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# **CONFRONTING BARRIERS TO WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS: A STUDY OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY**

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**ABSTRACT:** In the modern era, the awakening social development of women in society has increased the scope of their participation in the development of the economy to widen from homes to the work place. However women are under-represented in the construction industry and the percentage of women leaders in senior management remains minimal. A substantial body of opinion within the research on women leadership reflects that modern organisations require a non-coercive leadership based on teamwork and building relationships. Furthermore it states, that this is the very style of leadership that is naturally employed by women. However, the generally held negative perception of women as leaders could be an obstacle to women leadership in construction. This study examines the barriers to women in leadership positions in senior management of the construction organisations, and the initiatives committed to promote women to senior level of management.

**Keywords** - Barriers, Construction Industry, Leadership, Women.

## **1. BACKGROUND**

The construction industry is a major industry which contributes approximately, one tenth of the nation's gross domestic product and employs 1.9 million people in the region (Office of National Statistics, 2002). According to the Department of Trade and Industry (2002) the UK construction industry is one of the world's strongest industries with an output ranked in the global top ten. Although there are over 11 million women employed in the UK, accounting for 49.5% of the workforce, they still constitute only 13% of the construction industry's workforce (CITB, 2003). This means that the construction industry is one of the most male dominated of all the major industrial groups (Fielden et al, 2000). It was also found that women have progressed slowly and have confronted a greater number of barriers to their development than their male counterparts. As a result, there is a higher turnover among women professionals and women in managerial positions within the construction industry. There is also a growing awareness that women face various forces that prevent them from being seen as leaders or as leadership candidates in significant roles. This needs to be addressed if women's participation is to be increased in the industry in future.

Professor Michael Romans, President of the Chartered Institute of Building, threatened to resign in 1996 unless the institute adopted a positive attitude towards women. Furthermore he said, "The construction industry sees equal opportunities as nonsense and this is the reaction of a dinosaur. If we continue in this vein we will find that we have a major employment problem" (Davey, 2001 cited in Contract Journal, May 1996)

Researches relating to women in construction found many barriers to women entering and moving up the career ladder. One of the main barriers is the under-representation of women in leadership positions, in strategic management, to act as role models and to facilitate the entrance of more women in to the industry (Jackson, 2001). It is necessary, therefore, to find out what obstacles prevent women taking leadership positions in the strategic apex of the construction industry order to attract talented young females with different styles of management.

## **2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

This paper aims to present a review of the literature relating to the barriers confronting women in leadership positions, in order to promote more women in to construction industry. Though leadership positions can be identified in every level of an organization, study limits its scope to middle and top management in construction organisations. The objectives of the study are to identify and examine:

1. The barriers preventing women's entry into strategic management roles within the construction organisations
2. The subsequent barriers faced by them while working in strategic management of the construction organisations
3. Initiatives committed to promote women in strategic management of construction organisations

This research has been based on theoretical and practical ideas obtained through a comprehensive literature review.

## **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **3.1 Present Position of Women in the UK Construction Industry**

The construction industry is the second most male dominated industry. It comes after mining and quarrying, where no women are employed in the UK. Although there are over 11 million women employed in the UK, accounting for 49.5% of the workforce, their representation in the construction industry remains low. Despite the increase in the number of women employed in the construction industry over the past decade, they still constitute only 13% of the industry's workforce (CITB, 2003). Fielden and his colleagues formulated eight interrelated theoretical models in the research which was carried out in 2001. Among these, they formulated a theory about the women's career development and it reflects the belief that the construction workplace is a competitive environment prone to conflict, where women are overtly and covertly discriminated against by men who use structural systems to undermine their participation (Fielden *et al.* 2001).

