



Preliminary Report:  
**INTERVIEWS  
WITH WOMEN  
IN FORESTRY**

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Prepared for: Free to Grow in Forestry



# Preliminary Report: Interviews with Women in Forestry

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## Preliminary Report: Interviews with Women in Forestry

# Overview

In January and February of 2020, interviews were conducted with 25 women working in the forestry sector in a variety of roles and locales. In selecting interviewees from the approximately 150 volunteers, I sought a cross-section of women: from those just starting out to those nearing retirement, from those working in remote locales to workers in urban centres. Interviews were conducted with women working in many different subsectors, from government to forest firefighting and sawmills, from silviculture through urban forestry, conservation, and including woodlot owners. I also spoke to managers, employees, self-employed consultants and owners, located from coast to coast. Most women were white, but some were members of visible minorities.

The women were, on average, positive about their experiences in the sector; however, in light of the ‘leaky pipeline’ in the field, it should be remembered that these are women who stayed in the sector. Those who have had *very* negative experiences are likely to have left. Some of the women I interviewed did mention former colleagues who had experienced considerable hardship. Even those who had fulfilling and meaningful careers in the sector, did identify barriers, challenges, and areas for improvement. Moreover, through their enthusiasm for their work, they revealed strategies for encouraging women’s entrance into the field, and potentially for facilitating persistence in forestry once women begin working in the sector.

Their insights should be helpful in constructing a national gender equity action plan.

### *This Report*

This report summarizes the preliminary findings from the interviews, focusing on five areas: (1) identifying challenges and barriers women experience in the field; (2) factors and forces helping women navigate these barriers; (3) advice to young women seeking entry into the field; (4) what they love about their work; and (5) their advice for the gender equity action plan.

The executive summary highlights major findings that are elaborated in later sections.

# Executive Summary

## **I/ CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS**

Several challenges and barriers hindering women's ability to have successful careers in the forestry sector were identified. Some women experienced few of these barriers while others experienced many.

**a) *Lack of opportunities for (informal) mentoring and training***

Many women talked about having to fight for opportunities to learn and acquire more advanced training. In some cases, men who were hired after them, or around the same time as them, were granted opportunities that the women had requested but were denied.

**b) *Stereotyping that cast women as not tough enough, and not competent enough. Sexism.***

Women talked about having to prove themselves over and over again as tough and capable of doing the work. Sometimes, even after years in the field, they found their skills discounted, and their ability questioned.

**c) *The need to fight for every opportunity & to be heard and respected becomes tiring.***

Most women interviewed had fought for opportunities, and managed to thrive under intense scrutiny, and succeeded in proving themselves. Nevertheless, after a while they found this tiresome. Some said they were tired of constantly waging an uphill battle.

**d) *Some men colleagues and bosses are not supportive, and at times are downright hostile.***

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Most interviewees were quick to praise their work colleagues, but many talked about a minority of colleagues who were negative, hostile, or sexist. A few had experienced sexual harassment. Negative colleagues could poison a work atmosphere, leading women to leave and find somewhere else to work (whether in forestry or another field). Several said they had experienced a negative work culture.

### ***e) The difficulty of combining work in remote locations with family life***

Many forestry jobs are located in remote areas and small towns. Those towns may not have abundant employment opportunities for life partners. Some women were in commuter relationships, while a few had partners who had sacrificed their own career goals to prioritize theirs. Some others had partners in the same industry. The latter facilitated work-life balance to some extent.

### ***f) Having children***

Women working in the public sector reported good work-life balance, but it was not uncommon for women working in the private sector to report challenges with combining work in the forestry sector with child-bearing and child-rearing.

Some reported bosses were reluctant to promote women with children.

## **II/ SUPPORTS AND OTHER FACTORS HELPING WOMEN**

### ***a) Mentors (men and women) providing opportunities for work, learning, and growth.***

Many women with successful careers in the sector had supportive mentors who provided them with opportunities to learn and grow. For many women these mentors were men, but women mentors were particularly valued.

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### **b) *Other women***

In some parts of the industry, women are working predominantly with men, and this is not a problem for them. However, having other women around them is very much valued; women colleagues can provide support, and improve the quality of work life.

### **c) *Workshops and networks bringing women together***

Several participants spoke about the value of periodic workshops and conferences that provide opportunities for women to meet with and talk with other women in the sector, and share experiences, exchange knowledge, and make contacts.

### **d) *A willingness to move to gain experience***

Opportunities in the sector can be uneven, and appear (at least at times) to be lower for women. Women report that they have been able to find opportunities for employment and skill growth by being willing to move to remote locations and take positions that are less attractive to others. Some women may not be able to move all across the country and far from home, friends and family supports; however, some of those who do say they have reaped the benefits.

