
ADÈLE LONG

Why Do So Few Women Go on Expeditions?



Katy Parrot, speaker at the Expedition Essentials for Women Explorers, on Broad Peak.

Listening to BBC Radio 4's PM programme some 15 or so years ago, I remember hearing an illustrious mountaineer being interviewed about a recent expedition he and his male partner had made in the Greater Ranges. There must have been some narrow escape involved to make the national news. In addition to the usual questions – 'Why do you do it?' – the interviewer asked him why he thought so few women go on expeditions. My ears pricked up and I listened intently to his reply.

Because I think they can't deal with the hardship; it can be really tough.



Symposium organiser Adèle Long, second from right, at event venue Plas y Brenin.

My reaction was mixed. How dare he say women can't deal with hardship? History shows that women have coped with hardship in every generation, country and culture. Yet, there was a niggling thought. Could he be right? I think he may have been alluding to the physical and mental attrition that wears you down the longer you are away from home, the higher the altitude you reach and the greater the technical challenge of your goal. This is self-inflicted hardship, not imposed due to war, poverty, oppression or the like. Is there a barrier more pertinent to women than men, which makes them reluctant to deal with the voluntary hardship of remote mountain exploration? Or is it something quite different?

It's not that women don't go on expeditions at all. The first recorded all-female expedition¹ was that of Monica Jackson, Elizabeth Stark and Evelyn Camrass who in 1955 reached the summit of Gyalzen (6151m, formerly Gyalgen) in the Jugal region of Nepal. Seven years later Jo Peacock and Barbara Spark made first ascents of two 6,000m peaks during their expedition to Kulu in India and then, with Dorothea Gravina, Denise Evans, Pat Wood and Nancy Smith, climbed Lha Shamma (6412m) in Nepal and six other previously unclimbed peaks. The American Arlene Blum led an all-female expedition to Annapurna I in 1978, the first to an 8,000m peak, while Rhona Lampard and Wanda Rutkiewicz made the first female ascent of Gasherbrum II in 1989. These women paved the way for a more recent generation of female mountaineers, with the likes of Louise Thomas, Glenda Huxter, Julie-Ann Clyma and Cathy O'Dowd making significant expeditionary ascents in the Greater Ranges. Many other women have made expeditionary first ascents and continue to do so.

1. In this context an expedition is a planned journey to reach and attempt to climb previously unclimbed peaks in a remote or unexplored mountainous region.



Fay Manners, leading female alpinist, with her recent haul.

However, the fact remains that while women are in abundance on crags and climbing walls around the world, and an increasing number are enjoying alpine climbing and mountaineering, relatively few go on expeditions. Only a handful of grant applications to expedition funding sources² are from women and even fewer are from women as expedition leaders.³ This has caused concern among those allocating grants and they were keen to understand why this might be. In addition to having the fundamental desire to explore, going on an expedition requires money, skill, knowledge, experience, commitment, freedom from home responsibilities and time. These potential barriers apply to men as well as women, except, arguably, the last two are weighted more strongly against women. Fund holders wanted to know if a dedicated Alpine Club women-specific expedition grant would help overcome real or perceived barriers to level the playing field. As the old adage goes: 'when in doubt, ask. When not in doubt, ask.' So we asked.

This was a bit like asking a chocoholic if they want a bar of chocolate. The reply was an emphatic 'yes please'. But there were some caveats, primarily that more information was needed and that a symposium or workshop would be helpful. We asked what such an event might cover.

Recent research into women involved in mountain training⁴ reported women having self-doubts about their ability in the mountains despite having met the requisite skill levels. Family and social constraints caused them to question their belonging in the expedition environment and cultural

2. Mount Everest Foundation, Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund, British Mountaineering Council.

3. In the last 10 years applications to the Montane Alpine Club Fund have ranged from 0% women to 10% with an average in the region of <5%. Applications to Julie Tullis Award, available to women, all-female expeditions and disabled climber of either gender, are between one and six each year for last 13 years, with an average of between three and four.

