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WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The construction industry is still mainly dominated by men as men ultimately decide what positions of power and leadership women occupy. The struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment is central to transformation. The South African construction industry continues to seize with all forms of gender discrimination, sexism and patriarchy. The primary aim of the study was to obtain data that was relevant to the problem 'Women in Construction' and is based upon a survey of the relevant literature as well as a questionnaire survey. The following constitute the salient findings: construction is still largely regarded as a male domain, women are not taken seriously as professionals in the construction industry and society, tradition, organization culture and sexist attitudes play a major role when appointing women in construction. The construction industry should not be male-dominated because it is considered rough and tough and that women should be provided with the opportunity to prove themselves. Women cannot secure top jobs or successfully assume management roles due to factors such as actual talent, ability and skills. Despite the increase in the number of women being employed in the construction industry, they still constitute a very small percentage of the industry's workforce which is less than 10%. The study concludes that women are underrepresented in the construction industry and that although they may face many challenges and barriers, women are competent to rightfully take up a position on-site within the construction industry. Although, construction is still largely regarded as a male domain change should take place in the industry to rectify this specific train of thought and culture, and that women equally deserve to participate in construction even though it may be considered as a place for men only.

Keywords: construction, women, challenges, barriers, representation

INTRODUCTION

Why is there the distressing feeling that women are still playing second fiddle to men? Men ultimately decide what positions of power and leadership women occupy. Women shape their own futures through their determination, ambition, and resilience to take their rightful place in the world. 'The more things change, the more they stay the same!' A very common and widely used quote, but never more pertinent than when it relates to women's quest for equality and recognition in the workplace, home and society as a whole (Govender, 2007: 2). Despite having a constitution that entrenches equal rights, discrimination practices, structural inequalities, cultural factors, prejudices, patriarchy and sexism are some of the hindrances that are still rife in the South African construction industry (Pappaya, 2007: 4).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Representivity of Women in Construction

Although women account for 41.3% of South Africa's workforce, only 15% are executive managers and just 7% of all directors are women (Pandor, 2005: 2).

Women's increased involvement in the labour force, however, is not paralleled within the management levels of organizations. Women appear to be 'trapped' at middle and junior management roles within organisations (Cross & Linehan, 2006: 28-39).

An increasing number of women are now entering this traditionally male-dominated environment which is not surprising, although the numbers are still minimal when compared with men. The register of the Construction Industry Development Board (cidb) reflects a total of 44 100 construction enterprises of which 48% are owned by women (cidb, 2008: 1). However, 83% of the women-owned enterprises fall within grade one, and a further 12% in grades two and three. Only 5% of all women-owned enterprises registered with the cidb are found in grades four and higher. In fact there are only four women-owned enterprise at grade 8.

There are currently over 11 million women employed in the UK, accounting for 49.5% of the workforce. Despite increases in the number of women employed in the construction industry over the past decade, they still constitute only 13% of the industry's workforce. This indicates that construction continues to be the most male dominated of all the major industrial groups (Fielden, Davidson, Gale & Davey, 2000: 113-121).

While it is now socially acceptable for women to constitute a large proportion of the world's workforce, when it comes to climbing the corporate ladder, how many women had to experience various challenges from the start in order to achieve success? The world's boardrooms are sadly lacking in women and much has been written over the years about the sexist 'glass ceiling' that hampers women's success beyond a certain point in their career (Hayward, 2005: 29).

Misconceptions Relative to Women in Construction

Since the 19th century women globally have been trying to change how people view them economically, politically and socially. They have been demanding equality and justice especially in the workplace. Many argue that women's equality has yet to be achieved since the democracy in 1994; the post-apartheid government has prioritized women's empowerment (Naidoo, 2007: 3). It is thus viewed that the construction industry's cultural values will not change overnight for as long as both male and female workers in the industry continue upholding such values (Gale, 1994: 3-14); with male workers upholding these values considering them as the 'norm' and female workers finding themselves in a 'fit-in' situation.

