

The Challenges to Women's Career Progression in the Construction Industry: An Investigative Study

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Abstract

The construction industry, a traditionally male-dominated sector, has seen gradual changes in female representation over recent decades. However, substantial barriers persist, influencing the rate and degree of women's career progression. This paper investigates the challenges to women's progression and trends in the construction industry, focusing on the South African context. This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from a questionnaire survey and qualitative insights from focus group discussions to obtain the data required to answer the research objective. The questionnaire was emailed/self-administered to 259 randomly selected construction workers and professionals listed in the Professional Construction Register, Housing Development Association, and Informal Builders Group. A total of 199 completed questionnaires were collected yielding a response rate of approximately 77%. The data collected were analysed using descriptive and thematic analysis. The study found that the key challenges to women progression in the construction industry include the cost of education, gender bias and a few female mentors. Based on these findings, the study concludes that positive changes in the organisational culture of construction companies, educational support, mentorship, and networking will foster an equitable work environment that enables women to thrive and contribute effectively to the construction industry. The study recommends that construction companies implement policies to close gender pay gaps and introduce quotas for women in leadership positions.

Keywords: Career Progression, Diversity, Gender Equality, Mentorship, Organizational Culture

1. Introduction

The global construction industry is a cornerstone of economic development, playing a vital role in employment creation, investment stimulation, and infrastructure provision. However, it remains predominantly male-dominated, with minimal representation of women in leadership roles (Hasan et al., 2021). In South Africa, this disparity is particularly stark, with women constituting only 9% of the workforce and mainly occupying non-managerial positions (Stats SA, 2022).

Previous studies have identified various barriers to women's career progression in the construction sector. For example, Afolabi et al. (2019) highlight that barriers often stem from societal influences, personal beliefs, and contextual factors that disproportionately affect women from marginalized groups. Research by Liem et al. (2021) and Zhang et al. (2021) emphasizes the necessity for gender-focused initiatives to boost female representation while addressing the qualitative experiences of women within the industry. Despite governmental efforts in South Africa - such as affirmative action policies and targeted training programs - significant obstacles to women's

progression persist (Ndweni and Ozumba, 2021; Windapo, 2024).

However, existing literature often lacks empirical depth, particularly regarding the distinct challenges women face in navigating their careers in construction. Many studies have either generalized the issues of gender inequality or failed to explore specific barriers especially within the South African context. While the conversation around gender diversity acknowledges its importance for innovation and enhanced organizational performance, it often overlooks the unique challenges women encounter, particularly in male-dominated environments.

This study seeks to fill that knowledge gap by offering empirical data specifically focused on the South African construction industry. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach allows for the identification and ranking of barriers, while capturing the nuanced experiences of women in the industry, thereby contributing valuable insights that can guide policy and practice. The literature review in the following section analyses existing studies on gender disparities and women's participation in the construction industry, followed by a mixed-method research approach employing questionnaires targeting randomly selected

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construction workers and professionals, as well as focus group discussions with industry stakeholders to obtain quantitative and qualitative data respectively.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Historical Context and Trends in Female Progression*

The construction industry has historically exhibited a pronounced gender imbalance, primarily characterized by a male-dominated workforce that often limits women's participation and advancement in various roles (Hirschi & Läge, 2007). In the United Kingdom, for instance, females represent less than 5% of the construction sector's employees, and their underrepresentation becomes even more evident in managerial roles, where less than 6% of leadership positions are held by women (Seidu et al., 2022). In contrast, South Africa's construction industry has made commendable strides toward addressing these gender imbalances through initiatives like the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Act, which aims to promote equality and improve women's representation in the workforce (Windapo, 2024). Noxolo Kuviet, a former Deputy Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure in South Africa, highlighted the importance of equitable participation, noting that women, comprising more than half the population, deserve a fair share of economic activities.

Women's representation in the South African construction industry shows positive trends, with 51% of registered contractor enterprises owned by women, while female enrolment in higher education in architecture and building programs has reached 29.4%, signalling progress toward bridging the gender gap (Stats SA, 2022). The differences in gender representation between South Africa and the United Kingdom highlight the ongoing challenges women face globally. For example, while women in South Africa are incrementally gaining ground in company ownership and educational participation, the situation in the UK illustrates a deeply embedded culture of gender imbalance that is resistant to change.

