

WOMEN OWNER-MANAGERS OF SMALL CONSTRUCTION FIRMS: A COMPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVE

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Studies on women in construction tend to focus on women in professional roles and building trades. Current literature has a bias towards the assumption that barriers affecting women hinder the efforts to address the gender imbalance in the industry. These barriers have been linked to the vertical and horizontal segregation that the industry exhibits. Although there is a growing number of small construction firms that are owned-managed by women, there is a scarcity of research on the experience of these owner-managers. Thus, exploring women's experience in senior management positions within their organisations offers a complementary perspective to the ongoing discussion of the gender balance in construction. This paper aims to examine how the experience of women in construction has been reviewed to date and to present the need to gain a more situated understanding of the experience of women owner-managers, especially those within small construction firms, which comprise 98% of UK construction businesses. This paper will contribute to a contextualised understanding of why the study of women's individual experience in small construction firms continues to be relevant in construction gender research.

Keywords: gender; small firms; social constructionism; women owner-managers

INTRODUCTION

Construction remains a male-dominated industry in terms of representation, with women accounting for 15.6% of the workforce as of December 2020 (ONS 2020). Attracting and retaining more women in the construction sector is suggested as a key priority for the UK construction sector as it faces skill and labour shortages (Aboagye-Nimo *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, Norberg and Johansson (2021) advocate for the balanced view of supporting the improvement of equal opportunities for women and addressing labour shortages. To understand this ongoing challenge, a significant body of research has focused on analysing the experience of women in the industry (Galea *et al.*, 2015; Navarro-Astor *et al.*, 2017). According to these studies there are barriers faced by women working in the sector (Regis *et al.*, 2019). Some of the identified barriers, such as differentiated pay levels, inadequate career progression, prejudice by employers and discriminatory selection process during recruitment, are closely linked to the argued vertical and horizontal segregation that the industry exhibits (Bridges *et al.*, 2020; Navarro-Astor *et al.*, 2017). Vertical segregation is thought to be the distribution of men and women in the same occupation but with one sex more likely to

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be at a higher grade or level, and horizontal segregation refers to the distribution of men and women across occupations (Gurjao 2006). The proposition is that in the case of vertical segregation means that at senior levels, women in the construction professions are not proportionately represented (Fernando *et al.*, 2014), while in the case of the horizontal segregation, women that are officially employed are mainly engaged in clerical/secretarial/administrative roles (e.g., Briscoe 2005, Fielden *et al.*, 2000). Vertical and horizontal segregation, and the challenges that women face to join and remain in the industry, have been a concern for a number of scholars for many years (Norberg and Johansson 2021). Despite all these obstacles, a small but growing number of women choose to be part of the industry as business owners. Whilst certain barriers are often outside women's control when they are in employee positions, Kalnins and Williams (2014, p. 824) suggest that women owner-managers have more autonomy than do employees and that they "have already overcome some hurdles to attaining status and power by gaining access to the prototypically male role of business owner". Hence, exploring the experience of women owner-managers offers a much-needed complementary perspective and thus merits further attention. In order to gain a general understanding of the understudied phenomenon of women owner-managers in construction, this paper proposes the need to explore their roles, experiences and responsibilities within their firms. Roles are understood as the duties or functions that women have in technical, professional and managerial occupations in the construction industry (e.g., Sommerville *et al.*, 1993), the experiences as "the consciousness that emerges from personal participation in events" (Foss and Foss 1994, p. 39); and the responsibilities as the domains that women owner-managers themselves choose to consider most important in their positions (Azam Roomi *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, although around 99.8% of UK construction firms are small enterprises with 0 to 49 employees (BEIS 2019) and are largely family owned (BEIS 2020a, 2020b), most studies on women in construction tend to focus on the settings of large firms. Within this context, through a critical literature review, the aim of the paper is to examine how the experience of women in construction has been reviewed to date and to present the need to gain a more situated understanding of the lived experience of women owner-managers in small firms in the construction industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women in Construction

A large part of the literature on women in construction focuses on identifying barriers preventing women from entering and remaining in the construction industry (Bridges *et al.*, 2020). This follows a previous trend in mainstream management exploring gender equality. However, as noted by Francis (2017) the dominance of career barrier investigations suggests that construction management research into gender is lagging behind mainstream management. Nonetheless, the existing literature supports the case for gender studies that focus on the construction industry. The male-dominated nature of the industry has been cited as one of the barriers that explain the under-representation of women (Dresden *et al.*, 2018) and the difficulties in that women face in progressing their careers (Clarke *et al.*, 2017). Contesting this perception is significantly important to make the industry more attractive for both women and men. To that aim, a lot of effort has been put into creating strategies or external approaches that, unfortunately, have not delivered the anticipated results (Clarke *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, the focus on the exploration of women's individual experience by previous studies has highlighted women's perceptions which have provided insights into the reasons behind their under-representation in the industry (Aboagye-Nimo *et*

al., 2019). Other studies instead have focused on the external perceptions towards women in construction. For instance, a recent study by Norberg and Johansson (2021) presented an analysis of how women in construction are represented in publicly available texts by mapping and analysing qualities and abilities connected with women. Their study indicates that although there is a central message in the material examined proposing that the industry offers many opportunities for women, a close examination indicates that women in the industry encounter gender-biased attitudes, discrimination and unrealistic demands (Norberg and Johansson 2021).

