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Challenges Faced by Women Outdoor Leaders

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Introduction

Working as an outdoor leader in a profession with a male-dominated history and practice (Bell, 1996; Lugg, 2003) presents unique challenges for women. Women leaders continue to face problematic work environments, sexual harassment, questioning of their technical outdoor skills and competency, and gender-role stereotyping. In addition, lesbian and gender-nonconforming leaders encounter discrimination rooted in heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia in the outdoor leadership field. This chapter examines some of these dilemmas using both anecdotal stories and research to uncover lessons for making the outdoor leadership field more friendly for women.

The authors are outdoor leaders with over 100 years of collective outdoor leadership experience. As we believe positionality and identity inform our

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stories and writing (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000), we identify as White cis-gendered female and gender fluid, raised working class, able-bodied, and lesbian. Two of us made a career of outdoor leadership by teaching and leading in higher education environments, whilst one of us faced challenges that caused her to leave the professional field of outdoor leadership. Two of us are mothers who negotiate constraints in the outdoor field, and all of us are aging in a youth-focused profession.

Skill Development and Questioned Competency

To make the transition from outdoor participant to outdoor leader, women must traverse troubling terrain in developing both the interpersonal and technical skills necessary, as well as the sense of competency to use them. Applng (1989) described how gender-role socialization limits the experience of outdoor education students:

Women avoiding leadership, being fearful of physical challenge, avoiding assertiveness, manifesting feelings of intimidation or inadequate self-esteem.... Or tent group dynamics: she does almost all the cooking, he usually sets up the fly, she barely knows the knots to do so herself, he can't cook an edible meal, she gives up weight to him every morning, he makes a point of passing her with it on the trail every day. (p. 11)

TA observed similar dynamics in a technical mountain search-and-rescue course that was required in her degree programme.

I observed one of my female peers struggling to set up the knots and carabiner arrangement of a lowering system. Before I could step over to assist, I heard a male peer say, "Women just can't understand mechanical things" and he proceeded to grab the carabiners out of her hand and set up the system without her participation. After that moment, the student began to doubt her technical ability and she hesitated to volunteer again to set up the lowering system. As a result, she never really learned the system and eventually she failed the course because she could not demonstrate the necessary skills in the practical exam. I invited her on several occasions to join my nightly "pull the chairs around the kitchen with rope systems" practice sessions but her confidence was too shattered by both her male peers and male instructor telling her every day (both verbally and nonverbally) that she was incapable and didn't belong in the course. There were eight men and three women in that month-long course and we were taught by a male instructor. Each day, new technical skills were presented with little time for practice. Soon after a skill was presented, we were

required to demonstrate it within a team-based, pressure-filled scenario where generally, my two female peers were relegated by our male peers to background support positions. (TA)

Loeffler (1995) identified competency as a major constraint in women's outdoor leadership career development. She found that women tended to perceive themselves as less qualified or competent than their male colleagues. Almost all ($n = 21$) of the women in the study described how they were limited in their careers by a lack of self-competence. "Competence development is a complex process that is shaped by gender-role socialization, learning environments, and by individual differences. We, as experiential educators, need to further our understanding of this process so we can fully empower ourselves and our students" (Loeffler, 1997, p. 119).

Mulqueen (1995) found a critical distinction between competence and sense of competence. Because women often view their actual competence through a lens of societal perceptions and responses, which are often sexist and degrading, their self-perceptions and evaluations of their competence may be incongruent with their actual competence (Sternberg & Kolligian, 1990). This mismatch can result in women perceiving they are less competent than they actually are (Mulqueen, 1995) and, as a result, they may hold themselves back or be held back by peers, instructors, or supervisors, in both learning and leadership situations (Bell, 1996).

Problematic Work Environments

For women navigating the field of outdoor leadership, the terrain might be anything but nourishing with entrenched gender-role conditioning and sexism complicating their leading and teaching. Pinch (2007) pointed out the gendered nature of power that results in a system based on hegemonic masculinity that complicates women's experience as outdoor leaders. Trip participants may have certain performance and behavioural expectations of leaders based on attitudinal beliefs about gender (Jordan, 1992) causing them to exhibit a lack of confidence in the ability of female leaders to facilitate a group or perform technical outdoor skills (Frauman & Washam, 2013).

