

# "The More Lady You Are, The More They Treat Sexual Harassment and Health Risk for Young Women in

by Jocalyn P. Clark

*En dépit de leur succès comme planteuses d'arbres, les femmes souffrent de harcèlement sexuel et de discrimination basée*

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***While this industry is currently undergoing major change and increased regulation, treeplanting provides an important example of a male-dominated workplace situation in which increasing numbers of young women face health risks due to gender bias.***

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*sur le sexe avec des risques de répercussions sur leur santé. Dans cet article, l'auteure demande l'attention immédiate de l'industrie.*

Each year in Canada thousands of young men and women are seasonally employed as treeplanters. Forestry companies hire treeplanters to manually plant tree seedlings to fulfill the legal obligation to reforest harvested areas. Treeplanters typically live and work in campsites located in remote areas of northern Canada for periods of eight to twelve weeks during the spring and summer months. The reforestation business has traditionally attracted college and university students because of its favourable earning potential and because its seasonal time frame accommodates students' breaks from school.

The nature of treeplanting work as seasonal and highly lucrative makes this work context unique, but labour instability remains an ongoing problem, enhanced by the fact that the workforce is largely transient and the working conditions poorly regulated. Despite the importance of reforestation to the forestry industry, and what is predicted to be burgeoning labour needs (British Columbia Ministry of Forests), there appears to be little health and safety regula-

tion nor worker advocacy. Further, the isolated locations of treeplanting camps and demanding physical requirements create extreme working conditions and high worker turnover throughout the season. These issues are particularly important for young women because they appear to be entering the reforestation business in the largest numbers.

I conducted a field study in northern British Columbia that explored health risks associated with treeplanting. While little previous research had been conducted on this unique group of young people, industry reports suggested very poor health and safety records and inconsistent regulation of camp standards (Banister, Robinson, and Trites; Brinkman; Johnston; Rugo; Smith), both of which were thought to impact on health risk. Gender was of interest to me simply because increasing numbers of women had entered the business in the last few years, resulting in a dramatic change in gender distribution in worksites that had historically been dominated by men, in many cases exclusively so. However, I did not anticipate the extent to which gender mediated the experiences of these young workers, nor to its potential implications for health risk.

Sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination appear to be central issues in treeplanting that heighten women's experience of health risks. While this industry is currently undergoing major change and increased regulation, treeplanting provides an important example of a male-dominated workplace situation in which increasing numbers of young women face health risks due to gender bias.

## **Treeplanting and male dominance**

Treeplanting crews are most strongly characterized by their hierarchical social structure. Workers are labelled primarily on the basis of planting production and years of experience, resulting in the organization of treeplanting crews into three main groups. The foremen are at the top of the hierarchy and in charge of their entire crews. "Highballers" are the planters with the highest performance and often the most experience. "Lowballers" are less productive and the least influential planters, including women, who are expected to take instruction from the highballers and abide by the unwritten rules that typify the social structure of treeplanting crews.

Gender proved to be a key feature of the hierarchy, emerging as an essential aspect of identity, and one by which role expectations of treeplanters were determined. Like other resource-based industries dominated by male workers and due in part to women's absence, treeplanting had traditionally maintained ideologies that judged women unfit for the work. However, recent shifts in the labour force, characterized by dramatic increases in the numbers of women, have had a significant impact on the social structure of treeplanting crews. But while women have proven their abilities to perform successfully as treeplanters, and are known to frequently surpass the planting levels of some men, they are not granted the same status as similarly productive male planters. Gender bias inherent in the hierarchy of treeplanting camps resulted in widespread reports of sexual harassment that have important implications for health risk. Those in power held traditional attitudes toward women, and because their authority defined the work situation for all

# You Like a Lady"

## a Male-Dominated Work Setting

workers, it allowed stereotypical roles to be attributed to women, sexual coercion to be an ongoing threat for women, and gender-based harassment to be constructed as normative in the treeplanting environment.

### Stereotypical roles

Women treeplanters rarely accomplished powerful positions in treeplanting crews despite demonstrating comparable planting production to men. Female planters were often described as the most hard working and conscientious workers on the crew, but traditional qualities were attributed to women that were offered as explanations for their successes. As an example, one highballer said that women's socialization was responsible for their work ethic and success:

*I think it's just the way women are raised—to do monotonous, tedious, repetitive jobs. Like doing things like chores around the house, stuff like that. (male)*

A woman planter suggested that female workers are more conscientious and caring about their work:

*They tend to have better production because they're perfectionist. Women tend to be perfectionists at this task and I don't know why. They care about how that tree went into the ground.*

Further, value was placed on traditional women's roles such as being "motherly," providing "emotional support," and for exuding a calming influence. For example, increasing numbers of women in treeplanting camps were judged responsible for less rowdy camp settings, and women gained respect for their support of other crew members:

*In terms of the camplife, women also tend to be more motherly. So women sometimes are respected within the camplife because they can help out.*

Help out how?

