

# 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

problem of gender disparity, especially in terms of the asymmetry in recognition and leadership, compel me to name this issue that has plagued the field: there has not been a thorough feminist self-examination. Since the 1990s, the successes achieved in the field may have created a false sense of complacency, and women have not actively pushed for additional changes that will be necessary for us to truly achieve parity.

The source of the problem is complicated: OE women do not often find explicit opposition or overt prejudice. Instead, the obstacles are invisible and the covert biases that prevent women's progress appear to be gender neutral. In addition, many women suffer from feminist fatigue — an important through-line of current feminist discussion — where women are exhausted of raising the “F” word time and time again, with no societal change or progress (Gray, Mitten, et al., 2016). In part, our reluctance to bring up these recurring issues is because many of the problems are hard to pinpoint. Joint experiences in OE suggest some women experience gender invisibility or feel marginalised and undervalued (for instance, Avery, 2015; Bell, 1996; Galpin, 1987; Goldenberg & Soule, 2014; Henderson, 1996; Loeffler, 1997; Lugg, 2003; Warren, 1996b). My ongoing conversations with seasoned female outdoor educators often focus on how it feels to be a *minority* female in the outdoor sector.

Especially important, however, is the notion that women's prodigious drive and enlarged presence at the junior level have not sufficiently translated into highly visible senior positions. Firstly, longevity within the profession up to our 50s and 60s is rarer than it should be (Wright & Gray, 2013). Secondly, even when we do achieve remarkable accomplishments, these sometimes do not translate into appropriate recognition or changes to our professional status, often because we do not sufficiently promote ourselves or champion each other (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003). Ironically, even our leadership style, our desire to distribute credit or nurture participants' sense of self-efficacy, can lead to our own professional self-effacement (Blades, in press; Cameron, in press).

The immediate provocation for this paper was the process of soliciting female contributors to become part of the *Palgrave Macmillan International Handbook of Women in Outdoor Learning Environments* now in preparation. Previously, I did not self-identify strongly as a feminist, nor did I recognise the depth of women's own complicity in the problem of gender disparity, until I asked dozens of women to consider writing contributions. Women who had achieved remarkable things in their careers — true leaders in every sense of the word — hesitated at my request.

Time after time, I 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. In emails and phone calls, I found myself butting up against a pervasive pattern that contributes to our collective low visibility. In some cases, it broke my heart to hear women I admired insist that they were not worthy to be invited, such as the first Australian woman to climb Everest who declined the offer, even though she has an Order of Australia Medal for her feats. An undercurrent of self-doubt and poor self-image afflicted these remarkable women, and it was revelatory.

This paper offers an analysis of common threads that transcend the fabric of individual women's stories and became highlighted as Denise Mitten and I edited the volume. The paper concludes by offering nine reasons why women still contend with aspects of gender invisibility and imbalance. I also consider some practical solutions and strategies for those grappling with ways to improve their leadership impact and help accomplish their personal career goals arising from the accounts of women leaders.

## Re-examining the level playing field in OE

In terms of gender scholarship and practice, the concept of “level playing field” is not new (for instance, Blackmore, 1997; Gavora, 2002; Reeser, 2005). Idealistically, practitioners and theorists in OE would like to position themselves as aspiring towards egalitarianism, where everyone faces equal opportunity. Moreover, in a utopic world, OE and feminist theory should philosophically dovetail. This stance is advocated by Warren and Rheingold (1996) when they remark, “feminist education practice infused into experiential education has the potential to create a just society” (p. 30).

In many cases, the women consulted through email exchanges (with permission gained to use these comments as data) were drawn to outdoor pursuits as they offered a safe “playing space” for us to advance feminism. In recent decades, researchers have amassed evidence to validate claims that girls and women in outdoor environments developed a sense of empowerment, enhanced wellbeing, body satisfaction, freedom, and independence, whilst also thriving psychologically, physiologically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually (Arnold, 1994; Barr-Wilson, 2012; Budbill, 2008; Dickson, Gray, & Mann, 2008; Gray, 1997; Hendersen, 1996; Mitten, 1985, 1992, 1996; Wesely & Gaarder, 2004; West-Smith, 2000; Whittington, 2006; Whittington, Mack, Budbill, & McKenney, 2011). A study conducted by Lichtenstein (1985) showed women

who assumed difficult, even impossible challenges in the outdoors developed a spirit that is characterised by intense bonding, cooperation, and support.

Despite assertions that participating in outdoor programming offers restorative health benefits, female outdoor scholars have experienced unilateral prejudice in terms of gender recognition (Bell, 1996, 1997, 2008; Edwards-Leeper, 2004; Gray & Birrell, 2015; Jordan, 1992; Leupp, 2007; Mitten, Henderson, Warren, Bialeschki, Yerkes, & Hampton, 1997; Mitten & Woodruff, 2010). Women are critically underrepresented. Sadly, disparity within the profession’s perceptions of our academic footprint, competence, credentials, and performance commonly abound (Allin, 2000, 2003, 2004; Allin & Humberstone, 2006; Avery, 2015; Avery, Norton, & Tucker, in press; Gray & Mitten, in press; Loeffler, 1995, 1997; Martin, 2013; Warren, 2016; Wittmer, 2001).

Ironically, the marked gender divide evident within our profession is at odds with a profession that, at its core, holds an unwavering social and equality mission statement. Irrespective of individual diversity, OE practitioners seek explicitly to be inclusive and respectful of all people. Yet, for over 30 years the needs of many women have not been heard, or addressed, adequately (Galpin, 1987; Sharp, 2001).

