

A photograph of three women in climbing gear standing on a rocky ledge in a desert landscape. The woman in the center is wearing a bright pink jacket and a white helmet. The woman on the left is wearing a grey jacket and a white helmet, and is holding a large coil of blue rope. The woman on the right is wearing a teal jacket and a white helmet. The background shows a clear blue sky and a rocky, hilly landscape.

Freedom of the Hills?

Women guides' uphill battle to succeed in a male-dominated industry

By Ilana Newman

BETHANY LEBEWITZ, SASHA MCGHEE, AND EMILY MANNISTO (LEFT TO RIGHT) ON THE FIRST-EVER ALL-FEMALE AMGA SINGLE-PITCH INSTRUCTOR COURSE, HELD IN RED ROCK, NEVADA, IN NOVEMBER 2018.

“CALL ME ‘DADDY’”

was the tipping point, although the suggestive comments had been going on all day. In August 2017, AMGA Certified Guide Sheldon Kerr was guiding a couple up the Grand Teton’s *Owen-Spalding* for Jackson Hole’s Exum Mountain Guides. The couple was middle-aged and fit, the types who would hike in zip-off pants and then go home for a beer. The whole way up, the man had been engaging in the offhand type of sexism your grandpa might throw out about women being incapable of driving. His girlfriend just laughed, shrugging the comments off with a small smile. By the time they reached high camp at the Lower Saddle, his girlfriend had decided to sit out the climb. Kerr, only in her second season guiding for Exum, steeled herself to spend the full summit day with a man who had little respect for her skills as a guide, and who made her feel uncomfortable as a woman. But the worst part wasn’t even the comments. It was the fact that other male guides at the busy hut saw these interactions and did nothing. While Kerr and her client failed to summit due to his lack of fitness, that didn’t interrupt his verbal diarrhea, and on the way down he started making threatening comments about other people he knew, continuing to make Kerr uncomfortable. Later, instead of reporting the harassment to her bosses, Kerr took two unpaid days off because she was so angry. “I didn’t tell [my boss] right away, because of this culture there that’s, like, ‘Put your head down and work really hard,’” says Kerr. “That’s how you move up, and whiny people don’t do well. And I didn’t say anything because the men I was working with who witnessed him didn’t say anything.”



SHELDON KERR
APPROACHING EARLY
MORNING SPIRE IN NORTH
CASCADES NATIONAL
PARK ON AN AMGA ALPINE
EXAM TRAINING MISSION.

SHELDON KERR

AGE: 34

YEARS GUIDING: 13

CURRENT EMPLOYERS:

Exum Guides in Jackson, Wyoming; San Juan Mountain Guides in Ouray, Colorado.

WHY SHE GUIDES:

“I like the constant physical and intellectual challenge. I love facilitating the connection between people and the wilderness.”

Unfortunately, it was far from the first time that Kerr, 34, had encountered sexual harassment in the outdoor industry. Originally from Vermont, Kerr started mountaineering and skiing at Colorado College; in 2016, she moved to Jackson, Wyoming, to guide. Kerr now guides for Exum and San Juan Mountain Guides, and only has one more alpine exam before she could become the thirteenth woman to get her IFMGA certification, the highest guiding certification in the world and one that allows recipients to work internationally.

When Exum hired Kerr in 2015, she was psyched to be working with one of America’s premier outfits. However, as the seasons passed, Kerr noticed that how guides were

chosen for trips had little to do with their actual experience and everything to do with their “image” and longevity with the company. Assistant guides were often chosen by the lead guide, and Kerr noticed that the women were asked far less than the men. From Kerr’s observations, in most companies she’s worked for, women make up only 10 percent of the workforce, much less than their approximately 30-percent-female clientele.

“I am very qualified, very experienced, very good at my job, and I’m certified! Yet some of the guys who were less experienced than me were getting more work,” she says. Although Kerr had been hired at the same time, these men were repeatedly being asked to work the more intensive, prestigious jobs with more advanced clients, whereas she was given the easiest climbs like the *Owen-Spalding*.

