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# Meliorating Women's Representation within Leadership Positions in the UK Construction Industry

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## Abstract

The construction industry in the North West of England is one of the region's largest industries and fundamental to all other economic activities. However, a scarcity of women in leadership positions in construction has persisted despite their increasing numbers in construction training. The lack of women leaders in construction has been a concern for many years, attracting government and industry wide attention. This issue has been made more prominent recently due to the potential managerial skills shortage facing the industry. Hence, a research project was carried out in order to study the underlying reasons for the scarcity of women in leadership positions in the construction industry, and to discover ways to improve the current position of women leaders in construction, with a particular emphasis on the North West of England. The research project conducted both critical literature review and case studies in order to understand the role of female leaders, the barriers faced by women in leadership positions, the present status of organisational policies and facilities and their suggestions for further improvement in construction and to provide effective practice guidelines. This paper presents the overall findings from this project and the recommendations to improve the current position of women leaders in construction. Although, the recommendations to organisations are mainly focusing on developing women leaders it recognises the importance of gender mainstreaming to facilitate all employees' career within the organisation.

**Keywords:** construction industry, initiatives, leaders, UK, women

## **1. Introduction**

The construction industry is a significant industry which contributes approximately, a tenth of the nation's gross domestic product and employs 1.9 million people in the region (Office of National Statistics, 2002). As per the Department of Trade and Industry (2002) the UK construction industry is one of the world's strongest industries with an output which is ranked at global top ten. However, although the female population accounts for 51% and over 13 million women are employed in the UK, they still constitute only 12% of the construction industry's workforce (CITB 2006). Women have progressed slowly and have confronted a greater number of barriers to their career development than their male counterparts. One of the main barriers is the under-representation of women in leadership positions in senior management to act as role models and to facilitate the entrance of more women in to the industry (Jackson, 2001). Further, previous studies (Still 1994; University of Salford, 2007) have found that the presence of women in leadership positions can assist the improvement of women's representation within the construction industry. However, advancement opportunities for women for leadership positions had also been confronted with many barriers.

The literature on construction and women suggests that the obstacles to women's progress in to leadership positions are derived from several sources such as, constraints imposed upon them by society, by the family, by employers, and by women themselves. 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 indeed, needs to be addressed if women participation is to be increased in the industry. Therefore, there is a necessity to find out the obstacles preventing women in taking leadership positions in the strategic apex in the construction industry to attract talented young females with different styles of management. In this context, the undertaken research project was aimed to study the underlying reasons for the scarcity of women in leadership positions in the construction industry, and to discover ways to improve the current position of women leaders in construction, with a particular emphasis on the North West of England. This project contained four work packages. This paper presents the findings of work package 4 of the project which aims to provide recommendations and good practice guidelines to address the barriers confronting women leaders in the construction industry. These recommendations and good practice guidelines are based on the findings from the earlier work packages of the research project.

## **2. Literature findings on improving the current position of women in leadership positions**

Governments to individuals have recognised that they need to take practical initiatives to overcome the barriers to women in senior management in every aspect of education, training, recruitment and retention and, the culture to break the "glass ceiling" and "glass wall" (White, 1997). This section of the paper summaries the findings from previous studies related to remedies to facilitate women in management of organisations in construction and other sectors. The Federal government of Australia expressed the view that, if women wished to break the "glass ceiling" then they need to become a part

of solution. Another research states that, while legal remedies could provide a mechanism, women are needed to provide the content (Smith *et al.* 1992; Still, 1994).

Literature reveals that policies with the objective of facilitating women's career retention and advancement in organisations have a great impact on women's career. As Evetts (1997) indicates, 'Opportunity 2000' attracted a great deal of media attention for its objectives to increase the quantity and proportion of women's participation in higher levels of management in public and private work organisations.