*They provide support to everything from a band-aid to someone who's not feeling well, to emotional support. And more women also affect the tone of the camp. Camps are less rowdy when there's women in the camp. (female)*

A highballer planter describes how the recent changes in gender distribution have affected the social dynamics of camp settings:

*I think that the camp would have been different if there had been less women and more guys. There may have been more [sex]. (male)*

### Harassment and gender

The impact increasing numbers of women has had on the social dynamics of treeplanting crews is important because traditionally women have been excluded from the work.

their own sexual benefit, and for the "benefit" of the crew:

*One foreman did try to hire, he hired more women than men. And his concept was then there'd be a good selection of women for his friends, for himself, for opportunities, for sexual opportunities. (female)*

Another planter described foremen's biased criteria for hiring:

*They'll justify it by saying, "Well, I knew she'd keep morale up if I had a real looker on the crew." (male)*

The authoritative power ascribed to senior male planters permitted them control over the make-up of the treeplanting crews. It also resulted in their personal and sexual dominance over the group. Foremen and highballers' influence extended to the conduct and behaviour of the other workers, but it appeared that their superior status yielded opportunities to use (abuse) that power in social relationships with other planters. A female

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Treeplanting crews employing women appear more frequently now, but so too do reports of gender bias and sexual harassment. This was especially the case in regards to the hiring practices of treeplanting companies, the responsibility of which fell to the crew foremen who are almost exclusively male. Some foremen were known to hire women for

planter described sexual harassment by foremen in treeplanting workplaces as a tool to motivate:

*Yes, I would say foremen often abuse their power in terms of harassment. And unfortunately foremen do tend to sexually harass women on the same terms. Discriminate against women in hopes*

*that just verbally [they'll get] a little anger. Some foremen have a concept that if you anger the women, the women will work harder.*

In some cases foremen's power resulted in expectations of sexual compliance from female treeplanters, contributing to what appeared to be an ongoing threat of sexual coercion. One female participant discussed the

*for himself last year. And [she] was kind of his conquest for this year.*

The implications of sexual harassment are made clear by this male planter's description of how non-compliance by a female planter resulted in verbal abuse and threats from the foreman:

*Certain foremen hire certain female planters based solely on the*

*fact that they think they will be able to sleep with that person for that planting season. And when that doesn't happen, and perhaps when they see that person looking at other people, they become harder on that person and when that person shows that they obviously have no intention of sleeping with them, in some cases I've seen them just get fired. Get really dumped on, like "Plant this shit, you're a lousy planter, what the hell is wrong with you? And why don't you just*

*leave? I'll drive you to the bus." I've seen that happen.*

#### Harassment and health risk

The presence of the hierarchy in treeplanting crews results in inequitable conditions for women both because male planters have disproportionate access to power and because of the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace. While women face the same working demands as male planters do, they also are required to cope with the additional challenges of gender discrimination. For my female participants, adapting

meant that gender-based harassment was accepted as part of the job:

*There was a lot of verbal sexual harassment that comes classed as a joke. And it's not a joke. And it bothers some women, and others put up with it. You know, ... the concept that if you dish it back, it will go away. But it doesn't go away. And [women] just get used to it and live with it.*

Another female planter described how modifying one's behaviour was required to both respond to harassment and to command respect:

*It's pretty rough. There's a certain amount of disrespect, a certain amount of harassment. It just really depends on the type of person you are—how you are treated. It's so hard to act like a lady out there, you know. But the more lady you are the more they treat you like a lady.*

While it appears that some women treeplanters have developed ways to negotiate their experience of gender bias, harassment was also reported as a factor in women quitting the job:

*Most of the women that quit just get really lost. They just can't take the harassment and the day-to-day grind. (female)*

It seems obvious that women's experience of harassment heightened the demands of their jobs and contributed to labour instability in treeplanting. More importantly, however, is the fact that sexual harassment has serious potential health effects, for which there appears to be little recognition. Both *quid pro quo* harassment<sup>1</sup> and hostile environment<sup>2</sup> emerged as issues in treeplanting and both types of harassment are discriminatory and harmful. Not only do they increase the likelihood of sexual violence, but sexual harassment and gender discrimination increase the risk of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, sexually transmitted

