

**ENGAGING THE WEHN REPORT:  
SUMMARY OF ACTIONS-TO-DATE FOR ASEH EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE,  
AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS**

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**Preamble - reprise and context:**

As agreed at the 2017 ASEH Executive Committee meeting in Chicago, we established a process to post the report via a link on the ASEH website, to inform members of the existence of the report and to encourage responses to specified questions to any one of five colleagues who agreed to receive submissions, keep them confidential, and produce an interpretive report on the feedback they received. As the original deadline for submissions approached it was clear that the initial publicity had generated few responses. We extended the deadline (with shorter lapse period) through an announcement in the *ASEH Newsletter*, which again stressed the importance of the issue and encouraged members to respond.

In total we received seven responses through this initial process. A third set of eight responses (Summary 3) was generated when one of the committee members, disappointed at the lack of responses from the formal dissemination process and additional efforts to draw attention to the survey and a call for input through social media, specifically asked a number of acquaintances, by personal emails, to provide reactions.

The original process for handling submissions called for each of five committee members to tabulate responses received (maintaining anonymity), provide a one-page “interpretive” summary of these responses for circulation among all members of the committee, and designate one of their number to write a meta-synthesis of the results. Given the low response rate, this seemed unnecessarily cumbersome.

In lieu, those colleagues who had received responses (beyond the one sent to all committee members) were asked to provide a summary of those responses and make them available to others on the committee via a Dropbox folder. All of these are now gathered below, with more or less interpretation and comment from the individuals who compiled them, as an Appendix to this document.

**Consolidation:**

On the basis of the material in Appendix I, I made an attempt at “meta-analysis,” synthesis, and the identification of possible steps forward. I then shared this document, in October, with Julie Cohn as lead representative of WEHN and Lisa Mighetto. Julie Cohn shared the materials in Appendix I and her own responses to them with her WEHN co-author, Sara Pritchard and with the two individuals who will take over from her in March, Sarah Elkind and Nancy Jacobs. Email discussion producing several iterations of comment and response continued among Julie Cohn, Lisa Mighetto and myself through

November and culminated in a two-hour telephone conference call among the three of us on 13 December.

These discussions turned on several topics emerging from responses to the WEHN Report. They are listed below for information

- i) Definition of the field:
- ii) Under representation in publications etc.
- iii) “Ghettoization” or marginalization in conference program?
- iv) Diversity beyond gender.
- v) Sexism and racism - overt and covert.
- vi) Opportunity vs imposition:

All of these are complex issues. Some might be addressed by relatively simple responses – we might, for example, add a tag-line emphasizing the broadness and openness of the field to every ASEH communication. In some instances we need more evidence (data) to assess perceptions - are papers dealing with gender routinely assigned to specific gender-focused panels at ASEH conferences and thus marginalized? would sprinkling these papers across sessions that were deliberately and notably diverse produce other expressions of unease and dissatisfaction? Are “gender-focused panels” panels creations of the program committee or of presenters? Some seem imponderable – how do we reconcile encouraging women to accept leadership positions with the sense that this imposes an unfair burden upon them? Most of these issues are multifaceted – we might gather data on the patterns and handling of submissions to the journal, but we will have a harder time determining why people choose to submit or not, follow R&R recommendations or not. We also note that issues such as sexism and racism are systemic –ASEH and its members need to be vigilant and do their (our) utmost (as many are) to eliminate such behaviours from our interactions, but we confront a small part of a much larger problem made complicated by shifting cultural norms and expectations.

### **Moving forward:**

In moving forward, we need to acknowledge that ASEH has limited institutional capacity to gather necessary data and frame and implement new strategies. These tasks cannot fall upon the Executive Director. Progress will depend on the commitments of members.

The immediate question raised by the WEHN report is; What can ASEH do to ease the burdens of female scholars at our conferences and in our journal publication (even if we can't solve the larger issues of inequity)?

