



Flames of Women Empowerment

Leading the Charge on the Frontlines

August is Women's Month and this year's Women's Month is commemorated under the theme: **"Celebrating 30 Years of Democracy Towards Women's Development."**



In the spirit of this powerful legacy, we shine a spotlight on the inspiring journeys of remarkable women who have risen from humble beginnings to become a force within the Working on Fire-Kishugu Joint Venture.

Their stories of how our skills development initiatives and their resilience, passion, and leadership embody the essence of Women's Month - celebrating the achievements of women who lead from the front, breaking barriers, and shaping the future.



Advocating for a brighter and more equitable *future for all*

On 9 August 1956, 68 years ago, 20,000 women of all races marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, singing “Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo!” which translates to “Now you have touched the women, you have struck a rock,” symbolising the strength and resilience of South African women.

The month of August is therefore not only a celebration and commemoration of that momentous day but also a reminder of the transformation that can take place when women are unified.



While employment in South Africa saw a decrease of 92,000 jobs in the second quarter of 2024 compared to the first quarter of 2024, it also reflected that the labour force participation rate for women increased to 55.8% in the second quarter, up from 50.9% in the first quarter. This indicates a narrowing gender gap in labour force participation.

The Working on Fire-Kishugu Joint Venture has also undergone significant transformation over the years, focusing on inclusivity, training, and international collaboration. We are intentional about breaking gender barriers in our traditionally male-dominated field. We aim to provide our women with valuable skills, employment opportunities, and ultimately a sense of empowerment.

As of October 2019, just over 30% of former EPWP participants who have assumed management portfolios within Kishugu are women. This includes roles in integrated firefighting, management, and support services. Currently, our Canadian Deployment is led by one of our female General Managers, and 30% of our 200 firefighters in Canada are women. Women are well represented in senior leadership throughout the group, and we boast two female spotter pilots.

This demonstrates our organisation’s commitment to advancing women into leadership positions and underscores the significant role women play in these critical operations.

In this special Women’s Month edition, we therefore amplify the voices of women who are driving change and making a difference in our communities and beyond. Their stories of courage, determination, and innovation serve as a powerful reminder of what can be achieved when women are developed and given the opportunity to thrive. Join us in celebrating their contributions and advocating for a brighter, more equitable future for all.

Megon Norman, Deputy Managing Director:
Working on Fire



Invaluable experience crucial in upskilling *new firefighters*

Nozipho Mkhize, a Training Instructor at Kishugu Training Academy (KTA), says the Canada deployment has infused a new sense of purpose in her.

She explained that being a woman in firefighting often means challenging gender stereotypes. Mkhize feels it is an incredible honour, coupled with great responsibility, to serve and protect others on foreign soil. A first deployment, she mentioned that it initially felt unreal when her manager informed her that she was part of the Mzansi One Hotshots.

Mkhize noted that the hardest part of being a female firefighter is the physical strength required, which can be challenging compared to her male counterparts. However, she emphasised that while women are built differently from men, they can overcome challenges through training and support. "My family was so excited about my deployment to Canada."

A former firefighter, Mkhize joined the Working on Fire Programme in its first year of inception in 2003. She moved up the ranks, serving as a crew leader until she transitioned to the KTA. This brought many opportunities, including completing a course in Veld Fire Management through the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in 2016.

"There are a lot of challenges because this is my first deployment. I had to adapt to the climate. However, a few crew members have been deployed before, so they played a huge role in making it easier for me to overcome these challenges."

This deployment has bolstered her to learn new skills and share South African firefighting techniques. "This invaluable experience is going to be crucial in my work back home at KTA and upskilling new firefighters in the future. I am gaining an understanding of what other countries do as firefighters," Mkhize concluded.





Always willing to lend *a helping hand*

Moleboheng Jeanette Radebe, a 32-year-old Crew Leader Type 1 from Free State, is among the 200 firefighters deployed to assist Canada in battling the infernos. Radebe emphasises that a firefighter should be honest, and dependable, and must pass regular fitness tests.

Her mission is to serve the host country and learn new skills in firefighting. "I am married and blessed with two children. They have been supportive and wished me well during this deployment," Radebe shared about her family.