## **III/ ADVICE TO YOUNG WOMEN**

Women's advice to other women who might be entering the field was illuminating. Some advice advocated perseverance in the face of obstacles and hostility. Many participants advised women to build relationships, find mentors, and seek advice. Other popular pieces of advice concerned seeking out skills, opportunities, and experiences for career advancement.

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### **IV/ WHAT DRAWS WOMEN INTO FORESTRY AND WHAT KEEPS THEM THERE**

Women listed many aspects of their jobs that they loved. Most-often mentioned were the ability to make a difference and help people, communities and society, opportunities for learning, and working outside and in forests.

### **V/ ADVICE FOR THE NATIONAL ACTION PLAN**

Participants had many recommendations for the national gender equity action plan. Most mentioned were the following:

- \* Look closely at work-family conflict and work-life balance
- \* Consider ways to correct misconceptions, raise awareness, and think about how to appeal to young people to encourage participation in the field.
- \* There is a need for women in leadership positions and more mentors for women.
- \* Keep intra-sectoral differences in mind
- \* There is a need to consider not just women, but members of minorities, and men when developing the plan.

# A Brief Profile of Respondents and Methodology

As noted in the overview section of this report, the women interviewed varied in experience, role, and locale. The majority of participants were based in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario (6 in each); four were located in the Maritime provinces, and the remaining participants were based in Quebec and Saskatchewan.

The interview schedule was semi-structured, with most questions being asked of most respondents, but the order of questions varied, depending on the flow of conversation. The focus of interviews was on women's education and careers, their experiences of working in the sector, and the barriers and challenges women face in forestry. On a more positive note women were asked about whether they felt women worked differently from men and whether their contributions were different, and what they found enjoyable and fulfilling about their jobs. The women had an opportunity to share advice for the gender equity action plan, and to talk about experiences they had not been directly asked about. Interviews varied from 30 to 50 minutes in length, and were conducted over the phone, or via zoom (an online meeting software).



## Challenges and Barriers

Women were asked general questions about their careers and their experiences working in forestry, and they were specifically asked whether women faced barriers in hiring and promotion. They were also asked about whether work-life balance was a challenge for workers in the sector. As noted in the executive summary, many women were quite positive about their jobs and their careers and recounted good experiences. Typically, participants said that any negative experiences were outnumbered by positive ones. Still, most women recounted personal difficulties, and/or barriers and challenges experienced by other women in the field. Most felt that their gender had affected their career in one way or another.

One question asked specifically about whether women experienced barriers in hiring and promotion. Although some women reported barriers in hiring, the most common response was that there were many opportunities for women in forestry, and that barriers in hiring were few in number. The main barriers identified concerned opportunities for training and skill acquisition, opportunities for mentoring, and opportunities for promotion (or career advancement). Several documented unfair treatment on the job, and a few even told horror stories (mostly related to colleagues and acquaintances) where women's safety was compromised, and harassment was experienced. None of the women I interviewed spoke to me directly about experiences of sexual assault, but during the interview period news stories revealing sexual assault in British Columbia tree-planting camps were published, documenting that this is a significant issue for women in the sector as well.<sup>1</sup>

The issues most-often raised are those identified in the executive summary. Elaborations are provided below.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/accounts-of-sex-assaults-in-bc-tree-planter-camps-deeply-disturbing/ar-BBZwCag?li=AAggFp5&ocid=mailsignout>

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### ***Lack of opportunities for (informal) mentoring and training***

A number of women mentioned having to fight for opportunities and promotions, in several cases making explicit comparisons to male colleagues who were hired around the same time as them, or after them. These male colleagues were taken under the wing of leaders, and granted opportunities for growth and learning – opportunities that in some instances, the women had asked about explicitly, but were denied. Some women had talked about having to fight hard for every opportunity. Some mentioned an ‘old boys club’ mentality, where men mentored other men, while excluding or ignoring women.

When faced with blocked mobility, women sought out opportunities elsewhere; several moved to different provinces, different parts of the industry, and to remote areas. A few sought out opportunities for consulting and contract work, when conventional employment dried up, or did not yield the opportunities they sought. Women usually saw these moves as fulfilling – providing them with career growth opportunities – even if they were accompanied by personal sacrifices and costs (lost relationships, estrangements with family, decisions to sacrifice having a family of one’s own, and so on).

It must be noted that some women had mentors who provided them with valuable career opportunities, and who helped facilitate their career success (discussed more below).

