

# Listening to Women's Voices in the Australian Forestry Workforce

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*"You learn to cope and get on with things..."*



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Many people in different ways contributed to this adventure: first of course the women who work in the forestry sector helped by telling their story but also by developing networks, circulating information and giving up some of their time. While it was at times emotionally difficult to tell one's story, women were pleasantly down to earth and straightforward. It has been a real pleasure to meet so many determined, strong and intelligent women across the country.

New South Wales State Forests and NRE Victoria covered the travel costs associated with the collection of the data and together with CALM (WA) provided logistical support for the organisation of workshops. The Institute of Foresters in Australia generously published a "call for interest" in their newsletter which publicised the study and was very helpful in setting up the initial contacts. A special thanks to H. Crompton who supported the idea of the study from its onset.

Many women from South Australia, Tasmania and the private sector responded positively to the study and offered to contribute to it. However due to lack of time and resources it has not been possible to include everybody in this process. I can only hope that those left out will recognise some of the stories and will find this paper.

## INTRODUCTION

Forestry is one of the last bastions of male dominance in the professions; despite the fact that women have graduated from the two Australian Forestry schools since the 1970s only a handful of women have been working for a State forest agency for more than 15 years. Women on average tend to leave the profession after 5 years or so (Crompton 2000); this is a concern for organisations which, despite equal employment opportunity policies fail to retain a gender diversity in their workforce.

**Quote 1:** *"Many of the 10 women that started the course with me left - we started with 10 and ended up with 3 originals from the 1986 intake. Many of these women went into the banking/nursing profession."*

Quote 1 suggests that women who leave the profession don't necessarily leave the workforce, but just leave forestry. This study started on the assumption that if female foresters tended to leave the profession, it was because they did not feel comfortable in their workplace and more specifically that the gender differences and the relationships between the genders may be at the root of the problem. Being a traditionally exclusive male territory, could it be culturally and structurally difficult for one gender to make place for the other and a new organisational culture to emerge from the diversity? Numerous scholars have argued that there is no such thing as "gender neutral" organisations and that historically organisations having been set up by men were fundamentally women-unfriendly places to work in (Aker 1990, Burton 1991, Cockburn 1991, Witz 1992).

Based on women's perceptions of their workplace, professional practice and aspirations this study attempts to list and understand the diversity of issues faced by female foresters. Although no doubt some of those issues will be shared by their male colleagues, this paper aims at taking stock of gender related issues in the forestry profession.

## A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The study followed an adaptive process: it was originally intended to interview men and women from private and state forest enterprises, women currently in the profession and some who had left, to conduct focus group discussions and in depth interviews and to gather organisation related data.

As the planning of the work progressed, in parallel with the discovery of relevant literature it became clear that what women perhaps needed was not so much an academic analysis of gender issues in their workplace as a forum to express their voice, to tell their story and to share their experiences with other women.

Using qualitative methods of enquiry this work is a contribution to raise women's voices in a profession where they still feel very much isolated. It attempts to disentangle issues faced by women in the workplace or in the practice of their profession; some issues are gender issues (which men will face too), some organisational issues, some are women's issues.

Hence this work does not compare men and women's working conditions, nor does it look in detail into organisational policy and culture; this work does not attempt to explain why things are the way they are but aims at telling how women perceive things to be. Hence no men were interviewed.

The results presented here are based on 3 different sources of information:

a) about 80 women across Australia responded to a "generic" electronic questionnaire, sent through a mailing list built up on an ad-hoc basis; sometimes women on the original list sent the questionnaire to other women not on the list. It is difficult to know exactly what proportion of women responded to the questionnaire but it would quite possibly represent 70 –80 % of women in the State forestry workforce. The questionnaire intended to draw a profile of women foresters (age, marital/family status, jobs, issues of interest) as well as to establish a communication network.

b) 66 women (some of whom had not answered the questionnaire) attended 6 workshops (4 in Coma and 9 in Manjimup (WA); 26 in Melbourne and 7 in Traralgon (Victoria) ; 10 in Sydney and 10 in Coffs Harbour (NSW). During these meetings women were asked to complete 3 tasks:

1) to draw their picture of forestry, and to indicate where they fitted in or where they wished to be if unsatisfied; they were asked to reflect on similarities and differences between the pictures as well as on their professional challenges as women; (see Drawing 1)

2) to draw a life line reflecting on what had been very positive and inspiring as well as difficult or negative in their life which may have affected their professional practice. They were asked to consider 3 life spans: before their entry in the profession; until their current position and how they may foresee the next 5 years; (see Lifeline 1).

3) to think about changes in forestry by asking these 3 questions: "In the next 5 years I would like forestry to be..."; "I shall know this has happened when I see..."; and "I shall contribute in this way for this to happen..."

c) 8 women were interviewed by phone (or face to face) having beforehand completed the same tasks as women in workshops.

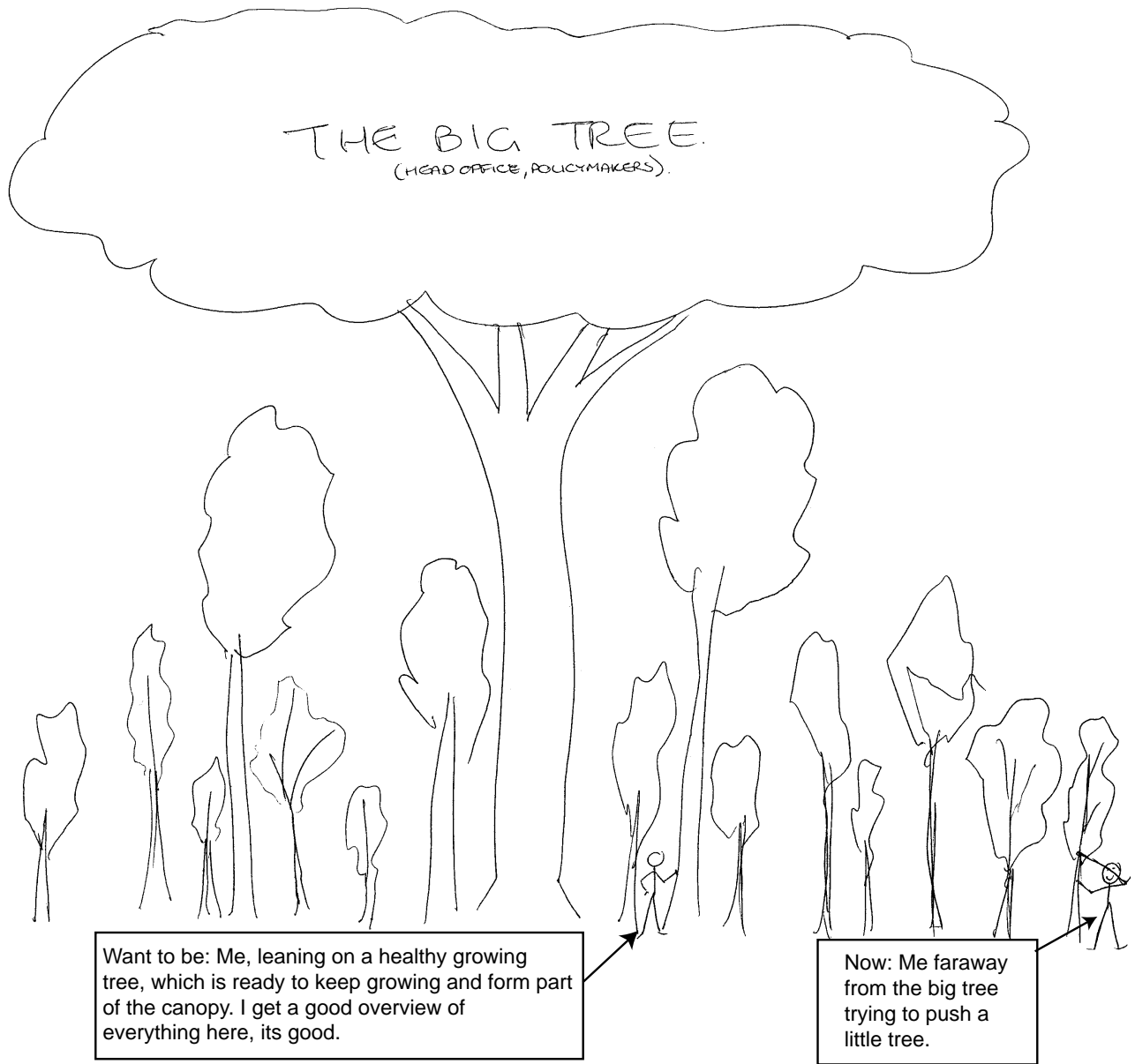
Women who answered the questionnaire, who came to workshops or agreed to give individual interviews were self-selected. It has been difficult to contact women who have left the profession and who have been willing to contribute to the study; in the same way it has been difficult to contact or involve the very few women working in the private sector. Therefore the scope of the study was somewhat reduced to looking at women working for State Forest Agencies in 3 states: Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales. Despite the cultural and political differences of these 3 state organisations, women's perspective across the states seemed to be fairly similar. Unless women have told very different stories on specific issues, the regional and organisational differences are not specifically noted in this paper.

