

NO LONGER IN THE WILDERNESS

Meet the women challenging stereotypes deep in the bush in Botswana's tourism capital Maun, filling roles conventionally held by men.

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Poling visitors through
the Okavango Delta

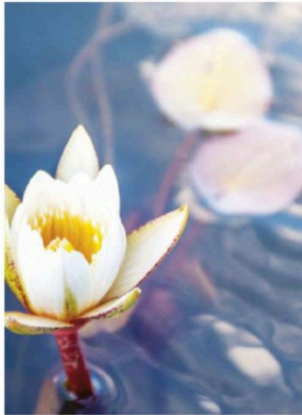
More women are defying stereotypes in the safari industry



FOR 10 YEARS, UNTIL 2018, Botswana had no First Lady, as President Ian Khama was unmarried. Botswana's first First Lady, Ruth Williams Khama, the wife of Botswana's first president Sir Seretse Khama, was recognized for her charitable work with women, and the current First Lady, Neo Masisi, is a champion for these causes too. However, Masisi is also an accountant by profession with an MBA and an impressive resume (United Nations Headquarters in New York, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in the Central African Republic).

But not just on the frontlines, in the deeper realms of this southern African country and acclaimed tourism destination, there are more women defying stereotypes, especially in its famed safari industry.

In the country's tourism capital of Maun, at Kwando Safaris, guests visiting the iconic Okavango Delta waterways and predator plains of the Central Kalahari might be surprised to discover that for over a decade, a majority team of women



have been behind the operation.

"Having so many women work in the company was never a policy; it just happened that way. I guess that women were just more capable," says Sue Smart in her office in Maun.

She talks about her role as the Director of Kwando Safaris for 12 years as an accidental occupation, but a gutsy corporate background primed her for the



head position.

"Coming to Gaborone as a volunteer, I worked with children impacted by HIV/AIDS. Then I visited the Okavango Delta on holiday. A chain of life events eventually led to me working at Kwando Safaris' Kwara Camp, volunteering back of house, in the kitchen, with housekeeping – anywhere they needed it."

Formerly a Director at

PricewaterhouseCoopers, with a background in environmental biology, it was a chance meeting with the owner that saw her grow from volunteer to boss in just three months. "In many ways, I was not a conventional fit for this role. I'm not African, a pilot, a guide, or a man, but my background in other areas meant I could run a business – even in the bush."

Having a woman at the helm has had significant side effects for the company. Many women at Kwando Safaris hold high positions, from the general manager to operations manager to those in reservations to sales and marketing. This unofficial head office policy also extends into the camps in a formal staff management plan, where each lodge has a male and a female camp manager always on duty.

Looking at the origins of tourism in Botswana, it's perhaps not surprising that (generally speaking) travel in southern Africa has been a male-dominated industry. After all, the very first visitors to Botswana's wild spaces were rough and tough gun-slinging, trophy-seeking tourists.

The current CEO of Botswana Tourism is a woman and, attesting to the country's progressiveness, she's not the first either. Myra Sekgororoane is encouraging about women in the industry saying, "I have not



A mokoro is one of Botswana's most iconic travel offerings

encountered any significant challenges because of my gender. Perhaps, I have been lucky in that the hospitality and tourism industry tends to have a high predominance of females globally."

According to *National Geographic*, research shows working women in developing countries invest 90% of their income in their families, compared to the 35% generally contributed by men.

Tumie Mathware and Ruth Stewart, managers for Travel For Impact, wholeheartedly agree. The Maun-based NGO aims to spread the wealth generated from tourism activities into the community, providing a direct and tangible link between conservation and its benefits.

"We want tourism dollars working beyond the traditional tourism world," says Stewart, when we meet for coffee at the charming Tshilli Farmstall, another

female-run establishment in Maun.

Travel For Impact has a powerful goal, with the slogan of "If every tourist who slept in our beautiful country paid 1 USD for every night they spent here, we would raise in excess of 300,000 USD per year".

By partnering with exclusive lodges, camps, tour operators and hotels in Botswana, funds generated are put into local community partners, such as support for basket-weaving cooperatives. Looking at the company profile, the NGO funds many projects that support women. Stewart shares the scientific standpoint endorsed by *National Geographic*, saying: "Women are the backbone of the community. If you support women, it gets passed down. They buy food, school supplies and more. They are the pillars of society."

The corporate social responsibility choice at Kwando Safaris concurs.

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Smart believes that “the ultimate saviors of animals are people, which is why we sponsor the grassroots initiative, Mummy’s Angels, instead of a more usual conservation project”.

