



Aug 18 - Written By Annaliese Smith

On Africa’s Highest Peak, Women Porters Are Fighting for Safety

In 2015, Mary* began working as a porter on Mount Kilimanjaro — one of the thousands of men and women who carry tourists’ food, tents and as much as 44 pounds of gear up Africa’s highest peak.

For many Tanzanians with limited education or acute financial need, portering offers one of the few ways to earn money quickly. The work, however, is grueling, seasonal, and largely informal, with few protections for workers. Mary was among just 200 women in a workforce of more than 20,000 porters on the 13,340-foot mountain—often the only woman in teams of up to 50.

During one of Mary’s first climbs as a porter, the dangers were not just from thin air and icy slopes. “We were all sleeping in the same tent and I could feel someone touch me,” she told More to Her Story. “Somebody was trying to open my sleeping bag. I couldn’t sleep through the night. I couldn’t do anything.”

Such harassment is an open secret on Kilimanjaro, quietly shared among a growing network of female porters — and, according to advocates, largely tolerated by the male-dominated tourism industry. Mary said that perpetrators have spanned from fellow porters to chief guides and park rangers, and she estimates that three quarters of the women she knows on the mountain have similar experiences to her own.

More than 50,000 clients rely on porters to climb Kilimanjaro’s seven routes every year, with over 4,000 trekking companies operating on the mountain. In 2024, The Citizen, a major English language newspaper in Tanzania, reported that the mountain attracted \$50 million in revenue. But, for its porters, it can be financially unreliable work. There are long days, treacherous conditions and a lack of regulation that leaves them vulnerable to poor treatment and exploitation. For female porters, a combination of patriarchal traditions, the inherent risks of high altitude mountaineering, and a lack of oversight has compounded their vulnerability.

“The biggest bribe on the mountain is the body,” Maggie Simbeye told More to Her Story.

A woman porter carries gear for guides and foreign tourists along a hiking path toward Mount Kilimajaro, Tanzania, on October 23, 2025. Sergei Andreichuk/ Wikimedia Commons

Simbeye, a former Kilimanjaro porter and guide, now works to empower women in tourism through her organization the Dare Women’s Foundation, a non-profit based in Arusha, the closest major city to Kilimanjaro. Through her network of more than 120 women working in tourism in Northern Tanzania, she confirmed instances where mountain workers have been assaulted or exploited for access to their tips, a tent, and their wages.

In Kilimanjaro’s adventure travel industry, it is standard practice for porters to be hired on a single-climb contract — typically lasting five to eight days, depending on the route. These agreements rarely include worker protections such as injury pay or insurance, several women porters working on Kilimanjaro told More to Her Story.

The Kilimanjaro Porters Assistance Project, a nonprofit, certifies companies that meet basic standards, including limiting loads to 25 kilograms (55 pounds), providing three meals a day, paying at least 20,000 Tanzanian shillings (\$8 USD) per day, ensuring adequate gear and maintaining transparent tipping. Although these standards follow Tanzania National Park Authority guidelines, studies show they are often ignored, and only 160 companies have sought KPAP certification. Without such protections, porters can face bribery demands to secure work — and for women, advocates say, the exploitation can include sexual assault.

Simbeye explained these incidents have persisted since women first started working on Kilimanjaro in the mid-1990s. The short and informal contracts mean that almost every worker moves frequently between companies and therefore stories of sexual violence are equally widespread.

“When [women] get good treatment it is a surprise,” added Simbeye.

There is no aggregated data on the rate of sexual violence on Kilimanjaro in part because few report it. “If you complain they [male colleagues] tell each other ‘that girl, she’s a snitch,’” said Mary. “You will lose your chance to get a job, so you say nothing. If you report it to the police, it would be the end of your work.”