The issue of how women are represented in OE will be explored by reflecting on two interrelated questions:

1. *What messages prevail, in the extant social media and related literature, about the status of OE women?*
2. *What insights and discoveries will galvanise a distinctive future for women in OE?*

### **The prevailing messages about the status of OE women**

Women outdoor leaders continue to face problematic work environments and sexual harassment (Joyce, 2016), whilst some males interrogate women’s technical skills and competencies in both subtle and blatant ways (Avery, 2015; Loeffler, 1997). The OE profession has at its core the development of leadership and individual potential; it is therefore imperative that both men and women examine this dynamic within the profession.

Inspiring senior OE women have been emboldened to share their own leadership journeys from across the globe. Having navigated their way through the distinctive OE maze, they provided key insights and personal stories about defining moments within their careers. By reflecting on those unexpected, sometimes tiny events that were turning points in both career and

life, I hope to illuminate the inequities and offer positive ways forward to advance the profession. A grounded theory methodological framework (Dhunpath, 2000) underpins the analysis of professional narratives and personal reflections that have shaped defining moments in our career trajectories.

### **Insights into the gendered OE space**

Turning attention to social media and the empirical evidence, *how is gender played out in the OE landscape?* Unquestionably, gender role stereotyping is alive and thriving in 2016 and one has to look no further than Wikipedia to observe elements of sexism.

Figure 1 turns the spotlight onto the absence of women as significant *players* or “protagonists” in the OE field. As a discipline, OE focuses disproportionately – if not exclusively – on male theorists whilst also exalting and valorising the insights of men. Not a single *woman* is mentioned in Wikipedia in the OE field, as it traces the contours of *male* professional lives. This begs the question: *How and why have women been erased from the public eye?*

Although women might like to think the exclusion is unintentional, nevertheless, a blind spot within the field is evidenced in the male domination of public representation of leadership in OE. Pioneering women such as environmentalists Rachel Carson and Jane Goodall, or trailblazing outdoor educators including Karen Warren or Denise Mitten are not included in what is a highly gendered landscape. These findings concur with Graells-Garrido, Lalmas, and Menczer (2015), as well as Wagner, Garcia, Jadidi, and Strohmaier (2015), who identified visibility of patriarchal patterns in online platforms such as Wikipedia and Twitter.

The vignette recorded below as Scenario 1 provides a self-reflection on a significant incident at an international OE conference.

Whilst Scenario 1 was unsettling, it provided the impetus for a dialogue about women in OE around the globe. This experience ignited and united women in the profession, and in June 2014, the first Australian Women’s Group in OE at the Western Sydney University’s Hawkesbury Campus was formed as a result of interest expressed from gender oppression in Scenario 1 at the 6IOERC. In this forum, personal stories were shared and our solidarity was galvanised when we hatched a plan to write a book to restore the gender imbalance. Ostensibly, we felt a need to coalesce our narratives into a unified voice, to do something about (re)imagining the patriarchal profession, and to strengthen our relationships with one another in order to more effectively advocate for change. As Christie (in press) suggests, storytelling “offers a way to continue

## People [edit]

Name	Notability
Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell	Founder of the Scout Movement and The Scout Association. <sup>[24][25]</sup>
Daniel Carter Beard	Outdoorsman. Founder of the Boy Pioneers. Co-founder of the Boy Scouts of America and the Camp Fire Girls.
Edward Urner Goodman	Scoutmaster. Camp Director, Treasure Island Scout Reservation. National Program Director, Boy Scouts of America. Founder, Order of the Arrow.
Bear Grylls / Edward Michael Grylls	Outdoor adventurer; summited Mt. Everest. Chief Scout of The Scout Association.
Luther Halsey Gulick	Proponent of Playground Education. Co-founder of the Boy Scouts of America and the Camp Fire Girls.
Kurt Hahn / Kurt Matthias Robert Martin Hahn	Experiential educator. Founder of Schule Schloss Salem, Gordonstoun, and United World Colleges system. Founded Outward Bound with Lawrence Durning Holt and Jim Hogan. Originator of the Moray Badge, the forerunner of the County Badge <sup>[29]</sup>
William Hillcourt	Boy Scout; Scoutmaster; Scouting professional. Authored many books and articles on Scouting, outdoor activities, and Scout skills, including the first <i>Scout Fieldbook</i> and three editions of the <i>Boy Scout Handbook</i> of the BSA. Endeavored to maintain the outdoor orientation of US Boy Scouting.
James Kielsmeier	Outward Bound instructor. Proponent of experiential education and service learning. Founder of the National Youth Leadership Council and the Center for Experiential Education and Service-Learning (University of Minnesota).
Ernst Killander	Soldier; Boy Scout leader; propagator of orienteering.
Richard Louv	Journalist. Proponent of nature awareness and opponent of what he termed "nature-deficit disorder."
John P. Milton	Conducted life transformation journeys in wilderness areas of Asia, Africa, North America, and South America. Founder of Sacred Passage and The Way of Nature Fellowship.
Joshua Lewis Miner, III	Worked at Gordonstoun; took Kurt Hahn's ideas to the USA. Co-founder of Colorado Outward Bound School with Charles Froelicher. Founder of Outward Bound USA. Inspired use of outdoor education in the Peace Corps.
Ohiyesa / Charles Alexander Eastman	North American Indian of the Isányathi tribe of the Dakota nation; physician; author; worked closely with YMCA, Woodcraft Indians, and YMCA Indian Guides; co-founder of the Boy Scouts of America and Camp Fire Girls.
Tony Pammer	Canoeing instructor. Co-founder and CEO of the Outdoor Education Group.
Jerry Pieh	Outward Bound instructor and school principal who pioneered the introduction of Outward Bound methods into the mainstream school system; father of Project Adventure (founded with Mary Ladd Smith, Robert Lentz, Karl Rohnke, Jim Schoel and others) which gave impetus to Adventure-Based Counseling.
Edgar Munroe Robinson	YMCA summer camp director. Set up the fledgling Boy Scouts of America organization.
Ernest Thompson Seton	Founded the Woodcraft Indians and the Woodcraft League. Inspiration and major source of Baden-Powell's <i>Scouting for Boys</i> . Co-founder of the Boy Scouts of America and the Camp Fire Girls. Chief Scout of the Boy Scouts of America.