Further, commencing from the secondary education, young women should be made aware of the opportunities in construction to avoid the creation of any negative perception about the industry by having visits to the construction industry to create their interest (Fielden *et al.* 2001). The visits should be designed to create their interest to find 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 also be encouraged to take their children to construction sites with adequate safety measures. Further the representation of women should be evidenced by the young women to find some role models in the industry at least at middle level of management. Most importantly the brochures and the hoardings regarding the construction firms or the industry should reflect the presence of women by having their values and interest on them (Fielden *et al.* 2001).

The reluctance to recruit women by the contracting organisations should be changed by having legitimate requirements and equal opportunities policies (Ellison, 2001). Further industry can make the recruitment and promotion processes transparent in order to provide equal chances to every qualified employee at open positions. 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 within the industry through challenging the stereotypes and encouraging the other women's entry.

Women should be provided with adequate training to improve and develop their competencies (Still, 1994). However discrimination should be avoided in providing different levels of training to women and men. Although earlier theories stated that leaders are born, present theories state it could be developed by proper training. The organisation should recognise 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. During their pregnancy women can be allowed with flexible hours of work to continue their work without taking longer breaks. Further according to Aitchison *et al.* (1999), above three categories (Table 1) represent the additional measures that the employers in leisure services could take to enhance women's prospects of career progression.

*Table 1: Measures to enhance women's career progression in leisure services*

<i>Cultural Change</i>	<i>Training</i>	<i>Improving Working Conditions</i>
<i>Greater recognition</i>	<i>Mentoring</i>	<i>The employment of more women managers</i>
<i>Allowance for family commitments</i>	<i>Training for women managers</i>	<i>More flexible working conditions with more home-working, flexi-time, job-sharing, workplace childcare, career breaks and flexible contracts</i>
<i>Better consultation and communication</i>	<i>Awareness training for men</i>	<i>The identification of role models through team working</i>
<i>More respect and recognition for women employees from senior management and local authority councillors</i>	<i>More information on training opportunities</i>	<i>Workplace job shadowing and secondments</i>
<i>More encouragement to women returners</i>	<i>More help with career planning</i>	<i>A greater focus on job specifications rather than person specifications</i>
<i>More encouragement for personal development</i>		<i>The restructuring of bonus schemes</i>
<i>Greater opportunities for informal networking</i>		

Further previous studies call for focus on leadership skills because it highlights that leaders can become better leaders, in part because skills represent capabilities that can be developed and by focusing on leadership skill requirements, the focus is shifted from the person holding the job to the job itself on leadership (Mumford, 2007). From previous conceptualisations of leadership skill requirements Mumford and colleagues (2007) suggested that these skills can be understood in terms of four general categories. They are Cognitive skills, Interpersonal skills, Business skills and Strategic skills. Cognitive skills are the fundamental skills comprised of skills related to basic cognitive capacities, such as collecting, processing, and disseminating information (Zaccaro, 2001). Interpersonal skills involve the interpersonal and social skills relating to interacting with and influencing others (Mumford *et al.*, 2000). Further Business skill requirements involve skills related to specific functional areas (Zaccaro, 2001) that create the context in which most leaders work. Finally Strategic skill requirements are highly conceptual skills needed to take a systems perspective

to understand complexity, deal with ambiguity, and to effect influence in the organisation (Zaccaro, 2001). These skills requirement are relatively more for senior job as it includes the important planning-related skills of visioning and systems perception that require the development of an image of how a system should work and determining when important changes to the system have occurred or are likely to occur (Mumford, 2007). However skill requirements changes with the work carried out, situations and the people involved in work.

### **3. Research methodology**

The study was carried out using comprehensive literature review and case studies to collect primary and secondary data. Literature on the current status of women in leadership positions in the construction industry and the barriers confronting women leaders was critically examined. Case studies were selected as the most appropriate research strategy for this study because they provide an opportunity for studying real-life phenomenon in detail, without any control over the phenomenon. Yin (2003) defines case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between both are not clearly evident. A case study is strong in elaborating a real-life context because it is a very detailed research enquiry into a powerful, single example of a social process, organisation or collectivity seen as a social unit in its own right, and as a holistic entity and not into a sample of one (Payne and Payne 2004).

