

“A different reality”
A case study of Akashinga
“The brave ones”



source:<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/dec/17/poaching-wildlife-africa-conservation-women-barbee-zimbabwe-elephant-rhino> Retrieved: 12/06/2020

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Abbreviation

IAPF= International Antipoaching Foundation

UNFPA= United Nation Population Fund

S.A= South Africa

1. Introduction

Founded in 2009 by Damien Mander, The International Anti-Poaching Foundation (IAPF) is a nature conservation organization focused on preserving ecosystems in East and South Africa. IAPF “implements programs in strategically positioned areas which promote increased habitat protection and restoration, contributing to national and ecoregion-scale conservation strategies, and the empowerment of indigenous peoples to protect their sovereign lands” (IAPF, 2020). While travelling across Africa, Mander, “an Iraq war veteran who served as Naval clearance diver and special operations sniper for the Australian Defense Force” (IAPF, 2020), was inspired to join the fight against poaching and create a militarized special operations approach in order to protect African wildlife. Upon establishing the IAPF, Mander recruited a team of instructors, many with an extensive background in military and combat situations. They then began searching for local men to recruit in the hopes of training them to be rangers. Mander received a lack of interest from males he approached, and many of the men he managed to recruit failed to complete the rigorous three-day training program. Mander and his small all-male troop were able to stave off poaching in the area which they patrolled, but soon he realized that his tactics were only providing a short-term remedy rather than a successful solution. Evidence shows “that a ‘war on poaching’ approach does not work for conserving wildlife long-term. Instead, community buy-in is key” (Nuwer, 2018). The solution to this, Mander concluded, was local and unempowered women.

Akashinga, meaning “the brave ones,” was created by Damien Mander in 2017 as an operational model of the International Anti-Poaching Foundation. A new method to unite conservation and community, “Akashinga is a community-driven conservation program which trains and empowers disadvantaged women to restore and manage networks of wilderness areas in Africa” (IAPF, 2020). It is the world’s only militarized wildlife conservation model consisting of all-female rangers managing and protecting a nature reserve. The Akashinga rangers protect Phundundu Wildlife Reserve in Zimbabwe’s Lower Zambezi Valley. At its conception in 2017, the program successfully recruited and trained 36 female rangers. Now it employs more than 240. The aim of the Akashinga model is to employ 1,000 female rangers who will patrol 20 parks, more than one million acres, by 2025.

Word was spread to 29 nearby communities that the program was looking to recruit prospective rangers. Mander and his colleagues were searching for women between the ages of 18 and 35. Specifically, Mander was looking for local women “who were victims of sexual assault or domestic violence; who were single mothers or abandoned wives; or who were Aids orphans” (Nuwer, 2018). These women, considered by the IAPF to be disempowered, would be most likely to benefit from the Akashinga model. “Who better to task with protecting exploited animals, than women who had suffered from exploitation?”, Damien Mander stated in an interview for National Geographic. To the IAPF and Akashinga model, men are considered as aggressors and women are seen as oppressed. The aim of the project is gender equality by shifting “the male roles to construction and labour and put women into the power roles of law enforcement, management and decision making” (IAPF, 2020).

Women’s empowerment is a recurring term used in every article and documentary about the Akashinga. By conducting a case study into the Akashinga conservation model, we will investigate the claims made by the International Anti-Poaching Foundation and subsequently produced data that the model empowers women. However, the term is undefined in all related publications. A further problem arises with the term as its meaning is contested and varied across development organizations based on the concept. Especially related to women’s empowerment, “without any clear definition, empowerment has become a vague goal, a fashionable term that is impossible to implement in the field” (Calves, 2009). Those who support the Akashinga model stress the success of the program in facilitating women’s empowerment. Ecologist Victor Muposhi states “this is a true empowerment programme because you are dealing with a highly vulnerable and damaged group of young ladies” (Muposhi, Barbee, 2017). Without a strong definition of women’s empowerment to rely on, positive advocacy for the Akashinga model and how it empowers women could be empty words.

By conducting a case study into the Akashinga conservation model, we will investigate the claims made by the International Anti-Poaching Foundation and subsequently produced data that the model empowers women. In applying the womanist theory to the subject of women’s empowerment, how does the organization and their activities actually facilitate the empowerment of women, if it does at all, in accordance with womanism?

2. On the Subject of Women's Empowerment

In this chapter, we will present the concept of women's empowerment which we will use as the subject within our secondary data analysis. In order to achieve this, we will use two research articles. The first, "Empowerment theory: Psychological, organizational, and community levels of analysis", written by Marc Zimmerman (2000), defines and discusses empowerment at the individual level and applies these to all individuals (men and women, adults and children, etc.). "Empowerment: The history of a key concept in contemporary development", written by Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès (2009), outlines the historical transformation of the subject of empowerment and how this affects modern day women's empowerment. After defining empowerment and, particularly, women's empowerment, we will discuss the theory of feminism; its premise, its global expansion, and its subsequent rejection. This leads into the particular African feminist theory of womanism, which we will apply to the subject of women's empowerment and, once these are connected, the Akashinga model.

Empowerment is a fundamental term throughout our project, as it is mentioned in every article and documentary related to the Akashinga. Despite its recurrence, it is undefined in all of our collected data sources. This begs the question- what exactly is empowerment and, more specifically, women's empowerment? According to Zimmerman, "empowerment is both a value-orientation for working in a community and a theoretical model for understanding the processes and consequences of efforts to have control and influence over decisions affecting one's life, organizational functioning and the quality of community life" (Zimmerman,2000). There are three distinct yet interconnected levels of empowerment discussed by Zimmerman: individual, community, and organizational. For the purposes of our case study, we will look solely at empowerment on the individual level. Sometimes referred to as psychological empowerment, the individual level of empowerment "includes beliefs about one's competence, efforts to exert control, and an understanding of the socio-political environment" (Zimmerman, 2000).

As a theory, empowerment "suggests that actions, activities, structures may be empowering and the outcome of processes result in being empowered" (Zimmerman, 2000). Within empowerment theory, it is important to distinguish between outcomes and processes. A process is considered to be empowering if it assists individuals in developing independent decision-making and problem-solving skills. On the other hand, an empowered outcome refers to the "operationalization of empowerment so we can study the consequences of citizens' attempts to

gain greater control in their community, or the effects of interventions designed to empower participants” (Zimmerman, 2000). In simpler terms, the outcome is a result of an empowering process. The process of empowerment at the individual level encompasses learning decision-making skills, managing resources, and working with others through participating in organizations or activities. These processes facilitate empowered outcomes such as critical awareness, participatory behavior, and a sense of control. Within our analysis, we will discuss empowering processes within the Akashinga model and empowered outcomes from the model. Outcomes and processes are not the same for all people in all contexts. Accordingly, “empowerment is context and population specific. It takes on different forms for different people, in different contexts” (Zimmerman, 2000). This theory supplies us with definitions we can use to better understand the term of empowerment as it is stated in every Akashinga related document. However, we will not employ empowerment as a theory within our research, but as a subject.

The idea of empowerment is prominent within current international development organizational discourse. Generally, ‘empowerment’ is used in conjunction with terms like ‘community’, ‘civil society’, and ‘agency’. “The idea of empowerment is now at the core of rhetoric on ‘participation of the poor’ in development” (Calves, 2009). According to Calves, empowerment refers to principles such as individuals and groups’ ability to act in order to ensure their mental health or their right to participate in decision-making that troubles them. (Calves, 2009). These variables have led research and intervention regarding marginalized groups in the Global North and was then adopted by Western international development organizations who brought these concepts to the Global South.

