

Enhancing Gender Equality Policies for Promoting Women's Participation in the Zimbabwean Construction Sector

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Abstract

Gender equality is a fundamental human right woven within the Sustainable Development Goals as a blueprint for progress across all areas of life. However, sectors such as the construction industry remain segregated and characterised by unequal opportunities for women. Therefore, the study explored how gender equality policies can be enhanced in the construction sector to improve the participation of women. The concomitant objective was to identify the key strategies that be incorporated in policies promoting women's participation in the Zimbabwean construction sector. Through an interpretive philosophy, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews of purposively sampled key informants from construction consultancy firms, government departments and construction professional bodies. Thematic analysis of data was conducted to unveil the prominent strategies for improving gender equality policies. The findings include the need to promulgate construction-specific legislation through improved and well-resourced quota systems for women, effective gender protection policies, and support of work-life balance policies for women. Although adequate policies may be in place, their implementation is lacklustre. A top-down approach may be a significant step toward promoting women's participation in the construction industry. The determined policy enhancement strategies, through analysing views of key professionals and informants, for enhancing gender equality are a significant step in promoting women's participation. A limitation of the study was the exclusion of most female construction professionals and operatives, yet they possess valuable experience and perspectives of work in the construction sector.

Keywords: Construction sector, Gender equality policy, Women, Workplace diversity, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Zimbabwe's construction industry is generally characterised by several challenges regarding the implementation of the intertwined Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Machingura and Nicolai, 2018). However, this paper focuses mainly on the aspects of SDG Number 5 and Number 8 on achieving gender equality and decent work, respectively. According to the United Nations Global Goals, achieving these is an approach to alleviating the tremendous waste of the world's human potential, especially in the construction industry (Brueckner et al., 2022). Inequality continues in various offices and workplaces across the globe (Mukhija, 2019). The construction industry remains a heavily male-dominated sector where the representation of female workers is insignificant despite the benefits derived from the construction sector (Moyo et al., 2023). Little has been achieved in this sector, and according to the Infrastructure Development Bank of Zimbabwe (IDBZ) (2019), the statistics of female construction workers was 3,5% in 2019, and it has remained at the same level over the years.

Therefore, this study sought to interrogate ways to enhance gender equality policies for the Zimbabwean

construction sector. Zimbabwe has ratified the most fundamental conventions to achieve gender justice.

Zimbabwe has ratified the most fundamental conventions to achieve gender justice across its economic sectors (Machingura and Nicolai, 2018). In support, the Women Research Institute (2023) asserts that protecting workers is not just a matter of legality. However, it should refer to the international legislation for the development of legal protection on the grounds of equal employment opportunities for men and women. The following section considers the theoretical framework proposed to shape and understand gender equality in society and the working environment. There is also a literature review on policies and legislation that supports gender equality. After that, the study's methodology was presented together with the discussion of the findings, and then the conclusions were presented.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical framework

There are numerous theories, but for this study, an extensive literature review identified two main sociological theories relevant to the study of gender equality in the working environment, as supported by Basmechi (2018). These are the 'gendered organization theory' and the 'hegemonic masculinity theory.' The

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theories aim to shape and understand gender equality in society and the working environment. The Gendered Organization Theory claims that organizational structures are not gender-neutral and that gendered characteristics are embedded in organizations and obscured by the nature of work (Basmechi, 2018). The Hegemonic Masculinity Theory legitimizes male dominance in society, while female subordination is justified through that legitimacy. Connell and Messerschmitt (2005) assert that culture, institutions, and persuasion are the tools that aid the attainment of hegemonic masculinity, benefiting men who participate in the complicit subordination of women. This perpetuates harmful stereotypes and creates unfavorable working environments for women (Ellemers, 2018). The theories provide an understanding of gender perceptions, gender role assignments, and the status of women in society and the workplace.

