



Strategies to Overcome Barriers Women Face in the Construction Industry

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Abstract: There is a lack of women represented in the construction industry. In 2022, approximately 11% of the construction workforce was female. Though this percentage has increased over time, women working in construction are still working in a “man’s world.” The purpose of this study is to show what barriers women in construction face and how to overcome them. The information from this study can be a guide for future females pursuing a degree in construction management about how they can overcome barriers and attain success.

Keywords: barriers, construction industry, diversity, mentors, women

I. Introduction

In 2020, approximately 10,786,000 total people were employed in the construction industry. Only 10.9% of that total were women (Smith, 2021). In 2009, 919,000 people total were employed in the construction industry, with only 1.4% of that total being women (Solis, 2010). Over an 11 year period, that is approximately a 10% increase in the number of women working in the construction industry. Although there is an increase in women in the construction industry, women are still considered a distinct minority in the field. As a minority in the construction industry, women must overcome various barriers to be taken seriously and establish credibility. The purpose of this study is to show what barriers women in construction face and how they are able to overcome them.

II. Barriers Women Face in the Construction Industry

As a distinct minority in the construction industry, women face barriers to success. According to Amaratunga (2006), the major barriers women in construction face include the image of the industry, career knowledge, culture and working environment, family commitments, male dominated training courses, and recruitment practices. The presence of these barriers can be discouraging for women considering entering the industry. In addition, it is also a challenge to retain women in the field with these barriers.

Women are treated differently in the construction industry based purely on their gender. Jasmin Rosa from the Queensland University of Technology evaluated the challenges and success factors of women’s career development in the construction industry. Rosa (2017) found that while women are perfectly capable of doing their jobs, they lack recognition on project sites due to stereotypes in this field. She concluded that the construction industry is almost entirely based off of the values of males, primarily due to the fact that the construction industry is very heavily dominated by men (Rosa, 2017). Additionally, the stereotypical male is viewed as better suited for a construction management job than a female due to men’s strength, ability to endure outdoor conditions and use of bad language (Amaratunga, 2006). According to Moore (2006), this perception of the industry has been formed because of a lack of knowledge and information on what qualifications are needed, as well as what career opportunities are available. Women are more reluctant to enter the construction industry because of the negative perception of knowing it is a male dominated field (Barreto, 2017).

This underrepresentation of females in the construction industry makes it difficult to recruit women due to a lack of positive role models and mentors (Amaratunga, 2006; Rosa, 2017). Women are likely to be discouraged from entering the field because they do not have mentors to support them in overcoming barriers to attain success (Barreto, 2017). Women who have already experienced gender-based challenges in the field can be used as a resource to help guide and mentor future female professionals. Female mentors were found to be an essential component in a woman’s professional development (Rosa, 2017). Having conversations with and take advice from someone with similar experiences to what new female professionals will face is a vital component of breaking the gender-based under-representation cycle currently faced by the construction industry.

Although women encounter barriers in the construction industry, there are ways to overcome these barriers that can help them to be successful in the field. It is one thing for the women going into the construction industry to accept that they will face additional challenges primarily due to their gender, but it is another thing for these women to be able to push through these challenges and overcome them. Female mentors and role models have been shown to be a positive influence in attracting women in the industry and provide personal benefits to both the mentor and mentee (Moore, 2007; Rosa, 2017). Mentor programs for females in the



construction industry can help bring awareness to the challenges these women face, as well as encourage change (Rosa, 2017). Factors that lead to success in the industry include good relationships with others, confidence, self-efficacy, leadership skills and dedication. Confidence and self-efficacy are related factors that support women throughout their careers and are acquired from within themselves, through mentors, and additional training to help them feel more comfortable in their roles (Rosa, 2017).

The apparent barriers that discourage women from entering the field contributes to the lack of women working in the construction industry. It is also a challenge to retain women in the field because they are confronted with these barriers. In order to encourage women that they can be successful in the industry, it is important to educate them on how to conquer these barriers. Factors that lead to success in the industry have been found with the presence of female mentors and role models, the ability to build good relationships with others, having confidence and self-efficacy, and the use of additional training in their roles (Rosa, 2017). These factors can help to compensate for the difficulties women may encounter in the field as well as promote change to create a gender-equal workplace in the construction industry.

III. Methodology

This research study utilized a qualitative multi-case study approach. The cases describe and provide further understanding about the barriers women face in the construction industry. Merriam (1998) explained that a case study is an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group. The participants for this study were females who are pursuing undergraduate baccalaureate degrees in construction management. Participants must have completed at least one internship in the construction industry. This requirement means that each participant had at least 400 hours of work experience in the construction industry prior to participating in this study. The participants for this study were identified using purposeful sampling. According to Creswell (2013), purposeful sampling is a common strategy used in qualitative research. This sampling technique allows researchers to select participants who can purposefully inform an understanding of the research questions. To recruit participants, individuals who met the inclusion criteria were emailed and asked to be involved in this study. Interviews were scheduled with interested participants. Case study research frequently utilizes interviews for data collection. Yin (2014) noted that in case study research, the interview and interviews are one of the most important sources of evidence. A total of six participants were interviewed for this study.