## **WHO IS SHE?**

Judging by the diversity of personalities of the participants who contributed to the workshops there is no such thing as "a typical female" forester. They came in all sizes and shapes, extrovert and introvert, from urban and rural backgrounds, with a broad range of forestry interest from logging, harvesting, fire management, ecology to planning, community education and communication. Most of the women who answered the questionnaire said they chose forestry because of their love of the outdoors; some hated the bush, some loved it.

What separated women, however, was their age, the number of years of professional practice and whether they worked in the field in operational forestry or in the city in planning or research related jobs. These differences are only important to note as they can explain differences in women's perception. At the risk of stereotyping and based on the answers to the questionnaire women can be divided into 3 age groups exemplified by C, E and M:

Drawing 1: "My perception of forestry and where I fit in the picture"

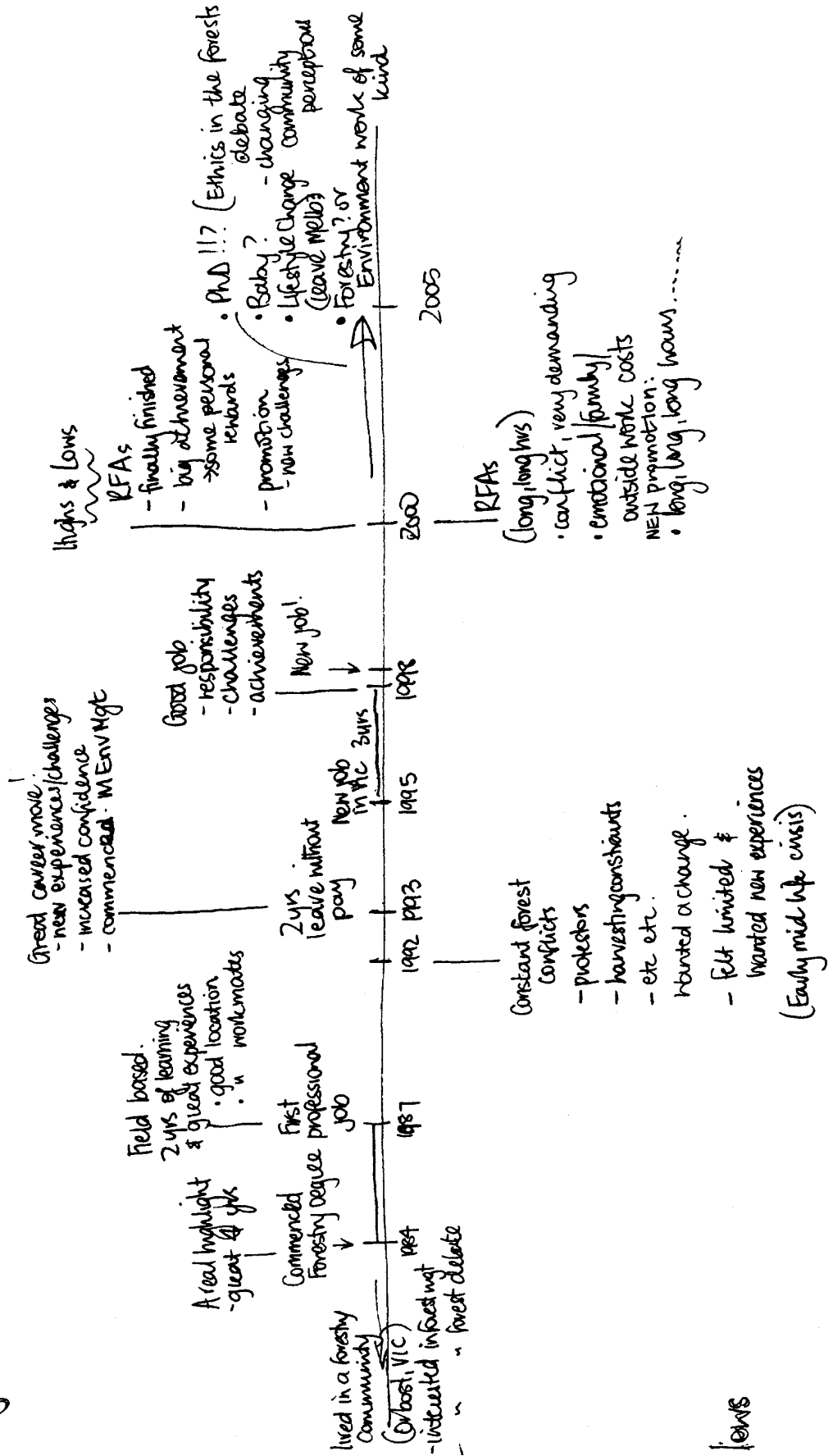


- C. is between 22 and 26 years old; she has worked in forestry for the last 2-4 years, has a University degree or came into forestry through the cadetship programme; she is less likely to be married and has no children; C represents a large number of women currently in the profession and is present in the field and at head office. She is not particularly aware of gender differences (except minor ones) although she is grateful for more women to be around now than there used to be. She is more likely to justify a superior or a colleague's possibly sexist behaviour because of her age. "After all young male recruits are having a hard time too." She is more convinced that women's position in the organisation will improve through the "trickle-up" principle: as more women join, more will climb the ladder.

- E. is between 27 and 34 years old; she has worked in forestry for the last 6 to 10 years; she is more likely to be in a relationship but she still is unlikely to have children. She is starting to be aware of gender differences, has some discrimination or possibly harassment stories to

Lifeline 1

highs



lows



tell and she is more likely to have considered quitting the job at some stage. She feels that there is little career prospects for her as breaking into "the old boys network" is still difficult and she is questioning whether "at the end it's all worth the effort?"

- M. is below 40; she has worked less than 15 years in the profession; she is more likely to have been the first female forester occupying a position and the only woman at any one time in the district or the team; she is more likely to have children. She is more likely to occupy a position of responsibility although there are currently no women regional managers. Her perspective on gender relationships within the workplace is certainly different from that of her juniors. However, as she is still here she has developed coping mechanisms and has come out of the experience scarred but strong and determined.

