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Sarah Hoffert

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## Buying in to Sell out? Supporting Women's Authentic Forms of Involvement and Leadership in Outdoor Programs and Adventure

Sarah Hoffert

*Millions of women and girls participate in outdoor recreation and adventure each year (Henderson, 1996), and yet they exist in appallingly small numbers as (student and professional) technical trip leaders, directors of outdoor programs in university settings, and directors of national organizations with outdoor emphasis. This disparity in leadership indicates the need to increase the quality of women's experiences in the outdoors. In this paper, I will review feminist critiques of outdoor adventure theory and explore the controversies surrounding gender-specific outdoor experiences and/or trips. Additionally, I will address alternative theories and practices that empower, support, and enable women to buy into outdoor adventure and leadership without personally or professionally "selling out."*

With the millions of women and girls participating in outdoor recreation and adventure (Henderson, 1996), educators and student affairs professionals might wonder if there is still a need for gender-specific programming, mentoring for women, and/or change to the outdoor and experiential education trainings, programs, and curriculum. Current literature in the field indicates that it is imperative to continue to empower women to become leaders in outdoor education.

I will address what is needed to prepare girls and women to continue to pursue or to begin a personal and/or professional relationship with the outdoors. An additional issue is addressing ways to support women in forming an authentic leadership style, so buying into outdoor adventure and leadership does not require selling out to culturally dominant and/or ineffective methods. There are different perspectives on what type of leadership opportunities are appropriate to encourage confident, empowered female outdoor leaders. One of the most prominent controversies that I will explore involves gender-specific adventure programming and trips.

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*Sarah Hoffert received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio where she majored in Sociology with minors in Women's Studies, Language and Culture of the Deaf Community, and Dance. Her love of the outdoors stems from traipsing through the woods as a youngster in her native North Carolina and her lifelong involvement in Girl Scouts. Sarah is a second-year HESA student and holds an assistantship in Community Service Programs. Her research interests include the identity development and experiences of twins in college, women in leadership, and sexual health and wellness issues.*

Outdoor Leadership and Mentoring Opportunities for Women

The importance of mentoring women and fostering women-centered leadership has been emphasized in college and university settings since the 1960s. Although the movement was halted in the 1970s due to the false impression that separate groups only enforced inequality, today it is acknowledged that women need and deserve access to leadership skills to progress through education and government, and to affect change (Nagai, 1997). An ongoing challenge surrounding institutional support for women undergraduate leadership involves students' lack of awareness of their own needs. Undergraduate women tend to equate equality with female representation in leadership roles. Nagai emphasizes that this assumption is false: Having a critical mass of women in positions of power does not indicate a lack of institutionalized sexism within a society or organization. She also states that educators need to encourage women students to speak out about their concerns, recognize gender inequities on campus and in society, and become visible leaders throughout all aspects of campus. This includes the representation of women leaders in outdoor organizations (1997).

Undergraduate women can gain support and leadership opportunities in outdoor adventure through all-women groups and ongoing exposure to feminist role models. Feminism can play a large role in liberating outdoor adventure experiences for women. As Crepezzi explains,

When women encounter feminism it can significantly alter their previously held beliefs, like bell hooks' experience at Stanford University when feminism "rocked" the campus, hooks (2000) reflects, "feminist thinking helped us unlearn female self-hatred. It enabled us to break free of the hold patriarchal thinking had on our consciousness" (p. 14). Feminism ultimately gave women the right to draw from experience rather than training. (2007, p. 10)

Undergraduate women in outdoor education have the same opportunity especially through the increase of all-women programs and trips and access to gender-specific learning environments.