2.2. *Zimbabwean gender-related policies and legislation*

The Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) made notable observations on the progress regarding the position of women at work (Mutangi, 2016). However, continued progress is still necessary to achieve a positive future of work for women, and this begins with

a proper rectification of appropriate legislation and public policies (Mushayavanhu and Mutangi, 2013), especially in male-dominated trades. In this section, the legislation that governs gender equality and related issues was reviewed with a specific focus on the construction industry, as shown in Table 1. The relevance was determined from a semantic point of view and the associations among them, highlighting the avenues through which gender inequalities have found ways to creep into the world of work for female construction workers. The literature presents gender equality, social inclusion, and diversity policies as foundations for creating environments that enable equality (United States Agency for International Development, 2018). Despite legislation that Zimbabwe enacted in support of women in workplaces, female workers continue to suffer from structural barriers, especially in industries predominantly dominated by men (Ibid). Strategies for enhancing the efficacy of the existing gender equality policies can be deduced from the identified concerns within the study area and literature.

The main areas of concern gathered from this review include challenges associated with work-life balance, sexual harassment, and leadership and decision-making. According to Kalysh (2016) and Tijani et al. (2020), work-life balance is a common struggle that has

Table 1: Zimbabwean Policies and legislation reviewed

Source	Challenges
Constitution of Zimbabwe 2013-2017	It does not criminalise certain acts of violence, such as verbal offences, or psychological and economic abuse (Domestic Violence Act (5:16); International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent Societies, 2018), yet verbal offences are a form of sexual harassment. Contradictory sections of the Labour Act (28:01) on maternity leave are in contradiction with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention on maternity rights (Mutangi, 2016). Zimbabwe has yet to ratify the Maternity Leave Convention No. 183 of 2000. Inconsistencies with other laws (Sibanda, 2023).
Labour Act (28:01)	Cumbersome and lengthy processes of the court systems to victims (Marimo et al., 2021). Female entrants of the reproductive age are often side-lined in preference for a male employee, and these firm stereotypes can be extremely harmful, automatically influencing conscious and unconscious presumptions about people based on gender and age (Machingura and Nicole, 2018). Mushayavanhu and Mutangi (2013) state the need to interrogate disciplinary hearings and decisions of sexual harassment in workplaces. The chain of reporting needs to be improved.
National Gender policy	Limited publication regarding the impact of the intended goals on the nation (Fombard, 2016). Culture and tradition hindered the implementation process (CARE International, 2014). Need more support and resources to implement the strategies at the company level (Mwangi, 2018); hence, women remain disadvantaged in workplaces. ILO (2020) states that legislative solutions need meaningful and proactive action from social partners such as employers to yield meaningful progress.
Gender Commission Act (10:31)	There needs to be more clarity on the actual roles of the established commissions, yet there is a need for a more holistic approach to deal with the systematic barriers against women, especially in leadership positions (Mwangi, 2018). The Commission is disappointing as it limits clarity on the actual responsibilities it is to deal with, and it only adds a little to the Commission's Constitutional powers (Machingura and Nicolai, 2018).
National Quota System	Criticised for tokenism (Ip et al., 2020), glass ceilings and downplay of the meritocracy of the selected female construction workers.

induced growing attention in the construction industry due to its effects on the mental health of female construction workers, turnover, and project performance. This was also echoed by Muthambi and Agumba (2022) when they highlighted the challenges of long working hours and work-life balance. Nyanga and Chindanya (2020) cite sexual harassment elimination through legislation as an essential action towards accelerating progress towards gender equality in the world of work.

In leadership and decision-making, executive leadership in the construction industry remains repeatedly constituted by masculine domination where women are silenced (Hill, 2016). Therefore, diverse voices must be included in drafting policies with input from multiple stakeholders at all levels, ensuring that women are included (ILO, 2020). Public consultation is critical to effective policymaking (Sibanda, 2023). Hanke (2017) and Wade (2015) point out inadequate support from the national government with resources to effectively implement the strategies at company levels. Therefore, effective legislative instruments and practices in line with international labor standards help industries promote transparent, accountable actions on gender equality (ILO, 2020), which positively impacts the participation of women in the construction industry.

3. Research Methodology

The study employed an interpretivist philosophy and implemented a qualitative method to collect data through in-depth interviews. Babbie and Mouton (2015) suggest that such approaches allow the data to determine the researcher's themes. In-depth interviews were conducted to uncover the detailed support for gender equality required from policies and legislation for the Zimbabwean construction industry. The first section of the interview guide addressed demographic issues, namely gender, profession, and experience in the relevant fields. The second section requested strategies for policy enhancement. According to the

Clayman Institute of Gender Research (2016), to achieve gender equality, the culture of masculinity must be dismantled through essential alliances with men to amplify new voices and advance gender equality. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select key informants, preferably females with expert knowledge, to create a more robust understanding of the research topic (Babbie and Mouton, 2015).

