

Primates & people

Sue Watt explores the role of women in Uganda, sharing the stories of three inspiring trailblazers working to help the communities living alongside the gorillas of Bwindi

Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in south-western Uganda is renowned for being home to half the world's population of majestic mountain gorillas, attracting thousands of visitors every year and millions of dollars in tourist revenue. But the region is also home to communities still living in poverty despite that tourism influx. On a recent visit, I wanted to explore Bwindi beyond the gorillas and met three inspiring ladies working to improve the lives of local people. Women, in particular, have a raw deal here, bearing the burden of bringing up the family, tending the fields and putting food on the table. They've had little opportunity to empower themselves through education or earning an income in these traditional, male-dominated cultures. But, thanks to projects such as these, times are changing: women are slowly but surely finding their voice.

Lydia Nandudu Nkuringo Youth Initiative Foundation

Lydia is the proud owner of Nkuringo Bwindi Gorilla Lodge in the south of the park: for two years running, it's won the Travel Awards' accolade of Uganda's Leading Safari Lodge. A savvy businesswoman and qualified social worker, her passion is to help women and young people help themselves, empowering them through tourism to improve their lives.

One of five sisters, Lydia, 34, praises her mother for her own success. "Dad never saw a future in us girls but Mum worked hard to put us through school. She was our unsung hero; she never let society define her. She gave her daughters the education she never had."

Lydia's breakthrough into tourism occurred in 2007 when she met Robert Brierley, a British man who employed her to research his online travel guide to Uganda. The following year, they became business partners, taking on a backpackers' campsite, which she eventually transformed into the beautiful award-winning lodge. They also established Nkuringo Walking Safaris, employing local guides for tourists wanting to explore Bwindi's fairy-tale forest on foot.

When Brierley died in 2014, Lydia took on the business herself. "My team, 80 per cent of whom are now women, were scared when Rob passed on but I encouraged them to give me their best and I would do my best. They inspire me with their dedication."

Because of her social-work background, Lydia was determined that her business would benefit community development through sustainable grass-roots projects. Recognising the lack of opportunity for locals, her focus was on inspiring disadvantaged women and young people to develop skills that would enable them to help themselves through tertiary and vocational training, earning an income rather than being dependent on handouts.

Hence the Nkuringo Youth Initiative Foundation was born. It gives young people the chance to train in skills such as producing honey, oyster mushrooms, coffee and tea with funding from the lodge and guest donations. Through

the Nkuringo Crafts Project, the lodge also sells their beautiful crafts ranging from carvings and brightly coloured paintings to baskets and jewellery.

Her latest initiative is the recently opened Robert Brierley Community Centre, where men and women are being trained as seamstresses to provide soft furnishings to lodges and their guests. They're also developing Beauty Kitchen workshops on making oils, organic soaps and products from ingredients they can grow themselves such as avocado and rosemary.

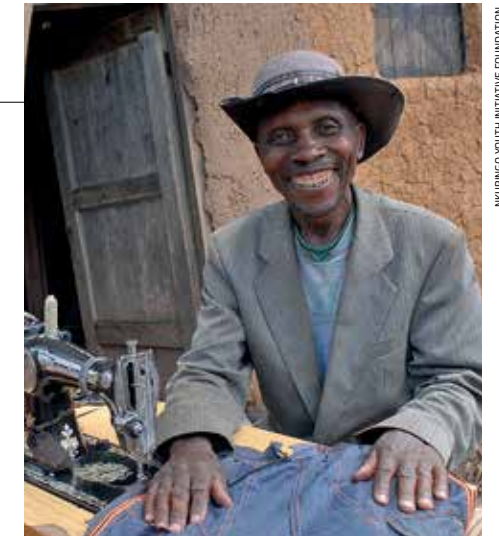
"The women are very happy making beauty products with things from their own gardens, and they know through tailoring that they'll be able to dress, feed and, most importantly, educate their children," Lydia explained.

"My school motto was: 'A girl trained, a nation trained.' If women have incomes, they'll send their daughters to school and they, in turn, will educate their daughters. I saw their excitement when we opened the centre: the ladies are embracing this as their salvation."

■ **Further reading** Visit mountaingorillalodge.com. →

NKURINGO SAFARIS

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INKURINGO YOUTH INITIATIVE FOUNDATION



Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka Conservation Through Public Health

JO-ANNE MCARTHUR

From the age of 12, Gladys knew she wanted to be a vet. Encouraged by her mother, one of Uganda's first female parliamentarians, she qualified from London's Royal Veterinary College in 1995.

When she returned home, Gladys became Uganda Wildlife Authority's first ever wildlife vet. "It was exciting but scary," she smiled. What she lacked in experience, she made up for in passion and enthusiasm. "They had confidence in me and that gave me confidence."

In 2000, Dr Gladys discovered the first confirmed case of scabies spreading from human to mountain gorilla. A young gorilla had died of the disease, which was traced to dirty rags on a scarecrow. It thrives on poor hygiene and Gladys wanted to educate communities to improve the health of people, livestock and wildlife: all three are interdependent.

