BUILDING A CAREER IN BUILDING: CAREER TRAJECTORIES AMONG WOMEN IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Robyn Johns and Caroline Johnson
School of Management, University of Technology, Sydney
Po Box 222, Lindfield, Sydney, NSW, Australia 2070
Phone: +61 2 9514 5437  Fax: +61 2 9514 5583
Email: Robyn.Johns@uts.edu.au Email: Caroline.Johnson@uts.edu.au

INTRODUCTION: Women in the Construction Industry

Across the globe women’s participation in the paid workforce has increased exponentially over the past 30 years. This is no less evident than in Australia where there has been a momentous rise in women’s participation. In 1964 women comprised 28 percent of total employment in Australia; by January 2004, this had increased to 44 percent (Equity Statistics Australia, 2004). Despite this momentous rise, women still remain under-represented in managerial roles, tending to be clustered in administration and service roles (Palmero, 2004). Women are also increasingly highly educated, and are academically outperforming their male counterparts in university exams, even in subjects with a higher proportion of males enrolled (Palmero, 2004). Yet the starting salaries of female graduates are on average lower than the starting salaries of male graduates.

So, what is going on? Why is it that after two decades after the creation of the Australian Federal Sex Discrimination Act (1984), women in the workplace start on lower salaries (Palmero, 2004), continue to earn lower incomes (Kirchmeyer, 2002; Whitehouse, 2003), gain less financially from promotions and transfers (Stroh, Brett & Reilly, 1992), and are less likely to reach managerial positions (van Vianen & Fischer, 2002) than men?

This paper, which forms part of a broader body of research, seeks to explore some of the factors that contribute to the under-representation of women in managerial roles in the male-dominated industry of construction. Drawing on empirical research and the literature relating to the British construction industry this paper seeks to explain why these barriers are an important issue for Australian businesses to tackle.

Organisational Barriers to Female Advancement

A large amount of research has been conducted into the barriers to female advancement and the drivers of female turnover (Blattel-Mink, Kramer & Micschau, 2000; Corporate Leadership Council, April 2004; Tischler, 2004; van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). With considerable attention being given to the barrier acknowledged as the “glass ceiling”. Whilst not actually visible this barrier “is strong enough to hold women back from top-level jobs merely because they are women rather than because they lack job-relevant skills, education or experience” (Goodman, Fields & Blum, 2003; 476).

Women in the workplace also face direct discrimination right from the point at which they enter the workforce; average salaries for female graduates are still lower than average salaries for male graduates (Palmero, 2004), and this income gap has been found to steadily increase over time (Kirchmeyer, 2002). Once hired, women face further barriers to progression inherent within the structure of an organisation (Palmero, 2004; Goodman et al, 2003). Whilst systematic disadvantage and discrimination are not often recognised; both men and women attribute the lack of women in senior roles to lack of experience rather than intrinsic organisational discrimination (Palmero, 2004; Corporate Leadership Council, April 2004), however a closer examination of the reasons why women ‘lack the appropriate experience’ is necessary to show the intrinsic nature of discrimination.
Tischler (2004) notes that the shortage of women in line management positions may be partially explained by women self-selecting ‘staff’ roles such as Human Resources and Marketing, however researchers such as Goodman et al. (2003) and Palmero (2004) have described how gender prejudices and stereotypes shape organisational design. Aside from reports of toxic male bosses actively blocking the progression of women (Sinclair, 1998), women are disadvantaged by the stereotypes associated with a successful manager. The characteristics seen as necessary to succeed in management roles are aligned with “masculine” traits such as dominance, aggression, rationality and independence (Palmero, 2004). Women are stereotyped as being caring, nurturing, supporting and emotional, and are therefore not considered to be capable of achieving the full range of activities necessary for management positions (Palmero, 2004). Organisations channel women into positions that are considered to be more appropriate to their stereotyped sex-role characteristics; typically staff positions such as human resources or marketing, rather than line management roles that would give women the experience they require to take the top roles at a later stage in their careers (Palmero, 2004).