After a week-long trip in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, I had an older female participant tell me that had she known how to paddle back to her car, she would have left the trip. She was not convinced upon first meeting me and my female coguide that we were competent based on our age. She confessed that she didn't think that,

“girls our age” had enough time to learn the skills to lead a trip. By the end of the trip, she not only realized our skills, we were able to teach her many new skills to assist her in becoming a competent paddler and enhance her love of the outdoors. She came back to do two more trips with the organization. (Shelly)

Research has shown that participants have a distinct gender bias in favour of male leaders in the outdoors (Cousineau & Roth, 2012). These stereotypes can lead to assumptions about who is qualified to lead and cause women to internalize messages questioning their leadership. Therefore, regardless of their gender, people who interact with female outdoor leaders can subtly devalue their leadership capability.

I often wonder if young women today face some of the challenges I faced early in my outdoor leadership career. Recently, in the gender issues class of my outdoor leadership course, I recounted a story about coleading a trip with a male student intern in Canyonlands to show how sexism pervades outdoor leadership. Years ago, when I spread the topo map in front of the ranger and asked directions about a complicated route into a section of the park, the male ranger picked up the map and set it down in front of my male student leader and proceeded to tell him the directions. As I told the story to my class, one woman student burst out with, “That’s exactly what happened to me this summer except the ranger was a woman.” (Karen)

Women outdoor leaders teaching in a co-ed leadership role often find students seeking advice on technical skill development (TSD) from their male co-instructor. Though equally skilled, women may find their skills tested and/or questioned before they are accepted by participants or other leaders (Warren & Loeffler, 2006). Women may find they need to continually prove their skills though they have completed the same training programme as their male counterparts.

While on a wilderness educators’ course, I had two very experienced and skilled instructors. Students, on their first day, usually asked the male instructor for advice whether it was about proper packing of a backpack or how to fix a blister. The male instructor was very charismatic and knowledgeable but did little to make it a co-instructing environment. I watched, as the first week went by, the female instructor take more of a backseat role unless it was her day to teach a specific lesson. She was very knowledgeable and on a one-on-one basis she was confident in her skills. As our course progressed, students could see she was skilled and able to critique our techniques on lessons we presented. When the time came for our evaluations of the instructors, the majority of the students were very critical, feeling she did not show enough confidence in the field. I remember seeing her crying when she came out from behind the rocks where the evaluations were taking place. (Shelly)

Female outdoor leaders are also faced with the “superwoman” dilemma that causes them to attempt to exhibit exemplary outdoor skills in order to be recognized as competent (Warren, 1985). Burnout can occur for women leaders who feel inclined to overcompensate or outdo male leaders in order to be accepted, with this turmoil causing them to question or truncate their outdoor leadership careers (Wright & Gray, 2013). Equally troubling is the flip side of this dynamic, whereby highly competent appearing female leaders have to be aware of situations where trip participants can’t use them effectively as role models because the participants believe their leaders’ superwoman status is unattainable for them (Warren, 1985).

Sexual harassment in learning and workplace settings remains problematic for women in the outdoors (Clark, 2015).

This is another story from near the end of that same mountain search-and-rescue course referenced earlier ... the course was to culminate in a two-day field scenario involving a technical rescue simulation on a remote rock spire. During the bus ride home from the last class prior to the field trip, a male student told a story of a woman climber who had large breasts. He said, “I’d sure like to climb those mountains,” while gesturing suggestively at his female peer sitting beside him. The female student was visibly shaken by this, and though this sexually harassing interaction was heard and seen by the male instructor, he did nothing. He did not intervene nor let the male student know this type of behaviour was inappropriate and damaging. After being dropped off at the college, we, three women met to express how unsafe the interaction made us feel and how we no longer felt we could participate in the final field experience in such a hostile environment. We communicated this to both the instructor and the college. The field trip went on without us, I received a “B” in the course because I opted out of the field trip, and the other two women received poor or failing grades. During the next year’s offering of the course, the instructor was replaced but our grades were never changed. (TA)

Compared to other less remote workplaces, escaping a coworker’s sexual harassment can be difficult or impossible when one is a week’s walk from the trailhead (Loeffler, 1996b).

As a graduate student, my teaching opportunities were often with male instructors. On a scouting trip, one of my male graduate student co-instructors made some off-color sexual remarks about what he’d like to experience with me. Not only was he a large man, but we were in the middle of the desert with limited places to escape if he were to pursue his imagination. I was able to remind him of his family and kids and managed to redirect his focus. I spent the next 3 hours afraid he might change his mind and pull over the van. Upon returning to the office, I informed

our boss of the incident. He believed I misunderstood his intentions and told me not to make a big deal out of nothing, since nothing actually happened. I was told to teach this course with this co-instructor despite requesting his or my removal. I was scared to be alone with him and teaching with him was humiliating; he clearly had no respect for me as a peer. I felt conscientious of how I taught and how I spoke with him and my students. I became more aware of my body, worried that somehow I was encouraging his behavior. It made me question my ability to teach in an outdoor setting. (Shelly)

Outdoor Leadership Career Challenges

Women seeking a path in outdoor leadership careers often encounter barriers to entry and longevity due to inequities embedded in the profession. Women working in the outdoors often lack a clear long-term career ladder and encounter lifestyle and self-identity constraints that cause questioning or deviation for a planned career trajectory (Allin, 2003). For example, in addressing those female outdoor leaders who chose to be mothers, Allin (2004) suggests that “the fragility of women’s career identities in the outdoors is evident where mothers struggled to identify a coherent sense of their occupational future” (p. 69).

