

# Women in South African Construction

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## Abstract

Worldwide the construction industry is still dominated by men and the issue of gender equity in construction has been the subject of many studies. However, the struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment is central to transformation in the South African construction industry. 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 primary aim of the study reported on is to determine the status quo and perceptions relative to 'women in construction'.

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 women should be provided with the opportunity to prove themselves. The study concludes that women are underrepresented in the construction industry and although they may face many challenges and barriers, women are competent to rightfully take up positions in the construction industry. Recommendations include a range of interventions that promote a cultural shift, including the improvement of the overall image of construction.

**Keywords: construction, women, challenges, barriers, representation.**

## 1. Introduction

Sang and Powell (2012) contend that the construction industry remains one of the most male dominated sectors as women are under-represented in all construction occupations and professions. This contention is corroborated by Madikizela and Haupt (2010) whose study conducted in South Africa confirmed that most construction firms employed small numbers of women. Pappaya (2007) states that 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).

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Given the aforementioned a regional study was conducted among general contractor members of the East Cape Master Builders Association (ECMBA) to determine: perceptions relative to women in construction; perceived competencies and competence of women in construction; challenges faced by women in construction; and representivity of women in construction.

## **2. Review of the Literature**

### **2.1 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). According to Ozumba and Ozumba (2012), trend analysis suggests that female employment in construction has generally increased, which is attributable to the gender-positive environment in post-apartheid South Africa. However, the rate of increase suggests a very slow improvement.

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 73 423 construction enterprises of which 48% are owned by women (cidb, 2008). 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 enterprises at grade 8. The study conducted by Madikizela and Haupt (2010) in South Africa confirmed that most construction firms employed small numbers of women, which were mostly employed in secretarial and administrative roles. Where they were employed on construction sites they were typically employed as labourers suggesting that they were regarded as being more suited to administrative than production roles.

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). Hayward (2005) states that while women constitute a fair proportion of the world's work force many women have to experience various challenges from the start in order to achieve success. Furthermore, 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.

### **2.2 Perceptions 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 advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, despite the government's focus on women's empowerment (Naidoo, 2007).

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, 2007). During a study conducted by Madikizela and Haupt (2010) professional women strongly agreed with the statement 'I would encourage other young women to pursue a career in construction, because I believe that there is a place and a need for females in the industry'. 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). "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)

Hayward (2005) argues that men who have been developed viewing themselves as superior to women have great difficulty coping with women at management level. However, 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.

### **2.3 Competencies of Women in Construction**

A study conducted in South Africa among women participants in construction investigated a range of issues (Moodley, 2012). All respondents agreed that women can build successful careers in construction. However, during a series of workshops conducted in South Africa, Haupt and Fester (2012) determined that most women-owned contractors were not involved in the management functions required to effectively operate construction businesses. They were primarily involved in the planning and organising of resources, and leading the human resources.

Bagilhole, Dainty & Neale (1999) provide an overview within the context of the United Kingdom (UK) and state that 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 sceptical 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.

Fisher (2002) argues that women have intrinsic values – they are quietly determined, have learnt to read others and understand them, and make good team leaders. Furthermore, women should be recognized for their strong qualities, and society should appreciate the added value women offer. Palomar-Fresnedi in Hayward (2005) says women seem to do well in situations where they need to manage different projects, as that is just in their nature. Guy Mollet in Hayward (2005) maintains women in managerial positions are more

demanding than their male counterparts and tend to be less tolerant of incompetence, because they usually had to fight quite hard to get their job. However, according to Hayward (2005) the glass ceiling is still there, but disappearing in a number of places, and 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.

In conclusion, Gurjao (2006) says: "Men who have had experience of working with women find they are capable, they fit in well with male colleagues, and they contribute to a quality outcome."