Gender and Women-specific Outdoor Experiences

Two questions traditionally evolve out of learning about women-only trips: "Why are there women-only trips?" and "Why would a woman choose a women's trip?" Interestingly enough parallel questions, such as "Why a men's trip?" are never asked of men. McClintock believes the reasons women choose to go on women-specific trips are quite obvious. The growing popularity of women's trips would indicate that women want to be in the outdoors with other women. "Outdoor-trip businesses run all-women's trips for the simple reason that they sell" (1996, p. 19). Although the literature overwhelm-

ingly lends credence to gender-specific environments for women, choosing these experiences still carries a stigma due to lack of awareness and education.

In addition to the popularity of women's trips, gender-specific learning environments have shown positive results for women and girls. In fact, it was found that all-girl schools consistently provided a better educational environment when resources were equal. Implications for adventure education were explored through a review of research published throughout the mid 1980s which determined that in various education systems boys usually received more attention than girls. It has been shown that this trend carries into higher education (Henderson, 1999). A different source elaborates on the findings involving gender and leadership. "Riordan's (1990) more recent review of the literature showed that males are more likely to assume leadership positions, be more orally active, and more influential than females in all types of groups and situations" (Henderson, 1996, p. 249). Without gender-specific learning environments women will continue to be relegated to second class citizens in various aspects.

Gender-specific experiences in outdoor education have shown little variance since 1982. Several themes emerge from research on gender-specific groups in outdoor settings. Those themes transcend the literature in specific fields. They include emotional and physical safety, the freedom to throw out gender role stereotypes, the opportunity to develop close connections with other women, a comfortable environment for both a beginner or highly skilled outdoorswoman, and opportunities to have or be a role model or leader (Henderson, 1996). It is apparent that these qualities are important to women in outdoor settings. It is noteworthy that Henderson is hesitant to suggest that these goals could be accomplished in mixed-gender settings (1996).

Positive outcomes of gender-specific trips and leadership opportunities correlate to women's feminist identity development where "embeddedness-emanation, is integral to development" (Crepezzi, 2007, p. 11) and "characterized by a first phase involving the discovery of sisterhood, and immersion in women's culture, and a preference for socializing with women to the exclusion of men" (Bargad & Hyde, 1991, p. 183).

Feminist identity development is one approach to answering the continuous stream of questions raised about women-specific experiences, though most questions are never answered to the level of satisfaction that they have stopped being asked. The most common question posed is, "Why are you going on an all-women's trip?" Mary McClintock (1996) reflects on her experience with this never-ending question:

I have lost track of the number of times I have been asked [this]...Nor can I remember the wide variety of responses, ranging from flippant to serious, that I have given over the years. Sometimes, the question

is asked with a genuine interest and support, but often the question is asked in a hostile, offensive manner. Other all-women's groups and organizations regularly face similar questions, especially if their activity or purpose challenges traditional gender roles. After twenty years of experience on all-women's trips, I thought that question would not be asked anymore. But I continue to hear "Why?" (p. 18)

When McClintock further explored the reasons that women choose gender-specific trips she found a variety of answers. Yet there were some clear themes that emerged in her *Mountains, Back Roads, Rivers, and Women* class. Those themes include the emotional and physical safety of all women's trips, the freedom to step out of gender role stereotypes, the opportunity to develop close connections with other women, and a comfortable environment for either a beginner learning new skills or an expert with highly advanced skills. These same themes are woven throughout Henderson's (1996) and McClintock's (1996) findings of female participants on all-women trips. This indicates several universal positive outcomes for women participating in gender-specific excursions.

#### Women's Purpose in the Outdoors and Reverse Discrimination

Additionally, McClintock avoids assigning purpose to women's experiences. She emphasizes one's own choice and reasoning for participating in women's trips. She cautions that this may be one of the most difficult questions to answer because, "In answering to herself, a woman often has to overcome the social conditioning that has trained her not to choose to meet her own needs, but rather, to meet the needs of others" (1996, p. 19). After answering ourselves, the next step involves having to answer those around us, perhaps a spouse, partner, parent, friend, co-worker, boss, or children. Even strangers we met on the trail or on the water are curious and have questioned why McClintock chooses women's trips, "or as they often see it, why we exclude men" (1996, p. 19).

