

In Conversation Blog
22 March 2021

NAWIC Releases Findings of IWD Scholarship 2020 Winner
Is Sustainability Leadership in the Built Environment 'Women's Business?'

The 2020 NAWIC International Women's Day Scholarship winner, Sarah Lawlor released the findings of her research paper at the 2021 NAWIC NSW IWD Breakfast.

Sarah, who is a proud NAWIC Member and Registered Senior Architect at fjmt studio, utilised the Scholarship funds to explore her timely and relevant research topic *Is Sustainability Leadership in the Built Environment 'Women's Business?'*

Her paper was based on the premise that gender equity and diversity in leadership has been proven to improve business profitability and whether this trend extends to sustainability related roles in the built environment.

QUESTIONS:

Your research appears to have taken you away from your original premise – how did that occur during your research?

SL: The premise for my research remained the same – to explore the diversity of the sustainability industry, and to make sure women's voices are well represented in this critical industry. What changed through the course of the year was that the results were unexpected. I thought the trend of low female representation in the construction industry may extend to the sustainability roles within it, but what I found was an ostensibly diverse industry. However, digging a little deeper, I found that in the sustainability field's interactions with the construction industry, perception issues relating to diversity and equity are still evident. My research took a different turn as I delved into an exploration of these perception issues that act as a barrier to the uptake and integration of sustainability.

The research appears to show that as a relatively new field, sustainability doesn't seem to suffer from the same prejudices or claims of a “boys club” culture. Is this correct?

SL: That's correct. Sustainability has become a standalone field over the last few years, with a culture distinct from the predominantly male spaces of construction and engineering. Newly developed as it is, it seems unburdened by the kind of ingrained prejudices or gender stereotypes that persist in construction and engineering. Many people who took part in my research shared experiences that highlight that gender equity is still an issue in the broader built environment industries, with issues including bias and discrimination examples of a 'boys club'

culture. However, the people who participated in my research overwhelmingly felt more supported in the sustainability field compared to construction in relation to gender equity and diversity.

Do you think there is a risk of sustainability becoming a female gendered field within construction? Do you think this will make it less respected within the industry?

SL: My study found a diverse sustainability field, with strong participation by men and women. Women participate at higher levels in the sustainability sector than other areas of the built environment, including the construction industry, and this can contribute to a perception of sustainability as a 'female' field. Compounded by other gendered perception issues uncovered in my research, such as sustainability being seen as 'soft' or 'unmanly,' there is a risk that these perceptions could be a barrier to participation from all genders (including as a deterrent for male involvement), but they also devalue the work being undertaken in this critical industry, reducing its much-needed impact.

It's a difficult line for a study like this to walk, because there is a desire to celebrate women's strong involvement and contribution to such an important industry, but a risk that a perception of strong female involvement could negatively impact how sustainability is valued in the construction industry, which is of course, a fundamental problem.

Sustainability industry appears to be more flexible in its work arrangements. What do you think that players/leaders in the construction industry could learn from the culture of the sustainability industry?

SL: Sustainability is a thriving professional field, and can be seen as a leader in enacting practices that support diversity, including flexible work practices and development of female leadership. This is indicative of the interconnectedness between the environmental and social aims of sustainability. However, these practices are not new or revolutionary - their uptake has been advocated for in the construction industry for many years. The level of satisfaction of people working in sustainability, and the fact that they feel supported in their working arrangements, should provide the construction industry proof of the benefits of a flexible work environment. A cultural shift is urgently required for the construction industry to accept and act on these learnings.

Could the sustainability industry be held up as a model for construction?

SL: One of the key areas where the sustainability industry is leading the way is in the emergence of a new model of leadership. Sustainability leaders are purposeful, strategic and empathetic - qualities that could be equally described simply as 'good' leadership, but haven't always been so valued. I think the construction industry has long upheld the model of tough, driven leaders, and many women I spoke to as part of this research have at various times during their career striven to emulate the leadership traits they saw being rewarded around them. The emergence and acceptance of a new style of leader, differently equipped to suit the changing context of our world, could aid the promotion of more women in leadership roles in the construction industry. Persuasive cultural change is required in the construction field, and making space for a new model of leadership is one

way the industry could create positive change for both gender equity and sustainability.

Has it turned out that your examination of the sustainability issue has uncovered a blueprint for what the construction industry could be if more women were invited to the leadership table?

SL: I would agree – it was encouraging to find an industry where women are represented in leadership roles in seemingly equal numbers to men in the industry. The women I spoke to generally felt supported in their roles, passionate about their work, and motivated by the change they could affect. These are the kind of outcomes that the construction industry should be striving for, and the sustainability field could certainly be described as a blueprint for that. That's not to say that challenges don't exist for women in leadership roles in sustainability – everyone I spoke to had their war stories - but I am optimistic about the culture evident in sustainability that supports meaningful representation of women in leadership.

What has this scholarship meant for you professionally?

SL: The scholarship has provided a way for me to solidify a focus on sustainability as forefront in my career. It's provided opportunities to have in depth conversations with leaders in the field, who have broadened my mind to the scope of our impact, and reaffirmed to me the criticality of sustainability.

What advice do you have for future winners?

SL: The opportunity to spend a year exploring a passion project is invaluable. I hope future winners similarly find scope to contribute to our collective vision for a more equitable industry.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Is Sustainability Leadership in the Built Environment 'Women's Business?'

A Study of Diversity in Sustainability Leadership in the Built Environment

Over the last few decades, the business case for gender equity and diversity in leadership has been proven to improve business profitability. The research undertaken in this study is based on the premise that diversity must similarly improve other business outcomes, such as sustainability goals. The built environment industry continues to be male dominated. This study investigates whether this trend extends to sustainability related roles in the built environment, with an aim to explore the diversity of the sector and promote diversity in leadership as a mechanism to improve sustainability outcomes.

What this study has uncovered is a diverse sustainability sector, in which women participate at higher levels than in other areas of the built environment. Gender representation in sustainability was found to be fairly balanced, with significant representation of women in leadership positions role-modelling and encouraging increased participation in the industry.

Evident in the sustainability sector is a strong interconnectedness between

environmental and social aims, with diversity seen as fundamental to sustainability. The sustainability field demonstrates practices that support diversity, including flexibility, mentoring and a commitment to social equity. As a new field with a culture distinct from the construction or engineering sectors of the built environment industry, the sustainability field is unburdened by entrenched gender stereotypes and rigid hierarchical structures that have been historically evident in other areas of the built environment.

However, sustainability has its own challenges in interacting with the established structures of the built environment industry, where problematic and often gendered perceptions of the sustainability field are evident, such as in its perception as a 'soft' field, with connotations of nurturing or 'greenie' types. Each of these perceptions is concerning, as they undermine and devalue the sustainability field, reducing the efficacy of sustainability outcomes in the built environment.

The research presented in this report recommends continued efforts to improve gender equity and diversity in the built environment, drawing lessons from an ostensibly diverse sustainability sector. Equity demands mutual respect, and pervasive cultural change is required in the broader built environment to break down negative perceptions of the sustainability field, and improve the integration and uptake of sustainability.

To answer the title question, is sustainability leadership in the built environment 'women's business?' Of course not, it's everyone's business. In the context of the climate crisis, we need to collectively take action, in the most effective ways possible, ensuring all voices are heard.