Statistics South Africa data reveal a diversification of women's participation in various construction roles, with women's involvement in site preparation increasing by 9.9% from 2017 to 2022, and participation in building construction rising from 10.4% to 16% during the same period (Stats SA, 2022). These developments signify that while the journey toward gender parity remains complex, progress is tangible and indicative of changing dynamics within the construction workforce. Despite these positive advancements, this period also saw a decrease in women's representation in civil engineering, where female participation dropped by 20.1%, resulting in only 14.5% of the workforce (Stats SA, 2022),

highlighting persistent challenges that warrant further examination and intervention.

2.2. *Overview of the Challenges to Female Career Progression in the Construction Industry*

The challenges to female progression is discussed in the following sub-sections:

2.2.1. *The Underrepresentation of Women in the Construction Industry*

Studies indicate a significant disconnect between the entry of women into the workforce and their representation in decision-making positions (Kodagoda and Jayawardhana, 2022). According to Naoum et al. (2020), women are confronted by ingrained organizational and societal barriers that challenge their success in high-ranking positions that require demonstrated competence. Oyewobi et al. (2019) note that the scarcity of women in leadership positions often reflects broader organizational structures that fail to promote inclusivity. The organizational culture skews towards males because of their dominance in decision-making positions. Moreover, insufficient mentorship, support networks and female role models further exacerbate these challenges, limiting their access to leadership opportunities (Ndweni and Ozumba, 2021). The introduction of interventions and affirmative action policies, such as gender quotas in leadership positions, has been suggested to enhance female representation and facilitate progress within the construction sector (Liem et al., 2021).

2.2.2. *Gender Discrimination*

Norberg and Johansson (2021) highlighted the prevalence of biases that favor male employees, resulting in wage disparities and reduced opportunities for women to secure promotions. Reports illustrate that women receive lower wages than their male counterparts, further embedding gender stratification in career advancement (Park et al., 2019). This discrimination is often exacerbated by traditional societal norms that perceive women as unsuitable for roles in construction, thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes and discouraging female participation in the sector (Afolabi et al., 2019).

2.2.3. *Unwelcoming or Hostile Workplace Culture Towards Women*

Male-dominated environments and inflexible work practices are substantial barriers to women's advancement in the construction industry (Naoum et al., 2020). Furthermore, women often face various forms of hostility—including bullying and harassment—that create an unwelcoming environment, contributing to lower retention rates within the industry (Osei et al., 2023).

2.2.4. *Work-life Balance Factors that impact Women working in Construction*

According to Lefrançois and Trottier (2022), male-dominated organizational cultures often fail to accommodate flexible work arrangements that support women in balancing professional and familial responsibilities. The lack of family-friendly policies can lead to increased stress and dissatisfaction among female employees, further complicating their career trajectories.

2.2.5. *Traditional Stereotypes About Women*

Traditional gender roles and societal expectations significantly influence women's career choices and aspirations in construction. According to Mbukanma and Strydom (2022) cultural perceptions that view construction as a male domain diminish the likelihood of women aspiring to or succeeding in these careers. The literature review outlines the historical context and current trends regarding women's progression in the construction industry, particularly highlighting the deep-rooted gender imbalance characterized by a

Sampling for the quantitative strand was conducted via a random sampling approach of 259 workers and professionals in the construction industry listed in the Professional Construction Register, Housing Development Association and Informal Builders Group via emails and self-administered questionnaires. A total of 199 completed surveys were obtained at the end of the survey period. The questionnaire featured closed-ended, open-ended, and contingency questions to facilitate data collection on perceived barriers, workplace culture, and professional experiences, while allowing for generating actionable insights. The data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics including Mean Item Score. The barriers are then ranked in descending order of their MIS to indicate their impact on adopting the technology. Mbachu and Cross (2015) illustrate the interpretation of the MIS and the rating of the various impact levels. This paper adopts this impact rating used by Mbachu and Cross (2015), highlighted in Table 1, in interpreting the MIS values obtained.

