

RESOURCIFIED BODIES: WOMEN MINERS' NARRATIVES OF LIMITS, RESISTANCE, AND CREATIVITY

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This article focuses on the gender dimensions of the mining industry in the Prionezhie district in Karelia (Northwestern Russia). It analyzes the formation of female workers' gendered subjectivities through their close engagement with ornamental stones: gab-bro-diabase and raspberry quartzite. The article uses the concept of resourcification to explore how industrial regimes render both materials and human bodies as extractable sources of value. During Soviet times, men in the quarries of Karelia were involved in blasting operations and stone transportation, while women did manual work such as cutting, polishing, and loading the stone. Close sensory interactions with diabase and quartzite resulted in women's vulnerability to stone-caused diseases such as silicosis. At the same time, women miners have developed strong emotional attachments toward diabase and quartzite while engaging with the stone daily. Female interviewees also expressed astonishment and pride at the limits their bodies could withstand when performing hard work. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the diabase and quartzite quarries were closed or privatized. Today, most men in Prionezhie still work in the quarries, while women are no longer involved in the mining industry due to changes in state legislation. The article focuses on three interconnected narratives prominent in the interviews: mining as symbolic imprisonment, resistance against the imposed limits, and the creative connections of women miners with the decorative stones they produced. Using Karen Barad's concept of cyborgian agency, the article reconsiders the relations between humans and materials in industrial settings and views them as a mutual transformation of interrelated actors.

Keywords: Material Power; Gendered Labor; Subjectivity; Resourcification; Cyborgian Agency; Women Miners; Extractive Industries; Post-Soviet Mining; Karelia

On the last Sunday of August, several villages in Prionezhskii District¹ of Karelia (in Northwestern Russia) celebrate Miner's Day.² The tradition is significant to many residents, given that stone quarries are the primary source of local jobs. During the celebration, the miners—all men—receive awards and praise, while their wives and mothers take secondary roles congratulating them and taking photos. However, until the mid-1980s, local women worked alongside their male counterparts, sometimes in more physically challenging positions, and received similar awards for their toil. This article charts the history of women's engagement in the mining industry in Karelia. Viewing gender as an interrelation of discursive and material practices (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2003), it analyzes the formation of female workers' subjectivities through their close engagement with ornamental stones.

Subjectivity is a dynamic process of constituting a relationship with oneself. In line with Michel Foucault's thinking, I see this relationship as produced through practices and activities (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987). The article contributes to the discussion of "Soviet subjectivity" as the construction of individuals' personalities under the influence of Soviet power discourses (Halpin and Hellbeck 1996; Naiman 2001; Uhl 2013). The research on Soviet subjectivity focuses on Soviet state power as a productive force creating new forms of identification that many citizens agreed with and eventually internalized (Hoffmann 2002). In the interviews, Prionezhie miners replicate state-promoted discourses of productivity and the high importance of dedicated labor. Even though they discuss their experiences through metaphors of "imprisonment" and mention cases of subtle resistance against imposed limits, they nevertheless operate within a specific labor discourse created by diffused state power.

In the article, I analyze this discourse using the concept of resourcification as outlined by Asia Bazdyrieva, which nowadays is especially pronounced in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to Bazdyrieva, "resourcification" implies that a specific territory, its natural resources, and the people residing there are viewed "as an operational space, merely a site for material transaction" (2022:2). The representation of human labor and bodily energy as a material resource ultimately justifies regimes of power, placing residents into a subordinate position of "providers" and exercising an extractivist approach toward their bodies. The concept of resourcification brings together humans and materials through their common conceptualization as resources from the periphery used by the symbolic "center." The peripheral territory of Prionezhie and miners' bodies and bodily capabilities become resourcified, that is, are seen as a resource in Soviet and post-Soviet industrial

¹ The name of the district means "near the Onega Lake." In this article I mostly use the colloquial name of Prionezhskii District—Prionezhie.

² The word "miner" is used in this article as a translation of the Russian word *gornik* referring to the workers of the mining industry, employed in underground mines, open-pit mines, and quarries. Another translation of the word is *shakhter*, primarily referring to workers in underground mines. The Miner's Day holiday was initiated in the Soviet Union in 1948, and the last Sunday of August was selected as a commemoration to Aleksei Stakhanov's record of mining 227 tons of coal in a single shift on August 30–31, 1935.

discourses. Workers' bodies become "docile bodies" (Foucault 1995), or objects of policies' execution. This is especially relevant for women in the mining industry: As state policies were changing, women were encouraged to enter the realm of heavy industry in the 1930s or to leave it in the late Soviet period. In the situation when demand for stone as a valuable resource was high in the state, women miners were also seen as an important resource for rapid industrialization.

At the same time, I argue that women miners' gendered subjectivities in Karelia are formed by specific practices of their close corporeal interactions with stone. The connections they build with the mining industry serve as "micro-powers" or "points of confrontation" (Foucault 1995:27) questioning the limits of productivity, bodily endurance, and femininity. The article complements studies on gendered subjectivities constructed through corporeal-material interaction (Golubev and Smolyak 2013; Krmpotich et al. 2015; Naji 2009). In line with Karen Barad's argumentation, it discusses the materiality of decorative stones as "not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency" (2003:212), focusing on miners and the resources they produce as co-alesced, or, using Barad's term, "cyborgian," agents (211). The article centers around three interrelated themes that are often present in the interviews with former mining workers: mining as a symbolic imprisonment, workers' resistance against the imposed limitations and their expansion of bodily capacities, and, finally, labor as a creative activity leading toward the formation of "cyborgian" agents.

