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Nourishing Terrains: Women's Contributions to Outdoor Learning Environments

Tonia Gray and Denise Mitten

Introduction: Be Bold for Change

Be bold. Be brave.
Be adventurous.
Be inquisitive. Ask questions. Be passionate.
Stand up. Speak up.
Be a trailblazer and a vanguard.
Be a truth teller who says the unsayable.
Be courageous. Be compassionate.
Be a leader. Be a lioness.
Be a naturally untamed woman
Facilitating change in outdoor learning environments.
—By authors

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The genesis of the *Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Outdoor Learning (PIHWOL)* resembles a rhizomatic process spanning over three years. In June 2014, on a clear and crisp winter's day, a group of Australian women gathered in a small cottage on the Hawkesbury Campus, Western Sydney University (WSU), Australia. The previous day, Denise Mitten had delivered an inspirational keynote address at the Centre for Educational Research symposium entitled *Precarious Times: New Imaginings for Sustainability* (see Malone, Truong, & Gray, 2017; Mitten, 2017).

As a highly esteemed feminist scholar and practitioner, Denise's presentation provided a catalyst for us to explore the covert nature of the genderwashing of women in outdoor learning environments (OLEs). Unfortunately, many powerful and significant women in history are not well known or celebrated, and this trend is evidenced in the outdoors. Denise recounted a fundamental truth about Kurt Hahn—one that seems obvious in retrospect but was revolutionary at the time. The group was left bewildered, astonished, and speechless. In this instance, the history (or herstory) books for outdoor education (OE) were rewritten. Kurt Hahn, noted by many as the founder of the Outward Bound movement, surprisingly had a female co-founder for his first school, Schule Schloss Salem (Salem Castle School), where the concept of using expeditions for learning began (Mitten, 2011a). According to Hahn's personal papers found by Nick Veevers and Pete Allison (2011), Marina Ewald co-founded the Schule Schloss Salem in 1920. Yet, her contributions have been erased by our profession's "gender blinkers." More importantly, her notoriety in the field of outdoor learning has been met with ambivalence and disaffection. This begs the questions: Were the blind spots societally imposed, or were they culturally constructed? Have we been experiencing unconscious bias and become immune to the chronic effect? The magnitude of this ambiguous situation was further enhanced in a recent conference presentation by Gray, Mitten, Loeffler, Allen-Craig, and Carpenter (2016):

In 1904, at the age of 18, Hahn suffered from sunstroke that left him with a recurring disability for the remainder of his life. He was frail in the heat and underwent major operations to relieve fluid in his head.... Hahn never completed a major expedition and had to regulate for the remainder of his life, how much time he spent outside and under what conditions.

We were left pondering: If Hahn were a woman, *theorizing* about the outdoor movement and never truly *experiencing* an extended expedition, would "s/he" be firmly entrenched in the history books? And more significantly, why has the outdoor industry never heard of nor promoted Marina Ewald? Why were the acumen, power, and authority bestowed on (white) men and not

women? How can we accelerate the gender parity debate? Has women's complicit inertia allowed this to happen, without raising our red flag? Clearly, Denise's keynote stimulated more questions than answers. The hegemonic nature surrounding male domination or supremacy in outdoor learning was becoming increasingly apparent. Indeed, contemporary society is punctuated with genderwashing and unconscious bias that is pernicious, pervasive, and debilitating (Smith, 2016; Tickle, 2017; Ziller, 2016).

Throughout this book, we combine an intersectional focus on the various—and sometimes colliding—elements of gender bias and inequalities in outdoor learning. We conclude by presenting reflections on the continuing need for a critical shift towards gender equality and feminism within (and beyond) the white male academy. Unashamedly, the through line for the handbook takes an explicitly feminist approach and orientation. From an international perspective, we combine renewed and revitalized feminist teachings and research methods with emerging theoretical concepts. This handbook is representative of a landmark project through which we harvested papers from women globally, who live, work, and participate in OLEs.