Figure 1. Wikipedia entries of “significant people in outdoor education” (accessed April 17, 2016).

an inter- and intra-generational conversation that can challenge rather than simply affirm the hegemonic discourse of the time.” The “F” seed — a feminist re-examination of the reasons progress in OE — had been planted, and we were committed to advancing women in the field.

Scenario 2 (p. 28 below) further exposes the current blind spots in the OE profession as evidenced in the 19th Australian National Outdoor Education Conference keynote line-up.

Given the issues outlined in Scenario 2, women in the OE discipline were not surprised to find that our gender had been erased from the professional

landscape. With no disrespect intended towards these three keynote speakers themselves, episodes such as having three male keynote presenters, with no mention of a woman, occur on a regular basis in this field. Ironically, the monopoly by male speakers does not reflect the audience. Women make up roughly half of the field of OE, successfully guiding programmes and building award-winning careers (Avery et al., 2017; Gray, Allen-Craig, et al., 2016). Nevertheless, research and academic leadership positions for women in the discipline have been painfully slow developing and do not accurately reflect the composition of practitioners (Martin, 2013). Examples such as the absence of women on Wikipedia, and

Scenario 1. Gender oppression at the 6th International Outdoor Education Research Conference (6IOERC) in New Zealand (2013)

A light bulb moment occurred at the 6th IOERC Conference in New Zealand (*Future Faces: Outdoor Education Research Innovations and Visions*, November 26–29, 2013). Three well-respected male academics and researchers conducted a workshop entitled, “Exploring critical and transformative methodologies in outdoor education research.”

Using a “fishbowl” format, the presenters arranged three chairs at the top of a horseshoe-shaped seating. The three workshop presenters were seated in these three chairs and commenced the dialogue about their workshop. The rules were simple: when any member of the audience felt the desire to interject and say something, they needed only to come up and tap one of the seated persons on the shoulder. The sitter would then allow the new speaker to enter the conversation and replace them in one of the three seats.

Despite the full audience being diverse, the participants in the exercise were not. As I scanned the room, I noticed women with long, rich histories sitting silently. As time passed, the conversation was lively, entertaining, and educative, but the absence of female voices hit me like a tonne of bricks. I sat paralysed and mute and witnessed what I now look back on as a revelation about the profession. Not one solitary woman got up to displace a man out of a seat for a chance to share her own insights or opinions. In addition, no one mentioned women as significant players in the field of critical and transformative methodologies in outdoor education research. The workshop ended. Men talked to men about their accomplishments and academic insights, a landscape that they did not even recognise as disproportionately masculinised.

What played out during their workshop was both disconcerting and, more importantly, an epiphany. The exchange left me frustrated but also profoundly perplexed. I had more questions than answers:

Why had I remained mute?

Why didn’t any other woman get up and actively participate?

Are we suffering from feminist fatigue or imposter syndrome, or why did we not join in?

Are we stopped by inertia, long conditioned to letting men lead the discussion, or is the cause more active exclusion?

Why don’t we name gender exclusion when we see it, or do we just fail to even notice?

Where were the male allies to name the gender exclusion?

Personally, I was disappointed in my own “voicelessness,” allowing this event to end without stepping up and naming the “F” word: feminism. After the workshop several female leaders got together and debriefed the incident fuelled by the question, “What just happened in there — did you feel like I did?”

We shared our emotions; they ranged from outrage and bewilderment, through irritation, confusion, fury, sadness, and grim resignation.

the exclusion and self-marginalisation in Scenarios 1 and 2, are a recurring theme. More importantly, they provide the underlying motivation for a call to action.

### Shifting the culture

An urgent culture shift is needed, but OE has not undergone a thorough radical feminist critique or reform (Gray, Allen-Craig, et al., 2016; McNeil, Harris, & Fondren, 2012). To date, many women in the field have responded to the entrenched patriarchal system by remaining somewhat compliant — not agitating openly, and passively accepting a subordinate position, as a natural way to protect themselves in the face of sexism. In my experience we, women, may send emails of commiseration to one another on the back of sleights, like the 2016 announcement of an

all-male programme of keynotes. Women cringe at the disproportionate male monopoly, and in direct contrast, firmly believe we have something distinctive to offer the profession. But, what changes need to manifest in order for the “F” word to become explicit in the field and, more importantly, guide practical renewal?

This series of recent injustices illustrates concretely the gender imbalance I am attempting to convey. The covert gendered terrain of OE becomes starkly apparent even if individual incidents, taken in isolation, sometimes appear banal and without malice. One way to redress the asymmetry is to explicitly introject women’s historical public voices and their own interpretation of their selves and lives into their struggle to exercise authority in education.

Scenario 2. All-male keynotes at the 19th National Outdoor Education Conference 2016

Outdoor Education Australia (OEA) is delighted to announce its 2016 biennial National Outdoor Education Conference (NOEC) . . . With the theme of *Innovate—Educate—Celebrate* and a major emphasis on outdoor experiential learning, the 2016 NOEC is set to be a cracking event.

