



## Uneven ground: navigating gender and diversity in the forestry sector

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### Extended summary

Historically, forestry work was associated with “difficult conditions and the dangerous, dirty and heavy work [...], which were understood as being unsuitable for women” (Ringblom and Johansson 2020). While the sector has seen changes with the introduction of new technology and the demand for employees with higher education (Johansson et al. 2019), which could have acted as potential openings, the perception of forestry as “men's work” largely persists today. Holmgren and Arora-Jonsson (2015) attest “a gender biased corporatist culture” as actors in the sector form a homogenous group with regards to gender, ethnicity, age and educational background.

Structures within work organisations, in which forestry work is organised, reflect this long-standing view. Scholars like Acker (2006) argue that work organisations are not gender-neutral; preferably, they are shaped by deeply ingrained assumptions about gender (Acker 1990), forming what Acker refers to as *inequality regimes*, “defined as loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations” (Acker 2006).

A large part of the literature on gender aspects in forestry has been dedicated to the study of the Nordic forestry sectors, such as the Swedish forestry sector (e.g., Johansson et al. 2018; Johansson et al. 2020; Ville et al. 2023 etc.), while there is only limited research available on Austrian issues. This gap is significant not only due to the importance of forestry to Austria's economy, but also because the forestry sector, like in other national contexts, provides a compelling field to study from a gender perspective with its cultural and professional norms rooted in tradition and history, and gendered notions of men and masculinities (Johansson 2020).

The Austrian forest-based sector plays an important role for the Austrian economy, as it generates a gross value added of almost 20.4 billion euros, accounting for a share of roughly 5.7% of Austria's total economic output. It also secures 300,000 jobs in the forestry and timber value chain (Kleissner 2021), and its role as an employer in rural areas of Austria is often highlighted.

A recent UNECE report concludes that approximately 10% of the workforce in forestry are women, which is below the European average of around 14% (UNECE 2020). According to the most recent data for sustainable forest management, this trend has continued, with roughly 8% of female employees in the forestry workforce (Linser 2020).

These statistics highlight a stark gender imbalance within the workforce. Yet, understanding the gendered processes at play within in the sector requires moving beyond the numbers (Follo et al. 2017).

This presentation aims to do just that by highlighting selected findings from two series of qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the Austrian forestry sector. These

findings shed light on existing gender-specific barriers and the strategies women in leadership positions employ to overcome them, reflecting the broader gender dynamics and inequality regimes present within the sector (Öllerer 2022; Ludvig et al. 2024). Additionally, they illustrate the perceptions of gender equality and diversity in the workforce that are present among key representatives in management of work organisations and what measures these organisations take to address these issues (Öllerer et al. 2024).

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