

The “F” word: Feminism in outdoor education

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Abstract

Women have embarked on outdoor careers believing the profession to be a level playing field and one that offers occupational alternatives to traditional sporting activities and educational opportunities. This paper seeks to provide a critical analysis of the pockets of bias associated with the status of women in outdoor education (OE), particularly in Australia. In spite of being an integral part of the OE profession for many decades, women remain dramatically underrepresented in terms of career prestige, academic footprint, leadership roles, and appreciation of their distinctive contributions to the discipline. Because of barriers to achievement, many talented women prematurely exit the field or wind up in positions for which they are overqualified or lack influence proportional to their capacity. Although many practitioners suffer from feminist fatigue — the reluctance to, yet again, bring up entrenched problems — there is a need for a position statement about how women are being erased, perhaps unintentionally, by gender laundering associated with cultural and social inequalities in OE. These obstacles include structural problems and blind spots that prevent women from being noticed, acknowledged, and celebrated. The paper concludes by showcasing nine key reasons for gender asymmetries and suggests ways that women, men, and the profession as a collective, can become more open, democratic, and equitable — so that we can all enjoy the same opportunities and recognition.

Keywords: outdoor education, outdoor leadership, women, careers, gender asymmetry, inequity, feminism

Introduction: The gendered outdoor education landscape

When I first entered the outdoor education (OE) profession in the mid '80s, gender disparity was overwhelmingly apparent. The work environment was highly gendered and homogeneous in a range of ways: white, middle class, and able bodied. Attending the first New South Wales state conference in the early '90s, I could almost cut the testosterone in the air with a knife. I was one of two lonely women; we made up a tiny minority of the workforce due to extreme gender imbalance.

A similar scene was playing out in the United States in the '80s as illustrated by OE pioneer and founder of Woodswomen, Inc (WI), Denise Mitten (in press), who has traced the history of women adventuring outdoors within a patriarchal field. She recounts:

Over thirty years ago, at the 1983 *Association for Experiential Education (AEE) International Conference* in Lake Geneva, WI, women made a move to unite using the time-tested communication method of posting a note on the bathroom mirror asking women to “meet at midnight at the picnic table.” In the US the AEE was in a challenged state because in a previous year the leadership refused to move the conference from Missouri, a state that did not ratify the equal rights amendment (ERA) for women. Women were understandably angry at the lack

of political awareness of male leaders. Women were concerned about lesbian baiting that is so often used to silence women. Meeting at midnight in practice and symbolically provided a space and place to talk about women in AEE. (Mitten, in press)

Thankfully, change came rapidly in the middle of the 1990s, with the number of women increasing exponentially (Gray, Allen-Craig, & Carpenter, 2016; Miranda & Yerkes, 1996). The field welcomed a groundswell of talented and competent women who aspired to lead the sector and to teach in the outdoor profession (Mitten & Woodruff, 2010). Yet, whilst the overall number of women in OE has risen steadily since the 1990s, growth in our academic recognition and professional influence has stalled (Christie, in press; Gray, Mitten, Loeffler, Allen-Craig, & Carpenter, 2016). Currently, we lag behind in professional status and are disproportionately underrepresented in leadership positions, in spite of the influx of gifted women. The issue has become more acute over the past decade as a number of authors have noted (Bell, Cosgriff, Lynch & Zink, in press; Blades, in press; Christie, in press; Gray, in press; Gray & Mitten, in press; Martin, 2013).

By nature, I would like to consider myself an optimistic and constructive contributor, but how to approach this issue is, nonetheless, a thorny problem. In fact, women's gains in the field have been remarkable, as evidenced by entry-level classes in the tertiary sector full of bright, vibrant, industrious young women and with many of the successful women having benefitted from mentors of both sexes. However, the entrenched