The definitions and concepts of empowerment provided by Zimmerman can then be applied to women. There are, however, additions to the concept when addressing women’s empowerment specifically. Women’s empowerment differs from empowerment since the household is at the heart of women’s disempowerment. Defining terms such as “options, choice, control, power, ability to make decisions, control over one's own life and over resources, ability to affect one's own well-being and make strategic life choices” (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011) as well as the ability to set personal agendas and alter events in a way previously lacking are specific to women’s empowerment. Along with these, the empowerment of women “involves the radical alteration of the process and structures which reproduce women’s subordinate position as a gender” (Wittmann, 2012).

Women's empowerment and autonomy is highly important for the economic, political and social balance of a community (Wittmann, 2012) and it can be achieved in various ways. The education of women "is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process" (UNFPA, 2020). In addition, mechanisms which promote the equal participation of women in different political and public activities can also facilitate the empowerment of women. Furthermore, there is a need to adopt corrective measures in order to "improve women's ability to earn income beyond traditional occupations, achieve economic self-reliance, and ensure women's equal access to the labor market and social security systems" (UNFPA,2020). It is important to eliminate violence against women as well as the "discriminatory practices by employers against women" (UNFPA, 2020). Governments and civil society groups have to assist women's development, paying attention to the elimination of poverty and ill health (UNFPA, 2020). These are particular to the empowerment of women which could be left unaddressed otherwise.

Zimmerman explains that empowerment and its possibilities depend on context. In Africa, the idea of women's empowerment in particular has become increasingly prominent as inequalities between men and women persist. These inequalities are constantly maintained, replicated, and are connected to historical contexts, such as apartheid (Wittmann, 2012). The effects of such contexts remain into the present day meaning African women are faced with unique and specific economic and social inequalities. Upon bringing Westernized ideas of empowerment to Africa, many trials and novelties have been conducted by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Community-based Organizations (CBOs) and grassroots movements. They call for the empowerment of African women to claim their rights, find their inner power and fight for gender equality (Wittmann, 2012). The International Anti-Poaching Foundation (IAPF) in Zimbabwe is one such organization.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Feminist Theory and Its Rejection

Western feminist theory calls into question the inevitability of the binary categories of male and female by focusing “on the specific processes whereby individuals are made into gendered subjects” (Davies & Gannon, 2005). The theory brings to light male-female binaries to show how certain power relations are created and further maintained through granting dominant terms a status of ‘normal’ or ‘natural’, and the subordinated terms a status of ‘other’ or ‘unnatural’, solidarity. Through disrupting the idea of an inevitable binary, feminist theory opens new doors to a different form of agency where the subject is open to the as yet unknown. Here, the subject becomes ethical, “reflexively aware of the constitutive force of her discursive practices, and of the particular social, historical moments, and material contexts in which her ongoing differentiation (becoming other than she was before) is made possible” (Davies & Gannon, 2005). This enables the subject to break down the signifying processes through which she is constituted and constitutes herself. In this way, the theory of feminism recognizes the power of gendered binary discourse and calls for breaking down previous notions of gender and generating new meanings rather than continuing habitual practices. As the theory evolved, researchers have begun to explore the materiality and spatiality of binaries where the subject is in a constant and active state of becoming, “an ‘assemblage’ of flows of desire and effect of varying speeds and intensities, not bounded but constituted in relation to other human and non-human subjects, spaces, times, surfaces and events” (Davies & Gannon, 2005).

As these theories expanded across the globe, gender scholars in Africa began to critique the arguments put forth by Western feminists. Many African gender researchers began to see problems with Western feminist thought leading some to reject the theory altogether deeming it irrelevant to African societies. They saw feminist theory as a Western import that assumes a universality of women’s issues, their wants, their needs, and their goals. According to Mary Modupe Kolawole, “the negative reception of feminism by African scholars is linked to the failure of feminism to address the many specific African historical and cultural contexts” (Kolawole, 2002). African scholars felt as if they were excluded from the Western feminism as they did not play a role in the theories creation so feminist needs specific to Africa were not included in the ideology, a sentiment also expressed by Judith Butler: “It is necessary to reread

the texts of western philosophy from the various points of view that have been excluded, not only to reveal the particular perspective and set of interests informing those ostensibly transparent descriptions of the real, but to offer alternative descriptions and prescriptions” (Butler, 1988). This led to the creation of an African feminist theory different from Western feminism, one which emphasizes “nature over culture, even as it called for social transformation” (Davies, 2015), and places an emphasis on African women.

Feminism was not only rejected by some scholars, but also by African men and women who view the concept as a Western ideology brought in to disintegrate traditional familial and social structures. Many African women, men, and scholars alike interpret feminism as a women’s only issue filled with contradictions of wanting and not wanting. In such paradoxes of “negation, it affirms the negated even more strongly, since negation is not destruction or abolition and one cannot negate nothing” (Chidammodzi, 1994). African men, in particular, see feminism as a way to alienate women from men and consider it a ‘man-hating’ ideal. Similarly, scholars see Western feminist theories as exclusionary towards men. By omitting and attacking males within their ideology, African feminists argue that these theories actually continue to fight for sexist prejudice rather than against it. Furthermore, since feminism is mainly directed at men by drawing attention to women’s issues, females are scarcely mobilized while males are antagonized.

Other oppressive mechanisms exist besides gender binaries and gender based power relations. “The diverse historical experiences of Africa continue to shape the perception of social realities, including gender- and thus the many ways gender and feminism is understood by African scholars” (Kolawole, 2002). Factors such as race, religion, culture, tradition, and social class combined with a plethora of national, tribal, and ethnic groups not only across the continent but within individual countries impact the realities of African women in particular ways. How African women understand gender and gender struggles within the context specific to them is also affected by such differences. These, African feminists argue, must “be dealt with in any investigation of the interdependent relations of feminism, gender theory, gender relations and power constructs in Africa” (Kolawole, 2002) so we can better understand the particular contexts in which power relations and structures are created and maintained. Understanding this can successfully facilitate feminist change.

Feminism in the country of Zimbabwe, where the Akashinga model is employed, is described by Carolyn Martin Shaw as irregular: “disturbed by their place in society, women, restless for

a better life, seek change, which comes irregularly, and when it does come, the change can be discomfiting” (Shaw, 2015). Zimbabwe’s particular context affects the everyday lives of women, their experiences, how they perceive gender and power relations in a way that is distinct from other African nations and other African women; authoritarianism, a decrease in government funding for social services, economic collapse, and state-sponsored violence have removed women’s comfort in conventional or traditional attachments. These specific factors have caused some Zimbabwean women to separate from bonds such as an “intense and positive attachment to their own moral superiority, maternal responsibility, and Christian conduct” (Shaw, 2015).

