

Gender Diversity in Construction

An MSc dissertation
by Nikita Badesha,
G4C Midlands Chair



**CONSTRUCTING
EXCELLENCE**
Midlands

BREAKING THROUGH THE 'CONCRETE' CEILING

Abstract

Despite decades of research into the barriers faced by female professionals, there remains a lack of gender diversity in the construction industry. This research aims to investigate the existence of a 'concrete' ceiling by identifying the barriers to progression which exist for female construction professionals. This study into the experiences of 20 middle and senior construction professionals suggests that these barriers hinder achievement of gender diversity within the industry and removal of the barriers could help to address the skills shortage. Primary qualitative research included focus groups and interviews which were analysed using grounded theory and thematic analysis processes. Findings from the research suggest that the ceiling for female construction professionals' progression is harder to break through than glass. Practical recommendations are provided for professionals and their employers with an aim to address the leaky pipeline problem and skills shortage challenges. These include a change in wellbeing culture and hiring practices, dedicated career development programmes for professionals who strive for leadership, and a focus on creating opportunities for these professionals to connect with mentors and role models.

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About the author

Nikita Badesha is a Project Manager at Rider Levett Bucknall with experience on Infrastructure and large-scale Logistics schemes such as Very Light Rail, Blythe Valley Park, Peddimore and Mercia Park. Nikita joined the construction industry in 2019 having studied Business at the University of Nottingham. She was Shortlisted for the Young Surveyor of the Year Award 2020 for Project Management and the Constructing Excellence Midlands Future Leader Award 2021.

Nikita is hugely passionate about promoting diversity and inclusion across the construction industry. As a young member of the Construction industry herself, Nikita understands the importance of young people's voices being acknowledged and understood, but also the difficulties they sometimes face achieving this. Her focus as Chair of G4C Midlands is to provide networking opportunities for the industry's next generation of leaders where they feel safe and confident meeting new people.

Nikita Badesha



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1.0

Introduction and Research Proposal

1.1 Introduction

Gender diversity is generally defined as a fair representation of people of different genders, i.e. an equitable ratio of women to men. In the UK's construction professional services, women remain under-represented despite repeated calls for gender diversity. In the face of current skills shortages and subsequent highly competitive labour market, there remains an insistence to restrict recruitment and favour promotions of under half the population (men). This can severely impede organisational growth and development (Dainty & Bagilhole, 2005). Fundamentally, the industry is not inclusive (Powell & Sang, 2013) and its dominant masculine culture problematically excludes women.

There is a well-defined business case for the industry to embrace gender diversity, see for example the Latham Report (1994) and subsequent reports by the Committee on Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (1995) and the Construction Industry Board (1996). Firstly, the industry is under-utilising the full range of skills and talents in the population. Secondly, a diverse workforce leads to a better-informed, more innovative and adaptable industry which is closer to its end users and is likely to be more responsive to their needs. Thirdly, there is an ethical responsibility for the industry to provide equal opportunities for entry and progression to all professionals (World Economic Forum, 2016). Furthermore, surveys have shown that diverse businesses are more profitable (CIOB, 2022).

Many studies explain that gender diversity cannot be achieved overnight; while female talent remains an underutilised business resource, it will take years to recruit and retain women into male-dominated industries such as construction which employs 31% of the male workforce in the UK (PwC, 2022). However, despite constituting over 50% of the UK population, 47% of the labour market and 57% of university entrants, women accounted for just 10% of the construction workforce in 2005 (Gurjao, 2006). More than 15 years later women still only account for 11% of the construction industry (PwC, 2022). Even after decades of research into barriers faced by women in construction, the industry continues to be in a very poor position to diversify its workforce.

This research paper will focus on the barriers to progression for female construction professionals: attracting women is arguably wasted effort if the working conditions and culture experienced create a "concrete" ceiling (Torres & Torres, 2022) which obstructs their career advancement compared with the experiences of male professionals. The research will conclude with practical recommendation which should be taken by construction consultancies to achieve gender diversity by reducing barriers faced by female professionals. These suggestions may not necessarily be new ideas, but they will be based on proven methods that have worked to achieve other diversity goals within the construction industry and have been successful to achieve gender diversity in other professional industries, as suggested by the CIB (1996).

1.2 Research Aim

To propose recommendations to remove the existence of a "concrete" ceiling by identifying the barriers to progression which exist for female construction professionals and hinder achievement of gender diversity in the UK construction industry.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. Investigate which barriers to progression have been identified for female construction professionals in academic literature.
2. Identify which barriers still exist through understanding the experiences of construction professionals.
3. Determine the role of the consultancy sector's culture.
4. Provide recommendations to improve the gender diversity of construction's professional services.

2.0

Literature Review

In the construction industry, women are especially disadvantaged over men (Worrall, et al., 2008). Despite the industry being one of the largest employers in the UK, progress on the employment rate of women has been abysmally slow and the gender pay gap is still wider than in other industries (Oates, et al., 2014). Access to a larger and varied pool of talent in a workforce that is still largely white abled male dominated will enable continued success for an industry which is facing a huge skills shortage. However, existent barriers to entry, retention and progression limit the advancement opportunities of “women of diverse ethnic backgrounds” (Naoum, 2019; Gurjao, 2006). Whilst the under-representation of different races and physical abilities is acknowledged as a critical issue, these factors will not be explored in depth in this study as gender is the focus.

This comprehensive review of the literature on female construction professionals' experiences will highlight the findings of research into the sector's gender diversity and barriers to entry, retention, and progression in the industry. The review will be organised chronologically to reflect the development in research over the past 25 years.

The importance of achieving gender diversity in construction was first highlighted by a 1994 review of the industry, summarised in the Latham Report. Although the report was commissioned by the UK government and its main focus was to review procurement and contractual arrangements, it provided an honest criticism that “women are seriously under-represented in the industry”, and that “there is no obvious reason why this should be so at a professional consultant level” (Latham, 1994). The report commanded that “equal opportunities must be vigorously pursued by the industry” and this call to action triggered the first wave of research focusing on barriers to entry into the construction industry.

Thanks to the insight uncovered by the subsequent era of research, women are now more equally represented in higher education. However, Gale (1994) raised that more research was needed to understand the experiences of women in construction. This message was reinforced by Bennett et al. (1999) who highlighted a need to understand why there are fewer women in the industry over the age of 36 than men. This sentiment and the excitement around the sociological theory of the “glass ceiling”, coined by Loden in 1978, fuelled the next decade of research into systemic barriers to progression. This research shed light on the numerous career development barriers faced by female professionals working in construction and is

discussed further in Sections 2.1-2.3. The literature identified barriers falling into 3 categories: the industry's perception of female professionals; women's personal situations; and organisations' support of female professionals' unique needs.