Naoum *et al.* (2020) report that whilst often men experience a consistent upward trajectory in their career progression, women tend to experience a 'zig-zag' career progression. Perrenoud *et al.* (2020) report that opportunities for women are improving with social attitudes and organisations becoming more accepting of women. However, sociological and cultural barriers remain; as explained by Clarke *et al.* (2017) structural barriers to equality and diversity are especially entrenched in segregated contexts, such as construction. Indeed, French and Strachan (2015) point out that the construction industry is "not engaging with equal employment issues and the numbers of women working in the industry and/or management are based on individual decision rather than an institutional commitment to equality in diversity". This resonates with Lu and Sexton (2010) study exploring the career journeys and turning points of senior female managers in small construction firms, which suggested that the choices of women senior manager appear not to be tangibly affected by any externally driven agendas. Francis (2017) further found that individual factors such as work experience, number of organisations worked for since starting work, relocations, tenure, work hrs/week, developmental opportunities, training for job, rather than interpersonal and organisational factors have the greatest influence on women's career progression. Hence, understanding women's individual experience in the industry arguably proposes a consistent source to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues faced by female construction professionals (Aboagye-Nimo *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, this approach offers the opportunity to propose recommendations for improving the working conditions of women, which are in alignment with their personal lived experience (Regis *et al.*, 2019). For these reasons, the study of the individual experience of women in construction continues to be relevant not only to identify the barriers affecting the attraction and retention of women in the industry (Navarro-Astor *et al.*, 2017), but also to identify the success factors behind the progress of some women in the industry (Francis 2017).

The discussion of women in construction has been explored by analysing women's position in multiple roles and occupations. Examples of research into exploration of women's roles in the industry include senior female managers in small construction firms (Lu and Sexton 2010); women in managerial and employee levels in construction organisations (Watts 2012); women in construction education (Richard *et al.*, 2018); women apprentices in construction (Struthers and Strachan 2019); women in construction occupations studies including engineering (Cadaret *et al.*, 2017), women in electrical construction roles (Perrenoud *et al.*, 2020); women quantity surveyors (Greed 1991); women in architecture (Matthewson 2015); and women in the construction trades (Ness 2012; Regis *et al.*, 2019). This approach to exploring the experience of women has mostly focused on their position as employees in the construction industry and in the challenges that these women face in these roles. In contrast, senior female managers who are also owner-managers have received little attention (e.g. Lu and Sexton 2010). Exploring women's advancement and success as

leaders in their roles as owner-managers rather than the focus on the external barriers hindering their career development presents a timely research opportunity. This paper argues that in order to understand the persistence of the low participation of women in the construction industry, it is important to continue exploring the experience of women in all the roles they perform within the industry.

Women Owner-Managers in Construction

Research into women owner-managers has often been carried out in the context of multiple industries. Although the results from this body of work have provided useful insights, scholars assert that it has limited in the development of theory in specific industries (Amit *et al.* (1993). For example, it has been identified that female-run businesses (and corresponding research) are concentrated in traditional areas of employment for women, such as retail, education, health, and distribution / domestic services sectors (Carter and Shaw 2006). Women owner-managers remain under-represented in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing, construction and transport (Carter and Shaw 2006). Kalnins and Williams (2014) argue that to capture the diverse range of different opportunities and constraints for women owner-managers, research needs to consider a broader range of industrial contexts. The issue of gender in these 'non-traditional' industries often have different connotations. Calabrò *et al.* (2020) reports that, in traditionally male-dominated industries, women are encouraged to go into traditional 'women's jobs', and their ability to be leaders of businesses in those industries may not be well recognised by members of their own industries. For instance, in the construction industry where gender segregation is present, senior female managers are underrepresented (Gurjao 2006). In addition, the difficulties that women experience, either in trade or in professional roles, have been linked to the industry's culture with its prevailing masculine attitudes and discriminatory work practices (Dainty *et al.*, 2000). How these construction-specific connotations affect the experience of women owner-managers in the industry is unclear.

