

# Mind the gap

## The past, present and future of Women in the British Hills

**T**he new research network launched in February this year will investigate potential barriers to women's access in upland recreation in the British hills. But, somewhat surprisingly, it's not all about what is happening in the hills right now.

Dr Keri Wallace co-founder of Girls on Hills investigates.

"Historically, women's narratives about experiences in the hills have been largely ignored," says Keri Andrews of Edge Hill University, just one of the academics that has joined the new research project Women in the Hills (WITH).

"Society's understanding of hills and mountains as sources of inspiration dates from the Romantic Era, but the people who author and feature in the stories about upland landscapes are almost all men (90% of key nature writing anthologies are male-dominated). But women have always been walking, climbing and mountaineering, and have written extensively about their experiences – however, much went unpublished for a very long time. By addressing this imbalance, we hope that WITH will be able to help contemporary women feel more like they belong in the hills!"

Academics from the University of Newcastle,

University of Manchester and Edge Hill University will be brought together with practitioners and stakeholders to characterise the factors that have shaped women's experiences from the early 1800s, through to the present day. The network will consider changes that have taken place over many generations, and the ways in which women's history influences our culture and attitudes today. The two-year initiative, which is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) will be working to produce a series of guidelines aimed at improving women's access to hill-walking, rock-climbing and trail running. Interestingly, however, the scope of WITH also includes women's creative responses – poetry, prose, non-fiction, nature writing and music, amongst others – to upland landscapes.

The WITH network was launched just weeks after the women's Pinnacle Club (founded in 1921) was awarded a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant to create a multimedia archive and mark its centenary in 2021. The Pinnacle Club's history charts a journey of female emancipation and independence embodied in journals, photographs, films, letters and the memories of its members, some now in their 80s and 90s.





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“We hope the archive will help rebalance the narrative, which is primarily about men, by spotlighting women’s longstanding involvement in this activity. This will inspire women of all backgrounds and ages to see how climbing and the outdoors can bring physical and mental health benefits,” says Pinnacle Club member and Centenary co-ordinator Val Hennelly. “In 1921 Pinnacle Club members broke the mould, and we want to carry on doing that. Being able to access our heritage better will facilitate the sharing of our stories and enable us to inspire wider engagement of women in the outdoors, and in climbing in particular.”

“How far the exclusion of women from the historical record has impacted on contemporary women’s engagement with hills and mountains is something we want to explore during the course of the WITH network,” added Andrews.

But projects like these are just part of a much bigger and longer-term shift in the balance of female representation in the outdoor community. Since the 1970s there has been a significant increase in the depiction of women in the outdoor media and celebration of female achievement is now on a par with that of men. Today there are enumerable talented female role-models and there has been a steady rise in the number of women in key positions (with recent examples in the British Mountaineering Council, Fell Runners Association and Rambler’s Association to name but a few). But despite much progress, the WITH project is responding to a gender-gap in participation that surprisingly still exists in mountain sports in the UK.

## Even though the first female British Mountain Guide, Gwen Moffat, qualified as far back as 1950, there are still only 10 female BMGs nationally.

According to the most recent surveys of outdoor participation, women make up only 31.2% of participants in mountaineering/scrambling, 32.8 % in fell running and 41.3% in rock climbing/bouldering, but as much as 46.8% in ‘hill and mountain walking’. This data is from the Active Lives study, carried out by Sport England, which has surveyed 175,000 people annually across England to create a dataset which so far spans 2016-2018. Despite the gender-ratio for hillwalking appearing almost equal at first glance, another report, Getting Active Outdoor (Sport England 2015) suggests that men and women are actually accessing the outdoor environment rather differently. The survey reveals that the majority of women surveyed are seeking outdoor time for ‘emotional, exploratory and learning’ purposes (e.g. photography, dog-walking or bird-watching), while men far outnumber women in the more ‘sporting’ categories of outdoor users. Proxy-measures of participation show an altogether different balance, with only 26% of current

BMC members and 13% of UKC/UKH users being female.

