

Take Off ▶ Guru



Woman at work: Khadija Napiru has always been fascinated by heavy load vehicles. PD/COURTESY

Women truck drivers making inroads in a man's world

The trucking industry has for a long time been male dominated. However, **Khadija Napiru** and **Grace Wanjiru** share how they are defying all odds to deliver goods, and remain on their career road

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For decades, hauling goods over long distances aboard an up to five axle truck has been viewed as an odd career choice for women to venture into. However, Khadija Napiru decided to take the bulls by the horns by venturing into the male dominated industry.

Since her childhood, Khadija shares how she had always been fascinated by heavy load vehicles. However, it bothered her that she would only see male drivers behind the steering wheel of these mammoth trucks.

"As a child, I enjoyed watching people drive cars. Particularly, big heavy trucks. After school, I used to sit by the roadside and just watch people drive. However, I noted that only men were driving trucks and I naturally assumed that it was probably a man thing. I never gave it much thought," recalls the 42-year-old.

Discrimination and unequal treatment

Years later, fate would have it that Khadija would find herself in the trucking industry. Khadija, however, recalls that her career journey as a truck driver has not been smooth sailing. She narrates how she almost got discouraged as soon as she started. Citing, a stream of never-ending and sometimes unnerving stares and jibes she would receive from people while driving.

"Most times, I hear men and even children by the roadside shout while laughing hysterically, 'look! It's a woman driving.' They will do this while pointing fingers at

me, which makes me really uncomfortable," says Khadija. She, however, asserts that she has long gotten used to it.

A 2020 annual report published by the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure reveals that the industry is speedily becoming one of the fastest growing sectors in the country, accounting for about 8.3 per cent of the country's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In spite of this, women take up only a 31 per cent of the total employees in the transport and logistics sector.

A separate study on Making Infrastructure Work for Men and Women conducted by The World Bank and the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure in 2020 reveals that a lot of women, though equipped with relevant skills, shy away from exploring the trucking industry as a possible source of employment due to society's gross misconception that the sector is a man's world. As a result, a lot of women, although passionate about the industry, disassociate for fear of being ridiculed. The study further observed that discrimination and unequal treatment at work is another key issue in the trucking industry preventing women from pursuing careers in the sector. Most often than not, women are denied employment altogether, while majority are paid lesser in comparison to their male counterparts who work in the same profession.

"It is discouraging when you do the same work with a man, operate on similar working hours only to realise that they are paid more than you. At some point, it makes you question what is it you do wrong," the wife and mother of three says.

Another truck driver, Grace Wanjiru is still hopeful that key players in the transport

industry will support the employment of women in the sector by creating favourable working conditions for women. She states that in most stop-overs/parking spaces, there exists no washroom facilities to cater for women. As a result, female truck drivers are often forced to opt for degrading means to relieve themselves.

"I think many people still believe that women don't drive trucks as a source of livelihood. That's why, in most stop overs, washroom joints are specifically designed to suit men only. As a female truck driver, you are left with a choice to either hold it or resort to relieving yourself in the bushes. I am hoping this will change as more women take up trucking," she notes.

Road to empowerment

She is also urging employers in the sector to consider increasing fuel budget, especially during such time when fuel costs are high. She notes that often, drivers opt to 'freewheel' to save fuel during distant trips.

A safety status report released by National Transport and Safety Authority (NTSA) in 2021 lists freewheeling as one of the major causes of road accidents in Kenya. Because it often increases the chances of a car spinning out of control leading to accidents. This makes freewheeling dangerous as it risks the lives of drivers and pedestrians.

The two women, Khadija and Grace, are beneficiaries of Women on Wheels (WoW) programme. Bamburi Cement in partnership with Diamond Defensive Driving Academy, Isuzu East Africa and Kenya Transporters Association launched the programme in December last year.

Women on Wheels programme (WoW) aims at encouraging women to join the trucking industry by equipping them with relevant road safety skills coupled with defense training, but with a special focus on heavy goods vehicle.

Khadija highlights that the programme has helped restore her confidence in her work by equipping her with relevant technical skills needed to operate different heavy trucks by exposing her to different driving techniques necessary for safety.

RANDOM SENSE

WITH EVELYN MAKENA @evemake-g

Primary education gender gap reducing in Sub-Saharan Africa

For years, girls in Sub Saharan Africa have lagged behind in education with many missing out even on the basic primary level. Girls remain behind in education at secondary level, but there has been a significant improvement in their enrollment and completion of primary education. Reducing barriers to girls' education — such as harmful cultural practices, discrimination and poverty — has contributed to the gains.

However, girls still face other emerging challenges in accessing education, particularly climate change, which has deepened inequalities and perpetuated different forms of discrimination against them. In reducing gender education inequalities and increasing education of girls, the region stands to have better outcomes in poverty reduction and improved maternal and child health among other benefits.

QUICKFACTS

In 2020, **66%** of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa completed primary education compared to 61% of boys.

This was an improvement from **44%** of girls who completed their primary education in 2000.

46% of boys completed lower secondary education compared to 44% of girls.

Only **29%** of girls were completing lower secondary education 22 years ago.

9 million girls in SSA aged 6-11 are likely to never go to school compared to 6 million boys



GRACE

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"During the training, I learnt a lot of valuable things—for instance, proper techniques on how to double clutch, which is necessary to extend the lifespan of a gear box of the vehicle," she uttered.

She further highlights how sexual harassment and risk of being exposed to violence while on the road is another key challenge for women in the sector. She, however, notes that through a defense training received during the programme, she is now able to stay alert and protect herself whenever she finds herself at harm's way.

Better opportunities

"I have learnt about little things such as body language cues, which we often tend to ignore can tell you a lot about a person — whether they are dangerous or not. I am now alert when being approached by people and mostly at stopovers where you get to meet different kinds of people," Khadija shares.

Bamburi Cement and its partners seek to train at least 100 women through the programme. Women trained are then accorded an opportunity for permanent employment with logistics partners of Bamburi Cement such as Isuzu East Africa. Last year, 17 women graduated from the programme.

Khadija is encouraging women to consider taking truck driving as a career choice. "I urge my fellow women to consider joining the trucking industry. Despite a couple of challenges, here and there, the pay is good. You won't have to depend on your partner to cater to your every need. Also, the WoW programme has really been impactful in my work, join the programme if you can!" Khadija maintains.