

# Forest Management and Empowerment: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Experiences of Women Forestland Managers in the State of Georgia, USA.

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## Abstract

Women are increasingly becoming the primary decision-makers of forested properties throughout the United States. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of women forestland owners in Georgia. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to interview nine female forestland owners. Three themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. Participants stated that land management involved: (a) initial feelings of inadequacy (an imposter syndrome), (b) personal and professional resources, and (c) genuine relationships. The theory of empowerment provided a basis for interpreting the findings and aided in the development of recommendations for future practice and research. We found that women experienced a temporary imposter stage early in land management that gave way to feeling empowered as their experiences with managing land increased. Access to trustworthy information, as well as genuine relationships with forestry professionals and other landowners, played key roles in such advancement. We recommend strategies for natural resource professionals to consider, including encouraging formal and informal networking opportunities when working with female audiences, including at educational outreach events like those hosted by Extension.

## Keywords

Empowerment theory, Forestry, Natural resource management, Underrepresented audiences, women landowners

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## Introduction and Problem Statement

A growing phenomenon occurring throughout the United States is that women are increasingly becoming the primary decision-makers of forested properties. In a field historically dominated by men, this has resulted in gender-based differences in perceptions of land ownership and services rendered. For instance, management philosophies and objectives differ as men are more likely than women to own their land for privacy, hunting, recreation, or timber purposes (Butler et al., 2018). Women are less likely to participate in active management than men, including harvesting timber for sale, and participating in landowner assistance programs (Butler et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies regarding adult learning indicated that women preferred different learning mediums and strategies than men (Grover & Miller, 2014; Fegel et al., 2018; Redmore & Tynon, 2010). These variances can result in ineffective outreach and extension programming for female audiences, which translates to poor adoption rates of best management practices among women timberland managers. The research reported here qualitatively explored the experiences of women timberland managers in Georgia, U.S. and how empowerment theory can facilitate greater understanding of women's educational preferences and professional relationships (Perkins, 2010).

Women are visible in nearly all natural resource occupations, whether in the field or office (Redmore et al., 2011; Wagner, 2015). Research conducted over the past twenty years indicated that perceived gender differences exist and have preserved a culture of gender and racial exclusivity within forestry that advantages white men above other groups (Pinchot Institute for Conservation, 2006). For instance, white men overwhelmingly comprise the majority of workers in the U.S. forest industry. Recent figures show that 71.3% of conservation scientists and foresters are male, while 26.9% are female (DataUSA, 2017). Private landowner demographics are similar on the national scale (Butler et al., 2016) as 78% of primary landowners were male and 22% were female (USDA, 2016). However, as of 2016, the gender makeup of forested property owners in the U.S. shifted, whereby secondary landowners [generally spouses and/or children] accounted for 83% of respondents (USDA, 2016).

The growth in female ownership is attributed to an increase in land inheritance from parents, an increase in property purchases by women, and a tendency of women to outlive their male spouses (Butler et al., 2018; Efland et al., 1993; Warren, 2003). With this trend comes a need to better understand the educational preferences and professional relationships of women when engaged in land management.

Landowner education is a primary concern for many natural resource organizations, particularly those promoting active land management objectives in tandem with conservation-based philosophies. Cooperative Extension plays a critical role in disseminating research information to the public. Kuhns et al. (2004) reported that men and women think differently about forestry, particularly from a management perspective. Other studies have also reached similar conclusions in that women were more likely than men to manage their property for wildlife and aesthetic purposes, whereas men sought consumptive or utilitarian purposes for their property

(Crim et al., 2003; Lidestav & Ekström, 2000; Redmore, 2009). Women were also more likely than men to see value in networking, outreach and workshops, and mentors (Pinchot Institute for Conservation, 2006). These fundamental differences in management philosophies and learning preferences are essential to consider when planning Cooperative Extension activities and prompted the need for the current study.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theory of empowerment allowed the researchers to identify key variables that may have influenced participants' experiences. The term empowerment is utilized by many disciplines and has varied meanings (Page & Czuba, 1999). A general, yet popular definition of empowerment describes it as the process of gaining mastery over one's life (Rappaport, 1984). For the purpose of this research, empowerment was defined as:

An intentional ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources; or a process by which people gain control over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their community, and a critical understanding of their environment (Perkins, 2010, p. 207).

