

The impact of the construction industry culture on the work – life balance of women employees: A case of South Africa

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Abstract

The debate on women's involvement in the different sectors of the economy has become progressively amplified than it was in the past where women's roles were understood to be synonymous with taking care of families. In most economies, both developed and developing, women form approximately half of the total population but their involvement in organized labour is still relatively lower because fewer opportunities are available for women as opposed to men. With the recent political commitments in South Africa, there has been an increase of opportunities for the advancement of women in construction, government and other industries. As a result women in the construction industry are confronted with the challenge of balancing their work, which in most instances is demanding, with their domestic and societal role of taking care of the family. Organizational culture provides a context for setting goals, taking action, understanding personalities and identities within organizations, but the critical area of concern is its impact on issues such as work-life balance. Work-life balance is an important issue in the construction industry because it has a direct bearing on organisational effectiveness and individual performance. This paper outlines, based on a literature review, the impact that organizational culture has on the work-life balance of women in the construction industry in South Africa. Break

Keywords: Construction Industry, Culture, Women, Gender, Work – life Balance

1. Introduction

Globally, more and more women are breaking the traditional barriers and stereotypes by being successful in the construction industry, which otherwise continues to be a male dominated industry. Within the South African context, major inroads backed by political commitments have been made, to encourage the participation of women in construction through various legislation and frameworks. Ironically, studies in certain African countries indicate that notwithstanding the countless successes, women are generally affected by patriarchal cultures, male resistance and hostility, apathy and domestic burdens, thus perpetuating the old age barriers of participating in the labour markets (Britwum, Douglas, & Ledwith, 2012: 49). Further research indicates that attitudes, behaviours and perceptions are grave barriers for women in all job roles and professions (Worrall, Harris, Thomas & McDermott, 2010: 279).

The construction industry is associated with high risk environments, labour intensive jobs, long working hours, poor health and safety(H&S) as employees are exposed to harsh conditions and operate dangerous machinery and equipment (James, Rust, & Kingma, 2012:

1553). It is project based and has long been recognized as a stressful industry due to the complexity of tasks, tight time frames, complicated working relationships and the general poor working environments (Fong & Kwok, 2009: 1348; Leung, Chan, Chong, & Sham, 2008: 636). Organizational culture, in this sense relates to the combination of these factors, artefacts, practices, expressive symbols or forms, values and beliefs and underlying assumptions that organizational members share about appropriate behaviour (Schein, 1992: 43). Although many have attempted to define organizational culture, research has established that there are indeed many descriptions and interpretations of organizational culture and it has been viewed widely as holistic, historically determined and socially constructed (Rashid, Sambasivan & Rahman, 2004: 164). According to Hofstede *et al.* (1990), organizational culture involves beliefs and behaviours existing in various levels and manifesting itself in a wide range of features in an organization. Consequently, empirical evidence for studies conducted in the UK show that with the existence of the intricate working practices within the construction industry, women often face career penalties in trying to balance work – life commitments and as a result, their potential career options and growth are jeopardised (Worral, 2012:17).

1.1 The Construction Industry in South Africa

The South African construction industry, similar to many around the world, has in the past been challenged by many systemic problems that are not exclusive to, unstable and insecure employment, financial instability, a bias towards urban development and erratic approaches to integrating the construction industry with overall government policy (Rwelamila, 2002: 435). However, to achieve its primary objective through the democratic dispensation of reconstruction and development programme, the South African government consolidated a process to create an effective strategy for the construction industry within the parameters of the national agenda of social and economic transformation (Rwelamila, 2002: 435). The South African construction industry also operates in a uniquely project-specific and complex environment, combining different investors, clients, contractual arrangements and consulting professions (Marx, 2012: 2). It plays an indispensable role in the economy of South Africa. Despite the numerous constraints facing the industry, it continues to make a significant contribution to the country's economy (James, Rust & Kingma, 2012: 1553). The industry has delivered significant growth, in the past six years employing about 1.8 to 2.25 million people in South Africa (van Wyk *et al.*, 2011: 5). The key driver of this growth has been governments' commitment towards improving the country's infrastructure (van Wyk, *et al.* 2011: 6). Accordingly, the transformation policies as implemented via the South African CIDB(Construction Industry Development Board), has provided frameworks for the increase of black and female contractors, to ensure that contractors reflect the demographics of the country (cidb, 2012: 32). A recent report further indicates that on average, an approximate percentage of contractors ranging between 30% - 40 %, of the Grade 2 to 4 bands are women in both civil engineering and general building (cidb, 2012: 32). This however, represents women contractors, not necessarily the other groups of women who are employed or being trained in the construction industry. Otherwise it would postulate a relative increase of women involved in the industry in general. According to Stats SA (2009), women accounted for about 3% to 17% of the construction workforce both in general