Four female leaders representing different disciplines of the construction industry were selected as the four main cases. Views regarding the selected leaders' leadership and the barriers encountered by her were also obtained from their superiors, peers and subordinates. The unit of analysis, the central concept in connection with understanding, preparing and implementing a case study (Yin 2003) was determined as the female leader because conclusions were drawn from them at the end of the study. Semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis were used for data collection. Interviews were chosen due to their appropriateness, 'for capturing the experiences and meanings of the subjects in the everyday world', and as they allow subjects to convey to others their own situation, from their own perspective, and in their own words (Kvale 1996). Semi-structured type of interviews were used because they allow for the collection of both structured information and people's views and opinions, allowing spontaneity in the interviewer's questioning and the interviewee's response (Moore 2000). Different interview guidelines were formulated in this research to obtain details from the women leaders, their superior and subordinates, and their peer employees.

The analysis of the interview responses of this research followed the process outlined by Hall and Hall (1996) which involves three activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The first stage was a process of selecting, focussing, and simplifying the interview transcripts. Before starting the analysis, all the interviews were transcribed. The data reduction was done by reading through the transcripts and extracting the most relevant data for all of the questions listed in the interview guidelines, and any additional questions that were raised during the interview. The second stage in the interview analysis process was the data display. This was done by producing a data matrix. A data matrix is produced by tabulating the interview data; the respondents were listed as columns and the questions as rows. This system makes it easy to identify patterns in the responses.

The matrix was also useful as a reference tool when providing recommendations, as it is simple to refer back to respondents that noted such issues, and to extract quotations. The final stage of analysing interviews was to display the data and draw conclusions. The analysed data were broken into relevant themes rather than a detailed account of each question, which would make the section very lengthy and unstructured. Additionally, organisational charts, employment records and other relevant documents from the respondents' organisations were studied in order to understand their positions within the organisational hierarchy; their duties, roles and total number of females employed.

## **4. Findings**

The project research findings suggest that family and work commitments, childcare problems, old boys networks and feelings of isolation when in meetings/events as the only female; are the most common barriers found within the study. Furthermore, male dominated cultures prevailing in the work place, gender stereotyping or attitudinal barriers, work patterns like long hours of work, inequalities in advancement opportunities - were solely identified within the construction site environment. Thus female leaders who work on the construction site need to overcome more hurdles to progress in their careers. The acceptance of female leaders' instructions by other employees is quite often a challenging task for the leaders within construction site offices. However female leaders who work in office environment do not face this problem within their organisation. A career break, for a female leader, is a major barrier that can challenge her career continuity unless she has a greater commitment and better understanding from her employer. Although this was quoted only by one of the respondents the importance of her experience needs to be considered for practice guidelines. A lack of women leaders in organisations presents many barriers for other emerging female leaders, since they may later need to challenge and demand their rights from their employers, which in turn can lead to lose of interest in moving up the career ladder. Further, women's personality and self-motivation are also important factors that need to be developed from the beginning of their careers to develop women leaders within the construction industry.

The findings of the first three work packages of this project were analysed in detail and compiled in order to provide recommendations and good practice guidelines to overcome the barriers confronting women leaders in the construction industry. The first work package which aimed to understand the role of women leaders in the construction industry were used to identify the strategic skills including leadership styles which facilitate women to advance in their career. Work package 2 with the aim of identifying the barriers confronting women leaders in construction lead to provide recommendations through identifying remedies to overcome the barriers. Providing opportunities to explore the barriers faced by the women leaders in other different sectors with an understanding of similarities and differences of culture of different industries, work package 3 captured the lessons to be learnt from the other sectors, specifically from education and health, where there is a greater representation of women in the higher positions of organisations to promote women's career advancement in construction. This section of the paper presents the recommendations and practice guidelines to address the barriers faced by females in leadership positions in the construction industry from the lessons learnt from education and health sectors as well. The recommendations, good practice guidelines and strategies

which are provided below are based on both literature and case study findings of the earlier work packages.

