

IMPROVING CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IMAGE TO ENHANCE WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN THE INDUSTRY WORKFORCE

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The Construction industry is an important sector in the UK economy. It is a dynamic and innovative industry, which has a considerable effect on everyone's life. Although the industry is growing day-by-day with its capabilities and technologies, the image of the construction industry is still rooted in the past despite years of positive image campaigning. The message about the importance of the industry is not properly passed to the society. The image of the industry shows it as an industry associated with difficult working conditions. Although the industry has many sub sectors, the general image is built with site work and physical labour, which leads to an impression of a macho environment. However, the present construction industry is suffering from a severe skill shortage and it has failed to attract young people interested in a career in the industry. Enhancing women representation in the construction workforce is a reliable solution for fulfilling the skill gap. Women under-representation makes the construction a male dominated industry with a lack of diversity. Since this negative industry image stands as a significant barrier for the recruitment and retention of women, there is an obligation for the construction educators and professionals to change the industry's image through their conscious effort and dedication to overcome the problems of filling the skills gap and to increase diversity. This paper attempts to address the issues related to the construction industry image and their influence in attracting women into the industry through a literature review.

Key words: construction industry, image, women.

INTRODUCTION

The construction industry is unique because it affects everyone's life and it is one of the few industries whose products can increase in value over time. It is often at the cutting edge of technological development, offering a wide range of challenging employment opportunities. The report of constructing a better image by the working group 7 of Construction Industry Board (CIB) (1996) says the construction industry has literally built Britain. Therefore, the UK construction industry plays a critical role in ensuring Britain's prosperity. It provides a tenth of the UK's gross domestic product and is a substantial employer, with over two million people employed (DTI 2003b; CITB 2003a cited Gurgao 2006). The UK construction industry is one of the strongest in the world, with annual output ranked in the global top ten (Gurgao 2006).

Although the industry offers many employment opportunities, there is a critical skills shortage in the industry. Entrance of young men into the industry has decreased over time and selection of a construction related profession as a career choice is not popular among young students. The UK's construction industry is facing a skills shortage that

is a threat to the long-term health of the industry. It is suffering recruitment problems with its traditional source of labour - young men aged 16-19 (Gurgao 2006).

Recruitment of women in the construction workforce has been identified as a potential solution to overcome the skills gap while enhancing equal opportunities for women within the industry and to bring diversity to construction. The construction industry is short of skills. Therefore providing able skilled labour through the employment of women on sites will facilitate an improved rate of construction and quality of building (English 2006). In recent years, the UK construction industry has clearly made a conscious effort to increase the number of women that it attracts, both in order to mitigate skills shortages, and to benefit from the advantages that workforce diversity could bring to the sector (Dainty *et al.* 1999). Similarly, Gurgao (2006) states that efforts are being made to recruit women into the workforce, but with limited success. In the short term, the industry is filling the skills gap using workers from low wage economies but what is needed is a skilled workforce that sees its long-term future in the UK construction industry. To meet the challenge of the skills gap the recruitment of women is no longer simply a nice thing to do; it has become a necessity. In spite of the attempts made for the recruitment of women, construction is still an adversely male dominated industry. There is a demonstrable under-representation of women within the UK construction industry (Court and Moralee 1995; EOC 1996 cited Dainty *et al.* 1999). Women account for around 9 per cent only of the total construction workforce (Gurgao 2006). This makes it the most male dominated of all major UK industrial sectors (Dainty *et al.* 1999).

Research has been conducted to find out the problems faced by women entering and working in the construction industry and these problems have been isolated as being due to a number of factors including the education process; image of the industry; recruitment practices; sexist attitudes; organizational culture and working environment (Greed 1990; Hughes 1996). The major purpose of this paper is to explore the issues related to the image of the construction industry and their influence for the recruitment and retention of women in the industry. Further, it attempts to demonstrate the remedies for the problems associated with the industry image that stand against women entering into construction.

Research Method

This paper is based on a literature review. Academic literature on importance of industry image, image of the construction industry and women's participation in construction and its associated issues was reviewed in order to explore and emphasis the influence of construction industry image for women's interest in selecting careers in the industry. In addition, the latter stage of this paper compiles and discusses the remedies that are indicated in literature to overcome the problems related to the construction industry image.