2.1 Barrier 1: Attitudes, Perceptions and Behaviours Towards Female Professionals

Watts (2009) carried out an extensive series of interviews and discovered that women face pressures placed on them which derive from stereotypes about their gender. The interviewees shared that they find themselves under scrutiny particularly in respect of demonstrating their credentials for the job. Watts adopted a neutral approach in framing the questions to hide their feminist bias, promoting the reliability of the study. Primary qualitative and quantitative research undertaken by Worrall (2012) further proved that the industry does have low expectations of women's skills, knowledge and abilities. These prejudicial attitudes led to women being overlooked compared to their male counterparts when training or career advancement opportunities arose. This was further supported by Sewalk and Nietfeld's (2013) research which found that many male directors and employees of construction firms assumed that female professionals are not capable of the work required or of balancing work and family priorities. The researchers raised that further work is required to “understand how experiences within the sector differ for men and women”. Furthermore, Aboagye-Nimo et al. (2018) raise that perpetrators of these injustices may not be aware of the effect of their actions and suggest that further research is undertaken to identify unconscious biases that exist amongst men in the industry. A large sample of professionals across a range of industry sectors should be interviewed, contrasting the characteristics of Aboagye-Nimo et al.'s own research sample.

Worrall et al.'s (2010) series of 9 focus groups and 231 questionnaire responses uncovered a perception from many respondents that women must perform better than male colleagues to progress in their careers. Whilst the numbers of women in this study were too small to be statistically significant, the requirement for women to prove themselves was supported in research by Aulin & Jingmond (2011), Worrall (2012) and Sewalk & Nietfeld (2013). This sexist attitude negatively affects self-esteem and confidence. Women are made to feel less capable,

experience lower levels of job satisfaction and more commonly suffer from physical health problems associated with poor well-being than their male counterparts (Sang, et al., 2007).

Research suggests that these health problems can also be attributed to higher levels of work-life conflict experienced by female professionals, supporting the second barrier faced by women as identified in the literature. Watts (2009) drew attention to working mothers being uniquely penalised by inflexible working practices which negatively impacts their careers opportunities in the long term.

2.2 Barrier 2: Responsibilities Outside of Work

For those who do have families, responsibilities outside of work create a second barrier to progression. Plenty of research provides proof that difficulties creating a work-life balance disadvantages career development, but we must also consider the impact on work expected by professionals outside of traditional working hours. Dainty et al.'s (2000) series of 41 ethnographic interviews of career-matched pairs of male and female professionals found that men use wide networks of contacts to secure positions and good remunerative packages. Women are at a serious disadvantage in industries where out-of-hours socialising enables the development of professional relationships and results in important work-related outcomes. This finding was supported almost a decade later by research undertaken by Tonge (2008) on barriers to networking for UK professionals. One of the 17 barriers identified by the women interviewed (of which the men only identified 7) was exclusion from key networks traditionally composed of individuals who hold power in the organisation. Tonge raised that it is inherently difficult for women to have the same career opportunities as men given the incomparability in their access to professional networks. Although this research focused on the UK PR industry which was 70% female at the time, it can be assumed that experiences of women in male-dominated industries will be more extreme. There is a gap in research specific to female construction professionals.

The literature identifies that women seem to be penalised for their personal circumstances and requirements, particularly in relation to flexible working patterns due to family commitments. Female professionals are therefore more likely to be single and/or childless than their male colleagues as they believe that the lack of work-life-balance

and poor quality of life is not worth the stress or extra hours expected, especially considering insufficient remuneration offered in return. (Watts, 2009). However, Naoum et al.'s (2019) finding that men are 4.5 times more likely to be promoted to executive level regardless of skill held true for all women, even ones without children, concluding that the often-cited excuse of child-rearing cannot be solely blamed for women's lack of progression. Furthermore, this paper highlighted that modern men want to be more involved with child-rearing (and would also benefit from more flexible working arrangements) and modern women want to take a more active role in their careers. These are two powerful messages that must be embraced to achieve true gender diversity for the industry's professional services but primary evidence to support this is a further gap in the literature.

2.3 Barrier 3: Organisational and Managerial Support

Female interviewees have highlighted that identifiable role models, mentors and an easily accessible support network enables them to gain insights into career opportunities (Worrall, 2012) and directs their long-term expectations and behaviours (Worrall, et al., 2010). However, while a strong need has been identified for women to be supported with access to mentors and role models, Sewalk and Nietfeld (2013) raise that there is a lack of female construction professionals in senior positions to provide this support. Moreover, the industry has a lack of opportunities (and budget) set aside for "soft skills" training and continued professional development specifically for women covering communication and leadership skills, confidence building and different managerial styles (Worrall, et al., 2010). This reinforces the importance of a reinvigorated focus on creating gender diversity in construction's professional services.

2.4 Organisational and Industry Culture

Although not a direct barrier, culture is a major factor which exacerbates barriers and hinders their removal. There is a large body of evidence to support the need for cultural change to make construction more accessible and appealing to women. As highlighted by Gale's (1994) research, the deep-rooted masculine culture of the industry is perpetuated by the 'internalisation' of masculine attitudes and ideologies.

While it is inherently difficult change industry culture (Worrall, et al., 2010), Williams and Emerson (2001) suggest that if women account for at least 30% of the workforce the existing cultures and norms may be challenged. However, a change in culture does not guarantee a positive move towards gender diversity (Naoum, et al., 2019). Women interviewed by Worrall (2012) had the desire to "fit in" with white male-dominated organisational cultures in an effort to better integrate into their working environments. Similarly, Amaratunga et al. (2007) observed that women who enter male-dominated cultures must act like men to be successful or leave if they are not adaptable to the culture. If they remain in the industry without behaving like men, they should not expect to progress at a comparable rate. The goal of equality cannot be achieved if subordinated groups merely assimilate to the culture of the dominant group (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004).

2.5 Conclusion

The literature unfortunately paints a picture of a poor female experience in an industry which overtly and covertly discriminates against them (Dainty, et al., 2000). This is evidenced further by the fact that 70.9% of women feel gender diversity is an issue that needs remedying compared to just 39.7% of men (Naoum, et al., 2019). Nevertheless, in the past decade the breadth of research into the barriers faced by female construction professionals has dwindled considerably. This is not because the problem of gender diversity has been resolved: the number of women working in the industry has remained relatively stable since the 1990s. There remains a trend of underutilisation of female talent in the construction workforce.

The researcher proposes that the first step towards achieving gender diversity is to determine which of the barriers to progression identified in the literature still hinder female construction professionals today. This research paper therefore aims to build upon existing research by interviewing construction professionals across a range of sectors to explore their relevant experiences.

