

PROFESSIONAL WOMEN FORESTERS IN THE BRITISH FORESTRY INDUSTRY

Executive Summary

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**A study commissioned by the Forestry Commission
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1. Introduction

Wildcat One Consulting was commissioned by the Forestry Commission to investigate:

- The recruitment, retention and advancement of women in forestry¹,
- The experiences of women working within the industry and,
- The recruitment of women into vocational forestry education.

2. Objectives of the Study:

The objectives for the research were based on information needs identified by an industry-wide Steering Group². The research was designed to:

- Identify issues faced by women foresters entering and developing careers in the industry and explore the reasons why women might be under-represented; and
- Formulate practical recommendations to encourage more women to consider careers in professional forestry and, having done so, to develop and fulfil their career potential within the industry.

3. Approach:

A survey using questionnaires, telephone interviews and discussion groups was used. A sample was taken of women and men foresters and forestry employers across the industry. The design of the sample was based on advice from the steering group. Colleges and universities offering forestry and related courses were also surveyed, as was a sample of current women and men forestry students. A literature search was undertaken and existing research on male dominated industries was used for comparative purposes.

4. Key Findings:

The Representation of Women in Forestry:

It seems that equal opportunity practise has improved over the last ten to fifteen years. Nevertheless, women are still under-represented in the industry. The survey findings confirm official figures showing a significant gender imbalance in forestry. There are differences within the sector so that NGOs and some local authorities maintain a more balanced workforce. On the whole, women foresters were more prevalent in the public sector and NGOs. Comparisons with other male-dominated industries show similar patterns. This suggests that the sample used for the study was valid, and is likely to be representative of women's employment patterns in the industry.

This gender imbalance is particularly evident within management, especially at senior levels. This is despite survey findings that women in forestry are as well-qualified in relevant disciplines as men. The picture of women's educational attainment indicates that qualifications or education do not provide a basis for discriminating between men and women, even in traditionally male-dominated industries. The fact that women are

¹ The definition of "forestry" used for this study, was that of the ICF.

² APF, FCA, TGA, FIC, ICF, FC

still failing to achieve senior positions in forestry suggests previous and possibly ongoing discrimination.

Both women and men foresters and students described the prevailing culture of the forestry industry as an “old boys” club, with very traditional, conservative views and predominantly male values. They believed that such attitudes apply throughout forestry in Great Britain. This leads to stereotyped assumptions about male and female capabilities and gives weight to male definitions of commitment and success (e.g. long hours culture, lack of flexible working etc.). These attitudes were thought to be particularly prevalent at the most senior levels of management.

If these findings are true, then HR theory suggests that managers are likely to make decisions about the career development and progression of their juniors based on a “comfort fit” with the prevalent culture, rather than on objective assessments of ability and potential. This is seen as a fundamental barrier to women’s career progression to more senior levels within most sectors of the industry.

Are Women Selecting Against Careers in Forestry?

The numbers of women applicants and entrants to forestry and related courses is very low, approximately 5-8% of class size. This has been the pattern for at least the last decade. As students, however, women prove to be as successful as men.

At the point of recruitment there appear to be no barriers to women graduates gaining appropriate employment in the industry, although this is sector dependent and there is a wide spread belief that many larger organisations are operating positive discrimination policies. Employers surveyed did not agree with this.

The continuing small numbers of women applying for forestry courses, however, was attributed to a variety of factors. Primarily this concerned the very low profile and relatively poor, stereotyped image of the industry³.

The general lack of awareness about what forestry entails has almost certainly impacted on career choices, where it often fails to be recognised or suggested as an option. Similarly, the image of forestry has been fuelled by negative media images of forest “destruction” and environmental disregard. Combined with a reported lack of industry engagement in promoting more positive messages, this means there is seldom a counterbalance to these negative images.

The nature of forestry work is also highly stereotyped as heavy manual tree felling and labouring. This is exacerbated by images in the industry’s own press, as well as national media. This “lumberjack” stereotype is the mental image that careers advisors and teachers seem to hold. There appears to be a lack of appreciation of the breadth of career options available. Their students, therefore, are often advised against a career in the industry. It is certainly the view among this important group that a forestry career is not perceived as a professional option.

