

# **WOMEN AS CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS: MODERN DAY CHALLENGES**

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The ratio of men to women in the construction industry is one that has often attracted great concern for all stakeholders. Although the UK construction sector has enjoyed a significant rise in the number of women, there is undoubtedly more room for improvement. Numerous schemes have been initiated by government and other professional bodies to encourage more women to join the industry. On the surface, many issues such as lack of workplace flexibility and looming discrimination prevent many more women from joining. Using the glass ceiling and the leaky pipeline theories, an in-depth exploration of experiences of female construction professionals is undertaken in this research. A total of six semi-structured interviews were carried out. Although the respondents acknowledged the industry had improved significantly, they nevertheless expressed concerns on many issues that they believed needed to be addressed. It was identified that many women struggle to re-enter the industry after embarking on maternity leave. Furthermore, the respondents believed that some workplace progressions were only due to senior managers' attempt to demonstrate a level of inclusivity rather than due to merit. Finally, it was revealed that sexism is still rife in the industry and many women are left in very uncomfortable environments with fear of voicing out this horror. This research merely offers a peek at the ordeals that some women have to endure when working in the construction industry. Hopefully by addressing such issues, more women will be encouraged to take up professions in the sector.

Keywords: equality, glass ceiling theory, inclusive practice, women.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The UK construction industry contributed to the economic output by £103 million (6.5% of the total) in 2014 (Rhodes, 2016), comprising of over 280,000 businesses (Waters, 2017) and employment figures of 2.1 million jobs (6.2%). This covers 10% of the UK's total employment figure in 2015 (Rhodes, 2016). Skills shortage in the UK construction industry continues to grow and there is an urgent need to plug this gap. One method of plugging this skill gap is the recruitment of women into the industry. The industry lacks great numbers of women participation and this could be one of the solutions to the skills shortage. Unfortunately the construction sector has been known to be less attractive women due to the stigma attached to the industry e.g. sexism (Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), 2015).

This research explores the current challenges faced by women in the UK construction industry in order to identify barriers that can be eliminated in order to encourage more women to join the industry.

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## WOMEN AND THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

The UK construction industry has always been dominated by males (Gurjao, 2017). The recruitment of workers in the industry has been homogeneous, with a marked propensity for companies to attract, recruit and select men (Dainty et al, 2001: 297). Understandably this has led to women being significantly under-represented (ibid).

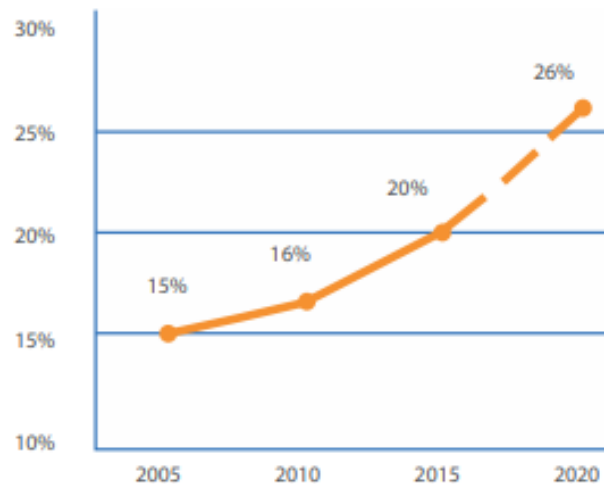


Figure 1 Proportion of female employees entering the UK construction industry (Randstad, 2016)

Figure 1 shows an upward trajectory of women entering the construction. By 2020, the industry could witness a quarter of its workforce being females. A great deal of effort has been made by professional bodies including the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) and Construction Industry Council (CIC) to encourage more women to join the industry in recent times. However, such initiatives still receives some resistance. This is partly due to the recruitment trends and the perceived image of the sector.

### Perceived image of the construction industry

The industry is perceived as a masculine, hostile, challenging and dangerous environment (Fielden et al., 2001). Unfortunately, the construction industry fosters a male only image, entrenched in a culture that undermines women (Gurjao, 2017). Within certain areas of construction, sexist behaviour towards female colleagues appears to have become normalised. As many as 40% of women in the construction industry have admitted to being bullied or harassed by managers, while 30% revealed they were too afraid to make a complaint about the treatment they suffered (Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT), 2014). Often women will be exposed to forms of sexual harassment, seen by male co-workers as a way of reasserting control, refusing to adapt to a culture that allows women to manage teams (Waters, 2017). A staggering 51% of women said they were treated poorly purely because of their gender (UCATT, 2014). It is imperative to acknowledge that the issues raised here are not as a result of women being incapable of executing the jobs to which they are tasked, but purely for their gender. Based on their gender, women believe there are significant barriers that prevent them from staying in their roles and also from rising above certain levels in the industry.

