



# 22

## Justice for All: Women in Outdoor Education

Sarah A. Dubreuil Karpa

### Introduction

I have always considered myself to be a bit of a feminist, believing that women and men should be treated similarly with equal access to opportunities. As an educated, able-bodied, mid-30s, middle-class, nonvisible minority woman, I come from a place of privilege regarding most areas of social justice. However, working in social work, I am often advocating for the needs of my clients, and I need to be understanding of the barriers they face. Oppression due to social justice factors is something that many face on a daily basis.

Recently, while pursuing postsecondary studies in outdoor education, I had a surprising encounter with oppression. I was suddenly quite aware of my gender, and that being a woman could influence my development in the field. No one overtly stated that the outdoors is a man's domain but that was the underlying impression. There was discussion of making the outdoors accessible to varying socioeconomic sectors, to be culturally sensitive, to be accommodating to varying physical capabilities, but no mention of gender was evidenced in the readings. In fact, the assigned readings not only neglected to address gender but, in addition, were predominantly written by men. Whilst some contained useful information, I felt like I could not see myself fully represented in any of the research we were provided in class.

---

S. A. Dubreuil Karpa (✉)  
Calgary, AB, Canada

As a social worker in Canada, I am directed to have an awareness of social justice issues that I may encounter (Canadian Social Workers Association, 2005). This consciousness has led me to examine different facets of my own life and question certain practices that I have encountered. Reflecting on my experiences within outdoor programming and the outdoor industry, I realized that certain expectations were put in place without considering my experience or abilities. Examples of this have spanned my personal, professional, and educational domains. I was told I am not a strong paddler before getting on the water, although I have been asked to work as a white-water rafting guide. Customers questioned my knowledge regarding outdoor equipment whilst I was working for an outdoor retailer over a span of 14 years. Repeatedly, I was shown how to tie a climbing knot in a course, despite the fact that I have taken several climbing courses and inexperienced male participants struggled to complete the same task. I began to wonder, were these assumptions based on my gender? More importantly, was my experience indicative of what girls and women encounter when trying to engage with the outdoors?

## **My Story: How Did I Get Here?**

From an early age, I spent much of my time outside. No matter what I was doing, I often did it outdoors. My parents fostered my enjoyment of the outdoors by registering me in Girl Guides. Most of the year, I was engaged in outdoor activities with either Guides or my family. I was quite active in Guiding, completing my All-Round Cord (former highest achievement as a Girl Guide), the Canada Cord (highest level of achievement as a Pathfinder), and becoming a Junior Leader. I felt great pride in my accomplishments, gaining both experiences and skills over the years. My parents chose a gender-specific programme with the hope that it would provide me the opportunity to develop outdoor skills in an accepting environment. However, as I progressed through adolescence, I became less engaged with outdoor activities and Girl Guides. Outside of Guides, spending time outdoors was not considered something that girls did amongst my peer group and, as such, it became something I distanced myself from. The outdoors was not considered fashionable and, as a teenage girl, it was expected that I desire to be trendy. I hid my outdoor activities from my peers. Where I had once spent most weekends outdoors, I was now shopping at the mall, playing school-based sports, and going to parties. Whilst once being central to my identity, the outdoors became something that I felt I needed to enjoy in secret.

As a young adult, my peers once again wanted to spend time outside and started going camping and hiking. However, the activities I wanted were not in line with what my peers expected. Camping in a co-ed group involved driving to a local campground to sit around the campfire and drink all weekend. Yet, when the young men went camping on their own, they went backpacking, rock climbing, canoeing, and hiking. When I expressed interest in joining one of their trips, I was dismissed as not knowing enough about the outdoors to go and that I would not enjoy it. I recall one specific time when I was told that I would have more fun staying in town to do “girl” things. When I questioned my peers about this, I was told that camping was “guy time,” and that I should not concern myself with it. Again, I was forced to enjoy the outdoors in secret and alone.

