

Dr Kia's bold path in wildlife medicine

Dr Martina Kia is part of a growing but still rare community of female veterinarians in Uganda. In this interview, she reflects on her academic journey, her passion for wildlife, the emotional realities of veterinary practice, and her hopes for the future.

BY CAESAR ABANGIRAH

There are not many women veterinarians in Uganda, let alone in the wildlife sector. Dr Martina Kia is one of the few. Her phenomenal humility belies her professional stature; one might walk right past her without realising she was once named among the 100 Women Personalities of the Year.

She is deeply passionate about her work and life in general, and is also an extraordinarily talented poet and advocate for the advancement of women. As she celebrates another milestone in her academic journey, I had the privilege of speaking with her about her life, work, and experiences so far.

Briefly describe your academic journey

I went to Safari Kindergarten for the first two years of my education, after which I joined Shimoni Demonstration School. I then attended Nabisisa Girls' Secondary School for my high school education, and later enrolled at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Makerere University, where I obtained my Bachelor's Degree in Veterinary Medicine and Surgery. I eventually went on to pursue and complete a Master's Degree in Wildlife Health and Management.

What were your favourite subjects?

From an early age, I found science generally interesting. English was also relatively easy for me because I loved reading, and my parents strongly encouraged it. At secondary school, I especially enjoyed Biology, Chemistry, English, and Literature. I was also very interested in French, although I unfortunately had to drop it at Advanced Level.

At university, I encountered many branches of science. I realised that my least favourite sub-

ject was physics, but I found a new path for someone interested in science.

However, I grew up surrounded by animals because my father loved them, and I had a few defining moments that sparked my interest in veterinary medicine.

One such moment was when I was about 11 or 12 years old, and a veterinarian came to our home to treat our family dog, Simba.

Another was when I met Dr Berna Nakanwagi, a female veterinarian in small animal practice, who visited our high school to encourage Biology students to consider veterinary careers.

That encounter sealed my decision because, for the first time, I could clearly envision myself, as a woman, working with animals.

As a woman in veterinary medicine, what are the biggest challenges?

One of the biggest challenges, in my experience, is compassion fatigue and burnout. Veterinary practice is emotionally unpredictable by nature. Some days are wonderful, meeting adorable young animals, performing successful procedures, and seeing them recover well. Other days are extremely difficult, involving unresponsive animals, unexpect-

ed deaths, and distressed or angry animal owners.

It is an emotional roller coaster. The physical and emotional toll of working with animals every day can build up over time, and managing that balance is an important part of the profession.

Are there many other women veterinarians in Uganda?

Compared to other parts of the world, the number of female veterinarians in Uganda is still relatively small. However, interest among young women is growing. I currently have many female colleagues working across various fields, including public health, epidemiology, livestock medicine, pet medicine, and wildlife medicine.

What sparked your interest

Fast facts: Dr Kia

Profession: Wildlife Veterinarian

Degrees: Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine & Surgery; Master's in Wildlife Health and Management

Works with: VetConekt Initiative (animal welfare and access to veterinary services)

Passion beyond medicine: Poetry and women's empowerment

Biggest lesson learnt: Compassion must be balanced with resilience

Next step: Pursuing a PhD

Personal motto: Follow your dreams. Stay assertive. Stay compassionate.

In wildlife veterinary practice?

My interest began in my third year at university when we started studying biodiversity. I was immediately fascinated by wildlife medicine. Unfortunately, there were very few internship opportunities at the time, so I did not get practical exposure until 2019, when I met the proprietor of CTC Conservation Centre.

Working there exposed me to a completely new field, and I had a lot to learn. That experience motivated me to pursue a Master's Degree in Wildlife Health Management. Much of what I know today, I learnt through hands-on experience, and I have no regrets about that journey.

Do you have a favourite animal?

That is a difficult question. Given enough time, I tend to fall in love with every animal I work with. I am not naturally fond of reptiles, but over the years, I have developed an appreciation for certain lizards and snakes.

What advice would you give to women interested in veterinary medicine?

Follow your dreams, be assertive, and remain compassionate. The best veterinarians are those who genuinely care about the well-being of their patients. It is also important to build a strong support network of colleagues, family, and friends. These relationships help you grow

professionally, continue learning, and remain grounded.

What is your next academic step?

A PhD would be the ideal next step. However, for now, I am focused on expanding my expertise and strengthening my knowledge and skills through my work as a freelance veterinarian. I currently work with the VetConekt Initiative, an animal welfare organisation dedicated to improving welfare standards for all animal species and expanding access to veterinary services for all categories of animal owners.

Uganda's tourism industry continues to grow and is heavily dependent on wildlife. The conservation and protection of these animals requires not only game rangers, but also skilled wildlife health practitioners such as Dr Martina Kia. Her work highlights the critical role veterinarians play in conservation and underscores the importance of supporting more women to enter and thrive in this field.

Dr Martina Kia's journey is not only a story of professional achievement but also one of passion, resilience, and quiet determination. She represents the future of wildlife conservation in Uganda and is an inspiration for the next generation.