Table 1: Mean Impact Ratings – The interpretation of the MIS values as ordinal scale rating point (adopted from Mbachu & Cross, 2015)

Mean Impact Score	Level of Impact of the Barrier in the Subscale
MIS > 4.2 (0.84)	Very high impact; very significant barrier
3.4 < MIS < 4.2 (0.68 – 0.84)	High impact; significant barrier
2.6 < MIS < 3.4 (0.52 – 0.68)	Moderate impact; moderate barrier
1.8 < MIS < 2.6 (0.36 – 0.52)	Low impact; insignificant barrier
MIS < 1.8 (0.36)	Very low impact; very insignificant barrier

predominantly male workforce that limits women's participation and advancement. The barriers identified in the literature were further broken down into 46 barriers used in the questionnaire to provide granularity. These barriers 20 of which are presented in Table 2 (see Appendix 1) suggest the need for further investigation towards proposing effective interventions and support mechanisms to promote women's advancement in the construction sector. The following section describes the research methodology used in collecting the data required to answer the study objectives.

3. Research Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach by combining primary data from structured questionnaires circulated among workers in various construction roles in South Africa and from Focus Group Discussions. The quantitative research approach allowed for objective analysis of perceptions of barriers and trends in women's career progression (Kothari, 2004; Creswell & Creswell, 2017), while the qualitative strand provided a more nuanced approach to understanding of the barriers to women progression in the industry (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013).

The focus group (see Creswell & Poth, 2016) comprised a diverse mix of 25 participants, including 14 construction professionals, five CEOs of construction companies, three students, two educators and a media consultant who registered for a capacity building workshop in August 2024. The gender distribution featured 18 female and seven male participants. The discussions followed a presentation of the findings from the quantitative data collection and two other presentations titled Gender Equality and Education, and Employment in the Construction Industry. The discussions were collated and analysed thematically to identify the key trends and barriers. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research, emphasizing informed consent, confidentiality, and participant rights. Ethics approval was received before data collection commenced. The next section presents the data obtained and the results of the data analysis, as well as a discussion of the implications of the findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. *Background Details of the Survey Respondents*

There was a predominance of female participation in the quantitative study: 125 females (62.81%) and 73

males (36.67%) participated. In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents fell within the 35 to 44 age range, accounting for 84 individuals (41.38%); this was followed by the 45 to 54 age group comprised of 56 respondents (27.59%), suggesting that the sample is predominantly composed of middle-aged individuals. Geographically, the respondents were spread across various provinces, with KwaZulu-Natal having the highest representation of 53 participants (26.63%), followed by the Western Cape with 46 respondents (23.12%), indicating a diverse provincial representation.

Regarding academic qualifications, the largest group was comprised of individuals with diplomas, with 68 respondents (34.17%). This was followed by those with other qualifications, such as Matric Certificates (55, 27.64%) and vocational qualifications (20, 10.05%). Notably, 22 participants (11.06%) reported having no formal education, while 16 (8.04%) were apprentices. A few respondents held advanced degrees, including 17 with master's degrees (8.54%) and one with a PhD (0.50%). The data on years of experience indicated that 68 respondents (34.17%) had 0 to 5 years of experience, making this the largest group. This was followed by those with 6 to 10 years (51, 25.63%) and 11 to 15 years (48, 24.12%), suggesting a relatively young workforce. Regarding job positions, most respondents identified as directors (93, 46.73%), indicating a significant representation of senior-level professionals with adequate insights into the study problem.

The types of organizations represented in the survey varied, with micro-enterprises comprising the largest group of 69 respondents (34.67%), followed by small enterprises with 56 participants (28.14%), medium-sized enterprises with 25 (12.56%), large enterprises with 16 (8.04%), and 33 participants (16.58%) identified as "other," suggesting a diverse organizational landscape. Lastly, professional affiliations showed that a significant number of the respondents (78, 39.20%) did not belong to any professional organization. Among those who did, the most common affiliations were with the Association of Construction and Project Managers (ACPM) (15, 7.54%) and the South African Council for the Project and Construction Management Professions (SACPCMP) (14, 7.04%). It can be inferred from Table 2 that the data collected is obtained from a sample of predominantly female, middle-aged, and well-educated participants, with a significant representation of directors and individuals from micro and small enterprises with diverse experiences.

