

2013

DISCUSSION PAPER

01

WHAT WOMEN WANT IN A CONSTRUCTION CAREER

**A discussion paper commissioned
by the National Association of Women in Construction**



nawic

The National
Association of Women
in Construction



FOREWORD



**Sheryle Moon, Chief Executive Officer
National Association of Women in Construction**

In 2012, the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) undertook a survey of its Victoria/Tasmania Chapter to examine the biggest challenges women face in securing and maintaining a career in the Australian construction industry.

The survey and subsequent forum revealed three key challenges - attraction, organisational and industry culture, and retention - that our industry must address if we are to maximise the number of women in the construction workforce.

1. Attraction

The industry suffers from a range of misperceptions - such as the unsuitability of roles for women - which act as significant barriers to women choosing construction careers. However, when properly engaged, talented women will seek education and career opportunities in the sector. Industry must invest in early attraction programs to develop relationships with potential talent.

2. Culture

A number of cultural barriers to women's participation in the sector remain. These range from long hours and inflexible workplaces, through to male dominated networks and lack of female role models. Active support and recognition of achievement is essential for women to feel comfortable in construction roles. Organisations must acknowledge the contributions of women and strive to meet their needs through initiatives such as mentoring programs and female-friendly networking opportunities.

3. Retention

Retaining female talent requires more flexible work environments and clear communication channels. Organisations must be willing to support alternative role options and lateral career paths while continuing to value the achievements of their female staff.

The recommendations in this report should act as a clarion call to our industry. With commitment and dedication, we will not only expand the career opportunities available to women in the construction sector, but also enable our industry to expand its skills base, drive innovation and secure Australia's reputation as a world leader.

Finally, I'd like to thank business journalist Adeline Teoh for synthesising the findings from the report and forum into this paper, and making a valuable contribution to this discussion.

INTRODUCTION

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This discussion paper explores the three key challenges - attraction, organisational and industry culture, and retention - and provides recommendations that will help create a culture that welcomes gender diversity.

While education opportunities for women in Australia have never been greater, with female tertiary enrolments now outnumbering male enrolments¹, some pervasive stereotypes have the potential to dissuade new talent, particularly younger women, from seeking construction careers.

To attract women into construction, the industry must clearly communicate to potential talent and to their sources of influence - including friends and family, teachers and careers counsellors and the media - that the construction industry can offer diverse and dynamic career opportunities.

Organisational culture throughout the construction industry continues to be male-dominated. Despite this, male employees are generally accommodating of women when they take up roles in the industry. Changes occur both actively and passively: proactive organisations use positive discrimination to diversify their workforce, while in other workplaces any addition of women on staff will incrementally alter the team culture. In both cases, support from peers and management is crucial to ensure a positive environment for women in construction.

The attrition rate of women in construction stems from two main reasons: lack of flexibility and lack of career progression. The construction industry is a highly structured sector where roles, and the tasks embedded in them, are well defined and therefore rigid. Other aspects such as long hours, activities undertaken and site locations - sometimes remote or requiring long commutes - are also firmly set. A lack of control with

regard to flexibility, often due to women accepting the role of family carer², appears to be at the heart of why women leave the industry; in many cases, work and personal commitments cannot be balanced.

To address inflexibility in the sector, the industry needs to consider alternative ways of conducting operations. This will benefit both women and men by preventing burnout and accommodating different life situations.

Lack of career progression seems to be heavily tied to organisational culture. While some cases of attrition have come from women hitting the 'glass ceiling' either due to organisational factors or from a lack of challenging roles, others originate from instances where women feel unable to communicate their dissatisfaction or control their career development. This may also be tied to pay inequality or slow pay progression. Making the culture more supportive and appreciative of women, and providing clear paths for career advancement can slow attrition for these reasons.

Reducing gender disadvantage will not only benefit the women who wish to find and engage in fulfilling construction work; it will also enable the construction industry to open up its talent pool to build and develop current skills levels and drive innovation.

The task is challenging, but not impossible. It will take time and commitment from leaders in the industry to achieve this change through influencing senior management and human resource departments in construction organisations. Women already in the industry will also need to commit to the cause at a grassroots level and be aware that they are forging a new paradigm for women to come. Only when the top-down and bottom-up pressure affects existing culture can positive change for women occur.