Another Parallel Story

Interestingly, whilst gathering the mounting evidence of gender invisibility, another backstory co-existed. Seeds of unrest had been sown seven months earlier following a gender-biased presentation at the Sixth International Outdoor Education and Recreation Conference (IOERC) in 2013. The gender-erasing incident galvanized a group of women who kept our gender inequity conversation alive from November until June 2014 (see Gray, 2016; Gray, Allen-Craig, & Carpenter, 2016). Equipped with our vision of an outdoor women's "think tank" occurring at the Hawkesbury cottage, our brave colleagues—Sandy Allen-Craig, Carol Birrell, Gen Blades, Amanda Lloyd, Alison Lugg, Terri-Anne Philpott, Kathryn Riley, and Heidi Smith—joined Denise and Tonia to ruminate and deliberate over their unease in the profession.

We chatted informally about unconscious bias, covert discrimination, and our overt powerlessness to elicit meaningful and enduring change. Our oft-voiceless stance in OLEs has been manifested in myriad ways, for example, women's hesitancy to enter into online debates such as OUTRES (see www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=outres), where only a handful of brave female souls ventured into this male-dominated terrain. Instead, our shared stories unveiled our preference to be silent lurkers within the "academic cyberspace," watching discretely from the "online sidelines." Many confirmed their

unwillingness to navigate this online space for fear of derision or retribution. Equally, we were disturbed by our low publication rates (Martin, 2013; Martin et al., 2018), the lack of keynote invitations (Gray, Allen-Craig, & Carpenter, 2017), and our continued reluctance to self-promote (Gray, 2016, 2018).

Double Jeopardy

An omnipresent concern for women is the conundrum of feminist backlash. At times, when women speak up or stand our truth, we're labelled as "feminazis," especially when we do not acquiesce (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). Many women who project an authoritative, assertive, or masculine energy pay deeply for their stance by being branded as ball busters, dykes, or even worse (DuRoff, 2017; Vint, 2007). Calling women who engage in OLEs lesbian or dyke has been a way to discourage women from being outdoors (McClintock, 1996). Called lesbian baiting, it is a way to divide women and scare women into working hard to retain a feminine posture, if they are outdoors at all. A remedy to lesbian bating is for women to stand in solidarity with all other women no matter what their affectional, sexual, or gender preferences or presentations are.

Alternatively, when we allow gender inequities to "go unabated," our actions are misconstrued as being hypocritical or dismissive of the woman's voice. Seemingly, a double-edged sword and a no-win situation prevail within the profession. Indeed, the solution is vexed, convoluted, and ambiguous. However, the words of Ringrose (2007) struck a chord, stating, "The new contradictory work of 'doing' successful femininity ... requires balancing traditional feminine and masculine qualities" (p. 471). This raises questions: How do we successfully navigate the gender divide? Who gets to decide how this is done? Will women be critiqued on their balancing of qualities whilst men continue to be critiqued on their use of masculine qualities?

An Epiphany: Nourishing Conversations

Interwoven throughout our musings was the dire need for a new book addressing these hidden and complex hegemonic issues. Twenty years after Karen Warren's (1996) book *Women's Voices in Experiential Education*, it emerged to the women in conversation at the WSU cottage that outdoor women were going backwards in terms of metrics at keynotes, publications, and academic standing. Even though significant inroads were reported in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s towards

gender equality or at least talking about women in OLEs (see Bell, 1996, 1997; Henderson, 1996; Loeffler, 1997; Mitten, 1985, 1992, 1996; Warren, 1996, 1998), there seems to have been limited or inconsequential impact.

As the vision for the book began to emerge, our aim and scope became far reaching. In essence, we wanted to share a collection of papers on theoretical approaches that highlight the voices of women and celebrate women's accomplishments from around the world.