#### **4.1 Family and work life balance**

The issue of balancing work and family commitments has been found as a major barrier faced by females across many sectors. Most of the main respondents and their co-employees in this study stated it as a barrier to females' career advancement. Further this barrier has a significant impact on females' career towards leadership positions especially when they are deciding the importance which they need to give to their family and work. Interestingly one of the male respondent from the construction industry also mentioned that he is currently facing this barrier as his wife is also has important work commitments. This indicates the improvement in the support given by husbands or partners of female leaders. However, this has a lot of room for improvement especially during additional work period and critical times in female leaders' career.

##### ***Recommendations***

Although the understanding of the task of balancing family and work commitments in women's career has changed from the past there is a need for further improvement in the understanding of the significance of work family balance in employees' career advancement between employers and people in the senior management. This study proposes the following recommendations by considering the suggestions and problems of female employees.

- Develop a flexible working policy to encourage females to come for work when they are in a critical time without allowing them to leave the organisation. This may include,
  - Flexitime, which allows the employees to come for work where they can vary their start and finish times and lunch breaks within agreed limits
  - Part time working, which allows them to work less than the standard full time hours with different options
  - Compressed working week, which allows them to carry out a full time job in less than five working days per week
- Allow them to work from home when they really need to spend time for family responsibilities
- Allow Parental leave to employees who have a child or adopt, as an unpaid leave to assist them to bring up till a certain age of the child or adopt
- Encourage employees to have mentors or provide mentoring, which is providing guidance and advice to personal and work related issues to employees in order to assist



them to overcome barriers, to advise them about the existing paths for their career development and make them aware of the available training and development programmes and the policies and support systems to improve their career with better family life

- Personally employees can plan their work and family activities well in advance and build a good coordination between family members about the family and work responsibilities to improve their life

## **4.2 Career break schemes and child care facilities**

The study found that women tend to suffer from career breaks due to child bearing. Respondents felt that some women do not get their original job title which they were occupying before their break or some do get degraded. Especially at the initial period after career break they find it difficult to cope up with child care responsibilities which ultimately make them to leave the organisations. In addition, some females take longer career break which eventually leaves them with less competence and benefits to demand for their rights after their career break. Further when females come back to their job after the gap in career they seem to be less confident and find difficulties due to their knowledge gap. Moreover, due to lesser support from their employers or superiors they tend to lose their interest in their career progress.

### ***Recommendations***

The above problems have led the female employees to realise the need for a better maternity structure and support systems to facilitate their career. Although currently construction organisations have maternity and paternity policies, the additional provisions to the judiciary requirements and the extent of its implementation need improvement. Therefore this study proposes the following recommendations and practice guidelines for the betterment of female leaders' career.

- Provide better Maternity policies in addition to the judicial requirements which may include,
  - Allow them to work from home with a few office visits to enable them to get to know the current practices and changes
  - Provide support systems such as a laptop with connections to web and with limited access to the office network to work from home
  - Develop a flexible working policy to encourage them to come for work when they are fit to work without taking a longer career break due to early child rearing responsibilities. This may include,

- Part time working, that is working less than the standard full time hours depending on the company work demands
  - Flexitime that is a system whereby staff can vary their start and finish times and lunch breaks within agreed limits. In this case staff can usually build up a debit or credit of hours work
  - Flexible working hours, which allows a total flexibility over when the job is carried out depending on the type of work the female employee, is carrying out. Further in order to encourage them to come for work, a small payment can be given with a requirement of minimum number of hours or some measures to indicate their completion of work given
- Provide workshops to superiors and subordinates to improve their understanding to create a cooperative working environment
  - Provide childcare facilities near to their work place which should try to accommodate additional working times to assist employees who have to work for long hours rather than for very limited hours which does not fit for employees from construction environment to cover the difficulties from both personal and organisational dimensions.