The gender-gap is even more well-documented in outdoor leadership pathways, where less than 25% of outdoor instructors are female (and only 7% of MIA/MCI are women). “Across all NGBs there is a drop-off with women in instructional roles as you work up the qualification levels,” says Doug Cooper, Glenmore Lodge. Even though the first female British Mountain Guide (BMG), Gwen Moffat, qualified as far back as 1950, there are still only 10 female BMGs nationally.

But why does any discrepancy in gender balance still exist? It cannot be due to any lack of opportunities. In today’s society there is no hill or mountain, course or event where a woman would not be welcome. But the removal of ‘barriers’ over the years has not de facto led to gender parity in the British hills. Clearly something more subtle is at work.

The Scottish National Centre held their first Women in Adventure Sport (VIAS) conference in 2016 to address exactly this question. “We invited experienced female outdoor instructors and participants to tackle the questions about enablers and barriers, to proactively tackle the gender-gap in both leadership and participation” says Cooper. “As a result of this work, we started delivering women-specific participation courses, actively employed more female directors and tutors of NGB courses, and now deliver the VIAS conference annually to explore, share ideas and support women in the outdoors.” Through this approach, some key areas have been identified where more can still be done to help increase women’s participation:

- More role models
- More representation of women in key roles
- Mentoring
- Female specific social support e.g. social media
- Supportive learning/performance environments considering:
  - Confidence & Competence
  - Community & Connection
- Women specific equipment
- Images & Language to support/promote/celebrate women in outdoors

“Academic studies continue to highlight historical and ongoing challenges faced by women in outdoor adventure, including mountain sports, which can involve gender socialisation, perceived confidence, family constraints and access to others with whom to adventure,” says Dr Emma Boocock, Co-Investigator and Lecturer in Sports Coaching at Northumbria University.

In a 2020 survey of the Scottish Women’s Walking Group, 87% of women felt that ‘mental barriers’ held them back from hill-walking or ‘stopped them altogether’, with 60% of 175 respondents selecting multiple and identical perceived barriers. Of the most common, 45-49% were anxious about their fitness and worried about ‘holding others back’ in a group setting, while 34% felt restrained by low-confidence in their navigational ability.

Guided trail running company Girls on Hills, who deliver women-only navigation courses, observed that many of their clients appeared to lack confidence. “A large proportion of our ladies are self-conscious about learning to use a map and compass and have low confidence in their ability, but in reality, they are more than capable,” says Co-Founder, Nancy Kennedy.

Feedback from the popular Women’s Trad Festival



PHOTO: GIRLS ON HILLS LTD

📍 On top of Stob Coire nan Lochan, Glencoe.

📍 Trekking the spine of Buachaille Etive Beag, Glencoe.

PHOTO: GIRLS ON HILLS LTD



PHOTO: XTREME EXPOSURES/AL TOPPING

📍 Stunning scenes while running in Glen Coe.

PHOTO: GIRLS ON HILLS LTD

📍 Girls on Hills run women-only trail and fell running courses aimed at equipping women with the skills and confidence they need to become independent in the mountain environment.







PHOTO: XTREME EXPOSURES/AL TOPPING



PHOTO: OUTWARD BOUND

(WTF) reveals similar attitudes, reporting that “over 50% of attendees found they were more capable than they previously thought”. One in four women also said the festival “helped them overcome fear or anxiety”, says Hetty Key of the WTF.

It is important, however, to recognise that “women are not a bunch of shrinking violets” says Kennedy. “I think this ‘perceived’ low-confidence is actually just a tendency to worry what others will think, combined with an overriding desire to have all the answers – to know what to expect and to be fully equipped to perform.”

To find out what kind of group format might improve accessibility for women, I turned to a success story for answers: the Scottish Women’s Walking Group (SWWWG). The SWWWG is a women-only online community of over 15,000 members, growing by an average of at least 100 newcomers every week. “Our walks are all organised by members, so any one of us can arrange a walk if and when we please. That way we can choose the location, distance and difficulty to suit our own levels of fitness and experience. We have no ‘leader’ on the hill as such and there’s no need for anyone to feel left behind – no matter how unfit you think you are, there’s always lots of others in the same boat, willing to walk with you,” says Heather Dunnell, Founder of SWWWG.