As suggested by Saunders et al. (2016), four to twelve interviews are acceptable to reach saturation. Therefore, the sample for the study targeted seven participants and consisted of both genders and registered construction professionals (five), legal practitioners of Labour Law, civil litigation, and estate administration (one), as well as a District Development Officer from the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development (one). Data saturation was achieved after the seventh interview. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, and it was the most suitable approach to apply to the transcribed interviews. According to Saunders et al. (2016), the researcher needs to scrutinize the data to develop patterns of meaning that repeatedly appear. The thematic analysis included various approaches, and it followed a six-step process that included familiarization, coding, categorization, and the generation of themes.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Profile of Respondents

The interviewees, shown in Table 2, were drawn from selected government ministries, professional bodies, and construction firms with extensive experience in the construction industry. They provided first-hand information and knowledge, thereby offering recommendations for solutions.

The interviewees included five (5) females and two (2) males; thus, the responses obtained from the interview were broadly representative of the gender under study,

Table 2: Profile of the Interviewees

Participant	Gender	Profession	Position	Years of experience
P1	Male	Civil/Structural Engineer	Director	20
P2	Female	Labour and civil litigation lawyer	Chief legal adviser and Consultant	15
P3	Female	Quantity surveyor	Director	12
P4	Male	Civil/ Structural Engineer	Professional body- General Secretary	22
P5	Female	Sociologist	District Development Officer for Gender Empowerment	18
P6	Female	Architect	Professional body executive member and consultant	10
P7	Female	Quantity Surveyor	Professional body executive member	7

and the presence of males mitigates bias in the study. The various designations of the interviewees also validate the data collected. Data saturation was achieved after the seventh interview.

4.2. Strategies for enhancing gender equality policies

Generally, the seven respondents offered strategies for good practices and programmes for enactment at the company and national levels. Themes were extracted from the data analysis. These included the need to promulgate construction-specific legislation through improved quota systems for women, effective gender protection policies and work-life balance support for women. They are discussed hereafter.

4.2.1. Generation of legislation specific to the construction industry

Apart from acknowledging efforts by the Zimbabwean government to achieve gender equality through legislation, some respondents inferred the need for legislation that deals specifically with the construction industry because of its manifest masculine culture, which is a significant barrier to the participation of women (Mwangi, 2018). P1 and P6's narratives describe the need for specific legislation concerning gender equality.

P1: "...there is effort in the construction industry to have their act in which they have been pushing through the Zimbabwe Construction Industry Association... which addresses specific issues within engineering".

P6: "... laws need to be enacted that directly penalise discrimination and incentivise inclusion to create healthy working environments for women".

In tandem with the literature, the labour laws that govern the construction industry universally apply to all economic sectors. Yet, unlike other sectors, female construction workers face more hardships in their work environment. ILO (2020)), also support this notion. Based on all the forms of discrimination experienced by women in the sector, undoubtedly, there is a need for more prescriptive policies and legislation through policy refinement and enactment enforcement. Furthermore, the legislation should be consistent with current trends, as Sibanda (2023) argued. The views shared by P1 and P6 are in tandem with the efforts by the Australian government to disrupt gender stereotypes in the construction industry through the enactment of the Building Equality Policy. Jones (2021) notes that the government mandated a percentage of females in each trade role. This aligns with arguments by Sibanda (2023), who states that legislation must be consistent with industry trends. Gender quotas are some of the suggested methods to increase the number of female leaders in the construction industry, as alluded to by P1, P2, and P5.

P1: " There is a need to push forward for a quota system to ensure a balance as of now to address deliberately previous imbalances ...".

P2: "Maybe introducing a temporary quota can certainly be effective as was done with the cabinet".

P5: "We want to reach a stage whereby women are not selected by quota system only...".

All respondents acknowledged the need for quota systems in leadership because the construction industry has been male-privileged for a long time. Nevertheless, the economy and society are interested in tapping into all talent in their midst, per Manzini (2020). Using the phrases 'as of now' by P1 and 'temporary quota' by P2 reveals that it is a desired policy in the short run to eradicate the inequalities until women are fairly or equally represented in management positions in the construction sector. Response by P5 shows that quotas are a starting point towards the maximum utilisation of female talents, but they downplay the meritocracy of female leadership versus men. P5 and P7 had this to say.