Notions of excluding men are the most common reactions to women-centered outdoor experiences. Male questioning of why women choose to participate in an activity void of men usually comes from a place of privilege where White men have rarely been excluded from anything. A similar reaction occurs when people in any traditionally oppressed population organize. It may be the first time that a White male has heard "no" or has not had complete access to others' ideas and plans. Society (inclusive of institutions of higher education) has become accustomed to operating on the White Male System's timeline and rules, where it is common for men to question why groups make decisions without them. The White Male System has been explored as a massive barrier towards integrating other systems into our realities (Schaefer, 1992). Perhaps this is why women-specific programming is still viewed as an alternative and confusing means to adventure.

## History and Exploitation of Women in Outdoor Leadership

Existing structures of male outdoor leadership involve the nearly complete erasure of women in the outdoors. Often women were, and continue to be, left out of outdoor leadership literature. Henderson (1996) states that if they are mentioned at all, they are exploited by male colleagues or relegated to a help-mate role. Their accomplishments are often questioned, minimized, or trivialized. Past efforts to include women have involved the “add women and stir” method of research and practice, in which those who notice that women are missing believe several examples or exceptions to the universal male experience might be important to note. “Underlying the idea of ‘adding women’ is a notion that women ought to be acknowledged, but such acknowledgment generally means that women are judged in terms of their contributions based on typical male standards” (Henderson, 1996, p. 109). Warren, Henderson, and Pinch have since invalidated outdoor leadership theory and practices that refuse to acknowledge women’s longstanding history and involvement in wilderness experiences.

## Feminism and Gender Analysis in Leadership

There are several popular feminist approaches to women in leadership. Among those are perspectives of liberal, cultural, and radical feminists. Yet all perspectives lead to one purpose: “Feminism is concerned with the correction of both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to social changes and the removal of all forms of inequality and oppression in society” (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1989, as cited in Henderson, 1996, p. 107). Liberal feminists suggest that women should have equal rights in outdoor participation and that their leadership opportunities should be similar to those of men. Cultural feminists are dedicated to seeing and focusing on the uniqueness of women’s outdoor experiences and leadership styles. Finally, radical feminists suggest that women should choose their own style of outdoor leadership and these forms have the potential to look completely different from male models. Henderson (1996) advocates for combining these perspectives to give a broader understanding of outdoor experience.

A corrective method intended to avoid the undesirable and unattainable standards of male leadership is gender analysis (Henderson, 1996). Gender analyses explore the myriad social and cultural expectations that accompany a child’s sex when born. The biological sex of the child leads to a series of life long gender expectations which have implications for outdoor participation and leadership. This analysis argues that “the meaning of gender is constructed by society and each of us is socialized into that construction” (Henderson, 1996, p. 111). Leadership styles based on gender stereotypes have recently been explored as more influential than the actual gender or sex of the leader.

In a study of young adults immersed in an outdoor program, it was determined that “prelearned gender beliefs and behaviors were brought to the outdoor education program and these influenced actions and supported a hierarchical power structure based on hegemonic masculinity” (Pinch, 2007, p. 422). The girls and boys sometimes experimented with different roles and challenged stereotypical gendered behaviors which reinforced that gender as a social construct is produced and reproduced through actions of individuals and social groups. Some diversity of gender expression was tolerated but harsh consequences, such as social isolation, were implemented for those that “stepped too far out of line” (Pinch, 2007, p. 423). According to Pinch, outdoor education has the potential to encourage the deconstruction of gender, but defining explicit steps necessary for it to become that change agent remains a challenge. This transformation may require tackling gender processes in a more direct fashion (2007).

