WORKPLACE HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION FOR SOUTH AFRICAN CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS

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Workplace harassment and discrimination negatively affect the wellbeing of workers. An opinion survey of professionals working in the South African construction industry was carried out to explore their experiences of harassment and discrimination, and to determine whether or not gender and ethnicity play a significant part in unacceptable workplace behaviours perpetrated by line managers and colleagues. Data from 676 professional architects, civil engineers, quantity surveyors and project and construction managers were collected. While the overall levels of harassment and discrimination were not found to be high, the negative experiences of women and professionals in ethnic groups other than white were significantly more frequent than those reported by 'White' males. The findings suggest that professional firms in the construction industry, assisted by professional associations, should take a more active stance in adopting policies against harassment and discrimination, and in implementing procedures to discourage and penalise such behaviours.

Keywords: discrimination, harassment, job stress, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Harassment is any form of unwanted and unwelcome behaviour ranging from mildly unpleasant remarks to physical violence. Flowing from this, *sexual harassment* occurs when the unwanted behaviour is linked to gender or sexual orientation. Similarly, *racial harassment* relates to skin colour, race, cultural background, etc. *Discrimination*, irrespective of the context, happens when a person is *treated differently* (less favourably) because of religion, culture, gender, language, disability, or sexual orientation. A fundamental tenet of these behaviours is that they negatively affect the dignity of men and women at work.

An opinion survey of the occupational stress experienced by professionals working in the South African construction industry was conducted in the latter half of, 2010. This paper reports the findings of one part of that survey: the respondents' experiences of harassment and discrimination in the workplace. It incorporates a focus on gender and ethnicity. Other factors such as the influence of age, religion and culture will be dealt with in future publications. The paper commences with a brief background review of harassment and discrimination at work. Issues of gender and ethnicity are considered.

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The survey design and administration are explained and followed by a presentation and discussion of the survey response data.

HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION AT WORK

The construction industry represents a problematic environment for women, and ingrained and institutionalised structures and cultures disadvantage them (see Dainty *et al.*, 2000; Dainty and Lingard, 2006). South Africa, a developing country, presents a particularly interesting environment with respect to exploring gender equality in the industry. Whilst official statistics indicate that professional women account for 50% of economically-active professionals in the whole economy (Department of Labour, 2005), the number of professional women in construction is far lower. Statistics obtained from the registrars of South African professional registration councils indicate that, as at February, 2008, women represented only, 20% of the architecture profession, 12% of quantity surveyors, 2% of civil engineers, 3% of project managers, and 0.6% of construction managers. Whilst no statistics are available from these statutory councils with respect to ethnicity, it is safe to say that construction professionals in South Africa are overwhelmingly 'White' – against a national demographic where 79.4% of the population is 'Black', 9.2% is 'White', 8.8% is 'Coloured', and 2.6% is Indian or Asian (Stats SA, 2001). Gender has been shown to be fundamental to the culture of organizations (see Mills, 1988; Ledwith and Colgan, 1996). One way in which male cultures manifest (and perpetuate) themselves in organisations is through discriminatory practices. These undermine, devalue and subordinate womens' positions and maintain patriarchal structures (Nicolson, 1996). Sex discrimination leads to feelings of low power and prestige and increases the likelihood of work conflict for women (Gutek *et al.*, 1996). Covert discrimination operates as part of the structural fabric of the organisation, and so remains hidden within its work practices. It is not as blatant as overt discrimination, but the effects can be more serious (Walsh and Cassell, 1995). Kiely and Henbest (2000) reveal that the increase in the numbers of women at work has been accompanied by a rise in the number of complaints of sexual harassment. Whilst many women choose not to report it formally (Baugh, 1997), Gutek (1985) suggests that this misconduct is widespread and that about 10% of women leave their jobs because of it.