A 2012 memorandum from the Avon Global Center for Women and Justice at Cornell Law School said women in Tanzania who report gender-based violence to police are likely to face harassment and corruption, deterring complaints on and off the mountains. No high court cases appear in the Tanzania Legal Information Institute database involving sexual assault on Kilimanjaro, and local courts did not respond to requests for records. Further, national crime data shows sexual assault and gender-based violence are rising across Tanzania, where women who work outside traditional roles often face discrimination.

Bullying is also rampant on the mountain, porters told More to Her Story.

“If a woman walks slowly, they start getting insulted: ‘You should be staying home with your mother!’” described Mary. “They tell us we should get married instead of being here.”

Several porters said the climate on Kilimanjaro discourages women from speaking out, as many fear losing their livelihoods. Mary noted that while some company leaders try to shield female porters, others sidestep harassment claims altogether—sometimes dismissing the women rather than addressing the abuse. She estimates that only about 10 percent of operators take meaningful measures toward justice, such as setting aside women-only tents along the trails. Male support can also be lacking. Mary recalled hearing about two first-time porters who, in May, were drugged and raped by a senior guide while others looked on, unwilling to intervene for fear of reprisal. The women never reported the assault. Mary only learned of it later, through a male colleague who witnessed the attack and eventually left the industry.

Although there are some trekking companies making improvements to guarantee the safety of Kilimanjaro’s female porters and guides, current workers and advocates say change has been slow to come. In an article from December 2017, then Kilimanjaro Chief Park Warden Bettie Loibook told eTN Tanzania she was unaware that female workers were facing sexual abuse. In the same article, the CEO of the Tanzania Porter’s Organization Loishiye Mollle acknowledged the severity of the issue but said the organization was “incapacitated” with regards to remedying it.

There have been no concrete industry-wide improvements in policy or practice to curtail gender based violence on Kilimanjaro since, despite the Tanzania Women Lawyers Association reporting nationwide improvements in accessing justice in 2024. The organization expanded their legal aid clinics, in-court representation, and legal education across the country and, in May, the government instituted a second National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children, which aims to halve violence against women by 2028/29. Though these provisions could help some female porters access justice, there remains a need for industry specific measures that respond to the unique conditions of the mountain.

This lack of assistance has left the women to build solutions from within their own network first. Mary, who is now a guide and responsible for her clients’ safety and well-being on the mountain, advocates for female porters whenever possible.

“We are trying to reach new companies that don’t have any females. I introduce them to more female porters,” she said, noting she has even been able to secure women-only tents on climbs that involve at least 10 female staff.” She hopes that providing women-only accommodation will become the norm for companies hiring female porters to ensure their safety and comfort.

Simbeye’s foundation is raising funds to provide female-only accommodation for as many climbs as possible. Mary confirmed to More to Her Story that there isn’t enough work for all of Kilimanjaro’s women workers in companies known to treat female employees well. Therefore, female-only lodging that isn’t tied to individual employers can help to mitigate the uncertainty of working with new companies or ones that don’t offer gender sensitive provisions.

Simbeye also stressed the importance of building confidence and capacity: “Money is number two, education is number two. What if you support the inner person first?” Her foundation provides high-quality gear, education and counseling on topics such as self-confidence and financial literacy, aiming to ensure that no woman is forced to trade her safety for work.

For all of the women who spoke to More to Her Story, the overwhelming need was to be heard. “The girls are ready to speak,” Simbeye said.

Although barriers remain for female guides and porters on Kilimanjaro, a growing network of women is lifting each other up. Among them are female-owned companies like Kilimanjaro Wander Women, founded by senior mountain guide Ekeney Njau, and Ramblin’ Travel, led by Arusha native Veronica Moshi.

For some women, tourism is simply a way to earn a living; for others, it’s the realization of a dream.

Jenifa Filipo climbs for the love of nature and the chance to meet new people. Mercedes Ngaleson climbs to finish her degree in tourism and hospitality and one day launch her own tour company. Lightness Laizer climbs because the mountains call to her. Ekeney climbs to support her family and community. And for Lucina Focus, climbing is transformation itself: “It changes everything. It is about who I am becoming.”

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