Further exploration into empowerment recognizes the existence of psychological and personal empowerment (PE). PE is generally described from a psychological perspective, and it is comprised of two constructs, locus of control and self-efficacy (Sadan, 1997). Kieffer (1984) viewed PE as a long-term process of adult learning and development. Based on those beliefs, an empowerment framework was created with four stages that are particularly relevant for those in Cooperative Extension, they are entry, advancement, incorporation, and commitment. Entry is motivated by an individual's experience of some life-changing or threatening event to oneself or family (Kieffer, 1984). As individuals advance, they experience a mentoring relationship, supportive peer relationships with a collective organization, and an understanding of social and political relationships (Kieffer, 1984). As individuals enter the incorporation stage, they perceive a growing recognition of organizational standing (Kieffer, 1984). Finally, commitment occurs when individuals apply their new participatory competence to their lives (Kieffer, 1984).

The theory of empowerment directly relates to a female land manager's ability to make informed, confident decisions. Cooperative Extension professionals are likely to play a key role in influencing PE and feelings of self-efficacy among female land managers through educational interventions. However, the types of intangible and tangible empowerment outcomes are not currently known, nor understood, among Georgia female landowners, which prompted the need for this study.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover the essence of how women experienced timberland management in Georgia. Two research questions were used to guide data collection and analysis: (a) what do women experience as forest land managers in Georgia? and (b) how do women experience forest management in Georgia? Insights gained from this research were used to create guidelines to better serve female landowners regarding active land management.

## Methods

Phenomenology was deemed appropriate for this study due to the need for an in-depth understanding of the emic or lived experiences of women in land management positions (Creswell, 1998; van Manen, 2014). This approach allowed female timberland managers the opportunity to share obstacles, successes, revelations, and other pertinent experiences in a safe space.

### Location and Sample Population

Georgia was deemed ideal as a study location due to its status as one of the top forestry states in the U.S. (Georgia Forestry Commission, 2017). For instance, Georgia is #1 in commercially available, private timberland, #1 in annual timber harvest volume, and the #1 exporter of pulp, paper, paperboard mill products, wood fuel, and wood pellets (Georgia Forestry Association, 2017). Women who own land in Georgia are likely to be engaged in active management practices, which made for an appropriate study audience.

The population for this study stemmed from two Georgia forestry organizations, *Ladies for Their Land* and *Greene-Morgan Forest Landowner's Association*. All participants met the following selection criteria: identified as female; owned, co-owned, or planned on inheriting the property being managed; had the authority to make land-use decisions; and the managed property was a minimum of 10 acres. Nine participants completed the study.

### Interviews

Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with nine participants. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol with probing questions to further explore the phenomenon in question. The guide consisted of ten main questions and fifteen sub-questions. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect their privacy. After interviews were completed, we conducted a member check by sending each participant a verbatim transcript of their respective interview, as well as conversation highlights to verify accuracy of the data (Janesick, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants responded to the member check.

### Subjectivity Statement

The lead author conducted all interviews and provided leadership for the analysis of all data. She grew up on 12 acres of forestland in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and spent much time outdoors. She holds a Bachelor's degree in natural resource conservation, with a minor in forestry, a Master's degree in agricultural and environmental education and has worked for a Department of Forestry where she was afforded the opportunity to interact with private landowners. She believes that gender equality within forestry is essential and that strength lies in bringing diverse perspectives to bare on solving complex problems.

### Limitations

The data presented here are limited to nine female landowners in Georgia and cannot be generalized beyond the participants. In phenomenological research, the researchers are considered the data collection instruments (Creswell, 2007). This introduces bias due to the researcher's experiences and perspectives. Along with the aforementioned subjectivity statement, an interview guide and journaling exercise were created from a comprehensive literature review to minimize data collection bias and ground the study in the literature. By purposefully sampling female participants, we inherently created a space where gender entered the academic conversation. Consequently, all participants mentioned something gender related. It is possible that in a blended female/male study, participants would have been less likely to acknowledge and share gendered experiences.

### Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used to identify patterns and synthesize meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). We employed the following RTA recommendations for analysis: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) coding, (c) generation of initial themes, (d) cross examination and review of themes, and (e) finalization of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2008). In order to establish trustworthiness and quality throughout the study, we adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) approaches for increasing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Approaches to Ensure Trustworthiness and Quality*

| Approach        | Description  | Strategies Employed   |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Credibility     | Establishes truth value, which corresponds to overall confidence in study findings     | Persistent observations, documented reflections, peer debriefing, and member checks |
| Transferability | Contributes to the rigor of a study by demonstrating the applicability of the research | Purposive sampling and thick description  |
| Dependability   | Establishes consistency  | All changes made throughout the study were noted to provide absolute transparency   |
| Confirmability  | Demonstrates objectivity   | Practiced reflexivity   |

## Findings

### Demographic Profile of Participants

Participants were asked to provide demographic information at the time of the interviews. Two-thirds of participants co-owned the property they managed, while one-third solely owned and managed their respective properties. The amount of acreage owned varied greatly from 100-3,500 acres. Participant age ranged from 45 to 84 years (average = 68 years). More than half of the participants were widowed, and all identified as white.

### What and How Participants Experienced as Forestland Managers

Three themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. Participants stated that land management involved: (a) initial feelings of inadequacy (an imposter syndrome), (b) personal and professional resources, and (c) genuine relationships.

#### *Imposter syndrome*

Women forestland managers experienced an imposter syndrome period when they initially took on management roles. Five participants reported feeling out of place, overwhelmed, inexperienced, and/or not qualified to make decisions on their own due to a lack of familiarity with forest management. These experiences occurred early in their land management roles but faded as time went on. Alice alluded to this by sharing her largest obstacle when she first began managing her land. She said, “Not knowing enough. Just not knowing enough.” Other participants mirrored this sentiment by sharing similar accounts about their initial dive into land management. For example, Becky said, “I would call myself emerging [she began solely managing her property in 2018-2019] ... I’m just so overwhelmed with all that there is to learn ... now we depend on our forest manager.”

Seven participants inherited property. These women initially found it more difficult to assume a land manager identity because their husbands or fathers were the primary caretakers of the land. Hollie shared in her interview that she “fell into it [land management].” Ingrid expanded upon her personal situation by communicating her feeling of displacement after her husband passed away by stating,

So, when my husband retired ... he started buying up some pieces of land that had been in his family and I didn’t really know what he was doing. I was busy with my little things ... So, I have not really known about being a forester or forestry or anything like that until after he died. And I found myself the owner of a lot of pine trees and a lot land where I had to figure out what to do with it.

The imposter syndrome was a transitional stage for participants. They eventually achieved confidence in their roles as land managers. Catherine shared she was “... much more knowledgeable. More confident. More relaxed” after learning the ropes in forest management. All of the participants had similar experiences of personal growth and development and continue to gain confidence in their ability to manage.

***Personal and professional resources***

All participants were thoughtful listeners and tended to make calculated decisions based on personal knowledge and advice from a trusted forestry professional. Six participants reported consistently wondering about and hoping that they were making the correct land management decisions. Faith said, "I am always wondering if I'm doing the right thing for the environment." All participants also stated that it was important to take an active, rather than passive, role in managing their properties and viewed continuing education as necessary for their success. Becky shared the importance of using guidance from a variety of forestry professionals, as well as her desire to make more independent decisions in the future. Becky said,

I think a repeated, but consistent experience ... is getting the job under control and feeling that I know all the tasks I need to do to manage our timberland well. As I learn, I rely on the advice of professionals. I get help and guidance from our forestry consultant, attorneys, and our accountant. We have access to wonderful help from capable, wise, ethical men. At the same time, I know that the decisions are mine. I have to take the information given by these experts ... and make the best decision possible. At first, I relied totally on their advice and have not made bad decisions but realize that our family has choices and we are the people responsible for the decisions made about our timberland.

All participants discussed the importance of having access to reliable, trustworthy sources of forestry information. Hollie noted the landowner forestry organization she belonged to (*Greene-Morgan Forest Landowner's Association*) had increased her interest in management techniques and approaches. She expressed her reliance on her consulting forester and briefly described their relationship. Hollie said, "And having a good manager, you know. I don't know anything about what I should be doing or anything ... And so, my manager is a valuable asset." Alice also shared an in-depth response detailing her advice to other land managers. She was particularly adamant about the need to reach out to all kinds of resources. Alice said,

There is so much learning to be done about how to manage your farm or forest. You could spend from now until forever researching, reading, and practicing new skills and tactics for healthy land management. One of the best ways to do this is by joining organizations, associations, and various groups that share in your interests ... Information and technical assistance can be gathered through many resources like the USDA, Cooperative Extension, universities, the Society of American Foresters, local Registered Foresters, and neighboring landowners. These conduits can provide meaningful material and act as inspiration for your own land practices.

