

HOW AN ENTIRELY FEMALE-RUN SAFARI PROPERTY IN THE SERENGETI IS SHAKING UP THE STATUS QUO.

By [MARY HOLLAND](#)

March 8, 2019

My guide is easy to spot at the Seronera Airstrip in Tanzania’s Serengeti National Park. Just five feet tall or so, she has bright eyes, a heart-shaped face, and a wide smile. In a sea of male safari guides, she sticks out like a [meerkat popping its head up from an empty plain](#). She runs toward me, hands in the air, shouting, “Karibu, I am Kazawadi! We are so happy to have you here, Mary!”

Jonesia “Kazawadi” Dominic grabs my bag and steers me through the tiny airport towards the vehicle. My first impulse is to seize the other strap of the bag from her. Not because she doesn’t look capable (she is petite, yet sturdy) but because I’m also a woman, and it’s in my nature to want to help another woman. But I allow her to do her job—to carry my bag—as I would expect any male safari guide to do.

Dominic and I are on our way to [Dunia Camp](#), an entirely female-run safari property located in an unfenced part of the central Serengeti. There are 16 women on staff at the eight-room tented camp, who do everything from the typically all-male bastions of security watch, guiding and chasing away animals like black mambas and elephants, to the more commonly female-infiltrated ranks of cooking and cleaning. Dominic bounces into the Toyota Land Cruiser’s driver’s seat, layered with cushions to prop her up. In this male-dominated industry, two women in a vehicle is as rare as a pangolin sighting, and as we drive past trucks with men at the wheel, other safari-goers stare curiously at us. Dominic is totally unfazed, and continues to drive through the muddy landscape.



The team at Dunia Camp. Kathleen Prior/Courtesy Dunia Camp/Asilia Africa

When we arrive at the camp, Angel Namshali is waiting for me with open arms. Namshali has been Dunia's manager since before the camp became all-female in 2016. [Asilia Africa](#), who owns the camp, made the decision to staff the lodge with women because they'd found the right woman to manage it: the incredibly capable, tenacious, and jubilant Angel. She's funny and easygoing, possessing both a no-nonsense attitude and the ability to put others at ease. As the first female Tanzanian camp manager in the Serengeti (at the once male-staffed Dunia) Namshali had displayed powerful leadership.

"In Angel, we had found the woman who could drive this project and see it through. She had long ago proven herself to us," says Jeroen Harderwijk, managing director at Asilia Africa. "We have always aspired to right the gender imbalance in the industry, and we were making progress in an incremental way. We realized we needed a high-profile project that was going to empower women and create role models, not just in Tanzania but across the industry."

The first time I traveled to the Serengeti, I stayed at a typical all-male safari camp. If you've been on safari in Tanzania, you'll know that this is an extremely common and culturally rooted scenario. Like much of East Africa, Tanzania grapples with a deep-seated gender inequality, resulting in fewer opportunities for women in most professions—especially safari tourism. Girls are often denied the opportunity to go to school (because of the travel distances and prices for school extras), or they drop out due to pregnancy. At home, women are typically expected to look after children; violence, child pregnancy, and child marriage are all threats to independence.

According to the [Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations](#), 52 percent of Tanzanian women's time is devoted to reproductive activities, compared to 32 percent of men's. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women 2007 states that Tanzania's "low education levels, lack of qualifications, and patriarchal attitudes limit women's opportunity of being recruited and promoted."

In 2001, though, Tanzania implemented a policy that abolished primary school fees and made enrollment compulsory at age seven. But in rural areas, sending girls to school can be seen as mispending hard-earned money. "Because of the local belief that women will be married into a different family, many people think there's no advantage to educating girls. Why waste the money?" says Dominic. Namshali, who grew up under the slopes of [Mount Kilimanjaro](#), says she couldn't attend university because there was only enough money for her two brothers. She cried for two days. Then she lifted her head, got a job organizing the linen cupboard at a safari lodge in the Ngorongoro Crater, and worked her way up through the ranks, all the way to manager of Tanzania's first female-safari camp.



One of the rooms at Dunia Camp.
Courtesy Dunia Camp/Asilia Africa

“It took me months to decide I was ready for this,” Namshali says. Six months after the executive managers at Asilia suggested the role of manager to her, they returned to see if she was prepared. “I said yes, but only if they interview other women who are ready to work in the bush,” says Namshali. We’re sitting on the deck over a lunch of roast chicken and vegetables, looking onto the luscious, dewy plains of the Serengeti and distant kopjes. “Nobody thought we could do it,” she says with a characteristic giggle. I’ve encountered many memorable male managers at safari camps across Africa, but when I study Namshali interacting with her guests and team, she offers a certain uncommon tenderness and humility. When she talks to her staff, it’s always with the same respectful, friendly tone. “When we first began with an all-female team it was hard,” says Dominic, who often faces challenges like changing a tire in the middle of the Serengeti—even if its pounding rain or there’s a pride of lion nearby. Day-to-day tasks require emotional and physical strength: Everything is run on solar power, there’s no access to shops, and the camp isn’t fenced, so animals can easily walk past the tents. Sometimes the water pipe is destroyed by elephants. “Everyone tried to discourage us!” says Dominic. “They said, ‘Bush life isn’t easy for girls.’ But we’ve shown them we are strong.”

Dominic was fortunate to have parents who supported her decision to become a guide, but most of these women face the utmost adversity—not just from their families and nearby communities, but from other safari guides and guests. Namshali tells me about a male guest who refused to have the female security guard escort him to his room at night, insisting that the male truck driver (who delivers groceries from Arusha and happened to be staying at the camp that night) take him. “I told him that the truck driver won’t know what to do if a lion comes out the bush, but the security guard will,” Namshali says. Eventually, the guest backed down. Dominic tells me how tourists often stop her vehicle and ask if they can take her picture, as though they’ve spotted a lioness.