The interviews were transcribed to begin the data analysis. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to remain anonymous. The researchers reviewed the transcriptions to identify major themes. The major themes were highlighted in the transcriptions and then categorized and compiled for the findings section of this study.

IV. Findings

As previously discussed, women are a distinct minority in the construction industry. Due to the lack of women in the industry, there are barriers present that must be overcome to help women establish their credibility in the field. Even though there has been an increase of women working in the industry over time, there are still barriers present that women must overcome because of the underlying stereotype that males are dominant in the construction industry. This is discouraging for women who are considering entering the field and makes it a challenge to retain women in the field with the lack of support available. All six of the participants interviewed discussed stereotypes about women present in the construction industry. When discussing the barriers women face in the construction industry and how to overcome them in the interviews, one participant expressed, "There have definitely been some people who treat me differently, but I try to ignore it or try to show them it's not something that's in my way. I will do my job like any other person in construction." This woman has been treated differently in the construction industry due to the stereotype that males are dominant in this field. She overcame this stereotypical view by doing her job just like any other person and did not allow this barrier to impact her work ethic. In her interview, another participant revealed:

They [men] just kind of look at you and are a bit more timid because they don't know what to expect out of you, but I think after you show yourself and you keep showing yourself and you are confident in your answers and you ask questions, then they'll be like "Oh okay this girl seems like she knows what she's doing so let's just put her in too."

This is another example of how a woman responded to the stereotypical view of women in the industry by highlighting the importance of having confidence and proving one's worth. Approximately 67% of the participants noted that it can be hard to prove your abilities as a woman in the construction industry and that it's important to have confidence. Proving your abilities as a woman in construction can be difficult with the stereotypical assumption that the knowledge women have on construction is minimal to none. Approximately



67% of the women interviewed stated that being taken seriously is something they are concerned about because they are a woman in construction. In her interview, a participant elaborated on this issue by saying:

I feel like as women in construction management, we have to try harder than our male peers to know everything. When I get something wrong, depending on the people I'm around, I feel like it's treated more like I don't know construction because I'm a woman instead of because I am a student still learning.

The assumption that women are not as skilled or as knowledgeable on different aspects of construction management compared to males has an impact on how satisfied women are in this field of work. Additionally, this assumption may steer women away from potentially entering the field knowing that there is a chance that they might have to jump through hurdles to gain the respect they deserve in the industry. Potentially having to endure or handle these situations based on gender is a lot to digest for a woman considering pursuing this field. It can be uncomfortable asking questions and attempting to comprehend the full scope of a position while simultaneously attempting to avoid any stereotypical views. One of the participants noted that the males had crude nicknames for the female employees at her previous jobsite, and she felt being a young intern had an impact on the mistreatment as well. This student expressed her concern on being taken seriously with gender stereotyping in the industry, stating, "I am a little worried about that sort of thing because I'm a small female person and young, so all of those things combined make me less easy to listen to or have preconceived notions of what those things mean." The responses from the interviews reveal that most of the female students are aware of the gender stereotyping and that it can be challenging to prove one's abilities. However, having confidence and a strong backbone are some ways that have helped these women to overcome these barriers and to move towards breaking the cycle of the social stigma that is present in the field.

Having a mentor is another strategy the participants identified to help with the barriers women face in the construction industry. Approximately 83% of the participants interviewed said they have or had a mentor in the industry. Having been in their shoes, a female mentor or supervisor can be a helpful guide and resource when looking for advice on how to prevent or overcome these barriers and attain success in the field. During an interview, a participant highlighted how experience with having a female supervisor shaped her view of the industry:

I think having a female supervisor was a big part of making it more comfortable for me. We would go to meetings, and it was just me and her as the only females in the room. It wasn't as daunting because she was there as well. So, I think that helped a lot with that whole aspect.

Another participant shared that having a female mentor versus a male mentor was an advantage for her because she could better relate to her and gained more than just the basic, generic knowledge or less personally relevant knowledge. On the flip side, in another interview, a participant expressed her gratitude for her male mentors. She discussed having two mentors, one younger and one older mentor. The participant explained:

The younger one has been very helpful in showing me how to get respect from people on the jobsite as a young person in a management role. The older mentor has helped me understand when to be nice, and when to be stern in different situations that I will see on site. I think they will still be helpful once I graduate. I plan on staying at my company, so I would be working with them still, but I am confident if I decided to switch companies, they would still just be a phone call away if I wanted advice or help with something.

The responses from the participants show that having a mentor is another way to overcome barriers and attain success as a woman in the construction management industry.

V. Conclusion

The primary limitation with this research study is the small sample size. This is an ongoing research study. As new participants are identified and interviewed, additional data from those interviews will be added to the results to provide more information on this topic. An additional limitation is that all participants are pursuing an undergraduate baccalaureate degree from the same higher education institution. Plans for further research include expanding the reach of this study and identifying additional participants at other higher education institutions.

As a distinct minority in the construction industry, women face barriers to success. These barriers include the image of the industry, career knowledge, culture and working environment, family commitments, male



dominated training courses, and recruitment practices. The presence of these barriers can be discouraging for women considering entering the industry and can also be a challenge to retain women in the field. This study showed what barriers women in construction face and how they are able to overcome them. The information from this study can be a guide for future females pursuing a degree in construction management and how they can overcome barriers and attain success.

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