

Unbeaten path A study by the World Bank and the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure in 2020 showed that many women

Give way! Female truckers

Long-distance truck driver Rhodah Kariuki, 31, during the interview on Tuesday.

PHOTO | LUCY WANJIRU



Grace Wanjiru, Khadija Napirio and Rhoda Kariuki know it is not easy to be a female trucker. They have faced many challenges along the way but that hasn't slammed brakes on their dreams

BY COLLINS OMULO

Long-distance truck driving has for long been viewed as a man's world and seen as an odd career choice for women to venture into.

The stereotype is prevalent in the developed world and far worse in de-

veloping countries like Kenya, where a woman's role is still being viewed through the gender lens.

However, for Grace Wanjiru Ng'ang'a, breaking such stereotypes and claiming her place in the male-dominated sector is a challenge she has always relished.

A mother and a wife, Ms Ng'ang'a is not your ordinary woman. At 36, she has been a long-distance truck driver for the last 12 years. In fact, she is among a group of a few Kenyan female drivers, thought to be less than 100, who have broken the glass ceiling.

In that time, she has worked for five different companies and transported cargo across four East Africa countries including Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

However, the journey to becoming a long-distance truck driver did not come by chance or design. It was both, she says.

Most times when driving, I will hear men and even young children by the roadside shout while laughing hysterically, 'Look! It's a woman driving.'

Khadija Napirio, trucker



Having been born in a family where her father and brother were truck drivers, she always wanted to follow in their footsteps and would picture herself behind the wheels of the heavy machines.

The desire remained something of a distant dream as she had never seen any female truck driver. Moreover, her father could not countenance seeing his daughter joining a career which has often had a bad reputation.

After completing her secondary school, she joined Darling Industries in 2006, where she sold hair products, but she kept her dream alive.

"I would travel from our home in Kikuyu to Mlolongo just to see the long-distance truck drivers and see if I could chance upon a female driver. One day, I met one and there and then, I made the decision to also pursue the dream of being a trucker," recalls the third born.

What followed was an arduous journey as she sought to learn the

ropes of truck driving, much to opposition from her father.

Further, with her father and brother working with a company that only did day journeys and were not allowed to carry unauthorised passengers, she knew she was on her own.

Armed with her driving licence, the mother of three had to look for long-distance truck drivers doing night journeys to take her under their wings and train her.

After getting one truck driver who was willing to help her, she quit her work at Darling Industries and ventured into the unknown.

"He trained me for almost a year during night trips and then we had to part ways as he was to start doing out-of-Kenya trips," she says.

While with the man, they would do trips between Nairobi and Mombasa and she would be paid only Sh200.

Luckily, she got another driver working for a bread delivery company. For another six months, he further sharpened her skills.

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on bumpy road to success



"We stayed for six months before he told me I was now ripe to start driving alone. He then connected me to get my first job at Metro Logistics in 2009," she says.

But as she learnt the ropes, Ms Ng'ang'a had to deal with men who preyed on her femininity and wanted to take advantage of her as well as a father who did not embrace the idea as he did not think a woman could survive in the industry that involves travelling over long distances for days.

"Since my father was not open to me being a truck driver, I had to hide from him. I used to call my mum to inform me where my father stopped so that we don't bump into each other. His colleagues would also give him negative reports," says Ms Ng'ang'a. "But when I got my first job, he was the first person I called to break the news to. His perspective changed as he believed I was really determined to be a truck driver."

She worked with Metro Logistics for one year before joining Maridadi Flowers where she clocked five years. Currently, she is with Progas which she joined in 2021.

Progas, which like Oilfield Movers, is part of transporters contracted by Bamburi Cement.

However, it is at OML that she came face-to-face with what long distance truck driving entails. They would transport crude oil from Turkana to Mombasa, with the trips taking a

week to and fro.

Then, she would also be tasked with transporting cargo to Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and DRC with the journey taking as long as three weeks.

But Ms Ng'ang'a is not alone in the industry. Khadija Napirio, a 42-year-old wife and mother, is also part of women who have decided to carve a niche for themselves in truck driving.

Since her childhood, Ms Napirio says that she has always been fascinated by heavy load vehicles. However, it bothered her that she would only see male drivers on the road.

"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... I used to see only men driving trucks and I assumed that it was probably a man thing. I never gave it much thought," she says.

Twenty years later, fate would have it that she would find herself in the trucking industry and she has been a truck driver for the past 15 years. Ms Napirio, however, recalls that her career journey as a truck driver has not been smooth.

She narrates almost being discouraged to continue with truck driving as soon as she started citing a stream of never-ending and sometimes unnerving stares she would receive from people while driving.

