



canadianavalancheassociation



Diversity, Inclusion, and Mental Health in the Avalanche and Guiding Industry in Canada

Executive Summary

Introduction & Background

In winter 2019 a collaborative national study was undertaken to examine diversity, inclusion, and mental health in the avalanche and guiding profession in Canada. It was conducted by Lotus Mountain Consulting, Inc., a Canadian consulting firm that specializes in diversity, leadership, and mental health in mountain-based professions, on behalf of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides, the Canadian Avalanche Association, and the Canadian Ski Guides Association.

Summary of Findings

DIVERSITY and INCLUSION

- **46% of females reported experiencing gender discrimination**; the most significant factor was perceptions of females as less competent than males.
- **27% of females reported experiencing sexual harassment**; of these, 27% were touched inappropriately. Client or guest-initiated sexual harassment is 40% of total sexual harassment; **60% is initiated by peers or supervisors**.
- **Nine incidents of sexual harassment** described in this study were **initiated by supervisor, examiner, instructor, or mentor**.
- **14.6% choose to report** experiences of sexual harassment.

MENTAL HEALTH

- **57% experience mental health challenges** in their professional roles.
- 1 out of 4 visible minorities have experienced suicide attempts or thoughts; 1 out of 3 non-binary genders have experienced suicide attempts or thoughts.
- Females experience mental health challenges 6% more than males in the industry.
- **18% of guides and avalanche workers report no access to mental health supports**.

DESIRE FOR CHANGE

- Guides and avalanche workers indicated a desire for increased minority representation; increased involvement from associations to provide support, education and awareness, and accountability for gender discrimination and sexual harassment issues.
- Guides and avalanche workers indicated a desire for increased access to mental health supports, greater skills and capacity building, and re-structuring of the industry to prevent mental health crises.



Conclusion: Respect and Resilience

The avalanche and guiding profession in Canada is ready for significant cultural change. A diverse, inclusive, respectful and resilient future in the profession requires a timely commitment to continued collaboration with mutual accountability across the industry amongst professional associations and employers. Strategic action steps that focus on: 1) supporting members who are experiencing discrimination, harassment, and mental health challenges; 2) education and awareness about harmful behaviours and beliefs, including cultivating shared values around diversity, inclusion, respect, and resilience; and, 3) accountability for all professional members.

Next Steps:

- 1) Fall 2019 Strategic Planning Workshop – Inviting HeliCat Canada, employers, and government to collaborate with professional associations and the Lotus Mountain team for a strategic plan.
- 2) Winter 2019/2020 Small Action Steps in Industry Training Programs, and Employee Training.
- 3) Spring 2020 Reflection on Feedback from Small Action Steps. Policy Change.

Executive Summary Outline

This document begins with study demographics. Findings are shared in three sub-headings: 1) Culture; 2) Diversity and Inclusion; and, 3) Mental Health in the Avalanche and Guiding Profession. Study conclusions and recommended next steps follow.

About Lotus Mountain Consulting, Inc.



Rachel D. Reimer (MA, PhD candidate), lead researcher and CEO at Lotus Mountain, began her work on leadership and organizational change with the United Nations in Lebanon over a decade ago. Gender, leadership, and conflict resolution were the primary foci of her early career. She transitioned into emergency response in Canada with the British Columbia Wildfire Service in 2012, and while working as a fire crew leader, conducted a provincial study into gender, leadership and culture. Her study, *The Wildfire Within* (2018), was nominated for the Nelson Mandela Award and the Governor General Gold Medal Award of Canada, and was a catalyst for cultural change in the profession.

Lotus Mountain's research-based method for investigating leadership, diversity, and effects on wellbeing have been shared with clients and academic institutions worldwide to support and guide organizational cultural change. The Lotus Mountain team brings together expertise from Rachel's networks in the non-profit, military, professional, and academic communities worldwide, using an innovative approach to organizational cultural change. Rachel's deep operational experience in militarized contexts, wildland fire, guiding, and avalanche work bring a practical and grounded approach to her consulting practice.