3.0

Methodology

This research aims to explore professionals' experiences of the three barriers to progression outlined in the literature. These barriers formed the theoretical framework for the research. Accordingly, the qualitative research design comprised analysis of female and male professionals' career progression in the construction industry. Gender differences in their experiences were explored with a particular focus on any barriers faced. Influences which originated outside of the working environment, i.e. personal situations, and relevant aspects of the internal environment, i.e. social and systemic barriers, were also considered.

3.1 Data Collection Methodology

Questionnaires were considered as a method of primary data collection and have been widely and successfully used (Worrall, et al., 2010; Worrall, 2012; Naoum et al., 2019). Questionnaires allow responses from a larger research sample. However, their nature limits the degree to which the researcher can interact with interviewees and discourages reflection by both the researcher and the participant (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003). Questionnaires are thus mostly used as an unideal inferior option (Worrall, 2012).

The primary method of research chosen was conducting group and individual interviews. Although interviewing as a research method is open to interviewer biases (Caplan & Gilham, 2005), the advantages of being able to clarify questions and explore responses in depth outweigh this potential limitation. Interviews also encourage the pursuit of unanticipated but nonetheless highly relevant themes that may emerge. Moreover, interviews with 'key professionals' provide current perceptions of the "concrete ceiling" and barriers to progression which are not available in the published literature. These professionals from a range of disciplines across the industry all had relevant experience in either people management roles, recruitment, or extended periods of leave due to family commitments. Focus group participants had between 5 and 10 years' experience in construction and interviewees had over 10 years' experience, although this was less relevant to the research.

All focus groups and interviews were semi-structured to provide a balance between the rigid layout of a structured interview and the flexibility and responsiveness of an unstructured interview. This further enabled defined qualitative data collection whilst allowing spontaneity in the interviewer's questioning and the participant's response.

The data collection approach is based on Glaser's (1992) 'grounded theory' (GT) methodology in which theories, issues and themes become emergent within an iterative process of analysis of the data. This allows the researcher to develop theories to explain their own observations of the data collected (Dainty, et al., 2000).

Research participants were sent the UCEM Research Ethics: Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix 1). Their answers have been anonymised and, although the questions were non-intrusive, no personal information that they shared has been used.

3.2 Data Collection – Focus Groups

The purpose of the focus groups was to confirm that the barriers identified in the Literature Review do still exist. Two sessions were held – one male and one female – each containing 4-5 low to mid-level managers across a range of disciplines: project/development managers, quantity surveyors, architects and engineers. This provided a broad depiction of experience from across the industry and allowed a comparison to be drawn between sectors which are seen as more or less gender diverse.

Focus group guidelines were formed based on the research topic and shared with participants prior to the sessions (Appendix 2). Guidelines for the focus groups were neutrally framed (Watts, 2009) and questions were open-ended to encourage discussion. Furthermore, focus groups were conducted under the wider topic of diversity in relation to career advancement; participants were not aware that the research focus was gender diversity. The extent to which a lack of full transparency can be perceived as an ethical shortcoming is a matter of judgement (Watts, 2009). The researcher's choice to hide the specific research focus on the contrast between women's and men's experiences was an approach to reduce unconscious biases, without which it might be impossible to conduct the research.

3.3 Data Collection – Interviews

Following the focus groups, 11 first-hand interviews of participants working in construction professional services were carried out. These female and male professionals had high levels of working experience and authority in their roles. Unlike the focus groups, interview participants were asked direct questions relating to their experiences of gender diversity in construction. Moreover, the GT approach

enabled modification of focus group guidelines by revising questions and including additional topics with reference to data which emerged from focus groups and prior interviews (Appendix 3).

The research proposal suggested 8-10 interviews and aimed to have a balance of men and women. It was determined after the focus groups that a larger sample and range of female interviewees was needed. This was because male focus group participants shared similar experiences to each other of working in the construction industry whereas female participants had differing experiences based on their discipline. In response to the research aims, this contrast was a key finding for the researcher to explore.

3.4 Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis followed the thematic analysis (TA) process developed from GT by Braun & Clarke (2006) whereby analysis begins and occurs alongside the research process. Interview topics and questions were thus continually reviewed in response to participants' experiences.

TA is a highly flexible approach to qualitative data analysis, but this breadth of choice has been criticised for making qualitative analysis inconsistent (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Braun & Clarke (2006) advise that researchers must actively make a series of choices about what form of TA they will be using. Following the deductive codebook approach to TA, data was analysed (coded and themed) in line with research questions. As themes pre-exist analysis, the codes and themes developed are based on the 3 barriers to progression identified in the Literature Review (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019).

Focus groups were audio-recorded and manually transcribed to increase researcher familiarity with the data. An initial codebook was produced following the focus groups using open and axial coding. Interviews were also audio-recorded, manually transcribed and coded. Copies of all transcripts can be found in Appendix 4. The codebook was further developed using interview data. A considerable limitation of TA is that data familiarisation and initial coding stages are particularly time-consuming despite being highly valuable (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). To reduce time spent, rather than coding data line-by-line, the segments most relevant to the research questions were given focus. Although this means that insightful data was disregarded, the researcher

does not believe that this negatively affects the overall research as the omitted data was outside of the theoretical framework.

Analysis then progressed to several stages of re-reading the data, making exploratory comments and identifying emergent themes. The final version of the codebook can be found in Appendix 5. Once three themes had been confirmed, a thematic map was created (Appendix 6).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has set out how thematic analysis will be used to collect and analyse data through focus groups and interviews. The subsequent chapter discusses the research findings.

4.0

Discussion of Findings and Data Analysis

Using themes and codes from the thematic map (Appendix 6), this chapter analyses the participants' responses to focus group and interview questions. These questions aimed to explore professionals' experiences of barriers to career progression identified in the literature.

The chapter follows the order of the codebook (Appendix 5) as the researcher believes that this allows optimal discussion of participants' reflections, enables key issues to be identified from thoroughly analysed data and practical recommendations to be made.

4.1 Theme 1: "Fake It 'til You Make It" Isn't Good Enough

4.1.1 There are Benefits to Being a Woman

This research assumes that being a woman in a male-dominated industry is a disadvantage, but one of the first considerations discussed during focus groups and interviews was whether there are any benefits to being in the gender minority. One female participant shared:

"I quite quickly learned [that being a woman] was probably more an advantage because there's less of us. I do feel like it helps because people... make conscious effort to get to know you over others." (FGP9)

Another had similar thoughts:

"Most of the meetings I'm chairing are all guys... and perhaps I might get a bit more respect because they want to be gentlemen in that context." (FGP8)

Whilst being actively involved in discussions and treated well by male colleagues is an inclusive action, this is not necessarily positive in achieving gender diversity. Although this provides insight into male professionals' perceptions of female colleagues being a novelty, there is no indication that these men actively work to promote career progression and equal opportunities for female professionals.