FEATURING

- Dr Simon Beames
- Mark McCrindle
- Tim Low

## Feminists as agents of change

As we look back through history, we know women were at the forefront of every progressive victory in this country. (Bernie Sanders @BernieSanders, November 12, 2015)

As Bernie Sanders acknowledged through Twitter during his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in the United States, women have consistently served as vanguards and catalysts for social transformation. Feminists, in an attempt to promote equality, must concern themselves with rectifying the invisibility and misrepresentation of female participation in social change and their experiences in order to build a strong foundation for future social and cultural reform, as well as more radical change. When viewed holistically, recognising the contributions of women provides a broader understanding of outdoor adventure experiences by sharpening our attunement towards an egalitarian and democratic future (Mitten & Gray, in press). In the same vein, renowned Australian journalist and political reporter Chris Uhlmann, whilst comparing the National Press Club: Women of Science recently remarked:

Clearly, the pace of our wisdom runs slower than the pace of our knowledge. Because, if we were a truly wise society, then we would use all the talents of our people and that would mean women would be equally represented in all things . . . and they aren't. (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2016)

At its root, feminism is the belief that men and women should be awarded the same freedoms and rights (Greer, 1971; Waring & Steinem, 1988). By breaking long-held gendered stereotypes that women are vulnerable,

weak, and subservient, feminist movements have sought to redress the imbalance (Gray, 1997; Lerner, 1989). Part of this process involves recuperating the history of women's accomplishments in order to provide a more balanced account of their prior contributions, dispelling the assumption that, because we do not hear more about women leaders of the past, they did not leave their impress upon our discipline.

### Brief overview of feminism

Understanding and contesting popular conceptions and misconceptions about feminism (or more appropriately, *feminisms*) is warranted. Although this paper is limited by an imposed word length, the cursory manner in which feminism is applied to the theoretical constructs of OE is acknowledged by the author. For those readers wanting an in-depth coverage, please refer to writers such as Allin and West (2013), Bell (2008), and Warren (2016).

Feminist perspectives have arisen in an attempt to better understand women's lives and challenge gender inequality. According to the extensive literature, four subsets of feminism have evolved. In no particular order, these are: 1) socialist, 2) radical, 3) liberal, and 4) poststructural. *Socialist feminist* philosophy argues that women's oppression is a consequence of both patriarchy and capitalism. According to Allin & West (2013), it focuses on understanding and celebrating the uniqueness, exceptionality, and distinctiveness of feminine leadership styles and ways of being. *Radical feminism* offers a foundation for how women can differentiate themselves from men and suggests ways in which women's approaches are unique models (Henderson, 1996). Radical feminists support women's different voices in OE — solitude, simplicity, and attunement to the natural world. *Liberal feminists* propose that men and women should have equal opportunities and equivalent participatory rights with commensurate acknowledgement (Allin & West, 2013).

Last, a fundamental concept in *poststructural feminist* analysis is that of "discourse." Language is fundamental to poststructuralist analysis and the deconstruction of the subject and according to Allin & West (2013), a poststructuralist critique has

led to a radical re-interpretation of social life, challenging, for example, the binary divides of male and female, black and white, gay and straight. In contrast to feminist approaches which viewed women as a largely homogenous group, differentiated only by social class, poststructuralist feminism contests notions of what it means to be female, arguing that there is no such person as a typical woman. (Allin & West, 2013, p. 120)

For the most part, feminist poststructural analysis draws on the work of Michael Foucault and his theory of discourse and the self (1979; 1990). Against this feminist backdrop, a balanced approach is needed to counterbalance the deep-rooted OE culture and as Henderson (1996) explains, “no one view of feminism . . . provides all the perspectives necessary” (p. 108). In essence, the emphasis is on recognition of the differences between women. Personally, I am a reluctant feminist. For most of my career, I believed in a *liberal* feminism: we simply need equal opportunity and the removal of active barriers to participation. My recent experiences in OE have led me to consider that true reform requires a more critical feminism, capable of leading cultural and structural change more thoroughly.

### Nine reasons: OE women’s responses to a highly gendered workplace

In the past 50 to 60 years, women have made significant strides in terms of social status, outdoor accomplishments, and career advancements in OE, but further progress requires a refinement of our strategies (Gray, Mitten, et al., 2016). As mentioned earlier, whilst recruiting women writers for our upcoming collection (see Gray and Mitten, in press, the *Palgrave Macmillan International Handbook for Women in Outdoor Learning Environments*), recurring patterns surfaced as we unpacked invitees’ responses to the sidelining of women in the OE profession. To understand the phenomenon of the gendered spaces in which we work, sharing stories is a fruitful mode of inquiry and narratives have the power to refine and guide, to connect the heart with the head (Gray & Stuart, 2015).

Examining the commonalities within these women’s stories highlights the subtle obstacles placed in our professional paths. The author used grounded theory (Dhunpath, 2000) to distil the commonalities in the conversations with OE women over an 18-month period leading up to submitting the final manuscript to Palgrave Macmillan. An analysis of the women’s stories revealed nine key emergent themes about why feminist reform has been stymied:

1. A lack of self-confidence and women do not like to self-promote;
2. Women typically employ a symbiotic or eco-feminist style of leadership;
3. Motherhood and the resultant struggles for longevity in the field;
4. A mismatch between heroism and gender roles plagues the profession;
5. Perfection is our worst enemy;

6. Some women suffer from *imposter syndrome*;
7. Women do not ask, stay silent, and allow others to determine the terms of discussion;
8. “Feminist fatigue” and the rationalisation that “women can’t have it all”;
9. Feminism has *failed* to achieve traction.