As with many male-dominated professions, being a female outdoor leader offers different challenges for women choosing to be parents than their male colleagues making the same choice. Having a career that often takes a mother away from her children may make her appear as a negligent mother. After the death of British mountaineer Alison Hargreaves whilst descending K2 in 1995, the media blasted her for being an “unfit parent” because she left behind two kids and a husband and chose to climb (Frohlick, 2006). When male climbers die in mountaineering accidents, there is no mention of them being derelict fathers because of the high-altitude career they have chosen.

In terms of advancement within the outdoor field, Loeffler’s (1996a) study on women’s involvement in outdoor experiential education careers found that “glass ceilings” for women seeking promotion in the outdoor field were prevalent and difficult to navigate beyond. One of Loeffler’s (1995) participants described it this way:

I have always sought challenge in my work. I eventually felt my head bumping the glass ceiling. After much soul searching and frustration, I decided to leave the organization and move in a new career direction. (p. 28)

Another participant noted that competencies in the outdoor leadership field have traditionally favoured men and that women look to the presence or absence of women in power positions as a measure of organizational climate and commitment to women staff.

For women of colour interested in outdoor leadership, the lack of race/ethnic diversity in the field is concerning and their outdoor education careers might be more community based and concentrated in communities of colour rather than traditional wilderness programme trajectories (Roberts, 1996). Hegemonic views of outdoor adventure based on rugged individualism and risk may not resonate with how women leaders of colour relate to the outdoors (Warren, 2012). Socioeconomic class issues can also challenge women in outdoor leadership. Low pay, training costs, and assumptions of the value of leisure are all class-based barriers that limit women in outdoor leadership professions.

Further, sexual orientation or gender expression harassment can cause leaders to avoid or continually have to negotiate outdoor adventure careers. Spaces in outdoor education environments are often conceptualized along a gender binary with male-female sleeping spaces and bathrooms being the norm. Transgender and gender-variant outdoor leaders are marginalized by this gendering of spaces and attitudinal adherence to a gender binary.

Bell (2008) pointed out that “gendered identities are not ‘stable,’ but have been changing social effects in Western society that inform everyday experiences. Still contemporary arguments and insights have hardly influenced the literature of outdoor experience” (p. 430). Lesbian outdoor leaders are viewed through the lens of gender transgression by calling into question what might be acceptable behaviour or appearance based on perceived gender or sexual orientation. Over its history, the outdoor adventure field has been slow to relinquish a heteronormative perspective and a gender-binary assumption rooted in practice and principles.

Finally, as outdoor leadership education is one avenue of entry into the profession, it is critical that subtle sexist beliefs and practices embedded in the hidden curriculum of outdoor leadership training be exposed, understood, and eradicated. (Lugg, 2003; Mitten, Warren, Lotz, & d’Amore, 2012).

Nourishing Terrain for Women Outdoor Leaders

In order to support outdoor leadership that values the experiences of women and nonbinary gendered leaders, the contributions of feminist outdoor leadership to the outdoor adventure field need to be considered

(Warren, 2016). The outdoor adventure field has evolved over the years, with feminist philosophies applied in leadership practice being a key motivation for change. These practices include an ethic of care; inclusive, nonconquering language; cooperation and shared leadership; and reliance on conscious choice in participation that eschews subtle influences to conform to facilitator or programme values (Mitten, 1985; Tyson & Asmus, 2008).

After grad school I got a job working for an all-women's outdoor organization. I was excited but it was completely foreign to me. During the leadership trip, one thing that stood out for me was the emphasis on language that was inclusive and not dominating. We never conquered anything wilderness related; we experienced it. There was quite a bit of time spent understanding each woman's frame of reference and meeting her where she was, without expectation. We were given opportunities to try out various lessons and received feedback that was encouraging and helpful. There was never a sense of competition; we all had the goal of learning and attaining skills.
(Shelly)

Ultimately, support for women in outdoor professions requires staunch ally support from those with power in the field. An ally is a person from a dominant group who acts in support of those from groups that experience discrimination and oppression. Allyship has the potential to be mutually beneficial to both groups (Edwards, 2006). Male allies can critically interrogate outdoor learning situations for unearned entitlements and work with women for just and equitable systems. They can “see escaping, impeding, amending, redefining, and dismantling systems of oppression as a means of liberating us all” (Edwards, 2006, p. 51).

