



Breaking the “Ore Ceiling”: Women’s Labor and Legal Resistance in North Country

Abdelilah EL HACHMI¹

¹Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Fez, Morocco,
abdelilah.elhachmi1@usmba.ac.ma

LICENSE



This article is licensed under the
 Creative Commons Attribution
 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



ABSTRACT

This article examines *North Country* (2005) as a socio-legal film that represents the movement from workplace harassment to collective legal resistance. Focusing on selected scenes related to harassment, complaint, testimony, retaliation, courtroom proceedings, and collective action, the study uses a qualitative socio-legal approach informed by legal

consciousness, access to justice, and gendered organization theory. The analysis shows that workplace harm does not become a legal claim because women, first, have to recognize normalized misconduct as wrongful, speak about it publicly, and confront the economic, social, and reputational costs of doing so. The film presents testimony as a contested process in which credibility is shaped by institutional expectations and cultural ideas of victimhood. As similar experiences are connected, individual grievance becomes a collective legal

challenge, making organizational patterns more visible. The article argues that *North Country* compresses the long and complex history of *Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.* into a more accessible narrative of confrontation, solidarity, and symbolic legal victory. The concept of the “ore ceiling” is used to describe the overlapping workplace, cultural, and institutional barriers that restrict women’s legal agency in a male-dominated industry such as the mine.

Keywords: legal consciousness, workplace harassment, collective resistance, access to justice, *North Country*.

Introduction

Whenever we come across the word mining, most of us immediately imagine strength, danger, dust, and helmets. So, we imagine men working in such harsh conditions. In most societies, mining is still imagined as a space where women are not supposed to be and they are not expected to belong. When women do appear, they often appear indirectly and silently as mothers, sisters, widows, and in most cases, they are silent figures waiting outside the mine. Women’s participation in this sector has involved more than access to employment. It has also meant working within occupational cultures where ideas about authority and belonging have often been shaped around male workers. Acker (1990) argues that organizations are not necessarily gender-neutral, even when formal rules appear to provide equal access. Informal practices and workplace expectations can still reproduce inequality. This remains relevant in mining, where Kansake et al. (2021) report that women continue to face discrimination and sexual harassment. A worker may have legal protection and still hesitate to complain because of possible retaliation and damage of reputation. In other words, having rights does not mean that those rights are easy to exercise. Access to justice depends on the conditions under which a worker can speak and complain.

Niki Caro’s *North Country* (2005) brings this tension into a mining community in Minnesota. Inspired by *Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.*, the film follows Josey Aimes as she confronts harassment, resistance from coworkers, and limited institutional support. Her decision to take legal action changes the nature of the conflict. What begins as a personal complaint becomes a wider challenge to workplace practices.

This article uses the expression “ore ceiling” to describe the occupational, cultural, and institutional obstacles that restrict women from participating in the mining workplace and challenge mistreatment without serious consequences. The expression draws on the familiar metaphor of the glass ceiling, but its meaning here is broader than promotion or career

advancement. It refers to workplace belonging and the ability to act as a legal subject.

North Country has already been discussed from legal and feminist perspectives. Korzec (2007), for example, examines the film in relation to sexual harassment law and the costs involved in pursuing workplace discrimination claims. Kamir (2009) approaches it differently, focusing on feminist agency, legal cinema, and the relationship between the film and the litigation that inspired it. Building on these studies, the present study focuses more on how workplace harm becomes a legal claim and how an individual grievance develops into collective resistance.

This paper addresses two key research questions:

RQ1: How does *North Country* represent the social and institutional barriers that prevent women miners from translating workplace harm into legal claims?

RQ2: How does the film construct the transition from individual grievance to collective legal resistance through testimony, class action, and community mobilization?

The article argues that *North Country* presents access to justice as a difficult social process rather than the straightforward application of existing law. Legal agency develops gradually when experiences previously treated as private and unavoidable begin to be understood as part of a wider workplace problem. In this particular context, breaking the ore ceiling refers to the movement from isolated grievance toward collective legal challenge.

1. Review of related literature and theoretical framework

1.1. Gendered Organizations and Women in Mining

Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organizations helps in understanding inequality in workplaces that appear formally neutral. She argues that organizational structures are not gender-neutral, since jobs, hierarchies, and expectations often develop around assumptions that privilege a masculine model of the worker. Inequality can persist through ordinary workplace practices even when women have formal access to employment. In simple terms, women may gain access to such workplaces without being fully accepted within their professional culture. Their presence can be questioned through informal practices that challenge competence and belonging.