Research undertaken in the UK found that over a third of ethnic minority construction employees described their working experiences as 'different' from white people (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009) and cited the following forms of racial discrimination: name-calling; harassment; bullying; and intimidation. More recent research by ConstructionSkills (2007) found examples of discrimination at work, namely, physical attack, harassment and abuse, and restricted training opportunities and promotion prospects. Race for Opportunity (2008) notes that ethnic minority professionals in the UK construction industry perceive a 'glass ceiling' to career progress. CABE (2005) found that white professionals receive more opportunities to progress and to do so more quickly.

Gender and racial harassment and discrimination at work is not only harmful to individuals but is also an impediment to the progress and development of the construction industry as a whole; especially in South Africa given the legacy of *apartheid* and the need to redress historical disadvantage. It is within this context that harassment and discrimination for construction professionals in South Africa is examined. Unfortunately no studies exist of harassment and discrimination among construction professionals during the *apartheid* era; rendering it impossible to say

how such perceptions may have changed over time. Further, space limitations preclude the exploration of the findings presented here within the context of the comparative experiences of other professionals working South Africa.

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The opinion survey questionnaire uses a mixture of closed, dichotomous, declarative, rating and multiple-choice questions. Demographic, cultural and professional background information are requested, and the survey questionnaire then explores participants' perceptions of levels of workplace stress experienced; work situations in terms of job demands and job control; organizational stressors such as job security, perceived support and harassment and discrimination in the workplace; the effects of stress; and coping mechanisms used to mitigate stress. Only the findings relevant to harassment and discrimination at work are discussed here. The contextualization of the questions relating to harassment and discrimination within the overall questionnaire, coupled with the 'rating' nature of the questions and the use of a pilot survey, effectively precluded a biased (leading) view of these constructs being given to participants.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

A web-based, online questionnaire survey was administered to selected construction professions in South Africa. Since these professions are subject to statutory recognition and control, it was possible to use email to access members registered with their relevant statutory councils. A pilot (web-based) study was conducted with a branch office of a national firm of South African quantity surveyors. This confirmed the adequacy of the survey instrument and the feasibility of administration. The full survey was launched in late September, 2010 and remained accessible online until mid-November, 2010. A population of 3025 architects, 1842 engineers, 1449 quantity surveyors, and 3359 project and construction managers were emailed by their respective statutory bodies (assisted where necessary by the voluntary professional institutions), given a URL where the questionnaire could be accessed online, and asked to participate. The response rates are: architects (8.9%: $n=269$); civil engineers (9.1%: $n=168$); quantity surveyors (12.4%: $n=179$); and project and construction managers (1.8%: $n=60$). The overall response is: $n=676$. Whilst this is a modest response it does not invalidate the study, since any incidence of workplace harassment or discrimination should be a matter for concern. The survey simply sought to establish a more informed 'picture'.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The survey response data have been analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software application. Pearson's chi-square test at the 5% level of significance is used to compare category groups. The survey collected data from different ethnic groups, including 'White', 'Black', 'Indian', 'Coloured' and 'Other'. However, because of the small number of responses in some categories, the groups are simply distinguished as 'White' and 'Other' for ethnic analysis in this paper. 'Other' is preferred to 'Non-White' because of the perjorative pre-1994 *apartheid* connotation of the latter term (see Note 1). For all tables in the analyses, the n values represent the number of respondents who answered each question; and the percentages indicate the proportion of each n group that reported a 'Yes' response to the question. Responses reporting 'Not Applicable' are excluded from the analyses.

Survey respondent profile

In summary, the majority of the survey respondents are South African, male (82%), 'White' (87%), and aged 40 years or older (63%). Gender is significantly related to professional group (p<0.001): proportionately more females are found in the architectural profession compared to the other groups. The civil engineers and project and construction manager respondent groups reflect greater proportions of males than the architect and quantity surveyor groups. Ethnicity and professional grouping are also significantly related, with proportionately more 'Other' ethnic group respondents in the quantity surveying group (*p*=0.011). Age is significantly related to both gender and race (*p*<0.000, respectively), with proportionately more males and 'Whites' being 40 years or older. The biases of the respondent sample in terms of gender, ethnicity and age need to be to be acknowledged when drawing inferences from the data

Physical or sexual harassment

Participants were questioned about the extent to which physical or sexual harassment, in the form of unwanted suggestions about, or references to sexual activity; unwanted physical contact; or unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature, had been experienced personally by them during the preceding 12 months. This period was deliberately chosen to reflect recent, more reliable, memory. Table 1 shows the results. Significant *p*-values for crosstabulations *within groups* are simply stated in the text where appropriate and not separately tabulated.