Outdoor women have persistence, passion, and determination. We are wise, we are resilient, and when backed into a corner, our vulnerability can be one of our strengths. We have irrepressible, heart-on-our-sleeve toughness and determination. This book represents both an amalgam and a manifestation of these qualities.

Our Next Challenge: Convincing Women Writers for the Handbook

With this in mind, we lobbied a substantive list of potential outdoor women representing authors from across the globe. In our usual (feminine) style, this process was a slow burn, taking 15 months before the editors "perfected" their pitch to Palgrave Macmillan. The fear of it being rejected as a frivolous proposal is something that we in academia have (too often) grown accustomed to. At the outset, we envisaged a small, 80,000 words or 300-page monograph similar in size and stature to Warren's (1996) groundbreaking publication. Palgrave foresaw the greater need for this piece and wrote back with a request for an international handbook consisting of close to 300,000 words.

The immediate provocation for this handbook was the process of soliciting contributors. Getting enough women and a diverse group of women to agree to write chapters, and do so within the time parameters, proved to be challenging. Responses were varied; some women were jubilant and eager, whilst others saw it as a hurdle—in fact, a major hurdle. Some women who had achieved extraordinary accolades in their careers—true leaders in every sense of the word—wavered at our request. A common theme was their modesty and self-critical viewpoints. Repeatedly, we had to

cajole and coerce women who had extensive accomplishments and demonstrated eloquence speaking to a variety of audiences, to consider contributing. They insisted that they had nothing to say or tried to pass the spotlight to someone else.... a pervasive pattern that contributes to our collective low visibility. (Gray, 2016, p. 26)

There are a number of women's voices not here. In the US, that includes Rita Yerkes, Wilma Miranda, Karla Henderson, and Deb Bialeschki—authors who began publishing in the 1980s and made important early contributions. Just like Marina Ewald, there are women we don't yet know and whom we may never know about, who have made contributions to OLEs. As a field, OE is predominantly white, and the authors in this volume largely represent that demographic. More voices of women of colour would strengthen this work and the field that uses OLEs.

Our Optimistic Mission

The intention of this book is to serve as a starting point for critical analysis and discourse about the status of women in OLEs. Many choose to participate actively in outdoor careers, believing the profession to be a level-playing field and that it offers alternatives to traditional sporting activities. Women gravitate to the industry on the strength of their enthusiasm for facilitating experiential learning in natural environments and being unperturbed about dirt, sweat, and the physicality of our challenges. Women begin optimistic for their careers, assuming the field is inclusive, rewarding excellence regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, religion, (dis)ability, or ethnicity. In the past two decades, since Warren's (1996) landmark book, however, it can be argued that we have experienced heightened levels of bias or career regression.

There is no shortage of attracting good women to the profession at the junior level, but their pipeline impact becomes diluted or invisible as their careers progress (or regress, in this case). In part, it may be that "women's prodigious drive and enlarged presence at the junior level have not sufficiently translated into highly visible senior positions" (Gray, 2016, p. 26). Alternatively, the bottleneck could be attributed women's exposure to implicit prejudice, such as the lack of notoriety, and kudos when we apply the Bechdel test to the OE field (see Gray, Chap. 3). One practical method of applying the Bechdel test to the OE profession is to review the reference lists in academic papers to see whether the gender ratio is skewed to the white, privileged, and middle-class male academy.

This gives rise to the questions: How did the phenomenon of gender erasing go unnoticed in our profession? Were we (as women) blinded by the pioneering vanguard leaders such as Germaine Greer (1971), bell hooks (2000), and Gloria Steinem (2014), for example, thereby whimsically hoping that society would self-correct the gender asymmetry? Was our illusion simply an altruistic notion? Were we living in a fantasy world, and did our complicit inertia allow the problem to exacerbate? Whatever the reason for the impasse, our experi-

ences as women in OLEs suggest many have felt unnoticed, marginalized, and undervalued (Mitten, Gray, Allen-Craig, Loeffler, & Carpenter, 2018).