¹ Tertiary enrolments include both vocational education and training (VET) and university admissions. Females comprised 51.7% of all tertiary entrants: 48% of VET enrolments and 58% of university entrants according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics

² According to the World Economic Forum's publication *The Global Gender Gap Report 2011* for UNESCO

IS CONSTRUCTION ATTRACTIVE TO WOMEN?

Due to the diversity of roles in the construction industry, it is difficult to say how many women are employed in the sector. Roles range from traditionally male-dominated areas such as labouring, engineering and project management, to more female-dominated departments such as administration, marketing and human resources.

As a guide, the Australian Government's Workplace Gender Equity Agency states that female employees represent 11.7 per cent of the construction workforce³, while Engineers Australia reports that more than 10 per cent of its members are female⁴.

Results from NAWIC's survey reveal a number of misperceptions of the construction industry perpetuated by family, friends, teachers and career counsellors and the media with regard to the suitability of construction roles for women.

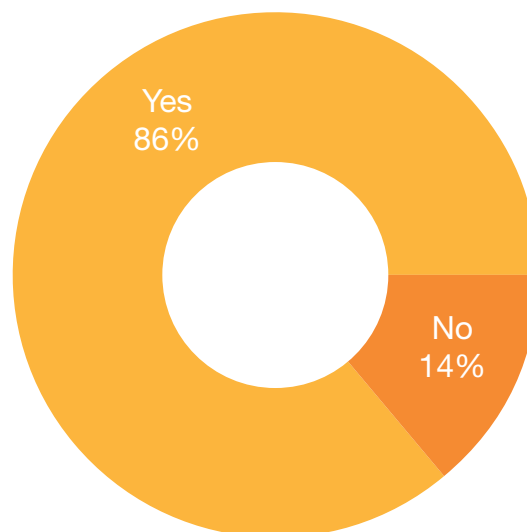
Some influencers omitted the construction industry as a choice for women, whereas others actively discouraged women from entering the sector for reasons ranging from the long hours and inflexibility involved, to the amount of education required to enter particular roles such as engineering, to the very fact that it was male-dominated.

Of the female respondents who indicated that negative influences suggested construction was 'unsuitable' for them, 86 per cent said their gender was a factor in that message. In comparison, no male participants who were told the industry was 'unsuitable' cited gender as a factor in that message.

By comparison, the small sample of male respondents in the same survey were more likely to be discouraged due to factors such as the perception of poor career prospects and poor pay based on outdated ideas of construction as a 'low tech' industry.

Figure 1

Is gender an influencer in the suitability of a construction career?



On a positive note, however, more than 52 per cent of female respondents were told that "the construction industry has interesting roles" with family members behind this message almost a third of the time. The importance of family support for women entering the construction sector, particularly at the graduate level, cannot be overstated.

When a woman aspires to a role that requires university education, such as engineering, for financial reasons it is often only with support from family that she can attain the relevant qualifications.

The most frequently cited barrier to entry into a construction role was 'lack of experience', with 42.1 per cent of female respondents naming it their top barrier, followed by 'inadequate education/qualifications' and 'gender issues' each on 16.7 per cent

³ *Women in the workforce: By industry*, Workplace Gender Equity Agency, January 2013, accessed 12 April 2013

⁴ Engineers Australia Membership Data (July 2010)

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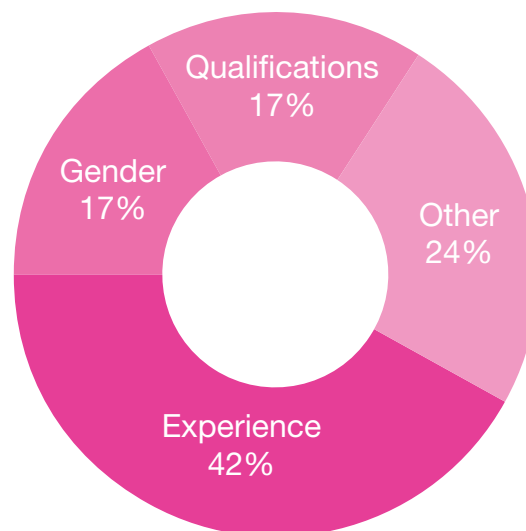
respectively. While a lack of experience and/or lack of adequate education is an expected barrier in most fields, especially at entry level, that one in six women cited 'gender issues' as a barrier should be of concern for the industry.

