

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 Mutaizibwa

A new dirt road snakes through the evolving hills of Buhweju District across the ochre-red 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 markets.

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

This group of women and children eke a living by crashing these rocks into stones.

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

The area MP, Mr Francis Mwijukye, borrows popular parlance to refer to it as 'the Karamoja of Ankole'.

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 lies a gold mine, yet there is little to show of this mineral wealth as social services lie in ruin.

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

With shovels in their hands, they cut across hills of rock to fill their basins and improvised jerry-cans.

In the desolate lands where gold is buried, they straddle these giant pits on bare foot to carry the flecks of these precious stones.

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

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

Each of the women is paid a paltry Shs100 for the basin 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 so are their male counterparts.

It is difficult to fathom that without the exploitation of these rural 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

Shs10b

Loss. Uganda lost more than Shs10 billion in royalties from undeclared gold trade last year.

this could place their employment in jeopardy. But their leaders offered to speak on behalf of those affected.

Ms Florence Kasende, the chairperson for Buhweju Women Miners Association, reveals: "We have been in these mines for sometime. We don't have protective gear and that is the challenge. The pit can also fall on you, in addition to chemicals affecting us."

Her deputy, Ms Jane Ahimbisibwe, adds: "The problems we have among others are; women have no boots and chemicals affect their legs. The women are poorly paid and there is no food. They travel here at dawn from their homes and they work till dusk. They have to walk back to their homes."

Protective

Across this expanse are hounds which guard the pits. They are ready to strike if anyone steals gold.

The proprietor, Mr Godfrey Kyerromba, says whereas he could improve conditions, he has helped to offer employment to these women.

"They are paid according to what they do. I start from Shs15,000 to Shs25,000 on a daily basis. The workers in the pit who collect the sand, which we crush, earn Shs25,000 because they are using a lot of energy. For the women, we pay them Shs10,000 on a daily basis," reveals Kyerromba.

Exploitation is not only in the mines but other enterprises such as tea, according to the district authorities.

"We have a district labour officer to ensure that children are not exploited and this applies to women too. You realise they [women] are in the mines for longer hours, day in day out, their families are collapsing and their children have left school," reveals the Buhweju District chairperson, Mr Juvenal Asiimwe.

He adds: "There is a lot of exploitation. There is need for central government and district local government to sensitise these women especially on how much they should be paid and



Hard work. Women carry rocks from the pits to the mining area. FILE PHOTOS

what they can invest in."

Ms Caroline Nakajubi Amana of Global Rights Alert, a watchdog organisation, said: "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 petty work of gold washing and they come in contact with chemicals. The working condition is completely unsafe."

Domestic violence

She also reveals that there are cases of domestic violence.

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

Global Rights Alert has since sensitised these women on the right to a safe working environment and has tried to educate women on the right to occupation health safety and to work with protective gear, among others.

Not far away from here is another gold mine. The roaring sound of mor-

tars 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 2016, a Bank of Uganda (BoU) report showed. Although Uganda is not a big miner of gold, experts said the re-exports saw the country register \$340 million (Shs1.2 trillion) revenue up from \$36 million (Shs129 billion) exported in 2016.

This performance makes the commodity the country's second largest export product after coffee. According to the report, most of the gold was destined to United Arab Emirates (UAE). Because of this, UAE became the leading export destination recording 20 per cent of Uganda's exports.



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.



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," **MR FRANCIS MWIJUKYE, BUHWEJU COUNTY MP**



10,000

**Gold miners
facing evictions**



Washing. A man pans gold from the rocks



It is time for a meal as 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 Bonabana, at one of the mines when a heap of soil caved in.

He takes 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 my land," says Grace Kyomuhangi.

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 Asimwe 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



Working. One of the women balances a basin with rocks at the gold mines.

gold and other minerals are not benefiting the people of Buhweju but those who come exploit and go. Even when they are mining, they use primitive means. The health hazards emanating from this-----, The people are not only being cheated but exploited," says Mwijukye.

"The locals are cheated by middlemen. They don't know the actual value of gold. Gold is one of the biggest resources God gave us. Local revenue generation is the technical function of the CAO. As political leaders, we can only guide. We have not been able to collect tax from there," says Asimwe.

Fear

Even as investors, including Chinese, eye lucrative mining deals in the district, there is fear that Buhweju is up for grabs and as the treasures buried in these lands are spirited away, all that will remain is environmental destruction and a people at the mercy of their masters.

As the space for artisanal miners in Uganda gradually shrinks in 2017, a Chinese company, Hubei Jiu Zhou Geological Exploration Company Limited, sued artisanal miners in Buhweju for encroaching

Work in progress. One of the pulleys being operated at the gold mines in Buhweju.

on its gold site. In a suit that Hubei has filed, the company says nearly 10,000 artisanal gold miners are operating illegally on its site, and, therefore wants them evicted.

"We have a case where the Chinese took the people of Buhweju to court. That people of Buhweju are mining Chinese Gold. As a member of Parliament, I am disturbed that somebody goes to Kampala, picks a licence without consulting the local authority here without consulting some of us, and you come and start taking away gold. As if that is not bad enough, you even expose the life of our people to what you have just seen," says Mwijukye.

Mr Asimwe also says: "You find somebody with a licence and trying to displace people. The Chinese came and acquired a licence but they found it rough because the people resisted. We have been engaging government to overhaul the legal regime and involve local leadership in licensing. You can't just displace people who are putting something on the table."

Uganda lost more than Shs10 billion in royalties from undeclared gold trade last year.