

Bridging the Gender Gap in Forest Stewardship: Facilitating Programs for Women Landowners

Abstract

Nationwide, women woodland owners are increasingly taking on the primary decision-making role for their land. In Wisconsin and beyond, most existing landowner outreach efforts target mixed-gender audiences. We explored how facilitation techniques can be incorporated into a women-centric workshop to increase women landowners' confidence, knowledge, and readiness to take action in forest stewardship. We highlight three core techniques Extension workshop developers can use to promote landowner learning and engagement: creating space for participant-driven open dialogue, generating opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, and enabling participants to receive personalized advice from professionals about their land.

Keywords: [woodland owner](#), [women](#), [workshop](#), [facilitation](#), [stewardship](#)

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Introduction

Women Landowners in the United States

Nationwide, women woodland owners are increasingly taking on the primary decision-making role for their land, with their numbers rising from 11% of private family forestland owners in 2006 to 22% in 2013 (Butler et al., 2016). Women also are statistically more likely to outlive their male spouses and inherit their land and its stewardship needs rather than to buy their land outright (Arias, 2015; Butler, Huff, Snyder, Butler, & Tyrrell, 2017). Yet, in part due to forestry being a historically and socially male-dominated field, women can feel that they lack the experience and knowledge to make forest management decisions (Huff, 2017; Redmore & Tynon, 2010). To continue to support family forest ownership, natural resources professionals will need to engage women landowners early in their lives and provide them with the

confidence, resources, and networks needed to successfully achieve their goals for their land.

In general, women are less likely than men to actively manage their forestland or participate in cost-share programs, but our understanding of *why* this is so is limited (Butler et al., 2017). To design more effective outreach and programming for women landowners, Extension professionals and others who work with woodland owners must examine assumptions about what motivates women to become active stewards and address social barriers that prevent women from taking action. Women-centric learning opportunities and support networks can be effective tools for addressing barriers and knowledge gaps (Huff, 2017; Redmore & Tynon, 2010).

Engaging Women Landowners in Stewardship

In Wisconsin, as in much of the United States, most outreach efforts directed toward woodland owners target mixed-gender audiences, including the Learn About Your Land workshop series provided by University of Wisconsin–Madison's Division of Extension. Anecdotally, we have heard from conservation professionals that many of the women landowners who attend woodland owner workshops in Wisconsin defer to their male family members to ask questions.

Across the United States, leaders of Women Owning Woodlands networks and the Women, Food and Agriculture Network have shown that successfully engaging women landowners in stewardship starts with selecting women presenters, featuring women presenters and attendees in promotional materials, setting an informal tone, and emphasizing peer-to-peer learning by creating social spaces that respect the landowners as the experts on their lands (Eells & Adcock, 2014; Huff, 2017). The alternative workshop structure used by these groups intentionally diverges from traditional workshop formats, which often consist of formal classroom-style presentations delivered by natural resources professionals.

To explore such methods and test how Extension professionals can use tailored facilitation strategies to more effectively engage women landowners in their programs, we designed, implemented, and evaluated a women woodland owner workshop.

Our key research questions were as follows:

- What role does facilitation play in creating a supportive adult learning environment for women landowners?
- Which elements of our programming are uniquely effective for and valued by women landowners?
- Does intentional, women-centric program design increase women landowners' confidence, knowledge, and readiness to take action in forest stewardship?

Method

In fall 2017 and spring 2018, we offered our full-day workshop for women landowners, Woodland Stewardship for Women, at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve in Wisconsin's southwest Driftless region. We applied previously described methods, such as featuring women presenters, setting an informal tone, and creating an environment intended to foster peer-to-peer learning. Indeed, all workshop staff and natural

resources professionals who presented were women, and each workshop was limited to 20–25 participants to maintain a more intimate size. The workshop was led by our lead author, a trained facilitator and natural resources professional. Table 1 shows the workshop agenda and rationales for each component.