"Most times when driving, I will

hear men and even young children by the roadside shout while laughing hysterically, 'Look! It's a woman driving.' They will do this while gesturing at me, which makes me really uncomfortable," she says. However, she adds that she has long got used to it.

Rhoda Kariuki is another female truck driver. The mother of two says that she did not choose to be a truck driver but the industry chose her.

Growing up, she wanted to be a truck driver because of her passion for travelling and the love for driving.

Aged 31, she has been in the business for 10 years and has been to Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan and Rwanda.

But for her, it was not such a tough ask like Ms Ng'ang'a's case as her family has been her greatest support. To put the icing on the cake, she is married to a truck driver whom she met while in her line of work.

"Trucking has been my passion and I have worked for different companies for 10 years and now I am with Agility," she says.

Ms Kariuki says she is proud that she is among the pioneers in the industry as when she started trucking driving, there were very few female truck drivers in the industry and it has been a struggle to fit in and break the glass ceiling.

The women point to traffic at the borders as the worst experience for a long-distance truck driver. The snarl-ups, they say, can even last a week be-

fore clearing. Other challenges include sexual harassment and risk of being exposed to violence while on the road.

"There is a day I left Mombasa and stayed at the Malaba border for six days. You can see Uganda is a few metres away but you stay there for a week; a distance you can walk for less than six minutes," says Ms Ng'ang'a.

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

The programme aims at encouraging women to join the trucking industry by equipping them with relevant road safety skills coupled with defence training but with a special focus on heavy goods vehicles.

A study by the World Bank and the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure in 2020 showed that many women, though equipped with relevant skills, shy away from exploring the trucking industry as a possible source of employment due to a gross misconception that it 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 points to discrimination and unequal treatment at work as other key issues in the trucking industry preventing women from pursuing careers in the sector.

Balancing family and work is another area where women truck drivers find it tough to deal with. The women have to contend with only off-days and leave to be close to their children.

Ms Ng'ang'a says sometimes it is hard being away from family, especially if one has a young child as the maternity leave is not long enough.

She currently has a two-year-old child whom she had to leave with a house help at only six months after having to take another three months of unpaid leave to at least breastfeed the baby. At one point, thoughts of quitting crossed her mind.

"It is sometimes difficult being separated from the family but it is work. You feel bad in the first days when the child is young. There is a time I almost quit after I was called and I could hear my child crying in the background. I felt like leaving and going back to look after the child," recalls the mother of three.

"I have to prepare the children that I am travelling with so you leave with them everything until you come back," she adds.

The same scenario plays out for Ms Kariuki who has been forced to leave her two children with her mother as she has to be separated from them for at least one week, the duration of most of her trips.

Then there is negative perception

that the women are there because of being favoured and not on their own merit.

"I am lucky I am married to a truck driver but there are those men who say they cannot marry a female truck driver. Most do it just to get under your skin," avers Ms Kariuki.

Ms Ng'ang'a says that the negative perceptions have seen a larger percentage of female truck drivers either being unmarried or being single mothers.

"Those married are very few because of the negative perception men have about the profession. They think you will be selling your body. Yes, there are some who do so but it depends on an individual," she says.

But the women say such perceptions are backward as truck driving is a profession that should not be defined by one's gender.

"If my daughter tells me she wants to be a truck driver then I cannot stop her because it is a good career that I can recommend to anyone," says Ms Napirio.

Ms Jane Wangari, the head of Health, Safety and Environment and Geocycle Director at Bamburi Cement, says there is a need to make the industry more accommodating to women.

She points out a partnership with North Star Alliance to improve safety on the highways to have stops with facilities like washrooms, eating places, toilets separate for men and women, safety briefings.

Also, they give women lighter duties as they approach delivery and absorb them back after their maternity leave as opposed to the past where some companies would kick them out of employment after getting to a point where they cannot drive due to pregnancy.

"With us, when a woman reaches a point where she cannot drive, then they are given alternative duties like clerical work or modify their duties then after the three months' maternity leave, we get them back," she says.

Ms Wangari explains that statistics have shown that women drivers tend to be safer drivers, more loyal and take care of their trucks better than their male counterparts.

Further, they deliver their loads on time, treat customers well and present themselves well, with most transporters reporting that they have managed to reduce the cost of maintenance and fuel consumption for their fleet managed by women.

"This helped other transporters to change the perception and appreciate there are benefits when dealing with women. We now have our own data where we can say with conviction that women drivers are actually safer drivers than the male counterparts and so give them a chance or opportunity," she says.

Grace Wanjiru Ng'ang'a at the Bamburi head office in Nairobi on Tuesday.
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