Out of the 80 women answering the questionnaire and still in the forestry workforce, 32 were in the first age group, 34 in the second age group and 14 in the third.

The difference of experience and perspective of gender issues in forestry between the age groups could be due to two reasons. In the last 20 years the situation of women in the workforce in general and in the forestry profession in particular has improved; as their numbers increase, women may feel more comfortable, less alienated and men themselves may feel more able to deal with women colleagues. Women have also probably benefited from a conscious effort by the organisation to redress the gender imbalance and feel that the attitude towards women in the profession is positive.

On the other hand women in the younger age group also occupy relatively lower positions in the organisation; they are less likely to have been victims of discrimination; they are also more likely to demarcate themselves from "women" or "feminist" issues as they feel these are battles from the past. In a class activity at the Forestry Department at ANU in 1997, students denied that there were any differences between the way male and female students were treated; only one female student commented on the fact that a student could go through the forestry degree without ever being taught by a female lecturer or meet a female forester in the field during field trips. She saw this as a major gender issue.

These differences in perspective may also be related to the understanding of the concept of gender. While the sex of an individual is determined by birth the gender is constructed by a combination of factors (see Box 1).

**Box 1:** "Gender refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of women's and men's position in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of the relations of power and dominance that structure the life chances of women and men. Thus gender divisions are not fixed by biology, but constitute an aspect of the wider social division of labour and in turn is rooted in conditions of production and reproduction reinforced by the cultural, religious and ideological system in a society." Ostergaard, p7.

As physical differences between the genders are easy to accept as a fact they are often used to explain or justify differences between the genders (by both genders); recognising that a difference of position in society may be due to dominance or power structures within the society brings individuals to question their society and beliefs, which can be uncomfortable. Denial has been identified by Breakwell (1986) as one of the coping strategies that humans develop to assimilate and accommodate when their identity has been threatened. Could it be that to survive as foresters many

women have to deny the existence of discrimination?

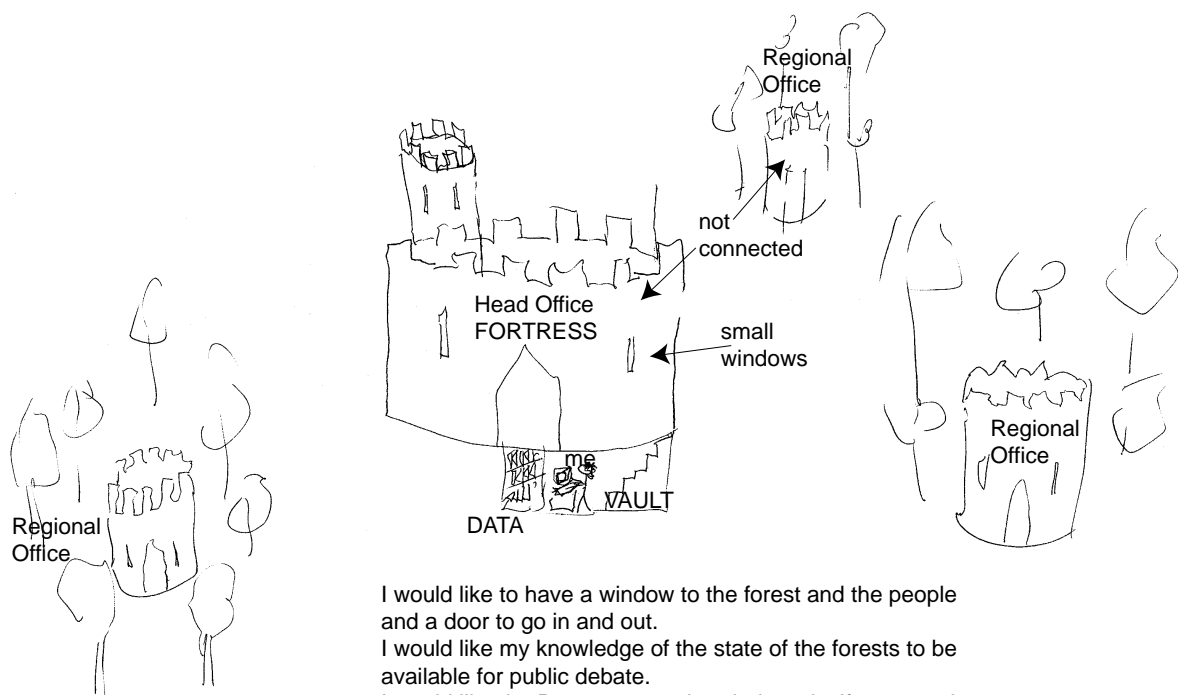
The other factor of difference in experiences among women that is not age related was definitively whether women worked in the city at the Head Office in management or research or whether they worked in rural areas. This divide was very clear between the two workshops in Western Australia and in New South Wales while in Melbourne the workshop gathered women from head office and from the field. In the city they were less likely to be involved in operational forestry or to have frequent contacts with the field; for example issues related to social and professional isolation - which will be explored further later - were not as important as for women working in the field. In desk related jobs based close to the centres of decision making, the "bureaucratic culture" tends perhaps to overshadow the "forestry culture."

## ORGANISATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CULTURE

Throughout the tasks and interviews the weight of the organisational culture has been a dominant theme and merits attention.

### A disconnected organisation

Drawing 2: "My perception of forestry and where I fit in the picture"



I would like to have a window to the forest and the people and a door to go in and out.  
I would like my knowledge of the state of the forests to be available for public debate.  
I would like the Department to break down its 'fortresses.'

We need to share/establish standards for appropriate behaviour.

In their perspective of "forestry" two women have used revealing pictures:

Drawing 1 uses the metaphor of the overgrown tree (the Head Office/the organisation) as suppressing the undergrowth, while Drawing 2 represents the organisation as a series of unconnected

fortresses spread across the state with no connection with each other and little or no connections with the outside world. This theme of an organisation working in isolation from its staff and the community was represented in various ways in drawings (forests fenced off, clear divide between the forests and the community), and this view was shared across the three states.

Forestry is a highly politicised issue in Australia and the recent and, in places, still on-going RFA processes have been very painful. The fact that decisions are taken on political grounds rather than scientific ones was mentioned by many women as hindering their professional practice. Dealing with constant battles in the field with the community while having to live in the same communities and being forced to apply policies decided at Head Office leaves women with a deep sense of dis-empowerment.

**Quote 2:** *"As government agents we are not allowed to speak to the public; we don't get any support from Head office while we have to deal with conflicts on the ground."*

Women in Victoria particularly named the "lack of control" over their work and decision making as a major challenge. They felt "powerless to change anything wherever they were within the organisation"; this was due to the structure of the organisation as well as the role of politics.

Women also feel deeply about the lack of communication with the public. As a result of working in isolation forestry as a profession has alienated itself and is seen as the "bad guy" while the media and misinformation are fuelling an acrimonious debate. Community education positions have been the first ones to be cut in the various recent restructures. Women are also concerned about the lack of transparency of their working practice. To the question "in the next five years I would like forestry to..." the majority of responses covered issues related to inclusive and sustainable practices, better use of monitoring indicators, better communication with the community, more science and less politics in decision making.