The poor image of construction, lack of role models and knowledge, poor careers advice, gender-biased recruitment, peer pressure and poor educational experiences are all been cited as mitigating factors against women's entry in to the industry (Gale and Skitmore, 1990; Coles, 1992; Johnson *et al.* 1992; Srivastava, 1992; Bronzini *et al.* 1995; Wall, 1997 cited Dainty *et al.* 2000). The research by Harris (1989) found that though there is a greater awareness regarding construction related professional activities such as engineering and architecture among advanced level students and undergraduates, the status of the industry as a career opportunity does not compare favourably with other options (Fielden *et al.* 2000). Female students account for only 8% of engineering and technology and 7% of architecture students in the further education after advanced level. In addition, only 14% of engineering and technology students are female in higher education, (EOC, 1997a).

Frequently it has been noticed that educational segregation leads to occupational segregation, with women still seriously under-represented in the primary sector, i.e. manufacturing (EOC, 1995). Women tend to be concentrated in health and social work (82%) and education (70%), whereas men tend to be concentrated in construction (87%), transport, storage and communication (74%) and manufacturing (72%) (Employment Service, 1997a). This reflects that construction continues to be the most male dominated even though

women’s employment within the industry has risen by 14% over the past decade (Court and Moralee, 1995).

Women are also segregated by the type of organization in which they are employed. According to a survey of the members of the Chartered Institute of Banking (1996), it was found that substantially more women were employed by housing associations than by any other sector within the construction industry. The survey showed that, in general, women were over-represented in the public sector and under-represented in the private sector, with the greatest discrepancy in self employment, where women accounted for less than 0.3% of the membership. Additionally, there was clear evidence from the women’s memberships of different professional bodies within the built and human environment that women’s development towards the strategic positions is limited.

The construction industry appears to exhibit the greatest degree of vertical occupational segregation. That is, the representation of women in managerial level and bottom level in an organisation’s hierarchy is highly skewed. Although there is no reliable data relating to vertical segregation, the analysis of general census data provides a relatively accurate picture of occupational segregation historically found in the construction industry (Fielden *et al.* 2001). Women are not only under represented within the industry but their vertical distribution in organisational hierarchy is also highly skewed. Fig. 1 shows that most of women are working in secretarial and clerical roles than in managerial levels. The detailed study of the figures showed that, though there was improvement in the representation of women in managerial levels over time, their participation in main stream management is very minimal.

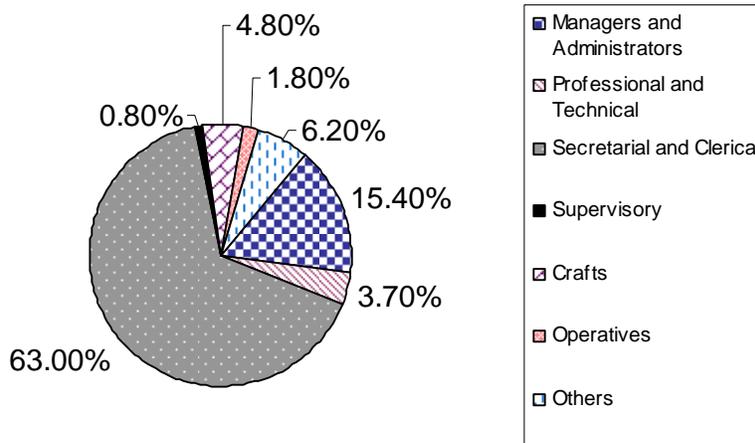


Fig. 1. Vertical occupational segregation of females in the construction industry-1991

Source: Gale (1994a), Court and Moralee (1995) and General Census Data cited Fielden *et al.* (2001)

Women’s representation in managerial and administrative category is concentrated in ‘specialist’ positions such as personnel and public relations rather than main stream management. Under the professional and technical category, women are significantly under-represented in the engineering and technical occupations compared with their male counterparts. Women who were employed in part-time positions amounted to 43% in 1996 compared with only 2% of men in the construction industry. These figures not only indicate a high degree of occupational segregation within the industry but also highlight a growing trend towards increased segregation in an already highly differentiated workforce (EOC, 1997b).