Kerr had experienced similar biases during her train-

ing with the American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA). Founded in 1986, the AMGA consists of 2,041 certified guides and instructors, 14 percent of whom are women. The association sets the standard for mountain-guiding certifications in the United States. (Currently, being certified is not mandatory, and many guiding companies do much of their training in-house. However, according to Jason Martin, director of operations for the American Alpine Institute [AAI] and a board member for the AMGA, by 2022 a guide will need to have completed an AMGA certification in at least one discipline in order to work for an AMGA-accredited company.) AMGA certifications function in three disciplines: rock, ski, and alpine, each of which requires a succession of trainings with guide instructors. Meanwhile, to become an IFMGA guide takes over 86 days of training and tens of thousands of dollars, typically over 5 to 10 years. According to Jane Soucy, operations director for the AMGA, there are currently 130 American guides who hold the certification, 12 of them women.

During Kerr’s AMGA Aspirant Rock Exam in fall 2017, she recalls receiving borderline sexist feedback from her male instructors, conflicting notions like “You stayed quite calm—would have been nice to see you get riled up more” versus “Maybe watch your



SPI COURSE PARTICIPANTS
GRACE ANDERSON AND
ROSEMARY SAAL DISCUSS
PROSPECTIVE ANCHOR
PLACEMENTS, RED ROCK, NV.

tone when you talk to people—you don't want to come off as bossy" and "You might want to take an extra year." Kerr wondered, had her instructors been women—something she'd never experienced in the AMGA—might the feedback have been different, from someone who knew firsthand what it was like to navigate a field molded and shaped by men? The men, she realized, weren't necessarily trying to be offensive; they'd just never experienced trying to fit in to the expectations of the other gender.

In fact, over her 13 years in the industry, Kerr, like so many of her female peers—an estimated 277 total AMGA certified instructors and guides—has found it difficult to pursue her career due to these structural issues. While the guiding profession is essentially as old as documented climbing itself, it has until recent years almost exclusively been a boys' club. Think of the phrase "mountain guide" and who comes to mind? It's likely a tall, stubble-jawed man with hands the size of frying pans. But women? "Dainty, delicate" women? Not until 1991, when Kathy Cosley became the first woman to attain both AMGA Rock and Alpine accreditation, did women even have a presence as guides in the States. Since then, they have had to fight tooth and nail to advance their careers, overcoming obstacles their male counterparts might barely be aware of, ranging from barriers to entry, to unique physical stress, to unique emotional stress, to the dilemma of whether or not to have children, to butting up against resistance to a feminine approach. In extreme cases, like the one Kerr encountered on the Grand, women guides have dealt with sexual harassment—or worse.

BARRIERS TO ENTRY

It was 1981, and Angela Hawse had just transferred to Prescott College from West Virginia to study geology. Then, she started climbing. Hawse switched her major to outdoor education and natural history. After graduation, she started teaching kayaking, climbing, and backcountry skiing as an adjunct professor at Prescott. In 1992, she took a summer job with the AAI, and suddenly had the opportunity to guide more-technical experiences. In 2018, after guiding all over the world for over three decades, and having become the sixth woman to attain IFMGA certification, she was elected president of the AMGA's board. Hawse hopes to pave the way for more women entering the AMGA. Early in her career, she'd avoided the organization, perceiving it as a "boys' club," holding off joining until 2003. Way back when, if you could keep up with the guys, say the right things, and blend in to the masculine culture, you would be OK. It's a dynamic that Hawse wants to change.

The first thing a guide needs is a solid background in the mountains, which is not always easy for a woman to attain. While many men find their beginnings through older male mentors, there are simply fewer older female climbers to go around—and, as Kerr states bluntly, "It's weird for a 50-year-old man to take a high-school girl out climbing every weekend." Out of the 11 female guides I spoke to, a lack of female mentorship was a common theme, though college outdoor-adventure programs like the one Hawse taught in provide a ready platform for women to gain experience in guiding.

Another barrier to entry—one perhaps linked with the lack of female mentorship—is the intimidation factor, what Julia Niles, the fourth woman to receive her IFMGA certification, in 2009, calls the "biggest barrier." Niles started guiding at 18 in her home state of New York before moving to Washington to work for AAI two years later. "It takes this

ANGELA HAWSE

AGE: 56

YEARS GUIDING: 35

CURRENT EMPLOYERS: Ice Axe Expeditions, Peak Mountain Guides, Telluride Helitrax, Chicks with Picks, and Silverton Avalanche School, plus work as the AMGA board president.