#### 1. Lack of self-confidence and women do not like to self-promote

My grandfather once told me there were two kinds of people; those who do the work and those who take the credit. He told me to be in the first group. There is much less competition. (Indira Gandhi, cited in Trehan, 2010, p. 155)

Women often wait to be discovered, believing that if they perform with excellence, we will be noticed. As a result, women do not push ourselves forward for career advancement the same way men do (Ridgeway, 1982). Psychological research shows that women typically underreport their competence levels even though they may possess the ability to lead in outdoor learning settings, as they do in other fields (McNeil, et al., 2012). Although a generalisation, women frequently do not like to self-promote in our field, whereas men are more comfortable espousing their skill sets (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Vukotic, 2016). This pattern might be a result of the fact that, when women do assert their skills or competence, men may negatively receive the attempt (Ridgeway, 1982). In many ways, women are caught in a double bind: to be accepted as a leader, both men and women must demonstrate their competence, but women, in addition, must demonstrate that they are not trying to acquire status at the expense of other members of the group (Ridgeway, 1982).

Repeatedly, as Denise Mitten and I looked for outstanding women to contribute to the *Handbook*, we found ourselves having to talk women into accepting the invitation over objections that they did not merit selection. As we wrote to one of the women in the collection:

Your hesitancy is exactly what we want to showcase. The dilemma between motherhood (and the inordinate time demands that come with juggling work, outdoor trips, etc.) questioning our role in academia (i.e. not thinking our work has enough intellectual grunt), and resignation to the status quo/maintaining homeostasis — that is — Who am I to put myself on a pedestal? I don’t want to rock

the boat. All I can say is your hesitancy signals all the more reason to do it. Our time has come to be a collective voice, and it is about garnering the support of the silent achievers. (Gray & Mitten, in press)

Women in OE need to start believing in their innate abilities and be emboldened to assert themselves to overcome this internalised poor self-efficacy, which has resulted from an enduring patriarchal system.

## 2. Cultivating a collaborative and symbiotic leadership style

Feminists have observed that women often do not aspire to be paradigmatic heroic or valiant leaders, clearly set off and distinct from the groups they lead (Blackmore, 1997; Gavora, 2002; Reeser, 2005; Schwartz & Zimmerman, 1992). In fact, many women who practice in OE practice a more introspective, intuitive, and relational model of leadership (see Cameron, in press). This style of leadership from behind, rather than taking a more prominent position, was advocated by the Confucian philosopher, Lao Tzu (1972, p. 46):

A leader is best when people barely know he [or she] exists, when his [her] work is done, his [her] aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves. (Lao Tsu, 1972, p. 46)

Giving power away and letting others receive the credit for shared achievements are traits that characterise many female OE leaders. I have always upheld the belief that those who have power feel most at ease with giving it away. So perhaps, in an indirect way, our weakness is also our strength. When operating in a symbiotic leadership model, all parts of the team have equal importance. Research suggests that women derive innate satisfaction from a distributed leadership model where hierarchy is diminished (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

The pitfall of this approach is that women's accomplishments are not linked to their individual identities. Their leadership legacy is indiscernible because they prefer that a group become empowered, rather than their own individual status being promoted. In fact, this leadership style of communal empowerment may contribute directly to the underrepresentation of women in OE in Wikipedia and professional presentations.

The leadership style mirrors what many cultural feminists argue is a preferred mode of connecting to nature in an intuitive, gentle way (Charles, in press; Plumwood, 1986, 1993; Warren & Erkal, 1997). As one of our contributors wrote, she searched for a more feminine way of doing OE: "I was more interested in a different way of being in the bush, than what had been

modelled to me, and what was being modelled through the field." Feminist ways of intimately connecting and interacting with natural teaching and learning spaces are reciprocal, rather than hierarchical. Or, as another practitioner wrote, she focused on "changing the relationship from something of domination and heroic motives, and conquering, to one which is *just being in nature*."

Some of the women we talked to thought that their distinctive ways of relating to people and to nature needed to be featured more in OE more generally, not just for their female students: "Being in the outdoors, and learning in the outdoors, can be vastly expanded, and I think maybe that's one of the things we've got to offer as women." Ironically, this contribution — a cooperative lead-from-behind approach and strength in reciprocal relations with others and nature — undermines women's chances to be recognised for their excellence. Encouraging talented women to maintain their leadership positions is imperative, as they bring a different and complementary set of skills.

## 3. Motherhood and longevity in the field

Motherhood and careers are a constant juggling act (Gerson, 1986). We struggle to negotiate work, parenting, and family commitments, especially when our jobs call for us to be away for extended periods in the field (Allin, 2004; Frohlick, 2006; Kiewa, in press). Being absent from family and ongoing responsibilities creates hidden tensions and women can often be socially stigmatised as being a "bad mother." For instance, many colleagues face constant dilemmas about whether to venture into the wilderness leading groups; a trip of 7–10 days, for example, might prevent them from being at home for a daughter's birthday party or to look after a sick child.

Along the same line, many OE women resent that they invest more time and energy into their students or clients on lengthy expeditions than they offer to their own children. The dominant discourses about "sacrificial motherhood" take a personal toll on pursuing an enduring career. The consequences are varied: some experience burnout and exit the profession, whilst others harbour resentment towards their unconventional, risky careers (Edwards & Gray, 1998; Kiewa, in press; Wright & Gray, 2013).