### ***Stereotyping that casts women as not tough enough, and not competent enough. Sexism.***

In the context of hiring and promotion women were rarely considered the ideal candidate. Most women talked about having to prove themselves. The assumption was that they were not competent, until they proved otherwise. Interviewees did not always identify this as a barrier – just simply a characteristic of their careers. However, they did express frustration at being stereotyped as incompetent, and with having senior and junior colleagues question their knowledge, or believe they were in need of men’s assistance. Some were tested to see if they could handle the demands of the job – sometimes in ways that put their safety at risk -- for

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instance, being sent out to do a job without necessary supports and training. Most of the women who I spoke to did not have a problem with proving themselves. Still, the assumption that they were incapable could lead to hostile relations with some colleagues (not all), could result in fewer opportunities, and could grow tiresome after a while.

### ***The need to fight for every opportunity, to be heard and respected eventually becomes tiresome***

At some point in their careers, women who have had to fight for every opportunity get tired of doing so. Especially those working on teams that change from one year to the next, find that they continually have to prove themselves. It can be irritating to contest, year after year, colleagues' assumption that women need men's assistance and advice. When women are in positions of seniority and are challenged by junior male colleagues, their irritation grows. It is at this point that many women seem to consider leaving the field, or moving to sectors where they can do their work, without having the extra burden of navigating sexist work environments.

### ***Hostile colleagues***

Many interviewees went out of their way to stress that their colleagues were lovely and supportive. Nevertheless, they made it clear that some colleagues were not. Hostile colleagues were said to represent a minority. Most participants did not want to talk about negative interactions to any great extent. They made note of these negative people, and at times mentioned that they made the working environment unpleasant, and/or blocked participants' mobility. Especially when these negative colleagues were in a position of influence, they could halt women's career progress. At worst, they could endanger women's physical safety, or mental well-being. Sexual harassment was mentioned on occasion.

Because women did not want to dwell on negative colleagues, they did not provide much detail on how they navigated these situations. It seemed that sometimes the impact of these negative men (negative interactions with women colleagues were not recounted) was reduced by the support of a good mentor, or other supportive colleagues. At other times, women left a company or job to find a more supportive, pleasant place to work. Although those I spoke with found

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another job in the forestry sector, it can be surmised that some women experiencing negative working conditions decide to leave the field altogether.

### ***Work in Remote Locations***

Work in remote locations is necessary in many areas of the forestry sector, and it was sometimes mentioned as something that women particularly enjoyed about their jobs. However, work in remote locations pulled women away from extended families. It could be difficult for women with partners to find a location where both they and their partner could pursue meaningful careers, and raise a family. The need to work in remote locations made work-family balance difficult for women, and could form a barrier to promotion and continued involvement in the field.

Moreover, women who are in remote areas and who experience difficulties – like hostile colleagues, safety issues, physical and sexual assault and harassment – are particularly vulnerable, with few supports in place.

The remote nature of the work may be a particular challenge for minority women. They may feel particularly isolated, and particularly vulnerable to discrimination and harassment in remote locations, while simultaneously removed from their cultural and familial communities that provide needed support for dealing with these challenges. Growing diversity in the sector generally, should reduce isolation and vulnerability for women and members of visible minorities in remote locations.

### ***Having children***

Although the sample of women I spoke with was far from random, many of the interviewees did not have children, and had no intention of having children. From many (those with and those without children), I was given the impression that the career was not considered child-friendly. Those who did have kids – especially those not working in government – discussed challenges with combining work in forestry with child-rearing. Some reported bosses were reluctant to

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promote women with children. Experiences were variable, however, with some finding that their jobs allowed for work-life balance and accommodations, and others experiencing difficulty to the extent that they changed where and/or how they worked.

The male-dominated nature of the field means that some businesses are not particularly supportive of women having children, and women may be made to feel guilty – or feel that they are sabotaging their careers, or falling behind – when they have children. The challenges of maintaining a two-career family, and the remoteness of the work (and associated limitations with day care) exacerbated the problems. Some women had very supportive managers and superiors and that made all the difference. Those in the public-sector reported virtually no difficulties with work-family balance.

Overall, while experiences were variable, for many participants child-rearing is a challenge, and work-family conflict a career barrier.

## **Supports & Other Factors Helping Women**

### ***Mentors (men and women) providing opportunities for work, learning, and growth.***

Most women mentioned the role or importance of mentors at some point in their interviews. Mentors help women navigate often hostile workplace cultures. They provide opportunities for training and promotion. They helped facilitate maternity and parental leaves, and provided general support. Many of the women with successful careers talked about how they benefitted from mentors. Those without mentors talked about how they missed having one. In their advice to young women, many interviewees mentioned the value in finding mentors. This was seen as crucial.

