

SOUTH AFRICAN FEMALE CONSTRUCTION STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND SEXISM AND PREPARATION BY THEIR UNIVERSITY

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As part of providing appropriate education and support to female students of Construction, Economics and Management (CEM) at the University of Cape Town, their current responses to hegemonic patriarchy in the industry were explored. Working collaboratively, the researchers infused concepts of gender; masculinity; sexism and discrimination within the engineering curriculum in 2016 and 2017 and ran semi structured focus groups with 17 CEM female students from these years. The intention was to establish their experiences of sexism (hegemonic patriarchy) in their professional environment and to identify their responses. The findings demonstrate that female students question the authenticity of their inclusion in the workplace. The data shows an internalised patriarchy by the female students, who rationalise the sexist behaviour and/or over perform to be seen as equal to male colleagues within the work place. The research concludes that there are sexist practices that affect females' ability to develop as professionals within the construction workplace. Recommendations focus on appropriate curriculum responses and professional development skills and suggest upskilling students to invoke change within their future workplace. This gender research is important to South Africa where increased employment of women in construction is legislated.

Keywords: gender, women, construction industry, socialisation, health

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Recent research has shown that gender diverse management has a positive impact on a workplace. Generally, companies with more gender-balanced management teams have better financial results than those without such teams (McKinsey Global Institute 2013). However, globally, women are still less represented in the workplace than men (40%) and of those women working, 57% do so part-time (ILO 2016). In South Africa, there are incentives for women to enter the construction industry. The conundrum is, however, that the good intention behind the drive for female empowerment could have a negative outcome if students involved are not appropriately educated and prepared to manage potential problems related to gender and sexism. Students need curricula and co-curricular spaces to discuss issues of masculinity, patriarchy, discrimination, gender based violence and HIV/Aids - all of which may exist in the construction industry (Wood, 2014). The programme described here has focused on the female students in the construction and property course as they have potential to move into management

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positions so their attitudes and knowledge, and perceptions in relation to sexism are essential.

Thus the over-arching aim of this study is to identify the perceptions and experiences of gender discrimination and related sexism in industry by the female student body from Construction, Economics and Management (CEM) at the University Of Cape Town (UCT). The objectives were to first, understand their experiences and the impact these experiences have on them and their coping mechanisms. Secondly, the study was to consider how the CEM, UCT curriculum prepares the female student to respond to these challenges once they are in the workplace. The study builds on work and relationships explored in a previous study on inclusion of health and safety knowledge (from HAICU) in the formal syllabus within Professional Communication Studies (PCS) taken by the CEM students (English and Alves 2016).

BACKGROUND

The studies on women gaining and retaining employment in the construction industry circulate similar challenges: namely, gender norms, lack of appropriate education and training, work-life issues and the glass ceiling (Haupt and Fester 2012, English and Le Jeune 2012, Mathur-Helm 2011, Floro and Komatsu 2011).

In a study of 1,435 industry practitioners, 141 first and final year construction students and 17 women working in the industry, it was found that discrimination applied to women plus their being regarded as not having the same gravitas as men were negative factors (Madikizela and Haupt 2010). A reinforcing factor - both a contributing one and an outcome was that there are so few role models for women in the industry - is confirmed by this study as well (English and Le Jeune 2012).

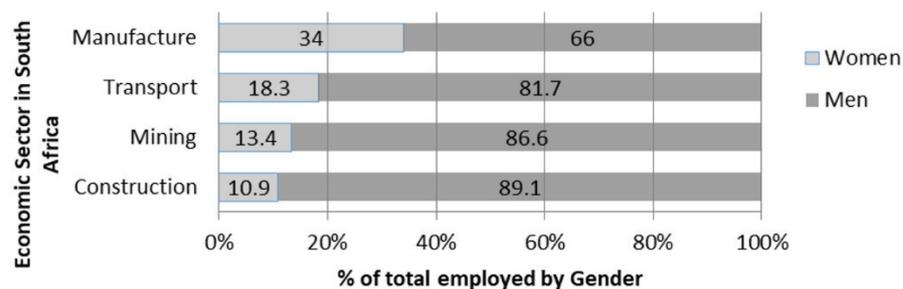
In terms of the macro environment, it is interesting to place South Africa in comparison with the other countries. South Africa is viewed as a third world country yet has been progressive in some areas since the paradigm shift brought by democracy in 1994. By 2013 more women than men were registered as voters and women make up nearly half of the parliament (Johnston 2014). The same equitable results are not seen in industry even though, over 10 years ago, the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), South Africa set minimum levels for female employment in the construction industry (CIDB 2006). Numerous other legislative initiatives on domestic rights, children and marriage have been instituted. In 2014 the African National Council (ANC) produced a manifesto which included facilitating women's access to work, business and enterprise. This reflects that, since 1994, the greater political drive has been to meet issues of poverty, race and economy with gender equality being a secondary concern. While this is understandable, gender equality is the cornerstone enabling women's rights to be met.