The next section presents some theories that have risen as a result of women's concerns in the workplace.

## The glass ceiling and leaky pipeline theories in construction

The 'glass ceiling' theory depicts the challenges experienced by women when trying to grow within their sectors (Weyer, 2007). The theory establishes the difficulties women face with lack of internal promotion, thus preventing career progression (Bass and Avolio, 1994). It can be described as the invisible, artificial barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing within their organisation and reaching their full potential (Morgan, 2015). The term originally described the point beyond which women managers and executives, particularly white women, were not promoted. Today it is evident that ceilings and walls exist throughout most workplaces for minorities and women. For the scope of this study, race will not be the main focus. These barriers result from institutional and psychological practices, and limit the advancement and mobility opportunities of men and women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Gurjao, 2017). The 'glass wall' theory represents the traditional gender split in various sectors of the industry. The segregation of women in traditional administrative or secretarial roles in comparison to men in manufacturing and production sectors (ibid).

In addition to the glass ceiling, women face the leaky pipeline whereby change in career, career break to have a family and other personal decisions see them exit the industry and subsequently struggle to re-enter (see figure 2).

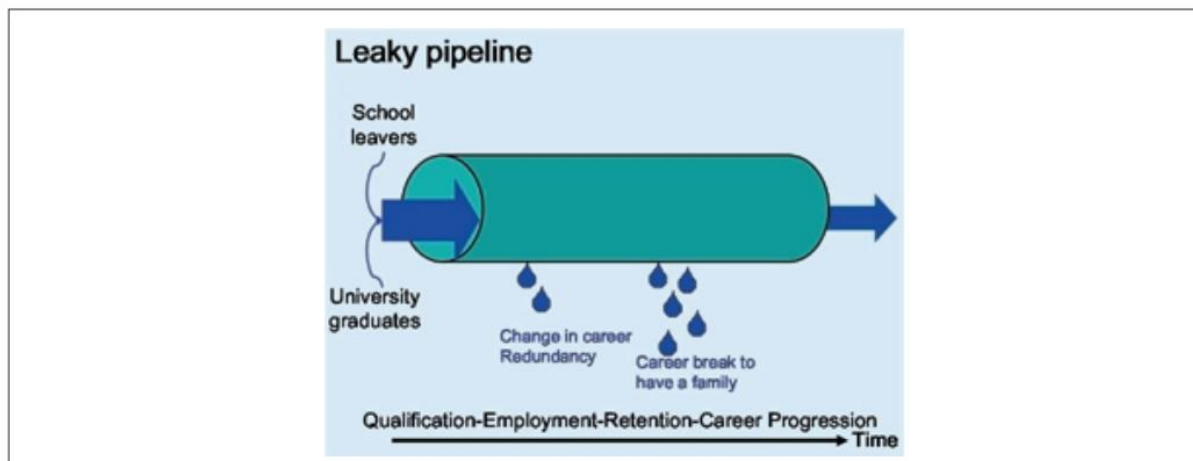


Figure 2 – 'Leaky pipeline' theory (Gurjao, 2017)

The leaky pipeline describes the lack of women able to remain within the industry (Worrall et al, 2010) after entering through education. It is acknowledged that once temporarily leaving the construction industry it becomes increasingly difficult to re-enter (Gurjao, 2017). The theory further depicts the issues that surround women throughout their career, the poor work-life balance, lack of internal promotion and continual lack of respect including instances of poor behaviour women are exposed to throughout their time in the construction industry. An important situation that would also force women to leave the industry temporarily or permanently could also be the harassment and abuse suffered by women in the workplace (see UCATT, 2014)

Having identified the existence of the glass ceiling (as opposed to hierarchical or occupational segregation) as a social phenomenon of many different communities as a real situation rather than a figment of women's imagination, the actual problem is that men above cannot see it as an institutional barrier faced by the women below (Morgan, 2015: 11).

Both the glass ceiling and leaky pipeline are identified to be barriers that prevent women from succeeding in the workplace. Cabrera (2009: 40) goes further to emphasize that: "The

*glass ceiling is not what prevents most women from rising beyond certain levels in organizations. Most women are leaving their organizations voluntarily long before hitting the ceiling. A "leaky pipeline" is a more accurate description of what is occurring".* Thus the leaky pipeline supersedes the glass ceiling in the case of female construction workers.

In order to understand the barriers faced by female construction professionals with respect to employment retention, an in-depth understanding of the issues faced is required. The research method is presented next.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Using a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six construction professionals. A purposive sampling approach was used to identify the interviewees. Previous researchers document the importance of gathering information regarding people's perceptions, opinions and experiences collected with the use of semi-structured interviews (Worrall et al, 2010). The semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate to acquire the in-depth information.