4. J Hall & A Doran, 'Researching Women in Mountaineering', Sheffield Hallam University, 2020.

barriers such as 'grade-ism' favoured a more masculine approach. Although by no means universal, misogyny was still in evidence; this was however countered by men who preferred the 'softer' approach of a female trainer. In an equally harsh environment, a 2022 report by the National Science Foundation⁵ found female workers in the Antarctic context experienced widespread sexual harassment from their male colleagues, with their complaints often being dismissed. Would the symposium mirror these concerns?

Taking action, the Alpine Club got in touch with the Mount Everest Foundation, the British Mountaineering Council and current AC climbing-fund partner Montane to organise an event specifically for women who want to go on expeditions. Five months later, on 28 and 29 January 2023, Expedition Essentials for Women Explorers was held at Plas y Brenin in north Wales. The purpose was to provide information, share experiences and discover what the real and perceived barriers might be and how they might be addressed.

Over 60 women (and two men) engaged in a series of lectures, workshops and talks for a day and a half. The programme covered all aspects of planning and executing an expedition. In addition to the more conventional subjects, and building on the feedback we had received, topics such as managing personal hygiene were included. In addition, the psychological aspects of success, managing conflict and confidence building were discussed in workshops. After dinner speakers Fay Manners and Katy Parrot gave highly entertaining and genuinely inspirational talks. Fay, a British alpinist based in Chamonix, and her climbing partner Line van den Berg completed the first female ascent of *Phantom Direct* on the south face of the Grandes Jorasses and the *Cassin* on Denali as part of an all-female team. Katy is a Montane endurance athlete; in 2016, aged 24 years, she was a finalist in the BBC programme *Ultimate Hell Week: Special Forces*. Since then she has participated in numerous challenges including being the second woman in the Montane Lapland Arctic Ultra in 2022 as well as reaching the summit of Broad Peak (8051m) in Pakistan. An unscheduled presentation from Freshta Ibrahimi, an asylum seeker from Afghanistan, on her *Unstoppable Project*⁶ reminded everyone that, unlike women in more fortunate countries who are benefiting from the progress that has been made in gender equality, women in Afghanistan and Iran are experiencing a decline in their basic freedoms.

Did Expedition Essentials for Women Explorers meet its objectives? A wealth of information was presented with access to further resources on the Alpine Club website, and delegates were open and enthusiastic to share experiences in what was described as a 'safe' environment. Women-only programmes can provide an atmosphere of care, cooperation, collaboration and informed choice that 'resist the subtle influences to conform to facilitator or programme values, or masculine norms'. Although women-only spaces do not necessarily challenge the dominant masculine discourse that can

5. <https://phys.org/news/2022-10-women-antarctica-assault-legacy-exclusion.html>

6. <https://unstoppableproject.com>

lead to social change,⁷ a factor that should influence future events. Feedback indicated that the event had surpassed expectations. Delegates were surprised to discover how many expedition funding grants were available and how many specifically targeted women.

Did we learn why women are less likely to go on expeditions than men? Delegates mentioned feeling more confident after the event; they hadn't been sure they were 'up to it', but now realised that they were. Family commitments were raised as an issue and these were at least partially dispelled by suggesting forward planning (12-18 months) and an unwavering commitment to the task. Coping with periods and the menopause were discussed frankly and as a result were seen in a different, more manageable, perspective. Tips on how to cope with stressful situations, be they conflict with other team members, a sense of isolation, concerns about fitness or acclimatisation, were discussed in workshops; the message being that openness is positive and everyone has a right to be heard: expeditions are a team event even if not everyone reaches a summit.

The symposium gave women the chance to share their concerns, their achievements and the excitement of exploration. Now this group of women at least have the information, tools, resources and contacts they need to go on an expedition. Around 30% of delegates said they would be applying for an expedition grant now or in the future. One month after the event, two had already applied. But to ensure a lasting impact, with more women participating in expeditions, we must hope that these women rise to the challenge and become the inspiration for future women. To do that necessitates the full support of the funding bodies, and their partners at home and on the mountain.

Interestingly there was no mention of coping with 'hardship'.

7. K Warren, 'Gender in Outdoor Studies', *Routledge International Handbook of Outdoor Studies*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, pp360-8.