³ Since the research was concluded, similar findings have been reported from Norway where stereotyped images of forestry inhibit applications from young women. Germany also reports very low numbers of women entrants into forestry.

This stereotype is likely to be particularly unattractive to women⁴. Few of our women respondents worked in harvesting operations and women students tended to be least interested in these areas⁵. It is unlikely that women would be attracted to a career where the prevailing stereotype failed to reflect their interests.

It is uncertain how strong a deterrent a male dominated work environment is to women. Small numbers of women foresters and students stated that they had not perceived it as male dominated prior to their studies. However, the findings indicate that coupled with the “macho” stereotype of the work this would be a deterrent to many women.

It seems, therefore:

- (a) that many women are *unconsciously* selecting against a forestry career because they are unaware of the opportunities that the industry presents, and
- (b) in cases where this is a conscious decision it is likely to be influenced by negative media images and stereotypes.

These two issues seem to be the most potent deterrents to women entering the industry.

5. Key Recommendations:

In formulating these recommendations it was necessary to bear in mind the current state of the British forestry industry. A balance has to be found between generating new interest and the limited opportunities in forestry for new graduates, be they men or women. The recommendations detailed in the report are thought to be practical and realistic proposals, which facilitate moving forward in a number of areas.

The key recommendations are as follows:

- A clearly demonstrated commitment to equality of opportunity is required from senior levels of management. Inappropriate behaviours and values need to be visibly discouraged, in order to negate the prevailing “old boy” cultural influences, which continue to impact on career decisions.
- It will be difficult to increase numbers of women across the industry, unless organisations appreciate the tangible business benefits in having a balanced workforce. An awareness campaign should be considered to ensure that these benefits are more fully understood, in the context of each sector’s particular needs.
- The improvement of positive media profile for the industry and of women’s roles within it should be actively pursued.
- Industry leaders should consider encouraging contractors/suppliers to work to codes of conduct, aimed at reducing harassment and hostility across the industry. Similar schemes within the construction industry have been implemented relatively successfully.

⁴ A recent Swedish report showed that young people in general do not see forestry as an attractive career choice because of low status and poor image.

⁵ A recent IUFRO conference on women in forestry identified this as a characteristic of forestry in many developed countries, though German research suggests that women engaged in harvesting and production are more likely to be younger than average for the sector.

- A carefully designed campaign to raise awareness of career opportunities. This should be specifically targeted on groups already interested in the “outdoor” life, since this was shown in the survey to be a strong influence on career choice.
- Collaboration with relevant educational establishments to develop an introductory programme on forestry for young women. This might be along the lines of the Insight programme, for the engineering and science industries.
- To develop a more comprehensive understanding of all women’s employment, across the industry, through adaptation of current data gathering to include gender information and through further research.

Additional recommendations for actions and further research are detailed in Section 3 of the main report.

6. Co-ordination & Management:

Many of these proposals will require direction, co-ordination and careful monitoring of progress.

It is therefore suggested that a representative, industry wide Steering Group is established, to develop a prioritised strategy and implementation plan. This will need dedicated (at least in the short term) support, to co-ordinate and assist with implementation - as well as providing single point information source, for those within/outwith the industry. It is felt that this support could be in the form of a part time role, with suitable funding sought to help initiate and support it.

7. Commitment & Resources:

Moving forward in any of these areas will, inevitably, require an investment from the industry of time, money and resources. There are clear cost implications, although these are thought to be realistic.

Achieving the benefits that come with a genuinely balanced workforce relies on improved equality of opportunity for all. It is incumbent on senior managers in the industry to determine the degree to which this must be pursued within their own organisations.

8. International Collaboration and EU Funding

The literature search indicated that many of the issues highlighted by this study are common to a number of other developed countries. It might, therefore, be possible to collaborate with EU countries on promoting forestry careers to women. Equal opportunities might also be an issue that could be addressed in EU funding processes such as Objective 1 & Objective 3 and the new Rural Development programmes.