DEMOGRAPHICS

A survey was sent out to all three organizations’ memberships, and was open from January until the end of March, 2019.

CAA – 74.64% (365)
PROFESSIONAL – (216)
ACTIVE – (135)
OTHER – (9) ¹
ACMG – 60.33% (295)
HIKE AND CLIMB – (103)
ALPINE AND ROCK – (36)
SKI AND MOUNTAIN- (189)
OTHER – (7) ¹
CSGA – 15.75% (77)
ANY LEVEL
OTHER CSGA

Fig 1. Membership representation.

AGE:
18-24 – 2.26% (11) ¹
25-34 – 24.07% (117)
35-44 – 36.01% (175) ←
45-54 – 19.75% (96)
55-64 – 13.99% (68)
65+ – 3.91% (19) ²
EXPERIENCE:
LESS THAN 1 YEAR – 3.1% (15)
1-3 YEARS – 14.67% (71)
4-10 YEARS – 27.69% (134)
10-20 YEARS – 29.55% (143) ←
20+ YEARS – 25% (121)

Fig 2. Age & experience.

GENDER:
MALE – 70.37% (342) ←
FEMALE – 27.98% (136)
PREFER NOT TO ANSWER – 1.03% (5)
TWO-SPIRITED – 0.41% (2) ¹
TRANSGENDER – 0.21% (1) ¹
RACE AND ETHNICITY:
CAUCASIAN/WHITE – 94.02% (456) ←
VISIBLE MINORITY – 2.47% (12) ¹
FIRST NATIONS – 1.44% (7) ^{1,3}
METIS – 1.03% (5) ^{1,3}
PREFER NOT TO ANSWER – 1.03% (5)

Fig 3. Gender, race & ethnicity.¹

A total of **514 guides and avalanche workers across Canada** completed the survey. Overall unofficial averages put the industry at approximately 15–20% female (CAA, 2019; ACMG, 2019). The survey responses came from 70% male, and 27.9% female respondents. This means that survey findings are representative of the industry, given the high percentage of males who completed the survey.

FINDINGS

1. Culture

What is the avalanche and guiding industry culture?

The guiding and avalanche professional culture was defined, in order of strongest in the data, as: 1) Exclusive; 2) Professional; 3) Safety-oriented; and, 4) Learning and evolving. The words most frequently used to explain ‘exclusive’ were ‘bro-culture’, ‘male-dominated,’ and ‘old boys club.’

“Proud, highly technical, high standards, good governance. Also – ego driven, not self-aware, male dominated, bro culture.”

2. Diversity and Inclusion

Is the avalanche and guiding profession diverse?

When asked if the profession is diverse, 60.8% said no, 28.2% said yes.

¹ “Two Spirited”: A First Nations/Metis traditional gender identity that describes individuals who hold both masculine and feminine spirits in balance.

“No, and we have a long way to go. The success of an individual in our industry is dependent on many limiting factors like economic status, gender, race, etc. that play out in subtle but powerful ways to make it inaccessible. The result is a pervasive stereotype limiting what capability in our field ‘looks like.’”

Is the avalanche and guiding profession inclusive?

When asked if the profession is inclusive, 68.6% said yes, and 23.4% said no. This reveals a self-image of inclusive behaviour, even with open acknowledgement that the culture is ‘exclusive’ and the industry is not diverse.

Does gender make a difference in how people are treated in the avalanche and guiding profession?

59.9% said yes, and 30.8% said no. Differences in perceived competence were the biggest factor.

“As a white male, I am the sought after ‘ideal’ of a guide, and treated as such.”

“Yes, there is a huge assumption of competence if you are a male. The opposite is true if you are a female at our workplace. I have personally heard the one more senior female state that the only reason the guys like her at work is because she hardly talks.”