Being on maternity leave can also have disastrous consequences for our visibility in terms of career progression and appreciation. A revered female colleague shared the following:

My boss took my place at a conference as I was off on maternity leave with my daughter. Rather than present my paper and my research as my work, he presented



it as his own and took my name off of it! I only found out he’d done this when I saw the paper cited on a website — minus my name! I challenged him, and he said it was an oversight and had it amended by adding a line or two at the bottom to say he presented it on my behalf as I was on maternity leave. But if I hadn’t called him on it — it would have stayed as his work!

This incident is not isolated. In fact, it is the third time I have heard of similar scenarios playing out in the tertiary sector and begs the question: *What would happen if the roles were reversed and a woman stole the work of a male colleague?* I would hazard to guess it would be career suicide. She would be banished from the academy, and her scholarly trajectory would be dead.

#### 4. Heroism and gender role incongruence

Stereotypes associated with gender roles shape how we perceive men and women in OE (see Becker & Eagly, 2004.) Because of the way that *heroism* is congruent with male stereotypes, heroes in the outdoor pursuits are disproportionately male. Women have noteworthy, even startling accomplishments in OE, and yet they do not attract the same notoriety because the personage of “heroine” is both gender incongruous and not clearly prefigured with obvious models. For instance, Schaffer (2016) writes about Lhakpa Sherpa, a Nepalese woman who has climbed Everest more than any other woman — six times — and is currently on the mountain trying for her seventh summit. Schaffer asks, “So why doesn’t anyone know her name?” Instead, she works as a housekeeper in the United States and lives in fear of domestic violence from her ex-husband. Both her gender and her ethnicity make it harder for the press and public to recognise her as a *hero* with real material effects: if she was an Australian man and had summited K2 six times, she would likely have a sponsorship deal from a clothing or footwear company and be on the motivational speakers’ circuit. The unwillingness of a broader society to acknowledge women as outdoors *heroes* excludes them from opportunities and starves them of resources available to the men in OE.

The unwillingness to consider women in the outdoors as heroes extends to the way that they are treated publicly, beyond simply irrelevance to much harsher negative judgements. A distressing example is the case of Alison Hargreaves, a British mountaineer who died after summiting the world’s second-highest mountain, K2, in 1995 (Frohlick, 2006). A talented outdoorswoman and mother of two young children, the media had a field day and disparaged her as selfish, irresponsible, foolish, negligent, and reckless.

Interestingly, a more balanced perspective was offered by Hargreave’s husband who supported her ambitions and pointed out she died doing what she loved.

In contrast, the following week a man died doing exactly the same climb but was lauded as a hero, idol, conqueror, victor, and champion. The same outdoor activities, the same risks, can draw diametrically opposing judgements depending not just on the outcome, but on the gender of those who engage in them. Judged more harshly for taking risks, the hidden message is that women are less legitimate in the outdoors and need to protect themselves more. The inconsistencies have important implications for the psychology of heroism and the way that young practitioners are socialised. The omnipresent message is that women may be vilified for attempting the same challenges that men are celebrated for confronting.

#### 5. Perfection is our enemy and also our handicap

Self-doubt can undermine women’s perceptions of their abilities (Brown, 2010; Oleson, Poehlmann, Yost, Lynch, & Arkin, 2000). When women believe they are not perfect, they surrender ambitions of career advancement. This aspect is reiterated by Vukotic (2016) when she states:

I find it often takes women 10 years longer than men to realise how good they really are. I don’t think you can make a contribution until you’ve moved beyond wondering if you’re good enough.

Similarly, another woman working in OE discussed via email how self-doubt prevents colleagues from putting themselves forward when male candidates would have no reservations:

Men will apply for a job if they have 7 out of 10 of the essential criteria, women tell themselves they must have 10 out of 10 of the criteria, and even then, they will find something within the criteria which they think will be their undoing.

Women, in fact, can pay a hefty penalty for success. For instance, when women and men have equal credentials showing that their performance is outstanding, women are rated as very competent — but *dislikable* — because they are labelled *independent* or *bossy* (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). Furthermore, studies show people will attempt to sabotage a woman’s performance if they can do so undetected (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Achieving an appropriate balance in leadership dynamics is even more challenging for women than for men, as a dominant woman is perceived

as more dominant than an equally dominant man. Likewise, skilful and assertive female leaders are often disproportionately evaluated negatively by their peers for being too headstrong and domineering. This dilemma plays out on a daily basis, as one female practitioner suggested in an email exchange:

By trying to be perfect, there are always those who cut you down to size, especially if you are a woman and perceived as a “ball-breaker.”

Clearly, perfection is our worst enemy and women hold themselves back by waiting to be flawless. Women are becoming increasingly exhausted by critiquing their personal capacities against their self-perceived inabilities. Regardless of the self-imposed consequences, we need to take ourselves more lightly and “just do it.”

## 6. Imposter syndrome

*Imposter syndrome* is a term used to designate the feeling of being a phony, fraud, or a *pretender* (Clance & Imes, 1978; Esposito, 2009; Hutchins, 2015). This condition arises from a perceived skills deficit, a sense of not belonging, or even a judgemental workplace. Operating as a female outdoor educator over many decades has presented a unique set of gender-related, asymmetrical challenges. Like the majority of my colleagues, I have found the profession to be dominated by a white male practice, and we have strived to have our voice noticed (Bell, 1996, 1997, 2008; Dickson & Gray, 2006; Humberstone, 2000; Lugg, 2003; McNeil et al., 2012; Warren, 1996a; 1996b; Wright & Gray, 2013). There also seems to be added criticism of female outdoor leaders and they appear to be under higher scrutiny (Gray & Mitten, in press).

