

WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINE

Women on the Frontline is a new section that explores what it is like to be a woman working in the oil industry. This section will examine the issues particular to women in our industry and will strive to inspire young women by sharing the learnings of their more experienced peers.



LINDA STUBERG



MARIE VAN STEENE



NOOR SHABIB



NOREENA AHMAD MURAD



WEIJIA LI

CONQUERING THE FIELD

Marie Van Steene, Editor, Women on the Frontline

In this first article, we explore the experiences of women working in the field. The contributors to this article all worked in the field and have since moved within their company to office positions.

Linda Stuberg is from Norway and spent her field days in Indonesia. She now works in Malaysia as a geophysicist. Weijia Li is from China and, after her field career in India, is now working in China as a sourcing manager for one of Schlumberger's manufacturing centers. Noor Shabib is from Saudi Arabia and worked in the UAE, India, and Australia. She just completed her MBA from Oxford University. Noreena Ahmad Murad is from Malaysia and spent her field career in her home country. She is now operations support engineer in Egypt. Finally, I (Marie Van Steene) am from Belgium and worked in field operations in Australia, New Zealand, and India. I am now a petrophysicist working in Egypt.

I had always dreamed to work in the field. At university, the brochures that the oil and gas companies used to distribute to students had pictures of drilling rigs in the middle of the ocean and of young men and women who seemed so up to the challenges of working in the middle of nowhere. I was dreaming of adventures and new landscapes, and I think I got my share of it. But my first assignment in Darwin, Australia, was a bit of an eye opener. Not just because of the wild crocodiles and the tropical

national parks of Northern Australia, but because my expectations were somewhat different from the reality of the oilfield. I thought the company would have big and modern offices downtown. I had packed a couple of suits in my suitcase because that's how I imagined I would be dressed for work. Instead, I found that the Darwin base was a small yard in an industrial neighborhood and that the offices were set in a few shacks. Needless to say, my suits stayed in the closet.

After university, it is hard to imagine what you will be up against if you have never set foot in the oil patch. "I think I didn't really know exactly what to expect before I went to the field," says Stuberg. "It was all new and pretty amazing. I had however had an internship when I was a student. I was working as a vacation field trainee one summer in Bakersfield, California. I was not allowed to do much, not even go up to the drill floor. However, at least it prepared me." Vacation training is a good way to know if a field job is going to be suiting your expectations. It is also a good way for companies to know you and eventually offer you a job if the training is successful.

Adapting to the job will also mean adapting to a new schedule. Working in the field means spending a lot of time at the wellsite. Li says of her schedule: "Vadodara [in India] was a land location. I was working 7 days a week with two to three weeks off every three months. The engineers are project-based, so normally I go for three jobs in a month for my client, which normally accounts for around 10 days. For the remote projects, such as

the one in Rajasthan [one to two days drive], the whole team needed to stay at the wellsite for several weeks, normally at the client camp or a little local hotel. For me, those days are shining in my memory.' Schedules can vary widely from one location to another. When joining the oilfield, be prepared to be flexible.

It is very likely that field employees will spend some of their assignment outside of their country of origin. It will be necessary to adapt quickly to a new culture, a new language, even new food. For me, the biggest adaptation was the language. My English was rather rudimentary when I started. I would not understand a word of what my colleagues were saying during the "smoko" breaks, because they were speaking in their colorful Australian dialect. "My biggest adaptation was the culture," says Shabib. "I am of Middle Eastern descent, and grew up in a conservative Arabic country, where there is limited male-female interaction. I went from one extreme to another. I was assigned to an Arabic country at first and the men on the rig there were not used to interacting with a woman. I had to become less shy, more social, and, most importantly, not take things personally and learn to let things go."

Although it is more and more common to find women in the field, it is still a male-dominated environment and women can expect some initial curiosity from their male counterparts. "Most guys would show quite a lot of interest when they see a woman on the rig, for the mere reason of it being uncommon,

if nothing else," says Shabib. "After they get over the initial politeness and being extra-nice to you, they want to get back to work. There are two categories in which a woman is placed. Is she A—the hardworking engineer who knows what she is doing? Or, is she B—the dainty young lady who does not want to ruin her manicure? The guys are quick to judge which type you are, and once the verdict is out the news spreads fast across the rig. You do not have to know how to do everything, but you need to ask and know where to look for answers. And above all, try to be confident. Easier said than done, I realize." As with any job, some time is necessary to adapt. A professional attitude will quickly earn the respect of the new colleagues.

