

# Women in Turf: A Qualitative Study Examining How Women Have Sustained Their Leadership Role in the Turfgrass Industry

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## Abstract

*Women are a traditionally underrepresented demographic in the turfgrass industry. As the industry faces labor shortages, increased recruitment and retention of women to the field may reduce labor issues. The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore the lived experiences of 13 female leaders in the turfgrass industry representing diverse job titles, years of experience, and geographic locations. The objective of this research was to promote change within the turfgrass industry and subsequently increase female recruitment efforts by identifying barriers faced uniquely by women and influences on female leadership success. To discover this information, participants engaged in 30-to-90-minute semi-structured interviews with the central research question, “What lived experiences have shaped your career in the turfgrass industry?” Transcriptions of interviews were open-coded and used to develop six main themes: (a) career paths, (b) mentorship involvement, (c) leadership styles, (d) challenges, (e) opportunities for personal growth, and (f) opportunities for industry growth. Interviewed women proved to be vibrant leaders in the industry and faced similar challenges in their journeys to leadership including inappropriate peer conduct, difficulty building a family, and overcoming stereotypes. Women sustained career success by engaging in self-efficacy through educational development, mentorship, and personal growth. These findings can be used by both women and men in the turfgrass industry to improve current culture for women.*

**Keywords:** women; turfgrass; leadership; mentorship; challenges; change

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## Introduction

Turfgrass is estimated to be the fifth largest crop in acreage in the United States, covering approximately 40 million acres (Milesi et al., 2005). The high costs and labor intensity associated with managing such an expansive crop have resulted in an estimated industry value in the United States

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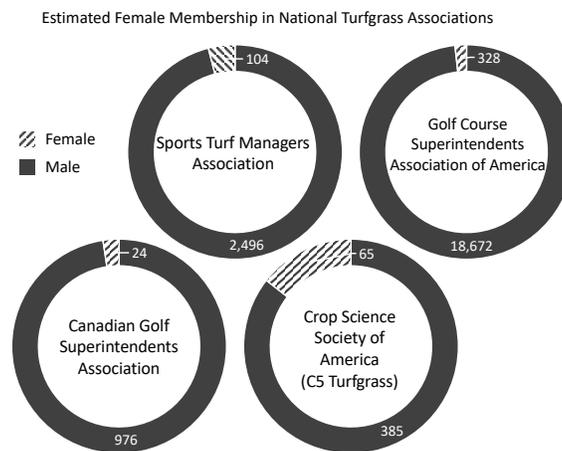
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alone of nearly \$60 billion annually and the provision of over 800,000 jobs (Haydu et al., 2006). Despite women comprising 51% percent of the United States population (United States Census Bureau, 2019) and 46.8% of the labor force (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics [USBLS], 2019), national turfgrass associations including the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America (GCSAA), Sports Turf Managers Association, and Canadian Golf Superintendents Association reported only 2 to 4% of membership as female in 2020 (Figure 1). Similarly, membership in the turfgrass research division (C5) of the Crop Science Society of America reflects only 17% of membership as female.

**Figure 1**

*Estimated Female Membership in National Turfgrass Associations Provided Through Personal Communication in February 2020.*



As of 2019, only 6.3% of workers in grounds maintenance across all sectors were female (USBLS, 2019). Therefore, work in the turfgrass industry for women is considered a non-traditional job, defined as an occupation in which 25% or less of total employment is female (United States Department of Labor Women’s Bureau, 2020). Similar female underrepresentation is prevalent in other labor sectors including farming, ranching, and other agricultural managing (10%); welding, soldering, and brazing (5.3%); construction labor (3.5%); plumbing, pipefitting, and steam fitting (2.7%); and electricity (2.2%) (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Low female engagement in the turfgrass industry may be attributed to barriers uniquely faced by women that discourage career development.

A decrease in the United States unemployment rate in recent years may also be contributing to low recruitment of turfgrass professionals of any gender (Hartsock, 2019). From August 2016 to February 2020, the unemployment rate steadily remained ≤ 5%, reaching an all-time low since the turn of the century in late 2019 and early 2020 (3.5%; USBLS, 2020). The decrease in unemployment from high rates (5 to 10%) occurring in 2008 to 2015 equates to fewer people seeking work. Additionally, recent declines in immigrant labor and blue-collar worker availability have caused a severe labor shortage in the turfgrass industry specifically (Getz, 2016; Hartsock, 2019; Woelfel, 2019). In a 2018 survey conducted by the GCSAA, 59% of golf course superintendents reported they had unfilled or open positions for most of the peak season in 2018. The labor market was described as *bad* or *very bad* by 63% of respondents in 2018 compared to a response in the same categories of only 19% in 2012

(GCSAA, 2018). These statistics indicate a change in the industry is required to meet labor needs, which may become further pronounced due to economic contraction caused by COVID-19.

Increased recruitment of women to the turfgrass industry could ease labor concerns. Women currently represent an underused demographic in the turfgrass industry and have the potential to close the labor gap if recruitment and retention flourish. However, change in the industry is first needed to improve the culture for current women and to create a more welcoming atmosphere for women considering careers in turf.

The subject of women working in turfgrass has recently gained attention on social media platforms and in trade journals and magazines. The accomplishments of female leaders paving the way for others has been featured with increased frequency (Brown, 2013; Carson, 2019, 2020; Richman, 2018, 2019). Additionally, the turfgrass industry is working to create space for women through the development of programs such as Ladies Leading Turf sponsored by Syngenta, Women in Golf sponsored by Bayer Environmental Science, and “Women in Turf” events held at industry association meetings (Golf Course Industry, 2019; Syngenta, 2021).