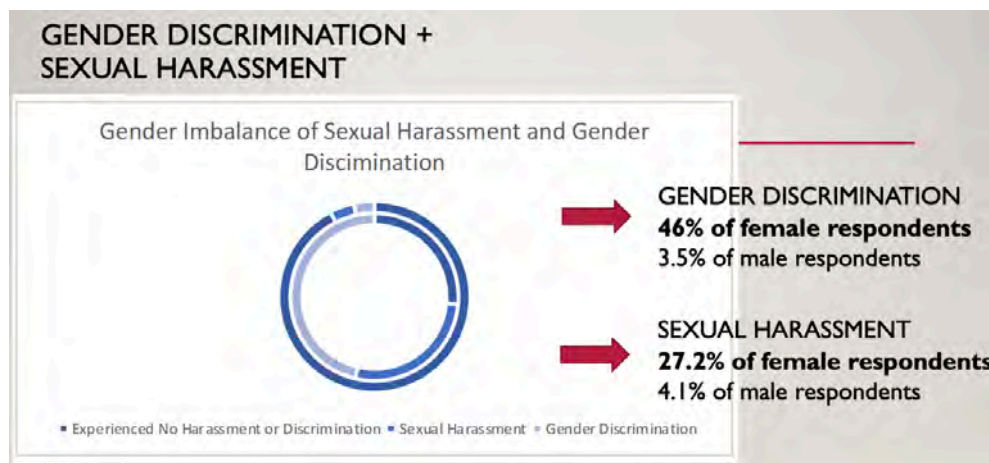


Fig. 4. Outer circle represents male experiences; inner female experiences. Those aged 45+ less likely to experience sexual harassment.

Gender discrimination in the avalanche and guiding profession

What does this look like? In order of most commonly experienced, gender discrimination in the profession is: 1) Females assumed less competent; 2) Family–work balance and motherhood; 3) Traditional gender roles; and, 4) Hostile, sexualized work environment.

Guiding and avalanche worker mothers were treated as if motherhood compromised their risk management abilities, and faced a double burden at work of both being away from their family, and also experiencing a compromised sense of belonging and acceptance in their work environments. Traditional gender roles were described as females being expected to be ‘soft’ or ‘emotional’ and take less physical and/or risky tasks; whereas males were expected to be ‘hard’, ‘unemotional’ and take on more physical and/or risky tasks. A hostile, sexualized environment was described as negative for many reasons.

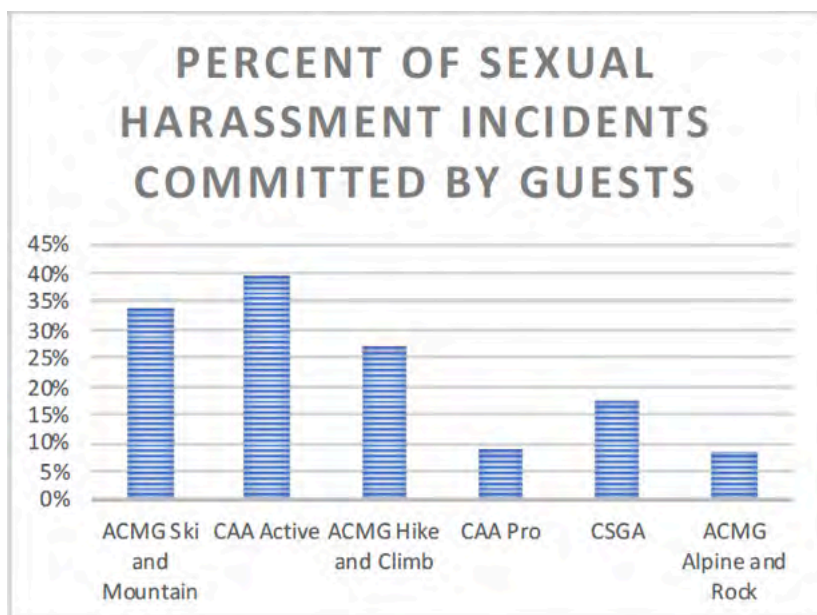
“I am transgender. I am not ‘out’ to my coworkers. I fear that I would not be treated equally due to the comments and jokes I heard on a daily basis.”

“I’ve been told by a male co-worker that my breasts are why guests like me, I’ve sat in a Guides meeting where my physical attributes were discussed. I’ve been groped by male guides and clients.”

