

Open Letter to Sierra Club Board of Directors Regarding Toxic Misogyny, Gender Oppression, and Exclusionary Practices in the Colorado Chapter

“Let’s be clear: Strong men who are truly role models, don’t need to put down women to make themselves feel powerful...” Michelle Obama

We are 5 members of the Colorado Executive Committee, representing one-third of the voting members and 100 percent of the diverse and female At- Large members. The Colorado Sierra Club members and supporters - who are overwhelmingly female¹ - elect diverse leaders like us to the Executive Committee. However, within the Executive Committee, we are outnumbered and tokenized by systemic rules, power dynamics, and election shell games that keep existing leaders entrenched even when groups are out of compliance with by- laws.

The Colorado Sierra Club is in serious trouble. We allege that the Colorado Sierra Club is in violation of its own by-laws. The Colorado Executive Committee has failed to self-regulate and bring itself into compliance. This is due to the fact that the lack of compliance to by-laws and exclusionary back-door dealings keeps the entrenched faction of males - mostly older, mostly white - in power. To address compliance issues, we recruited new volunteers, we held additional meetings, and we raised compliance issues during Executive Committee meetings. For example, in the December 2019 Executive Committee meeting we raised the issue of the Denver Metro Network *never* having been in compliance with Chapter by-laws. No matter what we did, the male members of the Executive Committee ensured these issues were not addressed, attacked our motives, and advanced their timeline to oust us. The pushback against those of us striving to diversify, comply and lead the Chapter forward, was particularly vitriolic.

Given the Executive Committee is composed of 11 males and only 4 females, we presented the Executive Committee with a gender equity strategy to evaluate opportunities to align with Sierra Club’s stated equity goals. Not only did they shut us down, they introduced a motion to remove gender equity as a Chapter priority. There is a pattern of silencing women’s voices and other diverse volunteers in order to keep power and uphold the status quo.

The women leaders of the Colorado Sierra Club Executive Committee have endured months of aggressive and hostile interactions with male Executive Committee members and male volunteer leaders. We have been harassed, bullied, and threatened by male members of the Colorado Executive Committee and their allies. The main priority of the predominantly male Executive Committee has become ensuring that the women are denied the leadership roles they were elected to, rather than carrying out environmental and social justice goals.

Female volunteers and staff who were not on the Executive Committee also reported being bullied. We intervened given the difficulty of that power dynamic, causing this faction of men to

¹ Colorado Sierra Club members are 56% female / 44% male; members and supporters are 69% female / 31% male.

come after us with more determination. We heard complaints that a male member of the Executive Committee conducted an unauthorized survey of dozens of female Sierra Club members, interrogating them about “me too” issues that made them uncomfortable. We elevated the bullying and intimidating tactics to the purview of the Executive Committee, but the ‘good old boys network’ in Colorado closed ranks and weaponized their denial that gender bias was the root of the problem. The faction harassed and intimidated female Executive Committee members by singling them out to question their votes, and when a lone male Executive Committee member abstained from voting in order to remain neutral, the faction removed him from his leadership position at the Chapter-level.

Starting in 2019, we came forward in good faith to the National Sierra Club. Together the female signees on this letter have submitted several formal complaints and/or filings under Standing Rule 5.10.2, identifying dozens of violations of the Affirmative Standards of Conduct by this faction of men in the Colorado Sierra Club leadership.

Sierra Club did not address these violations in an effective or timely manner. Instead the faction on the Executive Committee used the fact that there was a complaint filed to intimidate and blackmail the Executive Committee to try to remove the first woman of color as Chair and young woman as Vice Chair. A few months after that, we were ousted via hostile takeover. The Sierra Club enabled this toxic culture to take deeper root by not providing a timely avenue or process for removing toxic volunteers or addressing unprofessional and unethical behaviors.

The Sierra Club has widely known issues with a lack of diversity and inclusion, particularly in decision-making and leadership in the Rockies². Despite that, we were attracted to Sierra Club because of its scale as the largest grassroots environmental organization and the equity and inclusion principles espoused by its Board³ and Executive Director⁴. Indeed, we were willing participants when Sierra magazine used our names, stories and likenesses to portray a more diverse version of the Club. Not [once](#), but [twice](#).