In the article, I discuss the experiences of Soviet women beyond traditional "feminine spheres" such as motherhood and beauty practices (Gradszkova 2007), domestic labor (Klots 2018), or consumption strategies (Ilic 2020). In contrast to these "feminine" domains, discourses of heavy physical labor as a "tough" job, requiring strength and expertise, are commonly used by male workers to construct their masculine identities (Soni-Sinha 2010; Soni-Sinha and Yates 2013; Vanke 2014). Existing studies focusing on Soviet women crossing the boundary between the "feminine" and "masculine" spheres tend to center on the mobilization of women during pivotal periods of turmoil such as the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War (Nikonova 2008; Rowley 2008) or the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945 (Krylova 2010; Markwick 2018). However, the involvement of Soviet women in heavy physical labor was rather an example of the "everyday and the mundane . . . often ignored and overlooked" (Ilic 2020:1). Soviet industry started to employ women in the 1930s, often in physically demanding and the least skilled positions (Goldman 2001). The employment of women followed two parallel trends: While occupying traditionally "female" industries such as textiles and sewing, they simultaneously entered the spheres heavily dominated by men, such as mining or machine building (Goldman 2002). By 1940, they constituted 41 percent of the industrial workforce, and their involvement in heavy industries remained high in the years after the Great Patriotic War (Conze 2001). Many women are still employed in low-paid positions and are exposed to occupational health risks in the industrial enterprises and factories of post-Soviet Russia (Olimpieva and Ezhova 2009; Pinchuk 2018), similar to other geographical contexts, such as China (Ngai 2004) or Malaysia (Ong 2010). Although industrial workers represent a large proportion of the Russian

population,³ there is a lack of research on their everyday lives. Therefore, workers become “an invisible group in Russian society” (Polukhina et al. 2017:4). Studies focusing on the experiences of Soviet and post-Soviet women workers are especially rare, and there has been no previous research on women miners in Prionezhie.

The article concentrates on several villages in the district of Prionezhie where Veps,⁴ an Indigenous Finno-Ugrian minority of Russia, reside. The area is rich in gabbro-diabase and raspberry quartzite,⁵ rare stones used for decoration on buildings and in the construction of pavements and monuments. The rapid growth of the mining industry dates to the early Soviet period. Since then, the majority of locals in this area have been employed in the quarries. Whereas men worked with explosives and were engaged in stone transportation, women performed the manual labor required to produce bricks and stone tiles and line the kilns. Women were also engaged in tasks requiring significant physical strength, such as loading diabase and quartzite on barges that transported the stone by water. Additionally, women were employed at the quarry sites’ indoor positions such as cafeteria operatives, boiler room managers, or cleaners. At the time I did my fieldwork, few local women were involved in the stoneworking industry on account of changes in Russian legislation: A set of state policies restricting women’s employment in heavy industries was adopted in 1978–1983.⁶

I refer in this article to the Soviet and post-Soviet narratives of my interviewees, the Prionezhie stoneworkers. The term “stoneworker” is used as a translation of the Veps word *kiviradnik* for a person engaged in different types of work with stone, including extraction, cutting, shaping, polishing, and loading. The historical period I describe as “Soviet times” primarily extends from the 1950s through the 1980s, when majority of my interviewees were employed in the quarries. When I refer to the post-Soviet experiences of stoneworkers, I concentrate on the period after the privatization of local quarries in the 1990s until my fieldwork in 2015–2018. I view a personal narrative as “a way of using language . . . to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order” (Ochs and Capps 2002:2). The narratives, as sets of interrelated themes, relate to concrete individuals, but simultaneously reflect a specific historical period (Caplan 1999). Narratives serve as versions of reality that are “governed by convention and ‘narrative necessity’ rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness” (Bruner

³ According to the Russian Federal State Statistics Service, in 2019, 26.8 percent of the total working population of Russia were employed in the mining sector, manufacturing, electrical and hydraulic engineering, and construction (Rosstat 2020).

⁴ Veps mainly reside in three regions of Russia: Karelia, Leningrad Oblast, and Vologda Oblast. This article focuses on northern Veps (or Prionezhie Veps) residing in Karelia.

⁵ Both stones are also referred to colloquially as diabase and quartzite, or collectively as “the stone” (in Russian, *kamen*’).

⁶ The list of restricted occupations for women was adopted by the USSR State Committee on Labor and Social Policy in 1978, with amendments added in 1987 and 1990 (Anti-Discrimination Center “Memorial” 2018). Additional restrictions were applied by governmental decrees issued in 1981, 1982, and 1983. As my interviewees recalled, the employment structure of stone quarries started changing in the mid-1980s, when women were gradually removed from occupations involving direct engagement with stoneworking equipment or lifting heavy weights.

1991:4). Accordingly, in this article I deal with versions of the past as experienced by my interviewees at the time of our encounter. My interest here is in why and how these versions are constructed, preserved, and presented.

The materialities of the female workers' bodies and of stone interconnect. Symbiotic relations between bodies and materials create interdependencies and parallels of human and nonhuman life trajectories (Vazyanau 2023): As demand for ornamental stones declines, their producers feel that they are not needed in society anymore. In their close interaction with materials and machines, mining workers develop a "cyborgian" form of agency, when human bodily productions are enhanced through intra-actions between "humans" and "nonhumans" (Barad 2003:211). The hardships of quarry work combined with household duties evoke specific narratives of confinement and limitation. Simultaneously, they awake the female workers' creative potential and their feeling of pride about their bodily strength and endurance, as well as their capacity to work extra hours and successfully manage work and household tasks.

METHODOLOGY AND THE OVERVIEW OF MINING DEVELOPMENT IN PRIONEZHIE

The article is based on semistructured biographical interviews conducted in three villages in Prionezhie, namely Shoksha, Rybreka, and Kvartsitnyi,⁷ as well as in Petrozavodsk, the capital of Karelia (see figure 1). Indigenous Veps are among the inhabitants of this part of Prionezhie. The region's ethnic composition changed in the second half of the twentieth century with the growth of mining activity. In the 1960s–1970s many Veps migrated from smaller villages to urban areas with better employment prospects (Strogaľshchikova 2014), while many workers moved to Prionezhie from other parts of the country in the 1960s–1980s.

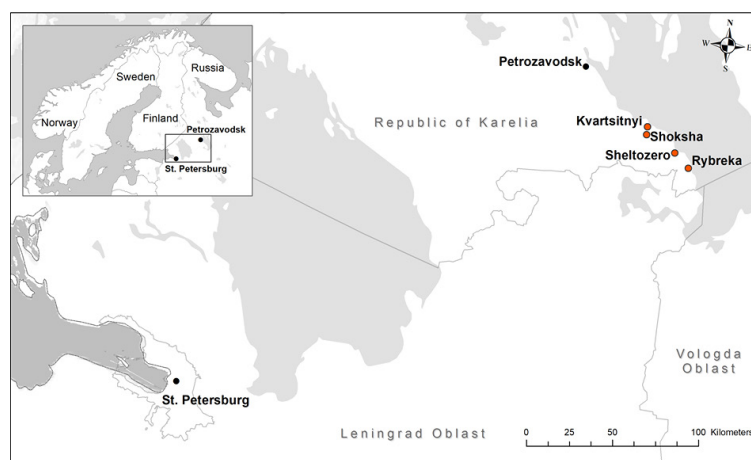


Figure 1. Veps villages in Prionezhie. Map by Anastasia Kvasha.