Only one male participant indicated an awareness of female colleagues' negative experiences.

"It still makes me sad how stuck in its ways it is, particularly when... there's a woman in the room and the meeting starts with 'gents'. It's those microaggressions where I just feel once they're dispelled... good things will naturally happen." (INT5)

While male professionals know that gender diversity is a discussion that is actively being had, few are actively

involved in that discussion. Without meaningful support and divisive action from professionals of all genders, progress towards gender diversity cannot be made.

4.1.2 Women Hold Themselves Back

Another surprising point raised by female participants was that women perhaps play a part in creating some of these barriers to career progression for themselves by using their gender as justification for not progressing. This is not considered by the literature.

"I've never seen me being a woman in a man's world as a disadvantage... I didn't let my gender hold me back." (INT4)

Another female research participant suggested that women need to accept responsibility for their own success.

"Actually, I think that women can sometimes put themselves down and then claim that others have put them down." (INT1)

When the researcher delved further into understanding why women felt they are to blame for their own lack of progression, a female participant shared the following experience:

"I wouldn't say I've faced any barriers that have been put in place that I haven't put in place myself. And these are around my confidence and self-belief." (INT2)

Whilst the sentiment that women have control over their career progression is positive, societal and systemic challenges which exist and hinder them professionally have been overlooked by these participants. It should be questioned why some female professionals believe that their lack of progression is their fault despite decades of research into theories such as the leaky pipeline and glass ceiling.

Moreover, INT4's self-confidence and certainty in her value was not shared by other female participants, with INT2 even citing these characteristics as barriers she had put in place for herself. INT10 raised that this lack of confidence is not just dangerous for individuals but also for women as a group. There is a suggestion that a competitiveness exists between female professionals as well as a willingness to hold each other back from progressing to remove the risk of competition.

"The worst thing I could ever think in my career is working with a load of women. And I have come across women

in the industry who are quite passive aggressive because they feel like they have to be to prove a position... [it] is probably a confidence issue." (INT10)

4.1.3 Lack of Self-Confidence, External Validation and Imposter Syndrome

The literature exposed male perceptions towards female ability being a barrier to progression, but this research indicates that women also have these perceptions of themselves. Lack of self-confidence was a topic that most female participants, but none of the male participants, resonated with. When asked about a proud career achievement, women mentioned finally feeling confident in their ability and knowledge.

"You know when you're sat in a meeting and you actually know what you're talking about and feel like you're doing a good job?" (FGP7)

This experience was shared by the other female focus group participants, with another associating the feeling of confidence with experience, suggesting that career progression generates respect and subsequently self-confidence.

"It really makes a difference when you are in a meeting and get the respect from the team because you're at that stage in your career. It makes you feel confident." (FGP9)

Male participants, however, raised practical achievements relating to particular projects and overcoming work-related challenges. This suggests that confidence and respect from colleagues is innate for men and does not have to be earned over time, a direct contrast to the following female participant's expectation of having to prove themselves.

"I think once you've proved yourself and got a bit of a reputation, people know that you are a force to be reckoned with within your career." (INT9)

When women were asked how they have gained confidence, they commonly cited external validation.

"It gives you a hell of a lot of confidence in your own ability if someone else is telling you you're the right person for that role." (FGP9)

"It took other people telling me that I'm good at my job for me to truly believe it. My Client was the one who told me I could do it... I could have lost an opportunity there." (INT3)

This is harmful when considering that women are not always willing to help other women's career progression. Furthermore, male participants were not aware that their female colleagues need this validation to build confidence. Female professionals therefore are more than likely not receiving the external validation they need to believe in their ability and lack the confidence required to ask for it.

Both women and men, however, shared that they have experienced "imposter syndrome", although female participants mentioned the term unprompted.

"Most successful professionals I know... have imposter syndrome." (INT9)

These discussions suggest that self-confidence, need for external validation and imposter syndrome may hinder women from achieving their full professional potential and thus career progression. However, rather than addressing these issues, female participants often heralded a solution of ignorance:

Researcher: "What do you think is important in order to progress to a senior position?"

Participant: "Fake it 'til you make it, isn't it?" (FGP7)

Ignoring the underlying issue and relying on others to boost their self-confidence may work for some women but is not a long-term solution to overcome the barrier. 'Fake it 'til you make it' is therefore not a good enough response. However, while it is not fair for the blame to be put solely on women, female professionals can then take some responsibility for removing the barriers to their own progression, including raising the need for support from their employer.

4.1.4 Male Energy is Overpowering

The researcher questioned how women may achieve confidence in their ability and role. The following comment was met with nods from others in the female focus group:

"Sometimes [women] doubt ourselves compared to the guys we work with because they are a lot louder and they'll shout about it." (FGP7)

Other responses also highlighted that women believe they must put their femininity into a box and emphasise their masculine traits to be accepted and respected. A female interview participant shared a reflection about her time working on a construction site, indicating that she felt she had to change her natural character to make her male colleagues more comfortable about her presence.

"I'm pretty sure I was well respected on site because it was clear I wasn't going in to change it by being a woman and they could no longer have their banter... The [women] that they struggled with were the ones that came in with this 'I'm a female in a man's world chip on my shoulder'. It's not about me coming into a male dominated environment and making it more female friendly." (INT8)

This assumed requirement for female professionals to mimic male characteristics was also highlighted by a male participant. However, men's responsibility in creating and perpetuating this culture was not acknowledged.

"The [women] I've worked with have all tended to fall into a similar mould in the way they outwardly portray themselves which is quite hard based and quite strong and feeling like they needed to be someone in particular to work in that environment." (INT6)

Another female participant shared a similar experience of needing to fit in to the male-dominated environment and not draw attention to herself, but in a physical way.

"I remember when I was coming up in my career I always dressed in sharp suits, I was never in a dress." (INT10)

There is a suggestion that female professionals have a desire to fit into the male-dominated construction environment, thanks to a masculine culture which makes them feel like they do not belong otherwise. To achieve acceptance, women try to blend in, in fear of being received negatively by the industry. The assumed requirement for female professionals to mask their femininity holds them back from achieving the self-confidence needed to succeed. Until women have confidence in their professional position, they will continue not to challenge the hyper-masculine attitudes that surround them in the professional environment. And as mentioned previously, while male construction professionals are aware of the gender diversity in the sector, they may continue to be ignorant to the role that they play as individuals.