IMAGE OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Image, the mental picture, decides attitudes and behaviour of people and it is built through a combination of both information gained from the environment and relevant past experience. Although the construction industry in the UK occupies a large sector in the economy and it is important for everyone's life, a positive picture is not projected as its image. According to Smith (2002), construction, representing one of the largest and fastest growing sectors in the UK economy, has a low profile, a poor image and a largely undeserved negative reputation. Today, this industry is one of the

most dynamic, innovative and technically advanced of any sector in the UK's economy. Unfortunately, the industry's image and its reputation lag a long way behind its true picture (Smith 2002). Jones (2005) shows that the perception and image of the industry is still deeply rooted in the past. The image of the industry is associated with bricklaying, deeming it dangerous, physically demanding and macho, despite years of positive image campaigning. The construction industry is seen as tedious, dirty, non-technical, non-professional, hazardous, cyclical and associated with difficult working conditions (Reid 1995). Construction is still viewed as a highly gendered activity. There is little realization that the industry is becoming high-tech, no longer simply requiring physical strength; it is more about mental strength, commitment and the determination to succeed. The general image is equated with site work and physical labour; instead it is a complex industry with many sub-sectors such as consultancy, design, manufacturing and supply (Gurgao 2006). In addition to the lack of knowledge regarding the industry, the negative perceptions of the industry among public stem from many sources such as building failures, quality problems, job accidents and construction fatalities, time and cost overruns, hazardous effects to the environment, high wage rates coupled with low productivity, low professionalism among workers, lack of research, union problems, and inconvenience caused to the public during construction of public projects such as highways (Bodapathi and Naney 2001).

INFLUENCE OF INDUSTRY IMAGE FOR ATTRACTING WOMEN INTO CONSTRUCTION

According to Harris (1989), the construction industry has an industry-wide problem with 'image', which makes both men and women reluctant or uninterested in the industry. The society is generally unaware about the industry, the career opportunities it can offer and what qualifications are required. The unfavourable image of the industry as discussed in the earlier section is strong enough to restrict people seeking the reality beyond it. The construction Industry Training Board (CITB) found that parents, teachers and school children believed that jobs in the construction industry were limited to bricklaying, joinery and decorating. Although a greater awareness has been found in A Level students and undergraduates with regard to professional activities such as engineering and architecture the status of the industry as a career opportunity does not compare favourably with other options (Harris 1989).

A study was conducted by Gale (1994) to investigate whether there is a relationship between perceived image of the construction industry and recruitment to the industry by sex. One of the two main hypotheses in the study was 'the image of the construction industry militates against the entry of women'. The results of the study revealed that the hypothesis is true but both sexes share a common image of the construction industry except some image factors such as job security, equal opportunities in the industry and consideration of environmental issues. The poor image of construction, a lack of role models and pressure, and poor educational experiences are cited as having a negative impact to women entering the industry (Gale and Skitmore 1990). The barriers that prevent the entry of women into the industry begin in early socializing and education, and continue throughout training and recruitment. These barriers are further exacerbated by the industry as it continues to foster a male only image and remains entrenched in a culture which undermines the value of women (Fielden *et al.* 2000). Perceptions exist that women are not suited to construction, that construction work is too physical for women and that the image of the industry discourages women (English 2006). The predominant image of

construction is that of a male-dominated industry requiring physical strength and a good tolerance for outdoor conditions, inclement weather and bad language. Reconciling this image with women's participation in the construction industry is problematic (Agapiou 2002). These findings determine the industry's image that exhibits it as an industry of physical strength and difficult working conditions as one of the key reasons for restricting women from entering into construction.

Structural and image related barriers militating against the entrance of women into the industry further include: the dominant male workforce; exclusive networks; informal recruitment; discriminatory sexist behaviour; attitudinal barriers; long hours culture; competitive and adversarial ingrained culture characterized by masculinity; conflict and crisis; challenging, dangerous and hostile environment; facilities; training; career progression; and the present level of their participation (Dainty *et al.* 2004; Sommerville *et al.* 1993). The CITB found in a study that 63% of young women interviewed felt that it would be practically impossible for women to get jobs in the construction industry and only 17 percent thought that it would be a suitable career for them. As construction is still viewed as such a highly gendered activity these findings are perhaps a perception which is perpetuated by the industry itself through its continuing use of gender biased occupational terminology, e.g. craftsman, chain boy or foreman. This situation certainly has a serious impact on women's pursuit of career advice and choice relating to the construction industry, a situation highlighted in the industry's career journal where out of nine graduate trainees interviewed only one was a woman (Hodkinson 1994; Rees 1994; GTI 1998; Gale 1994b cited Fielden *et al.* 2000).

