

## Exploring Gender

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My sudden urge to write about gender issues is unexpected. Gender is not a topic I have studied or considered with any degree of thoroughness. In fact, for most of my academic life—since 1973 when I first entered college, through graduate programs, and in academic positions at three universities—I have mostly tried to ignore gender. But being female in natural resource-related departments and colleges—places that traditionally have been and even now remain predominantly male—eventually seems to produce a sense of dis-equilibrium that provokes reflection about both personal and institutionalized forms of gender bias.

The stimulus for my meditation is a recently-purchased copy of *National Geographic Traveler* magazine, whose October 1999 issue profiled the “world’s greatest destinations.” Each place is introduced with a vivid quote from an historic figure and then described by a notable writer. It is an enchanting issue, and I read it seeking new travel quotes for a future tourism class. Half way through, though, I stop in surprise: there are almost no quotes or stories by women authors! In fact, a quick count shows that of 51 articles, 48 (94%) are authored by men and only three by women. About 80 percent (46 out of 58) of the quotes from historic figures are also from famous men; eight others (14%) are attributed to women; I am uncertain about four others. This magazine issue seems to suggest that the “world’s greatest destinations” are mostly male domains, reflecting male ideals, and celebrating male experiences. The subtlety of this bias, along with its implicit assumption that the content and form of presentation are entirely acceptable, troubles me. Yet, if I—an educated woman—have only accidentally noticed the bias, how deeply must these ideas be entrenched in our lives, and especially in our work and careers?

### *On Discovering Gender*

What does it mean to be an academic woman studying and working in resource-based recreation or tourism? For my age cohort, being female meant we stood out. As a very small minority of the students in natural resources schools in the 1970s, we had few role models. I had only one female teacher—part-time, no Ph.D., hired to teach one course—in all my

undergraduate and Master's level natural resources classes. During my Ph.D. program in a major research university's college of forestry, there was only one tenured female scientist on a faculty of about 25. It comes as no surprise that in such settings, women of my cohort were expected—and we expected of ourselves—to just get on with the work. Feminism may have been taking root in society during the 1970s and 1980s, but it went unnoticed in my programs.

But, in hindsight, I recall signal moments that elaborate the gender relations of academe. Senior male professors advised me to downplay my athletic activities—I was an elite figure skater—so I would appear, especially during job interviews, to be a serious academic, not a dilettante. One administrator introduced a group of us—all men except for me, all of us with Ph.D. degrees—to a room full of non-university people, saying: “This is Dr. X; next is Dr. Y; next is Pat; then Dr. Z.” Another professor told me that I would never succeed because I spent too much time teaching—and when reminded that I had been hired on a teaching contract to cover four classes a semester, he replied, “Now don't go getting defensive.” One colleague tried to convince me that being addressed by undergraduates as “Ms.” rather than “Professor” or “Dr.”—as he and all my other male colleagues were called—was really an honor, because it meant students felt closer to me; I remained unconvinced, and annoyed.

Women of my cohort share the experience of looking around conference halls and seeing mostly men. We may have been the only woman on a departmental faculty, and then the only tenured woman on that faculty. We have had male colleagues with lesser credentials or years of service appointed over us into leadership positions. We have been told directly by some of our male colleagues (or have heard through the proverbial grapevine) that our gains were the result of being female—not the result of our intelligence, skill, or hard work. The litany of unsettling events could fill many pages, but these are not simply personal stories; *most* mid-career women in natural resource-related fields can report having similar experiences in their academic lives.

### *On Understanding Gender*

These moments coalesce into a systematic pattern of institutionalized gender inequality. Conversations with female colleagues at all stages of their careers suggest that women in natural resources fields more often leave graduate programs early without completing their degrees, or take longer to finish their degrees than men; they are less likely to obtain research funding from traditional resource agency sources; they suffer tangible consequences when they rebuff the advances of male colleagues; they have fewer graduate students and sometimes less salary and office space than male colleagues; they more frequently report suffering feelings of inadequacy and depression at critical junctures in their careers; and they often have fewer social resources outside their work than do male colleagues. With career trajectories that are often less direct than those of males in their cohort, women remain

under-represented on the natural resources faculties of universities, and are less likely to hold leadership positions in their programs or nationally.