The current World Economic Forum ratings of the gender gap are an indicator that the rating is not only about numbers. In 2016 the issue of the wage gap became a basis for a study across countries. South Africa came through well overall in 15th position out of 72 countries (World Economic Forum 2016:10). The improved reading for "Namibia and South Africa, is due to progress in closing their gender gaps in women's labour force participation and estimated earned income" (World Economic Forum 2016: 23). The global indices looked at economic participation; opportunity; education; health and survival; and political empowerment. South Africa scored only 63/72 for economic participation and opportunity.

At the macro-level, public policies need a legal framework to support women in the marketplace, and with land and property rights. In Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa,

laws recognising husbands as the heads of households have been abolished. This has enabled women to register property in their name (Hallward-Driemeier 2011). A mechanism to assist women enter positions of influence and independence is affirmative action - particularly intended to redress in practice the effects of past or continuing discrimination between men and women (ILO 2007). An example of this was the 2012 gender policy developed by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) advising unions to ensure leadership positions for women and now one third of its leadership is female (Munakamwe 2014). However, the percentage of women in construction compared with other industries, remains low (see Table 1) and the reasons for this continue to relate to a hostile environment, negative attitudes of employers and lack of motivation for women (English and Hay 2015).

Table 1: Percentages of women and men employed in construction and related industries



(Source: adapted from Statistics South Africa's *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS)*)

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The constructivist worldview was applied, namely critical theory, to inform the research methodology. The critical theory lens was particularly useful to analyse the perceptions of the female students because critical theory takes into account intersectional relations of race, class, gender, sexuality and education, among others (Gramsci 1971, Denzin 1978, Neuman 2013). In the application of critical theory within this study, the intention was to seek out the relationship between societal structures and the female students' perceptions and their decision-making in relation to gender and 'being' female in the construction industry. Using the qualitative method of semi structured focus groups, three focus group discussions were held (May 2016, July 2016 and March 2017). Female students who were part of the construction course were invited to attend (Table 2).

Table 2: Number of students per focus group

Year	Number of students from CEM
2016 May	7
2016 July	5
2017 March	5

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Under the critical theory approach, the power relation is equalised between the researcher and the participant, who are considered collaborative partners in the research process. The focus group was deemed fit for purpose as it invited a dialogical process between participants and the participant and researcher. The following questions facilitated the focus group discussion.

FINDINGS

From the data analysis, the following nine themes emerged: protectionism; inherent agency; authentic inclusion; over-performance; assertion of patriarchal assumptions; navigating sexism; career development in a male dominated profession; and scope of influence or leadership. In the paragraphs that follow, each theme is discussed in relation to the findings that emerged in the focus groups. The students were able to give this information on the base of their having vacation work which gave them opportunity to experience habitual behaviours in the industry (CTEq, 2015).

Table 2: Focus group questions and probes

Six Focus Group Question	Probe / Prompts
What do you think are some of the challenges that you think you may experience in industry because of your gender?	Harassment? Deemed unable to participate? Compelled to prove oneself?
Are these challenges specific to female engineers industry?	Whether response is positive or negative, give examples?
Are these challenges specific to South Africa or developing countries?	Perceptions of developed versus developing countries?
How has the engineering curriculum prepared you to respond to the challenges you've mentioned previously?	Formal curricula content?
Has the university prepared you to respond to some of the challenges?	Informal discussion e.g. societies. Activities such as building on site e.g. Habitat for Humanity

Protectionism

The first finding was that of protectionism which is described as the actions of some men who take it upon themselves to protect, support and assist females in the workplace. The female students shared their experiences of protectionism which ranged from warding off advances of young men to educating the female students about how to navigate and therefore succeed in the workplace “to earn respect” (F1).