WHY SHE GUIDES:

"Sharing my passion for the mountains with others, be it on rock, glaciers, or skis, makes my heart sing," says Hawse, who is one of the few women IFMGA guides in the States.

ANGELA HAWSE ON SUMMER'S EVE (5.9), CASCADE CANYON, DURANGO, CO.



level of confidence that isn't a given when you don't see other women doing it, and sometimes the women who are doing it are our own worst enemies because we get proprietary about our territory," says Niles. "It's important to realize that we all need to support each other." In recent years, Niles has actively sought to support other women in guiding, and makes it a point to climb with more women in the spirit of comradery rather than competition.

Over her 35 years of guiding, Hawse has noticed that the two genders approach guiding differently: "[Men] seem to be more, like, 'Let's go; let's get to the summit,' or, 'Let's carry on,' and women are much more detail oriented. [Women] really want to make sure they're prepared before they set off, to the point of being ridiculous." Hawse cites this hesitation as one reason so few women pursue AMGA programs, and encourages more dialogue around the issue. "It's a little checking in, like,

‘I don’t need to spend seven hours studying this before I go to a job interview, or lead this route. I’ve done this before; I’ve climbed this grade in this area many times. I don’t even want to question myself,’” she says about her own mental process. Hawse has, however, seen this mindset evolve, as women become more comfortable pursuing techier objectives.

PHYSICAL STRESS

It was Erica Engle’s first ever multi-day ski-tour, and she and friends were heading out to the Triad, a peak in the North Cascades. One of her partners, Nathan, was in peak fitness, training for his AMGA ski exam. Engle, relatively new to ski touring, was using old skis that didn’t quite fit, and her pack was too heavy. As she huffed and puffed behind the guys, she mentally berated herself for

not being fast enough. Now an experienced mountain guide and the twelfth woman to receive her IFMGA certification, Engle looks back and sees, on the one hand, a motivated young woman who would do whatever it took to get where she wanted to go. But she also sees a cautionary tale. Says Engle, “I want to make sure other young women learning how to do something new don’t get led into believing that the reason they are behind or slow is because they are somehow not good enough or strong enough.”

For the first five years of her career, Sheldon Kerr, like Engle, found herself at the bottom of the pack: the least experienced, the youngest, the only girl, and the least fit. But once she started focusing on training, she became as strong and fast as the men. “The age factor you have to wait for, the experience you have to wait for, but the fitness you can attack,” she says. “I do think some of those physical gaps will start to shrink because you can train yourself out of them.”

Guiding is not for the physically weak. On five-day trips to learn snow skills and summit Mount Baker, Jenny Merian, who guides for AAI, says her pack weighs between 40 and 50 pounds—plus, she’ll often take weight from clients, a common practice on strenuous mountains like Baker or Rainier. Guides’ workdays are long, usually 10 or more hours on one’s feet, and start early, often in the wee hours. Meanwhile, there is rarely paid sick leave, no healthcare, and no childcare to soften the stress.

For female guides like Merian, it’s come down to the realization that, as a woman, you might need to work harder than your male peers to accomplish the same objectives, both in guiding and in your personal climbing. Training can compensate, sure, but there is also the constant wear-and-tear on the body. Currently, Merian is returning to school for occupational therapy after watching her boyfriend—also a guide—lose work after an injury sustained during an AMGA exam, and experiencing chronic overuse injuries herself, such as a strained disc. “Injuries are one of the major cruxes of guiding,” says Merian, an issue further complicated by the fact that taking time off to heal means not getting paid. She hopes to continue guiding in the future, but because of the physical strain does not plan to pursue it as her main career. Factor in also that guiding companies don’t always pay for employee health insurance given both the seasonal nature of the work and the fact that guides often work for multiple companies, and the risks associated with getting injured become even clearer.

EMOTIONAL STRESS/SEXUAL HARASSMENT

It was winter 2017/2018, and Katlynn Schauberg had just finished her first season of guiding for AAI. She was wintering in the North Cascades, working at a collection of backcountry cabins where she was one of the only returning employees—and the only woman. She and three fellow-employees, all men, had become good friends, and one had developed a crush on her, though she’d told him she wasn’t interested. “My communication with him was so clear in expressing the importance of professionalism and equality in the workplace,” Schauberg says. Her last day before returning to her guiding job, for what would be her first season on Denali, her coworkers took her out for drinks and dinner. Schauberg was encouraged to keep up with the boys and drink every beverage bought for her; she blacked out and woke up



ERICA ENGLE

AGE: 39

YEARS GUIDING: 14

CURRENT EMPLOYER:

Based in Leavenworth, Washington, Engle works for Jackson Hole Mountain Guides and others.