These media features and events signal the beginning of change toward acceptance of women in the industry and have brought forward some barriers and challenges women in the industry face for discussion. However, these accounts are limited as few women have shared their experiences and may have been influenced by feeling a need to maintain their own emotions or fearing retaliation by peers. Additionally, some males in the industry perceive change in the name of diversity as unwarranted given that few women have openly expressed their challenges, and those who have are often considered outliers. Therefore, a deep understanding of barriers for women in the turfgrass industry is needed to promote change and ultimately inform recruitment and retention efforts (Zula, 2014).

Research with these goals has been conducted in other male dominated agricultural industries including the study of female deans of agricultural institutions, tenure-track female faculty in postsecondary agricultural schools, and female agriculturalists in Australia (Kleihauer et al., 2013; Murphrey et al., 2016; Stephens et al., 2018). Female faculty success factors include having workplace awareness and expectations, taking proactive strategies to facilitate success, and managing internal and external actions (Murphrey et al., 2016). Similarly, female agriculturalists in Australia described overcoming hardship, developing leadership styles, and encouraging outreach for others as major components of the journey to leadership (Stephens et al., 2018). Female deans of agriculture demonstrated their leadership was not limited by education, gender, or other external factors and their personalities encompassed leadership traits such as surgency, conscientiousness, agreeableness, adjustment, and intellectance (Kleihauer et al., 2013). These findings indicate women are successful leaders in male dominated agricultural fields and an awareness of barriers is increasingly needed to change these sectors toward acceptance and comfort for women in order to continue promoting their success in such roles.

Such information would be valuable to the turfgrass industry but has not yet been elucidated. A scientific assessment of the barriers faced by women in turfgrass may aid the industry in creating a more diverse workforce. Conducting anonymous interviews, which provide protection to interviewees, would likely facilitate a more global view of challenges women face than personal media already available. Data obtained in the turfgrass industry could likely be extrapolated to other sectors of the green industry including landscaping and nursery production, which are facing similar labor challenges. Understanding challenges faced by women currently in the industry will define opportunities for change, ultimately improving female retainment in the industry and enhancing recruiting abilities, which will aid the turfgrass industry in mitigating labor issues.

## Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and journeys to leadership of 13 female leaders in the turfgrass industry to discover the barriers and challenges they have faced. The objective of this research is to promote change and to inform efforts in the turfgrass industry focused on recruiting women to the workforce. The central research question posed to participants was “*What lived experiences have shaped your career in the turfgrass industry?*”

## Theoretical Framework

A leader’s gender and associated characteristics (i.e., masculine or feminine) may be essential indicators of leadership and, in various contexts, are attributed with the leader (Kark & Eagly, 2010; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Schein, 2007). However, there is a shift to more women assuming leadership positions (Eagly, 2004; Kaufman & Grace, 2011) that has resulted in women increasingly being seen as transformational. According to Northouse (2021), “transformational leadership is the process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower” (p. 186). van Engen, van der Leeden, and Willemsen (2001) mentioned transformational leadership is “depicted as a feminine leadership style because of its emphasis on the manager’s intellectual stimulation of, and the individual consideration given to, employees” (p. 582). The association of transformational leadership aligns more with the feminine than masculine role due to the mentorship and empowerment the leader provides their followers (Duehr & Bono 2006; Kark, 2004).

While women are depicted as more transformational leaders, one’s decision to engage in careers centered around leadership is often determined by their genetic endowment, environmental conditions and events, and learning experiences. These areas are best explained by Krumboltz’s Social Learning Theory (1976), which describes genetic endowment as one’s race, sex, physical appearance and characteristics, and intelligence. Additionally, Krumboltz (1976) describes environmental conditions and events as social, political, cultural, and economical occurrences beyond one’s control. Furthermore, learning experiences consist of past experiences which impact career decision making (Krumboltz, 1976).

Another framework that directly influenced this study was Barsh, Cranston, and Craske’s (2008) Centered Leadership Model. The Centered Leadership Model is focused on five areas which assist women to thrive in a leadership role: engaging (voice, ownership, risk-taking, adaptability); connecting (network design, sponsorship, reciprocity, inclusiveness); positive framing (self-awareness, learned optimism, moving on); managing energy (minimizing depletion, restoration, flow); and meaning (happiness, signature strengths, purpose).

## Methods and Procedures

### Research Approach

A phenomenological approach was used in an attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of study participants in order to understand how and what meaning they construct from their lived experiences (Taylor et al., 2015). Phenomenology allowed for the accurate interpretation and description of the career journeys of 13 women in the turfgrass industry and how each woman has sustained her leadership role in a male dominated field.

Forty-six female leaders in the turfgrass industry were identified as potential study participants through personal relationships with one of the primary researchers or by suggestion from leadership in the Sports Turf Management Association, GCSAA, or Canadian Golf Superintendents Association.

Researchers sought to engage participants from the widest diversity of work titles, experience, and geographic locations possible. Therefore, due to an inability of researchers to conduct 46 interviews, invitation to participate in the study was limited to 19 of the 46 identified women, representing the greatest diversity across their position in either the golf or sports field management sectors of the industry, years of experience in the industry, and geographic location. For example, if two women working in golf course maintenance were from the same state, only one was chosen as a potential participant based on her diversity in years of experience.