She founded Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH) in 2003. CTPH monitors the condition of gorillas by analysing faecal samples at their Gorilla Health and Community Conservation Centre in Buhoma, which tourists can visit. Nearby, they have a budget campsite and guesthouse whose profits are poured back into conservation. Crucially, CTPH educates locals living alongside the gorillas about hygiene, sanitation, nutrition and family planning. Their Village Health and Conservation Teams, with 84 volunteers, hold community meetings and visit homes to discuss health issues, monitor infectious illnesses, and essentially encourage a healthier life.

The third string to CTPH's bow is to assist with alternative incomes for people to deter them from poaching. Their latest

initiative is a cooperative of 75 people with a history of poaching, now producing Gorilla Conservation Coffee for sale in Uganda and expanding to international markets. Their work in Bwindi is reaching 25,000 people in 44 communities and is spreading to other wildlife areas. "When I first started, women weren't expected to be out in the bush. The field of veterinary medicine and wildlife conservation in Uganda is still male dominated," Gladys explained. "But I've faced relatively few problems; I've always been taken seriously because I take myself seriously."

As mother of two boys, raising children while working in the field was perhaps her biggest challenge. "Women in conservation face greater pressures than men, juggling parenting with a demanding career, and so have to try harder to balance work and family life."

Gladys has won many awards, most recently a Golden Jubilee Award on International Women's Day 2017 from Uganda's president for her work as a veterinarian and conservationist. She has mentored many young women entering her profession and those working with CTPH, where half the volunteers are female. "They've become conservation leaders in their communities," she said proudly. Gladys herself was inspired by renowned primatologists Jane Goodall and Biruté Galdikas. "Biruté told me: 'Follow your dreams and the rest will follow.' Today, I pass that advice on to the young women I meet."

■ **Further reading** Visit ctph.org.



Women in conservation face greater pressures than men, juggling parenting with a demanding career, and have to try harder to balance work and family life



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A toddler of the Mubare group of mountain gorillas in Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest; a Conservation Through Public Health sign, with some of the organisation's sponsors listed below; a man from Conservation Through Public Health educates local people on family planning. **OPPOSITE:** Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka





Evelyne Habasa Ride 4 A Woman

Born and bred in Buhoma, the gorilla-tracking hub of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Evelyne channels her passion, energy and genuine warmth into her organisation Ride 4 A Woman (R4W). Helping to empower more than 300 women in the area, she provides training, microfinancing, English tuition and – unusually in Uganda – a sanctuary for victims of domestic violence.

I come from a poor background,” she told me. “My mother owned only one dress. She would wear it every day and wash it overnight – all the money she earned, she put towards our schooling. She always said to me: ‘One day, I hope you’ll come back to this community and help these women.’”

That’s exactly what she did. In 2009, Eve and her husband Denis Rubalema trained women as bike mechanics, setting up a bicycle rental business for tourists wanting to cycle around the area. Three years later, the project branched into a sewing programme following a chance meeting with three Australian tourists who suggested they make quality products using African textiles that visitors could buy for souvenirs. The Bwindi Women’s Community Centre was built as R4W’s base. Today, it’s a thriving hive of industry selling all kinds of brightly coloured products from gowns to iPad covers.

Constantly evolving to find new ways of empowering women, R4W runs a successful microfinancing scheme to help them set up their own businesses. They’re trained in ‘sack gardening’ (growing nutritious produce that doesn’t require masses of land), learn English, perform cultural dances and run a cheerful guesthouse and café for tourists.

Aptly called Mwebesa, meaning ‘the house that helps you forget your worries’, the guesthouse also functions as a short-term refuge for women suffering domestic violence, sadly a frequent occurrence in rural Uganda. With the income from tourists, R4W provides clothing, food and counselling for victims and a safe place to stay until differences are resolved.

Eve explained the challenges of running R4W: “When I started championing women’s empowerment, because of male chauvinism, people thought I was creating a revolt. Men’s egos were threatened; they thought they were losing control of their women. We try to ensure that we create unity within the community and encourage women to tell their husbands what they’re doing and how they’re benefiting the family. Over time,



views have changed. People now accept that we’re here to help the community and not to destroy families within it.”

Much of R4W’s funding comes from visitors who, impressed by what they see, become long-term donors. “Sometimes I feel blessed,” Eve told me. “You talk to people and they believe in you. That’s very special. I want people to be happy. I want to change lives.”

■ **Further reading** Visit ride4awoman.org.

Sue Watt travelled to Uganda with the help of Steppes Travel and Uganda Tourism UK. To read more about initiatives such as these, go to visituganda.com.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: One of many women benefiting from participation in one of Ride 4 A Woman’s projects; the organisation’s centre in the village of Buhoma; a selection of vibrant items handmade by the Ride 4 A Woman team, which are available to buy at the Buhoma establishment. **OPPOSITE:** Evelyne Habasa, founder of Ride 4 A Woman