The Working on Fire Programme has provided leadership and management skills to women like Radebe. She is grateful that the programme's management has confidence in selecting women to be part of the vanguard at the base level and on international deployments.

A challenge she faced during this deployment was the death of a firefighter in the line of duty, which deeply affected her. "No one deserves to die, especially while serving their country. I had to calm myself by praying every day for the safety of every firefighter. I stay constantly alert and communicate safety hazards with colleagues and managers," she reflected.

Radebe has been a firefighter for 13 years. Her Women's Month message is that every woman's success should serve as inspiration to one another and that women are strongest when they support each other.

"Let women not fear taking opportunities. I am one of the best firefighters and am willing to lend a hand. Women hold the knife on the sharpest side," she said.

Radebe video calls her family when she feels homesick. "I know we are here on a sojourn. We are executing the mission with aplomb. We never give up," Radebe concluded.





Stand up, walk tall, and stay positive

Crew Leader Type 1, Zamafunze Pretty-girl Ngcobo from the Working on Fire Forestry Support Programme Kwagubeshe base, in KwaZulu-Natal, is one of the fortunate young female firefighters among the 200 firefighters and management selected for this year's Canada Deployment.

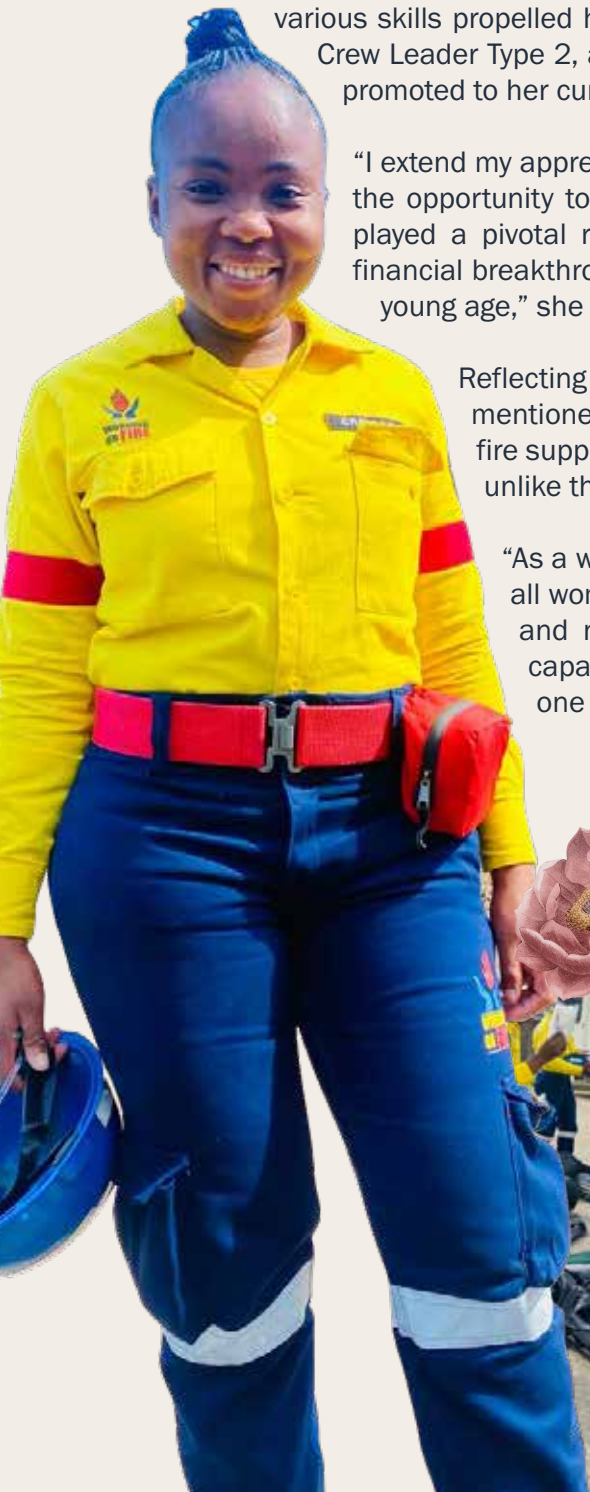
A hardworking leader with discipline and experience, this is her third deployment to Canada and makes up 30% of women in the Mzansi One Hotshots team.