WHY SHE GUIDES:

“My path toward mountain guiding really started out with a love of the outdoors and adventure in general, and wanting to be outside and explore my environment.”

IFMGA GUIDE ERICA ENGLE KEEPS TENSION ON THE LINE FOR SPI COURSE PARTICIPANTS TO PRACTICE FRICTION HITCHES.

JULIA NILES

AGE: 39

YEARS GUIDING: 20

CURRENT EMPLOYER:

Niles lives in British Columbia, and guides and teaches in the area for Extremely Canadian, Whistler Heli, and Altus Mountain Guides.

WHY SHE GUIDES:

"I love the mountains and an active, adventurous lifestyle."



JULIA NILES ON
NORTH TWIN SISTERS
MOUNTAIN, WA, IN 2017.

women in this field All of this alongside the daily doses of microaggression, [like] the clients who inquired if I was available for laundry service the next time I came to serve them hot water at 17,200 feet."

Schaumberg, 27, is at the beginning of her guiding career. After getting a degree in environmental education from Western Washington University, she took a job with Outward Bound in Colorado. She applied for the American Alpine Institute Alaska Support Internship in 2016, and a year later was guiding for the company. After her traumatic season, Schaumberg took a six-month hiatus from climbing and guiding. She has returned to AAI, stepping into a management position for the Alaska program and with a vision for further developing AAI's women-only climbing/mountaineering program. In 2020, Schaumberg will help guide an all-female Denali expedition to honor the fiftieth anniversary of the first all-female ascent in 1970.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has a chart detailing the 12 risk factors for workplace harassment, including a homogeneous workforce, workplaces that rely on customer service or client satisfaction, and decentralized workplaces. Guiding fits about nine criteria. For her part, Kerr constantly has to consider her interactions with male coworkers, saying, "I want to be cool but not seen as uptight, and definitely don't want to attract untoward behavior when we're alone at a belay ledge." In a contentious Facebook post in an AMGA group in October 2017, Kerr attempted to start a conversation around these issues. As she wrote: "The issue is that during morning meetings on Crested Butte Mountain Resort's Ski Patrol, I had to sit on a couch under which were piled stacks of *Hustlers*, which were broken out when the day's action slowed. The issue is that my employer and lead guide at the ski operation, which was my longtime employer, humiliated me with repeated public comments about my sex life I've been whistled at by the owner of a guide service while changing my shirt in the locker room As icing on the #Me-Too sexual harassment cake, I also have a picture of a colleague's balls in my inbox—and blocking his presence

the next morning in bed with the man she'd previously turned down. Schaumberg went to Denali without telling many people what had happened—that she'd been raped by a coworker. Meanwhile, Alaska posed its own emotional havoc, including a falling out with her only other female coworker on the mountain, who on multiple occasions verbally and publically harassed her, and riding out an avalanche with a partner during a personal trip into the Alaska Range. Yet Schaumberg had to continue working—at a job where she was the youngest in a group of 12 during the three-week expedition. "I had to compartmentalize my experiences so I could focus on the tasks at hand. If I thought about any of it too much, I felt disrespected and fearful—two traits that make guiding exponentially more stressful," she says. "The concentration of my traumatic trifecta might have been unusual, but all three experiences are relatable to many

on Facebook and in my email has meant that I miss out on much of the content of the NW Info Ex and the Professional Guide's Forum. The issue is that I'm afraid of what will happen to me if I name names."

After posting the above and more, Kerr received responses from fellow guides, most male and many surprised to hear this was even an issue. Since then, she has, she says, found herself with a target on her back, one that feels like it has upped the stakes for her AMGA exams, often administered by the same guides who responded to her post. Still, says Kerr, she's willing to shoulder that burden to effect change in the industry.

