For women in gold mines, it’s a chance amidst hurdles

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Florence Kasule is at her wit’s end. As the chairperson of Bubujwa Women Gold Miners’ Association, she has paved up and down bringing women who help in gold mines in Bubujwa together to demand improvement in their working conditions.

"The progress is slow," she told The Observer last week. "We still don't have gloves, gumboots and helmets. Our pay has not improved either.”

Kasule and her members, who are all women, carry sand, do the digging for the precious material, cool food for the miners and sometimes risk their lives from the mining areas.

Women artisanal miners are rarely talked about, let alone have conditions to improve.

Global Rights Alert (GRA), a non-for-profit agency, has embarked on an effort to help women miners in Mubende in central Uganda and Bubujwa in western Uganda to organize themselves in groups to demand better working conditions from their employers.

“We were trained and now we are gaining confidence. But we're still small. We're trying to get them to buy animals and other basic necessities,” Kasule said.

But that is just it. The wider changes particularly on their day-to-day being including decent pay and work protective gear, are still hard to come by.

Wineke Nbildungwe, the GRA executive director, admits the tangible changes in terms of what has been put in place in terms of respecting the safety of women at work are waning.

Statistics of all the women working in gold mines and artisanal miners are difficult to come by but Kasule said the three mining sites in Bubujwa, they are grouped in clusters of between 50 and 50 women.

A study by the gender dimension of TDG (mining, transport and gold) in the Great Lakes region, including Uganda, found a significant proportion of artisanal miners comprise of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including elderly, women and youth.

"Within these groups, women and girls face additional disadvantages mainly owing to discriminatory beliefs, impediments to their agency and bargaining power, the higher burden of women and girls' work, and lack of access to and control of key assets and benefits derived from them," said the report, done by the Gender Resource Facility (GRF), operated by Netherlands’ Royal Tropical Institute and Femco Institute on behalf of Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Women and girls, the study said, are restricted in access to skills, education and training and denied freedom to participate and influence decisions that concern them.

They are the lowest paid and this is increasing their vulnerability to insecurity, ill health and sexual and gender-based violence.

"Perhaps Kasule contextualizes this better. In Bubujwa, they earn 1500 per basin of sand carried on a short distance. On longer distances, it increases to 2000 but one has to carry tons of them to earn a decent amount.

Sometimes, she said, accidents happen when at work and women are injured but it is not the responsibility of the company to treat them.

"If the boss frowns, he pays for treatment, but we usually pay for ourselves in case you are injured," she said.

Nyagimire told The Observer in Monday that women miners in the mining industry, especially artisanal miners, were the "sake devil in the sector.

Government doesn't give them due attention," he added.

"Most women are artisanal miners and need for them to be regulated to improve working environment. Even men in the sector are going through a lot," Nyagimire said.

"For women, it is harder to find places of convenience like toilets and clean water when they are working."

Jane Akabululle, the leader of Women Miners Association, said in addition to lacking general materials for use like baskets, overall and gloves, lack of access to critical facilities like clean water and toilets are causes.

"There are no toilets and we fetch water from far," Akabululle said.

"The only change is that at least we can now meet our employers once a month.

Government has a women’s programme to help women groups start small projects but women in the mines have not been able to access it.

Akabululle said: "We failed to understand the whole idea of women’s empowerment.

Yet women in gold mines in Uganda remains optimistic of the future even though things haven’t changed fast - the fact that they now hold meetings with their bosses makes it a positive step.

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