

Women in the driver's seat

A Ghanaian oil-supply company with a strong female focus is to set up its own gas-station network.

As the first – and for the moment – only indigenous company supporting the upstream sector of Ghana's newly discovered oil industry, the UBI Energy Group is determined that Ghanaian women will be among the chief beneficiaries of its efforts.

This focus is understandable as UBI's chief executive Salma Okonkwo is a 39-year-old Accra-born, U.S.-educated woman who is well on the way to becoming "Mrs Oil" in Ghana.

Having graduated from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and working initially in the U.S., Okonkwo returned to her roots in Ghana and joined one of the big companies in the Sub-Saharan oil sector before establishing the UBI Energy Group in 2007.

Her company handles the procurement, storage and distribution of petroleum products throughout the country and provides oil exploration and production companies with marine gas oil which they use to run their rigs and generators, and to fuel their supply vessels.

UBI also has an extensive clientele base outside the oil industry, servicing clients in the telecommunication, manufacturing, mining and construction sectors to mention a few. In essence, UBI provides fuel to any company that needs it. "I can supply them with an uninterrupted supply of fuel, which is crucial to most companies that come in," says Okonkwo. "If they don't have fuel for a day, the rigs shut down and that amounts to huge losses."

Launching UBI was a challenging undertaking, she says. Obtaining financing and convincing people of the company's prospects was very taxing. She lists as the company's core focus points the provision of unparalleled service to its clients; enabling young Ghanaian men as well as women to enter the workforce; and ensuring that the company's activities are environmentally friendly.

In keeping with the last point, UBI is pioneering the installation of fiberglass fuel-storage tanks that prevent leakage and ensure that land remains uncontaminated.

UBI is now surfing a wave of expansion in Ghana's emerging oil sector and diversifying into related services. In addition to distributing oil-derivative products to the international giants, the company intends to provide a point-of-entry service to companies arriving in Ghana, and to set up its own gas-station network to fuel the



nation's transport sector.

"We want to go to the hinterland, where people do not have access to gas stations, and provide them with the kerosene they need for cooking and lighting," says Okonkwo. "The government encourages the use of LPG

for cooking but there is not enough to get to the hinterland. Building small retail outlets close to villages is our way of giving back to the community," she says.

Combining branding the UBI name with providing a social service, the company plans to create bus stops in villages and furnish them with drinking fountains carrying the company's logo for the benefit of passengers.

Okonkwo was the fourth of seven children in a family for whom, she says, mediocrity was not an option. "The family put a lot of pressure on us and somehow it has helped us," she says.

UBI is strongly committed to charity activities and recently co-sponsored a polo tournament to benefit a local foundation seeking to promote cancer awareness. The company recruits its staff fresh from college and trains them in professional practices.

Separately, Okonkwo has created an organization to assist young women between the ages of 14 and 25 on how to make career choices. "We are going to teach them how to take care of themselves and not depend solely on men," she says. "We will give them principles on ethics, advice on how to dress, etiquette and when to say yes and when to say no."

Explaining her emphasis on the role of women, Okonkwo does not mince her words. "We are coming from a culture that is male-dominated. But Ghanaian women have always been working women. You often see men in groups sitting down doing nothing. You will never see women like that, unless they are taking a break from a hard job they have just finished."

Although she has faced multiple personal and professional challenges including blatant gender discrimination, she refuses to play the role of victim. "As a business woman you continuously have to deal with chauvinistic comments and attitudes. It happens to me a lot but I just brush it off."

UBI has increased its return on its investment and, having started with just two employees, now has 33. "Women account for 90 percent of our staff and most of the management are female," she says. "But 10 percent are men because they are needed to do the hard work. The women cannot keep climbing tanks. The men can do that!" ♦