Female leaders were invited to participate in the study via email. Thirteen of the 19 women agreed to participate. Participants were from three countries including nine states in the U.S. and three Canadian provinces. The interviewed women had six to 30+ years of experience working in turfgrass. Eight of the women worked on golf courses whereas five worked on sports fields in leadership roles including golf course superintendent, assistant golf course superintendent, graduate student, athletic field manager, and assistant athletic field manager. Additionally, many of the women held leadership roles in service to the national or local chapters of the GCSAA, Sports Turf Managers Association, and the Canadian Golf Superintendents Association.

This research was approved by the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board prior to contacting participants (UTK-IRB- 20-05827-XM; May 18, 2020). All participants signed an informed consent letter prior to being interviewed. To protect all parties participating in this study, the identity of interviewed women and their affiliated workplaces remains confidential.

### **Data Collection**

Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and safety measures, data were unable to be collected through in person interviews and field observation. Therefore, data were obtained by primary researchers virtually conducting semi-structured interviews of participants. During interviews, participants were asked to respond conversationally to 13 open-ended, non-leading questions related to social learning theory and the centered leadership model (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Questions Related To Social Learning Theory And The Centered Leadership Model Asked In A Conversational Manner*

<b>Social Learning Theory</b>
1. Describe your family upbringing
2. Describe your immediate family.
3. Describe the road to working in turfgrass or describe the road to obtaining your current position.
4. Describe your educational experience.
5. Describe events in your life that have altered the direction in your career pursuit.
6. Describe your perceptions of yourself in terms of your leadership and leadership role.
<b>Centered Leadership Model</b>
1. What has motivated you to obtain your leadership role?
2. What advice do you have for future women pursuing a career in turfgrass?
3. Describe how you make meaning of your strengths or weaknesses.
4. Describe how you manage your energy so you can be a productive worker/leader/wife/mother/etc.
5. Describe how you keep a positive frame of mind.
6. Describe your network relationships and mentorship experiences (both past and present).
7. Describe your philosophy of collaborating with others and your ability to take risks. Now compare your philosophy with actuality.

An environment of comfort and flexibility was created for interviewees through virtual interviews by allowing each participant to select a method of interview, to suggest an interview time convenient to their schedule, and to choose their physical location during virtual interviews .

Two participants elected to share their experiences via email. These participants were electronically sent a word document containing the 13 interview protocol questions. Participants were given two weeks to respond to the questions and to provide any additional information regarding their experiences working in the turfgrass industry.

Eleven of the 13 participants chose to be interviewed through video call. Interviews were conducted over the platform Zoom. This method of interview allowed researchers to personally interact with participants in a conversational manner. Researchers verbally asked participants to answer the 13 research protocol questions. Interviews lasted 30 to 90 minutes and were recorded.

Many participants from interviews, conducted both by email and Zoom, provided additional information and detail beyond the posed interview questions. Immediately following the conclusion of each interview or reading email responses, primary researchers recorded descriptive and reflective notes. These notes included reflection of bias, connection to participant experiences, and commentary on the emotional aspects of the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed by REV (transcription company) and analyzed with primary researchers' reflective notes. Direct question responses were considered interview transcriptions for interviews conducted via email. Reflective notes allowed researchers to recall the details of interviews and their thoughts. Researchers developed themes by examining data for significant statements and elements of meaning, creating textural and structural descriptions, and recognizing descriptions which

revealed commonalities among the participants' experiences (Taylor et al., 2015). Emerging themes from analysis were then open-coded to discover the main concepts within each theme.

Data were analyzed and coded separately by both primary researchers. Research codes included recruitment, challenges, significant relationships, peer support, childhood experiences, mentorship, positive mindsets, motivation, leadership, encouragement for others, turning points, education, personal growth, and industry growth. Primary researchers discussed their coding and agreed upon six main themes: (a) career paths, (b) leadership styles, (c) mentorship involvement, (d) challenges, (e) opportunities for personal growth, and (f) opportunities for industry growth. The challenges theme is most relevant to fostering industry change and was the strongest of the six themes, thus the theme was further divided into three sub-themes: (a) family building, (b) peer misconduct, and (c) overcoming stereotypes.

### **Researchers**

Five researchers were involved in this study – two primary researchers and three secondary researchers. Primary researchers contacted participants, conducted interviews, analyzed data, and led manuscript development. Secondary researchers aided in designing research, analyzing data, and writing the manuscript. All three secondary researchers are male faculty members at the University of Tennessee. One secondary researcher is an associate professor in the department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications. The other two secondary researchers are professors of Turfgrass Science in the department of Plant Sciences.

Both primary researchers are female. Primary researcher A is a graduate student in both the departments of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications and Plant Sciences. Her career focus is studying turfgrass science. Primary researcher B is a professor in the department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications whose research focuses on women in leadership.

### **Validation Strategies**

#### ***Subjectivity Statement***

Prior to the study initiation, both primary researchers reflected on qualities they possess which may impact the relationships with interviewed women and findings of the study. Primary researcher A has been a female member of the turfgrass industry for six years. She faced similar challenges to those described by study participants while working on male dominated crews on golf courses, athletic fields, and in research settings. Negative experiences in the turfgrass industry may have caused the researcher to focus on the challenges faced by women in the industry and on developing strategies to overcome gender hardship. Primary researcher B is a qualitative researcher who is passionate about women in the agriculture industry. Primary researcher B has participated in several agriculture initiatives highlighting women and providing mentorship to others who are passionate about advancing women in the industry.