From the critical literature review, the following areas were identified to be explored in the development of the interview guide:

1. Everyday sexism in the workplace
2. Societies' perception of industry, in terms of image
3. The gender pay gap
4. Retention issues, including maternity difficulties and progression issues
5. Educational impacts and awareness

Ethical considerations included anonymity and confidentiality of the interviewees. All interviewees were nicknamed Jane Doe (JD). Furthermore, there was a potential of sensitive matters being revealed and as such standards of the Social Research Association were strictly adhered to in order to ensure the interviewees were never in an uncomfortable situation.

## FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and analysis from the interview data are presented in this section.

### Background of interviewees

*Table 1 Profile of interviewees*

	JD1	JD2	JD3	JD4	JD5	JD6
Years of experience	22 years	16 years	22 years	4.5 years	26 years	24 years
Job category	Management	Senior Management	Senior Management	Management	Senior Management	Senior Management
Job title	Knowledge Manager	Director of SH&E	Former Director	Diversity and Social Program Manager	Technical Director	Project Manager
First role in construction	No	No	No	Yes	No	No

A range of roles and time of experience of interviewees were included in the study. All interviewees had managerial roles. The years of experience and managerial positions were chosen with the hope of capturing the barriers the interviewees face or have had to overcome during their time in the industry. Furthermore, having managerial roles meant the interviewees had some 'power' or 'control' in their respective organisations. JD4 had the least experience (4.5 years) and this was her first role in construction. Her role was not a technical construction role but more aligned to managing diversity in the organisation. As such her role may not be considered as the traditional construction role.

### **Joining the industry**

The interviewees had different reasons for entering the construction industry. Some of the reasons included simply wanting to contribute to the built environment. Reasons for entering the industry seemed to be as a result of genuine interests. However, they had all expressed there were challenges when trying to get into the industry and more importantly rising to their current roles. JD2 described the industry as an aggressive one. She stated:

*'...working in a gruff atmosphere, in a man's world'.*

Unfortunately her response demonstrates that she does not feel as though she is a part of the construction world if she describes it as a world belonging to the opposite gender. JD3 also referred to the industry as *'a man's world'*. JD4 believed she was *'only able obtain a job because [she] knew somebody there'*. She did not believe her educational qualification(s) enabled her to gain the employment opportunity. JD2 was explicitly told that she was being employed to *'meet a gender equality quota'*. From the above findings, it can be deduced that some women may already feel inadequate when entering the workplace. Although they may be competent to undertake their role, they may be intimidated from the point of entry into the industry and the situation may frighten them throughout their careers i.e. if they do not leave. This can then lead to the individuals suffering from the imposter syndrome – a psychosomatic pattern in which people doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud (Reis, 1987).

### **Treatment of women in construction**

A clear pattern about unhappiness with respect to how the interviewees felt at work emerged. They believed that there was unequal treatment and lack of [appreciation] from senior managers.

JD2 stated: *'the more senior you get the worse it is, the old men just won't let us have a say'*.

Although she had risen high enough to become a senior manager, she believed other senior managers wielded more power. When probed further about the above comment, she added:

*'men in senior roles have worked through the ranks since an early age and believe that women should do the same, educational certificates are not worth the paper they are written on if you haven't 'been there and done that' you are not welcome'.*

Evidently, she was intimidated by the behaviour of the other senior managers [men] that she worked with. She had been made to believe that working your way through *'the ranks'* was more important than educational certificates.

JD3 explained that women in the industry often feel patronised by men and added that *'if [some] men will not accept change, they should retire'*. In essence JD3 acknowledges that treating women unequally is an archaic practice and should be phased out. It was also revealed that *'younger managers are extremely welcoming to both genders'* (JD6). Poor treatment identified by the interviewees clearly pointed at male (older) senior managers. It

was also uncovered that women believed they were overshadowed by male colleagues of similar positions as themselves.

### **Leaky pipeline and glass ceiling in practice**

There are many reasons that drive women to leave the industry. Women had to change roles continuously if they wanted to gain promotion or climb the corporate ladder. JD2 explained that it was *'easy for men to be hired or promoted... not acceptable for women'*. Thus she had witnessed both the leaky pipeline and glass ceiling in the workplace.

JD5 added that since women are often less confrontational, *'men show an unconscious bias and underestimate women'*. Women have been known to leave the construction industry due to frustration of being treated poorly or being overlooked for promotion. Furthermore, it was identified that gaining entry into the industry is not always based on merit and as such, females leaving a particular job are not guaranteed of gaining another role.

