

70%



of management
roles in Wales
are held by
men

78%



of senior roles
in Wales are
held by men

Mind the



A snapshot of gender parity in the outdoors

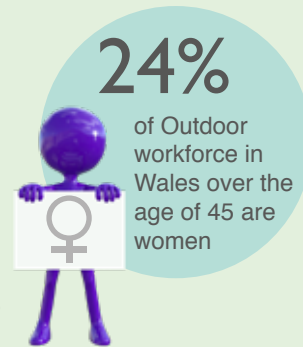
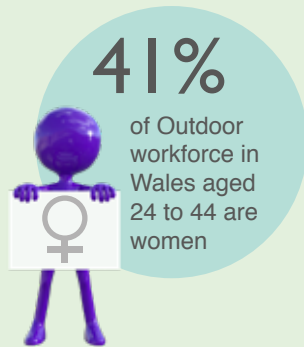
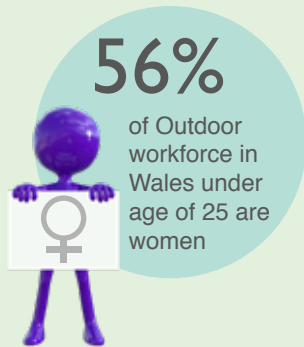
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It is striking the absence of all-women teams. It is something I hadn't anticipated. In the minority yes, but the only ones? (1).

If you have paid attention to the media over the past year or two you will have noticed an increase in the volume of narrative around gender equality. This is an issue, which for some time appears to have been buried under the illusion that western society has moved on, or somehow 'fixed' such out-dated social structures. In the professional outdoor sector perhaps there is a quiet acceptance that men have always outnumbered women and a feeling that like many traditionally male dominated occupations, the majority of women simply don't (and wouldn't want to) fit the mould.

In 2017 I began researching for my Masters dissertation on the subject of gender parity, specifically within the professional Outdoor sector in Wales. Having worked in the outdoors for over 20 years this was a topic I had often debated informally with friends and colleagues. As a woman in the Outdoors I initially felt uncomfortable with the cliché or predictability of such a topic for my own research. I had never considered myself a feminist and nor did I want to be associated with the many negative connotations of such a word. Yet as I welcomed another intake of students, I could not ignore the disparity staring back at me in the classroom.

Before starting my research I read a number of articles predominantly by female authors, exploring the narrative of women's experiences as professionals in the outdoors. It became apparent that much of what has been written on the subject of gender parity is based on subjective interpretation or personal experience. Cressida Allwood's article for *Horizons* in 2016 (2) stood out from the crowd for the very reason that it gave a rarely found statistical picture to gender parity in leadership of the



Outdoor sector in the UK. Overall there appeared very little empirical data with regards to any aspect of diversity within the professional Outdoor sector, thus limiting the ability to identify important trends within its workforce.

Having lived and worked in Wales for the past 15 years it made sense to focus my research close to home.

The primary aim was to create a national map of gender representation based on statistics from the Welsh professional Outdoor sector.

Data generated could then be used as a foundation for identifying future trends and informing further research. This would also provide an accurate set of statistics from which others might extrapolate similarities and perhaps inform change beyond Wales or even the UK.

Findings from my research showed that demographically Wales's professional Outdoor workforce in terms of gender representation is similar regardless of locality. While North Wales marginally maintains the most balanced picture of the four main regions (North, South, Mid and West), all witness a significant male dominance across senior organisational levels including management and leadership, those holding the highest level National Governing Body (NGB) awards and those maintaining a career over the age of 45.

If you work in the outdoors then these findings probably don't come as a surprise! Allwood identified that in the UK 77.5% of leadership positions in our sector are held by men. My own research findings support a similar picture within Wales, evidencing that men occupy 70% of management and 78% of senior positions. Perhaps more interestingly, my research also showed that female professionals at a basic instructional level account for more than half (56%) of the current workforce.

So where do they all go?

Although the main focus of my study was to give objectivity (numbers) to the feeling of imbalance, a mixed methods approach combining data analysis (from a survey of 60 females and 100 males) and interviews (four males and four females) revealed a deeper perspective.

Allwood suggests that a key reason for women not perceiving a long-term future in the outdoors, or aspiring to leadership roles, is a lack of female role models at the top; this is certainly a believable concept when we look at statistics like these. My own research utilised data provided by Mountain Training Cymru to reveal that only 9% of women who achieve their Summer Mountain Leader award go on to gain a high level qualification (MIA or above), compared to 15% of men (3). I discovered a similar picture within Paddlesport (4) indicating that men are more than twice as likely to progress to a high level award. This male dominated upper echelon of our sector certainly doesn't help women to feel inspired or even comfortable in their career progression. However, I wholeheartedly do not believe that this is a case of men being obstructive or even not championing women's progression. Neither do I believe that women simply aren't present or 'aren't made of the right stuff'. After all, the statistics tell us women are the dominant gender at the start of their career pathway.