In instances where younger men would make inappropriate advances, it was found that the older men would reprimand the younger men’s behavior by stating “leave her alone, leave her to work, she’s not here for you guys... I’ve never heard you ask me how my weekend was” (F1). Similarly, GW described her frustration of being protected by men onsite and stated “the moment a woman walks onto a construction site men are like are you okay? Like, I can walk on dirt, like my feet can handle it. We can handle the things that men can handle, but they don't think we can” (GW).

Whilst there appears to be an altruistic motive by male colleagues to support the female student(s), protectionism is recognized by some authors as benevolent sexism (Glick, Fiske *et al.*, 2000) which is defined as the full support by men for female equality yet the male colleague(s) will continue to provide support and assistance to the female without specifically being asked to do so. The limitations of protectionism are wide reaching, and can in its most extreme form, limit the female student(s) learning, career development, and professional identity within the workplace. There is therefore a need for educators in higher education, to consider the function of the curricula and/or supporting co-curricular work that can better prepare and equip female students in their navigation of sexism, patriarchy and other forms of gender based violence in the workplace.

Inherent Agency

The inherent agency in 'being' female in a male dominated industry is the power held by the female body and presence which invites attention. Some students considered that there is an inherent advantage in 'being' female in a male dominated industry. One participant indicates, "Like the minute a female walks in, you immediately get attention. ... and then you... voice what you have to say" (F1). Conversely, GL indicates that because the female is receiving this special attention, it is not always possible to know whether the males in the company are genuinely listening and including female colleagues.

Authentic Inclusion

Authentic inclusion as opposed to performed inclusion is related to the earlier theme of inherent agency - where females experience different treatment because of their gender. However, whether this 'treatment' is genuinely aimed at including females is contentious, because individuals in companies may believe it is advantageous to appear to be including and supporting females in the industry due to the high "demand" for females in property (RM); yet on the other, females are unsure whether their inclusion in the workplace is tokenistic. The latter resulting in females being uncertain of whether their professional contributions are being viewed for their true quality and worth. As a result, females feel compelled to "match" and/or out perform their male colleagues to be valued and respected in the workplace.

In the last decade, the inclusion of women in the workplace as formalised practice has seen beneficial results (ILO, 2016) and the cohort recognised this as an advantage - but could identify the difference between authentic inclusion within the workplace setting as opposed to performed inclusion for points as GL's comment confirmed, "So a company ... is earning some points from having some females".

Over-Performance

An outcome of being uncertain of the authenticity of inclusion by male colleagues in the workplace, is the female students drive to prove that the points are spurious; they are achievers in their own right. Furthermore, the female students also feel they must over-perform to be regarded as equal to their male counterparts - "I will show you I can be here" (F1). This is compounded where there is a racial divide as depicted in the this statement by one female participant, "When I'm talking to a professional, especially a white male in the industry, I feel a lot of pressure to prove myself and I don't think it's solely because I'm a student wanting to impress a professional. I think it has very much to do with being an Indian female" (GL).

Assertion of Patriarchal Assumptions

The female participants in this study shared common experiences where they were not allowed to perform functions on site, which were deemed too difficult for the female student. For example, one participant describes how her supervisor specifically prevented her from using a jack hammer (despite having used it before elsewhere) claiming that "it's heavy" (F1) and granted permission for the male student to use the tool. Similarly, F13 describes being told to not "worry, just sit there" rather than being involved with heavy lifting on site.

In both instances, there is an assumption made about the female body and its ability to participate in heavy labour. For both students, the sense of frustration is exacerbated by the need to prove to colleagues that they are more than capable. Furthermore, the

patriarchal assumptions directly impact on the students' ability to fully engage with the scope of the work involved in the property and/or construction industry, with the result that female students end up "mainly doing administrative work, but there's so much more to learn; but they [the supervisor] haven't asked if you would like to [get involved in the heavy labour] or if you are capable of doing it [heavy labour]" (F13).

Once again, educators are challenged with preparing females for careers in property and construction, through a curriculum that is seemingly distanced from the realities facing female students in industry. Left unchallenged, it is likely that educators may be underpreparing female students with the skills needed to succeed and assert themselves in male dominated industries.

Navigating Sexism

There is a defeatism, an acceptance of being patronised, in that many felt it easier to work around the status quo which ranges from dismissive attitudes through to sexual harassment, than to confront it "... girls just, they have to because if you're not the top intelligent student, I mean, once you've graduated, a male is more likely to get a job if you're not on the top" (F2).