Although similar in many ways to discrimination faced by members of racial and ethnic minorities, the inequity faced by women in the occupations has its unique side. Women are inexorably seen in relation to their child-bearing functions and child-rearing tasks, the delegation of family roles to them, and men's historical dominance in the family and in society. The attitudes connected with the child-bearing function are those most commonly evoked in the discussion of women at work. These are often used as rationalization and justification for the status quo. What is regarded as necessary, natural, and just, are the efforts to seek alternative solutions is thereby undermined (Epstein, 1971: 3).

Construction as a career path is still regarded largely as a male domain, and entering this career path is a challenge for most women. Nonetheless, there are women who are active in the entire spectrum of the construction industry, constructing houses, roads, dams, schools, and casinos (Moodley, 2006: 1). Women are not taken seriously as professionals in the construction industry. It begins at an early age when girls are not encouraged to pursue technical subjects at school, are taught by mostly male lecturers at college and continues in the workplace where they are seen as a temporary asset. Women are often paid less than men, are undervalued and regularly not considered for promotion (Fisher, 2002: 1). "The ball is rolling now. We must lift the aspiration of women and encourage them to pursue a career in construction. This issue will not go away. We need to make improvements at all levels." (Fisher, 2002: 2)

The construction industry, as one of the last male bastions, has seen a significant degree of resistance to concepts such as gender equity, affirmative action and resentment at what is seen as the 'big brother' approach of the government's social justice agenda. There is a widespread misinterpretation of equal opportunity, with men either taking the stand that women are not equal physically or that if they want equal opportunity they must demonstrate that they can do everything in the very same way that a man does on the construction site (Pringle & Winning, 1998: 220). Men who have been developed viewing themselves as superior to women have great difficulty coping with women at management level. Balanced men will happily accept women in the boardroom and acknowledge that they have worked with men who do accept women on an equal footing (Hayward, 2005: 33).

Vinnicombe and Sturges (1995: 1-19) suggest that some organisations operate a double standard for marriage: they view the married male manager as an asset, with a stable support network at home allowing him to give his undivided attention to his work, but they view the married female manager as a liability, likely to neglect her career at the expense of her family at every opportunity.

Competencies of Women in Construction

It is vital to retain women at every stage of their career. Mitos (2001) has argued that there is a need to recognize the promotion of women in science as crucial to improving the relationship between science and society, in order that science better reflects the diversity of the entire population. Logue and Talapessy (1993) suggest that the lack of women in science poses a threat in terms of a number of aspects (Powell, Hassan, Dainty & Carter, 2007: 347-348):

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- Equity – gender discrimination is a violation of human rights;
- Excellence – the under-representation of women threatens excellence;
- Efficacy – the ageing population and the shrinking pool of young scientists makes it essential to target both genders, and
- Efficiency – it is wasteful to educate and train women scientists, but then not use their skills in employment.

The Council of Europe (1999) identified 3 goals with regards to women in science and technology (Powell, Hassan, Dainty & Cartert, 2007: 347-348):

- To improve our information on the place women occupy in science and technology;
- To improve girls' access to scientific and technological studies and careers, and
- To achieve greater equality in the relationship between men and women throughout society.

Most women sought site-based experience in their early career stages; in contrast they tend to seek experience on smaller projects within regionally-based divisional companies. Women felt that smaller projects would allow them to gain a broader range of skills and experience, which would help them to demonstrate their competence to male colleagues who were skeptical of their ability. Women were encouraged by senior male managers to enter supporting roles which tend to be office based. Such positions, which tend to be removed from the production function, were widely acknowledged not to afford as many opportunities for rapid advancement (Bagilhole, Dainty & Neale, 1999: 355).