Sexual harassment in the avalanche and guiding profession

What does this look like? In ranked order: 1) Hostile, sexualized work environment; and, 2) Unwanted touching. 27% of sexual harassment included unwanted touching. Only 14.6% of people who experience sexual harassment chose to report it. The most common response when the incidents were reported was that the incident was “not resolved.”

Nine incidents of sexual harassment shared in this study were initiated by a supervisor, mentor, instructor, or examiner. All three organizations (ACMG, CAA, CSGA) were implicated in different incidents.



Guest-initiated sexual harassment only makes up on average 40% of total sexual harassment incidents for ACMG Ski and Mountain Guides, and CAA Active members. This means that **roughly 60% of sexual harassment incidents in the avalanche and guiding profession are from other guides and workers.**

Fig. 5. Guest sexual harassment.

3. Mental Health in the Avalanche and Guiding Profession

The majority of guides and avalanche workers self-ranked their mental health mid-season as ‘average’ or ‘above-average’. However, 57.7% indicated personally experiencing mental health challenges, and 74.8% indicated observing others experience challenges.

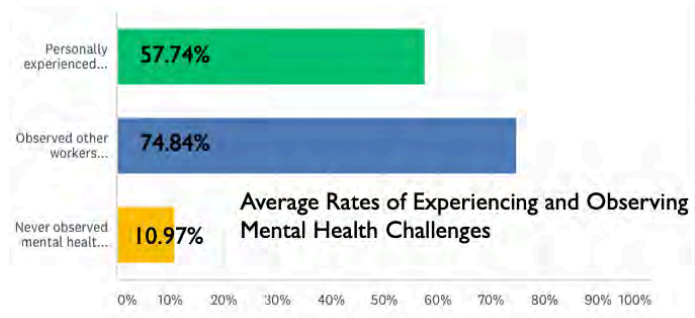


Fig. 6. Mental health challenges.

Minorities More Vulnerable

Females experienced mental health challenges 6% more than males. 100% of people who identified as First Nations/Metis and people who identified as Transgender or Two-Spirited experienced mental health challenges.

One out of four First Nations/Metis members of the industry have had previous suicidal thoughts/attempts; and one out of three Transgender or Two-Spirited.

Physical or mental fatigue	93.46%
Prolonged exposure to high levels of workplace stress	63.40%
Exposure to critical incidents in the workplace, including fatalities	61.44%
Loss of a friend, colleague or family member to suicide	37.25%
Social isolation	32.68%
No previous support from counsellor or doctor	26.80%
History of mental health challenges in self or family	26.80%

Fig 7. Most frequently experienced mental health challenges and risk factors.

Accessing Supports for Mental Health Challenges

Barriers to support included cultural barriers, especially stigma from older generations. Informal support—for example, debriefs led by untrained personnel with alcohol—were also listed as barriers.

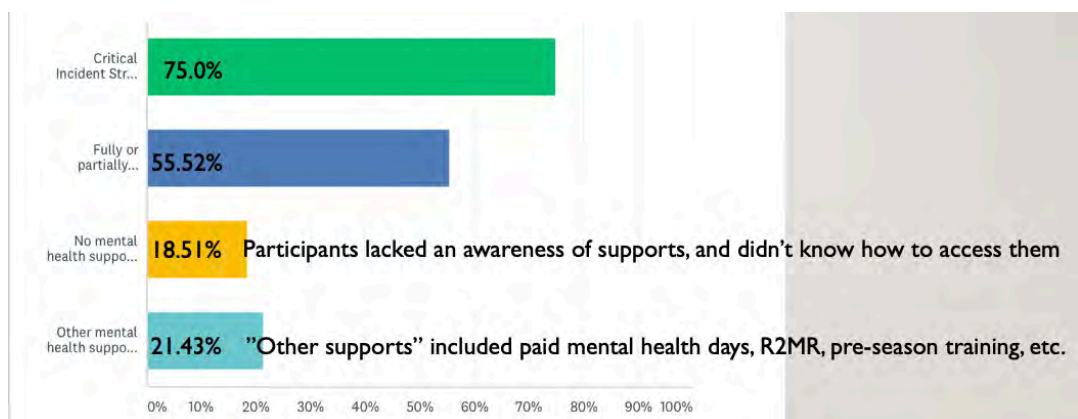


Fig 8. Mental Health Supports.