Aggregating the female respondents' top two barriers, 'lack of suitable roles' was the second most popular obstacle at 17.7 per cent. Suitability in this context relates to both suitability of experience, as new entrants to the industry would unsurprisingly have fewer roles they could realistically apply for, as well as suitability of skills matched to particular roles. Paired with the barriers of experience and education, this indicates that the industry needs more entry-level positions to enable less experienced workers to enter into construction roles. This could include graduate and/or work experience programs for students, or orientation programs for women transferring from other sectors to streamline their career pathways.

Despite the barriers to entry, the respondents now work in the construction industry largely due to factors of their own making. Respondents used words such as 'self-belief', 'self-confidence', 'tenacity', 'persistence' and 'perseverance' to describe how they broke through barriers to entry, while other paid homage to the support they received from family, friends, mentors and employers.

Figure 2

What are the barriers to a construction career?



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INVEST IN EARLY ATTRACTION

Industry must promote itself to women at an early stage to enable them to make an informed decision about pursuing a career in construction. The response from the forum discussion on this topic suggested that students were generally unaware of the opportunities in the sector, including the variety of roles and educational prerequisites, and were therefore at a disadvantage when choosing the right study path.

Forum participants recommended that industry “catch them in high school before VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education]”, because subject paths chosen in the middle years of high school and taken in the final two years of high school usually formed part of the prerequisites for appropriate tertiary study. They also suggested that industry, educators and organisations need to collaborate on programs such as scholarships, site visits and industry talks to demystify the sector and encourage more students to consider a career in construction.

Early attraction would also assist in clarifying different roles available in a construction career, leading to greater, more informed awareness of the industry, which would negate some of the dampening effects of external influences who may misinform potential candidates due to a lack of knowledge of the sector.

PROVIDE ROLE MODELS AND OVERT SUPPORT FOR WOMEN

Since the perceived ‘unsuitability’ of construction is so closely linked to gender, industry should promote female role models who can dispel some of the negative perceptions of the sector and provide women with a realistic view of construction roles.

At present, many of the women in construction roles have gained a foothold in the industry due to their own determination and drive. To widen the pool and capture more talent, organisations should look to implement strategies that provide overt support for women suitable for a construction career. One way to do this is to conduct a campaign that highlights skills rather than roles in construction to attract talent from other sectors.

Attracting women from other sectors in mid-career is also often overlooked in favour of strategies to engage graduate entrants. One survey respondent suggested women in the 35-45 age range as an untapped market for talent.

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While the number of women in construction roles still remains comparatively small, awareness of the need to accommodate gender diversity in the industry is high, with industry bodies and construction organisations developing and adopting a number of gender inclusive initiatives.⁵

It is also clear that the pioneering phase of having women in construction has passed, with women in all but the very small construction organisations expected to have at least one female colleague, even if she may not be in the same department.

Although women are present in middle and upper management in several construction organisations, unfortunately, the number of women in leadership positions remains low. The effect of this is a distinct absence of role models at the highest level, which has the psychological effect of signalling to women that it is impossible to attain such a position.

In NAWIC's survey, respondents were asked to rank a number of frequently cited influences on organisational culture. More than 56 per cent of all participants indicated that their direct manager or supervisor had the strongest effect on organisational culture, with colleagues the second most influential choice. Less than six per cent of female respondents said these people affected their comfort level as a woman in construction in a negative way, and just six per cent said it had a negative effect on their future career development. This indicates that much of the negativity that women encounter does not stem from social sources and, therefore, must relate to the role itself and the other elements of the industry, such as the physical environment.

Bullying does still occur in the industry.⁶ It appears, however, that women feel able to control most negative incidents that stem from gender discrimination, particularly when

they feel supported by direct managers, supervisor and colleagues.

Women entering a construction career are aware that it is a male-dominated industry and as such are prepared for gender imbalance. While none condone gender negative behaviour, in many instances most will overlook minor indiscretions and learn to 'pick their battles'.