Women's self-perception and the understanding of it by men is important because it helps to explain how women make sense of the barriers and challenges they face in a male dominated environment and culture, and how they seek to attain positive outcomes for themselves. When comparing women in construction with women in other male-dominated and female-dominated industries there is minimal variation in self-perception. Women in the construction industry emerge relatively positive with the highest overall self-esteem which is encouraging and surprising when considerable evidence of significant barriers to entry and career progression for women in the construction industry is taken into account, compared to that of other industries. This indicates that the construction industry is not a special case and that support strategies used in other industries are directly transferable, although the culture of the construction industry makes it more difficult to implement. Women who work in male-dominated occupations in particular are often thought to be sexless. The woman who takes her work seriously – the career women – traditionally has been viewed as the antithesis of the feminine woman (Epstein, 1971: 23).

Women were excluded from certain jobs, and from career progression through jobs, because of the expectations that they would marry, have children, and take responsibility for raising them. Employers are segregative and inflexible about the designation of the appropriate gender for jobs, because their utilization of fixed capital and organisation of work are closely linked to the process of sex-typing of jobs (de Groot and Schrover, 1995: 4). Women workers are generally denied access to formal training in traditionally masculine areas of work. Comparing the skills required in women's and men's work is therefore not simply a technical matter. Women's work tends to fall into the unskilled or semi-skilled categories of official classifications (de Groot and Schrover, 1995: 5). Women have intrinsic values – they are quietly determined, have learnt to read others and understand them and make good team leaders. Women should be recognized for their strong qualities, and society should appreciate the added value women offer (Fisher, 2002: 1). There is this idea that women are emotional and not able to strategise and give clear direction. "That's not true...if women can organize in the union like they do at home, we can have very strong women leaders." Men are brought up to be leaders. Women are brought up to follow men, as second class citizens. They are not expected to lead or make decisions and because of this most women do not believe it is possible that they can. Many do not even try. For those women who do, it is a long battle to be accepted as leaders by other women and men. They have to do the job better than men just to prove they can do it (Basckin, 1991: 15).

Palomar-Fresnedi says: "When it comes to being 100% focused on a situation, the men come out on the top: They are naturally 'wired' to have one thing going one hundred per cent and to do it well. I think if they have ten things going at the same time it's more difficult for men. Women seem to do well in situations where they need to manage different projects. That's just in their nature."

(Hayward, 2005: 36) Guy Mollet says: "In my experience, women in managerial positions are more demanding than their male counterparts. They tend to be less tolerant of incompetence, because they usually had to fight quite hard to get their job. That might be why men are reluctant to work for female bosses!" (Hayward 2005: 52) The glass ceiling is still there, but disappearing in a number of places, there are definitely some fissures and women now have that confidence to go out and promote themselves knowing that they are able to do the job and to do it well (Hayward, 2005: 34).

Challenges Faced by Women in Construction

Barriers to women entering and working in the construction industry have been identified (Fielden and Davidson, 2001: 293-304; Benett *et al.*, 1999: 273-291). The barriers include: the industry's masculine image, construction related career knowledge amongst students and adults, selection criteria on male-dominated courses, recruitment practices and procedures, sexist attitudes, male-dominated culture, and the work environment. Gale and Cartwright (1995: 3-8) characterize the construction industry's culture as constituting: male domination, crisis, aggression and conflict, gallant behaviour, and traditional attitudes. They consider one of the prerequisites for employment in the industry is the initiation into such a culture, through the socialization process inherent in the education system. Essentially they state lack of education deters the initiation into the industry's culture and hence employment.

Women that join the industry are hence compelled to adapt 'male values-cum-construction industry values' for them to survive (Dainty *et al.*, 2001: 297-304). Gale (1999) contends that for women in management positions the burdens placed upon them in this regard are enormous, and often happen at a time in their lives when they are trying to manage the requirements of young families, ageing parents and developing their own careers. In addition, such women face the psychological anxiety of the conflict between spending time pursuing their careers, and the remorse of not spending enough time with their families. A major obstacle to women's movement into wage labour has been stated to be a combination of patriarchal relations and the traditional division of labour by sex. Division of work according to socially constructed values such as the gendering of work exacerbates women's disadvantaged position and is significantly pronounced in the culture of the construction industry (Gale, 1994: 3-14). Prejudice and bias unfortunately still exist in the work place in terms of performance and salary. Managers sometimes fail women in a role to prove themselves right. Some may go as far as increasing the workload or complexity of the work to ensure failure bearing in mind that even the most experienced men in the same position would not cope (Govender, 2007: 2).