In response to our perceived gender invisibility, *PIHWOL* celebrates the richness of knowledge, wisdom, and practices of women practitioners. Women scholars and practitioners from numerous fields, such as experiential OE, adventure education, adventure/Bush Adventure Therapy (BAT)/wilderness therapy, and gender studies, explore the implications of their research and practice using poignant examples within their own disciplines.

Our insights emerge from similar life experiences as women and outdoor leaders from the 1960s and into the twenty-first century. The alignment of our experiences helps to shape the female narratives within each chapter and provides the through line for this book. OE as a discipline focuses disproportionately on male theorists and exalts or valorizes the insights of men. Frequently, when we are placed in a room full of alpha males, for whatever reason, we don a magical cloak of invisibility. Within this ubiquitous intersection, women find inequities abound amongst the acknowledgements apportioned to our contributions to the field. Albeit, if these injustices are allowed to persist, the field will continue to validate and perpetuate our non-existence and diminished value.

Some successful women have benefited from mentors of both sexes. However, the entrenched problem of gender disparity, especially in terms of the asymmetry in recognition and leadership, compels women to name this issue that has plagued the field: We have not had a thorough feminist self-examination. Perhaps our own blind spots have exacerbated the problem. For instance, the successes we achieved in the field during the 1990s may have lulled us into a false sense of complacency, becoming smug and not actively pushing for the additional changes necessary to truly achieve parity.

Nonetheless, social inequalities still thrive in OLEs, and our task is to elucidate the contributions of women as well as the work that needs to be done to make these spaces inclusive. What has become blatantly clear is the need to closely examine this gridlock with an open mind to make a difference. Perhaps as a field there needs to be more reflective listening and watching? If so, what do we see? The new paradigm requires a shift in consciousness by both men and women alike.

Within (and Beyond) the White Male Academy

A cross-examination of the gender disparity, both in the field and in the academy, unveils some discouraging metrics. Recently, Mitten (2011b) commenced this conversation when she probed the experiential education

landscape for gender bias through a review of the *Sourcebook of Experiential Education*. In this sourcebook, 36 people (8 women and 28 men) were named and described as “key thinkers” who helped shape the philosophy and practice of experiential education. However, the women:men ratio rings alarm bells in terms of gender asymmetry.

Gray et al. (2016) followed in Denise Mitten’s earlier footsteps and cross-examined the unconscious gender bias in terms of female representation as keynotes at state and national OE conferences in Australia. To their dismay, only 4% of keynotes were OE women at national conferences. More alarmingly, when women do feature as keynotes, unlike male keynotes, they are much more likely to be sourced from beyond the outdoor learning profession, such as generic fields of psychology or sociology. In the same vein, Gray et al. (2016) cast a feminist microscope on the subtle elements of gender discrimination and call for

a shift in what we see and who we see, or how we interpret people and actions. Just as when we enter natural environments and remain quiet, we see things we did not see before; we likewise can see an intellectual field differently when we pay attention to figures outside the narrow canon.

To this end, Mitten (2011b) concluded, “Perhaps it is time to discard the parental metaphor and understand how broad-based our experiential education philosophy is and how diverse and widespread the methods are for translating that philosophy to praxis” (p. 81). Mitten suggested an ecological metaphor where a number of folks from many different niches contribute to the development of a field, rather than a genealogy, one that focuses on the “father” of a field. Notwithstanding these oversights, re-storying women’s future prominence from the margins to mainstream offers a critical shift of gender and feminisms within (and beyond) the white male academy. This space may help ignite our capacity to include more works of women and other underrepresented groups in our scholarly discussions.

The *PIHWOL* pushes to break through the barriers that are created by men and women’s reluctance to speak up and explicitly challenge the biases that prevent fuller participation. We seek to create discussions not centred on male theorists but that, rather, foreground women’s distinctive contributions and put them into conversation with each other. The predominant reason we have chosen to embark on this journey is to create deeper awareness and understand the environment in which we, as women, conduct research and practise our profession. For too long, we have been sidelined, disregarded, banished, or hidden (Warren, 2016; Wright & Gray, 2013). Albeit, the time is now ripe and we are beginning to create our own channels for sharing our insights and ideas.