In April 2018, community leaders including the American Alpine Club (AAC), AMGA, *Climbing*, and *Alpinist* came together to distribute a survey about sexual harassment and assault. The results of the #safeoutside project were published in a study hosted by the AAC. Out of over 5,000 responses—most from self-proclaimed gym or sport climbers, though it doesn't take much imagination to extrapolate these results to the larger community, guides included—when participants were asked if they had experienced sexual harassment/sexual assault (SHSA), only 9 percent of men and 40 percent of women answered yes. But when asked about more specific forms of SHSA like catcalling, unwanted touching, or verbal harassment, 16 percent of men and 47



SPI COURSE INSTRUCTORS
ELAINA ARENZ AND
TRACY MARTIN GO OVER
GEAR SPECIFICS.

percent of women answered yes. Clearly, there is a perception problem. “Many women who experience assault and harassment or discrimination don’t think of it as that,” says Kerr. “It’s not like you have to be lynched to experience racism; we just don’t get to compare notes enough with each other.”

STARTING A FAMILY

Walking in to Julia Niles’s home in Squamish, British Columbia, the first thing you notice is the presence of children: the scattered toys and the drawings scribbled on the walls in the kitchen where Kodiak, her eight-year-old son, gleefully cooks pancakes as Ava, five, sits on her mom’s lap. Now 38, Niles has been guiding since age 19. She got her IFMGA pin in 2009 after meeting her husband, Sean Easton, also an IFMGA mountain guide but who has since become CEO of a rope-access business. These days, Niles has also stepped back from guiding; it’s difficult to leave for more than a day at a time given the reality of having two young children.

“I miss the big adventure and the way you slowly develop a comradery with an expedition and the group dynamic and all the joy that came out of that, but I am fully transformed by my children and I want to be with them, more than anything else,” says Niles as we sit in her kitchen drinking tea on a rainy day, looking out over the Howe

Sound. “It’s the opposite from when I was 20 and trying to get far away from my family, and just so happy to find my strength in my own independence out in the world. Now I’m like, “Well, they kind of need me.””

Over the past few years, Niles has watched most of her male peers become AMGA examiners or go on to take on other larger roles in the guiding industry. She is currently returning to school to study psychology, hoping to combine it with guiding as her children grow older and gain more independence.

Guiding does not lend itself to raising a family. It can be difficult to reconcile the rigors of guiding with time off for pregnancy, childbirth, and recovery, breastfeeding, and the common sentiment—whether right or wrong—that the mother should be the one tending to a child, especially in the early years. This isn’t to say that guiding and being a mom aren’t possible, just that the challenges seem to make many women wait to have kids.

Take Majka Burhardt, a New Hampshire-based guide who married another guide, Peter Doucette, in 2013. Burhardt has been guiding for 21 years, but only part-time since her late twenties, while also pursuing writing and social entrepreneurship. She held off pursuing children until her late thirties because she was focused on the rest of her life, but also because she saw very few examples of other women climbers/guides who'd pulled it off or been supported in their efforts—like Alison Hargreaves, the first woman to climb Everest without bottled oxygen, and who was, says Burhardt, “run through the coals” after her death on K2 in 1995 because she left two kids behind. Now, Burhardt says, attitudes have changed, with many more examples of moms who climb and guide. In 2016, Burhardt gave birth to twins, Kaz and Irenna, and now she and Doucette juggle raising two toddlers with their overlapping schedules. “It would be easier if one of us was an accountant based on how much scheduling we have to do,” jokes Burhardt. For others, such as Lilla Molnar, a Canadian IFMGA certified guide, the balance comes from bringing her six-year-old daughter, Ella, with her on trips for guiding, and the support from her husband, Mark, also a mountain guide. Molnar had Ella at 39, after she had completed her certification. At the time, she was primarily guiding independently, as well as working out of the Bugaboo Lodge where the management invited her to bring Ella while she was working—a rare, fortuitous arrangement.

However, there is also the reality that guiding has dissuaded women from having kids. For guide-parents, the consequences of injury and death can feel heightened, not to mention the lack of parental intimacy created by long days and weeks away from family. As Kerr puts it, given the lack of support for parents, especially mothers, in the industry (no maternity leave, for example), “Although I still don’t know whether I want to have kids, I don’t want to have to decide... based on my career.”

RESISTANCE TO A FEMININE APPROACH

Six women hang out at the base of the Morning Glory Wall in Smith Rock State Park, Oregon. One ties into a rope, a nervous smile on her face. Their guide, Lizzy Van Patten, talks her through the belay commands, then the other women cheer as the woman tackles her first-ever top rope. Near the top, the client freezes; Van Patten runs around to talk with her until she gains enough confidence to finish. For Van Patten, this is what guiding is all about: empowering women to overcome fear, teaching them the skills to get out on their own.

