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Meet the women changing the way we travel

Ahead of International Women's Day, Sarah Marshall speaks to some of the inspiring female forces shaping our future holidays.

By The Newsroom
Sunday, 7th March 2021, 7:00 am

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Elizabeth Ojo, director of operations is at ALU's School of Wildlife conservation. "There were a few snide and insensitive comments in the beginning about my stamina and tolerance for fieldwork. Thankfully, I was part of a tough team of women and I soon proved my critics wrong."

For too long, so many career fields have been dominated by men. Travel is no exception. From operators designing itineraries, to guides leading tours, few distinguished roles have been easy for women to reach.

All that is changing though, resulting in a far better travel experience for everyone. In celebration of International Women's Day tomorrow, three inspiring ladies leading the charge share their stories and future ambitions.

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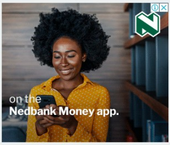
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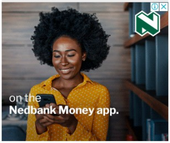

Jonesia ‘Zawadi’ Dominic, safari guide for Asilia Africa’s all-female Dunia camp in Tanzania

As a young girl, did you ever imagine it would be possible to do a job like this?

“A lot of people have the mindset that guiding isn’t a woman’s job, since it is dominated by men. Women are considered too weak, and have certain jobs to do like taking care of children, collecting firewood, cooking, washing and cleaning. But I’ve loved nature since I was little. One day, I went on safari and was inspired by the guide.”

Which parts of your job do you find physically demanding?

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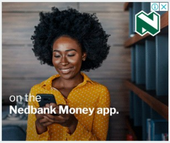

Zina Bencheikh on one of Intrepid's Women's Expeditions, one of the most successful product branches of Intrepid.

"When nature doesn't provide what most of the guests want, it's really difficult. Otherwise, replacing a flat tyre!"

What do male friends and family think about your job?

"A lot of them warned me that I was entering a man's world and some went as far as telling me I wouldn't last long. But luckily here I am; I have proved them wrong and now they are happy and proud of me."

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How do you balance family life with a career?

Zina Bencheikh, general manager of Intrepid Travel's Morocco office, who lobbied to have guide licences issued for women.

"Since my career is based in the bush and family is based in the city, my work does not allow me to spend much time with my family. I call them every day to check if they're OK, and when I go for holidays, I prefer staying at home with my family. But eventually, it will reach a point where I will have to choose between family and career."

What is the biggest challenge to women working in the safari industry?

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"Competition between men and women. Men think they know better, so it's difficult to share information about sightings and what's happening in the wild. It's also hard to prove to the guest that they are going to survive with a female guide."

The inspiring agent

More women travellers want to visit destinations through the eyes of another woman and female guides help break barriers, especially in conservative countries.

Zina Bencheikh, general manager of Intrepid Travel's Morocco office

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What work have you done to increase the number of female guides globally?

"At Intrepid, we operate trips that are guided, so the role of the tour guide is critical for us. It's a key role, but it's mostly dominated by males, especially in my country, Morocco. I lobbied to have guide licences issued for women. As a company, we decided that by 2020, we would double the number of female guides."

What challenges do women face when considering a career as a guide?

"Women in all the countries in my region of the Middle East and North Africa suffer a similar type of cultural barrier. But I could see that there was a new generation coming that was much more open, much more free, much more ready to do new things. In Cambodia, one of our female guides told us her mum had warned her she'd be seen as a prostitute, but she managed to change perceptions by getting her community to understand what she was doing."

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Are men frightened about women stealing their work?

Safari guide Jonesia 'Zawadi' Dominic. "A lot of people have the mindset that guiding isn't a woman's job, since it is dominated by men."

"Early on, I was told many times by guys that we were taking away work from them. But I can tell you now, if you ask them, they will say they're proud of these woman and are supportive of their work. There's an understanding that the more you engage within our group of leaders, the more beneficial it will be for everyone."

How has the experience for female travellers improved?

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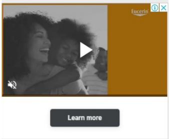

"Since we launched our range of Women's Expeditions, it has become one of the most successful product branches of Intrepid. More women travellers want to visit destinations through the eyes of another woman. There are so many barriers that we can break if we have a woman to help us, especially in conservative countries, where there are a lot of questions around religion and questions around not being able to mix men and women."

How is the travel industry better addressing gender equality?

"In the beginning, 31 years ago, Intrepid was co-founded and owned by two white men. Now, 40% of our board is female, and that's very important. Hopefully we'll get to 50% or even 60% as we grow. But in my opinion, the industry needs to do a lot more work internally."

The game-changing conservationist

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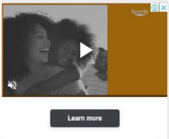

Elizabeth Ojo, director of operations at African Leadership University's School of Wildlife Conservation in Rwanda

What challenges have you experienced as a women working in a male-dominated field of conservation?

"Initially, the absence of consideration for my basic needs. There were a few snide and insensitive comments in the beginning about my stamina and tolerance for fieldwork. Thankfully, I was part of a tough team of women and I soon proved my critics wrong."

Currently, what are the biggest obstacles stopping more women from working in conservation?

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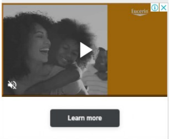

"Firstly, it's hard to juggle marriage, motherhood and career. These competing priorities do lead to a loss of opportunities. Subconsciously, our capabilities are also judged in relation to our male counterparts."

Who are your female role models?

"Helen Gichohi who stepped into a powerful role at African Wildlife Foundation as president when there were even fewer women leading conservation efforts. I also look up to Jane Goodall for her dogged commitment to a cause. No one is perfect, but she blazed a trail where few had dared to go."

How do you balance motherhood with a career?

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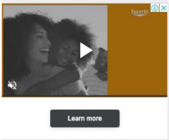

"I try to place value on quality time. This means that when I'm with my daughter in the evening after work hours, I do my best to shut down on emails and work calls."

What words of encouragement would you give to girls wanting to have a career in conservation?

"Persevere. But be aware of statements that seek to promote negative stereotypes about women and address those in a non-confrontational manner as soon as you can. And don't sit back and expect others to call on you for contributions. You have value to add, so don't be shy to do so. Be confident and bold."