## **2.4 Challenges Faced by Women in Construction**

A study conducted by Madikizela and Haupt (2010) in South Africa confirmed the gender bias that exists in South African construction. Furthermore, they highlight the male dominant nature of the industry and the gender-based discrimination experienced by women employed in the industry as challenges that need to be overcome if more women are to embark on careers in construction. They also cite the overall poor image of the industry as a further inhibitive factor. They specifically cite the following as medium to high influences on other women choosing careers in industries other than construction: the dangerous nature of construction; challenging work environment; inability to work and influence a male dominated industry; male dominance of the industry; discriminatory work environment, and lack of knowledge of the industry. A further study conducted in South Africa by Moodley (2012) required women respondents to indicate whether they had experienced gender discrimination or harassment. Those that responded 'yes' were then required to identify the form. Disrespect (28%) predominated followed closely by limited opportunity for growth (24%), inequality (20%), and treated unfairly (19%). Sexual harassment (9%) was the least identified form.

Menches and Abraham (2007) cite the following as the top five challenges to women participating in construction or barriers to success: slow career progression; difficult work-family balancing act; attitude barriers caused by male dominance; 'job hopping' to overcome career barriers of slow advancement, and overtly masculine culture that consists of conflict and aggression. However, the culture of the industry was identified as the single largest contributor to women leaving the construction industry - and women failing to choose construction as a viable career. This is supported by Dainty, Bagilhole, and Neale (2001) who argue that women that join the industry are hence compelled to adapt 'male values-cum-construction industry values' for them to survive. 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).

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) 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 Annual General Meeting of South African Women in Construction (SAWiC), Bici (2002) 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.

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) Fisher (2002) simply says: "Women must seize the opportunities and make things happen."

### **3. Methodology**

The self-administered questionnaire consisted of six sections: general information; perceptions relative to women in construction; competencies of women in construction; challenges faced by women in construction; representivity of women in construction, and general comments. 13 of the 26 questions were five-point Likert scale type questions, and the remaining 13 were a mix of 'Yes' / 'No', and questions pertaining to the responding organisations such as age, type of construction undertaken, and management composition.

109 General contractor (GC) members of the East Cape Master Builders Association (ECMBA) were contacted per telephone and asked whether they would be willing to participate in the survey - 56 responded in the affirmative. Thereafter, a covering letter and questionnaire addressed to the 'Manager' of each of the 56 GCs was forwarded per post, with the exception of 4 GCs who requested that the survey be had delivered and retrieved by the researcher. Despite the attempt to optimise the response rate by personally contacting the GCs, and assuring respondents that the data provided would be treated with confidentiality and anonymity, only 11 responses were received from the 56 GCs that indicated they were willing to participate, which equates to a response rate of 19.6%.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Demographic**

All the respondents were male. More than half of the respondents' organisations employed > 12 < 35 employees, whereas the minority indicated ≤ 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.

#### **4.2 Perceptions relative to women in construction**

81.8% of respondents indicated that construction is still regarded largely as a male domain, which concurs with the contention of Moodley (2006). 54.6% of the respondents indicated that women are not taken seriously as professionals in construction, and 36.4% differed. This finding aligns with the findings reported by Fisher (2002). Respondents were required to indicate the extent to which four factors affected the appointment of women in leadership positions. Based upon mean scores (MSs) between 1 (minor) and 5 (major), society (4.00) was ranked first, followed by tradition (3.80), organisation culture (3.70), and sexist attitudes (3.60). 72.7% of respondents do not believe that construction should be male-dominated because it is 'rough and tough'. Given the response, it can be deemed that women should be given a chance in the construction industry even though it is considered 'rough and tough'. This finding concurs with that of Green (2006).

The MS of 3.27 between 1 (minor) and 5 (major), indicates that respondents subscribe more to a major than a minor extent, albeit it marginally, to the contention that women in managerial positions are more demanding than their male counterparts.

90.9% of respondents 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. This finding corroborates with the contention of Hayward (2005), who concludes that the 'glass ceiling' is still there, but disappearing in a number of places, as there are definitely some fissures and women now have the confidence to go out and promote themselves knowing that they are able to do the job, and to do it well.

#### **4.3 Competencies and competence of women**

Respondents were required to indicate the extent to which six factors affect the core competencies of women in construction. The MSs between 1 (minor) and 5 (major) indicate that they have more of a major than a minor effect: commitment (3.73); dedication (3.73); responsibility (3.73); acknowledgement (3.64); confidence (3.64), and self-promotion (3.28).