building and civil engineering prior to 2007 indicating a considerable increase from the period when women's participation in labour was largely domestic in nature.

2. Industry Culture

According to Tjihuis (2012), culture has evolved from the initial description of "how things are" to how things are done, what is done, why things are done, when and by whom; which makes culture a construct that concerns groups of people rather than individuals. An appreciation of culture is crucial for organizations because combinations of cultural manifestations such as language and behaviour have major business impacts (Tjihuis & Fellows, 2012: 52). The construction industry is set within the back drop of South Africa, a nation characterised by diversity at its best. Multilingualism, different races, ethnicity and religion are some of the qualities that render South Africa diverse and it is for this reason the country is colloquially known as the "rainbow nation" (Butler, 2009: 36). To trace the path, which perhaps has contributed to this diversity, it is evident that history, before and during the apartheid government system, was largely responsible for propagating this diversity through colonization and segregation. During the apartheid, multiplicity of culture arose as a result of different racial and ethnic groupings (Zegeye & Kriger, 2001: 1). In addition to that, the influence of the west cultivated new cultural patterns within the indigenous ethnic groups (Butler, 2009: 37).

It is undisputable therefore that the cultural climate in South Africa, in addition to the indigenous tribal systems, has been shaped by the overarching intellectual systems associated with white supremacy, segregation and apartheid and it is inevitable that these systems continue to manifest in contemporary South Africa (Butler, 2009: 180). Even though apartheid collapsed and the African National Congress (ANC) took over as the ruling party, its legacy lives on and true to form, labour practices in this country are still influenced by the past. The progressive urbanization and suburbanisation has brought massive changes in the nature of everyday community life (Butler, 2009: 174). Thus the nation persists as a pre-eminent constituent of identity and society, cultures and all other social processes are anchored on the national space (Edensor, 2002: 1). The broader organisational culture will therefore be reflective, to a greater or a lesser extent of the national culture. In other words, an organization's culture is grounded in the culture of its host, normally the country or society where the organization is located (Tjihuis & Fellows, 2012:16). Today the major sources of pressure on institutional norms or practices in South Africa are functional economic, political, and social norms. Several tenets of institutional theory are applicable to South African labour and they include: (i) inappropriate behaviour on the part of management as a result of a lack of understanding of how to adapt to new processes; (ii) the influence of informal cultural, societal, and social rules on South Africans; (iii) misconceptions and ignorance of the norms governing behaviour in the new and uncertain environments especially post-apartheid (Pillay, 2008: 373). There is also a strong indication that South African Government still operates within the constructs of a liberation movement rather than a democracy, which displays two different struggles standing in the way of transformation through socio economic and political progress (Ramphele, 2012).

Classifying organisational culture into defined types offers a simple and systematic method of establishing relationships with other organizational variables such as, work – life balance in the case of this paper and it creates a possibility of highlighting the experiences of those working in each type (Walker, 2011: 183). Many scholars have designed different models of measuring organizational culture and each offer an in-depth understanding of the patterns of meaning that link these manifestations together, sometimes in harmony or in conflict between groups and individuals in an organization (Martin, 2002: 3). Hofstede (1994) proposed six dimensions for analysing organizational cultures; Process – Results (technical and bureaucratic processes), Job – Employee Orientation (derives from societal culture as well as influence from founders and managers), Professional - Parochial (One category or people identifying with professions), Open – Closed System (Ease of admitting new people, styles, internal and external communications), Tight – Loose Control (degrees of formality, punctuality depending on technology and the rate of change), and Pragmatic – Normative (how to relate with the environment- e.g. customers).