⁷ Kvartsitnyi received its name from the raspberry quartzite quarry (in Russian, *kvartsit*) situated next to it.

Prionezhie Veps began extracting gabbro-diabase and raspberry quartzite in the early eighteenth century, when the demand for building and pavement materials from the region grew due to the construction of Saint Petersburg (Strogaľshchikova 2014). The quarries from which dark-gray diabase is extracted are located near Rybreka village, whereas crimson-red raspberry quartzite is extracted near Shoksha. Both diabase and quartzite were used in the construction and ornamentation of well-known buildings and monuments in Russia and abroad, including the Red Square complex in Moscow and Napoleon's sarcophagus in Paris.

State-managed extraction of diabase and quartzite started in Prionezhie in the 1920s. The stones were used during the Soviet period not only for decoration but also for industrial purposes, such as in the production of glass. Production resumed in Prionezhie after World War II and was increasingly mechanized at that time. A new quarry containing diabase gravel opened near Shoksha village in 1971, and the new settlement of Kvartsitnyi was built next to it. State mining enterprises gradually went bankrupt during the 1990s after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the ensuing financial difficulties, and many were closed or sold to private owners. Currently, the extraction of raspberry quartzite near Shoksha village is almost at a standstill. Private companies of different sizes are engaged in diabase mining in Rybreka (see figure 2).⁸ At the time of my fieldwork, the local stoneworking industry predominantly employed men. Local women could be employed at diabase and quartzite quarries in occupations such as cleaning, administering workers' shifts, or cooking.



Figure 2. At a diabase quarry near Rybreka. Photo by author (2017).

As part of my PhD fieldwork in 2015–2018, I conducted 54 interviews with current (i.e., employed in the quarries at the time of the interview) and former mining workers (28 men and 26 women). Of the 28 male interviewees, 19 were current and 9 were former mining workers. Only one of the 26 female interviewees was employed in

⁸ The exact number of diabase mining companies registered in Rybreka may vary (during the fieldwork, I usually heard about eight or eleven companies), as some of them are registered in the region but do not operate.

the mining industry at the time of the interview (in a managerial position). In addition, I interviewed five local female residents and one local male resident who had never worked in diabase or quartzite mining but who were connected to the industry through their families (e.g., a close relative was thus employed).

The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours. The theme of women's employment in stoneworking was not raised separately as I had a different research focus at the time. However, this theme often emerged, in many cases accompanied by strong emotions, and therefore I became motivated to explore it further as a side topic. In the years following my initial field research in Prionezhie, personal experiences of pregnancy and motherhood further deepened my interest in the gendered aspects of miners' work, making me reflect more thoroughly on women's bodily capabilities and endurance as workers and childbearers.

The interview quotes used in this article are coded as follows: "AFD" (author's field data), "K" (Karelia), and the sequential number of the interview. I use pseudonyms for all the interviewees mentioned in the article. All interviews were conducted in Russian: Although I understand the Veps language, my Veps-speaking interviewees were bilingual and usually preferred to talk to me in Russian. Translations of quotes are my own.

Although embedded within my broader research on stoneworking and Indigenous/local identity, this article is based largely on several interviews with Veps women employed in the quarries starting from the 1950s. Alena (b. 1936, AFD K34) started loading diabase at the age of 15, in 1951, and she retired in 1986. Anis'ia (b. 1929, AFD K22) worked at the diabase quarry between 1951 and 1982; her main duties included transporting mining instruments by narrow-gauge railway (in Russian, *uzkokoleika*). Galina (b. 1937, AFD K2) started working in the Shoksha quartzite quarry in 1960, manually cutting and shaping quartzite bricks, and she retired in 1987. Evgeniia (b. 1930, AFD K33) worked as a manual laborer loading diabase for 20 years, starting in 1951, after that she loaded the stone using an excavator, and then she was moved to "light labor" (in Russian, *legkii trud*) until her retirement.⁹ Zhanna (b. 1939, AFD K30) worked as a cutter and polisher of diabase bricks in Rybreka between 1968 and 1985.

During the interviews, I asked my informants whether they self-identified as Veps or non-Veps. The Indigenous identity of Veps is a fluid and dynamic category, not set in the rigid definitions of Indigenous peoples employed by the Russian state (Varfolomeeva 2019). I do not discuss the experiences of the Veps and non-Veps interviewees separately in this text, nor do I focus on the theme of Veps indigeneity. However, the long-term involvement of northern Veps in stoneworking has strongly influenced the perception of mining as a traditional economic activity in Prionezhie. I should also point out that there were certain differences in employment between local Veps and non-Veps women moving to Karelia in the 1960s–1980s. The recruitment of local women to work in quarries started in the early days of the Soviet industrial development, and they were largely engaged in unskilled labor. However, some of them were

⁹ "Light labor" could mean a reduction of production rates or a transfer to another job that reduces exposure to harmful factors.

promoted to higher positions after completing courses or nonresident training. Many of the women migrating to Karelia in the 1960s–1980s occupied positions that required specific skills, as engineers or mine surveyors, for example. Nevertheless, this division is not strict, and I also interviewed non-Veps engaged in unskilled labor.

In my discussion of the general conditions of women's employment in the quarries I complement the interview data with Soviet material published in local newspapers of Prionezhskii District, namely *Kommunist Prionezh'ia* (The Communist of Prionezhie) and *Krasnoe Sheltozero* (The Red Sheltozero; Sheltozero is the main Veps village in Prionezhie). I also relied on the essay collection of the well-known Karelian journalist Ivan Kostin (1931–2015), *Kamennykh del masters* (Masters of stoneworking; 1977), as one of the rare local publications devoted to the mining workers of Prionezhie. Significantly, the vast majority of Kostin's characters are men. Only a brief section of the book (pp. 45–47) concerns women employed in the quarries. Within this article, I aim to explore the position of women as silent actors in the history of stoneworking in Prionezhie.