Some women in Zimbabwe have begun to embrace feminist ideas in order to exercise greater control over their own lives, even if they do not explicitly mention feminism as a reason for their decision to break their conventional attachments. According to Shaw (2015), the conventional “includes improvisation: manipulating, stretching, or contracting the rules and understandings in accord with the moment” (Shaw, 2015). She describes how Zimbabwean women have gradually begun to add more unconventional actions into traditional and culturally specific ceremonies, such as dancing at public gatherings where convention traditionally called for containment of female dancing. Thus, they “contain contradictions; and they incorporate global issues while holding on to local ones” (Shaw, 2015). Through small acts, women in Zimbabwe have begun to slowly incorporate women’s rights into their society depending on and within the context in which they live and push towards their particular goals.

3.2 Womanism

Since mainstream Western feminism discusses only gendered binary discourses, excludes male perspectives, and fails to incorporate the specific contexts in which African women find themselves led African feminist scholars to develop an alternative, inclusive and more intersectional feminist approach tailored to address feminism in Africa: Womanism. Advocates of womanist theory believe the theory “better accommodates African women's reality, identity and dynamics of empowerment” (Kolawole, 2002). A wider acceptance of the feminist premise by African scholars, men, and women will occur, womanists argue, by incorporating African histories and African women’s realities into feminist ideology, which they argue have been

overlooked, generalized, or universalized in Western thought, as well as including men into the feminist argument.

Like feminism, “Womanism encapsulates diagnosis of certain imperfections of reality, a vision of a better reality and a means to that better reality” (Chidammodzi, 1994). However, a major difference between the two relates to the aspect of contextuality and intersectionality; womanist theory incorporates these while feminism leaves them out. When addressing women’s rights, “the nature of recent work in black feminist scholarship has been how to address power intersectionally” (Davies, 2015). As previously stated, African women’s realities are determined by a number of factors specific to their location in time, space, society, and history, as well as their economic status. Womanist theory argues that these create a multitude of diverse oppressive factors affecting women across Africa, all existing in separate contexts. The experiences of African women are therefore not universal which makes African women’s end goals varied, dependent on specific contexts and intersections, and cannot be said to be the same for all. “Feminist theory has sought with success to bring female specificity into visibility and to rewrite the history of culture in terms which acknowledge the presence, the influence, and the oppression of women” (Butler, 1988). It is thought by womanist scholars that feminism assumes universality of women’s experiences, oppression, and goals so is therefore not representative of African women’s concrete existence.

Womanists argue that larger systems may be in place which hinder women’s liberation as “in many African nations, other forms of oppression are more intimidating and self-diminishing than gender and this must be dealt with” (Kolawole, 2002). Women’s issues can be tackled simultaneously with others, while some problems might be more important to address before women’s rights. For African womanists, it is about realizing which contextual oppressions are most important to dismantle first in order to clear the way for women to have the best chance of reaching their goals. Womanists argue African women could be faced with several specific contextual problems and power structures affecting them at once, some perhaps reaching beyond the scope of those based solely on gender. Variations in goals, according to womanists, means that not all African women are in search of the same rights, as feminist theory suggests, and the road to achieving their goals depends on the context in which they are situated.

Another differentiation between the theories is that of inclusion. While feminism is thought to exclude males, Womanism accommodates them. There is a shared consensus amongst womanists that male inclusion is imperative since their presence in women’s lives is concrete

and will always remain. Womanists argue feminist successes rely on the cooperation of men as one gender is indispensable to the other within any society and vice versa. Therefore males cannot be excluded from the process of change as they are in the feminist approach. Womanism attempts to educate both African men and women on women's subordinate status as it exists within society's specific context. "Changes that will address women's needs cannot succeed if men are alienated" (Kolawole, 2002) given that males are the dominant gender in most African societies, both domestically and politically. To facilitate change, "men ought to realize that women's liberation is part and parcel of liberation for society and mankind as a whole" (Chidammodzi, 1994). In this way, Womanism further differs from feminism as Womanism calls for not only African women's rights, but the well-being of African society as a whole while feminist ideology pushes only for women's rights. There is a double commitment inherent in Womanism, "one to the emancipation of women and another to the liberation of all African peoples from social, economic, cultural and political oppression" (Chidammodzi, 1994), of which gender is only one issue.

One final difference between Womanism and feminism has to do with the celebration of difference. Womanists contend that feminism fights only for gender equivalency. But, given that African women survive in different contexts thus giving them different priorities and goals, not all African women vie for equal status. In the particular context of Zimbabwe, "for most women, differences from men—rather than moral equivalence between the genders—prevail" (Shaw, 2015). A cause of Western feminist theory's rejection by African men, women, and scholars is due to their perception of feminism as trying to make women equal to men, a sentiment many do not agree with. In contrast, Womanism "appreciates the natural design of femininity as a given fact, and aims to promote and preserve the pride of being a female human being" (Chidammodzi, 1994) which proponents believe make it more appealing and accessible to all Africans. However, "this may demand concessions, as opposed to blind sisterhood or exclusivist female bonding" (Kolawole, 2002). Celebrating the difference between binary genders rather than calling for equality between the two brings recognition to African women's specific issues while not antagonizing males which in turn leads to a stagnation of progressive societal change for both.

4. Methodology

While examining every publication and documentary produced on the Akashinga model, we noticed that a key term used in all articles was women's empowerment. Due to its prevalence in our data but with lack of a clear definition, we were prompted to conduct a case study. A case study allows us to examine a specific phenomenon "in order to extrapolate key themes and results that help predict future trends, illuminate previously hidden issues that can be applied to practice, and/or provide a means for understanding an important research problem with greater clarity" (Mills, 2010). Performing a case study of this kind is required to comprehend a subject which is assumed to exist but is not completely understood. According to Mills, "the case usually focuses on human interaction within a complex physical, social, economic, cultural, or political system" (Mills, 2010). This is pertinent to our analysis as we explore women's empowerment through the Akashinga model as it occurs within a complex, specific circumstance.

Thus, the recurring theme of women's empowerment becomes the subject in our case study; the Akashinga model is the cause and women's empowerment is the effect. Through analyzing IAPF statements, articles, and documentaries, we can better understand the phenomenon of women's empowerment by investigating the term as it is used and supported by examples in our gathered data. Examining women's empowerment in the Akashinga model thoroughly by conducting a case study enables us to better understand our research problem of what is meant by women's empowerment within the Akashinga model and our compiled data and to bring the answers to light. By grasping the subject more fully, we can better apply the womanist theory to women's empowerment and attempt to validate the assumptions put forth by the International Anti-Poaching Foundation and subsequent data which claim the Akashinga model facilitates women's empowerment.

4.1 Secondary Data Analysis

To understand the Akashinga model, women's empowerment, and how both can be discussed within the womanist theory, we will rely on secondary data sources for our analysis. As a result of Covid-19, we were unable to interview members of the IAPF and individual Akashinga rangers as we originally intended. Due to this, we are unable to carry out our own primary research and analysis. Using secondary sources allows us to examine broad questions as they relate to the subject of women's empowerment. It is representative and focused on a specific

group or topic. Collected over time, secondary data can show changes from one point to another. “Secondary sources are materials that someone else has collected or produced” (Hoffman, 2017). Data published by for-profit or non-profit organizations, research articles used as a basis of analysis, interviews, films, magazine articles, or other forms of media are all included under this category. For the purposes of our case study, we will rely on a mixture of data sources to conduct a secondary data analysis.