Strategies to Support Women in Outdoor Leadership Positions

There are many ways to support women in outdoor leadership positions and careers. The strategies below were borrowed and/or adapted from Loeffler (1996a) and Warren and Loeffler (2006), and though many organizations have made significant changes in their organizational climate and structure, there is still much work to be done to support women in outdoor leadership organizations. It's clear that the strategies below, if widely adopted, can create a positive cycle of empowerment and change that may, in turn, lead to further empowerment and change.

Create an organizational climate that supports women employees

Establish and maintain nondiscriminatory employment policies and procedures. Publish sexual and gender harassment policies widely and strongly enforce them. Provide training to all employees in harassment prevention. Pay men and women equally for equal work. Provide a liveable salary. Reduce bravado and macho attitudes in programmes. Focus on creating curriculum and work environments which provide support, are free of harassment, and which dispel stereotypical roles of women and men. Support increased social justice awareness and sensitivity in all programme areas. Provide training in gender-role socialization for all staff. Interrupt derogatory use of gender-based comments that put down women's outdoor experience. Avoid sexism in language by using gender-neutral pronouns, by not calling women girls, and by stopping inappropriate joking and teasing. Give greater credibility to risk management orientations that value prevention of accidents. Consider expanding definitions of adventure and risk to include women's experiences in the outdoors. Assist women in balancing work with family and relationship commitments. Provide day care, staff housing that works for families, parental leave, courses on which parents can include their own children, and flexible scheduling options to support parents. Allow partners to work courses together or have field times that coincide. Give women leaders the opportunity to work in the field with other women leaders.

Actively recruit and encourage women to apply for outdoor leadership positions

Value interpersonal skills as highly as technical skills when hiring. Set up recruiting networks between organizations. Provide scholarships for women to attend instructor-training programmes. Use gender-inclusive marketing to attract more women and girls to attend outdoor leadership programmes. Use the language "technical skills" and "interpersonal, communication, or leadership skills" instead of "hard" and "soft" skills. Publish books and articles by women authors and about women's accomplishments in the outdoors. Encourage and assist women in becoming recognized and visible in national organizations. Find and/or produce literature and popular images that portray women and girls in powerful outdoor situations requiring mechanical manipulation and advanced technical skills. Closely examine the hidden curriculum of outdoor adventure education for subtle messages challenging to women.

Offer skills training in both single-gender and mixed-gender environments

Eliminate territorial sexism by developing an awareness of the position of men and women in the learning environment and attempt to equalize it. Provide outdoor instruction that takes into account women's lack of childhood technical conditioning. Provide pre-teaching or additional support for skills involving spatial ability. Educate staff and participants to recognize gender-role incongruence and internalized gender bias and its effects on women learning technical skills and men learning nurturing leadership skills. Encourage cooperative learning. Provide noncompetitive learning environments where performance pressure is minimized. Give women opportunities for repetitive practice of technical skills. Single-gender training allows women to learn in a safe, nurturing, and harassment-free environment where they feel more comfortable taking risks. Provide a wide variety of professional development opportunities. Provide single-gender courses and learning spaces on mixed-gender courses including advanced technical skill courses. Teach participants to GRAC: a process whereby participants gain, recognize, assess, and claim their competence in a particular area. This can

involve providing opportunities for participants to perform tasks on their own as a way to recognize and claim their competency. Encourage instructors to teach subjects outside of their traditional gender roles (e.g., have a male instructor teach baking class whilst a female instructor teaches rock climbing anchor construction).

Hire and promote more women into administrative and executive positions in outdoor leadership organizations

Develop executive training programmes for women. Develop formal and informal mentoring programmes for women at all levels within outdoor organizations. Provide women with role models and mentors by employing female instructors, course leaders, and programme administrators.

Conclusion

Whilst the outdoor leadership field has seen some advances regarding social justice, there is still much change needed for women and sexual/gender minorities leading in the outdoors to experience full equity and inclusion. In talking to our students and colleagues whilst writing this chapter, we were dismayed to hear that some of the same challenges we had faced in our early careers were still in existence. We hope these stories and strategies can further the dialogue so that the terrain of outdoor leadership can include paths to success for women and identity groups who still encounter challenges that range from subtle messages to blatant discrimination.

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