DOCILE BODIES AND MATERIAL POWER

It is suggested in this article that the formation of gendered subjectivity in women miners was influenced by dominant state discourses translated by management on the local level. In my analysis of state-level labor discourse, I do not view the Soviet state as a unified entity or an "it" (Joyce and Bennett 2010). As Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov notes, Soviet-type governmentality was effective precisely because the state was "widely dispersed in the minutiae and texture of everyday life" (2003:203). Similarly, Alexei Yurchak (2006) refers to the wide distribution of standardized Soviet discourse throughout everyday scenes or interactions. Stephen Kotkin (1995) also demonstrates that Soviet mechanisms of power coexist on multiple levels, including the very ordinary practices sustaining the state just as well as its primary institutions, such as the police. Therefore, I see state power as being distributed among different actors, including managers of the quarries and local administration in the villages.

My analysis of women's corporeal relations with stone is based on Foucault's notion of the "docile body" as a fluid object toward which disciplinary power is executed. The disciplining of docile bodies is facilitated through institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and schools, which act as coproducers of power. In Foucault's view, power is dispersed in society, and its relations are "not univocal; they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability . . . and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations" (1995:27). Disciplinary practices function ambivalently: They simultaneously challenge the specific limits they place on bodies with a view to improving bodily capacities and offering grounds for resistance (McLaren 2012; Pickett 1996). Therefore, the body is never fully docile: Although an object of power, it is also a locus of resistance to imposed limits.

Foucault's theorizing about embodied power relations has been instrumental in discussions concerning the construction of femininity (McLaren 2012), but it was simultaneously challenged and expanded to include the gender dimension of docili-

ty. As Sandra Lee Bartky notes, "Foucault treats the body . . . as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life," whereas she focuses primarily on disciplinary enactments that produce "a body which in its gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine" (1997:132). However, as Jill McCorkel points out, the gendering of bodies is not enacted solely by institutions aiming at constructing masculine or feminine bodies, and gendered docile bodies may be produced by institutions "whose stated mission is directed to other goals" (2003:45). The diabase and quartzite quarries, which made a vital contribution to the general discourse of Soviet industrialization, reflected the notion of the "Soviet working woman" successfully balancing her contribution to the country's economy with household duties and childbearing. These images were in line with the general Soviet discourse about women as actively engaged in the socialist conquest (Golubev 2016; Kiblitckaya 2000; Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2004) while simultaneously valuing motherhood as "the highest form of service" (Issoupova 2000:32) and bearing manifold responsibilities of the organization of everyday family life such as cooking, clothing the family, washing the clothes, or organizing and tidying the living space.

As Foucault points out, it is impossible to speak about power relations if subjects are not free. A certain degree of freedom exercised by all involved actors is needed to make such relations what they are: mobile, fluid, and unfixed processes (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987). If power relations are viewed as dynamic and constantly changing, engagement with materials may create a point of resistance that temporarily overturns established narratives. Therefore, power could be viewed as a "genuine material issue," manifested in relationships and assemblages between humans and their creative, scientific, or technical works (Witzgall 2017:19). Women miners in Prionezhie constructed their subjectivities through close everyday interactions with stone and stoneworking machines. By training their bodies, balancing work and household duties, and realizing their creative potential, these women question the limits imposed by the quarries as institutions of state power. Instead, they value the idea of "limitlessness": endless endurance, steadily increasing production, and continuity in the mining industry in Prionezhie.

POWER, LIMITS, AND LIBERATION IN MINING NARRATIVES

This section focuses on three interconnected themes that arose in the interviews with former and current miners in Prionezhie as they discussed the Soviet period of operations in the quarries. The first is the feeling of being "imprisoned" or limited by quarry management and the hardly bearable working conditions it imposed; the second is the miners' perceived resistance to imposed limits by increasing bodily strength and productivity; and the third is the creative element of labor and the construction of "cyborgian agency" by the miners as a result of their interaction with stone. These themes illustrate the interplay between docility and "intra-activity" (Barad 2003:189) in mining narratives. Whereas women stoneworkers are presented as subjects of state power and the resources of industrialization through the metaphor of "imprison-

ment," they are simultaneously viewed as agents entering into a creative relationship with diabase and quartzite and questioning the limits of their bodies.

MINING AS IMPRISONMENT: "WHAT DID YOU DO TO BE SENT HERE?"

When I was doing my fieldwork, I was surprised to hear numerous comparisons between working in the quarries and being in prison. Sometimes, these references seemed subtle and were very brief: "We transported the stone on trolleys, like prisoners" (AFD K40). In other cases, prison-related narratives took the form of anecdotes about encounters between anonymous "delegations," "visitors," or "tourists" and female stoneworkers. In such anecdotes the "delegation" members or tourists are appalled to see the local women's working conditions and take them for prisoners in Soviet labor camps, not believing it is possible to do such a job voluntarily. In some versions the quarry management interferes and prohibits further encounters between "delegations" and stoneworkers to keep the harsh labor conditions secret:

Once, some delegation arrived at the raspberry quarry, and they were shocked to see the conditions. They asked our women, "What did you do to be sent here?" (AFD K6)

There was a case once. . . . Foreign tourists took a trip to the quarry, and they asked our women how many years they had to serve. The tourists thought they were prisoners! The women said, "We are not serving time, we work here voluntarily!" . . . After that, no more tourists were let into the quarry, and no tourist ship ever docked here! (AFD K2)

Many people worked in the quarry, including many women. Once, a film was being shot here, right by the raspberry quarry. When the crew visited this place, they were surprised: Only prisoners engage in such a labor! That is why they chose this location to film a prison scene. . . . They [the crew] asked us why we worked like this, if we were prisoners or if we were in exile. But no, just ordinary people worked here. (AFD K43).

Forced labor existed in the Soviet Union since its early years. In the late 1920s, the Gulag appeared as a network of forced labor camps. The Gulag system reached its peak during the 1930s–1950s. The comparisons between mining and forced labor may have their origin in the narratives about Gulag labor camps. Several well-known Gulag camps, such as Vorkutlag (established in 1938) and Rechlag (established in 1948) near the city of Vorkuta in the Komi Republic, focused on coal mining, as they were built next to the largest coalfield of European Russia and provided coal for the needs of the World War II and postwar reconstruction (Barenberg 2014). In Karelia, a labor camp (Belbaltlag) was established in 1931 and focused on the construction of the White Sea–Baltic Canal. The narratives of prison-like work in Karelia also go back to the 1950s when the Gulag system was still in force. Karelia's location in the Russian North, relatively close to the mining labor camps of Komi, and its own history of forced labor may have influenced the circulation of prison narratives among the miners of Prionezhie.