She joined the Working on Fire Programme in June 2020, and in a very short time, her various skills propelled her through the ranks. She rose from being a firefighter to a Crew Leader Type 2, and later that same year in October 2020, and she was then promoted to her current position as a Crew Leader Type 1.

"I extend my appreciation and gratitude to the WoF-Kishugu JV management for the opportunity to have been part of these Canada Deployments which have played a pivotal role in my growth as a women leader and allowed for my financial breakthrough. I have achieved goals that I never thought possible at a young age," she said.

Reflecting on her experiences during the past Canada deployments, she mentioned that flexibility and adaptability were very important during fire suppression efforts in Canada, as the fires there are underground, unlike the surface fires they are accustomed to in South Africa.

"As a woman in firefighting and in the leadership ranks, I encourage all women out there to never give up on their dreams, to stand firm, and never underestimate the power within themselves. We are capable - stand up, walk tall, and stay positive. Remember that no one will do it for you if you do not do it yourself," she encouraged.





Courageous Leap into *Firefighting*



Aletta Mashishi began her journey with the Working on Fire Programme on 1 February 2023, when she joined the Mookgophong Base in Limpopo as a firefighter. Leaving behind her career as a Sales Agent for a telecommunication company, she chose to pursue her true passion-firefighting. Her first winter fire season was challenging, but Mashishi's steadfast determination and commitment to embodying the WOF value of adaptability have driven her to excel in a field traditionally dominated by men.

Mashishi brings a unique and valuable perspective to her role, supported by her qualifications in Early Childhood Development (ECD) from UNISA, obtained in 2020, and Marketing from SETA, obtained in 2023.

Reflecting on her journey, Mashishi shares, "It has been a difficult fire season, however, I have been working hard to save lives and protect the environment. I keep my head up and chest out, always reminding myself never to allow anyone to look down on me because I am a woman."

As we celebrate Women's Month, we honour Mashishi and all the strong, resilient women on the firefighting frontline. These remarkable women continue to break barriers, inspire the next generation, and prove that strength knows no gender.





Soaring to Great Heights

In the ever-changing environment of aerial firefighting, women are breaking barriers and challenging traditional norms within the profession. Lizanne Woite is one of the women making remarkable progress in aviation, particularly in the demanding and often male-dominated field of aerial firefighting.

The conditions are tough at times, but what drives Woite is the profound fulfillment she gains from her work. "Every successful firefighting mission brings me immense pride, knowing I have contributed to saving lives and protecting the environment."

Woite, an experienced spotter pilot, began her career with Kishugu Aviation in 2008 and finds her work deeply gratifying. "We often fly in challenging conditions, but it is incredibly rewarding to tackle a fire, extinguish it, and see a satisfied Incident Commander (IC), knowing that the team is pleased with the result."

This role, her first after earning her commercial pilot's license, has taken her across South Africa, following the seasonal shifts of fire-prone areas. Despite the frequent relocations, she remains passionate about her work.

As a spotter pilot, Woite's responsibilities include coordinating aerial water bombing resources at the fireline, primarily to contain fires under IC directives. She ensures the safety of these resources and works closely with the ground crew, often leading the charge and maintaining constant communication to ensure a cohesive and effective response.

Aerial support allows for rapid response to wildfires, accessing areas that are difficult or impossible for ground crews to reach. These aerial resources can deploy water, fire retardant, or foam directly onto the flames, significantly slowing the fire's spread and reducing its intensity. This capability not only enhances the effectiveness of ground operations but also helps protect lives, property, and vital ecosystems more efficiently.





Teamwork makes the dream work

In November 2016, a young woman joined the Working on Fire Programme at the Ermelo Base, and little did she know that this decision would be the catalyst for a transformative journey. A former athlete, she easily passed the rigorous physical tests required for recruitment, thanks to her background in school sports. However, Thabiso Mabuza's path to WOF was anything but straightforward. Before joining WOF, she worked in a call centre on short-term contracts and even helped her aunt with household chores, ironing, and laundry, as her family could not afford to send her to further her studies.

"I joined WOF to earn money and continue my education," she recalls. "As I got involved in firefighting, I discovered a passion for the action on the fireline. It ignited a desire in me to grow within the company and take on more responsibilities."