Generally sex segregation is associated with differentiated pay levels. This is especially true in construction industry, where full-time non-manual women workers earn less than 60% of that paid to their male counterparts (Employment Service, 1997b). The recent statistics reveals that despite the large numbers of women in the profession, they are greatly under-represented in positions of main stream management. This leads to fewer women entering construction at all levels. Therefore this study reveals the obstacles confronting women in strategic management of construction organizations.

### **3.2 Barriers to Women in Senior Management**

Women's representation in either senior management or in leadership positions still constitutes a "cultural dilemma" for most the construction organizations. The cultural dilemma is defined as something not part of, or presents a threat to, the established order, meaning, values, etc. of an organization, society or nation (Still, 1994). This indicates that, the inclusion of previously excluded individuals i.e. women in senior management, creates a problem for construction organisations if they are to cope with both men and women in their management. However since the industry is male dominated, there is a need to facilitate women entering in to senior management to overcome their under-representation and to assist them in further developing their career. Initially therefore, the barriers to women's entry into senior management and their subsequent obstacles should be analyzed.

The barriers to women in construction can be identified at different levels from education to retaining their strategic positions. The literature identifies some criteria from which barriers are arising in entering and working within industry such as: the industry's image; career knowledge amongst children and adults; selection criteria and male dominated courses; recruitment practices and procedures; sexist attitudes; male dominated culture; and the work environment (Fielden et al. 2000). Among these, most criteria continue to hinder women's development while they are continuing their career in senior management of the construction organisations.

The literature suggests that obstacles to women's progress into senior management derive from several sources such as, constraints imposed upon them by society, by the family, by employers, and by women themselves. Observers present a number of different arguments to explain why women are not present in large numbers in executive leadership positions. Two of the most powerful barriers are; the behavioural expectations regarding women's role in the family which represent a very real obstacle to their corporate upward mobility and discrimination in the form of organisational structures and policies.

This section focuses on the upward mobility of women into senior management and their subsequent barriers from two different perspectives – organisational and personal dimensions. This study has been carried out with the hope that this investigation would enhance women's understanding of their own careers and it could lead to the development of better coping strategies. In addition to this and just as important, it is hoped to provide men with a greater understanding of their female colleagues.

#### **3.2.1 Organisational perspective**

This section discusses about the barriers faced by women in senior positions in terms of structural frameworks and cultural aspects of organizations. Since organizational structures provide motivation for employees in pursuing occupational goals in terms of their psychological fulfilment, it has to be analyzed with the cultural dimensions to fulfil their

esteem needs. Presently women find fewer problems being accepted in lower management levels in construction because they possess better functional and managerial skills than before. However it has been identified that women still face considerable odds in attempting to enter senior management because of the preferred management style and ways of doing things. Women are perceived, by men, to be a disturbance to the established culture of certain organizations because women have the potential to change the existing culture or to establish new alternatives. Under this section the organizational perspectives are discussed under two main categories: structural frameworks and organizational culture.

### ***Structural frameworks***

Though there is no discrimination in formal announcements, most construction organizations have differentiated pay levels for men and women. According to Employment Service (1997b) it was identified that throughout their working lives women generally earn less than men, with women employed in full-time positions currently earning on average only 78% of the hourly rate attained by men. This is especially true of the construction industry, where full-time non-manual women workers earn less than 60% of that paid to their male counterparts (Employment Service, 1997b).

Recruitment to senior management is achieved mostly through the male networks in middle and top management of construction organisations. Their discriminatory acts result in greater under-representation of women in senior management. It was proposed, therefore, to encourage more women in senior level could help to change the attitudes within the industry to challenge the discriminations and to give encouragement to others. The informal networks and cultures that are male-dominated often become barriers to women's progression. Most importantly the corporate inequities in advancement opportunities and rewards discourage women from seeking top management positions. Additionally, for these reasons, the prevailing image of the industry - formal qualification required, general perception about industry among family members and lack of information about the career opportunities - results in more and more women becoming reluctant to set their career in the industry.