4.2 Research Limitations

Secondary data analysis presents us with a set of limitations. We must remember that the articles and documentaries we analyze were produced by others, most of which by authors and documentarians from Western countries. This means the data was created in a different time and space for a different purpose. As most of the data we analyze was written for or produced by Western organizations, the widespread use of the term within these publications could be used under the scope of Western conceptions of women’s empowerment. The data presentation could be skewed to pander to Western audiences or fit into the author’s preconceived notion on the subject. Possible Western ideological influence on primary data is something we must keep in mind throughout our analysis process as we interpret the data through the Womanist lens. This facilitates the need for us, as researchers, to be critical of the views presented within the data while conducting our analysis.

Few articles and documentaries about the Akashinga exist causing some of the data provided to be outdated, not reflecting the current situation of the Akashinga or the context in which they operate as of now. The problem of not being there means that, as researchers, there is a “lack of control over who, what, how, and when. A researcher who uses secondary data has no control over the sample” (Hoffman, 2017). In the case of the Akashinga, we do not have any control over what previous authors have asked interviewees nor their intentions. There is also an issue of sample size, as there are only a few rangers who have been interviewed within the collected data. As such, we are left with a small representation of Akashinga rangers and their stories. It is important that we do not generalize the statements given by those interviewed and assume their sentiments apply to all rangers in the model.

Since we are unable to interview members of the Akashinga to get direct responses related to women's empowerment, we must interpret what is meant by the term as it is used within the data as well as what women's empowerment means in the specific context of the Akashinga model. We will apply the definition as discussed previously to combat the possible ambiguity of the term as it is employed by other authors and documentarians. Our research will be based on information provided in the following articles, web pages and documentaries:

- **“International Anti- Poaching Foundation (IAPF) and “Akashinga (“The Brave Ones”) Nature Protected by Women: Official Web Pages”**

The International Anti-Poaching Foundation's official website contains information on the organization, its projects and the aims of each project. IAPF's mission statement is provided as well as an overview of the organization's formulation and objectives. This gives us a clear outline of the organization as stated by the group itself. The statements made on their webpage come directly from the source leaving little room for the data to be skewed by Western media publications. The web page will help us understand the organization's make-up, its goals, its members, and its function.

An IAPF project, the official webpage of the Akashinga model details its distinct objectives and outlines their specific functions and goals, all of which revolve around women's empowerment. It provides background information on the group's creation, lists numerical data about the model's growth, and its results over time. Also discussed on the web page is the current situation of women in Zimbabwe, the circumstances in which the rangers found themselves prior to joining the group, the reasonings behind Damien Mander's decision to recruit these women, and the benefits of their employment. Such information comes directly from the source and is kept up to date with the Akashinga's current situation. As the web page provides numerical data, we are given concrete numbers which to use in our analysis. These numbers are reported from the organization directly making them free from potential inflation or deflation by governments, writers, or documentarians reporting on the group. The official web page of the Akashinga will aid us in fully understanding the unit, the context in which the project works, and the model's results by using numerical data and information provided by the IAPF. However, as the IAPF is run by individuals from the Global North, it is possible that Western notions of women's empowerment, development, and growth could influence their definitions. As researchers, we must keep this in mind when discussing the data as it applies to women's empowerment using the African womanist theory.

- **“Africa’s new elite force: women gunning for poachers and fighting for a better life”**

Published in ‘The Guardian’ in December 2017 and authored by Jeff Barbee, this article argues the empowerment of vulnerable and damaged women is beneficial for both the conservation of wildlife and the economic prosperity of the community. His article contains interviews with Akashinga rangers, Damien Mander, and Professor Victor Muposhi, a conservation biologist at Chinhoyi University of Technology. The Akashinga rangers who gave statements, Sgt. Vimbai Kumire and Primrose Mazliru, explain their stories; what their lives were like before joining the unit, their journey through the group, and how they feel upon becoming a ranger. Barbee also provides details about the nature reserve and the situation of nature conservation in Zimbabwe. These lend insight into the context in which the Akashinga model existed as of 2017.

Interviews conducted by Barbee supply us with statements from rangers and professionals working with the model giving us an opportunity to hear from those in the field. Their comments shed light on women’s empowerment within the Akashinga model as expressed by the rangers themselves. Although later interviewed in 2019, the rangers provide information not mentioned in the later article. We can use the difference in statements to discuss the model’s change over a span of two years. Others interviewed share well-informed knowledge as they work closely with the rangers on-site. Muposhi was later interviewed in 2018. He does, however, give different comments in Barbee’s article. These interviews allow us to glean information on the Akashinga model, its impact, and women’s empowerment in our analysis.

Unfortunately, Jeff Barbee’s article was published several years ago so it may not reflect the current context of the Akashinga. There is a small sample size of individual rangers interviewed by Barbee. Though their comments illuminate the interviewees’ individual journeys, they may not reflect the feelings of other Akashinga rangers. We must be careful not to generalize what is expressed by the interviewed rangers and assume their opinions are universal to all. We must also be wary of Barbee’s intentions in writing the article as he is from the Global North and The Guardian is a Western publication. This could mean his idea of women’s empowerment leans towards the Westernized concept.

- **“Meet the 'Brave Ones': The women saving Africa's wildlife”**

Written by Rachel Nuwer for the BBC online in September, 2018, this article outlines the history and growth of the Akashinga model in great detail. Nuwer provides numerical data on the prevalence of poaching in Zimbabwe showing the need for a new model of conservation. She discusses the reasons for Damien Mander's decision to found the International Anti-Poaching Foundation and the Akashinga model. In Mander's interview, he outlines his previous conservation work with all-male ranger squads, the limited success of those groups and why he believes all-male groups are unsuccessful. He then discusses his reasoning for starting an all-female conservation model, the situation of women he recruits, and why he believes the Akashinga model is more successful than all-male units. More numerical data pointing to the success of the model in its anti-poaching efforts is provided. Nuwer also describes the recruitment process, the ranger's training regimen and, upon their graduation, their duties in the field.

Two Akashinga rangers were interviewed for this article: Kelly Lyee Chigumbura and Future Sibanda. They describe their lives before joining the program, why they chose to join the Akashinga, their journeys through the training process, and their lives after becoming rangers. Both discuss pushback from their communities, and males in particular, which they originally encountered and further mention how they are currently received by communities. Other professionals working closely with the rangers were interviewed for this article: Victor Muposhi, Mervis Chiware, a University of Zimbabwe lecturer and counsellor, and Leon Varley, an Akashinga instructor and trainer. All discuss their role within the model, their original thoughts on the project, and their current stance. Emmerson Mnangagwa, the president of Zimbabwe, and his daughter, Tariro, also provide comments on the Akashinga. Another individual interviewed, Craig Spencer, expresses his concern about the Akashinga model. Spencer is the founder and manager of South Africa's Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit, the very first all-female anti-poaching unit in Africa. Unlike the Akashinga model, the Black Mambas are unarmed, do not operate as a lone unit, and lack authority to arrest poachers so they must work in tandem with all-male groups.

We can use this article to obtain information from an array of sources on women's empowerment and womanist ideology within the Akashinga model. The variety of professionals interviewed provide us with many insights into the model as each professional serves a different purpose within the model. All work closely with the group, with the exception

of Spencer, giving us first-hand knowledge of the model's operation as of 2018. Although Muposhi was previously interviewed, he has different comments regarding the model in this article. We can use his different statements to see the model's change over time. Negative sentiments mentioned in the article present us with another side of the argument which we can use in our analysis. A majority of interviewees are from Zimbabwe. However, the article, its author, the BBC, and some of those interviewed are from the Global North. As such, their notions of and their intentions in discussing women's empowerment within the model could be based on Western conceptions of the subject. Only two rangers were interviewed by Nuwer so we cannot assume their sentiments on the Akashinga model apply to all rangers and must not be generalized. Nuwer's article was published in 2018 and it may not reflect the current context of the model as the information provided might be outdated.