Her journey has been marked by steady growth. After four years of dedication and hard work, she was promoted to the SHE representative position in 2020, a role that not only expanded her knowledge of safety but also instilled in her a deep sense of responsibility and accountability. This experience laid the foundation for her promotion to Crew Leader Type 2 in August 2023, a leadership role she now holds with pride.

"I am experiencing my first winter fire season as a crew leader and it has been challenging and exhilarating at the same time. My team is one of the most dispatched teams, assisting our partner - Msukaligwa Fire and Rescue - in various Integrated Fire Management Solutions, especially wildland fire suppression."

"One of my most memorable moments was when my team in Ermelo took first place in singing choral songs and second in drilling at the 2023 Yellow Card training camp," she says.

Leadership comes with its own set of challenges, but she approaches them with a positive mindset and a determination to grow. "I stay positive, see challenges as opportunities, and believe in my ability to find solutions. I am not afraid to ask for help from my mentors and colleagues, and I involve my team in decision-making."

Her promotion to crew leader has had a profound impact on her life. "A promotion usually comes with a salary increase, which has improved my financial situation and provided more stability for my family. It has enabled me to save more, invest in my child's education, and achieve other financial goals."

As Women's Month shines a spotlight on the incredible contributions of women like her, she remains focused on her next goal: becoming a Safety Officer within the company. "I am planning to study health and safety, hoping to advance to a safety officer role one day."

For now, she continues to find joy in her work, especially in singing morale-boosting songs with her team and experiencing the thrill of firefighting. "The action on the fireline makes me feel like a hero, knowing that I am saving lives."





Making a Difference in the Community

Over the past five years, WOF-Kishugu Joint Venture's Community Fire Awareness Officer in KwaZulu-Natal, Makhosi Dladla has been conducting FireSafe Talks for women who harvest Incema at the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife Umlalazi Nature Reserve..

This initiative is part of Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife's community-based natural resource harvesting programme, which benefits approximately 3,500 participants. Many of these participants are women, including widowers, and use their mat business to support their families..

"These women do not just keep the information they learn at camp to themselves but also share these safety tips with their families and neighbours," said Dladla..

Dladla went a step further in her objective of making a difference in the women's lives and collaborated with the Umfolozi Local Municipality's LED/Tourism Unit. This support provided them with a platform to sell their final products, such as baskets and grass mats..

"The event was a success, with His Worship, Mayor Cllr X Bhengu, present and praising the wonderful work of the Incema harvesters. Women are the backbone of many households in their communities," Dladla noted..

Thanks to this initiative Dladla, the women will be entered into the Umfolozi Local LED/Tourism database for future small business support initiatives. This will ensure they have the platform to sell their products and continue to support their families.





A Driving Force

Phumzile Gininda has tackled and overcome a litany of hurdles in her quest to reach her career goals as she rose through the ranks within the WOF-Kishugu Joint Venture.

She has worked in various business units and departments, seeking to consolidate and pave her career path that spans over two decades. It was the transformative intervention introduced by management that led to Gininda's climb up the rank and subsequently her promotions.

Her humble beginnings in the Working on Fire Programme began in 2005 at the Warburton base (now known as Lothair) in Mpumalanga. In 2006, she gained a promotion to Crew Leader Type 2, followed by Crew Leader Type 1 the following year.

Gininda was promoted to Training Instructor at the Kishugu Training Academy and was later moved to Procurement in 2009.

In 2011, Gininda was promoted to Creditors Clerk, and in 2016, she was seconded to Kishugu Fleet Solutions as a Creditors Clerk and, in 2018, as a Fuel Administrator.

Some of her highlights include exchange programmes on wildland firefighting in the United States (Washington, DC) and Canada. "At the time, wildland firefighting was not widely recognised in South Africa. I learned a lot during those deployments, which was around 2008."

The former firefighter did not rest on her laurels and furthered her education by completing short courses in financial management and bookkeeping at Damelin and an Occupational Health and Safety certificate at Lexus and Nexus in Pretoria. She also recently completed a supply chain management course through the University of Cape Town.

"I am grateful for the opportunities offered to me and other women to venture into new disciplines as former firefighters. I have acquired numerous skills and have been able to fund my child's tertiary education," she said.