**Box 2:** In the next five years I would like forestry to ...

"become less political and more scientific" WA

"I would like to see people approach forestry in a professional manner and for the public to understand more what forestry is about" WA

"I would like to see the timber industry encouraged to change their technology .. and timber to be treated as a precious resource" WA

"encourage informed debate about forests (and therefore attempt to provide information to the community)" Victoria

"demonstration of better management" Victoria

"more public awareness of what we do, how and why we do it" Victoria

" greater flow of information between sections of SF, both within regions and between divisions" NSW

"I would like to see forestry and the forest industry take a pro-active role in educating others in forest management and practices and recognise the management for non-timber values within forests in a positive way" NSW

"Australian forestry standard developed" NSW

From these quotes (Box 2) it is clear that the current volatile context of forestry is influencing women's perspective. It is difficult to know whether these concerns are specific to women as many

men in the field may share the same views. Concluding that women want a different forestry may be too simplistic but it is clear that they are not satisfied with the current state of affairs. What is clear too is that some women feel "worn down" by these "constant fights and battles." Some commented on the fact that "men may be more educated to deal with aggression while women felt more strongly about things and would be more likely to be emotionally affected." Another possible explanation would be that women identify themselves less easily with a confrontational approach to management of conflicts and community issues... Recent research on managerial behaviour found that "women were much more likely to adopt a democratic or participative style" (Grant 1993:30), in which case women may find it frustrating to have to comply to top-down management tactics alien to them.

### **Lack of support and the power of the "manager"**

Women in field based jobs certainly feel aggrieved by what they call "the lack of support" from their employer. This manifests itself in different areas of their work. They feel that without adequate training they are left to deal with angry protestors and at times fear for their safety.

**Quote 3:** *"When protests started, security was upgraded in Melbourne. In X anybody could come and destroy the office; the little padlock is just a joke."*

They feel that the salaries are low and that they have to put in long hours while there is little recognition for their effort, hardly any feedback from the head office or from their managers. Because the communication lines are not well developed, "we hardly ever see anybody from

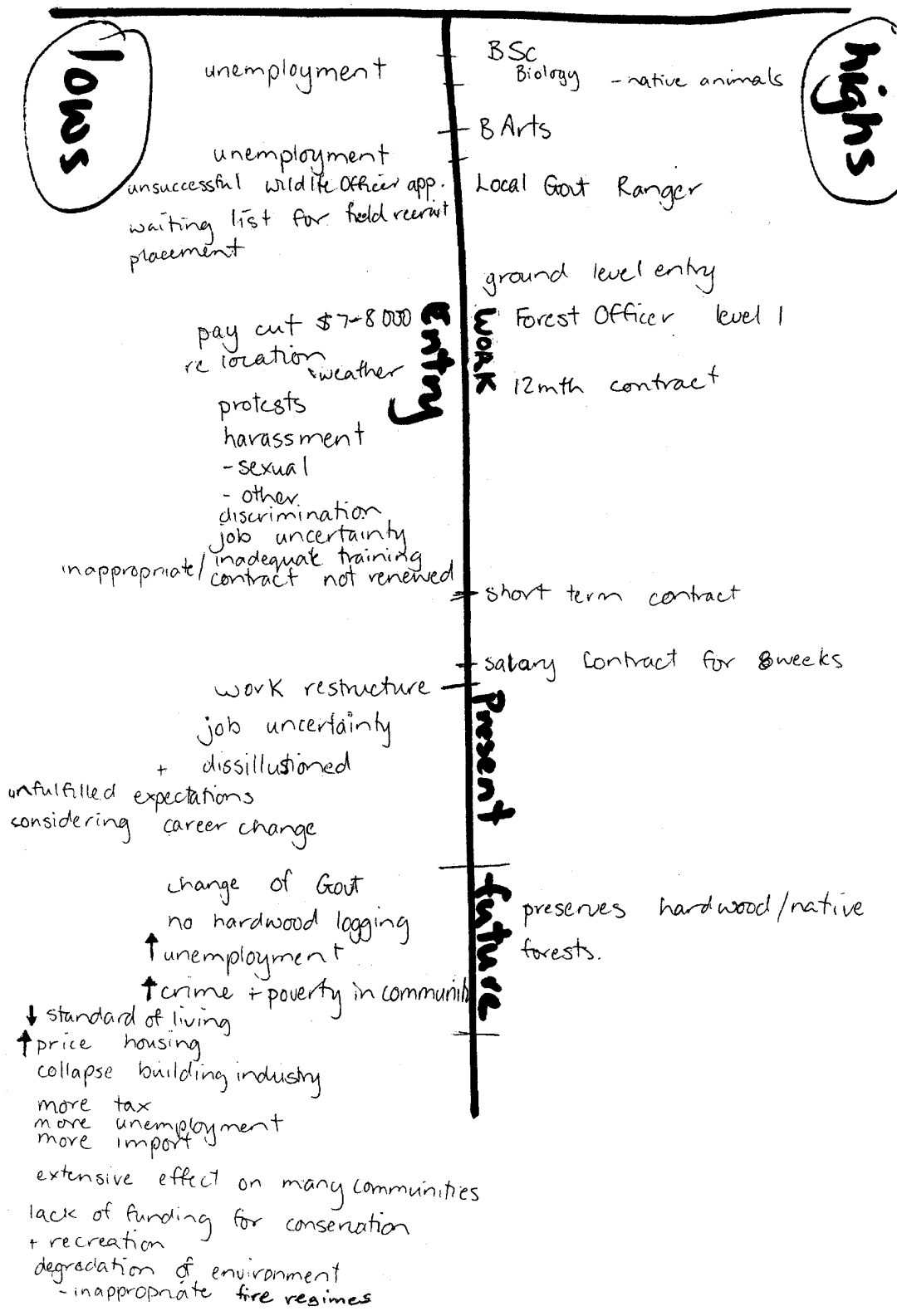
head office down here", they feel that people making decisions and demands on their work are not in touch with the reality.

Historically forestry organisations have developed on a territorial and hierarchical basis and the regional offices are like small organisations within the State Organisation. The regional manager is a very powerful man and time and time again women have commented on the fact that nothing can be done or changed without the support of "their manager." The manager sets the culture of his region and the words go round fairly quickly about "bad regions" for women. These would be regions with a bad track record in numbers of women or where women have had a particularly bad time. Managers may decide not to deal with claims and complaints and few women feel confident enough to bypass the hierarchical etiquette by voicing their complaints higher up. Although there are policy and procedures in place to deal with complaints, women are not confident that they will be listened to.

**Quote 4:** *"The forester is stuck between applying all the rules and regulations and facilitating timber extraction for the contractor: it is a difficult task. As a junior staff member you need a lot of support ... you also need to be comfortable with your supervisor. When you are young you don't want to constantly ask for advice as your credibility may be questioned."*

**Quote 5:** *"The Department accepts the idea of flexibility but it's down to your manager whether they allow it to happen or not. He has discretionary powers. Managers may not necessarily have been exposed to these arrangements and may not even know they exist."*

Counselling services for example are either non-existent or have been out-sourced to the private sector as in Victoria. Avenues to get information about employees' rights are not clearly identified and during workshop discussions it was obvious that women had a lot of unfounded misconceptions about their rights.



For example in New South Wales, there is a mandatory government policy of women being represented by spokeswomen who are elected every 3 years by women within the organisation. However if the manager does not support this idea it is difficult for the spokeswoman to operate.

While identifying sources of "highs" and "lows" in their lifeline, the absence or presence of mentors and supportive managers or a supportive team is often mentioned. Women do not specifically require other women as mentors although as they go up in the hierarchy they would welcome being able to meet women role models. Some women talked very fondly about the rare men who recognised their professional value, who have helped them professionally either by passing on vital contextual information or given them challenging jobs where they could learn a lot, and by showing public support when needed within the office.

### **Lack of organisational learning**

Because of the lack of communication within the organisation women feel that a lot of knowledge is wasted. In Victoria and in New South Wales women were concerned by the unbalanced demographic structure of the organisation. With the next wave of retirements many very knowledgeable employees will leave. Nothing is done at the organisational level to nurture this knowledge or to share it with younger staff. It almost seems that not sharing knowledge is part of the culture.