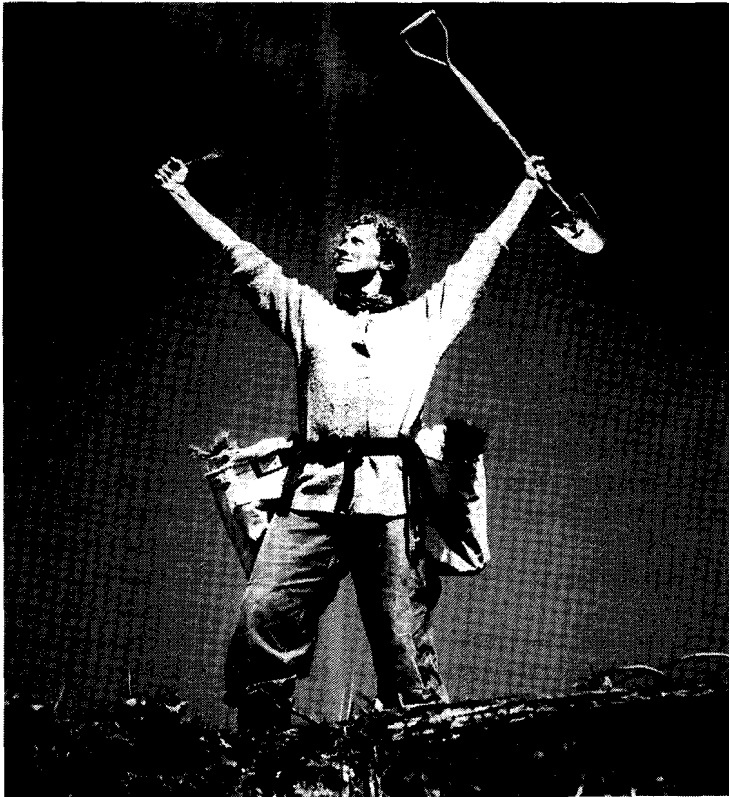


Photo: Tim Swanky

pressure involved with the expectations for and the commonality of casual sex, "especially for the girls because we're so outnumbered." A male planter described the pressure placed upon a woman planter who was the target of a highballer's attention:

*We have a [highballer] that was trying to hit on this rookie treeplanter this spring which to me basically constituted, you know, sexual harassment. I thought it was terrible because it put her in a bad situation. I was hearing that he had a rookie treeplanting chick*

diseases, unwanted pregnancy, suicide, and homicide (Collier; Heise). Further, gender-based violence increases the likelihood of alcohol and drug use, smoking, and unprotected sex (Heise). Although sexual harassment as a health risk in treeplanting had not been reported anecdotally nor in the literature prior to this study, its centrality to the experiences of my participants was striking. The potential for serious health consequence resulting from sexual harassment in treeplanting will only intensify as seasonal employment contexts become more attractive for Canadians, especially young women, in an increasingly unfavourable job market.

## Conclusion

The treeplanting environment provides an important example of a workplace traditionally dominated by men but for which increasing numbers of women face health risks due to gender-based discrimination. Despite the importance of the Canadian reforestation business and the impact of its labour force needs on young workers, no prior recognition of gender bias has been indicated, nor consideration of the potential health implications. The centrality of sexual harassment in the reports of treeplanters, however, suggests its significance. While women have proven their abilities to perform the treeplanting job, the existing hierarchy that bestows power on the basis of production does not grant women equal status to similarly productive men. Women face additional pressure because those in power hold traditional attitudes toward women that allow gender-based discrimination and harassment to persist despite increasing numbers of women entering the business. The implications of sexual harassment for health risk are serious and represent inequitable working conditions for female treeplanters.

The issue of sexual harassment requires immediate attention as more women become members of the

treeplanting workforce and no mechanism exists in treeplanting camps for the resolution of harassment issues. Women's experience of gender bias constitutes additional health risk and reinforces the inadequacy of existing health and safety support for treeplanters that has been documented in recent industry and media reports (Brinkman; Crankston; Johnston; Parker; Richard; Strickland). The reforestation business is currently negotiating unprecedented changes to ensure proper industry regulation and consistent camp standards and must prioritize the issue of sexual harassment to ensure the health and safety of their workers.

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*Jocelyn Clark has a master's degree in community health from the University of Northern British Columbia, a special interest in women's/gender studies, and is currently pursuing her PhD in Public Health Sciences and Women's Studies at the University of Toronto.*

<sup>1</sup>*Quid pro quo* harassment applies when a person in a power position makes decisions that affect a person of lower power's position based on their compliance with certain sexual demands.

<sup>2</sup>Hostile environment applies when the harassing behaviour of anyone in the work environment—not only a person in a power position—causes the environment to become hostile, intimidating, or offensive and unreasonably interferes with peoples' work.

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