Table 1.

Woodland Stewardship for Women Workshop Agenda Items and Rationales

Agenda item	Description	Rationale
Check-in	Workshop staff greet participants and provide breakfast snacks and drinks, an agenda, and informational materials. Each participant is given a note card to write down her top "burning question" (i.e., "What is the one thing you hope to learn more about today?").	Preparing an activity for participants (e.g., writing down their "burning question" for the day) is a helpful way to engage participants when they arrive and make them feel welcome, particularly for those participants who do not yet know anyone at the event.
Introductions (30 min)	Participants and professionals sit in chairs arranged in one large circle. The facilitator asks participants to introduce themselves and answer the question "What is your favorite place on your land?"	It is important for workshop staff and professionals to be part of the circle too so that everyone has an equal voice. There is no right or wrong answer to this icebreaker question. It sets a positive tone, and all landowners have an answer no matter their experience level.
Large-group discussion (70 min)	The facilitator leads a discussion, inviting participants to drive the conversation by encouraging them to ask questions. She prompts discussion with open-ended questions, including "What's your vision for your land in the next 10 years?" and "What are some challenges or barriers you have run into?" She asks follow-up questions to keep the conversation going, invites input and technical advice from natural resources professionals, and provides context as needed (e.g., for cost-share program acronyms or advanced forest management terms). The facilitator addresses the landowners' "burning questions" before closing the discussion.	The facilitator plays an important moderating role when leading a participant-driven discussion, ensuring that participants have space to contribute. Large-group discussions provide participants the opportunity to hear diverse perspectives and become acquainted with the other women so that they feel more comfortable approaching other women during the workshop to ask questions or share insights.
Small-group	Participants break into small groups (5–6 people),	In a small-group setting,

map activity (70 min)	each facilitated by a natural resources professional, and examine printed maps of their properties supplied by workshop staff.	participants are able to receive personalized advice about caring for their land and engage more directly with a professional and their peers.
Lunch (45 min)	Workshop staff provide a local, hot catered lunch.	It is important to give participants a mental break and create an inviting social atmosphere that facilitates new connections.
Individual goal-setting activity (45 min)	Participants work independently to write down their vision for their land and any action steps or resources needed to achieve their goals. One-on-one time pursuing questions with professionals is also encouraged by the facilitator.	The day is full of new information and can begin to feel overwhelming for participants. It is valuable to give participants time to process what they have learned and think about their own land and potential goals.
Field tour (90 min)	Both the participants and the natural resources professionals visit a local woman landowner's property.	Participants greatly value learning from their peer women landowners and want to see management in action.
Closing	The facilitator invites participants to reflect on and share what was most valuable from the day, what else would have been helpful, and any next steps they plan to take.	This closing discussion provides one final opportunity for peer landowners to inspire one another and sets a positive tone. In addition, workshop staff could collect immediate qualitative feedback on the workshop at this time.

In all, 40 women landowners with a diverse range of stewardship experience attended the two offerings of the workshop. Sixty-six percent of participants had no or only minimal prior engagement in stewardship practices on their land, 24% had implemented a few practices, and 10% had implemented several projects. Only 14% had attended another land stewardship event in the preceding year. The workshop also attracted participants of diverse ages, with 14% at 36 years of age or younger, 36% between 37 and 52 years of age, and 48% between 53 and 71 years of age. Several participating landowners were family of or friends with one another, further reflecting the social nature of the women's workshop.

We evaluated the workshop using a mixed-methods approach that comprised observing and gathering qualitative feedback from participants during the workshop sessions, hosting a facilitated discussion with workshop staff after each offering of the workshop, and collecting data via an online survey sent to participants after the workshop.