- **“Why Zimbabwe's female rangers are better at stopping poaching”.**

The most recent article, written by Lindsay Smith and published in National Geographic Magazine in June 2019, follows the Akashinga rangers through the fields of Phundundu Nature Reserve. Her article provides us with an inside look into the rangers at work, the obstacles they face, how they overcome such hurdles, as well as the circumstances in which the Akashinga operate. In providing statements from Damien Mander and rangers Primrose Mazliru, Sgt. Petronella Chigumbura, and Sgt. Vimbai Kumire, she details the creation of the IAPF and Akashinga model, their training regimen, as well as some background information on the abuse the women faced prior to joining the squad. Additionally, she provides data on the model's influence using examples from their anti-poaching efforts. Smith discusses how the women managed to overcome their past traumas and find their balance and self-esteem through participating in the Akashinga as well as the group's role in neighboring communities.

Lindsay Smith's article outlines the story of the Akashinga model, their impact, and the lives of the rangers, both before and after joining. The rangers were previously interviewed in 2017. As Smith's article was published in 2019, their comments are more up to date with the present situation of the model. However, her article only has remarks from a small sample of rangers. It is important that we do not generalize and apply what they discuss to the whole group. National Geographic is a Western publication while Mander and Smith are from a Western countries. As researchers, we must remember it is possible their statements and stance on the Akashinga model could be biased due to their Western notions on women's empowerment.

Arguments within the article could also be constructed to fit the Western notion of the subject as it appeals to National Geographic's readers, which is something to consider in our analysis.

- **“Akashinga: The Brave Ones- Unbreakable Women, Unstoppable Force”**

Executive produced by James Cameron for National Geographic Documentary Films in 2019, this short documentary on the Akashinga premiered at the EarthxFilm Festival in April, 2020, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. Directed by Maria Wilhelm, the film follows a large group of women as they train to become Akashinga rangers. Footage shows the model's intense training program, what prospective graduates must endure in order to become a ranger, and different encounters rangers experience while on duty. The main character in and narrator of Wilhelm's film is Sgt. Petronella Chigumbura. She is in charge of deciding which candidates graduate from training. Chigumbura discusses what qualities women must possess in order to become an Akashinga ranger as certain characteristics are crucial to the model's work in the field. She also mentions the resistance rangers receive while on duty as well as male threats towards the women once they join the model. While these are negative encounters, Chigumbura mentions how members of neighboring communities provide the rangers with information on poaching operations. These positive encounters are also depicted in some documentary scenes. Film footage shows what takes place outside of the difficult daily training regimen. Women are encouraged to open up to each other about their lives. During this scene, five prospective rangers undergoing training discuss their past abuses as well as what drives them forward in their quest to become rangers. In promoting open discussions between the women, Chigumbura explains that the rangers learn to support each other, help one another, and in the end form a sisterhood which enables them to work as a team while on patrol.

The screening was followed by a live Q&A session with Damien Mander, Akashinga ranger Nyandzo Hoto, and moderator Danni Washington. In his interview, Mander discusses why he believes the Akashinga model is more successful than all-male troops. He talks about his previous experiences with all-male ranger squads, why he thinks those groups fail in successfully curtailing poaching, his reasons for establishing an all-female conservation model, and the model's growth. Mander mentions the influence Akashinga rangers have on neighboring communities and their impact in combating poaching in Zimbabwe. Finally, Mander states what drives the model forward, and plans for its expansion across Zimbabwe and across Africa. Nyandzo Hoto, a ranger since 2017, discusses the transformation she has experienced since joining the squad. She explains that she was a victim of abuse and

exploitation prior to joining the model, and discusses how her life and her outlook on conservation have changed now she is an Akashinga ranger. Hoto states what she has achieved since becoming a ranger and her goals for the future.

Film footage depicts the rangers in action and the model in operation. Wilhelm's documentary gives us a different look into the Akashinga which written articles cannot provide. Scenes show the rangers' duties; their field encounters, the danger they face, their determination and grit. Footage gives the women faces. We can see their emotions, hear their voices and experience what the women go through seemingly alongside them. A recent publication on the Akashinga, this documentary shows us the closest context of the model in which it presently operates which aids us in our analysis. Sgt. Chigumbura's narration provides us with an inside perspective on the Akashinga. We can use her comments and Nyandzo Hoto's statements from her Q&A interview in our analysis. Though we hear from several Akashinga rangers, more than in any of the articles, it is still a small sample size. As researchers, it is imperative that we do not generalize their remarks and assume their sentiments apply to all rangers in the model.

As it was conducted live, the Q&A portion of the screening with ranger Hoto and Damien Mander gives up to date information and provides us with the model's most current operational context. This is vital to our research as the articles we use in our analysis are not published as recently. We can use the numerical data Mander provides in our analysis. Mander's statements in the Q&A allow us to hear from the founder of the IAPF and Akashinga model himself so his comments are not skewed by outside sources. Directly from the source and in real time, his comments on the rangers, their growth, the model and its growth as well as the future of the Akashinga allows us to see its evolution on different levels since its establishment in 2017. However, as Mander is the model's founder, we must remember that his sentiments could be biased. It is possible that his statements are manipulated to fit with the model's objectives, to present it in a more positive light to audiences, or even to pander to Western viewers in order to promote the Akashinga model for funding purposes.

5. Analysis

Our analysis will follow 5 themes of women's empowerment, which are prevalent within the subject.

5.1 .Themes

1: Women's Empowerment Through Participation

Zimmerman states that participating in community organizations, mutual help groups, or groups advocating for social change can result in “an increase in activism and involvement, greater perceived competence and control, and a decrease in alienation” (Zimmerman, 2000), which leads to one's individual empowerment. Applied to women's empowerment in the Akashinga model, we can see participation as a process and an outcome.

There are many examples of an increase in activism amongst the Akashinga rangers. Many women developed a strong initiative to protect African wildlife which they did not experience prior to becoming involved in the Akashinga model. Sgt. Chigumbura tells us that the women have a drive to protect animals like their own children as women have a natural protective instinct. In her interview, Sgt. Vimbai Kumire states, “before this job, I didn't think about the animals” (Kumire, Smith, 2019). Now, however, her sentiments have changed, and Smith says all of Kumire's colleagues feel this way.

In her live interview, ranger Hoto explains that she has developed a passion for wildlife she did not have before. Since participating in the model, Hoto says she has developed “a different vision on conservation” (Hoto, 2020) she was unable to express to her community before. Her vision has started to become a reality as she is now attending university and is studying for a bachelor's degree in conservation. In furthering her education, Hoto's goal is to boost the Akashinga model across Zimbabwe and across the globe. Wanting to carry the model into the future is also expressed by Chugumbura: “I want to spend my whole life here on this job, arresting poachers and protecting animals” (Chigumbura, Nuwer, 2018). Comments made by the women themselves show how, since becoming a ranger, they have become empowered conservation activists. The model has shown it facilitates women's empowerment as it increases ranger's involvement in conservation resulting in the rangers wanting to continue their work in the future. As Future Sibanda declares, “wildlife has the right to live. I want my kids to have the opportunity to see animals, not only in photos and books, but alive and in nature” (Sibanda, Nuwer, 2018).