Depending on personality, women will employ different strategies to deal with direct or indirect discrimination. Several women have commented that aggressive behaviour and/or 'acting like a man' does not work and in some cases serves to confuse gender issues. Most females working in the industry adopt a firm but polite stance and prefer to call attention to any indiscretion on an individual level before escalating negative incidents to management or the human resources department where applicable. This enables women to raise awareness of, and take control of, inappropriate behaviour on a small scale as well as prevent them from earning a reputation as a whistleblower.

Unfortunately, less assertive and shy women tend to experience bullying more often than their assertive counterparts. Bullying can range from minor sexual harassment, such as inappropriate remarks, to deliberately obstructive behaviour that targets women who are perceived as weak, preventing them from completing their jobs.

100 per cent of all survey respondents answered 'yes' to the question: 'would you recommend a mentor/sponsor?' This was the case even if they had never had a mentor or sponsor. Eighty eight per cent of those respondents indicated that the gender of the mentor was irrelevant. Both these findings serve to emphasise the important role mentors play in orientating

⁵ 'Our experiences in elevating the representation of women in leadership', Male Champions of Change (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011)

⁶ *Women in the Professions: The State of Play 2009-10* (APESMA, 2010) and *Bullying Research Report*, Drake Workwise (Drake Australia, 2010)

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women into construction roles and providing specific, contextual advice about roles, the organisation and the industry where needed.

Almost 60 per cent of female survey respondents valued the 'troubleshooting' advice they received from a mentor or sponsor. More importantly, female survey respondents relied on their mentor/sponsor for role guidance (73.3 per cent) and career development (70.9 per cent), which signifies a gap in industry and organisational orientation: women appear to find it difficult to navigate a clear career path.

The advancement of women is possibly inhibited by the ways in which a construction career progresses: networking, the need to be seen working long hours, and following a role model's path all present difficulties that affect women more than men. These three factors, plus the rigidity of construction roles and outmoded stereotypes of women's capabilities, are the biggest cultural barriers to women's participation in the construction industry.

MALE-DOMINATED NETWORKS

Networking, for example, when it leans towards more male-friendly activities such as participating in or attending sporting matches, or involves drinking alcohol and/or socialising outside of work hours, is less palatable for women as statistically fewer women are sports spectators compared to men⁷, women are not treated equally with regard to their drinking habits, and women still do the bulk share of unpaid household labour⁸, which makes networking after hours a less viable option.

LONG HOURS AND INFLEXIBLE WORKPLACES

At times, construction projects attract long hours due to the pressure to perform activities to set schedules in deference to stakeholder expectations. Unfortunately, the construction industry suffers from a culture of 'presenteeism', where it is seen as more important to endure long hours than it is to be productive with shorter periods. This is especially true of site-based roles where employees are assumed not to be working if absent from the site even if the role does not require the employee to be present full time.

As women statistically take on caretaker responsibilities more often than men, they suffer comparably worse from the culture of presenteeism. When prioritising caretaking responsibilities, women who remove themselves from the site are stigmatised with being unreliable or not hard working. As a result, women in this position may miss out on career opportunities offered to men without this stigma.

Participants in NAWIC's survey and the forum often mentioned long hours and inflexible working conditions as a significant drawback for women in construction. At the attraction stage it is a consideration that may change women's minds about entering the field, particularly for Gen Y, which has been shown to value flexibility more than salary and other traditional working conditions. The misperception in the industry that working long hours makes for a better employee gives rise to a career conundrum for women who have or plan to have children, or for those in caretaking roles. Women in this position often feel that to prioritise career is to neglect family; because more women than men perform caretaker roles, this situation adversely affects women more than men.

⁷ According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 50% of men and 37% of women attend sporting events with attendance varying according to sport, e.g. motorsports and cricket attracted twice as many males as females.

