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A Space of Their Own: A Spatial Analysis of Professional Women's Groups within the Geoscience Setting in Alberta

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Summary

As a profession, the geosciences are dealing with more women entering the field. Throughout the life cycle of a geoscience career gender inequalities still exist, even in the face of legislative change. Empirical evidence shows gender inequalities in terms of pay and promotion, and many female geoscientists within the Alberta oil and gas sector are leaving the profession mid-career. One response to gender inequities in Alberta is the formation of professional women's groups. Using an intersectional feminist theoretical lens, this research investigates the role of spatiality in response to gender inequality within the Alberta geological workplace, specifically centring on the role professional women's groups plays within this dynamic. By investigating how relational space and gender inequality are interlinked, the information can support the building of better theories and practices to challenge gender inequality within the geosciences.

Introduction

This research included input from over 30 female STEM professionals within the geoscience work environment in Alberta. The women involved in the study have been or are currently a member of over 20 different women related groups within Alberta. These groups range from grassroots local to international in nature and can be in a variety of settings from public to private. Women join these groups for a multitude of reasons, including to network, learn leadership skills, to finding strategies to combat gender discrimination and sexual harassment.

Theory and/or Method

This research was conducted using an intersectional feminist lens.

Examples

When studying gender inequality, it is important to investigate the underlying structures that prevent change. This research breaks down the gendering of relational space to better understand the systemic structures that prevent forward momentum in the topic of gender inequality. Using an intersectional approach, the research also identifies that there can be compounding issues for many women. This means that this is no simple answer for change. The underlying structures at play can fall within three themes: gendered divisions of labour, the gendering of behaviours and norms, and the gendering of knowledge.

Conclusions

Often professional women's groups are created as a response to gender inequality. Due to underlying systemic barriers within the geoscience work environment in Alberta, this research indicates that these groups have limited influence toward promoting change. In order for there to be true change, the women within these groups cannot do this work alone. Change must come from a variety of levels: within the educational system, within the workplace, and within the provincial and federal level. Leadership must come from those who have influence. That being said, professional women join these groups for a variety of reasons. Many professional geoscientists find themselves a

minority within their working environment. The research has shown that these groups can play an important role often acting as a network of support, and can provide a safe place for these women. The groups can help to find mentors, provide leadership training and have even helped women find employment. The professional women group can help women to find a space of their own.

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