

# Journal of African Elephants

SPOTLIGHTING THE PLIGHT OF AFRICA'S ELEPHANTS



NEWS

## How One Woman Escaped Her Violent Marriage To Join The World's First All-Female Anti-Poaching Force

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By Dominic Smithers, LADBible



Nyaradzo Hoto was just 20 when, with no money and nowhere to go, she was forced to drop out of school and get married.

Over the next two years, she suffered at the hands of her violent husband; enslaved by his family, forced into hard labour, and used as a punch bag during his drunken fits of rage.

But while she feared she may never escape her 'prison', Nyaradzo told LADbible how she gained the courage to find her voice and is now part of an elite squad in Zimbabwe, fighting to protect the world's most endangered animals from extinction.

"My parents did not have enough money for me to continue at school," the 28-year-old says. "I was forced to drop out.

"In desperation, I chose to get married. There was no other option for me to survive.

"I was forced into hard labour, day in, day out, with nothing in return. A slave for him and his family.

"My husband was physically violent. He used to slap and kick me, coming home drunk late at night and beating me.

"I always wished to be a dignified and respected woman, to have a career and help build a good life with my husband, but it never happened.

"He didn't allow me to have a career. I could never dream."

In Africa, Nyaradzo says, women are second-class citizens, to be seen and not heard. Divorce is 'something men do'. The prospect of leaving her husband and starting a new life seemed beyond impossible.

No one would listen; so she said nothing. "I never told my parents about the abuse I went through," she confesses.

"Most Africans tend to take domestic abuse for granted. Divorce is out of the question. In the end, you're forced to accept the harsh and painful conditions for the rest of your life."

Eventually, somehow, she found the courage to break the chains of her brutal marriage, and escape the servitude she had been forced into by her husband. She tells me: "It wasn't easy. It was difficult for me to finally



decide to move out of marriage. Back to an even more uncertain and vulnerable position.

“It was painful, but I told myself that nothing great comes easy and nothing easy is ever great.”

Following her father’s death, Nyaradzo returned home, where she spent the next three years caring for her family of eight. That was until she came across an advert in her community centre looking for women try out for a new team of rangers.

Unnamed at the time, it would go on to be called Akashinga (The Brave Ones), the world’s first armed, all-female anti-poaching force, which takes women who have suffered indescribable acts of violence and torture, and gives them a new life.

It’s the brainchild of Damien Mander, a former Australian special forces sniper, who spent three years on the front line in Iraq before leaving the military and moving to Africa as private contractor. He is now the CEO of the International Anti-Poaching Foundation (IAPF), which works to protect the world’s most vulnerable animals.

“When I first moved to Zimbabwe in 2009,” he tells LADbible, “it had the lowest life expectancy in the world for a woman.

“For this reason, when we initially scoped the program we decided to create opportunities for the most marginalised.

“The 87 women that came to that first selection were all survivors of serious sexual assault, domestic violence, AIDS orphans, single mothers and abandoned wives. Sex workers as well.

“This criteria has carried through the program as we go forward.”

One of those selected to be part of this elite squad was Nyaradzo.

“It was a once in a lifetime breakthrough,” she says. “The training for Akashinga was so tough, but it was an eye-opening experience.

“This was what I was born to do. As a woman, I was focused on using Akashinga as a tool to fight my battle towards a better life.”



After surviving the gruelling training, she joined up with just 15 other women at Phundundu Wildlife Area, a huge 115 square-mile expanse that has been ravaged by poaching. Here, 8,000 elephants have been killed in the last 16 years. It's from here that Nyaradzo started her new life tracking down those attempting to make money from the planet's most vulnerable animals. On over the past three years, Akashinga has made more than 190 arrests and helped reduce the level of elephant poaching in Zimbabwe's Lower Zambezi Valley by 80 percent.

"I'm not scared of arresting poachers," she says. "Because if we don't stop them, nothing will be left.

"Animals can't speak, so it is now my responsibility to rise and stand firmly to save their lives. I have nothing to fear. Saving animals is now my first priority.

"All of the success we have had and the arrests we have made have cleared any fear and empowered us so that nobody can stop us.

"I can't tolerate cruelty towards animals. If poachers hunt my animals, I will catch them."

And it's a combination of their fearlessness and subtle approach that Damien says has caused Nyaradzo and her fellow rangers to be a success; they are 'the bridge that brings communities together'.

He tells us: "The old proverb, familiar around these parts of Africa, tells a tale of the 'cold shoulder' that communities feel from colonial style fortress conservation: When the child is not embraced by the village, they will burn it down to feel its warmth.

"On a continent that will have two billion people by 2040, it will be the people that decide the future of conservation in Africa. Not bigger fences and more guns.

"A small group of women seem to have achieved what armies and entire police forces often find impossible – the age-old cliché of winning the hearts and minds of local communities."

With that in mind, it's hoped that by the end of the year the number of Akashinga's rangers will rise to 320 – and 1,000 by 2025 – allowing them to cover more ground and save more animals from harm. Phundundu



Wildlife Area borders 29 communities, and Damien says that the focus on women from the region, as opposed to men from 'far afield', means they are able to empower people to take ownership of the land and benefit financially.

He said: "The area they protect was a former trophy hunting reserve, left to waste as hunting continues to take a downturn in Africa.

"With the approach of being able to employ local women, we are able to invest the same amount into that community every 34 days as what trophy hunting could do per annum."

But achieving this means finding more women who are able to escape from the depths of abuse and inspire others to do the same. Nyaradzo, who is now studying for a degree in conservation, says she couldn't have imagined having a future just a few years ago.

She says: "My job and duty as a ranger has totally transformed my life.

"Arresting poachers, I understand that it is not such an easy job, but if we don't stop them, there will be nothing left for our children.

"Animals can't speak – but we can speak, stand, and raise up a voice to save their lives."

And she now wants other women to join her and find their voice.

"To all the women around the world," she tells me. "All I can say is when you look in the face of hardship, there is no other option but to keep moving forward.

"Don't force yourself to stay in an abusive relationship. There are opportunities out there. A woman can escape exploitation and be free."

Adding: "During our training, we were told to surround ourselves with people that can fly. To dream. When I asked, how do we know who those people are, I was told, 'They are like you Nyaradzo. They are the ones with wings.'

"I am strong today because I have been weak. I am fearless today because I have been afraid. And now I can fly."