The construction industry has a poor public image, synonymous with high cost, low quality and chaotic working practices. Women therefore tend to choose not to enter an industry that fails to acknowledge their ability, and all too often places them in a hostile and threatening environment (Gurjao 2006).

HOW CAN THE IMAGE BE CHANGED?

The existing image of the construction industry forms a strong barrier for attracting women into the industry. Therefore, there is a need to change the image to focus on the good features of the industry. It is extremely important to enhance the flow of good news from the industry to the society. The UK construction industry has a lot of good news to tell. It is a world leader in technology and engineering achievement. It offers exciting career challenges. It has an important role to play in the national economy. However, this message is not getting through, either within the industry or outside (CIB 1996). Smith (2002) states the construction industry in general suffers from a lack of coherent and sustained communication with other industries and the general public. Further, the study indicates this has, over time, led to the development of a poor reputation and a negative perception of construction at large, as well as its component parts within this broad industry sector. Handled sensitively, with a commitment to nurturing understanding between the public and construction staff, proactive and professional community relations by the construction industry will have a profound and positive impact on the general perception of the industry in society at large (Smith 2002).

Working Group 7 of CIB (1996) introduces specific proposals for a national scheme to be initiated by CIB to improve the public perception of the construction industry in their report of Constructing a better image. Under the proposal of Considerate

Constructors Scheme, the report says if the majority of the 16,000 construction sites in the UK always presented an image of competent management, efficiency, safety, environmental awareness and 'neighbourliness', then each of them would promote the construction industry as caring and responsible. Additionally, through peer pressure and competition, a Considerate Constructors Scheme would improve actual levels of management, safety and quality, through participants' adherence to a code of good practice. The other proposals of the report show the importance of taking the messages of the industry to the society through different media such as editorial campaigns, national construction week, building an industry focus and exhibitions to enhance the general awareness of the industry in order to achieve a better image. The CIB is recommended by this report to give further consideration to the value of relationship marketing, saying that it is widely accepted that the industry has suffered from confrontational attitudes which are deep-rooted and a major barrier to improving its image.

The main parties of construction projects have to play an important role towards improving the industry image. The responsibility of changing the traditional view that construction is a hazardous and pollutant to the environment and which has conflicts among contractual parties, stands with the main stakeholders of construction projects. Sir Michael Latham's report on *Constructing the team* (1994) brings some recommendations for the industry, which ultimately lead to create a better picture on construction. It is essential that every project now has 'best practice' guidance and the necessary tools to eliminate or reduce the impact of construction works upon the environment, neighbouring residents and local businesses, and to enhance the image of construction among the public within the surrounding community (Smith 2002). In order to attract more women into the industry there is a necessity to change the traditional perception that construction is all about manual work, which needs extensive physical strength and tolerance to dust and noise. English (2006) states, the industry needs to become more of a process industry (incorporating a high level of mechanization and use of plant and equipment) than a craft industry. As Latham (1994) recommends it is extremely important to publicize the work of completed construction projects through attractive mediums in order to change the unfavourable attitudes towards the industry and increase public awareness.

Studies show the importance of increasing the awareness of students about the industry to improve its image. It clears the path of mitigating the adverse skill shortage in the industry through attracting more students to construction. Gale (1994) indicates that the knowledge of the nature of construction industry professional occupations, higher education routes to professional status and career opportunities in construction were seen as extremely important by school students considering a degree in construction. The research says, it is more likely to select a career in the construction industry, when the more that school students of both sexes know about the construction industry better. It is not only the students that should be educated about the construction and related occupations but the parents as well because the influence of parents is significant in the career selection of their children. With regard to the recruitment of able young persons, it is essential that the image of the industry is improved, with particular emphasis placed on schools and parents (Letter from Principal Thomas Wilson of Glasgow College of Building and Printing 1994 cited Latham 1994). The image-building attempt among students should not be stopped once students have chosen to study on construction related courses. According to Gale (1994) the socialization of construction students through higher and further education

is fundamental to the promotion and maintenance of the image of the construction industry.