Women face another type of barrier to career progression by being less able to access the networks and mentors that males use to gain recognition and opportunities to climb the corporate career ladder (Palmero, 2004). Informal networks allow people to maximise potential job opportunities and advance careers (Palmero, 2004). People tend to associate with others they see as similar to themselves (van Vianen & Fischer, 2002), which means that male senior executives willing to become a mentor to those in the management pipeline may be more likely to select a male protégé than a female one (Palmero, 2004). As informal networks are also frequently segregated by sex, and as there are a larger number of men in senior positions with power and influence, networks are more likely to provide male employees with access to senior people and provide them with the associated benefits (Palmero, 2004).

Given that successful managerial skills are associated with masculine characteristics and women are assumed not to have these characteristics, and that women are less able to access organisational networks, women often feel they have to be demonstrably “better and tougher” than men to succeed in management. As Kirchmeyer (2003: 6) notes, “It is still discrimination if women have to be better educated and more committed to earn the same returns at work as men”. Additionally, women who do reach senior management roles are more visible than their male counterparts, and are therefore under more scrutiny and face the double challenge of succeeding in the role and breaking down cultural barriers (Goodman et al., 2003; Palmero, 2004; CCH, 2005).

(UN)Attractiveness of Traditional Models of Career Development

Traditional models of career development emphasise linear vertical progression through the ranks of the organisation, with each role an increase in terms of status, power, and remuneration on the previous role (MacDermid et al 2001; Parker & Inkson, 1999). Mavin (2000) and Jackson & Scharman (2002) suggest that the traditional career model - linear, uninterrupted progression based on continuous full time work - puts women at a competitive career disadvantage compared to men, as women typically have more career breaks than men due to family responsibilities.

Many women are choosing to “opt out” of the traditional career model and associated push towards management roles in order to take roles which provide them with personally satisfying career development and balance with lives outside of work (van Vianen & Fischer, 2002). Tischler (2004) and Jackson & Scharman (2002) describe the way women make a conscious decision not to sacrifice their lives outside work in the way that many top jobs require, in the full knowledge that this will “torpedo their chances for a climb up the ladder” (Tischler, 2004: 54). However, Tischler (2004) and Jackson & Scharman (2002) note that
many of the women who make this choice are happy with it and do not feel that they “have made sacrifices or paid a price” (Jackson & Scharman, 2002: 185).

Women in the Construction Industry
The construction industry employs both blue collar workers, such as tradespeople and builders labourers, and professionals such as engineers, architects, designers, surveyors and property developers, and is one of the most male dominated of all industries (Dainty, Neale & Bagilhole, 1999; Fielden, Davidson, Gale & Davey, 2001). Fielden et al (2001) noted that not only are 84 percent of workers in the UK construction industry male, the industry exhibits one of the highest levels of vertical segregation with two thirds of the women who do work in the industry engaged in secretarial or clerical roles. A study by Bennett, Davidson and Galeand (1999) into professionals in the UK construction industry found that women who did reach senior professional roles tended to do so in organisations with fewer than 500 employees, whereas the vast majority of the professional males in senior management roles in their sample population were in organisations with over 500 employees, reflecting the disparate power of the senior management roles attained by women.

The construction industry has a male-orientated culture characterised by an expectation of long working hours, geographical flexibility and career centrality which can lead to inflexible work practices and discrimination (Dainty, Neale & Bagilhole, 2001). The barriers that have been shown to impede female career advancement in the general workforce; organisational barriers, the challenge of combining work and family, and the overall (un)attractiveness of the traditional models of career development, are particularly applicable to female professionals in the construction industry.

There are several forms of organisational barriers facing women wishing to enter and progress in the industry. In many construction companies, Human Resources Management (HRM) activities are devolved to line managers who are typically male and lack experience in HRM practice (Dainty et al, 1999). These managers tend to and recruit using informal networks and word of mouth, and make stereotyped and frankly sexist assumptions regarding women’s commitment to work, their mobility, and their career priorities, when making selection decisions (Dainty et al, 1999; Dainty et al, 2001; Bennet et al, 1999; Fielden et al, 2001; Gale & Cartwright, 1995a and 1995b).

Bennett et al (1999) noted that women in the construction industry generally felt greater satisfaction with their careers than their male counterparts, and attributed this to women seeing opportunities in entering roles formerly held by males. However Bennet et al (1999) noted a major decline in the number of women in the industry once they passed their mid-thirties. Although many organisations and industry groups have implemented programs to recruit more women into the construction industry, there is a high turnover rate amongst women who become disillusioned with the culture of the industry and the expectation that they will comply with working practices that do not suit them if they are to get ahead. (Dainty et al, 2001). Finch (1994, in Dainty et al, 1999) described how only 25 percent of women in the construction industry believed they could reach the top of their professions, and so many had chosen to move to another sector of the industry or leave for a different profession altogether rather than fight a battle they did not feel was worth winning.