One key problem that enhanced the occurrence of the leaky pipeline for the women was issues relating to maternity. Three of the interviewees had had children. JD2 used her annual leave as a maternity break. She states: *'didn't really have a [maternity] leave, I took six weeks'*. JD5 had to change roles because having children meant there was no work for her when she expected to return. JD6 recalls the difficulty in returning to work and had to assure her employers that she would not be taking a maternity leave anytime soon. From the above, it is evident that the interviewees struggled to return to work. Without a stronger will they could have all decided to leave the industry for good and become victims of the leaky pipeline. Considering the situation from another perspective, if the employees feel they have to choose between their newly born babies and their work, they may then leave the industry. This concept is confirmed by Carbrera (2009) where it is noted that many women leave the industry before even reaching the supposed glass ceiling.

JD6 stated she took a maximum of three months at home and continued to work throughout the time where possible. *'It's hard to come back, even after a short time, they expect you to prove yourself'*. The law states that a woman is entitled to 39 weeks paid maternity leave (UK Government, 2018), whereas research indicates that very little maternity leave is taken due to the lower chances of companies taking women back post maternity on a more flexible basis. JD4 recalls that she *'left the industry to cut back long travel hours'*. Unless a more flexible approach is made accessible women will not be enticed to pursue a career, or return.

### **Recommendations for the eradication of the leaky pipeline**

In order to eliminate the current barriers faced in the construction industry, Carbrera (2009: 45) highlights five areas that need to be improved in order for females to be adequately accommodated:

- Flexibility – rethinking when, where, and how work is done;
- Care-giving support – providing more support for the care giving needs of working women;
- Maintaining contact – maintaining ties with past (and intermitting) employees
- Welcoming re-entries – recruiting or rehiring ex-employees as they also possess key knowledge that will be useful to the organisation
- Supportive organisational culture – reinforcing the legitimacy of new ways through organisational culture

JD2 stated that in order for the industry to eliminate the leaky pipeline, male employees needed to be retrained in order to change their perceptions about the role of women. JD4 added that promoting flexible working conditions was the way forward and would encourage more women to join the industry. Other comments on improving the industry were as follows:

*'Wait for the dinosaurs to retire'* – JD3

*'Make companies aware of the positives when recruiting young people'* – JD4

JD3's comment reflects an earlier revelation that the older males in the industry were the most problematic therefore upon their retirement, the industry will improve. JD4 also echoes the thinking that younger people (males) embraced all genders in the workplace equally. All the recommendations are somewhat in line with suggestions from Carbrera (2009), i.e. introducing new working practices and changing the overall culture of construction firms.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The problems faced by females in the construction industry are still present and may be one of the main issues limiting the sector from plugging some of the skills shortage. The industry is one of the largest contributors to the nation's GDP and yet is not being encouraged to evolve for the better. Beyond the discussion of plugging the skills gap, the industry has a serious problem of women being treated badly. This situation not only discourages women from joining but also forces the women in the industry to leave and not return. Sexism is widely accepted practice in the industry according to women who work in the sector.

The industry will require a major overhaul if it is to eradicate this negative culture. At present, women are worried about taking career breaks for crucial circumstances such as starting a family. It has been recorded that the Statutory Maternity Pay is not implemented and women can face redundancy when/if they decide to take their entitled maternity break. Some women have thus resorted to using their annual leave to have children and return to work thereby losing out on very important time they could have spent with their newly born babies. Such practices make the industry rather unattractive and hence critical steps need to be adopted in order to make the sector flourish.

The industry has often been labelled as being resistant to change but this is one change that must be embraced. The issue at hand is not particularly one of change but one of unfair treatment and an irrational exclusion of key people who can contribute significantly to the industry. Furthermore, the unfair treatment of women in the construction industry can also make it less attractive for males who believe in equality and therefore are unhappy with the stigma attached to the industry, thus an additional loss of new entrants. With current skills shortage, BREXIT uncertainties and the government's encouragement for the expansion of housebuilding projects, the need for more workers in the construction industry is definitely set to grow. For this reason, recruitment and fair treatment of everyone in the construction industry is a definite priority!

### **Recommendations for future study**

Although this paper offers a unique contribution in its own right, there are a few critical recommendations for further research that will undoubtedly help advance the discourse initiated here. These are as follows:

- Having identified situations where women have faced barriers of their retention or progression in this study; a quantitative study using questionnaire surveys should be carried out focusing on variables such as age, qualifications, industry experience and

family and marital status juxtaposed with the attitudes and behaviours that women have witnessed and/or experienced in the workplace. A larger sample from this approach will give an opportunity to establish representative findings for the industry.

- In numerous cases of gender discrimination, the perpetrators may not be aware of the effect of their actions (see Goldberg, 1968). Thus a research to ascertain how men feel about the treatment of women in construction would offer a very valuable perspective. This will ultimately help identify and subsequently address unconscious biases that exist amongst men (and some women) in the industry.

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