In a survey of its members, 98% said that SWWWG group events had ‘helped improve their experience of the hills’, with 72% of respondents agreeing on multiple ways through which the group had facilitated their participation – including walks that were women-only, had lots of flexibility, low-commitment and an informal feel.

Perhaps surprisingly, over 25% of the women surveyed listed ‘personal safety concerns’ as a reason for not joining other/mixed-gender walking groups, intimidated by the idea of being the only woman or in a minority within a group of men. “I wouldn’t feel comfortable arranging to meet men I’d never met in a remote place,” confirms Dunnell. By extension, this same concern might also prevent some women from staying at a bothy alone – something that might not even occur to most male hill-walkers.

Somehow, what is needed is equity in the outdoors, rather than equality. “If we want equality, things have to be the same for everyone. Except, ‘the same’ often

Leading the way: guided trail running for women in Glencoe, Scottish Highlands.

Outward Bound’s Women in Leadership Course is the first of its kind and for those interested in a career developing young people and working towards outdoor qualifications.

doesn’t equate to fair” says Katherine O’Brien, Project Manager of Instructor Diversity at The Outward Bound Trust. “Sameness only parallels with equality if everybody starts from the same place. Equity is a different concept; it is about fairness and making sure that people get access to the same opportunities. Sometimes historical differences can create barriers, and to move towards equality we first need to ensure equity by creating opportunities for groups who were previously restricted in some way.”

The good news is that independent training providers, national centres, sports councils, governance organisations, regulatory authorities and funders are stepping-up, making evidence-based adjustments to improve women’s access to both recreational and professional pathways.

Mountain Training began its Women in Mountain Training initiative in 2015 and is now writing a Women in Mountain



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Training Strategy to better meet the needs of women entering the instructional system. “We are keen to better understand and address the difference in participation levels in walking and climbing, compared to the number of our qualification holders who are women. We are in the development phase of the strategy at the moment and hope to have it finished later this year,” says John Cousins, CEO of Mountain Training UK & Ireland.

All National Outdoor Centres in the UK now offer women-only or women-specific courses, as do an increasing number of independent providers. There is also an increase in single-gender social movements such as The Adventure Syndicate, Girls on Hills, Adventure Queens, Love Her Wild and Wonderful Wild Women which showcase authentic female adventuring and empower women of all ages,



backgrounds and abilities to join in.

“Initiatives which increase female participation, representation and leadership by women offer a different image and narrative around what it means to be female, which hopefully over time will shift out-of-date perspectives and create a more empowering environment, which supports women’s development in the outdoors,” says O’Brien.

But redefining the norm is a lengthy process and will take generations of further change. For this reason, it is important that these new initiatives extend to our young people. Research has highlighted the importance of role models and empowerment initiatives specifically, in helping shape our future female runners, climbers and mountaineers.

Girlguiding UK delivers Walking and Climbing Schemes and The Outward Bound Trust runs a Women’s Outdoor Leadership Course, with the aspiration of training more female instructors, who will in turn become an inspiration to the thousands of girls who attend their courses each year. Unfortunately, “research suggests that there are still widely held gendered expectations, roles and stereotypes which impact on young women getting involved in outdoor adventure. Judging girls on their appearance rather than their competence, the assumption that girls can’t be strong and the accepted norm that some activities are more for boys, are just some of the more subtle influences that over time, left unchecked, gently stifle a sense of confidence, competence and belongingness in mountain environments,” says O’Brien.

There is no doubt that although we are seeing more women in the hills of the UK than ever before, there is still more we can do to facilitate the continuation of this trend towards its natural equilibrium, whatever that might be. 🏔️