The preference of information conduits varied amongst participants. The top three resources mentioned included landowner organizations, forestry professionals, and federal or state sponsored forestry organizations, which included Cooperative Extension. Resources are further described in Table 2. Frequency refers to the number of participants who cited using this resource.

**Table 2***Educational Resources Used or Mentioned by Participants via Interviews*

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| <b>Landowner organizations</b>               | <i>f</i> |
| Other landowners                             | 9        |
| Greene-Morgan Forest Landowner’s Association | 8        |
| Ladies for Their Land                        | 3        |
| Georgia Forestry Association                 | 2        |
| <b>Forestry professionals</b>                | <i>f</i> |
| Registered foresters / consultants           | 9        |
| Timber buyer / logger                        | 4        |
| Attorney / accountant                        | 2        |
| <b>Federal or state sponsored</b>            | <i>f</i> |
| Georgia Forestry Commission                  | 6        |
| Natural Resources Conservation Service       | 4        |
| Cooperative Extension                        | 3        |
| <b>Non-profit</b>                            | <i>f</i> |
| American Tree Farm System                    | 1        |
| Longleaf Alliance                            | 1        |
| Society of American Foresters                | 1        |
| <b>Other land management resources</b>       | <i>f</i> |
| Various online and in-text publications      | 2        |

All participants valued continuing education courses but noted they can be improved upon. Participants cited a need for more small landowner workshops. Catherine said,

I think people that are coming out of forestry school are trying to manage large, large tracts of land. Work for corporation. Manage it that way rather than for a small landowner ... And small landowners ... it may not be economical for them to do things the way ... somebody that owns several hundred thousand acres would do.

Donna, a small landowner with 106 acres, said, “The small landowner is at a disadvantage ... because an awful lot of the loggers don’t want to fool with you.” Alice expanded upon small landowner woes by adding forestry programs are geared towards “industry” or larger landholdings.

There was veritable participant interest in inviting forestry professionals to land events, such as procurement representatives, buyers, loggers, mill operators, and college faculty / staff. Catherine was especially interested in more workshops that focused on the timber market and



associated taxes. Catherine also noted there is a lot of overlap between forestry education workshops and events. She said, “Eventually they’re all the same. You’ve been to enough of them that ... there’s not much new.” Donna expressed the same sentiment and said, “There is some stuff lacking for people like me [advanced landowners].” Providing a workshop series based on skill level and interest was proffered by Donna and supported by two other participants. The cost of attending forestry programs was also mentioned as an obstacle by two participants.

### ***Genuine relationships***

The participants believed in creating genuine relationships with forestry professionals and other landowners, and a strong sense of community was present. When asked about her experiences with the current culture of forestry, Becky viewed the “good ole boy system” in an optimistic light. She stated, “Good ole boy almost sounds crooked. There’s also the good ole boys where the boys are good. And they just ... treat everybody right.” Faith echoed this statement and described her positive relationships with local forestry organizations and personnel. She reported it is because of the “small town living” often found in rural communities. She found the qualities in rural areas, such as helping your neighbor, “carries over in those agencies [GFC] because they’re all local guys.” Gemma fixedly stated for other female land managers to not be afraid and to, “Go out there and find yourself someone who’s been there, done that, and they can point you in a good direction. Having trusted, sage advice is invaluable.” She strongly believed that most forestry professionals and organizations were looking out for the landowner’s best interest.

All participants noted genuine relationships revolved around mutual respect and a feeling of being valued. Both the landowner and the forestry professional must hold themselves to high personal standards when working with one another. Eleanor said,

If someone speaks to me with respect for me and my need and desire to know more – I’m far more comfortable whatever their recommendations are because I don’t feel like there’s some hidden agenda or that they’re pushing me through.