A similar distinction between formal participation and actual equality appears in Menouar’s (2025) study of gender inequality in entrepreneurship. Although her study deals with

entrepreneurship rather than mining, Menouar argues that inclusive institutional environments can still produce unequal outcomes when women have weaker access to resources and opportunities. This point is useful here because it reinforces the distinction between formal access and practical equality.

For the present study, that distinction is central. *North Country* does not simply portray women entering a male-dominated industry. It also shows what happens after entry, when women are expected to remain within that environment without challenging practices that disadvantage them. The ore ceiling refers to this second barrier: the difficulty of gaining full workplace recognition and the practical ability to challenge misconduct.

1.2. Sexual Harassment and Workplace Inequality

MacKinnon (1979) played a pivotal role in addressing the issue of sexual harassment by framing it as a matter of sex discrimination rather than simply as inappropriate interpersonal behaviour. Her argument placed harassment within wider structures of workplace inequality and connected it to women's economic position in employment. This perspective is relevant in male-dominated industrial settings. Harassment can do more than target individual women; it can reinforce occupational boundaries by suggesting who belongs in the workplace and who does not. This is visible in *North Country*. The women's place in the mine is challenged through sexualized behaviour, humiliation, and intimidation. Such practices are not only personal attacks. They also help maintain a workplace culture in which women remain marginalized in a weaker position.

The film also draws attention to the gap between legal protection and practical protection. A worker may have formal rights and still face economic and horrible social consequences for reporting misconduct. Sexual harassment in *North Country* is presented as part of a broader struggle over workplace power rather than as a series of isolated incidents.

1.3. Legal Consciousness and Access to Justice

Legal consciousness helps explain how people deal with law in their everyday life, not only when they enter a courtroom. Silbey (2005) develops this point by focusing on the gap between formal legal promises and the unequal conditions under which law operates in practice. A remedy may exist, yet individuals do not have the same ability to use it. Economic resources, familiarity with institutions and social position can all affect access to justice. This distinction is important in employment disputes. A worker may recognize that certain conduct is wrong and still hesitate to complain if doing so

threatens income, reputation and his or her workplace relationships. In such cases, the problem is not simply whether a right exists, but whether the worker can ask and fight for it.

In *North Country*, the mining company occupies a much stronger institutional position than an individual worker whose employment and social standing may be at risk. In relation to this, collective action does not remove this imbalance, but it can change how grievances are understood. Separate experiences become easier to recognize as part of a wider pattern once they are connected. For this study, legal consciousness is closely tied to the movement from private harm to collective legal resistance.

1.4. Law, Cinema, and Previous Readings of *North Country*

Law-and-film scholarship treats cinema as more than a form of entertainment that happens to include courtrooms or legal disputes. Greenfield et al. (2001) examine film as a cultural space where ideas about law, justice, and legal authority are represented. Sarat et al. (2005) take a similar interest in the relationship between visual culture and legal meaning, showing how film can shape the way legal institutions and conflicts are publicly understood.

Narrative texts can also make gendered violence visible by placing individual experiences within wider relations of power. *North Country* is useful for this kind of analysis because it draws on actual litigation while reshaping that history for cinematic purposes. Korzec (2007) reads the film in relation to sexual harassment law and emphasizes the personal costs involved in pursuing discrimination claims. She emphasizes the significance of class action and the way in which cinema can shape public perceptions of legal matters. Kamir (2009) approaches the film from another angle, comparing it with the historical litigation and examining the interaction between feminist narrative and the conventions of the lawyer film.

These studies make it difficult to claim that the legal dimension of *North Country* has been neglected. The gap addressed in this article is more specific. The concern here is how workplace harm becomes legally meaningful and how an individual complaint develops into collective legal resistance. Particular attention is given to legal consciousness, institutional resistance, testimony, economic vulnerability, community pressure, and collective mobilization. The question is not simply how law is represented in the film, but how the women become able to use it against an institution that holds greater economic and social power in the community.