Eventually, I managed to trace the origin of the prison narratives during my interview with Lada, a former mining worker (AFD K43). Scenes from the Lithuanian film *The Flowering of Unsown Rye* (in Russian, *Tsvetenie neseiannoi rzhi*; 1978) were filmed

at the quartzite quarry in Prionezhie in the late 1970s. These scenes depicted the imprisonment of the main character. The incident was later transformed into an anecdote comparing miners with prisoners. The repeated telling of prison-related stories during the interviews implied to me that such narratives carried deep meaning for the interviewees. Many of my female informants noted that they were attracted to the quarry job despite the tough conditions, as it was better remunerated than other positions available for women in the villages and, in addition, offered prospects for earlier retirement. However, they simultaneously reflected on the limited alternative choices available to them. In this sense, although they did their job voluntarily, they chose it out of necessity, and thus it bore a resemblance to forced labor.

A number of interviewees mentioned direct physical difficulties experienced by women, such as the need to work outside. As Vasilii, a former miner, reflected: "The women stoneworkers worked outside, in these tiny cells [*iacheiki*; wooden units with walls but without a roof], cutting pavement bricks. Red Square was built out of those bricks. But the job was not so good; you try working with stone in the freezing cold!" (AFD K36). Another male interviewee started weeping during our conversation as he remembered his "poor mother" working with stone bricks in the cold weather (AFD K60). Additionally, narratives about harsh work conditions were often connected with having to lift heavy pieces of stone. Anis'ia worked on the narrow-gauge railroad transporting diabase between the quarry and the wharf, where it was loaded onto barges (see figure 3). As she mentioned in the interview, although the wagons transporting the diabase were operated by men, women loaded stone manually on the train and later on the barges (AFD K22).



Figure 3. Women stoneworkers on the narrow-gauge railroad in Rybeka.
Photo courtesy of an interviewee.

Another common narrative related to the limits imposed by mining is that of work-related illnesses. In many cases, working in the quarries affected men's and women's bodies differently. As men tended to work with machinery, many of my male informants mentioned hand vibration syndrome as a direct effect of mining on their bodies. On the other hand, women, who tend to work directly with stone when they cut or polish it, suffered in particular from silicosis—a lung disease caused by rock dust (AFD K31, K56). The theme of silicosis was so common in the interviews that my interlocutors sometimes called it just “the disease” (*bolezn'*), and the mentions of silicosis are often related to the theme of untimely death. Thus, Nadezhda reflected:

It's a wonder that I will turn 80 the day after tomorrow. When I got ill, I thought: That's it. . . . The matter was that when people started getting ill, they [the doctors] did not recognize it as silicosis. They treated it as tuberculosis. But silicosis cannot be treated like that. And when I got ill, I was not sent to the republican tuberculosis dispensary; that is why I am still alive. (AFD K41)

The women who had to lift heavy pieces of stone were also vulnerable to gender-specific illnesses. As Zhanna said, “In general, I feel well. Of course, I have uterine prolapse; it was so difficult to lift stone blocks onto the polishing machine and then put them back. . . . They don't look so large, but it was difficult” (AFD K30).

Additional limitations mentioned in the interviews related to the need for women to balance quarry work with household responsibilities and childcare. The work schedule in the quarries made very few allowances for pregnant and breastfeeding women. They had to do their usual work until the seventh month of pregnancy, when they were transferred to “light labor” (AFD K22). They were on leave for one month before the due date and one month after, but after that, there was no additional leave (AFD K33). Infants were placed in nurseries near the quarries, and the mothers used their work breaks, including lunch breaks, to breastfeed their children; food from the cafeteria was delivered to the nurseries at lunchtime (AFD K22).

The strain of combining heavy work in the quarries with duties at home created the feeling of continuously carrying an ever-present burden. While some interviewees noted that their husbands were also involved in household tasks, it is evident from the interviews that the housework and taking care of the children were predominantly women's responsibility. As Evgeniia said, “I was thinking at that time: How come I was still alive when I had this work? And then I had to wash by hand clothes for five people at home” (AFD K33). Similarly, Galina remarked, “It [the work] was tough, as I had two children at home. . . . After working a full day I went home to cook them meals. Many women worked like this” (AFD K2). Zhanna reflected on the routine of combining night shifts in the quarry with daily tasks at home, even though she had help:

Night shifts—well, one gets used to them, and then they are not hard. . . . When I returned home in the morning, the kids were already in daycare; my mother-in-law was helping me with that. Then I had to cook, and after that, I would go to sleep a bit. Before work in the evening, I would also sleep for an hour or two.

Then I would walk to work, being all sleepy. There was a bus to the quarry, but I always walked later. The bus was early, at half past 11, and I would leave home at a quarter to midnight and be at work by midnight. (AFD K30)

Through the symbolic comparison of quarry work to a prison or labor camp, the workers reflected on the limitations imposed by their work on their bodies, their health, and their daily routines. The metaphors of prison in most cases center on women's experiences, and indeed, the limitations imposed on women were often more severe: They needed to work outside, were exposed to stone dust, and had to lift heavy objects, which could result in stone-caused illnesses. Many women also needed to combine heavy work in the quarry with pregnancy, household duties, or caring for infants and older children. Women miners were seen by quarry management as an important resource in achieving the goals of industrialization, but their well-being and health were often neglected. However, the mere exercising of disciplinary power in the diabase and quartzite quarries led to subtle acts of resistance among women. The following sections of the article focus on the narratives of counteraction and the construction of women workers' subjectivities through daily interactions with the stone.

RESISTING BOUNDARIES: "THE STONES WERE FLYING IN MY HANDS!"

While reflecting on work-related difficulties, the interviewees pointed out that the hardship made them stronger physically and mentally, expanding their bodily capacities. As Evgeniia noted when sharing details of her work routine, "We had to be tough" (AFD K33). Women stoneworkers engaging in mining work in Prionezhie gradually increased their bodily strength and endurance. In this sense, the limiting power of the state-managed quarries simultaneously produced acts of resistance.

