Women Scholars in Environmental Sciences and Sustainability: Opportunities and Challenges in Latin America

WORKSHOP REPORT

By Antonieta Eguren, Marcela Márquez, Cristina Nuñez, Constanza Ríos

Gainesville, Florida
March 24th and 25th, 2015
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The workshop was organized by Lyn Branch, Jonathan Dain, Antonieta Eguren, Karen Kainer, Marcela Márquez, Cristina Nuñez, and Constanza Ríos.

Funded by the National Science Foundation, University of Florida’s Tropical Conservation and Development Program, and the Southern Cone Conservation Leadership Initiative.

Special thanks to Diana (Tita) Alvira, Maria Juliana Bedoya, Sonia Canavelli, Maria Fernanda Checa, Citlalli López, Amanda Monroe, Suzana Padua, Noemi Porro, Bárbara Saavedra, Xoco Shinbrot, Verónica Vazquez, Bette Loiselle, Patricia Sampaio, Natalia Ochoa, and Sebastian Palmas for helping organize the workshop and for greatly enriching our learning by sharing their experiences and thoughtful insights during the workshop.
“A woman with imagination is a woman who is not only able to envision the lives of a family and a society, but also the future of a millennium.”

Rigoberta Menchú
It is well known that women are under-represented in STEM fields, which include sustainability and environmental sciences. To address the challenges that we face in today's world, we need to incorporate more women into these fields of study and promote collaboration and support among them, particularly in regions such as Latin America where pressure on natural landscapes intensifies every year.

On March 24th and 25th, 2015 the workshop “Women Scholars in Environmental Sciences and Sustainability: Opportunities and Challenges in Latin America” took place at the University of Florida (UF). Thirty women from across Latin America and the U.S. participated, enthusiastically sharing their experiences and ideas regarding gender-related issues faced by women working in sustainability and environmental sciences in Latin America.

The workshop was organized by UF’s Southern Cone Conservation Leadership Initiative and supported by the Global Women’s Scholars Network (GWSN) and UF’s Tropical Conservation and Development Program (TCD). The GWSN, funded by the National Science Foundation, aims to enhance collaboration among women working in sustainability and environmental sciences by generating instances to bring them together across disciplines and cultures. Under the umbrella of this project, and recognizing the need for these types of encounters, a group of students and faculty of the University of Florida designed and developed a two-day workshop that aimed to explore the following:

1. Goals and gender-related challenges faced by professional women working in sustainability, biodiversity conservation, and other areas of environmental sciences.

2. Opportunities and strategies that lead to success of women in this arena.

3. Mentoring of women: experiences, needs, opportunities, and approaches.

The 30 women participants from Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and the United States, formed a diverse group of academics, graduate students, NGOs and government workers, researchers and more, from many disciplines related to sustainability and environmental sciences. A participatory approach was used to explore the three main topics, including small group activities, personal reflections, narrative sharing, and open discussions. This report aims to share the experiences during the workshop and summarize main findings.
Participant responses to how their goals have evolved from their early career to present day.

**goals**

- Cultural differences/stereotypes
- Family as a priority
- Finding balance (family and work)

**Current goals**

- Be aware of reality
- Set priorities
- Integrate different aspects of life
- Secure income

- Enjoy the process
- Discover new passions and abilities
- Generate a positive impact on others

**Early career goals**

- Gain academic knowledge
- Gain practical knowledge
- Explore seek adventure
- Embrace challenges
- Bushwhack
- Make positive changes
- Foster gender equality
- Get a graduate degree/job
- Get status and recognition
- Find a niche

**Personal factors that influenced evolution of goals**

- Childhood experiences
- Personal values
- Collaborative spirit
- Female role models
- Family support
- Economic security

- Include science education and communication
- Work from local to broader scales
- Incorporate social perspective
Gender-related challenges faced by women working in sustainability and environmental sciences

- **Self-expectations**: Our own high expectations of perfection and need to prove ourselves all the time, rather than seeking for help or support.
- **Social expectations**: Expectations from family, colleagues, and society of what it is the ideal female model. Women are pushed to be good at everything!
- **Academic challenges**: What is the impact of your academic work in the real world? Are you taking science into action? Are you collaborating across disciplines?
- **Time management/balance**: How can we manage our time and balance our personal and professional life? Keep productivity at work while having a rich personal/family life?
- **Patriarcado**: The western system perpetuates gender inequality.
- **Stereotype-women**: Simplistic generalizations about women’s attributes and roles associated with gender.
- **Stereotype-scientific**: Assumption that women are more associated with social sciences because this is "less scientific".
- **Stereotype-cultural**: Stereotypes associated with cultural differences and power relations among cultures, such as race and language.
- **Collaborative spirit**: Always being willing to collaborate can lead women to being stretched too thin.
- **Funding**: Generate attractive ideas to find and secure stable sources of funding.

Participant reflections on their personal challenges as women working in sustainability and environmental sciences.
TOP 10 STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

1. DON’T WORRY, BE HAPPY
   • Find a reason to laugh everyday, even about your own situation.
   • Accept complexity in its most wide sense: human, institutional, familial, ecological, financial.

2. INVEST IN PEOPLE
   • Invest (time, energy) in your students. Trust them. Encourage them. Work with them. Publish with them on an equal footing.
   • Consciously look for each person’s positive aspects, sweeping annoying things aside and working with the positive.

3. ENJOY THE JOURNEY
   • Take pleasure in the process. This way even the most awful failures may become opportunities: to learn, to grow, to change.
   • Establish short-term goals to avert feeling like a failure when you can’t immediately “save the world”. Do not lose the joy of working locally, despite the weightiness of the larger context.