Mummy’s Angels started in April 2018, spearheaded by three women in Maun, to empower mothers with newborns who have little by way of financial support.

“We had second-hand clothes and other baby items in good condition and wanted to donate somewhere it would make a difference,” says one founder, Rochelle Katz.

Thus, they put the word out and soon began delivering baby bags stocked with essentials, such as nappies, clothes and wipes, plus pyjamas for the mothers.

“Items that seem so indispensable to us count as luxuries to these moms. Women come from as far as Ghanzi to give birth in Maun, often they have very little with them, or the moms are young without work or funds to support a family,” says Katz on a visit to the maternity wing at Ngami District Health Management Team.

“Luckily, there is no one in need today,” a nurse smiles, as Katz walks in. The local Maun hospital certainly approves of the initiative, which is driven by need rather than imposed, and the nurses on duty identify mothers that can benefit from the meaningful baby bags.

Speaking of children, Bontekanye ‘Bonty’ Botumile is a research student based in Maun specializing in oral traditions and land use. She is also a prolific story-teller.

“I come from a family of story-tellers, and I think maybe because I don’t have children, I needed a channel for my stories. I created books such as *Tlou the Elephant* to share what I’ve learned and to pass on the teachings I learned at home.”

She believes that women are predominantly custodians of culture, passing it onto to children in diverse ways that include story-telling. “My challenge isn’t so much a gender issue, but a sector issue. Carving a niche is hard work. I am trying to develop cultural tourism in a destination renowned for wildlife. It’s a steep incline on many levels.” She is also



ABOUT 20 PILOTS IN MAUN ARE FEMALE, AND I THINK 12 OF US ARE LOCALS TOO.

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an inspiration for others.

“If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t have joined the tourism industry,” says Wabone Temane. Hailing from Moeti Ward in Maun, Temane is the current camp manager for Pom Pom Camp, a luxury stay in the Okavango. She’s been in tourism for almost 20 years but admits to some gender-based challenges.

“As a female manager, I come across people who do not want to be supervised by a woman. They are afraid of change and do not accept criticism easily. They can even change the whole working environment since they are full of negativity and very influential on the other staff. It’s very disrespectful at

times.” However, there is strength in numbers.

“Bontekanye ‘Bonty’ Botumile is my inspiration in the tourism industry. She has always been very supportive and encouraging – a sister, indeed,” she adds.

Camps such as Pom Pom are famed for its forward-thinking environmental policies and sustainability, but the crucial means to access and experience Botswana’s remote landscapes is to fly in.

Ungwang Makuluba is Moremi Air’s first local female pilot. “About 20 pilots in Maun are female, and I think 12 of us are locals too,” she says, when we meet at the Maun Airport.

“The guys I’ve worked with have been very supportive, and I’ve learned so much from them. I think we are past the stage of flying being a male-dominated industry and there’s been gradual change. I want to work for Air Botswana. It’s great flying across the Delta, but I want to work for my country.”

The General Manager of Moremi Air, Kelly Serole, has been in charge for over 10 years, reinforcing the notion that women are not new to the safari scene.

From the sky to the soil, two more women demonstrate this on the ground. Floating through on the waters of the Okavango Delta in a *mokoro* (a traditional dugout canoe) has to be one of Botswana’s most iconic travel offerings, yet, at many high-end lodges, you’ll find its a male guide that steers guests between the tall reeds and yellow-centered waterlilies.

The Okavango Kopano Mokoro Community Trust (OKMCT) early on saw the need to include women in their operations. On an overnight trip facilitated by Delta Rain, Sophie Kehemetswe and Nora Tsaru, pole visitors through the UNESCO World Heritage Site waters of the Okavango Delta.

“More women are poling the rivers now than men; there are many women,” the two agree when asked about the gender split.

“It can be difficult to get the guiding license though. I studied for a month,



which includes a written test and interview. Some old women in the village cannot write,” says Kehemetswe, as she gently poles between the swishing reeds.

A community-run operation, the OKMCT operates in six villages at the southern access points to the Delta, namely Ditshuping, Boro, Xharaxao, Xuoxao, Daunara and Xaxaba. This safari offering started back in 1997, and a visit to head office reveals that women were

included in the operation as early as 1998 – just one year into business.

“I can lead walks on the islands as well. I much prefer walks to the canoeing and seeing zebra is my favorite – that is our national animal. Do you know why? The zebra is black and white reflecting our history. Sir Seretse Khama, a black man, married Ruth Williams, a white woman. All people are welcome in Botswana,” she smiles proudly. The country’s two First Ladies can be proud.

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