4.2. Barriers to Progression

The study sought to find out the perception of the respondents on the barriers impacting women's progression in the construction industry on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very insignificant and 5 is very

significant. The ten top and least ranked barriers out of the 46 proposed are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that while all the top ten barriers were significant and that from a ranking perspective, Educational Expenses and Costs ranked as the most significant barrier with an MIS score of 0.76, followed by Male Domination and Lack of Representation, Ineffective Recruitment Programs, and Lack of Encouragement from Male Colleagues with the same MIS score of 0.75. Workplace Culture and Support Systems ranked equally at fifth place with an MIS score of 0.74. The responses also indicate that traditional views regarding women's societal roles hinder their career progression, and issues such as gender pay gaps (0.72), and the insecurity associated with short-term contracts (0.71) ranked lower but are perceived as significant barriers that affect long-term planning and stability for women in the construction industry.

4.3. Findings from the Focus Group Discussion

The following themes emerged from the Focus Group Discussion:

4.3.1. Gender Biases

Gender biases affecting women's advancement were a prevalent discussion point. A female CEO of a construction company noted that, "Women are often overlooked for projects simply because of gender biases; these norms need to be challenged." A male professional manager also stated that "women generally find it difficult to access construction due to gender biases, whether it is in business or in the office." According to him, it is rare to find new entrants in the construction industry, those those who have made it continue growing while those like us remain stagnant and in the same place."

4.3.2. Work-Life Balance Challenges

Several participants highlighted women's difficulties in juggling professional duties and family responsibilities. According to a male academic, "The construction industry is demanding, and for women, managing home life alongside work is a real struggle. Women need supported from the men in their lives." A female professional noted that "there is no counselling for women to motivate them, women can also do men's work."

4.3.3. Educational Gaps and Opportunities

There was a consensus for improved educational initiatives in construction-related fields to encourage female participation. A female Health and Safety practitioner noted that, "We need training, master classes and short courses." Another female professional stated, "In construction and building courses, there is no funding for people, especially women, to empower themselves and improve their living conditions,"

supporting the view that there is inadequate educational training and courses available for women.

4.3.4. *Advocacy and Policy Changes*

The group discussed the need for advocacy to promote women's representation at higher organization levels. According to a Male Media Consultant, "We need to build a space for force that accommodates women and helps them to demand their rights." The female CEO of an advocacy group noted that "Gender inclusivity in the industry should be non-negotiable" and "that the lack of policy implementers is a concern."

4.3.5. *Utilization of Technology*

Participants noted the importance of leveraging technology to enhance participation. "Creating a database of resources for women in construction could help in networking and connect them to jobs and opportunities (Female member of the South African Women in Construction). The Focus Group Discussion revealed a multifaceted overview of the barriers to female career progression in the South African construction industry. Key issues that surfaced include gender biases, work-life challenges, educational gaps and opportunities, advocacy and policy changes, and the utilization of technology.

4.4. *Discussion of Findings*

The study sought to identify the barriers women face regarding career progression in the South African construction industry. Findings indicate that while progress has been made in engaging women in the construction sector, barriers such as financial constraints, gender biases, work-life balance issues, and insufficient educational opportunities persist. The survey data reveals that educational-related expenses and costs are perceived as the most significant barrier to women's career progression in construction, with an MIS of 0.76. This indicates a pressing need for financial support systems that can alleviate the economic burdens women encounter when pursuing careers in construction. Additionally, male domination in supervisory and managerial roles is seen as a significant barrier to female career progression, reflected in the responses indicating an MIS score of 0.75 for the combined barriers and lack of encouragement from male colleagues. This aligns with the findings of the FGD and previous research by Kodagoda and Jayawardhana (2022), who identified a considerable disconnect between women entering the workforce and their representation in decision-making positions. This systemic undervaluation of women's contributions aligns with the documented gender discrimination in the literature, reinforcing that societal norms influence organizational behaviors and decisions (Norberg & Johansson, 2021)..

Barriers such as a highly competitive environment and institutional discrimination, each scoring an MIS of 0.74, indicate not only a hostile workplace culture but also reflect larger issues of gender inequality that persist in the industry. The survey findings are aligned

with previous studies indicating that male-dominated organizational cultures often foster environments that make it difficult for women to thrive (Naoum et al., 2020). Work-life balance emerged as another key barrier during the FGD. Participants articulated the struggles of managing professional responsibilities alongside family duties, which aligns with previous studies by Oyewobi et al. (2019). The findings highlight the need for more flexible work arrangements and family-friendly policies in an industry known for its demanding schedules and rigid work environments (Lefrançois & Trottier, 2022).