Overall, the WEHN report has reminded all of us that we need to be more attentive to “outreach” and “in-reach” as well as diversity and discriminatory behaviors. We need to broaden our base to (among other things) enhance diversity, and work at being inclusive by ensuring that people feel honored, valued and appreciated as colleagues and for the work they do in environmental history.

We are not alone in this, and in moving forward we would do well to recognize and learn from the efforts of others. I notice, for example a recent announcement of a workshop on “Gender and Environmental History” being convened in Melbourne, Australia in December 2018. The description of this workshop notes: “Gender remains an under-developed area of inquiry in environmental history. Despite Carolyn Merchant’s provocative 1990 article on gender and environment in the *Journal of American History*, little has happened to address this fact. The July 2017 European Society for Environmental History conference hosted one single panel on gender and environmental history; presentations in the area at the American Society for Environmental History were similarly sparse, and subsequent discussions on social media confirm that few environmental historians have considered the implications of a gendered analysis for understanding environmental change.” A recent analysis by Dorceta E Taylor of diversity reporting in over 2000 environmental nonprofits in the USA (including 56 professional societies and associations) found that no more than 5% of the 56 reported on the racial and gender diversity of their boards or staff. Conservation organizations accounted for over half of those generally large organizations included in the study, about three quarters of which had annual budgets over \$750000. Overall the data show that the mean percent of white employees exceeded 85%. Males accounted for almost two-thirds of Board members but barely 40% of staff (“Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Reporting and Transparency” January 2018). Finally, a group of graduate students and mentoring faculty at UBC embarked on a labor-intensive and systematic study of “Diversity in geoscience: participation, behaviour, and the scientific division of labour at a Canadian geoscience conference,” (forthcoming in the open access journal *FACETS*). They report that women accounted for 28% of some 250 presentations, and document various behaviours that contribute to chilly climates for women and people of colour. Diverse as these examples are, they provide important context for thinking about the challenges before us, and useful pointers to the ways in which issues might be framed and addressed.

To achieve the desirable ends identified in our consideration of the WEHN report, ASEH leadership should continue to work with the leadership of WEHN and the Diversity Committee (soon to be renamed the Committee on Diversity, Inclusion and Equity (CODIE)) to formulate what one respondent to the WEHN report called “a plan of action to help correct for inequities of opportunity for all members of ASEH.” This will necessarily be an evolving document, but it is already taking shape.

**Actions taken\*, planned or in progress:**

- i) **\*Conference Childcare assistance:** Liability concerns make it impossible for ASEH to serve as childcare provider. As a pilot to assist younger scholars we have set aside limited funds to underwrite some of the costs they may incur in securing childcare. ASEH will attempt to reimburse individuals/families at a rate of \$10 per hour for a total of up to ten hours of childcare per family during the conference. This initiative will be reviewed and adjusted as necessary and possible in summer 2018
- ii) **\*Revamped Mentorship Program:** To enhance inclusiveness and the value of membership in ASEH, we are moving to expand and invigorate the ASEH

mentoring program. A one-to-one mentoring program has run in a small way for a few years now. Going forward, we envisage mentoring groups of three or four students and one established scholar (or professional from beyond the academy). Mentoring conversations will focus on career advice, professional advancement, and facilitating contacts rather than reading student work.

- iii) **\*New protocols for responding to harassment/ discrimination at annual conference:** These are being put in place at the Riverside meeting.
- iv) **\*Encouraging diversity and inclusion at grassroots:** Developing local and regional nodes of environmental history activity should, among other things, facilitate greater integration of people of various cultural, racial, ethnic, demographic, professional, and educational groups.
- v) **Editor of *Environmental History*** to write a piece for the newsletter "demystifying" the submission process
- vi) **Continue analysis** of submission-publication processes and patterns in *Environmental History*
- vii) **Seek similar data** from other journals
- viii) **Make changes to ASEH Website:** Add new section to "Course Outlines" section and encourage, via Newsletter, submission of syllabi dealing with "Race and Gender in Environmental History"
- ix) **Add** an optional question to the online ASEH membership form asking for gender identity
- x) **Continue** to acquire data for evidence-based engagement with issues raised in the WEHN report
- xi) **Encourage colleagues** to be mindful of the need to include junior and female scholars (and people new to ASEH) in activities and conversations
- xii) **Provide** "funding opportunities not just for research and travel, but for writing and editing" as recommended by one respondent to WEHN report.