Unquestionably, we need to challenge the status quo of women in the OE field, and we provide a pathway for transformational change in terms of gender equality. Through systematic change in the profession, we can ensure a brighter future for the women who will follow in our footsteps and a better environment for all our students, including young men. *PIHWOL* balances the needs of different audiences, from upper-level undergraduates and well-educated non-specialist readers to academics using interdisciplinary approaches in their research. These accessible foundational chapters establish the groundwork for readers to grasp the more in-depth examples presented later.

In all six parts, the authors bring together a narrative with rigorous intellectual and personal arguments, presenting well-written, persuasive examples. In particular, the case studies offer compelling stories that integrate attention to gender inequities and social norms in practical contexts.

Part I: *Setting the Scene* provides historical accounts and lays out some of the foundational principles and conceptual framework, which are essential to understanding the rationale for the book. Women's way of being in the outdoors and historical contributions are examined through the lens of gendered spaces and leadership. This part builds extensively on broad reading and experience in the field and provides an expansive view of the state of play within the discipline.

Part II: *Contested Spaces: Examining Gender Disparity* unravels how gender equity is not just a women's issue; it is a societal issue that requires attention from both men and women. Outdoor women have a prodigious capacity for undertaking exemplary work and have been resilient, steadfast, and resourceful in the face of adversity and setbacks. Countless women have continued to progress forwards with an undefeatable spirit despite all that is thrown at them, and this part is devoted to some of our warrior women who have helped shape these contested spaces.

Part III: The chapters on *Motherhood and Outdoor Learning Environments: Chaos and Complexity* raise critical questions about what aspects of our personal life are sacrificed and which of them are enhanced when women leave behind traditional roles and expectations to pursue careers in the outdoors. Many of these women—whether single, partnered, or married—encounter difficulties when traversing the tumultuous terrain of raising a family coupled with extended periods in the field (Allen-Craig & Hartley, 2012). The chapters in this part explore the ways in which the past catches up with them as they reflect upon the losses and gains of longevity in the field.

Motherhood has an impact not only on the outdoor mothers but also on their children. The compelling array of narratives in this part offer a detailed exploration of the intersectionality of career and family. Competing demands

for women mean that some have felt they have had to make the difficult decision to choose between an outdoor career and family life. Several women may identify with the resentment some children feel when they have an “absent mum” or when they have to tag along to the fieldwork site, whilst other women may identify with children who used their time with mum outdoors to go there. Unlike many other careers, time away from the family for extended periods is an integral component of outdoor expeditions. Edwards and Gray (1998) articulated how it is harder to enter back into the family fold when you feel elements of burnout and depletion following a lengthy camp.

Part IV: *Identity and Transformation Through Outdoor Learning*, which explores our heartfelt reaction towards the growth and the transformation of the women, resonates on many levels. With generational differences and similarities, women write from a place of connection and relationship with the environment and themselves and others. In turn, this has ramifications for body image, self-concept, and identity as well as transformative life experiences.

Part V: The chapters in the *Case Studies* part consist of examples that demonstrate women’s approaches to OLEs, some of which are unique and some are examples of excellent common practices. Drawing on past experiences as well as current practices, this part sheds substantial new light upon our modus operandi. The proof of any new perspective is that it tackles “wicked problems”: questions that are not easily answered with older ways of thinking. These case studies present compelling, evidence-based arguments for why new, distinctly gender-informed approaches can contribute to more effective and more inclusive OLEs.