### **4.3 Self development**

From the study it was found that many women tend to lose their courage to advance further when they reach a level in the management structure. One of the main reasons behind this is their lack of confidence in carrying out the tasks as some consider it as an intense responsibility and as scary. Therefore there is a need to develop their confidence, self aspiration and courage to move forward and take responsibilities in their career. In addition females should be encouraged to develop their competencies to create their demand for further effective management roles within the sector while they progress in their career.

Further the study identified the need to develop women's leadership skills in order to carry out their roles and to advance and retain their leadership positions within organisations. Many respondents felt that women leaders need to possess skills related to team working, communication, inter personal management, multi tasking, organising and prioritising, negotiation, listening, delegation, time management, sound knowledge on their profession and the ability to stand on your ground with not feeling intimidated in aggressive situations. In addition they stress the need to have a broader and better understanding of work and people since they need to work with people who have different responsibilities as well. Besides leaders must be able express the ideas well and influence others in a more democratic way as this approach is been considered as better way of leading by other employees. However female respondents insisted the need to change their style of leadership depending on the people and the situations. Moreover the strategic leadership skills that were highlighted within this study involve planning, evaluating, problem solving skills, decision making,

figurehead, spokesperson, liaison, intellectual competence, system perspective and higher cognitive capacities such as complex investigations and judgements.

### ***Recommendations***

Females' lesser confidence in continuing their career to higher positions found to be a common barrier in different sectors. However in order to promote more women in construction the construction industry should further take care about building the confidence and courage of all its female employees and provide training and development programmes to increase their potential. Especially it should assist female leaders to tackle the difficulties arising immediately after their career break due to child bearing and when they are applying for promotions. As previously mentioned women need to be encouraged to develop their competencies. In order to address the above issue the study recommends following suggestions.

- Provide special training programmes to create employees perseverance to improve their competencies and confidence
- Provide a better employer support to encourage women to develop their career further in the management structure
- Provide mentoring to all employees or grant additional benefits to have mentors
- Conduct training programmes to allow employees to get familiarised with the current organisational practices and developments or provide induction programmes to new employees or to employees who are after their career break
- Encourage female students to get involved in extra curricular activities from their school life to create their interest and the ability to hold leadership positions
- Conduct training programmes to develop leadership skills to effectively carry out their roles and develop other employees

## **4.4 Improved working environment**

The culture of the organisation has a significant impact on employees. Lack of inhospitable culture within the construction organisations is one of the most significant barriers to women's advancement and also a major factor in diminishing their satisfaction in work. Although the culture of the construction industry is slowly changing, the resonance of the macho culture can be found in many activities carried out through out the construction life cycle. Gender stereotyping is one of the barriers found in the construction industry. Some female respondents felt that although they hold leadership positions men tend to expect them to carry out certain activities which they normal expect from females such as preparing tea for meetings. In addition they said that they feel they are isolated in certain events and meetings from other employees in construction environment as opposed to other

sectors. Men's network between themselves acts as a barrier in allowing women to network well among other employees. Further they felt that the acceptance of their instructions is sometimes being challenged specially in construction sites.

### ***Recommendations***

It was found that the above problems have not been addressed well in organisational policies. In addition few respondents felt that generally the construction industry have minimal facilities compared to other sectors such as maternity structure, flexible working hours, etc. which help to maintain a better working environment through out their career. This study considers the following in addressing the above issues.

- Build committee to consider gender issues arising from harassment and bullying and grievances cases
- Provide a better mentoring facilities and employers support to employees who suffer from harassment
- Organisations should recognise the obligations under Sex discrimination act, Equal pay act and relevant Equal opportunity policies and legislations and ensure its compliance within the organisation
- Provide training which will enhance the understanding of the need for an equal opportunities programme

## **4.5 Recruitment policies and advancement opportunities**

Although formal announcements do not reflect any discrimination some respondents felt that there are instances where promotion has taken place through word of mouth which resulted in demotivating their interest in career progress. Further some feel there are occasions where the recruitment has taken place through the network between exiting employees. However since construction is a male dominated industry females feel that there are inequitable procedures within organisations. In addition they feel employers support is a significant factor which helps to implement equitable recruitment and advancement policies.