## Examining the Literature

Boniface (2006) explains that men dominate participation rates in outdoor programmes, and that women are less likely to participate in outdoor activities unless there are other women present. Even then, mixed groups tend to have more men than women participating, which can cause seclusion of female participants (Autry, 2001). Societal gender norms are often maintained within conventional outdoor programming (Warren & Loeffler, 2006), where expectations of ability are often based on normative gender beliefs (Morse, 1997; Warren & Loeffler, 2006) causing assumptions of skill level (Wittmer, 2001). I do not doubt that these beliefs of normative gender roles within the outdoors influenced my interactions with peers as an adolescent and young adult.

Visual media helps perpetuate gender stereotypes within outdoor activities. McNiel, Harris, and Fondren (2012) found portrayal of normative gender roles in two prominent outdoor magazines, often showing women to be passive in the outdoor experience, either sitting or walking, whilst men were shown participating in challenging activities, such as rock climbing or kayaking. As women were shown to be well groomed and exhibiting rather than engaged in activity (McNiel et al., 2012), societal expectations of women in the outdoors were underscored and emphasized that women should be stylish when participating in outdoor activities (Warren & Loeffler, 2006). Media presents a *hegemonic femininity* by depicting women to be overtly traditionally feminine, promoting social norms whilst objectifying and oppressing women in the outdoors (Smith, 2016), whilst promot-

ing the outdoors and outdoor activity as masculine (Humberstone, 2000). This all may lead to women believing that they do not belong in certain outdoor activities and discourage them from engaging in activities of interest (Lee, Scott, & Floyd, 2001). Even if they do believe that they belong in the outdoors, they may fear the potential stigma of rejecting gender expectations within their social group, leading to an avoidance of outdoor activities (McNiel et al., 2012). In retrospect, I can attribute my shift in activities to an awareness of societal pressure to conform and fit in with my peers, as well as to the fear of social rejection.

## My Adult Experiences

As an adult, I am fortunate to have found a partner who does not subscribe to gender-normative beliefs. Active in the outdoors, we enjoy a variety of activities that span all four seasons. Enthusiastic about our outdoor adventures, we want to inspire others to enjoy the outdoors and maintain social media accounts to share our passion. This has led to a variety of interactions with our friends and the public regarding our outdoor activities. Many people have assumed that our activities are motivated by my husband, not realizing that our choices are a 50-50 partnership. We each have our preferred pursuits and organize our excursions accordingly; our hiking adventures are his passion, our rafting trips are mine. Yet, we are often asked how he has convinced me to partake in outdoor activities, most often ones that are of my choosing. It seems to be difficult for people to understand that a woman can be as passionate for outdoor adventure as a man.

Throughout our experiences, we have witnessed those who have made assumptions about my skills as well as the skills of female leaders prior to the excursion. Whilst we have observed few females in leadership positions on our adventures, they have all been treated as less knowledgeable than their male counterparts by other participants. On one such trip, the trip leader was highly educated and knowledgeable in her field and was also co-owner of the adventure company. Despite this, she was disregarded by many participants on the trip. Two male participants in particular, after openly dismissing my abilities, ignored her directions and recommendations. The men were overheard making several derogatory comments about women and their outdoor abilities, and expressed that they would have a lesser adventure experience due to their female guide. Their disregard for her leadership resulted in an emergency situation from which she needed to rescue them.

## Related Literature

Women's technical skills tend to be overlooked in the outdoors (Warren & Loeffler, 2006), and this is amplified when a woman is in a leadership role (Wittmer, 2001). Not only are female leaders disregarded but participants have also been found to prefer male leaders due to gender bias (Jordan, 1991). This gender bias can be difficult for women to overcome in the outdoors due to societal reinforcement of gender norms (Jordan, 1991; Warren & Loeffler, 2006; Wittmer, 2001). Gender stereotypes in the outdoors can also lead women to doubt their own skills (Loeffler, 1997; Warren & Loeffler, 2006), whilst men may identify their own skills to be greater than women's (Warren & Loeffler, 2006), which potentially speaks to the greater gender issue of power imbalance (Jordan, 1991; Morse, 1997). However, these trends differ when participating in all-women activities, where societal gender norms can be challenged in a safe, supportive environment (Hornibrook et al., 1997; Loeffler, 1997; Mcdermott, 2004), indicating that a shift in how outdoor programmes are designed and delivered is required in order to provide equitable experiences to all participants.