Organisational Strategies for Reducing the Barriers
Sinclair (1998: 19) describes four phases of corporate culture with regards to the lack of women in senior roles. The first stage is denial, where the absence of women in senior roles is not regarded as a problem. In the second stage Sinclair states that the absence of women in senior roles is seen as a problem, but the problem is seen to lie with the women and the ways they are different to the male norm. The solution to the problem therefore lies in women learning how to adapt to the dominant culture and workplace norms. The third stage involves recognition by the organisation that changes might have to be made to move more
women into senior roles, but it is assumed that changes to the margins of the organisation, such as promoting one or two highly visible and low risk women, will be sufficient to resolve the issue. The final stage involves recognition that the absence of women from senior roles is symptomatic of deeper organisational cultural problems, and a commitment to a new culture.

While the construction industry as a whole is firmly entrenched in Stage 1 of Sinclair’s model (Dainty et al., 1999), many individual organisations have started to realise that attracting, retaining and promoting women is an important business issue and are attempting to find solutions (Lee & Kossek, 2005). Many of the common solutions companies implement are aimed at enabling employees to successfully balance family responsibilities with productive employment, such as allowing part-time work, job-sharing, flexible working hours, working from home, paid parental and carer’s leave, and customised jobs (Corporate Leadership Council, April 2004; Corporate Leadership Council, July 2004; Lee & Kossek, 2005).

**Women’s Strategies for Dealing with the Barriers**

What do women do when faced with these barriers to their career? Some women make a conscious decision to “step off the career track” (Mavin, 2000: 13) and take roles that they acknowledge are less likely to progress them up the organisation hierarchy in order to achieve greater balance with their lives outside work (Jackson & Scharman, 2002; Tischler, 2004). These women seek out roles that are personally satisfying and rewarding, and meet their own career needs but are unlikely to lead to progression up the corporate ladder (Tischler, 2004). Some women feel forced out altogether by workplace cultures that do not recognise their abilities because of gender stereotypes and inflexibility, and choose opt out of the workforce altogether (Corporate Leadership Council, Palmero, 2004).

Other women choose to opt out of the corporate world and start their own businesses (Palmero, 2004; Tischler, 2004). The statistics speak for themselves: in 1996 women comprised 11 percent of the self employed; by 2003 this had risen to 31 percent (Palmero, 2004), and Construction is one of the industries with the fastest growth in female-owned companies (Perrin Moore, 2004). Many highly educated women see self employment as a chance to achieve career success without the pressure of high visibility, accusations of tokenism, or fighting the system (Tischler, 2004).

Many women, however, choose to stay on their chosen career path and are optimistic about their opportunities; indeed, in a study by Bennet et al. (1999), female professionals in the construction industry were far more optimistic about their abilities and career development than either male professionals or both male and female undergraduate construction students. Gale (1994) noted that women who seek to work in the construction industry are socialised into the culture of the industry, and actively seek this culture. This could be a result of women underestimating the effects of the barriers they face in the industry, or choosing to be more satisfied with less.

A review of the literature shows several barriers to advancement of women’s careers, particularly in male-dominated industries such as construction (Bennett et al., 1999). Women have more difficulty entering the construction industry than men, are ‘funnelled’ into horizontal rather than vertical career paths once in the industry, and face a culture and working environment that at times is openly sexist and structured to suit the needs and ambitions of males (Fielden et al., 2001; Dainty et al., 1999). However, the proportion of women entering the industry has been increasing since the 1990s (Dainty et al., 2001), and Bennett et al. (1999) note that female professionals in the industry are generally very optimistic about their abilities and career opportunities. With most of the available literature on women in the construction industry coming from the United Kingdom (e.g. Bennett et al., 1999; Dainty et al., 1999; Dainty et al., 2001; Fielden et al., 2001) this research aims to compare the experiences of UK women in the construction industry, as described in the literature, to the experience of Australian women in the construction industry and to see how
the different factors identified in the literature affect the careers trajectories of Australian women. It is expected that the Australian women in the construction industry will face similar challenges to those described in the UK literature, but will also have a similarly positive overall approach. Additionally, as Gale (1994) identified that women who pursue careers in the construction industry tend to align themselves with the culture of the industry and their organisation, it is expected that cultural factors, such as direct discrimination by men keen to protect the male culture of the industry, will be seen to have less impact on women’s career progression than factors that directly impact their ability to meet the requirements for promotions such as long working hours and geographical mobility, or entry into informal male networks that feed promotional opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection
A questionnaire was placed on the website of The National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC). The NAWIC is a not-for-profit organisation whose mission is to promote and improve the construction industry by the advancement of women within it (www.nawic.com.au, visited 25/08/05). NAWIC’s membership includes women in a broad range of construction related occupations, including engineers, architects, interior designers, project managers, builders and tradespeople, landscape architects and surveyors.