The reasons behind such inequities are well-documented in analyses of women engaged in scientific study and research (Eisenhart and Finkel 1998) and in academia more generally (Aisenberg and Harrington 1988). These sources show that my cohort faced an inevitable tension between traditional norms for women (subordinate roles, sexual attractiveness, domesticity and care-taking, emotionalism, "niceness") and the norms of public professional life: competition, intellectualism, individualism, authority. The messages that came through most clearly to us were that we should conform, learn "how things are done around here," and be grateful for the help of more powerful colleagues who would mold us into academics who were worthy, marketable, or successful.

This model repeats a pattern described by a female writer, Patricia Spacks, who analyzed the autobiographies of several well-known women. Commenting on one, Spacks observed that her subject "has a clear sense of self—but struggles constantly to lose it" (cited in Heilbrun 1988: 23). While men in our disciplines step easily into roles that have been previously defined and modeled for them, women academics seem to spend immense amounts of time trying to adapt, to change, to become someone else's version of success. Those who rebel are labeled as complainers or whiners, not focused enough to succeed, not team players. Those who favor teaching over research, who are sympathetic undergraduate advisors, who choose non-traditional research topics or methods, run the risk of operating on the sidelines outside the larger arena of academic contests where real rewards and power are negotiated.

These historical circumstances are not trivial, especially because we women who entered university natural resources programs in the 1970s are now at mid-career. Have we learned from our journeys? Can we continue to maintain enthusiasm for our chosen fields, and also help make a difference for younger women, students and new faculty members, who follow in our steps?

### *On Challenging Gender*

It seems clear that the answer is not in gender neutrality, for as Eisenberg and Finkel (1988: 181) observe, "women are diminished . . . by a discourse of gender neutrality that renders women's distinctive circumstances invisible, irrelevant, or inappropriate." Academia should not be a place where people are expected to minimize their unique qualities to become clones of an imagined, superior model. Yet, our methods of teaching and conducting research sometimes presume just that. But, each person has special gifts, and the ways of making lives and careers are varied. We must come to understand and appreciate excellence in all its forms.

Additionally, the answer is not merely in advocating or hiring for diversity. Numbers are not equivalent to commitment. Committing to diversity requires fairness in resource allocation as well as support for varied methods

and viewpoints. It requires awareness that each person, regardless of status, can contribute useful qualities and skills to the practice of academic and leadership roles; it requires understanding that there is no single way of doing things. Rotating job assignments, bottom-up rather than top-down decision making, and collaborative approaches provide alternatives to the "business as usual" model. Instituting these changes, though, requires confronting and changing existing power structures. As Heilbrun (1988: 18) explained, "Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter." To be part of the conversation, though, means that we all, female and male, must be prepared to speak as well as to listen—and we must listen especially carefully, with the intent to hear, not only to rebut.

The solution to many academic gender problems is in re-making the social relationships and structures of our university settings. Critical mass clearly matters, but it is often only obtained outside specific academic programs. Women's networks and professional groups thus can be important mechanisms for providing tangible and emotional support, professional guidance, resources, motivation, leverage, and opportunities. Supportive administrators, male as well as female, are also key in fostering a climate of equality, tolerance, and good will. They must enact new procedures to fairly distribute resources (salary, start-up packages, teaching/advising loads, assistantship assignments, space, and so on); make shared governance a reality; and ensure that search committees conduct fair searches (Phillips-Miller et al. 1999; MIT 1999). They must also support and value non-traditional approaches that contribute significantly to the mission of a university, especially in rewarding innovative teaching practices and in enacting more sensitive personnel management.

Ultimately, though, we women will be responsible for conducting ourselves in ways that accomplish personal and professional goals while also incrementally affecting and changing the rules of the academic game. To do so, we must first step out of our shells and re-discover our voices. My cohort must begin to use our current privileges—our tenured positions, our middle-aged accumulation of experiences—"to take risks, to make noise, to be courageous, to become unpopular" (Heilbrun 1988: 13). We must tell our stories, to both women and men, in settings where those stories will matter—in our undergraduate classrooms, in advising graduate students, in faculty interactions, and in broader society. We must refuse to be tokens, and must insist on and stand for principles of inclusion, openness, fairness, courtesy, and respect for all—male and female—in our worlds and in our work.

Finally, we must be vigilant in monitoring what is taken for granted in our academic settings as well as in our society. Recognizing the subtlety and persistence of gender issues is a first step. In his Introduction to the October issue of *National Geographic Traveler*, Editor in Chief Keith Bellows wrote, " REGARD this issue as something of a time capsule. For it freezes in prose and pictures those places that . . . are our most remarkable." His statement is incorrect: the October issue reveals only a single view of reality, one that

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supports only traditional narratives. Our millennium challenge is to uncover such biases and work communally to eliminate them.

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