

## Economy



Women filter sand in search for gold in Mubende

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

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**F**lorence Kasande is at her wit's end. As the chairperson of Buhweju Women Gold Miners' Association, she has paced up and down bringing women who help in gold mines in Buhweju 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."

Kasande and her members, who are all women, carry sand, do the sieving for the precious material, cook food for the miners and sometimes run bars in artisanal mining areas.

Women artisanal miners are rarely talked about, let alone have their conditions in mines improve.

Global Rights Alert (GRA), a not-for-profit agency, has embarked on effort to help women miners in Mubende in central Uganda and Buhweju in western Uganda to organize themselves in groups to demand better working conditions from their employers.

"We were trained and now [we] organized ourselves into Saccos. When we get the money, we save it and help ourselves to buy animals and other basic necessities," Kasande said.

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

Winfred Ngabirwe, 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 wanting but the fact that women now are able to articulate is a positive step.

Statistics of all the women working in gold mines and as artisanal miners are difficult to come by but Kasande said of the three mining sites in Buhweju, they are grouped in clusters of between 20 and 30 women.

A 2016 study on the gender dimension of 3Ts&G (tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold) in the Great Lakes Region, including Uganda, found a significant proportion of artisanal miner communities comprise of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including the 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 undue burden of women's and girl's 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 Femconsult on behalf 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 Kasande contextualizes this better. In Buhweju, they earn Shs 100 per basin of sand carried on a short distance. On longer distance, it increases to Shs 200 but one has to carry tens of them to earn a sizeable 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 is good, he pays for treatment. But we usually pay for ourselves in case you are injured," she said.

Ngabirwe told *The Observer* on Monday that women issues in the mining industry, especially artisanal miners, were the "the devil in the sector".

Government doesn't give them due attention, she said.

"Most women are artisanal miners and need favourable regulation to improve work environment. Even men [in the sector] are going through a lot," Ngabirwe said.

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

Jane Ahimbisibwe, the leader of Women Miners' Association, said in addition to lacking general materials for use like basins, overalls and gloves, lack of access to critical facilities like clean water and toilets was an eyesore.

"There are no toilets and we fetch water from far," Ahimbisibwe said. "The only change is that at least we can now meet our employers once a month."

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

Ahimbisibwe said: "We failed to understand the whole idea of women funds."

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

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## NSSF OFFERS AMNESTY TO DEFAULTERS

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In a bid to recover more than Shs 160bn in unremitted contributions, the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) has announced a grace period of three months for defaulting employers to agree a payment plan.

Only those that have not remitted employees' social security contributions are affected.

In exchange, the Fund will waive up to 95 per cent of the penalty amount owed. Richard Byarugaba, the NSSF managing director, said in a statement recently.

About 10,000 out of more than 33,270 employers registered with the Fund have not paid NSSF contributions in a period ranging from two months to seven years, thereby denying their employees social security protection.

Byarugaba said although it is the obligation of every employer to pay social security contributions for their employees on a timely basis and the correct amounts, the Fund recognises that for various reasons, some employers may be unable to remit funds on a regular basis. Eventually, they get overwhelmed by the arrears and penalties levied on unremitted funds.

"Therefore, for the next 90 days, we have declared an amnesty for all defaulting employers to allow them negotiate payment plans with the Fund. In turn, I will waive up to 95% of the penalty the defaulting employer is supposed to pay. This is on condition that such an employer comes forward, commits to clear all the arrears owed in a period to be agreed by signing a deed of settlement," Byarugaba said.

He added that using a similar approach, the Fund has already recovered about Shs 13.7bn from 380 employers since July 2017.

Byarugaba said employers that do not take advantage of the amnesty window risk court action to recover the arrears, the penalty and interest accrued.

"Litigation is our last resort. We prefer to have discussions with employers as per our Relationship Management business model, because we understand that sometimes, businesses face challenges with their cash flows. However, employers that not only categorically default but are also unwilling to agree payment plans with the Fund will be taken to court," he said.

As at end of December 2018, the Fund was worth Shs 10.2 trillion, up from Shs 8.7 trillion in December 2017. Monthly average contributions are now at over Shs 96bn.

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