The New South Wales (NSW) Board of NAWIC agreed to support the research and encouraged their members to participate. An email notice was sent to all members of the NSW chapter advising them that NAWIC was supporting the research, inviting them to participate and directing them to the survey on the website. The survey was live on the NAWIC website for 11 days, and two email reminders regarding participation were sent by the NSW Secretary to NAWIC members; 27 responses were received within the timeframe. The respondents accessed the survey through the NAWIC website and emailed their completed response to the researchers. Completed surveys were immediately detached from the email and saved without any identifying information to maintain confidentiality.

In-depth follow up interviews were also conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of women in the construction industry. As the researcher had immediately detached the survey responses from the covering emails in order to separate identifying information from the responses, respondents could not be selected based on their characteristics, so 11 respondents were randomly selected and contacted by email to see if they would participate in a follow-up interview. Seven of the women contacted were both willing to be interviewed and were available in the required timeframe, and the interviews were conducted by telephone in the week following the close of the survey.

Questionnaire Design:
Survey
As the aim of the research was to compare the experiences of Australian women in the construction industry with the experiences described in the literature (e.g. Gale & Cartwright, 1995a and b) of women in the construction industry in the United Kingdom, a survey was developed to gain a broad perspective of the barriers Australian women in the construction industry feel they face.

The first section of the survey aimed to establish the demographics of the respondents that were relevant to interpreting their experiences in the construction industry, such as their age, whether they had children or not, and the size of the organisation they worked for and their level of seniority within the organisation. The second section of the questionnaire sought to assess the respondents’ level of satisfaction with their careers in the construction industry, their intention to remain in the industry, their level of interest in senior management roles in
the industry, and whether they believed that they would be able to attain a senior management role if they chose to pursue this career path. This was assessed by asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements such as “I enjoy working in the construction/property development industry” on a Likert scale. The final question in the second section asked respondents whether they believed that there were particular barriers to the career progression of women in the construction/property development industry, and asked them to elaborate on their response.

The third section of the questionnaire described six factors that have been identified in the literature (e.g. Bennett et al, 1999; Dainty et al, 1999) as impacting the careers of women in the construction industry. The respondents were asked to rank the six factors in order from the factor they felt had the most impact on women’s careers in the construction industry to the factor they felt had the least impact. The final section of the questionnaire was an optional free text section that gave respondents the opportunity to add any issues they did not believe had been covered in the survey or to add any additional thoughts or comments.

Follow-up interviews
The follow-up interviews were designed to get a more in-depth perspective of women in the construction industry, and to explore their motivations for entering the industry. The interviews were semi-structured, where the interviewer followed a guide covering the following topic areas of interest:

- the reasons why the woman originally pursued a career in the construction industry,
- the challenges they had faced as a woman in a male dominated industry
- what they had done to over come those challenges
- what changes they felt the industry could make to attract and retain more women, and
- the advice they would give to a young woman considering a career in the construction industry

Each topic area had one set question to get the discussion going, then the researcher conversed with the participant on that area until the participant had nothing more to say. The interviewer also collected demographic information on each interview participant. Each interview took approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

RESULTS

Survey
As expected, the women in the survey were overwhelmingly positive about the industry and their career prospects. There was a strong average level of agreement to statements such as “I enjoy working in the construction/property development industry” and “I believe I will be able to reach a top management role in the construction/property development industry if I choose to follow this career path.” This strong level of agreement was indicative of both younger and older respondents and respondents with and without children.