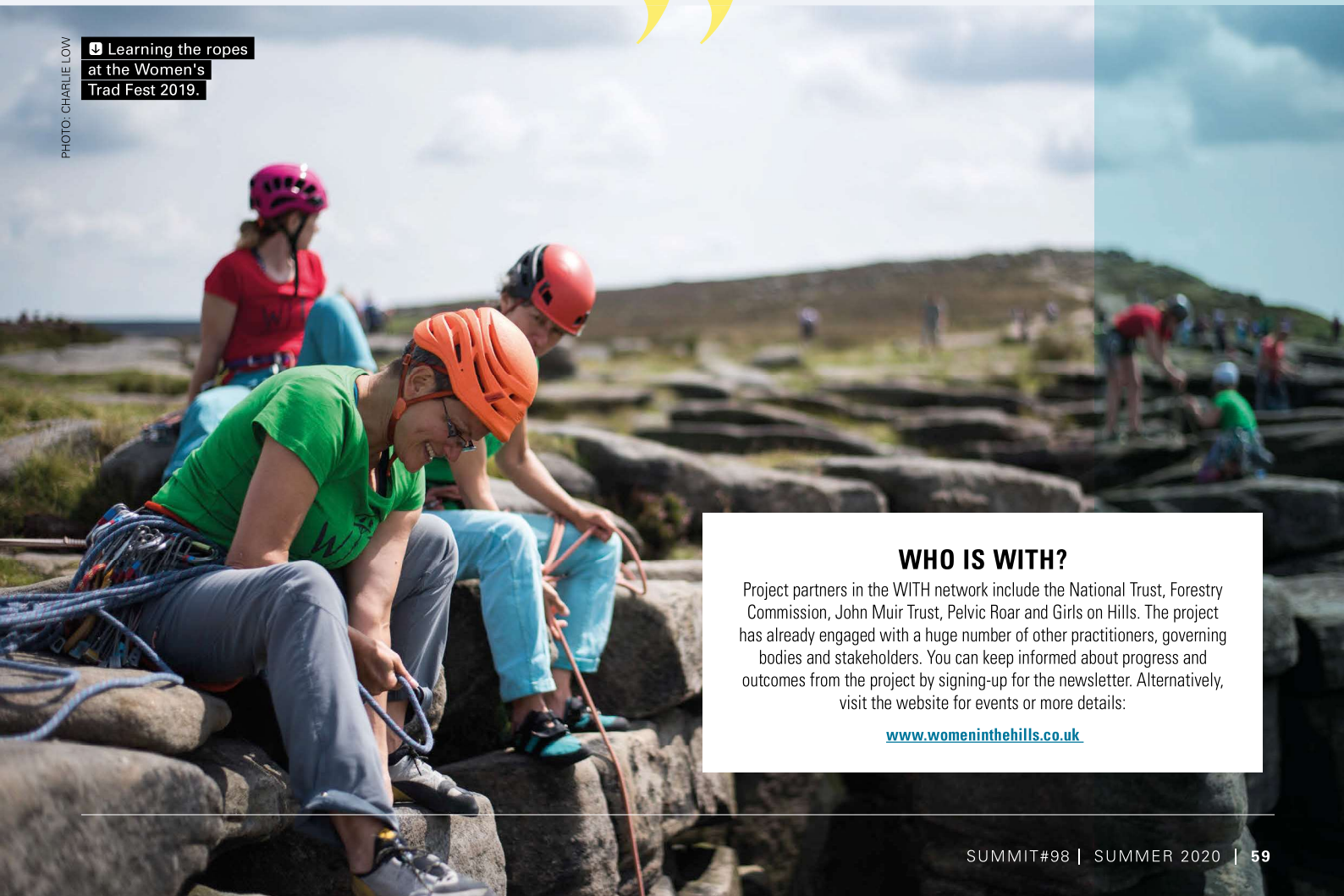
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**Words:** Keri Wallace  
Keri is a trail and mountain runner, and Co-Founder of Girls on Hills Ltd. She is Summer Mountain Leader (SML) and Rock Climbing Instructor (RCI) qualified - and mother of two. She has been running and racing in the Scottish Highlands for 12 years and is based in Glencoe. [www.girlsonhills.com](http://www.girlsonhills.com)

PHOTO: CHARLIE LOW

📖 Learning the ropes at the Women's Trad Fest 2019.



### WHO IS WITH?

Project partners in the WITH network include the National Trust, Forestry Commission, John Muir Trust, Pelvic Roar and Girls on Hills. The project has already engaged with a huge number of other practitioners, governing bodies and stakeholders. You can keep informed about progress and outcomes from the project by signing-up for the newsletter. Alternatively, visit the website for events or more details:

[www.womeninthehills.co.uk](http://www.womeninthehills.co.uk)