Our reason for using participant observation in our mixed-methods approach was that "direct participation in and observation of the phenomenon of interest may be the best research method" (Patton, 2002, p. 21). Observations were recorded on paper by the facilitator and workshop staff during active discussions. As noted in Table 1, at the end of the workshop, the facilitator posed open-ended questions to participants in a large-group discussion format, including questions about what was most useful about the workshop and what could be improved. We encouraged participants to be candid, explaining that their input would help us refine our methods for future workshops.

The observations recorded by the facilitator and workshop staff during workshop discussions were later shared during the postworkshop facilitated discussion with staff. These observations were reviewed for dominant themes as well as unique ideas (Patton, 2014).

After each workshop, we sent an online survey questionnaire to participants. The questionnaire included 21 items, and 73% of participants completed the survey ($n = 29$). We conducted a simple descriptive analysis of the quantitative data and grouped responses to open-ended questions into emergent themes (Patton, 2014).

Results

In analyzing the data we collected via our mixed-methods approach, we determined that our findings addressing the research questions were interrelated and thus best presented as a synthesis. The primary lesson learned was the value of integrating facilitation strategies into a workshop format to increase landowners' engagement in land stewardship. Herein, we highlight three core facilitation methods that our data indicated were effective:

- creating space for participant-driven open dialogue,
- generating opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, and
- enabling participants to receive personalized advice from natural resources professionals about their land.

Creating Space for Participant-Driven Open Dialogue

The participants independently recognized the value and impact of the learning circle as an element that created a safe space and more accessible and inclusive environment for learning about forest stewardship. Participants commented that the all-women, open-discussion format prevented them from feeling "overshadowed," a term we heard repeatedly during our evaluation. One woman described this sentiment as follows: "The biggest thing it [the all-women event] probably did was allow women to discuss without being overridden by men." Another stated, "I am typically in a work environment where I am the only woman or one of a few women. At this workshop, the tone was different from what I am used to. It was much easier to convey ideas."

The professionals in attendance remarked, during the facilitated debrief discussions following the two offerings of the workshop, that the stewardship topics that arose during the discussion were not different from those that might be explored at a traditional mixed-gender workshop but that the women appeared more empowered to ask specific questions regarding topics that interested them most. From the beginning

of the workshop, the women were able to tailor the discussion to achieve their own learning goals. In total, 93% of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop format provided a "safe place to ask specific questions [they] had about land care."

Generating Opportunities for Peer-to-Peer Learning

Throughout the workshop, we built in time for the women landowners to openly share their experiences and suggestions with other participants, fostering a peer-to-peer learning setting. One participant noted, "I thought the open discussions were most valuable. It helps those who don't know what questions to ask or where to start. I gained so much knowledge from fellow landowners with unique situations." Another woman said, "Hearing other people's stories of what they have worked on, on their properties, gives you ideas for the future."

One way we created opportunities for peer-to-peer learning was by setting aside structured time for the facilitated small-group exercises in which participants explored printed aerial photo maps of their properties. Landowners discussed their land and ideas with fellow landowners who had varying degrees of stewardship experience, and natural resources professionals provided recommendations that guided the small groups' discussions. In total, 73% of survey respondents rated the small-group exercise as very or extremely valuable, on a 4-point scale.

Whereas in a traditional workshop, landowners typically interact with their peers indirectly through postpresentation Q&A sessions and at lunch tables, our workshop structure emphasized facilitated discussion between landowners and professionals throughout the day.

Enabling Participants to Receive Personalized Advice from Professionals

A workshop that provides adequate time for each participant to receive advice tailored to her own goals requires an approach that differs from the presentation-heavy workshops many Extension and natural resources professionals are familiar with. Traditionally, it is up to participants to find the space and time to seek out presenters for personalized advice relevant to their land. Additionally, time is a barrier landowners often face, limiting their progress toward deeper engagement with their land, local resources and connections, and, ultimately, stewardship projects (Rickenbach & Kittredge, 2008).