As one of the foremothers in OE, Karen Warren noted in her seminal book, *Women's Voices in Experiential Education*, we struggle with parity of esteem in terms of professional status and identity. To this end, 20 years ago, she dedicated her book to the “women and girls everywhere who strive to have their voices heard” (Warren, 1996a, p. iii). In part, our voices have been inaudible because of our misconceptions of being *imposters*. We have an equal right to belong, and be protagonists and active players in an outdoor environment. As a unified and coherent body, men and women need to disrupt the current patriarchal dispositions. I was heartened to see, during our NOEC conference presentation (Gray, Allen-Craig, et al., 2016), a male audience member make the astute observation about why women are not noticed:

Men are predominantly the influential leaders and figureheads of outdoor

companies. They are the front line impression, go into schools and organisations and secure the contracts, then a female does all the administration, logistical and personal relationship building with the clients, behind the scenes.

Two distinct roles emerge, the *male image* as “spearhead” or public face, and the *female role* of “workhorse” or behind-the-scenes manager. In this gendered division of labour, women will inevitably be invisible. Importantly, a man named the problem publicly in this setting, in front of an audience that was in universal agreement, a sign that the problem is widely recognised. So progress is being made, albeit slowly. Some women do not see themselves as trailblazers or influential figures with a skill set appropriate for management or leadership roles. Some women may prefer to do the nitty-gritty, “back-of-house” work, such as managing bookings, logistics, scheduling, and rosters, because of the consistency of these roles with gender norms. Unfortunately, the gendered division of labour may protect us from feeling like imposters, but it also prevents women’s insights from being shared with the community of practice and recognition of our distinctive forms of leadership.

## 7. Women do not ask, stay silent, and allow others to set the terms of discussion

A recurring theme in the feminist literature is that women hesitate to push themselves forward for major leadership roles and, whether intentionally or inadvertently, are complicit in their own erasure (Babcock & Laschever, 2003, 2007; Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007; Kary, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001). One incident that highlights how a chain of actions can lead to women’s erasure shows that the result can be profoundly unethical. A colleague is the only woman in an OE faculty, surrounded by male co-workers. She recounts an event that was a revelation to her:

I selflessly (or stupidly) allowed the men to use my conference travel money to attend an international event. They presented my research findings in a joint paper, whilst I stayed home *holding the fort* and running the faculty single-handedly. My career is effectively on hold, while they reap the benefits.

The combination of willing self-abnegation with co-workers’ uncollegial behaviour, as in this example, can lead to a chain of events in which women may conspire in their own erasure and mistreatment. In this case, feeling like a self-confessed *doormat* put the

woman in a position where she felt unable to press a complaint; after all, she had agreed to the arrangement that set the stage for her colleagues to remove her visibility from her own research.

Although the inequity is clearly made immeasurably worse by having disrespectful and unethical colleagues, women are also conditioned by pervasive sexism and patriarchy to allow these kinds of chains of events to unfold without questioning more vigorously the injustice (Pinker, 2009). *Complicit inertia* can make us collude with our enemies. Feeling compelled to assume a dutiful role — supportive, unquestioning, compliant — worried about not appearing to be good *team players*, women too often let men (and unethical women) shape the institutions we work for in ways that go against our values. We must be ready to work with allies, but also stand up to those who erode our standing, or we are likely to remain faceless and voiceless in the OE community. (One irony, however, is that it is often easier to become indignant about how a friend or colleague is treated when we are silent, and thus complicit, when the same sort of inequity is visited on us.)

## 8. Feminist fatigue

An OE career for women is exhausting, both physically and emotionally, not just because of the quality of the work, but also because of the difficulties and contradictions that we have to negotiate. Overlaying the physical weariness from an increasingly challenging academic career environment on top of the gender inequities and indignities suffered in outdoor pursuits, it is little wonder women suffer from *feminist fatigue*. Feminist fatigue is the energetic toll of standing up, over long periods of time, for gender equity, remaining vigilant and yet repeatedly facing derision or impatience for, yet again, needing to point out that equal rights for women is (still) an incomplete project. The hardest attitudes we have to deal with in OE are not blatant sexism or overt misogyny, but the insidious assumption that *the problem* is already fixed because the field has taken some measures towards greater access for women. Even some women colleagues try to tell us that feminist concerns are obsolete because conditions really have changed in meaningful ways. We have to ask ourselves when confronted by yet another example of careless or inadvertent sexism, are we ready to go back into the ring for another fight, especially if the person or institution we have to confront is making some effort, however limited or successful, towards greater equity and inclusion.

For many, the words of Anne Marie Slaughter (2015) and Jean Wallace (2006), “*women can’t have it all*,” resonate with their conflicting values. Managing careers, family, social support networks, and an assortment of responsibilities makes our lives a blur of

juxtaposed events. Some women acquiesce to the fact that surviving is more important than external tributes or praise. Burnout remains the only other option, albeit an unpalatable one (Edwards & Gray, 1998; Gray & Birrell, 2005).

Those who rail against the system end up burned out, unwell, or increasingly cynical (Edwards & Gray, 1998; Gray, 2004; Gray & Birrell, 2005). Tragically, talented women are so busy juggling a number of roles, both professionally and personally, that they simply cannot commit to pursuing a role in OE leadership or to advocating for change in the gender relations in our field. Some of us console ourselves that we are *doing* feminism by proving our value and competence, even if we are not overtly advocating for feminist principles. The danger is that, given the way that gender roles are normalised and labour in our institutions divided, just being feminist is not enough: some of our strengths work against achieving true equality and appreciation. Other women advocates, because of the fatigue, simply leave the profession to find a more equitable work environment or a field more aligned with their core values, identifying that the time demands are too high, the chances of maintaining a satisfactory work/life balance too remote.