4.1.5 Female Role Models

This sentiment of not wanting to stand out as a woman was also associated with female-focused industry networking groups by the same participant and another female interviewee.

"I don't like Women in Property... I don't want to be badged as a woman in property." (INT4)

"I can't stand the Women in Property network. I can't think of anything that's worse for the industry." (INT10)

Most other female participants, however, highlighted the benefits of having supportive network of female peers, mentors and role models.

"One thing I valued that I've had in some workplaces but not in others is... a network of women that you work with... sometimes you just need that bit of support." (FGP7)

Female participants shared thoughts of this network having a positive correlation with career progression.

"I've got a really good network of largely female colleagues who... have also been through that journey. It's been incredibly important in my career journey." (INT9)

"For me, having female role models and mentors was massive. And I can see people who didn't have that who probably flounder a bit." (INT1)

Furthermore, female interviewees shared that having female role models gave them confidence that progression was not an unrealistic goal.

"When you look up to [her], it's achievable, so it didn't seem out of kilter that I was there. I didn't even think there would be a ceiling for me." (INT4)

"I saw what she achieved and knew that there was a pathway. That gives you confidence that the doors are at least ajar, they might not be fully open, but they're ajar." (INT7)

Although male participants agreed that mentors have been equally valuable to their success, they did not herald the same significance of role models. Perhaps this is because a male role model is not a novelty – there are plenty of men in positions of success to draw inspiration from.

Contrastingly, there are not enough female construction professionals to act as role models for other women. When prompted as to whether female professionals would have benefitted from having male mentors and role models in lieu of females, the consensus was that this would have been beneficial to their progression but not to a comparable extent.

"To have female role models on top of that, I think maybe I could have got to where I've got to a bit sooner, because I can relate to that person. I do think women face slightly different challenges to men. They've experienced what I've experienced and if they can do it, I can do it." (INT3)

These discussions relating to perceptions of participants' ability highlight that negative experiences are shared between female participants more so than male. Women do face pressures at work which stem from prejudices about their gender, particularly in respect of demonstrating their credentials for the job. And these attitudes towards them impact their self-esteem and confidence.

Similarly, in terms of confidence and career progression, more women than men raised the importance of having mentors and role models supporting and inspiring them. While this support could come from male colleagues, the relatability of a woman provides further benefits.

The acceptance from women that 'fake it 'til you make it' is their only option is concerning. There needs to be an awareness of the support required by female professionals to help them overcome challenges like imposter syndrome. This would empower them to believe that they can progress and do deserve their success. A female participant suggested that an impactful way to achieve this may be actively promoting mentorships and encouraging successful women to share their stories.

"Women should represent women... We have a duty and responsibility to encourage more women to come to the top and share our story and also promote it ourselves."

I want to share my story with as many people as I can, because I want people to feel like they can achieve whatever they want to achieve. They've just got to believe in themselves. And I think it's easier to do that when you see people that you can relate to." (INT3)

4.2 Theme 2: Respect That People Have Lives

4.2.1 It All Changes When You Have Kids

When prompting participants to consider responsibilities outside of work which they believe impact on their career progression, it became apparent that children are a considerable factor in this discussion – for both women and men.

For female participants, there was a consensus that women's priorities naturally change when they have children: career becomes a lesser priority.

"My primary focus has switched from being my career to my family – [my kids] always come first. Any issues and I'm gone to be quite honest, and that's known." (INT10)

There was an acknowledgement that this change in priorities was at the detriment of career progression.

"I don't want to put in the hours that I used to before I had kids but that means that what I need to do to progress to the next level in my career takes longer." (INT8)

Female participants also reflected on their struggles of having to choose between career progression and starting a family, with many admitting they have chosen to delay having children as they don't believe balancing both priorities is a viable option.

"It sounds a bit ridiculous but I'm delaying having a family so that I can afford help." (FGP8)

"I purposely waited [to start a family] until I was an Associate." (FGP9)

However, while women are accepting of this choice for themselves, there was a suggestion from some female participants that this is not always respected or welcomed by peers and employers.

"Someone was complimenting me on networking and then they said, oh yeah it all changes when you have kids, you won't be the same, women are different when they have children. And I was really taken aback by it and I thought oh that's a bit unfair." (FGP9)

Moreover, most female participants agreed that there is a negative perception from peers when they say no to job responsibilities outside of traditional working hours such as networking and staying late in the office.

"I think women are mindful the fact that [their families] are their priority, and therefore they... immediately they take a step away because they think it's 100% or nothing. And actually, sometimes if they have the conversation with the employer, the employer might accept that, you know, they've got to be a bit more flexible, but women just automatically discount themselves." (INT7)

There should not need to be a dispirited acceptance from female professionals that they must choose between their family and their career.

Although male participants also struggle to balance work and home life, they did not share the same anxieties relating to career progression as women, nor experiences of similar comments from peers regarding prioritising family commitments over their career.

4.2.2 Hard Work Equals Time

There was a general agreement from research participants that "hard work" is essential to career progression.

"Hard work is the minimum expectation." (INT6)

The researcher wanted to determine the participants' definition of hard work as initial comments indicated that it is congruent with additional time outside of traditional working hours. Thus, if hard work equals time, this requirement for progression is a barrier for women with priorities outside of their career.

"Not putting in the extra hours would have impacted both my career progression and the success of my business." (FGP9)

A research participant confirmed that hard work, time and progression are positively correlated.

"Hard work is putting in the hours when something demands it and sometimes making personal sacrifices." (FGP8)

Although many research participants agreed with this statement, there was a contrasting belief from senior female participants that hard work does not always equal time.

"I think there's a correlation between work ethic and progression. But I think it's a combination of work ethic and outputs. If somebody knows that you work hard, and you'll always do what you said you were going to do, they don't care how long it takes you." (INT1)

"I think people perceive that they have to work long hours in order to progress, but I think it's an internal perception. Working longer hours to get on is something from the past. But we put pressure on ourselves to think that that's the way." (INT4)

4.2.3 Work-Life Balance is our Choice

The discussions around hard work naturally led onto the participants' attainment of "work-life balance". While

specifics were different for each participant, irrespective of gender, there was a common agreement that having a healthy balance is a personal choice and responsibility. However, there was a stark difference between female and male professionals in terms of respecting and maintaining their boundaries. The female participants, regardless of seniority, were generally successful in prioritising achievement of their optimal work-life balance, albeit for different reasons.

For some, family priorities defined this balance.

"I'm really strict that I'm back for bedtimes." (INT8)

Others truly understood the benefits of having work-life balance.

