

From the Editor

On being a female supervisor in forest research education

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Research-based doctoral education has its roots in the early years of the 19th century in Berlin. A proponent of Romantic philosophy and science, Alexander von Humboldt, originated the idea of supporting promising students in their own research projects under the guidance of experienced researchers, in order to intensify, expand and improve the research community. Since then, doctoral education has evolved; passing through a millennium crisis because of criticisms in the 1970s, and structural reforms started in 2000, and is still transforming education across the globe.

In recent years, the forest sector has been responding to the pressures of social and environmental sustainability. The challenges of the latter have been known for decades. The concept of social sustainability, however, raises awareness in the forest sector to a new level regarding diversity and gender equality, especially because it has been historically a male-dominated field (e.g., Follo 2002). In response to the 5th Sustainable Development Goal of Agenda 2030, the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) was tasked with integrating gender equality issues in their agenda implementation, and contribute to gender mainstreaming processes and strategic actions. In line with this development, the Gender Equality in Forestry Task Force under the coordination of Gun Lidestav at Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) was formed in addition to activities being coordinated by Division Unit 6.08.00 Gender and Forestry under Elias Andersson at SLU.

Studies have been carried out to examine the gender equality issues in the forest sector (e.g., Andersson and Lidestav 2016; Baublyte et al. 2019), and in the forest education in the context of forestry industry and its reluctance to employ women (e.g., Follo 2002). Actions to improve gender equality in forest undergraduate and graduate education have been already taken within various contexts. An example is the Skogligt basår (Forestry base year) a one-year programme prior to applying at SLU for undergraduate studies. The programme is funded by the Ministry of Education in Sweden and offers 10 places for women and six places for men to encourage female applicants in forestry education. Another example is the project Genusintegrering och jämställdhetsarbete vid fakulteten för skogsvetenskap, Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet (Gender integration and gender equality work at Faculty of Forest Science, Swedish University of Agriculture Sciences), aiming at the development of strategical methods to achieve gender balance within the forest MSc programmes.

As for research-based doctoral education, SLU demands representation of both genders in the supervision team. However, the specific effects of these actions are not well studied. Moreover, little analysis has been done on gender relations in the supervision of research education, which is seen to be the training ground for career growth in academia.

With the support of the IUFRO Task Force and the Division Unit Gender and Forestry coordinators, a study on gender relations in research-based doctoral supervision was initiated in early spring 2020. It takes the form of a survey-based study, followed up by interviews of selected volunteers. The primary goals of the study are threefold: (i) to map existing gender relations in doctoral supervision in forest sciences; (ii) to link potential unequal treatment to overall wellbeing in the work environment; (iii) to provide guidelines on how to improve the supervisor-student relationship. The survey was sent to eight universities in the Nordic region: Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Linnaeus University (Sweden), University of Eastern Finland, Helsinki University (Finland), University of Copenhagen (Denmark), Aarhus University (Denmark), Norwegian University of Life Sciences and Agricultural University of Iceland. Three research fields were in focus: Forest Sciences, Agricultural Sciences, and Veterinary Medicine, although many researchers from other areas also responded to the survey. Whilst the primary target was Forest Sciences, our results allow us to make comparisons between different research fields. The results of the study will be communicated through the IUFRO Task Force and the Division Unit Gender and Forestry, and be published as an article. In the study, we try to analyze how gender relations influence research-based doctoral supervision success; how gender representation in the work environment influences doctoral supervision; whether gender correlates with doctoral supervision volume and/or the amount of supervision experience; and whether or not there is a correlation between work environment wellbeing and success in doctoral supervision.

The collected data are still being processed. I expect that the data will provide insights on the existing gender culture in forest research education and academia. As a woman in academia, I feel it is important to raise awareness in this area, since research-based doctoral education has a key role in shaping future research culture towards gender equality through creation of the exemplary work environment in the context of social sustainability.

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