### ***Organizational culture***

The construction industry, after mining and quarrying, is renowned for its macho culture. The organizational culture in construction is essentially gender biased because from the period when both organization and management systems formed, males were representing the majority of the organizational workforces. In many instances the male senior executives and professionals have many shared experiences known as “old boys network” (Appelbaum *et al*, 2003). As a result, women still do not fit easily into this atmosphere except in appendage roles. Most importantly the lack of encouragement for women from male managers hinders their career development in construction. The prevalence of gender stereotyping and the incidence of sexual harassment also remain as major threat to women especially in entering and remaining in senior levels of management.

Women are given tasks intended to “test” their ability to work in male environment. This is a challenge especially to those who are interested in developing their career in construction. Some researches found that, refusal to carry out such tasks led women to be accused of incompetence and be seen as a legitimate target for further harassment. In certain instances this becomes a black mark for their future offers. However the poor performance of women leads to reinforce gender stereotypes and jeopardises their chances of acceptance for

their promotions. A range of prejudices creates barriers to women in construction industry. Some people treat these differences as weakness. This sexist attitude should be changed to give space to women to progress within the industry.

Despite the advent of women into both the workforce and management, and the introduction of anti-discrimination, equal opportunity and affirmative action laws, there has been little fundamental change to the underlying culture. Instead, a gendered substructure dominates work activities with men making the decisions and women helping them carry them out (Symons, 1992 cited Still, 1994). If women try to take leading roles they are judged and criticised by both men and women for breaking the accepted codes of behaviour within rural community (Hughes, 1997 cited Fielden *et al.* 2001).

Lonely, unsupportive working environment for women in senior roles encourage them to leave the industry even after reaching the senior level. The under-representation in senior level in construction and the experiences of other women discourage younger women to enter or to remain in senior levels. Thus women say they need to prove their capabilities to reach senior levels and to retain their positions. In the comparison between themselves and their male counterparts they find more challenges before them to rise up in their career ladder. Female managers emphasised their personal qualities as critical factors in their career, such as, capacity to hard work; integrity; desire for responsibility and positive attitude. The continued reluctance on the part of construction companies to recognise women as an important intellectual capital, rather than a lack of access to appropriate training, remains as a threat to women. The organizational culture and practices indirectly hinder women in senior management.

Generally a cultural dilemma thus arises whenever either a male or female enters a non-traditional area and it needs a very concerted effort to overcome the prejudices, stereotypes, traditions and accepted practices if more than just a token number of women are to be given their chance in senior management (Still, 1994).

### **3.2.2 Personal dimension**

The literature reflects that women are facing strong barriers in terms of their personal lives. Wolf (1993 cited Still, 1994) believes that women should cease viewing themselves as victims and begin to see themselves as potent agents of change with many resources.

*“...it doesn’t matter any more if “society is ready” for women to attain equal status; ready or not, “society” no longer has the power to stop women. For women now have the potential clout to create the conditions necessary for gender equality. The question now is not whether society is ready to yield gender equality, but whether women themselves are ready to take possession of it.”*

(Wolf, 1993)

Under the personal dimension, the barriers are viewed under different categories: personality and self motivation, educational achievement, and women’s multiple commitments.

#### ***Personality and self motivation***

Women have the lack of confidence and assertiveness to go for positions of power due to internal and external barriers created within them and from the external environment (Itzin and Newman, 1995 cited Omar and Ogenyi, 2004). Their reluctance to compete for senior jobs (Blanksby, 1987 cited Taylor, 1997) is a major barrier created by them. In addition to

above, their lower aspirations and inappropriate expectations (Spero, 1987 cited Taylor, 1997) hinder their career from leadership positions in senior management. Due to the created perception about the industry they direct their interest towards other fields. For example, they make decisions on their educational qualifications at their initial stage and this becomes a major obstacle to entering managerial levels if their interests change later on due to personal and family requirements. This will ultimately leave them in lower managerial levels or they may be able to reach managerial levels during their later part of their career, which does not have as much effect on women careers in senior management.