In addition to the patriarchal assumptions, there were also many instances of sexism that affected female students within the workplace but which they learn how to navigate. Sexism that was experienced included receiving "like 24 marriage proposals a day (FI), whilst another student was told "your job is so easy, why don't you go and do real work and work in a kitchen?" (LI). Similarly, GL was reprimanded for going on site without "safety so they [male colleagues] were like it's a bit dangerous you know, don't come here with your high heels" (GL). These experiences disadvantage the female students who may be an excellent graduate but unable to overcome the discrimination found within the male dominated industries.

Young female students and graduates who, in addition to developing their careers, are having to work within a possibly inhospitable organisational culture. What then can females do when faced with hegemonic patriarchy in the workplace? One student's response was to ignore it [sexual harassment], and then somehow, I just wouldn't feed the fire...and just try to showcase how I actually know what I am doing and prove to them, I am on par with you" (AN). Another student who had experienced persistent advances from a male colleague brushed the sexism off with a sense of despair "because you are going to see these people over and over and I don't want it to be an awkward experience" (LI).

Both responses to sexism by the students depicts a desperation on the part of the female students to "not feed the fire" (AN) yet the students fail to realize that they are rationalizing sexism on behalf of male colleagues who in any setting (including higher education) would be dismissed for sexual harassment. It is also interesting to note that the students do not refer to the male behaviours in a condescending way but rather dismiss sexism in order to protect the working relationship.

Career Development in a Male Dominated Profession

Two issues for women in non-traditional work are lack of role models and social acceptance, both by themselves and by their environment (Madikizela and Haupt, 2010, English and Hay 2015). Perceptions held by family towards the construction industry reflect assumptions about the type of career path that it is usual for a female to pursue as the comment by F13 illustrates "It's just frustrating, because it limits how much you can

learn, because obviously you go on site to participate in the more hands on work but you end up doing mainly administrative work."

Societal norms are that women in construction can only be administrative support, be it in the site office or as an estate agent, a largely feminized career. This has been perpetuated by the lack of role models ("because I honestly don't know someone who has done this [construction and property] course before" FS5) and of knowledge ("Property still has a stigma, so everyone assumes that because you say I'm in the property industry, they're all thinking brick and mortar" RM).

The perpetuation of these attitudes has been through the lack of role models. Female students with no female archetypes to aspire to follow have lacked confidence in their outlook. The reflection was that there was a negative viewpoint which was not being challenged. "In our industry there are very few of us already and then if you want to take six months [for maternity leave] it's going to be like oh, let's not employ so many of them because they just disappear for six months in the end" (FS). The resulting lack of confidence is inherent in attitudes to curricula that does not ensure that female students are accessing the same knowledge as male, as verbalised by this debate "Isn't there a project where you're going to have to do everything yourself?" (FS3) and "That's why I'm so scared, because I'm not going to be able to" (FS2).

Scope of Influence or Leadership

Women were described earlier as having good communication skills and thus adding to the dynamics of leadership (McKinsey and Company 2013; ILO 2016) and this has been well documented in research specific to construction (Fielden *et al.*, 2000, Dainty *et al.*, 2004). Leadership for the students was seen as a future role but not in conventional terms of power but of respect, development and outreach. As female students they emphasised communicative practices "...think about the social impact of the development, as opposed to just developing this. If you are developing in the UK, most of it is more just you are developing so that there is space for people to live. In South Africa you've got to think much more broadly. Is it inclusive? Is it going to help future generations?"(FS). Though having no role models themselves, they saw themselves taking on this role "I actually went to my high school to tell them about what I am doing, which they obviously were not aware of...we should] make them aware that there is property, because so many people don't know" (F5).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers consider that a focus on the relationship between graduate competency, the curriculum *and* the places of employment is lacking. We question how universities and industries are preparing themselves for our graduates and what quality assessments are being conducted to ensure that our graduates are being received into inclusive, equal, and diverse workplace environments that reflect the ethos of inclusion that is being attempted and in some areas successfully inculcated in our own institutions of higher education. What this research therefore emphasises is the potential disconnect between the taught curriculum and the expected competencies of graduates. Of concern is the underprepared state of companies to receive graduates that are expecting industry to be inclusive, equal and diverse.

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