Since there is a specific need to attract more women into construction, it is necessary to project special attention to make girls aware of the industry and its importance through their curriculum, introducing attractive selection criteria for the construction related courses including scholarships and bursaries and conducting training programmes to change the traditional attitudes of a gendered industry and develop necessary skills. Gale (1994) shows that the masculine culture of the construction industry is promoted both actively and passively through the educational institutions, in which students are socialized, educated about and initiated into the construction culture. Therefore, it is necessary to change the traditional education and training system to give a broader picture of the industry. An effective positive image campaign should be conducted to raise the profile of the construction industry and the campaign should address all the potential sectors in the society especially women in order to seek their interest. The report of *The changing role of the women in the construction workforce* by Gurgao (2006) shows that, in the past, the image campaign has not targeted the entire audience of women. Besides young school leavers and university students there are other populations of women - those returning to work from career breaks and those changing careers (Gurgao 2006). It is important for any image-building campaign that Sir Michael Latham's recommendations in *Constructing the team* (1994) are fully implemented to improve the structure and operational practices of the industry (CIB 1996).

Women are not encouraged to enter into the industry by its existing conditions such as poor welfare facilities. The study of English (2006) states that the findings of the surveys lead to the conclusion that the industry projects a poor image, and that the welfare facilities (such as medical support and childcare) are inadequate. The sites are generally known as the environments with insufficient facilities for women. Therefore it is necessary to enhance welfare and healthcare facilities within the industry to create a better picture particularly women.

The finding of Dainty and Bagilhole (2000) that the construction industry is considered to have one of the most negative public images of all industries is reflected in the concurrence relative to: "Increased participation by women will contribute to improving the image of construction." This reflects the potential role of women in improving the image, the poor image being attributed to, among its reputed working practices. This implies a bi-lateral effect where women participation in the industry can be increased by improving the image and on the other hand, it is necessary to have more women in the industry to improve its image.

A study carried out by Bodapati and Naney (2001) identified that the negative image of the construction industry can be changed through the conscious effort and dedication of construction educators and professionals. Implementation of positive image campaigns which target women as special consideration, enhancing effective education, training and development programmes, carrying out more research activities to improve construction processes and environment, introduction of recommendations to improve the image, compilation of good practice guidelines for construction teams and compliance with them can be done by the professionals and educators as discussed in this section to improve the image.

CONCLUSION

Getting more women into construction has become a necessity to heal the industry from suffering a severe skill shortage. It fulfils the requirements of equal opportunities in the industry and the need for diversity in construction. The image of the construction industry stands as an enormous barrier against attracting women into construction at all levels. Although the UK's construction industry is a massive sector in a country's economy that supplies one of the basic human needs of shelter with high technology and many exciting and dynamic employment opportunities, the image is still associated with the past. The image of the industry shows construction as a macho environment, which needs extensive physical strength and tolerance to rough conditions. It has failed to show the reality of today's construction, which stands far beyond brick laying and joinery.

It is essential to take necessary action to change the image of the construction industry in order to attract more women. Good practice guidelines should be followed by the construction teams to achieve effective management, safety, environmental friendliness and higher quality of products. It is necessary to publicize the industry's achievements especially about its great products and quality standards to attain a favourable image. Students and their parents should be taken as an important target group in the image building campaigns to fulfil the skill gap bring diversity to the industry. A particular attention should be given on girls in this regard because recruitment of women has been identified as a major solution for the industry's skill shortage. It is essential to emphasize the industry is no more an extensively macho environment, where women cannot easily deal with and the industry needs diversity through women's participation. There is a great need for enhancing facilities in the industry, which women will expressly look in to, at the point of their career selection.

There is an important role for the construction educators and professionals in the image-building attempt. An effective positive image campaign should be carried out that addresses the entire audience, in particular, all the potential sectors of female population in order to bring more women into the construction industry through creating a better industry image.

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