Due to negative attitudes towards their promotion, women fail to undertake appropriate training to develop executive skills required for senior management. Some fail to plan their careers (Morrison, 1992 cited Taylor, 1997) and do not build networks and support systems to locate and maintain effective mentoring relationships.

### ***Educational achievements***

Though most female students continue to perform well in their studies, their choice of field segregates them from the field of construction. Their educational segregation limits their access to higher level construction related courses, which require formal qualifications. This seriously undermines their opportunities to enter into the construction industry at a managerial or professional level. Their entrance into lower levels or their entrance into middle level at later stages of their career, affects their progress towards senior management.

### ***Women's multiple commitments***

The construction industry fails to appreciate some of the issues associated with combining job and family commitments (Play, 1995; Gale, 1994b cited Fielden *et al.* 2000) and organizations tend to treat family and work as completely different aspects. As a result, women often highlight the aspects of multiple commitments as barriers to their career development in construction. The tradition of long hours of work including routinely working through weekends and the project nature of the industry they need to spend more time in work especially during the commencement and completion of the contract. The periods away from home and the travelling substantial distances are major obstacles to them. In addition, women's commitments to child care and the elderly prevent them from carrying these duties. This challenge of balancing the career and the family is a major barrier for their advancement. Researches found that they have been socialized to subordinate their careers in favour of their families (Fagenson and Jackson, 1993 cited Taylor, 1997). Any career break due to family commitments is a blow to their advancement. Some women leave their job or do not take any interest in developing them or in promotions.

The majority of the burden of child rearing still is placed on mothers, imposing additional responsibility on a career woman that is often not faced by a man. Bullock (1994 cited Taylor, 1997) states that women's late entry into middle management hinders their promotions. This results in under-representation of women in senior management. The long hours of work required from senior managers to actively participate in the management is incompatible with women's domestic responsibilities. Additionally, the time, duration and location of meetings sometimes creates stress in women's roles. Some women feel that they are the only or very few women attending the meetings (Pini, 2002). Some women face difficulty in attending meetings where no other women were in attendance, even though they

had the support from their spouse. This resulted in women not taking any interest in promotion towards higher level or them simply quitting their post for their family life.

Women believe that the inadequate support for them to become actively involved in senior management from their spouse, other employees, community and most importantly from other women really de-motivates them. This has been observed in other industries like agriculture, finance, medical, etc. Evetts (1993 cited Fielden *et al.* 2000) found that many women in construction do not feel that management is an appropriate career for them because of the conflict between family and work commitments.

### **3.3 Proposed Initiatives to Remedy the Obstacles to Women in Senior Management**

It is recognized from governments to individuals that practical initiatives are needed to overcome the barriers to women in senior management. These are needed in every aspect of education, training, recruitment and retention and change the culture to break the “glass ceiling” and “glass wall” (White, 1997). The Federal Government of Australia expressed the view that, if women wished to break the “glass ceiling” then they needed to become a part of solution. Another research states that, while legal remedies could provide a mechanism, women needed to provide the content (Smith *et al.*, 1992 cited Still, 1994). This section outlines the initiatives proposed by earlier researchers to overcome the barriers to women in leadership position at senior management level.

Commencing from secondary education, young women should be made aware of the opportunities in construction to avoid the creation of any negative perception about the industry, for example, by having visits to the construction industry to create interest (Fielden *et al.*, 2001). The visits should be designed to create interest to find out more information about the industry. During their training in construction, proper placements should be provided to overcome the negative perception of the culture and structure of construction organisations. The workers can be also encouraged to take their children to construction sites with adequate safety measures. Furthermore, the representation of women should be evidenced by the young women finding role models within the industry, at least at middle management level. Most importantly the brochures and the hoardings regarding the construction firms or industry should reflect the presence of women by displaying their values and interest.

