

Breaking the Concrete Ceiling: Unveiling perspectives and pathways to gender diversity and equity in the construction industry

Summary & recommendations

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Introduction

"You got to keep your company car even though you only work 16 hours a week due to your masters? Is your manager in love with you or something?"

This is something that has been jokingly said to me personally, twice, by two different male colleagues and it might not be an uncommon type of thing to hear when you work in a technical field, as a woman.

In many countries, women are significantly underrepresented in technical occupations. In 2011, figures from the United States (US), for instance, say that the share of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) jobs is around 24% (1). Another example of the gender gap comes from the Netherlands, where the share of women in technical professions is around 14%, similar to the UK (2). The need for more women in STEM fields is widely recognized, with the United Nations acknowledging the importance of ensuring unrestricted and equal entry to, as well as active involvement in, science, technology, and innovation for women and girls across all age groups. They state that participation of women in these fields plays a big role in advancing gender equality and fostering the empowerment of women and girls (3).

Much research is done on the challenges and barriers that women face in male-dominated environments, especially the workplace. One of these environments that have a poor representation of women is the construction industry. Research of women in the construction industry in the UK reveals that women often occupy roles in facilitating departments, rather than technical positions (4). A generic report by Techniekpact (5) claims that only 2% of the technical occupations in the construction industry in the Netherlands is occupied by women. This last statistic emphasizes a significant gender gap within the Dutch context, prompting a need for a detailed investigation into the factors contributing to this notable gender imbalance. A comprehensive and actionable framework for effectively addressing factors of gender diversity and equity within organizations seems to be lacking. The absence of a suitable framework could leave organizations grappling with how to identify, approach and navigate issues effectively.

This research aims to bridge that gap by examining the perspectives and experiences of different roles within an organization regarding gender diversity and equity in relation to a newly defined framework for organizational change. By doing this, this research contributes to the existing knowledge on gender and inclusion in the workplace, specifically in male-dominated industries.

To gather in-depth data on the topic, the combined case study and ethnographic



research design is chosen to thoroughly investigate the gender diversity and equity challenges within one company, a large rail maintenance company in the Netherlands. The selection of this organization is based on the researcher's role as an employee, which grants access to interviewees, data, and a distinct contextual advantage. This methodology provides insights into the organization's culture, practices, and policies while considering the broader construction industry landscape. This approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of the research objective while acknowledging the researcher's unique position within the organization.



Research Findings

Research finds that women experience a lot of obstacles in male-dominated environments. In the context of the construction industry, Wright (4) identified a hostile working environment as a prevalent obstacle for women. Factors such as the gender pay gap, demanding working hours, and sexualization and harassment contribute to this hostile environment. Organizational culture plays a crucial role in shaping women's experiences in male-dominated industries. Fielden (6) noted that women in construction often feel isolated and unwelcome due to their minority status.

Power dynamics are another challenge for women in male-dominated environments. Wright (4) highlighted the use of different power resources by men, including positional, personal, and sexual power. Sexualized interactions and harassment contribute to a hostile work environment, with women often forced to manage men's behavior and set strict boundaries.

In response to these challenges, various strategies have been proposed to promote gender diversity and inclusion. Morello (7) argued for a cultural shift within industries to make them more welcoming to women. Mentorship programs and male allyship have been identified as effective support mechanisms for women in male-dominated industries.

Powell (8) suggested strategies such as advertising diversity messages, expanding selection criteria to include emotional intelligence, implementing non-monetary rewards, and challenging gendered biases in job advertisements to improve gender diversity. The choice between these two ideologies can impact the effectiveness of gender equity efforts. Gender-blindness, while aiming for equality, may overlook systemic biases and perpetuate existing inequities. Gender-awareness acknowledges the importance of addressing gender disparities and actively dismantling gender-based biases. Given the obstacles women often have to deal with, is the gender-blindness approach more effective to promote diversity, equality and inclusion.

In this comprehensive examination of gender diversity and equity within a construction company in the Netherlands, a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics and challenges that women face in such a male-dominated field emerged. Through the perspectives of employees, managers, and Human Resources (HR) professionals, the study revealed the multifaceted nature of gender-related experiences within the organization, adding to the existing literature of obstacles faced by women.



Obstacles Experienced by women

Research suggests that women are in the spotlight in a male-dominated field. They are either supposed to be the woman who proves the assumptions wrong, or they are expected to act in a certain way because of these assumptions. Consequently, women seem to adapt. It seems that women have to choose to embrace their femininity with the risk of not being taken as seriously as their male colleagues, or they adapt to the male-dominated culture by changing their behavior by becoming more aggressive ('bitchy') to be heard.

Power dynamics related to gender were also found. One interviewee shared the story of being compared to a colleague's daughter, with the best intentions. However, she shared that this comparison was detrimental to her own perception of competence as it introduced an automatic power relationship between her and her colleague. A demonstration of a form of gender-based power assertion was given by another interviewee, who described a comment made by a colleague during a meeting with multiple other colleagues. This male colleague had compared the interviewee to his teenage daughter, which can be interpreted as an attempt to assert power and control over the interviewee.

Power dynamics are also shown in the role that management plays. People in power seem to have the ability to set the tone, which determines the position that women have in a team or a meeting. This emphasizes the importance of management commitment and their position as role models in challenging gender dynamics.

To be taken seriously in the male-dominated organization, women expressed that they felt the need to assert themselves to address gender and power dynamics. They expressed a strong sense of ownership and responsibility, many recognizing that gender related comments were 'part of the deal'. Setting boundaries to let colleagues know what kind of comments are acceptable and which are not seems to be accepted by women as being their own responsibility.