Equipping women with construction related skills as well as giving them confidence to improve their development, ensures that women engage in self-build housing projects, which not only ensures that women have adequate shelter, but also that they earn an income from these skills. Getting women to participate in the construction industry empowers women to harness their development, which reduces vulnerability amongst women. The women in South Africa are waiting to release their strength and ability in order to prove they are able to work in the construction industry. Women demonstrated that they are capable of joining together to make a difference when faced with significant challenges. Stereotypes were broken by both women making their mark in the male-dominated construction industry and by doing away with social stereotypes, which state that women are not competent when dealing with hard labour. Men are traditionally seen as technically competent and creative. Women are seen as incompetent – suited only to work with machines that have been made and are maintained by men. This negative association between women and technology is one of the features of the sex typing of jobs. Men identify themselves with technology, and technology is identified with masculinity (de Groot and Schrover, 1995: 1). There are minimal categories of women's work that are designated as skilled, because of the pervasive belief that women's work is by definition unskilled. Female skills are considered complementary to male skills. If women lack a certain skill, men are

supposed to possess it, and vice versa. All jobs done by men, simply by virtue of the fact, are seen as more skilled than those done by women. Women's skills, such as cooking, caring and sewing, are seen as 'natural' (de Groot and Schrover, 1995: 5).

While for men the 'glass ceiling' may be just a myth, for many women it is a source of actual frustration and can potentially spell the end of their career unless they can find a way to break through. Why can't women secure the top jobs? There are several issues. Hayward (2005: 29-32) argues that there is a huge and widening gulf between the perception of whether women can successfully take on a management role and their actual talent, ability and skills for doing so. There's also the changing culture of the workplace; the traditionally 'female' skills involving communication and team building are more essential today than they have ever been, which could actually put some traditional male 'macho' men at a disadvantage as their traditional empire crumbles around them. At the launch of SAWiC, Sigcau (1999: 1) said: "To have gained entry in what is regarded as male terrain must have called for great courage – despite the odds you have lived up to the challenge and proved to be worthy players in the mainstream economy of the country."

At the Annual General Meeting of SAWiC, Bici (2002: 1-5) said: "A milestone does not mean the end of the road. It signifies the end of a stretch and the beginning of another. We are fully aware of the challenges many have to face in order to gain recognition. These obstacles are universal in occurrence and afflict women contractors and women in construction in many parts of the world, including developed countries such as the UK and the USA. Women universally still find it difficult to penetrate and persevere in the male-dominated built environment, including construction."

The barriers to women advancement were identified as, *inter alia*: as arising from the industry's macho image; male-biased construction education courses; selection criteria; recruitment practices; sexist attitudes; male dominated work environment and culture, as well as a general lack of women representation in the industry's many formal structures. There are many battles women have to wage before they win the war against prejudice. When Marcia Rackley was installed as the 47th President of NAWiC, she dedicated her term of office to 'plugging into the power of women'. The concept referred to the construction industry's critical need for labour and the average woman's desire for achievement (Bici, 2002: 1-5).

Although Niall Fitzgerald says: "I believe it is increasingly important that women should stop feeling they have to be like men to succeed like men. This is going in the wrong direction." (Hayward, 2005: 48), Fisher (2002: 1) says: "Women must seize the opportunities and make things happen."

RESEARCH

Methodology and sample strata

The total number of general contractors (GCs) registered with the East Cape Master Builders Association (ECMBA) is 109. The registered contractors include probationary, standard, and master contractors. Given the poor response rates relative to previous research studies, it was deemed necessary to randomly select GCs from among the 109 registered GCs, more specifically from the standard and master registered GCs in order to maximize the number of responses. These GCs were contacted per telephone and asked whether they were willing to participate in the research and questionnaires were sent via facsimile and hand delivered to those who agreed. The total number of GCs that indicated they were willing to participate totaled 56.