When examining the trends, it became evident that the older group of women were, on average, slightly more positive than their younger counterparts about the industry and their career prospects. In particular, the older group of women were more confident than the younger group of women that they would be able to attain a senior management job in the industry if they chose to do so, which was the opposite of the expected result. There was very little difference in the trends in average levels of agreement between women who had children and women who did not have children. Overall, 70 percent of respondents believed that women do face particular career barriers in the construction industry. This result remained consistent when analysed by age and whether the respondent had children.
The responses to the free-text question “Do you believe there are particular barriers to the career progression of women in the construction / property development. Please provide comments to support or elaborate on your response” were categorised into themes using content analysis. The themes most commonly expressed concerned the culture of long working hours in the industry and the difficulty this posed for women with family commitments:

“I believe that inflexible and exhausting work conditions are the worst barrier for women, particularly those who want to have children and go back to work afterwards.”

The women were also concerned with the “boys club” culture of the industry, as can be seen by the following quote:

“Despite attempts to change (albeit minimal), there is still a "boys club" within the organisation. Also, I believe that to some extent around construction sites and the like, one needs to adopt "masculine" behaviours in order to fit in and be accepted.”

Follow-up interviews:

Motivation for entering the construction industry
Several of the women entering the industry reported a family member or friend who was already in the industry and encouraged them to consider a career in construction. This is consistent with research by Fielden et al (2001) that found that women are more likely to enter construction if they are aware of the opportunities and career paths available.

Barriers faced as a woman in a male dominated industry, and how these were overcome
The younger women largely felt that gender was not as much of an issue now as it had been in the past, and believed that a woman with ability would have the same or similar opportunities as men. One of the older participants, however, graphically described the challenges she had faced when trying to return to the Australian construction industry after a period of studying and working in the United States; stressing issues of discrimination associated with what she termed as “a real culture of yobbo masculinity”. Some of the respondents also commented on how gender did become more of an issue when women deviated from the male norms by having children, or by reaching senior management positions and being unwilling to participate in the ‘boys club culture’. Generally speaking, the women reported that the best approach to the challenges was to continue to perform well and make an effort to not let the dominant male culture “get to them”.

Discussion And Conclusions

Consistent with the research by Dainty et al (2001) and Gale (1994), the women who participated in the research expressed high levels of satisfaction with the construction industry, and the majority indicated that they intended to remain in the industry for the next 10 years.

Fielden et al (2001) noted that women are more likely to consider a career in the construction industry if they have been exposed to the career options and encouraged by family members and mentors from a young age. Dainty et al (1999) reports that women who had gained insight into the realities of the construction industry from a friend or family member had more realistic expectations than women who had entered the industry through targeted recruitment campaigns, and were less likely to suffer from disillusionment with the career opportunities available. Several of the women who participated in follow up interviews reported that they were initially attracted to a career in the construction industry because of the encouragement of family members or family friends, which may have helped them form an accurate
perception of the industry and align their expectations prior to entering it, contributing to their high levels of satisfaction.

While the women surveyed and interviewed were not actually asked about their satisfaction with their job, as educated professionals using their skills and qualification in their roles, some of their job satisfaction would be attributable to the jobs themselves. However, given the high levels of satisfaction reported and the intent to remain in the industry for the future, it is highly likely that they would also enjoy the culture of the industry and / or their organisation. This is consistent with research by Gale (1994) and Gale & Cartwright (1995a) who found that women who pursue a career in construction deliberately choose a non-traditional career path and are more likely to be attracted to, and be willing to be socialised into, the culture of the industry than women who choose more traditionally female occupations. This does not mean that the participants in the research necessarily approved of the culture of the industry, but it does indicate that they were not concerned by it to an extent that would cause them to seek an alternate career.

The construction industry is highly gender segregated, with more than two thirds of women in the industry working in secretarial or clerical roles (Fielden et al, 2001). Data on vertical segregation in the industry is harder to come by, but it is estimated that only 15% of managerial roles in the construction industry in the United Kingdom are held by women (Fielden et al, 2001). Finch (1994, in Dainty et al, 2001) noted that only 25 percent of women the UK construction industry believed that they would be able to reach the top of their profession.

The respondents to the survey, however, were very positive about their ability to reach a senior management position in the industry if they chose to do so. On a scale of 1 to 7, with seven being strongly agree, 74 percent of respondents gave a rating of 5 or above to the statement “I believe I will be able to reach a top management role in the construction / property development industry if I choose to follow this career path”, and the average rating was 5.1. Although this is a very small sample, it does suggest that attitudes have been changing since 1994 when Finch (in Dainty et al, 2001) surveyed women in the UK construction industry.