**Realizing many of these objectives will require commitments of members' time (as mentors, in organizing regional events, in being thoughtful about inclusion and the encouragement of diversity) and generosity in the form of monetary donations to ASEH to assist with the costs of childcare support, writing and editing workshops and so on.**

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## APPENDIX to ENGAGING THE WEHN REPORT:

### WEHN Responses Summary 1

Total responses received: 4 (one was sent to the entire committee)

#### Experiences

Respondents uniformly said that the report confirmed and reinforced their own perceptions of diversity issues within the ASEH. One felt the report's wording actually underplayed the problem, and another mentioned that the extent of the discrepancies in publishing was greater than expected. All respondents stressed that despite the clear challenges facing the organization, the ASEH remained an extremely supportive and welcoming group of scholars.

Several respondents' experiences led them to believe that ASEH's lack of diversity stems from the way the field has been traditionally defined. One respondent characterized the basic canon of EH literature as centered around "wilderness themes," specifically conservation/preservation, environmental politics, and natural resource use, while those whose work deals with gardens, food, domestic or household issues, or the role of race and gender in experiences of the environment are left "at the margins of the field."

Respondents whose research fell into this latter category stated that they self-selected non-EH publications, assuming that they would not be accepted by the flagship journal or major series. One respondent wrote that "the more I tend towards gender history scholarship, the greater risk I fear I take of environmental historians not reading my work." Another said that "my interest in gender seems to have ended up actively pushing me away from environmental history" and towards non-environmental history journals and book series. One added that "to stay engaged with the field, I feel I have to do more work to convince scholars not to dismiss the work as irrelevant to the big conceptual questions they care about. My sense is those writing about loggers or miners or even factory workers who breathe sullied air don't have to do that work." The perception of such work as marginalized and disparaged by influential (largely male) scholars in the organization is reinforced by experiences such as that of the respondent who recalled an ASEH panel commentator's public disparagement of her work on domestic environments as "not environmental history."

Other respondents noted that papers dealing with gender are routinely "ghettoized" into specific panels at the conferences (eg, a panel on "women's labor" or "women in science" rather than one paper on women within a general panel on labor), and as such attract far smaller audiences than the (frequently all-male) panels dealing with more traditional "wilderness" or conservation history. While some respondents hoped that the rise of a new, more gender-balanced generation of leaders in the field might alleviate the problem – by, for instance, bringing more women into editorial positions at journals and series – others noted that this is unlikely to change the thematic focus of the field because many members of this new generation are mentees of the original "wilderness" senior scholars. Accordingly, most respondents felt that ASEH

needs to make conscious efforts to broaden the field to embrace a wider range of research questions in order to alleviate our diversity problems.

One respondent (circulated to the entire committee) suggested that direct outreach to female scholars for “commissioned” articles is an effective way of improving the gender ratio in EH and other publications. My own feeling is that this is at best a partial solution and raises a number of risks to the greater interest of diversity in the ASEH. As one respondent noted, many female scholars already wonder if our successes are due to an effort to include “a woman” rather than the actual merits of our work, and the commissioned article approach seems guaranteed to exacerbate this problem. This applies to service as well as research: a respondent expressed concern that ASEH’s new focus on gender may result in women being encouraged to take on responsibilities or positions for which they are not prepared; requests which may be well-intended but which would result in harming both the individual woman and the legitimacy of diversity efforts as a whole. That respondent wrote: “I want gender equity, but also want gender to be considered alongside other factors so that ‘the best woman for the position’ rather than ‘a woman’ will be on the ballot or the panel.”

Respondents were also extremely concerned about the ASEH’s lack of diversity beyond gender, and one respondent devoted the vast majority of his response to that issue. Again, the perceived reason for this problem is the narrow definition of EH as “wilderness” studies and the fact that many (though of course not all) scholars of color and non-American scholars are working on topics that do not fit within that definition. As one respondent wrote, “we cannot continue to assert the universality of environmental problems when our professional society seems so disconnected from things that scholars of color consider important.”