2. Historical and Cinematic Context of the film

North Country is inspired by the litigation surrounding *Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.*, a major sexual-harassment case involving women employed at the Eveleth Taconite mine in Minnesota. The historical case gives the film its legal foundation, but the cinematic version reshapes the events. Lois Jenson and other female employees alleged extensive sexual harassment and sex discrimination at the mine. In 1993, the United States District Court for the District of Minnesota found Eveleth Mines liable on class-wide claims involving sexual harassment and discrimination in promotion (*Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.*, 1993). The litigation did not end there. It continued through later damages proceedings and reached the Eighth Circuit in 1997, which vacated the damages determination and ordered further proceedings. The length of this legal process is important because it contrasts with the concentrated narrative presented in the film.

Caro's *North Country* does not attempt to reproduce the case as a documentary record. Josey Aimes is a fictionalized protagonist, and the chronology, courtroom confrontations, and moments of collective support are reorganized for dramatic purposes. Kamir (2009) makes this distinction clear in her comparison between the film and the historical events on which it is based. Her analysis shows that the film turns a long and complex legal struggle into a story centered more closely on one woman's experience, her lawyer, and the gradual emergence of collective support. The distinction between history and film should not be reduced to a question of factual accuracy. What matters for this study is how *North Country* reshapes a complex legal conflict into a public narrative of injustice and resistance. The film simplifies legal procedure, but in doing so it makes the social dimensions of legal struggle more visible.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Corpus

This study relies on a qualitative socio-legal analysis of *North Country* (Caro, 2005). The film is approached as a cultural text in which workplace inequality, legal meaning, and collective resistance are represented and negotiated. The aim is not to test the legal accuracy of every scene or to reconstruct the case in detail. The focus is narrower which is how the film represents the movement from workplace harm to legal recognition and collective action.

The corpus consists of selected scenes that speak directly to the research questions. These include scenes dealing with harassment and exclusion in the workplace, attempts to report

misconduct, legal consultation and courtroom proceedings, retaliation and community pressure, and the shift from individual grievance to collective mobilization. For practical purposes, the selected material was organized into six broad categories: workplace harm, institutional response, legal engagement, testimony, collective action, and extra-legal pressure. These categories were not treated as fixed and mutually exclusive. Some scenes, especially those involving testimony and retaliation, contribute to more than one analytical dimension.

3.2. Analytical Procedure

The film was viewed several times, with attention to dialogue, narrative sequence, character positioning and the relationship between individual and collective actors. Concepts such as legal consciousness, access to justice, institutional resistance, economic vulnerability, and collective mobilization provided the initial analytical frame. Repeated viewing was used to identify patterns that became more visible within the film itself.

Four main themes emerged from this process are 1. the normalization of workplace harm before it becomes a legal grievance 2. the movement from silence to testimony 3. the shift from individual grievance to collective legal action 4. the operation of law beyond the courtroom through retaliation, community pressure, and solidarity.

Dialogue was not treated as evidence in isolation which means that individual lines and exchanges were read in relation to the scenes in which they appear, including who speaks, who is allowed to respond, how other characters react, and the institutional position of the speakers. This was necessary because authority and vulnerability in *North Country* are conveyed through visual and social relations as much as through explicit legal language. The study remains interpretive and is limited to the representation of law and labor in *North Country*. Its findings are not intended to describe all mining workplaces and all forms of sexual-harassment litigation all over the world.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. Normalization of workplace harassment and the emergence of legal grievance

In *North Country*, harassment is part of the mine's ordinary culture. Women face insults, intimidation, and humiliation, but these practices are treated by many of the male workers in the mine as normal features of the job. The expectation of silence is made explicit when Josey is told by her boss in the mine to "work hard, keep your mouth shut, and take it like a

man". Silence is presented as part of the job itself and it is assumed among workers that to remain accepted, they are expected to tolerate misconduct rather than challenge it. Before any legal claim can emerge, women have to recognize that what they are experiencing should not be tolerated. But the film makes this difficult because women become part of a workplace whose culture was established before them. Their presence is formally accepted, but their legitimacy is questioned through sexual comments and challenges to their competence whenever possible. Acker's (1990) idea of the gendered organization is of paramount importance in this context because it shows how workplaces can still reproduce assumptions about who properly belongs in such an environment.

It is believed that harassment does not immediately become a legal grievance because it is embedded in routine interactions and presented as part of workplace custom. Ewick and Silbey (1998) argue that people experience law through everyday social life, not only through formal institutions. In the early part of the film, women's responses are shaped more by fear and established workplace expectations than by believing that the law can protect them.