Different and new ideas about science or management are also not valued.

### **The limited career path**

In their "lifeline exercises" many women have identified as low points in their career times where they were in non-challenging non-specifically defined jobs with low responsibilities. Conversely they identified "studying further" or "learning new things" as inspiring and one of the attractions of working in forestry as there is so much to learn. In the generic questionnaire women were asked to identify issues they may want to discuss at workshops: "career development" and "career prospects" were very high on the list. Although women in WA felt that the former CALM structure allowed plenty of opportunity to move across between conservation and forestry and occupy different positions and learn a lot of different things, other women felt that they often ended up in dead end jobs which quickly became repetitive.

**Quote 6:** *"Yeah we do have access to counselling services: these guys come round every six months and they sit at your desk saying "do you have any problems at work?" "We are sitting in open plan office ... you don't think I am going to start talking about "my problems" in front of everybody?"*

**Quote 7:** *"Management didn't like me to become a spokeswoman; he didn't even know what it was all about. I'm actually not getting to the women; they are too worried to speak up."*

**Quote 8:** *"When you start nobody tells you anything; they throw you in at the deep end and see if you can swim or sink; it's just part of their old ways of teaching you. It's just such a waste."*

**Quote 9:** *"August 2000: applying for other jobs. [I am] lacking confidence about my ability to work in "real forestry" and I feel like I am in another dead end job."*

Women are not necessarily looking for promotion (although the limited promotion prospect is in every body's mind) but they are certainly looking for intellectual challenges which many feel their current position does not necessarily offer. Could it be that the female workforce is currently under employed or is this a more general issue for the forestry workforce?

**Quote 10:** *"Sometimes I have no say. Because I am so low in the food chain I get crappy jobs or get projects changed/taken away because there is no more money."*

With the recent multiple restructures within the 3 organisations, women also felt that the future may be uncertain. Some also tended to fear that if they have to compete for a newly created position "the men competitors" have more chance of being appointed. Given the current contextual situation of forestry some offices may be closed down and jobs become no longer available. The morale of the workforce is therefore fairly low.

### **Inadequate answers to contemporary needs**

With more women in the workforce, employees have new needs which the organisations may, or may not, take into account. Based on a model on the male forester as the principal bread winner in the family, putting in long working hours and being transferred often at short notice, the job descriptions, requirements and expectations may no longer be adequate and may affect men and women in the profession. In the same way that foresters' wives may want a career so do foresters' husbands.

More relationships between 2 professional foresters are occurring and yet there seems to be little consistency within organisations to offer assignments to both partners in the same place. Again the power of the manager plays a role in the faith of individuals.

**Quote 11:** *"One day I was told that if we were married I would have a greater chance to work in the same place as my partner... Then I applied for a job advertised in X, got the job offered, but at the last minute the position was transferred 1 hour away. I was told they didn't want relationships happening at the office... what could I do? I am a new recruit I just cannot go and complain. I just have to wait for a while."*

There are examples where two partners have managed to maintain their career and have a family. But in the 2 examples I came across in this study it was the protagonists themselves who approached the organisation with a defined strategy of how this could happen and they had to negotiate with their managers. And in both cases, to my knowledge, no policy has been put in place since in order to anticipate such new cases.

The possibility to work flexible hours, work part time or job share seems to be limited. It appears there is an assumption that if one wants to work part time, one is not committed to the job. The fact that childcare facilities in rural Australia are few and far between does make it more difficult for young parents to work full time, long hours or during set office hours. Again this is a legacy from the times when the forester's wife would take care of the family responsibilities. While this model may no longer be accurate it still is the pattern of most male managers who are in decision-making positions. Burton (1998) has argued that taking into account private concerns in the public domain would introduce new values in the workplace and "lead to expectations that men do things at work as well as at home." This would be a direct threat to men's identity in workplace.

While men may be taking more interest in raising children, pregnancy, maternity leave and juggling private and professional life is still the burden of women; women still suffer the brunt of the "double burden" (Baxter *et al.* 1990; Grant 1993). The fact that out of the 80 women who responded to the questionnaire only 5 have children, while at the same time 80% of them identify child related issues as one of the main threats to their career speaks for itself.

Quote 12 highlights the complexity of the dilemma faced by women. As forestry as a profession is not prepared to give way to new ways of working it is the individual who has to make the adjustment. In the case of women the adjustment is doubly costly as few men are prepared to "sacrifice" their own careers but also (the Australian) society may not yet be sufficiently supportive of women making career choices.

### A family business...

All in all forestry organisations across the country don't seem to be very "people-caring" places to work for. Although the image of "being part of a family" was often mentioned by women as a positive aspect of the forestry profession, the lack of people skills may well come from this same family like structure. At the top sits the patriarch with his eldest sons and potential heirs; they make decisions with little consultation with the rest of workforce who, according to the pecking order, may or may not be in a position to make some changes. "Being young" has often been mentioned by women to be a possible reason for discrimination or difficulties in the workplace and it applies to young men recruits too.

Seeing youth as a problem rather than as an asset, a potential for commitment, new ideas and energy is also a typical attitude in conservative families. Changes may be accepted when they satisfy the business objectives but not when they threaten the position of the patriarch. The patriarch may welcome and be proud of performing daughters; however as girls marry and join other families the business can only be transferred to the sons in order to maintain the name, the identity and the tradition. Some scholars have coined the term "homo-social reproduction" whereby those in power chose people more like themselves to ensure smooth interpersonal functioning (Kanter 1977).

Women certainly felt that it was time to "modernise" the culture of forestry by introducing "standards of communication" - applied across the board rather than designed into protocols. They also talked about the need for a professional attitude. New recruits would then have clear reference points and know what is or is not