The reluctance, by contracting organisations, to recruit women should be changed by having legitimate requirements and equal opportunities policies (Ellison, 2001). In addition a commission should be established to look after the implementation of these rules within organisations. By adopting standards such as corporate governance construction organizations can improve the perceptions about women in senior level within their industry. They can also make the recruitment and promotion processes transparent in order to provide equal chances for all qualified employees applying for vacancies. The culture and practices of the organisation should change, so that they require managers to conduct performance reviews solely based on concrete results, rather than double standards, which can serve to undermine and undervalue women’s leadership potential.

It was proposed in a research by Fielden and his colleagues (2001) that the employment of women in the industry could help to change the attitudes through challenging the stereotypes and encouraging more women to entry. Construction organizations should change their culture and practices to recruit women into the senior positions by adopting standard selection criteria and recruitment methods to avoid discrimination.

Women should be provided with adequate training to improve and develop their competencies. However discrimination should be avoided in providing different levels of

training to women and men. Though earlier theories stated that leaders are born, present theories state they could be developed through proper training. Therefore construction organizations should organize themselves to provide better training and development to their employees. The human resource department should take proper measures for the implementation of proper networks and mentoring schemes for women to support their development. The organization should recognize and curb stereotyping of women by instituting rigorous performance evaluation measures and accountability mechanisms to ensure that women are evaluated on performance and not on perception.

In addition, construction organisations could provide childcare facilities for women to continue their roles without having to stop for a few months. This will help them to avoid career breaks which in turn will provide more opportunities to them to enter senior management. During their pregnancy women could be allowed more flexible hours of work to help them continue working without taking long breaks.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

In some of the researches it was found that leadership in senior management is viewed as a masculine area (Still, 1994). Also one of the early management theorists, Douglas McGregor (1967, cited Sti11, 1994) set the prevailing paradigm with his model of a successful manager as:

*“...a masculine one...He is not feminine; he is not soft and yielding or dependent or intuitive in the womanly sense”*

In past, perhaps as a consequence of this type of attitude, there were fewer women in management as role models and women managers tended to become “masculinised” or “neutered” in order to survive in the industry. As shown in the researches, women know that they need to exhibit more aggressive types of leadership skills; however they also believe that communal type personal behaviours will be valued by others. They believe, therefore, that the personal qualities listed under the label “perceived charisma” would be important for them (Wood, 2002).

However as the modern era is moving towards more participative and a non-coercive leadership based on teamwork and building relationships, and it is the very style of leadership naturally employed by women. Their involvement and participation in senior leadership positions will be of utmost benefit to construction organisations. Presently, however, the contractors continue to show an autocratic style of leadership compared with consultancy organisations where more democratic style of leadership is present. Fortunately, it can be seen from researches that the percentage of contractors still adhering to autocratic leadership is reducing with time. Therefore since women are in favour of interactive-collaborative leadership styles there is more prosperity for women to enter into leadership positions in the construction industry.

#### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

In the construction industry women are not only under-represented, but also their distribution throughout the industry is highly skewed. Though their representation is increasing in senior levels the actual representation in managerial level remains minimal. This under-representation in senior level results in fewer role models for young talented women who are willing to select construction as their career. The entry of women in to senior level leadership

will have to be improved in order to change the attitudes and the culture of construction industry to attract more talented leaders with diversity. Therefore not only the construction industry or the other stakeholders who influence women's career but also the women concerned should take the interest to overcome their own barriers for entry into leadership positions in senior management.

The attribution of "soft skills" to women has both positive and negative implications for women. On the one hand, it may serve to raise the status and value of women in management but it also works in ways that contribute to women's marginalization in management. Therefore women need to become viable and valuable contributors to the senior management in construction, not by doing low-paid work on the "sticky floors" but in essential jobs, pushing through the "glass ceiling" and pushing aside "glass walls" to become leaders in their own right.

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