Josey's attempts to resist show how difficult it is to move from private experience to public complaint. Speaking about how struggles at work places her in conflict with coworkers and with an institution on which she and her kids depend economically. Once she started complaining, the response she receives from the institution deepens the problem. Her complaints do not produce protection. Instead, they are minimized, and the pressure shifts back onto her in order to avoid disruption. The early part of *North Country* can be read as a pre-legal stage. Harm is already present, but it has not yet acquired full legal meaning. Resistance begins when what has been treated as ordinary workplace behaviour is reinterpreted as wrong behaviour and when private experience starts to become a matter of public concern.

4.2. Testimony, credibility and the transition to collective legal action

In *North Country*, speaking about harassment in public does not make a woman's experience legally credible. Josey may decide to speak, but once her story enters the courtroom, it is subjected to another form of unfair judgment. Attention shifts from what happened to her at the mine to her own personal life and sexual history. Kamir (2009) pays particular attention to this aspect of the film. She notes the importance of the courtroom revelation that Josey's first child was conceived through rape by her teacher. The disclosure challenges the claims about her past and changes the way she is seen by the

people around her. For this reason, testimony in the film cannot be understood simply as empowerment. Speaking gives Josey a way to seek recognition, but it also exposes parts of her private life to the public. The courtroom gives her a voice, but it determines the conditions under which that voice will be judged. Josey's lawyer warns her that "the illusion is that all your problems are solved in a courtroom. The reality is even when you win, you don't win". His warning shows us that Josey risks her employment, her reputation, and personal relationships by continuing with the case.

The situation begins to change when Josey no longer appears to be speaking alone. Other women's experiences give her horrible experience in the mine a different weight. A complaint that can be portrayed as personal and sometimes exceptional becomes more difficult to dismiss once similar stories begin to emerge from the same workplace. Testimony matters in *North Country* not because individual women speak, but because their stories start to connect. The accumulation of these stories changes the focus of the dispute. Instead of asking only whether Josey is credible, the film begins to ask what kind of workplace could produce similar experiences among several women. For this reason, testimony in the film becomes a vital link between private grievance and a broader claim of institutional wrongdoing.

A major shift in Josey's story occurs when her complaint moves beyond an individual dispute. As long as she stands alone, the company and her coworkers can frame the conflict around her personality and her inability to adapt in the mine. That interpretation becomes harder to sustain for a long period of time once similar experiences begin to emerge as part of a wider workplace pattern. In simple terms, what can be dismissed when narrated by one worker becomes more difficult to isolate when comparable experiences accumulate. Harassment is no longer presented only as a personal dispute; it becomes a question of organizational responsibility. Earlier in the film, Josey was supposed to explain herself all the time. Later, attention begins to shift toward the workplace conditions that allowed similar experiences among women to happen. This movement strengthens the metaphor of the ore ceiling. The barrier confronting the women is sustained through isolation, but breaking it requires more than individual resistance. It depends on recognizing that separate experiences are connected by shared workplace practices and which can become the basis of a collective legal challenge.

4.3. Retaliation, community pressure and social barriers to access to justice

North Country shows us that legal struggle does not begin and end in the courtroom. Josey's decision to challenge the mine affects her position at work and her family relationships. This matters because access to justice is not only about whether a legal remedy exists. It is also about whether a person can benefit from that remedy without paying a huge social and economic price. This gap between legal right and practical justice is captured in Josey's exchange with her lawyer. When she insists, "I'm right," he responds, "I'm sure you are right, but right has nothing to do with real life". Being right does not protect Josey from economic pressure, reputational damage, hostility at work, and the personal costs of continuing the case.

The mine is more than an employer. It is a central economic institution in Josey's community, and this gives the conflict a wider reach. Suing the company is seen by her male colleagues as a threat to workplace relations, local stability, and shared economic interests. Retaliation manifests in various forms. Some instances are direct, but in most cases, they are informal, including hostility, rumour, mockery, and exclusion. Ewick and Silbey (1998) are useful here because they show that law is experienced through everyday social relations, not only through formal institutions. In *North Country*, the community helps shape the meaning of Josey's legal action. At first, she is often treated as disruptive and disloyal. As more people begin to recognize her horrible struggles, the interpretation of her resistance starts to change among her family members and her coworkers.