P5: "...because we want to be selected based on merit just like men..."

P7: "...we deserve and are capable of functioning in our workplaces..."

P5 and P7's responses align with Ip et al.'s (2020). Nonetheless, quota systems work better alongside measures that address biases against females in the workplace. However, they are a starting point to signify the end of women's exclusion from decision-making positions in the construction sector.

4.2.2. Establishing effective gender protection policies for women.

Findings from the research study show that some female construction workers endure harassment on construction sites, which can cause mental health effects such as depression, and sometimes they leave the industry too early. Mutangi (2016) and Marimo et al. (2021) cite inadequate and inconsistent support from legislation against harassment at workplaces can also trigger unethical behaviours such as drug addiction and alcohol intake on sites to cope. The responses from P1, P2 and P7 demonstrate the importance of support and immense psychological safety in the working environment.

P1: "Employers and managers who are senior on-site must make sure that construction sites are comfortable for both genders as one of their key result areas."

P2: " As a constitutionalist, I believe there is a need for remedying injustice. Women should be encouraged to report injustices at workplaces".

P7: "...women seldom respond to discriminatory practices due to a lack of guaranteed protections..."

Employers and workplaces such as construction sites must address violence against female operatives and professionals in all its forms by setting up practical interventions that encourage equal and respectful relationships between female and male workers. This also entails assigning adequate resources towards creating policies that encourage the minority voice to speak out against unfair treatment practices. There is a need for an integrated approach rather than individual mandates to support victimised women from the courts of law, the sectors, ministries, and departments (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2017).

4.2.3. Support for work-life balance.

Women face increased pressures and frustrations in their desire to balance work and life domains, and quite often, the relationship between work-life balance and female leadership is complex.

P2: "The law should work on that...there is no paternity leave in Zimbabwe, yet it significantly affects how work and life are later balanced ...".

P3: "Of course, introducing flexible working would do, but it is easier within advanced technology spaces."

P4: "The existing labour statutes have improved working conditions in the construction industry even for the female employees, especially on balancing work and life..."

P2 is a female, aware of the struggles of the work-life balance of female professionals with family responsibilities. Motherhood and fatherhood differences stem from the cultural expectations and gendered societal roles of family responsibility prevalent in patriarchal societies like Zimbabwe. P2's proposed social support from paternal leave enables women to combine their reproductive and productive roles successfully. ILO (2020) supports this notion, stating that well-managed maternity and paternity leave policies encourage women to return to work after childbirth, thus closing the leaky pipeline of female talent. Kalysh (2016) suggested that social support relieves the work-life pressure in studying female leadership in the construction industry, especially when supported by legislation. In addition, P3, in line with P4, expressed concern about the need for flexible work policies that support work-life balance to encourage female construction workers to stay in the industry. Tijani et al. (2020) emphasised that this continuous struggle for work-life balance has effects on job satisfaction, which causes women to either leave or stay in the industry. Therefore, there is a need for flexible working policies supported by legislation which enable

female construction workers to manage the coexistence of family and work responsibilities.

5. Conclusion and Further Research

Gender inequality exists in the Zimbabwean construction industry; the industry can improve with appropriate strategies. Zimbabwe has progressed in promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights in the workplace. However, significant impediments to achieving diversity remain within the legal stipulations under which the policies are devised. The provisions of the law should clearly define what constitutes a gender-inclusive work environment. Consequently, there is a need for gender equality legislation and policies specific to the construction industry that support work-life balance for female construction workers. Additionally, a well-supported quota system is needed as a measure to enhance the representation of women.

These findings contribute context-specific strategies that can be incorporated into gender equality policies to address their identified shortcomings. They have substantial implications for policymakers and leaders in the construction industry who design policies and legislation that support gender equality and the effective functioning of female labor in the traditionally male-dominated construction sector. As proposed by gendered organization theory, workplaces must be gender-neutral. Furthermore, the hegemonic masculinity theory within workplaces that legitimizes male dominance must help identify variances. Future studies should consider the experiences and insights on gender equality from female operatives and professionals on construction sites. The major limitation of the study was its exclusive qualitative nature.

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