Architects generally report higher levels of physical or sexual harassment, but differences in harassment experiences *between* professional groups are only significant (Table 1: *p*=0.002) for unwanted sexual references or suggestions from workplace colleagues.

Table 1. Survey respondents' personal experiences of physical or sexual harassment in the workplace

Physical/Sexual harassment experienced in the previous 12 months in the workplace.	Architects (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	Engineers (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	QS (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	PM and CM (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	All (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	Between groups *p*-value
Unwanted suggestions about, or references to, sexual activity by:						
Line manager	8% (*n*=145)	2% (*n*=99)	4% (*n*=105)	2% (*n*=41)	5% (*n*=390)	*p*=0.105
Colleagues	14% (*n*=175)	4% (*n*=120)	6% (*n*=127)	0% (*n*=47)	8% (*n*=469)	*p*=0.002
Unwanted physical contact by:						
Line manager	5% (*n*=151)	0% (*n*=100)	4% (*n*=107)	0% (*n*=41)	3% (*n*=399)	*p*=0.063
Colleagues	7% (*n*=175)	2% (*n*=122)	5% (*n*=130)	0% (*n*=45)	4% (*n*=472)	*p*=0.071
Unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature by:						
Line manager	3% (*n*=153)	0% (*n*=98)	3% (*n*=108)	0% (*n*=42)	2% (*n*=401)	*p*=0.280
Colleagues	3% (*n*=176)	0% (*n*=118)	2% (*n*=130)	2% (*n*=46)	2% (*n*=470)	*p*=0.211

Note: The p-values are from the Pearson Chi-Square test. These statistics exclude 'not applicable' responses.

Across *all* survey respondents, significant differences arise in terms of gender for all the factors noted in Table 1, with proportionately more female respondents than males reporting unwanted experiences. The individual *p*-values are not shown here but are all <0.003. For unwanted sexual suggestions, proportionately more respondents in 'Other' ethnic groups than 'Whites' (*p*=0.029) report negative experiences.

On the other hand, *within* the professional groups, significant differences arise for each group *except* project and construction managers, where the number of 'not applicable' responses precludes analysis. For architects, the significant differences are seen mainly in terms of gender, with proportionately more female than male architects reporting unwanted sexual suggestions from line managers ($p=0.023$) and colleagues ($p=0.009$); unwanted physical contact from line managers ($p=0.002$) and colleagues ($p=0.020$); and unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature from line managers ($p=0.011$) and colleagues ($p=0.013$). The response demographics noted earlier (more females in the architect respondent group) should be borne in mind with these findings. Among the professional engineers, proportionately more female than male respondents report unwanted sexual suggestions from line managers ($p=0.006$) and colleagues ($p=0.001$); and proportionately more 'Other' ethnic respondents than 'White' report unwanted sexual suggestions from colleagues. For the quantity surveying profession, proportionately more female than male respondents report experiences of unwanted sexual suggestions from line managers ($p<0.001$) and colleagues ($p=0.001$); unwanted physical contact by line managers ($p=0.003$) and colleagues ($p=0.002$); and unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature by line managers ($p=0.013$).

Harassment or discrimination from line managers

Survey respondents were asked to report experiences of harassment and / or discrimination that could be attributed to their line managers. Note that in the South African context, language is strongly indicative of culture (e.g. English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, etc.) and can be used perjoratively (harassment) or as a means of discrimination. South Africa has eleven official languages. Table 2 shows the relevant responses.