#### Challenging Traditional Theories and Metaphors

Metaphors are utilized in the form of activities in the field of adventure therapy and experiential education. They are recognized as an effective method for transferring participants’ learning into purposeful change outside of the experiential learning environment. They can be utilized to assist with addressing behaviors associated with substance and illegal drug abuse, as well as eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia. There are two basic forms of metaphors: imposed-metaphors and derived-metaphors. An imposed-metaphor involves the facilitator or adventure therapist instructing the participant to visualize different elements of an activity as specific things. For example, a river is the obstacle and walking to the other side of the river is success. A derived-metaphor involves the participant drawing their own metaphors which often look very different depending on the individuals’ experiences; success is determined by the participant. Individual interpretations may involve drawing meaning out of sitting on the bank of the river observing wildlife, walking in the river but not across it, touching or smelling the river environment (Mack, 1996).

Heidi Mack explains these metaphors in relation to women’s experiences. The belief that metaphors are an effective way to bring about change in individuals does not necessarily mean that existing metaphoric constructions address the specific needs and voices of women, how we learn, and how we experience. Carol Gilligan (1982) speaks of “theories in which men’s experiences stand for all of human experience—theories which eclipse the lives of women and shut out women’s voices” (Mack, 1996, p. xiii). It is vital that outdoor metaphors evolve to allow all participants to create their own definitions of meaning and success (i.e., using any or all senses to experience an environment).

Further, Joyce (1998) states that this difference may reflect how men and women

create experience: “Men create through a mechanism or extension outside of their bodies and women create from within their bodies: external/internal, tangible/intangible” (Mack, 1996, p. 22). Therefore, outdoor instructors for women cannot assume that existing metaphoric theories consider and include women’s experience and women’s ways of learning. Existing strategies for the use of metaphors with women should be carefully evaluated and restructured and, at times, discarded all together” (p. 24). Mack also notes “that women have an incredible capacity to internalize information about their situation but lack the tools to transfer that knowledge to their lives” (p. 25). Appropriately framed settings where women have the space to create their own metaphors can assist with empowerment and the transfer of knowledge, in addition to aiding in healing (Mack, 1996). Altering existing metaphoric constructs involves shifting away from directed learning and striving towards systems that give women control in their learning, changing, and healing.

It has been argued that adventure therapy requires additional direction for certain populations. Mack counters that when outdoor instructors direct and impose metaphors, rather than encourage women to construct their own based on individual needs, they only “disenable women by modeling ‘others know what is best’” for them (p. 27). This knowledge may require student affairs professionals and educators to re-evaluate teaching styles to appropriately enable students of any gender identity to thrive within their own critical thinking and experiential learning processes. These metaphors are commonly utilized in university adventure programming and adventure ropes courses. Being more conscious about altering metaphoric philosophies will allow trip and course facilitators to better serve their student clients in achieving personal goals.

### Myths that Prevent Full Participation from Women

One of the many challenges for women in outdoor leadership is the pressure of having to consistently prove their competency to male participants, partners, co-leaders, and employers in an attempt to defend their right to a presence in outdoor adventure/leadership. By addressing these myths and realities, both personally and professionally, student affairs practitioners will have a greater understanding of the myths that perpetuate through generations. For women, access to outdoor leadership, and the acknowledgment of the realities that women face in outdoor leadership, may serve as a form of liberation; their experience is not an isolated one and discrimination is not imagined. Just over four decades ago Outward Bound opened its doors to women, initiating the trend of providing access to institutionalized outdoor adventure for women. Twenty years ago Warren acknowledged this fact and declared, “It is now time to move on” (1985, p. 10). Warren states that ultimately adventure leaders must recognize that women’s experiences are different and unique, and programming should correspond with this varied perspective. The concept that experiential education’s



methodology can apply to everyone regardless of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and varying abilities has been passionately questioned. Warren believes that debunking myths surrounding women in the outdoors is necessary before adventure programs can respond to the specific needs of women in the wilderness (1985).