A further reason that calls for a focus on the particularities of the construction industry rather than studies that cover women business ownership in the context of multiple industries, is that the construction industry is largely composed of small and medium enterprises (SMEs)[1] with over 98% of UK construction firms being SMEs (BEIS 2019). It has been identified that women in construction are increasingly likely to work in smaller firms or as self-employed professionals (Greed 2000). In addition, construction has one the highest number of family firms in the UK, where 83% of SME firms with employees are family owned (BEIS 2020b). This might present opportunities for women interested in forming part of the family enterprise as Salganicoff (1990, p. 121) indicates "the career that women can pursue in family businesses are often better than those available in the corporate world." Nevertheless, construction, like other male-dominated industries, presents unique challenges for women seeking to succeed as owner-managers. Women owner-managers might experience difficulties that have not yet been explored in the women in the construction research field, such as limited funding, overall negative attitudes towards them as 'female' business owners, cash flow problems, high business rate and overheads, lack of business networking and support groups (Carter and Shaw 2006; Fielden *et al.*, 2003; Marlow *et al.*, 2009).

Apart from forming part of a small family business, in some cases, business ownership is pursued by women working in senior roles within the industry switching

to owner-managers roles in order to obtain a greater autonomy over their working life (Marlow 2002). Flexibility and the glass ceiling are the top reasons cited by women who had left their previous employment to start their own businesses (Mattis 2004). The path to business ownership is not always a prearranged career plan. In construction, for instance, some women business owners, who already in the industry, have expressed they did not consciously choose a career in the sector (Lu and Sexton 2010). Lu and Sexton (2010, p. 125) further argue that "the career decisions of senior female managers in small construction companies are a product of serendipitous circumstances and choices". In Lu and Sexton (2010) study, some of the women participants were joint owners of small construction firms with their spouses, and their roles which demonstrate leadership capabilities, were mainly focused on 'organisation and management' instead of the 'project delivery' their spouses perform. Although these women's participation in the industry is relevant, it is often overlooked with limited research dedicated to understanding more about their involvement in the construction industry and the particularities of their roles. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the split of business responsibilities reported in Lu and Sexton (2010) between husband-and-wife joint owners uphold socially constructed gender roles. Marlow (2002) suggests that women's subordination within wider society is brought with them into self-employment; essentially, business ownership does not separate an individual from the prevailing rules of an androcentric society. Whether this assertion applies to the construction industry remains to be explored. This identified research gap prompts the need to initially explore how women owner-managers of small firms experience business ownership in the UK construction industry. This seemingly broad research goal offers a flexible and dynamic entry point into this understudied phenomenon, which might allow to contribute towards more general themes such as the role and responsibilities of these women within their organisations.

There is a small body of literature that is concerned with women-owned small firms in the UK (Azam Roomi *et al.*, 2009; Fielden *et al.*, 2003). Although the literature addressing women ownership of small firms in the construction industry is still limited, where exceptions were found, these studies tend to focus on countries other than the UK, such as the United States and South Africa (Jonas *et al.*, 2014; Mattis 2004). Most of these explorations on women-owned small construction firms have used quantitative methods such as surveys as their main research method. Research exploring women business ownership in other sectors has demonstrated that women business owners are not a heterogeneous group (Carter and Shaw 2006); they differ in the importance that they attribute to professional achievement, level of motivation in the scope of enterprise growth, managerial style and even the administrative participation in their organisations (Plawgo 2013). Hill *et al.* (2010) argue that it is essential that research is designed to capture their heterogeneity. In line with this assertion, exploring the lived experience of women business owner-managers in the UK construction industry is of interest.

The recent 2019 'Labour Force Survey', an annual survey of small businesses, carried out by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), offering the most robust source of data in the UK which provides gender-disaggregated for business ownership, reveals that 43% SMEs 'with employees' have women owner-managers within their organisations; 21% SMEs 'with no employees' reported having women owner-managers (BEIS 2020a, 2020b). The 'businesses with no employees' category include sole proprietorships, self-employed or partnerships. Considering that nearly a fifth (around 1 million) of all SMEs in the UK operate in the construction

industry (BEIS 2019) the percentage of women owner-managers of small firms is noteworthy. Thus, exploring women owner-managers' experience in small construction firms could present invaluable insights.