## Higher Education: An Unchanged Landscape

In spite of all my previous encounters regarding my gender in the outdoors, my recent experience in postsecondary was surprising as I thought that higher education would be more mindful of the need for inclusive practice. Classmates admitted this was not something that they had thought about until I mentioned it and agreed that gender, as well as all social justice issues, was something important to consider in outdoor education. This led me to locate literature on experience in the outdoors by women and about gender.

Using my social work roots, I looked at the role of social justice in education. As Warren (2005) explains, outdoor education "is a mirror of the prevailing social climate where changes in social structure affect theory and practice" (p. 94) signifying that if I wanted to look at how gender fits into outdoor education, I needed to understand more about social justice issues in general. Warren and Loeffler (2006) propose that an examination of social justice issues is important due to the changing societal climate.

Social justice teachings in outdoor education are lacking (Martin, 2013; Thomas, 2009; Warren, 2002; Warren, Roberts, Breunig, & Alvarez, 2014) indicating that those who are responsible for outdoor education programmes may not understand the importance of social justice. This can perpetuate

disparity in outdoor programming regarding social justice issues such as race, gender, culture, age, ability, religion, or socioeconomic status (Warren et al., 2014). Furthermore, social justice issues do not exist independently of each other, and individuals may identify with many different areas within social justice (Warren et al., 2014). Picower (2012) explains that educators identify social justice issues as having implications for their work; however, it is something that outdoor education tends to overlook in training programmes (Thomas, 2009).

When social justice issues are examined in outdoor education, it is most often women scholars who address the subject (Martin, 2013). I found myself wondering: “If I had not brought up social justice issues in my outdoor education programme, would they have been addressed?” Whilst my experience led me to focus on gender, there was little consideration for social justice issues in general. Some discussion centred around how to make outdoor education programmes less expensive, but the way it was presented was still not accessible to those with a lower socioeconomic status. Had a classmate not brought up the importance of language, I am unsure that consideration of how outdoor education programmes are presented to participants would have happened. The curriculum placed emphasis on facilitating programming for those who were fit, able-bodied, high school students. However, even within our cohort a wide variety of ages, abilities, and previous experiences were apparent. There was also a focus on task completion rather than the journey itself, which speaks to the traditional masculine perspective that nature is something to dominate whereas women tend to see it as something to connect with (Cosgriff, Little, & Wilson, 2009).

Outdoor programmes have traditionally been designed by men (Gilliam, 1993; Warren, 2002; Warren et al., 2014), which has resulted in programmes that may fail to take into account feminist theory and the role gender plays in society (Humberstone, 2000; Mitten, 1994; Warren, 2002; Warren et al., 2014). Warren and Loeffler (2006) suggest that current outdoor education, with emphasis on technical skills over interpersonal skills, is a disservice to both men and women as it fails to provide a balanced leadership approach. This style of training lends itself to spreading gender bias and prolonging current gender norms in the outdoors. If outdoor education training was well rounded, a more person-centred approach could be taught in order to generate facilitators that are better equipped to support all participants (Thomas, 2009). This type of training would allow facilitators to consider each participant’s needs individually and tailor the programming accordingly.

