

SESSION 1: Workforce of tomorrow - a gender perspective

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Why not forestry? Comparative analysis of barriers and needs for inclusion of girls and young women in forestry

Mateja Karničnik¹, Ema Šumenjak²

¹ Fundacija za izboljšanje zaposlitvenih možnosti Prizma, ustanova, Tkalski prehod 4, 2000 Maribor, m.karnicnik@fundacija-prizma.si

² Fundacija za izboljšanje zaposlitvenih možnosti Prizma, ustanova, Tkalski prehod 4, 2000 Maribor, e.sumenjakk@fundacija-prizma.si

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Extended summary

Women have long been active in the forestry sector of the Danube Region, yet they continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles, even though many women own forests. Research from the Fem4Forest project shows a growing interest in forestry among women, marked by an increasing number of female graduates. This signals the potential for a more female-driven forestry sector in the future. However, the sector today faces challenges, such as labour shortages and declining interest in forestry professions in general. For women, these problems are compounded by persistent gender stereotypes and limited access to career opportunities, which continue to hinder their full participation in the sector.

The Fem2Forests initiative is tackling these issues head-on by creating innovative career pathways for girls, integrating gender perspectives into forestry education, and improving conditions for women's participation. Its goal is to significantly boost female representation in forestry by 2030. To understand the challenges women face, the project conducted extensive research across nine countries in the Danube Region, gathering input from target groups through surveys and roundtable discussions. This participatory approach captured a comprehensive view of women's experiences, challenges, and needs. Two sets of online questionnaires were designed: one for girls studying forestry and another for those outside the field, supplemented by roundtable discussions with key stakeholders. The findings reveal that personal interest in forestry plays the most significant role in career choices, though financial considerations and work-life balance also matter. Yet, the sector struggles with persistent gender stereotypes, misconceptions about the profession, and concerns about occupational safety and physical demands – barriers that are particularly challenging for women.

Widespread misconceptions about forestry persist globally. Students from non-forestry backgrounds often know little about the sector, and even those studying forestry feel inadequately informed about required skills and opportunities. Many view the field as offering limited prospects, heavy physical labour, and being unsuitable for women. These misconceptions deter potential candidates, especially women, from entering the field.

Female students face additional hurdles in their education and internships, including unequal treatment and gender biases. The male-dominated nature of the industry only magnifies these challenges, creating further barriers for women to thrive in forestry.

The demand for practical experience and mentorship is clear. Female students are calling for more hands-on fieldwork, internships, and programs led by successful women. Female role models are essential to inspire and guide these students through their education and careers. To support this, educational institutions must improve career guidance and provide more information on the diverse opportunities within forestry.

The research also highlighted best practices for career guidance, which will be explored further in the next phase of the project. Hands-on approaches – like fieldwork, job shadowing, and professional lessons – were shown to effectively engage young people in forestry. Other successful strategies include school open days, participation in reforestation projects, and using platforms like TikTok to reach a broader audience. Mentoring programs, meetings with forestry professionals, and career days at companies were also identified as impactful ways to raise awareness and interest in forestry careers.

Dismantling stereotypes and promoting equal opportunities are key to a more inclusive forestry sector. With the rising interest of women in forestry and targeted initiatives like Fem2Forests, the future of forestry in the Danube Region could be one where women not only participate but lead in sustainable forest management.

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