⁸ 'Paid and Unpaid Work in Australian Households: Towards an Understanding of the New Gender Division of Labour' (Australian Institute of Families Studies, 2008) and 'Engagement in work (Employment related and unpaid)', *Gender Indicators, Jan 2012* (cat. 4125.0), Australian Bureau of Statistics

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RIGIDITY OF CONSTRUCTION ROLES

The legacy of a male-dominated industry means women must act and deliver in a manner that has been established by men. Because the industry is male-dominated, some organisations have never experienced ways of getting things done outside this paradigm. To do her job, a woman must either learn to conform to the established male-dominated system or change the perception of what success in the role entails. This male domination also extends to socialising, where many women find it difficult to relate to colleagues due to differences that are often gender-related. Difficulty in conducting formal and informal networking is a disadvantage for women.

LACK OF ROLE MODELS

While Australia has no shortage of women in prominent leadership positions, fewer women are in leadership positions than in other industries. This hinders women entering the industry to identify female role models in the same numbers as male leaders.⁹

A lack of very senior female role models makes it difficult for women to see how they can balance work and personal commitments as a woman at that level, which can therefore be discouraging to career progression. It is possible that mentorship or sponsorship will go some way to addressing this dearth until such time as more women enter the upper echelons of the construction industry.

OUTMODED STEREOTYPES

The research also suggests that, due to the rigidity of the industry, many hold a set view of construction roles that includes judgement on whether a woman can do certain jobs. This often unconscious bias is a mental barrier that can be overcome by acknowledging that such judgement occurs and actively seeking to overthrow it with exceptions that will change the view.

Additionally, women are required to adopt certain behaviours in order to perform in their roles and relate to their male colleagues, management and clients effectively. Women must be actively mindful of the way they are perceived and respond in a way that builds their position to reduce the focus on their gender. Aggression and adopting male traits are generally not effective, hence women must balance inherent femininity with status. One form of unwitting gender discrimination is the constant need for a woman to prove herself in a role, while a man in the same position benefit from a natural assumption that he can do the job.

⁹ *Boardroom Diversity Index 2012*, Women on Boards, 2012; accessed 19 March 2013

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ADOPT DIVERSITY REPORTING

Companies should consider voluntarily adopting the ASX Corporate Governance Council's gender diversity Principles and Recommendations, introduced in 2011. While following these principles is not mandatory, they provide a reporting framework for gender diversity. An ASX-commissioned report, conducted by KPMG and released in March 2013, found the key benefits of a diversity policy identified by the 600 companies surveyed included "improved culture and corporate image, improvements to the bottom line, broadening skills and experience of workforce, access to broader talent pool and a better environment for generating ideas".¹⁰

IMPLEMENT INDUSTRY-WIDE MENTORSHIP OR SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMS

While some universities and industry associations, such as NAWIC, run structured mentorship programs, individual organisations should consider developing a mentorship/sponsorship program to ensure all employees, male and female, can benefit. It is also evident that having responsibility of a mentee or sponsored employee can add to mentors' and sponsors' own continuing professional development.

CONNECT KPIS TO PRODUCTIVITY, NOT HOURS

Introducing key performance indicators based on productivity rather than an unofficial presenteeism-based merit system will allow women to prove they can perform in a role without needing to rely on working long hours. Many organisations understand the need for productivity-based KPIs on an intellectual level but fail to change the psychological effects of presenteeism. Until these genuine indicators are taken seriously when accounting for performance, women's careers will continue to suffer from a perceived lack of dedication.

INTRODUCE DIVERSE FORMS OF NETWORKING

To address the obstacle of male-dominated forms (and hours) of networking, the construction industry needs to diversify its activities to ensure it hosts more inclusive social interactions. Organisations need to understand the benefits of networking for their employees as well as their business and incorporate related activities into core working hours to accommodate all employees. Additionally, they should consider asking employees to nominate the types of activities that they would feel comfortable participating in, taking into account individual preferences. Mentors and sponsors may also play a key part in helping employees network; the survey indicated that only 36.7% of mentors/sponsors performed this function, which indicates that there is scope for this area to grow.

¹⁰ ASX Group, 'Report finds majority of Australia's listed companies adopt gender diversity policy', 8 March 2013, accessed 4 April 2013

WHY DO WOMEN LEAVE CONSTRUCTION ROLES?

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In the survey, participants were asked to consider a number of reasons for female attrition from the industry and speculate and rank the items according to how likely it would cause them to leave a construction role. More than one in four female respondents said family commitments would be the most likely cause them to leave. More than 21 per cent indicated negative organisational culture and one in five cited inflexible working conditions.