It has been suggested that when curriculum is taught with a “gender-conscious pedagogy” (p. 13), students are more likely to become agents of

change towards gender equality in their respective field (Witt & Cuesta, 2014). Therefore, in order to see a change in how women are treated by society in the outdoors, there needs to be a change in how gender is addressed in outdoor education programmes. Whilst the number of women in outdoor education is on the rise, there continues to be unequal representation of women in positions of leadership in the field (Gray, 2016) and in literature (Martin, 2013). This may be due to societal beliefs of leadership roles being associated with masculine expectations (Jordan, 1991; Wittmer, 2001), leading women to be limited in their opportunities and desire to take the lead in outdoor education (Gray, 2016; Loeffler, 1997). The lack of women in visible leadership roles has led to a lack of pressure to change the current programming, as programmes were designed by an “old boy network” (Morse, 1997, p. 126) that has largely neglected the role of gender dynamics (Humberstone, 2000). It is important to note that people will resist oppressive practice in order to stimulate change within the current practice (Morse, 1997), which may be why women choose to focus on bringing gender and other social justice issues to the forefront of outdoor education scholarship (Martin, 2013). By critiquing gender inequality in my education experience, I chose to employ a feminist perspective in an attempt to liberate myself from the restrictions of the established norm.

## Trekking Onward: Future Trails for Gender Equity

There is undoubtedly a need for social justice training in outdoor education as established through both the literature and my personal experience. Outdoor education seems to be caught in a circular argument—social justice issues are not taught so masculine perspectives remain; masculine perspectives remain so there is no push to change and include social justice issues. Awareness of gender disparity is central to creating opportunities for women to engage in the outdoors. The literature indicates that outdoor programming focuses on men and gender-normative representations in the outdoors, whilst my experience demonstrates that gender bias towards women in the outdoors endures. Feminist theory is fundamental for progression of gender equity in the outdoors. It is crucial that education and training programmes begin to teach social justice ideas in order to enact change.

It is important to note that the questions raised in my outdoor education programme did lead to meaningful conversations. After these conversations, one male professor began looking at how local outdoor education programmes dealt with various social justice issues, finding that one school had dealt with



gender disparity in their programme attendance through addressing the students' needs for gender-specific programmes. Through questioning and challenging the traditional outdoor education curriculum presented, I was able to address social justice issues and gain further insight into the field. It is my hope that this provided a learning opportunity for my classmates that they would not have otherwise received.

Starting the dialogue around social justice issues seems central to making change in outdoor education. Morse (1997) suggests we need discussions on how "language, social norms and power issues" (p. 129) contribute to the climate of social justice in outdoor education. Conversations explicitly examining personal levels of privilege can be an area in which to start, as each individual needs to be aware of their own freedoms and biases (Warren & Loeffler, 2000). Wittmer (2001) recommends that programmes specifically discuss gender bias, both in programming and on a personal level. By using feminist perspectives, gender can be at the forefront of social justice conversations, leading to change within outdoor programmes. It is suggested that by creating a learning environment that is noncompetitive and supportive by design, participants may feel more confident, empowered, and engaged with outdoor programming (Hornibrook et al., 1997; Loeffler, 1997; Mcdermott, 2004; Warren & Loeffler, 2006). Whilst change will take time to infiltrate the entire outdoor industry, by starting with outdoor education training programmes, new facilitators will have the skills to support social justice in the field moving forward.

Without having these social justice conversations, it is impossible to inform the old boys' network of changes that are wanted and need to happen. Having recently given birth to a daughter, I have scrutinized the role of gender in outdoor programmes more than in the past. It is my hope that she adores the outdoors as much as I do and has unlimited opportunities to participate in outdoor activities. Through further dialogue, I am optimistic that gender and other social justice issues will be regularly addressed in outdoor programming and that she will not face the same barriers to experiencing the outdoors as I, and others before me, did.