The Sierra Club has a responsibility as an organization to support diverse volunteers when they face these hostile and toxic volunteer leaders. Sierra Club did not support us; providing neither a timely nor effective response to the escalating situation. Sierra Club has an obligation to make sure that Executive Committee members take their responsibilities seriously and follow Sierra Club by-laws. The Colorado Executive Committee does not self-regulate and they are not being held accountable.

Today is a recognition that the problems in the Colorado Sierra Club are deeply entrenched and systemic, and it has become impossible for us to navigate this double bind⁵. The Sierra Club will

² Schwan, Bryony Jane, "Gender power and the environmental movement: A critique and model for change" (1997). Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers. 9203. <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/9203>

³ “Join Us In This Walk Through the World Together” Sierra Club Equity [vision](#) from the Board in 2015

⁴ Various blogposts by Michael Brune on Women’s March [2017](#) and [2018](#), [Feminism 2020](#), [the border wall](#), [youth](#), [equity](#), [immigration](#)

⁵ “Infographic: The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership”, August 2018 [research](#) by Catalyst

never keep womxn, minorities and the under 35 population as members, much less as dedicated volunteers and leaders, unless it changes.

Effective as of today's date, we resign from the Colorado Executive Committee and all Chapter leadership roles. Even with this resignation, because those involved are relentless, we expect retaliation and the harassment to continue. Our complaints filed under 5.10.2 still have standing and we expect Sierra Club to address them.

Signed:

Fran Silva-Blayney
Megan Rast
Kathy Slaughter
Matt Kirby
Eric Rechel

Appendix - Individual Statements by Signees

"As a younger member of the Executive Committee newly-elected in December 2019, I was excited to join the leadership of Fran and Megan and the good work that I have seen from chapter. But what I encountered on the Executive Committee was a toxic atmosphere of individuals who seemed far removed from and less interested in the necessary work of the chapter and more interested in cutting each other down. I witnessed Fran and Megan's admirable work consistently undermined and belittled in ways that no professional organization should tolerate. The group is dysfunctional and unable to fulfill the mission of the Sierra Club and is not a place where I can in good conscience put my energy nor would I recommend it to anyone else." -Matt Kirby

"I am resigning from the Colorado Sierra Club Excom after being elected twice to serve at large. This is due to my objection to how the two women leaders, some women staff, and other volunteers doing important work for the club have been treated. I know from experience that disagreements can be worked out with self reflection, open communication, open, honest minds, and polite, conciliatory, respectful language. I have not seen that at work in the Excom. I made up my mind to resign after participating in the January Excom meeting by Zoom. Behavior was not at all conducive to solving problems. The forced election in May continued this pattern. I have received late night texts asking me to justify my votes. My no vote was changed to abstain as to vice chair. I feel that there is a faction that wants status quo from the past 20 years, and it is not even possible to remain neutral. There are lots of environmental groups that value diversity in volunteers. Colorado Sierra Club Excom is not one of those places." -Kathy Slaughter

"Many young female volunteers with the Club have approached me in tears or frustration, and I vividly recall one woman asking why I wasn't doing more since I was on the Executive

Committee. I want the women who have felt sidelined, harassed or opted out to know that I understand, I share this burden, and I consistently worked to make Colorado Sierra Club a more welcoming and inclusive space. There are many times where I have felt more like a human shield protecting other women than a volunteer contributing my time and talent. Today I admit my efforts could never succeed because there was never organizational support to change."

-Megan Rast

"As an environmentalist, I feel the urgency to act to address climate change. As a first generation Asian American I am acutely aware that my culture defines how I show up in the historically white space of the Sierra Club. And as a woman, it has been made very clear to me that females in Colorado volunteer leadership and staff positions are marginalized and that the patriarchy is determined to remain entrenched in the Colorado Sierra Club. I am choosing to resign rather than continue to be persecuted by those for whom the Sierra Club has become an extension of their ego and the mission has been lost. The Sierra Club needs to walk its talk. But climate change isn't going to wait for the Sierra Club to figure out that the intersection of environmentalism and social justice cannot be ignored."- Fran Silva Blayney