Fellows, (2005: 51) reports that Cameron and Quinn (1999) devised a contemporary “Competing Values Framework” which yielded four quadrants; each denotes a type of organisational culture which most organisations are likely to adhere to. The quadrants are; Clan, Adhocracy, Market, and Hierarchy. Cameron and Quinn (1999) proposed a further framework, Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI), for evaluating organizational culture based on core values, assumptions, interpretations, and approaches that characterize organizations and six artefacts were suggested; Dominant Characteristics, Organizational Leadership, Management of employees, Organizational glue, Strategic emphasis and Criteria for success.

Handy (1993: 183-190) described organizational culture as being founded and built over the years by the dominant groups, which are the central power source within an organisation. He came up with four main types of culture of which organizations would likely subscribe to; Power Culture – a centralised culture with few rules and procedures, represented by small enterprises, Role Culture – a bureaucratic culture where rules are coordinated by senior management and focus is on the role rather than individuals or groups, Task Culture – a project oriented culture which focuses on getting the job done and responding on market needs and Person Cultures – a culture that focuses on the individual and their professionalism. Liu (1999) identified nine artefacts to describe culture of the real estate professionals in Hong Kong which detail how power orientations, rule and procedure orientations, people orientation, external versus internal focus, team orientation, customer orientation and communications will affect business in construction. Although these models represent a fraction of the literature available on organizational culture, the general understanding is that they can be utilised to understand cultures in organizations and they are comprehensive enough and carry similar interpretations that can be linked to the organizational culture existing in the construction industry. Evidently, both employers and employees in the construction industry cannot avoid the influence of culture, all groups involved ought to be aware of it and use its influence positively (Tijhuis & Fellows, 2012: 175). Consequently understanding culture helps explain many of the puzzling and frustrating experiences of organizational life (Schein, 2010:7).

3. Women and Work-life balance

Work-life balance is essentially about individuals having some level of control over where, when and how they work and have a life beyond paid work (Smith, Wainwright, Buckingham & Marandet, 2011: 604). A considerable amount of research has attempted to measure the conflict between work and other aspects of non-work life (Lingard & Francis, 2009: 77). Ever since the publication of Kanter's (1977) work, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, there has been a growing understanding of the interconnected nature of employees work and non-work life. Previously, early studies focused on men to examine the effects employment on family life and the results indicated that men did not see any connections between their work and family lives (Voydanoff, 1989: 2). Back then the relationship between structural characteristics of jobs, closely tied to family included the timing and the spatial locations of work and the fact that working long hours was associated with work – family conflict, particularly because job demands created job induced stress which negatively influenced family relationships and health (Voydanoff, 1989: 5). Prior to all these dispositions, Kahn *et al.* (1964) wrote that work-life conflict is a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domain are mutually incompatible to some respect (Kahn *et al.*, 1964: 20).

Much recent research shows that job demands borne by construction professionals are damaging on their personal relationships (Lingard & Sublet, 2002: 507). The construction industry is a demanding and project based work environment where employees are expected to work for long and irregular hours (Lingard & Sublet, 2002: 508). Family life can also have a negative impact on the work interface which is why the notion of work-life conflict flows from the premise that workers are expected to perform multiple life roles, on one hand as a worker and on the other, as a parent, carer, student or community participant (Lingard & Francis, 2009: 78). Family provides an important resource and a diminished family functioning is likely to impact on employees' ability to cope with the demands and pressures of work (Lingard & Lin: 2004: 410). A critical evaluation of work-life balance shows that by isolating the issue of balancing paid work and life, from wider gendered and social class patterns runs the risk of obscuring inequalities. Work-life balance thus ignores the often blurred and ultimately socially constructed nature of what counts as work and what does not and tends to mask the large amount of reproductive work performed by women in the private sphere in some occasion (Smith *et al.*, 2011: 604). Men and women experience the demands of work and family differently as it is generally women who assume greater responsibility for domestic and caring work whilst participating in a paid work economy (Gatrell, 2004: 43). Thus it is a useful departure point to examine how women's lives have been affected in the construction industry within this young democracy, which is still trying to find its footing in repairing the perils of the past. The nature of the status of the work-life balance of women in the country is not only confronted with the general cultural composition of the industry, but also a broader and more intricate socio economic and political climate. To juxtapose the literature and theoretical analysis that has been highlighted ushers a better understanding on the extent of the effect of the industry culture on work-life balance of women in the South African context.