Examples of "toughness" given in the interviews fall into two categories. The first one is about overcoming physical limits for the sake of the industry: loading extra amounts of stone or working additional hours, for example. Given the strong promotion of the "labor collective" in Soviet discourse, workers were expected to invest in the well-being of industries and their work teams (Ashwin 1999). Working extra hours also gave them additional remuneration. Several of my interviewees reflected on their tough financial situation: "Our income was low. My whole salary was spent on daycare and nursery fees, and we spent my husband's salary on daily living" (AFD K33). Even so, many female interviewees said they were ready to work extra hours when necessary, stressing their willingness to help their enterprise and their labor collective. At the same time, doing more than was required officially gave these women stoneworkers more confidence in their bodily capacities and skills, and they felt stronger both physically and mentally.

The second category of examples is about refusing to do what is required or creating alternative work routines that go against official guidelines. In many cases, the rejection of quarry policies had potential health implications. Many quarry workers refused to wear protective gear, including masks shielding them from the stone dust that causes silicosis and gloves protecting their hands from scratches and bruising.

ing. Although such actions were potentially personally harmful, they simultaneously strengthened the agency of these female stoneworkers in terms of not complying with the administration's guidelines.

An example of the first category is the decision to work night shifts even if it was not compulsory. As Zhanna recalls, women with small children were exempted from working night shifts, but at times, due to the shortage of workers, extra help was needed. She was ready to work extra to help the diabase quarry if it was necessary, as she shares:

So, the men needed to deliver the order, and they started working three shifts, including the night shift. And someone needed to work the night shift for a whole week. . . . Our unit master said: We must not ask Zhanna to work night shifts; she has small children, so this is prohibited. But I told him: Of course I will work! My mother-in-law could take the children to daycare. (AFD K30)

In this quote, Zhanna expresses her understanding of the need to complete an important order on time. For this, she is willing to sacrifice her obligations at home. In her willingness to contribute to the well-being of the mining industry, she is a cocreator of disciplinary power. At the same time, in questioning the official night shift restrictions and doing extra work when not asked to do so directly, she constructs her subjectivity as a skilled miner and a valued member of the work collective.

The story of Alena, who worked in the stone-loading section—one of the most physically challenging in the diabase quarry—provides an additional example of overcoming physical limitations for the sake of productivity. Alena started working in the loading section when she was young, and at first, her mother came to help her. However, the other workers asked her not to do that: "You need time to get used to the work." Alena admits: "Indeed, I did get used to it; soon the stones were flying in my hands!" As Alena learned how to work with stone, she started to challenge official quarry policies: She did not wear a protective mask or gloves that, in her opinion, hindered productivity: "We had to load everything manually. . . I was also told: Don't load so much. But I said: It doesn't matter! So, we would put these 'barnacles' [face masks] and gloves in our pockets and load everything with our bare hands" (AFD K34).

Alena's story about not wearing gloves during loading work echoes the narrative of not wearing protective equipment that other mining workers shared. Engagement in stoneworking involves a high level of risk-taking. Many older respondents acknowledged that they did not always follow the instructions about protecting themselves against the negative effects of stone dust. As former workers remarked, the masks were uncomfortable to wear: "We were told to wear muzzles [face masks] and glasses, but we rarely did. It was hard to work like that—you would sweat more. You do not see it [the stone] when you're wearing glasses, so we took them off" (AFD K2). In fact, information about the dangers of stone dust was not properly communicated to the workers, hence people chose easier working conditions over vaguely formulated possible health risks.

In their narratives about avoiding masks and glasses or loading stone “with their bare hands,” these former workers express pride in their endurance and physical power. The decision not to wear a protective mask or gloves could also be viewed as exercising agency. In refusing to wear protective equipment that slows down the working process or deciding to take a night shift even when it is officially prohibited, the women question the limits established by the quarries and promote alternative work routines.

However, the fact that many of these self-established routines are harmful to their health strengthens the feeling of imprisonment. The quarries’ limiting power produced the acts of resistance, but these acts further placed the stoneworkers in the realm of dominant Soviet industrial discourses centered on resourcification. Since 1935, the record set by the miner Aleksei Stakhanov became promoted in Soviet work collectives as an example to follow. Stakhanov was seen as the symbol of a “New Man” and a model worker-hero inspiring a movement of Stakhanovite workers attempting to follow his achievements (Cunha et al. 2007). Although the Stakhanovite movement had some initial positive effects, such as realizing the creative potential of workers and increasing their pay for overproduction, in many cases it eventually turned into administration-initiated showcases or resulted in artificial distortions of workers’ actual achievements (Zykin 2021). Although the interviewees view their decisions not to wear protective equipment or to work extra hours as personal choices, it is important to note that these choices were at the same time an integral part of the general emphasis on overachievement and going beyond one’s limits promoted in Soviet industrial settings. Therefore, women miners’ subjectivities as knowledgeable workers willing to take initiative have been formed under the influence of industrialization discourses. Following Foucauldian thinking on the inseparability of power and resistance (Foucault 1990), we see that the acts of resistance among Prionezhie miners are nevertheless grounded in the established power relations between the miners and the quarry administration, or between citizens and the state.

“CYBORGIAN” AGENCY OF BODIES AND MATERIALS: “ALMOST LIKE A SCULPTOR”

This section further ties together the themes of imprisonment and resistance, discussing the role of materials in the formation of mining workers’ subjectivities in Prionezhie. It follows Karen Barad’s argument about the role of materiality “in the workings of power” (2003:809) and the importance of rethinking “one of the most stubborn of all dualisms—the animate/inanimate dualism” (Juelskjær and Schwenesen 2012:21). In this section, the analysis concerns the interplay of corporeal and material experiences among stoneworkers in the establishment of their subjectivities. After years of engagement with diabase and quartzite, Prionezhie miners developed a “cyborgian” form of agency (Barad 2003), when interaction with mining materials influenced their self-perceptions as skilled and knowledgeable masters. According to Donna Haraway’s well-known definition, a cyborg is “a hybrid of machine and organism” and “a creature in a post-gender world” (1991:149–150). For Haraway, cyborgs are meant to question the binaries between humans and animals,

humans and machines, or the organic and inorganic. However, cyborgs are not genderless: They question and reimagine established categories and simultaneously produce “new articulations of gender” (Taylor and Fairchild 2020:520). As Barad (2003) notes, the concept of “cyborgian agency” is important as it draws attention to agency as a matter of changes in bodies, and some of these changes take place through “intra-actions” between human and nonhuman organisms.