Both primary researchers hold moderate feminist beliefs and are passionate about female achievement in male dominated industries. These beliefs may have influenced participants' responses when asked to describe the challenges they faced and their leadership roles in a male dominated industry.

In an effort to mitigate impacts of bias on study results, researchers sought to maintain a neutral viewpoint by regularly reflecting on their bias, assumptions of study outcomes, and each occasion of contact or communication with study participants. Researchers also structured interview questions in a

way that did not lead or guide participants to a predetermined response in order to prevent the imposition of the researcher's knowledge or presuppositions of the study topic. Moreover, male researchers were included on the research team to mitigate bias.

### ***Credibility, Transferability, and Dependability***

In addition to the researcher's efforts to reduce the impact of bias on the data collected, several validation strategies were employed to document the accuracy and value of this phenomenological research study. Since prolonged engagement in the field was not feasible due to COVID-19, extended Zoom interviews were conducted, and the triangulation of data sources, methods, and investigators were techniques used to establish credibility (Taylor et al., 2015). Additionally, member checks of data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions were conducted to confirm credibility of the study.

Equivalent to external validity in quantitative research is transferability (Hays & Singh, 2012). In this study, transferability was established through the use of interviews, related literature, and reflective journals to confirm consistency amongst sources. Additionally, a thick description of the studied population was provided (Hays & Singh, 2012). Moreover, the researcher presented distinct descriptions of the study's procedures, interview results, and conclusions. Dependability of the study was established through peer review by another researcher trained in qualitative analysis throughout the research process.

## **Findings**

Interviewed women described similar experiences to one another in their journeys to leadership and expressed parallel thoughts on the future of the industry. These descriptions have been divided into six main themes aligned with the responses of all 13 participants: (a) career paths, (b) leadership styles, (c) mentorship involvement, (d) challenges, (e) opportunities for personal growth, and (f) opportunities for industry growth. Sub-themes including family building, peer misconduct, and overcoming stereotypes were further developed within the main theme of challenges.

### **Career Paths**

Although interviewed women had highly diverse geographic locations, job titles, and years of experience working in the turfgrass industry, many participants shared similar lived experiences. All the participants experienced childhood upbringings involving outdoor activities including playing sports, working on farms, skiing, hiking, or fishing. Some women indicated time spent outdoors in early childhood influenced their career decision to work in the green industry later in life.

In addition to similar upbringing, all of the women discussed the importance of education in their industry success. Twelve of the 13 interviewees earned a degree in turfgrass science or related agricultural field. Interestingly, 10 participants began their college education in majors other than turfgrass such as nursing, kinesiology, dental hygiene, psychology, engineering, or construction. Value was placed on education by all participants including one woman without a turfgrass degree,

College and affording that was just not an option. So, I went straight into a career and having to earn money. Don't get me wrong, I learned everything that I could possibly learn short of going to college. I wouldn't highly recommend the path that I took because it wasn't easy. I think that there were lots of times I wished I had that base foundation of education from going to turf school and it would have made things easier for me just in knowledge base, but I wish that I had and I always recommend it. So, even though I didn't, I think that you can have a successful career in turfgrass without a degree, but I think that college gives you a leg up.

## **Leadership Styles**

Most of the women described their leadership style as open or hands-on. Women expressed the importance of working alongside their crews as much as possible and taking time to teach rather than simply direct staff. Emphasis was placed on providing crew members with opportunities for growth through education and honesty. Female leaders felt strongly that staff empowered with knowledge take ownership of their work. Furthermore, women engaged in open leadership styles in this way by maintaining order while allowing for flexibility. When asked to describe her leadership style one woman responded,

I'm the type of leader that will teach anything that you want to know and I like to give people loose supervision. I'm there as a safety net. I'm not going to micromanage you. So, there are some superintendents that will manage their team such that "This is the way I taught you to do it and I want you to do it exactly the way I taught you to do it." My outlook is, if the end product is the same and it's of the same quality and you got there a different way than I told you to get there, then I'm fine. So, I like seeing innovation and people who change processes to be more efficient but achieve the same outcome.

Many participants felt this open-leadership style common to women in the industry is different from the styles of their male counterparts. Women tended to focus on members of their staff as individuals through teaching and by engaging in the emotional aspects of leadership. Female leaders expressed they are more relational than men. One woman responded,

I think I'm a very hands-on leader. But, I'm also probably compassionate to a fault as a leader. I have had a lot of different managers that treat people poorly. So, because of that, that's why I say compassionate to a fault, because I try to please too many people with the job tasks that I'm trying to assign them. And I think that I try to notice a lot more about staff than a lot of other managers might just because of the different managers that I have had. So, I notice a lot of the little cues if people are unhappy or starting to get too tired with the jobs that they're doing.

Another participant responded similarly by stating,

I think in our genetic makeup, the way that we were raised, women tend to be more empathetic and want to talk about their feelings and create that relationship. And men, sometimes are like "I just want to get the job done. I don't want to go through this touchy-feely stuff, I just want to get the job done."

Emphasis was placed by female leaders on the importance of keeping their staff happy. Women felt that connecting emotionally was important to accomplish this. One woman explained how she connected with her crew members by saying,

I always have returning staff. I never have anybody that's not happy to come to work. I make sure I say thank you at the end of the day to everybody for what they did, every single day. I'm very approachable. I like working for somebody like that, so I just do my best to try and bring that back in. There's these strong men that are working in this environment where the boss is going, "Go, go, go, go, go," but then I'll step in and take over as superintendent. At first, they somewhat take advantage of the fact that I'm a little bit more lax, but I make ways of saying things to make them want to work to their potential.

