

# 'What a man can do, I can do'

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It is approaching midday and the four of us are about to start setting up our equipment when a female construction worker approaches us and asks if we are there to watch her.

The worker has just dismantled a bicycle and is coming from buying ingredients for *m'memo*, contributory lunch for a bigger group synonymous with construction sites.

We, again, ignore the construction worker and continue to read our still and video cameras, inwardly dismissing her as one of those who hanker after publicity for the sake of it.

But the construction worker piques our interest when she says she is employed as a grader operator and that meant at present, the only woman in Malawi who can perform such a task.

"Are you serious?" We ask in unison. Suddenly she wears a safety helmet and a reflective vest over a white T-shirt.

"My grader is there, just give me a little time," the woman says, pointing at a construction vehicle standing about 100 metres away.

Ten minutes later and just as she said, we see her behind the wheel of a 23-tonne Komatsu grader,



PHOTOGRAPH: GOSPEL MUBWALANDA

**Mazalo at work levelling the ground**

changing gears as she drives it backward and forward, levelling the ground in the sweltering heat.

"What a man can do, I can do," she challenges, leaving us speechless as she alights from the grader.

Talk of Malawian women who are breaking taboos, doing jobs that were previously associated with men and the list would be incomplete without Rhoda Mazalo on it.

Mazalo, 49, is one of hundreds of workers

involved in the construction of the 118 kilometre main irrigation canal of the Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP).

This is a 14-year programme covering the period 2018 to 2031 that the Department of Irrigation in the Ministry of Agriculture is implementing with support from the country's development partners.

The Malawi Government, World Bank, African Development Bank, Opec Fund for International

Development and Global Environment Facility are currently financing SVTP.

The project will irrigate 43 370 hectares by abstracting water from the Shire River at Kapichira and conveying it by gravity to the irrigable area in Chikwawa and Nsanje districts through canals.

The objective of the country's flagship irrigation project is to increase agricultural productivity and commercialisation for the 48 400 targeted

households in the Shire Valley.

Construction works on the intake at Kapichira as well as the main canal from the intake to Bangula in Nsanje started in 2018 and are in progress.

SVTP has contracted Conduril Engenharia of Portugal and China's Sinohydro Corporation Limited. The contractors have employed both skilled and unskilled workers on the multibillion-kwacha project.

Among the workers are Malawian women performing different jobs.

However, some female workers are drawing people's attention because they are doing jobs that society considers masculine.

Licals in Chikwawa, where construction of the canal started, often marvel at Mazalo who works for Sinohydro Corporation Limited and sometimes crowd around her, not believing their eyes.

"It is the first time we are seeing a woman operate a grader," one elderly woman says, referring to Mazalo. "We are used to seeing only men driving heavy construction vehicles."

A single mother of four, Mazalo says one are the days when some jobs were considered a preserve for

men, adding "I believe that whatever a man can do, a woman can also do."

She advises women to stop vying for white collar jobs only, but to also go for jobs available outside the office that people think are for men.

Mazalo, who is one of 380 workers at Sinohydro's Main Canal 2 (MC 2) camp, exudes such confidence that she is not covered by male drivers who are in majority.

"Let us not look down on ourselves. We are as good as men or sometimes even better when it comes to performance in these supposedly male jobs," she says.

A female driver who worked for the then public transport company, Stagecoach, may not have known it, but the sight of her driving the company's buses in the early 1990s was an inspiration to Mazalo.

"A female Stagecoach bus driver who used to ply between Lilongwe and Blantyre inspired me. I was married and living in Lilonde at the time," she says.

But as fate would have it, as Mazalo was contemplating to follow in her footsteps, she learned that the Stagecoach bus driver had died from chest-related complications.

The chest pains reportedly developed as a result of driving big vehicles and it was said that the deceased was not supposed to drive buses, being a woman.

Says Mazalo: "People discouraged me from pursuing my ambition, saying I would meet the same fate."

Initially, Sinohydro was reluctant to employ Mazalo given the nature of work she was to do. But when she started working, they did not regret their decision to employ her.

MC 2 Camp human resource assistant Yamikani Msusa vouched for Mazalo, describing her as a hardworking woman who knows her job well.

"We have had no complaint so far from her supervisor about her work. We have not heard about any problem with either her performance or discipline," Msusa says. ■

## **AYOBE**



**Ralph Mawera**