4. FORGIVE YOURSELF IF YOU MESS UP
   • Take lessons learned as opportunities to guide next steps.
   • Use your own story (even negative or positive) to build a constructive future.

5. IF YOU WANT IT, GO FOR IT!
   • Pursue a continuous and comprehensive education, consistently look for ways to improve your knowledge and exceed your expectations.
   • Take advantage of educational and funding opportunities.
6 PUT ON YOUR OWN OXYGEN MASK FIRST

• My mom said “If you like what you do, you have take care of yourself first.” Then you can attend to others and enjoy what you are doing even more.

• Stop comparing yourself to other women; don’t be such a perfectionist, value what you have to offer and your strengths, and turn your weaknesses into assets.

7 UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

• Listen, and understand the context of the problem, rather than trying to apply “ready made” solutions.

• The real world can be challenging, you might need to develop new skills and approaches to deal with its complexity.

8 COLLABORATE AND BE HUMBLE

• Establish healthy and safe working environment, practice respect, reciprocity, thankfulness and trust.

• Maintain a social network that helps you see beyond teaching and publishing.

• Integrate yourself into working group with more experienced people, learn from them and allow them to lead you when needed.

9 FOLLOW YOUR INTUITION

• Identify your passion, purpose, and goals and direct them toward a collective benefit.

• Do not shun your feelings and instincts, trust them and consider them when making your decisions.

10 HAVE A LIFE!

• Establish priorities and create your own rituals at home and work. There is definitely more to life than just work.

• Accept support from others and share roles and responsibilities at home.
LESSONS ABOUT MENTORING

1. Simple words can change everything: "You can do it" "I believe in you." Even one word can make a huge difference.
2. We need competent (not competitive) women.
3. Each student has a niche, and a set of skills and knowledge. Students have their own desires and interests, support them and help them to stay on track.
4. Mentoring is a learning process.
5. Mentoring is not mothering.
6. Having an inspiring and honest vision can become a key tool for engaging others to join/support the transformation path of conservation and sustainability.
7. Mentoring is about generosity. It is about being open and willing to share experiences and give advice to whoever asks.
8. Give confidence to your mentees. Assign them specific tasks and give them the opportunity of leading. This way they can produce tangible results and gain experience and confidence.
Although women face particular issues in environmental sciences and sustainability, as we recognized during the workshop, we also have a lot of opportunities and strategies to use. This workshop provided a safe and friendly space to share experiences and reflect on gender-specific issues, and to identify possible pathways to grow as women working in environmental sciences and sustainability. The consensus among participants was that we need more of these kinds of meetings!!

The warm environment, openness, and trust generated in the workshop made us keenly aware that opportunities for this kind of sharing are virtually non-existent in the field of environmental sciences and sustainability in Latin America. Numerous spaces exist for women to share their research and professional experiences, but not spaces where they can take a moment to reflect and connect with their own experiences as women. This workshop represented a unique opportunity for participants to share their stories and concerns, helping them to internalize them and learn about themselves and others.

Many of the participants, especially those coming from the natural sciences, had not had the opportunity to discuss gender issues in relation with their research or professional work. This workshop provided their first experience with this theme. Several follow-up workshops were proposed. Given that gender is a complex topic, future workshops could greatly benefit by adding an introductory discussion of core topics of gender issues such as identity, power relations, and social constructions of gender and women, and how these relate to the work of women professionals in sustainability and environmental sciences.
SO WHAT CAN WE DO?

These are some concrete actions that participants of the workshop proposed:

**ABOUT THIS WORKSHOP:**
- Share the information of this workshop with other women.
- Generate spaces like this workshop in your country or workplace. To date, participants have proposed workshops in conjunction with professional meetings in Ecuador and Argentina or Chile.

**AT A PROFESSIONAL AND WORK PLACE LEVEL:**
- Inform yourself about gender issues in your workplace and field of study. Question the current model and critically think about the social structure that maintains and promotes gender inequality.
- Foster opportunities for other women to participate and lead in the profession, or create instances where this will be possible.
- Be more of an advocate for other women so they are represented and involved in areas where they are currently underrepresented.
- Be more proactive in creating and strengthening your networks (university, laboratory, etc).

**AT A PERSONAL LEVEL:**
- If you have something to say, then say it!
- Start an activity that you enjoy and is good for your health.
- Have tea, happy hour or any type of meeting with female friends and colleagues. Take the first step and invite them.

**AT ALL LEVELS:**
Be supportive of other women, listen more, understand and encourage.
# WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Xoco Shinbrot</td>
<td>PhD student at Colorado State University</td>
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**WORKSHOP AGENDA**

### DAY 1: TUESDAY MARCH 24TH, 2015

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<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:45</td>
<td>BREAKFAST</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00</td>
<td>OPENING / WELCOME / OBJECTIVES</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:15</td>
<td>INTRODUCTIONS: ICEBREAKER</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:15</td>
<td>BREAK</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:30</td>
<td>SESSION 1: GOALS AND CHALLENGES AS PROFESSIONALS WOMEN</td>
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<td>12:00</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
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<td>1:00</td>
<td>SESSION 2: OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES LEADING TO SUCCESS</td>
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<td>2:30</td>
<td>BREAK</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:45</td>
<td>CONTINUATION OF SESSION 2 + MENTORING</td>
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<td>4:15</td>
<td>BREAK</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:30</td>
<td>PLENARY DISCUSSION</td>
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<td>5:30</td>
<td>TAKING IT TO MY REALITY</td>
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<td>5:45</td>
<td>CLOSURE</td>
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<td>6:00</td>
<td>RECEPTION</td>
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### DAY 2: WEDNESDAY MARCH 25TH, 2015

9:00-12:00 OUTDOOR SOCIAL ACTIVITY
“What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.”

Jane Goodall