4. Critical Issues

4.1 Policy and Politics

The South African cidb as established by an Act of Parliament (Act 38 of 2000) has a critical mandate of improving the construction industry through national, social, and economic development objectives, industry performance, efficiency and competitiveness and improved value for clients (cidb, 2011: 1). As such, significant inroads have been made to increase the number of women contractors participating in the sector through funding and training initiatives but the number is still low as the industry continues to fully utilise the potential of one gender (Haupt & Madikizela, 2009: 47). Although the national legislation has provided room for women, this is not easily translated and enforced into practice across the board, indicating a non-existent correlation between policy and practice (Mathur-Helm, 2005: 62-63). This in itself is an obstacle towards formulating workplace policies and frameworks to support work – life balance initiatives because the main focus is in the implementation of strategies that are aimed at increasing the participation of women in sectors previously reserved for men. The South African construction industry is also trailing behind regarding modern human resource practices and as a result workers experience stressors due to time constraints, pressure to complete jobs and hard working conditions (James, Rust, & Kingma, 2012:1553). Whereas human resources policies and programs to this effect represent the formal or espoused approaches to manage an effective workforce (Harrington & Ladge, 2009: 154). The great challenge remains in synchronising policy and practice.

4.2 Power and Dominance

South African women have always stood in the secondary echelons of society, as past policies were in favour of men to the extent that a culture of inequality of power between women and men, inevitably leading to the unequal sharing of resources such as information, time, and income was created (Mathur-Helm, 2005:56). The cultural implications militate against women's equal progression through the somewhat exclusionary and discriminatory environment that characterises construction (Haupt & Madikizela, 2009: 48). The industry culture plays a role in defining the leadership style, orientation in terms of human resource practices and the business ends. If for instance the leadership style or power relations in construction were extrapolated according to the organizational culture frameworks of *Hofstede, Handy, Cameron and Quinn*, to the construction industry which is largely project based, small and medium enterprise constructed, the culture in construction industries would depict a scenario where focus is in favour of the bottom line or the completion of the projects and little emphasis on the processes or methodology or even the development of women. (Marx, 2012:2). The postulation in this instance therefore is that construction firms, are likely not be keen to even formulate work – life balance policies that will negatively affect the bottom line, in the short term, due to the assumption that overheads associated with best practice in human resources are relatively time consuming and costly. The more enlightened senior management, possibly male counterparts often recognise the undesirable and debilitating effects of an entrenched male culture but little evidence suggest that significant strategies are often made change it (Drew & Murtagh, 2005: 264).

Furthermore research indicates that in some cases male workers actually do not recognize or appreciate that there exists a work family conflict (Drew & Murtagh, 2005: 273). With these factors in mind it would be tricky for women to even consider applying the principles of work-life balance in their lives because their responsibilities in construction are normally within high risk, competitive and tight time frameworks (cidb, 2008: 7). Women also see themselves as being blocked from advancement to managerial roles and participating in decision making processes, which foils any chance for them to challenge, change or influence policies which would incorporate work-life balance (Bowen, Cattell, & Distiller, 2008: 15). Ironically, it is common practice for construction firms to employ women in secretarial and administrative roles, a higher percentage to those that are contractors (Haupt & Madikizela, 2009: 64). To state that women do not have the necessary clout to apply work-life balance in the construction industry in South Africa is a worthy argument.