This shift is important because the same community that helps enforce silence can also become a source of legitimacy and support. The social environment is not simply a backdrop to the legal case. It is part of the struggle itself. The ore ceiling is sustained through several overlapping pressures: workplace hierarchy, economic dependence, gender expectations, reputation, and community loyalty. Breaking it requires more than invoking legal rights. It requires challenging the social conditions that make those rights difficult to exercise.

4.4. Cinematic compression and the representation of legal victory

North Country reshapes the legal struggle through the way it handles time. Josey's cases against the company unfolded over many years and passed through several procedural stages. The film reduces that long process to a much shorter sequence of grievance, confrontation, testimony, collective support, and legal recognition. This compression changes the way justice is understood. The audience is given clear turning

points and can follow a direct movement from harm to recognition, although the real process was complex. It also personalizes the conflict which means that Josey becomes the main figure through whom workplace inequality is understood. Accordingly, the film does not suggest that legal victory repairs everything. Public exposure, damaged relationships, and the consequences of harassment remain. Breaking the ore ceiling means more than entering the mine and succeeding in court. It also means challenging the idea that discriminatory treatment is simply part of ordinary workplace culture and making it visible as a legitimate object of collective legal resistance.

5. Conclusion

The study at hand examines *North Country* as a socio-legal film concerned with the movement from workplace harm to legal recognition. The analysis shows that access to justice depends on more than formal legal rules. Harassment is initially normalized within the mining workplace, and women workers who challenged it face institutional resistance, economic insecurity, reputational damage, and pressure from the surrounding community. The film makes clear why workplace harm does not become a legal claim on the spot. Formal protection may exist, but using it requires workers to speak about it in public and accept the risks that may follow. Legal rights are meaningful only when people are able to act on them in their everyday life.

The movement from individual grievance to collective legal resistance is important. Josey's complaint becomes harder to isolate once other experiences begin to support it. What first appears to be a personal dispute becomes evidence of a broader workplace problem. Collective action changes the scale of the conflict, but it also changes the way the grievance itself is understood. *North Country* places much of the legal struggle outside the courtroom. Family relations, economic dependence, workplace loyalty, and community judgment influence whether a legal claim can be sustained. This is one of the clearest ways in which the film connects law with everyday social life.

The ore ceiling refers not only to women's participation in a male-dominated industry, but also to the difficulty of being accepted as legitimate workers. The article's main contribution lies in connecting legal consciousness, workplace dependency, collective resistance, and access to justice within the same reading of the film. *North Country* argues that legal resistance becomes possible when private experiences are no longer treated as isolated problems and start to be recognized as part of a shared institutional injustice.

References

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002>
- Caro, N. (Director). (2005). *North Country* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Ewick, P., & Silbey, S. S. (1998). *The common place of law: Stories from everyday life*. University of Chicago Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226212708.001.0001>
- Greenfield, S., Osborn, G., & Robson, P. (2001). *Film and the law*. Cavendish Publishing.
- *Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.*, 824 F. Supp. 847 (D. Minn. 1993).
- *Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.*, 130 F.3d 1287 (8th Cir. 1997).
- Kamir, O. (2009). North Country's hero and her cinematic lawyer: Can "lawyer films" and "women's films" merge to launch a new feminist sub-genre? *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 21(1), 119–142. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjwl.21.1.119>
- Kansake, B. A., Sakyi-Addo, G. B., & Dumakor-Dupey, N. K. (2021). Creating a gender-inclusive mining industry: Uncovering the challenges of female mining stakeholders. *Resources Policy*, 70, 101962.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2020.101962>
- Korzec, R. (2007). Viewing *North Country*: Sexual harassment goes to the movies. *University of Baltimore Law Review*, 36(3), Article 3.
<https://scholarworks.law.ubalt.edu/ubl/vol36/iss3/3/>
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1979). *Sexual harassment of working women: A case of sex discrimination*. Yale University Press.
- Menouar, R. (2025). National wealth and gender inequality in entrepreneurship: A paradox in high-income economies. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Innovative Studies*, 4(3), 9–15. <https://doi.org/10.63883/ijrsjournal.v4i3.388>
- Sarat, A., Douglas, L., & Umphrey, M. M. (Eds.). (2005). *Law on the screen*. Stanford University Press.
- Silbey, S. S. (2005). After legal consciousness. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 1, 323–368.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.lawsocsci.1.041604.115938>