Van Patten owns She Moves Mountains, a guiding company run solely by women and that only guides women. She found her passion after taking a job in 2016 with Chockstone Climbing Guides out of Terrebonne, Oregon, and organizing women’s climbing clinics. In 2017, she and her future business partner, Carey deVictoria-Michel, the only other incoming female guide at Chockstone, left to start their own company, something Van Patten calls the most terrifying thing she’s done. To launch She Moves Mountains, they ran an Indiegogo campaign that ended up being funded over 100 percent. She Moves Mountains started their first season with 100 clients spread over 20 workshops, and has grown by more than 200 percent for their second season. Another She Moves Mountains offshoot opened in the Southeast in 2018, and the company is sponsored by The North Face and, soon, Black Diamond.

However, even a successful business owner like Van Patten has experienced backlash—in particular related

to her perceived lack of experience (she has been climbing for five years and guiding for three). This came to a head during an intro to trad clinic she was teaching at Smith in summer 2018. That day, a man climbing nearby interrupted to question her authority. “Gates in or gates out?” he asked, interrogating her carabiner-racking knowledge. “I let them choose, and tell them to pick one and stick with it. It doesn’t matter that much,” Van Patten replied. Later, he butted in to ask if she was planning on teaching students what to do if they couldn’t hear each other’s belay commands—a relative non-issue, Van Patten pointed out, as she was teaching a single-pitch clinic. After this, she ignored the man, but when she encountered him while approaching the cliff the next day, he continued to harass her: “So what did you do? Did you tell them?” he nagged. She shook her head and kept walking. “Oh, so you’re just going to ignore me?” the man hectorated. Van Patten said nothing, tears of frustration filling her eyes. Some male climbers, it seems, are just not ready to accept women in leadership roles.

Today, even as women like Sasha DiGiulian, Margo Hayes, and Brette Harrington climb at stratospheric



KATLYNNE SCHAUBERG
ON A RECENT
BACKCOUNTRY SKI TRIP
INTO THE SAWTOOTH
MOUNTAINS, ID.

KATLYNNE SCHAUBERG

AGE: 27

YEARS GUIDING: 3

CURRENT EMPLOYER:
Schauberg lives in Bellingham, Washington, and works for the American Alpine Institute.

WHY SHE GUIDES:

“It’s a privilege to spend a day in the mountains, and to make my living there is an absolute dream. I love helping others find their inner strength.”

levels and take on leadership roles within the outdoor industry, very few women choose to be certified guides—if you can see it you can be it, the saying goes, so why this discrepancy? One explanation may be that guiding certifications are only recently becoming more popular—or even necessary. As the new president of the AMGA's board, Hawse wants to make the organization more accessible for upcoming female guides. The AMGA has hired Kathleen Nalty, a consultant who specializes in inclusivity, diversity, and unconscious-bias trainings, to work with the instructor team. These instructors are directly responsible for dealing with incoming guides, teaching them the tools of the trade, and evaluating guides taking their AMGA exams. Most of the instructor team is male: Out of 52 members, only 7 are women. Hawse became the first woman to join the team, in

2006, and other women, including Engle, who joined in 2018, are coming online, too.

Women have traditionally lived in a world of double standards as outdoor leaders. They are often asked to live up to a higher level of competence compared to their male counterparts, to be able to “prove” themselves: You are either a leader or a *female* leader, a distinction that can evoke questions of authority and experience/accomplishment. For Engle, it's exhausting to constantly be reminded of her gender every time she meets a new client, even after multiple decades of guiding. “Clients have various levels of surprise, or adjusting to those expectations,” says Engle. “It is brought to your attention on a fairly regular basis that you are not what they expected, so you have to rebooster the fact that you are a mountain guide, and you should be doing this: ‘Hell yeah, I’m your mountain guide—prepare to have your mind blown!’”