All participants were asked what ingredients made for a healthy, professional relationship with forestry professionals. They overwhelmingly responded with three qualities: respect, honesty, and knowledge. Becky shared an additional quality: clout in the industry. She reported it was helpful for a forestry professional to have regional knowledge, as well as influence. Becky also found it extremely helpful, at the beginning of her managing career, to have a consultant who was welcoming. She felt welcomed by receiving emails and reminders about upcoming management events, as well as the occasional phone call to let her know about a beetle outbreak or some other happening that might affect her forestland. Faith reported that establishing credibility is vital in the landowner-forestry professional relationship. She shared, in her experience, facilitating “cooperation and eagerness” was key to strong partnerships and successful management projects. Eleanor offered some sage advice related to genuine relationships with forestry professionals. She shared, “I would recommend that any new land

manager look for a forestry consultant with the heart of a teacher and an interest in long-term, sustainable solutions for your land as well as a long, healthy working relationship with you.”

Genuine relationships imply mutual respect between landowners and forestry professionals. Throughout the study, participants were asked what made them feel accepted as landowners in their local forestry communities. Hollie expressed involvement as a key factor in feeling accepted. She reported that honest, consistent communication helped her feel accepted because she felt valued and appreciated. Gemma, who was both a landowner and forestry consultant, shared her views on acceptance as a forestry professional by stating, “I’ve been entrusted with peoples’ livelihood, peoples’ inheritances, peoples’ way of life. You know they trust us – me – to make these big decisions ...that shows me that I’m trusted, and I’m accepted. Your reputation [your word] is everything.” Alice saw forestry as a vibrant, robust, and positive network of landowners, forestry professionals, and organizations. She fittingly said, “The people in forestry are some of the best people you’ll ever meet. They’re real people, who have real values and are interested in helping each other.”

## Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

In summary, more than half of the participants in this study reported initially feeling out of place, overwhelmed, inexperienced, or not qualified to make decisions on their own due to a lack of familiarity with forest management upon acquiring their land. This experience was categorized as a type of imposter syndrome, which refers to a state where individuals find it hard to believe they deserve credit for what they have achieved, and remain internally convinced they do not belong (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

The imposter syndrome relates most closely to the empowerment theory (Kieffer, 1984; Lord & Hutchison, 1993). Regarding participant experiences, the described phases were not experienced in a specific order. Some participants experienced all the phases, while others experienced only a few. Participants built confidence in management decisions after experiencing entry, advancement, incorporation, and commitment (Kieffer, 1984).

Based on study findings, participants in the entry stage acquired land via inheritance or purchase. In the advancement stage, participants sought out information to learn independently, often by contacting a trusted, public organization. They also established a mentoring relationship with a trusted forestry professional and other landowners. In the incorporation stage, landowners became active within local forestry organizations. Finally, participants demonstrated commitment by implementing active land management practices with confidence.

Forestry organizations and professionals that provide land management education also played a pivotal role in facilitating participants’ empowerment via learning and networking. In the context of Cooperative Extension, this psychological process directly relates to Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) agents who served as information conduits and networking tools.

Participants mentioned a variety of supportive resources that aided them with their land management decisions, with the top three being landowner organizations, forestry professionals, and federal or state sponsored forestry organizations, respectively. Previous research suggested that individual involvement in such community organizations helps to decrease feelings of inability and isolation (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Zimmerman, 2000).

Natural resource professionals, particularly those in Cooperative Extension and forestry education roles, are advised when working with predominantly female audiences to allow ample time for networking, such as through an opening coffee hour during meetings. This would encourage the development of genuine relationships with others. It is also advised that educators create a formal mentorship program between experienced and novel female managers to promote fellowship, information exchange, and a culture of inclusiveness. Finally, natural resource educators are recommended to facilitate a new landowner event where forestry organizations (public and private) showcase their available educational and technical resources. This would enable landowners the opportunity to view local resources, as well as develop relationships with professionals in the field.

Future research should focus on how the characteristics of an educator can potentially influence empowerment as a learner. Ample research touts the benefits of female-oriented programs, but none have examined the effect of female speakers or facilitators on audience adoption of best practices. A final research suggestion is to examine silent or marginalized female landowners. These are women who do not actively participate in management practices or continuing education. How might these landowners be recruited and engaged, and what role does empowerment play, potentially through Cooperative Extension, in their decision to not practice active landownership strategies?

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