

A woman in a man's world – female used oil collector celebrates a decade of success

Jemimah Mofokeng is proving that women can indeed conquer typically male dominated jobs. Jemimah is the owner and operator of Jemimah's Oils, and spends her days collecting used motor oil.

Used motor lubricant is dirty, hazardous stuff. One litre of used oil, containing cancer causing carcinogens and harmful compounds, can contaminate one million litres of water. In South Africa about 350 000 million litres of oil is used every year in machinery and vehicles. While a certain amount of the oil is used up in the tools and machines it lubricates, 120 million litres of collectible used oil is generated annually. This has given rise to an industry that sees South Africans making a living by going out and collecting this used oil and transporting it to refineries to be recycled.

Jemimah, who is a single mother, started her oil collection business ten years ago and says that despite it being a tough and competitive industry, she has managed to make a sustainable living for herself and her children. "While I have seen many male oil collectors come and go in my industry, I have stuck it out and persisted. I have worked hard and do my best for my family. I work with a dedicated heart and a committed soul - I refuse to be conquered."

According to Jemimah one of the biggest hurdles she encountered initially was start up capital to get going. "Getting funds together to start a business can be a major barrier. Also as a women I received my fair share of criticism for wanting to enter what is seen as a "mans world"." And whilst she has made a success of oil collection it is not without its ongoing challenges for this brave woman who says that the physical side of oil collecting can be taxing. "Don't underestimate the physical demands of doing this job! Over the years I have hired people to help me and they all find the work too hard so don't stick it out for long. I mostly go out their alone to collect oil."

Being alone on the road presents another set of challenges for a women, and Jemimah says she does need to be careful about safety – especially when working with money.

"Used oil collectors often go around carrying cash to pay for the oil we collect from the small workshops, who do not have electronic machines, so it's can be a very risky job for a woman on her own. I try to minimise this risk by doing electronic payments to my clients so that I don't carry cash at all – that makes you less of a target."

But all said and done, a decade later and Jemimah is going strong and is a registered used oil collector with the ROSE Foundation (Recycling Oil Saves the Environment) "I like knowing that in the years I have been collecting oil I have not only continued to provide for my children but I have contributed to keeping the used oil out of our environment."

The collection and recycling of used oil is an environmental priority – and is required by law through regulations laid down in the Waste Act. It is essential to ensure that it is not being poured into drains, onto the ground, painted onto poles, used as a dust suppressant or dumped into landfill with domestic refuse –practices which allow used oil to pollute the environment.

The ROSE Foundation (Recycling Oil Saves the Environment) has successfully been driving the collection and recycling of used oil for 25 years – championing the collection of over 1.5 billion litres in this time. The organisation's collector membership base operates all around South Africa, collecting and transporting used oil to refineries for proper processing and recycling.

“ROSE collectors such as Jemimah are the heroes of the industry,” says Bubele Nyiba, CEO of ROSE. “They are the ones who go out there and collect every possible drop of used oil that could damage the environment – it's hard, messy work, but they are making a difference.”