## References

- Autry, C. E. (2001). Adventure therapy with girls at-risk: Responses to outdoor experiential activities. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 35(4), 289–306.
- Boniface, M. (2006). The meaning of adventurous activities for 'women in the outdoors'. *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning*, 6(1), 9–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729670685200711>



- Canadian Association of Social Workers. (2005). *Code of ethics*. Retrieved from [http://www.acsw.ab.ca/document/1328/casw\\_code\\_of\\_ethics.pdf](http://www.acsw.ab.ca/document/1328/casw_code_of_ethics.pdf)
- Cosgriff, M., Little, D. E., & Wilson, E. (2009). The nature of nature: How New Zealand women in middle to later life experience nature-based leisure. *Leisure Sciences*, 32(1), 15–32.
- Gilliam, N. (1993). What happens when the ropes courses move from the woods to psychiatric treatment facilities. In M. A. Gass (Ed.), *Adventure therapy: Therapeutic applications of adventure programming* (pp. 209–216). Boulder, CO: Association for Experiential Education.
- Gray, T. (2016). The ‘F’ word: Feminism in outdoor education. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, 19(2), 25–41.
- Hornibrook, T., Brinkert, E., Parry, D., Seimens, R., Mitten, D., & Priest, S. (1997). The benefits and motivations of all women outdoor programs. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 20, 152–158.
- Humberstone, B. (2000). The ‘outdoor industry’ as social and educational phenomena: Gender and outdoor adventure/education. *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning*, 1(1), 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729670085200041>
- Jordan, D. (1991). In the eye of the beholder: Perceptions of female and male outdoor leaders. *Leisure Studies*, 10(3), 235–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614369100390211>
- Lee, J., Scott, D., & Floyd, M. F. (2001). Structural inequalities in outdoor recreation participation: A multiple hierarchy stratification perspective. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 33(4), 427–449.
- Loeffler, T. A. (1997). Assisting women in developing a sense of competence in outdoor programs. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 20(3), 119–123.
- Martin, S. V. (2013). *The representation of women in adventure education literature*. Prescott, AZ: Prescott College.
- Mcdermott, L. (2004, April). Exploring intersections of physicality and female-only canoeing experiences. *Leisure Studies*, 23, 283–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0261436042000253039>
- McNiel, J. N., Harris, D. A., & Fondren, K. M. (2012). Women and the wild: Gender socialization in wilderness recreation advertising. *Gender Issues*, 29, 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-012-9111-1>
- Mitten, D. (1994). Ethical considerations in adventure therapy: A feminist critique. In E. Cole, E. Erdman, & E. D. Rothblum (Eds.), *Wilderness therapy for women: The power of adventure* (pp. 55–84). Binghamton, NY: Hawthorn Press.
- Morse, A. J. (1997). Gender conflict in adventure education: Three feminist perspectives. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 20, 124–129.
- Picower, B. (2012). Teacher activism: Enacting a vision for social justice. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 45(4), 561–574. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2012.717848>
- Smith, A. (2016). *Feminist outdoor leadership: Challenging hegemonic masculinity through outdoor education*. Portland, OR: Portland State University.

- Thomas, G. (2009). Outdoor leadership education: Do recent textbooks focus on what is important to effective practice? In *Fourth International Outdoor Education Research Conference*, Beechworth, VIC, Australia.
- Warren, K. (2002). Preparing the next generation: Social justice in outdoor leadership education and training. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 25(1), 231–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105382590202500107>
- Warren, K. (2005). A path worth taking: The development of social justice in outdoor experiential education. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 38, 89–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680590907837>
- Warren, K., & Loeffler, T. A. (2000). Setting a place at the table: Social justice research in outdoor experiential education. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 23(2), 85–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105382590002300206>
- Warren, K., & Loeffler, T. A. (2006). Factors that influence women's technical skill development in outdoor adventure. *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning*, 6(2), 107–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14729670685200791>
- Warren, K., Roberts, N. S., Breunig, M., & Alvarez, M. A. G. (2014). Social justice in outdoor experiential education: A state of knowledge review. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 89–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825913518898>
- Witt, A.-K., & Cuesta, M. (2014). How gender conscious pedagogy in higher education can stimulate actions of social justice in society. *Social Inclusion*, 2(1), 12. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v2i1.30>
- Wittmer, C. R. (2001). Leadership and gender-role congruency: A guide for wilderness and outdoor practitioners. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 24(3), 173–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105382590102400308>