## 9. Feminism has failed to achieve significant traction

Naively, women made an assumption in the ‘80s and ‘90s that feminist reform was just a pipeline issue and that gender inequality would self-correct over the oncoming decades. According to Cox (2016), this particular feminist vision of a social victory has failed, and what is playing out in the 21st century is cause for alarm. Women who have been professionally driven and who have a clear sense of what they want to achieve — such as career advancement — are wrongfully perceived as being aggressive, assertive and even forceful — and that’s not feminine! We are caught between a rock and a hard place, not wanting to de-prioritise being a wife, mother, or daughter — but also wanting to challenge the status quo of implicit gender bias. We feel like we’ve been here before, and maybe the fact that we’re still fighting this battle means that we’re condemned to lose.

I let the workshop wash over me, wondering if a female would say anything, or indeed, be acknowledged by the presenters as having contributed to critical and transformative methodologies in OE research . . . but it appears we aren’t on the (male) radar as significant contributors.

The reality is that the erasure of women’s achievements, and the failure to make our own and our predecessors’ contributions to the field, can make

us disproportionately fatalistic. Failing to stand up for women as keynote speakers, demanding that we get equal billing, can lead to us losing the ground that our foremothers have potentially won for us. If we do not document what we have learned and achieved, then women's distinctive insights will be lost to OE, our styles of leadership will not be respected and taught (including to men), and our contributions will quickly be forgotten. Standing up for women's voices is not just about acknowledgement or equity; it is required for us to consolidate our gains, map out what is still yet to be accomplished, and make sure that later generations of women do not have to fight to regain the same ground that we have. If progress means standing on the shoulders of giants who have come before us, we need to show women in the field the giants who have come before them.

## Discussion

Raising the "F" word, or feminism, has never been an easy task for women, no matter what forum or audience we address. For me personally, it has taken 30 years in the profession for me to muster the courage and conviction to bring this ubiquitous issue to the table. *So how do we tackle this lambastic conundrum we face?* In the first instance, women need to collectively and defiantly stand on the cusp of the modern era with resolute solidarity. And that means a shared understanding from men and women. I am uncertain if we need to make a slow tectonic shift, or whether a tsunami is required to self-correct the heavily gendered biases in OE. In principle, our field is behind gender equity; women need to demand that the principle is put into practice by calling out bias wherever we see it.

Gender inequity and irregularity in power dynamics, may seldom be obvious in the current climate. Often those who act inequitably believe that they are applying gender-neutral standards or operate with unexamined assumptions, not out-right bias. Within this gendered landscape, we need to clarify what causes feminist fatigue, how we can be complicit through inertia, and examine our willingness to acquiesce to the dominant male voice. Throughout this paper I have attempted to convey the gender asymmetry in OE, in particular, how the discipline focuses disproportionately on male scholars and leadership styles and valorises the insights of men (Avery, 2015; Gray et al., 2016, McNeil et al., 2012). One of the hardest lessons has been to recognise the degree to which women concede to this system, even though it is biased against us. Within this intersection, women find inequities between the praise apportioned to our silent contribution to the field. Social inequalities still abound in OE, and our task is to illuminate the contributions of women as well as outlining the work that needs to be done to make these spaces inclusive.

The predominant reason I have chosen to embark on this journey is to create deeper awareness of the environment in which we, as women, conduct research and practice our profession. For too long I believe women have been sidelined or overlooked, and from a personal standpoint, I have begun to create new channels for sharing our insights and ideas. OE women lag behind other fields and can learn quite a great deal by sharing explicitly the lessons learned by other women's professional communities who have struggled to improve their professions. Women need to challenge the status quo in the field and revisit culturally the meaning of women in OE. Through systematic change in the profession, I hope to ensure a brighter future for the women who follow in my footsteps and a better environment for all of my students, not just young men (or not just young men of a particular stereotypical type).

The underlying goal is to celebrate the richness of knowledge and practices of women as a unified body. Scholars and practitioners from numerous fields, such as experiential outdoor education, adventure education, adventure therapy, and gender studies, explore the implications of their research and practice using poignant examples within their own disciplines.

## Conclusion

Women in the outdoor profession still face gendered challenges such as being recognised and accessing the upper echelons of the academy. In this paper, I have discussed a series of revelatory incidents, where women remain under-recognised and invisible. The impetus for this paper has been to address the subtle and intangible discriminatory practices in hopes of shedding some light on the imbalances and blind spots which still exist today.

Throughout this paper, I have demonstrated the impediments to women, not all of their own making, which continue to slow and stymie their progress to the most influential levels of the profession. Today, these obstructions remain poorly understood by both the profession and its representative bodies. My intent was to elucidate how feminist understandings and perspectives can usefully serve as a critique of contemporary OE participatory practices. More importantly, I wanted to challenge the long-held assumptions that OE is inclusive, democratic, and egalitarian. A closer scan of the Australian field, on the contrary, reveals a stark contrast to these explicit egalitarian values.

Feminist perspectives offer a basis for scrutinising the nature of participation and the meanings associated with our involvement in the field. An important facet of working in outdoor learning environments is the recognition that women's *modus operandi* may be

different to men’s, but are equally extensive and diverse. If women’s distinctive contributions are not recognised, then their exclusion can appear to be the inevitable outcome of meritocracy. Finally, this paper has endeavoured to unravel the subtle and nuanced messages that prevail in OE regarding the covert status of women. By shining a spotlight on the inequities and asymmetries in OE, my desire is to empower women and men to fortify their mutual efforts towards an inclusive future and to eliminate the pockets of bias we experience.

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