Another example of women's empowerment via activism within the Akashinga model relates to veganism. Lindsay Smith tells us “the entire team follows a vegan diet, a rule set by Mander

to avoid animal cruelty and support sustainable food choices” (Smith, 2019). The rangers have embraced the diet as Kumire tells Barbee “it’s great!” (Kumire, Barbee, 2017). She goes on to explain that while she is on leave, she makes vegan food at home, tells others about the lifestyle and her fellow rangers agree. This shows that the women spread the message of veganism to others as a form of activism. Nuwer states that bush meat hunting is increasing in areas surrounding Phundundu. Professor Muposhi, also a vegan, “argues that showing communities they don’t need bush meat is about setting an example, one that stops poaching and reduces the need to farm animals in wilderness areas – a driver of habitat loss” (Barbee, 2017). In sharing their sentiments towards the vegan diet and refusing to eat bush meat, the Akashinga rangers play the role of activist within their communities; something they would not have done before joining the model. In this way, the model empowers the women and gives them the tools needed to become social activists, even in conducting a small act such as not eating meat.

One scene in Maria Wilhelm’s documentary depicts Sgt. Chigumbura encouraging prospective rangers to talk about their lives and past experiences. Several give personal testimonies in front of a large group of women and discuss their previous traumas. All describe abuse and violence within their narratives. This is an example of a women’s empowerment process within the Akashinga model. While participating in this form of all-female group therapy, women share their stories with one another and hear similar accounts from others. According to women’s empowerment ideals, this can decrease the sense of feeling alone as they learn others have experienced similar traumas.

Wilhelm’s short film highlights the training regimen of the Akashinga rangers. Sgt. Chigumbura can be heard yelling “teamwork!” in several scenes, as teamwork is a core aspect of the Akashinga model. The rangers’ training is meant to force the women to work together as one. “Akashinga ladies, they must be one group, one family, work as a team, work as a group, help each other support each other” (Chigumbura, 2019). The Akashinga model includes women’s empowerment processes such as participating in all aspects of the training regimen, learning one another’s life struggles. By working with and helping each other in the field while on duty and on base, the Akashinga rangers form a sister-like bond. This is an example of an empowered outcome within the model, as the women “become sisters” (Chigumbura, 2019). The process of working as a team and creating a sense of sisterhood, eliminates the sense of alienation, a women’s empowerment outcome.

Mavis Chiware was brought into the model by Damien Mander to help the rangers overcome losing three colleagues after they drowned crossing a river while training. Chiware now regularly counsels the rangers “on topics such as self-esteem” (Smith, 2019). She notes “that building one’s person is very important, because the moment you become self-reliant, with your own job, then enables you to make decisions for yourself” (Chiware for Nuwer, 2018). By participating in counselling with Chiware, Akashinga rangers receive such advice. This can be considered a process of individual empowerment as the rangers are given professional counsel on decision-making and taking control of their lives. This plays into another empowered outcome visible in the Akashinga model.

2: Women’s Empowerment Through Control

In empowerment, control refers to one’s belief that they can influence outcomes such as reaching a certain goal or avoiding a particular situation. On the individual level, “individuals react differently to situations perceived as controllable versus those seen as uncontrollable” (Zimmerman, 2000). Control within women’s empowerment is visible on three levels: women controlling their own lives, controlling situations and, in the case of the Akashinga, controlling the model.

2.1: Chiware’s counselling work with the Akashinga rangers helping them to take control of their lives is only one empowering process in this theme. Before becoming a ranger, Kelly Lyee Chigumbura states that her dreams were shattered after being raped and falling pregnant. She left school and lost custody of her daughter to the rapist’s family. For three years “everything was misery” (Chigumbura, Nuwer, 2018), After joining the Akashinga model, she says “I see myself as a better person” (Chigumbura, Nuwer, 2018). After two years, she has regained custody of her daughter and “since becoming employed as a ranger, I’m now able to take care of my child, I can go back to high school and I can have a life as an experienced professional” (Chigumbura, Nuwer, 2018). Though she does not state which exact empowerment process she went through, Chigumbura’s story and her words show that she has gained control over her life since becoming a ranger. She can provide for her daughter, return to her studies, and control her future using her experiences and education.

A similar example is provided by Primrose Mazliru. “I can testify to the power of this program to change my life” (Mazliru, Barbee, 2017). Before becoming an Akashinga ranger, Mazliru

was in an abusive, violent relationship and then a single mother. Following her recruitment, she has bought property using her ranger salary. She states, “I don’t need a man in my life to pay my way for me and my child” (Mazliru, Barbee, 2017). Her comments show how she has gained the ability to control her life; she left her relationship, bought her own land, and supports her family on her own. This is an empowered outcome that emerged from Mazliru’s participation in the Akashinga model. Her sentiments are echoed by ranger Nyandzo Hoto. In her Q&A interview, Hoto discusses her previous encounters with exploitation and her abusive marriage prior to becoming a ranger. “From the time I joined Akashinga, I began to be a transformed person” (Hoto, 2020). Now that she is a ranger, she has gotten her driver’s license, bought land and a house, and resumed her studies. These are all examples of empowered outcomes enabled by the Akashinga model which has given Hoto the ability to control her life. Hoto is now in control of her travel, her household, and her education opening multiple opportunities for her future, of which she is now also in control.

2.2: To control situations within women’s empowerment means being able to identify and assess issues at hand and taking corrective action to tackle them. This involves participating in making decisions and solving problems within one’s immediate environment. We can see this occurring in several examples from our collected data. The rangers go through a rigorous three day training period designed to prepare “women for the worst-case scenario in their roles” (IAPF, 2020). It is based on special operations training which Mander himself experienced during his extensive military career. He “believes that putting the well-being of wildlife in their expertly trained hands could usher in a new way of carrying out conservation – one that is far less violent and which empowers women and improves communities in the process” (Nuwer, 2018).

The difficult training creates critical awareness within the Akashinga rangers. A tenet of women’s empowerment, critical awareness entails knowing when to engage in or avoid conflict. This process facilitates an empowered outcome as evidenced by the low rate of physical confrontation between rangers and poachers. Leon Varley, says the “rangers have yet to be caught up in an armed conflict, that’s not to say they haven’t been caught up in physical altercations, but they have so far managed to resolve conflicts using de-escalation techniques and non-lethal force” (Varley, Nuwer, 2018). Varley believes women are better at de-escalating conflict due to their empathy. He says this comes naturally to women, a remark supported by Mander in his Q&A session. The rangers are able to assess situations based on their training

and, as a team, use their critical awareness to solve the task at hand in the most effective way within the scenario. Akashinga rangers are armed while on duty and are trained to use firearms. “It’s very unfortunate that rangers are required to carry guns to protect animals, but we need to be willing to give them all the training and tools they need to be best equipped to handle whatever situation they may face” (Mander, Nuwer, 2018). Given that they have weapons and have not yet used them further tells us that the women possess the empowered outcome critical awareness. According to Professor Muposhi, “one thing that I am sure of is that Akashinga has brought a new dimension to conservation and law enforcement in Zimbabwe” (Muposhi, Nuwer, 2018).