Another respondent's approach was considering her staff a key part of her budget,

Following a budget is very strict to me but I'm willing to take away from other things in order to make the staff happy, because in my opinion, if you don't have a happy staff, you're not going to get as good a product.

## **Mentorship Involvement**

Women noted the importance of mentorship in making women feel welcome in the industry and developing their careers. Mentorship was discussed in terms of both being a mentor and a mentee. Interviewed women had similar views of a successful mentor/mentee relationship with emphasis placed on providing support for both parties involved. One woman described this relationship by saying,

Mentorship is messy because the person has to learn the lessons without you spoon-feeding them. So, it can be messy and it's not all fun and sometimes there are tears involved. It's about support. It's about providing a safe space for people to learn and grow. I could sit here and preach all day long to you, but that's not being a mentor.

Participants also described the role of mentors in leading mentees to answers and providing opportunities for growth. Women agreed that mentor/mentee relationships are highly personal and different for everyone: "I think finding the right mentor for you means a lot, because what's good for me and what's good for you is two very different things."

When asked to provide advice for mentees, women discussed the importance of choosing a mentor willing to teach and being a mentee willing to learn. One woman responded by saying, Find someone who wants to teach you literally everything. Don't be afraid to try everything when given the opportunity. The more pieces of equipment you can run and repair the better, not only for your career but for your confidence working in a culture that's generally all men. Don't be afraid to ask questions and admit you don't know something. You'll never learn until you can be humble and ask.

Women described the benefits of serving as a mentor to women currently in the industry. Some participants felt their skills in turfgrass management have been enhanced from mentoring because they learned more about turfgrass science through researching and answering mentee questions and refining communication skills. Women also discussed the value of mentoring in terms of productivity. One participant summarized her mentorship experience at work by saying, "If you invest in people, they will start to invest in you."

## **Challenges**

Although participants generally maintained a positive view of their experiences in the turfgrass industry, all interviewed women revealed challenges faced uniquely by women. Women expressed discussing challenges is not only important to foster change, but also to show current women in the industry they are not alone. One woman explained,

I need some kind of camaraderie from my fellow females in this industry regardless of if it's sports or golf. Tell me, how do you move on? They can't answer that question for me, but it'd be nice to know, 'Hey, I was there too before. This happened to me, so you're not alone.' Just that feeling.

Most of the issues described involve difficulty building a family, inappropriate peer conduct, and overcoming stereotypes, and are discussed below as sub-themes.

## **Family Building**

A major challenge discussed by most interviewed women was the ability to raise children and foster spousal relationships. Of the 13 interviewed participants, only four are married and five have children. Participants acknowledged that men working in turfgrass face similar challenges in work-life

balance; however, women felt these challenges were experienced more deeply and frequently by women due to duties of motherhood and physical limitations imposed by pregnancy.

One woman discussed the demands of working in turfgrass as a force of choice between family and work,

I didn't really have a desire to have kids myself because I just felt I could not split my time between having a family and having the career that I wanted to have. These turf management careers are a lifestyle and don't mix well with inclusion of a lot of other things.

Similarly, another woman felt that her career path was limited by her desire to raise a family, When I was in school everybody had to do a paper on their goals for the next 10 years and one of my professors looked at me like I had four heads. I said that I wanted to work at a low budget public course, that I could learn a lot on, but where I could also be the mom that I wanted to be. My kids were still in school, I was actively involved in coaching my kids in sports, and I needed to be able to have the time to be both a mom and the assistant at that time. It afforded me that, whereas so many people in the industry seem to want to go to top 100 golf clubs. I didn't want to go that way. That wasn't what I wanted to do with my career.

Women also felt that aside from raising children, pregnancy could negatively impact career mobility by imposing physical limitations and requiring women to take time off for medical appointments and maternity leave. One woman revealed she is reluctant to have children despite her desire to by saying, "I am terrified to get pregnant as I feel I would be worked out of my position".

### *Peer Misconduct*

Participants described instances of sexual harassment and expressed their discomfort in being pursued romantically on social media, at work, and at conferences. One woman recounted an experience with a male superior who initiated a professional conversation that he later interrupted with an offer for him to take her on a date. The participant felt this undermined her leadership role and made her uncomfortable seeing and speaking with him in the future.

Such experiences have led many participants to feel self-conscious about how they look and what they wear to work,

It's hard because of the perception. People look at you and they see you out there and you're not the typical groundskeeper. You're not the typical person that looks like you're working in dirt. Some people assume you're there for inappropriate reasons. And then you start doubting yourself. Well, what do other people see me as? And then you build up this wall. You can't really be your true self. I would wear more professional looking things. I would wear shorts and I was worried about, 'Oh, are my shorts too short? Am I showing too much? What are they going to think?'

One participant described feelings of paranoia related to wearing makeup at work,

So I put on mascara, I put on makeup. I'm justifying to you why I had makeup on. So that should say how much abuse I've felt through all these years. I'm justifying right now to you why I put mascara on for an interview. That shouldn't even be a question. Normal people just wake up and put on their makeup. But I'm justifying to you five years, seven years later, why I had makeup on.