A workshop that addresses this barrier prepares each landowner to leave with a set of actionable steps specific to her land and contact information for local professionals who can help her. One participant noted that this personalized touch was the most valuable aspect of the workshop, remarking on the importance of "time [spent] looking at the maps of the property with the forester, time speaking with the various land management professionals to learn about how to access different cost-sharing programs and what to do next."

We found through our survey that these facilitation methods collectively were particularly effective for improving women landowners' engagement in stewardship, regardless of their prior experience. From our quantitative survey data, we identified the following results:

- Eighty-three percent of respondents increased their confidence in selecting practices to improve the

health of their land.

- Respondents felt their knowledge about caring for their land increased after the workshop. Before the workshop, 43% considered their knowledge to be low or very low, 39% average, and 18% high or very high. After the workshop, only 7% considered their knowledge to be low or very low, whereas 48% considered their knowledge to be average, and 45% considered it to be high or very high.
- Ninety percent of respondents felt a greater commitment to conduct stewardship practices on their land.
- Replying using a 5-point scale, 65% of respondents said they were very or extremely likely to establish a management plan, 62% were very or extremely likely to walk their property with a forester, and 55% were very or extremely likely to walk their property with a conservation professional.

In addition, 69% of respondents could be categorized as "promoters" who would actively promote a similar type of workshop to other women landowners. ("Promoters" rated their likelihood of recommending the workshop as 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale).

Recommendations

As our results show, applying facilitation techniques to specific activities can increase women landowners' confidence, knowledge, and readiness to take action on their land. A few steps are key to implementing this approach:

- Create a structured agenda with predetermined discussions or activities that engage participants.
- Find a facilitator who will succeed in the role, which involves setting the tone for inquiry, moderating the conversation, creating an open and welcoming environment for sharing, and providing context for and making connections between topics.
- Invite several personable natural resources professionals, preferably women, who can cover an array of topics and are comfortable not knowing what topics may emerge.

For this audience, our decision to provide a women-only setting was an important one, as it provided the landowners with more confidence to ask personalized questions and find answers to address their own goals for their land.

Another key aspect of success was having all natural resources professionals ready to facilitate discussions. To prepare natural resources professionals to take on a facilitation role and comfortably manage a group discussion, they should be coached to

- use an aid to focus the discussion (i.e., map, activity, worksheet),
- create space for peer-to-peer learning while moderating to ensure the quality and accuracy of information shared,
- ensure that experienced or more outspoken landowners do not dominate the discussion while inviting

quieter landowners to contribute, and

- monitor the time to allow for a summary of highlights.

All these elements and others created a setting that helped the landowners identify next steps that fit their goals and built on prior stewardship actions. Engaging landowners in many smaller actions over time, represented as a ladder of engagement, is often necessary for building toward greater management action (e.g., a timber harvest) (Sustaining Family Forests Initiative, 2019). For this reason, we see workshops such as ours being appropriate for both unengaged landowners and those who have taken some initial actions.

Conclusion

Creating an environment that facilitates empowerment of women forestland owners is critical if Extension professionals and other natural resources professionals want to accelerate landowner learning, encourage greater action on the landscape, and increase the number of stewards caring for our natural resources. Using women-centric facilitation methods is one way Extension professionals can more directly serve the needs of private landowners, especially those who are historically underserved.

Acknowledgments

Funding for this work was provided by a generous donation from Ralph Nuzum via the Kickapoo Valley Restoration Fund and administered by the University of Wisconsin–Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. We would like to thank Ken Genskow for his financial support of this initiative and the natural resources professionals who actively participated in the design of our workshop and whose participation in the workshop was greatly valued by the women landowners: Becky Brathal (Pheasants Forever); Ann Calhoun (The Nature Conservancy); Allissa Corrow (Kickapoo Woods Cooperative); Darcy Kind, Juli Van Cleve, and Christine Walroth (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources); Carol Nielsen (Nielsen and Nielsen Forestry, Inc.); and Jen Simoni (Aldo Leopold Foundation).

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