Unfortunately we do not have adequate research on women who have left the industry to ascertain if this speculation mirrors reality. However, this basis gives us an understanding into the importance of providing more flexible roles and a supportive working environment to stem attrition.

With regard to addressing attrition from family commitments, individual organisations could provide childcare facilities to benefit both male and female workers who are parents. This option is expensive, however, and does not address the full spectrum of family-based responsibilities including caring for elderly or infirm relatives or enabling parents to take an active interest in their child or children's school life when children reach school age.

Alternatively, the construction industry needs to consider flexible working options, which would benefit both male and female workers and workers with and without family commitments. Providing flexibility undeniably prevents burnout, which is another cause of attrition for a number of construction workers of both genders. Flexible options may include, but are not limited to, allowing part-time work, job sharing and working offsite.

Although working offsite is clearly not possible in roles where the employee's presence is required onsite, such as labouring, allowing part-time work and/or job sharing is possible in most construction roles. Working offsite is increasingly used in other sectors to assist flexibility. Technology now provides secure connections to workplace networks for knowledge workers. In construction roles where the worker is not required to be present for the duration of the job, organisations should consider providing work from home options to retain staff.

The biggest barrier to flexible working options is the immaturity of the industry in terms of accepting that flexible work is real work. Normalising flexibility requires genuine support from the top down and care with language when discussing alternative work options so as not to devalue part-time contributions. Using KPIs based on outcomes and productivity rather than hours will also contribute to the validation of part-time work.

In the survey, a term that arose frequently as a suggested solution to a number of difficulties to improve organisational culture and stem attrition was 'communication' - most often in relation to upper management. Women feel that upper management performs poorly at active, open listening and that poor communication allows problems to grow. Good communication is also often fundamental to career development for women as these interactions give a better picture of performance and troubleshooting than presenteeism.

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EMBRACE A GENUINE COMMITMENT TO FLEXIBILITY

Organisations need to define and disseminate the business case for flexibility and senior management needs to commit to flexibility as a viable option for workers. As lack of control with regard to flexibility affects more women than men, genuine integration of flexible working conditions will improve retention of women, but will benefit both.

SUPPORT CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Women are less likely than men to follow a progressive hierarchy of roles due to a number of factors including the effect of maternity leave, hitting the 'glass ceiling', or simply not wanting to follow a conventional or expected path.

Construction organisations need to think differently about women's career paths as their motivation for progression is less likely to be more money or more power, instead weighted in favour of better working conditions including having flexible role options and the opportunity to perform different and challenging roles. Being open about the career options for women and widening the channels of communication to allow women to steer their own career development would help organisations retain more female talent.

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

Management must commit to communicating with all employees in a way that removes judgement and increases support for resolving issues in the workplace, whether related to gender or not. This would help prevent issues from escalating to a point where women feel they have no choice but to leave. This communication must also translate into action so that positive effects will change workplace culture. The forum discussion pinpointed that CEOs were aware of the need for gender equality but had to follow through by 'walking the talk' for this knowledge to be effective.

CONCLUSION

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A number of the challenges women face in the construction industry directly and indirectly relate to gender. It is possible that the male-dominated, male-led industry suffers from a lack of diversity at the helm, making it difficult for women to understand and conform to the established male culture and for men to understand alternative ways of performing construction roles. Due to the requirement to develop and retain talent, however, there is a clear business case to attract and retain more women in construction roles and ensure that they are comfortable and willing to work in the industry.

Many of the recommendations contained in this paper have worked in other industries and, in some cases, have been fully integrated and normalised. They have been proven to benefit women by correcting gender imbalance and addressing female needs. However, it is also important to note that because the industry is immature in terms of changing its work practices, several of the recommendations will also benefit men.

The biggest barrier to implementing these changes is the resistance to change itself. Acting on these recommendations will require commitment from the top down and the bottom up to change the culture of the construction industry, which has formed from its male-only origin and unique context combining product and service, onsite and offsite roles and labour and professional contributions. Flexibility must not stop at working conditions; flexibility of mindset in becoming more inclusive of women should also be an integral part of the construction industry's strategy to remain an attractive place to work.

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