Women also discussed being mistaken for someone's wife, a waitress, or the beverage server rather than a turfgrass manager at conferences and at work. One woman shared

I struggled a lot because I was so tired of being mistaken for somebody's wife. Being asked whose wife I was or whose fiancée I was, girlfriend I was, was a punch to the

gut every single time. I'm not here with a man. I'm here because I work here. It's hard to walk through that entire event center, and everybody is looking at you funny because you're one of six girls in the area, and it's awkward.

### ***Overcoming Stereotypes***

All participants felt overcoming stereotypes was a challenge in their journeys to leadership. Women described experiences of having to prove themselves, receiving fewer opportunities than male counterparts, managing their emotions, and trying to "fit in". One participant summarized current stereotypes in the industry by recounting a conversation with a former male superior,

The second golf course superintendent I worked for sat me down one day, and he said, "If you want to get into turf, there are some things that I think you need to accept and not necessarily like going into this field. You're going to have to do it better, be smarter, be more savvy and be thicker-skinned just to get the same respect that the guys get just walking in the door."

Another participant described challenges in being taken seriously in a leadership role:

Getting people to take you seriously and getting them to understand you are qualified, capable, and good at your job. And then what was always interesting was the salesman, those poor salesman, who would come to visit me. They go to a guy and they talk about guy stuff, right? The stuff that's not appropriate to talk to a woman about. They would come into my office and they wouldn't know what to say.

Similarly, other participants noted difficulties in building trust with leadership due to gender differences. Some participants felt this was due to an inability to form a personal connection. One participant described an experience in which her superior called industry suppliers to check on her decisions, something he did not do for her male counterparts. Other participants expressed challenges in building trust with leadership and their crews because of real or perceived physical limitations due to their gender. These perceptions caused women to receive fewer opportunities than male employees, such as not being trusted to operate equipment. One participant explained how gender stereotypes influenced her internship experience,

I feel like I didn't get as many opportunities as the other intern who was there. He got to do more stuff than I did on the day-by-day. Like the machinery, we did renovations and they didn't, for some reason, trust me with the equipment to help them out. And they had him help out with that. And I did a little bit of it, but they put me more on mowing or helping out in the gardens, which I didn't mind. I didn't mind doing gardening. I mean, I grew up in horticulture, but it was frustrating.

Because of gender differences, many women felt pressure to "fit in" by trying to mirror the appearance, behaviors, and mannerisms of male leaders. For example, women expressed feeling a need to manage their emotions. One woman discussed feeling that her emotional behavior had an effect on other women in the industry,

When you behave in a certain manner, like say angry all the time, you just set a bad precedent. They'll just be like, 'Oh, she's just bringing her anger.' Sometimes men will just think women get angry for no reason, or we are nagging. But if you maintain a very positive attitude... I think because we are... I want to say we are the pioneers... I know there are many who are before us, but we are sort of the pioneers in getting many women into it. We need to set a good precedence so that they are more accepted, then they can behave how they want. They don't need to prove anything, but for now we really need to, like I said, set that good precedence.

However, women also described being taken advantage of by their employees for trying to maintain positivity and not being as stern as male leaders.

For reasons related to peer misconduct and fitting in, some women expressed the sentiment of needing to be a “tom-boy” to be accepted in the industry. One participant stated,

I think in this industry, you're not getting a lot of the really feminine females, although there are quite a few, but on average that's not what you're seeing. You're seeing a little bit more of the tom-boy type. I think that helps with the fact that you are in a male dominated industry. So being a very feminine female would be very difficult. Just because I don't think you'd be treated the same as a more tom-boyish type. And I know that's very wrong, but that's just what it is I think.

### **Opportunities for Personal Growth**

Participants discussed that while challenges for women working in turfgrass exist, women can take steps to improve their experience in the industry. Women expressed the importance of taking time for themselves and working toward finding balance in life. One woman summarized her ability to maintain a positive mindset by saying,

I'm making this very purposeful effort in taking time for myself and understanding that nobody is going to die if I don't get that report in exactly on time. I can stop working now and go home and have a really nice dinner and a glass of wine and not work and come in the morning and finish it, and it would just be fine. You need to set good habits now so that you can do it well because the golf course will be there in the morning. And there are some things that are an emergency at a golf course, but then there are a lot that are not.

Participants also described the need for female leaders to build a team they can trust so that they can focus on relaxation rather than work when taking time off. One participant approached balancing her time by stating,

Turf, it's a living being. Organisms that are living, day and night. You are responsible for a lot of plants. It's a lot, but the reality is whether or not you're thinking about it while you're sitting at home, it's not going to change what's going on at the golf course while you're not there.

Female leaders also highlighted the significance of personal awareness in industry success. Women should regularly assess their professional strengths and weaknesses and work on improving these qualities. “I like to describe my weaknesses rather in the terms of opportunity to grow and learn. I enjoy always trying to improve myself and learn new skills,” stated one participant. Another participant expressed overcoming challenges as a way of improving herself

I feel blessed that I found a career that I like. I found an industry that I like, and while there's been hurdles along the way, I'm a bull in a china shop and nothing is really stopping me. I just learned from them and adapted and overcame. Challenges are opportunities and opportunities are challenges and I've preached that enough that I believe in it, and I'm going to make the best of anything that's tossed at me.

Women should also seek to foster relationships in the turfgrass industry as a means of overcoming challenges. Many participants felt finding camaraderie with other women and relying on peers in the industry for support benefitted their experience working in turfgrass. When discussing feeling alone following a negative experience one woman expressed,

I need some kind of camaraderie from my fellow females in this industry regardless of if it's baseball, football, soccer, whatever, golf. Tell me, how do you move on? They can't answer that question for me, but it'd be nice to know, "Hey, I was there too before. This happened to me, so you're not alone." Just that feeling.

