Policy can be a powerful catalyst. The removal of restrictions on women working underground by the Government of India in 2019 was transformational. Following this reform, Hindustan Zinc Limited became the first company in India to deploy women engineers underground, appoint female underground mine managers and establish women-led underground mine rescue teams.

We are seeing similar progress across other businesses. At Cairn Oil & Gas’s Mangala Processing Terminal, women have been working night shifts since 2019, managing complex 24/7 hydrocarbon processing systems and ensuring uninterrupted production at one of India’s most critical energy assets.

The next step is to move from permitting participation to normalising it. Uniform national standards on night shifts, transport and workplace safety, along with stronger industry–academia partnerships, can help scale women’s participation across the sector.

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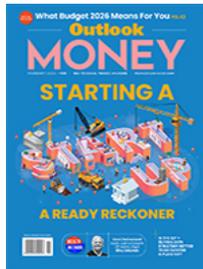
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