2.3: Finally, we can see women being given the opportunity to take control as they are the ones in control of the Akashinga model. Rangers guard the nature reserve on their own. “Akashinga employs the most marginalized women from rural communities; educates and trains them to be rangers and biodiversity managers” (IAPF, 2020). In her narration, Sgt. Chigumbura tells us that it is the women who take the program forward, are the leaders, and are in charge. The rangers dictate where the model will go and what needs to be done. One scene in Wilhelm’s documentary shows the rangers conversing with a local individual who provides intel on an illegal trade operation happening nearby. Community members often tell rangers about poaching operations and arms deals. This information is shared with the group who collectively devise plans to conduct raids to shut down illegal activities. Women are better at gathering information from communities at the household level, according to Mander. He discusses how the Akashinga model is driven through interpersonal relationships and by women in communities where they have a “long-term invested interest” (Mander, 2020) in these communities' success. The women’s empowerment process of teamwork and decision-making leads to collective awareness, and an empowered outcome of control.

3: Women’s Empowerment Through Earning an Income

Women’s empowerment and autonomy is highly important for the economic, political and social balance of a community. For women’s empowerment, it is necessary to adopt corrective measures in order to “improve women's ability to earn income beyond traditional occupations, achieve economic self-reliance, and ensure women's equal access to the labor market and social security system (UNFPA, 2020). The Akashinga model is certainly not a traditional occupation.

The Akashinga model believes in equality and the power and contribution of women in society. Rangers earn their own income, they are able to support the education of their children and they are encouraged and supported to buy their own land so as to invest in local communities (IAPF, 2020). According to IAPF's statistics, "women with salary in rural Africa invest up to 3x more into families than males. In addition, 62% of Akashinga operational costs go directly into the local community turning conservation into a community project" (IAPF, 2020). According to Chiware, "when you employ men – not all men, but some – they can be irresponsible with money, despite the fact that they have kids. But with women, once they get money, in most cases they support their kids" (Chiware, Nuwer, 2018). Earning an income due to their employment and contributing to society are women's empowerment processes enabled by the model; rangers develop self-esteem through counselling and feel equal to men, as previously mentioned. Kelly Lyee Chigumbura said: "Akashinga has given me confidence, autonomy, and the chance to have custody of my daughter" (Chigumbura, Nuwer, 2018). Taking into consideration the above numerical data about the Akashinga model in conjunction with literature on women's empowerment, it can be said that women's ability to earn an income is an empowering process which leads to an empowered outcome, which results in women's autonomy and alteration of their position in the community.

4. Women's Empowerment Through Education

Mander tells us about an African saying, "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation" (Mander, Nuwer, 2018). The education of women "is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process" (UNFPA, 2020). For the IAPF, education is a key factor for developing women's empowerment. "It is necessary to create a generation of highly intelligent, ethical leaders" (IAPF, 2020). Akashinga rangers learn skills such as leadership, patrolling, camouflage and concealment. In addition, they are educated in first aid, dangerous wildlife, recognizance, democratic policing, firearm safety and use and they learn how to gather information and conservation ethics. (Stein, 2017). After graduating from the program, women employed by IAPF have the same law enforcement training and the same role as a male ranger (IAPF, 2020). Upon joining the group, rangers express that they have enough income to finish their studies, either at high school or university (IAPF, 2020), as already discussed. This further shows how education is an empowering process within the model and empowered, educated women is an outcome.

5: Women's Empowerment Through Alteration

Women's empowerment involves changing processes and structures which maintain and reproduce the subordinate position of women. To become empowered, women must be able to analyze and understand their situation within the socio-economic context in which they find themselves. This is another aspect of critical awareness. Akashinga rangers must have the ability to identify which power relations exist and work to shift such relations. Data shows this occurs within the model as rangers understand and experience traditional gender relations in their society; women's roles, male dominance, and community opinions towards rangers. Many of the women share stories of pushback from men in their communities. In her film narration, Sgt. Chigumbura tells us many of the Akashinga rangers receive threats from men after they join the model. They are told they would be raped, their houses would be burned down, or their families would be destroyed. This is evidence that the women are aware of male social dominance as they experience it first-hand.

Future Sibanda explains how men told her "it's difficult for a woman to patrol in the bush, and that this job is meant just for them" (Sibanda, Nuwer, 2018). She felt discouraged initially, but in undergoing empowering processes under the Akashinga model, Sibanda realized this "was only a matter of jealousy, she could more than do the job" (Nuwer, 2018). This shows Sibanda recognized her position within the conventional power structure, but in being involved in the Akashinga model, her perceptions of that structure and her role within it evolved, which is an empowered outcome.

Leon Varley shares his initial misgivings on the Akashinga model upon his recruitment: "I was skeptical whether women would be up to the physical part of the job, and also worried that, since they all came from within the community, that would open them up to intimidation, bullying and repercussions" (Varley, Nuwer, 2018). Varley, like Damien Mander, also has an extensive military background. He followed the rangers through their training process and, on seeing their progress, later commented "I didn't have any complaints at all" (Varley, Nuwer, 2018) because he saw how tough the women could be. His comments show that even men from outside contexts had doubts about the Akashinga model. They further show that, in watching the rangers transform through empowerment processes, his perceptions of women in society and the Akashinga rangers has flipped. If it is possible for Varley, there is the potential this is true for local men.

Both men and women are trapped in gender-stereotyped roles, and African cultures often “assign the role of protector – never mind armed protector – exclusively to men” (Nuwer, 2018). Drawing on his experiences, Varley says “we men tend to go in guns blazing, aggression and machismo” (Varley, Nuwer, 2018). When it comes to all-male wildlife conservation groups, Mander states that male groups “fight fire with fire” (Mander, 2020). Taking into account Sibanda’s comments, and further explained by Sgt. Chigumbura, men rarely take the Akashinga rangers seriously. They think women are not strong enough or have the authority to arrest them, which shows the perception of women within the Akashinga’s operational context.

The fact that the rangers are aware of the men’s opinions adds more evidence to the empowered existence of the Akashinga rangers’ critical awareness. The women often go up against armed men so they must be aggressive in their anti-poaching efforts, which their training prepares them for. This aggression is successful, as Sgt. Vimbai Kumire says the culprits always start “shaking on the ground” (Kumire, Barbee, 2017). She also notes, “this job is not meant just for men, but for everyone who is fit and strong” (Kumire, Barbee, 2017). The poacher’s fear implies that he takes the ranger’s force seriously, and their high numbers of arrests suggests that the women’s forceful message is heard by many thus spreading the word. Akashinga rangers show the community that women can have an authoritative role, not only men, and this empowered outcome has the potential to alter traditional, contextual power relations.

6. Discussion

The notion of women’s empowerment is closely related to the African feminist theory of Womanism. The theory revolves around social change for the benefit of all, not only women. Women's empowerment can achieve this premise. Both empowerment and Womanism rely on context. According to Womanism, women experience different realities created by their surrounding environment. Differing circumstances between women are caused by a variety of intersecting oppressive factors, all existing in separate and specific contexts, some are outside of gender based power structures. The womanist theory calls for women to understand the context in which they exist and the different forces of their oppression in order to facilitate change as it applies to them. Such shifts can arise from women’s empowerment. Similarly, “the contextuality of the empowerment process is important, as the context enables empowerment” (Zimmerman, 2000). Women’s empowerment can only occur if they are given the ability to be

empowered within their particular circumstance. Thus, if African women understand the context in which they live and are provided an opportunity to be empowered within that context, women's empowerment can lead to social change for all who will benefit from such an outcome, as it is stated in womanist theory.