Women can form these relationships by attending “Women in Turf” events. One participant described, Right now, because of the Women in Turf events, I’ve had the absolute privilege of meeting a group of amazing women who support each other and are always there to ask questions or bounce ideas off! Between Twitter, texting and the WhatsApp. We’ve been able to stay pretty connected!

Women working in the industry should make an effort to attend these events for both personal gain and to serve as support for others. Similar supportive relationships can also be created with men working in turfgrass. One participant discussed the value of relationship building by saying, I also knew that along the way, you have to have industry people to help you get through. You have to know that you can call somebody down the street and say, "I really don't know what's being asked of me, can you help me?" And have those people and learn from each other. To me, networking is what's developed my career friends. They're there for me as colleagues, but they're there for me in my life as well as things go rolling along.

Such relationships can create opportunities for women. Participants discussed the role of networking in stimulating their career journeys. Women also described the need for females in the industry to be open to new opportunities and not limit themselves. One woman said,

So even if this one job that you take in the turfgrass industry because you love turfgrass or you love growing things, maybe that one job doesn't suit you. There are tons of other jobs within the same industry that you can hone in on, on what turns you on and what you'd be satisfied with. I would always say, "Never do a job that doesn't feed you here."

All participants discussed the benefits of seeking educational and leadership opportunities. Women can enhance their education by engaging with and learning from others in the industry. Educational opportunities can also be obtained by attending conferences and working toward professional certifications through industry associations. Participants suggested women apply for leadership experiences such as the GCSAA Grassroots Ambassador program, the EXCEL leadership program sponsored by NuFarm, and the Women in Golf conference sponsored by Bayer Environmental Science.

Women can also improve their leadership skills by serving in leadership positions in turfgrass associations. These opportunities benefit the woman in the leadership role and provide a pathway to future success for other women. One woman described serving on a national turfgrass association board by saying,

I think if I was a woman coming up in this industry and I saw a woman on the board, I would be really excited about it. So it would help women. It would just be a lot tougher on the girl on the board I think.

Such apprehension in engaging in leadership and seeking opportunity was discussed by many participants. Women expressed perceptions of themselves as one of the major barriers they faced in personal development. One woman stated,

When I first began there were not many women in the industry and they have always seemed to rely on the approval of men. I need to change that perception for myself. I need to stop listening to men tell me I can't do it.

Overcoming self-imposed barriers was presented as a means for women to grow in the industry.

## **Opportunities for Industry Growth**

Interviewed women discussed ways for the turfgrass industry to improve culture. Women emphasized the need for all members of the industry to promote acceptance of diversity. One woman explained acceptance could occur in the form of assuming women belong:

I remember an incident where I went to a conference. One man, who is now my friend, said hi to everyone and left me out, because I was the only woman in the midst of all the superintendents. Later, he came and apologized and said, "I didn't think that you were part of the conference. I thought maybe you had come here to do service". So, I kept it very positive. Right now, he's a really good friend of mine. I just told him maybe it's just good to not assume. It's not bad saying hi to the waiter. Even if I was the waitress, it's not wrong saying hi to the waitress. Maybe you would just have said hi, then later realized that I'm part of the group.

Additionally, members of the turfgrass industry can show acceptance by avoiding doubting the abilities of women. Participants described their dismay in realizing leadership and coworkers assumed they lacked turfgrass knowledge or were unable to perform their job physically. Women desired the opportunity to show their passion and skills without prior judgement. One participant described the value in having male coworkers treat her as an equal by saying,

I've always had bosses that push me and don't let me cheap out on the fact that I'm physically smaller than them. They would say, "You can carry the same amount that we're carrying". And they forced me to be an equal and a strong person. So, I appreciate that and I totally now have their respect because I've always pushed myself to do the same as a man in the same position.

Men in the turfgrass industry should promote acceptance of women themselves and seek to hold others accountable for their actions if misconduct is observed. One participant described, The management really stood with me, and they really helped me out and set the ground rules like, "She's your leader, you need to listen to her. She knows what she's doing. You just have to really just listen. If you have any concerns, just approach her."

Interviewed women were appreciative of managers and others in the industry who have spoken out on their behalf during incidents of misconduct and who have believed in their leadership abilities.

As a whole, the industry should seek to foster and create opportunities for women. Men can serve as mentors for women working in turfgrass by providing support and encouragement.

Opportunities for women can be created through such relationship building. One woman described the importance of networking and supporting others by saying,

I've always told anybody who's come to a conference for the first time, if there's somebody you want to know come find me and I'll go find them. I'll introduce the two of you and then you're on your own, because people did that for me. They walked me up and that's what you have to have, people willing to help you make that first connection. I think now there is a large message going out there, how can I help? A lot of times, that's all I ask.

Opportunity can also be in the form of providing education. Men should nominate or encourage qualified women to take on leadership roles and pursue professional development. Employers should also ensure female interns and employees have the chance to learn equally to their male counterparts through experiential learning or attending conferences and educational sessions.

The industry has made recent progress in supporting and accepting women through the development of women's programs. One participant expressed,

The women in turf events are definitely beneficial. It has created such a bond with the women that were able to go and they have created a Facebook page that has reached out to even more women. I love to see what they've done. That's something that has come out of this movement. It's definitely given us a platform, not saying that we're special, but sometimes the women just need to talk to other women.