Both male and female stoneworkers in Prionezhie developed “cyborgian agency,” blurring the borders between their bodies and the resource they produced. However, given the separation of their tasks, men and women formed different types of cyborgian assemblages with mining materials and machines. For women, mining engagement often meant reinterpreting their relations with their bodies, increasing their strength through daily interactions with stone, and balancing their work roles with motherhood. Interestingly, a number of female interviewees, when recalling their working biographies, closely tied them with the birth of their children or other personal events; for example, “I moved to the diabase quarry a year after my second son was born” (AFD K2). This interweaving of professional and personal biographies is rarely present in male workers’ interview narratives.

Many women stoneworkers engaged in close corporeal-material relations with mining materials and equipment when they were cutting, shaping, polishing, manually transporting, and loading stone, and these daily routines resulted in deep emotional connections with the resource. These connections, in turn, fostered their sense of creativity—the process that “supports, nurtures, and actualizes life by increasing the number of choices open to individuals and communities” (Eisler and Montuori 2007)—or challenged established limits. Engaging in heavy labor allowed these women stoneworkers to extend their creativity far beyond traditional “feminine” spheres such as managing households and childcare, and through it, they contributed to the creation of well-known buildings and monuments, as well as vital elements of industrial production. In the interviews, women miners usually spoke about diabase and quartzite more affectionally than their male colleagues and reflected more on the stone’s beauty and rarity.

Both quartzite and diabase had a double status during the Soviet period of the quarries’ development. Due to their firmness and durability, they were widely used in industrial contexts (as grinding balls for bar mills used in glass production, for example) and in road surfacing. At the same time, because of their strong black and red colors, they were also widely used for decoration and were thus perceived as ornamental stones. Many interviewees ruminated on these diverse spheres of usage and expressed feelings of pride related to the stones’ physical qualities. As Nina, a former miner from Rybeka, noted, “Our diabase is the hardest stone. It is even used in nuclear stations, that’s how tough it is” (AFD K29).

The stones’ qualities are closely connected to the miners’ perceptions of their labor: Stoneworkers are valued for being tough and strong, as are diabase and quartzite. The importance of staying strong despite the hardship is emphasized in the interviews. As Galina, who worked at the quartzite quarry, noted, “there were people who came to work for three days and left, they . . . could not cope with the stone, of

course it was hard. But one could learn if one wanted to" (AFD K2). At the same time, many female interviewees remarked on the beauty of diabase and quartzite, their pure colors and extreme firmness. Faina expressed her feelings poetically: "It is amazing what color it [quartzite] has—the color of a ripe raspberry, of overripe berries. This is such a beautiful color" (AFD K24).

The beauty, value, and popularity of the stones made the work especially meaningful to the Prionezhie miners. Vladimir said, referring to his experience of working with diabase: "This is hard work, but you feel almost like a sculptor when you're doing it" (AFD K23). Zhanna interweaves the themes of hardship and creativity: "You know, the Eternal Light monument in Petrozavodsk is made of stone blocks. Can you imagine how hard it was to lift these blocks? But all of this we made with our own hands. . . . I worked in the stone-cutting section along with the men" (AFD K30). Zhanna connects the monument's materiality with her bodily memory, stressing the fact that she contributed to the creation of this landmark with "her own hands" and "along with the men." Through their labor, women stoneworkers needed constantly to prove their strength, their endurance, and their ability to keep up with their male colleagues. This continuous process of reclaiming capacities strengthened their bonds with their work.

The quarry administration promoted the connections that formed between the workers and the resources they produced. Thus, the medals that most productive stoneworkers received as a sign of appreciation for their labor were made of raspberry quartzite. Being rewarded with personal pieces of valuable stone represented the materialization of their efforts. Emma, one of my interviewees, showed me some of these medals. "Look," she said affectionately, turning the medal around as its deep red color flashed in the sun, "what a stone!" (AFD K40).

The interweaving of corporeal and material manifestations is visible in the interviewees' self-perceptions as creators who shaped well-known monuments or crucial elements of Soviet industry "with their own hands." Similarly, in the post-Soviet period, when state enterprises ceased operations and were later sold to private owners, many former workers symbolically connected the lack of demand for local stone with the sense of their own fragility: "Now we are not needed anymore" (AFD K22). As the mining industry continues to go down, and the rare stones produced in Prionezhie are losing their value, local workers struggle to find new meanings in the changing realities: Alienated from a declining industry, they are simultaneously detached from their creative potential as resource producers.

Although the closure of quarries became a point of rupture for both male and female interviewees, women stoneworkers were particularly strongly affected. In the early post-Soviet years in Russia, women were more often prone to unemployment and loss of social status (Sacks 1995). In Prionezhie, there has been a gradual decline in the demand for labor since the mid-1980s. Additionally, diabase and quartzite quarries nowadays employ only men as stoneworkers, and stone mining is included in the list of prohibited occupations for women in Russia. The prohibition of selected occupations is presented in the official discourse as a sign of care for the

reproductive health of women. However, the list could also be viewed as an act of disciplinary state power producing a distinct image of womanhood.

Several interviewees mentioned the limited opportunities for self-realization for women in contemporary Prionezhie. As a result, many of them leave to work in nearby cities such as Petrozavodsk or stay at home with the children while their husbands work in local quarries. The official statistics of unemployment in Prionezhie¹⁰ do not include those not actively seeking employment or employed part-time or temporarily. In Veps villages of Prionezhie, many households rely on men's employment, and therefore their stay-at-home wives are not seen as unemployed. Still, the lack of work for local women was repeatedly raised as a problematic point during my field visits. While local men are still constructing their identities as qualified miners, women need to take side jobs in the quarries as cleaners or cooks; in other words, they do not interact with the industry directly but rather assist male workers. Alternatively, they search for employment outside the quarries, for instance, in the local schools, daycare centers, shops, or post offices.

Nevertheless, the past involvement of women in stoneworking remains a part of local history. It is often remembered in informal conversations, either through the symbolic image of "poor women" or with astonishment at their strength and endurance. Women's direct engagement with stone, their concern for it, and their feelings of pride in its firmness, beauty, and recognizability formed their roles as cocreators of Prionezhie mining history.