## **Proposals**

In addition to commissioning submissions from female scholars, respondents provided a wide range of suggestions for the ASEH to take to improve diversity. Many focused on standard methods of getting underrepresented populations to the conferences, including travel grants (targeted both thematically and geographically), childcare assistance, and creating a list of women “experts” so that if ASEH members were seeking “a woman” for their panel, they could use it to identify one who’s actually relevant to the topic. Others suggested ASEH- or WEHN-facilitated networks, specifically online writing groups in which women working on similar topics could provide support and accountability to each other, and could counsel each other on how to say “no” to unnecessary service obligations.

In order to attract new constituencies to the ASEH, one respondent suggested increasing connections between community colleges and university faculty in order to “foster greater attention to environmental history (and a more diverse set of transfer students) who could advance in the field.”

Some suggestions focused on raising awareness of the issues facing the ASEH and on informally encouraging people to attend or pay attention to the more “marginal” topics in the field. Some were fairly vague ideas about encouraging people “to show up and ask questions when women talk,” or “to seek out and sit next to women on the field trip bus or at the issue-based lunch.” One noted that the WEHN report itself is a good

start, and that its circulation may have the same effect as more pointed calls by editors for more women to submit.

Several respondents also suggested panels, website sections, and/or articles in the ASEH bulletin on how to be attentive to gender equity as a recommendation letter writer, member of a job committee, etc. (the University of Arizona was mentioned as a good resource on this), or “demystifying the submission process” to *Environmental History* in order to encourage new authors.

Finally, several respondents emphasized that the best way to change the culture of the ASEH is to broaden the definition of environmental history as a field, a process which must begin in the graduate classroom if not before. To that end, they urged the ASEH to create or collect and publish syllabi featuring works with diverse authors, as well as those with diverse subject matter, in a non-tokenizing manner.

Respondents mentioned that they would like more information on the following questions:

- How do *Environmental History*'s percentages compare to other top journals?
- Does the AHA have a survey that could be used to bolster WEHN's findings, rather than investing further time and energy in conducting additional surveys ourselves?
- What is the gender breakdown of ASEH membership?

## **WEHN Response Summary 2**

Total Responses (four, one of which was sent to the entire committee):

### General Experiences and Reactions:

The general issues respondents mentioned seemed to note that they have heard (or experienced as) younger women in particular have felt very excluded in general at ASEH meetings. Anecdotal evidence of this ranged from men avoiding eye contact in conversation to outright ignoring women or actively excluding them from (seemingly mostly?) social engagement at the conference. Others wrote of overt sexism in conversation, where men would mock women or engagement with women's issues.

People also made mention of the discrepancy of publications, one wondered if the discrepancies have something to do with work-life balance, and thus, mean that women on the tenure track focus more on books than articles. Regarding books, one respondent wondered if that could be attributed to the fact that men oversee most major book series in the field.

Finally, there was some commentary on the lack of participation of senior white men in these conversations and, in discussing sessions about gender or diversity, the respondent

said, “men attend these sessions in relatively small numbers.” Three out of four respondents made this point and identified it as perhaps a key issue. As one wrote: “white men who mentor white men in large numbers perpetuate this problem again and again.” In short, the question seemed to be, how do we get (senior) white men to care about this stuff? This seemed to also be the primary reason respondents think that women and people of color don’t join ASEH.

#### Proposals and Suggestions for the Future:

1. We need more women editors for journals and for book series—this, of course, though, means that women will be asked to do more service in the profession, which is, as one respondent put it, “already carried by women. Most of the organizing, the committee work—all of it is carried by women.” This same respondent acknowledged that men are sometimes engaged, but lamented that, women carry most of the committees that men serve on. Still, increases women’s roles in chairing committees or overseeing things that they can delegate to men, was mentioned more than once.
2. One respondent asked if, in addition to our new equity awards, we should add a gender equity award to show our commitment to working through these issues as an organization.
3. Two respondents noted that presidential endorsements and statements mattered and encouraged us to continue to raise these issues at big events where white men tend to show up.
4. Three out of four respondents expressed hope that we will continue organizing the WEHN reception.