"It was quite eye opening to see that actually you do need balance in your life ... to give you space to think strategically and creatively ... You've got to have that downtime for the ideas to come forward." (INT4)

One female participant highlighted that the nature of the consulting industry in fact enables work-life balance to be achieved, in spite of other responsibilities, if that is something we prioritise.

"I think project work gives you flexibility ... once you know your team and you know your clients, I think consultancy has a level of flexibility that other professions don't." (INT1)

For male participants, however, any semblance of balance was largely aspirational.

"The industry we work in is so time absorbing particularly if you're trying to seek a certain profit margin and satisfied clients. You make a lot of sacrifices." (FGP3)

"There is always the risk of your competitors grabbing that project. There is fear behind a lot of my overcommitment ... even if that means you're at work at 9 o'clock on a Saturday morning." (FGP4)

Despite being no more senior than the women, the male participants' responses indicated that they placed much more pressure on themselves to 'succeed'.

These statements highlight the need for a change in culture: policies can be put in place but will not achieve their expected purpose if the mindset towards them is not one of acceptance.

"As much as we can give people permission as the business to do things, people have got to give themselves permission to set their own boundaries." (INT3)

The disconnect between these experiences when using a gendered lens is eye-opening and suggests that male professionals are hindering an industry-wide change by being less open to new ways of working.

Although male participants acknowledged that creating a healthy balance is their choice, and an important one, they reasoned their lack of balance with the consultancy sector's culture. However, construction consultancies are increasingly understanding the importance and benefits for themselves and their employees of having a work-life balance. This is being encouraged by the introduction of various wellbeing, hybrid and remote working policies. Yet the literature tells us that men continue to be rewarded with faster career progression, and it seems that not having a healthy work-life balance is congruent to this progression. This research implies that this is because they are "working harder", despite themselves acknowledging that this is not healthy or 'right'.

Contrastingly, female participants seem to be embracing this culture change and are accepting new policies. Although this is positive from a wellbeing perspective, when considering that lack of "hard work" (defined by additional hours) is a barrier to progression, there is a danger that women are continuing to be held back despite doing the 'right' thing.

4.2.4 Expectation / Pressure to Overwork

Further questioning from the researcher into difficulties for professionals to achieve a healthy work-life balance uncovered that an expectation and pressure to overwork exists within the construction consultancy sector. One potential reason for this is high levels of competition encouraging a race to the bottom for fees.

"From my side, it's always a race to the bottom for fees and ... to bring in the necessary fee levels you've got to bring in more jobs, which then means everyone's busier." (FGP1)

"As a PM, if you can do two projects really well and there's enough fees coming in, I think you could have a really healthy work-life balance. But if you've got five or six [projects], then it starts to become an issue." (FGP3)

Further to the discussion around work-life balance being an individual's choice, it could be argued that this pressure to overwork is internalised. However, another participant highlighted that this pressure does also come from employers, even when employees are actively creating work-life balance.

"I know someone who's a mom, and she does get a bit of negative press because she's three days a week when we're talking about resource ... because she doesn't fit as easy to a role. It's quite condescending. The business has accepted that she's gone back three days ... so there's got to be a way of working with that." (FGP9)

A further reason for the expectation to work outside of traditional working hours is the requirement for consultants to network, which was quickly understood by the researcher as a necessity for career progression.

"If I did no networking, and I would have said, half past five, I'm going home, I don't think I would have got to where I am." (INT1)

"You'll have a good job and career but without that networking to find opportunities to find relationships, I don't think you're gonna go much further." (INT11)

"If you want to be a leader in the industry, or if you want to progress, your network and your ability to go and win work is going to be the thing that will get you there." (INT6)

It was confirmed that this expectation is also an external one.

"As you get more senior, there is a negative perception from others when you say no to networking. I think it was almost a case of well, it's part of your role." (INT7)

However, several senior participants raised that, as with creating work-life balance, networking can be done in a variety of ways.

"[Networking] isn't always about going to an event after work... It's about relationship building. It's how you create future work based on what you're doing now." (INT4)

Moreover, there are important skills required for successful networking that must be developed.

"It's not just networking that's important, it's how you deal with people. If I meet someone but they can't communicate in a way that I can understand and ... that helps up to build rapport, we aren't gonna be able to do business together." (INT11)

Similar to insights around hard work and work-life balance, these views on networking are not being shared across the sector. There is an inference that businesses are not doing enough to make professionals aware that “networking” does not just mean meeting new people after work. Additionally, businesses may be encouraging employees to network without having given them training to develop the relevant soft skills required to make their efforts meaningful.

4.2.5 Support for New Parents

During discussions about maternity leave, all female participants with children shared anxieties regarding returning to work after an extended time off. They raised that they feel businesses need to do more to support their return to work.

“I would have benefitted from some support and training to help me re-enter the industry after a year out.” (INT10)

One female participant emphasised that support from her line manager was instrumental in her career progression post-children. Empathy does not come from any gender specifically; having career support from a manager who can relate to your situation can be significant, regardless of gender.

“My mindset has changed since I’ve had children. I’m not as career driven as I was. My line manager had to pinch me to put myself forward for promotion. A lot of senior women at my company don’t have children. Would I have had the same support if they were my line management? I don’t think so. But again, it goes back to the fact that my two immediate line managers have been fathers... And that sounds incredibly sexist for me as a woman to say that another woman who doesn’t have children can’t ever empathise. But in the back of my mind, I do wonder if my experience would have been different.” (INT8)

While these same struggles were not raised by male participants with children, one did share the following thought:

“I don’t think back and remember having any anxieties... but does that mean my business got the best out of me at that time? I’m not sure. Mental health impacts every aspect of your life. If you’ve only got 2 weeks and you’ve come back to work, perhaps you had a difficult birth or you’re having difficulties adjusting.” (INT11)

It is clear, therefore, that the conversation should not just involve mothers – returning to work is difficult for fathers too. Ultimately, businesses and colleagues need to respect that people have lives outside of work and provide support to all employees – male and female – to enable them to set and maintain healthy work-life boundaries.

“I think employers need to really... [respect] that people have a life. They are treated like human beings... That would help not only the employee but the employer because you build trust, you’re building this environment where people can thrive because they feel secure, they feel safe, they feel like they can be open and honest.” (INT3)

4.2.6 Top-Down Support

Further to discussions analysed in 4.1.5 regarding mentors and role models, these discussions relating to work-life balance and returning to work after extended periods of leave again highlight the importance of managerial and organisational support and its direct consequence on business success.

“I’ve had very good line management and I’ve never felt that me becoming a mother... was a barrier. I got promoted when I was heavily pregnant with my first child and again shortly after I returned to work from having twins.” (INT8)

This experience reinforces the ongoing theme throughout this research that employers must understand and respect employees’ responsibilities outside of their working life in addition to their long-term career goals. Moreover, support in balancing these priorities can be hugely beneficial for motivating professionals to continue to focus on career progression.

