

# Competing with the Men? Is There No Haven from Women Anymore?

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The tradition of climbing as a masculine activity forged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has carried over into modern times. From its inception in the early 1970s, rock climbing was viewed by outsiders and participants alike as a male activity. The “rock jocks” tested each other on the cliffs as well as more recently in professional competitions. The male camaraderie and oneupmanship of their gymnastic world mirrored a centuries-old traditional bonding of mountaineers. With often “juvenile” behavior, rock climbers performed to gain status within an exclusively male hierarchy. And though they often wrestled to gain the eye of a woman, she was not prized as a climber but as an object. The woman’s role in early rock climbing thus was traditional; she was either the supportive belayer or the significant other, but she was always an accessory who followed behind. As in the society generally, a woman’s status in climbing culture was based on her relationship to a male.

Yet the modernization of climbing in the last decade, as well as the women’s movement, have undermined tradition. Women today have a more active role in the world of mountaineering and rock climbing. Today several women climbers have a climbing status equal to males. And whether in the frozen Himalayas, or in rock climbing, women have enlarged their sphere. In fact, all-female expeditions to the Himalayas, and women leading men up rock climbs, are commonplace today. As in the general society, women have redefined their role, and honed new skills. They have even started to challenge men successfully in head-to-head competitions.

The dramatic alteration of women’s status in climbing has deeply eroded the foundations of the older male hegemony. Their new role was not gained without being contested. Males disturbed by the loss of tradition, and the feminine threat to their authority, have resisted the advancement of women, or at best, disparaged their accomplishments. While male dominance is reeling, sexism and even misogyny still exist.

This paper, and the accompanying slides and film, detailed the empowerment process for women climbers over the last two decades, as well as the contention and social dislocation it created. By examining climbing periodicals the author explores how these changes altered both the women’s perceptions about themselves, and the social dynamics within climbing culture. It was suggested that the growth of the women’s role in climbing parallels their growing power within the general society, and that the evolution of women in climbing forecasts the projection of women into other “male” sports.