Gaining experience plays a significant role in how women perceive and manage expectations. However, it also plays a role in women's own confidence in their professional abilities.

The perspectives offered by female interviewees is not fully recognized within the management perspectives. While all managers express the desire for more diversity and more women within their team and the organization, they do not recognize the unique challenges and power dynamics that arise from the gender dynamics.



Management Recognition

The interviews with managers reveal several implicit biases related to gender. These biases are rooted in societal expectations and gender stereotypes.

First, some managers suggest that women, especially younger ones, prioritize part-time work and personal time over their careers. They imply that men are more flexible and better at balancing work and personal life. This reflects a stereotype that women are less committed to their jobs and prioritize family life.

This is related to biases about commitment. Managers express surprise or admiration when female colleagues demonstrate strong work ethics, such as working on weekends. This implies a bias that women are less dedicated to their jobs compared to men.

Secondly, managers sometimes describe women in leadership roles as either "bitchy-but-fair" or "feminine". This suggests that women's leadership styles are evaluated differently from those of men, leading to gender-related stereotypes in leadership.

Third, managers acknowledge gender-related differences in self-confidence and self-perception. They suggest that women tend to undervalue their abilities compared to men, reinforcing the stereotype that women lack confidence in their expertise. Overall, managers place responsibility on individuals, particularly women, for self-imposed inequalities. Some address that women can control the way that they are perceived or the opportunities that they get by changing their own behavior. However, while acknowledging the responsibility, some also acknowledge the need for a more equitable approach to distribute opportunities.

Being unaware of barriers that female employees encounter shows a blindness to gender challenges, which is also complemented by a self-professed gender-blindness. Although they claim not to consider gender when evaluating employees, differences in career ambition, willingness to work full-time, and assertiveness are emphasized and often assigned to gender differences. This apparent contradiction suggests a potential inconsistency between their stated gender-blindness and their underlying biases.



Goals for Gender Diversity

Most female employees express the benefits of having more women in their teams, including an improved culture and atmosphere. However, there is some variation in opinions, with a minority feeling content as the only woman among men. The questionnaire results reveal a stark difference in perceived importance, with women valuing diversity efforts more highly than men.

On the management side, there is a recognition of the need for more women in the organization to reflect societal diversity better. However, there is hesitancy regarding specific goals or quotas for gender diversity. Many managers prioritize meritocracy in hiring and promotion decisions and resist setting clear diversity targets. Some managers acknowledge the need for gradual progress and a clear vision for gender diversity, while others emphasize the importance of a heartfelt commitment to change.

HR faces challenges in attracting women to the industry due to a perceived lack of interest from female candidates. Recruitment teams note that personnel shortages make it challenging to prioritize gender diversity when qualified male candidates are readily available. They also recognize the influence of societal expectations and gender biases on girls' career choices and the need to create a more women-friendly work environment.

The concept of meritocracy was discussed in interviews, where most managers emphasize merit-based decisions and therefore, express hesitation regarding quotas or clear diversity goals. Some female employees recognize instances of nepotism or arbitrary promotions, indicating potential disparities between the idealized meritocracy and actual practices. To address these issues, the organization has introduced systems like the "vlootschouw" and the "functiehuis" to create a more objective evaluation and advancement framework. The role of HR business partners is crucial in critically assessing managers' evaluations to promote fairness.

HR acknowledges the importance of language in job advertisements, ensuring inclusivity and diversity in attracting candidates. Moreover, they emphasize the significance of addressing basic needs and providing a supportive environment for women, including appropriate work clothing, facilities, and amenities.

As an addition to a desire to diversity, policy requirements also serve as an incentive to diversify. As of January 5, 2023, the CSRD (Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive) has taken effect, compelling large and listed companies to report on various social and environmental aspects to enhance sustainability reporting, transparency, and comparability. Among the social factors, organizations must report on working conditions, equality, non-discrimination, diversity, inclusion, and human rights. This directive



mandates disclosing diversity policy and gender pay gap information starting in the 2024 financial year, with specific benchmarks yet to be defined. The guidelines from EU directive 2019/2034 for financial institutions provide insights into potential diversity policy expectations. Achieving consensus on gender diversity among top management is crucial to meet CSRD requirements. The directive addresses the gender pay gap through gender-balanced decision-making and equal pay for equal work reporting, stressing the importance for objective assessment.



Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made to address the gender imbalance and promote gender diversity and equity within the construction industry.

1. It is advisable to establish goals regarding the representation of women in various departments of the organization and monitor these goals periodically. Without clear goals it's not possible to implement a strategy to improve diversity and inclusion. These goals and strategies will assist in complying with regulatory requirements, such as the CSRD.
2. Actively challenge gender biases for women found within the organization and management. To work towards a gender-awareness mindset, initiatives should address unconscious biases, gender dynamics, and gendered language.
3. Implement mentoring and sponsorship programs specifically tailored for women in the construction industry. These programs can provide guidance, support, and networking opportunities, empowering women to navigate challenges, assert boundaries, and enhance their resilience.
4. Establish transparent and objective evaluation and advancement frameworks that ensure fair opportunities for all employees, regardless of gender. Monitoring assessments should be done by multiple people.

Set goals, make strategy, address implicit biases, make sure objective assessment is monitored, mentorship programs for women. AND AND AND AND. Not one, but all at the same time.

According to the framework described, creating awareness is the first step. This means awareness about the organization and its culture, but also about people's own biases. Many will recognize the organizational culture, but not one's own role in it.



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