**Quote 12:** *"If a woman is to develop a full time career in forestry, the main requirements are:*

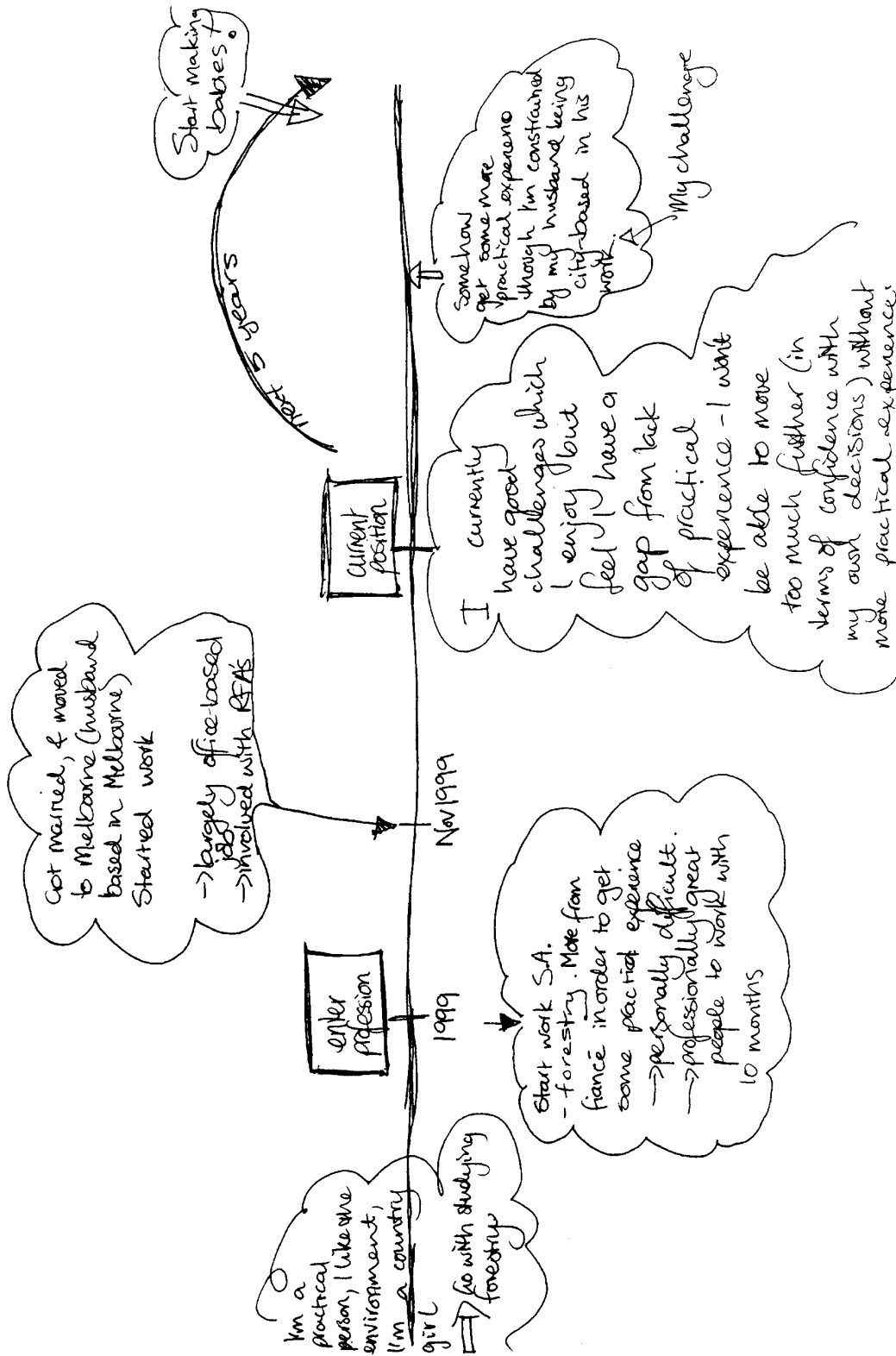
- to remain single without children*
- if married or with a partner, be willing to live apart if career development requires it, or have a partner who is willing to move house according to the demand of his wife's career*
- if she has children, she requires a partner who is willing to be the primary care-giver for the children and that any job he has will be dependant on the availability of childcare and that the job will be subordinate to the demands of his wife's career. She also requires a society that fully supports this situation and finds it socially acceptable."*

**Quote 13:** *"There is no culture to listen to the subordinate; it all depends on managers."*

**Quote 14:** *"In my view some parts of ... are prime examples of how senior individuals have surrounded themselves with people created in the same mould. Consequently the business is achieving exactly the same results as it always has - no worse perhaps, but sure as hell no better."*



Lifeline 3



acceptable and be able to act upon situations equipped with appropriate information.

## "THE BITCH AND THE TOUGH GUY"

It is well known that characters which glorify one gender, when displayed by the opposite gender are seen in a derogatory manner. While the feminine woman is glorified the "effeminate" man is mocked; while the aggressive, ambitious determined male is a "tough guy", the woman displaying the same attributes is a "bitch." Men who put in long hours do it for the benefit of the household or have no choice while women doing the same are selfish and are blamed for the disintegration of the social fabric.

Women entering the male dominated arena have to learn to live with unsuspected (by men and often by themselves) distracting psychological pressures. Yet these unrecognised or non-acknowledged pressures can take a heavy toll on an individual (Cassel & Walsh 1993; Cockburn; Grant 1993).

### "You have to prove yourself..."

The women's message is quite clear: as a woman working in forestry you have to prove yourself all the time, you have little margin for error, you have to be much better at your work than the boys.

This is not an attitude specific to forestry and most professional women have experienced this situation.

**Quote 15:** *"As a woman you can't just do a good job: it has to be exceptional."*

Reflecting on her relative success, a senior forester commented that as a woman one cannot just sit there waiting for the "tap on the shoulder." She had developed a strategy based on "selling" herself, pre-empting situations by preparing "waterproof cases", presenting options to her manager, showing that she had thought issues through. In short, the woman has to convince her manager that she can do it, that she would be the best person for the job, rather than hope that over time he would have recognised her skills and value.

Another woman commented that to be accepted by "the blue collars" she had to demonstrate that whatever she asked them to do, she had to be able to do herself without failing.

Women's isolation in the profession also contribute to their "high visibility" (Powney 1997: 51) or to their sense of being the "token" person; this puts pressure on them not to fail.

### The sense of isolation

Constantly having to prove oneself is energy consuming. Yet the deep sense of social and physical isolation that women face makes it more difficult at times to find the energy to constantly prove one's self. Isolation occurs at different levels:

- firstly the woman is often the only woman, sometimes even the first to work in a crew or an office. Her first reaction is to try "to fit in", "to keep a low profile" or "make sure I won't be noticed."

To "fit in" women develop different tactics: being more a bloke than the blokes has proved damaging for some women. Swearing, joining in at drinking parties, "walking differently", "learning

how to shake hands like a bloke", dressing differently are all part of the strategy. However a woman is not allowed to swear; to be respected she "has to behave like a woman."

Other women work on a "hard professional image" by developing exclusively professional relationships with colleagues, never talking about their feelings or their private life. They become more aggressive and confrontational.

The other strategy is to keep quiet, never complain, work hard. But after a while this strategy too seems emotionally costly. For some women being the second female in a position is a mixed blessing as she is often expected to behave like the first one.

Women develop strategies to cope sometimes going as far as losing their own personality, going through a 'depersonalisation' process (Breakwell 1986). The issue here according to Grant (1993:74) is that "when these strategies fail altogether, the individual is likely to experience psychological, social or physical withdrawal... all of which may lead to serious psychological disorders."

- secondly, the fact that women feel they have to fit in – and this is confirmed as an expectation by some men - rather than being allowed to be themselves is a situation commonly faced by minority groups in intolerant societies. Newcomers will be tolerated if they integrate in the dominant culture but regarded as a threat if their presence is likely to change patterns of behaviour. Some women commented that if their male colleagues had to develop different new behaviours towards their female colleagues, they may also have to start to question their behaviour with their female partners, which may not be so comfortable.

**Quote 18:** *"When I used to go to parties it was awful: the blokes didn't speak to me because of their wives; the wives didn't speak to me because they didn't like me working with their husbands; it became easier when I had a partner as I was seen as more normal than I suppose?"*

Women say that they would just want to be treated as persons not as "women", because each woman is different and her personality says more about who she is than her gender.

- thirdly, she is also often socially isolated: in country towns where forestry is a contentious issue it will be difficult to have a normal social life.

In some rural places where only a few women have a career of their own, the society does not seem to view favourably the arrival of young professional women who may have a higher standard of living than the average female population.

**Quote 19:** *"When you go to parties you don't even mention your profession as it automatically leads to conflicts."*

She is also often socially isolated from her male colleagues : it is not uncommon for the chatter to stop as a woman joins in, men will talk at length about football technicalities without even trying to be inclusive in their conversation or men will go on "men-only" fishing week-ends or farewell

**Quote 16:** *"I was young and I didn't know how to behave in the country so I became very masculine; I dressed like a bloke, adopted their body language. I realised that I was less respected by the men in the bush if I behaved like a man; they were more comfortable with the stereotypical woman. When I swore they felt insulted... you ended up being nothing having lost your sense of who you were."*

**Quote 17:** *"At the end I decided to protect my private life: I was asked whether I was a lesbian. At this game you lose part of yourself; I got hard at great personal cost."*

parties (women are actually told they can't come). Cassell and Walsh (1993) have identified male networks "related to sport or drinking a convenient way for men to make useful contacts with superior colleagues based on reciprocity." The authors add "women are often excluded from such networks or when included have to ensure that they behave like one of the boys" (Cassell and Walsh 1993:111). Depending on individual personality and circumstances it may be difficult for some women to adjust to isolation and loneliness.