In fact, my own study identified a significant cause to be a slow and erosive cocktail of both women's personal perceptions of their own validity/competency as well as external, often subconscious messages, creating a number of 'invisible' barriers in relation to age, perceived social expectations and personal conflict. In a recent article by Kate O'Brien (5) unconscious bias is discussed as something far more prevalent than conscious bias and often in conflict with our expressed conscious values. One participant during my research clearly identified such bias, relating how during a practical assessment she, as the only female,

felt she had to prove herself more. She recalled thinking,

"I know I am probably the weakest physically here, but I don't want you (the assessor) to think that."

This prompts me to question: as women, how much are we consciously or subconsciously trying to overcompensate for our gender, to make up for our differences rather than embrace and celebrate them?

Contributing to this mindset are longstanding societal attitudes towards the outdoors as a career. Tom Kilpatrick (6) in his recent article notes how those looking for a lifelong career in the outdoors often face questions around meeting their long-term and family aspirations as well as realistic longevity. My own research echoes his sentiment of social stigma and the outdoors not being 'a real job'. In fact a common theme emerging from my research interviews was that the outdoor sector was more of a 'lifestyle' than a career. This is important to gender equality because the values and behaviours associated with this perception are often at odds with the requirements of starting a family or 'settling down'. It seems that many women (but not men) feel that it is inevitable that they will need to make a choice between their personal and professional aspirations. This contributes to our understanding of why high numbers of women leave an Outdoor career in the middle years of their lives. Of those interviewed during my study, 100% of women over the age of 25 had either made a conscious choice not to have a family or recognised it as a

GENDER LEADERSHIP

For more research updates and good practice guidance go to page 26.



significant challenge they would have to navigate in the future.

One female participant, when asked about her career longevity, noted that although she didn't have children yet she was concerned about the impact. She stated that:

"Obviously being female I would be the one who would be pregnant... then there is the post birth period of recovery... then also there's the childcare issues."

In contrast, the male interviewees in the same age group all had a family, and while they recognised there had been compromises or 'pay offs', had still maintained their career to a high level. Male professionals interviewed during my research appeared, with the greatest respect, to see the issue as a 'woman's problem' and although empathetic did not indicate an understanding that they individually, or the sector, could be part of the solution. One male interviewee stated:

"...(women) have to front up to the conversations and decisions... in respect of pursuing a career or trying to have a family... trying to do both can be challenging."

Evident throughout my research is how many women within the sector feel a lack of self-confidence in a technical skill arena. They feel a need to prove themselves above and beyond the expected competency to be considered equal and undervalue their own skills in comparison to their male counterparts. One female participant commented:



"Women are far less confident of their own ability... slower coming forwards for training and assessment... want to feel better than the pre-requirements (which) slows down the process massively."

This impacts directly on the number of women progressing into high level NGBs, a key measuring stick for competency in senior roles within the sector. If women are getting there slower then it stands to reason that they would be well into their child-bearing years before reaching their technical potential. Gaining and then maintaining qualifications in the Outdoors requires a considerable commitment of time and continuous skill development, often requiring time away from home and in remote environments. This creates a conflict between managing healthy relationships and family life, and maintaining a 'hands on' outdoor role (7). Data from my survey shows that 66% of the female respondents in this study were under the age of 44 compared to 58% of men, suggesting an increasing disparity between the prevalence of men and women into the older age groups. Alongside this, women are not progressing into senior operational positions at the same rate with over ¾ of senior roles filled by men compared to less than half of all basic positions.

National governing bodies have a duty to ensure there are opportunities for all to be trained and assessed in a technical arena.

It is true that professional qualifications do not exclude or differentiate between gender and neither does the natural environment in which we practise. However, when we identify the social and subconscious bias that still exists within our sector and indeed wider society, can we as a profession really say that we provide equity in opportunity for all when it comes to both developing and maintaining a career in the Outdoors? I do believe that the tide is turning but we need to ensure momentum is not lost by a misguided perception that this as an 'age old issue', or one which is just an inevitable consequence of our choice in career. Perhaps we need to stop seeing

gender as binary (male and female) but instead a spectrum, along which we all find our place. Traditional dualistic notions of men and women are often divisive, leading to a set of predetermined assumptions about what is and isn't expected in terms of behaviours and attributes (8). This can only contribute further to a woman's sense of 'not-belonging' within a profession historically perceived as a masculine domain. Within our organisations and governing bodies more care needs to be taken to consider not equality but equity in how we structure opportunities for employment and skill development, so that a situation can be reached where a career in the Outdoors and a family life are no longer perceived by many as mutually exclusive offerings. By a sector-led approach to re-framing the measures and associated values we attribute to competency in senior positions, perhaps we can in turn address women's own perception of their place and potential within the professional Outdoor workforce ■



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IMAGES

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AUTHOR

Denise Leonard with supporting author Dr Andy Williams

Denise, graduate of MA Outdoor Education at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, has worked professionally both in the UK and overseas for over 20 years including project and centre management. She currently lectures on the BA Outdoor Adventure Education degree programme at UWTSO Carmarthen.

Associate Professor Dr Andy Williams is the course director for the MA Outdoor Education programme and Head of Outdoor Research for the Wales Academy of Physical Literacy (WAPL) at University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Carmarthen. His professional work focuses on postgraduate teaching and research into socio-cultural aspects of the Outdoor sector.