Table 2. Survey respondents' personal experiences of workplace harassment and / or discrimination from line managers

Types of harassment and / or discrimination experienced from line managers in the previous 12 months	Architects (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	Engineers (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	QS (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	PM and CM (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	All (% of *n* reporting 'Yes')	Between groups *p*-value
Harassed by your line manager because of your:						
Language	7% (*n*=149)	4% (*n*=104)	2% (*n*=111)	5% (*n*=44)	4% (*n*=408)	*p*=0.291
Ethnicity	6% (*n*=151)	5% (*n*=104)	5% (*n*=113)	14% (*n*=44)	6% (*n*=412)	*p*=0.202
Religion	5% (*n*=150)	0% (*n*=103)	2% (*n*=110)	2% (*n*=44)	2% (*n*=407)	*p*=0.119
Gender	4% (*n*=149)	1% (*n*=104)	4% (*n*=109)	2% (*n*=44)	3% (*n*=406)	*p*=0.512
Sexual preference	3% (*n*=147)	0% (*n*=99)	0% (*n*=107)	0% (*n*=44)	1% (*n*=397)	*p*=0.076
Discriminated against by your line manager because of your:						
Language	8% (*n*=153)	7% (*n*=102)	4% (*n*=111)	7% (*n*=45)	6% (*n*=411)	*p*=0.564
Ethnicity	10% (*n*=154)	9% (*n*=102)	14% (*n*=111)	13% (*n*=45)	11% (*n*=412)	*p*=0.633
Religion	5% (*n*=155)	1% (*n*=100)	2% (*n*=108)	2% (*n*=45)	3% (*n*=408)	*p*=0.210
Gender	12% (*n*=150)	4% (*n*=102)	7% (*n*=111)	2% (*n*=45)	8% (*n*=408)	*p*=0.046
Sexual preference	3%	0% (*n*=97)	3% (*n*=106)	0% (*n*=43)	2% (*n*=397)	*p*=0.210

(*n*=151)	

Note: The p-values are from the Pearson Chi-Square test. These statistics exclude 'not applicable' responses.

While architects generally report higher levels of harassment and discrimination by line managers in terms of language, religion, gender and sexual preference, project and construction managers report greater levels of harassment and discrimination by line managers in terms of ethnicity. Differences *between* groups are significant only in the case of gender discrimination (*p*=0.046), where proportionately more *architects* report experiencing such harassment and discrimination at work from line managers.

Across *all* survey respondents, significant differences arise for experiences of harassment or discrimination by line managers in terms of gender and race (Note: *p*-values not tabled). For *harassment* by line managers, proportionately more female respondents than males report being harassed in the previous 12 months because of their religion (*p*=0.035) and gender (*p*<0.001); and proportionately more 'Other' than 'White' ethnic group respondents report being harassed on ethnic grounds (*p*=0.005). For issues of being *discriminated* against by line managers, proportionately more female respondents than males report being discriminated in the previous 12 months because of their religion (*p*<0.001); and proportionately more 'Other' than 'White' ethnic group respondents report being discriminated against on ethnic grounds (*p*=0.003). *Within* the professional groups, a few significant differences arise for reported experiences of harassment and discrimination by line managers. Again, the number of 'not applicable' responses precludes analysis for the professional group of project and construction managers (Note: *p* values not tabled). Proportionately more female than male architects report being *harassed* and *discriminated against* (in terms of gender) by line managers (*p*=0.037 and *p*<0.001, respectively); and proportionately more 'Other' than 'White' architects (*p*=0.013) report discrimination by line managers on ethnic grounds. For the professional engineers, proportionately more female than male respondents (p=0.001), and more 'Other' than 'White' ethnic group respondents report being discriminated by line managers on gender grounds. In the quantity surveying professional group, proportionately more female than male respondents report experiences of *harassment* by line managers in terms of gender (*p*=0.039), and *discrimination* by line managers in terms of language (*p*=0.046) and gender (*p*=0.001). Proportionately more 'Other' than 'White' quantity surveying respondents report *harassment* by line managers in terms of ethnicity (*p*=0.013).

Harassment or discrimination from colleagues

Survey respondents were asked to report experiences of harassment and/or discrimination that occurred at the hands of their workplace colleagues. The responses are shown in Table 3. The differences *between* groups are significant only in the cases of gender harassment, and discrimination on the grounds of sexual preference, where proportionately more architects report experiencing such negative treatment from their colleagues (Table 3: *p*=0.009 and *p*<0.001, respectively).