### **WEHN Responses Summary 3**

Some notes about the collection of these responses:

Although I reached out by posting calls for responses on various social media, I was unable to claim any responses until I reached out to a large number of graduate student and early-career ASEH members of multiple genders by email.... [Many of] those who responded expressed concern that I confirm their comments would remain anonymous. To me this suggests one or more of several possible things about emerging scholars of ASEH:

- they don’t have time to worry about issues that don’t directly affect them
- they don’t think gender is a problem within ASEH or are indifferent to the issue
- they are falling in established patterns wherein female academics are more likely to engage in service activities while male academics are more likely to be disengaged

- they feel intimidated to participate in a conversation that isn't 'about' them, or that frames male academics as problematic; they may feel in their silence they are making room for the voices of women in ASEH

Reading through these responses and the silences around them, I do think that this is a problem that we can hope that younger generations of scholars don't replicate, but I am unsure that we can count on a proactive coalition of motivated younger scholars to take up arms to fix this: we are all too busy trying to survive and maybe even land the mythical tenure-track position.

Redacted digest of eight comments:

I'm not exactly sure what to make of the WEHN report. I'm glad though that we are starting to address the issue. It surprises me that men are more published. I have had experiences as a woman historian that certainly veer on the side of sexism. Sometimes I feel that because we study nature that some scholars think gender doesn't apply to what we do. I've been looking for advice from female mentors about how to deal with sexism in their personal relationships with colleagues in academics. I'm hoping that WEHN can build a safer space for women to express their ideas and their bodily autonomy at EH. With the "great works" being almost entirely male-written (excepting books like *Silent Spring*), environmental history has a distinct masculine feel at times. The gendering of the environment and nature is reflected in the gendering of the society, it seems. I have [often] found myself the only female in the room, in a large conversation, and on a panel .... I have also seen wonderfully heartening collaborations between and among scholars of many genders at ASEH as well. The question of subject-content and gender... would be an interesting avenue for further research. ... I ...have [not] personally felt that ASEH was biased against women at any point. The meetings have always felt fine to me.... All the panels I've been on have been mixed....

[On] job market outcomes .... I suspect any achievement gaps .... [are relatively small compared] to the difference between those attending elite schools and those ....[beyond]. Should we spend more energy describing the problems or work to fix them? [Are there ways of funding] writing and editing [as well as] research and travel. .... [Could] ASEH to take a strong and public stance about bigger problems of academia affecting its members...: the adjunct system of labor, the bias of student evaluations, for secure employment ....., maternity/paternity leave, and childcare access ....

My overall reaction to the report was anticlimax.... -- a report whose recommendations are that further studies should be done doesn't feel very useful.... [This] is a very tentative document mostly focused on identifying a pattern than suggesting how to change it. .... Another thing that gave me pause was the call for a survey. ... If a survey is [conducted], let's do it right; ....good analysis is even more important than the data and then... [we need] concrete steps to remedy the problem. ....This [report] is a great first step. Next ...[we need] qualitative assessments to delve deeper into experiences. ... None of this seems particular to environmental history.... The focus here seems too narrow. What are the actual PROBLEMS that women or other under-represented groups face? .... I would suggest that the report's authors talk not just to women but to all (especially early career) scholars about the challenges THEY feel they face, not just a statistical breakdown of publications etc. ... I am very grateful for the work of the women's network at ASEH.... I hope that ...[it] will be able to enforce

change in some form so we can begin to see a more equal distribution of voices. I don't know what that change will look like...but I support it.... I have always felt much more confident submitting papers to ASEH than other conferences because I knew that I would not be accepted or rejected based on gender.... [I am surprised by the reported] gender disparity in authorship of EH articles, inclusion in representative books series, and winning of book prizes. That's not good....

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