CONCLUSION: RESPECT and RESILIENCE

In this study, guides and avalanche workers shared their ideal future goals for a diverse, inclusive and resilient future in the profession. In ranked order of strongest in the data:

Diversity and Inclusion

- 1) Equality of opportunity. This was described as removing barriers to entry, including changing cultural norms in the profession. This did not mean introducing quotas or fixed outcomes.
- 2) Inclusive AND diverse. This was described as becoming aware of the ways the industry is perpetuating an exclusive culture, and limiting diversity. Choosing to consciously foster inclusivity as a new cultural norm.
- 3) Respectful work environment. This was described as recognizing the current hostile, sexualized work environment, and fostering respectful work environments as a new cultural norm.

Mental Health

- 1) Open discussion about mental health. This was described as addressing stigma by fostering openness, especially leading by example from older generations to open up about their own challenges.
- 2) Relevant support is readily available. This was described as introducing skilled and timely supports, and connecting guides and avalanche workers with the resources they need, both proactively and in post-incident timeframes.
- 3) Structure the industry to prevent mental health crises. This was described as addressing the cultural norms that create expectations of social drinking, excessive days worked, and limited time off post-critical incidents. Fostering a healthy and proactive culture that values mental health and consciously cultivates wellbeing.

Action Steps Suggested by Guides and Avalanche Workers

More representation of minorities in leadership and mentorship roles; active organizational and employer engagement in diversity and inclusion issues through education, awareness, and policy; and, a generational shift within industry leadership. To address mental health concerns in the industry: Reducing stigma through open dialogue; increasing mental health supports, especially in smaller operations; and, structuring the industry to prevent mental health crises.

Study Conclusion: Respect and Resilience

- 1) **Accept** that, based on the data and lessons learned in other industries, **cultural change is necessary**.
- 2) **Collaborate** across and within industry to make a plan.
- 3) **Commit to act** with mutual accountability and follow through.
- 4) **Accept** that cultural change is imperfect. Mitigate unintended outcomes by creating feedback loops consistently, and take a gentle and deliberate approach to change.



NEXT STEPS

- 1) Strategic Planning Meeting, Fall 2019
 - a. Three Key Focus Areas:
 - i. **Support** for guides and avalanche workers experiencing discrimination, harassment and mental health challenges.
 - ii. **Education and Awareness** to address harmful behaviours and beliefs, including cultivating shared values around diversity, inclusion, respect, and resilience.
 - iii. **Accountability** across all associations, including employers, that is consistent with upholding an inclusive, diverse, respectful and resilient profession.
 - iv. Potential Meeting Attendees:
 - HeliCat Canada
 - Association of Canadian Mountain Guides
 - Canadian Avalanche Association
 - Canadian Ski Guides Association
 - Government representatives (EMBC, FLNRO, others)
 - WorkSafeBC
 - Employers
 - BC Backcountry Lodges
 - Lotus Mountain's strategic planning team
 - Rachel Reimer (lead researcher/consultant, CEO Lotus Mountain)
 - Kevin West (ret'd Chief Warrant Officer, tasked with Operations Honour, CAF)
 - Naomi Grattan (strategic communications and innovation)
- 2) Implement Action Steps, Winter 2019/2020
 - a. CAA Industry Training Program
 - b. ACMG Training and Assessment Program
 - c. CSGA Training
 - d. Employer Staff Training Winter 2019/2020
 - e. Committees/point of responsibility on each associations' Board of Directors
- 3) Feedback Loop to Reflect, Create Policy, Spring 2020
 - a. Investigate change since initial study in behaviours, perceptions, beliefs and values.
 - b. Draft policy for implementation winter 2020/2021.