**Quote 20:** *"For the blokes it's easier; they go down the pub, play footy together and even if they are not local they are more easily accepted."*

At the end women feel that in many ways "you can never win" as you are either a stereotypical woman and therefore cannot do a man's job or you are an atypical woman and therefore you can't fit in. Either way it is difficult to be accept-

ed for what you are and for some women it's been "like bashing one's head against the wall." It is indeed very trying.

## HOW DOES SEXISM AFFECT WOMEN'S CAREERS?

As already mentioned younger women have been keen to deny existence of sexism or discrimination and this could be due to real changes in attitudes. However when one listens to their stories one can only wonder how much their willingness to fit in does blind their awareness.

### The undermining patronising behaviour

At face value, women feel that most men who have never had to work with women just don't know what to do or how to behave. They often have a stereotypical idea of what a woman is and what they can expect. This sometimes translates into patronising, protective behaviours; females may not be expected to do the same tasks than the men or to perform them to the same level; women are also more likely to be expected to do the coffee (even if she is a senior officer, hosting a major meeting with industry partners), asked to take minutes at meetings or answer the phone.

**Quote 21:** *"You realise after a while that during rainy days, the girls get asked to do the filing or the photocopying while the boys get out there to sharpen the saws or fill in the tankers."*

Like some men, some women may not be able to perform certain tasks or do not have interest in them. The problem comes when being a woman automatically suggests that some tasks are out of reach. Within the context of "I have to prove myself all the time" women cannot afford to accept the patronising attitude as it will backlash in the long term. Paternalism affects women in two ways: it affects their confidence and it affects their career in the long term.

**Quote 22:** *"Discovering that I could use a chainsaw, drive a four wheel drive...do these things that were men's things. This showed me that I could do them but also it opened the door to do other things; if I could do this why couldn't I try that?"*

### "Job streaming"

According to the questionnaire's answers most women chose forestry for its opportunities to work outdoors (see also Drawing 3). However (although this would need more research to be sustained) women talked about "the gentle push" towards desk bound office jobs in management rather than in operational forestry. The issue here is the one of career prospects: only officers with a solid knowledge and experience of field realities will be considered for higher jobs. Gaining a maximum

of field experience while young in the job, able to accept mobility and long hours is the way to build a reputation and ultimately one's career's prospects. Those early years are critical and if women are not watchful they can easily end up in management related jobs like mapping or planning with little prospects of obtaining the valuable field based experience.

The job streaming manifests itself more obviously in fire management. Very few women are involved, often by lack of opportunities than by choice. While not everybody fancies working on fire crews many women said they really wanted to join in but were prevented from doing so.

**Quote 25:** *"The other day I went to a fire against my boss' advice; now I know how to manoeuvre a tanker, I know how to do this or that.."*

**Quote 26:** *"If you can't remove a log with your hands it seems you can't be a forester: you are not strong enough. But nobody thinks that there may be different ways around the same problem which may require different skills".*

**Quote 23:** *"Once in employment there does seem to be a gentle push towards planning/office based work - not sure if this is a result of people seeing that the women who went before me eventually chose to take a more office-based career path. However this does mean that you have to fight harder to remain in field-based position if that's what you prefer."*

**Quote 24:** *"3 years ago I was told that women don't have the right mind for management. Women can't be out there in the field; men never have to deal with the "not being able to."*

At the same time fire crews may be the most hostile to women. There is a "fire type" bloke who may resent having to work with women; although it is hard to get accepted in this field some women enjoy joining in the action. Also, fire crews may be seasonal labour not fully aware of gender equity policy within the organisation; they may not know what the limits are. There is also the assumption that fire fighting requires a lot of physical strength while in reality there is a wide range of tasks which require different skills.

"Exclusion, segregation and job demarcation" have been identified by Walby (1986) (in Witz

1992:25) as strategies used by men to exclude women from their work place or contain their presence to certain areas. This in turn maintains women in position of inferiority in the workplace as they are never given a fair chance to develop required skills and qualities for promotion. These practices are also contrary to Equal Employment Opportunity policies.

### **Debilitating pregnancy...**

A number of quotes could be added to this list emphasising that the issue of combining a family and a job in forestry is a real challenge and that somehow women are well aware of it. Most of the related issues have been highlighted in the first part of the paper and are linked to the absence of flexibility in the workplace. But these quotes also show that there are some attitudinal issues here that make it difficult for a male manager to reconcile the image of the pregnant and committed officer. Although both men and women may be affected by their decision to have children, only women have to bear the disapproval and the negative attitudes. Although the employer has to guarantee a position to the young mother who decides to return, it has been difficult for the few

**Quote 27:** *"They look at you and think: you are either going to start a family and not stay around for too long, so there is no need to invest in you, in your training. Or once you've passed (in their mind) the reproductive age they start thinking that may be you are committed."*

women who have made this choice to regain a similar position. Women expect to be down-graded if they come back while the rule says they should get their original position back. Women also feel that they would not be able to afford taking too much maternity leave as it would be too difficult to get back into the job.

Women can't even afford taking time off with a clear conscience; the concerns, the fight continue even while on leave.

### **Harassment and discrimination**

Sexual harassment is allegedly no longer tolerated in the workplace as organisations have put in place various policies. Cockburn (1991) makes the distinction between "good house keeping gestures such as removing pin-ups from the office wall and cleaning up spoken and written sexist terminology" and the real test "[which] is the encouragement given or not to women to bring cases of complaints against men and the action taken to discipline those who are found to be offenders."

In some forestry districts pornographic material seems to be ostentatiously displayed and sexual jokes (not necessarily only affecting women) seem to be part of the on-going forestry culture.

Women react differently to pornography; some say they couldn't care less, others that they find it very offensive. Again men here apply double standards: what is allowed for a man, hanging pictures of naked women, in the office is not acceptable for a woman. In one of the districts, as one man refused to remove his pictures, a female colleague decided to hang pictures of naked men around the place. Those pictures didn't stay very long as the same man removed them very quickly.

Some women have been able to deal easily with sexual harassment; for others it can be unnerving. Although this study did not particularly investigate this issue of harassment it seems that many cases remain unreported for fear of backlash. In one meeting, 6 women admitted having been victim of or knowing of unreported harassment. In their attempt to "fit in" women do not want to be seen as "trouble makers"; they also feel that "it would be too easy to know where the complaint came from" and "only blatant cases of harassment get a fair hearing." In other words, women do not feel that the system and the policy are there to help them; there is little sign from the organisation that they will be listened to and the risks of complaining are too great.

Sexual harassment, but also jokes about women's appearance competence or behaviour, form part of "social-sexual practice" helpful to maintain power relations within organisations (Grant 1993:41). These practices serve to maintain women's lower status.