It was expected that the younger respondents to the survey would be more likely to be positive about their career prospects and their ability to reach senior management positions than women in their mid-thirties and older who were more likely to have experienced “career log jam” as described by Bennett et al (1999), however the reverse result was actually found; the older women averaged an agreement level of 6.0, on a scale of 1 to 7, that they would be able to reach a senior management position if they chose to, compared to an average of 4.8 for the younger women. This suggests that the older women were quite strongly confident of reaching senior management positions, while the younger women were not much above neutral. This result was not tested for statistical significance, and may be due to the small sample size that was strongly skewed towards younger women (19 out of the 27 women were aged 34 or under), but nevertheless deserves further research. It was also expected that women who had achieved senior management positions would have done so in smaller organisations, as described by Bennett et al (1999), however it was not possible to test this expectation as the sample was also heavily skewed towards women who worked in large organisations of 1000-plus employees.

Despite the positive attitudes towards their career prospects expressed in the first part of the survey, 70 percent of respondents said that they felt that women in the construction industry faced career barriers. Despite greater acceptance of women in recent years, Gale & Cartwright (1995a) describe the culture of the construction industry as continuing to value male characteristics and behavioural styles. As a result, the onus has been on women to fit in to the dominant culture and adopting styles that allow them to overcome these cultural
barriers, rather than the onus being on organisations or the industry at large to remove the constraints on women. In this environment, it is unsurprising that women report barriers to their careers.

As discussed above, however, the literature also shows that women who choose a career in the construction industry are also more likely to be able to adapt to the dominant culture, and may even enjoy it (Gale, 1994, Gale & Cartwright, 1995a). This suggests that the kind of career barriers women are more likely to report would be ones that impact their ability to adapt to the culture and environment rather than cultural barriers per se. This was borne out in the way the responses to the question that asked the women to rank various barriers identified in the literature in order of the impact they would have on women's careers:

Factors that caused barriers for women to do their job and fit in, such as working patterns that were difficult for women with family commitments and higher levels of scrutiny for women in senior positions, were ranked as having a greater impact on women's careers than factors such as direct discrimination and the overall male culture of the industry that the women may have come to accept as part of the job.

It is interesting to compare the kinds of barriers the women identified themselves in a free-text question with the order in which they placed the barriers identified in the literature. The free text question in the survey was presented on a separate page from the ranking question, so it can be assumed that women who answered the questions in order had not been 'primed' by viewing a list of potential barriers before describing the barriers they saw themselves. The ideas most commonly expressed in the free-text questions related to the inter-linked themes of working hours and work / family balance, however comments regarding the 'boys club' culture of the industry also featuring strongly.

In the ranking question, working hours was also identified as the factor having the greatest impact on women's career progression, however the item identified as Male Networks, “Male networks and word-of-mouth recruiting as the primary means for both entering the industry and gaining promotions” was ranked fifth out of six. This is interesting, as the question was intended to reflect, the more formal language, the 'boys club' that many of the women described as being a particular barrier in both the free text question and the follow-up interviews.

Given the similarity between the description of the male networks in the ranking question and the barrier of an exclusionary ‘boys club’ raised by the women, and the frequency with which the ‘boys club’ was raised as a barrier, it was expected that male networks would have ranked as having a greater impact on women’s career progression than it did.

Within the literature, culture in male dominated organisations, such as the construction industry, is commonly categorised into three spheres. Gale (1994) for example describes them as:

• The “locker room” culture usually composed of white males talking about sport and sex. Other males can join the group through sexual innuendo and sport talk, but women and homosexual men are generally excluded.

• The “gentlemen’s club” which is paternalistic and gallant in that women are treated with courtesy and respect provided that they conform to clear gender-role stereotypes

• The “smart macho” culture where managers encourage excessively long working hours in order to meet the pressure of performance targets.

Aspects of each of these cultures were raised by the women as barriers to female career progression in the industry. The ‘locker room’ culture and the ‘smart macho’ culture were the subject of more comments, most likely as they have more visible indicators, sexist language and long working hours respectively, than the ‘gentlemen’s club’. The topic of long working hours has already been discussed, therefore the next sections will focus on the ways the
women identified the ‘locker room’ culture and the ‘gentlemen’s club’ as barriers to their careers.