A covering letter stating the purpose of the survey, contact and return details was attached to the questionnaire. Respondents were assured that the data provided would be treated with confidentiality and anonymity. The questionnaires were returned by the GCs via facsimile with the exception of four GCs who requested that the questionnaire be hand delivered to them. These

were then collected in person. A list was evolved to facilitate the control process of sent and returned questionnaires, as well as those who could not be reached due to technical problems experienced with their facsimile machines.

11 Responses were received from the 56 GCs that indicated they were willing to participate, which equates to a response rate of 19.6%.

The design of the questionnaire

The primary aim of the questionnaire was to obtain data that was relevant to the problems being researched. The questionnaire was compiled based upon literature relative to the various sub-problems. The qualitative research method was applied, which constitutes the focus on phenomena that occur in the 'real world' and involves studying these phenomena in all their complexity (Leedy, 2005: 133). Most questions were based on a five-point scale being either:

- 1 (minor) to 5 (major);
- 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree);
- 1 (rarely) to 5 (mostly), and
- 'No' and 'yes'.

An 'unsure' option was provided for most questions.

Findings

Terms used when commenting on the data are defined as follows:

- Minority - 33.3% and less
- Less than half - 33.3% and more, but less than 50%
- Half - 50%
- More than half - greater than 50%, but less than 66.7%
- Majority - 66.7% and more, but less than 80%
- Nearly all - 80% and more, but less than 100%, and
- All - 100%

More than half of the respondents' organisations employed > 12 < 35 employees, whereas the minority indicated \leq 12 employees. Only one respondent indicated 100 employees. However, the organization specialises in major building work, and has been in business for over 20 years.

Less than half of the respondents indicated their organisations employed > 1 < 4 women. The majority of respondents indicated that their organisations employed no women. However, one respondent indicated that their organisation employed more than 15 women.

Less than half of the respondents indicated that their organizations employed women in management positions, which varies between > 1 < 4 women. More than half of the respondents indicated that their organizations have no women in management positions.

More than half of the respondents indicated that women are not taken seriously as professionals in construction. Slightly more than the minority indicated that women are taken seriously as professionals in construction with the exception of one respondent who indicated unsure. Fisher (2002: 1) concludes that women are not taken seriously as professionals in the construction industry. It begins at an early age when girls are not encouraged to pursue technical subjects at school, are taught by mostly male lecturers at college, and continues in the workplace where they

are seen as a temporary asset. Women are often paid less than men, are undervalued and regularly not considered for promotion.

Most of the respondents, namely 81.8% indicated that women are prepared to work harder in order to be successful if given a chance to prove themselves. 18.2% of respondents indicated that women are not prepared to work harder in order to be successful if given a chance to prove themselves. Hayward (2005: 5-27) concludes that in today's society women are increasingly making conscious decisions about their lives and taking responsibility for their actions. In some industries and particularly those dominated by men, it can seem a time-consuming battle for female recognition. The stereotypes of the permanently glamorous and polished, short-skirted female executive or that of the battle axe have now given way to a more realistic picture of women who are prepared to work hard for their success.

The majority of respondents believe that women seem to do well in situations where they need to manage different projects all at once. However, it is notable that 18.2% of the respondents were unsure.

Nearly all respondents, namely 90.9% believe that women have the confidence to pursue and motivate themselves in the construction industry knowing that they are able to do the job, and do it well. There were no negative responses, and limited unsure responses. Hayward (2005: 34) concludes that the 'glass ceiling' is still there, but disappearing in a number of places, there are definitely some fissures and women now have that confidence to go out and promote themselves knowing that they are able to do the job and to do it well.

