Women exploited in Buhweju gold mines

Wages: From dawn to dusk, women in Buhweju toil in gold mines for as low as Shs100 per basin of rocks they have to lift from the pits, writes Emmanuel Mutazilikwa

A new dirt road snakes through the evolving hills of Buhweju District across the once-idyllic earth.

The climate here is cool and occasionally rain may pound the grounds to disrupt the serenity of this landscape.

To the farmers, it is harvest time as they carry their produce to the market.

Here, it is a common place to find women and children engaged in hard labour to provide for their families.

This group of women and children is living by crushing these rocks into stone.

Even when it is considered one of the poorest areas in Aronho Sub-region by some people, Buhweju is abundant with minerals.

The area MP Mr. Francis Mwinekula, hears popular rumour to refer to it as ‘the Karamoja of Aronho’.

Karamoja, a semi-arid area, is perhaps the poorest sub-region in Uganda even when it has vast mineral deposits.

In every pocket of Buhweju District, there is gold mine, yet there is little to show of this mineral wealth as social services lie in wait.

At this vast wasteland, in Katenga Village, women toil from dawn to dusk to earn household income to feed for their families.

With shovels in their hands, they carry rocks in basins to fill their baskets and improvised jerry-cans.

In the desperate bid, where gold is buried, they struggle to carry these giant rocks on bare breast to crush the rocks near the Electrical Power.

Unwittingly, they navigate these trips from the bottom to the top, it is a balancing act, which requires skill.

Piles of sweat drip down the face of this women. Yet she must remain unwavering if the family is to have a meal.

Each of the women is paid a paltry Shs100 for the basins of rocks they carry from the pit.

They have to make several routes to earn a small fee.

With bare hands, they have no protective gear and are their male counterparts, who is difficult to find that without the exploitation of these women, these precious stones that fetch staggering prices may not reach the department stores.

Daily Monitor could not speak to these women because we feared that what they can invest in.

Ms Caroline Nakajubi, a member of Global Rights Africa, a watchdog organisation, says: “The working conditions of women in gold mines is alarming. The issues range from unfair payments that are not adequate and do not come on time and the fact that they are exposed to chemicals as they work. Most women do dirty work on gold washing and they are in contact with chemicals. The working condition is completely unsafe.”

Domestic violence

She says reports that there are cases of domestic violence.

Women go back home and they are beaten. Men do not think that women should be in good mines because of the cultural norms. Women is seen as a menace. The man beats you and takes your money,” she reveals.

Global Rights Africa has since sensitised them on the rights to a safe working environment and has tried to educate women on the right to compensation health safety and to work with protective gear, among others.

Not far away from here is another gold mine. The roaring sound of motors filters through the hills of this landscape.

Women at this site offer cheap labour. Here, they collect the gold dust, which will later be carefully sifted.

Uganda’s Gold Exports

Gold exports from Uganda recorded an 89 per cent increase in the year ending 2015, a Bank of Uganda report showed. Although Uganda is a big producer of gold, experts say the sector is a big miner of gold, experts said the report showed. Although the nation has a big mine of gold, reports said the sector is a big miner of gold, experts said the report showed. Although the sector is a big miner of gold, experts said the report showed. Although the sector is a big miner of gold, experts said the report showed. Although the sector is a big miner of gold, experts said the report showed. Although the sector is a big miner of gold, experts said the report showed. Although the sector is a big miner of gold, experts said the report showed.
It is time for a reversal in the way they take a break ahead of the day. Like their counterparts, there is a risk at some of these mining sites.

One of the men lost his relative, Grace Birabara, at one of the mines when a boom of soil came in. He took us to a place where this woman was buried in a banana plantation. She left behind orphans who live in a mud and wattle home.

Another woman, whose husband is in jail, says there are people trying to grab one of the mines where the family has an interest. She says the mine is their only source of livelihood.

"Nobody can throw me out of the mine. That is my land and even if my husband is in jail, nobody will take his land," says Grace Kyomugensi.

Whereas many would expect better social services, Buhweju remains a basket case.

There are hardly any good schools, roads and hospitals. This is a concern, which is shared by the district chairperson Mr Aritono and area MP Mwijukye.

"Buhweju is gifted by nature. To find that one of the most endowed districts is one of the poorest, is a paradox. This gold and other minerals are not benefiting the people of Buhweju but those who come exploit and go," says Mr Aritono.

Exploitation, "Buhweju is gifted by nature. To find that one of the most endowed districts is one of the poorest, is a paradox. This gold and other minerals are not benefiting the people of Buhweju but those who come exploit and go," says Mr Aritono.

CHALLENGES: According to experts, the working conditions of women in gold mines is alarming. The issues range from unfair payments that are not adequate and do not come on time and the fact that they are exposed to chemicals as they work. Most of the women do petty work of gold panning and they come in contact with chemicals.