4.3 Theme 3: To Have Women at the Top We Need Women at the Top

4.3.1 Patriarchal Dinosaurs

Although only acknowledged by one male participant, this research has confirmed that societal issues do still exist which hinder women’s progression. These include outdated views of female ability and a hesitancy to let go of presenteeism and the expectation to work additional hours. As a closing question in the focus groups and interviews,

the researcher asked participants why they thought gender diversity has not yet been achieved in construction’s consultancy sector.

The responses suggest that older male members of the industry are hindering change and progression.

“I do tend to think that the old boys club operates more in the older generations within the industry.” (INT7)

“I do feel the main culprits of what is driving the patriarchal bigotry... are moving towards retiring or dying now, which I think can only be a positive thing overall.” (INT5)

The researcher suggests that a passive solution in waiting for the “patriarchal dinosaurs” to leave the industry is not good enough. Construction consultancies must be actively creating gender diversity, but not just because they are required to by law.

4.3.2 Companies Must Truly Believe in Gender Diversity

It is clear from unprompted comments by participants that there is an appreciation of the benefits of gender diverse teams for construction.

“Bringing in... [a] female is a real positive because it allows a change in the dynamic of teams. Having that diversity within the team gives different perspectives, different approaches, different behaviours.” (INT7)

The implications of a lack of gender diversity are also recognised.

“If somebody is so crude and so socially unaware... that they think it’s appropriate to turn up [to a tender interview] with four blokes, then actually, they’ve already shared their characteristics, irrespective of the quality of the blokes that turned up.” (INT1)

The researcher further questioned why gender diverse teams are not the norm despite the advantages being understood. The researcher discovered that even when female professionals have the confidence to put themselves forward and though they have the skills and experience for a promotion, reflection bias holds them back from being chosen over a male colleague.

“If you don’t have a diverse panel, then you’re going to have everybody who’s largely been shaped by the same experience, and therefore they’re all going to think alike. And then they’re never going to be able to see the true potential of somebody who is different from them.” (INT9)

Diversity targets can be positive in overcoming challenges like reflection bias and many businesses now have these in place. But rather than hiring women to correct the gender imbalance, participants revealed concerns that construction consultancies are making certain recruitment choices for positive publicity and to meet external pressures, not necessarily because diversity is valued.

“We are not focusing on hiring women because we like feel like a charitable company. It’s because we’re a listed company and we have to write it in our annual report.” (FGP8)

“Part of our focus on diversity is coming from B Corp.” (INT5)

The researcher asked participants for their thoughts on how to correct the gender diversity issue. One female participant argued that, while positive discrimination itself is illegal, strategies to ensure women have equal opportunities should be encouraged, so long as they have the appropriate skill set. The latter comment regarding capability was supported by several other participants.

“A bit of positive discrimination for anybody who’s not a white man sometimes it has its place. I also think that within a week of doing the job people will know whether you can do it or not.” (INT1)

However, this employment of positive discrimination-style strategies to quickly achieve gender diversity quotas is dangerous. Female participants agreed that positive discrimination undermines women’s ability and deservingness of the job or promotion. Furthermore, positive discrimination demoralises male professionals who are sent the message that they will now be held back from progressing because they are the more privileged gender.

“The message [positive discrimination] sends everyone in the business is really dangerous, because it makes certain people think that women have been promoted... because they’re a woman.” (FGP8)

From a wider perspective, the hiring of a female professional in the name of gender diversity can be harmful for that woman’s own career progression.

“If that person wants to recruit somebody but they are forced to recruit somebody else, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of their failure. It’s not the right way to go in terms of a working relationship.” (INT11)

4.3.3 Desperate Recruitment

Whilst prioritising gender diversity can address the industry's skills shortage, this shortage itself is a barrier to achieving gender diversity.

"There are far more vacancies available at the moment than ... candidates." (INT9)

Participants' responses evidence that construction consultancies are desperately recruiting to meet resource requirements. They do not have the capacity to consciously hire to address social issues.

"Researcher: can you give us a little bit of insight on what the key characteristics are that you look for in candidates?"

Participant: A pulse." (FGP1)

"We know what skills we need. And when a CV comes across, if they have those skills we have them in for interview. That's pretty much all it is." (FGP6)

When questioned on how they or their employer could overcome their skills gap, most participants discussed "grassroots" recruitment in schools, colleges and universities and the need to change the industry's image. Moreover, they recognised that recruitment practices can be passively discriminatory towards women, particularly in terms of the language of job specifications, the interview questions and the interview panel.

Unfortunately, none of the participants recognised that earnestly focusing on supporting women's promotion and return to work after having children could address part of the skills shortage challenge.

4.4 Limitations of Research

The research sample was limited in size and location, and therefore may not be representative of all UK construction professionals. Furthermore, there was an imbalance between female and male interview participants. As having children was recognised as a major career barrier, this should be a factor which is prioritised in future research. However, given the research topic, it is significant that it was difficult for the researcher to identify female professionals with children who met the seniority requirements.

Qualitative researchers should be unbiased. As the researcher is female and has a natural bias in researching women's barriers to progression, this was difficult to guarantee. Having multiple researchers, both female and male, would have helped to neutralise the bias.

Additionally, thematic analysis is often undertaken by multiple researchers to have a breadth of interpretation. This research was carried out by a single researcher.

4.5 Conclusion

This research aims to determine whether the barriers to progression for female professionals identified in the literature do still exist in the construction consultancy sector. The experiences and reflections of the research participants suggest that all three barriers remain and continue to hinder achievement of gender diversity in construction's consultancy sector.

Firstly, negative perceptions of female professionals' ability are a barrier identified in the literature which the data suggests is not as prevalent as it previously has been. This research did however find that there is a gap in evidence of male professionals actively working to promote career progression and equal opportunities for women. Moreover, female professionals themselves often also do not support each other's progression. Both factors will hinder achievement of gender diversity.

Furthermore, a new barrier was identified relating to female professionals' struggles with self-confidence and imposter syndrome. As proven by the literature, discussions around how to achieve gender diversity are dwindling. This has led women to believe that society is doing all it can to make progress and they therefore blame themselves for lack of progression.

Secondly, the barrier created by responsibilities outside of work continues to obstruct progression disproportionately for women. A lack of organisational and management support of female professionals also continues to be a barrier. The research shows that these barriers are perpetuated by the consultancy sector's culture which continues to expect overworking and rewards an unhealthy work-life balance.