Across *all* survey respondents, significant differences arise for experiences of harassment or discrimination by colleagues in terms of respondent gender and race (Note: *p*-values not tabled). For *harassment* by colleagues, proportionately more female respondents than males report experiences of being harassed in the previous 12 months because of their language (*p*=0.040) and gender (*p*<0.001); and proportionately more 'Other' than 'White' ethnic group respondents report being harassed on the grounds of their language (*p*=0.032) and ethnicity (*p*=0.013). For

experiences of being *discriminated* against by colleagues, proportionately more female respondents than males report experiences of being discriminated in the previous 12 months because of their gender ($p<0.001$).

Several significant differences arise *within* the professional groups for reported experiences of harassment and discrimination by colleagues. As noted earlier, the number of 'not applicable' responses precludes analysis for the professional group of project and construction managers.

Table 3. Survey respondents' personal experiences of workplace harassment and / or discrimination from colleagues

Types of harassment and / or discrimination experienced from work colleagues in the previous 12 months	Architects (% of n reporting 'Yes')	Engineers (% of n reporting 'Yes')	QS (% of n reporting 'Yes')	PM and CM (% of n reporting 'Yes')	All (% of n reporting 'Yes')	Between groups p-value
Harassed by your colleagues because of your:						
Language	8% (n=198)	5% (n=132)	5% (n=138)	6% (n=50)	6% (n=518)	p=0.654
Ethnicity	11% (n=199)	7% (n=132)	14% (n=140)	10% (n=50)	11% (n=521)	p=0.338
Religion	7% (n=197)	2% (n=131)	4% (n=138)	4% (n=50)	4% (n=516)	p=0.282
Gender	12% (n=198)	5% (n=133)	7% (n=137)	0% (n=50)	8% (n=518)	p=0.009
Sexual preference	4% (n=190)	0% (n=125)	2% (n=130)	0% (n=49)	2% (n=494)	p=0.060
Discriminated against by your colleagues because of your:						
Language	8% (n=203)	5% (n=132)	6% (n=137)	10% (n=50)	7% (n=522)	p=0.421
Ethnicity	15% (n=204)	10% (n=132)	17% (n=139)	10% (n=50)	14% (n=525)	p=0.272
Religion	5% (n=202)	1% (n=130)	2% (n=137)	2% (n=50)	3% (n=519)	p=0.137
Gender	16% (n=203)	3% (n=133)	9% (n=137)	2% (n=50)	10% (n=523)	p<0.001
Sexual preference	4% (n=194)	0% (n=126)	2% (n=129)	0% (n=48)	2% (n=497)	p=0.105

Note: The p-values are from the Pearson Chi-Square test. These statistics exclude 'not applicable' responses.

Proportionately more female than male architects report being *harassed* and *discriminated against* (in terms of gender) by colleagues ($p<0.001$ in both instances). Similarly, proportionately more female than male engineers report being *harassed* and *discriminated against* (in terms of gender) by colleagues ($p<0.001$ and $p=0.001$, respectively). More 'Other' than 'White' ethnic group engineer respondents report experiences of being *harassed* by colleagues on language and ethnic grounds ($p=0.013$ and $p=0.028$, respectively. For the quantity surveying professional group, proportionately more female than male respondents report experiences of *harassment* and *discrimination* by colleagues in terms of gender ($p=0.001$ in both cases), and proportionately more 'Other' than 'White' quantity surveying respondents report *harassment* by colleagues in terms of language ($p=0.037$).

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The overall impression gained from the survey findings is that, although several issues of concern arise, undue alarm is not warranted. Generally fewer than 10% of survey respondents report adverse experiences in terms of harassment or discrimination in the workplace. Nevertheless, there is no reason for complacency in this regard, and some comment on the findings is justified.