Instead of playing down “feminine” traits such as expressing emotions, vulnerability, and community connection, female guides and climbers are starting to incorporate these into their leadership styles. “I think as women we can be way better guides, because we connect. As soon as you’re connected with a client, it translates immediately into safety and efficiency and success, because if you’re checking in with your client, if they feel comfortable with you, and they feel comfortable telling you their weaknesses, you are better in tune with how they are doing,” says Niles. Niles recounts a recent trip to the Konee Cabin in Southeastern British Columbia organized by experienced Squamish skiers—which made Niles nervous because experienced clients can sometimes be pushier than newbies. Instead of coming in each morning dictating the day’s plan to the group, Niles would instead come to the table and semi-interview people, seeing who wanted to do what. Then she’d take them aside and they’d look at maps, collaborating on an itinerary. Enhanced by this collaborative approach, the trip was a huge success.

ABETTER FUTURE

In October 2018, the AMGA announced Hawse’s appointment as president of its board, only the second woman ever in the role. Things are changing, with emerging mentors and role models like Van Patten, Niles, Hawse, Kerr, Schaumberg, and others. So what’s next?

Engle, with co-chair and fellow guide Derek Debruin, is heading up the AMGA’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee, formed in 2015. She believes that the isolation of being a woman in guiding wore away at her, as did always sharing hotel rooms with guys on courses and trips. No one else going through these experiences with her had the same female body, the same fundamental commonalities. “Women who say, ‘That didn’t affect me,’ either got lucky or they internalized it,” says Engle. Having more women in the field automatically makes it a more comfortable and accommodating place for women to work. Engle and Debruin’s goal is thus to build a climbing and guiding community in which people of all genders and backgrounds have agency over the content.

“Filing my [sexual assault] report with the county deputy was far more challenging than climbing El Cap,” Schaumberg says. “What I’ve learned from these events is the power of vulnerability and importance of accountability.” For her, being encouraged to share her emotionally exhausting season with her supervisors at AAI was empowering. In 2018, AAI employed six full-time female guides—16 percent of their staff. With female leadership



SHE MOVES MOUNTAINS
CO-FOUNDER LIZZY
VAN PATTEN AT THE
BUTTERMILKS, CA.

LIZZY VAN PATTEN

AGE: 29

YEARS GUIDING: 3

CURRENT EMPLOYER:

Her own company, She Moves Mountains, a female-run guiding company in the Pacific Northwest.

WHY SHE GUIDES:

“Guides are often seen as someone to aspire to be, and I could never see myself being one. So what I do is try to make guiding approachable. I don’t want climbing to be seen as this elitist thing. Come climb alongside us.”



MCGHEE AND MAILEE HUNG RAP DOWN ON INSTRUCTOR TETHERS TO SET UP A TOPROPE ANCHOR ON THE SPI COURSE.

gaining momentum, AAI is investing in opportunities for female guides to receive further female mentorship as well as holding biannual meetings to share their season's experiences, giving these guides the opportunity, as Kerr put it, to compare notes.

In late November 2018, the first all-female Single Pitch Instructor course was held in Red Rock, Nevada, sponsored by AMGA, Flash Foxy, the American Alpine Club, Camber Outdoors, and Brown Girls Climb. It was attended by 12 community leaders who specialize in outreach for people of color, women, trans, and queer people. The AMGA also announced that in September 2019 they will be holding the first all-female Rock Guide course sponsored by The North Face, complete with partial scholarships for participants. Engle, Hawse, Margaret Wheeler, and Karen Bockel will instruct.

So when will all genders be able to recognize the truth of bias? Where are the protocols for feeling uncomfortable around a creepy client like Kerr's on the Grand Teton? When will a woman not have to choose between career and family? And how can we change how the next generation of female guides is mentored?

These questions are not being ignored. From the AMGA's current push to Van Paten's work with She Moves Mountains, these issues are being addressed with direct action, not just hollow talk. The question is not whether or not women can climb or guide clients up mountains—clearly, we can. For Engle, the questions to ask are “How

has the culture of our society disproportionately affected women?” and “How do we shift those cultural and structural institutions and contexts to allow women to manifest fully?”

In entrenched industries like guiding, change often happens slowly and only with persistence. Institutional obstacles have to be overcome, paradigms smashed, and hackles raised. The first step is to have these conversations, to be writing and talking and educating others. “I really think there's a desire to make change happen, but change also has to include men, and how they are impacted by stereotypes and expectations,” says Nalty. “People can't do better until they know better.”

ILANA NEWMAN is a writer/photographer from the Pacific Northwest. She loves wandering the mountains in search of climbing and stories.