The turfgrass industry should continue to provide such platforms to women to increase female comfort and better the industry culture.

### **Conclusions**

This study found women in the turfgrass industry, from a broad range of positions, years of experience, and geographic locations excelled as leaders by overcoming and growing from barriers related to gender discrimination. Similar to Kleihaur et al. (2013) and Stephens et al. (2018), women's leadership development was not limited to their educational and professional experiences and was highly influenced by their lived experiences. Women discussed their journeys to leadership in terms of challenges, mentorship, and opportunities.

Overcoming challenges related to gender was found to be a significant factor in leadership development. Many of these challenges are not unique to the women in the turfgrass industry and are prevalent in other traditionally male dominated careers (Baxter et al., 2011). However, such problems related to sexism and inappropriate peer conduct may be a barrier to the number of women entering and remaining in the industry.

Women in this study described facing real and perceived barriers in terms of personal growth. Similar to the findings of Kelsey (2007), female leaders in the turfgrass industry maintained a high degree of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is people's beliefs in their ability to influence events that affect their lives (Bandura, 2010). Female agricultural education teachers and students who felt a need to prove themselves, a challenge common to women in turfgrass, reported high levels of self-efficacy by believing they had the skills to do so from their previous experiences and upbringing (Kelsey, 2007). In Kelsey's study, 64% of 78 participants described methods of self-efficacy as a means of overcoming barriers related to gender discrimination. Individuals can observe their performance in relation to others through self-observation generalizations and task approach skills, which relate observations of self and environment to create projections and can be used to form conclusions as a means of informing changed behavior and outcomes (Krumboltz, 1976).

Women in turfgrass reported similar mechanisms of coping and overcoming challenges by drawing on skills and past successes to persist in their careers, aligning with Krumboltz's (1976) Social Learning Theory. Female leaders in this study demonstrated self-efficacy by enhancing their perceptions of self through building relationships with co-workers, connecting with mentors and other women in the industry, seeking additional leadership and educational opportunities, and maintaining positive outlooks. Such measures have been identified as success factors for women in other male-dominated fields. For example, Murphrey et al. (2016) found the internal actions of self-awareness and remaining true to oneself, in addition to external actions such as communicating clearly, spreading optimism, and being mindful of dress, were success factors for tenure-track female faculty members in higher agricultural education. Women in this study also described similar external actions related to success.

Leadership success was also attributed to leadership and educational opportunity. Women reported strong influences of educational achievement and previous leadership roles in the success of

their current roles (Krumboltz, 1976). Thus, development of opportunities in these areas provided by employers and the turfgrass industry were described as a method of improving industry culture for women. A similar finding was reported by Androulidakis (2001), who found that of nine studied independent variables, leadership experience was most likely to predict leadership ability for women in rural communities. Although unsurprising, this finding indicates the importance of creating leadership opportunities for women in the workplace and in professional associations early in their careers to develop female leaders as described by Barsh, Cranston, and Craske (2008). This will also assist women in becoming more confident and encouraging more effective leadership (Barsh et al., 2008).

The concluded needs for industry change and for more opportunities for women in turfgrass are likely important factors in increasing recruitment and retention for women. Although individuals are born with inherited qualities, such as gender, that may limit occupational preference, an individual is more likely to express preference for an occupation if they experience positive reinforcement by engaging in opportunities that are associated with successful performance (Krumboltz, 1976). Because occupational decision making is highly influenced by past learning experiences, the more opportunities women have to successfully engage in the turfgrass industry through positive experiences, the more likely they are to remain in the field and grow as leaders.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

Women in this study were hopeful that sharing their lived experiences would inspire others to better the industry and improve culture for future women in the turfgrass industry by enlightening the industry to areas for change. When asked to provide advice for women entering the industry, interviewees echoed sentiments of, “*Just do it.*” Participants described the need for women in the industry to be strong, confident, and their authentic selves. One woman said,

Any woman entering this industry at this time is going to be a trendsetter, right? You are blazing a trail for young women to follow you. And part of the challenge of being a trailblazer is that there are uncomfortable situations. And you have to learn how to navigate those with integrity and dignity.

Information discovered in this study can be used to prepare females entering the industry with the knowledge and skills to overcome potential barriers and take full advantage of positive opportunities. Additionally, the findings of this study are likely relevant to women working in other green industries such as landscaping and nursery production, which face similar challenges in culture, labor, and recruitment.

While findings of this study most strongly support change, results of the career path theme can also inform female-centric recruiting. The educational background of female leaders interviewed in this study revealed that 11 of 13 started in careers outside of the turfgrass industry. These findings indicate few women are choosing turfgrass as a career immediately following grade school. Thus, students need to be informed about turfgrass as a career option early in their education.

Recruiting will likely also be enhanced through increased female visibility and the development of formal mentorship programs. Women in this study described the positive impacts mentorship and fostering relationships with other women had on their leadership success. This research found women sharing their experiences with others and continuing to participate in events highlighting women in turfgrass will likely further showcase the abilities of females and encourage others to consider turfgrass as a career.

Future research should assess the success of implemented targeted recruiting programs to increase diversity in turfgrass education and the workforce. Further exploration of successful mentorship of women in turfgrass focused on informing male supervisors who have not previously employed females is of value to the industry. Additionally, there is a need to determine barriers faced by women in other sectors of the turfgrass industry including academia, sod production, and sales. Similar studies of the underrepresentation of other minority groups in the turfgrass industry are warranted and necessary.

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