At home, the challenges continue. Women with children have to rely on family members to support their kids while they're at work, usually for six weeks at a time. But the women at Dunia have created a firm sisterhood in which they can lean on each other for support. "If a car gets stuck in the mud, then we all go together and get it out," Namshali says. When she talks about her co-workers, many of whom had never been to the bush before they were hired, she smiles. "They said, 'Yes, yes, we can.' So we gave them a chance," says Namshali. "I'm so proud of these women. At first they were too scared to walk anywhere without a [flashlight]. Now I have to remind them to take one!"

THEY SAID 'YES, YES, WE CAN.' SO WE GAVE THEM A CHANCE.

On my second day, Namshali, Dominic, and I traverse the great, grassy plains of the Serengeti in search of the migration. We stop the truck when we see two male cheetah prudently stalking a small wildebeest. The one cheetah distracts a larger wildebeest while the other attempts to pounce on the smaller animal, but alas, it's unsuccessful. Next, we see a lone, sick, and hungry lioness, too weak to hunt. Namshali and Dominic explain how that the lioness will waste her limited energy if she tries to make a kill. They also tell me funny stories, like how they once had to chase an elephant out of the camp—all 16 of them. As we thunder through the reserve, we find ourselves in fits of laughter. "We're the three dadas (sisters)!" cries Domenic, from behind the wheel.

When we stop to tell another vehicle about the leopard sighting, we see a lone female traveler sitting on the back seat. She peers down at us with a furrowed brow. It's a look I've gotten used to over the past few days. Namshali turns to the traveler and tells her that we're from a lodge in the central Serengeti. "It's run by females, you should go!" I yelp from the back of the truck. "Why?" asks the woman dubiously. Dominic bears that wide smile of hers and says two words I frequently hear her say, "Why not?"



A central Serengeti migration.
Courtesy Dunia Camp/Asilia Africa

Across the continent, the safari industry is starting to shift, from South Africa all the way up to [Tanzania](#) and Kenya. “It differs from country to country and tribe to tribe, and it also depends on the location of the lodge or safari camp, but the changes are coming,” says Nicky Fitzgerald, founder of [Angama Mara](#) in Kenya and one of Africa’s few female lodge owners. “It’s a deeply cultural matter, so it will take years before women are granted the same educational opportunities as men.”

At Angama Mara, only 20 staff members of 120 are female. “In Maasailand, the women are generally expected to stay home and look after the children, they build their houses and work with their crops,” Fitzgerald says. “I am, however, proud to say we have just promoted one of our three female security officers (out of a team of 22) to assistant security manager.”

Some women who’ve broken into the safari tourism business think of their gender as something of an advantage. At the Tanzania operation of Thomson Safaris, half the managers are women. “It’s perhaps not typical in a patriarchal society but, therefore, even more important,” says Judi Wineland, co-owner of [Thomson Safaris](#). “They are true pioneers, tenacious fighters, keen to succeed. Rose Ngilisho [the Manager of the Camping Department] for example, runs our six safari camps, each of which employs 14 men in hospitality operations as well as supervising her home office team of women. She’s entrepreneurial, resourceful, self-taught and frankly, just extraordinary,” says Wineland. “Women are intuitive and filled with emotional intel,” says Deborah Calmeyer, founder and CEO of safari outfitter [ROAR Africa](#), who believes that women are often more attuned to smaller details. Calmeyer tells the story about how one of her clients mentioned having a headache on a flight. When a female private guide overheard this, she texted the lodge and asked them to have an espresso and aspirin waiting for the guest on arrival.



Angel Namshali, Dunia's manager.
Kathleen Prior/Courtesy Dunia Camp/Asilia Africa



Jonesia "Kazawadi" Dominic.
Kathleen Prior/Courtesy Dunia Camp/Asilia Africa

Chantel Venter, the head guide at [Singita Kruger National Park](#) and who oversees all the guides for Singita's Kruger properties, has witnessed a spike in women infiltrating the industry. "Initially, not all companies were open to the idea of hiring female guides, but this has definitely changed," she says. The sous chef at Singita's Sweni and Lebombo lodges, Tsakane Khoza, has become a star after successfully completing an internship at New York's Blue Hill at Stone Barns. Botswana's [Chobe Game Lodge](#) has an all-female safari guide team known as the Chobe Angels. South Africa's Tswalu has employed more than 75 women, some of whom fill the roles as guides, camp managers, and chefs. [Fireblade Aviation](#), which shuttles guests between camps, has four female pilots. And most daringly, South Africa's Kruger National Park and Zimbabwe's lower Zambezi Valley have [entirely female anti-poaching units](#), who head out into the bush on foot every day.

For Asilia, the all-female team at Dunia has been an unequivocal success. "We really feel it's worked and we are keen to roll out more camps. It's been an amazing exercise externally, but also internally, as we have really changed the thinking of a lot of our colleagues," says Mercedes Bailey, who handles PR and brand building for Asilia Africa.

On my last night, sitting around the hissing camp fire with the distant sound of whopping hyenas, Dominic, Namshali, and I talk about how, if they want to see more women in the industry, they have to continue the fight. Dominic recalls the day a male safari guide almost refused her help when his truck got stuck in the mud. When she asked if he needed a hand, he laughed: "Do you really think you can do it?" And she responded pragmatically: "Do you need my help or not? Just say yes or no."

When he eventually agreed, she hauled the tow rope out the trunk, tied it to his car and successfully pulled him out of the mud. The guests on the vehicle were in shock. "I knew I could do it," she says. "Why not?"