

WORK/LIFE BALANCE: EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Toni Moore

School of Management, University of Western Sydney
Locked Bag 1797, Penrith South DC NSW 1797, Australia
Phone: +61 2 4620 3254 Fax: +61 2 4620 3787
Email: t.moore@uws.edu.au

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

Around the world 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).

This paper, which is 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 male-dominated industries such as the construction industry, and explain why this is an important issue for Australian businesses to tackle. Particular attention will be given to the demands faced by women when balancing their work and family responsibilities. The second part of this paper will draw on empirical research conducted with women in the construction industry in Australia to see if the barriers in balancing work and family responsibilities described in the literature relating to the British construction industry are the same for women in Australia.

Dual life spheres: family and employment

For working parents, 'balancing' work and family involves establishing a workable and acceptable combination of the two spheres. Thornthwaite (2004) argues that research to date suggests that an essential element of balance is some autonomy in how working parents manage their roles. Options typically used by working parents to help balance the demands of work and family include restructuring their work commitments to part-time work or prioritising the career of one partner while the other assumes the primary care-giving role. Despite the societal changes that have seen women's workforce participation rates increase dramatically over the past thirty years, women still take primary responsibility for domestic and family arrangements (Dex & Joshi, 1999). It is of concern that organisations tend to lag behind the social and demographic changes that have occurred (Poelmans and Sahibzada (2004). The compatibility of work and family remains a difficult issue for women, and depends on a complex interaction of the woman's skills, education and ambitions; the division of domestic labour and partner's earning capacity; societal expectations of gender roles; and the individual woman's idea of gender roles (Blattell-Mink, Kramer & Mischau, 2000; Palmero, 2004).

Research shows that having a family presents career obstacles for women (Corporate Leadership Council, July 2004). Having a spouse is correlated to higher income and higher perception of success for men, but a lower income and lower perception of success for

women (Kirchmeyer, 2002). Women are more likely than men to take career breaks and work shorter hours to meet family obligations, both of which have a negative effect on career progression and income (Kirchmeyer, 2002). Additionally, women typically bear the bulk of the burden of domestic duties, with male behaviour changing very little regardless of whether the female partner is employed or not (Kirchmeyer, 2002). Despite these obstacles, however, studies show that the majority of women still desire to combine employment with having a family, and place priority on meeting their family commitments over succeeding in employment (Blattel-Mink, Kramer & Mischau, 2000; Kirchmeyer, 2002). Thus, if forced to choose between family and work, many women will choose not to pursue a top management career in order to meet their family obligations (Blattel-Mink, Kramer & Mischau, 2000).

Women in the Construction Industry

The construction industry consists of 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 available career paths, 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).

The culture in the construction industry is not family-friendly, with long hours and geographic flexibility seen as imperative to career success (Dainty et al, 1999). While women's careers may be limited by male assumptions and expectations about their family commitments and priorities, women with children are still typically the primary care-givers (Kirchmeyer, 2002) and do find the demands of the industry a strain. The majority of men in management roles in the construction industry who have families also have supportive partners who are either non-working or who consider the man's career to be more important (Bennett et al, 1999; Dainty et al, 1999). In contrast, the majority of women in similar roles have working partners, and consider their partner's career to be at least of equal importance to theirs (Bennett et al, 1999). This suggests that women are less likely than men to have the support from their partner or family to fulfil the demands of the industry for career success.

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.

Taking responsibility for work-family balance

Liddicoat (2003) suggests that the question of who should take responsibility for the development, implementation and maintenance of family-friendly work practices is part of an ongoing debate. Results of her study indicated that human resource managers felt that employers should bear some of the responsibility to help employees balance their work and family responsibilities. Results of a study by Moore (1996) in which 72 human resource practitioners in Australian organisations were surveyed found that the responsibility for assisting with work/family balance should be shared between organisations, government, community and the individual employee.

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.

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, and 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 each of the following statements across both younger and older respondents and respondents with and without children:

1. I enjoy working in the construction / property development industry.
2. I intend to remain in the construction / property development industry over the next 10 years.
3. I am satisfied with my career prospects in the construction / property development industry.
4. I find senior management roles in the construction/ property development industry attractive as career options.
5. 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.

The average level of agreement, measured on a seven point scale, to each statement is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Average ratings of questions relating to satisfaction

Category of Respondent	Average Level of Agreement				
	Enjoy Industry	Intent to remain for 10 years	Satisfaction with career prospects	Interest in Snr Mgmt jobs	Able to obtain Snr Mgmt jobs
Overall	6.0	5.3	5.4	5.3	5.1
Younger Women	5.9	5.2	5.2	5.2	4.8
Older Women	6.3	5.8	5.8	5.5	6.0
Women without Children	5.9	5.2	5.4	5.3	5.1
Women with Children	6.3	5.9	5.3	5.3	5.4

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.

