At the Vestergaard NMIMR Vector Labs (VNVL) in Accra, Ghana, time moves to the pulse of the three mosquito colonies in the thriving insectary. The working day begins early and often ends late, and Gloria Quarshie is always ready to greet her colleagues with a warm and welcoming smile.

“I am at the front desk bright and early each morning, so I am the first person in the lab that everybody meets,” Gloria says. “When the researchers need anything throughout the day, whether it is supplies or assistance, they come to me first.”

The VNVL is a pivotal hub of research and innovation in long-lasting insecticidal bed nets (LLINs), safeguarding millions from malaria. With the capacity to breed over one million mosquitoes annually, the lab team are in constant demand as their work moves in tandem with the small but deadly insects they tend to.

Gloria is their trusted point of contact to ensure the teams in the insectary, bioassay and molecular labs can devote their time and expertise to what they do best – tending to the mosquitoes that will be used for large-scale testing on the effectiveness of LLINs. She has also stepped in to give hands-on support to the insectary team when there is high demand.

“Mosquitoes scare me because I have seen first-hand the impact they can have on people and communities I care about, spreading malaria through their bites,” Gloria shares. “Fortunately, there are very few mosquitoes flying around the office – ignoring the several thousand of them safely contained in the insectary!”

Gloria Quarshie and Melody Zateh form part of the administrative and facility support team at the Vestergaard Vector Labs in Accra.

Gloria, together with her colleagues Felicia Dorlah and Melody Zateh, form an indispensable lab support unit, handling critical routine tasks at the VNVL such as financial management, supply ordering, and general facility maintenance.

Melody is dedicated to maintaining pristine hygiene in the lab facility and understands the profound impact of her work and the lab's outputs.

"I know how important it is for the lab to be hygienically clean for the research to be accurate and for our scientists to work in a safe environment. I feel like a caretaker for the essential work that is being carried out here every day, enabling the researchers to do their jobs," Melody says.

Felicia leads the maintenance and swift resolution of administrative and infrastructure issues that could disrupt the flow of research – tirelessly ensuring that time is never wasted.

"We have infrastructure and several different types of equipment in the lab, from glass

instruments to high tech machinery. It is my job to ensure everything is kept in running order. If something breaks down or has a fault, I do the due diligence to find the right mechanical expertise or the best replacement urgently, to keep the facility on track," Felicia says.

Driving gender parity in the sciences

These three remarkable women are motivated by dreams of a malaria-free world, that will unlock new opportunities and possibilities for humanity.

For Felicia, "A world free from malaria is a world with more freedom". "And for me, it means a world where we can sleep safely and be happy," adds Melody.

Felicia Dorlah is the Office Administrator at VNVL. She has overseen the lab facility's operations while also pursuing her own education.

As Vestergaard approaches its billionth net milestone this year, continued development of bed nets is more important than ever to drive us towards the malaria-free future described by Felicia and Melody. These women have played an instrumental role in delivering a billion nets that diminish the mosquito threat, and their dedication at the VNVL ensures the next generation of bed nets remains effective against the ever-evolving mosquito vector.

Vestergaard recognises the value of investing in its employees and the benefits this brings to the company's efforts to tackle malaria. The company has supported Felicia and Gloria to complete new degrees, giving them financial support and the flexibility to pursue further education while carrying out their work.

With 10 years of experience and dedication as Office Administrator, Felicia has overseen the lab facility's smooth operations while investing in her professional growth. With the support of Vestergaard, she has completed a two-year degree in Management and Administrative Studies, before returning to study a second course in Accounting and Finance.

Gloria is in the process of completing her second degree in Human Resource Management and has also benefitted from other internal training opportunities to develop professionally.

"Covering for Felicia whilst she was on maternity leave allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of important need for a well-run site, which I apply in my own role," Gloria says. "I know that my presence here, in one way or another, is helping to propel Vestergaard forward in its mission."

The all-female operational support team, along with several female research assistants at the VNVL are part of a growing wave of women entering scientific research fields and building professional career paths. Vestergaard promotes and celebrates the gender-balanced teams at its facilities, with 44% female representation at the VNVL.

Only one in three researchers in Africa are women (UNESCO Science Report 2021). While gender equality remains a challenge in the broader community, Gloria and her team remain

optimistic about the opportunities of tomorrow. “Women are already playing instrumental roles in this field of research, and in the near future, with the right opportunities, they can achieve even greater things than what we are able to do right now,” Gloria says.

Vestergaard’s B Corp certification further solidifies their commitment to transforming the business into a force for good, actively fostering an environment of inclusivity and empowerment that positively impacts the communities we serve.

Melinda Hadi, Director of Market Development & Access, Public Health comments: “Female representation in the African scientific community remains low, but here at Vestergaard, we recognise the pivotal role of gender-balanced teams in fostering innovation and driving progress in our scientific research.”

Duncan Kobia Athinya, Technical Manager, Public Health adds: “By achieving this at the VNVL, we strengthen our ability to do impactful work, develop life-saving vector control tools and create opportunities for women and men in the surrounding communities to thrive in health, professional development, and financial prosperity.”

Paving the way for malaria-free futures

The facility and operations team together with the insectary and lab teams at the VNVL put in place strong foundations for the future of malaria prevention by creating a more resilient and productive research environment delivered through the steady passage of hours.

They each take immense pride in their work and the positive impact they are making. Gloria is particularly motivated by visions of a malaria-free future where public health researchers are freed up to focus on solving other global crises.

Vestergaard and NMIMR joined forces in 2011 to create the Vestergaard-NMIMR Vector Labs (VNVL). Their partnership is committed to strengthening the development of innovative vector control tools for the prevention of malaria in Sub-Saharan Africa.

“One day, when malaria is eliminated, we will be able to build better lives for us and our children. It will improve our quality of life and enhance our economic situation,” Gloria says.

Embodying resilience and determination, the commitment of these women ensures that the VNVL can produce life-saving research that informs the development of vector control tools, leading to safeguarding millions from malaria. With each day they show up to work, they facilitate vital testing and development of insecticide-treated bed nets, paving the way for healthier communities, improved livelihoods, and a future free from the burden of malaria.