Women can also be the victim of abuse by disgruntled contractors or members of the public. One

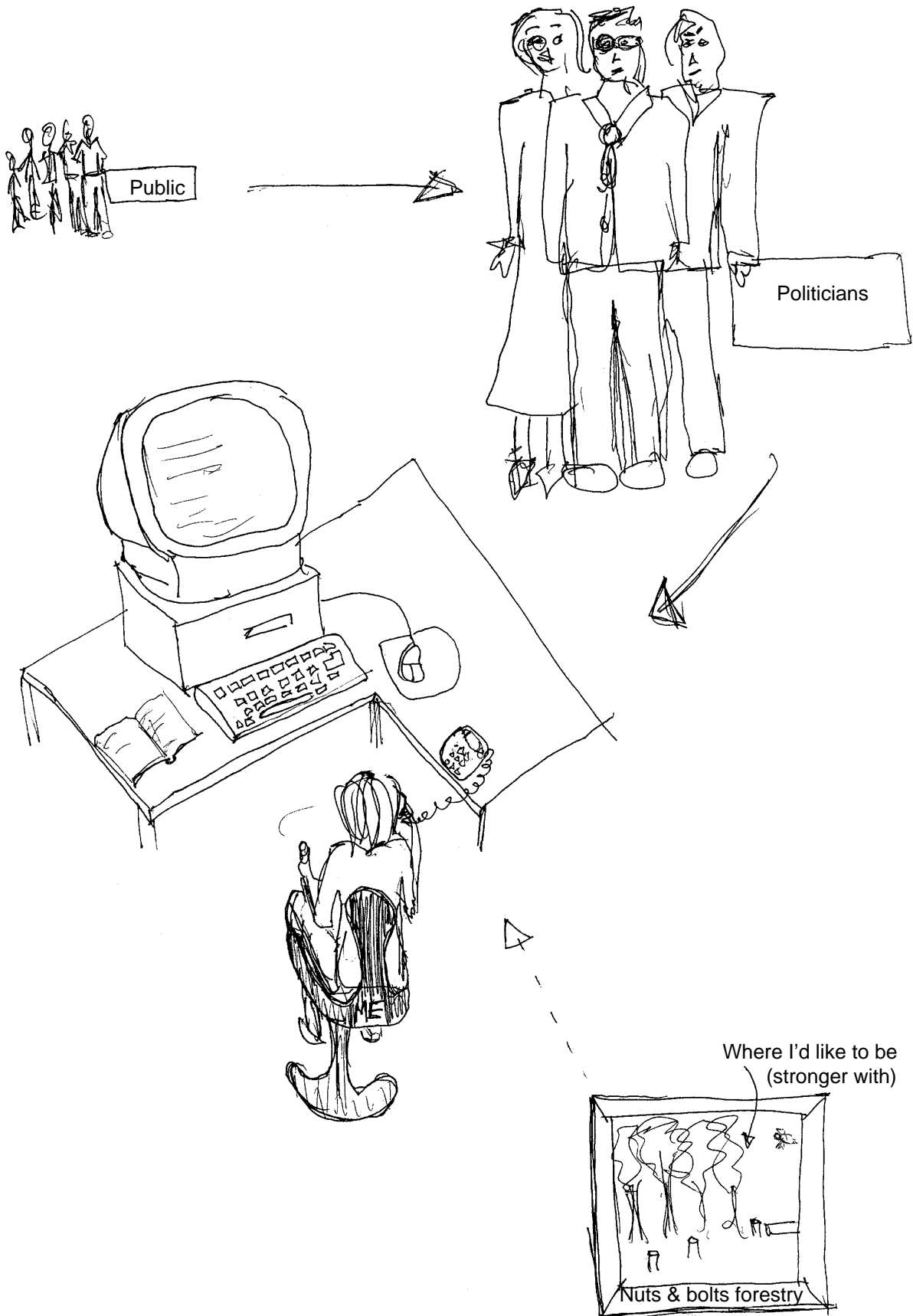
**Quote 28:** *"I was asked whether I was planning to have a family and if I was whether I could plan my leave outside planting time."*

**Quote 29:** *"There is no issue about taking long service leave or recreation leave but it's definitely a problem to be pregnant; it's like it's disabling you for life sort of thing."*

**Quote 30:** *"If I was going to take some time out I would still keep an eye on what's going on; networking is important, remind people that you are around; otherwise you just get overlooked and forgotten."*

**Quote 31:** *"The lack of standard and confidence makes you put up with things that looking back you would characterise as harassment, discrimination or simply unacceptable."*

Drawing 3: "My perception of forestry and where I fit in the picture"



woman reported how she found it distressing to be abused by people at the supermarket while she was having trouble with a contractor who was trying to ignore the code of best practice. Some men can become very abusive while confronted by a female officer and one woman reported how a landowner had been particularly violent with her while completely changing his tune the next day when a male colleague came with her. It can

**Quote 32:** *"When I started to work I had a foreman who just refused to work for a woman; I just didn't know what to do about it; I had only been working for 4-5 months and I didn't want to stir things; now I would know; I would be more vocal, more assertive about getting things done."*

be argued that dealing with the public is a fact of life and if women cannot deal with it they should not be out there. The issue here is not so much whether women can or cannot deal with situations of abuse: it's more to do with the fact that as "young" officers they feel they don't get the support they need from their manager, they don't get a fair hearing. There are no avenues for them to unwind or voice their frustration and it is the accumulation of such incidents that can bring a persons' self-esteem down. It takes a long time for women to realise or accept that what is happening is nothing to do with them as individuals but is simply unacceptable behaviour, blatant sexism.

Discrimination is another difficult area: it is often difficult to prove, yet most women seemed to agree that discrimination on gender grounds was a reality. Again, women chose not to challenge a discriminatory decision as the system is far too intimidating. One woman told how she challenged her department after losing her job in what she saw was pure discrimination. She recalls this period as a very unpleasant one as she felt very isolated; while she won her case and recovered a position it took her a long time to be accepted back in the workforce as she was labelled as a trouble maker and people didn't trust her. In the long term discrimination works against the employer as the employee discriminated against loses interest and commitment as the message seems to be "no matter how hard I try I'll never get there."

### **IS IT ALL WORTH IT?**

This study didn't look at why women left forestry but at first sight, from comments from women who have left as well as others, it could be concluded that it is the perceived incompatibility of conducting a professional career and assuming a family which is the main cause of women's departure. However from the testimony on how it is to be a woman working in forestry, the conclusions are not so clear cut. One could easily conclude that the child raising issue is more the straw breaking the camel's back: women feel that being in forestry is a "fight", "a constant battle." Once they have the opportunity to develop an additional dimension in their lives they begin to question whether, at the end, it is all worth it?

A number of organisational issues identified by women are most probably shared by men too: the lack of communication, the sense of dis-empowerment, insecure jobs, working long hours, lack of flexibility. However the response mechanisms developed by the two genders may be different. It is also most likely that some issues are specific to women: harassment and the psychological costs of "having to fit in" are not experienced by men in the same way or to the same degree. In their study on barriers to women's career progression Cassell and Walsh (1993) distinguish practical barriers (like lack of child care facilities) from cultural and even less visible psychological barriers. It seems so far that while most forestry organisations have attempted to deal with practical barriers, tackling organisational culture ones for example, would be much more sensitive and challenging. Ignoring the reality of women's life and the weight of personal life and social structure (Grant & Porter 1994) while developing gender equity policy in the work place will be unhelpful to genuinely promote gender diversity in the workplace.



To the question "what do you expect from this study" women said they didn't expect very much or major changes. They saw their contribution to the study as an opportunity to meet other women, to share their experiences and perhaps achieve a bit of networking. Networking has been a strategy developed by women in other sectors of the workforce; it can break down the sense of isolation, inspire younger women in their career and personal development and reinforce self esteem. However it is not sufficient.

If organisations are to keep women in their workforce, important organisational and attitudinal changes have to occur. Policies are in place but their implementation mechanisms don't seem to be creating a comfortable place to work in.

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