Barriers faced as a woman in a male dominated industry, and how these were overcome

One of the older participants 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:

“I faced a lot of problems with discrimination when I returned to Australia; there was a real culture of jobbo masculinity. I was the only woman in the industry to have gone to the States and got the qualifications and experience that I had, and most of the Australian men with similar qualifications had actually been sent there by their companies to get them, but I couldn’t even get an interview with a particular large Australian construction

company when I got back. One manager even told me that the industry wasn't ready for someone like me and advised me to go back to the States."

On the whole, however, the younger women 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. However some respondents commented that gender became 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':

"At a work level my male colleagues are very professional but the social side brings out the boys club attitudes when they relax and they make inappropriate comments.... I think that women often get actively excluded from social events like golf days and so on because the men don't feel they can relax if we're around or they make assumptions that we wouldn't want to go."

On the whole, 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

As in the research by Dainty *et al* (2001) and Gale (1994), the women surveyed in this 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.

Value theory of job satisfaction states that overall job satisfaction is a result of the job outcomes, such as rewards, that the individual receives for doing the job matching the individual's desire for those rewards (Greenberg & Baron, 2003, p154-155). Simply put, the more people receive rewards they value, the more likely they are to be satisfied. Some factors that can affect job satisfaction are the job itself, pay and promotional opportunities, people (e.g. colleagues) and culture (Greenberg & Baron, 2003, p153).

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.

Given that a constant theme in the literature on women in construction is the difficulty the culture of long working hours and geographic mobility poses for women with family responsibilities (e.g. Dainty *et al*, 1999; Fielden *et al*, 2001), it was expected that women with children would be less positive about their careers and their ability to attain senior management positions than women without children, however the patterns of responses were very similar for women with and without children in the survey. In fact, women with children were very slightly more positive about working in the industry, had a slightly higher average score for intent to remain in the industry for 10 years, and were slightly more confident in their ability to achieve senior management positions. Not knowing more about the personal circumstances and domestic arrangements of the women in the survey, it is difficult to see why this would be the case, however this also deserves further research.

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.

Gale (1994) describes three common cultures in male dominated organisations such as the construction industry:

- 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.

This research has shown that women in the Australian construction industry face similar challenges to their counterparts in the United Kingdom, as found by researchers such as Gale (1994), Gale & Cartwright (1995a & 1995b), Dainty *et al* (1999 & 2001) and Fielden *et al* (2001). While the women who participated in this research were positive overall about the industry and their career prospects in it, 70 percent of them felt that women in the construction industry faced particular career barriers. The most commonly identified barrier was the difficulty of balancing the demands of the industry for high levels of commitment and long work hours with the demands of family life, however negative stereotypes about women and high levels of scrutiny women managers in the industry face – the pressure of performing combined with the pressure of being more visible – were also seen as having a strong impact on women's career progression. Interestingly, direct discrimination and hostility from men was seen as having the least impact on women's career progression.

Limitations of this research

The first limitation of this research is the small sample size. There are many women working in the construction industry in a variety of professional roles, however this research covered only 27 women, and the sample population was heavily skewed towards younger women without children who worked in large organisations of 1000-plus employees. This means that the sample surveyed is not necessarily representative of the population at large of women who work in the construction industry.

Secondly, the population of women who participated in the research may be unrepresentative of the wider population in another way. Gale (1994, p9) found that women in the construction industry were typically 'at pains to point out that they were not feminists, and distance themselves from feminists and feminism'. The participants in this research were members of the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), which is an industry body whose mission is to 'promote and improve the construction industry by the advancement of women within it' (NAWIC website, visited 25 August 2005). As membership of NAWIC is voluntary, it is reasonable to assume that members are more interested in women's issues, may also be more likely to identify themselves as feminists, than women in the industry who chose not to join.

Finally, as this research aimed to investigate the barriers to career advancement faced women in the Australian construction industry, both the survey questionnaire and the interview guide focused heavily on ranking and discussion of barriers identified in the literature. Several of the women who participated in the research, particularly younger participants, commented that they did not feel that gender was an issue any more, and that ability was more important than gender. This would have been an interesting avenue to pursue however the survey design, in particular, did not allow it. The researcher also observed that the women expressing these attitudes were typically aged 25 or under however this could not be recorded with the two age categories used in the survey.

Suggestions for future research

The first suggestion for future research would be to conduct similar research with a larger sample size, ideally with a better mix of women from different age groups, levels of seniority and a larger group of women with children. Secondly, rather than just examining barriers to women's careers in the construction industry, future research could explore the changes in culture and practice women would like to see to improve their career prospects. This could extend research by Dainty *et al* (2001) which found that women in the construction industry in the United Kingdom were far more interested in increasing the formality and fairness of the processes guiding recruitment, selection and promotions, and in formal networking and

mentoring programs than their male colleagues, to women in the Australian construction industry.

Finally, it would also be interesting to research the attitudes of men in construction to the barriers to women's career advancement. Given that construction is an industry with a culture that is well documented as being "culturally and structurally 'male' in orientation" (Dainty *et al*, 2001 p299), it would be interesting to see how men view the challenges women face and the changes that organisations have been making to attract and retain more women.

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