Most of the respondents believe that women have made great strides in construction, but that the 'glass ceiling' is far from being shattered. The remainder of the respondents were unsure. This finding concludes that women have made great strides in business, but the 'glass ceiling' is far from completely shattered. Women still earn less than men, encounter various challenges in order to obtain promotions and venture capital, and have fewer role models. In addition, women typically continue to take on most of the burdens at home, which makes it more challenging for them to manage a career.

All the respondents agree that despite the increase in the number of women being employed in the construction industry, they still constitute only a very small percentage of the industry's workforce. Epstein (1971: 9) concludes that an increasing number of women are now entering this traditionally male-dominated environment which is not surprising, although the numbers are still minimal when compared with men. Currently less than 10% of the 3 257 registered emerging contractors on the government database are women. Few women are at the top anywhere in the world. Despite the wide base of female professional personnel in construction, the number of women decreases disproportionately relative to the top in the hierarchy, both professional and governmental, and things do not seem to improve. However, Fielden, Davidson, Gale and Davey (2000: 113-121) conclude that there are currently in excess of 11 million women employed in the UK, accounting for 49.5% of the workforce. Despite increases in the number of women employed in the construction industry over the past decade, they still constitute only 13% of the industry's workforce. This indicates that construction continues to be the most male dominated of all the major industrial groups (Fielden, Davidson, Gale & Davey, 2000: 113-121).

CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that construction is still largely regarded as a male domain and that women are not taken seriously as professionals in construction. Society, tradition, organization culture, and sexist attitudes play a major role when appointing women in leadership positions. Construction should not be male dominated because it is considered rough and tough and that women should be given a chance to prove themselves in the construction industry.

There is a clear indication that commitment, dedication, acknowledgement, responsibility and confidence have a major impact on the core-competencies of women in construction. Self-promotion does not have a major effect. Women are prepared to work harder in order to be successful if given a chance to prove themselves. Women seem to do well in situations where they need to manage different projects all at once. Women in managerial positions are on a major basis more demanding than their male counterparts. Women have the confidence to pursue and motivate themselves in the construction industry knowing that they can do the job and complete it successfully.

To participate in construction takes great courage mainly because it is regarded as male terrain. Women have to face many challenges in order to gain recognition in the construction industry, which makes it difficult to penetrate and persevere in the male dominated environment. Women can succeed in construction using their female skills without having to adopt a masculine approach. Women have made great strides in construction, but the 'glass ceiling' is far from being completely shattered. Women's representation in the construction industry's formal structure ranked first among the factors that constitute barriers to advancement of women in construction followed by male dominated work environment and culture. It is increasingly important that women cease thinking that they have to be similar to men in order to succeed as men do.

Despite the increase in the number of women being employed in the construction industry, they still constitute only a small percentage of the industry's workforce. Relative to succeeding in construction, the competition is tough especially when competing against your male counterparts. It can be deemed that the construction industry's boardrooms are sadly lacking women in MD posts as well as in CEO posts in the construction industry. Women are seldom employed in construction as the maximum amount employed constitutes about 1-4 women employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are aimed at manipulating the male-orientated culture. Initiatives aimed at the management of culture have been shown to be more successful when they are integrated into packages of change initiatives. The range of equality measures should comprise a mix of gender-specific initiatives aimed at improving women's careers, and at addressing the barriers to women's careers. If women must participate optimally in the construction industry, strategies aimed at mainstreaming women into construction need to be embarked upon.

Appropriate steps should be taken to create a more equitable work environment through the development of cultural change within construction organisations. It is only through a genuine commitment to the development of a more equitable industry from the highest level, that women are likely to be able to develop their careers in parity with men. However, if more women can be retained in this way, then this may in turn lead to a further increase in the number of women entering construction as those obtaining management positions act as role models for future entrants. The main implication for organisations in the construction industry is that they need to improve the industry's image if they are to attract women graduates. Organisations need to provide mentors for undergraduates and young graduates entering the construction industry. The mentors should ideally be women who would also act as role models to women entering the industry, although male mentors would help reduce some of the stereotypes of management through increased interaction with women recruits.

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