CONCLUSION

This article discussed blurred boundaries between resourcified bodies and materials, focusing on two intertwined processes: the construction of resources and the formation of workers' subjectivities as producers of valuable stones. The state policies of resourcification positioned women's bodies and Karelian stone within the logic of profit and benefit. This situation results in multiple limitations imposed on workers' bodies by state power impacting their health and creating the feeling of being "imprisoned" by the quarry. However, bodies and materials are also brought together through daily embodied interaction, developing, as a result, a "cyborgian" form of agency enhancing their bodily productions through a relation formed with mining materials and the industry. This process led to acts of subtle resistance or questioning the limits imposed on workers' bodies by dispersed state power.

Whereas workers change the form of the stone by cutting and shaping it, the stone influences them as well, damaging their health but simultaneously making their bodies stronger. Just as the raw material evolves as a resource in the miner's hands, the stoneworker's subjectivity is constructed and reshaped in constant inter-

¹⁰ According to the weekly statistics collected by the Ministry of Labor of Karelia, unemployment was 1.13 percent in April 2025 (https://mintrud.karelia.ru/content/оперативная_информация). It was previously reported that, at the end of 2024, the unemployment rate in Karelia was 3.8 percent, placing the republic 73rd out of 85 Russian regions ranked by unemployment level (Stolitsa na Onego 2025).

action with the materials, instruments, and the industry itself. State-managed diabase and quartzite quarries started operating in Prionezhie in the early years of the Soviet period, and being among the primary local job providers, they largely shaped the self-perceptions of their workers in line with the new realities. As the stoneworkers were producing the resource, the industry simultaneously created their Soviet subjectivities.

Different forms of labor undertaken by men and women in Prionezhie had varying impacts on their bodies. Women worked closely with the mining materials; hence they suffered more from stone-caused illnesses such as silicosis. Due to lifting heavy objects, women stoneworkers also could develop gender-specific illnesses such as uterine prolapse. Their direct engagement with stone also meant that, at times, the working conditions were especially difficult, such as having to do their work outside even in extreme temperatures. These challenges, as well as strict regimes and strong control of work routines exercised by management, created a symbolic image of incarceration. The generalized image of a "poor woman" working outside in severe conditions could therefore be seen as the shared notion of being governed and controlled in a manner that bore a resemblance to imprisonment.

However, although being exposed to severe working conditions and going beyond the limits of their bodies, the women had additional avenues for exercising their agency as strong, capable workers equal to their male colleagues. Most of them were involved in manual labor, thereby engaging in a stronger corporeal-material entanglement between their bodies and the materials they produced. As a result, many women stoneworkers formed a deep attachment to diabase and quartzite as rare, beautiful stones that brought glory to Prionezhie and symbolically connected their villages with well-known places. They developed a "cyborgian" form of agency, such that direct engagement with materials gave them more confidence in their bodies as well as in their physical and mental capacities.

Although citizens are symbolically imprisoned and limited by the dispersed administrative power exercised in the stone quarries, they find alternative ways of expressing agency through creative entanglement with the material, willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of the industry, and refusal to follow established regulations. Through their engagement with mining materials and the blurring of boundaries between the material and the corporeal, the workers realize their creative potential as producers of a valued resource, reinforcing the relations of "agonism" between power and freedom (Foucault 1982:790). However, the post-Soviet period brought a sense of devaluation, both of the stone and of the women working with it. With the drop in demand for diabase and quartzite, women are almost completely excluded from working with stone. The prohibition of specific work for women is presented in contemporary Russian discourse as a sign of care—but it is nevertheless often viewed as a sign of governmental control. The restrictions on women's employment in stoneworking are presented as an act of liberation from the damaging effects of the occupation. However, they could also be viewed as a further confinement of Prionezhie women within specific state-produced discourses of femininity and motherhood.

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LIST OF CITED INTERVIEWS

Interview code	Place of the interview	Gender (m/f)
K2	Shoksha	f
K6	Shoksha	f
K22	Rybreka	f
K23	Rybreka	m
K24	Shoksha	f
K29	Rybreka	f
K30	Rybreka	f
K31	Rybreka	m
K33	Rybreka	f
K34	Rybreka	f
K36	Kvartsitnyi	m
K40	Kvartsitnyi	f
K41	Kvartsitnyi	f
K43	Kvartsitnyi	f
K56	Rybreka	f
K60	Rybreka	m

ТЕЛА КАК РЕСУРСЫ: НАРРАТИВЫ ЖЕНЩИН-ГОРНЯКОВ ОБ ОГРАНИЧЕНИЯХ, СОПРОТИВЛЕНИИ И ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ

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Исследование, результаты которого представлены в этой статье, было проведено при финансовой поддержке Центрально-Европейского университета и Европейского общества экологической истории (ESEH).

Автор выражает благодарность Юлии Карповой, Биргитте Бек Пристед, Ольге Гуровой и анонимным рецензентам за их комментарии и предложения, которые очень помогли в работе с ранними версиями этого текста.

В статье рассматриваются гендерные аспекты горнодобывающей промышленности в Прионежском районе Карелии (Северо-Запад России). Анализируется формирование гендерных субъективностей женщин-горняков через их взаимодействие с поделочными камнями: габбро-диабазом и малиновым кварцитом. В советское время в каменоломнях Карелии мужчины были заняты взрывными работами и транспортировкой камня, а женщины выполняли ручную работу – резку, полировку и погрузку камня. В результате женщины были более подвержены профессиональным заболеваниям, таким как силикоз. В то же время многие женщины-горняки сформировали определенное эмоциональное отношение к диабазу и кварциту. Женщины-респонденты выражали удивление и гордость, рассказывая о нагрузках, которые их тела выдерживали при выполнении тяжелой работы. После распада Советского Союза карьеры по добыче диабаза и кварцита были закрыты или приватизированы. В настоящее время большинство мужчин в Прионежье по-прежнему работают в карьерах, но женщины больше не участвуют в горнодобывающей промышленности из-за изменений в государственном законодательстве. Статья фокусируется на трех взаимосвязанных нарративах, которые звучат в интервью: добыча камня как символическое тюремное заключение; сопротивление навязанным ограничениям; творческие связи женщин-горняков с производимыми ими ресурсами. Используя концепцию «киборгианского агентства» Карен Барад, автор пересматривает отношения между людьми и материалами в промышленных условиях и анализирует их как трансформацию взаимосвязанных акторов.

Ключевые слова: материальность; гендер; горное дело; камень; субъективность; ресурсификация; Карелия