81.8% of respondents indicated that women are prepared to work harder in order to be successful if given a chance to prove themselves. Hayward's (2005) conclusion that in today's society women are increasingly making conscious decisions about their lives and taking responsibility for their actions, amplifies the importance of these factors, and validates the aforementioned 81.1% affirmative response.

The MS of 2.45 between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree), indicates that respondents do not agree with the contention that women cannot secure top jobs or successfully assume management roles due to factors such as actual talent, ability, and skills. 72.7% of respondents believe that women seem to do well in situations where they need to manage different projects all at once. Furthermore, the MS of 3.27 indicates that respondents agree, as opposed to disagree with the contention that woman can succeed in construction using their female skills without having to adopt a masculine approach.

#### **4.4 Challenges faced by women in construction**

Respondents were required to indicate the extent to which they agree with the contention that the power men assume over women makes them feel they can label women negatively. Based upon the MS 2.91 between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree), the response indicates disagreement as opposed to agreement with the contention, albeit marginally so. This finding does not quite concur with that of Mackenzie (1992), namely that sexism occurs when people are prejudiced against others because of their gender.

Construction being regarded as male terrain is frequently regarded as a 'barrier to entry' by women and men. However, the response and subsequent 3.09 MS between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree) relative to the question 'To what extent do you subscribe to the contention that to participate in construction takes great courage mainly because it is regarded as male terrain?', indicates marginal agreement. This question was followed by 'To what extent do you agree that women have to face many challenges in order to get recognition which makes it difficult to penetrate and persevere in the male-dominated construction environment?' The 3.55 MS indicates greater concurrence than in the case of the former question. 81.8% of respondents believe that women have made great strides in construction, but that the 'glass ceiling' is far from being shattered. This finding concurs with that of Hayward (2005), namely that while current chief executives and chairmen remain those that perpetrate the 'old school' views, it will for a time remain harder for women than men to break through the glass ceiling.

Respondents were required to indicate the extent to which five factors constituted barriers to the advancement of women in construction on a scale of 1 (minor) to 5 (major). Male dominated work environment and culture was ranked first (3.55), followed by women representation in the industry's formal structures (3.36), male-biased construction education courses (3.18), construction's macho image (2.91), and sexist attitudes (2.73). It is notable that the first three (60%) are perceived to constitute barriers to a major extent and the last two (40%), a minor extent. These factors were identified as barriers to women advancement by Bici (2005).

The MS of 3.82 indicates that respondents agree to a major, as opposed to a minor extent with the contention that it is increasingly important that women cease thinking that they have to be similar to men in order to succeed as men do. This finding concurs with the statement made by Niall Fitzgerald: "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) However, the MS of 3.82 between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree), indicates that there is agreement as opposed to disagreement with the statement 'When it comes to succeeding in construction, the competition is tough especially when you are competing against your male-counterparts'.

#### **4.5 Representivity of women in construction**

Respondents were required to indicate the degree of concentration of women in unskilled, low-skilled, low paid jobs. Based upon the MS of 3.18 between 1 (rarely) and 5 (mostly), the degree of concentration can be deemed to be slightly more than moderate, as opposed to mostly. Furthermore, 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. With respect to board level, the MS 3.91 between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree), indicates that there is agreement, as opposed to disagreement with the statement 'The construction industry's boardrooms are sadly lacking in women'.

### **5. 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 women should be given a chance to prove themselves in the construction industry.

There is a clear indication that commitment, dedication, acknowledgement, responsibility, confidence, and self-promotion have an impact on the core competencies of women in construction. Women are prepared to work harder in order to be successful if given a chance to prove themselves. Women are perceived to do well in situations where they need to manage different projects all at once. Women in managerial positions are perceived as 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 male counterparts. It can be deemed that the construction industry's boardrooms are sadly lacking women in managerial as well as chief executive posts in the construction industry.

## **6. Recommendations**

The recommendations are aimed at realising a change in the industry 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 in construction, and at addressing the barriers to women pursuing a career in construction. If women are to 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 provide 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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