### ***Recommendations***

In order to address the above issues this study proposes the following by considering the policies from other sectors considered for the study.

- Recruitment policies must be set to ensure that the selection criteria and its policies and procedures are maintained to treat individuals solely on the basis of the merits and abilities which are appropriate to the job. The above policies should indicate that the

organisation is offering opportunities to people of both sex and it must avoid any stereotyping of roles. Most importantly organisation should avoid the recruitment solely by word of mouth or through recommendations of existing employees to avoid unlawful activities

- Training and development programmes should be circulated widely to employees and should be monitored for any imbalances for corrective actions irrespective of gender difference
- All employees should be provided career guidance
- Access to advancement opportunities should be made available to suitable employees irrespective of gender or marital status.
- Organisation should have individuals in planning and monitoring the human resource management policies who are open minded in order to promote lesser gender discrimination, to develop better understanding of employee status and to encourage delegation of work for empowering employees

#### **4.6 Arrangements to accommodate different work patterns**

It was quite often noticed within the study that work patterns within construction environment hinder women's career progress. Some respondents expressed the view that women tend to lose their interest in applying for promotions as they feel that they won't be able to spend more time to work. A long hour of work is a major challenge to women leaders within construction especially when they need to look after their personal and family responsibilities. Besides, the construction industry requires its employees to allocate time to carry out the task within the specified period of time.

##### ***Recommendations***

Within other sectors which were considered for the study, women have the flexibility to overcome the obstacle related to work patterns. Educational sector has the flexibility to accommodate their family and work responsibilities which ultimately assist women leaders to have better work family life. This study proposes the following recommendations to overcome to above problem.

- Allow compressed working week. However a specific timeline should be given to improve the work performance and to ensure the completion of the task given
- In critical situations organisation can allow job sharing, which is a full time job shared by two or more employees where salary and benefits are also shared.

- Allow flexible working policy which may include flexible working hours and home working. However the organisation should give the responsibility to the employee to ensure the completion of the task given
- Develop a better understanding between employees and senior management to accept and overcome the difficulty of sharing more time at work place to complete the tasks
- Conduct workshops to employees to adopt different arrangements between family members for a better work life

## **5. Conclusions**

The Constructing Women Leaders project was established to identify the role of women leaders and to recognise the barriers encountered by women in leadership positions in the construction industry in order to provide recommendations. This paper which is based on the final work package of this project was aimed to provide recommendations and good practice guidelines to address the barriers confronting women leaders in the construction industry and to identify the strategic leadership skills which need to be developed within women leaders for their career progression.

The study found that women leaders need to develop skills related to team working, communication, inter personal management, multi tasking, organising and prioritising, negotiation, listening, delegation, time management and the ability to stand on your ground with not feeling intimidated in aggressive situations. In addition it highlights the need for broader understanding of work and people with different responsibilities. Finally the research identified the strategic leadership skills such as planning, evaluating, problem solving skills, decision making, figurehead, spokesperson, liaison, intellectual competence, system perspective and higher cognitive capacities that need to be highlighted when providing training to employees who work specially in managerial positions.

The findings suggest different recommendations and practice guidelines to organisations and to female leaders under different categories based on the challenges face by female leaders. They are family and work life balance, career break schemes and child care facilities, self development, improved working environment, recruitment policies and advancement opportunities and arrangements to accommodate different work patterns. Although the recommendations to organisations are mainly illustrating about developing women leaders, it recognises the importance of gender mainstreaming to facilitate all employees' careers within the organisation. Therefore some of the suggested recommendations for career development consider all employees irrespective of gender or sex.

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