Comments about the ‘boys club’ most commonly described the ‘locker room’ culture of inclusion based on talking about sport and sex. There are two aspects of the ‘locker room’ culture that deserve further discussion; language and behaviour that exclude women, and the effects that this exclusion has on female careers.

Gale (1994) noted that women in construction were more tolerant of sexist language and behaviour than women in other occupations, with comments such as “you know nothing, you stupid cow” from a male to a female colleague routinely rationalised as part of normal office banter. Some of the women who participated in follow-up interviews commented unfavourably on the banter and innuendo that is a hallmark of the ‘boys club’ culture, but they typically described it as ‘inappropriate’ rather than offensive, and often mentioned that they found it frustrating but were not personally offended by it. One explanation for this is that women entering and working in the industry expect to find the ‘boys club’ attitude, and therefore see it as ‘part of the job’ and an irritant rather than as a serious barrier to their careers when compared with other factors such as long working hours and assumptions about their ability or commitment.

The more serious side of a ‘boys club’ or ‘locker room’ culture is its exclusionary nature. Many of the women surveyed and interviewed were less concerned about the sexist language, humour and innuendo of the ‘boys club’ than they were about the way this allowed men to network and form connections in an environment that excluded women. In the construction industry, recruitment for entry to the industry and promotions is often informal, based on networks and word of mouth rather than an open process of advertising a vacancy and inviting people to apply (Fielden et al., 2001; Dainty et al., 2001). Thus, allowing networks to build that exclude women means that female candidates are less likely to be known to the predominantly male selectors than their male counterparts and are less likely to be approached as part of a recruitment process (Fielden et al., 2001).

The quotes from the free-text question and interviews clearly show that the women who participated in the research were concerned that exclusion from male networks would impact their careers, therefore it is surprising that this factor did not rank more highly in the ranking question. It is possible that using the words ‘boys club’ in the ranking item would have produced greater recognition causing it to be ranked more highly, however it is also possible that this reveals that this is relatively less important a barrier to women’s careers when compared to aspects of the ‘gentlemen’s club culture’ that are less visible on a day-to-day basis.

“The gentlemen’s club’ culture is polite and civilised and not hostile to women as long as they confirm to clear role stereotypes” (Gale, 1994, p11). It is in this type of culture that assumptions about women’s commitment, ability and the impact of family responsibilities are most likely to be made. Dainty et al (1999) found that the majority of men in management positions in the construction industry had supportive non-working partners who took responsibility for family and domestic duties, allowing them to develop their careers, while Bennett et al (1999) found that 72 percent of professional men in the industry felt that their career was more important than their partner’s. A ‘gentlemen’s club’ culture that values the traditional family model of the male as primary income earner and the female as the raiser of children and keeper of the house is unlikely to support women who vary from these expectations. Even if the women are treated politely and in a civilised manner, the culture is likely to exert subtle pressure to conform to its expectations of gender norms, as shown by the quote below from an interview participant:
"A lot of the older men I work with have wives who stayed home to raise the children, and they don’t say anything but I don’t think they approve of my choice to return to work full time while my children are still young. I think that they make decisions on these assumptions and what I “ought” to be doing with my family, and I think this will affect my career prospects."

Other assumptions made about women in a ‘gentlemen’s club’ culture may relate to sex-stereotyping women as fragile and emotional and needing to be sheltered from cut-throat nature of some aspects of the construction industry (Goward, 2002). In other words, male managers may assume that women inherently do not have what it takes to be managers, and should be moved into functional roles for their own protection (Goward, 2002). Although intended in a paternalistic way, this is unhelpful for women seeking to progress their career.

This may explain why women focus on the effects barriers such as negative stereotypes about women, their abilities and their commitment, and the requirement for long hours rather than factors such as the ‘boy’s club’ network. Women are excluded from ‘boys clubs’ primarily because they are female, therefore for a woman to see this as the greatest barrier to her career progression she may also feel powerless to make changes. Barriers such as negative stereotypes and family unfriendly work practices are external problems to the woman, and have the possibility of being changed over time.

REFERENCES


Sinclair A. (1998), Doing leadership differently: Gender, power and sexuality in a changing business culture, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press