The synthesis across all sources of data used reveals a narrative that highlights both progress and persistent barriers to the career progression of women in the South African construction industry. The intersection of these issues – rooted in gender bias, cultural expectation, finance and organization culture – shows that women's progress is inhibited by both structural (gender inequalities, educational access, organizational culture) and societal factors. For instance, traditional stereotypes, as observed in the literature and survey, significantly diminish women's aspirations and reinforces cultural biases against them.

5. *Conclusion and Further Research*

This paper investigates the barriers to female progression and trends in the construction industry using a mixed-method research approach. The study found that there are improvements in female representation and ownership in the South African construction industry. Despite these improvements, significant barriers-including financial constraints, gender biases, organizational structure, and work-life balance issues-persist and hinder female career progression. Based on these findings, the study concludes that positive changes in the organizational culture of construction companies, educational support, mentorship, and networking will foster an equitable work environment that enables women to thrive and contribute effectively to the construction industry.

The study recommends that construction companies implement policies to close gender pay gaps and introduce quotas for women in leadership positions; develop and support mentorship initiatives to guide women in career development and leadership competencies; and increase exposure for young women to construction career paths through funded educational initiatives and outreach programs in schools. The study fills a gap in the literature by providing empirical data on the key challenges women encounter, such as the cost of education, particularly in the South African context, where the representation of women in leadership roles remains low. Further research could investigate how technology can be leveraged to enhance female participation and career progression in the construction industry.

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Appendix 1

Table 2: Ranking of the Barriers to Female Career Progression

Barrier	Response %					MIS	RANK
	Insignificant.....Very Significant						
	1	2	3	4	5		
Educational related-expenses and costs	8.18	6.36	20.91	27.27	37.27	0.76	1
Male domination in construction industry careers. Few female peers, supervisors and managers	9.01	10.81	17.12	20.72	42.34	0.75	2
Ineffective programs to attract women to challenging and competitive jobs and positions	9.26	8.33	18.52	24.07	39.81	0.75	2
Lack of encouragement from men	4.59	10.09	25.69	26.61	33.03	0.75	2
Highly competitive environment, being unwelcoming and lacking support	8.93	9.82	20.54	22.32	38.39	0.74	5
Explicit and implicit gender bias favouring men. Institutional discrimination	8.93	11.61	18.75	22.32	38.39	0.74	5
Lack of support networks, including career sponsors and professional groups	9.73	10.62	16.81	23.89	38.94	0.74	5
Lack of female mentors/role models, career counselling and supervision opportunities	9.73	10.62	18.58	21.24	39.82	0.74	5
Lack of strategies and policies for gender balance in construction-related fields	10.00	7.27	20.00	28.18	34.55	0.74	5
Lack of access to vocational construction-related training and development opportunities	10.00	8.18	20.00	26.36	35.45	0.74	5
Difficulty in finding work-life balance. Lack of flexible work conditions	14.04	8.77	21.05	32.46	23.68	0.69	40
Lack of encouragement and support from family members and friends/peers	12.73	10.91	22.73	23.64	30.00	0.69	40
Queen bee syndrome in the workplace: women competing and hindering other women	7.89	15.79	32.46	17.54	26.32	0.68	42
Women are perceived with lower physical and mental abilities	19.30	8.77	15.79	24.56	31.58	0.68	42
Women being discourages or dismissed from managerial and leadership positions	14.29	16.07	17.86	23.21	28.57	0.67	44
Lack of personal interest in construction-related fields	16.81	9.73	21.24	24.78	27.43	0.67	44
Lack of self-confidence about skills and abilities	16.96	8.93	25.00	21.43	27.68	0.67	44
Lack of supportive facilities I the working environment (e.g. creche, single-sex toilets)	12.17	14.78	23.48	25.22	24.35	0.67	44
Lack of confidence to apply for positions and promotions	18.02	9.01	21.62	25.23	26.13	0.66	45
Construction-related courses are difficult	18.92	9.91	28.83	21.62	20.72	0.63	46