

Is the construction industry dawdling on gender progress?

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Many sectors are sprinting towards gender equality, implementing

initiatives and programs to boost diversity in senior management, but one of the industries still lagging behind in Australia is construction.

Construction remains one of the most male-dominated industries in the world, with female participation remaining stubbornly sluggish since the 1990s, at around 12 percent in Australia.

A collaborative study between the University of Sydney and Queensland University of Technology published in the American Society of Civil Engineers looked into the effectiveness of the design, selection, and implementation of human resources (HR) practices in engineering and construction industries.

The researchers found that the majority of organizational leaders appear to be unaware of the systems and practices within their organizations that lead to unfair discrimination based on gender.

Instead, the researchers found construction organizations select gender-based equality and diversity HR initiatives based on legal requirements, rather than on an understanding of structural and cultural inequalities and injustice within their organizations. This leads them to fall short on delivering significant, innovative, and transformative outcomes.

"Organizations in engineering construction are persistently among the most male-dominated worldwide and are not capitalizing on numerous performance gains derived from greater diversity," said lead author and School of Project Management researcher, Dr. Marzena Baker, who previously worked in the [construction industry](#).

"Although some [women](#) work in construction and building companies in Australia, very few are in management or leading roles. Women's representation as board directors is only 11.1 percent, with women making up only 2.7 percent of construction CEOs, and 15.1 percent of

construction key managers," she said.

"Comparatively, across all industries, women make up over 18 percent of all CEOs, 28.1 percent of board directors and 32 percent of key managers.

"While the construction industry is attracting women, and women are studying engineering and project management at a tertiary level, very few of these candidates are being properly progressed once they enter the workforce. This is not for lack of desire or motivation but is due to organizational issues."

Tailored approach needed

Dr. Baker believes a tailored—rather than perfunctory—approach would assist construction organizations in increasing gender equality in management.

"Instead of ignoring demographics and the identity of women by treating all employees the same, construction organizations could achieve greater equality by developing specific and tailored means of attracting, retaining and promoting women," Dr. Baker said.

"Those initiatives are often described as "special measures" or "affirmative action" and are allowed under federal anti-discrimination laws. They are positively associated with the increased numbers of women in management and across organizational levels.

"It's evident that current gender-based HR diversity initiatives in the construction industry—which are only focused on meeting legislation and treatment based on merit alone—need improvement and nuance. The decisions by leaders also need to be underpinned by a better understanding of structural and cultural inequalities, justice and bias."

Women could be a boon for the industry

Dr. Baker believes the industry is missing out on diverse skillsets and workforce by not adequately supporting women and progressing their careers.

"Australia is experiencing a [construction](#) skills shortage and rather than looking externally for workers—which is more difficult now due to the pandemic—we should look to increase workforce capacity by hiring and promoting women. Employing and progressing more women would also cater to a widening range of customer needs and would increase innovation," she said.

Provided by University of Sydney

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