Theoretical Positioning - Social Constructionism

The approach taken to explore the literature presenting the experience of 'women in construction' and 'women business owners' is based on the understanding of gender as a social construction, which refers to the social roles that men and women play and the power relations as self-perceived between them (Foss and Foss 1994). Lorber and Farrell (1991) argue that gender is continuously created and re-created out of human interaction. Thus, we argue, gendered behaviour is learned, unlearned and relearned across social ripples of structure and time. Mikkola (2019) claims that it is possible to create more equal societies by 'unlearning' social roles. A social constructionist perspective is adopted as it allows the study of the conditions and practices that produce gender rather than focusing on the differences between women and men. In the case of studies related to gender, a common approach using a social constructionism is the focus on human experience (Friedman 2006). Experience is extracted through "women's personal narratives about the events of their lives, their feeling about those events, and their interpretations of them" (Foss and Foss 1994, p. 39). Malmström (2011) notes that paying attention to 'lived experience' prompts inquiry into the role of agency in the construction of gender and further calls for exploring 'gendering practices' as 'lived experience' rather than as fixed subjective positions. Most social constructionist studies apply specific social constructs that delineate the positioning of their exploration. The exploration of the experience of women in construction is often based on the understanding that women's socialisation is different, and due to this, they have different experiences that deserve to be analysed separately (Francis 2017; Gurjao 2006; Ness 2012). The three concepts considered to be of particular importance in this research are career, leadership and women's enterprises. The three identified social constructs offer the possibility to categorise some aspects of women's experience between structurally determined or socially constructed. This differentiation allows for a critical exploration of their experience from a social constructionism perspective which seeks to reveal the social world's operations and the political distribution of power to challenge social injustice and replace them with something fairer (Friedman 2006). The following will explain and justify the chosen reason for each of the three constructs.

(1) Career: Research exploring women in construction have often analysed women's career development and their experience in the industry and hence incorporated this concept into this analysis (Dainty *et al.*, 2000; Francis 2017; Lu and Sexton 2010). Past studies discussing the career development of women in construction has demonstrated that women progress more slowly (Naoum *et al.*, 2020), this could arguably contribute to the understanding that traditional gendered views of career might be acting as a constraint for women in the industry. This is supported by a growing body of research that links the role that individuals' social contexts have in shaping career decisions (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997). The study of career as a social construction explores the culturally and socially rooted nature of career and the influence of social processes in understanding career (Young and Collin 2004). This perspective enables studies to explore the association between social settings and career.

(2) Leadership: The concept of leadership is presented in a growing body of research proposing to identify specific challenges faced by women in leadership roles within a male-dominated sector such as construction (Thayaparan *et al.*, 2014; Watts 2012). Leadership as a social construction proposes that leadership is a product of the observer's perception (Billsberry 2009). This socially constructed approach to leadership contests the dimensions that are central to most theories of leadership: Quality of leaders (e.g., trait theory), a response to environments (e.g. situational theory), or a combination of both (e.g. contingency theory) (Billsberry 2009); instead, it proposes that there are no fixed characteristics that can be attributed to a person to designate them as a 'leader'. Studies focusing on women in leadership roles argue that women in these positions continuously negotiate their roles as they face the competing demands of their roles as women and as leaders (Watts 2012). However, this review of the literature found that other understandings of leadership seem to be more prominent in the research of women in construction (Thayaparan *et al.*, 2014).

(3) Women's enterprises: This concept of women's enterprises has been identified based on research focusing on the experience of women business owners, which argues the need to understand the gender factors that influence business ownership (Azam Roomi *et al.*, 2009; Haupt and Ndimande 2019). A recurrent theme in the literature is placed on women's enterprises, presenting not just the gendering factors affecting the individual experience of these women but also the influence of gender interfering in the growth of these businesses (Fielden *et al.*, 2003). The view of women's enterprise as a social construct recognises that notwithstanding the progress in women's participation in multiple aspects of economic and social life, their participation is affected by cultural values and social structures governing gender roles (Carter and Shaw 2006). Carter and Shaw (2006) further argue that the social construction of women's enterprise emphasises that gender is not a characteristic of individuals, but a fundamental process of understanding women experiences of business ownership. This review encountered limited research specifically exploring how/whether gender affects the experience of women owner-managers in the construction industry and hence, this paper poses the need to further explore this understudied phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

There is much literature exploring women's experiences in employee positions within the construction industry which offers important and crucial insights into the external barriers hindering women's career development. This paper, however, proposes the need to study women owner-managers' experience, which allows the exploration of women's advancement and success as leaders in construction. Most studies on female owner-management tend to encapsulate firms in multiple sectors and fail to capture the gendered reality of male-dominated industries such as construction. Moreover, these studies tend to use quantitative methods such as surveys which could be argued to not effectively capture the nuances of the experience of these women. To address this gap, this paper proposes to use women's first-person accounts of their lived experience as owner-managers of small construction firms rather than explaining generalisation about women owner-managers or comparing their experience to that of male owner-managers; and, in doing so, contribute to a richer and contextualised understanding of the experiences of women in small construction firms.

NOTE

[1] According to (BEIS 2019), small firms are enterprises with 0 to 49 employees; and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are businesses with 0-249.

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