The most prominent myths facing women in the outdoors include the Myth of Accessibility (outdoor experiences and opportunities are widely available to women), the Myth of Egalitarianism (gender equity is not a reality in society but is in the woods), the Myth of Square One (all people start from the same place as beginners in outdoor education), the Myth of the Superwoman (women with outstanding technical skill and competency are the exception to the gender—this myth maintains stereotypes about women’s abilities and place in society), and the Myth of the Heroic Quest (all people should explore outdoor adventure through a “conquer and defeat” lens). This series of myths not only prevents women, who are one of the largest groups of people experiencing the outdoors, from fully immersing themselves in the outdoors, but it limits all genders’ perceptions of women (Warren, 1985). Student affairs professionals should be mindful of these myths when making decisions concerning the evaluation of dynamics in outdoor clubs, hiring of trip leaders, and recruitment of women in all forms of outdoor programming. Professionals greatly influence perceptions of women in the outdoors by continual self-education.

#### Now What?

Is there a realistic means for women to assume leadership roles and still remain authentic to their value system and style? How does one “buy into leadership” without “selling out” to dominant forms of male leadership?

Understanding that leadership styles in outdoor adventure are not exclusive to other fields may give insight into possible directions for the future of leadership. In a recent edition of the *Harvard Business Review* (2007), it was reported that remaining true to one’s own style is not just a trend but now a preference and standard for current leaders. A great leader is one that understands that the “incomplete leader” is more competent than one that does not acknowledge her, zir, or his weaknesses. A leader that can collaborate, delegate, and use consensus is much more powerful than someone who is afraid to lose power. It must be acknowledged that this style of leadership is consistent with the type of leadership that women have been advocating for and leading in for years, which has gone unnoticed only to be claimed by a majority male profession. From the emergence of this “new” preferred form of leadership can we deduce that men in business are finally listening? Does this mean that America will eventually buy into a more “feminine” form of leadership but only if it is labeled otherwise? All signs indicate if it is endorsed by the *Harvard Business Review*, then perhaps yes.

## Haunting Questions

Several haunting questions that have surfaced throughout this process involve Title IX's influence on women and sports. If outdoor adventure programming were included in Title IX regulations, would women have better access? Would there be increased funding for women-specific adventure trips or competitions (e.g. adventure racing)? Or would they face similar barriers as women's sports teams around the country as universities attempt to legally re-interpret Title IX to prevent the reallocation of funding to women's sports?

Another lingering question addresses infusing social justice and true diversity into the field of outdoor education. The ability to work with diverse populations through high adventure programming and trips is predicted to be a highly sought after skill (Warren, 2002). Why then are classes exploring the experiences of people of color, women, the queer community, and social justice still optional in university programs, if they are offered at all? And finally, if higher education institutions refuse to change their strategies to include more diverse populations in outdoor education and adventure how long will professionals sit idly while resources continue to primarily support White men?

## Conclusion

At this point, not a single generation of women has lived and functioned under a system that has completely recognized and applauded their various systems. Student affairs professionals have an opportunity and an obligation to listen to the needs and expectations of women currently in, and those striving to be in, outdoor leadership and adventure. Professionals can support women in outdoor leadership by advocating for all-women programming, trips, and leadership opportunities, by increasing awareness of the myths surrounding women in any type of physical activity, rethinking and redeveloping metaphors we use for experiential learning, and fostering a campus environment where gender roles are discouraged or no longer exist.

Addressing women's experiences in outdoor education is just the tip of the inclusivity iceberg. With increasing research and education surrounding the experiences of people of color, queer populations, those with differing abilities, and various socioeconomic classes it is only more evident that there is much work to be done. It has been stated that the field of outdoor leadership and adventure will only change when social justice elements are considered to be as important as technical outdoor skills (Warren, 2002). When a person does not get a job because she/ze/he has outstanding leadership and technical experiences, but can show no commitment to diversity and social justice, then substantial progress will have been made.

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