4.3 Gender Roles

The nature of the work place culture in construction is critical in explaining the under achievement of women in construction careers (Haupt & Madikizela, 2009: 48). Gender issues are a significant theme in the debate on work-life balance because work models continue to reward workers who are willing to sacrifice involvement in other life domains in order to manage larger workloads, demanding production targets and tight deadlines (Lingard & Francis, 2009: 283). Generally women come into construction already at a disadvantage in many ways. Women are expected to be able to combine careers, children, family and housekeeping responsibilities (Smith, Wainwright, Buckingham, & Marandet, 2011: 604). Secondly, women's patterns of work and childbearing are diametrically contrary to the expectations posed by construction particularly when the workload is intensive and high levels of commitment necessary to succeed are required (Drew & Murtagh, 2005: 266). Women have trouble keeping up with the intensiveness of their roles in construction and inflexible working hours although both have a bearing on their ability to perform (Drew & Murtagh, 2005: 265). The requirement to observe a strict separation between home and work frames is seen as appropriate workplace talk; women's collusion in this observance is emotionally demanding adding to their stress but essential in managing others' impression of their performance in role (Watts, 2008: 221). So in most instances women have to work twice as hard to gain any respect or recognition compared to their male counterparts (Haupt & Madikizela, 2009: 48). Alternatively, they are forced to actually make a choice between their careers and family, sometimes choosing to quit construction careers (Bowen, Cattell, & Distiller, 2008: 4). Depending on the role, women may not be able to complete certain tasks as easily as men in such a labour intense environment. Despite the difficulty in achieving work-life balance, other barriers exist such as discriminations, sexual harassment, adversarial attitudes and threats that render women psychologically unable to determine much of their fates in the industry (Fielden, Davidson, Gale, & Davey, 2000: 18). Increased participation of women in the labour force poses a challenge for them to balance work and family obligations. The situation becomes more complicated in patriarchal societies due to women's stereotypical domestic roles, religious prescriptions as well as cultural norms and values (Rehman & Roomi, 2012: 209). Eventually, the work culture of the construction industry will curtail any efforts of negotiating a work-life balance. (Lingard & Francis, 2009: 287).

4.4 Demographics

Apart from the many challenges that South Africa faces today, the disadvantage of women is still prominent because there are numerous impediments to their ability of exercising their human rights (Butler, 2009: 107). Poverty and poor access to services impact disproportionately on women in addition to their arduous primary responsibility of household maintenance and rural physical labour. This society has patriarchal cultures that elevate male dominance and stereotyped gender roles and racism, restricting women's professional and social development (Butler, 2009: 176). During apartheid black women especially, were victims of discrimination in two dimensions; gender and race. The added dimension of race in addition to gender, aggravated during apartheid still prevents women from achieving economic freedom (Mathur-Helm, 2005: 68). South Africa is encumbered by a backlog of social needs and demands as well as economic deficits which were created by the repressive apartheid policies and intensified by political inequality resulting in a situation where economic distance across racial groups was also exacerbated (Nkosi & Priscilla, 2007: 14). Unfortunately, these disparities are still woven in the South African social, economic and political landscape. In light of all the development gaps experienced by the population and women in particular, which are integrated into most work situations, work-life balance in the work place is the least important. Rather, most previously disadvantaged groups are still negotiating for employment, better salaries and working conditions.

5. Conclusion

This review of literature reveals a direct relationship between the construction industry's culture and the work-life balance of women. Women are confronted with a catch twenty - two situation in construction because they are expected to work twice as hard to prove their worth against a backdrop of a difficult male dominated industry whilst performing other life responsibilities with the same vigour. Evidently a work-life conflict cannot be undermined. The nature of the industry culture effectively prevents the implementation of work-life balance both in policy and in practice. Nonetheless, women's integration into the economy is slowly changing as women are now more educated, have more opportunities of career advancement and are choosing to delay starting families. This may be perceived as an opportunity towards balancing work with a less hectic life domain but this is only applicable to a smaller percentage of women in general. The ordinary majority of women, particularly those who live along poverty lines continue to grovel between work and life to ensure that they meet their basic needs without even considering the importance of work-life balance. Achieving work-life balance in the construction industry requires an integrated approach that includes proper policy formulation and implementation. Obviously there remain major gaps in this area of research in the construction industry. Work-life balance has not received the necessary acclaim that it deserves in the South African construction community yet it has a bearing on the general performance of the industry. There is an opportunity to investigate further, how work-life balance can become entrenched as a core component of maintaining a healthy and productive construction workforce in South Africa.

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