The attitude of men toward women is usually quite positive in the field. "It was not easy to begin with but once you start working and they learn to trust you, they become very supportive," says Murad. "Most of the men were nice, and I did not have many problems," says Stuberg. "I know I was the one everyone talked about and looked at; the center of attention so to speak. My safety meetings were immensely popular, so in one way it was easier to get people's attention when needed."

Getting Attention

Shabib shares Stuberg's views: "The stories about crane and forklift operators being more helpful to women are true. You do get things done faster if you are female." So much for the fears of discrimination. Would women actually be experiencing positive discrimination? "On the rig whatever you do is news," says Shabib. "The cooks all knew what I had for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and whether I had vegetables today or not, and I did not mind being spoiled that way. They were very polite and proper. As for negative discrimination, I do not think so. There are rules and regulations against discrimination and they cannot get away with it if it is something obvious."

For Li, discrimination is not necessarily only about gender. "You can always meet different people with different prejudices. Most of the time, it is on the age of the engineer. Clients always want to have an experienced engineer with them ... or at least someone who looks like it. It can be a bit difficult when you are a trainee or new. I would say calm down and work to the standard is the way to conquer it." Many companies have strict rules to deal with harassment

and discrimination in the workplace. At Schlumberger, for example, a specific policy addressing these issues is in place and entitles any employee to raise his/her concerns in a confidential manner.

There will be tough times but there can be a lot of solidarity among rig people. Shabib recalls one of her own experiences. "We were in the middle of having problems. I was in charge and trying to figure out what to do. Luckily, the rig was circulating a kick and we had some time to come up with a solution. The driller came by the logging unit and asked me to come and see something very important. I told him that I could not, and that I was in the middle of a catastrophe. He insisted, so I asked my crew to do a few things while I was gone and went with him. He took me to the fishing spot and said, 'Let's throw a few lines.' I looked at him like he had gone crazy. He said, 'Come on, just a couple.' So I did. After 5 minutes of fishing, he asked, 'Do you feel better?' I actually did, and then I went back to the shack all refreshed and ready to tackle the problems. I met a lot of good people on the rigs, some of whom I am still in touch with today. Moral of the story, take a 5-minute break when the world seems to be falling apart around you, and then try again."

Regarding wellsite accommodations, because of their smaller numbers, women are usually accommodated with a lot of consideration within the limits of what is possible on the rig. If the accommodation does not meet a basic need for privacy, women have the right to request a change. "Most of the time I had the best of what was available," reports Shabib. "Sometimes it was my private room and toilet, other times it was the 'high-class' shared toilet [shared with a tool pusher or important people on the rig]. On land rigs, and because I was working in a conservative Arabic country, I had special treatment in terms of accommodation."

From my point of view, working in the field was a very rewarding experience. It taught me many skills that cannot be acquired on the benches of university or are harder to acquire in an office environment, like working under pressure and around the clock, working as a team, interacting with people of all ages and of very different backgrounds. For Shabib, it was something not to be missed: "It was not only due to the actual field experience, it was due to the opportunity to travel and meet people from all over the world. Although I hated it at the time, being thrown into the deep end has

given me confidence and the ability to tackle any problem. Handling pressure is something I have gotten very good at as well. Given the chance and knowing everything I know, I would go back and do it again. There are many skills I gained from working in the field. The ability to discuss issues with someone with far more experience than myself with confidence and knowhow is one of them."

Start in the Field

So for the young women who are considering a career in the oil industry, the best advice would be to start by working in the field. "Go for it," says Stuberg. "You will get the experience of a lifetime, and in the end you will be very proud of yourself. I know I am! As for working in a male-dominated environment, don't worry. Your crew will take care of you—just treat them nicely and they will be your family. Don't be scared to tell the people who treat you badly to 'Stop it or I'll report you.'"

For Li, her experience in the field was also very valuable. "The three-and-a-half years experience in the field was something totally different from what I had before. The environment I worked in and lived in, the nice people I met, and even the difficult tasks and challenges I had to overcome will stay as beautiful scenery in my mind." Shabib adds a few recommendations: "Talk to other women in the field, or those who were there. Get to understand what is normal and what is not. Do not be pushed into anything. And do not be afraid to bring up a situation that makes you uncomfortable. We work in a very diverse environment, with people from all over the world. Some things may be acceptable in one culture and not in others. Above all, do not let go of your own values and morals, do not change for the sake of being accepted."

Although some concessions will have to be made about lifestyle, starting a career in the field is certainly worth it. Not only does it help to develop skills like teamwork and communication, it also provides a practical understanding of all phases of a well's life. This is a perspective that someone who has never worked in the field will lack. The field is not an environment which is exclusively reserved for males anymore. It will allow determined women to thrive and excel in it too. **TWA**

Please send your comments to Marie Van Steene at mvsteene@slb.com.