In understanding the context of the Akashinga model and after analyzing related data, we can see women's empowerment taking place resulting in different empowered outcomes. The women have been able to shatter the reality in which they once existed, one created by circumstances specific to Zimbabwe. In accordance with the womanist theory, empowered Akashinga rangers have been able to change their contextual situation, take control of their lives, and advocate for themselves as women. At the individual level of women's empowerment, the rangers have been able to receive a specific form of education and pass this knowledge onto others. With their incomes, they have been able to buy property, further their studies, and take care of their families independently. The Akashinga model has provided empowering processes which enable the rangers to feel self-confident. According to Mander, "these women have sacrificed and put their lives in danger in order to save the wilderness areas and change their lives" (Mander, 2020). Through the process of women's empowerment, the rangers have created a new reality for themselves and are better equipped to shift social structures hindering others' empowerment, the heart of the womanist premise.

Women's "empowerment suggests that community participants have an active role in the change process" (Zimmerman, 2000). Womanism calls for community involvement to push for a change that improves society as a whole, not just for women. Professor Muposhi states, "Developing conservation skills in communities creates more than just jobs, it makes local people directly benefit from the preservation of wildlife" (Muposhi, Barbee, 2017). Our data shows that a relationship between the empowered Akashinga women and their neighboring communities exists. Simultaneously, in their community engagement, Akashinga rangers understand what the community needs. This better enables them to enact change as it applies contextually to the situation.

In our analysis, we discussed how individuals provide rangers with information regarding illegal operations in areas near Phundundu. One issue arises from this data evidence. According to Nuwer, "Akashinga also gives rewards to community members who assist in an arrest or help recover ivory or illegal weapons" (Nuwer, 2017). This raises questions about the model's community involvement. Given the context in which the model is situated, we cannot know

the informant's intentions. It is possible that they are only passing intel to the rangers in order to collect a payment. If this is the case, not all members of the community are reacting positively to the model, as the data suggests. However, this may not apply to all persons who cooperate with the Akashinga rangers in this way. Those who approach the rangers with the best intentions shows that communities have trust in the model. This “fosters a harmonious relationship with local communities as the best defence against illegal wildlife crime” (IAPF, 2020).

The skills and advocacy of the Akashinga women is brought into the community through children's education. As empowered women, Akashinga “sometimes pay visits to local schools, where they are ‘mobbed like rock stars’ and speak to classrooms about the importance of protecting wildlife” (Nuwer, 2018). This tells us rangers positively engage with the community and the message is well received by children. The women spread the message of conservation and teach children it is for the good of all community members, which follows womanist theory. We have presented further data on how teaching children builds future leaders with more awareness. This has the potential to continue to empower the community into the future as the children become leaders, thus reaching towards womanist goals.

Craig Spencer, a negative proponent of the Akashinga model, argues that arming women in the field is irresponsible. Instead, “women rangers should play to their strengths by focusing on community-building and education [...] we need to start moving more and more of our resources into communities, and the best people for that are women” (Spencer, Nuwer, 2018). Our data shows that Akashinga rangers can do both. Keeping in mind our evidence regarding community development and education, data also supports the idea of the ranger's possessing critical awareness. Through the process of empowerment, the women have learned when to engage in conflict or retreat.

We have shown that, as empowered women, the rangers are in control of the Akashinga model. They decide what needs to happen, and in so doing, they empower their own organization. Through positive engagement, they empower communities. The female rangers are able to drive the model in a direction which can positively alter societal, contextual power relations. In this way, women's empowerment through the Akashinga model leads to a womanist idea of well-being for all. Put simply, empowered women in an empowering organization can empower their community

6.1. Theoretical Failures

Womanists reject the feminist fight for gender equity. The theory celebrates differences between men and women and does not promote their equivalency. The IAPF states “at Akashinga, the equality between the 2 genders is encouraged and the key components of the program is teamwork and equality” (IAPF, 2020). Furthering this idea, Muposhi says “women are equally as good as men – and could be even better” (Muposhi, Nuwer, 2018). This implies the organization’s want for gender equality and suggests female superiority. This does not follow womanist theory. Despite this, our data shows a difference between the genders as described by those interviewed. Empowered women are said to be better at de-escalating conflict and they have more empathy because of their gender. Although he is against providing the rangers with weapons, Spencer explains “women are the single biggest untapped resource in Sub-Saharan Africa, but trying to make them into men, I think, is self-destructive” (Spencer, Nuwer, 2018), a womanist statement in itself.

Moreover, the notion of sisterhood described by Sgt. Chigumbura does not exist in womanist theory. After becoming a team, “if I face a problem, before I tell my brother or my sister, I tell my [fellow ranger]” (Chigumbura, Smith, 2019). While this is effective during the women’s empowerment process, it does not follow womanist ideals.

7 .Conclusion

From our data analysis, we can conclude that the Akashinga conservation model empowers vulnerable women. Despite statements from the same individuals over three years, their sentiments have not changed and have only gotten more positive. The model has continuously drawn outside attention and attention from women in Zimbabwe, who are eager to join as evidenced by its expansion plans. Successful numbers show that the model does facilitate women’s empowerment. The term is not one used by the organization to gain interest or funding. Akashinga rangers are part of the local community and have “won the hearts and minds of the local population. If given the opportunity, women will change the face of conservation forever” (Mander, 2020).

By engaging both genders in their conservation efforts and educating men on women's issues and rights, women’s empowerment through the Akashinga model can change society as a

whole for the betterment of all. In womanist theory, men are not excluded but are part of society's balance. Rather than blame or attack men, rangers include them in their program through teaching and community outreach. "Zimbabwe's new president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has met with some of the Akashinga women and voiced his support, and his daughter, Tariro, even joined the rangers on multiple occasions to train, patrol and engage with communities"(Nuwer, 2018). Tariro Mnangagwa later declared "these women show me hope," (Tariro, Barbee, 2017). The fact that Zimbabwe's president supports the Akashinga model and rangers shows us the model's efforts have been successful as they have reached to the top tier of Zimbabwe's power structure. In womanist theory, this is pivotal for enacting positive change for everyone in a society. This has the potential to enable the model's acceptance, expansion, and adoption even further in the future. Professor Muposhi explains "it is happening right in the middle of nowhere in the Zambezi Valley, and it is part of a greater movement. We are going to develop it to become one of the best models of conservation of wildlife based on women's empowerment" (Muposhi, Barbee, 2017).

Our analysis is based only on secondary data. It should be mentioned that the outcomes of this particular study apply only on a small portion of samples. This means the outcome of our research could be different if we had the ability to conduct primary research and collect primary data giving us a larger sample size and literature directly from the source. Despite the research limitations, we can argue that our research is significant in examining how the IAPF uses the empowerment of women in the Akashinga model. It is necessary to examine women's empowerment in the model in depth and extend the research across different contexts. For example, to examine how this particular and successful model could be adopted by other organizations focused on women's empowerment.

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