

Determined>She ignored suggestions by some colleagues not to work at open mine

Trailblazer Zaina is doing 'a man's job' and has no regrets about it

Hydraulic machine unit operator has proved herself and won male colleagues' respect

BY LILYS NJERU

Lnjeru@ke.nationmedia.com

As the only woman surrounded by 15 men, she stands out. And she excels in a field many still consider the preserve of men.

Ms Zaina Hare, 26, is a hydraulic unit machine operator at Base Titanium Ltd, which operates Kenya's largest mine. The company, based in Kwale, produces rutile (a commercially important titanium mineral), ilmenite (commercially the most important ore of titanium) and zircon (a multicoloured gemstone).

Last year it was awarded flagship project status under the Kenya Vision 2030 blueprint. Under the scorching sun, and sometimes even in the rain, she operates a monitor gun, which breaks ore walls, with the resulting water slurry moving through launders (troughs for holding or conveying water) to the catchment area.

She says the work is very demanding since it involves standing for more than five hours, and occasionally working through the night.

Nobody from her family has visited her at work, so they have no idea what she does.

But she thinks that just like her friends, they would wonder how she manages given how demanding it is.

"The mining doesn't stop, so we work in shifts. Sometimes I have to work throughout the night. Depending on the nature of what needs to be done, it is important for one to get enough rest since a mistake occasioned by, say fatigue, could lead to fatal accidents. When I declared my interest in working at the open mine, some of my colleagues tried to dissuade me. 'That's a man's job,'



Zaina Hare, 26, a hydraulic machine unit operator at Base Titanium Ltd in Kwale. She says the responsibility of the job has given her the courage and ability to face day-to-day challenges.

PHOTO | COURTESY

they said, and implored me to change my mind," she says.

But the second-born in a family of four stood her ground, a decision she is proud of. She says the responsibility has given her the courage and ability to withstand the many challenges she encounters daily.

Academic background

Remarkably, Zaina doesn't have any academic background in mining. In fact she got the job at Base Titanium Company by pure chance, and she was not going to let any cultural barriers stand in her way.

"I did well in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education exam in 2010, but my parents could not afford to take me to university. I was surviving on menial jobs when Base Titanium came to our village on an exploration mission in 2012.

"In addition, they were looking for bright young people whose education

had been impeded by financial constraints. That's how I got the job. I have been extensively trained since I joined the company. I worked as a mine attendant and through hard work and determination, I rose to this position in 2015," she offers.

She confesses that as the only woman in the team, she found the first few months so challenging that she almost gave up.

Thankfully, she has continued to receive support from women in the other departments.

Globally, gender disparity exists in the extractive sector, with women's direct participation in large mining activities accounting for less than 10 per cent. This is according to a study done in May, 2017, by Adam Smith International in collaboration with International Women in Mining (a network for women in the industry).

Besides, the number of women studying science, technology, engineering

and mathematics in Kenya is still small compared to that of men.

According to Ms Joan Kago, systems and external development and training officer at Base Titanium, the company offers various programmes, including work experience, in a bid to create an interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics among students in Kwale and Likoni.

"During the first intake in 2014, we had more than 70 students from seven local secondary schools participating. The idea is to provide an avenue for Form Four students to appreciate first-hand the operations of a large mining operation. Also, we occasionally visit schools in the community to mentor the students," she adds.

Currently, women comprise 16 per cent of the company's workforce, with people from Kwale working on its sites (757) accounting for 66 per cent of the total workforce.