Physical or sexual harassment

While the overall frequency of reported experiences of physical or sexual harassment in the workplace was low, 14% of architect respondents (those indicating that this form of harassment had occurred in the previous 12 months) report that this occurred through unwanted sexual suggestions or references to sexual activity received from *work colleagues*. This statistic is higher than that for similar harassment at the hands of line managers, and in all cases proportionately more female than male respondents report this form of harassment. This suggests that, for the most part, line managers and supervisors have a better understanding of improper or unacceptable behaviour than do fellow-workers, and that the latter may be assuming an unwarranted level of familiarity and intimacy. Clear communication is needed within professional construction organizations about what type of work conduct is expected, and what is discouraged or not sanctioned, together with clear understanding of the actions that may follow any breach of behavioural standards. Further, while there may be a reasonably common understanding within an organization as to what constitutes unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature, it is possible that the nature of other forms of unwanted physical contact requires greater clarification, particularly for female professionals.

Harassment or discrimination from line managers

Although inter-group comparisons were not significant for reported experiences of harassment or discrimination at the hands of line managers, the relatively high levels reported by project and construction managers deserves some comment. It is possible here that the preponderance of site-based work for this professional group renders it more vulnerable to the notoriously 'rough' environment of construction sites, particularly for females. It is also possible that residual levels of *apartheid* in South Africa could aggravate such harassment for professionals who are not 'White': hence the perception that it is occurring on ethnic grounds. In short, a 'Black' male or female professional working mainly on site in South Africa may still, in the 21st century, experience harassment and discrimination at the hands of 'White' supervisors. Only generational change will eradicate this.

Harassment or discrimination from colleagues

The findings for harassment or discrimination by colleagues suggest that this is largely experienced by female construction professionals, and particularly by those who are not 'White'. Although architects seem to be bearing the brunt of this, the relatively greater proportion of female respondents in this group should be borne in mind. It seems that antipathy towards women in the construction industry still exists, at least in South Africa, and the professions still have some way to go in removing it completely. Discrimination in terms of language is probably unique to South Africa: the only way to address this is through education.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of one aspect (namely, reported experiences of workplace harassment and discrimination) of a web-based opinion survey of 676 professionals working in the construction industry in South Africa have been presented. While the incidence of reported experiences is not regarded as high, they do occur with sufficient frequency as to raise concern for the professions and for the construction industry as a whole. Physical and sexual harassment happen far too often, particularly for female workers, for a society now well into the 21st century. The legacy of *apartheid* still appears to be dragging at the heels of the South African construction industry – even in the closer relationships normally found among work colleagues. Greater attention to the well-being of construction professionals is called for.

These concerns should be addressed at a macro- and micro-level in the South African construction industry. At the micro-level, professional firms should develop and implement appropriate polices towards workplace harassment and discrimination. Implementation might take the form of company charters; orientation programmes; and ongoing in-service seminars – all with the clear aim of communicating policies and ensuring that all workers understand the consequences of breaching them. In-house committees, with adequate employee representation and assured confidentiality, should be established to deal with claims of harassment and discrimination. At the macro-level, the statutory professional councils and the professional associations connected with the construction industry could provide guideline policies and template documents, and organize appropriate regional seminars and forums.

Concern about harassment and discrimination, and its long-term effects, is such that standing back and hoping it will eventually disappear is not an option for the construction industry in South Africa. Follow-up case-based research will explore some of the issues raised by this study in greater depth.

NOTES

1. In terms of *apartheid* legislation, people in South Africa were racially classified as 'White', 'Black', 'Coloured', or 'Asian'. For the purposes of enforcing *apartheid*, people were generally categorised as either 'White' or 'Non-White'. Post-apartheid South Africa has seen the introduction of '*positive discrimination*' or '*affirmative action*' as a vehicle to assist previously disadvantaged persons (PDIs) - who are mainly recognized as 'Non-whites' and women (RSA, 1996). Affirmative procurement policies are examples of mechanisms developed and implemented by the public sector to facilitate change. Within the context of the construction industry, affirmative action has, for example, taken the form of preferential procurement in the award of building contracts and the appointment of professional consultants. Any form of discrimination and harassment is contrary to the provisions of the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996).

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