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Many women had mentors who were men. This makes sense given the male-dominated nature of the industry. It is important to encourage men to take on this role and mentor women in the sector. Several women hoped that the gender equity action plan could impress on men the importance and value of mentoring women in the sector. At the same time, women talked about the need for more women mentors, particularly at the senior ranks. Experienced women workers, especially those in positions of authority, had few senior women to guide them. Having more women in positions of influence – and having access to women in positions of influence to serve as mentors – was identified as being important.

### **b) *Other women***

Many of the women had worked almost exclusively with men. Some of the younger women and women in the public sector had a more gender-balanced workplace. As much as the women talked about how great some of their colleagues were, many found other women a wonderful source of inspiration, mentorship and support. Research has shown that in some male-dominated fields, women are not supportive of each other. This was not mentioned as a problem in forestry. Women sought out opportunities to connect with other women, and enjoyed working with other women when the opportunity arose. Even when they were happy working alongside men, having opportunities to connect with women was deemed important. Such connections appeared to improve the quality of their work lives.

### **c) *Workshops and networks bringing women together.***

Many spoke of the value of periodic workshops and conferences that provide opportunities for women to meet with and talk with other women in the sector, and share experiences, exchange knowledge, and make contacts.

### **d) *A willingness to move to gain experience***

Opportunities in the sector can be uneven, and appear (at least at times) to be lower for women. Women report that they have been able to find opportunities for employment and skill growth by being willing to move to remote locations and take positions that are less attractive to others.

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Some women may not be able to move all across the country and far from home, friends and family supports; however, some of those who do say they have reaped the benefits.

This is an avenue of success for women, but comes with difficulties, as can be seen by the fact that working in remote locations was also identified as a barrier.

## **Advice to Young Women**

Participants were asked, ‘What advice would you give to a young woman interested in a career in the forestry sector’. Their advice is not only helpful for those seeking ways to improve women’s experiences in forestry, but it reveals quite a bit about the challenges the women have experienced in their careers. The following pieces of advice were among those mentioned in interviews.

“You have to fight for your respect”

“Don’t let yourself be pushed around by older workers, with negative comments”

“Do your job, and don’t worry about what others think”

“Keep persevering”

Build relationships, build a network and seek advice. Find a mentor

Build your skill set, especially technology skills. Advance your education; seek out new opportunities (even if you have to travel, move); get experience.

Be your authentic self; try not to hide yourself away.

Educate yourself about all the forestry sector has to offer; learn about the opportunities.

## What Draws Women Into Forestry & What Keeps Them in the Sector

To balance out the focus on women's challenges in the sector, and to understand what draws women into forestry – and what keeps them working in the sector – interview participants were asked to describe what they particularly liked about their work. The following is a list of the most common answers (ranked in order of times mentioned):

- \* Making a difference, having an impact, contributing to society and communities, helping people.
- \* Working outside, being in the forest
- \* Opportunities to learn
- \* Work is variable, challenging, and sometimes unpredictable
- \* Conservation, sustainability, helping to address climate change, protect the environment
- \* Great colleagues
- \* Balance of field and office work.

## Advice for the National Action Plan

Participants were asked if they had any advice for those developing a national action gender equity plan for the forestry sector. Their suggestions were very helpful. The following is a summary of their advice.

- \* There is a need to correct misconceptions about the sector and raise awareness to appeal to youth



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- \* Work-life balance and work-family conflict is a major issue for many that needs to be addressed
- \* There is a need for more women in leadership, and more mentors for women
- \* Consider intra-sectoral differences and variations; interprovincial differences too.
- \* An intersectional approach is necessary (consider gender in tandem with race / ethnicity, Indigeneity, age, and other factors)
- \* Pay attention to discrimination and safety concerns
- \* Consider mental health issues.
- \* Consider meaningful inclusion (don't just focus on numbers).
- \* Show companies that diversity brings many benefits.
- \* Need for women in leadership
- \* Need to bring in men (as allies, and to raise awareness among men about these issues)
- \* Be aware of differences across sectors within the industry.

## **Final Thoughts**

The women I spoke to loved their work, and typically found it important and meaningful. The women tended to focus on the positive, highlighting what was working well for them, and other women in the sector. Nonetheless, in interviews they revealed several barriers and challenges, most of which have been detailed in this report. It seems that some small but significant changes to hiring, mentoring, promotion, and inclusion in the forestry sector, could have a big impact on increasing women's participation. These changes are well worth implementing.



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