Part VI: *Towards an Inclusive Future* provides chapters that highlight the contributions of the past and detail the necessary steps to achieve inclusive environments. Leaders in this field provide accounts of developments in theory and research for innovations that make our inclusive vision a reality. These chapters are crucial for understanding how we seek to translate theories and principles into practice and work with the real-life challenges practitioners face when seeking to create inclusive environments for learning and growing outdoors.

Standing as a United Voice as Vanguards of Change

As educators, we are mindful that *behaviour* is underpinned by *motivation* (Gray, Allen-Craig, & Carpenter, 2017). This next phase in our gender trajectory represents a dual responsibility, men and women alike, to be enthused

and inspired as vanguards of change. A cultural shift is part of the atonement process. Unquestionably, this starts at the leadership level in academic circles and with practitioners. Leadership sets organizational tones and direction, including who is hired and whose voices are heard. At the same time, women and men joining organizations need to engage in equality and change. Together we can enact positive change for the betterment of the OE profession.

We are searching for a profession that honours participants regardless of race, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, culture, age, socioeconomic status, religion and, as importantly, gender. Speaking up, unashamedly naming and addressing the inequities of asymmetrical gender dynamics, is part of our ongoing conversation as a solution for 2017 and beyond. In the words of Christine Norton (cited by Chambers, 2015), "Voice is both a privilege and a responsibility ... silence is simply not an option."

Whilst united in bringing voices forwards, this should not be mistaken for having one voice or one story. Women do not think alike, as evidenced when we requested pictures and dialogue about the visual image for the cover of *PIHWOL*. As we had hoped, women looked critically at the proposed pictures. The debates and arguments, pros and cons, helped increase understanding across continents and helped all to know that dialogue is a continuous and necessary process. Our final picture can be critiqued in many ways, and we applaud the continuing conversation.

Serendipitously, as our book was in process the theme for the 2017 International Women's Day March was "Be bold for change" (#BeBoldForChange). There has never been a more fitting or appropriate tagline to amplify the outdoor woman's voice. Changing the conversation from its asymmetrical gender bias, whether conscious or unconscious, needs to be woven into the fabric of the outdoor profession.

Concluding Comments

This is not just a handbook for those with a thirst for an adventurous or rugged life. The book presents myriad experiences, observations, reflections, and acumen of women's involvement with outdoor learning, providing insight and inspiration for all by encouraging greater inclusivity for women in this space. *PIHWOL* provides a comprehensive space for a progressively diverse and complex area of interdisciplinary research: gender and OLEs. We need to constantly remind women of their extraordinary latent power, to not be too self-critical, and to challenge themselves to move beyond the sociocultural

barriers. More importantly, this handbook actively promotes women's rightful place as co-leaders of critical acclaim alongside men in the outdoor learning profession. The editors recognize the importance of probing beyond the boundaries of male-centric approaches to outdoor learning to develop a more intersectional focus.

We should be inspired by the final words of Hillary Clinton's (2016) campaign: "Fighting for what is right is always worth it. . . . Let us not grow weary." The inspirational and gracious women who have contributed to the *PIHWOL* possess a burning desire to be agents of change in the outdoor learning profession and, more aptly, have demonstrated actions towards these ends. Hope, risk taking, and dreaming are integral to our advancement and evolution (Bishop, 2008). Re-storying our future helps us to remain hopeful and brave. Dreaming of nourishing gender-inclusive terrains ensures an ongoing conversation in the well-established, interdisciplinary field of gender and OE.

I wondered about the explorers who'd sailed their ships to the end of the world.
How terrified they must have been when they risked falling over the edge;
how amazed to discover, instead, places they had seen only in their dreams.

—Jodi Picoult, *Handle With Care* (2009)

We invite men and women from around the world to open up their personal channels of communication and encourage others to #BeBoldForChange and help accelerate or interrogate gender (dis)parity within your own sphere of influence. Here's to dreaming about us standing together as strong, compassionate women and men, on the cusp of critical, cultural, and structural change. In closing, once a heightened sense of gender awareness is reached, we caution the field to not become disillusioned, complacent, or smug.

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