Finally, the research identified a new barrier relating to desperate and dangerous hiring practices because of the industry's skills shortage challenges. The research suggests that, due to numerous constraints faced by employers, gender diversity targets are either being ignored or misused to the detriment of both female and male professionals.

To conclude, this chapter has discussed and analysed experiences shared with the researcher during the data collection stage of research.

The researcher's conclusions are set out in the next chapter along with recommendations and suggestions for further research.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This research paper addresses the skills shortage faced by the construction industry and considers whether improving gender diversity by promoting and retaining female construction professionals could help to address this challenge.

The research has firstly confirmed that barriers to female construction professionals' career progression still exist despite decades of research and calls for action. The lack of progress suggests that female professionals' face a ceiling that is harder to break through than glass. Although systemic change does take time – proven by the slow pace of change outlined in the literature – “waiting for the patriarchal dinosaurs [in the construction industry] to retire or die” is not an acceptable solution.

The researcher has highlighted that female professionals' lack of self-confidence in their professional ability has led women to believe that they hold themselves back from their own career progression. Rather than attributing career progression challenges to systemic barriers, female professionals often take full responsibility. While this confidence barrier naturally reduced with experience, the female professionals who have had positive experiences with supportive mentors and role models also felt they faced fewer barriers to progression, particularly upon returning to work after having children.

The industry's culture, including the internalised masculinity, the expectation to overwork and the requirement to network, was discovered to be a considerable barrier for female professionals. Although female professionals achieve work-life balance more successfully than men, there is an indication that women are penalised for prioritising responsibilities outside of work over their career, despite doing so in line with wellbeing policies introduced by construction consultancies.

Positive and successful action is being undertaken to increase the gender diversity of professionals entering the construction consultancy sector. However, the research has shown that consultancies are overlooking the leaky pipeline problem of experienced and competent female professionals leaving the workplace and choosing to not return. A focus on closing the leaky pipeline will increase gender diversity across the industry and simultaneously address skills shortage challenges.

“Positive discrimination” strategies are seen by some as a step in the right direction towards meeting gender diversity targets. However, this is widely considered to be an artificial method of meeting quotas which undermines female professionals' merit and ability to do the job. It is also demotivating for male professionals who then feel as though their gender is now a barrier.

The research suggests that diversity targets themselves encourage this behaviour, particularly for companies who have investors to answer to. The market can increasingly see past performative actions and there needs to be a move towards promoting women because doing so aligns with a company's values. Consultancies must truly believe in the benefits of diverse teams and understand that supporting female professionals at all levels can address the skills shortage in the long-term.

5.2 Practical Recommendations

To meet the challenge of the skills gap, recruitment of women is no longer simply a nice thing to do; the lack of progress since the Latham Report (1994) has made it a necessity from both ethical and business perspectives. A skilled workforce that sees its long-term future in the UK construction industry is critical to the sector's longevity. It is also clear that attraction by itself is not the key to increasing gender diversity: recruitment must be followed by progression, support and subsequent job satisfaction.

“If you're really serious about this equality stuff, don't prance around at the edges to make yourself feel good.” (INT1)

It is prudent to firstly acknowledge that not all female professionals have the desire to progress to the 'top' of their discipline, business or the construction industry. Nevertheless, there should be nothing holding back those who do. Construction consultancies must actively identify those individuals and give them the support that they need to progress.

“We assume everybody's equally ambitious and they're not.” (INT1)

To support those who strive for leadership, businesses should provide dedicated career development programmes. These programmes should focus primarily on developing soft skills. By addressing issues stemming from lack of self-confidence and helping professionals to overcome imposter syndrome, identified barriers to progression will be tackled.

Moreover, support must be given to all employees to empower them to create work-life balance. This should be reinforced by a culture which respects employees' priorities outside of work so that a healthy balance will not hinder career progression.

This must also extend to professionals who take extended periods of leave, especially to grow their family. Consultancies must work with employees before, during and after their leave to assist them in rethinking their work-life balance, ease their anxieties and support them to returning to work.

The research suggests that some employers are prioritising profits and client expectations over employee wellbeing, despite introducing wellbeing policies. Consultancies must celebrate and support female professionals' successful prioritisation of a healthy work-life balance and encourage the same from male professionals.

“As consultants... we sell our people; [they] are our biggest investments.” (FGP3)

In addition to direct development training, opportunities to connect with mentors and role models are invaluable for the career development of female professionals. Although the research shows that connecting with other women is most beneficial, we must acknowledge the limited number of senior female professionals in the consultancy sector. Male professionals should be aware of this challenge and should raise their hands to offer support, especially if they can relate to female professionals' barriers to progression such as experience balancing career and family priorities.

It would be dangerous for construction consultancies to place responsibility female professionals for their own lack of progression and be distracted from also tackling organisational barriers to gender diversity. However, we cannot and should not be choosing to hire and promote women over men for the purpose of achieving gender diversity targets, regardless of any well-meaning motivations.

“How do we give women the opportunity to shine? They've still got to be good. They've still got to pass all the metrics, but is there anything that we can do to give more opportunity to women?” (INT4)

Consultancies must be considering female professionals when making all hiring and promotion decisions. Further to having no single gender shortlists, job descriptions should be made gender-neutral and gender-inclusive interview training should be given to employees to ensure that

all interviewees are given the best chance of success. Moreover, diverse interview panels will benefit both consultancies and professionals. Removing reflection bias in hiring and promotion decisions guarantees a more varied range of opinions.

When we aren't struggling to curate diverse shortlists, interview panels and project teams, and every female professional has the opportunity to connect with female mentors and role models, gender diversity will become an expectation rather than a goal.

“To have diversity at the top you have to have diversity at the top.” (INT3)

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

Support for female professionals before, during and after maternity leave was identified by the research as an action which can overcome a barrier to their career progression. Further research should focus on the support being provided by construction consultancies and how this can be improved to increase return to work rates.

The research also highlighted the currently untapped talent pool of female professionals who have had extended career breaks to prioritise their family or other responsibilities outside of work. The investment to retrain these professionals is less than that required for a young professional, and more experienced professionals are generally less mobile, often staying with an employer for a longer period of time (Easton, 2022). Further research should therefore consider why consultancies are overlooking this experienced talent pool and how these professionals can be encouraged to re-join the industry.

The construction consultancy sector's culture of expectation and pressure to overwork was uncovered by the research to be a barrier to career progression. To tackle this pressure, further research should consider quality and output-driven methods to calculate consultancy fees rather than the current hourly calculations.

6.0

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An MSc dissertation
by Nikita Badesha,
G4C Midlands Chair

For more information contact us at:

info@cemidlands.org

www.cemidlands.org

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